Encounters with Art

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Art "is one of the few ways in which divinity is constantly reasserting itself."

Sheldon Cheney

Introduction

Gospel tells us that the son who asks for bread shall not be given a stone. What if he asks for a stone? Shall he receive bread? Inconceivable. We moderns have difficulty

believing in bread. Our practical, literal minds find stones more believable. Without knowing what we do, we ask for stones. How dangerous to ask for the wrong things!

We asked limited and limiting things of art. Therefore we thought art was limited. We mistook it for diversion, luxury, a refined interest on which to spend surplus time and money. We lost a sense of the working of art in community.

For generations we have asked art to fit our cramped and matter-of-fact world, to confirm our puny assumptions, to give us false promises of what life ought to be or what we wished it might be. We demanded that art divert us with prettiness or amaze us with staggering feats of skill. We relished the melodramatic and sentimental because it drained off surface emotion without involving us in real emotion. Even the milk companies now scorn, for their calendars, the art we acclaimed a hundred years ago!

So wrongly did we assess art that we lost the power to recognize genius in our midst. In Giotto's time and in Michelangelo's, the public recognized radical new seeing and unique idiom, preparing for a new era of history. The young Rembrandt succeeded brilliantly in meeting the restricting requirements of the new mercantile market. But in mid-career, he turned away from his phenomenal success in favor of the freedom to formulate a new visual language. From then on he lived out his years in poverty and obscurity, with only a few to respond to his penetrating vision. For this, some refer to him as our first modern artist, because many great artists in recent generations have

worked and lived out their lives with little recognition. If this is tragedy for the artist, it is thousandfold tragedy for the community.

Now the Western community has exhausted its unearned spiritual income from the past. It finds itself catapulted into a new era as different from the Post-Renaissance world as that was from the Byzantine. It discovers itself, with unbelief, in the most dangerous opportunity of history. It lives in a world of dematerialized physics, yet still *sees* the world in terms of mechanically oriented science and dynastic technologies. The leadership and most of its people act and react in terms of what they see…

Out of sheer desperation, the sensitive and reflective person of the Twentieth Century must dare to ask for a new way of seeing. Not only for himself, but for the sake of his world, he must recover and liberate the languages of spirit. The image arts always have been and always will be the non-verbal language of spirit, the silent educator of soul.

More often than not, the art specialist cannot help us. As a Bible scholar may be tempted to interpret the Bible endlessly without making room for transforming encounter with any part of it, so too with the specialist in art. Nor can those who deify art help us. Art is no more and no less than a language of spirit.

All of my adult life I have gone to museums whenever I could. Yet I delayed until one day in the early 1950's to

enter the Metropolitan Museum in New York without taking my specialist side with me. For many months I had been in a state of acute inner crisis. On this day I found myself submerged in a cloud of density. I wandered aimlessly, finding vague comfort in anonymity among familiar surroundings, just psychologically and physically drifting. Looking back, I cannot recall the minute of change. There I stood, before a painting I had never noticed before, with floodgates of compassion wide open and all the world drenched in healing light. The whole world and I were forgiven and connected up in a livingness not our own. Not forgiven for special offenses—simply forgiven.

For weeks I lived in an aftermath of that flood. All my visual experience inspired feelings of wonder and awe. Then, after a few weeks, this seeing began to fade. The world started to look more familiar, more routine. Yet I had been released from inner impasse and re-entered my life from a new inner position. Later, I remembered intimations of this experience occasionally in a Quaker Meeting or in the quiet meditations at the beginning of a day.

How could I drop the matter there? I felt that everything I ever knew had become unimportant and I could start learning all over again. Teeming questions wooed me like living phantoms. What happened that day in the museum? Why? Who else had stumbled into life-affecting encounters with art? Could one build a relationship to art to serve healing processes and transformations? How? What were the requirements?

These questions pressed me, demanding that I change my outer life to make more room for exploring them. They required that I simplify my life down to the bone of sheer necessity and salvage room for seeing art all over again from this new position.

How quickly I saw that my assumptions and opinions, my skills as a specialist, all my knowledge (not remarkable in fact, but even very little can be too much), were barriers to a living relationship with art. I experimented on museum trips and with small reproductions in my own home. I explored art openly, alert and curious. I allowed the pictures to act on me rather than imposing on them. I came to understand what it means to choose and be chosen all at once. Slowly I felt a new relation to art unfolding, a kind of wordless conversation capable of awakening new life in me.

I dug deep in the books of the great critics and art philosophers looking for evidences of this relation to art in the lives of others. Here and there lay hints implying that basically this was a private matter, not of interest to others. Once I would have slid over these hints blindly. Now I had the power to recognize them.

My most thrilling find in the books was a short passage that went beyond hinting. Buried deep in one of his less important books, Bernard Berenson describes and credits an encounter with art that loomed like a mountain.[1] It happened during his forties, *after* he had written the great books that established him as father of Renaissance criticism in the Twentieth Century.

Berenson confessed that a question gnawed like a worm in him through all the earlier years. The question was "What is great art?" "What is great art?" This living question, surviving deeper than all his scholarly genius, found a living answer.

His monumental encounter came one minute when the scholar in him was off guard. He stood in a drifting, unknowing state of mind, at the entrance of an ancient building. Suddenly he found himself caught up with the throbbing life in some foliage sculptured on the aged door jamb. The heart of the universe pulsated there, and in Berenson too.

From that minute on, Berenson says, all the world looked different to him. The scales of habit dropped from his eyes. All his visual experience became characteristically alive and wonderful. He said that he habitually saw with the genius of sight of the great artist. On one hand he didn't need art any more; on the other hand, art came to mean more to him than ever before.

