

Some Fundamental Ideas in Relation to Art

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IN *The Times* of 8 December 1923 the following words occur :—" It is evident that the old distinctions between class and class in the community are breaking down. Yet in the future the divisions between men may be more acute than ever, since they will no longer depend on differences of wealth, education or social standing, but on men's conception of and response to spiritual realities." Believing this to be profoundly true, it occurred to me that some reflection on this principle as it may affect the arts should be both timely and interesting.

Assuming that all art is the manifestation of thought and feeling, it stands to reason that thought and feeling must be of supreme importance to all those who are practising the arts, as, indeed, it must be to everyone who realises the importance of all that affects the cultivation of the character. What stronger reason can there be for trying to make beautiful things, than that they help to purify and strengthen our thought and feeling, which are responsible primarily for all our conduct ?

It is the unseen that is the glory of the seen. Any appeal to the senses through colour, form, texture and light and shade may cause pleasure and delight, but there is a higher appeal in that which stimulates our love and admiration. When we look at any work of art, we may ask ourselves—How is it wrought, is it technically well done, is the material of it rightly used ? Then we may inquire : What is its sensuous effect, does it please any of our senses of form, colour, texture, light and shade, etc. ? Then, what is its intellectual force, what does it say ? What thoughts does it arouse ? And then lastly, but most important of all, what emotions does it bring forth, what kind of affection does it kindle ? This last we must recognise as the spiritual quality. The unseen. That spiritual quality which we can neither measure nor weigh, but which calls for the exercise of our personal character in the comparison of values. How we regard the higher qualities of man. How we love truth ; how we love beauty, and how we love God. These three affections are the essential foundations of all real culture, and upon which all characters are built up. The love of truth, the love of beauty and the love of God, must be the dominating impulses of all we do ; no one of which will suffice without the other two.

Believe me, what will affect our work, more than our skill, will be our attitude of mind towards it. Whether we are out to make money, rather than to serve. Whether we wish to glorify ourselves or our Maker. If we were more ready to make sacrifices for truth's sake, we should be less ready to follow conventions,

which are often the outcome of the desire to deceive. To give but one illustration, the rustication of stone work, that is the accentuation of the jointing, arose from the desire to make a wall look more massive than it really was. Thousands of pounds and thousands of hours of labour are being wasted every day over this convention, which is nothing more than a dirt-catching trick. As long as the law of fitness governs our regard for traditional methods, tradition as such will do no harm. But fitness is often forgotten in the anxiety not to offend against convention. Convention, which is the twin sister of tradition. Most of us are like lame men, frightened to put aside our crutches ; and so, through fear, we follow the conventions of our time, thoughtlessly like sheep.

The world is getting weary of technical and intellectual skill. The horrors of post-impressionism, cubism and many of the other isms are due to the revolt of man against over-intellectuality. The war has made the world more emotional. And after the first violent reactionary symptoms have subsided, it is likely we shall see a genuine revival of artistic feeling. Already the colours of costumes and shop windows are more healthy and cheerful, less khaki and drab, less colour that is harmonious with decomposition and decay. When a nation is happy its colour is bright. The more idealistic the people the bluer is their colour ; the more sordid and materialistic they are, the browner and greyer they become. Go to your great manufacturing centres and see how mud-coloured everything and everybody is. Climb into the hills of Westmorland and Cumberland, and rejoice over the lovely blue and greeny-grey costumes of the peasants, and their surroundings.

We might with much advantage limit all art teaching to the study of conditions and requirements—that is, materials, what they are, where they come from, and their possibilities and limitations. And for requirements, what it is that man needs to make him a better man. The study of fitness covers the whole ground, if we always remember that man is a spiritual being, and has a body. His body must be fed and clothed, protected and trained. Still more important is the cultivation and nourishment of his soul, which must be done by himself. Too often we forget the soul altogether.

We are not half alive to the poisons engendered by ugliness. We even advise each other to look at ugly things, knowing them to be ugly. And we think it is much more dangerous to hold our noses over the sewer gas of a gully. Never look at an ugly thing twice. It is fatally easy to get accustomed to corrupting influences. Let mothers and fathers remember that it

matters greatly how far they try to keep their homes free from ugliness—that is, free from what their own consciences tell them is ugly. For there is no standard of beauty, therefore no standard of ugliness. There are fashions in plenty. The consensus of opinion often establishes what looks very like a standard of taste, but it cannot endure. The thick-lipped South African nigger lass to the nigger man is beautiful. We all have to fix our own standard of beauty. It is a very great mercy that it is so, and that there cannot be any one standard of beauty acknowledged by all. Were it possible there would be an end to all progress in taste, and we should be so much less charitable to each other. It is the assumption of a standard that has led to such slavish imitation of the past, and has well-nigh petrified all creative power, causing the archæologist to assume an importance far greater than he deserves. He is now the right-hand man of the collector and dealer, and has produced many founders of museums incapable of telling the true value of anything, before knowing the date and author. Archæological interest in things stimulates a conceit in knowledge without wisdom. Quite a nasty flavour is being given to some modern so-called art productions by the indecent exposure of Egyptian sacred antiquities.

Perpetual intercourse with the beauties of nature must have a refining influence on character. In all creative art there must be that spiritual quality which is the very life and soul of the object. Students cannot study nature too much, or too faithfully. To draw the real shapes of leaves and flowers, not the distorted perspective views of them, will help to fill their vocabulary of form, from which creative work will come. The study of human form may be carried on in the same way, in detail and in the street. As you walk along concentrate attention on different features, on gestures and movements of the body and limbs. All attentive observation of this kind, if earnestly pursued with a view to increase our knowledge of truth, will be greatly helpful, much more so than conventionally posing an ill-bred peasant without clothes, or bowls of flowers in crowded confusion.

Deliberate transcripts from nature are most valuable exercises, but in no sense are they art. The art arrives

the moment the artist's thought and feeling are turned on to select and reject, to arrange and to convey thought and feeling to others. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as realistic art, though all good art is the result of realistic practice. The more truly you have seen a tree the finer will be the pattern you make of it. It may almost be said with truth: "What you can remember is your own, but what you sketch you steal." That is to say, the facts about nature only become yours when you have absorbed and digested them.

We never need be anxious about being original. If we work in this way and saturate our minds with nature, we cannot help our work being original; it is bound to be, simply because no two people in the world are exactly alike. Let us be wary of the spurious originality which arises from the imitation of men's modes and methods, or the egotism of eccentricity. Little personal traits are easily exaggerated, and if allowed undue prominence will kill all humility and sense of proportion.

We have encouraged water-tight compartments in our art training far too much. The sense of graceful and dignified proportion can be exercised in any craft. Training in mechanical construction will help, but not hinder the decorative designer. A feeling for colour and texture should be encouraged in all the crafts. Why should carvers and sculptors be content to ignore colour? Remember the carved and coloured screens in many of our churches. It may be said with truth that sculpture is not complete until it *is* coloured. Think of our alabaster tombs, reredoses and effigies splendid in their richness and fullness of colour.

We must reverse the order of things and put commerce second to art, not art second to commerce. It is no use relying on collective action, on public bodies, institutions, organisations or governments. It can only come from within. Do not let us deceive ourselves by thinking that Acts of Parliament, or Ministries of Fine Art, will help us. Each one must stand alone. Not that we can escape altogether the influences of our time, but by our sincerity we can raise the quality of the influences of the future. The desire to bestow that which we think good, is the secret of true happiness and true progress.