BEAUTY AS MEANING

Marcel OTTE

In their distant and mysterious universe, in the heart of the immensity of China, painted and engraved rocks did not escape the first rule of plastic expression: harmony. Renewed on each occasion, this pictorial experience awakens a part of us that was silent until that moment, their strangeness even adding a note to the range of our sensitivity. Here, the mass of a bovid was expressed through a “reserve” of the stone mass that imparts its density, roughness and texture to the animal, as if the image leaped from the stone that had been waiting for the bovid to arrive. This controlled imprint would be less troubling to us if the outline of its profile was familiar, but it is not: the horns, raised tail, hind-legs and chest remind us that we are in another world. The image reveals what a Chinese spirit from Protohistory saw in its dreams of the surreal element in all of us. Herein lies the charm and mystery of this work. Though its sacred meaning has perished, the durable work of art retains its essence: its form, exuded from abstract thought.

Verging on reality, the horses of Chauvet Cave nonetheless reach beyond its limits; their vital appearance is there only to attract the senses. Such beauty owes nothing to Nature, it is made only of seduction, where myth is materialized by configurations drawn from the imagination, where the virtual reality in which Paleolithic humans placed their lives took refuge, composed of dreams and beauty.

On the other side of the world, in Australia, the most mysterious of arts was produced in a universe where beings transform themselves, and the mythic foundations of this are still known to us: the passage from the “Dreaming” into real life, during which some humans became the animals that occupy the earth and sea. The paintings evoke these myths and give them substance, in a strangeness and fluidity that the spirits must have had: in them, we “see” the myth laid out as in oral histories; they become sublime, hanging between reality and the surreal, the perpetual, and permanence. The mystic “reality” is there, in this confusion where the story, drawn from a sacralized imagination, has become eternal, and thus more real than any inevitably transient lifetime. This call to mystery opens an immense perspective onto that which painting could be, detached from any academicism and revelatory of a magic view of the world that is completely different from ours, but which shares the greatest virtue of our sacred arts, that of creating eternal beauty.

Like the arts of the Omo, and all original art, the greatest form of beauty is that which is applied to oneself, following an absolute rule that traverses all creative time and space. The Amazonian tribes have given us, along with the masks of New Guinea, sumptuous examples of body art, composed of brightly colored feathers, skins, fabrics, body painting and abundant jewelry. Ethnologists could explain the lost meaning of each element, its elegance and fragility, but it is the balance of elegance that is most striking, and such ephemeral decorations, elsewhere made permanent by the wall paintings realized by the same populations, emphasize above all the importance of the exceptional circumstances with which they were associated.
Feminine head know as La Dame de Brassempouy or La Dame à la capuche (~ 21 000 BC, excavations Édouard Piette, 1894-1897).

Beauty, the first component of any meaning, flagrantly breaks any logical link that messages try to establish via an ephemeral and specific code. On the contrary, the emotional attraction traverses time and all modes of plastic expression; it is through emotion that the message exists, in all its forms, from floral decoration to the majesty of the vault. The language is thus carried by seduction. This is the common element linking all works from all continents and times, and it is through this seduction that they live on in our eyes, because beauty is timeless.
Beauty is certainly not a meaningful factor, as we would expect of a word in a speech. But it is nonetheless beauty that renders a plastic message universal, and which links the spirits of peoples constantly surprised by the audacity of artists. Expressions of beauty must have been found in other forms, such as in the narratives themselves, in all the stories and legends that awaken our dreams. But the hand of other artists was necessary to transform this quivering of thought, inspired by the charm of stories, into images offered for all to see, and avoiding the detour of an entirely intellectual signification. It awakens the foundation of our understanding, initiating a discourse that is transmitted from soul to soul in only its plastic form. Such performances are thus substitutes for narratives, and are the only remaining source of emotion, a phenomenon that is more powerful than any intelligence.