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UDC 18

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL EXPRESSION IN PAINTING

SUMMARY. In the process of painting evolution, a gradual shift of emphasis from description of a piece towards its expression has appeared. But expression is heterogeneous and depends on the kind of pictorial art we deal with. Landscape painting expresses an individual inspiration of an artist and mentality of his nation. Individual expression requires a thorough work on a picture to make it homogeneous and accessible for perception. Social expression needs to use general cultural symbols to make a reference towards some public values. National identity of an artist is also reflected through the mirror of his creations. In still-life painting the social can express world vision of a social group by means of poetizing of its routine symbols. In respect to his nation, the artist becomes a mediator, expressing its values and making them available in meaning for next generations. Society cannot create for itself, so the mediator, acknowledged by the rest, can accomplish public self-expression.

KEYWORDS. Expression, picture, mediator, reflection, image.

The development of expressive component in painting throughout the history of its evolution, starting from creating flat “copies” of objects to forming complex coloured and shaped arrangements that can represent nothing but are able to express a lot, is shifting the emphasis from the perception of modern painting to the semantic aspect of the works [1]. And here one’s attention is arrested by an important factor — expression itself is very heterogeneous and depends on what kind of content it expresses. In well-known examples of expressiveness in portraits, landscapes, still lifes and historical scenes (mythological, religious, battle and historical themes) we see the difference of expressed meanings, which is in most cases typical [2].

Thus, landscape painting, being the most illustrative example of this article, on the one hand, renders the expression of individual meanings of an artist, and on the other hand — the people’s spirit and mentality. In the landscape the individual can easily be traced in the works of the Impressionists.

In the picture “Magpie” by C. Monet [3; 628] our attention is drawn to the bright joyful day, the spring is coming, and a magpie sitting on the fence in the midst of white silence of the morning, is a symbol of anticipation of the waking life. The morning has come, the village street wakes from sleep, and the spring is going to come soon. Both these “awakenings” merge, as Monet manages to emphasize it in his canvas. This is clearly the individual meaning of Monet himself, which he made generally comprehensible due to his artistic skills; one can definitely feel the artist

behind this picture, who, probably, having already been tired of winter, is looking forward to spring.

In the picture “Nymphs. Study of water. Clear morning with Willows” by Monet [3; 631] the reflection of willows in a body of the lake water is depicted. However, the colours and shades are chosen in such a way that the presented lake seems magical and even a little intimidating, making us imagine something fairytale there, beneath the surface of fabulous water, for example, a mermaid, a river-horse or something like that: mysterious and startling. This is also the artist’s private, individual perception of lake derived by the combination of a purple surface of the water with hanging willow branches (perhaps passion for mysterious transcendence of nature was typical of Monet). In this case, the artist also makes his individual associations and meanings generally significant.

In the first case, general significance is attached to the subjective perception of Monet: on the one hand, through the combination of reality with symbols that are more or less comprehensible for the society (in a winter landscape he paints the obvious spring sun; he depicts a magpie, which is certainly not a migratory bird, but in our perception, any activity of birds on snow is associated with the coming of spring), and on the other hand, through the elimination of bothering components (people), and through the selection of the appreciate moment (dawn is associated with awakening, beginning of the period of activity). In the second case, the artist removes all the elements that can return a person’s perception to the reality of the depicted lake and therefore he chooses the very fragment which looks surreal.

Great attention should be paid to the expression of the subjective in a generally significant way, which always implies a certain analysis of an image, which should reinforce the necessary associations of a picture viewer and, if possible, on the contrary, to subdue the unwanted associations. This allows the artist to create an image only in a certain way: while one can read the reality in a heterogenous way, the artist somewhat narrows the field of our perception. But at the same time Monet’s subjectivity ceases to be only subjective: when translated into the language of generally significant symbols, it becomes available for the understanding of other people, at the same time it starts to be generally significant: not only it begins to express subjective views of Monet, but also the subjective perceptions of a person who looks at a work of art and admires it. Of course, someone may pass by a work of art, not mesmerized by its charm, but if such a meeting happens, and the work produces an impression, a man recognizes his own symbols and meanings in it, and thus by referring to the picture, he acquires to a certain extent these “dormant” significations inside of him. Artistic painting becomes a “mirror”, it has a “reflection” — this phenomenon is precisely described by M.N. Shcherbinin [4; 135-141].

People’s spirit and mentality are expressed in the landscape because they always have sufficiently rich symbolic “equipment”, in other words, social consciousness binds its own national (or ethnic, or religious) self-identity with certain symbols, such as birch trees, vast expanses, crosses and churches in Russia. These are symbols of sea in the consciousness of sea peoples, etc. Such symbolism can be actively used in landscape painting [5].

