

UNDERSTANDING THE ART OF INDIA¹

WORKS of art have been thought of in two very different ways. According to the modern view, the artist is a special or even abnormal kind of man, endowed with a peculiar emotional sensibility which enables him to see what we call beauty; moved by a mysterious aesthetic urge he produces paintings, sculpture, poetry, or music. These are regarded as a spectacle for the eyes or a gratification for the ear; they can only be enjoyed by those who are called lovers of art, and these are understood to be temperamentally related to the artist, but without his technical ability. Other men are called workmen, and make things which every one needs for use; these workmen are expected to enjoy art, if they are able, only in their spare time.

In ideal art, the artist tries to improve upon nature. For the rest, the truth of the work of art is held to be its truth to an external world, which we call nature, and expect the artist to observe. In this kind of art there is always a demand for novelty. The artist is an individual, expressing himself, and so it has become necessary to have books written about every artist individually, for since each makes use of an individual language, each requires explanation. Very often a biography is substituted for the explanation. Great importance is attached to what we call genius, and less to training. Art history is chiefly a matter of finding out the names of artists and considering their relation to one another. The work of art itself is an arrangement of colours or sounds, adjudged good or bad according to whether these arrangements are pleasing or otherwise. The meaning of the work of art is of no significance; those who are interested in such merely human matters are called Philistines.

This point of view belongs only to the last few centuries in Europe, and to the decadence of classical civilization in

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the Mediterranean. It has not been endorsed by humanity at large, and may be quite a false view. According to another and quite different assumption, which prevailed throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, and is in fact proper to the Christian as well as the Hindu philosophy of life, art is primarily an intellectual act; it is the conception of form, corresponding to an idea in the mind of the artist. It is not when he observes nature with curiosity, but when the intellect is self-poised, that the forms of art are conceived. The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist, or else is something less than a man. The engineer and the cook, the mathematician and the surgeon are also artists. Everything made by man or done skilfully is a work of art, a thing made by art, artificial.

The things to be made by art in imitation of the imagined forms in the mind of the artist are called true when these imagined forms are really embodied and reproduced in the wood or stone or in the sounds which are the artist's material. He has always in view to make some definite thing, not merely something beautiful, no matter what; what he loves is the particular thing he is making; he knows that anything well and truly made will be beautiful. Just what is to be made is a matter for the patron; the artist himself, if he is building his own house, or another person who needs a house, or in the broadest sense, the patron is the artist's whole human environment, for example when he is building a temple or laying out a city. In unanimous societies, as in India, there is general agreement as to what is most needed; the artist's work is therefore generally understood; where everyone makes daily use of works of art there is little occasion for museums, books or lectures on the appreciation of art.

The thing to be made, then, is always something humanly useful. No rational being works for indefinite ends. If the artist makes a table, it is to put things on; if he makes an image, it is as a support for contemplation. There is no division of fine or useless from decorative and useful arts; the table is made to give intellectual pleasure as well as to

support a weight, the image gives sensory or, as some prefer to call it, aesthetic pleasure at the same time that it provides a support for contemplation. There is no caste division of the artist from the workman such as we are inured to in industrial societies, where, as Ruskin so well expressed it, 'Industry without art is brutality.'

In this kind of art there is no demand for novelty, because the fundamental needs of humanity are always and everywhere the same. What is required is originality, or vitality. What we mean by 'original' is 'coming from its source within,' like water from a spring. The artist can only express what is in him, what he is. It makes no difference whether or not the same thing has been expressed a thousand times before. There can be no property in ideas. The individual does not make them, but finds them; let him only take possession of them, and his work will be original. The highest purpose of Christian and Eastern art alike is to reveal that one and the same principle of life that is manifested in all variety. Only modern art, reflecting modern interests, pursues variety for its own sake and ignores the sameness on which it depends.

Finally, the Indian artist, although a person, is not a personality; his personal idiosyncrasy is at the most a part of his equipment, and never the occasion of his art. All of the greatest Indian works are anonymous, and all that we know of the lives of Indian artists in any field could be printed in a tract of a dozen pages.

Let us now consider for a short time the history of Indian art. Our knowledge of it begins about 3000 B.C. with what is known as the Indus Valley culture. Extensive cities with well-built houses and an elaborate drainage system have been excavated and studied. The highest degree of artistic ability can be recognized in the engraved seals, sculptured figures in the round, finely wrought jewellery, silver and bronze vessels, and painted pottery. From the Rig Veda, the Bible of India, datable in its present form about 1000 B.C., we learn a good deal about the arts of the carpenter, weaver, and jeweller.

