

Image, «Communal House», and Word in relation to some important changes in the visual arts of Europe

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The more a student of art history looks at the development of European visual arts, the more he will be impressed by the important changes that took place in the course of time. We intend to examine some of these changes more closely – although very briefly – from a point of view that combines insights from art history and from cultural anthropology. Our main attention will be directed to the art of painting, though some other aspects of the visual arts will also be taken into consideration. In our contribution, two topics will occupy a central position, viz. Image and «Communal House», and Image and Word.

Image and «Communal House»

To have a separate place for ceremonies and social meetings is a universal phenomenon of human cultures. It may take a variety of forms: open spaces in the woods, on the mountains, or near and in the inhabited area; temporary buildings and movable tents like the tabernacles in ancient Israel; natural sheltered places such as mountain caves; more permanent community houses (of various kinds) and sanctuaries whose purpose it is to mediate between this world and the world of transcendental powers they represent (e.g. the Borobudur in Indonesia). A very large part of the visual arts of mankind was made to function in these places¹. Of course, that is the case with regard to religious, political and social architecture, but it is also true in respect of the typical visual arts, i.e., painting, sculpture, and related forms of art.

We should be aware that in other cultures and periods, distinctions may be made in a way which differs very much from our approach to the arts. Since it is apparent that sculpture all over the world has mostly been painted, we know that in many cultures sculpture and painting overlapped. A very good example is given by the culture of ancient Greece. As stated in «A World History of Art»: «Sculpture was normally coloured and thus more closely related to painting than is nowadays apparent; indeed, there seems to have been a symbiotic relationship between the two arts»². Just as in ancient Mexico, polychrome colouring was to be found in ancient Greece on the outside of monumental buildings. A Greek temple

¹ *Godfried Willem Locher*, Huis, Macht en Staat, in: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 141, 1985, p. 86 and p. 88.

² *Hugh Honour and John Fleming*, *A world history of art*, London 1982, p. 101.

could not only be characterized as a form of sculpture because of its outward orientation, it also could be seen as a kind of three-dimensional painting.

The study of architecture in various cultures has demonstrated how strongly our notion of architecture has been influenced by the idea of shelter. This fact is stressed by *Kubler* in his book on the art and architecture of ancient Mexico, where he writes: «Our conception of architecture has been dominated for so long by the need for shelter, that we lack the sense of building as monumental form apart from shelter»³. A more comprehensive idea of architecture is necessary for understanding not only the monuments of ancient Mexico but also the monuments of ancient Greece and several other countries. The Greek temple formed a unity with the open space connected to it. It consisted primarily of an enclosed room opening at the east end and housing the statue of the patron deity. The building had no congregational purpose, since religious ceremonies and rituals took place at an altar outside the front of the temple. Roman monumental and public architecture gave far more attention to the interior than the Greek had done. The application of colour on the outside of buildings and on sculpture declined or ceased. However, whereas the interior of a Greek private house usually was simple and undecorated and the owner of the house usually did not possess statues, the houses of well-to-do Romans were richly decorated and statues could be found there, even large collections⁴. The characterization: «Greek architecture was a kind of sculpture made to be seen from outside, Roman a development of engineering constructed for men's use» is, perhaps, somewhat exaggerated, but it points out certain tendencies in an excellent way⁵.

Temples and other religious edifices did not occupy a dominant position in Roman architecture. Nevertheless, temples were numerous because the Romans were very active in building. They also produced some outstanding creations in this field of architecture, such as the Pantheon in Rome. After the deification of the Roman emperor, the many statues of emperor erected throughout the empire brought a kind of religious atmosphere to buildings and spaces that were not intended for religious purposes.

The visual arts were well represented in temples and public buildings of the Roman world, in the palaces of important officials and in the houses of prosperous people. The expansion of Christianity took place in this context. How the relation between the church and the visual arts would develop was to become a matter of great importance to both. We shall examine this subject further when discussing the relation between Image and Word. Here, it is sufficient to state that from the beginning this relationship was under great strain, leading more than once to violent conflicts in church and society.

