

André Malraux and the modern, transcultural concept of art

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Few visitors to art museums today are likely to be even mildly surprised to find exhibitions that include Pre-Columbian figurines, statues from Egyptian tombs, Khmer sculpture, ceremonial masks from the islands of the Pacific, or Australian Aboriginal bark paintings. Objects such as these are now a normal, accepted part of art museum exhibitions and of the wider world of art represented, for example, by reproductions in books about art. Yet this, as we know, was by no means always the case, and we need only glance briefly at the history of art museums to see what a relatively recent development it has been.

The nineteenth century art museum, or the museum of 'fine arts' as it was then more commonly called, unambiguously reflected the view that the only art worthy of the name was Western art—in particular Western art since the Renaissance, with the addition of selected works from Greece and Rome. This had been a long-established view, at least four centuries old. The painting or sculpture of non-European cultures, or of pre-Renaissance Europe, might occasionally have had a kind of curiosity value, but it was definitely not art, and certainly had no place in the 'musées de beaux arts' where the Raphaels and the Caravaggios, the Titians and the Poussins, held their exclusive and uncontested place. Louis XIV's reaction to Medieval art—'Away with those monstrosities!'—was by no means idiosyncratic. It was representative of the view, firmly established even by the seventeenth century, that there was art—which had probably reached its peak of perfection in Raphael, Michelangelo, and certain works of Antiquity—and then there were strange, often misshapen, objects from times gone by and distant parts of the globe that were at best botched attempts to be art or merely grotesque fetishes or idols.

All this changed rapidly in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. Not that the Raphaels, the Caravaggios, the Titians and the Poussins were banished. But suddenly, after long centuries, the boundaries of the domain of art began to shift and blur. The so-called ‘primitives’ of European art such as Cimabue and Giotto began to grow in esteem. Selected artefacts from non-European cultures, which, if preserved at all, had been confined strictly to archaeological or anthropological collections, began to migrate by ones and twos into art museums. The process was gradual—gradual enough anyway that it seldom ‘made news’ as contemporaneous developments in twentieth century art, such as abstract art or ‘ready-mades’, made news. But its effects were no less revolutionary. The new world of art included not just earlier periods of European culture—Medieval, Romanesque, and Byzantine—but also a steadily widening range of non-European cultures, from Ancient Egypt to Pre-Columbian America, from Africa to India, China and the islands of the Pacific. By the mid-twentieth century, art for the West encompassed objects from the four corners of the earth and from cultures stretching back to the dawn of prehistory. The fetishes, idols, and ‘monstrosities’ had moved in beside the Raphaels and the Caravaggios to become works of art, and in many cases masterpieces. A different world of art—a *transcultural* world of art—had come into being.

What is the significance of this event? Why did it happen? And why did it happen *then*? Did it somehow imply a major change in Western responses to painting and sculpture? Does ‘art’ today mean something different from what it meant during the previous centuries? How, in short, are we to make sense of this event, which seems to stand like a watershed between art as it once was and art as we know it today?

The answers I want to offer to these questions are the answers given by André Malraux in three major works on the theory of art published in the decades following World War II—*The Psychology of Art*, *The Voices of Silence* and *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*. Malraux has a lot to say about the event I have just described and offers some very interesting answers to the questions I have just posed. For Malraux, the event was nothing short of an ‘aesthetic revolution’ which resulted in ‘the first universal world of art’—the world of art we inhabit today. Malraux’s account of this event in the books I have just mentioned is much more

detailed than the abbreviated version I will give here. I would, nevertheless, like to outline the key points he makes because his concerns are closely linked to the themes of our conference and might, I hope, provide an interesting background to our deliberations.

Most of what I have to say will be closely related to the concrete world of art itself. I would, however, like to begin on a more abstract note and briefly explain one of the fundamental ideas underlying Malraux's account which will be a recurring theme in my remarks.

Lurking within most of the familiar theories of art, its slumber rarely disturbed by the harsh light of analysis, is a notion of something called 'reality' or 'the world'. If, for example, art is theorised as a form of representation, then it is ultimately 'reality' or 'the world' that is said to be represented. If art is, as some aestheticians maintain, a source of 'knowledge', then it is 'reality' or 'the world' that it is said to give us knowledge about. And even if, as some deconstructionists have argued, art is somehow trapped in its own web of language, it is apparently still 'reality' or 'the world' that language prevents it from grasping. It is regrettable, in my view, that the apparently innocuous, uncomplicated notion of 'reality' or 'the world' invoked in such cases is so frequently allowed to slumber on unanalysed and undefined, and unfortunately I will not have time in this paper to ask any of the questions that seem to me to be begged by it. I mention it however because for Malraux the idea of 'reality' or 'the world' in the context of art is *not* left undefined, but, on the contrary, takes on a quite specific meaning which plays a crucial role in his thinking.

