

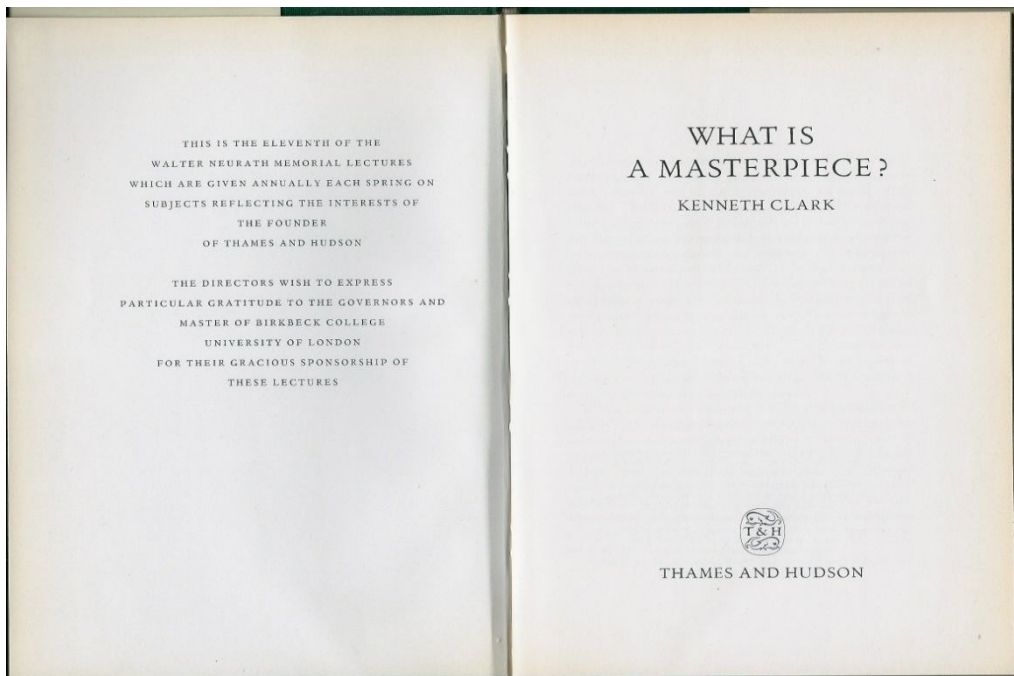
International Journal of Art and Art History
December 2014, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 77-100
ISSN: 2374-2321 (Print), 2374-233X (Online)
Copyright © The Author(s). 2014. All Rights Reserved.
Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/ijaah.v2n2a4
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15640/ijaah.v2n2a4>

The Masterpiece as a Question of Structure and Values: In Search of Universals in Art

Michael Kausch*

1. To the Question

“What is a Masterpiece?” was the question asked by the famous British historian of art Kenneth Clark in a small essay (III.1) in 1979.[†]



III. 1: Kenneth Clark: What is a Masterpiece? (1979)

*PD Mag. Dr. phil. habil, Eschenrieder Str. 11, D-82194 Gröbenzell, BRD, Austrian.
Telephone: +49 (0) 89 28803698

[†] Clark, Kenneth: What is a Masterpiece? London 1979.

He answered the question in the line of classical aesthetics and in reference to works of art mainly of the classical European tradition. Although in our opinion many of these answers respectively criteria are still valid, the exclusive frame of reference, which here is still taken more or less for granted, today seems in multiple ways doubtful:

1. The reference to classical aesthetics
2. The reference to classical art
3. The reference to European art and culture

To 1: Classical aesthetics essentially going back to the state of the 18th century seems to have become relative by aesthetics of the open work of art, which is not centered in the work, but – being based on the interaction between the work of art and the recipient – in the observer.

To 2: The artistical frame of reference – which in Clark ends so to speak just as a critical prospect with Picassos *Woman with a Guitar* („*Ma Jolie*“) und *Guernica* - is broken by modern age and its revolutionary artistic phenomena.

To 3: The limitation to European art and culture seems not any more tenable in times of a global perspective heading for world art and in the frame of a postcolonial perspective.