Berenson records that he found difficulty discussing this encounter with the scholars. Mostly, they couldn't understand…

And yet some know—even among the specialists. "Art and religion belong to the same world," Clive Bell Writes, and "… we regard art and religion as twin manifestations of the spirit…" And again: "When the majority lack, not only the emotion out of which art and religion are made, but even the sensibility to respond … nothing is left of art and

religion but their names; illusion and prettiness are called art, politics and sentimentality religion." Jacques Maritain speaks of that " … intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination…" This he calls the "secret life in each and all the arts." Maritain says "… the poetic perception which animates art catches and manifests at the same time what matters most in Things, the transapparent reality and secret significance on which they live."

And those two giants of modern criticism, God-intoxicated atheists, both, Andre Malraux and Elie Faure know…

What is Great Art?

Great art is a *visual equivalent* of a fresh and unique encounter with life. It is a living organism, a microcosm—just as a person is—with a life of its own. Its construction and structure form a unity of parts bound with a life rhythm. This living structure bodies forth a specific meeting with a particular, a particular that became transparent and allowed the universal heart beat through. The grasping of the nature of universality through a particular, this is the stuff that makes great art.

The critics call the structure of a work of art its *plastic values* or its *formal values*. Some consider only formal values of significance in art. Formal values, uninformed and not fused with fresh encounter with life, seem to me to be a limited kind of art. However, when formal values are weak, art is weak. That is why the fresh and vital seeing

sometimes found in children's art, interesting as it may be, cannot stand beside the great masters.

The grasping of the universal in a particular becomes a transformation. This, rather than subject matter, is the content of great art. For instance, pictures with religious subject matter are often simply pious picturing, not art at all. Institutions and individuals who put great stock in them weaken their generative possibilities. A landscape of Cezanne's late years or a clown of the mature Rouault is religious art more truly than the average picture of Christ. Religious subject matter and religious art do sometimes overlap. No one understands this matter better than Paul Tillich as he describes it in his chapter on art in *Christianity and the Existentialists.*[2] Rather than subject matter, the true content of great art is the event where artist and a particular thing meet non-verbally, the divine in each answering.

Some artists, like Cezanne, steady the outer eye on the objective world with an intensity and penetration that break the matter-of-fact crust, and the nature of the underlying architecture of the universe comes through. Others, like Chagall, gather up within themselves the imagery of true encounters and allow the imagery to percolate and distill within them. This "inward" imagery becomes the content of their painting. What matters which way the artist woos Proteus to reveal himself?

Labeled greatness can frustrate people. Reynold's "Age of Innocence," for instance, claims the honor of fame and familiarity, yet is an appallingly limited work of art. Growing up with such pictures helped to consolidate our

assumption that art is limited, with nothing involving *our* connection with life as a whole.

Take a much finer painting, da Vinci's "Mona Lisa." How pathetic, the thousands that have stood before it, laboring to respond, and finally leaving it disappointed in themselves or disappointed in the painting. One person said, "The most impressive thing about it is the crowd perpetually standing in front of it." Eric Neumann says that "Mona Lisa" was the soul image for men of the Post-Renaissance world. In this new era, she may have exhausted that possibility. Now she must be rediscovered as simply one of hundreds of fine paintings of the tradition, one which may or may not involve us personally. For me, da Vinci's "Virgin and Child with St. Ann" is a far richer and greater painting, though much less known.

Michelangelo's "David" and "Moses" bask in the light of fame, yet some of us who love his work almost forget these in our devotion to the various bound captives, bearded giants and the nearly Gothic last works. Many of us find Rembrandt's early work only meticulous craftsmanship, lacking the transformations of his later years.

Whether we recognize greatness or not, the imagery of some art will filter through and affect our lives and our way of seeing. It is hard to credit how much the artist forms our seeing, even if we never go to a museum, even if we have no particular respect for art. How else could the public have become indignant when Constable in the early 19th Century painted treetops green? Contemporary artists had trained the public to see treetops predominantly brown.

Therefore Constable's green insulted the public intelligence. We think a sunset reminds us of Turner: actually Turner taught us to see sunsets the way we do. The process repeats over and over through the generations, but never more dramatically than with the Impressionists. To our grandfathers these paintings looked like the smearing of paint by careless children, again insult to the public intelligence. Yet to us today, Impressionist painting is the familiar and reassuring world, the world the Impressionists trained us to see.

We know museums have much that is not great, much only of interest in building a panoramic history of art. Even though we crave guidance to help us focus in the richest areas, we need be wary of being over-impressed by fame or authority. It is not objective greatness we seek, in any case, but a sensibility to discover our own spiritual and temperamental relatives among the great. Let us hold judgments tentatively and venture forth with holy curiosity.

What Can Art Do for Us?

The best advice to anyone approaching the world of art is: "Find joy in it. Sheer joy!" For where we find pure joy, we love truly, and what we love truly comes to life and reveals. But the newcomer is too bewildered to find joy. And moderns have trouble crediting joy as a substantial reality. Far easier to approach art dutifully, respectfully—even grimly. So what good to say: "Find joy in it"?

A large reproduction of a Rouault painting dominates our living room. Like most of the best 20th Century painting, it

departs from the Post-Renaissance tradition of creating an illusion of matter-of-fact reality. It is closer, in idiom, to Gothic stained glass. Some, unfamiliar with Rouault, begin by wondering why the Bloms choose to live with this picture. Many of these people, returning again and again, find themselves growing in relation to it. They find it reveals itself in new ways the more they see it.

What exactly, does great art do for us?

