

means, and the scandal of a Christian compromise with the morality of totalitarianism, one got familiar with a certain shrug of the shoulders. 'It's very terrible, I know—but . . .' That shrug expressed perfectly the spiritually escapist mentality of the Christian *bien pensant*. To-day it is still with us, sometimes expressed by different shoulders. It betokens, of course, a very nearly final repudiation of Christ's commandment of charity.

We can all of us begin at that level to wrestle, in crucial awareness, for the souls and bodies of our fellows. This work of integration must be a hidden work; we must begin, all of us, by learning to be terrified by the reality of our impotence. Yet our hope is set upon a resurrection, when God will make all things new, and, though our labour may often seem vain, it is not truly lost but only awaiting the glory of his appearing for its manifestation. And, if this way is closed to us—what else can we do, anyway?

D. M. MACKINNON.

### WHY EXHIBIT WORKS OF ART<sup>1</sup>

WHAT is an Art Museum for? As the word 'Curator' implies, the most essential function of such a Museum is to take care of works of art which are no longer in their original places or no longer used as was originally intended, and are therefore in danger of destruction. This care of works of art does not necessarily involve their exhibition.

If we ask, why should the protected works of art be exhibited to the public, the answer will be made, that this is to be done with an educational purpose. But before we ask, Education in or for what? a distinction must be made between the exhibition of the works of living artists and that of ancient or relatively ancient or exotic works of art. It is unnecessary for Museums to exhibit the works of living artists, which are not in imminent danger of destruction; or at least, if such works are exhibited, it should be clearly understood that the Museum is really advertising the artist and acting on behalf of the art dealer whose business it is to find a market for the artist; the only difference being that it makes no profit. On

---

<sup>1</sup> An address delivered before the American Association of Museums in May and October, 1941.

the other hand, that a living artist should wish to be 'hung' or 'shown' in a Museum can be only due to his need or his vanity. For things are made normally for certain purposes and certain places to which they are appropriate, and not simply 'for exhibition'; and whatever is thus made by an artist for a consumer is controlled by certain requirements. Whereas, as Mr. Steinfels has recently remarked, 'Art which is only intended to be hung on the walls of a Museum is one kind of art that need not consider its relationship to its ultimate surroundings. The artist can paint anything he wishes, any way he wishes, and if the Curators and Trustees like it well enough they will line it up on the wall with all the other curiosities.'

We are left with the real problem, Why exhibit? as it applies to the relatively ancient or foreign works of art which, because of their fragility and because they no longer correspond to any needs of our own of which we are actively conscious, are preserved in our Museums. If we are to exhibit these objects for educational reasons, and not as mere curios, it is evident that we are proposing to make such use of them as is possible without an actual handling. It will be imaginatively and not actually that we must use the mediaeval reliquary, or lie on the Egyptian bed. The educational ends that an exhibition can serve demand, accordingly, the services not of a Curator only, but of a Docent who explains the original patron's needs and the original artist's methods; for it is because of what these patrons and artists were that the works before us are what they are. If the exhibition is to be anything more than a show of curiosities it will not suffice to be satisfied with our own reactions to the objects; to know why they are what they are we must know the men that made them. It will not be 'educational' to assume that these men thought of art in our fashion, or that they had aesthetic motives, or were 'expressing themselves.' We must examine *their* theory of art, first of all in order to understand the things that they made by art, and secondly in order to ask whether their view of art, if it differ from ours, may not have been a truer one.

Let us assume that we are considering an exhibition of Greek objects, and call upon Plato to act as our Docent. He knows nothing of our distinction of fine from applied arts. For him painting and agriculture, music and carpentry and pottery are all equally kinds of poetry or making. And as Plotinus, following Plato, tells us, the arts such as music and carpentry are not based on human wisdom, but on the thinking 'there.'

