

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

Another View of Art

There is scarcely a subject, or rather an object on which so much has been written and said as about art. It has a vocabulary of its own. These are high art, still life, Italian, Greek, French, Spanish, English, and American art: each having a patois of its own. There are fully as many books and pamphlets about paintings as there are paintings. Every body knows what art is; yet everybody is always asking and answering the question "What is art?" Other branches of human knowledge require study and experience. Only art needs nothing of the kind. And yet, amid the universal deluge of knowledge an honest inquirer may still ask, "Well, what is it? What is art? Is it, as Falstaff says, a thing to thank God on?"

Perhaps it is something which cannot be told in words no more than you can paint a syllogism or hit a nominative case with a stick. Some impossible things have a fascination for weak minds. Just as a high tower will tempt some to suicide, to squaring the circle, inventing perpetual motion, and describing hell, or the other side of the moon challenges a certain intellect to make a fool of itself, and tell what it does not know.

At the Centennial in Philadelphia, if I saw one person taking notes of the pictures (mostly young ladies) who previously knew nothing more artistic than a sewing machine or a young man with bangs, – I saw thousands. And the result was that in the social circle, as well as in the magazine and newspaper, art critics overflowed every other topic; it was an experience of art twaddle which inundated the land. And yet no mortal told, or came within a hundred miles of telling what art really is. I go every year to our art-school, and note with pleasure the academical drawings of Greek statues, and the tentative pieces of colored painting, and the drawings in black and white; and while admiring the young men and women in their practical efforts to solve the problem of what is art, I feel that no art-school can make a Rembrandt or a da Vinci, no more than Harvard or Yale can, has, or ever will turn out a Dante or a Shakespeare, for the very obvious reason that before a great poet, painter, or philosopher can come out, a genius must have gone in. Nay: you may go further and say that art-schools will no more make a Raphael or a Phidias than bathing in Newport every summer will make a young lady web-footed. Still the question is what is art? What is its mission? I know what Ruskin says: "copy nature and read your Bible;" but you must remember that Ruskin is a spoiled Bishop. His mission was the church not the atelier. What is art? What is the artist trying to produce? And here be it said that five sixths of the pictures exhibited every year in the Salon at Paris, or the Royal Academy at London, or the national Academy at New York no more reveal the true aim of art than a piece of charcoal gives all the qualities of the diamond. Leaving the writer upon art, I went to the writer upon philosophy for a definition of the aims, the nature, and the being of art. And here is a birdseye view of it.

The statue of Apollo Belvedere, the San Sisto Madonna of Raffaello, the Hamlet of Shakespeare, and a Symphony of Beethoven, have a common origin and possess one influence in common: –that of lifting the sympathetic spectator or auditor into a sphere of

mental serenity in which the anxieties of this life are as totally forgotten for the moment as though no such thing as care existed. This mental serenity, we call aesthetic pleasure, – the only fountain of the waters of Lethe. Of course two things are necessary, – a great and genuine work of art on one side, and a sympathetic spectator on the other. But as there is only one being who can produce the genuine art-object, we must first define the subject before considering the object of art. As the sun is one of the indispensable conditions of all flowers, so genius is the necessary basis of all genuine works of art, poetry, or music. And what is genius? Let us try to define this absolutely necessary foundation. The human race as members, top-most members – of the animal kingdom, are composed of at least two factors: the body, and the intellect or mind. As this is not a theological treatise, the soul, as a component part of man may be left out of the discussion. Now, without deciding which is primary or secondary of these two factors body and mind, or intellect, or will and heart, we may briefly give the primary function of each. The only mission, purpose, aim or instinct of the intellect, that is of the ordinary intellect, is to be the servant, provider, or purveyor for the body. Not only food must be supplied and clothes, (and in the latter is included the crown of the King and the ermine of the judge) but anything and everything which may be an object of human desire and human need, must be fought for by the fore going mind. And this is the common lot of the common run of humankind. A body, constantly yearning, craving, and demanding something more, and an intellect incessantly striving to find the material for quenching these desires, be it the lust for wealth, beauty, or power. And with the huge mass of mankind the mind or intellect never forgets its mission. If it think or scheme, or study, or plan, the object is always the same: – the comfort and welfare of the body. In short the mind is the slave, the voluntary slave to its Lord, the will or body. The single exception to this universal rule is the genius. Here is a body, and intellect also; but the latter is in such superabundant power and force that it emancipates itself from the hereditary slavery of its race: and for the first time demands a wider orbit than the treadmill of the slave, and like a comet finds its center in some invisible sun. With this excess of intellect it rises above the clamor of the petty, personal desires of the body, and looks abroad upon the world and the processes of life objectively; that is to say disinterestedly. And this looking, perceiving, and contemplating is so piercing, so intense, that he is lost in the object contemplated. He almost becomes one with it as Byron says:

Are not the mountains, waves, and sky apart
Of me, and of my soul, as I of them

this is the genius. You might figuratively compare the genius so far as its main attribute, – pure objective perception is concerned, to one of those winged heads which float around the madonnas and saints in the pictures of the early Italian painters. This possibility of objective perception is one of the fundamental distinctions between the genius and the ordinary mortal which nature, like a huge factory working day and night turns out by the million. The mass of mankind is utterly incapable of a disinterested observation of anything. The landscape is beautiful when they own it, and the women, like the fruit, are beautiful when they provoke the appetite. The beauty of anything is simply a reflected light. In short, a world that they can neither domineer over, nor own, nor eat nor associate in some way with their love or hate or their family or their fame, is a desert of Sahara. The average man or woman, even the smart one, owns an intellect

which like a lantern guides only his own feet: while that of the genius is a song which lights up the world.

The genius then, consists in an abnormal power of intellect (which, by the by is not gauged by the size of his head) more than sufficient to act as a servant of the body. Thus emancipated it turns to the world and examines it more with the eye of a microscopist; then like a magic lantern magnifies its images and processes, and throws the illuminated effigy infinitely enlarged, on the canvas of time for the instruction of mankind. The first manifestation it makes is to reproduce in a picture, statute, or poem or Symphony, the image which it has perceived or invented. And it may be added that whether the work produced represents a bull or a Magdalene, depends upon the environment of the genius and the material upon which it has fed. It follows then that the genius sees, hears, feels, conceives, and understands more, and much that is denied to the ordinary mortal who, in fact, in comparison is more or less blind, deaf, and dumb. For only the genius has the power of pure cognition, that is, of viewing things objectively without any relation or interest to his own self. When he surveys the world and all the moving atoms of life on its surface, from the lowest instinct (sic) to the highest animal man, he perceives two things: one is that the stream of forms, figures, and bodies constantly rises and falls: that birth fades into death, and death into life again. Like an inscription on a ring, the end is close to the commencement; and that, although this immense moving mass is composed of individuals all apparently alike, they are all dissimilar: and then the individuals perish but the race continues.

The other things (sic) which he perceives is that these individual forms contained something which is not changeable, not perishable, an archetype, a permanent exemplar or model which Plato calls the Idea: and it is this Idea, this eternal exemplar or whatever you may call it, which the artist genius perceives, and reproduces, – either in a statue, like that of the Apollo Belvedere or a picture like that of the Madonna San Sisto. And by his technical skill, we see it through his eyes.

The next distinction is more important still: for next to knowing what a thing is, what it is not is important. The mere bungler in the art, – whether he be called an Impressionist, Realist, idealist, colorist, or any other “ist” possessing no genius but only imitative talent, never perceives the real object of art, – the idea; but “sticks in the back” and gives you an accurate copy of that – the shell.