For a long time our culture has exploited the logical mind and thinking processes at the expense of other human functions. Laurens Van der Post says, "We have abolished superstition of the heart only to install a superstition of the intellect in its place. We behave as if there were some magic in mere thought, and we use thinking for purposes for which it was never designed." No wonder many modern artists diminish the size of the head in proportion! In our time the head needs some whittling down. Thinking at its best formulates freshly in the light of new impressions, intuitions and feelings. The era of non-physical physics could come only through a man like Einstein who used thought to co-ordinate, not tyrannize, the evidence of his total experience.

What part does the thinking function play in the creating of great art? In varying degrees it participates, but never dominates. It explores without imposing itself. The great artist is strongest where we are weak. If we allow, the artist will educate us in the areas of the senses, intuition and emotion, releasing each to participate freely with the others in the larger process of the whole person.

What is the *whole person*? Martin Buber warns against attempts to "preserve only the 'pure,' the real, the lasting, and to cast away everything else." He asserts that "… the instinctive is not thought too impure, the sensuous is not thought too remote from its course, what is concerned with emotion is not thought too fleeting: everything must be gathered into the orbit of its mastery. This concentration does not desire the self that is apart, but the whole unimpaired man. It aims at, and *is* reality." It would seem that the gathering of person requires all the original God-gifts sifted from the acquired self consisting of those manners and mannerisms, skills, habits, and most of all the vast accumulation of opinions which we tend to think of as "self." How hard to trust these uneducated sides! Because we do not credit their value nor honestly listen to what they have to offer, they live a life of their own, setting up counter-tyrannies at odds with our exploited side. Frequently they frustrate our best intentions. They rebel exactly as neglected or rejected children do.

The senses, uneducated, make constant demands for monetary comforts and satisfactions but fail to serve deeper needs or a dynamic relation between inner and outer worlds. They crave distraction and diversion to the point of overstimulation. A person tyrannized by the senses is glued to them and has no life of his own.

In reaction, the puritanical type of mind has always been tempted to condemn the senses. Yet without our senses we would be senseless. And without a healthy sense of our physical natures—that earth-relating anchor of the spiritual journey—the body may rebel with intermittent or chronic

disorders. During his final illness, St. Francis apologized to his own body for the abuse and neglect he had meted out to it.

The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that "… understanding shines in through the senses, the doors of the body …" and warns "… the sense-organs and the intellect are instruments only…" Blake called the senses windows of the soul, and understood even his sexuality as an inseparable part of his total vitality—yet another channel through which God could be approached.

The great artist has an acute and compelling sense contact with the outer world and a sheer necessity that it serve more than momentary comfort and desire. This initial connection upon which any response depends is essential in bringing forth a work of art. It is uncluttered by stale assumptions and does not impose judgments. It is free and alert, clean for a new and living response. If we would learn how the senses can serve our larger process, we have no better teachers than the artists of the ages.

Intuition is knowledge and recognition awakening within. Everyone has intuitive insights and intimations; but, untrusted, they sift through the fingers without ever affecting the life into which they come. The great artist trusts the intuitive flicker. He holds on to it, focuses on it, until emotion surges up in support of it. What threatened to be nebulous and fleeting becomes true and real and affecting. It takes its place in the larger process.

Emotion is our source of vitality and drive. It is "where our life bubbles up in us," says Gerald Sykes. Most Americans, says Sykes, are numb emotionally, and don't know they are numb until they become half-thawed. This may mean chronic tiredness or theatrical substitutes for emotion, or, too often, fanaticism. For some, uneducated emotion churns in constant inner turmoil, consuming energy and robbing one of the capacity to relate or take initiative.

We treat world crises as merely cause of anxiety rather than in large measure consequence of anxiety, Archibald MacLeish says, because of the "divorce between the knowledge of the fact and the feel of the fact …," because we fail to "see feelingly." We must know with the solar plexus as well as with the head. The wise old Hebrews knew. In Psalm 16 we read "my reins also instruct me in the night seasons." Feeling seems to be where body and spirit meet. Because the great artist trusts this, he gives us, MacLeish says, "recreation of common experience" with "uncommon understanding" —the common experience as it becomes revelation.

The image educates emotion where reason never reaches. The significant image held, recalled, has the power to transform. No one knows why this is so. One can only know that it works. A trust of this practice is one of the most liberating factors for spiritual growth. A great artist holds to an image until depth of feeling knows and understands what mind alone cannot know. How the community needs its image makers!

How Do We Communicate with Art?

Every person is endowed with two ways of seeing. Both, together, are indispensable for fulfilling living. The climate of our culture encourages only one of these, the matter-of-fact seeing, the functional observation. This seeing is essential. Literally, with it, we see the physical path before us and avoid stumbling into things. With it we identify, analyze, deduce. Nevertheless, the more we depend on this sight exclusively, the less we contact what is new and fresh and vital in visual experience. This seeing, carrying the whole load of visual experience, slowly turns to scales of habit on the eyes. Einstein said that every observation consists of a combination of two parts: what is seen *and* the observer. When the scales of habit grow thick, almost nothing new comes through; what the person sees is mostly what he expects to see. Bernard Berenson calls this seeing the utilitarian blur. If we depend on the utilitarian sight alone we use only half our sight and may feel only half alive.

The other way of seeing is the communicative vision. It is not directly useful and that is why our educational institutions neglect it. It sees always new, as if it had not seen before. It sees a life in a particular thing in a way that new life awakens in the observer by way of response. This sight nourishes being. It can release a sense of participation in continuing creation. It is generative rather than practical. The small child has it. As the child grows it tends to get crowded out.

Communicative seeing has to do with the whole matter of relating and relationship. MacLeish tells us: “the end and aim of any true work of art is precisely the achievement of the relationship we have lost—the relationship between man and world—between man and man’s experience of the world.”