³ *George Kubler*, *The art and architecture of Ancient America, the Mexican, Maya, and Andean peoples*, 2nd ed., Harmondsworth 1975, (*The Pelican history of art* 21), p. 30.

⁴ *F. L. Bastet*, *Beeld en Reliëf*, Gids voor de verzameling Griekse en Romeinse beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden, 's-Gravenhage 1979, p. 16.

⁵ *The Oxford companion to art*, ed. by *Harold Osborne*, Oxford 1970, p. 992.

It is a matter of fact, however, that over a period of more than a thousand years religious art occupied a supreme position in European art and culture. As far as the visual arts are concerned, we are not thinking only of churches and cloisters with their mural painting, mosaics, glass painting, pictures, tapestry, and sculpture, but also of the religious art in public buildings and in the palaces of state and church leaders. The princes played an important role in financing churches, cloisters and their religious works of art. Much support was also given by the nobility, the lesser authorities, and later on by prosperous cities with their well-to-do citizens and influential guilds. It is well known that in various cases the building of cathedrals was made possible by contributions from many sections of the society. Such activity need not be supported for the same reason by all contributors.

The combination of different interests, of higher and lower orders, can often be observed when works of art are made in a spiritual environment. Leonardo's Last Supper gives a good example of such a combination⁶. In 1494 Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to execute a mural painting of the Last Supper in Santa Maria delle Grazie, a Dominican church and monastery in Milan. Leonardo was not commissioned on the initiative of the monastic community but by the duke of Milan, Lodovico Sforza, who had chosen Santa Maria delle Grazie as court church and burial place for his family. He decreed that the building should receive a more splendid form in accordance with its lofty function. He employed the two best artists of his court: the architect Donato Bramante, who began the new choir in 1492, and Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1494 started his work on the Last Supper in the refectory, which was likewise enlarged. In these years the duke made a habit of dining fairly frequently at the prior's table in the refectory which was to receive Leonardo's masterpiece. The renovated Santa Maria delle Grazie did not result in the perpetuation of Sforza's name and fame. The new architecture of the church itself proved to be quite an important phase in the development of the great architect Bramante. However, the church and monastery complex won fame all over the world because it houses Leonardo's Last Supper. This tableau is part of an organic whole including the surrounding building, as the artist intended. The great difference is that this building now functions as a museum!

In the sixteenth century, the position of religious art underwent radical change in a number of important European countries. This change was brought about by the great crisis in relations between the church and the visual arts in the wake of the Reformation with its program of return to what it regarded as the original content of Christianity. To the reformers, this content not only had been overgrown by peripheral inessentials that acquired a position of central importance, but had also been affected by ideas which the Reformation regarded as absolutely inconsistent with Christian principles.

⁶ *Godfried Willem Locher*, Changing interpretation in the study of art and culture, in: The language of things, Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, No. 25, 1990, pp. 30-32 [abbr.: Locher, Interpretation] and the literature mentioned there.

The visual arts disappeared from many churches in the reformed areas of Europe. This did not stop the production of art inspired by the Bible. However, the image no longer functioned as a ritual element in the church⁷. In contrast to what happened in the churches of the Reformation, the use of visual arts in the Roman Catholic Church was greatly stimulated by the Counter-Reformation, especially by new religious orders such as the Jesuits. In combination with a kind of mystic piety, the art of the Counter-Reformation propagated the image of the militant and triumphant Church. The idea of a continuous process of secularization since the Renaissance and Reformation does not apply to a large part of Europe.

It is true, however, that religious art had definitely lost its dominant position in most countries of Europe. Themes for images were no longer taken mainly from sacred history and church tradition. Antiquity and national history also became important sources for the visual arts. Moreover, elements that were peripheral in pictures of earlier periods not only received more attention but even became central themes. In this connection we refer to the genres of landscape, still life, and portrait, which acquired a special place in Dutch art and were to be highly appreciated in later centuries in the international art world.

