ART AND SOCIETY : THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON ART : by W. G. Constable, M.A. ; being a paper read to the SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY on the 14th March, 1922.

ONE peculiarity of a work of art is that it must proceed from an individual ; no committee yet produced a great painting, a great statue, a great poem, or (to take an example from Westminster Abbey fresh in all our minds) a great inscription. Any complete discussion, therefore, of the relations between that manifestation of the spirit we call art, and that complex of religious, political and economic activities which make up the rest of social life, must centre round the study of individuals, and calls for at least three kinds of specialized knowledge—that of the artist and art historian, of the political and social historian, and of the social psychologist. All that I can do to-night, however, is to put before you some facts and considerations bearing on the subject, from the point of view of one whose chief interest and occupation is in the plastic arts.

As in all the social sciences, two methods of approach are possible—the deductive and the inductive ; and again, as in all the social sciences, each has its special dangers. An indispensable preliminary to the use of the deductive method is a satisfactory definition of art—and the most ingenious diplomatist would quail at inventing a formula which would satisfy at the same time (say) Tolstoy, Signor Croce, Mr. D. S. MacColl, and Mr. Roger Fry. This perhaps is why the historical and inductive method offers most attractions. Here the danger is of confounding coincidence with causal connection. Another mistake too often committed is to compare the character of the art of any age with the general character of that age *as estimated from all its activities, including the artistic* : and it would be surprising if such comparison did *not* yield resemblances. It is dangers such as these which must excuse my putting certain general considerations before you as a preliminary to historic treatment of my subject.

IN dealing with any art, and certainly with the plastic arts, two elements have to be distinguished : what I may call the *subject matter* of the artist, and his *imagination*. By subject matter I mean the nature and character of the material which he uses for creative purposes ; by imagination, the spirit, the method, in which he deals with this material. Broadly the artistic imagination is of two types, which may be conveniently described as the Classic and the Romantic, or, to adapt Mr. D. S. MacColl's vivid terminology, Olympian, and Titan.

The one is marked by certainty and confidence in outlook : by a passion for clarity, precision and logical statement : and its work has a harmony and balance, at times amounting to impersonality, and almost to coldness and formality. The work of the Romantic or Titan, on the other hand, typifies the struggle of the spirit in revolt ; will distort, exaggerate, emphasize to express a highly personal emotion ; and consequently tends to the dramatic or sentimental, and the use of associated ideas.

BUT the character of his imagination does not dictate or even indicate what material the artist uses. He may be a realist, taking the world as he finds it at his studio door, however mean, sordid and ugly it may appear ; or he may seek for the ideal type in nature, selecting and choosing his material according to some pre-conceived standard of perfection ; or again, he may borrow in the main from other artists, and so join the great army of eclectics. Important, however, as this material or subject-matter may be, the similarities or dissimilarities between artists are mainly determined not by the material they use, but by the quality of their imagination. For example, Claude is nearer to Corot or Turner, working two hundred years later with different material and in a different social milieu, than to Poussin, his great contemporary, who worked by his side. Cézanne has more affinity to Chardin than to Manet, his contemporary : Ingres is more easily compared to Raphael than to Delacroix.

I SUGGEST that the really significant movements in art centre round modifications and changes in the artistic imagination, and not in the material on which it feeds ; and I also suggest that while there is a close relation between general social conditions and the artist's material, the connection between these conditions and the artist's imagination is more remote and obscure. Before developing these points, let me clear the ground by admitting that great social cataclysms will affect both the material and the imagination of the artist, by simply making art impossible. The barbarian invasions of Italy first weakened and then broke entirely the artistic tradition of that country ; and art in Italy virtually has to be re-born. In England the troubles of the 15th Century cut short the development of English painting, so that it is not until the late 17th Century that any distinctively English work appears. Similarly, so far as I know, there is little or no creative work taking place in Russia to-day. Such examples of rattling back to barbarism are, however, not relevant to my present purpose. For that, I propose to compare the general development of art and society in Europe, at various important epochs : and reinforce this by comparing the art and social conditions at different times in different countries. Certainly, politically, socially and morally there have been few more important events in European Society than the rise and growth of Christianity. Yet it is a significant fact that for a long period its

influence was almost entirely on subject, and that in treatment and conception, early Christian art is simply a development or debasement of Roman Art. The close affinity between certain early illuminated MSS. and Pompeian wall paintings is one example of this. True, the art of Byzantium felt the influence of religious formalism very strongly, and took to itself important elements from the East ; but it must not be forgotten that the Hellenistic spirit survived there in a remarkable way, especially in secular art.

