

## JOSEF ČAPEK'S INTERPRETATION OF PRIMITIVISM

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Josef Čapek's writings from between 1914 and 1920 present a distinctive conception of primitivism, which was, beginning in the early twentieth century, of fundamental importance for the development of modern trends in the fine arts, in connection with the essential change in understanding the term 'art'. Two manuscript version of the essay *Umění přírodních národů* (The art of primitive peoples) from 1914 to 1916 and the article 'Sochařství černochů' (Negro sculpture) from 1918 are amongst the first European critical attempts to interpret ethnic art. Čapek presents the 'art of the savages' (*divošské umění*) as fully fledged art, and he tries to analyse its principles of expression. He compares them to current trends in art. The essays from the volume *Nejskromnější umění* (The humblest art, 1919–20), which consider other dimensions of primitivism, present a particular definition and expansion of the term 'art'. In contrast to academic virtuosity, Čapek here emphasizes values of hitherto peripheral and unacknowledged areas of artistic expression, and achieves a distinctively personal revision of the traditional conception of the boundaries of the work of art and therefore also its essence and purpose. The essay 'Sociální užitečnost umění' (The social utility of art, 1919) also relates to these questions.

Josef Čapek, a painter, illustrator, stage designer, journalist, dramatist, and fiction writer, the brother of the internationally renowned writer Karel Čapek, was born in the family of a doctor in the town of Hronov, northeast Bohemia, on 23 March 1887. From 1905 to 1910, he attended the School of Applied Arts (Umělecko-průmyslová škola), Prague. After graduating, he spent several months in Paris. He arrived in the French capital in a revolutionary period involving a fundamental re-assessment of the traditional norms of art and aesthetics, as Cubism was beginning to make its mark. Čapek at first had a reserved attitude to the new trends in Parisian art.<sup>1</sup> The influence of Cubism did not begin to manifest itself in his art until late 1912, whereas he was unreservedly enthusiastic about ethnic art, whose artistic value was then being pointed out by artists in Paris. Following their example, Čapek studied the collections of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and also discovered the charm of naive art. The most important thing

<sup>1</sup> This is attested to particularly by Čapek's correspondence. See *Dvoji osud: Dopisy Josefa Čapka, které v letech 1910–1918 posílal své budoucí ženě Jarmile Pospíšilové* [Double fate: Josef Čapek's letters to his future wife, Jarmila Pospíšilová, 1910–18], ed. Jaroslav Dostál, Jiří Opelík, and Jaroslav Slavík (Prague: Odeon, 1980), 35.

that he brought back to Prague from Paris was a nascent but distinctive concept of primitivism. Čapek came to believe that the concept of 'art' could not be grounded in the practice of traditional institutions, and that the fundamental principles of artistic expression had to be sought outside the work done in the academies. His own art work and theoretical essays were henceforth oriented in this direction.

Upon his return to Prague from Paris, Čapek became a member of the Group of Fine Artists (Skupina výtvarných umělců), which, before the First World War, mounted exhibitions in Prague of works by Braque and Picasso and also ethnic art. Čapek took part in the activities of the group most visibly as a critic and editor on the periodical *Umělecký měsíčník* (The art monthly).<sup>2</sup> He soon quit the group, however, because of disagreements with the painter Emil Filla (1882–1953) and the theorist and collector of fine art Vincenc Kramář (1877–1960). Whereas Filla and Kramář advocated an 'orthodox' version of Cubism, Čapek open-mindedly adopted a whole range of current approaches to art, in an effort to clarify the logic of their development and to defend their legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> After quitting the group, he pushed for the principles of new art as an editor of *Volné směry* (Free trends, 1912–13), the periodical of what was then the strongest Czech art society, the SVU Mánes (Mánes Fine Arts Society), and as an art correspondent of other journals. At the same time, he also tried to be actively involved in the art of the rest of Europe. While attending the First German Autumn Salon (1913), he made the acquaintance of the German gallery owner and publisher Herwarth Walden, and in May 1914 he published the essay 'Moderne Architektur' in the periodical *Der Sturm*,<sup>4</sup> continued to work with the Paris art scene, and participated in the organization of the international 'Modern Art' exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 1912, Apollinaire mentions this periodical in passing in his article on Cubism: 'In a review published in Prague, I recently saw some photographs of cubist furniture [...]'. Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Cubism', in *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902–1918*, ed. LeRoy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 258.

<sup>3</sup> In his review of Apollinaire's *Les peintres cubistes*, Čapek writes, for example: 'Modern art is a destination to which many roads lead. Obviously, not all are right; some lead back and some may lead nowhere. Morally, they may mean at least that rather than impersonally and dependently imitating the best recognized examples it is often better and more useful to attribute to those influences also something of personal interest, and at worst it may also lead, say, to a personal mistake.' Josef Čapek, Review of *Les peintres cubistes*, by Guillaume Apollinaire, *Volné směry* 17, nos. 7–8 (1912–13): 203–5. On the debates within Czech Modernism, see *Czech Modernism 1900–1945*, ed. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), and Vojtěch Lahoda, 'Searching for a "Democratic" Shape in Czech Modernism at the Beginning of the 1920s', *Centropa* 8 (2008): 26–35.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Čapek, 'Moderne Architektur', *Der Sturm* 5, no. 3 (1914): 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> Organized by SVU Mánes in spring 1914 as its 43rd exhibition in Kinský Gardens, Prague. Curated by Alexandre Mercereau, the exhibition included works by Archipenko, Brancusi, Delaunay, Duchamp-Villon, Dufy, Friesz, Gleizes, Metzinger, Léger, and Mondrian.

From 1914 to 1915, Čapek's artistic adaptation of the principles of Cubism and Expressionism came to maturity in individual, original expression, which is closely linked to his development of the ideas of modern primitivism. In 1918, he helped to establish the group called the Tvrdošijní (the Stubborn), whose forward-looking artists of the new Czechoslovak Republic continuously developed the principles of modern art forms. From the mid-1920s, when the left-wing avant-garde began to make its presence felt on the Czech art scene, Čapek stood alone outside the art groups of the times. He understood making art as an important personal statement related to elementary values of human existence. Already at the beginning of the 1920s, in his essay 'Cestou I' (On the way I), he formulated the basic idea that would essentially remain the motto of his future work: 'What exists? Yes, man and the meaning of life exist. This is not a question of content in painting. This is a question of both origin and destination.'<sup>6</sup>

The work of Josef Čapek came to a peak in the 1920s and 1930s. The spectrum of his artistic interests at the time was extraordinarily wide. His domain was painting, but in an original way he also influenced print-making and illustration, caricature, book covers, and stage design. In parallel he devoted himself to literary work, writing short stories, short novels, dramas, and modern fairy tales for children. His literary work is crowned by plotless reflexive fiction: *Kulhavý poutník* (The limping pilgrim, 1936) and *Pšáno do mraků* (Written into the clouds, 1936–39). After the German occupation of the rump Czechoslovakia, Čapek was arrested in September 1939. He died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945.<sup>7</sup>

Like many Modernist artists, Čapek also wrote theoretical and critical reflections on art. As an art correspondent he observed the Czech art scene continuously for a few decades and contributed importantly to the interpretation of modern art trends in the Czech arts milieu. His theoretical reflections and essays went beyond everyday commentary, aiming to capture the essence and meaning of artistic work. Though Josef Čapek was not concerned with academic aesthetics, he became acquainted with it from his brother Karel, who thoroughly and systematically researched contemporary aesthetics and art history for his university dissertation, 'Objektivní metoda v estetice se zřením k výtvarnému umění' (The objective method

<sup>6</sup> Josef Čapek, 'Cestou I' [On the way I], in *Co má člověk z umění a jiné úvahy o umění z let 1911–1937* [What art gives us & other essays on art, 1911–37] (Prague: Výtvarný odbor umělecké besedy, 1946), 56. Originally published in *Musaion: Sborník pro moderní umění* [Musaion: Anthology for modern art], vol. 1, ed. Karel Čapek (Prague: Aventinum, 1920), 17–21.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Josef Čapek, see Pavla Pečinková, *Josef Čapek* (Prague: Svoboda, 1995), Pavla Pečinková, *Josef Čapek*, trans. Elizabeth Spacilová (Prague: Galerie Zdeněk Sklenář, 2009), and Jan Patočka, 'Josef Čapek, A Limping Pilgrim' (1964), trans. David Short, *Slovo a smysl* 2 (2005): 360–80.

in aesthetics with regard to the visual arts, 1915), which was an attempt to formulate his own conception of aesthetics, starting with a critique of psychological aesthetics and following on from the 'general science of art' (*allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*) of Emil Utitz (1883–1956). Until the 1920s, Josef and Karel lived in a close creative and intellectual symbiosis. At first they even wrote together, and as the Brothers Čapek they published not only fiction and drama but also a number of articles and reflections on fine art. Though they went their separate ways as authors in about 1912, their views, particularly concerning general aesthetic questions, continued to be in harmony and to complement each other. 'Aesthetic understanding' became Josef Čapek's methodological starting point. In his dissertation, Karel Čapek defines the term as reception that reveals the 'structure and organization of a work, its individual rules and character', that is, reception that 'does not separate things from each other but finds relations between them.'<sup>8</sup> The concept of autonomous forms of art and the understanding of the work of art as a new, distinctive reality,<sup>9</sup> which Josef Čapek developed in connection with his interpretation of Cubism, largely comport with the ideas in Karel's dissertation. Similarly, the bibliography to the dissertation contains a number of publications on the 'beginnings of art', which Josef probably also drew on for his theoretical essays.<sup>10</sup>

Josef Čapek's concentrated theoretical interest in tribal art is evident from the outbreak of the First World War onward. Čapek at the time returned to notes he had made on visits to the Trocadéro and the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. On the basis of these notes he began to work on his essay 'Umění přírodních národů' (The art of primitive peoples).<sup>11</sup> The Josef Čapek Papers include several

<sup>8</sup> Karel Čapek, 'Objektivní metoda v estetice se zřením k výtvarnému umění' [The objective method in aesthetics with regard to the visual arts] (dissertation, Charles University, 1915), in *Univerzitní studie* [University essays] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1987), 199.