He may give you delicious “bits of color” and dashes of light which suggest a piece of decayed wood or a bal (sic) costume or a pretty face, or an attractive leg, or the sheen of silk or quaint furniture, fine texture and all those wonderful things as expressed in the gibberish which you hear in the studio and the picture shop, but this is the limit of the gifts. The genius is born, not made, its limitation to the poet was a mistake. And if you were to inquire for the motive, which led this bungler in art paint so assiduously his pot-boilers or squeeze out the bad novel, you will find it was the desire to gratify personal vanity, or to make money easily without labor; or to acquire fame, or form an inordinate self-conceit; or to be esteemed for something he utterly lacked. Hence he makes a business of art, and turns out his novel or his picture with the dull monotony and diurnal regularity of the clay potter and his brown pipkins. And he flatters his contemporaries, panders to the prevailing taste, however bad and ugly that taste may be: floats and sinks

with the mode or with the prevailing fashion, and in every case a good shoemaker, Carpenter, or Barber is spoiled in a bad artist and a mean novelist.

As the genius-artist sinks his mind into the object perceived, and cuts it loose from every other thing – plucked it out of the stream of time, and held it up as something finished, completed to the observation of the world, so the spectator becomes absorbed in every true work of art, and catching the mood of the artist, is so lost in the object that the wheel of Ixion stands still, and for a moment the world is forgotten, and he tastes the purest of all pleasures – a joy that only “a thing of beauty” can evoke. This is the test of the great work of art, that it should excite this aesthetic pleasure in the mind of the sympathetic spectator. A genuine work of art only arises from an actual and patent observation of nature. The picture or poem which is built upon some scheme, or plan or series of concepts, is a mere subjective notion, and if produced would be a piece of mechanism without vitality or meaning. The perception of the beautiful in art always includes two things; a pure cognizing subject observing or artist, and the object observed, – a Platonic Idea or the unchanging kernel or element in each object.

The enjoyment felt in the presence of a beautiful work of art lies sometimes more in the contemplation of the Idea so conceived, and then again, more in the mental calmness evoked in us by the picture, which absorbs us entirely, and for a moment drowns the world and its cares, and we, like the genius, are free. The beautiful landscape produces this subjective effect. We are calm, serene, tranquil: the historical picture – the highest form of art – is more objective: we are lost in the contemplation of the noble and beautiful object.

The subjective side is strongest in the paintings of still life, architecture, interiors, ruins: our delight is not so much in the contemplation of the ideas presented to us as the serenity evoked in us by their presence. We see through the eyes of the painter, and feel and participate in that happy mood of his which predominated when he painted them. We share his disinterestedness, which enabled him to sink his mind so deeply into these lifeless objects and forget himself so completely. This objectively (sic) must never be forgotten: it is the line which divides Byron from Shakespeare and Benjamin West from Rubens.

He who paints fruit or any other article of food so that the picture excites the appetite instead of the intellect, has missed the aim and purpose of art. This is true in a greater degree of the human figure. In modern French art, out of ten nude pictures, nine of them shall excite in the spectator not simply aesthetic pleasure in which the affections and desires of the will or body are silent and a tranquil state of contemplation prevails: but on the contrary, a whole pack of desires are allowed on to the chase, and the aesthetic pleasure is drowned in a storm of sensations. And this is what the painter intended and worked for. This is the perversion of art, and is never the work of genius. And here we may ask What constitutes human beauty? How is the artist (and when I say artist, I mean only genius) to find it? To know when he sees it? A beautiful human face awakes in us instantly like music a pleasurable, noble feeling; it heightens the strings of life. As Goethe says: “Whoever looks upon human beauty is beyond the breath of evil; he feels that he is in harmony with the world and with himself.” But how is an artist to produce it? The common opinion is to imitate nature. But how is the artist to be able to perceive and