As Dutch and other European cities gained importance as economic and social centres, local officials, rich merchants and governors of all kinds of institutions had portraits painted much more frequently. As prosperous citizens acquired social prominence, they also started to commission portraits of themselves and their families. Both group portraits and individual portraits were very popular. Several of the most important artists in this period (the 17th century) held positions at the dynastic courts of much greater influence on the standing of art and artists than has been assumed for a long time⁸. These court artists not only functioned as painters of portraits and other genres but also advised and assisted with regard to the expansion of the royal art collection. Velasquez is a good example of such a court functionary. He was ennobled by Philip IV, king of Spain, and thus acquired a status reached by many artists in the period between 1300 and 1800.

A court artist was subject to certain limitations, but on the other hand he was free of guild restrictions, was not dependent on market forces, and enjoyed many privileges in connection with his court function.

The large art collections of princes and of other wealthy people preceded the public collections in the «community houses» known as museums. It is significant that the buildings in which museums were housed in many cases had previously functioned as palaces (e.g. the Louvre) or, when newly built, had the appearance of a palace. The museum building could also look like a temple with colonnades or, by its style, remind one of a church. In recent times, when many museums have aimed at maximum attendance, the museum has often taken on the character of a business enterprise. This development is also expressed in the style of many

⁷ On the ritual function of art in the church, see: *Hans Belting*, *Bild und Kult, eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, München 1990 [abbr.: Belting, Bild].

⁸ *Martin Warnke*, *Hofkünstler, zur Vorgeschichte des modernen Künstlers*, Köln 1985.

new museum buildings and by the way in which the collection is shown, in many respects similar to the displays in a modern department store (e.g. Centre Pompidou). A reaction against this trend has started but a satisfactory compromise has yet to be found between the various functions of the museum, such as the presentation of more permanent exhibits and of changing exhibitions.

The creation of art for sale to private and public collections via artdealers is a modern development which does not seem to correspond to the spiritual ideals about what art should be. The same problem arises when we look at attempts in this century to integrate art and society, as happened under communist and fascist regimes and in revolutionary movements seeking a new social order.

Image and Word

From the study of non-literate cultures we have learned about the close connection which exists between word and image, even though the visual arts have their own structure and tradition. Mythology is of great value for understanding the iconography of these cultures, and vice-versa. In many countries, it is impossible to determine the meaning of certain images without knowledge of the customary sayings and proverbs⁹. Cosmological ideas are often associated with the architecture of these cultures and the same holds true for the colours used inside and outside the «communal houses» of societies characterized by a more sedentary way of life. As we know from the history of art, the above-mentioned relations between word and image are also present in literate cultures, sometimes even to a greater extent.

Appreciation of the various arts and art-forms differs according to culture, social group and time. Anthropological fieldwork has proved that the gift of oratory, the command of rhythmic language and narrative art are highly regarded by many nonliterate peoples, as are singing, music and, last but not least, dancing. Among some literate peoples, «writing» as a form of art is very highly esteemed. The position of calligraphy in Chinese and Japanese culture and in the Islamic world are excellent examples of this appreciation, and in this connection mention should also be made of ancient Israel, classical Antiquity and the European Middle Ages. In the Gothic period, architecture was highly valued as an art form, while in later ages painting and sculpture came to the fore in Europe.

Within a given artistic genre, it was of much importance which form was practised and what subjects were chosen. However, many changes took place in the appreciation of art forms and subjects over the course of time. This appreciation was influenced by one's national or local culture and social class. Some cultures have a negative attitude to certain arts, art forms and subjects, an attitude not limited to certain groups but characteristic of the cultural mainstream. In ancient

⁹ A. A. Gerbrands, Art as an element of culture, especially in Negro-Africa, in: Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, No. 12, 1957, p. 114.

