Social Trends In Art Essay, Research Paper

Art is something which can be analyzed to give deeper insight as to the common values and beliefs shared by the members of a certain society. Regardless of the place of origin or the time period of a form of art, it will always be a reflection of the social structure in which it’s creator/s lived. However, the way the artist perceives the culture common to his time period is very relative. People pertaining to a higher social class had different values and ideologies than members of a lower class. This different view of life can be seen very clearly in individual forms of art such as painting and music. These specific forms of artistic expression required very little money, thus could be exercised by anyone including members of a lower class. Other forms of art such as architecture and sculpture required more money and in most cases wealthy patrons such as kings or queens. Architecture also required large numbers of workers which often made it hard to see any individual influence in the design, however showed the collective ideology of all of the people involved. The cost of labor and materials was also so great that very affluent members of society were needed to financially support the whole process. Sculpture was also an artistry that required great amounts of material and labor. This resulted in a more normative form of art which portrayed societal aspects in a way that was of interest to the financial backers. By studying both popular and normative art together it is possible to obtain a greater perspective on a specific culture.

Outside influences from other countries can also affect the art and the artists of a certain society. As a country sees more and more immigrants from a certain area, the art will begin to reflect the ideologies these outsiders bring in with them. This same change can be seen more drastically in the case of an invasion. The architecture would change drastically, since it is normative art and the new rulers would enforce their own norms and rules. The painting would also change, however less drastically than more official forms of art. This more gradual change could be attributed to the individuals of the country who still retained the old values and customs. These same influences on art would take place if nobility of another country married into the royal family, and was then given heir to the throne. The change would be just as drastic, but departure from old ideologies would be encouraged instead of enforced. In the case of Arab influence in Spain during the eighth century, it was not an invasion rather a gradual settling of this other culture in Spain’s borders. The change was brought about by the affect this outside influence had on the people of Spain. The new ideas and forms of artistic expression were exciting and intriguing to Spaniards, and eventually they adopted these ideas as their own. The change was seen in all forms of art, especially in the new arches and vivid colors used in Arabic architecture. Any time a new way of life makes itself present in a society, it has an affect on the art. Usually this change is seen mostly in architecture and sculpture, while painting follows behind. The two cultures can also mix together and give rise to a new form of hybrid artistic expression. This mixing of ideas and beliefs is usually most evident in places were the people are trying to choose between the new popular culture, and the old beliefs and values of the country.

Painting of a certain society can be analyzed either technically or with the purpose of discovering its meaning. It’s the second which should be used in order to give a better idea of the philosophies of a certain group of people. The background of the painting is always very important when studying a painting. The landscape or buildings behind the main focus of the painting can give an idea of where the artist is from. Many times the artist will use a background which doesn’t pertain to the actual painting to show loyalty to his place of birth. This occurred mostly with painters who moved from their home country to live elsewhere and ended up painting in the same style as the other artists in his new country. If the background is painted in a very refined way and contains very elegant features than it can be deduced that the society at that time gave importance to these features. If it is painted very realistically, not showing much attention to beauty, then portraying the scene in a sincere way is probably the author’s primary objective.

The subject of a painting is also a very important factor when examining its social influences. In cultures where religion governs every aspect of life, the painting will reflect these beliefs. In any society run primarily by the Roman Catholic Church the only theme used in painting is that of Christianity. This art is known as committed art, and the most common subjects in painting are the Virgin Mary and Jesus. In a society where the paintings are mostly of mythological events and people, it can be deduced that the church is not the most important part of life. Returning to ancient Greek and Roman ideals is more important to this culture than the Catholic Church. Many times art will show common people participating in everyday activities. This type of painting is done by popular artists who have more of an interest in the lower class than the higher class. Many of the artists who depicted this lifestyle were more popular than normative artists, however didn’t receive the same attention from the critics. By looking at the techniques used in paintings it is evident which qualities were seen as more important to art. If the society views color and the overall impression of the painting as the most important aspect, than these techniques will stand out the most. If lines and realism are more important than these aspects will be emphasized in the painting. These trends are often parallel to the social trends which accompany them. If a certain culture believes that reason and straight thinking are the guidelines of life, then these qualities will be reflected in the painting. However, if feelings and the human soul are more important, than the paintings will be less realistic and more emotional. Likewise if a society sees religion as something to be painted with respect, the figures are more likely to be shown idealistically. For instance if the Virgin Mary is always portrayed as young and beautiful, then this shows the society’s respect and admiration for this religious figure. However a different culture could believe in realism as more important and portray Christ on the cross in a gruesome, instead of peaceful, manner.

Architecture is the form of art most representative of a certain cultural period. It doesn’t allow for as much individual expression as sculpture or painting because of the number of people involved. While only one or two people design the building, hundreds of people help make this design reality. The designers also had to please the people who gave them the money for supplies and manpower. This made it hard for an architect to show much individual expression. Often times the architecture of a time period is very similar throughout a certain area. The churches are all built in a certain style, as are any official buildings. The architecture very rarely strays from this style since all of it is made to please the same people. This, although sometimes monotonous, makes architecture a unifying force for a specific society. When people see a certain building they know what that building is used for and what that style of architecture signifies.

It is also possible to examine architecture and find out more about the society from which it originated. The institutions hailed as important by that society are often built in the official style while other buildings are not. Also, these institutions are often housed in the biggest, most elaborate buildings. Much like painting, the social trends of the time period are often portrayed in architecture. The period of Enlightenment where reason governed most actions, the buildings were built rationally and ever structure served a purpose. The baroque period gave rise to buildings which closely resembled the attitude of the people: the more adornments, the better.

Sculpture is a form of art which was often found on buildings as a decoration, or as part of the architecture. Most of the time it was used to portray religious figures in a narrative on the front of a church. The altars inside the church were also made up of mostly small sculptures of religious figures and people. Official sculpture can be found of kings and queens and other important people of the society. Sculpture is helpful in analyzing society partly because it shows a culture’s view of the human body. A culture with an interest in the human body is more likely to show the person nude, and use great detail in the artwork. Sculpture also shows what symbols or figures were representative of a society, and how that society used this symbolism in their art.

Music is a form of art that is very individual in nature, and because of this is very diverse. There can be many types of music in a certain society, however, the most popular songs will be those that embody the ideas and beliefs of the common people. Music’s availability to almost everyone makes it a very popular art form. Someone could make an instrument out of just about anything they could lay their hands on. Singing doesn’t even require an instrument, just a voice and some artistic talent. Courtly forms of music show the lifestyles of the rich, affluent members of society, while popular music illustrated that of the common man.

Since all of these forms of art are products of society, the driving force behind them are the normative and popular views of life at the time. Although individual expression is always important for any artist, his art won’t appeal to the people if it isn’t representative of society. This makes art a constant reflection of social trends, whether they be those of common man or those of the king and queen. Studying art can prove helpful in analyzing a specific culture or society because embodies the ideology of the nation.

Bibliography

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