

Rococo and Art Nouveau

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Abstract

We proposed ourselves, in this article, the “reading” of two moments of the European civilization through art: the XVIII Century and the art Rococo, the year of 1900 and Art Nouveau. The civilization and mentality for each of them, the dreams and the anguish of those historic ages are revealed in art. I have analyzed those two historical periods in this article because of a common characteristic: the predominant of the decorative arts.

Keywords: *Art, civilization, decorative art, Rococo, Art Nouveau.*

Two major moments in the history of art, the artistic currents Rococo and Art Nouveau, started from new ways of decorating usual objects. The applied arts were the ones that begin and sustain the change.

The new status of the object is mirroring a new way of life and a new kind of civilization. The embellished of the daily life in XVIII century, the century of Rococo, is obvious in the way that objects, the house, the comfort are growing in importance. “Rococo was, in the first place, a decorative style which found the ideal application in numerous pieces of furniture, porcelains and silver ware needed for the decoration of Court of Versailles.”¹ J. Philippe Minguet pointed out that in XVIII century a series of new models of furniture – like the “causeuses”, “vis-à-vis”, “bergeres” chairs, “en corbeille”, “a confident”, “en tete-a-tete” sofas and more of that – is produced. The “boudoir” appears and the architects are dealing with the heating and distribution of water. That reflects “the unanimous concern for comfort”. Rococo, the style of applied arts, reflects a way of life and an attitude which will expand in all major arts, and it is the expression of a new

¹ Mary Hollingsworth, *Arta în istoria umanității*, Enciclopedia RAO Publishing House, 2004, p. 356.

culture. The emphasis of the object, that means private life and intimacy, is the beginning of re-evaluating the person, the individual, the beginning of the interest for personal taste, originality, social and quotidian manifestation of man. The state room became the place where the taste, the conversation, the originality is revealed; the XVIII century is the one of rising up of intellectuals, women, crackpots, and of the individual. After J. Philippe Minguet, “the courtier was replaced by the commoner”². The decorated object is lovely, its value consisted in its beauty and not in the material it is made of. Accordingly, the collection of many objects, furniture, porcelain, silver ware became not only the sign of comfort, of the embellishment of the daily life, but the reflection of a new value of life; not only for the social one, but also for the private life. A new value of “the usual” – through the decoration of the useful object – brought a new conception and a new way of making life worth in all respects: the gallantly scenes appear in paintings, the conversation appear in drawing rooms, vast erudition, and also a new theme in philosophy and intellectual concern of the XVIII century – the happiness (“the theme of happiness gains till the end of that century an almost obsessive value”³). The happiness is not a social value; it is an individual fulfilment in all the aspects (but not religious or connected to the public life). The man reveals himself as an universe of feelings, ideals, passion. The value of life depends on all that: the joy became the purpose and the motivation of individual life. While in ancient times the theme of happiness was taken in consideration exclusively as an intellectual and moral matter or as a way of overcame the grief and wise accept of the destiny, the XVIII century discovered the happiness as a feeling: joy, fulfilment, the manifestation of the individual.

Another artistic age in which applied arts created a style is in 1900. Its name is Art Nouveau. Objects made of glass, wood, porcelain or metal became little works of art through decorations. There are useful objects that underline once again the issue of the private space and life ideal associated with objects and there value. This time Art Nouveau is creating objects destined to the inner space. Being objects created in series or as unique, they are the testimony of a desire for stability, family, order – threatened by the changes of the year 1900. Art Nouveau is not handing down the feeling of happiness, comfort and joy of living as does the Rococo. The anguish of the 1900 is obvious in Klimt’s paintings, Lalique’s jewelry and in the vegetal and asymmetric ornaments that seize the objects. The same feeling of fatigue and sadness (but not anguish) appears sometimes in

² J. Philippe Minguet, *Estetica rococoului*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1973, p. 188.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 216

Rococo works, in the pictures of Watteau, where the joy, the moment, the excitement and brilliancy are overcoming but without a fundament and a strong ideal. The society will rediscover them along with the Neoclassicism and the French Revolution. The anguish and the threatening mystery in some of the Art Nouveau works, reveal a world that precedes the Freudian researches about the subliminal and of what this psychoanalyst was calling, in a famous article, “anguish in civilization”.

The general liberation of the comportment, of art, ways of life following the World War I was revealed in 1900 only under some aspects associated with the industrialization and the social aspects derivate from it.

Woman’s image in the European culture and civilization, reflected in Rococo and Art Nouveau, is also different. In XVIII century she became the moderator of the illuminist intellectual debates and part of them. In Art Nouveau women are mirroring the fear and the psychical abyss of a new world about to come to light. In both cases, the woman is for artists a person and not only an aesthetic object; she is an active subject of civilization.

The Art is the mirror of the cultural phenomena, of the civilization and dreams of a world. In Rococo and Art Nouveau I have seen two worlds, two civilizations, each with a strong and distinct figure.

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