Whenever Plato speaks disparagingly of the 'base mechanical arts' and of mere 'labour' as distinguished from the 'fine work'

of making things, it is with reference to kinds of manufacture that provide for the needs of the body alone: The kind of art that he calls wholesome and will admit to his ideal state must be not only useful but also true to rightly chosen models and therefore beautiful, and this art, he says, will provide at the same time 'for the souls and bodies of your citizens.' His 'music' stands for all that we mean by 'culture,' and his 'gymnastics' for all that we mean by physical training and well-being; he insists that these ends of culture and physique must never be separately pursued; the tender artist and the brutal athlete are equally contemptible. We, on the other hand, are accustomed to think of music, and culture in general, as useless, but still valuable. We forget that music, traditionally, is never something only for the ear, but always the accompaniment of some kind of action. Our own conceptions of culture are typically negative. I believe that Professor Dewey is right in calling our cultural values snobbish. The lessons of the Museum must be applied to our life.

Because we are not going to handle the exhibited objects, we shall take their aptitude for use for granted, and rather ask in what sense they are also true or significant; for if these objects can no longer serve our bodily needs, perhaps they can still serve those of our soul, or if you prefer the word, our reason. What Plato means by 'true' is 'iconographically correct.' For all the arts, without exception, are representations of a model; which does not mean that they are such as to tell us what the model looks like, which would be impossible seeing that the forms of traditional art are typically imitative of invisible things, but that they are such adequate analogies as to be able to remind us, *i.e.* put us in mind again, of their archetypes. Works of art are reminders; in other words, supports of contemplation. Now since the contemplation and understanding of these works is to serve the needs of the soul, that is to say in Plato's own words, to attune our own distorted modes of thought to cosmic harmonies, 'so that by an assimilation of the knower to the to-be-known, the archetypal nature, and coming to be in that likeness, we may attain at last to a part in that "life's best" that has been appointed by the Gods to man for this time being and hereafter,' or stated in Indian terms, to effect our own metrical re-integration through the imitation of divine forms; and because, as the Upanishad reminds us, 'one comes to be of just such stuff as that on which the mind is set,' it follows that it is not only requisite that the forms of art should be adequate reminders of their paradigms, but that the nature of these paradigms themselves must be of the utmost importance, if we are thinking of a cultural value

of art in any serious sense of the word 'culture.' The *what* of art is far more important than the *how*; it should, indeed, be the what that determines the how, as form determines shape.

Plato has always in view the representation of invisible and intelligible forms. The imitation of anything and everything is despicable; it is the actions of Gods and Heroes, not the artist's feelings or the natures of men who are all too human like himself, that are the legitimate theme of art. If a poet cannot imitate the eternal realities, but only the vagaries of human character, there can be no place for him in an ideal society, however true or intriguing his representations may be. The Assyriologist Andrae is speaking in perfect accord with Plato when he says, in connection with pottery, that 'It is the business of art to grasp the primordial truth, to make the inaudible audible, to enunciate the primordial word, to reproduce the primordial images—or it is not art.' In other words, a real art is one of symbolic and significant representation; a representation of things that cannot be seen except by the intellect. In this sense art is the antithesis of what we mean by visual education, for this has in view to tell us what things that we do not see, but might see, look like. It is the natural instinct of a child to work from within outwards; 'First I think, and then I draw my think.' What wasted efforts we make to teach the child to stop thinking, and only to observe! Instead of training the child to think, and how to think and of what, we make him 'correct' his drawing by what he sees. It is clear that the Museum at its best must be the sworn enemy of the methods of instruction currently prevailing in our Schools of Art.

It was anything but 'the Greek miracle' in art that Plato admired; what he praised was the canonical art of Egypt in which 'these modes (of representation) that are by nature correct had been held for ever sacred.' The point of view is identical with that of the Scholastic philosophers, for whom 'art has fixed ends and ascertained means of operation.' New songs, yes; but never new kinds of music, for these may destroy our whole civilisation. It is the irrational impulses that yearn for innovation. Our sentimental or aesthetic culture—sentimental, aesthetic and materialistic are virtually synonyms—prefers instinctive expression to the formal beauty of rational art. But Plato could not have seen any difference between the mathematician thrilled by a 'beautiful equation' and the artist thrilled by his formal vision. For he asks us to stand up like men against our instinctive reactions to what is pleasant or unpleasant, and to admire in works of art, not their aesthetic surfaces but the logic or right reason of their composition. And so naturally he