COME now to a very remarkable period of artistic development, the efflorescence of art at the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th Century, which marks the change from what we call Romanesque to Gothic, and centres round the artistic activities of France in architecture, sculpture, illuminations, and stained glass. Yet politically the period was one rather of reaction than of expansion and development.

THE next great period I take, is the Renaissance, and Italy becomes the centre of interest. Here the correspondence between art and social conditions is extraordinarily close. This, of course, is the period to which those at once turn who regard art as a very direct and simple function of society. Broadly, the Renaissance spirit as reflected in Renaissance society, represents almost a *volte face* from the religious mysticism which dominated the Middle Ages, and regarded man as an inconsiderable atom in a great organised cosmos, with the deity as its centre, to a conception of the world in which man is the central and most important figure, round whom all things revolve, and to whom all things are possible. Combined with a spirit of restless enquiry, is a strong rationalizing tendency which issues in a passion for order and logical completeness. At the same time there is poise, certainty and confidence in outlook, which produces a mode of life marked by balanced and harmonious adjustment of all activities. The same outlook lies behind the art of Renaissance Italy. Donatello, though he retains many Gothic elements, yet in such work as the Gattamelata Statue and the Santo Altar-piece, gives birth to masterpieces of the Classic Spirit. Mantegna, building upon foundations in part laid by Donatello, produces an art dominated by harmonious and heroic dignity ; Raphael, casting his figures in a softer mould, with equal serenity, balance and clarity, pursues the same path of deifying humanity ; while in Venice, the old Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, and the young Titian translate into terms of paint the spirit of pagan poesis which marks the flood-tide of the Renaissance. This art of Venice, compared with that of Florence, emphasizes my point as to the possibility of unity of spirit with diversity of material. More objective, more concerned with outward appearance, more sensuous, it nevertheless shews the same kind of imagination. Its late manifestations, the art of the old Titian and of Tintoret, were, however, to

pave the way to the art of the 17th Century—the Baroque art of whom El Greco, Rubens, Rembrandt and Bernini may be taken as representatives. Now painting becomes more occupied with the purely visual ; form and colour as they appear to the eye, modified by violent contrasts of light and shade, or by atmosphere, become the artist's material. Close-knit design, based mainly on a series of planes parallel to the picture plane, are replaced by one composed of a series of sharply interpenetrating planes, which sometimes tries to break outside the limits of its frame. Art becomes the vehicle for dramatically expressed personal emotion. In the 18th Century the baroque is succeeded by the rococo, its legitimate offspring, but one which replaces the dramatic and heroic, often becoming the turgid and bombastic, by fantasy, delicacy, wilfulness, extravagance.

BETWEEN the qualities of artistic imagination here displayed, and political and social events, there seems no very close connection. The disillusionment, doubt and distrust which mark the counter reformation seem to find their counterpart in the spirit of the baroque. Yet this, it must be remembered, is also the period of the Bolognese and Roman eclectics, and gives birth to the strongly classic art of Poussin ; and the baroque spirit runs its course little changed by the consolidation of national power, the establishment of French supremacy in Europe, the substitution therefor of a balance of power between nations, or by the widening gulf between a small governing class and the bulk of the people. Again, when 18th Century Society is led to the guillotine at the Revolution, the neo-classic art of David, which dominates the Revolutionary and Imperial epochs, is the development and fruition of tendencies already in full swing in the latest phases of the rococo. Similarly, before the group surrounding Delacroix, paralleled by Byron among the poets, Romanticism had its representatives in Proud'hon and Gros and Rousseau. Similarly throughout the 19th Century Romantic and Classic waged their battle independent, apparently, of the enormous increase in material prosperity, the developments of scientific knowledge, the rise of democracy, and even of the final cataclysm, the great war. The influence of this last is, I think, a test case. At first it threatened to limit artistic output severely. But soon a huge demand arose from individuals and public bodies for illustrative, propagandist or commemorative work which has borne fruit in many different ways. Broadly, however, this work shewed little more than the application to a particular kind of material of methods already matured. Possibly the war may have helped to stimulate a nationalist quality in art, by throwing artists in each country on their own resources ; perhaps it may have stimulated a search for structure and coherent design, by reducing life so much into terms of machinery and organisation ; possibly, too, the depth and variety of emotions it aroused, and the

