The Archaic Smile:  
A Commentary on the Arts in Times of Crisis

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Director

Fifty years ago archaic sculpture was known only as a curious phenomenon. It was assumed that all primitive peoples made statues in much the same spirit in which children make mud pies. No one but archaeologists—antiquarians and numismatists they were called then—bothered to look at these barbaric efforts in stone and clay. It was soon discovered, however, that savages worked in bronze. German professors wearing large watch chains and scruffy beards began to collect hairpins and cooking utensils. Civil servants with gaping mouths and pith helmets learned that their preferment depended upon the number of curiosities they forwarded to the British Museum. The boulevardier who seldom left Paris and never under any circumstances went beyond Marseilles was the first to be attracted by archaic beauty. Arrested by their sophistication and their gallantry, he pointed out that these strange creations of remote antiquity were not only very fine to look upon but that in some way they were intimately connected with the artist’s private life. And primitive art moved into the drawing room.

Archaic sculpture is an art which belongs to that period of man’s religious development when the idea is as big and important as the forms which symbolize it. Moral values and concepts had not yet become established, and a confusion existed between objects of reality and the world of the spirit. The rational and irrational were merged together and responded to physical and mental stimuli. Strange and occult powers were ascribed to rocks and trees, to events and natural phenomena. There was no part of material existence that was not bounded by taboo and superstition. Chance was completely unknown as was the concept of nature as a thing apart; reality was felt as mysticism and every action determined by participation rather than by natural law. Even the images and idols which man created had no individual actuality. They were at most transfer mechanisms through the means of which the portrait, for example, partook of the identity of its subject and the subject in turn acquired the characteristics of the portrait.

“There was a child went forth every day  
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder, pity, love, or dread, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years...”

The image in which the sculptor was living over again his own passions and experience was architectonic. Like a newborn baby, however awkward it might be, it was nevertheless a fully created thing with definite relations between its parts; and like the average baby, remarkably self-contained.
A smile appears on the faces of most archaic figures. It is not an accident of the sculptor's clumsiness, nor is it a conscious effort of his skill to create in his figures a happiness of expression seeming to transcend that of human beings. To understand the smile one must turn to archaic sculpture itself. The almond shaping of the eyes, widespread upon the forehead, thick ribbon lids, and shelving brows give an impersonal dignity to their regard. The eyes are superb and proud, not vacant. There is a complete indifference to portraiture; a tranquility and resignation which one may sometimes observe on the faces of dead persons. Not only in the treatment of the eyes are these eliminations apparent but in the nostrils as well; placed above coarse cubic lips, they bring the flatted surfaces of the cheeks together between definite nose and chin. The jawbone continues the boundaries of a compact head set upon massive shoulders, which are gradually welded into an organic trunk, immobile and majestic. The figure is built up step by step from the base on which it stands and of which it is a part.

Certainly the Greek of the sixth century B.C. did not observe such heroic individuals in his daily life. Nor can one dismiss these images as the product of inferior execution. The fact that he did not attempt the actual portraiture of those about him must be laid to a sense of consecration within himself, rather than to technical deficiency. His figures are conceived in immortality, and, since he had not inquired too closely into the character of his gods, he created ideal representations of them, generalizations of supermen, bearing none of the arresting peculiarities of actual persons.

This was, of course, not destined to continue in the later and more classical periods of Hellenism. By the time of Thales of Miletus, the father of physical science, the dawn of formalized religion had risen and conscious disassociation of the material from the spiritual had already taken place. The power of inanimate things had been transferred to a pantheistic association of human or semihuman gods and goddesses who shared all the mortal vices but seldom tempered their divine authority with any virtue other than confusion. The Olympus of the Homeric poems had indeed become so complicated that a priesthood was essential to regulate the powers and influences of the several deities, to separate the sacred from the profane, the human from the semihuman, and to establish the personalities of heroes, gods, and mortals. Often a dualism of function and purpose was admitted; the sun and heavenly bodies were both human and divine. Even in those remote days we see emerge that omniscient anthropomorphism which was to be the basis of an ultimate union between the rational and the ethical. Plato and Aristotle were to hand this concept on as the theological foundation of the medieval church.

