

The role of the artist in contemporary society as compared to pre-Christian and early Medieval society in Northern Europe

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When I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, like many kids at that age, I puzzled over the one and many secrets of the world. One particular question kept me intrigued: how is it possible to depict a circle, as viewed from the side. Logically this shape would show up only as a straight line. However, I was never quite satisfied with this solution because the straight line to me did not represent two fundamental elements of the circle: The first being the idea of movement and the second the notion of infinity, both being suggested through the absence of beginning and end.

In my quest to find an answer, in which my parents and teachers could not assist, I consulted a friend of our family who was a commercial artist. I admired this gentleman's artistic skills tremendously. After a brief explanation of my problem he easily came up with an answer: he quickly drew a sketch, adding some body to the profile of the circle. This allowed him to shade the object in. The result was an image, representing a perfect disk, seen from its narrow side -

the profile.

I was deeply disappointed, having invested so much hope in the person whom I regarded so highly, but gaining not much more than a clever trick, an optical illusion.

The artist's sketch was, of course, accepted by everyone as the most appropriate way to solve the problem. But to me this smart sketch did not even attempt to address the 'inner core' qualities of the circle as a concept. I kept trying to find a solution in many drawings and application of different media but was unable to succeed.

I was confronted with a conceptual problem and tried to find an appropriate solution, which I know now, can only be found in the conceptual or philosophical sphere.

Many months later, during a physics-lesson, I came across the symbol for infinity (∞). This unique symbol seemed to come as close as I could imagine of expressing the inherent qualities of a circle. In fact, prior to seeing this sign, I had developed similar shapes in my sketches while trying to symbolise the qualities of the circle.

By now you may ask yourselves what this adolescent experience has to do with the Saga Conference. Quite a lot.

The experience which I made in my search for a solution to the described problem is associated with various aspects which I came across when I investigated in the field of medieval art.

Had I lived prior and during the early Middle Ages, the artistic solution to my problem of depicting the essence of a circle may have been quite different from the result which was executed by the commercial artist. It may have shown less emphasis on illusionist techniques, such as perspective and shading. A medieval artist would probably have achieved a more simplistic and some may say, a more pure and accurate conceptual representation. The fact, however, that I approached a "commercial artist" to help me solve my problem, suggests a parallel with the role of the artist in the Middle Ages.

It is assumed that medieval artists, mainly, produced commissioned work, similar to contemporary commercial artists. The latter are briefed with well-defined parameters by their clients to create certain artwork which closely matches the clients' expectations. Most artistic work created during the Middle Ages was produced in commission from the clergy or the aristocracy. It seems that painters and sculptors were commissioned predominantly for their technical and representational skill. The historian Georges Duby (1998) stated that "not much is known about the position of artists in the 14th Century". Duby assumed that detailed, legal contracts were drawn up between customers and artists. Were medieval artists then in a role equivalent to today's commercial artists?

Medieval training in sculpture and painting reflects similarities to contemporary trade-skill and craft training. The contemporary training of fine

artists indicates differences, reflecting the change of the artist's position.

It may be assumed that the position of a sculptor or a painter during the Middle Ages was associated with trademanship, and that young talents were trained in workshops similar to apprentices. In the beginning, the apprentices or trainees were given simple and odd tasks. Gradually they were given more responsibility provided they had proven themselves to be worthy. They learned from observation and by following instructions from their masters. Given that a high proportion of orders were commissions of sacral nature, one can imagine that a strong religious commitment may have been important in developing an ability to create outstanding artwork by demonstrating the passion we can observe now in many examples of medieval artwork.

We know many medieval artifacts as having an inherent 'touching' quality, although they were likely commissioned and produced in a manner comparable to today's commercial works. Some of the 20th and 21st century artisans and designers occasionally also produced creations which extend much further than serving a simple application or decoration and express an inner value, which is normally expected from an artistic masterpiece.

Today's fine art training takes place in art colleges and academies. The first European art school was founded in 1494 in Milan; however, the 19th century art academy in Paris became a dominant institution. Today's art schools encourage art students to experiment and engage in social and philosophical discourse.

Going back to my adolescent quest, described at the beginning my disappointment clearly related to the lack of any such inner meaning which I intuitively knew to be necessary to represent deeper symbolic aspects.

After the Renaissance qualities of medieval visual art found only minor appreciation. The subsequent Baroque flourished with highly developed perspective and shading techniques as well as excessive patterning on every conceivable surface. Artists created 'pseudo-realities' and the more photographically realistic an artwork appeared, the more the audience appreciated the images.

Almost five hundred years later, in the 19th century, a group of artists, including John Dante, Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt and Everett Millais, founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. John Ruskin, who taught aesthetic theory at Oxford, became an associate and public defender of the group. They sought their inspiration in pre-Renaissance artists and appreciated the symbolism and iconography from Gothic artwork. The members of the group felt that a medieval approach, in its representation of reality, applied much more 'honesty' than the art which was produced subsequently. Rossetti worked together with Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Morris and Ruskin developed many influential ideas for the English craft movement which originated in the Pre-Raphaelite ideology.

