

Dec. 14/80

## WHY STUDY THE HISTORY OF ART?

Why study the history of art? What value can it hold for today's artist? Our present environment in the latter half of the twentieth century surrounds us with the arts of advertising and photography; with pop art, abstract art, realistic art, super-realism, surrealism, impressionism, expressionism, and on and on. The list can be added to indefinitely, until we realize that we can scarcely move without coming into contact with art. Whether we are referring to pottery, glassware, prints, silverware, paintings, billboards, fashions, architecture, sculpture, or furniture; all we have to do is open our eyes and art confronts us in one form or another. Why, then, study the history of art?

There is an old saying: *Familiarity breeds contempt*. The environment that we live in, have grown up in and see every day tends to become accepted without thought. We are so used to seeing billboards, posters, and high rises that we no longer recognize them as art, representative of the twentieth century. Students in future years will likely be found studying the creations and concepts of today in order to grasp a sense of what it was like to be alive in this particular era, and how it led to other developments of artistic endeavour. Similarly, students of today look backwards, trying to define the world and surroundings that resulted in achievements of artists throughout the centuries.

Michelangelo's expertise was a result of the study of classic sculptures of Greek and Roman times, plus a reaction to current trends in art that highlighted the study of perspective, combined with his own unique concepts that resulted in the heroic sculptures of the *Moses* and the *David*. In later years, he tended less towards physical detail, and more towards the emotional and spiritual elements he wished to convey. Masterpieces are thus the creation of the artist from his individual standpoint, which he has managed to imbue with a quality that goes beyond the definition of time and place.

In deepening our awareness of the past, we can get a fuller grasp of the world within which the artist lived, while at the same time recognizing that the strength of his work was a result of his individual interpretation of his beliefs and ideas as influenced by the time in which he lived, both on an internal and external level. El Greco's mystically religious paintings are an individual expression of his beliefs, as influenced by the world about him, which was at that time experiencing the upheavals of religious reformation. Through the knowledge of past techniques and accomplishments, combined with present influences, great artists manage to project their personal vision and ideals into a realm of timelessness.

Thus great works of art can stand alone in the strength of their messages and execution. Through the study of the artist and his times, we can deepen our appreciation of them. Leonardo da Vinci's paintings express his fascination with the psychological and intellectual implications of the individual as depicted by his intensive detail on facial features and expressions, as well as associated body demeanour. His

art, revealed an awareness of past achievements (i.e. in the way that he painted the hands of the *Mona Lisa*, which it is presumed came about from his knowledge and study of Verrochio's *Lady with Primroses*); and current developments (such as the application of the rules of perspective, and the patron who hired him to paint specific themes), and on the ideas he pursued himself (such as the study of nature and anatomy) which took him beyond his time.

Titian's powerful exploration of painting emphasized the role of colour and layering as opposed to drawing and filling in the outline; thereby expressing his individual vision through the medium of paint, and so, through awareness of past and present concepts of art, he projected ahead of time.

In studying the history of art, we begin to see that art development is based both on life and on art. Our present world, of the twentieth century, offers us potentials of using both past and present developments as a means of finding our individual expressions in the world of art. It is the past that has laid the foundations; it is the present that offers technologies never before available, and influences us in terms of ideas and beliefs. It is the individual artist that must create his own vision and originality in the creation of his art.

The masterpieces of the past reveal a visionary quality that places the great works of art into a realm of timelessness. Through study we can appreciate not only the techniques and abilities of the artist, but also see how his power of expression made him almost a prophet of his time. Deepening our knowledge of the history of art can teach us to appreciate within our surroundings, the element of both the past and the present. We are living in a future that the past has made possible - and are living in a present that is laying the foundations for what has yet to be.