



André Malraux and the Challenge to Aesthetics

Writers in the field of aesthetics - especially those in the Anglo-American sphere - have had very little to say about André Malraux's works on the visual arts, such as *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*. Literary critics interested in Malraux have quite frequently commented on these works, but one needs to search long and hard in British or American textbooks on aesthetics, or in major disciplinary forums such as *the British journal of aesthetics* or the *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, to find any significant comment on Malraux's very substantial work in the field of visual arts. (1)

Malraux himself would not perhaps have been altogether surprised by this. In his introduction to *La Métamorphose des dieux*, he states clearly that the work is not intended as 'une esthétique,' -2- and there is little doubt that this comment can also be applied to his other works on visual art. Passionately interested in art though he was, Malraux did not see himself as an 'aesthete' and would not perhaps have expected his writings on the subject to find a ready home among the deliberations of those who were.

Yet it would be a major loss to the field of aesthetics to let the matter rest there. As his books amply demonstrate, Malraux had an extensive - some have used the term 'encyclopaedic'- knowledge of the world of painting and sculpture, from Palaeolithic times to the present. His works are generously illustrated, text and images working in

tandem to illuminate each other. Above all, he is a highly original thinker - one who, in a determined pursuit of an analysis that will make our world of art intelligible to us, regards no proposition or assumption as above question, no matter how well entrenched or taken-for-granted it may be.

Though not attempting to provide a comprehensive account of Malraux's wide-ranging thinking about visual art, the present essay seeks to bring to light a number of major elements whose relevance to modern aesthetics appears to be much greater than has so far been recognised. Malraux can place substantial demands on his readers because he invites them into intellectual territory that can occasionally be unfamiliar, and asks them to come to grips with ideas that sometimes diverge in startling ways from conventional thinking. This feature, added to a writing style that is often quite unlike the somewhat dry and neutral mode favoured by aestheticians, has occasionally led commentators to suggest that Malraux's approach is unsystematic - one claiming, for example, that *Les Voix du silence* should be regarded as a 'lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational' account of the world of art. Such judgements should be viewed with great caution. As the following analysis will seek to show, Malraux sets out his arguments with great care, and while his style is often evocative, even poetic, it is never loose or ill-considered. The following discussion will attempt to approach Malraux's account of visual art with the care it merits, and will begin with a step by step exposition of those aspects of his thought that are relevant to the issues to be considered. The rewards of doing so, one finds, are well worth the effort. As the discussion will seek to show, Malraux's account of visual art is not only argued with clarity and force but also invites us to think about art in a new and quite revolutionary way.

The opening chapter of *Les Voix du silence* is headed by a photograph of a gallery in one of the world's major art museums. The image is apt because art museums are, in many respects, where Malraux's thinking about art commences. Malraux begins his reflection, not with abstract definitions of art, but with the range of particular *objects* that contemporary Western culture considers to be art - and thus, to begin with, the objects displayed in the world's art museums. These, together with many objects that cannot be moved (such as stained glass windows and many frescos) make up what Malraux terms our 'musée imaginaire' - a vast art collection 'in our minds', so to speak, that far exceeds the scope of any individual institution no matter how large or well endowed. Unlike the approach frequently adopted in aesthetics, Malraux's thinking about art begins, therefore, not with by an attempt to conceptualise art in terms of an *idea* (such as 'beauty' or 'self-expression'), but with specific objects. He

locates himself firmly within the contemporary Western culture whose responses he is seeking to understand, and begins not with abstractions but with the particular paintings, sculptures, and similar works, that the West has chosen to regard as works of art, and to admire as such. This, of course, is only a point of departure. Malraux's thinking has much further to go. But it is, as we shall see, an orientation of fundamental importance to the arguments that follow. -3-

Malraux's next step is to extend his thinking beyond what the art museum is *now*, and to reflect on what it has been previously. A key fact, he argues, is that there has been enormous change within a relatively short period of time. Visitors to major art museums today are unlikely to show even mild surprise to encounter exhibitions that include, for example, statues from Egyptian tombs, Mesoamerican figurines, or ceremonial masks from Africa and Oceania. Yet objects from non-Western cultures such as these, Malraux points out, as well as works from the West itself prior to the Renaissance (such as Romanesque sculpture), only began to gain admittance to the world's art museums from the early years of the twentieth century. Prior to that, art collections were almost exclusively devoted to post-Renaissance European painting and sculpture, and selected works of Greece and Rome. Objects from other sources were seen merely as products of barbarian tastes, lack of expertise, or clumsy execution-4-, suitable perhaps for a collection of curios, or for ethnological or archaeological museums (once these came into being), but not at all acceptable under the same roof as a Raphael, a Titian, or a Rubens. The art museum, Malraux thus concludes, has undergone a radical transformation. For at least four hundred years, 'art' had signified painting and sculpture from specific periods of European civilisation. Within a short few decades from about 1900 onwards, it had extended its reach to include objects from the four corners of the earth, and from cultures stretching back to the dawn of prehistory.

