

*Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Practical Æsthetics*

lawful rights and interests of his fellow-citizens. Nobody here can compel a man to buy soap if he prefers to emulate St. Simon Stylites and forgo washing. But if he buys soap, plainly he considers himself better off with the soap and all its consequential advantages than his money. He may think he would be better off with more soap for less money. He may even agitate for what he will probably call his moral rights, which are, of course, only the political rights which his fellow-citizens have not as yet conceded him. So he will come into the life of politics which ever alternates between storm and calm, between revolution and reaction, for new interests have ever to be found room for among old ones. And just as surely as peoples and nations live under the constitutions and governments they deserve, so surely, too, are they masters of the commercial usages and industrial conditions they develop.

But plainly also he should not give the matter an exaggerated importance. Soap is not the only thing necessary for the salvation of his soul.

FRANCIS R. MUIR.



*AN ESSAY IN AID OF A GRAMMAR OF  
PRACTICAL ÆSTHETICS.*

THERE are three possible qualities in a work of art. These three qualities are mimicry, intellectual content, and original form. Every work of art must have these three in one degree or another. First of all I will explain what I mean by these terms. By "mimicry" I mean what is called representation, i.e. likeness to something existing in Nature. By "intellectual content" I mean that in the work which expresses the story or anecdote it relates, that is to say, its

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literary significance apart from its significance as a representation of something. These two qualities are, I suppose, readily understood. Everybody is able to judge as to the degree of likeness to something which artists achieve in their work ; also everybody is able to understand the notion that by means of representation it is possible to tell a story or express a meaning or idea. It is the third quality, which I have called "original form," which is the most difficult to appreciate, and yet it is original form that is especially the artist's business, whether he be painter, poet, or potter. For an artist is not so called because he has the ability, in paint, words, or clay, to make things which shall resemble things seen in Nature ; if it were so any kind of imitation would rightly be called a work of art, which is absurd. Neither is a man an artist because he has the ability to present in paint, words, or clay some matter of fact or even of fiction, for were that so every spoken sentence would be a work of art, which again is absurd. It is not that a spoken sentence cannot be a work of art, nor is it that an imitation of something seen in nature cannot be a work of art ; but it is not likeness in the one case or representation of fact in the other which makes it so. For otherwise, as we have said, all imitations and all statements would be works of art, which is absurd. The quality which makes a work of art such is a quality independent of, though not necessarily divorced from, representation or intellectual content, and it is this quality which I have called original form. It would be simpler to call it "Beauty" were not that word generally misunderstood ; I shall indeed call it Beauty before the end of this essay, but to start with, to avoid misunderstanding, I prefer to give it the enigmatical name of "original form" so that it may perhaps be possible for the reader to avoid jumping to a false conclusion.

By original form, then, I mean that quality in the

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thing made which owes its origin directly to the workman or artist, and is not either an imitation of something seen or an idea given to him by another person. For instance, if a man paints a picture of a bird because he has been asked to do so, the fact that his picture represents a bird is a fact for which he can claim no originality for two reasons. First of all because somebody asked him to paint a bird, and secondly because a bird is something he has seen and not something that he has invented.

Again, if a man be asked to paint a picture representing two cocks fighting, the picture, when done, will have the quality of mimicry in so far as the objects shown are like cocks, and in so far as their attitude suggests fighting; and it will also have intellectual content in so far as by means of this representation the painter has conveyed to the mind of the spectator the pleasure or otherwise of the sport of cock-fighting.

Examples may be multiplied to any extent and be made more simple or more elaborate. For instance, a man may paint a picture of the Deluge, and in such a picture there might be a very great amount of mimicry according to the number of figures and realistic treatment of rain and so on. Such a picture would have what is called intellectual content in so far as it conveys to the mind of the spectator not merely the vision of rain falling and people drowning, but, by the arrangement of the people or their dress or by the expression of their faces, or by some other means, first, that the incident portrayed was that recorded in the book of Genesis, and second, the theological and moral aspects of the situation.

Mimicry knows no bounds, and intellectual content, whether philosophical or merely anecdotal, is also possible to an almost unlimited extent; but in neither mimicry nor intellectual content is there anything for which the artist or workman is himself responsible,

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*qua* artist or workman. The mimicry is necessitated by the subject given or chosen; the intellectual content is given or chosen by the customer who orders the picture or, if it is given or chosen by the workman, it is given or chosen by him as if he were his own customer ordering it. But the actual manner of laying on the paint, the shape or grouping of the parts, are matters for which he is responsible as a workman, and are things not given or chosen by a customer. Therefore, it is clear that there is in every work of man this third thing which is especially the business of the workman, which is done by him at his own initiative, and which can only be done to order where the servile conditions of modern commercialism and the factory prevail.

I am not here concerned with the problems arising out of modern servile conditions: I am only concerned with the analysis of a work of art; I am not here concerned with the conditions under which works of art are produced.

It is necessary to make it clear that by the words "works of art" I mean the widest possible range of objects. Any work of man may be a work of art, and when men are free (not necessarily economically free, but free in the sense of being responsible for the form and quality of the work they do) practically everything made is a work of art. That is to say that everything in such periods contains at least the one quality which I have called original form.