We must stress beyond all question that *both* these endowments of sight are important. “There is no illusory world,” writes Martin Buber in *I and Thou*, “there is only world—which appears to us as twofold in accordance with our twofold attitude.”

We can learn to allow room for and trust our endowment for communicative seeing. We can reclaim it. The great artist confronts us with fruits of communicative vision. And yet it is possible to spend much time in museums for years and never give up the utilitarian vision. And never know what one has missed. When you sit in a museum awhile, you can see many people doing this.

Watch such a person for a minute—in the mind’s eye. You see him approach a picture, glance at it, take a look at the name of the painter. Then he stands back, giving the picture a more or less thoughtful examination. Watch his face now, and you see his reaction, whether pleasure, distaste, bafflement or indifference. After registering reaction, he moves to the next picture. Within a minute he may have covered several pictures in this way. After an hour or so he has identified and approved of or disapproved of several score pictures. Then he goes home, somewhat weary, having never given up his utilitarian vision for a minute.

Now, in the mind's eye, watch a person who obviously has a life-enhancing relation to art. We see him drifting along slowly, then coming to a pause in front of a picture. He stands there for some time. If it is new to him, undoubtedly he looks at the name of the artist. Perhaps he moves back, to see the picture at a distance also. If there is a bench, he may sit for a while. Finally he moves on, again drifting along, and perhaps he does not stop with another picture in this same room. If we stayed awhile we might see him return to this same picture again before he leaves. This man is sensitive to his own deeper response. He has gained the power to recognize what is especially for him at a given time, and he has learned to stay with a picture as long as he's "all with it." He knows that repeated exposure to a picture that has drawn him will be more rewarding than spreading his focus thin on many pictures. Altogether, he knows how to make room for the communicative vision to function.

This man may be physically tired when he leaves the museum, but he will feel an inward vitality that he did not bring with him. He will have a sense of knowing who he is without having to know exactly what he knows. He has better connections with life. It would not be surprising if, as he walks home, he sees the world around him as he never saw it before, the trees, the sky, the atmospheric condition, the people. The ordinary, familiar world is reborn and fills him with wonder and awe.

Instinctively, in this time when people become aware of their great needs, many who have never taken art seriously before go to museums. For many, an attitude becomes an

obstacle. The wrong approach may deplete and exhaust a person. Since the simple instruction, “find joy,” is usually futile, we must see clearly some of the common obstacles.

For a comparative newcomer the most common obstacle consists of laboring to “get the right thing.” He stands before a picture, asking himself: “What am I *supposed* to feel?” He asks for a response that presumably would be approved of by experts. This allows no inner freedom for real response.

Whether newcomer or habitual museum visitor, a person may be so impressed with his own automatic reaction that he pours his energy and capacity for response into it. No vitality remains for deeper response. Some of these people say, “I don’t know anything about art, but I know what I like.” Which means they like what they know. They gravitate to the familiar, to anything that caters to the inner status quo. Such a person inevitably takes offense at what he does not like. How he contends with it! How much God-given energy and capacity for true response is burned up in taking offense and contending with what you do not like! It makes no difference if it is a trivial painting or a great one which will some day stir you to the roots. Learn to withhold contention, not to take offense.

Often a newcomer picks up from the expert or the aesthetically-minded a habit of discursive mind that leaves no room for true encounter. If we spend our entire time “interpreting” a picture, analyzing it, deducing symbolism, deciphering style and technique, what chance has the picture to live in its own right? The discursive mind, the

literal mind, belongs to the utilitarian vision and to technology instead of true encounter.

Sometimes a labored approach to art interferes with the normal functioning of the eyes. Strain can freeze the seeing process into a stare. In normal sight, the eye bounces like a tennis ball on a practice board. It gleans bits at a time until they reveal themselves in their relationships within the dynamic and unified whole. If you have a tendency to fasten on a detail of a picture, missing its microcosmic "life of its own," practice consciously this normal bounce of sight over the entire surface of a picture.

What about art that repels? Sometimes a person says: "At least art should be beautiful, shouldn't it?" Of course! Macbeth and King Lear are beautiful. If these themes appeared in sensational journalism, they would have no beauty. They would allow us a morbid preoccupation with other people's tragedy, a way out of honestly facing the tragedy in life. The savage storm reveals truth as validly as the June garden.

One afternoon a caller noticed on a table in my home a reproduction of "The Condemned Soul" from the Sistine Altar. He glanced at it with alarm. "Great heavens," he said, "who wants to look at a thing like that?" I made light of it—though I spoke truly—"That's the self-condemned one within us all. If you look at him squarely enough, your own haunts and fears will wither a bit." To my surprise, he responded thoughtfully: "I see what you mean." He picked up the picture and sat on the couch with it for some time,

absorbed. Then respectfully, saying nothing, he put it back on the table.

Why is it that the work of art that repels or both attracts and repels has the power to heal? We know that these things often represent something in us that we cannot face in ourselves. By facing them fearlessly outside of ourselves in the form of a powerful image, we affect the inward factor.

Art in the Home

Most people do not visit a museum more than a few times a year. It is the relation to art we cultivate in our homes that affects our everyday living. If I had to make a choice between museum trips and the collection of folio-sized reproductions I rotate in my home, I would choose the latter.

Our relation to art develops much like our relation to music. A person who attends an occasional concert and hears no other music has a limited relation to music. Repeated exposure makes music mean more and more. Exposure to much good music helps you know your spiritual relatives among the composers. Shallow or cheap music does not awaken a taste for deeply moving music. If you get glued to the Blue Danube and use it for a measuring stick of what music ought to be, you close off a growing relation to music.