freedom of expression it permitted, may have stimulated the use of form and colour for expressing highly personal emotion. But all these elements were present in a developed form long before the war. Cézanne was dead, likewise his younger contemporaries, Gauguin and Van Gogh, the decorative romanticists. The Fauves, centring round Matisse, had already achieved a reputation; Cubism and Pablo Picasso were established facts. Moreover the most recent work of both Matisse and Picasso and of the younger men such as Marchand and Derain, has all tended towards a less extravagant, less mechanical, more classic and more impersonal quality since the war.

LET me reinforce my general contention that the movements of the artistic imagination have no obvious or simple connection with political and social life, by a very different group of facts. Primitive art in all countries, for example, early Egypt, Assyria and Greece, has certain common characteristics, unexplainable either by one art influencing another, or by similarities in environment. These are, in fact, due largely to psychological conditions, such as the tendency of the primitive artist to reproduce not what he sees, but a "memory picture," which results in his reproducing the aspect of a thing easiest to remember, *e.g.*, the body full face, the legs in profile. Similarly what is called the "principle of frontality" is practically universal in primitive art, in that the human figure is treated quite symmetrically round a straight and rigid median line.

THE foregoing historical analysis also shows that in the case of a nation political and artistic supremacy do not necessarily coincide. In the 15th Century the dominant artistic influence in Northern Europe was that of the Flemish school, grouped round and descending from the two brothers Van Eyck. This had pushed its way into France, Spain, up the Rhine, and even into Italy, and yet it was backed up by no political influence. Again, when the invasions of Italy by Charles VIII. and Louis XII. broke down barriers which led to Italian art flooding Europe, Italy's political power was broken. French political dominance may seem to walk hand-in-hand with artistic dictatorship; but since the 17th Century this dictatorship has been practically unshaken, and has never been so complete as in the 19th Century, when French political power was in decline. But what I have said does not deny that political and social movements profoundly influence the artist's material, and to this question I turn. There does, for example, appear to be some connection between the character of an age, and realism in art. Any conditions which breed disillusionment in the artist seem to drive him more persistently to take his material from the world actually at his doors. It is as though he dared not trifle with nature. Thus in the late 16th and early 17th Centuries the disillusionment reflected in the counter reformation is accompanied in Italy—the home of idealism—by a burst of

naturalism, wherein one of the chief figures is Caravaggio. But in the 18th Century, everywhere optimism became the note of life especially among the upper classes, and art became perceptibly more mannered, more inclined to idealize, and to make use of types. In the 19th Century, however, the rapid spread of industrialism, the growth of a materialist spirit, and the burden of immensely increased and imperfectly assimilated knowledge, seem to have driven most artists either into a state of subservience to nature—which began with the realism of Courbet, and culminated in the illusionism of the late impressionists—or into a kind of mysticism such as is seen in Puvis de Chavannes or Gustave Moreau. An explanation of realism in art must also be sought in national psychology. Whether this be a fixed or changeable element in social conditions, historically it is of some importance in determining the artist's choice of material. The northern or Gothic temperament runs to realism, as the art of Flanders, Spain, and to a less extent, that of France and England shews. Similarly, national psychology is one of the elements which plays a part in a very important determinant of the artists' material, which I now turn to consider, viz., the demand he has to satisfy. In England especially, and also in Holland, national taste seems to demand some form of portraiture, be it of persons or places. Hence the important position in the art of these countries of what used to be called "face-painting," and of topographical work. Another force working in the same direction was the organisation of Dutch society in the 17th, and of English society in the 18th Century. Both were great bureaucracies controlled in the main by great individuals, very conscious of their individualities. Such societies always breed a passion for portraiture. Men want their features recorded in something more permanent than the minds of contemporaries. Comparable cases are the medals and portraits of the Renaissance tyrants in Italy, and the amazing series of portraits produced in Venice. The comparison of Dutch and English art, with that of other countries, is illuminating in other respects. Holland of the 17th Century, with a Calvinist Church and no king or great nobles, did not ask for the altar-pieces or great religious and secular decorations produced so freely in Italy, France and Spain; but demanded instead pictures mainly for hanging in the houses of the wealthy bourgeoisie, of genre subjects, still-life or landscape—the landscape being of that of their native country, and not the hitherto fashionable classic landscapes of other countries. One other curious and little known fact, which explains the enormous production of pictures in Holland at that time was that they were an avenue for investment which brought its return by the pictures being sold abroad. Similarly in the 18th Century England, the English church, and the prevalence of panelling and tapestry as decorations in great noblemen's houses