Now which conclusion has to be drawn from these results? Are there no aesthetic criteria universally applicable to the arts and the cultures? Does each (individual) work of art and each culture stand just for itself? Do we therefore have to accept a situation of relativism, subjectivism, even solipsism? Or are there still possibilities – starting from the classical tradition and in view of the conditions of modern age – to work out a new aesthetics more open and flexible but universally valid?

In this analysis arguments for the latter way shall be collected and presented – which naturally requires an approach to the question without prejudice (!).

It is therefore necessary to liberate oneself as much as possible from traditional and contemporary taboos and ideologies (to practice Epoché according to Edmund Husserl).

Then it is obligatory to follow the fundamental purpose of science, that is to analyse the phenomena without prejudice, to discern the typical and finally to formulate sentences of general validity.

The process of modern age has come to a point, where relativism and subjectivism threaten to erode the base on which just this modern age and its conception of a free, open society are founded (example: universality of human rights).[‡]

2. On the History of the Conception

The conception of the masterpiece probably originates in the medieval formative system of the guilds, wherein the journeyman achieved the highest degree – that of the master – by the production of the masterpiece. From this context, where the craft aspect of techné was constitutive, comes the emphasis on the pole of the work character in the sense of a differentiated, perfect execution.

It is known that with the nobilitation of the fine arts and the increasing importance of the creative artistic personality since the Renaissance a shift of the center of gravity came about: on the one hand to the subject of the artist and his *idea*, on the other hand to differentiated theories of art and their teaching at the newly founded academies. The masterpiece becomes a creation which is produced according to established rules and criteria by the inspired artist, who is orientated towards idea. So finally in the *Balance des peintres* published by Roger de Piles marks are given to the painters in the categories of *composition, dessin, coloris* and *expression*.[§]

This balance was given up in Romanticism in favour of the pole of the personality of the artist and its individual expression. Now the masterpiece is regarded as the accomplished artistic transformation of the artist's individuality in which the artistic genius gives the rules to himself. The extreme consequence of this artistic conception is demonstrated in a paradigmatic way in *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* by Balzac (1831).

[‡] This danger was seen in the famous 2004 Munich discussion between the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, the later Pope Benedict by both interlocutors from their very different philosophies and world views.

[§] See: Vouilloux, Bernard: Article Chef d'Œuvre. In: Morizot, Jacques ; Pouivet, Roger : Dictionnaire d'esthétique et de philosophie de l'art. Paris 2007, p.77f..

The protagonist of the short story, the painter Frenhofer, goes over his work so long until the subject has almost completely disappeared under an amorphous layer of over paintings. Here the elements of the conceptual and of the process appear as fundamental characteristics of modernism.**

Here and especially in abstract and non-representational art (f.e. Kandinsky, Mark Rothko) the balance is largely tilted from the pole of *Rezeptionsvorgabe* to that of the recipient and the *Rezeptionsbedingungen*. As it is already prepared in the artistic structure of symbolism, the work of art is essentially constituted in the beholder's individual process of reception. If there is still something such as a masterpiece, it probably consists in the structure of the *Rezeptionsvorgabe*.

Inversely in conceptual art (f.e.) the masterpiece – if there is still something like that – could be found in the theoretical conception being formulated in the medium of discursive language making up the work to a high extent.

On the side of theoretical reflection and definition, a radical extension of the concept of the Masterpiece as given in the UNESCO *Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2001-2005)*, including any cultural expression and space of outstanding value – such as religious ceremonies and even technical skills- , may be of practical value for preservation of endangered cultural phenomena, but necessarily reduces the contents of the concept to a rather generalized, vague and therefore insignificant meaning..

3. Thesis

1. A masterwork is a work of art in which the minimally necessary, constitutive basic structure of the work of art is given and is qualitatively achieved resp. exceeded to a high, exemplary extent.

Subthesis 1: There are universal fundamental structures and processes of general and artistic perception resp. of visual reception and production, which are founded in human physiology resp. psychology.

** See: Belting, Hans: *Das unbekannte Meisterwerk*. München 1998.

Rosenblum, Robert: *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*. London 1975.

These fundamental natural laws meet different differentiations in diverse artistic and cultural regions.

Subthesis 2: As well there are anthropologic constants in the semantic field, whether in the sense of archetypes (C.G. Jung) or in the sense of universal fundamental values.

