Art Criticism and Avant-Garde: André Lhote’s Written Works

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André Lhote (1885-1962) was an important figure in the art world of the 20th century. He contributed to cubism and the “rappel à l’ordre” movement. During his whole career, he was known for his work as a painter, as a writer and as a teacher. This triple identity led him to mingle classical artistic references with modern revival style. Above all, he occupied a central place in the debate on art literature. Indeed, he was one of the most important contributors to La Nouvelle Revue Française (La NRF) between 1919 and 1942. The problem of the “avant-garde” in his work is interesting for an art historian. This is perceptible between 1910 and 1962 in his strategy as an artist and writer, in his critical comments on the artistic field and in the question of his position within or outside the avant-garde movement.

Lhote’s Strategy

The period from the end of the 19th through the beginning of the 20th century is a privileged period to observe the transformation of the artistic field. The development of avant-garde, the establishment of the “dealers-critics” system (Harrison and White: 1993), and the revival of art criticism result in many innovations and confrontations between different representations of art (Gamboni 1992: 49-54). One of these transformations results in the opposition between “strategies of the order” and “strategies of the rupture” throughout the first half of the 20th century (Bouillon 1996: 19-37). Another main transformation is the development of artists’ written works, after several years of conflict between artists and critics at the end of the 19th century (Gamboni 1989a : 208 and Gamboni 1989b: 11; 231-236).

André Lhote participates in the last struggle between academism and avant-garde and between detractors and defenders of the artists’ practice of writing. He is also involved in the debates on the statute and the role of the writing. André Lhote thus personifies the 20th century figure of artist-author, as a creator and theoretician in a context where this double status was more and more prevalent but, at the same time, more and more criticized in the artistic field.
One can find in his career a strategy in his recourse to writing and choice of reviews. Between 1912 and 1962, André Lhote published texts in more than sixty reviews and a score of books with approximately ten publishers. He always defends the practice of writing as a tool at the service of the painter rather than as an element participating in the process of creation. He also defends cubism with obstinacy and tenacity.

However, his writings often vary in their form. Malcolm Gee showed that a printed text is the result of a collaboration in which factors other than the ideas or the will of the author play a major share (Gee 1993: 4 ff). It is thus necessary for a writer to learn how to use the various literary genres. In the case of André Lhote, his relationship to his texts can never be regarded as free and independent from his career as a painter.

In the 1910s, understanding the importance of writing for the establishment of a painter’s reputation, Lhote relies on the support of his friends’ literary networks in order to overcome his double handicap: his lack of renown and his distance from Paris. Gabriel Frizeau (1870-1939), Jacques Rivière (1886-1925) and Alain-Fournier (1886-1914) are then his principal relays. Frizeau connects him, from Bordeaux, with contacts like Paul Claudel (1868-1965), André Gide (1869-1951) or Ary Leblond (1877-1953). Rivière and Alain-Fournier help him with many small services and refer him to publishers and gallery owners. The fact that he lives in Bordeaux indeed obliges him to have constant recourse to these intermediaries to defend his interests in Paris, the only place where he believes he can be understood.

It is thus natural that he delegates to his writer friends the work of mediating on behalf of his painting. In 1909 and 1910 Jacques Rivière writes two articles on his friend Lhote in La NRF before publishing two more general articles on modern painting in 1912 (Rivière 1909; 1910; 1912a; 1912b). But in 1912 André Lhote also discovers the disadvantages of this delegation. Indeed, while praising Lhote as the most promising painter of his generation in his article of March 1, 1912, “Sur les tendances actuelles de la peinture”, Jacques Rivière criticizes the other cubists at the same time.

Other painters and critics’ hostility towards Lhote can be interpreted as consequences of Rivière’s unfortunate benevolence (Moueix 1969: 254-255). Lhote is isolated from the cubists’ small