For Malraux, the reality to which art is addressed is a *metaphysical* reality. That is a notoriously vague word, so what do I mean by it here? The 'reality' to which art is addressed, Malraux argues, is 'the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own.'² That emotion is the bewildering sense, which we all have all no doubt experienced at certain moments, of the arbitrariness and contingency of all things. It is the sudden awareness that all the myriad forms of the world seem to have no reason for being the way they are, or indeed for being at all—that 'all this' is not the permanent, definitive 'scheme of things' but merely a realm of fleeting appearance, a boundless chaos in which everything, including man and all his endeavours, seems to be

without the least significance. Across the millennia, Malraux argues, humanity has defended itself against this sense of chaos and insignificance by a series of ‘absolutes’—belief systems such as the major religions of the past that have swept aside the veil of appearance to reveal the underlying ‘nature of things’—the Truth, the *reasons why* things are, and are the way they are. Appearance then becomes a realm of snare and delusion—for Christianity it is the ‘here-below’, for Buddhism ‘impermanence’—and can thus be vanquished because it is simply the obstacle that man, given sufficient fortitude, can overcome as he makes his way along the path of Truth.

Absolutes, however, Malraux argues, have not been man’s sole means of defence against the sense of chaos and insignificance in question. From as early as Palaeolithic times, there has also existed the creative act that we today call art. Unlike an absolute, Malraux contends, art makes no claim to reveal the underlying nature of things—the Truth beneath the veil of appearance. Art conquers by another means. Art, Malraux argues, creates a *rival* world, ‘not necessarily a supernal world, or a glorified one’, he explains, ‘but one different in kind from reality’.³ Different in what way? Different because *unified*: it is a world constructed solely of elements that, unlike those of mere, given reality, *are* the way they are, and *are present*, ‘for a reason’. Art, Malraux writes, creates ‘another world’, a world ‘scaled down to man’s measure’.⁴ It ‘wrests forms from the real world to which man is subject, and makes them enter a world in which he is the ruler.’⁵

In the case of visual art, for example, ‘reality’, ‘the visible world’, or ‘nature’, is not, as is so often suggested, the artist’s reference point or guide. Reality—the realm of mere appearance—is at most, Malraux argues, a ‘dictionary’—an assemblage of separate elements, individually *capable* of being invested with meaning, but combined in a manner that renders them incoherent.⁶ Thus, all artistic styles, he writes.

are *significations*; they impose a *meaning* on visual experience ... always we see them replacing the uncharted scheme of things by the coherence they force on all they ‘represent’. However complex, however lawless an art may claim to be—even the art of a Van Gogh or a Rimbaud—it stands for unity as against the chaos of appearances.⁷

Fundamentally, therefore, art for Malraux, like the reality it addresses, has a *metaphysical* significance. Art creates a rival world that affirms man's presence in the face of the vast indifference of the 'uncharted scheme of things'. At its deepest level, art does not exist simply for psychological or ideological purposes, such as providing an avenue for self-expression, communicating feelings, representing the world, affording 'aesthetic pleasure', providing a form of 'cognition', or interpreting social or political experience (to mention some familiar explanations). Art is a response to man's incipient sense of insignificance in the face of a scheme of things in which his presence seems to count for nothing. Whether visual art, literature or music, art is, Malraux writes, one of the ways in which man 'denies his nothingness'.⁸

These, as I have said, are rather abstract ideas but I now hope to make them more concrete through an examination of certain specific events in the history of art. My key concern, as I have indicated, is the 'aesthetic revolution' at the beginning of the twentieth century which brought about the vast expansion in our world of art to which I have alluded. To do justice to Malraux's analysis, however, I need to begin further back—as far back as Byzantium and the Renaissance in fact. At first glance this might seem rather excessive. Byzantium and the Renaissance are surely ancient history where our present topic is concerned? I hope to show otherwise. I hope in fact to show that the history I will briefly trace is of vital importance in understanding the significance of the aesthetic revolution in question and the world of art we now inhabit.