One obvious temptation would be to see this development as a natural consequence of Europe's growing familiarity with other cultures during the nineteenth century, and the increasing influence of historical and archaeological research. Malraux does not regard this as an adequate explanation. The inescapable fact, he points out, is that many of the cultures whose works first began to enter art museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had already been familiar to Europeans for long periods of time. The objects in question had, however, been seen simply as fetishes, idols, or curios - never as art. Malraux writes in *La Métamorphose des dieux*:

---L'Occident a découvert l'art africain avec les bananes? constatons qu'il n'avait pas découvert l'art mexicain avec le chocolat. Les explorateurs de l'Afrique n'ont pas

découvert l'art nègre, mais les fétiches; les conquistadores n'ont pas découvert l'art mexicain, mais les idoles aztèques.(5)---

The change in question is not due therefore simply to an increase in knowledge. The vast expansion in the domain of art that began to take place around 1900 involved nothing less than a new way of 'seeing' the objects in question. 'La métamorphose du passé' that took place, Malraux writes,

--- fut d'abord une métamorphose du regard. Sans une révolution esthétique, jamais la sculpture des hautes époques, la mosaïque, le vitrail n'eussent rejoint la peinture de la Renaissance et des grandes monarchies; jamais les collections d'ethnographie, si vastes qu'elles fussent devenues, n'eussent franchi la barrière qui les séparait des musées.(6)--

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The transformation in question thus involved a radical break with what had gone before - 'une révolution esthétique'. It was, moreover, an event which, in Malraux's eyes, brought about a profound change in the very meaning of the term art and the experience it denotes - an issue which we are now in a position to explore in more depth.

An aspect of the 'révolution esthétique' of central interest to Malraux is that, for the first time, the domain of art for the West came to include works created in cultures in *which the very notion of art was unknown*. The point at issue here is crucial to Malraux's reasoning, but it can easily be misunderstood and needs to be stated with care. Malraux draws a distinction between the *means* employed by visual art - the activities of painting, sculpting, drawing, carving, etc - and the *ends* for which different human communities have employed those means. The impulse to paint (or sculpt etc), he agrees, seems to have been part of the human make-up from the earliest times. Those means have, however, been employed for a variety of ends, and over many millennia - in fact, for all but a relatively brief period of human history - they were employed for the creation of objects whose ends were religious or ritual in nature ('sacred', to use one of Malraux preferred terms(7). They were the means of creating the Pharaoh's 'double' to aid him in the Afterlife; the means of shaping an 'ancestor figure' to house the spirit of a dead chief; the means of fashioning a votive offering to render thanks to the gods. Where evidence is available, it is clear that the various cultures that created such objects rarely possessed a concept comparable in meaning to our concept 'art'- and that this remained the case until as recently as medieval times. ('Le Moyen Age', Malraux writes, 'ne concevait pas plus l'idée que nous exprimons par le mot art, que la Grèce ou Égypte, qui n'avaient pas de mot pour l'exprimer.' 8) Yet,

for us - for contemporary Western culture following the 'aesthetic revolution' Malraux describes (but only since then) - large numbers of these same objects have become 'art', and, indeed, are in many cases regarded as great works of art. On occasion, we may perhaps know something of their original purposes, although frequently enough, as Malraux reminds us, we know little or nothing at all. But whether we have such knowledge or not, those purposes - those 'ends' - are no longer the ends the objects now serve for us: they are not sacred for us; *we* do not place them in tombs, regard them as objects of reverence or as offerings for the gods. For contemporary Western culture, such objects - the figure of a bodhisattva in a fresco at Nara, a statue of the Pharaoh Zoser, or a Sumerian figure from Lagash (to cite three of the illustrations in the early pages of *La Métamorphose des dieux*) - have become something called 'art', and, in our eyes, belong in our art museums (and our 'musée imaginaire'). There seems in short to have been a puzzling transformation. An object that was (for example) once created to be a god in a culture that had no word for art, has become a 'work of art' in a Western culture that, often enough, is unsure even of the name of the god that the object once embodied. And this state of affairs, as Malraux observes, is by no means uncommon: 'une part considérable de notre héritage artistique nous est léguée tantôt par des hommes dont l'idée de l'art n'était pas la nôtre, tantôt par des hommes pour lesquels l'idée même d'art n'existait pas.'⁹

