

Modern Art – II

July 17, 2010

By its very ugliness, modern art points to the existence and goodness of God. After three months (cf. EC 144), let us return to this paradox, in the hope that if any soul admits the common sense difference between beauty and ugliness in art, that soul may be helped further to see that if God did not exist, that difference would not exist either.

The word “art” means skill, or the products of human skill. It can cover paintings, drawings, sculpture, fashions in clothing, music, architecture, and so on. The expression “modern art” usually refers to paintings and sculpture in particular, as generated from the early 1900’s onwards by a movement of artists who deliberately rejected, and reject, all standards and measures of beauty as understood before the 20th century. The difference between pre-modern and modern art is as real and clear as the difference here in London between the classical Tate Museum on Millbank, and the Tate Modern, a completely new museum, floated ten years ago a short boat-ride downstream from its progenitor on the opposite bank of the Thames. It is as though modern art cannot sit still under the same roof as pre-modern art. They war on one another, just as do old church buildings and the New Mass.

Now modern art in this sense is characterized by its ugliness. Common sense agrees here with the Communist leader Khrushchev, who is reported to have commented on a modern art exhibition in Russia, “A donkey could do better with its tail.” And what is ugliness? Disharmony. In Arianna Huffington’s admirable book, “Picasso, Creator and Destroyer,” she demonstrated how each time Picasso fell in love with another of his six (main) women, his calmer paintings reflected something of their natural beauty, but as soon as he fell out of love again, his rage tore that beauty to pieces in “masterpieces” of modern

art. She shows how the pattern repeats itself in Picasso like clockwork!

Thus beauty in art comes from a harmony in the soul, be it a merely earthly harmony, whereas ugliness proceeds from a disharmony in the soul, as of hate. But harmony has no need of disharmony, on the contrary, whereas disharmony, as the word suggests, presupposes some harmony on which it is, essentially, making war. Thus harmony is prior to disharmony, and every disharmony testifies to some harmony. But more profoundly harmonious than any paintings of lovely women can be paintings of the Madonna, because the harmony in the soul of the artist painting the Mother of God can go far higher and deeper than the harmony inspired by any merely human model, however lovely. Why? Because the beauty of the Madonna derives from her closeness to God whose divine harmony – perfect simplicity and unity – infinitely surpasses the human harmony of the loveliest of mere creatures.

Therefore poor modern art points to the harmony it lacks, and all harmony points to God. Then let nobody resort to the ugliness of modern architecture to house the Tridentine Mass. One would guess he was wanting, or waiting, to go back to the disharmony of the Novus Ordo Mass!

Kyrie eleison.