In the picture “Over the Eternal Rest” by I.I. Levitan typical Russian symbols of existence can be identified: an Orthodox chapel against the background of desolate expanses vanishing in the horizon, with some huts looking small against the vastness of the landscape, a graveyard near the chapel (also a very characteristic detail of Russian painting). In other words, it is clear that the picture embodies the image of Russia. The church is also depicted on the canvas of A.K. Savrasov “The Rooks Have Returned.” In pictures by I.I. Shishkin trees indicate the Russian character of nature — trees, perceived as symbols of native wildlife (a birch, an oak, a lime-tree, etc.). In Shishkin’s pictures they reflect a typical Russian worldview (for example, in the painting “Morning in a Pine Forest” we can see massive tree trunks spread out over the space of the picture with an almost complete lack of any finer shoots between them — so is the pine forest in the Russian national perception of the world).

But the “Russianness” of a landscape is manifested not only in reference to patriotic elements represented by symbols of cultural presence of people (churches etc.), by Russian symbols of nature (birch, etc.) and by specific arrangement of objects in nature (distinctiveness of spatial location and “separation” of trees from seedlings); Russian mentality is manifested in the character of painting, in the approach to the choice of colours: Russian landscapists are characterized by a more restrained colour scheme, by the ability to admire ordinary pictures and things; the images usually express pitiful love rather than overwhelming admiration. In such a perception of the world one can see echoes of Russian Orthodoxy, educating austerity, modesty of demands, forming a tragic perception of life.

As a result, “Russianness”, national world perception is reflected in the choice of nature, and in the way it is perceived; however, it does not prevent artists from expressing their individual attitudes to the world.

I.I. Shishkin’s perception of the world is very different from that of I.I. Levitan’s. The former is more selective in the choice of nature: he expresses the beauty of Mother Nature, choosing its most aesthetic, perfect specimens. The latter is largely satisfied with the Nature which he casually sees on his way (in this respect, I. Levitan is more realistic than I. Shishkin), making it perfect by means of the angle selection, composition, entourage.

Depicting beautiful nature of his motherland, the artist idealizes it in a certain way, and the audience identifies this idealization with the entire nation, thereby acquiring a sense of pride because of their belonging to this people. It is also a “reflection”, but a reflection of a man in his national identity.

In the Dutch still life of the 17th century a burgher’s way of life and the power of the national bourgeoisie are poeticised and idealized [6; 154]. In this case we deal with another kind of expression when neither an artist’s personal vision of the world (world-view) is expressed, nor his national spirit. What is expressed is a particular lifestyle, an outlook of a social group formed by solidarity of its members’ roles in the system of labour division, i.e. the Dutch still life of that time expresses an outlook of a definite class and “poeticizes” symbols of its way of life. In the landscape, of course, it is difficult to express a certain class position, as a peasant and a gentleman live in the midst of the same nature, although the worldview of a town and that of the country is expressed in different landscapes imbued with different perceptions of nature.

However, still life expresses not only poetics of a social group's life, but also its national and religious character. Many paintings depict Christian symbols, some of these works are of moral and religious nature, and some express metaphors of the Christian worldview (allegorical still lifes). "Dutch Protestant artists endowed their still lifes with insightful allegories and Christian symbolism that replaced for the Protestant viewers the churches richly decorated with icons and monumental canvases on religious subjects" [6; 161]. And while talking about paintings with such complex symbolism, whose roots are lost in the history of Christianity and now require considerable knowledge of the history of culture, E.A. Kolchanova notes: "[...] just a few centuries ago, their content was absolutely clear even to an illiterate peasant" [6; 161]. This means that they might play a "reflecting" role in the process of self-cognition of any person, even of an illiterate Dutchman of that time, who considered himself a Christian.

However, besides religious, there was regionally-national self-identity as well. "For example, in The Hague, where the main occupation of the local population was sea fishing, there dominated still lifes with fish and other sea creatures. In Rotterdam there was a "kitchen" still life. In Utrecht the genre of a floral still life was designed as a result of strong Catholic influence, and love to pomp and elegance. In Leiden, a university town, appeared an enigmatic still life of the "vanitas" genre and the so-called "bookish" still life.

The famous "breakfast" genre of the still life, the objects of which symbolizes a man with his destiny, desires and inclinations, originated in Harlem" [6; 154]. In still lifes of various regions of the Netherlands there are specific features of the local outlook, and all together they form the specificity of the Dutch mentality, different from the mentality of the French and the Germans, who did not create similar style of expression in their art.

And yet it is simple to recognize the individuality of artists who created these paintings, their individuality in the choice of themes and subjects, colours, compositions etc.