<sup>9</sup> 'The expression of form must be extracted from everything random. It must be liberated from the object and must be a logical, pure expression of content, to achieve truthfulness. The work of art must become something free-standing and cannot then be compared to a natural fact, if we want to discover its truthfulness. Its truthfulness resides in the organism of the work of art and is a result of the relations and harmony of various laws, which are in its case naturally different from those in things in the physical world.' Josef Čapek, 'Nové umění' [New art], in *Moderní výtvarný výraz* [Modern artistic expression] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1958), 70. Originally published in *Lidové noviny*, February 22, 1912; March 6, 1912.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ernst Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (Freiburg and Leipzig: Mohr, 1894); Yrjö Hirn, *The Origins of Art: A Psychological and Sociological Inquiry* (London: Macmillan, 1900); Max Verworn, *Zur Psychologie der primitiven Kunst* (Jena: Fischer, 1908); Moritz Hoernes, *Urgeschichte der bildenden Kunst in Europa* (Vienna: Holzhausen, 1898); Konrad Fiedler, *Schriften über Kunst* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1896); and Adolf Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1901).

<sup>11</sup> The origin and redrafting of Čapek's 'Umění přírodních národů' has been researched in detail and reconstructed by Opelík, who first published the original MS fragments that preceded the 1938 book. See Jiří Opelík, 'Vznik a proměny Umění přírodních národů

manuscript versions of the essay and fragments of writings from 1914 to 1918, from which I have compiled this small selection. The most important is 'Version S', which is about 65 typewritten pages long. Using extant correspondence, a leading Čapek scholar, Jiří Opelík, has convincingly dated 'Version S' to 1914 or 1915.<sup>12</sup> Its ambitious outline attempts to describe this phenomenon as broadly as possible and includes the chapters 'Africa', 'Oceania', 'Pre-Columbian Art', and 'The Art of the American Northwest'. Čapek interprets the 'art of the savages' not as ethnographic material, but as fully fledged works, 'art that is original, mature, and fulfilled'.<sup>13</sup> He finds here basic creative principles, which are located in the 'deepest essence of art',<sup>14</sup> and he reveals the original elements of the 'elementary order',<sup>15</sup> which in European art had been covered over with the sediment of cultural patterns. The primitive artist, according to Čapek, directly 'materialized' his ideas and thoughts, whereas the cultured academically trained artist only describes them.<sup>16</sup> Čapek tries to 'read' the language of form, which is used in tribal art: he analyses 'basic formative components', the means of expression, the structure of composition, the manner of modelling, and the conception of colour, form, and space. He focuses chiefly on those aspects that are in accord with the postulates of current art trends; of contemporary art he specifically mentions the works of Picasso, Derain, Picabia, and Archipenko. He compares mainly the non-descriptive attitude to reality with the 'modern sensibility', and repeatedly emphasizes that the art of primitive peoples, unlike the craftsmanship of academy-trained artists, does not imitate what is seen but creates an autonomous new reality.

Opelík has demonstrated<sup>17</sup> that Version S of the 'Umění přírodních národů' manuscript was written independently of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (1915), which is generally considered the first scholarly publication on African art.<sup>18</sup> Čapek had been

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Josefa Čapka' [The origin and transformations of Josef Čapek's The art of primitive peoples], in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], ed. Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 533–87.

<sup>12</sup> Opelík, 'Vznik a proměny'.

<sup>13</sup> Josef Čapek, 'Negro Sculpture', in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. Miriam Deutch and Jack D. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 114. Originally published as 'Sochařství černochů', *Červen* 1, no. 18 (1918): 251–53.

<sup>14</sup> Josef Čapek, 'The Art of Primitive Peoples (Version S)', this issue of *Estetika*, 86; 'Umění přírodních národů (verze S)' (manuscript, 1914–16), in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:394.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 84; 5:392.

<sup>16</sup> Josef Čapek, *Umění přírodních národů*, in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:198. Originally published as *Umění přírodních národů* (Prague: Borový, 1938).

<sup>17</sup> Opelík, 'Vznik a proměny', 561–62.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (Berlin: Verlag der weißen Bücher, 1915). On the concept of African art, see Jean Laude, *The Arts of Black Africa*, trans. Jean Decock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

working on this essay even before the publication of Einstein's book, and he conceived it more broadly than Einstein's. Nor could he have known the other pioneering essays devoted to the topic which were published during the First World War.<sup>19</sup> His contribution to the contemporaneous discussion, however, existed only as a manuscript for more than twenty years. *The Art of Primitive Peoples* was not published in book form (partly revised) till 1938.<sup>20</sup> By this time, however, it was already out of date from the specialist point of view, since few people still doubted the artistic legitimacy of 'primitive' art. The only published essay by Josef Čapek from the pioneering period of the European reception of ethnic art therefore remains the article 'Sochařství černočů' (Negro sculpture), published in the December 1918 issue of *Červen*.<sup>21</sup>

Čapek's interest in non-European cultures was linked to the contemporaneous search for original forms and the deep sources of art, which in the early twentieth century included interest in many different kinds of artistic expression defying traditional European norms in a broad spectrum from medieval art to children's drawings.<sup>22</sup> As early as their first jointly authored article, from 1907, the Brothers Čapek wrote about Cézanne, in the spirit of the times, as a 'modern primitive'.<sup>23</sup> Josef Čapek's later articles on art reflect the contemporaneous interpretation of the modern art attitude towards primitivism in the broader sense of the word as it was used in the French and German milieux. In 1912, for example, he published a report on Wilhelm Worringer's fundamental essay 'Entwicklungsgeschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst', in which Worringer defends and explains the relationship between primitivism and the new trends in art.<sup>24</sup> Čapek also discussed André Salmon's book on contemporary French

<sup>19</sup> Marius de Zayas, *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (New York: Modern Gallery, 1916); Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Concerning the Arts of the Blacks' (1917), in Flam and Deutch, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 107–10.

<sup>20</sup> Čapek, *Umění přírodních národů*. The book edition is largely the same as the original manuscript version both in the basic division of the chapters and in all its passages, except that general, introductory chapters about the origin and magical essence of art have been added.

<sup>21</sup> Čapek, 'Negro Sculpture'.

<sup>22</sup> See William Rubin, ed., *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: MoMA, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> The Brothers Čapek, '23. výstava Spolku výtvarných umělců Mánes v Praze: Pavilon pod Kinského zahradou' [The 23rd exhibition of the Mánes Fine Arts Society: The pavillion below Kinský Garden], *Moravskoslezská revue* 4, no. 2 (1907–8): 73–74.

<sup>24</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, 'Entwicklungsgeschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst', in *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den 'Protest deutscher Künstler'* (Munich: Piper, 1911), 92–99; Josef Čapek, 'V boji o umění: Dr. Wilhelm Worringer, privátní docent v Bernu; Vývojově-historické poznámky k nejmodernějšímu umění' [Fighting for art: Dr Wilhelm Worringer, privatdozent in Berne; Notes on the historical development of the most modern art], *Umělecký měsíčník* 1, no. 4 (1911–12): 114–16.

painting,<sup>25</sup> emphasizing the links between ethnic art and the naive art of Henri Rousseau, and referred to Apollinaire's article 'Exotisme et ethnographie' and Wilhelm Uhde's monograph on Rousseau.<sup>26</sup>

Čapek's broad conception of primitivism was not limited solely to the terrain that was 'discovered' by the artists of the pre-war generation (tribal art, the naive art of Sunday painters, and children's art), but also took into account areas that had not yet been included in the institutionally recognized conception of art. He compiled his articles and reflections on this topic in the volume *Nejskromnější umění* (The humblest art, 1920), which is a direct parallel to the writings on tribal art. The central article in the volume is 'Malíři z lidu' (Folk painters), devoted to the art of anonymous painters of advertising signs, 'little Rousseaus', whose directness and truthfulness Čapek sets against the 'falseness of the artistic goods' at official exhibitions.<sup>27</sup> His reflections overturn established assessments of 'academic' and 'amateur' artistic expression. Čapek does not consider the expressions of the academically trained painter to be valuable art, since that painter 'relies exclusively on the receptivity of his retina and makes his technical skill and an optical impression the only starting points of his work'. By contrast, Čapek admires the work of the Sunday painter, if he starts from the 'inner world, where the arrangements and appearances of things are given by inner experience, [...] where knowledge becomes one in simple, firm forms'.<sup>28</sup> Čapek's starting point for acknowledging artistic value is mainly the attitude towards a thing and towards the world, which is manifested in the work.

Čapek's opposition to routine academic work leads him to consider marginal areas and the overlaps between 'high' and 'low' or art and non-art in various areas. He is interested in the poster, and expressions of modern suburban folklore, like illustrations to trash literature and the decorations at amusement parks. He enquires into the boundary between artistic expression and craft, between artefact and banal object. And he touches upon the question of kitsch. Under his label 'the humblest art' he even includes photography and film, new media that

<sup>25</sup> André Salmon, *La jeune peinture française* (1912), in *André Salmon on French Modern Art*, ed. and trans. Beth S. Gersh-Nešić (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27–92.