One more preliminary word. In his books on art, such as *The Voices of Silence*, Malraux accompanies his text with reproductions that illustrate and amplify the points he makes. From here onwards, I would like to adopt the same approach, using slides, and in some cases choosing the same examples Malraux himself chooses. I will say very little about the individual images I show—many of which will be very familiar to you anyway—but I hope that, as in Malraux's case, they will serve as a kind of counterpoint to what I say and give it added depth and resonance.⁹

For its creators and its original audiences, Malraux argues, Byzantine art was not 'art' in any sense of the word that resembles its meaning today. The very word 'audiences', which I have just used with great reluctance, helps to highlight the difference. Byzantine images, such as the Virgin in the basilica at Torcello, or the mosaics at Ravenna, were not created for groups of admiring art lovers, but for assemblies of devout Christian worshippers. The art museum, which is so much a part of our contemporary experience of art, was then quite unknown and almost certainly unimaginable, and works such as these were not created to consort with others of a different kind in an art museum, but, as Malraux reminds us, for one specific context—the candle-lit interiors of Byzantine churches, where, for the assembled faithful, they evoked the mysterious presence of a transcendent God.¹⁰ Originally, in other words, images such as these were intimately linked to the faith which they, in turn, served to animate. In keeping with the basic proposition I outlined a moment ago, they certainly sought to evoke 'another world'—a coherent world deliberately different from the world of fleeting appearances—but it was not a world of 'art'. It was 'another world' of revealed Truth—a supramundane world of an eternal and loving God far removed from the transitory human domain 'here below'.

Although I run the risk of telling you what you already know, I should perhaps interpose here that there have been numerous cultures in which the term 'art', in anything approaching its modern Western signification, was quite unknown.¹¹ As Malraux writes in *The Voices of Silence*, 'A major part of our art heritage has been bequeathed to us by men for whom the idea of art was not the same as our own, or by those for whom it did not even exist.'¹² For cultures like that of Byzantium in which a sense of the sacred played a central role, this comment is of particular relevance. Even for the European Middle Ages—relatively close to us in time, after all—painting, sculpture and architecture were not, Malraux contends, created to serve the cause of 'art' but to reveal the features of God's divine world, and the Middle Ages, he writes, 'were as unaware of what we mean by the word "art" as were Greece or Egypt, who had no word for it.'¹³ The absence in so many cultures of a term equivalent in meaning to our word art is, I might add, something that the discipline of aesthetics has only recently begun to treat with

some degree of seriousness—though mostly, I would argue, to explain *away* rather than to explain.¹⁴ One of the many advantages of Malraux's theory of art is that he treats this fact seriously and helps us understand why it is so. In Byzantium, as in so many other cultures, he argues, the 'other world' that painting, sculpture and architecture strove to bring into being was first and foremost an Other World of the sacred. The notion of art as know it—the art of art collections and art museums—was not only alien but in all probability quite unimaginable.

At a certain stage in European history, however, a radical change was to occur and, for the first time, something called 'art'—though not yet with the meaning we attach to the word today—was to come into being. For Malraux, this change began with Giotto.

The Christian faith of Byzantium, Malraux argues, was a 'dualism': its God was beyond the reach of human understanding. God was love, Malraux writes,

But not human love. God's love is sacred love, and partakes of the central mystery of the Godhead. The Revelation did not bring elucidation of the mystery, but communion with it ... Though God was love and though man had access to Him through love, the ultimate mystery of his being remained inviolate.¹⁵

Hence, Malraux argues, the 'transcendent' nature of Byzantine art. These artists, he writes,

never attempted to depict Jesus and Mary as individuals or even to standardise Christ's physical appearance... Yet in one respect—their otherworldliness—all these figures of the Saviour have a striking uniformity, and this is equally true of the biblical scenes over which they preside. For these scenes do not depict events that once took place on earth, but episodes of the sacred.¹⁶

Giotto, Malraux argues, represents the first clear break with this dualism—a first step in man's reconciliation with God. The crucial development was not, as is so often said, a sudden interest in

‘naturalism’ or ‘illusionism’, although this played a necessary part. Giotto’s discovery, Malraux argues, was a new *power* in painting unknown to Byzantium. No longer a hieratic vision of otherworldliness, Giotto’s frescos depicted sacred scenes that are at the same time ‘scenes of the life of Jesus’¹⁷—events that once *did* take place on earth. Thus, Malraux writes,

[Giotto] discovered a *power of painting* previously unknown in Christian art: the power of locating without sacrilege a sacred scene in a world resembling that of everyday life... For the first time sacred scenes related no less to the world of man than to the world of God.¹⁸

Giotto thus opened up a new world of what Malraux terms ‘pictorial fiction’ or ‘the imaginary’.¹⁹ Though his painting was still very much in the service of a strong Christian faith, Malraux writes, he ‘[brought] the divine on to a plane nearer that of man’ by replacing the hieratic forms of Byzantine art with ‘[a] sublime expression of the Christian drama.’²⁰ A degree of naturalism or illusionism played a necessary part because the drama took place in ‘a world resembling that of everyday life’. The essential point, however, was not ‘nature imitation’—the mere mimicry of the world of appearances. Once again, as always, the aim was the creation of *another* world, but this time one that ‘related no less to the world of man than to the world of God.’