Fine music in the home is essential to a growing and nourishing relation to music. Yet if a Beethoven symphony

were played all the time, day in, day out, through the years, we would cease to hear it.

When you transcribe the above in terms of the visual arts, you see that a library of reproductions is as important to a relation to art as a library of records is to music. The difference between the two is that art reproductions are much cheaper than records. Some magazines have fine reproductions of choice works of art. Mounted on black poster board, they become more or less permanent pieces. The folio sized reproduction from museums, art stores or ordered by mail, usually costs less than a sandwich. I have watched many families build these picture libraries and rotate the pictures in a key place in the home where they play an important part in routine living.

One family with four small children, experienced in the values of rotating pictures, built a new dining room onto their house. They bought two large Victorian mahogany veneer mirrors and replaced the mirror part with Bristol board, giving themselves two dressy bulletin boards on which to mount groups of pictures. They put one period or one artist at a time on each board. These pictures participate actively in family life, drawing responses from all ages. As soon as the family ceases to respond, a change is made. No picture stays long enough to become a part of the routine environment. Even a permanent picture we love takes on new life when we change its position.

If we own one or more of those beautiful (if expensive) art books, we can buy for very little a metal bookstand such as law students use. On this a book may be always open on a

living room table or another spot where the eye often catches it. How wasteful it seems to have such books closed on the shelf most of the time!

Aside from reproductions, originals have their own rewarding appeal. If you buy an original, move slowly, so that you will not outgrow your choice in a year or two. See many paintings and wait until you know what it means to "choose and be chosen" in relation to art. Sometimes we find a spiritual relative among the unknown and young artists as well as among the famous ones. When we do, his growth and development can become, in some measure, our own. Prints by contemporary artists open into a fascinating world to explore, one in which the dollars stretch much farther than they do with paintings.

Art in the home does two things for all ages. It implants imagery in the memory. This inner store of imagery caters to one's needs for imagery in various growth processes through the years. Secondly, it cultivates the fresh seeing of life itself, the kind of seeing that nourishes being. A living relation to great art in everyday life keeps the seeing process limber.

As we realize more and more the power of imagery in the shaping of life, we tremble to think of our children (or ourselves) fed exclusively by the imagery of the average TV fare and popular publications. Yet it seems to me that in homes where great art takes an active part, the richer and more powerful imagery wins out. That which is more real shows up the artificial and the superficial for what it is—paper thin and momentarily diverting.

A Look at Our Art Tradition

> *The visual arts, and indeed all the arts, are … deeply involved, both as cause and symptom, in the general process of history. The arts have an originative function in this process—they pre-figure and give plastic precision to inhibitions and aspirations that would otherwise remain repressed and voiceless. In this sense artists are socially integrated, and act as units dispersed throughout society rather than as members of one or more self-sufficient and independent groups.*
>
> Herbert Read[3]

The art of all the ages has become available for the first time to one generation. Art, we discover, is not like technology with its more or less steady progression from the invention of the wheel to the I.B.M. machine. Art doesn't even spiral. It swings pendulum-like between two worlds, the inner world and the outer world. Sometimes it reflects community values, sometimes it prophesies. To me, the richest periods lie in the intervals between the extremes of this pendulum swing. I see this art bridging the abyss that separates the two worlds, proving them two parts of a larger reality. For convenience I call these periods bridge periods.

It seems to me that earliest man belonged to both worlds. His numinous experience and the hunt were not separate departments of life, but fused with each other. The outer world spoke a language to him that inwardly rang true.

The two seedbeds of Western civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia, show us, in the Third Millennium, two cultures, each with an opposite emphasis. Yet each of these still had a strong connection with the unemphasized side of life.

The Sumerians in Mesopotamia were most impressed with the outer world, outward organization, efficiency, expediency. They reaped amazing harvests of specialization because of the firm sense of the reality of the inner world that sustained the outer focus. Their art is a simplified, formally conceived realism, and the image of man daylight-clear, poised. Usually it portrays the ruler, for the ruler symbolizes human adequacy.

Until recently, archeologists saw Egypt as three thousand years of death-centered sameness, with little change in values or art. Today we see better and know better. Translated hieroglyphics introduce us to a light-hearted and life-loving people in the Third Millennium. Life and death had not become opposites for them. They knew death to be in life and life in death, and treated them much alike. Although they specialized in the intuitive and feeling side of life, their good outward-world connection found testimony in their engineering, science, mathematics and astronomy—as well as in their art.

The sculpture of this Early Kingdom displays an amazing diversity of human types. What unites this diversity is the sense of human dignity, whether the portrayal be Pharaoh, scribe, or chunky, earthy peasant. In my opinion this human dignity cannot be surpassed in all the history of art. Even

the bound, foreign captive in the Metropolitan Museum in New York becomes a monument to superhuman endurance of suffering with unshatterable dignity of human spirit. As far as I know, this Early Kingdom is the only ancient art that often portrays man and wife, side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder. Occasionally they have their arms casually around each other. In this Kingdom the ancestor of the Madonna and Child appears, as well as the prefiguration of the Cross—their "Life" symbol, the Life that supports life.

The Middle Kingdom of Egypt in the early Second Millennium reflects the full-blown emergence of the individual with all its implied responsibility to God and man. Charles Breasted claims that the Hebrews absorbed this value from the Egyptians. Evidently this individualism and its implications frightened those spiritual ancestors of ours. The Pharaohs had to carry it, symbolically. The portraits of King Senwosret III from the Middle Kingdom are not only profoundly individual but also dynamically realistic.

