

Carl Schmitt

The Conscience of Beauty



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FOREWORD

Jacob A. Schmitt

In this relativistic age it is most salutary to find a person, and especially an artist, with a Vision grounded in a tradition that is firmly rooted in objective truth and values. That person is the painter Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, the thread of that glorious Vision, first woven into the Greco-Roman contribution and then spread across the European continent—transforming that continent into the Holy Roman Empire—became not only for Schmitt a refuge but also the very fiber of his life, his thoughts, and the inspiration for his work.

Schmitt was fully aware that the effects of this same Vision and tradition influenced the foundation of American culture. But he also saw that shallow, immature, and barbaric ideologies were attempting to tear apart the very fabric of that Vision. He pitted himself against those forces with the only tools he had: his prayers, his common sense, and the esthetic thought expressed in his writings and paintings.

It might be asked, then, to whom did Carl Schmitt look for guidance and verification for what he was pursuing? The answer is that he followed his own inspirations and vision based on a common sense commitment to objective reality and his esthetic gifts that he believed came from, and were grounded in, his Catholic faith. He felt that the pursuit of beauty for its own sake (even though his work was not often beautiful) attested to its own veracity and authenticity. No

INTRODUCTION

Samuel A. Schmitt

Carl Schmitt's vision

If my grandfather Carl Schmitt had a “secret,” it was that he saw life as a gift—a gift received from God to be given back to him through other people. Within this dynamic, art played a vital role in his life, both as a gift received and returned. Schmitt’s gift to us is the tremendous legacy we see in his art, his thought, and finally in the generous life he led, a life in which he strived to give fully what he himself had been given.

Schmitt saw his art as an embodiment of what he called a “vision” of life and reality. This “vision” came to him in his 30s when he was struggling to support his wife and six children solely through art. He saw it as the path he had to pursue if he was to aspire to greatness as an artist.

Schmitt’s vision saw art and life in three stages or “planes”: the lyric, the epic and the dramatic. The lyric was the first encounter with reality—the perception of a child who sees the world bathed in light. In art, this is expressed in “flat” designs, permeated with light and free of shadows. As the child grows and into adulthood, shadows and conflict appear—he must reconcile himself to things outside of himself that challenge his first innocence. One can see this “epic” stage in paintings where the light comes from without, casting shadows and nuance upon the objects depicted. Finally, the tensions of the epic give to way to an integration of the first two stages in the “dramatic” plane. Here the light

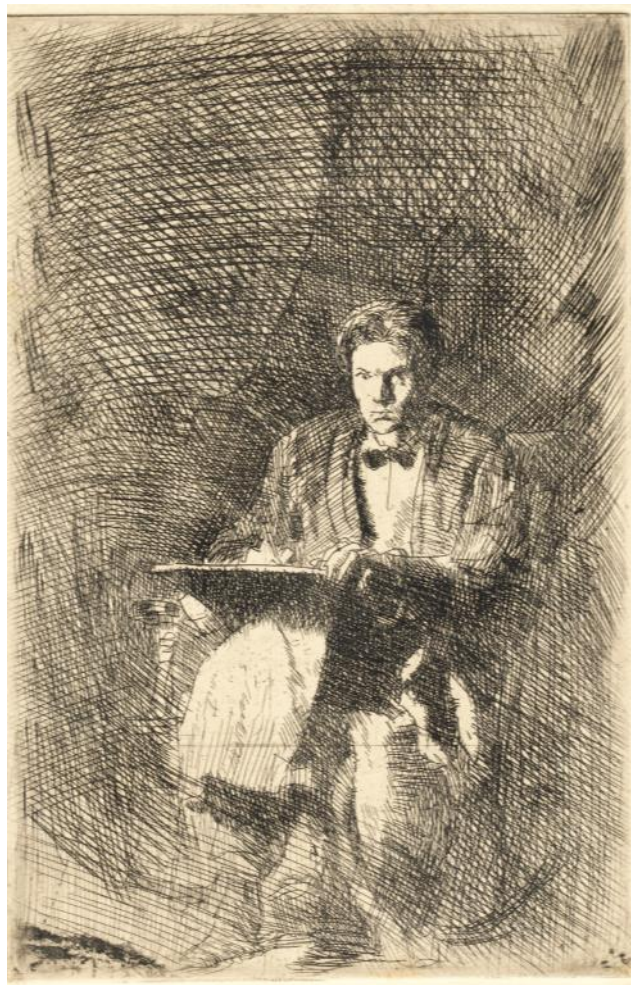
The Conscience of Beauty

*All art, like spiritual progress,
is dependent upon grace:
“Artist by the grace of God,”
as my father used to say.*

*Each day the outlook must be free of system;
that is, one must feel free
to break the rules of procedure, but not the
“conscience” of beauty;
the “morals” of Beauty must grow.
That is esthetic “wisdom.”*

*Carl Schmitt
October 1959*

PAINTING AND THE FINE ARTS



Some Brief Suggestions of My Main Beliefs in Art (1922)

I shall attempt to write some brief suggestions of my main beliefs in art. If they seem vague, I can plead that the artist is filled with the desire to express through vision alone. When he speaks, it is with the good (though perhaps unfortunate) intention of bridging, however inadequately, the gap which exists between the esthetic and rationalistic extremes. When he speaks he is painfully aware of the strangeness of his medium and that his muse is displeased at the digression. That, in a word, he is perilously close to talking rubbish.