Developments from this point onwards reveal an enthusiastic exploration of the possibilities Giotto had opened up. ‘It was not that religious feelings were submerged’, Malraux writes,

but these were supplemented by the thrill of discovering an imaginary realm revealed by a power of the artist that differed from his power of representing scriptural scenes, in that it no longer called forth veneration, but ... admiration.²¹

This development took a further step forward with Botticelli. In its exploration of the newly discovered imaginary realm, Malraux argues, art began to call more and more frequently on the mythology of Antiquity whose heroes and goddesses seemed to represent an enduring,

privileged world of the imaginary and to offer a ‘repertoire of exalted acts’ befitting such a world.²² For Botticelli—in his non-religious works at least—it was no longer a question, as it had been with Giotto, of ‘locating without sacrilege a sacred scene in a world resembling that of everyday life’ but instead of creating an earthly realm that *rivalled* that of the sacred. Thus, the admiration inspired by a painting such as *Spring*, Malraux writes,

like that inspired by Antiquity (and which Antiquity legitimised), is addressed to a demiurge which, for the first time, rivals the Christian demiurge, because for the first time it gives exalted expression to a fiction drawn from the realms of the profane.²³

These developments, Malraux contends, conferred on art—and the very *word* art—both a new function and an unprecedented prestige. The point is crucial to Malraux’s argument. The paintings and mosaics of Byzantium, like the art of other major religions, had given form to a sense of transcendence that *preceded* them and could be experienced without them. They had drawn their strength, their authority, and their very *raison d’être* from a faith in another world that pre-existed them. By the time of Botticelli, Malraux argues, there has emerged the first unambiguous depiction of a transcendent world that came into being *solely* through the artist’s achievement. Christian faith is not as yet under open attack (and Malraux argues that this did not occur until the eighteenth century). Yet through its newly discovered powers, art has now begun to construct an exalted ‘other world’ independent of any pre-existing absolute—a world, as Malraux writes, outside of which ‘man did not fully merit the name man’²⁴ that came into being *solely through the power of art itself*.

In short a revolutionary change has taken place, which has altered the very function of painting and sculpture. Source of a ‘nobler’ world—a world peopled by men and women touched by a spark of the divine—art is no longer an object of veneration but of *admiration*—an admiration evoked by the transformative powers of art alone. Art such as that of Botticelli, Malraux writes, was in effect the ‘Declaration of the Rights of the Imaginary’ that will become the guiding light of the

painting to follow.²⁵ The creative task of the painter is henceforth 'accomplished in a domain unknown till then by Christianity, because its prime objective will be the admiration it must evoke.'²⁶

Thus began, in Europe, the reign of 'art', in the sense described, which was to last some four centuries. The domain opened up by Botticelli's 'Declaration of the Rights of the Imaginary' was thenceforth explored and vastly enlarged, Malraux argues, by figures such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Tintoretto, Poussin, Rubens and Delacroix. Further advances were made in the techniques of illusionism—and Malraux credits Leonardo with certain decisive discoveries in this regard—but in no case, he argues, was this the central aim. The goal was not a slavish copying of appearances but as always the creation of another, 'rival' world—in this case a world of God and man reconciled, a world outside of which 'man did not fully merit the name man', and which art alone could conjure up. Thus, despite the pursuit of the 'lifelike', Malraux writes,

Art (as indeed its name implied) was always recognised as something different in kind from the world of appearances ... [and] what was asked of art in the period following Leonardo was not a literal imitation of reality but the depiction of an idealised world. While resorting to every known device for rendering texture and spatial recession, and attaching so much importance to rounding off its figures, this art was in no sense realistic; rather it aspired to be the sublime expression of a dreamworld of harmonious beauty.²⁷

My summary of Malraux's account has brought me to the threshold of the development discussed at the beginning of this paper—the 'aesthetic revolution' towards the end of the nineteenth century that saw the sudden expansion of the world of art to include objects from a wide a range of non-Western cultures past and present. As we have seen, Malraux argues that the developments we have just considered conferred on the notion of art a significance and a prestige previously unknown in Western civilisation.²⁸ The 'aesthetic revolution' I am about to describe has taken nothing away from that prestige but has, Malraux

contends, fundamentally altered the *significance* of art and the function it performs.