That this progress from the general to the specific was shared by the artist may be deduced by comparing the archaic Tenean Apollo of Munich, so typical of the tense, flat-sided heroes of Boeotia, with the later and still more famous Hermes at Olympia. In the former one observes the archetype of mankind, not necessarily Apollo (for the cult was in its infancy) but certainly a god. The enigma of man's relation to the Infinite is on his face. Hermes, on the other hand, is sweet and precious. He is a particular Hermes, the son of Maia and guardian of the infant Dionysius. He is Hermes with all the emblems of individuality which Praxiteles, another individual, put upon him and therefore lacks the universal quality of the anonymous Apollo.

Every civilization has had its great period of archaic sculpture. In Egypt under the Memphis kings the Sphinx, whose smile is perhaps the greatest riddle of antiquity, was carved. Never has a people produced an art more instinct with dignity and reverence. A statue of the pharaoh epitomizes not only the absolutism of his rank but the strangeness of his origin. The Nile which bore him alone might explain the mystery of his smile, a transfixed but scarcely humorous expression of his deity. In the early periods of Egyptian art his identity was revealed in nearly every instance by an insignificant cartouche; yet the solemnity of the convention is rarely disturbed by the desire for portraiture. This convention asserts itself moreover in every art that derived its inspiration
Bronze head of an Iranian ruler, from north Iran. II millennium B.C. Rogers Fund, 1947
Granite head of Amun. Egyptian, late xviii or early xix Dynasty. Rogers Fund, 1907
Granite statue of a general. xviii Dynasty. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. V. Evetit Macy, 1923
from the Egyptian. In Assyria and Babylonia, in Chaldea and Cyprus, even in Crete and the Aegean islands, the religious purposefulness of archaic art is combined with a stillness of the spirit which denies the very existence of the individual who brought this conception into being.

In Italy a parallel procession took place in Etruscan art. No visitor to the Villa Giulia in Rome will resist the suavity of the early figures or the happiness in the faces of the effigies, half-raised upon one arm, on their terracotta tombs. Borrowing their gods from the Greeks they gave them a new and terrible authority. All that is somber in the Latin temperament seems steeped in the uncompromising attitudes reflected in the tomb paintings at Corneto and Cervetri. Yet Roman sculpture, on the other hand, reflected another point of view. It was immediate and finite, never knowing an archaic period, for the Latin mind was too filled with actuality. Roman gods were as regularly codified as Roman law, and the citizens of both the Republic and the Empire were inspired by little else than the acquisition of property and the steps necessary to retain it. Every religious statue dedicated by a citizen was a direct financial settlement with a divinity for a specific amount of grace or service rendered to the donor. Rome was the Chicago of antiquity and Roman law was based on the principle that it is better to buy off a god than to flatter him with prayer. That the Romans excelled in portraiture is therefore not surprising for they were masters of the commonplace and the portrait bust invariably spoke only in the terms of the limitations of the sitter, not of his potentials.

Romanesque art, on the other hand, is once again Romanesque religion. The sense of contract between man and his creator had been lacking in the earlier centuries of the church where at best the pagan tradition of the court was crudely imitated. The worship of the cata-