<sup>26</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Exotisme et ethnographie', 1912, in *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Pierre Caizergue and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 473–76; Wilhelm Uhde, *Henri Rousseau* (Paris: Figuière, 1911). See 'Podzimní Salon v Paříži' [The Salon d'automne in Paris], *Lumír* 41, no. 2 (1912–13): 92–96; 'Pro příští rok chystá se v Paříži...' [Next year, Paris will see...], *Volné směry* 17, no. 2 (1912–13): 62.

<sup>27</sup> Josef Čapek, 'What We Encounter', this issue of *Estetika*, 100; 'Co potkáváme', in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:61. Originally published in *Nejskromnější umění* [The humblest art] (Prague: Aventinum, 1920), 61–66.

<sup>28</sup> Josef Čapek, 'Folk Painters', this issue of *Estetika* 93–94; 'Malíři z lidu', in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:16. Originally published in *Nejskromnější umění*, 5–24.

had hardly been considered art. Though he does not permit himself explicitly to declare photography an art, he does attribute the same possibilities and tasks to it as he does to painting, in particular, the task of revealing the truth (and beauty) of reality.<sup>29</sup> In film he clearly perceives a new means of artistic expression. He is convinced that 'all its open possibilities are simply asking to be used for artistic work and also for a responsible account of the world, for an utterly new and penetrating intervention in dramatic material'.<sup>30</sup>

Following on from *Nejskromnější umění* he published *Málo o mnohém* (A little about a lot, 1923), about applied art. In this volume, Čapek considers another borderline area, linking utilitarian and aesthetic values. In his essays from the early 1920s he resolutely rejects the conventional academic criteria of judging works of art:

because, it seems, there is no clear-cut point at which art begins. It definitely ends with truth and beauty, but it also begins in truth and beauty. One feels better therefore down amongst matter-of-fact everyday art than amongst art fakes. The most primitive clay dish is much closer to the most beautiful vase of classical antiquity than is a showy vase on the sideboard of the owner of four tenement houses.<sup>31</sup>

Although he was not trying to come up with a new theory of aesthetics, and tended to formulate his views only as personal declarations, Čapek's developing conception of primitivism manages substantially to expand the boundaries of the then existing conception of art. His reflections to some extent fit in with the ideas of the Czech avant-garde before the First World War, whose leading members did not rely on conventional theory and criticism and tried instead to legitimate the new art trends with their own interpretations of the laws of artistic development and the universal principals of making art.<sup>32</sup> In their writings, the latest in art history and aesthetics mixes together in a shared amalgam of opinion: neo-Kantian formalist aesthetics, which pushes for the autonomy of the work of art, Croce's conception of intuition as the supreme creative principle, which seizes the material and overcomes it with form, and mainly a new understanding of artistic development, represented by the Vienna School, Wölfflin, and Worringer, who substituted typological categories for the normative evaluation of artistic

<sup>29</sup> 'The gaze of the camera looks deeper and straighter. It is not so superficially distracted [...]. And that is why it yields much more truth from the world of the visible. And much more beauty,' Čapek writes in defence of photography. Josef Čapek, 'Chvála fotografie' [In praise of photography], in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:28. Originally published in *Nejskromnější umění*, 25–46.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:45.

<sup>31</sup> Čapek, 'What We Encounter', 101; 'Co potkáváme', 5:64.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Bohumil Kubišta, Emil Filla, Otto Gutfreund, Vincenc Beneš, Vlastislav Hofman, and Pavel Janák.

development, and thereby opened up a space for the assessment of hitherto neglected areas of artistic expression.<sup>33</sup>

In the early 1920s, the ideas of *Nejskromnější umění* had a fundamental influence on the up-and-coming generation of Czech artists. That generation, in the early stage of 'proletarian naivism' applied those ideas in theory and practice.<sup>34</sup> Soon, however, the interwar avant-garde would break apart the boundaries of art, which had already been loosened up by Čapek, when they parted ways not just with routine academicism, but also with traditional forms of art in general, and would come out in support of the 'liquidat[ion of] existing art categories.'<sup>35</sup> In his thinking, Čapek, formed by philosophical relativism, did not let himself be carried away by revolutionary utopia. His work continued to be oriented more to the principles of primitivism and amateurism. His theoretical writings on early forms of creativity led Čapek to reflect on the essence and meaning of art in general. In the 1930s this research resulted in an existential conception of art as a 'confrontation with being.'<sup>36</sup> Understanding art as an expression of 'the most primal of human needs, [developed] to come to terms with the eternal riddle of life and its meaning', he opposed its instrumentalization.<sup>37</sup> In the introductory chapters that he added to the book version of *Umění přírodních národů*, Čapek explicitly links the foundations

<sup>33</sup> Josef Čapek was not the only Czech artist who at this time was thinking about primitivism in fine art. See Emil Filla, 'O ctnosti novoprimítivismu' [On the virtue of Neo-primitivism] (1911), in *Osmá a Skupina výtvarných umělců: Teorie, kritika, polemika* [Osmá and the Fine Arts Society: Theory, criticism, polemics], ed. Jiří Padrta and Miroslav Lamač (Prague: Odeon, 1992), 38–40; Vincenc Beneš, 'Před dílem Rousseauovým' [Looking at Rousseau's oeuvre], *Umělecký měsíčník* 2, no. 2 (1912–13): 51–58; Vlastislav Hofman, 'Prozaická krása moderního umění (Cézanne, celník Rousseau, umění barbarské, hnutí kubismu)' [The prosaic beauty of modern art (Cézanne, Rousseau, barbarian art, the Cubist movement)], *Volné směry* 17 (1913): 252–58; Vincenc Kramář, 'Kubismus' (1921), in *O obrazech a galeriích* [Of paintings and galleries], ed. Josef Krása (Prague: Odeon, 1983), 65; V. V. Štech, *O projevu výtvarnou formou* [Expressing oneself in painting and sculpture] (Prague: Laichter, 1915); Václav Nebeský, 'Smysl modernosti' [The meaning of modernity] (1917–18), in *Smysl modernosti*, ed. Karel Srp (Prague: VŠUP, 2001), 97–122; Václav Nebeský, 'Duch a forma moderního umění' [The spirit and form of modern art], *Červen* 1 (1918): 158–63, 191–95, 212–14, 228–30.

<sup>34</sup> Teige, the leading theorist of the Czech avant-garde between the two world wars, in his first manifesto, of 1920, states that the art of the young draws 'its reserves from the sources of primary creative forces: notice its proximity to folk art, children's drawings, and the artistic expression of the tribes of the native peoples'. Karel Teige, 'Obrazy a předobrazy' [Figures and prefigurations] (1921), in *Výbor z díla* [Selected writings], vol. 1, *Svět stavby a básně* [The world of architecture and poetry], ed. Zina Trochová (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966), 31.

<sup>35</sup> Karel Teige, 'Poetism' (1924), trans. Alexandra Büchler, in *Karel Teige: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>36</sup> Josef Čapek, 'Co má člověk z umění?' [What art gives us], in *Moderní výtvarný výraz*, 19–24. Originally published in *Život* 13, no. 2 (1934–35): 22–23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

of art with magic and religion: 'Each truly creative approach is magic. It contains wonder, that special, barely graspable wonder of transubstantiation [...] the artist borrows the material of the world and exchanges it for his own material to express his own relationship to the world.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Čapek, *Umění přírodních národů*, in *Spisy Josefa Čapka*, 5:199.

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## JOSEF ČAPEK: THE ART OF PRIMITIVE PEOPLES (VERSION S)

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AFRICA, OCEANIA, PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICA, AND THE AMERICAN NORTHWEST

### INTRODUCTION: RELIGION

Compared to other ethnographic or colonial material, the art of the so-called 'savages' is assigned an unimportant place in ethnographic museums. In scholarly books too little space and even less understanding are devoted to it, as if compared to other things these imperfections were not worth the trouble. Though the efforts of ethnographers are aimed at establishing a theory about the *general similarities amongst human beings*, they have not been objective enough in matters related to art. They have always been led to this neglect by bias and excessively European standards, even though they have taken a fair approach towards other forms of expression by primitive cultures. Searching for these general similarities also entails searching for the *elementary nature of ideas*. Borne by different lives, expressions of this elementary nature are admittedly lower or higher, uneven and variable, but ethnographers have, in questions of artistic form, let themselves be deterred by unnecessary prejudice. The result is that all artistic material in this sphere is so disorderly and unclear that it would be very difficult to systematize it.

Even art theorists did not attach pure artistic value to the artistic expressions of primitive peoples. Because of a lack of exclusively formal interest, this research did not provide enough practical benefit. The art of these peoples was usually considered merely a contribution to our knowledge of the psychology of the primitive beginnings of creative work. It seemed, up until that point, that in relation to the European idea of beauty the art of primitive peoples was only an unattractively cellular, amorphous stage, something like the monstrosity of the embryo compared to the developed Apollinarian beauty of a body in full bloom. To give that art a merely embryonic role means to make a not particularly well-grounded parallel to the assumption that the psyche of primitive peoples must be an image of the childhood of mankind. But this soul is usually distinctive, peculiar, regardless of whether it appears clearer, or more obscure. Our criteria, education, perfection, higher standard of living, and so on, do not represent a higher level

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[‘Umění přírodních národů (verze S)’ (manuscript, 1914–16), in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], edited by Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 391–446. This translation covers pp. 391–95.]

than theirs, but often perhaps do mean a different essence. To be interested in the artistic ability of primitive peoples as if it were nothing more than an awkward initial groping for something that we had taken to higher levels is like wanting to put something in nappies even though it is perfect and distinctive.