The seeds of this revolution were sown in the closing years of the seventeenth century. This was a decisive moment for Europe, Malraux argues, a moment when ‘something unprecedented was happening; something that was to transform both art and culture’.²⁹ For at least three centuries, Christianity had been gradually losing its hold on men’s minds, and the new century of the *philosophes*, with their all-out war on religion, saw its final collapse. Now, for the first time, Malraux writes,

a religion was being threatened otherwise than by another religion about to take its place. In its long evolution from the numinous awe of its beginning to the concept of a loving God, the religious sentiment had frequently assumed new forms. The cult of Science and Reason that now ensued was not just another metamorphosis of the religious sentiment, but its negation. The new generation would hear nothing of religion, even though they replaced it with the cult of a Supreme Being.³⁰

The victory was swift and decisive. An Encyclopaedist, Malraux writes ‘was farther removed from Racine in his Port-Royal retreat than Racine was from St Bernard; for the mere notion of “retreat” had ceased to mean anything to the Encyclopaedists.’³¹ Despite the persistence of the forms of pious observance, Western culture became as ‘unresponsive to the voice of Christianity as to the stellar myths and Druid trees.’³²

In the first instance, Malraux argues, the void left by the disappearance of religious faith was filled by a new faith in humanity itself, a faith which, allied to the idea of History, gave birth to what he terms the ideal of the ‘coming man’ with its powerful myths of liberty, democracy, science and progress. Yet while some of these hopes linger on and still form part of our thinking today, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw their progressive disintegration. ‘That hope which Victor Hugo, Whitman, Renan and Berthelot placed in progress, science, enlightenment, democracy’, he writes, ‘soon lost its self-assurance.’ For ‘when those great hopes first arose in Europe there was nothing to give

them the lie'. But this is no longer the case. For, we know now, he writes,

that peace in our time is as vulnerable as it ever was; that democracy has latent in it the germs of capitalist and totalitarian policies; that Progress and Science mean the atom bomb; that the human predicament is not amenable to logic.³³

The result today is an agnostic culture—a culture lacking any fundamental value. The claim is not, one should stress, that belief in God has necessarily become an impossibility, or that no-one in any previous culture ever doubted the prevailing beliefs of their times. 'Agnosticism is no new thing,' Malraux writes, 'what is new is an agnostic culture'.³⁴ The unprecedented development, which is our present reality, is a culture lacking any fundamental value, any absolute in the sense defined earlier—unlike Ancient Egypt, unlike Greece, unlike Byzantium or the Middle Ages, unlike post-Renaissance Europe, unlike even the nineteenth century despite the fragility of its faith in Man—in short, unlike so many other cultures that have preceded ours or that have existed in other parts of the world. We can look back across the millennia of human history, Malraux is saying, and see culture after culture in which a shared sense of the numinous, or of the sacred, has given man an assurance of his place in the scheme of things—an assurance that there is something other than the ephemeral realm of appearances. Modern Western culture, by contrast, has only a series of unanswered questions. Having taken to heart Nietzsche's pronouncement (issued somewhat late in the day) that God is dead, and having recognised, willingly or not, that, in Malraux words, 'Man is dead after God',³⁵ we are the first 'agnostic culture'—the first civilisation in human history in which men and women are born, and live, and work, and suffer, and die, without any sense of a *fundamental* reason for it all.

The consequences in the field of art, Malraux argues, have been dramatic. Previously, as we have seen, the function, the *raison d'être*, of painting and sculpture had always been inseparable from a fundamental value, and this remained so even when, from the Renaissance onwards, that value depended on art itself for its existence. What might

the function of art be, however, in an agnostic culture? What kind of 'other world' could painting and sculpture aspire to in a context in which the possibility of something beyond the world of mere appearance seems to have irretrievably vanished?

For Malraux, the first visual artist to offer an unambiguous answer to this question was Manet. Manet's *Olympia*, which caused such a scandal when first exhibited (and not simply for its subject matter), announces a change in the function of art no less dramatic than that brought about by Giotto. A long chapter in the history of Western art, lasting several centuries, was suddenly brought to a close. Gone was any attempt to conjure up an exalted fictional world—an 'other world' of nobility and beauty such as that found in Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*, or even as late as Delacroix. For Manet, as for the many artists who were soon to explore the new regions he opened up, such as Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso and Chagall, the 'other world' of art would now be a world in which, Malraux argues, art is simply *its own value*.³⁶ Like Giotto, Manet had not simply discovered a new style, but revealed a new *power* of painting. No longer linked to *any* value outside itself, painting would now rely exclusively on its own power to create an autonomous, 'rival' world. For the first time, painting simply became 'painting', no longer subordinated to anything outside itself.