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*Head of a youth, fragment of a marble gravestone. Attic, vi century B.C. Rogers fund, 1942*
Marble statue of a youth. About 600 B.C. Fletcher Fund, 1932
Terracotta head from a colossal statue of Mars. Etruscan, about 500 B.C. Rogers Fund, 1916
combs was a groveling affair, a brave attachment to a cause which defied the horrors of persecution and the hardships of its mission. Man had little time to speculate upon his relation to his divine author. Even the cleric, the most enlightened man of his day, was too busy carrying on the daily life of the church to burden his mind with metaphysic. The year 1000 brought about a change in his point of view. Modern scholarship has made it seem a convenient date at which the world might end, for medieval man, too, preferred round numbers. The Christian peoples prepared themselves for Judgment. But, strangely enough, the world kept on and the spirit of inquiry which had provoked was directed into the pathway of monastic reform. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a wave of religious emotion swept over Europe. The Cluniac reform inspired by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux brought about an intimacy between the monk and his Christ, the monk and the Blessed Virgin, not seen since the religions of primitive times. Sheltered from the world, and a sorry place it was if we believe the chronicles, the monk gave up his life to the contemplation of his God. Although to medieval man the details of Jesus' life were almost a commonplace, the individuality of Christ was not that of a mythological hero. For the generality of His position as Saviour of Mankind was uppermost; He was not only Jesus of Nazareth but the ideal of redemption as well, just as His Mother was the Mother of All Living in her dual role of wife to Joseph and Mother of the Son of God.

It was just this bigness of conception which was needed to produce Romanesque sculpture and why in it we find those qualities, even to the smile itself, which abound in the archaic art of every civilization. *Gloria* was the word associated with these decorated portals, and it was the Glory of the Court of Heaven. The skeleton plan for these arrangements was laid out in the cloister and passed on by means of manuscript illumination to the stonecutters. But nothing was lost in the transmission of the idea; for, sharing to some degree the fervor of his monastic brother, the artist thought in the large and carried out his program without injecting into it his own personality. This anonymity may account for the consciousness in medieval art which enabled the craftsman to rise above the limits of an established iconography and to communicate in terms of universal human experience.

Elie Faure has properly contended that whenever voluntary sacrifice of the artist to his work is found, then that art may be considered truly medieval or archaic. The most notable parallels which he cites are the Gupta sculpture of India and the pre-Columbian art of Mexico and Peru. It matters little, however, what this art is or where or when it is made, for in the final analysis it represents merely the current artistic expression of a genuine religious period through which at some time or other every people pass.

So many parallels have been observed between Buddhism and Christianity that it is not surprising to find a similar relation between the monastic art of China and that produced by religious communities in the West. The famous rock-hewn caves at Yün Kang approach in spirit the ideals set forth at Avalon or Vézelay and the great west front of Chartres. No less filled with anecdote and philosophy than that of Christ, the life of Buddha lent itself to asceticism and contemplation. It has even been suggested that the parable of the lotus flower pushing its way up through the mire may be considered analogous to the mystery of the Virgin Birth. Certainly the most vigorous plastic expression that we know of in China took place during the Six Dynasties, the moment when the legend of the life of Buddha was introduced from India. Not yet was the Buddhist hierarchy irrevocably defined, and the sculptor or fresco painter put into his figures much of his personal experience. Yet, since this experience was religious and emotional, the sculpture and painting could not fail to take on that impalpable quality which we have seen inherent in all archaic art.

To enumerate the other places and periods where this circumstance occurs would be to prepare a catalogue for some ethnographical museum. In all of the primitive cultures of the Americas and of the Oceanic world we find
similar developments. African Negro sculpture, so popular because of its abstractions, offers a splendid field for study since it is possibly the most recently executed primitive art that we know. Abstract it may be and perfect in its conception and design, but none the less it remains essentially anthropomorphic. The Negro sculptor feels his living God as God, and the smile which we see upon his face is a translation into stone or wood of his reconciliation with the Infinite.

The elaboration of this theme must seem the vilest platitude to anyone who has so much as cast a tourist’s glance at an archaic statue. But there is a significance to the archaic concept which is too often overlooked simply because archaic art has always appeared to be a product of the past. Yet the fact that its simple qualities are so appealing to the rugged individualists of the twentieth century is worthy of consideration. It suggests perhaps that in the present day we are starved for universals—for ideas and ideals that transcend our all too finite lives and habits of thought. In contemporary art the emphasis is nearly always placed upon the particular rather than the general; the great community of belief in which all men shared and shared alike has fallen prey to the privy experience and the momentary incident.