Through the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, medieval visual

representation became one of the founding elements for the 20th Century abstract art. After centuries in which artists tried to gain perfection in the realistic expression of nature, the most dominant direction of the 20th Century's visual art became the experimentation with abstraction - an attempt to depict the essence of things rather than just their external appearance.

The Pre-Raphaelites found in medieval art qualities, such as the expression of inner values and abstract concepts, which they missed in European 19th century art. Several artists on the European continent, such as Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso, tried to find inspiration in African art, which also had strong symbolic qualities, carrying messages. Picasso, best known for the "Primitive" influence in his work, ignored the accepted means for creating the illusions of perspective totally. He applied light and shadow only as boundaries for different colours, so that some of his work came to resemble the design of Gothic stained windows.

In my attempt to define the role of the medieval artist, I have focused strongly on a comparable contemporary position which seems to be that of the commercial artist. Because now, in the present, we have to define two different kinds of artists. One is the commercial artist, who is commissioned, works within a specifically defined brief and contracts out his/her skills for specified income. The fine artist, who works on projects which are developed by him or herself, sometimes in creative co-operation with other practising fine artists, produces work which may appeal to an audience and therefore sell and generate enough income to fund the production of further artwork, or it may not. The artist has complete control over his/her work - at the risk of material survival.

Some artists create pleasing images, such as moody or even kitsch-art to survive, some of them may even be satisfied by this decorative kind of work. Many artists, however, do prefer not to work in a populist manner or refuse to produce series of decorative works. Unless they become famous during their lifetime, these artists may obtain grants or sometimes commissions but normally have other sources of income - ranging from taxi driving, unemployment benefits to social welfare. Some are lucky to be engaged in teaching art, which allows them still to be involved with the subject while earning money for their livelihood.

Relatively few artists can survive solely on the creation of quality artwork.

In my earlier elaborations, I focused predominantly on medieval artists who produced Christian religious art. In order to find examples from earlier medieval and pre-medieval periods I have been curious what the position of those people was, who created runic inscriptions. 'Rune-masters' were consulted in order to create inscriptions and engravings in objects such as bracteates, knives or grave - and memorial-stones. These inscriptions were often considered to have magical powers, for example as oracle, to enhance luck or to protect burial sites against bad spirits or plunder.

Stones with runic inscriptions often include illustrations. It seems, in most

cases, they were arranged to create a composition, a balance of content and form including text, illustration and the shape of the particular rock on which the engravings were executed. Such work suggest that their creators were allowed a certain degree of artistic liberty. From inscriptions we can conclude that rune-masters were not only executive craft/trades people. Quite often they proudly included their name and position as part of their inscriptions, referring to themselves as experts in the realm of magic knowledge. We may thus conclude that they were more than master craftsmen - one may speculate that the rune-masters were completely in charge of the arrangement of their artwork. Cases are known where rune-masters commissioned someone else to execute the engravings. This reminds me of the practice of one particular contemporary artist: Jeff Koons. The internationally recognised American is regarded as controversial for his practice of out-commissioning most of his work to experts in their fields. One of his more recent installations was called 'Puppy'. It was an approximately 12 metre high metal construction, covered with wire-screen which was planted all over with flowers. Koons, as the conceptual creator, was only involved with the execution as an "art-director" (a professional position in today's advertising industry), the actual physical work was executed by metal workers and gardeners.

I am assuming that rune-masters would have been multi-skilled. One who was able to engrave runes may also have been able to cast metal or carve wood. However, it is equally likely that at least some of the work was out-commissioned. The runic horn of Gallehus might be seen as such an example. The horn indicates a highly elaborated artistic composition and complex symbolism which does not necessarily coincide with a goldsmith's craftsmanship.

I am also speculating that a parallel exists between contemporary (non-commercial) artists and artists from the Middle Ages, in the desire to communicate predominantly with the 'soul' rather than the intellect. This is not to be misunderstood. The intellectual process does take place. In fact comprehensive knowledge is necessary to succeed in this kind of communication. The artist has to know his/her audience, has to be aware of perceptual concepts as well as social and psychological aspects. Otherwise the artist's message might be misunderstood or might be seen as meaningless. Illusionist trickery, as described at the beginning, is a technique to express surface qualities, it is only a secondary element to express comprehensive concepts. In order to find ways, to connect as directly as possible with the mind and soul of the audience, an artist has to experiment. An artist also needs to know about historical and contemporary sociopsychological dimensions, in order to provide a glimpse of the future. It is necessary that ethics and morals are established, challenged and - if necessary - renewed. It is the responsibility of avantgarde-artists to undertake, sometimes unpopular, challenges. Society has often rejected revolutionary concepts initially, only to later elevate them to

prestigious (and valuable) status.

I am wondering about their role in pre-Christian times. Were they the guardians of accepted morals and standards, were they subject to changes in the taste and style of their audiences' preferences, were they revolutionaries and visionaries who challenged accepted norms?

This is the question underlying my current work. Yet still underneath all that is the niggling thought: how would a medieval artist have shown a circle in profile? - May be not at all.