If this art is accepted as a woefully impotent attempt to catch up with something like the sculptures and paintings of the teachers and members of academies, that is only evidence of the modern era's unfortunate inclination to academicized taste and kitsch. One is unable to recognize and experience art as such, perhaps because that art is grotesque and often risible, but certainly because the common European sense of form has, under the sediment of academic traditions, become hardened, curtailed, too settled in its ways, and superficial. It refuses to accept things that torment it with an unusual sensation, and it lacks a vivid sense of original invigorating forms of another kind.

Only the latest European art, under purely internal pressure, has returned to these underrated forms. Its line of development was at one necessary moment touched by the attractiveness of the art of primitive peoples, an attractiveness that had hitherto been latent. This fertile conjugation did not, however, have the aim of learning by observation and transferring primitivism and exoticism to new forms and new ground. Both are alien to serious modern art. Modern art has only needed to see in the art of primitive peoples the many components of the elementary order, components we would not find so plainly naked and striking anywhere else; many things were there for the taking. It turned out that the ways the natural, basic power of creation is expressed were simple and straight, a power that is highly original and alive amongst precisely these peoples. In reaction to this richness, it became necessary to amend many arid concepts of traditional understandings, which had stagnated and been needlessly transferred to the developmental stage, where art was experiencing a great rebirth. This rebirth had been prepared by the long development of European art, but was not given powerful direction till Cézanne's work. But the exuberant development did not wish peace and quiet or premature stabilization. The fermentation demanded more enzymes. In this development the need for continuous shocks persisted, and one of them was a violent, naive interloper into habitual ideas. It had the effect of being a refreshing stimulus, a source of relaxation, leading to simplicity, and it also tempted one to boldness. It was also one of the effective actors in the struggle for a new conception of formal space, which modern art marked out for the future as a means of new life in contrast to the bloodless survivals of mechanical tradition and superfluous eclecticism.

Where it served as an example in this temporary influence, the art of primitive peoples was not meant to be a direct model for the needs of modern art. It was

more like a formula, akin to formulas for mathematical or, to be more precise, stereometric solutions, which were not to be scholastically applied, yet it was important to become acquainted with them. As soon as these examples were mastered, the resulting collision with the path of purely European and modern art resulted in a booming development. Interest in the art of the 'savages' originated in a natural departure from dully scholastic optical realism. Interestingly, in France the study of this art had a more fertile impact on painting than on sculpture; the most valuable results were drawn from it by *Picasso*, in the period when in his paintings he closely pursued the characteristics of African and Polynesian art. *André Derain* also studied African art, perhaps even before Picasso. For a time, *Alexander Archipenko* was under the influence of Mesoamerican sculpture. *Francis Picabia*, an Orphist, was probably also concerned with the colour forms of the Indians of the American Northwest. Certain later consequences of the art of primitive peoples were deduced also in Bohemia, and were also applied in the development of new architecture. But in this Czech architecture, they have not inclined as closely to this temporary model as these French initiatives did.

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The artistic power of primitive peoples is genuine and alive. It is here that we find a natural sense of form, which – mainly in sculpture, for it is always close to the original sense of form – is elementary and intense, even piercingly so. Here too we find intact the basic sense of plastic shaping laid bare, retaining all its natural ideas and the first sap of the simple conception.

We cannot, however, judge savage creations by the criteria of traditional harmony and beauty, for they would often seem ridiculous to us. What is important here is the special sensibility for transferring space into individual embryonic components and forms, sharply grasped, and a sensibility for creating their synthetic system. The Negro has a special sensibility for characterizing and presenting form, for example, the form of the human body. This is not to say that he imitates by faithfully transferring from a model as the European artists do. Rather, he sharpens the characteristics of his subject, ruthlessly violating them, and substituting for them with some figure from his creative, abstract ideas. In consequence, he so often and so powerfully achieves synthetic simplification, geometrization, and intensive determination in the plastic shaping that his figures then seem to the European sensibility to be monstrous caricatures. This direct, unhesitating sense of form continuously stands out also in statues intended for the most superstitious religious purposes that do not require naturalistic features, but substitute the fearsomeness and cruelty of the dark divine regime for them instead.

We must also admit that it is sometimes good to free ourselves and simplify ourselves with plain refreshment, because our over-cultivated sensibility has already become ensnared in the bloodlessness of handed-down forms that refined the intellect and dulled the instincts. The artistic expression of primitive peoples is primary, basic, and full of the fibres of life, which bind it to vital origins, to organic urges and instinctual paths, that is, to the *deepest essence of art*. All of that had already been eroded in the heavy corpus of European art, and needed a natural resurrection like the one that had by that point existed only in the works of the great artist-individuals and the pioneers of developments in modern art. The value of all such basic examples, like 'primitive' creative language, is most present where we enjoy ourselves, without contamination and without insincerity, by looking at original artistic expression. Here, artistic expression is stripped bare, psychologically exciting, and still somehow eloquently juicy in its natural, fresh, organic nature.

Why do we *like* savage art? Because the new developments are interested in 'space', in expression by means of created space. Neither perspective (line or colour) nor, even less so, an academically realistic copy of a model can provide the modern sensibility with enough of a mental representation of spatial form. So, for example, in Negro art it is as if space were acutely tasted, captured in a state of pleasant and fresh rawness (cut into lentil shapes, segments, and so forth). Form is autonomous, stripped bare, and freed of the flavour of imitation. The appearance of materials, simple and sharp sensational things, tactile texture, bare stuff, and the new flavour of the surface are also pleasant. Modern art likes this kind of corporeality of forms, which is achieved also by surface texture. The modern sensibility, which, only recently, spontaneously achieved geometrical and stereometric forms of understanding space, was in this case glad to encounter elementary examples. They consist in synthetic space-forming elements of a geometric nature, formal shorthand, mutual bonds, an organic nature, and integrity, but also freedom of approach, arbitrariness, interesting unpredictability, and effective paradox, as when, for example, a cylinder and outwardly turned spherical pyramid are made to appear increasingly similar, and so on. All such systems are endowed with a special vibrancy and dynamism, which they have in common with modern art. There are many exciting surprises here about how to create space and how to build figures and appearances from it.

The elementary nature of a spatial sensibility like the one we see in this sort of Negro geometry is important. Whereas we chase after the space of art, primitive peoples achieve the space of their art easily, from its foundations, by real black magic. The ruthlessness and wit of the creative paths are presented with such flair and brazenness, that the pieces are sometimes even ridiculous. By contrast, another

field of our interest is the monumental art form of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, its weighty power and dark lack of restraint, and how from the deepest causes it brings matter to life in monumental plastic space.

It would not be right to allow oneself to be drawn chiefly to one side of the art of primitive peoples, a side that could mislead and distract by its exoticness and perversity. In addition to information concerning style and abstract construction, it is important to be aware of the *formal naturalism* of many of these arts, which was dominant also in pre-historic European art. Not only the simplest but also the most sophisticated and abstract forms demonstrate that they belong to human beings and originate with them. They come from human beings, become an element in their own right, and then return to human beings and the organic world. Their sensual charge brings to mind nature, their vibrancy brings to mind the animal kingdom, and their psychological essence brings to mind a child, a human being, an instinct, a feeling, a recollection, an idea. But, unlike European scholastic realism and academicism, they are never an empty copy of nature or its barren reflection.

[...]

Translated by Derek and Marzia Paton

## JOSEF ČAPEK: THE ART OF PRIMITIVE PEOPLES (VERSION L)

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AFRICA

[...]

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Among the white peoples, nature in art is interpreted, imbued with spirit. Among the blacks it is more a matter of producing or creating something. Nature imbued with spirit does not emerge from the work; rather the work wants to be equal to the thing or appearance.

For us, *reality* is a subject of philosophical inquiry. But what is reality for the savage and how can he seize it and make it submit by means of his artistic work? For him, reality is in any case veiled and ambiguous, so ungraspable that a sense of reality in the field of art can play strange tricks on a savage. True, the savage of the South desires to be deceived with sensation, suggestion, and everything that is artificial. For him, every phenomenon conceals something more behind it. He presents that 'something more' with the suggestive sensation of artificial forms.

Colours, forms, components, and hints all demand to be perceived strongly in his artistic feeling. The savage mind wants strong sensation. It craves this sensation and searches for elements that bring to mind, substitute for, and overcome narrowly understood and hard-to-comprehend reality, behind which the Negro believes there is something more. Just as he gives each thing a soul, a special function, and power, so too does he give these things to the components of art. In this way the forms of art receive much content from the savage. This content often protrudes so tendentiously that it is practically written all over it.

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The art of the Negroes is noncanonical and the things in it have only their own natural individual order. This order is already present in the germ of the creative idea, and according to this idea, and actually in it, this order develops well. It somehow sprouts wildly, for itself, only for its particular work. It is free desire, unfettered, and therefore remote from the great arts, which are like a system. It is

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[‘Umění přírodních národů (verze L)’ (manuscript, 1915–18), in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], edited by Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 447–65. This translation covers pp. 457–60.]

an art that is barbarian and often childish, without high order and discipline, yet lively, in which feelings and ideas appear nakedly, directly, without ceremony.

In the indiscriminate naturalness of savage beauty there is much that is rapacious and greedy, the playfulness of simple, artificially unpretentious ideas. It searches for the strange things that can happen to matter. Matter consists of nice pieces: it is nice how living forms enter into the uncomposed, un-mosaic-like whole, how quickly this can happen, how nicely matter thus shows itself, turns round as one likes, stands up, is carved out, is spread out, and becomes taut. All of this, which the Negro does by himself and creatively performs for himself, is often his sole aim: he requires the pleasure of amazement and wants to give himself a sudden pleasant surprise.