The problem today, then, is not so much that of a lack of a single conviction but the multiplicity of convictions with which the creative artist is confronted. For two thousand years Western civilization has been concerned primarily with a monotheism in which the various levels of the hierarchy have been not only established but accepted by people in all walks of life. The iconology of the Judaic-Christian world has thus been for many centuries clear to both the artist and the spectator; and it was taken by each of them as a matter of course. So too it was with the classical heritage of the Greco-Roman pantheism. Bacchus was as identifiable as Saint John, and Moses could be set apart from Hercules by the most lowly member of society.

In the rapidly expanding, secularized world in which we live, where neither the Bible nor Bullfinch’s Age of Fable any longer play their traditional role and where one person’s gods are as good as the next person’s, it becomes imperative that there should be a return, if not to the gods of our fathers themselves, to some unifying principle in which the twentieth-century man of many faiths may find the comfort of authority. For the artist has ever required authority as a framework—a point of departure—for his own experience. The most telling lesson of the history of art, indeed, is that there is nothing new under the sun; a new movement at most is a return to a simpler expression of an already accepted fact.

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Why, some of you will ask, if this be true, have I titled this address “The Arts in Times of Crisis”? What can this have to do with the placid calm of an antique and worn-out formula? Has the archaic smile become in our time the leer of a derision starting from within, which has warped and discolored the visual world in which we live? These are valid questions more currently upon the lips of everyone than the snobbery of art circles is ready to admit. The contemporary aesthetic gives us pause; we find in it the nightmares and the ghosts which in the political and economic areas we sweep out of sight, under the rug, and forget that they exist. The chaos and fury of a painting or sculpture, or the dissonances of a new concerto, aggravate us because we have inherited a wholly unjustified belief that the art of the past presented a stability of thought that was impervious to the political and spiritual agitation of the age of which it was a part.

Nothing could, of course, be more untrue. For every art, every new style or tendency, has been born in a time of crisis. Yet, long after the historical issues have been forgotten and resolved, the work of art remains an absolute, something which neither time nor tide can alter. In the words of E. M. Forster, “works of art are the only objects in the material universe to possess internal order.” Our error lies in judging works of art not by their own internal order but by previous standards bred from other crises than our own.

From the ashes of the present-day conflict between Man and Science has been unleashed bit-
Head from a wooden crucifix (the lower portion of the beard restored). Italian, xii or early xiii century. Fletcher Fund, 1947
ternesses unknown since the religious wars of the Renaissance and Reformation. Aesthetic issues have become inextricably confused with social ethics and whereas the average citizen is now obsessed with the necessity of "reasserting his responsibility to other individuals," the artist has taken refuge in a symbolic language whose very symbolism applies only to his own confined and limited experience. We are living in an age of experiment where in the laboratory and the studio personal invention rather than the traditional universals of philosophy has established the basis of individual conviction.

A recent broadcast by a British scientist, Alex Comfort, (reported in The Listener, Nov. 19, 1951) has sought to explain this preoccupation of the artist and the scientist with ethical purpose. "Man has so far developed," he said, "only two effective techniques for widening his grasp on external realities: the technique of communicating total perception which we call art, and the technique of investigating objective experience which we call science, and these are complementary techniques. In the past, artists have been content to discuss their responsibility in aesthetic terms, and scientists have taken, and still do take, the kind of view which rejects any direct concern with the application of their results—the usual argument has been, I think, that the scientist has only the ordinary responsibilities of a citizen, and that he has no right to make special claims on the ordering of society. Those attitudes, I admit, have broken down. They have broken down in the face of the experience we have had with Nazism, in the face of the atom bomb, and the advent of policy-determination by mass hysteria; most of all they have broken down, for the scientist, in the fact of the realization that the policies now applied over large parts of the earth are the result not of purposive planning, or even of purposive malice, but of entirely irrelevant factors springing from personality-disorder, neurotic and aggressive compulsions, and even of mental disease."