This idea is easily misunderstood and Malraux has much more to say about it than I have time for here. The suggestion is not that visual art simply became a virtuoso display of technique—an exercise in the various possible uses of colour, line, harmony, and spatial relationships. The purpose of art remains, as it had always been, the creation of a coherent 'world apart', a rival world proof against the chaos of appearances. The crucial difference now is that for the modern artist—those who explore the new world opened up by Manet—that purpose has, for the first time, become the artist's *exclusive* aim. Cut off from any other value, modern art falls back on what Malraux terms its 'hard core'. In doing so, he writes, it reveals

that immemorial impulse of creative art: the desire to build up a world apart and self-contained, existing in its own right: a desire which for the first time in the history of art, has become the be-all and end-all of the artist.³⁷

Thus while we continue to use the *word* art—hallowed, after all, by centuries of usage since the Renaissance—its meaning has altered fundamentally. Moreover, and most importantly for our purposes at this conference, the change is signalled not only by the nature of the art created, but also by the range of works *resuscitated*. For in falling back exclusively on that ‘immemorial impulse of creative art: the desire to build up a world apart and self-contained’, modern art has simultaneously opened our eyes to that *same* impulse in a vast range of works from other cultures whose admission to the ranks of art had never previously been contemplated.

Now we can begin to see the deeper significance of the ‘aesthetic revolution’ I discussed at the beginning of my remarks, and reason why it took place. We today, Malraux is arguing, inhabit a world of art that is quite unprecedented and radically different from that which preceded it. The combination of an agnostic culture—a culture that owes allegiance to no fundamental value—and the discovery by Manet and subsequent artists of an art that relies *solely* on its own power to create another world, has made us progressively aware, for the first time, of this *same* power in countless works of the past and of other cultures. Every work of art—every object, that is, that we now call a work of art—whether from our own culture or from another, has at its core, Malraux is saying, this same ‘urge to build up a world apart and self-contained’ or, in the terms I used earlier, the urge to construct a coherent world rivalling the chaos of appearances. The emergence in the West over the past century of an art dependent exclusively on this power has simultaneously made us aware of this same quality in the works of the distant past and of other cultures.

This is why we have, for the first time, welcomed into the world of art—the *new* world of art—objects from cultures as various as Pre-Columbian America, Ancient Egypt, Africa, India—and of course Byzantium as well—all of which, previously, were rigorously excluded. And we can now see clearly *why* they were excluded. For those who first worshipped before the Torcello *Virgin*, as for the contemporaries of Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, and even of Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, it would have been unthinkable to compare those images with objects from other cultures as ‘works of art’. It was not a question of superior skill or talent. It was, as we can now see, that one would

have been dealing with objects of different *kinds*—objects that could not sensibly be compared. For their contemporaries, as we have discussed, Byzantine images such as those at Ravenna were not ‘works of art’, they were manifestations of a revealed Truth. As such, they were image besides which *all* images of other times and places—including the surviving, and often still visible, works of Classical Antiquity—were nothing more than the worthless products of error and delusion. For the contemporaries of Leonardo, Poussin or Delacroix their paintings *were*, certainly, ‘works of art’, but in the specific sense we have examined in which they stood for an exalted world of harmonious beauty. *All* other painting (including, by this time, Giotto as well, and of course Byzantine art) was at best a failed attempt to achieve the same goal. As Malraux writes, making the same point but choosing different examples,

In the twelfth century, there could have been no question of contrasting or comparing a Wei statue with a Romanesque statue; on the one hand there was an idol, on the other a Saint. Similarly in the seventeenth century a Sung painting would not have been contrasted with a work by Poussin. For this would have meant comparing a ‘queer’ outlandish landscape with a ‘noble work of art’. Yet if that Sung landscape were not appraised primarily as a work of art, it simply did not exist. Its significance was repudiated not by Poussin’s artistic talent but by the conception of art for which that talent catered and from which it was inseparable.³⁸

The quite different attitude that seems second nature to us now, which allows us see *all* these objects as ‘works of art’ is thus unprecedented. As Malraux writes:

It must not be forgotten that we are the first to realise that every art is closely bound up with a significance peculiar to itself; until our times such forms as did not tally with a preconceived significance of art were not linked up with *other* significances, but relegated to the scrapheap.³⁹

