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Jean Charlot Collection
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Art and Archaeology

Jean Charlot

What I should like to say will be said from the point of view of the artist rather than that of the archaeologist. When there are no archaeologists in the room, sometimes I pretend that I am one, but this is not the case today.

Many archaeological objects are also art objects. The archaeologist admits that, and it is specifically that quota of art in the art object that I should like to speak of now. That is, is there a way of investigating the art in the archaeological object of art? Those of you who like contemporary art and have artist friends, find it is very difficult to make an artist speak of his own work when you want any clarification of the work. Sometimes he shuts up like a clam, and sometimes he will talk at length beside the point. Yet this is, of course, the easiest problem—I mean, finding the “art” in the art of your friends, because we are contemporaries, we are part of the same culture, and so on.

So, of course, when you face the more difficult problem of dead artists and lost cultures, it is a very different one. What has been done in archaeological studies is not perfect, but is perhaps the only thing that could be done. That is, the archaeological art, to call it that, has been investigated in terms of the contemporary—contemporary, that is, to the archaeologist. Whatever concept of art was current at the time the object was studied is reflected in its appreciation. I just want to survey the different trends, so to speak, that have in turn directed this study, and see if any has been valid, from what I think is the scientific point of view.

If we take some of the oldest research in the field of Maya art, that of a man like Waldeck, we find immediately that it was done with the prejudices of the time. Waldeck was a man old enough to know the craze for Egyptian art which came with the discoveries of Napoleonic times, and when he visited the ruins of Yucatan, he was taken with everything that to him looked Egyptian. His eye was caught by such resemblances, and this is reflected in the plates, where, let's say, an owl in flight is transformed into a scarab with wings, the famous Egyptian motif.

The more usual attitude in the study of those ancient works stems from what we could call the classical point of view. I don't mean the true classical taste of the scholar of Greek art, but our own—what I might call the undergraduate—point of view, which most of us have. When you look at pre-Columbian art in that way, you find certain things that interest you.

There was a very interesting experiment that Dr. Gamio made around 1915. He gave to some friends—not experts, but what you would call cultured laymen—a heap of archaeological objects. He asked his friends to sort them into what they considered to be artistic objects and non-artistic objects. Though the thing was done individually, without any one knowing what the next man would do, everybody pretty much agreed on the results. Then Gamio went to work with his scientific approach. He found that the works classified as non-artistic were unfamiliar. They were things that those friends had never seen before, because there was no parallel in classical culture. The works that they considered artistic had been seen before, and sometimes there were very close parallels: for example, the famous head of the Eagle Knight in the museum in Mexico City. Gamio illustrates it in the book in which he speaks of this test, and compares it to the head of Alexander in the guise of Hercules—with the profile inside the jaws of the lion—and the resemblance is nearly perfect. This particular Alexander comes from a Greek medal and has been reproduced in textbooks.

There are other examples, but I think this is enough to show you how the man who has classical culture at the back of his head picks things from that classical point of view.

There is another ideal which we all have also in the back of our

heads, without being specialists in art, and that is the Italian Renaissance, (or what we think is the Italian Renaissance). I had a personal experience of what I am about to relate; in fact I was part of it; so when I speak of my friends as examples, I am not saying anything against them that I would not say about myself too. In Chichen Itza we unearthed seventeen atlantean columns that supported the main altar of the Temple of the Warriors. Now these were obviously made by one man, they were all in the same style. Out of these seventeen, we immediately picked one as a work of art, as a masterpiece. The other sixteen we dropped. That is, we put them up in the place where they were, but covered them very carefully with the altar-slab so people wouldn't see them, and the one we liked we put in front. We called it the Mona Lisa of Chichen Itza, and it was photographed and published and became famous to some extent. When I analyzed this Mona Lisa of Chichen Itza, I found it was the only one of those little statues on which the mouth curled upwards, while on the others the mouth curled downwards, and that was, of course, less fascinating to us because of our background of Leonardo da Vinci.

There is another attitude that is found among all of us, and that is what I would call the idea of photographic realism. Especially around 1900 it is linked, for example, with the admiration, or the adoration, of Meissonier. All people who didn't know art, all people who did know art, all cultured people, considered Meissonier's the great art of the century. Naturally, that appreciation is carried into pre-Hispanic art.

