

WHY EXHIBIT WORKS OF ART?

(Concluded.)

It is, then, by the notion of a vocational making, as distinguished from earning one's living by working at a job, regardless of what it may be, that the difference between the museum objects and those in the department store can be best explained. Under these conditions, which have been those of all non-industrialised societies, that is to say when each man makes one kind of thing, doing only that kind of work for which he is fitted by his own nature and for which he is therefore destined, Plato reminds us that 'more will be done, and better done than in any other way.' Under these conditions a man at work is doing what he likes best, and the pleasure that he takes in his work perfects the operation. We see the evidence of this pleasure in the Museum objects, but not in the products of chain-belt operation, which are more like those of the chain-gang than like those of men who enjoy their work. Our hankering for leisure is the proof of the fact that most of us are working at a task to which we could never have been called by anyone but a salesman, certainly not by God or by our own natures. Traditional craftsmen whom I have known in the East cannot be dragged away from their work, and will work overtime to their own pecuniary loss.

We have gone so far as to divorce work from culture, and to think of culture as something to be acquired in hours of leisure; but there can be only a hothouse and unreal culture where work itself is not its means; if culture does not show itself in all we make, we are not cultured. We ourselves have lost this vocational way of living, the way that Plato made his type of Justice; and there can be no better proof of the depth of our loss than the fact that we have destroyed the cultures of all other peoples whom the withering touch of our civilisation has reached.

In order to understand the works of art that we are asked to look at, it will not do to explain them in the terms of our own psychology and our aesthetics; to do so would be the pathetic fallacy. We shall not have understood these arts until we can think about them as their authors did. The Docent will have to instruct us in the elements of what will seem a strange language; though we know its terms, it is with very different meanings that we nowadays employ them. The meaning of such terms as art, nature, inspiration, form, ornament and aesthetic will have to be explained to our public. For none of these terms are used in the traditional philosophy as we use them to-day.

We shall have to begin by discarding the term *aesthetic* altogether. For these arts were not produced for the delectation of the senses. The Greek original of this modern word means nothing but reaction to certain stimuli; the sensibility implied by the word *aisthesis* is present in plants, animals, and man; it is what the biologist calls 'irritability.' These sensations, which are the passions or emotions of the psychologist, are the driving forces of instinct. Plato asks us to stand up like men against the pulls of pleasure and pain. For these, as the word passion implies, are not acts on our part, but things done to us; only the judgment and appreciation of art is an activity. Aesthetic experience is of the skin you love to touch, or the fruit you love to taste. 'Disinterested aesthetic contemplation' is a contradiction in terms and a pure nonsense. Art is an intellectual, not a physical virtue; beauty has to do with knowledge and goodness, of which it is precisely the attractive aspect; and since it is by its beauty that we are attracted to a work, its beauty is evidently a means to an end, and not itself the end of art; the purpose of art is always one of effective communication. The man of action, then, will not be content to substitute the knowledge of what he likes for an understanding judgment; he will not merely enjoy what he should use (those who merely enjoy we call 'aesthetes' rightly); it is not the aesthetic surfaces of works of art but the right reason or logic of the composition that will concern him. Now the composition of such works as we are exhibiting is not for aesthetic but for expressive reasons. The fundamental judgment is of the degree of the artist's success in giving clear expression to the theme of his work. In order to answer the question, Has the thing been well said? it will evidently be necessary for us to know what it was that was to be said. It is for this reason that in every discussion of works of art we must begin with their subject-matter.

We take account, in other words, of the *form* of the work. 'Form' in the traditional philosophy does not mean tangible shape, but is synonymous with idea and even with soul; the soul, for example, is called the form of the body.¹ If there be a real unity of form and matter such as we expect in a work of art, the shape of its body will express its form, which is that of the pattern in the artist's mind, to which pattern or image he moulds the material shape. The degree of his success in this imitative operation is the measure of

¹ Accordingly, the following sentence (taken from the *Journal of Aesthetics*, I, p. 29), 'Walter Pater here seems to be in the right when he maintains that it is the sensuous element of art that is essentially artistic, from which follows his thesis that music, the most formal of the arts, is also the measure of all the arts' propounds a shocking *non sequitur* and can only confuse the unhappy student.

the work's perfection. So God is said to have called his creation good because it conformed to the intelligible pattern according to which he had worked; it is in the same way that the human workman still speaks of 'trueing' his work. The formality of a work is its beauty, its informality its ugliness. If it is uninformed it will be shapeless. Everything must be in good form.

In the same way *art* is nothing tangible. We cannot call a painting 'art.' As the words 'artifact' and 'artificial' imply, the thing made is a work of art, made by art, but not itself art; the art remains in the artist and is the knowledge by which things are made: What is made according to the art is correct; what one makes as one likes may very well be awkward. We must not confuse taste with judgment, or loveliness with beauty, for, as Augustine says, some people like deformities.

