

THE MAIN TREND OF ART in the twentieth century has been anti-vital, in which term we must include the anti-human. There are very good reasons for this trend: it is an expression of the anxiety prevailing in the Western World, a search for some absolute in pure form, in fantasy, in dream or in gesture. The extreme of this tendency is a nihilism that exhibits to the world an angry, aggressive scrawl: the spit of a dying man in the face of destiny.

Against this trend very few artists in the Western World have been brave enough to protest. Certainly the most talented of those who have refused to despair, who have on the contrary dared to affirm life, who have even greatly dared to cast their *joy* in the face of destiny, is Hans Erni.

I am well-known as an exponent of 'modernism' in art. I have tried for many years to *explain* the dilemma of the modern artist, his existential plight, and have done my best to justify the modes in which he has given plastic expression to his despair. My own philosophy, however, is not pessimistic. On the contrary, I belong to the tradition which (to go back no farther) we may associate with the names of Nietzsche, Bergson, William James and Whitehead—a tradition that affirms the vital principle, has faith in the possibilities of human development, and dares to hope. Dares to hope even in the shadow of the bomb, and in spite of daily proofs of man's inhumanity to man. I believe that some of the artists with whom I have been most closely associated—Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo—are also fundamentally optimistic, and I do not, in fact, find any essential contradiction between their work and Erni's. But there is, as Erni would be the first to admit, what might be called an "existential" difference. There is a difference of manner, of sentiment and of social orientation. Perhaps the manner is governed by the sentiment: I cannot distinguish between Erni's linear calligraphy and that of Nicholson, in so far

as each is a technique in the service of an intention. But the intentions do differ—and precisely in relation to the purpose, which in one case is ideoplastic, in the other case physioplastic. Behind Erni's work there is always a concept, and the desire to share a knowledge of the visible world. Behind Nicholson's work, or Gabo's there is always an image, and the desire to construct a material icon that gives this image real existence. One artist celebrates the given world; the other renders visible, in Klee's phrase, an invisible world. Both types of art are fraught with dangers. The visible world is seen through a screen of emotions, even of prejudices. The result is sometimes an emphasis that becomes sentimental or a mannerism that becomes precious. The invisible world, by contrast, may be devoid of all human emotion, and the result is then an empty formalism. But one should judge each type by its triumphs, and when Erni's work is free from the faults inherent to its kind, then the result is an art that attains the level of the art of the great humanistic periods—Attic grace and Renaissance wonder.

There is one more quality in Erni's work to stress: what I would call its *viability*. It is an art that circulates—as book illustrations, as posters, as murals. It does this without any sacrifice of its aesthetic quality, without distortion of its means. Like the didactic art of the Middle Ages, such an art does not have to be consciously adapted to an illustrational purpose: it is an art that quite naturally takes on the content and the scale of a visual statement made in a public space. No other kind of art can serve this social purpose. For that reason, if for no other, we should respect Erni's unique achievement.

H. R.

(Main Street Gallery, USA-Chicago, exhibition of paintings by Hans Erni, 1959,
foreword by Sir Herbert Read; online by ghidelli.net)