Does this mean that we are the first to see art ‘as it really is’—in its ‘definitive’ form, free at last from all extraneous values that previously obscured its true nature? That would be a misunderstanding. Malraux is not presenting us with a teleology or treating art as we now know it as a kind of apotheosis. Indeed, he writes in *The Voices of Silence*, ‘Should a new absolute emerge, a large part of [our] treasured heritage of art would doubtless fade into oblivion.’⁴⁰ He is certainly arguing that all those objects that we today call art, from the horses of Lascaux to Picasso, have sprung from the same creative impulse—the urge to create ‘another world’ acting in defence against the chaos of appearances, ‘the desire to build up a world apart and self-contained, existing in its own right’. Yet that impulse, as we have seen, has manifested itself in different ways across the ages, and by no means always *as art*. For Byzantium—which, like so many other cultures, had no notion of what we today mean by art—it was the means of bodying forth ‘another world’ of revealed Truth, as it was also for Buddhist India, for Pre-Columbian civilisations, and for so many others, although in each case, of course, those Truths were of a different kind. From the Renaissance onwards, as we have discussed, that creative impulse sought to reveal ‘another world’ of God and man reconciled, a world that endowed the term art with a special, privileged meaning because art alone could conjure it into existence. In today’s agnostic culture—a culture in which, for the time being at least, all avenues to the transcendent seem closed off—that creative impulse has been left, as it were, to its own devices. It has responded by discovering an art in which, as Malraux writes, the desire to build up ‘a world apart and self-contained’ has become for the first time the ‘be-all and end-all of the artist’. In doing so, it has created not only a new art of the present but also a new art of the past—a past now peopled not simply by the works of Europe since the Renaissance and selected works of Greece and Rome but also by those from the temples and grottoes of South-East Asia, from the islands of the Pacific, from as far back as the early civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and even from Palaeolithic times. Not that we, today, see any of these works as they were originally seen. Indeed, if we did, Malraux points out, we would immediately remove many of them from our art museums.⁴¹ But the presence within them of that same ‘immemorial impulse’ to which modern art has so successfully

drawn our attention has enabled them to foregather in a world of art of a kind hitherto unknown. No longer relegated to the scrapheap, no longer heathen idols, 'queer' outlandish landscapes, botched attempts to be art, or 'monstrosities', they have become 'works of art', not in the sense that phrase possessed from the Renaissance down to the end of the nineteenth century, but in the new sense it has acquired today. Just as the world of art initiated by Giotto revived the works of Greece and Rome that Byzantium had so decisively spurned, so our new world of art, dating from the closing years of the nineteenth century, has brought about another Renaissance—but on a much larger scale. The result is, in Malraux's words, 'the first universal world of art'—a world in which, as he writes, 'a Mexican god becomes a statue, not a mere fetish, and Chardin's still lifes join the Chartres *Kings* and the gods at Elephanta on equal footing'.⁴²

By one of those strange accidents of history, due to the rapid spread of Western culture around the globe, there remain certain exceptional cases in which objects that might form part of this new world of art originate in non-Western cultures still in existence. In such cases, Western eyes might perhaps wish to view the objects in question as works of art in the sense just described even though they still retain their original sacred significance in the cultures from which they come. Such circumstances, as we know, occasionally lead to rather fraught debates about the 'real' or 'authentic' significance of the objects, and about whether treating them as art—and placing them in an art museum, for example—constitutes a denial of their 'true' nature. If we accept Malraux's analysis, these debates rest on a misunderstanding. Neither significance—the original sacred significance or the significance now as art—rules out the other, any more than regarding the statues at Luxor or the cave paintings at Lascaux as works of art denies their now vanished significance as sacred or magical objects. Where Luxor and Lascaux are concerned, the original cultures have long since disappeared, and with them, irretrievably, the original significance of the objects concerned. In the case of non-Western cultures still extant, we obviously have an obligation to respect the religious beliefs involved and the status this confers on the objects in question—a status that might well, if the communities in question so decide, rule out their inclusion in an art museum. But if Malraux's analysis is correct, the

search for the 'real' meaning of the objects in some definitive sense is a red herring. The Western observer today, if he or she is permitted, may well discover in many such objects the immemorial voice of which Malraux speaks, just as he or she may discover it in the cave paintings at Lascaux, the sculpture at Luxor or at Chartres, the paintings of Titian, or the works of Picasso. For the culture in which the objects in question still play a part in a living religion, their significance may be quite different and, for the reasons we have discussed, that significance may be quite incompatible with the idea that it is a 'work of art'. Both voices are authentic; neither is definitive.