4. Masterpiece and Artistic Structure

4.1. Classical Criteria

First of all a series of criteria shall be presented which recur in classical art criticism as well as in art historical analysis and which are considered as being constitutive of a masterpiece. Many of these can be found in the already cited essay by Kenneth Clarke and shall be presented from his paper:

- **Complexity:** „An even more moving example of self-surrender to a complex character is his [Titian] portrait of Paul III at Naples. One can look at him for an hour, as I have done, turning away and turning back, and discover something new at each turn.“^{††}
- **Density, conciseness (“good form”), Unity and diversity:** „First, the Descent from the Cross by Rogier van der Weyden. It is both concentrated and complex. The figures are effectively all on one plane, and could be rendered as sculpture. The composition could be analyzed in great detail. Every part of it works, and no passages are included simply to please the eye [...] And yet all this elaborate art is subservient to the subject.“^{††}
- **Imagination und technical ability:** „But Roger’s imaginative power, supported by his great technical skill, forces us to suspend the criticisms of commonsense – in fact, they do not even cross our mind.“^{§§}
- **Significant subjects** (Tradition: mythology, Christian subjects, antique and biblical history; in general: subjects being exemplary for man and society): „The highest masterpieces are illustrations of great themes.“^{***} (Arena Chapel, Padua)

^{††}Clark, op. cit., p. 16.

^{††} Clark, op. cit., p. 20f.

^{§§}Clark, op. cit., p. 21.

^{***}Clark, op.cit., p. 20.

- **Truth and imitation:** „Well, we may agree that devotion to truth is an attribute of the human mind from which a masterpiece may grow, and most people who are inclined to use the word masterpiece at all would apply it to Las Meninas of Velazquez. In the simplest meaning of the word, Las Meninas shows a devotion to truth that has never been equaled.

But can mere imitation be the basis of a masterpiece? A small detail – what used to be called a trompe l’oeil – can hardly claim to be a masterpiece. But when the discovery of truth is extended to a group of persons situated in a large room, and involved in a delicate human situation, then the painter’s intellectual grasp and his technical skill can be combined to produce a masterpiece.“^{†††}

- **(Human) values:** „Thus the Entombment [Titian, Louvre] has that double relationship with us, which is the prerogative of the masterpiece. It is a superb piece of design and a profound assertion of human values.

The human element is essential to a masterpiece. The artist must be deeply involved in the understanding of his fellow men. We can say that certain portraits are masterpieces because in them a human being is recreated and presented to us as an embodiment, almost a symbol, of all we might ever find in the depths of our hearts.“^{†††}

- **Tradition and innovation:** „[...]two of the characteristics of a masterpiece [Donatello, Annunciation, Santa Croce, Florence]: a confluence of memories and emotions forming a single idea and a power of recreating traditional forms so that they become expression of the artist’s own epoch and yet keep a relationship with the past.[See Pathosformel]“^{§§§}

^{†††} Clark, op. cit., p. 16.

^{†††} Clark, op. cit., p. 12.

^{§§§} Clark, op. cit., p. 10f.

This definition is very close to the Pathosformel by Aby Warburg. Irma Emmrich in *Weltbild und ästhetische Struktur* distinguishes two ways resp. degrees of reception and transformation: the conservative one of modification and the revolutionary one of innovation. See: Emmrich, Irma: *Weltbild und ästhetische Struktur*. Dresden 1982.

4.2. Criteria from the Perspective of Psychology of Perception

Many of these criteria of the tradition of classical aesthetics and theory of art can be conceived and justified in a better way from the perspective of modern scientific knowledge. For the field of the formal aspects and structures of the work of art the psychology of perception and here especially Gestalt psychology has provided essential insights.

Precursors of this conception can already be found in the theory of art of the 19th century: So for example the German sculptor Adolf v. Hildebrand in his work *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893) following the contemporary physiology of perception differentiated between *Nahsicht* and *Fernbild*. Due to distance only the latter would be able to perceive the structure of a work of art clearly; this ought to be composed of simple, clearly perceivable Gestalt forms.