Another English voice has paralleled the scientist's dilemma of today by citing the artist's "intense awareness, heightened by the intellect, of the tragedy within our time—of the religious struggle which is carried on to the last drop of blood—between the spiritual ideal of liberty and the tyrannous brutality of matter and its inexorable determinism."

"One can perceive," continues Cyril Connolly in his valedictory editorial in Horizon (vol. xx, nos. 120-121, December 1949-January 1950), "the inner trend of the Forties as maintaining this desperate struggle of the modern movement, between man, betrayed by science, bereft of religion, deserted by the pleasant imaginings of humanism against the blind fate of which he is now so expertly conscious that if we were to close this last Comment with the suggestion that everyone who is now reading it may in ten years' time, or even five, look back to this moment as the happiest in their lives, there would be few who would gainsay us. 'Nothing dreadful is ever done with, no bad thing gets any better; you can't be too serious' This is the message of the Forties from which, alas, there seems no escape, for it is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair."

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Clearly the artist and the scientist are agreed on the limitations of our present world. And, since our society cannot escape from politics, political coloration enters in. Quite recently, in fact, much too much has been said about the political overtones of contemporary art. A concerted movement is on foot to spread the witch hunt that has harassed our universities to the creative artists themselves. Academicians no longer able to sell their pedantries and their pedestals are unwilling to concede that new formulae are needed with which to project and protest the artist's anxiety for our daily existence. Not only has the atom been split in our time but man's conscience has been rent asunder. Every artist, every writer, every teacher is profoundly shocked with the material irresponsibility he sees on every side and is offering for better or worse, for richer or poorer, his individual solution. That the form or expression which these individual protests take are sympathetic or antagonistic to our traditionally tuned eyes or ears is merely an accident of history—a
reflection of the particular time of crisis in which these works are created. It is the individual’s right in a free society to express his intellectual and emotional conviction in his own terms and not to be accused in so doing of being a propagandist for other people’s ideologies. Rugged individualism, which is the cornerstone of the capitalistic system, cuts both ways, and free enterprise which is no longer free is the one thing which in the arts as in business we most fear. Academies and societies which veer to the Left or to the Right, far from being the guardians of an immortal tradition, are merely the tools of pressure groups whose greatest fear is fear itself.

There are those who may wonder where individualism will end and authority begin. The authority I believe will inevitably lie in the work of art itself, in its “internal order,” for the work of art, to quote E. M. Forster once more, “stands up by itself, and nothing else docs. It achieves something which has often been promised by society but always delusively. Ancient Athens made a mess—but the Antigone stands up. Renaissance Rome made a mess—but the ceiling of the Sistine got painted; Louis XIV made a mess—but there was Phèdre. Louis XV continued it, but Voltaire got his letters written. Art for Art’s sake? I should just think so, and more so than ever at the present time. It is the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced. It is the cry of a thousand sentinels, the echo from a thousand labyrinths, it is the lighthouse which cannot be hidden; ‘c’est le meilleur témoignage que nous puissions donner de notre dignité.’ ”

Just what the nature of this internal authority should be is a question that has occupied the waking hours of all thoughtful artists and connoisseurs. Wilenski, the English critic, has put the problem very well: “To be an original enlargement of an artist’s experience a work of art must be called forth by the service of religion or some consciously held idea of art.” What then is this consciously held idea? “To regain a creative consciousness both in the artist and the spectator.” He accepts religious art without comment as votive and therefore originally conceived; it is the product of a common emotional experience. Non-religious art, however, must be dominated by a principle—a knowledge held jointly by the creator and the spectator. Call it architecture, composition, what you will. It is the fundamental discipline underlying the creative process—a process which is instinctive and universal, something shared with the biological world in its innate order, balance, symmetry. It is the thing which Aldous Huxley defined at a recent symposium on modern art:

