

Stefan Heymann, “Cosmopolitanism and Formalism” (December 1, 1949)

Abstract

In the GDR, the state and the party put art and literature in the service of building up Socialism. Art and literature were to reflect the reality of the new society. At the end of 1949, the head of the Division for Culture and Education in the Central Committee of the SED, Stefan Heymann, criticized recent East German art as “cosmopolitan” and ideologically lacking. He accused artists of failing to break away from the framework of bourgeois art production, and he recommended that they engage in an intensive dialogue with Soviet artists in order to learn from their example.

Source

At the festivities surrounding the awarding of the 1949 National Prizes in Weimar, Paul Wandel lamented the fact that there was not a single painter and only one sculptor among the prize-winning artists. In doing so, he touched a raw nerve. Unfortunately, his observation that no work of art of the past few years met the requirements of the National Prize was all too true. The German Art Exhibition in Dresden has made this clear once again. Here, we are talking exclusively about the ideological side of the visual arts, because in formal terms most works of art created since 1945 are of notable quality.

The essential deficiency that has been identified in the visual arts, time and again, is the complete lack of a genuine connection to the life of our people. Not even the large, collectively painted murals at the Dresden Art Exhibition can disguise this fact. These paintings are undoubtedly earnest attempts to capture the life of the worker, the farmer, and the working youth from an outside perspective. But these are, alongside a small number of other pictures, exceptions.

The Dresden Art Exhibition, in particular, has revealed with frightening clarity that the spiritual content of nearly all paintings and sculptures is cosmopolitan, that is, without national roots. Of course, I am speaking only of the works and not of the artists. Everyone knows just how bravely many artists in the National Front are fighting for Germany’s unity and a just peace. The courageous conduct of Professor Ehmsen is exemplary for all circles of intellectuals. We definitely distinguish between the artist, who is a progressive person, and those works in which he has not yet liberated himself from the past.

In no other area of art is cosmopolitanism as pronounced as in the fields of painting and sculpture. It is a falsely understood internationalism – advocated even by many progressive artists – if one slavishly imitates the art of other peoples. That does not mean, on the other hand, that there should and cannot be mutual inspiration – on the contrary. There is, however, a big difference between reciprocal artistic relationships and the mostly uncritical adoption of some kind of “ism.”

Can one continue to observe the state of the visual arts without doing anything, or is it not high time to finally get out of this dead end? Is it not the duty of progressive artists to recognize the reasons behind the current state of the visual arts, and to draw the correct conclusions from this insight? Is it not the task of the progressive artist to chart new paths with determination and boldness, just as our entire people is charting a new path today?

The following discussion will try to uncover some of the causes that have led to this particular state in

the visual arts.

The Role of the Clients

Every creatively active person, regardless of the field in which he is working, creates his works not for his own satisfaction, but rather to achieve certain effects. In the process, he imagines – consciously or unconsciously – the people he is seeking to reach. Therein lies the first fundamental difference between literature and music, on the one hand, and the visual arts, on the other. Writers and composers are always creating for a large group of readers and listeners. To have an effect, therefore, they must not only be familiar with the life of the people, but must also find forms of expression that will forge a path to their fellow human beings. The reference to the princely clients of our composers during the age of Absolutism is no counterargument, since these works, too, were more or less intended for public performances.

By contrast, the visual artist creates – at least since the period of developed capitalism – for a private client. A public commission is the rare exception. No wonder, then, that this attitude invariably gave rise to alienation from the people, alienation that continually grew as the contrast between the monopolistic client and one's own people deepened.

That is why the cultural decay in the age of imperialism assumed in no other field forms as crass as those in the visual arts. Here, it would be going too far to want to analyze in detail the personal belief of many artists that they are accomplishing a revolutionary act against a musty tradition by developing a new "ism." Already the fact that none of these attempts arose from a popular movement but were (and unfortunately often still are) nebulous studio creations proves that in no case was this a genuinely revolutionary renewal of the visual arts. The profound decay of the visual arts is closely related to the commissioning clients among the propertied bourgeoisie.

The Classical National Tradition

The 1949 Goethe Bicentennial contributed substantially to making the classical national tradition of German literature popular among our people. Our writers became aware of the progressive traditions of German literature, and they are now able to appropriate and reshape those traditions in accordance with the new tasks.

A similarly clear situation, if not yet quite so evident, prevails in the field of music. The great classical masters of composition, Händel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (to name only a few), are uncontested and still remain the great models for our progressive composers today.

But what about the progressive national tradition in the visual arts? Do we already have the same fixed principles of classicism as in literature and music? Does the classical tradition of German painting and sculpture begin and end with the great artists of the age of the Reformation? Are Dürer, Grünewald, Holbein, Cranach, Riemenschneider, and their great contemporaries the only representatives of classical perfection in Germany's visual arts? One need only recall the checkered, indeed, contradictory attitude toward one of the greatest German painters, Matthias Grünewald, that emerged within German art history during the last few decades to realize immediately that there are hardly any fixed notions left.