Israel and in Muslim culture this negative attitude was very evident in respect of the visual representation of divinity. In both cultures, there was also a kind of aversion to figurative art in general, especially in the religious sphere. As often is the case, these are not absolute rules. We must allow for divergences and exceptions since there are different currents in Islam and in Jewish tradition and also differences in respect of time and in regional cultural backgrounds.

In the first centuries many leaders of the Christian church felt very uneasy about the relation between images and the church. This is understandable considering the Jewish-Christian background of the church, the negative reaction of Christians to the cult images of Greek and Roman deities and their refusal to venerate the image of the deified emperor. Several Christian writers of that time discussed the use of images and image worship. They declared themselves against the use of images or insisted on the greatest prudence if they were used. It may be true that no image worship really occurred – anyhow not on a large scale – in the first centuries of Christianity and that listening to the Scriptures and their explanation was an essential element of the religious service, while the presence of religious images on the walls was of secondary importance only¹⁰. The fact that various leaders of the church continued to discuss the problem of images demonstrates how much they were afraid of idolatry and of losing the spiritual idea of God.

After the conversion of emperor Constantine, the mass of the population joined the church. At the end of the fourth century, Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. This development made the problem of images in the church even more pressing, accustomed as the people were to a close relation between worship and image. In the eastern part of the Roman empire, and later in the Byzantine empire, not only image worship, but later even an image cult came into being. This latter development led to violent conflicts in church and society during the eighth and ninth centuries. Many images and illuminated manuscripts were destroyed in that period. Finally, the iconoclasts lost the fight, one in which not only religious motives were involved.

In arguments in favour of the legitimacy of images in the church, the doctrine of Incarnation played a significant role. The Old Testament command against image worship was superseded by God's epiphany in the form of the Son of Man. Christ as Man is an image of God. Therefore, his image also implies an image of God. If it were forbidden to make an image of Christ, it would mean that He did not live among us as a real human being. This would be in conflict with the orthodox dogma about the two natures of Christ. Therefore, the argumentation of the iconoclasts should be rejected as heretical. An extreme position was that God's image should be regarded as «incarnation». In his important book «Bild und Kult», *Hans Belting* summarizes: «das Bild Gottes sei, wie die Menschenfrau Maria bei der Zeugung Christi, vom Heiligen Geist überschattet worden»¹¹. Ac-

¹⁰ *F. van der Meer*, *Oudchristelijke kunst*, 2nd ed., Bussum 1972, p. 110.

¹¹ *Belting*, *Bild* 174.

According to this view the Holy Spirit actually functioned as an artist. This idea coincides with the contemporaneous belief that miraculous images were not man-made but a gift from Heaven. The legendary vernicle, a cloth impressed with an image of Christ's face and later associated with St. Veronica, belongs to the same category.

In 787 the second General Council of Nicaea sanctioned the veneration of images and anathematized the accusation of idolatry from the side of the iconoclasts. However, it decided that this worship did not apply to the image itself but to what was pictured and that a distinction should be made between the adoration of God and the veneration of the image. The image in question was mainly the two-dimensional icon, which held an essential place in the Eastern Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the three-dimensional sculptural image faded into the background or disappeared from the church in this part of Europe.

The decisions of 787 (Nicaea II) were rejected by the Frankish theologians and Synods in Western Europe. They did not agree with the veneration of images and rejected the ideas and behaviour of the iconoclasts as well. Images remained in the church but only for narrative purposes and decoration. They had a didactic, not a cultic function. In its totality, the whole church building could give expression to Word and Sacrament, to Gospel and Mystery as, for example, is evident from some types of Gothic churches where architecture, stained-glass windows and sculpture were subordinated to that common purpose.

An important element in many medieval churches was the presence of relics: the mortal remains of a saint or any object that had been in contact with the saint. Over time, veneration of relics grew in Christianity. They received a central place in the church, usually in or near the altar.

