

THE SOUL OF ART

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(Continued)

VERY often we read about new and more direct approaches to Art appreciation, and how much time or effort may be saved the prospective patron if he will only follow them. But common-sense should always reveal the snare in such lazy programs. True and valid Art-appreciation can be had only after the same manner that true and worthy Art-creation is accomplished. And that is through some sort of synthetic method of conception and design and coloring; it is only through a moral selectivism of theme and vehicle, subject matter and symbolic setting, that we ever really come by either representative or creative Art. And any appreciative attitude which lays claim to repical principles will take on the same complexion and viewpoint which went into the process of production. It will recognize that these principles are patterned after the methetic states of the creative process, and no sham aesthetic of stereotyped rules can render the proper understanding any easier or more direct.

The interested patron is to be congratulated for remembering Quilter's universalism in being able to see that "there is nothing that man has ever dreamed or hoped or feared, suffered, enjoyed or sinned in, which is not a fit subject-matter for Art: nor is there a single aspect of the mind or spirit which has not, or may not have, some fitting or commensurate analogue in form and color" ("Sententiae Artis"). But he will show equal vision and more discernment of judgment if he also takes George Mason's advice that "Artists may produce excellent designs, but they will avail little unless the taste of the public is sufficiently cultivated to appreciate them". Still, neither side of such good counsel goes the full length of the race. Even with an appreciable degree of cultivated taste for the excellence

of Art, one must still remember that there are no atomic weights for deciding the specific gravity of elementary Art. Its simplest forms are still composite structures of thought, design, color-sense, harmonic proportion and anagogic expression. And anyone who proposes to be a critic, a connoisseur, or even an intelligent patron of the Arts, either fine or industrial, must possess somewhat of these basic functions in his own mind if he expects to live up to his professions. For they are basic in the sense that both artist and art lover must share the same credentials if the particular form of Art which is created and loved is ever to be intelligently produced and appreciated.

In a theory of Fine Art advanced by Prof. Torrey close onto fifty years ago, the Beautiful is considered as being more often felt than understood, "the end of all the imaginative Arts being to express the truth of things in sensible forms, and in such a way that their forms, so far as Art is concerned, have no other use or purpose than simply to serve as the expression of Truth in its unchanging nature". But there have always been at certain times those who argue that the expression of Truth includes the expression of everything imaginable to the dual mind of man. This is a mistake, as the idea applies rather to artistic expression as a mere representation of some external form or internal perception. Such representative expression, including both good and bad art (that is, both true and false art), and following the immediate pattern of thought exercised by creators and critics alike, always shares the same degree of exaltation or degradation as their own individual cases may indicate. So that if their ideal, which may be either a true or false ideal seeking portrayal in one or another of the various forms of artistic expression, is fragmentary, sordid, risque or otherwise grown askew and decadent, the resulting creation is bound to be of similar nature and pattern; or, with the critic, the resulting "appreciation" is bound to be similarly alien and delinquent. This is known as the moral principle in aesthetic criticism, and applies equally to both those who would create and those who would appreciate any worthy form of artistic expression.

It is indeed an irresponsible if not a false art which works only for self-satisfaction or other sordid aims, holding no converse with the ethical influence and social welfare which is or may be derived from its public exhibition. Especially must this be guarded against nowadays when easy publicity and journalistic exaggeration often

combine (perhaps, and perhaps not, unintentionally) to misinterpret and exploit a new artist's work. This is a twofold misdemeanor in that if the new artist has really produced something worthy it is cheapened thereby, while if he is only an uninspired pretender the public is deceived and mocked. Hence, not only is it hazardous to be too credulous about what we *read about* new art, but it is equally dangerous to make too quick estimate of the new art itself. We cannot too diligently guard against the stealthy foist of commercial rubbish into the courtly salon of our nobler artists' creative efforts. We cannot afford to spend our time and energy in seeking the thrill of precarious art situations, when we are still far short of a thorough understanding of the safe and sane creations of the Masters. And when we have once taken firm grasp of the principles underlying true and valid art creation we will also have the means at hand for the honest and direct appreciation of its expression in either simple or complex forms.