The actual origin of Gestalt psychology resp. of the term and the conception of Gestalt lies with the psychologist Christian v. Ehrenfels (1890), who pointed out that a melody cannot be explained solely by its tones (elements): at a transposition of the tones the melody stays the same; it is "Gestalt", the typical structure of the series of tones, which makes up music. ****

The conception and working out of Gestalt psychology as a scientific theory and method was then carried out by Max Wertheimer (1927) ††††, Wolfgang Köhler (1933) †††† and Wolfgang Koffka (1936) §§§§; it was carried on in the postwar period by Wolfgang Metzger (1953) *****. For the application to the field of the fine arts the name of Rudolf Arnheim stands out (1954). †††††

**** After: Schuster, Martin; Beisl, Horst: *Kunstpsychologie. „Wodurch Kunstwerke wirken“*. Köln 1978, p. 24 f..

Ehrenfels, Chr. V.: *Über Gestaltqualitäten*. In: *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*. 1890.

†††† Wertheimer, Max: *Gestaltpsychologie*. In: Saube (Hrsg.), *Einführung in die neuere Psychologie* (1927).

†††† Köhler, Wolfgang: *Psychologische Probleme*. Berlin 1933.

§§§§ Koffka, Wolfgang: *Principles of Gestalt psychology*. London 1936.

***** Metzger, Wolfgang: *Gesetze des Sehens*. Frankfurt 1953.

††††† Arnheim, Rudolf: *Art and Visual Perception – a psychology of the creative eye*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954.

According to manifold experiments and their results the cited researchers formulated a series of Gestalt laws.^{####}The best known is

- *The law of figure and ground*: It means that one always splits up the seen image in two components, in a figure which is seen in the foreground in a sharp and well-structured way, and a ground which is assumed to be rather diffusely in the background. The contour, the form belongs to the outlined figure, the background is formless. (It is not so that the things around us would offer sharp figures and diffuse backgrounds by themselves). The best known example is the so-called *Rubin vase* (III.2), a realization in art is found in *Invisible Bust of Voltaire* (1940, Salvador Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida, III.3) by Salvador Dali.



III.2: The Rubin Vase

^{####}Presentation after: Schuster, op.cit., S. 25ff.



III. 3: Salvador Dali, Invisible Bust of Voltaire, 1940, Salvador Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida

The fundamental law of figure and ground is completed by other Gestalt laws:

- *The law of proximity*: Neighbouring points or lines are more likely combined in a common figure than distant ones.
- *The law of closure*: Enclosed things easily form a figure.
- *The law of similarity*: Similar elements are combined in a figure. Things already forming a figure due to proximity can enter into a new perceptive structure by similar, more distant things.
- *The law of past experience*: The beholder introduces familiar things into strange things or accidental structures. Such perceptive Gestalten which one has already often seen and with which one has some experience, are easily differentiated as a figure from the whole visual field. This is a point of connection and interference between individual and social experience and its cultural history one hand's side and the physiological basis of perception on the other hand's side.^{§§§§§}
- *The law of prägnanz*: Gestalten being prägnant (pithy), standing particularly out and being perceivable without difficulty are more easily perceived as figures.

^{§§§§§} A well-known analytical and therapeutical adaptation is the Rorschach test which works by projection of visual structures including their emotional or conceptual contents. See also Leonardo's advice in his *Trattato dellapittura* to develop figures (resp. Gestalten) from humidity stains on walls.

The mentioned laws can be resumed in *the law of good gestalt*. This law means that forms, especially if they are not perceived precisely, are improved, are made prägnant. ***** Improvement of gestalt therefore means: Filling in of gaps, production of symmetry, approach of the form towards a known object, production of higher regularity, turning away from an accidental distribution of figurative elements. Now if these fundamental insights of the Gestalt psychology are related to the traditional criteria of aesthetics – especially to the formal ones – partially cited in Clarke's essay, the following becomes clear:

Simple geometric basic forms such as the triangle (pyramidal composition, f.e. Madonnas by Raphael, III.3) or the circle, but also the rectangle, the ellipse or the diagonal, are found not by chance and not only in certain styles or cultures. For evidently they have a psychological, a physiological and in the end an anthropological base: that means they are based in the constitution of man. The organizing strife for prägnanz, for the good form is effective as well in the depiction of singular objects as in the shaping of the global composition.

*****If for example simple figures (circle, triangle, square) showing a gap in the flow of the line are offered for a very short time, the beholder is closing these gaps, that means he does not notice the gaps.