As the Second Millennium got under way, both Egypt and the Mesopotamian Valley overspecialized, losing connection with half of life. They left their bridge periods behind. In Egypt, Pharaoh abdicated from responsible individualism in favor of egocentric self-worship, exploited by the priesthood. Sculpture turned to rigid idealism, which in turn called forth its opposite, the grotesque gods. Only the brief reign of Ikhnaton broke the monotony of Egyptian sculpture in the next thousand years.

The Babylonians and Assyrians, inheritors of the Sumerian traditions, left the inner world out of the picture. Their art portrays tyrannical muscle men, bloated with confidence. Their artists hit back at tyranny by making the animals more subtle, more alive, yes, even more human, than the kings!

Both cultures, Egyptian and Mesopotamian, in exploiting half-life, finally substituted superstition for religion.

How fascinating that the Bible people, from Abraham to Jesus, were tossed or guided back and forth between these two lands. This seems to say that the values of both half-worlds must be gathered up into life-whole to support and generate the new living religion. No wonder those old Hebrews rejected the figurative arts: the only art they knew, on either side of them, idolized tyranny.

I see the next bridge period in Greece. The serenity and wonder of the choicest Archaic Greek art appeals to many moderns even more than the peak of Greek Classic. Archaic periods have a vitality of excitement in discovery that can be more alive than the goal they reach. Nevertheless, the serenity and grace, the inherent sense of rightness and balance of Classic Greek art remains a worthy fruit of archaic sensibility. How quickly, though, freshness petered out and distorted idealism led to Hellenistic Naturalism.

Rome picked up the trite naturalism of decadent Greek art as she wrung the outer world of all it could give. Finally,

experts tell us, it is hard to distinguish between true portraiture and the doctored-up death mask.

After generations of fumbling for an adequate visual equivalent for new revelation, Christianity rejected Roman materialism. In fact, the whole pagan greed for overstimulation in the outer world sent the 4th Century Christians scurrying to the inner world as the only one real and significant. The Byzantines drew upon the Orient to build an art of splendor and in this they embedded their fast growing symbolism. It seems to me that Byzantine art represents inner reality. It can never be confused with the outer world. This is both its strength and its weakness. The Byzantines encrusted the inside of cathedrals with such strong sensation experience of glitter, with such light-catching and light-flickering jewel colors, that the world outside looked dim by comparison.

The next bridge period came when the rugged northern realists caught the Christian flame and created a monastic art we call Romanesque. Close to good-earth connections lost by the Mediterranean peoples, they fused this with a strong decorative impulse that flowed back from the Orient with the Crusades. Their newly awakened eyes began to see Classic motifs that had been in Southern France since Roman times. This, too, found its place in the new art. Animal and human life, fantasy and fact, myth and mundane living, heaven and earth—all these weave into an unselfconscious "expressionism." This art is crude and elemental by Classic standards, but of special value for us because of its vitality and lack of sophistication. Early Gothic refined the skills, using them for aspirational

distortion. But before the cathedrals were completed the great generative surge had spent itself. The last completed areas give us a naturalism of courtly elegance, tritely illustrational, and without regard for a living structure.

In the meantime, to the south, St. Francis recovered a communication between inner and outer worlds better than anyone since Jesus. The first flicker of the Renaissance consists of painters so influenced by him that we can call them the Franciscan painters—Giotto and the Sienese. By this time travelers brought sketches from the northern cathedrals, and Giotto sometimes incorporated these figures from Gothic cathedrals bodily into his frescoes. So the northern fresh seeing drifted slowly to the south. The Classic infusion entered later in Italian art.

Giotto himself became a splendid dawn of the Renaissance, straddling the year 1300. Another hundred years passed before the day ripened with another new idiom to equate another new sight; the man is Masaccio. Then, in the 15th Century the Renaissance day glowed with the sheer excitement of discovering linear perspective, deep space, and volumes in that space. We share this excitement in the haunting world of Uccello and in the potent space of Piero della Francesca. The Venetians refined and completed the sense of recovery of the other world teeming with meaning for the inner world.

By the time the giants of the High Renaissance worked—Michelangelo, Raphael, da Vinci—the bridge, as I see it, had been crossed and the responsive roots of the inner

world began to wither. These giants towered against a mediocre background.

Then, in the second half of the 16th Century, astounding prophecy came through art. Crystallizing academies poured forth an art of intense energy with little or no inner connection. “Elegance and Anxiety,” a recent exhibit called this period of leaping, plunging energy. At the same time genius with communicative seeing got caught up in this energy, notably in Tintoretto and El Greco. So it is we see the pattern for the Western World: a powerful but blind energy, and a smattering of those who see. Each generation of the Western tradition has had one or more great artists who transcended the exclusive outward focus of the community.

In the judgment of many, the 19th Century flowered in a Renaissance as impressive and prophetic as the earlier one. It began as Goya found the necessity and genius to draw from outer reality a visual language for the neglected and outraged inner person. It grew as Blake gave traditional themes new life as they work within a man. Then it struggled for bearings as genius contended with genius in an effort to find a significant reality.

Finally it met with new departure as the Impressionists cleaned the art world of the whole Post-Renaissance pattern of sight, releasing a new, immediate seeing. A fresh and buoyant vision the Impressionists gave us; now we have accepted it as our world. More importantly, they trained and released the greatest generation of painters since the first Renaissance, those giants Cezanne, Van Gogh,

Gauguin and Seurat, not to mention the others. Ironically we have no better name for this great generation than Post-Impressionism.

Cezanne appears to be the greatest new idiom for communicative seeing in hundreds of years. He spent thirty years finding a visual language adequate to his "little realization" or "little sensation." The public—even those who "appreciate" his paintings—lag behind him, still lingering with the sight of the Impressionists. Our children or our grandchildren will see the world with Cezanne's eyes.