checked the demand for large religious and decorative work. Contrast with these examples 17th Century Spain, with its highly centralised monarchy, and the Roman Catholic Church predominant. Here art, which had its roots in the kitchen, passed thence into the service of the church or of the court. Zurbaran and Murillo are types of those who ministered to the one; Velasquez the prince of those who served the other. Genre and still-life painting there were in Spain, but they are found mainly in religious pictures, and portraiture, outside that of court personages, is tolerably rare.

THE position of modern art, here and elsewhere, throws some light on the influence of demand on art. During the war, as I have said, saleable work had to be of a special character, commemorative or illustrative. Such are the bulk of the pictures in the Imperial War Museum; and there, and in the production of innumerable posters and cartoons, can be seen the cramping of the artistic impulse by its being forced into uncongenial paths. The influence of the war has also worked in other ways. It has brought about such a redistribution of wealth that buying power is in the hands both of nations and individuals, who are on the whole least fitted to exercise an independent judgment as to what is good or bad in art. Consequently, there is now a boom in old masters, who carry a certificate of character, or in men of established reputations, however much they may have outlived them; while younger men can often sell little or nothing. The people who used to be able to "back their fancy" in modern art, now can hardly buy at all. One other interesting and curious influence which has affected not only the artist's deliberate choice of means for expressing his imaginative conceptions, but also the demand he has had to satisfy, is the development of industry and commerce. A notable instance of this has been the trade of Europe with the East. The fact that Venice looked eastward rather than westward, and was so closely linked with Constantinople and the Levant, must have helped her artists to realise the possibilities of colour as an artistic weapon; just as the use of colour in Byzantine art seems to have been stimulated by contact with the East. So in the 17th and 18th Centuries, with the opening up of trade with India and the Far East and the importation into Europe of vast quantities of Chinese and Japanese *objets d'art*, there was a double effect. The rococo imagination of the time found in Eastern motives food very much to its taste; and the passion amongst collectors and purchasers for anything Eastern stimulated artists to imitate Eastern work. Likewise in the 19th Century the discovery or rediscovery of Japanese art exercised an important influence upon the system of design in artists such as Degas and Whistler. On the more general question of the influence on art of the growth of industrialism and commercialism the evidence is conflicting. I have already touched on some aspects in connection

with Holland and England. But it must always be remembered that in the past some of the most enlightened patrons of art have been business men. I need only mention the Medici in Italy, the Fuggers in Germany, and Jacques Cœur and a whole race of financiers in France. Another interesting speculation is how far the growing power of labour will affect art. That Jean François Millet and Constantine Meunier drew their material from the poorer classes shows nothing. Le Nain and Rembrandt had done the same. But a little fact which may be of significance, is that a few years ago a Welsh miners' trade union, on its own initiative, placed a commission for a memorial to members killed in an accident in the hands of the late Professor Thomas. In the time, and with the material at my disposal, I have not been able to do more than adumbrate some lines of thought and from my own point of view state some relevant facts. The general conclusion I suggest, however, is that the artist, working within the lines dictated by the demand for his work, necessarily takes his material from his own experience, which is largely settled by his social environment. If you ask me to invent a new animal I *can* only utilize component parts of animals known to me ; but how I put them together is another thing, and here the quality and kind of my imagination comes in. This has some kind of connection with other activities of society ; yet seems to move with a rhythm of its own. Investigation of the exact nature of the link is a matter for the psychologist. It has been suggested that the clue lies in the study of the respective spheres of the conscious and the sub-conscious in the artist's mind ; that, in fact, his imagination is a function of his sub-conscious mind, which in turn is influenced by the collective or group mind of the society in which he moves. It is also argued that the artist's mind, from the mere fact of his being an artist, is more sensitive than others to movements in this group mind : and hence that his art is the first fruits or the herald of the general change in the mind of society. But on this difficult and thorny path I am neither competent nor bold enough to venture.

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