How is one to make sense of this transformation - this 'metamorphosis of the gods', to borrow Malraux's apt phrase? The discipline of aesthetics has only recently begun to turn its attention to issues of this kind,⁽¹⁰⁾ but the prevailing response there, and in other relevant fields such as anthropology and the history of art, has been to argue, in effect, that no transformation is in fact involved - because the objects in question have always essentially *been nothing else but works of art*. Two main arguments have been advanced in support of this view. The first suggests that even if the original significance of the object - a painting or sculpture for example - appears to have been religious, and even if the culture in question did not possess a term comparable in meaning to our term art, the system of cultural 'practices' involved in the activities of painting and sculpture in all cultures is always sufficiently similar to that which we now associate with art for the term art to be applied appropriately in all cases. (Examples of such 'practices' mentioned by one writer include the 'exercise of specialised skill' or 'intentionally affording pleasure' to an audience. ¹¹) The second argument shifts the emphasis to the features of the object itself. If we, in twenty-first century Western society, regard an object from another culture as a work of art, it is argued, this is because, knowingly or not, its creator endowed it with certain timeless, formal qualities (sometimes termed 'artistic universals') characteristic of art everywhere and at all times⁽¹²⁾. The Egyptian sculpture created as the Pharaoh's 'double' has, according to this view, always been essentially what we see it as now - a work of art - because it possesses these timeless qualities. Both this and the previous

argument lead to the same conclusion: there has been no 'metamorphosis of the gods' because the objects in question were never, except in some transitory, superficial sense, 'gods' to begin with. Their essential, permanent nature has always been 'work of art'(13).

It is clear that Malraux would accept neither of these arguments. The cultural 'practice' (to borrow the term used above) that Malraux regards as crucial to the emergence of the contemporary notion of art is one that, far from being universal, is without precedent in *any* other culture, and quite recent even in our own - the art museum. 'Le rôle des musées dans notre relation avec les oeuvres d'art est si grand,' he wrote in 1951 in the opening paragraphs of *Les Voix du silence*, que nous avons peine à penser qu'il n'en existe pas, qu'il n'en exista jamais, là où la civilisation de l'Europe moderne est ou fut inconnue; et qu'il en existe chez nous depuis moins de deux siècles.

Art museums, Malraux argues, 'ont contribué à délivrer de leur fonction les oeuvres d'art qu'ils réunissaient'. So accustomed are we now to this situation - the estrangement of the work from its function - that we tend simply to take it for granted. We easily forget that 'Un crucifix roman n'était pas d'abord une sculpture, la Madone de Cimabue n'était pas d'abord un tableau, même la Pallas Athéné de Phidias n'était pas d'abord une statue.' In reality, however, the contemporary response is quite unprecedented, Malraux points out, and in encouraging the modern spectator to see these objects as 'sculpture', 'picture' and 'statue', the art museum has in fact brought about 'une relation toute nouvelle avec l'oeuvre d'art'. As a cultural 'practice' the art museum is, thus, both crucial in its effects and radically *discontinuous* with practices that have gone before, or that have existed in other cultures. Indeed, Malraux argues, it is a practice that other cultures and earlier periods of our own would have found quite incomprehensible, so that if, for example, 'nous parvenions à éprouver les sentiments qu'éprouvaient les premiers spectateurs d'une statue égyptienne, d'un crucifix roman, nous ne pourrions plus laisser ceux-ci au Louvre.'(14)

Malraux also rejects the argument that the works we now include in our 'musée imaginaire' can all be shown to exhibit certain common formal properties (or 'artistic universals'). As commentators have often noted, a recurring theme in Malraux's analysis is the idea that each great artist *destroys* the forms he inherits, inventing new forms to take their place. Malraux certainly agrees that each artist *begins* with existing forms: 'Tout artiste,' he writes, 'commence par le pastiche'. The true artist, however, soon understands that interpreting the world in another man's language involves a kind of 'slavery' - 'une soumission à des formes, à un style'. Thus, 'ce qui sépare le génie de l'homme de talent, de l'artisan, voire de l'amateur ... c'est que, seul entre ceux que ces oeuvres fascinent, il veuille *aussi* les détruire.'(15). Many of the most illuminating pages in *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* are, in effect,

case studies in this process of destruction, followed by the creation of new forms - well-known examples being his account of the transformation of Egyptian and Oriental forms into those of Greece, of the Greek Apollo into the forms of early Buddhist sculpture, and of Roman forms into those of Byzantium. In each case, the process is presented as a genuine metamorphosis - the complete transformation of one set of forms into another, and not merely a modification that somehow leaves a 'timeless essence' intact.