Siehe also the special experiments mentioned in Schuster.
In: Schuster, op.cit., p. 31f..

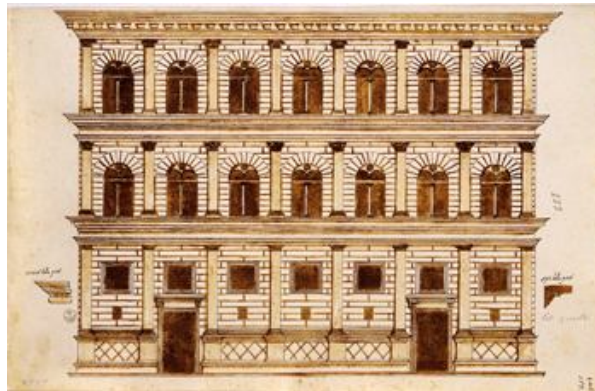


III. 4 Raphael, Madonnadel Cardellino (Goldfinch), 1505-6, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

Here, however, the pole of plurality as a compensation counterpart for the traditional principle of “unity and variety” comes at play. This is probably based among others in the physiological need of stimuli respectively the change of stimuli.

Among others on this – within a wider frame – the range of variation and the change of individual and period styles are based. So f.e. Sander (1931) – following on the thesis of Heinrich Wölfflin – tried to put down the difference between Renaissance and Baroque to different architectonic ways of construction, which apply the law of good gestalt.

According to Sander/Wölfflin Renaissance art is characterized by: Beautiful calm form; liberating beauty has an effect like a general feeling of wellbeing; the constructive elements convey sensations of a steady increase of vitality; the forms are free, light and complete; they have a slow, lasting effect; they radiate quiet; they provoke the desire to stay with them. This effect is based on the following basic forms and construction principles^{†††††}: The square and the rectangle of the golden section are dominating among rectangle forms; circular curves, spheres, right angles, metrically regular sequences of windows etc., symmetrical horizontal structure, equilibrium, frontal parallel plane, demarcation line are emphasized. (III. 5, 6)



III. 5 Giorgio Vasari il Giovane, Facciata di Palazzo Rucellai, Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi

III. 6 Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, 1446-58, Florence

^{†††††}See also psychological experiments on the effect of forms resp. the assignment of forms to artificial names.

On the contrary Baroque art is characterized by: It wants to seize; attacks with the power of affect, it overwhelms, produces excitement, ecstasy, transport, is determined to the impression of the moment, conveys the experience of development, events, the forms leave the beholder unsatisfied, give the impression of restlessness, produce tension, the condition of passion.

This effect is based on the following basic forms and construction principles: Rectangles being near to the square or exceeded in length or width, elliptic curves, obtuse or acute angles, sequences with not equal distances (windows), the axis of symmetry is moved out of the center, no frontally parallel plane, solid demarcation lines broken up.

So the artistic conception of Baroque is founded on other basic forms and compositional principles, on other "good gestalts" than that of the Renaissance. However, to a certain degree, the former ones can be understood as a deviation resp. a variation of the latter ones – what corresponds to the dialectics of the evolution of style.##### (III. 7)

This is also or even more true for the relationship between Renaissance and Mannerism.



III. 7: Lukas v. Hildebrandt, Belvedere, 1714-23, Vienna

Now in a similar way the conceptions resp. the principles of depiction of regions of art outside the area of European tradition can be analyzed. Here it becomes clear that there are - not only within the artistic evolution of a large cultural area – as shown above - but also between the various large cultural areas - different preferences within the repertory of “goods Gestalts”. Looking at the example of Japanese art, for instance the colour wood engravings, the principles of a construction by planes without central perspective and that of the diagonal can be observed (III.8).



III.8: Katsushika Hokusai, the Big Wave of Kanagawa, about 1830

That means that in a global, transcultural perspective, too, evidently a certain, limited repertory of good Gestalts does exist, the different cultural areas having different basic preferences. These good Gestalts are rooted in the fundamental human structure of perception (and that of the creative process), so in the end in the fundamental anthropological structure of man.

On the other hand, within each culture resp. artistic area, there is a range of sometimes even contradictory varieties which take form in the course of cultural and artistic development or even in the way of synchronic varieties.