Since the thirteenth century there has been a steady decline in art. Individuals here and there, it is true, have not floated downstream. Some have breasted the current: El Greco, for example, is an extreme outstanding figure which comes to mind. But, generally speaking, as the natural sciences were developed and man became more and more practical, superseding his more balanced progenitor, art declined. A balanced man, I believe (I make the statement with some timidity today), is one who recognizes two coexisting realities: the reality of the divine law and the reality of the natural law, and furthermore (a most important point) knows the former reality as the greater, uninterrupted and eternal. I am concerned, then, with the Christian culture.

Now art in its essence is neither practical nor religious. It is play. For play is that unique activity of



A Monument (1935)

My companion took me along a foot path over the Palatine to the farthest western end and showed me a heroic ruin on the hillside. I immediately liked it. Green fields surrounded us richly sprinkled with scarlet poppies. On the ground among the flowers I saw occasionally bits of mosaic and iridescent glass. The building was bulky and recalled the typical poetry deep in Rembrandt. He must have seen somewhere a print of this. On this account it was good to draw but also because it was isolated. An occasional pair of lovers or two mounted policemen came by and seminarians. So in the heart of Rome and overlooking it, we sat down to sketch.

Rome lives in the round. All sides of the ruin, on different levels, are interesting. And it is constructed, not poured. Even the vertical blind walls are arched with the peculiar thin Roman tile. That solid construction coupled with tremendous scale characterizes ancient Rome.

When I had finished a beggar came by, a little shrunken man, toothless, and in dialect he said something, so I gave him two soldi, and thinking of my investment I asked him who made the building we were drawing. He said Septimius Severus had built it for his palace, and shuffled along.

My companion who knows about such things told me that Septimus Severus was an Emperor-soldier who lived in the second century and that he found the world in fragments and left it one, even imposing peace in Britain.

Whether what I had heard was true or not, there stood that bulk. I have never felt time so challenged.



The Dull Times of Life (1922)

The dull times of life - the discouraging times—are the times in which we are concerned with ethics—the rules applied, learned, and made habitual. They are hard because they are of thought—rules. The examination of conscience, the assumption of responsibility—the cross of thought.

When we set about detecting offense—watching the sly presence of jealousy and laziness and countering with love and industry, being patient and meek when anger rises, and being temperate with when we overreach—this is dull, this conscious exercise of the little details. But it is time well spent. At times we feel that life means nothing if it means this tight little groove and we forget that God sends his grace from time to time and we are transported—full of joy—different beings.

And every truth of life is a truth of art. These dull times of rules are times well spent. When grace comes, these habits painfully formed are then guides, for they are unconscious and habitual.

Images

(1943)

Man is made in the image of God. Hence, the mystery of the most Holy Trinity is at the basis of the mystery of man.

Hence, man like God is triune: he is *family*; he is an individual *person*; he is *society*. When the human trinity is severed from the Divine Trinity it cannot long remain neutral: it will soon serve evil if it does not consciously serve God. Unless the family be specially dedicated to God the Creator, the Father, it will decay in Lust. Likewise, unless the person be specially dedicated to the Redeemer, Christ, it will degenerate in Pride. So also, if society (man collective) be perpetually dedicated to the Holy Ghost, it will be seen to be dedicated to Avarice.

History, which deals primarily with collective man, shows most clearly the degeneration of society. In Europe, in the Middle Ages, society was dedicated to God. The Guild System was fundamentally just that: in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, especially in France, every organization was united through prayer with God. But in the thirteenth century one can trace the gradual and increasing secularization of such groups until, in our own day, we can see the complete decay of all collective man through secularization. Society has been "freed." It has been emancipated from God.

As has been said, man cannot be neutral for long. He must be ultimately the slave of God or the slave of the Devil. We have finally reached the crisis of slavery once more: hence, the issue is once more "totalitar-

ianism.” The Servile State in all countries is literally upon us. We can no longer think of “freedom” in the sense of secularism. We have reached the period of totalitarianism; of total slavery. Our choice is between the Servile State of avaricious materialism (factory civilization) and total Christianity.

We must rededicate ourselves to God.

When men gather together for any other end but God, the seeds of decay are present. Societies as well as Families and Persons must once more depend upon prayer.