What then is Malraux's own answer to the dilemma we have outlined? Having rejected notions such as universal artistic 'practices' and timeless forms, how then does he account for the presence of the Pharaoh's 'double' (to stay with this example) in the 'musée imaginaire' *as work of art*? If one excludes arguments that seek to establish that it was 'essentially art' from the beginning - that there has been no essential transformation - how does one make sense of the fact that this once sacred object, created to aid the God-King in the Afterlife, is now a 'work of art'?

This question begins to lead us into the heart of Malraux's thought because the answer lies, for Malraux, in a radical revision of the Western notion of art. In particular, it lies in a firm rejection of the view - effectively taken for granted in the discipline of aesthetics for the last three centuries - that when we speak of 'art', we refer to a permanent category of human experience, a human 'constant' common to all human societies now and in the past. Malraux's view is quite different. The Egyptian statue that we now admire as 'art', he argues, is not 'timelessly' or 'essentially' art any more than it was timelessly or essentially the Pharaoh's 'double'. It is both - and neither: 'both' in the sense that it *has been* a 'double' and *is now* a work of art; 'neither' in the sense that it is not *essentially* either. Malraux, in other words, is refusing to grant primacy to either state of being. The response to such objects that *we now* term the experience of 'art', he is saying, is itself as time-bound - as subject to change and potential consignment to oblivion - as the long-forgotten response towards those same objects that once demanded (for example) their veneration as gods (or indeed, as the very different response that later, often for millennia, saw them treated with indifference or disdain).

In thus dissociating art from any sense of permanence (though not, as we have seen, denying the ubiquity of the *means* employed), Malraux is not predicting its demise, or engaging in speculation about the 'death of art'. He is not concerned with predictions of any kind but with nature of the particular experience *we now* call the experience of (or response to) 'art'. Effectively, he is arguing as follows: Presumably - or rather, self-evidently - the particular objects from non-Western cultures, and from the pre-Renaissance West, that were once regarded with indifference or disdain but are now regarded as works of art must, in some way, have always had within them the

potentiality to evoke the kind of response we now experience - the response that urges us, even when partly or wholly ignorant of their original purposes, to admire them as 'works of art', worthy of a place in our 'musée imaginaire'. But nothing requires us, or indeed even authorises us, to conclude that this response is a response to an enduring essence of the objects concerned. We respond, when we reflect on the matter, in what appears to be a quite specific and unprecedented way - a way that estranges the objects from their functions, and enables us, unlike Western culture prior to the twentieth century, and unlike all other cultures at any time, to admire, simultaneously, painting and sculpture from all cultures and all times. In thus insisting on the specific nature of our response, Malraux is not, one should stress, implying a devaluation of it, or of the objects it singles out for admiration. On the contrary, he believes strongly - for reasons beyond the scope of the present discussion - that this response bears witness to human aspirations of the highest order. (He writes in the opening pages of *Les Voix du silence*, for example, that 'le musée est un des lieux qui donnent la plus haute idée de l'homme'(16).) Yet, while in no sense devaluing the response, Malraux is rejecting any suggestion that it is in any way superior or definitive - as if we were now able, for the first time, to have a clear view of the 'real essence' or 'true value as art' of the works of all ages, unimpeded by the dross of obsolete beliefs and prejudices. The question is not one of inferiority or superiority but of the specificity, and ultimately the *contingency*, of the experience we name the experience of 'art' - a recognition, in other words, that this experience - this form of response - is distinctively *ours* and not something that we can, or even need to, see as deriving in some way from the 'true nature' or 'essential purposes' of the objects concerned. It is a response that emerged at a specific point in time, and one that is, by its very nature, susceptible to change - one that, no less than the long-forgotten gods and spirits once embodied in many of the objects we now call art, may itself pass into oblivion. Malraux does not shrink from this last implication or attempt to evade it. In his eyes, as we have noted, art is a human achievement of the highest order and the 'musée imaginaire' is the locus of that achievement - a vast storehouse of objects from cultures past and present that we now treasure as 'works of art', many as masterpieces. Yet, even so, he acknowledges, we cannot assume that these objects, whether once fashioned as gods or spirits, or drawn from the more familiar realms of post-Renaissance painting and sculpture, have somehow at last attained a moment of definitive and permanent self-realisation. 'Le musée imaginaire ... n'est pas éternel,' he states without equivocation. And 'devant un nouvel absolu, sans doute une grande partie du trésor des siècles s'effacerait-elle comme une ombre...' (17)