In this candid atmosphere, matter likes to show its own beauty and the ability to be dematerialized. If formed in this way, it manifests its poetic nature and bares its magic claws. But it does not need to be dressed up and smoothed out. It shows itself that it is lovely in its own wild invigorating nature. If this enjoyment can thus arise out of itself, if it is subjected to an independent impartiality and the bold, inventive, pure appeal of simple opinion, then the matter of artistic forming has many ways to satisfy the frank desire and curiosity to achieve new form, and the *kernels of a new piece* are easily produced from it.

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In Picasso's study of Negro sculptures – so long as it served as an impulse to his painting – one observes, in addition to simplifying spatial representation, a method that can usefully be called *impressionism of form*. Impressionism of form is the capturing of space in stereometric observations as well, but observations that are vaguer, more arbitrary, and freer than the constructive and overly projection-like rotation of objects and their volumes, which other Cubists put into the surface of their paintings. But to depict a nose as a pyramid, to make a dot instead of an eye, to make a flat rectangle instead of a complicated volume, and to record these observations in a scattered way, without an inner idea, onto a surface, this kind of new descriptiveness is not a synthetic activity. In the work of Picasso, as opposed to that of his imitators, the organic quality and unified power, the unity of feeling amongst such observations, have always been synthetic.

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The executed ideas of form have to be mediated, integrated, have to follow on from each other and be joined, and have to create the requisite interplay between the perceptions and the usual pieces. The created space, which is borne by the formed material, is meant to be distinctive, vividly functioning, non-schematic.

Otherwise it is dead, spuriously laid out, and without content. In Negro art, creative space is organically built and linked together into a final whole, in a self-evident, freely alive way – bringing to mind the vitality of nature, and in terms of architecture developed from itself, from its core, and from the consistent development of the basic idea. The joining together, affiliating, and linking of forms, and the tying together of motifs, all of that bears the fresh traces of a psychological journey; it does not happen mechanically, without a vivid improvising sensibility.

The thing created, this newly achieved space, must have its own idea. The individual space is unique, belonging to only one created thing, valid only for it, creating its plastic and poetic essence. 'Space', in order to be experienced aesthetically, must be formal; it cannot be mere descriptive geometry. This principle is also observed in the other arts of primitive peoples, and in pre-historic European art, and must be raised as a requirement with regard to the nature of modern art.

[...]

Translated by Derek and Marzia Paton

## JOSEF ČAPEK: FOLK PAINTERS

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### INTRODUCTION

[...]

Art is creating, creating with human hands, with the human heart and spirit, creating new things that join the other integral parts of life and the world. It therefore probably begins where man first became involved with matter in order to originate it *himself*. In short, it begins at the beginning, in simplicity, in fundamentality, in apparent poverty, somewhere so low that few people notice it. It begins low and deep, and can rise all the way up to compete with a god. It definitely does not begin only with the worst pieces in galleries and at exhibitions or with paintings for soap and postcards or with pretty figurines of the 'City of Paris'. Nor are its roots only in the past. Art surely puts down live roots in all periods.

Art is therefore not only enclosed in galleries and art magazines, where it counts on your taste and aesthetic education as if it had already achieved perfection, in comparison with which the rest does not deserve attention. Expressing the beauty and power of the world and life in the supreme way, huge sculptures and paintings demand admiration. The humblest art, which I wish to discuss, also calls for your attention; it wants to provide you with a pure depiction of beneficial things, things useful to man; it is imbued with respect for labour and life, and knows both the necessity and joy that exist between both; it does not have high aims, but brings to life its humbleness by pure and poignant means. And that is no small feat. It wants to be only the mediator between everyday things and man, but its language, though poor and modest, is usually not without a rare loveliness and quiet ardour; it is natural and truthful; it is the grace that has very often been lost by those who have eaten too much from the tree of academic knowledge.

[...]

### HENRI 'LE DOUANIER' ROUSSEAU AND SUNDAY

One bright early evening shortly before Easter, on Holy Saturday, the last plaster-white day of the week, a white plasterer is heading home from work, made white by lime, with white makeup on his hands and face, looking more like a statute

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[*'Malíři z lidu'*, in *Nejskromnější umění* [The humblest art] (Prague: Aventinum, 1920), 5–24, reprinted in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], edited by Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 9–26. The selection translated here covers pp. 9–10, 12–21 of the latter edition.]

than a powdered Pierrot. But he walks, heading down a long suburban street towards home, with an empty lunch pail hanging from his belt, and tomorrow he will be different, in a stiff black suit for Sunday. Women are just emerging from gates of houses and are sweeping the doorsteps, and across the way the tailor is sailing along with a dignified gait, because he does good work – namely, new, ironed, Sunday clothes, from which a sleeve, stiff as a board, is sticking out from under a tablecloth. Tomorrow is Sunday. The family will have their photo taken or will go on an afternoon outing to the countryside or along the embankment, to count ships and bridges; perhaps they will see a floating balloon or will watch a football match. And family dinners and weddings also take place between Saturdays. Sunday is not a genre but the real world of little people, as painted by the customs officer Henri Rousseau in his simple, extremely lovely paintings.

This feeling of respect and that poignant candour of everyday life are full of seriousness and have changed into the rare purity and innocence of a painter's rendering. But between two Sundays are the workdays, and it does not seem that the amateur would let himself be particularly moved by the dramatic nature of work, but would probably much rather pay his respects to tranquil pleasure, peace and quiet.

We needn't go so far as to recall loveable Rousseau, the autodidact and master painter, for in our country we also have a great many Rousseaus, lesser and anonymous. They are the painters of shop signs. Not all those shop signs are memorable, particularly not today, because compared to the old-fashioned ones these newer shop signs are for the most part imperfect. I will explain later the causes of this decline, which, I believe, has yet to cause hardly anyone any heartache. First of all, I should like to discuss the way in which these inconsequential paintings differ from academic paintings. I hope to convince you that the difference does not consist merely in a lack of skill, but that it is fundamental and resides in the artistic approach and way of regarding the things of this world.

I have already mentioned that this art wishes to mediate between everyday goods and man. That is not to say that a nice shop sign is only a notification and enticement to get you as quickly as possible into the shop. It has often seemed to me that these simple still lifes are an expression of a poignant creed, a small altar of calm deities, ruling benevolently. It is some ardent deity of abundance, of simple virtue and quiet blessing, which rules by the sure affirmation *that the things are really here*. Things of practical need, everyday things; they exist; they exist here, nicely arranged, of pretty appearance and good quality. There is flour, there are loaves of bread, there are eggs and milk, there's coal, everything that people need. And just as the eggs and the loaves of bread are not a mere impression for the

buyer, the painters of the shop signs are something real, not an impression or a pretext for a painter's playing with technique.

For the simple amateur even the sun is not a phenomenon, the interplay of phenomena, or a capricious effect. Rather it is an object, a golden disc, a thing, a circle with a divine face, or, say, a person. In other words, the sign painter is utterly convinced of the absolute existence of the things he depicts. His relation to them – compared to the Impressionist view – is non-optical, vital. He knows them in their essence, each one of them, each in isolation. Their innermost life, rising up in space in peaceful mutual tolerance, does not remain concealed from him. For each thing, many, many views, many experiences one on top of the other in a simple, total fact, in inner creative experience. And now, when he has to depict them, he takes them from himself already definitive, clear, and compact, as he feels them in himself and knows them; and in order to make them visible and recognizable, he endows them all with signs and attributes, which matter-of-factly characterize them. He properly equips them with their matter-of-fact, local colour: for white, blue, or black things he uses pure, real white, blue, or black, and states them as clear complete words. He does not shade or illuminate objects in order to veil or drown them in a picturesquely moody medium; he shades them if he wants to express their plastic essence.

Even better, one could say that the objects painted in these humble still lifes model themselves, willingly develop themselves with a graphic approach, offer themselves to the viewer with realistically matter-of-fact colour, and show themselves to him lucidly in the simplest spreading out and concentration from the inside out. So, for example, a shadow is either a simple grading of local colour or belongs directly to the object; it is a fixed component of the object, a necessary result of roundness or squareness, of the spatial power of things.

That is the great difference between them and more demanding paintings for art dealers. Imagine an academically trained painter as he composes his still life into picturesquely arranged light, trying, in all sorts of ways, to find the most suitable arrangement: whether to light it from above, whether to shade the windows from the left or the right. And he copies them with this desired, combined, but in fact arbitrary light, because these things would exist anyway, even without all the interesting lighting and its effects that are spread out over their surface. One could therefore say that he copies this lighting and these surfaces on which the shadows and light slip across and are caught on, rather than the things themselves. And if he sets them up as models, it sometimes happens that he has thereby set them up completely apart from himself, that he has set them too far away, so that by even this short distance they become alien to him. So, where the one person relies exclusively on the receptivity of his retina

and makes his technical skill and an optical impression the only starting points of his work (which, unfortunately, often happens), the other creates from his own inner world, where the arrangements and appearances of things are given by inner experience, which is condensed and established, where knowledge becomes one in simple, firm forms.

And now this more primitive painter endeavours, by means of a creative approach, to mediate his own experience of things to the viewer, to encounter the viewer's own experience, and thus to achieve mutual agreement about the depicted object.

Art truly needs some kind of mute, natural agreement between artist and viewer, assuming of course they are not absolutely contrary in spirit, as is the case, unfortunately, in these days of the crisis of no style. It is fair to assume that in the unified style periods this kind of spontaneous agreement was in operation between the viewer and art. This agreement is necessary in order for art to be able to persuade, to meet with a similar state of mind, and to avoid misunderstandings. Otherwise, an expression of style oriented solely to the optical would seem pointless, unnatural, ineloquent. Anyone who sees with eyes spoilt by admiration for, say, Makart or Lenbach (to go further afield for my examples) will consider even the nicest shop sign to be mere naivety.<sup>1</sup> But surely nothing can be brushed off that way. Someone who looked impartially, with a bit of earthiness, would without a doubt be rewarded with the insight that simplicity is usually endowed with the rare gift of not being superficial.