Works of art are generally ornamental or in some way ornamented. The Docent will sometimes discuss the history of ornament. In doing so he will explain that all the words that mean ornament or decoration in the four languages with which we are chiefly concerned, and probably in all languages, originally meant equipment; just as furnishing originally meant tables and chairs for use and not an interior decoration designed to keep up with the Joneses or to display our connoisseurship. We must not think of ornament as something added to an object which might have been ugly without it. The beauty of anything unadorned is not increased by ornament, but made more effective by it. Ornament is characterisation; ornaments are attributes. We are often told, and not quite incorrectly, that primitive ornament had a magical value; it would be truer to say a metaphysical value, since it is generally by means of what we now call its decoration that a thing is ritually transformed and made to function spiritually as well as physically. It is only when the symbolic values of ornament have been lost, that decoration becomes a sophistry, irresponsible to the content of the work. For Socrates, the distinction of beauty from use is logical, but not real, not objective: a thing can only be beautiful in the context for which it is designed.

Critics nowadays speak of an artist as *inspired* by external objects, or even by his material. This is a misuse of language that makes it impossible for the student to understand the earlier literature of art. 'Inspiration' can never mean anything but the working of some spiritual force within you; the word is properly defined by Webster as a 'supernatural divine influence.' The Docent, if a rationalist, may wish to deny the possibility of inspiration; but he must not obscure the fact that from Homer onwards the word

has been used always with one exact meaning, that of Dante, when he says that Love, that is to say the Holy Ghost, 'inspires' him, and that he goes 'setting the matter forth even as he dictates within me.'

Nature, for example in the statement 'Art imitates nature in her manner of operation,' does not refer to any visible part of our environment; and when Plato says 'according to nature,' he does not mean 'as things behave,' but as they should behave, not 'sinning against nature.' The traditional Nature is Mother Nature, that principle by which things are 'natured,' by which, for example, a horse is horsey and by which a man is human. Art is an imitation of the nature of things, not of their appearances.

In these ways we shall prepare our public to understand the pertinence of ancient works of art. If, on the other hand, we ignore the evidence and decide that the appreciation of art is merely an aesthetic experience, we shall evidently arrange our exhibition to appeal to the public's sensibilities. This is to assume that the public must be taught to feel. But the view that the public is a hard-hearted animal is strangely at variance with the evidence afforded by the kind of art that the public chooses for itself, without the help of museums. For we perceive that this public already knows what it likes. It likes fine colours and sounds and whatever is spectacular or personal or anecdotal or that flatters its faith in progress. This public loves its comfort. If we believe that the appreciation of art is an aesthetic experience we shall give the public what it wants.

But it is not the function of a museum or of any educator to flatter and amuse the public. If the exhibition of works of art, like the reading of books, is to have a cultural value, *i.e.* if it is to nourish and make the best part of us grow, as plants are nourished and grow in suitable soils, it is to the understanding and not to fine feelings that an appeal must be made. In one respect the public is right; it always wants to know what a work of art is 'about.' 'About what,' as Plato also asked, 'is the sophist so eloquent'? Let us tell them what these works of art are about and not merely tell them things about these works of art. Let us tell them the painful truth, that most of these works of art are about God, whom we never mention in polite society. Let us admit that if we are to offer an education in agreement with the innermost nature and eloquence of the exhibits themselves, that this will not be an education in sensibility, but an education in philosophy, in Plato's and Aristotle's sense of the word, for whom it means ontology and theology and the map of life, and a wisdom to be applied to everyday matters. Let us recognise that nothing will have been accomplished

unless men's lives are affected and their values changed by what we have to show. Taking this point of view, we shall break down the social and economic distinction of fine from applied art; we shall no longer divorce anthropology from art, but recognise that the anthropological approach to art is a much closer approach than the aesthetician's; we shall no longer pretend that the content of the folk arts is anything but metaphysical. We shall teach our public to demand above all things lucidity in works of art.

We shall sharply distinguish the 'visual education' that only tells us what things look like (leaving us to *react* as we must) from the iconography of things that are themselves invisible (but by which we can be guided how to *act*).

It may be that the understanding of the ancient works of art and of the conditions under which they were produced will undermine our loyalty to contemporary art and contemporary methods of manufacture. This will be the proof of our success as educators; we must not shrink from the truth that all education implies revaluation. Whatever is made only to give pleasure is, as Plato put it, a toy, for the delectation of that part of us that passively submits to emotional storms; whereas the education to be derived from works of art should be an education in the love of what is ordered and the dislike of what is disordered. We have proposed to educate the public to ask first of all these two questions of a work of art, Is it true? or beautiful? (whichever word you prefer) and what good use does it serve? We shall hope to have demonstrated by our exhibition that the human value of anything made is determined by the coincidence in it of beauty and utility, significance and aptitude; that artifacts of this sort can only be made by free and responsible workmen, free to consider only the good of the work to be done and individually responsible for its quality; and that the manufacture of 'art' in studios coupled with an artless 'manufacture' in factories represents a reduction of the standard of living to subhuman levels.

These are not personal opinions, but only the logical deductions of a lifetime spent in the handling of works of art, the observation of men at work, and the study of the universal philosophy of art from which philosophy our own 'aesthetic' is only a temporally provincial aberration. It is for the museum militant to maintain with Plato that 'we cannot give the name of art to anything irrational.'

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