

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Mr. Joseph C. Keeley, Editor
AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE
720 Fifth Avenue
New York 19, New York

Dear Mr. Keeley:

The historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations in the article on modern art in the October issue of the AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE give such a distorted picture of the subject that they should be corrected in the interests of truth and fair play.

The article leaves the reader with the impression that modern art is sacrilegious and in essence anti-Christian and that the churches and particularly the Roman Catholic Church, officially condemn modern art. This is not true. No church has officially condemned modern art, and in fact the article does a dis-service to the Catholic and Protestant churches which are important patrons of modern art. One out of every four churches being built today in this country is modern, including the Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church in San Francisco; the Roman Catholic Church of St. Philip the Apostle in Clifton, New Jersey; St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Columbus, Ohio and the Faith Lutheran Church in Tuscon, Arizona.

Here and abroad modern artists of world-wide reputation have been commissioned to create works of art for Catholic Churches. For example, Jacques Lipchitz, a sculptor ridiculed in your article, has just completed a statue of the Virgin Mary for the Church at Assy, and Léger, another famous modern artist, has painted the murals for the church. Henri Matisse designed an entire chapel at Vence, including the altar crucifix and the vestments worn by the priests to celebrate Mass.

The Crucifixion, reproduced in your magazine and characterized as vulgar and distorted and, by implication, sacrilegious, has in fact been highly praised by leading Catholic Churchmen. Monsignor Robert E. Brennan of the Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Sun Valley, said of it specifically:

"It is wrong for anyone to force all artistic creations before the judgement seat of realism. How would some of the great Byzantine representations of our Lord and saints fare from such treatment? The charge of 'sacrilegious' by realists is out of order because realism has no place in the matter.... From a personal point of view, I do not find anything in your work that merits the stigma given it. On the contrary, it possesses spiritual qualities of a high value for those who think in terms of the medium you have chosen."

This statement from a high church dignitary is itself evidence that the interpretation of Pope Pius XII's words is left to individual church leaders and is not intended as a blanket condemnation of modern art, as implied in your article, but

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as a condemnation of lack of spiritual qualities in some art.

Your article also misrepresents the facts by saying that modern art is used as a weapon by the Communists. On the contrary, modern art has been consistently attacked and ridiculed by the Communists not only in their own press in Russia, but also in official Soviet propaganda magazines published for readers outside Russia and in the various Communist organs of other countries, including the United States. For example, the official magazine VOKS, published for Soviet cultural propaganda abroad, calls Picasso's pictures "morbid, revolting...an esthetic apology for capitalism." Socialist Realism is the official name for the kind of art the Communists approve. In other words, Communist art must be Socialist in subject and very realistic in style. The Communist attitude towards modern art was summed up in PRAVDA, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, U.S.S.R.: "It cannot be tolerated that side by side with socialist realism we still have a co-current represented by the worshippers of bourgeois decadent art who regard as their spiritual teachers Picasso and Matisse, cubists and artists of the formalist school." And in this country, a Communist publication, MASSES AND MAINSTREAM said:

"Today an increasing number of artists and intellectuals moved not only by strong currents coming from the realistic art of the Soviet Union and the people's democracies, but by their own struggles against fascism, are looking critically at this false and empty 'modernism', breaking the manacles it had fastened upon their power to investigate and understand the real world about them."

We would also like to correct a serious confusion about the history of the Museum of Modern Art. Contrary to the statements in your article, the Société Anonyme, founded in 1921, has no connection with the Museum of Modern Art, initiated in 1929 by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Miss Lillie P. Bliss and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan. In 1950, however, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. of the staff of the Museum of Modern Art became a member of the Board of Directors of the Société Anonyme, primarily to assist in the preparation of a catalogue published by Yale University which nine years before had received the Société's art collection. When the collection, which your article implies was somehow an instrument of Soviet subversion, was accepted by Yale University, President Seymour wrote the donor, Miss Katharine Dreier saying, "Your benefaction will not only be of lasting usefulness to the University, but to the entire country."

The assumption underlying the article in the Legion magazine, that new or unfamiliar art, or art one does not like, is subversive and un-American and should be suppressed, was vigorously denied by President Eisenhower in a message he sent to the Museum of Modern Art last fall on the occasion of our 25th Anniversary Year celebration:

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"To me, in this anniversary, there is a reminder to all of us of an important principle that we should ever keep in mind. This principle is that freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty of our land. For our Republic to stay free, those among us with the rare gift of artistry must be able freely to use their talent. Likewise, our people must have unimpaired opportunity to see, to understand, to profit from our artists' work. As long as artists are at liberty to feel with high personal intensity, as long as our artists are free to create with sincerity and conviction, there will be healthy controversy and progress in art. Only thus can there be opportunity for a genius to conceive and to produce a masterpiece for all mankind. But my friends, how different it is in tyranny. When artists are made the slaves and tools of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed....Let us resolve that this precious freedom of the arts, these precious freedoms of America, will, day by day, year by year, become ever stronger, ever brighter in our land."

Objective observation of the history of recent years reveals the fact that wherever tyranny has taken hold of a people and a government, modern art has been suppressed but when the tyranny is replaced by democratic freedoms and artists are free to create and people free to use their own judgement, modern art once again emerges. Communism, like all other political systems based on tyranny, condemns art forms that cannot be used as weapons for its own ends. It is for this reason that the Communists hate and fear modern art.

Faithfully yours,

René d'Harnoncourt