But our intolerance should not be without reasonable bounds. By this warning I do not mean to brusksly abandon or repudiate all those subtle and elusory suggestions which any sensible analysis of the erratic works of Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse or Cézanne would afford any true philosopher of Art; but only to make sure of a few provisions for holding them at their proper perspective and if need be, to avoid wasting too much of our sympathy on the dullness and distortion which are concealed beneath their gaudy angles. Whatever may be said in extenuation of the raucous flare and vulgar angularity of their pseudo-art, their red grass and green faces, club feet and tubular torsos fail to "arrive" intelligently and seem to inspire only those who labor under the delusions of stricken aesthetic faculty. For, in order to have any degree of public patronage, the same obliquity and astigmatism must be present in the public mind and taste that was present when the artist did his crabbéd work, else he would have no patrons and hence no cause for continued zeal or effort.

On the other hand, however, if the public has the interest of true Art at heart or at least nearly uppermost in its varied cycle of activities, it will have its own simple tests of an artist's faith and work. Thus, provided that the journalistic panderers and predatory commercializers let the susceptible public do its own thinking long enough to *see the work of Art first*, I have no fear that true artists will be recognized and rewarded while the bad ones, the imposters

and crude ungifted pretenders, will be discouraged by public neglect or, if not totally hopeless, will be urged to reform and become proficient. There is a vast fund of encouragement to be derived from the fact that the public mind has no need of the lying blurbs and screechy propaganda so often foisted on its attention, that it rather has sufficient naive innocense and moral insight to make approximately just and accurate appreciations of every sort of artistic expression possible to human genius. Perhaps it is because genius is never snobbish, never concerned with vain pretensions of exclusiveness. It is instead always warm and cordial, patient, industrious and cosmopolitan in its feeling, always honest, genuine and humble in its thought, always conscientious and constructive in the expression of its work.

The inherent realism and idealism which are conjoined with such effectual harmony in the soul of genius were very aptly tagged by John A. Symonds when he wrote that: "There is a Beauty which is never found in Nature, but which requires a working of human thought to elicit it from Nature; a Beauty not of parts and single persons but of complex totalities, a Beauty not of flesh and blood, but of mind, imagination, feeling. It is this synthetic, intellectual, spirit-penetrated Beauty to which the Arts aspire".

Very few of us will be able to write down in our notebooks any such record of heroic sacrifice and generous service for the sake of art-lovers as may be read in Ruskin's notes relating to his great labor of saving Turner's legacy of private papers, sketches, paintings and water-colors. The prolific collection (more than 360 oil paintings, 135 water-colors, and twenty thousand sketches) now in the British National Gallery have the order and condition they enjoy all because Ruskin took about seven months of indefatigable unrewarded labor in sorting and smoothing them out of the apparently hopeless jumble that Turner has left them in. I often wonder how many of the high-speed ultra-modern patrons of Art would be sufficiently industrious and *generous* to serve any similar contemporary purpose. Labors of love are scarce indeed when everyone seems hellbent to wallow in the lazy ooze of profit-slime.

Very few of us, again, can find ourselves able to live up to the fine tribute which Charles Eliot Norton paid to the humble painter of birds, insects, flowers and foliage (Hamilton Gibson) upon his coming into fame for duplicating the scintillating hues and blending colors of a peacock feather in the painting called "The Peerless

Plume". A normal boy's life in the Connecticut hills gave him an abiding Nature-love that inspired his work and ambition for perfect realism. He had no thorough schooling in the intricacies of historical art, no travels abroad, no contact with any of the recognized master-artists, but through sheer industry, enthusiasm and close attention to Nature's inimitable designs he was able to paint a new symbol of Beauty ranking easily the equal of Hogarth's *line*, Rembrandt's *shell*, Murillo's *cherubim*, or his famous namesake's "Gibson Girl."

And turning to another sphere of activity, who can claim comparison of dignity and technique with those great masters of the Baroque, Sir Christopher Wren and Fischer von Erlach. Right now when it is found urgent that St. Paul's Cathedral is in need of many repairs the authorities have no architect ready at hand who would try to *improve* any of the existing arrangements or ornamental features. The Viennese architect too enjoyed a unique reputation for his artistic combination of sculpture and architecture in those "composite quotations" from the Italian Renaissance which he incorporated into no less than thirty buildings, monuments and churches in or about his native city, among them being the entrance to the building occupied by the Hungarian Bodyguard, the Holy Trinity Monument in the Graben, and the church of the imperial palace at Schonnbrun. Though starting out on divergent lines, one from scientific studies and the other from adolescent contact with complex and elaborate art-atmosphere in his home life, they both acknowledged the debt of originality to Michael Angelo the real pioneer with his life-like figurines and balcony plaques, and to Pietro de Cortona two centuries later with his pleasing adaptations of painting, metal work and sculptural combinations rendering the Baroque style plastic instead of rigid and severe.

