

MODERN ART

The preoccupations indicated here are among those which have given the art of this century its special qualities. Some of them are altogether new; others have engaged artists before, only never so urgently, and the difference of degree has been enough to create something new in art. Several have meant bringing into the world of art ideas which had previously been in use, but not used in making what was thought to be art: for example, some of the techniques of assemblage have long been employed in women's and children's pastimes. Indeed, underlying many of these preoccupations has been a concern to find meaning and beauty in things hitherto regarded as too trivial or infantile or ugly or alien or banal to be treated with respect.

The condition of music - "It has to be remembered that a picture--before being a war-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote or other--is essentially a flat surface covered with colours put together in a certain order." In 1890, the young painter and theorist Maurice Denis prefaced a manifesto with this definition of art, and artists since have rarely questioned it. Of course in one sense it is a truism; but in its historical context it was a firm avowal that colour and form mattered more than representation. Underlying the idea was a thought crystallised in 1877 by Walter Pater: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Once this was said, abstract art had to come. It has been the dream of many 20th-century artists from Kandinsky on to create paintings and sculptures that would convey emotions and feeling as directly as music does.

Unconventional formats - When the picture is no longer considered as a window or stage but as a surface covered with colours, there is no longer any reason why that surface should have the shape of a window or stage. Nevertheless, it is only in recent years that painters have become greatly involved in getting away from the rectangle. Some, notably Frank Stella, have explored the possibilities of various kinds of polygon, symmetrical or asymmetrical. Some, such as Richard Smith, have had the canvas itself stretched into a curved instead of a flat plane and/or have cut away a corner of the rectangle. Such shaped-canvas paintings are, of course, virtually a form of relief.

Primitive art - During the 19th century a taste developed for the art of the so-called Primitive--the Italian, French and Flemish painters of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries--whose art appeared more honest and pious than that of the 16th, 17th and 18th, with its greater complexity, technical mastery and illusionistic skill. Twentieth-century artists have inherited this preference and followed it through, rejecting, for example, the sculpture of classical Greece--the traditional cornerstone of European art--in favour of the archaic art that preceded it. What is more, they have looked with respect at the art of small children, admiring and trying to emulate its boldness and spontaneity and freedom, as likewise at the art of untutored and naive men such as Henri Rousseau.

Above all, this enthusiasm for the products of people less civilized than themselves has led them to embrace the so-called primitive art of African and Oceanic tribes and of prehistoric man. Carvings brought to Europe in the 19th century were first seen as exotic curiosities of purely anthropological interest. In the early years of this century young artists such as Picasso, Braque and Matisse came across them and declared they were great art, collected them, were deeply influenced by them. It was African sculpture that meant most to this generation. Later, the Surrealists were drawn above all to Oceanic and Pre-Columbian American art.

Doubtless this acceptance of 'savage' prototypes was encouraged by the discoveries of Darwin. The classical Greek norm, with its idealised vision of man as a noble athlete, became questionable once man was seen as one of the primates, and as one among a multitude of species surviving through natural selection from chance variations. Later the classical Greek image came back, in the work of Picasso and others. But it has never regained its unique place as the perfect prototype: it is now one of a multitude of models.

'Less is more' - Simplicity of form, economy of means, absence of elaborate detail, have been as generally sought after by artists as by architects in the 20th century. This streamlining has partly been a protest against bourgeois materialism, which a profusion of ornament seems to symbolise; partly the affirmation of a belief that simplicity is more honest than complexity; partly the result of a desire for powerful and immediate impact.