points out that 'The beauty of the straight line and the circle, and the plane and the solid figures formed from these . . . is not, like other things, relative, but always absolutely beautiful.' Taken together with all that he has to say elsewhere of the humanistic art that was coming into fashion in his own time and with what he has to say of Egyptian art, this amounts to an endorsement of Greek Archaic and Greek Geometric Art—the arts that really corresponded to the content of those myths and fairy tales that he held in such high respect and so often quotes. Translated into more familiar terms, this means that from this intellectual point of view the art of the American Indian sandpainting is superior in kind to any painting that has been done in Europe or white America within the last several centuries. As the Director of one of the five greatest museums in America has more than once remarked to me, From the Stone Age until now, what a decline! He meant, of course, a decline in intellectuality, not in comfort. It should be one of the functions of a well organised Museum exhibition to deflate the illusion of progress.

At this point I must digress to correct a widespread confusion. There exists a general impression that modern abstract art is in some way like and related to, or even 'inspired' by the formality of primitive art. The likeness is altogether superficial. Our abstraction is nothing but a mannerism. Neolithic art is abstract, or rather algebraic, because it is only an algebraical form that can be the single form of very different things. The forms of early Greek are what they are because it is only in such forms that the polar balance of physical and metaphysical can be maintained. 'To have forgotten,' as Bernheimer recently said, 'this purpose before the mirage of absolute patterns and designs is perhaps the fundamental fallacy of the abstract movement in art.' The modern abstractionist forgets that the Neolithic formalist was not an interior decorator, but a metaphysical man who saw life whole and had to *live* by his wits; one who did not, as we seek to, live by bread alone, for as the anthropologists assure us, primitive cultures provided for the needs of the soul and the body at one and the same time. The Museum exhibition should amount to an exhortation to return to these savage levels of culture.

A natural effect of the Museum exhibition will be to lead the public to enquire why it is that objects of 'museum quality' are to be found only in Museums, and are not in daily use and readily obtainable. For the Museum objects, on the whole, were not originally 'treasures' made to be seen in glass cases, but rather common objects of the market place that could have been bought and used

by anyone. The only possible answer will again reveal the essential opposition of the Museum to the world. For this answer will be that the Museum objects were made for use, while the things that are made in our factories are made primarily for sale. The word 'manufacturer' itself, meaning one who makes things by hand, has come to mean a salesman who gets things made for him by machinery. The Museum objects were humanly made by responsible men, for whom their means of livelihood was a vocation and a profession. The museum objects were made by free men. Have those in our department stores been made by free men? Let us not take the answer for granted.

When Plato lays it down that the arts shall 'care for the bodies and souls of your citizens,' and that only things that are sane and free, and not any shameful things unbecoming free men, are to be made, it is as much as to say that the artist in whatever material must be a free man; not meaning thereby an 'emancipated artist' in the vulgar sense of one having no obligation or commitment of any kind, but a man emancipated from the despotism of the salesman. If the artist is to represent the eternal realities, he must have known them as they are. In other words an act of imagination in which the idea to be represented is first clothed in an inimitable form must have preceded the operation in which this form is to be embodied in the actual material. The first of these acts is called 'free,' the latter 'servile.' But it is only if the first be omitted that the word servile acquires a dishonourable connotation. It hardly needs demonstration that our methods of manufacture are, in this shameful sense, servile, or that the industrial system, for which these methods are indispensable, is unfit for free men. A system of quantity production dominated by money values presupposes that there shall be two different kinds of makers, privileged 'artists' who may be 'inspired,' and under-privileged labourers, unimaginative by hypothesis, since they are asked only to make what other men have imagined. As Eric Gill put it, 'On the one hand we have the artist concerned solely to express himself; on the other is the workman deprived of any self to express.' It has often been claimed that the productions of 'fine' art are useless; it would seem to be a mockery to speak of a society as free, where it is only the makers of useless things that can be called free, except in the sense that we are all free to work or starve.

*(To be concluded)*

ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY.