

The art that got away — a near myth



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The title of our article in the Sunday STAR magazine, "We have seen the future and it isn't art" makes me sound like Cassandra or like one of the French communists who prophesy the death of art because, they say, it has become a strictly bourgeois activity and object of elitist commerce. But there is a lot of truth in the statement as applied to Puerto Rican life today.

However, I can't really make the wholesale statement that our artists are bourgeois. As general consumer yes, maybe, but not as producers of art, thank God. I believe we do have a great future in the Caribbean.

But I do not believe that we will have that nice future if our arts are not the "Compleat Arts," since the arts are supposed to be "The Compleat Angler" of a people's soul and we shall need our complete soul to win the race in the Caribbean. Hares can't afford to sleep here: there are too many other hares, and dedicated tortoises, eager to win.

A "complete work of art" is one of both style and substance, a plastic form with its content of idea or emotion. But in our context and for the race it has to be more. Our arts have to be spontaneously integrated within themselves, go in one direction with our soul as a people and in a credible unity of purpose, as a harmonious song to both our life and our death, since each is the container of the other and life is a serious gamble of life and death.

Our people are known gamblers, drinkers and dancers; they have that necessary stuff. Our artists should reflect that lively zest, but as unifying myth-makers for all of us. We are now too divided as a people.

We need the unifying myths so useful and necessary for the growth of the first "peoples" between Neolithic

and historic times, those myths that anteceded the "great" religions which were the property of the "great states", or — warring religions, not useful in the Caribbean now. We need the harmony that only great ideas or myths and the arts can bring. Notice the universal harmony produced by the myths of our "national" participation in the world olympics. We need art myths for similar reasons, until the many myths coalesce into a possible reality within the Caribbean.

Religious or philosophical ideas could eventually bring such unity, but we seem to be too pragmatic really to go wild theologically, and as for philosophy, we are too lazy or else too interested in everything at once to be able to focus on something specific at a time, as philosophy demands. So all we have left just now are our various arts to fashion a sense of harmonious unity within our tremendous diversity.

Diversity can be many-splendored, yes, but only if simplified and thus apprehended and put to work for an ultimate splendoredness, which could mean our future in the Caribbean. That is where the myths come in, they are tools for simplification.

Understanding or comprehension starts by simplifying things away from their diversity, seeking a finite underlying truth or sentiment which substitutes for the infinite diversity and allows us to apprehend it "with more energy" as Ortega y Gasset says. And he continues "The ideal of science would be to explain with one single idea all the many facts of the universe. Such an idea isolates and defines a radical fact of which all the other facts are nothing but modifications or combinations."

It is this radical fact which has to be pursued as the substance for all our arts as well as all our social and political endeavors in their diversity. I don't know what this modifying radical fact is yet but I know it is a matter

of substance, not style, absolutely not of style. It is a matter which all artists and other creators must deal with if they want to be a real part of their country.

Many "radical" facts are presented in Puerto Rico as the only one. Each artist is free to choose the one which best inspires him. The point is to make it stick in the Puerto Rican collective mind. Then it can become our guiding unifying myth, so necessary for our future. It is a marvelous goal, fit for any great artist, including Goya.

Notice that at no moment am I implying that we have to do "social-realistic" art for a monolithic state as was produced in Germany, Italy and Russia during Hitler's Mussolini's and Stalin's time, and now in China's wall posters so surprisingly photographic. Neither am I implying we have to copy the Big Four in Mexico. They cannibalized too many artists who followed their style without their substance, or vice versa.

Also, I am not saying art is of any particular modern style. All styles can be "substantial." There is a lot of allegorical substance in Mondrian's rectangles as expressed in his writings, or in Pollock's paint dribblings, literally substantial as paint, then allegorically too, since he publicly loved urinating on hearthside fires to put them out, and neighing at passing girls, thrusting his buttocks up and frontwards as if to fertilize them. Both the urinating and ejaculatory acts are linear, as are his paint dribbles can any painting be more substantial? Thus sometimes the artist if sufficiently driven is all the substance needed in the art work, especially since we were all licensed by Romanticism and Naturalism.

But whichever, plastic style is chosen, its substance should try to create those unifying and simplifying myths we need as a people, or we are lost in our present harassed diversity. Even personal myths can be useful if they stick to our collective soul.