An objection along the following lines might perhaps be raised: Whether or not a concept of art existed in other cultures, the concept has certainly existed in *Western* culture for much longer than the last hundred years, and can be traced back at least to the Renaissance, if not to ancient Greece. To suggest, as the argument above does, that 'art', as we now understand the term, denotes a concept and a form of experience that

emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century ignores this history. The term art has been part of the Western tradition for much longer than the last hundred years.

Malraux is of course well aware of this historical background, but his argument takes it fully into account. Firstly, the claim that the term art can be traced back to Ancient Greece can be set aside since, as Malraux observes (and as other authorities agree)(18), Greek civilisation did not, despite what is sometimes suggested, possess a term equivalent in meaning to the term art as it is now understood. What then of more recent periods of European civilisation? The answer is that Malraux draws a sharp distinction between the meaning that the term art began to acquire from about 1900 onwards and *any* of the meanings it possessed previously. The *word* art, he would certainly agree, was employed prior to this, especially from the Renaissance onwards. Its various meanings (for there were changes over time) were, however, all crucially different from the meaning it has now assumed. Malraux, as we have seen, argues that the closing years of the nineteenth century ushered in an 'aesthetic revolution' - a radical 'metamorphosis of our way of seeing' that involved, among other things, an estrangement of the work from its original functions. The consequences of this, he contends, are *as pronounced for the works of post-Renaissance Europe as they are for those of other cultures* - as pronounced, for example, for *the Man with the Glove* or *the Man with the Helmet* (which, for us, are no longer portraits of the men who sat for them but simply 'Titian' and 'Rembrandt'-19-) as they are for an Egyptian Pharaoh's 'double' or a Dogon mask. The original functions of European painting and sculpture - 'art' as it was sometimes called - were certainly very *different* from those performed by painting and sculpture in other cultures, but they were no less decisive in the way these objects were originally perceived. It would be impossible in the space of the present discussion to do justice to Malraux's account of post-Renaissance European art but a central theme is the progressive replacement of 'the sacred' by a human ideal of beauty. The stages along the way include, for example: Giotto, who discovered 'un *pouvoir de la peinture* inconnu de l'art chrétien: le pouvoir de situer sans sacrilège une scène sacrée dans un monde qui ressemble à celui des hommes' -20-; Botticelli, whose *Spring* 's'adresse à une démiurgie pour la première fois rivale de la démiurgie chrétienne, parce qu'elle exprime pour la première fois de façon exaltante, une fiction profane'-21- ; and Leonardo, whose discoveries led a step further to the pursuit of 'un monde idéalisé ... l'expression la plus convaincante d'une fiction - de l'imaginaire harmonieux'-22- . The essential point for present purposes is not the detail of this account - highly illuminating though it is - but the general point that emerges. Although the centuries from Cimabue and Giotto onwards saw a decline in the sacred element in European painting and sculpture from its previous high points in the Byzantine and Romanesque periods, this was replaced, Malraux is arguing, by other functions no less important. At no time prior to the closing years of the nineteenth century were painting and sculpture viewed, as they are now, as estranged from their

functions - just as, at no previous time, was the domain of art regarded, as it now is, as encompassing the painting and sculpture of all other cultures (and the pre-Renaissance period of our own). The mere fact that the *term* art was in use in post-Renaissance Europe should not therefore mislead us. The change that took place towards the end of the nineteenth century gave this term a meaning fundamentally different from any it had possessed before. The objection we are considering - that the concept of art as we now know it was part of the Western tradition well before 1900 - would therefore be based on a misunderstanding. As an observation about language use, Malraux would agree; as a comment about the meaning of the concept, he would dissent strongly, and for good reason.