But how do we intend to develop a progressive German art, if it is unable to connect to the progressive tradition of our people and develop it further? It is therefore undoubtedly one of the most important tasks of all progressive artists and art historians to bring the great classical national traditions in the visual arts to the consciousness of the entire people in the same way that they have already been brought to the people in music and literature. The appropriation and further development of classical progressive traditions in the visual arts is an indispensable precondition for the development of a truly national, progressive art.

The Attitude toward Soviet Art

In 1931, Stalin proclaimed: "Not a single ruling class has managed without its own intelligentsia." And that is why the Soviet Union, from the very beginning, exerted extraordinary powers to create a new intelligentsia, after large segments of the bourgeois intelligentsia had joined the enemy camp. To be sure, in this process, the Soviet power was able to draw on a good, liberal tradition within the Russian intelligentsia. After the failure and cowardly surrender of the European bourgeoisie in 1848, the banner of the struggle for civil liberties passed to the progressive forces in the Russian intelligentsia. Herzen, Chernishevsky, Bogolubov, and others proclaimed, in closest solidarity with the oppressed people, the demands of human freedom. It is extraordinarily characteristic that their great works, in which the combative spirit of true democracy lives, remained nearly unknown in capitalistic Europe, while the great writers Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gorki exerted tremendous influence on the development of literature in all European countries.

By contrast, the great Russian painters of that period – as also of the subsequent decades – remained utterly without influence and known only in expert circles. This, too, is no coincidence. For the truly important painters of Russia were deeply bound to the life of the people; the struggle for liberty by the oppressed masses is vividly reflected in their works. Thus, they remained incomprehensible to the bourgeois artists in other countries.

This lack of comprehension also extended to Soviet painters and sculptors.

Most of our visual artists do not know about the development of the Russian intelligentsia; they know nothing of the true attachment to the people exhibited by the progressive circles of the Russian intelligentsia, whose tradition has awakened today to new life in Soviet art. That is why they lift their noses disparagingly at the supposed "naturalistic" or "obsolete" works of Soviet art. But unfortunately today only very few are able to understand that. Yet if the German working class can and must draw crucial lessons from the Soviet people's extensive experience of struggle and then apply this to their own struggle, then this is also true of the visual artists. They must study the experiences of the Russian intelligentsia in the battle for the rights of the people; and, in particular, they must acquaint themselves with the problems of Soviet art and the numerous discussions about these questions in the Soviet Union. Without knowledge of this development, without knowledge of the fundamental controversies over artistic questions in the Soviet Union, and without the appropriate application of the same principles to questions relating to the visual arts here, it will be impossible to develop a truly realistic new art in Germany.

Formalism – Realism

It is regrettable that the discussion about formalism in the visual arts in Germany begun by Alexander Dymshitz was not carried through to the end, or that it ended with nothing to show. But without a complete clarification of these issues one cannot speak of a new development of art in Germany. In my view, the main reason for the basic lack of outcome of the discussion of a year ago is the fact that this discussion was conducted in far too isolated a fashion. The discussion was limited entirely to the formalism-realism problem, without touching on the other questions I have mentioned above.

It is therefore essential for this discussion to be continued and brought to a conclusion by progressive artists. Above all, the point is to show the close connection between a progressive development and realistic art – a connection that Goethe had already discovered.

Our great national struggle for the unity of Germany and peace is linked inseparably not only to the constant strengthening of our Democratic Republic and to the fulfillment and over-fulfillment of the

economic plans, but also to the development of a new realistic art. Through their works, German artists can make a substantial and lovely contribution to this battle for our nation's existence. They can do this not only by being active on behalf of these national goals of our people, as many today already are, but also by creating works that strengthen and elevate the moral and cultural consciousness of our people. This requires above all the complete liquidation of cosmopolitanism in the visual arts.

What emerges from everything that has been said is that the problem of the visual arts is not a question of formal language, but exclusively a matter of ideological clarification. Not uniformity or leveling, but diversity in the means of artistic expression is necessary to reach the goal we have set. Artist and work intimately bound to the people – that is the path to the renewal of the German visual arts.

Source: Stefan Heymann, "Kosmopolitismus und Formalismus" ["Cosmopolitanism and Formalism"], *Neues Deutschland*, December 1, 1949; reprinted in E. Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED [Documents on the Artistic, Literary, and Cultural Politics of the SED]*. Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1972, pp. 127-30.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Stefan Heymann, "Cosmopolitanism and Formalism" (December 1, 1949), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4576>> [June 16, 2026].