In 1906, Cezanne died. Before the public even noticed, it had a great wealth of new image-makers; artists had already crossed the bridge between inner and outer worlds, and began to leave the outer world behind.

By 1906 the Fauves dominated the art world in Paris, insisting that formal values are sufficient in art, and the outer world need only be reduced to powerful design. By 1912 the Cubists had splintered the outer world at least a generation before the community in general began to notice that the familiar world was, indeed, splintering fast. Out of the First World War came Dadaism, angrily defiant of deified reason and its fumbling failures. A decade later Surrealism despised the controlling, logical mind and contrived desperately to escape from it. Then came schools and schools within schools of non-objective art. Sometimes it had no more to say than, "The outer world is too much—we cannot cope with it; let us abdicate from the outer world of things." Never in history had there been an art so inward,

so private. Some of our greatest artists have dipped in and out of these many trends, sometimes helping to form them, sometimes gathering value in passing, but finally transcending them all.

Modern art, good, bad and indifferent, repels and disturbs many people. Not that modern art is meaningless. It makes sense in the light of the condition of the community. The repelling and disturbing responses underline the fact that the artist tends to live the unlived side, the neglected side, within the community. For many, modern art becomes the fiercely rebelling and disconsolate inner self which is too threatening to focus upon. Unhealed artist and unhealed public form two halves of a whole. Journalistic Freudianism has infected both groups with the silent assumption that inner life is "nothing but" a personal matter in which the individual must endlessly wallow. If the modern artist is often shallow and one-sided, it is because he has not transcended the community of which he is a part.

Is art today poorer than traditional art?

In 1860 only four living artists we honor today had the opportunity to be known to the public of Paris—Ingres, Courbet, Corot and Delacroix. Most of the art was insipid, sentimentally melodramatic, or refinedly pornographic. It has been said that Florence in the 15th Century had 20,000 artists. Name, if you can, a dozen. We forget how much bad art the past has had. The public of 1860 loved its bad art—an art reflecting its famine of inner life. The public today feels threatened by an art reflecting its inner limitations, isolated and futile privateness. Or laughs it off!

Look at two substantial and proven modern masters: Rouault and Chagall. Both lived honestly through disconsolation and disillusionment. Their paintings reflect the process. Both healed and recovered their innocence. Their paintings became more luminous, more moving, more infused with new life as they became older. Rouault rescued Christian imagery from its tired, pale countenance and universalized it. Chagall sang visual folk songs, wisdom without logic. Listen to his paintings as you would to folk songs.

How about the two most famous names of our Century, Matisse and Picasso? Matisse may not be a profound painter, but he is certainly the most original designer since the Renaissance. Matisse created design based on vital contact between inner and outer worlds. The world of his painting is the comfortable world, untroubled and clean, as seen from a well-upholstered armchair. Those impatient with the reflections in art of the troubled world do well to get into step with his idiom. And the serene vision of the classically minded Braque. Having once encountered a kitchen chair in a later Braque painting, you will always see kitchen chairs as life-enhancing miracles. The untroubled way of seeing is real too.

For me, Picasso is a prototype of 20th Century man, as da Vinci was of Renaissance man. Picasso is restless, moody, energetic, egocentric, inventive, occasionally creative, phenomenal in his skill, a lover of youth values, showman, and practical businessman. He is all these and artist too. Future generations may find that Picasso has painted a half dozen of the greatest works of our time. His hundreds of

other paintings will undoubtedly be at least academically fascinating as the innumerable workouts of a great inventor and as the initiators of trends for the Century. If he had never painted, we would still have his voluminous assortment of etchings and drawings that trace a life through labyrinths in search of individual destiny. Occasionally he lets go of the outer world and plays around in structural invention, but never for long. The outer world seems to hammer at his door and demand involvement.

A new age must have an adequate image of man in its own context. Can we afford to see ourselves in terms of drip dry ads and detergent users, paper thin, a kind of two dimensional myth? Even a three dimensional image of man will not do for our time. The age demands a four dimensional image of man. Otherwise we fail to feel at home in our world and have no creative initiative for facing its dangers, threats and challenges. Not only must the artist give us the image, but we must have the power to recognize it. Artists like Ben Shahn, Jack Levine, Giocometti, Francis Bacon, Leonard Baskin and others are giving their lives in the struggle to wrest such an image out of the teeming welter of modern life. Paul Tillich defines this urgency and this struggle in his Introduction to *The Image of Man* published by the Museum of Modern Art.

Will it take two generations for the public to catch up with the honest-won classic image of man given us by Henry Moore? Here we have monumental dignity, supra-personal, balanced, serene, fully at home in the universe. Heaven and earth fuse with a sense of inherent lightness buried deep in the human spirit. Moore may be the greatest sculptor since

Michelangelo, but for many he remains a foreign visual language.

The spiritually-leavened human imagery of our own Quaker Fritz Eichenberg is full of timeless vigor. I find him at his best when he gathers imagery from the Bible, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. He creates in terms of the eternal human predicament through which one faces the constellations within oneself. As image-maker, he is both diagnostician and physician. The art world considers him the greatest woodcut artist of our time.

We have desperate need, too, to gain back our relation to nature, animal and otherwise, in order to be at home with human nature. Franz Marc gives us imagery of animal life at once so fresh, so intimate, so vital that we cannot mistake it for mere pictures of animals. Like the Oriental tiger accompanying a monk or the water buffalo on which Lao-Tze rides, they are animal reconciled with human, animal nature supporting human nature.