As indicated earlier, this discussion of Malraux's account of visual art has not sought to be comprehensive. Malraux has much more to say - for example, about the specific power and significance he attributes to art in the modern world (the thinking that underlies his view, mentioned above, that 'le musée est un des lieux qui donnent la plus haute idée de l'homme'). Enough has perhaps now been said, however, to suggest why Malraux represents a major challenge to the discipline of aesthetics, and indeed, to modes of thinking about art that have long been taken for granted in the broader public arena. The final section will summarise the main elements of this challenge.

As we have seen, a fundamental aspect of Malraux's position is his clear recognition that, for contemporary Western culture, the domain of visual art now encompasses far more than the works of the Western tradition. Malraux's point of departure is the 'musée imaginaire' - the range of objects, both within art museums and elsewhere, that modern Western culture now regards, and responds to, as art. For many decades now, he points out, this has included large numbers of objects from non-Western cultures, past and present, as well as many from periods of Western culture itself that were previously regarded with indifference. 'Art' now is as much the frescos at Nara and Ajanta, or the mosaics at Ravenna, as it is Botticelli, Titian or Chagall. It is a New Guinean mask, the head of a Khmer Buddha, or the tympanum at Moissac, as much as it is Michelangelo's *Night* or Rodin's *Balzac*. Here is the first challenge implicit in Malraux's account. The prevailing tendency among aestheticians whose analyses refer to particular works of art (and for many, it must be said, such references tend to be rare) has been to concentrate on post-Renaissance Western art. More recently, the scope has begun to broaden, but the development still seems tentative, with little more than the occasional reference, for example, to the large numbers of works from ancient cultures now included in the world's art museums. A clear challenge that Malraux presents to aesthetics - one that he himself had fully embraced by the 1930s-(23) - is to develop an account of art that takes account of the *full* range of objects now regarded

as art, and that frames its questions and develops its answers, as Malraux has done, on this much broader canvas.

Secondly, there is the important history of this development. As we have seen, Malraux's account highlights the relative suddenness of the change that took place towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the enormous and unprecedented consequences that flowed from it: whereas, previously, 'art' for the West had signified the works of post-Renaissance Europe and selected works of Greece and Rome, within a few short decades it had expanded its reach to encompass works from cultures around the globe, and from cultures more distant in time. Modern aesthetics has had almost nothing to say about this development. Understandably perhaps, its attention has often focused on the sometimes surprising developments in twentieth century Western art itself - such as abstract art, surrealism, and 'ready-mades'. In doing so, however, it has largely ignored what is, arguably, one of the single most important changes in the history of the Western sensibility where visual art is concerned - a change that, as we have seen, Malraux terms an 'aesthetic revolution'-24- . Rectifying this imbalance seems to be one of the key challenges aesthetics has still to confront.

Undoubtedly the most radical aspect of the challenge Malraux represents, however, is the conclusion he draws from these developments, and, in particular, the question he raises about the permanence of the contemporary Western category 'art'. Since its emergence as a formal area of philosophical study in the eighteenth century, aesthetics has implicitly treated art, and the human response to art, as, in effect, anthropological 'givens' - natural and permanent features on the landscape of human experience. Opinions about the *nature* of art have of course varied widely but the possibility that 'art' may denote an aspect of human experience that is *contingent* - something no more firmly anchored than, for example, the state of mind that saw many of the objects now called art adored or feared as gods - has never been seriously entertained. For writers as different in their approaches as Hume, Kant, Taine, Croce, Collingwood, Clive Bell, Elie Faure, Henri Focillon and, more recently, writers of the Anglo-American school of 'analytical aesthetics', art and the human response to art are treated as if they were intrinsic, permanent aspects of human life. The possibility that this might not be the case is simply never raised (25). A key feature of Malraux's account is that he calls this basic assumption into question. As we have seen, Malraux recognises that the impulse to paint or sculpt has been part of human life from the earliest times: the *means* that art employs, he acknowledges, do in fact seem to have been employed more or less universally. Yet to respond as we now do to the range of objects we call 'art', he argues, is to respond to those objects in one *specific* way among a range of possible ways - two of which can already be seen in what we know of the past: first, the original response that regarded the objects in question as (for example) gods, ancestor spirits, or votive offerings, or, in previous stages of Western culture, as representations of

