

On Artistic Judgment

by *Jacques Maritain* [1943]

Our attitude before a work of art depends upon our natural taste and our artistic education, but it depends also, and more basically, on the very conception we entertain on the subject of Art. If we believe that art is merely an exercise of skill intended to give pleasure or to distract us momentarily or to figure forth for us in easy and agreeable fashion some likeness of ideas which we already bear within ourselves, what we shall demand of a painting or of a symphony is that they confirm us in our own vision of things; what will interest us in them is the subject they treat, and we shall require that this subject be treated in such a way as to agree with the assortment of concepts previously formed in our minds, and which seem to us to express the truth about the subject. We shall judge the work of art as an article subject to our whim, an article the measure of which is our own bent of mind. Under such circumstances, to tell the truth, we do not judge the work of art; rather, it is we who are judged by it.

Everything changes the moment we think that art is a creative effort of which the wellsprings lie in the spirit, and which brings us at once the most intimate self of the artist and the secret concurrences which he has perceived in things by means of a vision or intuition all his own, and not to be expressed in ideas and in words – expressible only in the work of art. Then that work will appear to us as infused with the double mystery of the artist's personality and of the reality which has touched his heart. And what we shall demand of it is to make this mystery manifest to us, in that ever renewed joy produced by contact with beauty. We shall judge the work of art as the living vehicle of a hidden truth to which both the work and we ourselves are together subject, and which is the measure at once of the work and of our mind. Under such circumstances we truly judge because we do not set ourselves up as judges but strive to be obedient to that which the work may teach us.

The first condition necessary for such a judgment is a kind of prior consent to the artist's general intentions and to the creative perspective in which he has

placed himself. For to judge a work of art is above all to have an understanding of another intellect; and before judging we must know – not only know but accept – the paths which the artist's intelligence has chosen to lead him into the secret heart of things and to express it. Then only can we perceive whether the artist really had something to say; which is the first and most indispensable step in artistic judgment. However skillful an artist may be, and however perfect his technique, if he unhappily has nothing to tell us, his work is valueless.

The great achievement of modern art and of modern poetry is that they have become, to a degree never before attained, conscious of themselves and of the spiritual mystery hidden within them. They have understood – and sometimes at a terrible cost – that the first duty of the artist and the poet is to be unshakeably faithful to their own truth, to the individual and incommunicable truth about themselves and about things, which is obscurely revealed to them and which must take shape in their work. An artist and a poet need much courage – a great artist and a great poet need heroism – if they are to remain faithful unto the end to that elusive spiritual element endowed with all the demands of an absolute and which does not forgive the least trespass. For, the more deep and trenchant is this truth, so personal with every artist, the more it risks at first seeming to his contemporaries something worthless or even foolish; for the artist has seen it and his contemporaries have not yet seen it. Later they will see it, thanks to him and to his suffering. By now we all know from what a heroic virtue of painting the work of a Cezanne sprang forth.

Of course, I am not unaware that, things being so, the artist runs every risk; I realize also that for a great and genuine creator to triumph in so strange a struggle with the Angel, many lesser men must fall shattered by the wayside. Be it noted, nevertheless, that if the latter have been truly faithful to their insight, even of limited compass, and to their love, however slight, for something greater than themselves, a tiny corner of heaven will have been reached by them. And even if they fall short and are shattered beyond repair, their efforts and their defeat itself deserve our respect. Respect for the effort of an artist, feeling for the spiritual mystery which pervades his creative work as a man grappling with beauty, are the prerequisites for every artistic judgment worthy of its object. The

only artist who does not deserve respect is the one who works to please the public, for commercial success or for official success.

I make no plea here for indulgence for every work of art, even for every sincere work of art; much less do I plead for those which exploit the truths I have just tried to outline, in order to produce a sort of theatrical aping of the modern or of misunderstood genius.

I do not ask for easy-going judgments. I think that the purer one's artistic judgment, the more it is demanding, nay, even pitiless. But what we have a right to require also is that this judgment be truly an artistic judgment: it must not set out to judge art from the mountain peaks of an incompetence which is sure of itself and yet knows nothing of the laws and the internal reality of the thing judged, it must itself be aware of the human and spiritual dignity of that special universe which is the universe of artistic creation, it must buttress itself by a genuine knowledge of the structure and principles of such a universe. As for everything else, in this case what is needed is a fitting intellectual training, based at once upon a deep-rooted study of the past and upon a wakeful interest in the searchings of the present.

The previous remarks are valid for sacred as well as for profane art. The arts of the liturgy are in their essence moored to a sacred tradition; but this is not the tradition of an artistic school, whatever it maybe, and however great it may have been in the past. It is the sacred tradition of the dogma and the life of the Church which transcend every form of human art. This is why the Church has made her own, both in her buildings and in their adornment, the great forms of art which have succeeded each other through the centuries – Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque. It is a misfortune that the same statement cannot be made, as a rule, with respect to the great forms of modern and contemporary art. Yet certain invaluable, though still exceptional, instances show us that the time is coming when the thread of that genuine life of religious art will be taken up again.

The fact remains that, obviously, it is in the evolution of profane art that we find today most freely displayed the searchings, the anxieties, the conquests of our own time, and that we are able to study them most clearly.