The sign painter does not copy his model, but recalls it from his inner consciousness. It is natural that an elementary, uncomplicated, artistic rendering is linked to a fundamental way of looking at things, because just as the amateur's heart is simple, so his artistic means are pure and direct. Here the line remains true to its primary role, and firmly, emphatically, and illustratively cuts the object out of the emptiness of the background, and embraces it firmly, but lovingly, with sincere earthiness. It creates a precise and meticulous boundary of objective colours; and it should come as no surprise that because of its honesty it sometimes ends up somewhat stiff and ponderous. From the start, the line becomes an essential component of the composition: it deploys forms on the surface of the painting, it stakes out and sets boundaries in which the colour and plasticity of things stand out. Not stopping at details, the line appears magnanimous, curt, even poor. Colour is linked directly to it; simply the edge, the border, the boundary of objective colour is also the outline of a form. The colour surface of things is modelled by itself, generally not by adding another colour, but by increasing the lightness or

<sup>1</sup> [The painters Hans Makart (1840–1884), an Austrian, and Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904), a German, were leading representatives of Academism.]

fullness of the objective colour. By means of this organic expansiveness of gradation, colour ceases to be mere surface, though its ability to create depth is usually used not for dramatic effects, only for objective ones. The colour gradation remains calm, though the colour contrasts are quiet sharp and bare; the intention is constructive, to highlight, to signify, but not spectacular or picturesque. The *folk painter* loves colours that are pure, without nuance, almost like their natural or chemical matter, which he buys from a seller. That is not to say, however, that he is obsessed with garish colours.

His conception of shadow and light is similarly objective. Light is usually simply white, shadow is black or brown. I have already noted that here shadow is not produced or caused by the lighting, but that it constitutes a permanent part of the forms, that it is, as we know from experience, a necessary result and matter-of-fact manifestation of the spatial essence of things. By their depth and dimension, things bring shadow and light into spatial existence by themselves.

Our painter does not copy from the outside; he does not record his own optical reaction to this just-presented model. Instead, he recalls it from his consciousness, from many unique, interlinked pieces of knowledge, from a synthesized great quantity that is already monolithic and stabilized. Not by way of allusion and recorded observation, but by the tough process of construction, of embodying an idea so condensed and ripe that it seems to be comprehensive. And here the formal means remain particularly pure, intact, because they are still organically emphasized and concentrated by the work, subject to the same inner law to become an objective, physical value of the pictorial space. They develop simply, directly, and consistently. During the work, they do not draw on effects, illusions, or imitative trickiness, which would violate them. That is why this elementary technique can seem primitive in these artistically disoriented times, which are accustomed to highly differentiated imitative effects. There is no doubt about that. Yet it is a simple, melodic harmony and the simplest proportionality between the object and the creative representation. In art that has this clarity and sincerity of intention, things seem almost sacred and their respectful, modestly magnanimous simplicity is true warmth.

This kind of simple painter undoubtedly does not even persuade himself that he is facing a vision that he would want, when inspired, to capture in his painting. He wants to make loaves of bread, sacks, bottles, paper cones full of spices. It almost has less to do with creating than with making a thing on the surface of a painting, a thing he now recalls from an inner experience of life, and wants to make as close as possible to something real: undoubtedly, he desires to make it beautiful. He pursues that goal along a simple, direct path, which guarantees the purity of the artistic work, the clarity, prettiness, and strikingness of the painting; by this path

of *making real* the humble artist often draws remarkable magic out of his own soul and the painting is filled with a charm and special mystery that can lend reality an almost spiritual nature. Things seem to be made beautiful by simplicity; sometimes it is beauty and pure comfort and those things appear as new and as clear as a landscape after the rain. They are nourished and revived with the breath and warmth of the human heart in which they intimately resided. They are elevated by the heartfelt sympathy and understanding that one can bring to everyday things. In another still life, for example, they reside in exalted peace, as if on a holiday of the world: that is the peace and quiet of the soul, which has thus blessed them. At other times they exist in a drowsiness of resignation and unconsciousness or are delineated as if in a slow, heavy awakening: the simple soul was, broadly and without interruption, astonished at being. True, we often find here a bit of the drabness of the world as well. So go and get rid of that bad taste by trying something else: here things raise themselves up proudly and prickly; the world is full of edges on which we have hurt ourselves many times.

In general, however, the folk painter loves things the way he knows them to be. He loves the whiteness of sugar and flour, the colourfulness of material and wrappings, the warm brown and circularity of loaves of bread, the soft roundness of bottles. So he depicts them nice and white. He draws them out and circles them with respect and thoroughness. And the painting bears the innocent traces of this material love. The painting appears meticulous and moving, even though it was made by a coarse and clumsy hand. The painted things seem to have stood up themselves in devoted astonishment at their own emergence and existence. They then persist in the sinless existence of the material. They sometimes seem almost sanctified: the bags of flour – though so similar to each other – rise up venerably like idols. And many loaves of bread, so pure and round and clear to everyone, seem to be not talking about a struggle for bread, but to be a reminder that bread was the body of the Lord.

But not all shop signs are as pretty as I have described them here. The painter's technique can be unskilled, uncultivated, lacking in nimbleness and harmony. Sometimes the lines rise up a little bit slanted, become stiff, and fall over. Sometimes they rise up almost threateningly. The colour black is no longer the colour of a new Sunday suit, but becomes an almost infernal tar. The painting has been intruded upon by a strange excitement, confusion, hardness, disproportion, wildness, and bellowing. And all of that testifies to a hard struggle. But don't think that you will necessarily be faced here with failure, gaping at you dully and barrenly. All of this might be beautiful, and not simply because the painting is rocking and reeling about dizzily and in the convulsions of the struggle. Nonetheless, it persuades one that life and reality, in the dizziness of clumsy

expression, fight their way out all the more fiercely, in leaps, rearing up, and colliding, in efforts accompanied by a bit of terror like everything in blind fervour. In any case, it elevates the *pure* amateur thing far above kitsch, because the *living* possibility of greater perfection, improvement, even beauty, is always in that thing. But kitsch cannot be improved; it would never become beautiful, for it is bad to the core. In front of baker's shops I saw some painted loaves of bread that could almost be transferred straight into a Giotto fresco. If you tried to do something like that with kitsch, which is brimming with technical obscenities, you would immediately be persuaded that it could not be transferred without causing damage anywhere but in a bourgeois living-room or some corner of the Modern Gallery.<sup>2</sup>

What I have written here about the formal values of shop signs does not describe them in general. I wanted to pay my respects to the folk painter, the heart of the amateur, if he expresses himself in a pure way, which is somehow a style beyond styles.

In any case, a bit of an old-world mood clings to those still lifes, consisting partly in their simplicity and their style. They are on the whole usually not completely lacking in tradition, so it cannot be said that they would always be totally virginal creations. For one thing, they have their own tradition, the tradition of the workshop in which the craftsman worked; this is the way in which the models, the style, and the overall nature and composition are transferred. This method of painting is most closely associated with the rather dry yet poetic painting of the Empire period and later. And it seems that shop signs in particular have remained untouched by Romanticism. In individual cases, the model has been transferred across an even greater distance – namely, from the reign of Empress Maria Theresa and also the Rococo. But these are neither determining influences nor a school. The spontaneity and naturalness which move one in the work of the amateur, the folk artist, is in his case a plus.

It can now finally be admitted that few shop signs merit the praise that I have lavished on them. No one should therefore think I was lying if he or she does not like the first sign they encounter in their street after having read these pages. Sign-painting has in recent times fallen into dreadful decline, if one can put it so tragically. I don't know whether the vocational schools are to blame, but this decline can definitely be ascribed to the disruptive power of the modern age. Naturalism, ornamentalism, and Impressionism have made their way in here, and the last named of these easily becomes a cancer, which is frighteningly able to corrode the strong, clear face of a painting, gnaw away at a drawing, corrupt

<sup>2</sup> [The Modern Gallery of the Kingdom of Bohemia was established in 1902 for the purpose of collecting contemporary Czech art.]

colour, destroy form and composition, and veil forms and things. I have documented it elsewhere several times, particularly in the common landscape paintings of today, which overflow exhibitions and shops with art, but I have not sought to turn that into an argument against Impressionism. Well, that is amateurism in the bad sense of the word, where high style is parasitically imitated, facility is feigned, and tricks, technique, and emptiness are blown up to be something that we sometimes encounter perfectly executed. I have seen academic painters' and sculptors' works presented with great allure and ambition, and yet they were nothing more than a relatively successful *imitation of art*. But the new shop signs are terribly done. So much for moderation; they are a coarse, empty, inelegant, smeared daub of ugly colour. The rendition has become horribly superficial and the technique is a bungling, muddy mix, the utter negation of all the basic means of expression. And all the painter of today does is skilfully apply a slightly better mixture of painterly techniques to a nicer subject in order to make a pretty looking morsel for the superficiality all around us. And, surprisingly, it definitely does not occur to him that a poor relation is gazing at him from above.

[...]

Translated by Derek and Marzia Paton

## JOSEF ČAPEK: WHAT WE ENCOUNTER

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A wily artist, a would-be expert, often fails to pull off a work, and the results are often quite depressing. The amateur, the folk painter, manages to do something, and we are surprised by the charm and wisdom of his good intentions and the pretty thing.