ideal beauty; and second, the response that over centuries, and often millennia, treated many of the same objects with indifference or scorn. *Our* way of responding - the response we now term appreciating or responding to 'art' - resembles neither of these. Our response, centring on the art museum, severs the objects from their original functions, and, in an unprecedented development, gathers together, as art, objects from *all* other cultures, not just our own. Malraux, as we have noted, values this response very highly but argues, nonetheless, that it is ultimately only one possibility among many - and no more definitive, essential or 'timeless' than those that preceded it. Art, as we now know it, he is saying, is not, as traditionally assumed in Western aesthetics, a permanent category of human experience, but something inherently *transient*: it is no more an anthropological 'given' than the emotions, long since incomprehensible to us, that the ancient Egyptian experienced as he brought offerings to his God-King's 'double', or even than those, now only dimly understood, of the assembled faithful who first beheld Giotto's frescos at Assisi. The notion of art *now*, Malraux is ultimately suggesting, *defines us* as much as we define it, because it identifies a form of human response specific to us - specific to modern Western culture since the beginning of the twentieth century. This proposition, argued by Malraux with great cogency and force, clearly represents a radical departure from the tradition of Western aesthetics since its beginnings in the eighteenth century - and a fundamental challenge to that tradition.

Endnotes

1-The indexes of the *British journal of aesthetics* list no titles mentioning Malraux for the past three decades. The same is true of the *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, with the minor exception of a review of Morawski's, *L'Absolu et la forme* in 1974 and a brief rejoinder from Morawski in a following issue. See *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, 32, 1974, 427, and 33, 1974, 93.

A small number of writers have commented on Malraux from the perspective of aesthetics. Examples are: Two essays by E.H. Gombrich: 'André Malraux and the crisis of expressionism', in E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a hobby horse and other essays*, (London: Phaidon, 1978), 78-85. (The essay was written as a review of the English translation of *Les Voix du silence* in 1954.); E.H. Gombrich, 'Malraux's philosophy of art in historical perspective', in *Malraux, life and work*, Martine de Courcel (ed.), (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 169-83; William Righter, *The rhetorical hero, an essay on the aesthetics of André Malraux*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); Stefan Morawski, *L'Absolu et la forme, L'esthétique d'André Malraux*, traduit par Yolande Lamy-Grum, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972). Two recent French titles of interest (although the approach is mainly from a literary rather than aesthetic point of view) are: François de Saint-Chéron, *L'Esthétique de Malraux*, (Paris: Sedes, 1996), and Christiane Moatti (ed.), *André Malraux 10, Reflexions sur les arts plastiques*, (Paris: Minard, 1999).

2-André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, (Paris: NRF, La Galerie de la Pléiade, 1957), 35. Malraux also quotes the comment in the preface to his second volume. See André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux, L'Irréel*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), V.

3-The main outlines of Malraux's concept of the 'musée imaginaire' can be found in Part One of *Les Voix du silence* and the Introduction to *La Métamorphose des dieux*.

4-*La Métamorphose des dieux*, 4. The summary of Malraux's position presented in this paragraph is drawn primarily from the Introduction to *La Métamorphose des dieux*.

5-*La Métamorphose des dieux*, 20. Cf. H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of primitive art*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 272: 'Although primitive artifacts were known to Europeans from the time of the great explorations of the New World and the Far East from the 15th century onwards, and although a few pieces were admired by artists such as Durer and Cellini, there was virtually no aesthetic interest in such artifacts as works of art until the early years of the 20th century. Gold objects from PreColumbian Mexico and Central and South America were melted down and the valuable raw material shipped back to Spain; a few pieces were taken back to the home countries as evidence of the culturally savage and barbaric state of the natives; and what aesthetic response there was was largely one of horror at the ugliness and brutality supposedly symptomatic of these savage, heathen works of the devil.' It should perhaps be added that Malraux is not of course denying the value of historical and archaeological research. His point is that for the development he is describing this was not the decisive factor.

6- *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 21.

7-*La Métamorphose des dieux*, 25-26. Cf. also André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 180: 'Qu'il est facile d'imaginer une histoire de l'art où la Renaissance ne serait qu'un éphémère accident humaniste!'

8-*Les Voix du silence*, 51. The extent to which non-Western cultures possessed a term equivalent in meaning to the modern Western term art has recently become an issue of some debate within aesthetics. There is no space here to canvass the different arguments. One interesting reference, however, which is also relevant to a later point in this essay, is a scholarly study of the development of the 'modern system of the arts' in Western culture by Paul Kristeller. This writer argues that there are major differences in meaning between the closest Greek and Latin equivalents to our term art and the meaning the term art had acquired in the West by the eighteenth century. Clearly, one might argue that if this is so for civilisations often regarded as seminal to modern Western culture, the differences in the case of other cultures are likely to be even larger. See: Paul Kristeller 'The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (1),' in Peter Kivy (ed.), *Essays on the history of aesthetics*, (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1992), esp.13. The anthropologist, Raymond Firth, comments 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.) For a more sanguine view of the possibility of equivalence, see: 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.