In the later Middle Ages the veneration of images, which previously had an incidental character in the West, became a general phenomenon. In the Western church it involved two-dimensional paintings, especially altarpieces, as well as three-dimensional representations. Just as in Eastern church, images of Christ, Mary and the Saints were venerated, and not only in a mystical way. From the fourteenth century on, the number of stories about speaking, miraculous and bleeding images increased constantly. People were increasingly inclined to believe in the inherent miraculous power of the image itself, as they did with regard to the relics of the Saints¹². In the same period, there was a strong tendency to transform peripheral and subordinate elements into central and autonomous units. In the church this process meant that several elements became detached from a real Christian context. In religious manuscripts of the period, more and more illustrations were introduced that had little or nothing to do with the text of the manuscript. These processes in the church, of idolatry on the one hand and seculariza-

¹² *Christian Tümpel*, Religious history painting, in: *God, saints, and heroes*, Dutch history-painting in the age of Rembrandt, National Gallery of Art (Washington) 1980/1, p. 45 [abbr.: Tümpel, Painting].

tion on the other, were sharply criticized from various sides. Abuses were denounced in words that could not be misunderstood; without much result, however.

An important change was brought about by the Reformation, which began as a movement of return to the original core of the Christian faith. According to the view of the reformers, a central place should be given again to the Word of God. The Word took form in Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, and could be known from the Holy Scriptures. In turn, the Scriptures did not come into being without the influence of the Holy Spirit. The reformers did not hold the same opinion about the relationship between Word and Spirit. One problem was the relationship between human spirit and Holy Spirit in connection with the preaching of the Word of God¹³. A common aim was to further as much as possible the spread of the Bible in vernacular language and to promote the study of the original languages of the Bible for a better understanding of Scripture.

The Reformation brought the primacy of the word to the fore. Any idea about incarnation in an image or a parallel placing of word and image was absolutely out of the question. However, the problem of images in the church did not have priority so far as Luther and Zwingli were concerned. It was the violent action of the radical iconoclasts that made the problem an urgent matter in the twenties of the sixteenth century. Both Luther and Zwingli rejected the forcible behaviour of the radicals but agreed with the ultimate aim of the action, i.e. to put an end to image worship. In 1524 Zwingli took care that images and relics were not removed from the churches in a revolutionary way. Zwingli's comprehensive statement about the image problem dates from 1525 and was still of influence in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century¹⁴. Zwingli regarded art as a gift of God. It would be senseless to remove images from the churches in which the subject was only represented as history («geschichtswyss»). But certainly, all measures should be taken to prevent the veneration of images and consideration should be shown for the weak characters who easily were led into idolatry. Zwingli pointed out that the place where the image was shown could be of great importance in this respect. That is the main reason why Zwingli was, in general, against the presence of images in the church and why he made an exception for stained glass windows. According to him, images in that place did not lead to idolatry. Outside the church building, Biblical pictures of a didactic character might be used for private and public purposes.

With regard to the issue of images, Calvin went further than Zwingli. No image whatsoever of God should be made. In addition, Calvin sharply curtailed

¹³ *Gottfried Wilhelm Locher*, *Prophetie in der Reformation*, in: *Charisma und Institution*, hrsg. von Trutz Rendtorff, Gütersloh 1985, p. 102. *Gottfried Wilhelm Locher*, *Grundzüge der Theologie Huldrych Zwinglis im Vergleich mit derjenigen Martin Luthers und Johannes Calvins, ein Überblick*, in: *Zwingliana* 12/7, 1967/1, 470-509, und 12/8, 1967/2, 545-595, (Wiederabdruck in: G. W. Locher, *Huldrych Zwingli in neuer Sicht*, 1969, pp. 173-274). *H. Berkhof*, *Christelijk Geloof*, 2nd ed., Nijkerk 1973, pp. 61-64.

¹⁴ Tümpel, *Painting* 46.

the permissible subject matter. Luther's attitude, on the other hand, was much more positive than Zwingli's, especially in his later years. For Luther it was important that the image should not be venerated. When used in church, even as an altarpiece, it should support the preaching of the Word of God and, therefore, have a didactic function only. Luther also became much interested in the selection of appropriate pictures for illustrated Bible editions, which were in great demand at that time¹⁵.