I have asked Dr. Spinden's permission to speak about something that he did. In his book on Maya art, which is a marvelous pioneering book, he takes a sequence of stelae from the same place and arranges them in chronological order and shows that not only the craft of the man develops and gets better in time, but that the art becomes more and more realistic. This was shown by one single problem, that of the angle of the feet of the standing personages on the stelae. Dr. Spinden shows that in the archaic stelae the angle is impossible, and that little by little the feet came into a natural position.

He did there, of course, what I say we all do—the only thing any

of us can do—that is, to apply our own knowledge of art to pre-Hispanic art. At that time it was believed that Greek art was bred in the same way, as a continuous progress toward naturalism.

I chose this particular example because I myself worked on the problem of the style of these very stelae twenty years later. Meanwhile there had been a twist in taste, which accepted, instead of realism, the idea of distortion. Meissonier gave way to Negro sculpture, let us say—perhaps to Picasso. So I approached those stelae with the same objective as my predecessor, that is, to find something there that I would like. I found that though the feet were getting more and more realistic, the proportions of the body were getting less and less realistic. The archaic stelae are fairly realistic anatomically speaking, the later ones are more baroque, and the most magnificent ones, as far as craft goes, are as distorted as Negro sculpture. I thought I had made a great discovery. I wrote it down—I think nobody read that little part of a little booklet called "*A Study of the Ruins of Coba Macanzoe.*" It is very well hidden there.

Just now—that is, another decade later, or a little more—I have seen that there was no discovery, there was no new method. I was using exactly the same method that had been used all through.

Since then, of course, there has been another change in the appreciation of art, and people now are less interested in what I would call the physical object, but much more in the psychology of it. With Surrealism there is a whole forest of enigmas and dream-images and libidos and what not that has come into our consciousness—people say from the subconscious—and we can put them to use, and we do. Some people put them to use in appreciating pre-Hispanic art.

I think a very good example is that article by Leo Katz on the Coatlicue,* in which he puts to use the Surrealist vocabulary and calls on the Surrealist art behind the vocabulary. I think it helps you to understand the meaning of this particular sculpture.

What will come next, I don't know. Probably we are in a cycle, and people will come back to the Waldeck point of view. But

* Katz, Leo. Art and Archaeology in the Aztec Figure of Coatlicue (*Magazine of Art*, Apr. 1945, p. 133-7).

what I would like to do now, after seeing this survey in chronological order, is to ask if certain of those approaches are more valid than others, that is, if we have any key to how far we miss or how near we miss when we look at pre-Hispanic art.

There is one thing, I believe, that we can take for granted, and that is that all objects that show, however dimly—there is a kind of instinct in these things—more than mere craft, were, in the opinion of their maker and in the opinion of their users, art objects. Objects that were used for embellishment, for decoration, for religious ceremonies, these were more than merely utilitarian, and deserve to be judged by artistic standards. Therefore, if we can discover a point of view that accepts and appreciates more of those objects, and rejects fewer of them, that point of view will be closer to the original point of view of the pre-Hispanic artist.

Realism and classicism and the ideals of the Italian Renaissance admit a very few objects among the great mass of pre-Hispanic art, perhaps one in every thousand. As such I have a doubt that these criteria coincide very fully with the ideal of the pre-Hispanic artist. But if we were to approach Aztec sculpture, let us say, from the point of view of Cezanne—according to his saying that nature must be interpreted in terms of the sphere and the cone and the cylinder, bringing into that appreciation a knowledge of the cubists and the value of the cube—we will find that we can admire a very great quantity, a very great majority, of Aztec pieces of sculpture. It gives us a certain security that there is a coincidence between this point of view and the *x*, which is the ideal of the pre-Hispanic artist.

If we go further than the body of the work of art, then we try to appreciate the spirit behind the work of art. Again, I would say that the peace and plenty of the Greek ideal, the humanism of the Renaissance ideal, are of no use. There are very few pre-Hispanic things that correspond to that. But if we use now all that paraphernalia of the Surrealist (however distasteful it is to me personally), we find that we can explain a lot, and that we can understand a lot, and that many things that were simply meaningless and ugly before, in classical terms, become at least alive, if not beautiful in our opinion.

So let me close with the idea that we are just now, in our period, at an unusual vantage point for appreciating this art. By using, as everybody else has, just the current ideals of art, we can clarify much concerning the ideals of pre-Hispanic art.