To give an example taken from another, in regard of Europe probably autonomous culture, let us take the famous Maya-Toltec Chacmool figure (III.9).



III.9: Chacmool from Chichén Itzá, Maya – Toltec, 11.-12.centuries AD, México City, Museo Nacional de Antropología

First of all we should remember that it is a constitutive quality of sculpture that it creates a quasi-real, corporal presence of the human being resp. the human figure – in this case of a pre-Columbian god. So the anthropological universal of human corporal existence (and personal identity) is at play. Then, in the case of this Maya – Toltec style, simplifying the human figure by abstraction, a good Gestalt being easily to perceive has been created.

Secondly, the God is represented in one of the basic corporal postures due to human anatomy, the reclining figure.

In modern European art, this type of the Reclining Figure has become one of the major artistic structures in the work of the British sculptor Henry Moore. Moore got to know the Chacmool figure by a plaster cast which he saw in the Trocadéro Museum in Paris. It became the work of reference for the creation of his famous Leeds Reclining Figure (III.10)



III.10: Henry Moore, Reclining Figure, 1929, Brown Hornton Stone, Leeds, Leeds Museum and Galleries (City Art Gallery)

As it happened often during the development of modern abstraction, a good Gestalt was adopted from a work of art resp. a style of ancient art, then transformed and adapted to the needs of the Western artist's artistic thinking. In many cases - such as for example in that of the cubism of Picasso, Matisse and others - this process was restricted to the formal resp. the Gestalt structure. In the case of Henry Moore, as regards contents, the male figure of a Pre-Columbian god (a rain god – according to one traditional interpretation) was transformed into a kind of archetypal female figure – a kind of secular, modern goddess of motherhood and fertility. In a certain sense, one could speak of a culturally induced transformation of archetypes.

Another example of the adoption and transformation of a non-European work of art by Henry Moore is that of the Malagan figure from New Ireland (Oceania). The sculptor had seen several examples in the Collections of the British Museum (III.11):



III. 11: Malagan Mortuary Figure, North coast of New Ireland, Late 19th – Early 20th Century AD, London, British Museum

Figures like this one were made for funeral ceremonies in New Ireland (Oceania), which were a part of the Malagan system determining the whole life of man. According to the interpretation of Susanne Küchler, the structure was destined to take in the life force of the deceased. This life force, called *noman* – a metaphor of energy and vitality – was linked to the female capability of reproduction.^{§§§§§§}

§§§§§§ See: Gunn, Michael: *Ritual Arts of Oceania – New Ireland in the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum*. Genova – Milano 1997.

In this case, too, Henry Moore, when developing the artistic idea of Internal/External Form in 1951 (III.12), was primarily interested in the formal structure:



III. 12: Henry Moore, Upright Internal/External Form, 1952-53, Plaster, London, Tate Gallery

The structure of the Malagan figure fitted perfectly in his artistic thinking of this period, which strived to open up consequently the compact, solid sculptural mass by creating voids and "holes".

But moreover - in addition to the correspondence of the formal side - there is also a connection as regards contents, as it was already the case in a similar way with the pair of Chacmool and the Reclining figure. In the beginning of the process of the development of this conception by adaptation and transformation this connection was probably unconscious and intuitive. However, Henry Moore's Internal/External Form being a figuration of the mother – child archetype which dominates his artistic thinking, a close connection with the complex of female fertility and reproduction in the Malagan figure is obvious.

These two examples give not only evidence of the existence of an intercultural, universal repertory of formal structures in the sense of good Gestalts. They also allow the presumption, that to a certain extent this is also true for the contents resp. the archetypal symbolism. Not astonishing at all, Henry Moore wanted to create a universal language of art, the way being this process of international exchange and adaptation, the roots being the anthropologic base of cultural forms.

As a result of this analysis it may be said, that good Gestalts resp. the principle of good Gestalts is omnipresent in world art. So it is legitimate to conclude that the artistic achievement of these may be regarded as fundamental values in works of art resp. in the process of artistic creation.

4.3. The Image of Man and the Conception of the World – Values - Ethics

Following the discussion of some aspects belonging to the formal side of the structure of the work of art resp. of the masterpiece now such ones as regards contents shall be mentioned – being definitely aware that the dichotomy of form/contents is an artificial perspective which is applied later to the work of art as a means of analysis.