These are only three examples, but they should prove sufficient to indicate the intention of my meaning in the titular reference. I do not presume to take in the full scope of all the Arts, else I would have to lease a whole library shelf somewhere in order to have sufficient space to accommodate some more or less appreciative mention of each one. Hence, perhaps there is no better brief way to illustrate the theory of various aesthetic functions than with the modern synthetic method. The component parts of this method are eclectic elements which harmonize in the makeup of a congenial "universality of idea and execution", as Hegel would say. All the different schools

and periods and nations have had their acknowledged masters and it is these masters who have contributed some measure of originality and representative power to the perennial progress of Art throughout the world. Teachers, critics, connoisseurs, philosophers of Art and other champions of aesthetic culture also come in for a place in the synthetic account, and even though we did not have room for all of them we could still be fair and generous enough to feel their presence while we were arriving at the final estimate of any particular situation, historical or functional.

Of course, we can readily see that no particular one of them seems to have possessed all of the subtle aperçus of genius wherewith to exhaust, in one individual's scant brevity of life and accomplishment, the whole range of artistic possibility. If it has taken all of the million or more masters of various aesthetic practice to make its history read the way it does, we would certainly be unreasonable to expect any particular one to be so versatile and pantologically perfect that all the rest were superfluous. The Caliph Omar tried that sort of folly when he thought the Koran contained the whole and only Truth and hence all other books were unnecessary. As with Literature, History, Government, Civilization itself, it has taken *all* of the world's past masters to produce the Art that is extant in the world today, and we cannot rationally doubt that it will have a future sufficiently exalted and functionally ample to include all the possible departures, developments and improvements which our successors will be able to make. We realize that the difficulties which vex us will be solved quite as surely as that the delights that fascinate us will be eclipsed and more thoroughly refined in the future achievements of Art. Scientific research into the normal expression and criticism of every field of symbolic functioning will be in the daily program; but especially in the field of Art and Music will we be looking anxiously for those idolons which are right now urging us on to hotter pursuit and more eager expectation of some day realizing that wholesome attitude toward life which shall contain the true and valid aesthetic.

In that age I trust we will no longer share the mistakes of the technical critics and trepidaceous connoisseurs who seem ever unable to make tangible analysis of the elusive genius which animated Sir Joshua Reynold's rugged energy of the picturesque when, busy with his investigations of the Venetian secret of painting, his glazes and palette were rich with the golden glow of Vecchio and Titian; of

Rubens' smooth beauty of background or Van Dyck and Corregio's remarkable reproductions of the natural human complexion; or Turner's magic art of pearly tones and rippling color variations which Ruskin considered at its peak in the "Approach to Venice".

One of the chief claims to prestige as a competent philosophical instrument which is made by the synthetic method in Art appreciation, is its argument and ability to prove that public stupidity is not the primarily culpable cause of modern art decadence. It draws up a most condemnatory indictment against those unscrupulous panders who thrive on the dilettante's lust for provincial veneer at the fatal expense of more worthy Art-appreciation. Under this indictment we read that public stupidity is one of the concomitants merely of the real cause, which is the degenerate or immature functioning of pseudo-artists abetted by the commercial cunning of the crooked dealer or loudly advertising exhibitor. If there were no fools in the world the scheming rogues would try to make them out of innocent but susceptible bystanders. These knavish crooks have no rightful place in the world of true Art, various as its bonafide expressions are. They are merely rude spoliators hiding behind the curtains of milady's private boudoir. And anyway, any real and capable expression of true Art does not (for its genuine creation in the past did not) require a vast barrage of advertised eulogy under which to advance its claims of merit or genius. There are indeed poor prospects for the prattling parvenu who must depend upon the constant assistance of press and postage to explain and recommend his own or any other poseur artist's work. For, if he has any intelligent message to deliver, and if he has any intelligible or delightful manner of making such delivery, I doubt not that in due season his powers will be developed, his work and genius will be recognized and properly rewarded. It would truly be a sad misfortune if, after laboriously emerging from the narrow shell of novice art, his nobler deserts should be defamed and disregarded under the hectic wrangling and aspersions of critics who in some slight degree are not themselves of similar industry and genius. The public has a right to be stupid if its education and aesthetic culture have not progressed to the point where intelligence and enlightenment begin; but the artist, the critic, the connoisseur or honest exhibitor have not the slightest excuse to be stupid, hectic, jealous or corrupt.