

The Artist and Nature ✓

The artist is very much concerned with what is happening to the world, to the cities as well as to the country-side. To his concern, which is a manifestation of his obsession with nature, the subject matter of his art gives expression. Probably the explanation for the number of photographers who are making records of the urban human condition rests on their pre-occupation with the nature of man in the cities where most of the photographers live. They are daily involved with the tension and ferment and discontent that infect and drive present day city dwellers, especially those that live in the slums and ghettos. It is in these poorer districts that photographers find most of their subject matter, or if not there then where people gather in the largest crowds. Painters express their involvement in city life less objectively, and by entirely different imaginative means, as for instance by the techniques of collage. Some modern sculpture is intensely realistic, human figures being portrayed in ordinary everyday activities, or in repulsive situations for their shock value. Even abstract expressionism and hard edged paintings are not uninfluenced by the nature and condition of man. They are either a negative response to insoluble problems by withdrawal into subjectivity, or are much more subtle manifestations of concern by an equally subjective perception, which expresses a parallel between the dissatisfaction of society and a groping art. If this interpretation is correct it clearly indicated the connection between non-objective art and man as part of nature, but even if rejected the connection itself is not disproved for it is impossible to conceive of anything that the artist does that could be inspired entirely from within himself. No one lives inside of a black vacuum; we all are in constant contact and communication with the world outside ourselves. Pure abstract art is impossible because as Picasso has said one has to begin with something. That something

may only be a thought, but the thought was generated by some outside experience.

The artist who lives in the country is equally inspired by nature, but much more by the nature from which so many men feel themselves apart. And he is concerned, as is the city man, by the changes taking place around him, which he may accept, or he may not, depending on his orientation. If he is conservation minded and a photographer too he may feel compelled to use his art to record the existing present state of nature in all its complexity and diversity just as the city photographer did with human subjects. He may focus on the big or the small, but part at least of his purpose will be to preserve in images those objects and relationships which by touching in his innermost being a cord of empathy with nature moved him most deeply. And in preserving these images he not only sublimates his emotion but states his conviction. His creations are a gift of himself to the world. He may also have the ulterior purpose to persuade others to accept his values. (It is artificial, I concede, to divide artists catagorically between city and country; they do not remain in such a rigid grouping but move about from one to the other. I used this device for the sake of the discourse.)

The painter's intention is to put on canvas not merely a literal rendering of the subject which inspired him - and in a quite different sense from the discussion above on the meaning of the abstract he abstracts the subject by separation and isolation from exterior reality - but his intention is also to convey with his image as strong an interpretation as possible of the emotions that the subject aroused in him in the first place. He is free to do this by many means inherent to his style of painting and very little controlled by literal representation. A free reign for spontaneous reactions working on an uninhibited imagination fosters the greatest originality and

most penetrating insight, which is to say more simply artistic sensitivity. The resulting interpretation may bear little relationship to the subject which inspired the creation.

[The Photographer's approach is essentially opposite. Faced with an unbounded subject, he must select a piece of it which when isolated from the rest carries the full force of the emotions he experiences at the moment his attention was attracted by the scene. This fragment of nature if sensitively chosen should not only be an expression of his emotional involvement, it should intensify that involvement by concentrating and narrowing the elements of the subject into a denser complex. An inseparable part of this selecting process is the recording of the fragment in all its subtle intricacy. This is not to say that every subject must be full of fine detail; it is to say, however, that what is there should be made the most of. Part of this process of intensification results from leaving out the extraneous material. If everything were included the photograph would be too explicit, and, by leaving nothing to the imagination of the viewer, would tend to bore him. What is not included is implied by the context of the selection; and the boundaries of the picture act as a restraining force to concentrate the attention of the viewer.

The purpose of the artist, the painter or photographer, is to communicate. They speak to their audience. The photographer's attention is directed not merely to making from a scene a selection which he himself feels combines all the excitement and emotion he experienced at the moment he became cognizant of it, but to making this transfer so powerfully that those who view the result will at the very most share his first sensations on discovering the subject, or at least the sensations later aroused vicariously by the photograph. Because all people differ in their perceptions and tastes, such exact