All three Reformers seem to have had a certain preference for images that represented events and histories believed to be true. This is probably connected to a great shift in Europe – apart from eastern and southeastern Europe – from devotional church art to esthetically appreciated, narrative art: the history painting, of which the religious history painting was a subdivision. A history painting is a painting with large figures (no portraits), which represents an episode of a story. It could be a scene from the Bible, from classical mythology, or refer to a legendary event or an episode from history. Without knowing the story, it was impossible to understand the painting. It is this kind of painting which in the first centuries after the Renaissance and Reformation received the highest appreciation, also in financial respects.

In his general introduction to the exhibition «God, Saints and Heroes: Dutch history painting in the age of Rembrandt» (National Gallery of Art – Washington, 1980/1) the Dutch art historian *Albert Blankert* states: «The greatest number of seventeenth-century Dutch history paintings are representations of episodes from the Bible. Less numerous, but also very much in demand were mythological subjects. These are followed in popularity by stories from Greek and Roman history»¹⁶. The fact that Dutch history painting was of so much importance during a long period after the Reformation – in the second half of the seventeenth century a decline took place – was a surprising discovery, made primarily by Dutch students of art in the second half of this century. It became evident, that Rembrandt and his school were no exception in the Netherlands in giving much attention to Biblical subjects. The exhibition in the United States and later at Amsterdam (1981 – «God en de goden») was meant to give greater publicity to changing ideas about the Dutch art of the seventeenth century.

The Reformation greatly influenced the way in which Biblical subjects were chosen for religious paintings. In his important contribution «Religious History Painting» to the publication «God, Saints and Heroes», the Rembrandtexpert *Christian Tümpel* points out: «Contemporary accounts reveal that in the seventeenth century such pictures were interpreted either literally, morally or devotionally, and that they often evoked association with the life of the person depicted or

¹⁵ *Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen*, Zwingli und Luther zur Bilderfrage, in: *Das Gottesbild im Abendland*, hrsg. von Günter Howe, Glaube und Forschung 15, 1957, p. 157.

¹⁶ *Albert Blankert*, General Introduction, in: *God, Saints and Heroes* (see Note 12) p. 20 [abbr.: Blankert, Introduction].

were related to political events. The reason is not hard to uncover – it too was a product of Reformation thinking»¹⁷.

Tümpel also notes a preference for the narrative, epic, novelistic aspects of the Old and New Testament, e.g., scenes of God's influence on the patriarchs, on biblical heroes, kings, and prophets, and on the life of his Son or of Christ's apostles. *Tümpel* remarks that «The century's almost encyclopedic hunger for knowledge led artists to rediscover the Bible. Artists uncovered in sixteenth-century graphics a treasure trove of previously unrecognized or unknown biblical subjects which were now done as paintings for the first time»¹⁸.

In the Netherlands, customers of this art were the palaces and collections of the «stadholder», as well as public institutions and buildings. Churches unless Lutheran or Roman Catholic (if permitted or tolerated) were not among them. However, the greatest customer was the Dutch burgher, although his preference was directed to other genres of painting. Apart from individual and family portraits, his preference was for scenes from daily life, landscape, and still life. For a long time these genres were regarded as typical of Dutch realism and as significant for the way in which the numerous owners of these paintings enjoyed the artistic representation of their immediate environment.

Since the last decades, a great change has also taken place in the interpretation of that art. The realism of Dutch seventeenth-century art has been called an invention of the nineteenth century. It was only an apparent realism; actually it should be regarded and interpreted as emblematic art. Sometimes, there was a tendency to deny all elements of realism in giving an almost exclusive symbolic interpretation¹⁹. However, we are often confronted with paintings in which sharp observations of visual reality are combined with representations of a symbolic nature that indicate the moralistic meaning of the pictures. In general, contemporaries recognized those symbolic indications very well and knew that they often referred to common sayings and proverbs. Sometimes, however, the clues were of a more sophisticated character and could only be understood by spectators with a certain literary training. To understand many paintings of those genres, familiarity with the relevant spoken and written language was a necessity.