First of all we refer once again to the essay by Kenneth Clarke: Here criteria of a masterwork as regards contents were named:

1. The illustration of great themes
2. Truth in the depiction
3. (Human) values resp. their symbolic depiction

Ad 1. The demand for the illustration of important themes has been a central point of classical art theory since antiquity and this not only in the area of the fine arts, but particularly also in the genre of literature. Here above all in drama – whether in Shakespeare, in French classical theatre with Corneille or Racine or in Weimar classics, that is in Goethe and above all in Schiller. Already in the further course of the 19th century the subject area of important themes was broadened from great issues of upper class figures to figures of the working classes – whether it is about Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *Die Weber* by Gerhard Hauptmann.

Today nobody will seriously maintain that in the latter works of art less important themes are treated than in the first ones. For both artistic conceptions concern the creation of humanly important subjects, which are fundamental for human social existence. In the sense of the analytical psychology of C.G. Jung these are archetypal subjects and motives such as oedipal conflicts, the relation of the sexes, motherhood (see the dominant presence of this archetype in the creation of Henry Moore and its interpretation by Erich Neumann) etc. or anthropologically speaking, anthropological constants.

If one accepts the criterion of artistic density, symbolization resp. of the paradigmatic as a basic principle and a characteristic of quality (in contrast to "kitsch"), the claim for important subjects – here, too, in a broadened conception – seems quite relevant to the current situation.

Ad 2. The criterion resp. the claim for truth in art is as old as occidental aesthetics and philosophy of art. It is known to be rooted in the Platonic doctrine of a close connection of the good, the true and the beautiful, a conception which – although in a transformed and lessened form – remained valid until the 19th century. Even Plato, however, criticized the artistic depiction of reality as being untrue for creating just copies of copies (of the ideas) and therefore for pedagogical reasons banished it from his ideal state.

Already in the 18th century a process of new determination of the aesthetic resp. the beautiful started: here Immanuel Kant holds a key position. In his *Critique of Judgment* he subjected this field to a fundamental analysis. Kant delimited the aesthetic way of cognition from the rational and conceptual one (the field of theoretical reason) and defined: „*Schön ist das, was ohne Begriff allgemein gefällt*“^{*****}. To the relation to the good resp. ethics (of practical reason) a strict limit is set: While the judgement of taste (Geschmacksurteil) was without interest, pleasure (Wohlgefallen) was useful to the good. Thereby the traditional connection of the beautiful with the good – at least on this fundamental theoretical and ontological level – is severed. Nevertheless for Kant the beautiful remains to be a symbol of the moral good (Sittlich-Gutes)^{†††††††}, though in the sense of an analogy.

With Aestheticism, l'Art pour l'art and in the conception of modernism this development got to its extreme consequence: The work of art is conceived as being autonomous with regard to the categories of scientific establishment of truth and to ethical claims and norms. This conception, however, proves to be an extreme position, to which numerous artistic movements of modernism stand really in contrast: Expressionism, realisms such as Neue Sachlichkeit or even Socialist Realism, social – critical and political directions, environmental – critical and ecological tendencies are committed to truth in the sense of uncovering and depiction of aspects of reality. In a time where art with regard to the perspective of science is increasingly conceived as an original instrument of recognition, the conception of autonomy of modernism reveals itself as obsolete.

***** Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, §9.

††††††† Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, § 59. Thereit says:

Nun sage ich: das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlich-Guten; und auch nur in dieser Rücksicht (...) gefällt es, mit einem Anspruche auf jedes anderm Beistimmung, wobei sich das Gemüt zugleich einer gewissen Veredlung und Erhebung über die bloße Empfänglichkeit einer Lust durch Sinneseindrücke bewußt ist, und anderer Wert auch nach einer ähnlichen Maxime ihrer Urteilskraft schätzt.(...)

