

# DÆDALUS

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## THE VISUAL ARTS TODAY

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**WINTER 1960**

\$2.50



THEODORE ROSZAK



THEODORE ROSZAK, *Invocation II*, 1950.  
Courtesy of the Pierre Matisse Gallery.

THE FORMS that I find necessary to assert are meant to be blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, reminiscent of those brute forces that not only produced life, but in turn threatened to destroy it. I feel that if necessary one must be ready to summon one's total being with an all-consuming rage against those forces that are blind to the primacy of life-giving values. Perhaps, by this sheer dedication, one may yet merge force and grace.

It is altogether possible that society may be on the threshold of a great transformation—and while its external circumstances may remain relatively unchanged, I believe we will witness vast shifts in emotional and moral outlook. It is not without possibility, too, that in the next most important phase of our century we will again see the emergence and meaning of the baroque symbol, revealing a psychic life of organic growth, that itself has the power of regeneration and transcendence.

It seems to me that the baroque symbol may be interpreted from either of two aspects. The early phase, when the budding is most closely related to the sharp Gothic thrust, the herald of its appearance; or the latterly phase, when the ripe fruit, ready to fall, disintegrates and deposits its seed again.

My interest and feeling for the baroque is for that of its inception, when it is closest to the Gothic thrust. In contemporary visual terms, it expresses itself at once as—sharp and undulating—assertive and pulsating—defiant and hopeful. The rhythm between the discipline of the classic and the emotional stirring of the baroque may well establish a new synthesis toward the completeness of man and his hopes for the fullness of life.

Sculpture and architecture have always symbolized unified institutions and unified man. Painting with its subtle mutations of change and broad versatility flourishes best within an atmosphere of suspension and discord. This explains in part why painting is still the dominant voice in these times. But, I believe we are faced with the prospect of an impending cycle of social

change that is already indicated by the growing presence of a New Architecture and New Sculpture.

Malraux describes in his *Twilight of the Absolute* the necessity for the contemporary artist to discover his moral values through his own work. Personally, I think this has always been the case in the past as it is now—with this exception—that the contemporary western artist is faced with the more exacting problem of choices, as compared with his predecessors who had their range circumscribed by the “absolute doctrine” of religious and moral values. If art is called upon to uphold the conscience of those who practice it, as Malraux suggests it may, then surely it must contain more than the “self-sufficiency” of plastic values inherent in the media, alone.

It seems to me that the sculptor as well as the painter must strive to break through the variety of change (that can take place in any period and generally does) and try to arrive at a significant value, basic and indestructible, for the widest range of human sensibility.

Malraux's statement obliquely supports the larger question of the relationship between form and subject matter, and in the light of my past experience, particularly with my former use of non-objective forms, I have frequently been asked how I feel about subject matter for the modern sculptor. I would like to talk briefly about this question, by referring to a specific work, and I feel that the *Whaler of Nantucket* may serve as a familiar jumping-off point. But first I would like to replace the term “subject matter” with the word “content,” and for this reason: subject matter as we have come to know it tends to relate itself to an immediate external—one might say a superficial—aspect of an object or event. For me, it suggests a fleeting, fragmentary kind of identity. Content, on the other hand, bears upon the core structure of an experience and grows from the center out, whether it be in terms of formal space building, or whether it is central to an orientation of feeling, quality of mood, or direction of an expression.

Content seen this way suggests organic growth, and becomes an endless source of visual suggestion for the sculptor. But, does such distinction between content and subject matter affect the artist and his work today?

Well, the fact that we are living at an historic moment that in part expresses itself in valid forms of an eclectic nature, would seem to suggest many possibilities. For my part, visual ideas must contain and transcend formal limits. The consideration of content as related to subject matter not only implies planting a seed of structural and spacial extension, it also presupposes

operation of an emotional apparatus that reaches out toward growth, is adaptable to change, and finally evolves toward maturity. Obviously, this transformation cannot be accomplished automatically, by the plastic possibilities of the medium, alone. One has to work at it. One has to bring it up to other and wider areas of human experience. One has to think and feel through a whole body of accumulated attitudes until one conjures a vivid sense of the total quality of the form, and invokes its image in the mind. I would say at this point that one is finally guided by an intuitional sense of order that prods the imagination into action. Its first intimations are felt through one's own psychological requirements that subsequently link larger patterns of social and cultural reference. In purely visual terms, it is really a question of coming to grips with, and challenging, the stuff of the imagination. In this sense, there are many sources and centers that can be tapped.

I believe there is an amazingly strong analogy to be drawn between the content of poetry and the content that I speak of as related to sculpture. In sculpture, we are dealing with a form that presents visual meaning within a changing source of light and the movement of the spectator. It constantly produces illusions of shifting shapes and images. Hence, like poetry, sculpture is fraught with structural and visual ambiguities that are resolved by reconciling opposites in its constant pursuit of a visual metaphor.

I think, then, that a medium such as sculpture, able to integrate diverse poles of meaning, can reveal significant suggestions of imagery that cross or fuse from one generation to another the rich source material of legend and myth.