In regard to painting, the Netherlands were not isolated, but occupied an important place with a strong individual character. Protestantism played an influential role, although it was not dominant. There were many contacts between Protestant and Roman Catholic artists in the Netherlands as well as in the international European world. «As early as the sixteenth century, it was not unusual to find Protestant illustrations in Catholic Bibles», writes *Tümpel*. In the preceding paragraph he states: «The age's fascination with religious history was not diminished by the pictorial strictures of the Calvinistic church, Jewish immigrants, or the Mennonites. Art even slowly found its way back into the Calvinistic church. At

¹⁷ Tümpel, *Painting 50. Christian Tümpel, Rembrandt, Amsterdam 1986.*

¹⁸ Tümpel, *Painting 50.*

¹⁹ Locher, *Interpretation 32-33 and the literature mentioned there.*

first, it reappeared in the guise of stained glass windows in churches – in accordance with Zwingli's teaching, but later it spread to such areas as organ decoration and even the adornment of a few pulpits. Even the Jews commissioned works of Old Testament history. During the first half of the eighteenth century, in the wake of a liberal policy shift, Catholics were also officially able to decorate their churches with art. And so even in the realm of art, the spirit of tolerance triumphed. This was a spirit which bound all artists together throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When they beheld a picture of religious history which so fascinated them that they too wanted to depict it, painters never inquired first into the other artists' religious affiliation»²⁰.

In several respects, the liberal bourgeoisie of nineteenth-century Europe held false notions about the «bourgeoisie» of seventeenth-century Holland. *Albert Blankert* points out: «Dutch burghers had not the least desire to emancipate themselves from the authority of the Bible and classical literature»²¹. The primacy of the word continues till the end of the eighteenth century and still has some influence on the Romantic movement. Then, however, begins a period of liberation from the past and a time of experiments which represent visual reality in a kind of dialectical interaction with an intensive quest for lasting truth and reality behind the phenomena.

The concept of inspiration and blessing of man's production of important works, has been associated for a long time with the idea of a gift from Above. The Reformation opposed the view that man as such was able to make works of lasting value, let alone that such works might have merits in the sight of the Lord. The Humanism of that period was inclined to see man as creator as well as creature. In the later centuries, the gift from Above was more and more replaced by the idea that some people received their great talent by Nature. In common language, the terms creativity and inspiration were used almost without any connection to God and the Holy Spirit²².

In this period, views of the universe changed greatly. The idea of a «higher» reality lost its function as point of orientation. To many, it was replaced by the notion of a plural reality. That reality can be seen as fundamental for our existence, but also as the reality of which our horizontal concrete reality is a direct manifestation. These ideas had much influence on paintings and graphic art after 1800. Three examples will be discussed briefly to illustrate this complex issue.

Nineteenth-century realism in visual arts was especially focussed on the concrete phenomenal world and the life of the common man. Gustave Courbet, who set himself up as the leader of the realist school of paintings, was a great propagandist of this movement. His immense horizontal painting «A burial at Ornans» (1849) was meant as an anti-traditional breakthrough. It gives a picture of a com-

²⁰ Tümpel, *Painting* 52.

²¹ Blankert, *Introduction* 24.