Die Rücksicht auf diese Analogie ist auch dem gemeinen Verstande gewöhnlich; und wir benennen schöne Gegenstände der Natur oder der Kunst, oft mit Namen, die eine sittliche Beurteilung zum Grunde zu legen scheinen. Wir nennen Gebäude oder Bäume majestätisch und prächtig, oder Gefilde lachend und fröhlich; selbst Farben werden unschuldig, bescheiden, zärtlich genannt, weil sie Empfindungen erregen, die etwas mit dem Bewußtsein eines durch moralische Urteile bewirkten Gemütszustandes Analogisches enthalten. Der Geschmack macht gleichsam den Übergang vom Sinnenreiz zum habituellen moralischen Interesse, ohne einen zu gewaltigen Sprung, möglich, indem er die Einbildungskraft auch in ihrer Freiheit als zweckmäßig für den Verstand bestimmbar vorstellt und sogar an Gegenständen der Sinne auch ohne Sinnenreiz ein freies Wohlgefallen finden lehrt.

This is basically obvious

1. For anthropologically man is predisposed to recognition of reality as a base for the transformation of reality being necessary for survival
2. For – from the perspective of system theory –the system of art has to be seen as a just partly autonomous subsystem of the total social system being in connection and exchange with this resp. with other partial systems like other areas such as culture, politics, economy etc.

Ad 3. This is also valid for the 3rd area - as regards contents - cited in Clarke, namely that of (human) values resp. that of ethics:

In the modern age the intention and the extensive realization of a partial or complete liberation of the work of art from the relationship with morals and the social laws which regulate "real" life can be observed. And – connected to this –the abandonment resp. the refusal of a pedagogical conveying of contents coming from outside of art. The sphere of art and artistry are regarded as a special area, being more or less independent, which shall serve the unrestrained and unlimited expression of the ego resp. the free creation of fictional aesthetic worlds.

Admittedly from this follows the possibility of completion and compensation of the conditions of the „real“ world, not least by the creation of the unconscious and the repressed.+++++

Nevertheless, with reference to the field of the relation between art and ethics, too, it has to be emphasized:

1. The work of art (as basically every cultural product) is a vehicle of values
2. It is related with the system of values resp. of ethical principles, norms and rules

Therefore we propose to speak about a „weak“ ethical relevance of the work of art.

+++++Connected to this is the function of individual and collective healing (corresponding to the perspective of psychoanalysis resp. of Analytical Psychology of C.G. Jung) by (re-)integration of the suppressed into the ego – on the level of the individual or society and culture and thereby the restoration of the sane integrality.

As regards contents here the question arises, which values can be valid as obligatory in the sense of criteria of a good work of art resp. masterwork.

Regarding this it suggests itself to start first of all at the own cultural tradition, that means at the basic values as they have developed out of the European resp. western history. Naturally we mean the development, which on the foundation of Greco-Roman antiquity through Christianity, humanism and the enlightenment has led to the modern conception of human rights. In the sense of philosophy and cultural history – especially in an increasingly globalized world – it is not reasonably possible to fall back from this stage of development.^{§§§§§§§§} In this respect here the position of a (moderate) universalism shall be hold. A moderate universalism, for, firstly, in the actual situation the other big cultural traditions of the globe, too, bring in their experiences relating to this and, secondly, in other cultures there have been movements of enlightenment, too.^{*****}

In this respect there are works of art – and in this category those being generally accepted as masterworks and having been accepted in the canon are largely included – which depict these basic human values explicitly or just only implicitly in a condensed form. On the other hand's side it is known that also works of art do exist, which propagate demerits or disparage or deride man in general, a social group resp. certain ways of life in a contemptuous way.

In the end in this question one has to refer to anthropological basic values which can be ascertained in an intercultural and transcultural perspective. Examples may be the respect for human life, the respect for nature/environment, the value of the transmission of life in the context of parenthood – mother – child, etc.^{††††††††}

^{§§§§§§§§}History, of course, shows many examples of this falling back from a higher philosophical, cultural or technical level, the best known and most famous being the development in late Roman antiquity. Nevertheless the achieved level remained valid as a point of reference and a source of cultural technology for all later epochs and, as we know, was taken up in all Renaissances.

See: Panofsky, Erwin: Renaissance and renaissances in western art. New York 1969

^{*****}One standard has always to be: the liberty of man to create his life with respect for the liberty of others.

^{††††††††}About the research on anthropological constants and universals see:

Antweiler, Christoph: Was ist den Menschen gemeinsam? Über Kultur und Kulturen. Darmstadt 2007.