I am not talking here about folk art in the ordinary sense of the word, that is, traditional, rural art. Here I mean contemporary folk art, the work of craftsmen and ordinary amateurs, an art that tends to be urban, or, better said, suburban. But I see that I always call it art whenever it has to do with art that is not intended as art and has no ambition to be art whenever it is without pre-established and followed models and criteria. It is art that comes into being by means of simple work, simple technique, and truly humble ideas. The naturalness and sincerity of the creative approach here are fertile soil for good opportunities and results. It is a great poverty, but a poverty that is not without purity. Art likes to spring forth even from barren soil, which is not exactly fertilized with the grand deposits of cultural manure. Or, let's say, not finding enough fertile soil here, this art, rather than grow up to be proud flowers, buds into a small, unimpressive, but beautifully humble little flower of subtle fragrance. Why would one want to despise it?

I became bored with the paintings at exhibitions. I felt alienated and tired, as if my head and heart had been emptied out. But I also noticed film posters on a corner: a train flying madly through yellow space, and a man in a death-defying leap, and then a coffin in shades of green and black surrounded by candles and faces full of hatred and grief, simple posters, which moved me and which I returned to look at again and again.

They were probably not by artist-printmakers; they were undoubtedly made by worker-lithographers. Their special expressiveness and charm resided in the simple, naively insistent vision of a train, a dramatic event, a vision that was utterly fresh and unpretentious, which, despite all the clumsiness and woodenness of the execution, took me back somewhere to the days of my childhood.

I didn't know how to get hold of those posters. I didn't have the courage to pull them off the wall, the way little boys cut out pictures they like. My youth is also long gone, carried away by the collisions of life. Here (it has often seemed to me), where we are so fond of blindly setting up idols, as we are of blindly tearing them

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[‘Co potkáváme’, in *Nejskromnější umění* [The humblest art] (Prague: Aventinum, 1920), 61–66, reprinted in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], edited by Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 60–65. This translation is of the latter edition.]

down, it would be disgraceful and dangerous to confess to a fondness for such an inferior item, an interest that would easily get me branded an imitator of amateurs. By contrast, in America an art journal called *The Soil* has appeared, which, in addition to the paintings of the old masters also publishes pictures of everyday life, lovely photographs of boxing matches, animals, and machines, children's drawings, and works by ordinary people.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, in Russia the government has taken into its hands the organization and encouragement of ordinary peoples' creativity, which is undoubtedly linked not only to folklore. I see that it was not only my personal hobby and perversions, which led me to this work; I see that we are living in times of a wave of new interest in hitherto neglected things. These are simple loves, poor, inconspicuous little flowers, which one can stop and look at on the way to the masters in the galleries.

Leaving the exhibitions, feeling depressed by the falseness of their artistic goods, fettered with pessimism, and fed up with the feigned boringness, I was glad sometimes to look at a poster for Singer sewing machines, on which a rigid, stern housekeeper, lacking vim and vigour, wooden, and matter-of-fact, convinced me with humane reassurance of the existence of things, of modesty and moral clarity, things which neither pretend to be anything nor manipulate anything in this world. I am not saying that it was an artistic experience; I only mean that she calmed me down and encouraged me without theatrics.

We sometimes find that ordinary people, simple craftsmen, potters, and woodcarvers manage to do some good work. It is a clay cat, a toy made for the pleasure of children and a place to put their pennies, ponderous as an artless letter full of spelling mistakes, but made with a sincere heart. Grey like an old idol, enclosed in calm illustrative outline, lively, emphatic, and summing up everything in its details, with the dapper whiskers of a lecherous cat, like a red, haughty, and stupid little loaf of bread, the kind we used to see when we were children. Yes, indeed, this naive little lump of plain clay is far from a piece of Royal Copenhagen, but it is – take note – also far from a mediocre or bad piece of Royal Copenhagen.

I came across dishes in the Prague suburb of Břevnov, decorated with a few little flowers like something from the beginning of the world, delicate and clumsy, like a father's kiss.

In Moravia I saw a new hallway painted with landscapes, a painting that was both repulsive and enchanting, whose trees and mountains immediately bring to mind Chinese paintings and the most charming Rococo painters. I also saw other paintings in farm hallways, similar to old frescos.

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<sup>1</sup> [*The Soil* was an art magazine published by the art dealer Robert J. Coady between 1916 and 1917. It promoted Coady's conception of American national art, which extended beyond high art to include everyday objects and industrial machinery.]

At glassmakers, amidst the most unsightly goods, one finds goblets and vases decorated with flowers, which seem like fresh new revelations. There are advertising calendars and hanging pressed-paper letter-holders, the astonishingly bad taste of which is sometimes balanced out by a special expressiveness and trueness, which are indescribable. I used to like coming across the newspaper ads of one tree nursery, where an ordinary man, a plainly depicted gardener, not rustic, very austere and undemanding, is wrapping up a little tree. Its genuine 'simple beauty' delighted me. There is unmounted crochet work decorated with flowers and butterflies of the maker's own invention, the delicate vegetation of dreams, whose charming and sweet naturalness is a true pleasure for the eye and the mind.

I used to like to look into the window of a shop with musical instruments. The shop was full of rows of standing and hanging brass trumpets, horns, and tubas, which created a sparkling gallery that breathed the peace and quiet of a real musical still life just like the ones the old masters loved. For, just as there is the art of spectacle, there is also the beauty of real still lifes, a quiet beauty, and the delectable positive side of things, displayed to be seen, a shop window that shows and speaks, the poignant little shop window, where kale as well as chicory and a scrubbing-brush are lovingly placed beside apples and a brown enamelled pot, creating a little domestic world which one feels good to be in. As a boy, here in front of these little shops, I was filled with sweet astonishment at these things. And it seems to me that Picasso seriously failed to compose, in addition to his still lifes of wood, newspaper, and tin, a pretty shop window with these kinds of tin, wood, and clay things, to show how much he loves them.

I think I've gone off on a tangent. I was supposed to talk about art, even if it was the most minor kind, and I have come instead to an enumeration of things. That's because it is a matter of charm, the charm of things and also the charm of the human relationship with those things, and that relationship can go all the way up, in hardly perceptible boundaries, to a great and noble work of art, because, it seems, there is no clear-cut point at which art begins. It definitely ends with truth and beauty, but it also begins in truth and beauty. One feels better therefore down amongst matter-of-fact everyday art than amongst art fakes. The most primitive clay dish is much closer to the most beautiful vase of classical antiquity than is a showy vase on the sideboard of the owner of four tenement houses.

I have the cheapest children's toys, chickens, made by a Prague woodcarver who is hard of hearing. They express all the good mimetic instinct and all the perceptive wisdom of the ordinary man who has entered a competition with an artist. The first requirement is a design that best corresponds to the effortless, quick technique of manufacturing something on a lathe. This manufacturing should be as uncomplicated and inexpensive as possible, achieving the maximum

possible effect with the greatest economy on the lathe. We see that it's impossible to achieve greater plastic simplicity. The results of this plastic reduction and creative ingenuity only appear easy; the whole is extremely lively and convincing. It does not appear to be deficient, limited, or lacking in anything. That's because, on the one hand, the model from nature has been skilfully captured here in a simple form and, on the other, this form has everything that is natural to it and is distinctive, making it a vivid, organic thing, even if, say, it hasn't been made after a model from nature. That is because these chickens are not parts; they are complex, a synthesis of motion, from which the vivid appearance of things is composed. They are not created for viewing only from one side, a view that would summarize for the memory a significant moment of a natural phenomenon. They are created for viewing from all sides, because their existence is presented to consciousness as a whole. They are their own absolute form, their own bit of life and organic nature. Neither the eye nor the mind need add anything to them.

Translated by Derek and Marzia Paton

## JOSEF ČAPEK: THE SOCIAL UTILITY OF ART

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### I

As he works, tired and getting old, a man who is granted a look at even a single tree growing green amongst the walls whose stones imprison him feels better, less oppressed. Life travels along a chain of days that seem all the same, and becomes exhausted. The days grow shorter, and we will soon live again in the desolateness and darkness of winter. A view of a tree that in its crown carries the changes of the four seasons whose lively charm and sequence are always full of hope fills the mind with emotion and consolation. Is the sight of a tree whose leaves were so fresh in spring but are turning yellow and falling now in order to bloom again, is this view that moves and consoles one, a pleasure? Before being a pleasure, and more than being a pleasure, it is part of life, expanding the emotional space of the heart. Is art a pleasure? It is usually defined as such. But if it were a pleasure, it would be a more general need. Is it a need? It does not seem to be one, because, as we see, most people are actually able to live without any art. Cézanne said that art addresses only an extremely limited number of people. But those are the pessimistic words of a painter who suffered all his life from a lack of understanding and recognition. Art surely must be a pleasure and a need: that is suggested by the fact that most members of human society like to surround themselves with ugly substitutes for art.

It would be an advantage for art, if it were not considered overly refined, sacred, or exalted. That would be as beneficial as if it ceased to be so frequently considered an obliging whore, lending itself to bad taste and to instincts that have nothing in common with art. Art is essentially a manifestation of life, just as everything else is an expression of life, just as every good human activity is, just as work, deeds, and ideas are. And the fact that society has to be educated, that there has to be something called *art education*, is probably the fault not of art, but of people, of human shortcomings, imperfections, and lack of harmony. That is irrefutable evidence that something's wrong here. Was it necessary in the days when art was something natural to provide art education to makers and viewers? I acknowledge that art education is an excellent thing. It is, however, not the cure but a symptom of something wrong. Art education necessarily contains something one-sided, insinuating, apostolic, which distracts one from life. If generally good

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[‘Sociální užitečnost umění’, in *Málo o mnohém* [A little about a lot] (Prague: Aventinum, 1923), 7–13, reprinted in *Spisy Josefa Čapka* [The writings of Josef Čapek], vol. 5, *Knihy o umění: Nejskromnější umění; Málo o mnohém; Umění přírodních národů* [Books on art: The humblest art; A little about a lot; The art of primitive peoples], edited by Luboš Merhaut (Prague: Triáda, 2009), 81–86. This translation is of the latter edition.]

mores are dominant, one needs no preachers. And the righteous life, good deeds together with fear of God, has always been better for life than an apostolate. An apostolate creates big opinions and ideas out of something that should be one's simple, obvious lot in life. It becomes something forced, only because people do not understand life well enough, because society is limited, and does not know how to run its affairs more harmoniously, and perhaps doesn't even want to. We have vegetarians because in general it has not yet been realized that the best thing for people is vegetables, fruit, and meat. Teetotallers exist because many people get drunk; if we were all temperate, there would be neither boozers nor teetotallers and a drop of wine wouldn't do anyone any harm. There is so little room for art in life today; it seems to be something uncivil, something that incessantly slides off the rails, and people who are sincerely enthusiastic about art seem to the others to be a bit like sectarians and madmen. Though most people today want their *artistically* executed life-size photographic print for twenty crowns, including the frame, we have let art grow distant from the heart and have turned it into something unusual. The results are that people who love art seem to the others to be strange zealots and that those who promote art really are zealots.