²² *S. Dresden*, *Het humanistisch denken, Italië-Frankrijk 1450-1600*, Amsterdam 1967, p. 234. *S. Dresden*, *Wat is creativiteit? Een essay*, Amsterdam 1987, *passim*.

mon burial in Courbet's region of origin without any idealization. The religious element is only represented in the presence of the priest and his suite, and a few outward symbols. There is no suggestion at all of the spiritual values which they represent. The painting reflects the earthly horizontal reality, what was visible at a certain moment in time. Courbet spent much time and energy to give the impression of an artless casual event which had a meaning in itself. When it was exhibited at the Salon of 1851, it provoked much criticism. Some critics rejected it as a blasphemous caricature of a religious ceremony, which certainly was not the purpose of the painter. Many ridiculed it because a trivial and insignificant event was depicted in a way that was out of all proportion, and with a repellent ugliness. At present, it is one of the most important paintings in the «Musée d'Orsay» at Paris. This painting has been contrasted with El Greco's famous vertical-monumental painting «The Burial of Count Orgaz» which dates from the period of the Counter-Reformation (1586) and is located in the Santo Tomé at Toledo (Spain). In this painting the reality of earth and the reality of heaven are differentiated as well as connected in a dynamic way²³.

The second example is Mondriaan (1872-1944) who became a leader of the geometric abstract style in painting²⁴. He began as a painter, mainly of landscapes, in the manner of the Hague School. During a short period his work was influenced by theosophy but thereafter he developed a visual language of his own. Very soon there was no longer any reference to a recognizable «reality». At first, this visual language consisted of small two-dimensional «planes», taken from Cubism. But gradually a process of hardening took place and colour took on more importance. About 1920, Mondriaan only used large «planes» with bright colours, mostly red, yellow and blue, supplemented by white, black and grey. They were demarcated by straight lines, only applied in the two most elementary directions: horizontal and vertical. The contrast between these two directions was regarded as essential by Mondriaan because it symbolized the fundamental contrasts of human existence. To harmonize these contrasts that was the aim of Mondriaan's work as an artist. He was convinced that his paintings gave expression to universal harmony and genuine pure reality by revealing the fundamental structure. This structure was the lasting foundation of a changing phenomenal world. As soon as this fundamental structure became concrete reality, the function of art would be finished, because we would live in the middle of it. Mondriaan to some extent anticipated this future event by the way he organized his studio in later years.

Our last example is the print «Verbum» made by the graphic artist M. C. Escher in 1942²⁵. This litho is part of a series which includes the long print Metamorphosis, showing alternately the transition from abstract to figurative and from

²³ Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, Harmondsworth 1971, (Style and civilization).

²⁴ J. L. Locher, ... [et al.], 150 jaar moderne kunst in het Haags Gemeentemuseum, series: Openbaar Kunstbezit, Den Haag 1974, pp. 71-75.

²⁵ The world of M. C. Escher, ed.: J. L. Locher, with contributions by J. L. Locher, C. H. A. Broos, M. C. Escher, G. W. Locher, H. S. M. Coxeter, New York 1971, p. 116.

figurative to abstract. The print *Verbum* demonstrates the transition from abstract to figurative.

From the grey transparent centre, in which the word *Verbum* is located, primordial triangular figures emerge which – arriving at the borders of the regular hexagon – have developed into birds, fish and frogs. They represent the living beings in the air, in the water and on land. This picture story reminded Escher of the Creation story in the Bible and that induced him to put the word *Verbum* horizontally in the centre of the print. As he told one of us, he later on preferred the word «*Logos*» instead of «*Verbum*». When he made the litho in 1942, he was going through a difficult period, not only because of the Nazi dictatorship which he detested, but also on account of personal circumstances. In this period, he came for a short time under the religious influence of a faithful Protestant friend and that was, perhaps, the main reason why he placed the word *Verbum* in the grey centre of the print. Grey is often used by Escher as the primordial colour which contains potential manifestations. In this case, the grey is presented in a transparent form, as if a movement from outside had passed through it, leaving behind it the creative *Verbum*.

Although we are faced with an incidental combination of word and image, it gives a surprising insight into ways of thinking about the plural reality of modern times and their representation – especially when supplemented by the given examples regarding the work of Mondriaan and Courbet.

The difference from previous periods is evident, but there is also a remarkable continuity of issues – for example, the search for what is lasting in and behind *phenomena and the constantly recurring quest for the lost and future paradise*.

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