The more familiar Indian art of the historical period has been preserved abundantly from the third century B.C. onwards. The greater part of what has survived consists of religious architecture and sculpture, together with some paintings, coins and engraved seals. The sculptures have been executed in the hardest stone with steel tools. From the sculptures and paintings themselves we can gather a more detailed knowledge of the other arts. The temples are often as large as European cathedrals. Almost peculiar to India has been the practice of carving out such churches in the living rock, the monolithic forms repeating those of the structural buildings. Amongst notable principles early developed in India which have had a marked influence on the development of architecture in the world at large are those of the horse-shoe arch and transverse vault.

An increasing use is made of sculpture. As in other countries, there is a stylistic sequence of primitive, classical and baroque types. The primitive style of Bharhut and Sanchi can hardly be surpassed in significance, and may well be preferred for the very reason that it restricts itself to the statement of absolute essentials, and is content to point out a direction which the spectator must follow for himself. Nevertheless in many ways the Gupta period, from the fourth to the sixth centuries A.D., may be said to represent the zenith of Indian art. By this time the artist is in full and facile command of all his resources. The paintings of Ajanta, approximately comparable to those of the very early Renaissance in Europe, depict with irresistible enchantment a civilization in which the conflict of spirit and matter has been resolved in an accord such as has hardly been realized anywhere else, unless perhaps in the Far East and in Egypt. Spirituality and sensuality are here inseparably linked, and seem to be merely the inner and outer aspects of one and the same expanding life. The art of this age is classical not merely within the geographical limits of India proper, but for the whole of the Far East, where all the types of Buddhist art are of Indian origin.

There follows a mediaeval period, which was essentially an age of devotion, learning, and chivalry; power and

wealth, and the patronage of art and literature moving together as a matter of course.

From the twelfth century onwards, the situation is profoundly modified, so far as the North of India is concerned, by the impact of Muhammadan invasions, of Persian and Central Asian origin. But while the effects of these invasions were to an appalling extent destructive, the Islamic added something real and valuable to that of India; and finally, though only for a short time, under the Great Mughals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there developed in India a new kind of life which found expression in a magnificent architecture and a great school of painting. Just because of its more humanistic and worldly preoccupations, this art is better known to and better appreciated by Europeans at the present day than is the more profound art of Hindu India. Everyone has heard of the Taj Mahal, a wonder of inlaid marble, built by Shah Jahan to be the tomb of a beloved wife; everyone can easily understand and therefore admire the Mughal paintings that provide us with a faithful portrait gallery of all the great men of northern India during a period of two centuries. This is a kind of art that really corresponds to that of the late Renaissance, with all its personal, historic, and romantic interests.

In the meantime, Hindu culture persisted almost unchanged in the South. In the great temple cities of the South both the reality and the outward aspects of the ancient world have survived until now, and the world has no more wonderful spectacle to offer than can be seen here. In the North, Hindu culture survived, too, in Rajputana and the Panjab Himalayas, and here, in direct continuity with ancient tradition, there developed the two schools of Rajput painting that are the last great expressions of the Indian spirit in painting or sculpture. Modern developments in Bengal and Bombay represent attempts either to recover a lost tradition, or for the development of an eclectic style, neither wholly Indian nor wholly European. At the present day the Indian genius is finding expression rather in the field of conduct than in art.

European influence on Indian art has been almost purely destructive. In the first place by undermining the basis of patronage, removing by default the traditional responsibilities of wealth to learning. Secondly, the impact of industrialism, similarly undermining the status of the responsible craftsman, has left the consumer at the mercy of the profiteer, and no better off than he is in Europe. Thirdly, by the introduction of new styles and fashions, imposed by the prestige of power, and which the Indian people have not been in a position to resist. A reaction against these influences is taking place at the present day, but can never replace what has been lost; India has been profoundly impoverished, intellectually as well as economically, within the last hundred years.

Even in India an understanding of the art of India has to be re-won; and for this, just as in Europe where the modern man is as far from understanding the art of the Middle Ages as he is from that of the East, a veritable intellectual rectification is required. What is needed in either case is to place oneself in the position of the artist by whom the unfamiliar work was actually made, and in the position of the patron for whom the work was made: to think their thoughts and to see with their eyes. For so long as the work of art appears to us in any way exotic, bizarre, quaint, or arbitrary, we cannot pretend to have understood it. It is not to enlarge our collection of bric-a-brac that we ought to study ancient or foreign arts, but to enlarge our own consciousness of being.

As regards India, it has been said that 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' This is a counsel of despair, that can only have been born of the most profound disillusion, and deepest conviction of impotence. I say on the contrary that human nature is an unchanging and everlasting principle; and that whoever possesses such a nature—and not merely the outward form and habits of the human animal—is endowed with the power of understanding all that belongs to that nature, without respect of time or place.

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