Art has been made into something rare for so long that it is indeed becoming rare. The American Indian who furnishes his wigwam doesn't worry about it or hesitate as much as someone who furnishes his flat, though there is more artistic labour in the Indian household and it is less random. The Indian makes everything himself, from his ornamented moccasins to his pipe. He paints his tent with hunting scenes and decorates his tools with grim divine faces. If each of us made his own tent by himself, exerting all his skill, craftsmanship, and taste, perhaps we would also be better off. But we no longer know how to make our own things ourselves and so it happens that we have gradually forgotten that art is in its origins also work, labour, that it was made as part of life, that it is as much an everyday thing as bread and the Word, and that it is not merely a decorated banner on top of a tent, nice fluffy foam on the bitter chalice of life.

Art is absolutely not mere trimmings. Do you think that it began where the savage set about decorating the handle of his axe with notches, crosshatching, and naked figures? If this axe did not have its own perfect *form* in addition to utility, added decoration would not have contributed much. The harmonious, perfect shape of the prehistoric flint knife, with its little leaf-like chips, contains something as definite and complete in form as an Empire longcase clock or an engraved and hammered suit of armour from the days of Emperor Rudolph II. The muse does not look the other way when the cabinetmaker carefully produces the cobbler's bench, but she flees in horror at the sight of furniture for snobs. Art

is not a luxury, nor should it be, and one can imagine that it would thrive even in modest circumstances.

## II

True, it has long been our experience that massive, truly great works of art were easiest to make with the support of art-loving tyrants and patrons. But, by contrast, a considerable number of outstanding works in our day were made anonymously, without general interest, indeed under the most onerous, obstructive circumstances. One cannot call today's public an art-loving tyrant. In addition to their many good qualities, recent times have also excelled in their utter lack of taste, which could at least be a slightly reliable guide in the labyrinth of what is desired and chosen.

The culture of past eras was in that respect more compact, more uniform. There was less uncertainty. If one devoted part of one's money to art, one would in all probability really get some art for one's money. Today, the opposite is often the case: the greater the expense, the lower the probability. In 1200 one got simple furniture for a little bit of money, more splendid and fancier furniture for more money, and magnificent furniture for a lot of money. The difference was in the costliness and the excellence, *not in the spirit*. Today, for a little bit of money, one gets bad furniture, for more money one can get almost a parody of art, and for 20,000 crowns you can get a stern, strident polemic against art. There is a certain consolation in that, a guarantee, and almost a bit of hope that art will not necessarily serve luxury, for which there should be no place in times of social rebirth, whose programme includes neither the rich man nor wastefulness.

Where it begins from the start, from anything where it is not something rare, where it is not evidence of luxury, art does not have to be the wastefulness of a tsar. If socialism intends to satisfy art by building a 'palace of the people' instead of palaces of the emperor or the archbishop, little will be achieved, for in that way only the users of the palaces will have changed places, nothing more. And it would also be too little if – as the good king of France who wanted each of his subjects to have a chicken in his or her pot every Sunday – the benevolent dictatorship would hang an original on the wall of every worker or if it carefully confiscated all the art collections from privileged private hands and concentrated them in galleries where no one would go anyway, unless forced to do so. It is not, however, a question of art being given a more popular, more general place, of it 'being the property of everyone'. It is rather a matter of once again achieving the justification for its existence and regaining its essence. It is odd that socialism too considers art a luxury, a special offshoot of culture, a fine by-product of civilization, just as perfumes and iridescent dyes are made as derivatives of coal tar. They

would like to socialize art, just as everything that the working classes have not yet had in their hands is meant to be socialized. But it would be impossible not to notice the special respect and certain gallant hesitations that socialist governments have felt in placing art in the social organization of the state, society – and work. I have already noted that it should mainly be a matter both of the justification for the existence of art and of its essence. If art is often considered an effusion of strange visions, ecstasies, and almost of epilepsy, one will forget that in its broadest essence *it accompanies work*, that it comes from the system of work, from a laborious, formative, and active relationship to material, the world, life, and man. Otherwise it would not, after all, have accompanied man (originally) in all his doings, in all his affairs. Art did not, after all, create only figures of gods, did not paint only visions and idealistic appearances, did not make only things that do not exist. Rather, art was present when man was making his tools, building his house and table, and it accompanied him in his life and work in a wide variety of forms, to the very threshold of death.

What is essential about art is that it can truly begin from the beginning, that it can also be present in the simplest things, if it is done by the natural way of work, activity, and general creation. The possibility of form resides in all materials, in all purposes, in all ideas. In earlier days that was convincingly manifested many times. Today, too, one may hope that the natural conditions for everyday art have not yet been lost, that they have not ceased to exist either in the relationship of privilege or of service, which was established in recent times between the artist and society.

### III

Tolstoy somewhere names three kinds of useless people: civil servants, industrialists, and scholars and artists, and defines them in the sense that they ride on the back of the working man, live only from his work, because they themselves do not work. They are not in an active, working relationship with the soil and the earth. Indeed, they avoid it – and they turned their idleness in the material struggle for their livelihoods and their parasitic participation in the work of others into their way of life.

If I understand him right, Tolstoy here considers the struggle with the soil to be the only real work, so that it satisfies man's needs, and provides him with foodstuffs and life. It is not my task to defend bureaucrats and industrialists, but it really does seem to me here that Tolstoy has conceived work and the relationship with the soil too much like a muzhik. I do not think that an active relationship with matter and the earth is conducted by means of the mattock and the spade, just as the relationship with God need not be restricted only to prayer.

On the contrary, science too has a very active relationship to matter and to the earth. After all, to what end does eternal restlessness drive science to search for things and to penetrate them by means of questions and answers? It is a search for all the causes and the meaning of existence, and also the search for God. All of that is the struggle with the soil (for we do not live on other stars and spheres) and it returns us to matter and the earth. Man does not free himself so easily from matter and the earth, nor does he ask for that. Because he himself is matter and the earth in another form, and there is no other way. And art! The artist creates his work with matter and reality. A painting or a play is by its existence a thing, just as a machine, a tree, or a man is a thing. I said that art in its essence accompanies work. Can you set a clear-cut boundary where art begins and work, that is, an active relationship to matter, ends? If someone makes a simple table or chair and really goes to great trouble to ensure that this table is made as well and as beautifully as possible, he is mainly making a table, but it already contains an element of art. Art is already in the joy of work and the perfection of work. The first blow of the axe cutting into the tree trunk and of the chisel into the stone is a gate through which work and art enter into matter together. It depends on how much of that art you let burst in. And ultimately there is not just one kind of work. Work can be bad or good. Similarly, the bad worker, as much as the bad artist, stands in an utterly poor relationship with matter and the earth. And Tolstoy should have listed the bungling craftsman far behind his parasites who ride on the backs of the workers, for the bungler devalues both work and matter.

In opposition to the voice of Tolstoy, one can hear another, equally powerful voice, the voice of Rodin, an artist no one can accuse of having a low opinion of art. Rodin has put forth the view that today, when work is considered a bother and an unpleasant necessity, only art is done out of a joy of work and its perfection. When, says Rodin, I see a bricklayer laying one brick after another out of the mere joy of work and its perfection, for me this bricklayer is an artist. Those are words that in their own way outstandingly characterize the moral crisis of today, the grievous materialism of the unenlightened proletariat, whose spirit is combative and desirous of redress, but has also been made weary from a life of work, because it is poisoned by a false, crippling view of work and man. Its sensibility has been sorely tried and is in revolt, and it sees work only as being necessarily connected to the fetters of servitude and slavery. In essays about the nature and basic causes of art one too often talks about an *'inner necessity'*, a necessity that may be categorical, but is, rather than servitude, a free act, the far from unpleasant necessity that we have already discussed. Without this free inner necessity, the disgusted, bad worker is like the sleepwalker who without a clear consciousness and inner involvement acts under the pressure of that

unpleasant alien necessity to work, and the sleepwalker is aware only of the efforts connected with it. That is a truly bad state of affairs, leading to aversion and unwillingness. Nor should one be surprised that in addition to all the achievements and progress, modern times are also an era of bad quality and shoddy production. It is probably unnecessary to add that this characteristic of the times has deeper moral consequences, which also affect a wide variety of aspects of life in the arts.

In a completely unexpected and unintended way, Rodin's words demonstrate that labour and art cannot be separated from each other as something alien and disparate, and that, on the contrary, art, which is a continuous 'endeavour to achieve perfection', can be an example for labour. Therein may be the first social utility of art in times of crisis, rebirth, and stabilization, its primary moral value, and a ray of light in the darkness.

Translated by Derek and Marzia Paton