Beyond all doubt, the same features of the expressiveness can be traced in other genres of art: portraiture, genre paintings on historical, mythological and battle themes, etc. An artist simultaneously expresses his own individual meanings (his perception of the world, his values and ideals) and the worldview of those social groups to which he belongs, and the national mentality. In other words, in his creative expression coexists the expression of the individual executed in a commonly understood manner, and the expression of various types of the social, experienced and rethought by the artist himself [7]. On the one hand, these different aspects of expression are interconnected (as the social can be expressed only by means of the individual, and the individual bears the traits which unite a person with the people around (sociality), and on the other hand, they oppose each other, which is sometimes expressed in a serious dramatic conflict through the whole life of an artist.

The life of Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) is an example of such drama. Court painter to the Spanish kings of the wartime with Napoleon's France, he had views that were not entirely compatible with the ideals of the Spanish court, especially in a period of reaction that followed the defeat of Napoleon. In Goya's art side by side there are paintings, that express traditional Catholic-monarchist worldview, which was partly typical of him, and partly was predetermined by the society he mingled in, and his creations which contrast semantically and aesthetically with this outlook, at times becoming

openly democratic (formal portraits of kings are combined with images of war scenes and protests against the regime). For instance, his famous picture “The Nude Maja” [3; 216], which was viewed as a challenge to the Catholic Church and the Inquisition.

There are “Los Caprichos” as well, filled with mocking satire against the Church; the artist of the turning period felt this “turn” to the deepest, expressing in different works ideas and concepts of the various social and ideological groups, to which he to some extent belonged. As any artist in general, a painter expresses both individual and social meanings: notions, ideals, values [8], and in this respect a problem of individual representability of the social is very important, i.e. how one or another individual mouthpiece of social meanings can claim to speak on behalf of his society, and how that society recognizes him as a bearer of such a right.

There are no people with exactly the same outlook, otherwise it would be a surprising coincidence, but nevertheless, we have the possibility to speak about the worldview of different social groups starting from particular families to entire nations — due to the fact that in their individual worldviews there is some commonality derived from their upbringing in similar cultural and historical conditions. A.I. Pavlovsky writes on this matter the following: “[...] culture is a virtual phenomenon, it exists neither in any singular individual, nor in any special supra-individual whole, it exists because of some coherence of value systems of individuals, and as it supports this coherence, it turns out that culture is a self-sustaining phenomenon, independently providing its own existence” [9; 96]. The same author considers art [9; 96] as the main instrument of culture self-sustaining that transmits values and meanings from generation to generation, which herewith ensures the relative integrity of culture. The central role in such function of art is assigned to the mediator.

In A.I. Pavlovsky’s opinion, the mediator is a creator of art (in our case, a painter) whose worldview matches most closely the current outlook of the people (of this or that social group). In this case, despite the obvious peculiarity of any art, the representatives of the people or of the social group see in the expressed notions, ideals and meanings something close to themselves, which allows them to perceive the creator of this art as the mouthpiece of their own worldview [9; 98-99]. And since there are no other ways of social self-expression, only a particular person with his individual inner world can paint a picture or make a film. It means that the expression of socially significant meanings in art can only appear through an individual mediator, whose personality carries socially significant meanings that would be sufficient for members of a social group to recognize him [10].

It actually shows us how a painter can combine social and individual expression in his works. Any expression is unique by nature, but all those painters who were cited above as examples — these are people who became classics, i.e. recognized by the whole society, or by particular social groups as their spokesmen (mediators), and hence, their personality had already carried social meanings that were significant in one or another social group.

The result is that different pictures regardless of their genre may carry different types of expression and for different reasons they may become pivotal in public consciousness. One work impresses with the national colour of nature and its perception in the domestic, patriotic spirit. Another painting represents the recognition of symbols of living that are

inherent to the entire social group of the viewer. The third attracts by the use of religious or historical subjects, describing the key historical events and the key religious characters. And so on. Sometimes various pictures of the same artist impress in different ways, sometimes particular artists are more consistent and express one thing most strongly than others. In other words, if we consider all the variety of artists and artworks, for whatever reason ranked as classical, there appears a variety of different options for dialectical synthesis of social and individual expression, which reflects the individual refraction of this or that social phenomenon that has become essential to this or that society. In their masterpieces artists-mediators reveal their own ideological entity to the society or its groups, and it often happens under the guise of objective reflection of reality.

In this respect, even a bright personality can become recognized, especially in a tolerant society, taking interest in individuality, it can become a symbol of extreme rejection of the social canon, but in this case this personality should carry the social element (first, as the rejection of it, and secondly, in the language of expression, incomprehensibility of which will make the perception of this marginal personality impossible).

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