

Liberalism Series - Abstracts

"The Relation of Art in Its Broadest Sense to Present Day Society
in America" - Mr. Lewis Mumford

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Before the advent of the liberal tradition in America there existed another quite different tradition which was responsible for a great deal of art in this country. This earlier tradition had its foundation in the old feudal organization of society and in the economic habits of the middle ages. Life then was organized on a communal basis--everything was a part of the whole and no one attempted to get outside of the framework of this tradition in order to achieve individualism. The tradition of his craft or trade was behind the skilled worker or artist, and his own individuality was not something to be exploited, but was to be used as a means of realizing more fully the ideals of this tradition.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the so-called liberal tradition came to wipe out the older more feudal idea of society. The new conception was a product of the capitalism which arose during that century when habits of mind grew up in which the quantitative idea became increasingly important. The sole object of any industry became the acquisition of more riches and more power. In such a society, of course, poetry and art were cast aside for they were conceived of as standing directly in the way of business success.

Allied to this industrial conception of society was the protestant conception which had its origins in the seventeenth century. Protestantism looked askance at all that was aesthetic and worked hand in hand with capitalism, for it transpired that what was good for the

Protestant's soul was also good for his pocketbook. Images diverted the mind from God and destroyed the efficiency of the worker.

Thus arose the present day cleavage between business and art which divides society into its parts and destroys it as a whole. Under the domination of capitalism art has been driven more and more into itself and the artist has become a solitary, attempting to escape from reality, casting off the society which has cast him out, and using his art as a personal compensation into which he has endeavored to inculcate all that society should have stood for. The neurosis created by society is responsible for this art which has ceased to express social ideals and serves rather to satisfy the artist for what he has been robbed of by society. Poetry, painting, architecture, have ceased to carry out the true function of art which is to add to and influence vitally the ideals of the community. And there is no way out of this impasse as long as capitalism and militarism exist and art continues to be regarded as an abnormal excretion upon society rather than one of its vital integral parts.

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