to recognize the beautiful in nature, if, prior to all experience he has not something within him, which anticipates it? He must certainly know what he is looking for. "Well," some one says, "he gathers a nose here, a mouth there, a leg from this one, a shoulder from that one, and so composes your human beauty." Which is a very stupid opinion. For the question still remains how is the artist to know the beautiful limbs from the ugly ones. Albrecht Dürer copied nature: are his naked men and women beautiful? Experience can never teach the artist what is beautiful. This is the only true answer. In the first place, the genius or artist is of the same web and woof of nature, which reaches its highest point of evolution in man: and in the second place, there slumbers in his mind the ideal which the actual contact with nature will excite into action. He carries the standard, the test, the model in his own mind and heart; but it would slumber there forever if these actual forms of nature did not excite it into life. Thus he can produce greater beauty than he finds in nature. This anticipation or foretaste of the beautiful as compared with collectedness and a penetrative imagination enables him to penetrate the plans of nature, conceive what she is aiming at, and to pronounce with distinctness what she only stammers. Strange as this may sound, it is nevertheless verified by an appeal to the works of genius. Shakespeare has drawn nobler men and women than experience has encountered in real life; and the Apollo Belvedere, the Venus de Milo, and the Madonna San Sisto still surpass in human beauty the earthly types from which they were taken.

Nature sometimes misses her aim because a disease of the body or a passion of mind has warped the beautiful model. The sculptor sees the spoiled effort and divines the hidden Idea, and stamps it in perfection upon the hard marble and says to nature "See: this is what you are trying to produce" and the connoisseur to reply "yes, that is it!" Only in this way could the gifted Greek sculptor find the primary type of human beauty and establish it as a canon for all future schools of sculpture.

Empedocles said "Nature can only be fathomed by nature" and Helvebus (sic), "Il n'y a que l'esprit qui seute l'esprit." Experience and reality hold before the eyes of the artist human faces and figures in certain features and members of which nature has been more or less successful: and asks as it were, his judgment upon them; and according to the Socratic doctrine this evokes out of the dim conception lying in the artist's mind the clear and definite conception of the ideal. Thus the early Greek sculptors had the daily opportunity of seeing naked and half-naked figures; and each member of the human body challenged comparison with that ideal which slumbered in the consciousness of the sculptor. The genius has within him the anticipation, the ideal of human beauty; and experience furnishes the pattern and the occasion which falls from this latent feeling the complete and perfected presentation of human beauty. Beauty combined with grace is the final aim of sculpture. Hence it is nude. If drapery be used at all, it is not to hide the form, but to busy the understanding and searching for it beneath its graceful folds. Besides beauty and grace, historical painting must also represent the character, the idea of mankind in its highest and noblest stage. Hence it selects one action which makes it manifest. And for this reason the painter presents to our view scenes of life, episodes and actions of great and permanent interest. No circumstance of human life is destitute of meaning and instruction for us.

One important consideration is to be noted, and one, too that is overlooked in ninety-nine

cases out of a hundred. Every human episode or event has two sides: the inner one which reveals this idea, and belongs to art, and the outer one, which belongs only to history. For example. Four ragged boors fighting and wrangling over a game of cards or dice in an inn or cabaret are fully as important and significant for the true purpose of art – that is, the revelation and presentation of the idea of humanity – as four generals or four Kings clad in ermine, purple, and gold, disputing over the territory of a conquered country. It makes no difference so far as the game of chess is concerned whether the pieces be made of wood or of gold. An event may have a great historical value, and no artistic or art value. For instance. The finding of Moses among the bulrushes on the river's brink was a very important event in history. But what is its value in art? A young woman stooping over a child in the cradle. If you happen to know the story, you find an interest in it which has nothing to do with its art value. An attempt to write history with a series of pictures is a misconception of the true purpose or mission of art.

To summarize, then. The object or aim of art is to present what Plato calls the ideas of which these earthly forms are but the images or shadows. Only the genius knows, perceives, or can render this. Other so-called objects of art are like a upholstering or dress or ornament or luxury. The valueless clothes of the real object: the bungler in the heart copies these, and the uninitiated buy them and are satisfied. But like old clothes, time and the moths show them the true value. Of all pleasures the joy awakened in us by a beautiful art-work is the purest, serenest, the most disinterested, and hence the happiest. What Chamfort says of men is true of artists:

“The value of men is like that of diamonds. Up to a certain size and degree of purity and perfection they have a fixed and established value; but when they surpass this (commercial) standard, they are priceless.”

Henry Hooper

Budget

Hooper editor

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