John Marin and Charles Burchheld give us new seeing of nature that sings like our most beautiful Psalms. When you get into step with Marin's idiom, his sea pictures make you feel the sea cruising in your veins and you know the sea to be your relative. Yet his idiom unfolds slowly for most people. Burchfield comes easier. In his early career he saw the world as a child whose head is packed with fairy tales. During the Depression years his paintings took on the character of bleak, blinking suffering. The vision of his old age recovers a child's wonder and awe, with fairy tales

forgotten. His joyous poignancy vibrates in a way the Impressionists never managed.

Morris Graves sifts and transforms gleanings of the world of nature and gives us living jewels. His paintings remind us of the Japanese Haiku poem, both elusive and profound—though a seeming bagatelle.

Paul Klee, too, seems to offer bagatelles. He sees as if he had been dead for many years and had the unbelievable and all but inexpressible surprise of coming back to see again. There is magic in it. His idiom invites lightness of heart as a means of catching glimpses of the profound.

What about "abstract" art? One can enjoy Jackson Po1lock's polyphonic rhythms as good music and as energetic spontaneity. Some find Piet Mondrian's geometric designs mystical, but their mysticism may be too austere for others. Much abstract art has no relation, no toe-hold, even, in the outer world. At best, it seems to me, such art is wonderful decoration, perhaps very living decoration with a place in life—if we do not ask it to be what it is not. At worst, it is a personal therapy, self-expression, perhaps, rather than art.

Interestingly enough, Kandinsky, the pioneer of "abstract" art, may be the greatest of them all. During thirty years of "abstract" painting, this highly mystical and intensely human man lived through an ever-evolving image-making career. His acute and vital vision constantly took in the visual data of our time and distilled it into life-relating

forms. He gave us “abstract” art constantly nourished by communicative vision.

Modern art is, of course, a babble of tongues. In this it reflects rather than contrasts with the tenor of our community. It is inconceivable that art representing our time could be otherwise. And this makes it harder than ever to recognize the great ones, who transcend the limitations of community, each speaking his own unique language. The great artist sometimes works through a valuable stage of diagnosis, and this further confuses us. Yet it serves his purpose and can serve ours. Unless we see clearly how we are with eyes of spirit, how can we be healed? Some artists remain good diagnosticians all their lives. If they fail their own larger purpose, at least they can serve ours. The problem is, though, to recognize the clear sounding cymbal amid the babble of tongues.

If the sorted-out great art of our time is prophetic, it says this much: if we pass through this dangerous opportunity without obliterating ourselves, our culture still has a generative potential beyond our imagination. Where do we, as individuals, fit into this? In all of history, for each person who left a record of having generated new vision, there have been thousands of anonymous ones who achieved a good connection between inner and outer worlds, leavening the community. If it were not so, the world would never have survived.

Book List

Sight and Insight, by Alexander Eliot; Dutton-Everyman, $1.25 (paper). A simple and helpful explanation of the purposes of art and ways to relate to it.

Art, by Clive Bell; Capricorn Books, G. P. Putnam's Sons, $1.25 (paper). An exploration of periods of art based on the assumption that art and religion derive from the same source.

History of European Painting and Sculpture, by Eric Newton; Penguin Books, $1.25 (paper). An abbreviated view in which the author shares without disguise his personal relation to various periods and to great artists.

New World History of Art, by Sheldon Cheney; Holt, Rinehart and Winson, $6.75, and *Story of Modern Art*, by Sheldon Cheney; Viking, $5.95 (text). An alive and vital text book approach by a man with a well developed religious sense of life and history and the part art plays in both.

Art and the Creative Unconscious, by Eric Neumann; Pantheon, $3.50. Several essays covering subjects such as the art of da Vinci, the art of Chagall, and modern art in general by the great Jungian of Israel. This is the best book for the layman on the psychological and spiritual values of great art.

The Archetypal World of Henry Moore, by Eric Neumann; Pantheon, $5.00. A Jungian examination of the

development of one of our greatest artists in terms of our need for adequate human imagery of our own time.

Poetry and Experience, by Archibald MacLeish; Houghton, $4.00. A vicarious venture into the processes that go into the making of great poetry which can in large measure be applied to all the arts.

A Concise History of Modern Painting, by Herbert Read; Praeger, $7.50, $3.95 (paper). A sensitive exploration of the trends in the art of our time and its significance.

The two following books are works of art about art, already classics. They are best read by entering into the surge and flow of response to art developments in history rather than with reference to factual matter. Read a little at a time, as you would read poetry. They may usually be found in libraries.

Voices of Silence, by Andre Malraux; Doubleday, $25.00.

History of Art Series, by Elie Faure, out of print.

Notes

1. *Aesthetics and History*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1954.

2. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956. Edited by Carl Michalson.

3. *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc. Used with permission.

About the Author

Dorothea Blom has written and lectured for many years in art-related fields. In the summer of 1962, she gave a course at Pendle Hill on encountering art. For the past eight years she has taught at the Pleasantville Adult School in New York and conducted museum excursions to the great museums on the East Coast. Her husband, Christian Blom, designs and makes furniture. A Friend, she has been chairman of the Advancement Committee and clerk of the Committee on Ministry and Counsel at Purchase Friends Meeting in New York. Readers will find in this pamphlet an expression of Dorothea Blom's three great interests: art, the Jungian concept of growth, and spiritual life.

Pendle Hill

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker adult education, retreat, and conference center offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community. Every year, people from many faiths and backgrounds come to experience Pendle Hill's educational programs in arts and spirituality, community activism and leadership training, and spiritual deepening.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats—including weekend workshops, extended online/on-campus programs,

and evening presentations. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at www.pendlehill.org. Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services—hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

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