In any event, we should not allow the heat and dust of occasional debates such as these to obscure the larger issue to which I have sought to draw attention. In the lifetime of everyone at this conference, and of our parents, the world of art has *included* objects from non-Western cultures, such as many of those we will discuss. Yet only a little further back in time, when some of our grandparents were young, the notion of a 'universal world of art'—a 'transcultural' world of art' to use the terminology of this conference—would have been very novel, if not quite unknown, and many of the objects we will discuss would not have been allowed across the threshold of an art museum. We, in other words, are living in the aftermath of an aesthetic revolution. We live in a world in which the scope of the term art, and indeed—if we accept Malraux's analysis—the very *meaning* of the term, have undergone a radical change. The story he has to tell, as we have seen, ascribes to Manet and the artists who followed him a significance no less than that of Giotto, Botticelli, Leonardo and the artists who followed them. Not surprisingly, therefore he has no hesitation in calling this aesthetic revolution 'our modern Renaissance',⁴³ although, as he points out, this is a Renaissance on a much larger scale. The prevailing mood of modern aesthetics, which generally prefers to stand aloof from the history of art, has, I believe, led us to overlook the importance of this event and of the radically altered nature of the world of art we now inhabit. I think it is time—high time—that situation was rectified. It is one of the many strengths of André Malraux's theory of art that he helps us do that.

NOTES

- 1 André Malraux, *The Psychology of Art, Museum without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Pantheon, 1949), 23. English translations from *The Psychology of Art*, *The Voices of Silence*, and the first volume of *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* are mostly based on Gilbert although I have made minor changes in some cases. Translations from *La Tête d'Obsidienne* and from the second two volumes of *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* (*L'Irreel* and *L'Intemporel*) are my own.
- 2 André Malraux, *La Tête d'Obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 221.
- 3 André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 320.
- 4 André Malraux, 'De la représentation en Orient et en Occident', *Verve*, 1, Summer, 1938, 69.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *The Voices of Silence*, 350.
- 7 Ibid, 324.
- 8 *The Psychology of Art, Museum without Walls*, 137.
- 9 The slides accompanying the paper included many of the works mentioned in the text and a number of others.
- 10 André Malraux, *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), 128-136; *The Voices of Silence*, 212-213.
- 11 Where European culture itself is concerned, an excellent account of this matter has been provided by Paul Kristeller in his essay 'The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics,' in Peter Kivy (ed.), *Essays on the history of aesthetics* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1992). Where other cultures are concerned, there are many references in the anthropological and archaeological literature. The anthropologist, Raymond Firth, comments, for example, that 'the concept "art" as such is alien to the practice and presumably the thought of many of the peoples studied by anthropologists.' [Raymond Firth, 'Art and anthropology', in Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (eds.), *Anthropology, art and aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 26.] See also, for example: Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1997), 12: '...as far as we know, the ancient Egyptians had no word that corresponds exactly to our abstract use of the word "art". They had words for individual types of monuments that we today regard as examples of Egyptian art—"statues" "stela", "tomb"—but there is no reason to believe that these words necessarily included an aesthetic dimension in their meaning.'
- 12 *The Voices of Silence*, 127.
- 13 Ibid, 53.
- 14 See for example: Denis Dutton, 'But they don't have our concept of art', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of art today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 217-238; and Noël Carroll, 'Art and Human Nature', in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Spring 2004, 95-107.

- 15 *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, 134.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid, 336.
- 18 Ibid, 337. Malraux's italics.
- 19 Ibid, 338-340.
- 20 Ibid, 338, 340.
- 21 Ibid, 350.
- 22 André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des Dieux, L'Intemporel* (Paris: Gallimard: 1976), 5.
- 23 André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des Dieux, L'Irreal*, (Paris: Gallimard: 1974), 115.
- 24 *La Métamorphose des Dieux, L'Intemporel*, 5.
- 25 *La Métamorphose des Dieux, L'Irreal*, 115.
- 26 Ibid, 111.
- 27 *The Psychology of Art, Museum without Walls*, 87.
- 28 And these developments were followed in the eighteenth century, as we know, by the emergence of a special branch of philosophy—aesthetics—specifically devoted to the study of art and, significantly, beauty.
- 29 *The Voices of Silence*, 480.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid, 468.
- 32 Ibid, 481.
- 33 Ibid, 540.
- 34 Ibid, 496.
- 35 Malraux had made this diagnosis as early as his 1926 work *La Tentation de l'Occident*. See André Malraux, *La Tentation de l'Occident* (Paris: Grasset, 1951), 174-175.
- 36 *The Voices of Silence*, 605, 610.
- 37 Ibid, 616.
- 38 Ibid, 609.
- 39 Ibid, 617. Malraux's emphasis.
- 40 Ibid, 460.
- 41 Ibid, 65.
- 42 *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, 21.
- 43 *The Psychology of Art, Museum without Walls*, 142.