“I have always imagined that the reason why we are appealed to by a beautifully composed picture is that in some curious way these things tell us about the nature of the world, and that the same, I think, passes up from the purely physiological into the intellectual and spiritual world, and that actually, not the subject matter but the whole unification and harmonization of different elements which the artist does, including subject matter, actually form values, and so on, and is in a sense a kind of apocalypse or revelation of the nature of the universe.”

Many people are inclined to ask how it is possible to recognize these spiritual qualities in a new and sometimes strange creative work. “I wish,” they say, “that I could see what you see in that picture.” Without attempting to define art (for its utter defiance to definition is probably its greatest charm), one might reply that you learn to know and estimate art in the same way that you learn to appreciate your friends. There are those among your acquaintance whom you love and others whom you cordially despise; some will convey a special sympathy, while others appeal only to the rational processes of your mind. Since works of art are the creation of human beings, they must be looked upon as extensions into stone or canvas of the artist’s inner personality. And your insight into their characters is based upon the same human experiences of constant association that you gain by living with your fellow men.

Perhaps the artist’s unique gift is to see beyond the narrow reality of the moment into the breadth of eternity. This is superbly expressed in the words attributed to the Chinese philosopher, Li Po, who wrote and painted at the court of the Emperor Ming Huang in the eighth century:

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Orpheus, by Carl Milles (1875- ). Cast iron, chiseled. Rogers Fund, 1940
I would not paint a face, a rock, nor brooks nor trees, 
Mere semblances of things, but something more than these. 
I would not play a tune upon the sheng or lute, 
Something that did not sing meanings that else were mute. 
That art is best which to the soul's range gives no bound, 
Something besides the form, something beyond the sound. 
These lines were brought to the attention of Miss Helen Keller by a distinguished artist who was painting her portrait. Talking with her as she sat to him, he became amazed at her understanding of the artist's point of view. He sent this poem to her on a Christmas card, to which she made a very beautiful reply. "Li Po's amazingly modern lines on art, which I have now in Braille, seem to me to describe the sincerity which I perceive emerging from the present ordeal like gold tried in the furnace. Eagerness for life's realities and not 'mere semblances of things' breathes through what I read not only about art but also spiritual experience, literature and the demands for a freer, juster, friendlier world. Although it is true that another civilization has gone bankrupt, I am not dismayed. God never leaves us without visions of the future and discoveries of greater possibilities in human nature that shall keep us enthusiastic. We are being made aware of a coming social order larger, nobler than our own, and the crusade of goodness and intelligence against ignorance and wicked passions must needs end in unfeigned good-will radiating through all earth's systems."

This revelation of the universe is not to be had for the asking. It requires humility and faith; faith in man and some acceptance of a divine order more considerable than the petty emotional experiences of man himself. He will find this faith in the art and in the writings of the great men of the past—in Van Gogh's letters and in Delacroix's Journal, in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Cézanne's confessions to Zola. To create a man must give himself; and if he gives himself, he must believe. Then and only then, will his work shine with the contentment of the archaic smile.

This address was given recently at Rollins College, Florida, based upon an article published by the author in Parnassus (April 1932) under the title "The Archaic Smile." It has been entirely rewritten and enlarged. The author is also obliged to the Editor of The New York Times Sunday Magazine for allowing him to reuse certain portions of his contributions and ideas which have appeared there in recent years. Many useful observations regarding primitive art and anthropomorphism may be found in Jean Pelseneer, L'Évolution de la notion de phénomène physique des primitifs à Bohr et Louis de Broglie (Brussels, 1947), where the passage quoted from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass was cited, and in L. Lévy-Bruhl, Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures (Paris, 1928).