9-*Les Voix du silence*, 125.

10-For example, discussion of theoretical issues concerning the art of other cultures is rare in anthologies of aesthetic theory. The recent volume edited by Noël Carroll (op.cit.) is an exception, although even here only two of twelve articles - at the end of the collection - specifically concern the topic.

11- Denis Dutton, op.cit., 233-235. It is worth noting that Dutton's definitions of the 'practices' in question seem question begging. 'Specialised skill' is required for the production of many objects that would not necessarily be regarded as works of art (clothing, boats, etc). Whether the intention is always appropriately described as 'affording pleasure' is also questionable. It seems open to doubt whether this was the motivation behind (for example) many African or Oceanic ritual masks, or objects from Mesoamerica such as the forbidding stone heads of the Plumed Serpent at Teotihuacán. Dutton suggests a number of other common 'art practices' but there is no space to examine these in the present discussion.

12-See for example Stephen Davies, 'Non-Western art and art's definition', in Noël Carroll (ed.), op.cit., 207. Davies speaks of a 'transcultural notion of the aesthetic' made up of properties 'such as beauty, balance, tension, elegance, serenity, energy, grace, vivacity'. There is no space to examine the merits of this claim here. It is worth noting, however, that the search for 'universal' aesthetic properties has a long and somewhat chequered history in aesthetics, and that not all writers are convinced of the possibility of its success. David Novitz, for example, comments: 'were it true that some artifacts are works of art just because they instantiate an artistic universal, what could such a universal look like, and why have scholars been so slow to isolate it?' David Novitz, 'Art by another name' in *British journal of aesthetics*, 38 (1), 1998, 32.

13-It should perhaps be added that there have been some dissenting voices to this view. See for example, George Marcus and Fred Myers, (eds.), *The Traffic in Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). There is no space here to examine contrary views such as these. They differ in important ways, however, from the approach adopted by Malraux.

14-*Les Voix du silence*, 11, 12, 63. It should perhaps be added that Malraux regards the art museum as a crucial factor for the artist as well as the spectator: in the contemporary world, the artist creates *for* the museum - just as, for the spectator, the museum is the context in which art is viewed.

15-*Les Voix du silence*, 310, 357. Malraux's italics. Not surprisingly, words and phrases such as 'rupture décisive', 'pour la première fois', 'découverte', 'invention', and 'sans précédent' occur again and again in Malraux's account of visual art.

16-*Les Voix du silence*, 13.

17-André Malraux, *La Tête d'obsidienne*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 240; *Les Voix du silence*, 458.

18-See above, note 8. The Greek and Roman concepts are in any case encompassed by the argument that follows.

19- *Les Voix du silence*, 12.

20-*La Métamorphose des dieux*, 337. Malraux's italics.

21-André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux, L'Irréel*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 115.

22-*Les Voix du silence*, 69,70.

23-Malraux indicates at the end of *Les Voix du silence* that the composition of the work took place over the period 1935 to 1951.

24-Malraux: 'La métamorphose décisive de notre époque, c'est que nous n'appelions plus "art", la forme particulière qu'il prit dans quelque temps ou quelque lieu que ce soit: mais qu'à l'avance, il les déborde toutes'. *Les Voix du silence*, 624.

25-Even those thinkers, such as Hegel and Arthur Danto, who seem at times to flirt with the idea of the 'end of art', do so within a theory of an intelligible historical progression that preserves the impression that art is an anthropological given, and part of human life since the earliest times, even if its future may perhaps be in doubt. Neither author's position on the 'end of art' issue is in any case clear cut. See, for example, Arthur Danto, *After the end of art*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Despite the title, Danto still speaks of 'art after the end of art' (25). Hegel's position also seems unclear. A useful account - concluding that 'Hegel did not intend the death of art' - is given in Curtis Carter, 'A Re-examination of the "death of art" interpretation of Hegel's aesthetics', in Warren Steinkraus and Kenneth Smith (eds.), *Art and logic in Hegel's philosophy*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), 83-98.