Not everything made has the quality of mimicry; not everything made is like something else. A chair is not generally like anything but a chair; chairs made to look like fallen trees are obviously absurd, though many people like them because they think they look well in a garden. But though almost anything may be made to look like something not itself, it is clear that this quality of mimicry is not essential. We are satis-

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fied with chairs even if they only fulfil the one primary material object of their existence—that of supporting our bodies—and do not by their shape either imitate some other object or tell us some story.

Not everything made has the quality called intellectual content. Not everything tells a story, although by a figure of speech we may say that we can see a story in everything. Thus a blood-stained knife picked up on the road may tell a story, but that is only a figure of speech, for it is clear that the knife itself has not necessarily that quality called intellectual content.

But everything made by free workmen has the quality of original form, that is to say, it has a form for which the maker is responsible.

The matter becomes considerably more difficult apparently, when we deal with those things which, like pictures, sculptures, poems or music, have, commonly, as far as the people who buy them are concerned, the qualities of mimicry and intellectual content. People have ceased to regard pictures, for instance, in the same way as they regard chairs, that is as furniture. They think of them as things, having no intrinsic purpose and no quality whatever but that of being like something or telling some story; and although people are quite ready to appreciate the form of chairs and tables—that is the original form and not merely the form determined by the use of such objects—they are quite unable to view pictures in the same dispassionate way, and are even inclined to deny that anything besides mimicry or story-telling is either possible or desirable in painting or sculpture.

There is no difficulty in understanding how this state of affairs has come about, but I will leave the analysis of the causes till later. My immediate object is to make it clear that just as in furniture mimicry and intellectual content are not essential, neither are they in paintings, sculptures, poems or music. Indeed,

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in music it is quite clear that neither mimicry nor intellectual content are so regarded, for except in so-called "programme" music there is neither. We are quite capable of appreciating a tune for its own sake, even though it be quite unlike the song of any bird or any other natural noise, and even though it have no story to tell. But in the matter of poetry, sculpture or painting we appear to be unable even to imagine what value there can be apart from representation or story-telling. Yet if we consider the works of the past, those which we are at such pains to preserve in our museums and picture galleries, we shall, if we consider them critically, see very easily that as representations they are generally inferior to the work of most modern art-school students, and as story-tellers they are out-done by any modern novelist or photographer. If they are worth preserving at all, and a modern manufacturer may well doubt it, it must be on account of some other quality, some quality independent of time and place, unless we are prepared to assert that our museums have a merely historical interest as showing the kind of things our half-civilized ancestors had to make do with. But such an assertion will not stand the test. The historical sense is not of universal importance. The study of Comparative Religion is of little value compared with the possession of Religion, and the study of past manners is unimportant compared with the possession of our own. It is interesting to know that such and such a thing was made in France in the thirteenth century (e.g. the ivory Madonna and Child in the British Museum), but it is more important to have the thing itself, wherever or whenever it was made, provided that we deem it good.

Now apart from this historical value, the only value of the things in our museums is intrinsic. In shape or colour or arrangement there is something about them that is of God, godly. And as God reduced chaos to

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order, so men in past times have given the quality of order to the things they made.

The thing then that I have called " original form " is essentially a matter of order, it is the " splendor ordinis " of St. Thomas, it is the thing called Beauty. And to achieve it men must will it, and to will it they must be free. The free man is responsible for what he does, but for the work of the slave another is responsible. That is the whole difference between the modern workman and his counterpart of past times. The modern workman is not responsible for doing anything but what he is told. The modern industrial system needs tools, not craftsmen, and a century of industrialism has destroyed in the workman the very memory of craftsmanship. With this destruction it has come about that Beauty has ceased to be the common quality of things made, for under the factory system, with its concomitant machine production,\* no man can be held responsible ; and therefore to conscience, which is essential to the production of things of Beauty, no appeal is made. The only thing which is considered is the satisfaction of the consumer, the buyer. Thus not only workmen but the whole world is degraded. Artists become fewer and fewer and more and more peculiar, and the appreciation of art becomes the special province of the connoisseur.

I am not considering remedies or the possibility of such. It is reasonable to suppose that no remedy is possible unless it be by the entire destruction of modern civilization. I am only considering the fact of Beauty and the fact of its decay. The realization of Beauty is absolutely dependent upon the acceptance of absolute values. Beauty, Goodness, and Truth cannot exist where men deny the existence of God and do not apply absolute tests to their works, deeds, and

\* The factory and the machine are not identical ; they are simply partners in the unholy marriage of cheapness and speed.

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thoughts. Primitive peoples and the free peasantries of all times and places apply these tests instinctively, naturally, and without self-consciousness. To-day we either do not apply them at all or only with great effort and at the risk of being merely cranks. Nevertheless there is no harm in analysis, for thereby, as in the Ten Commandments, we may discover not only the necessity of loving and worshipping God but also what to avoid doing. The most priggish people are often the most abominably slovenly in their affections, and those who are most ascetic in their physical habits are often, mentally and spiritually, the most abject wallowers. Both as workmen, and as the customers of workmen, we should bring things to the bar of conscience and demand absolute value on every occasion.

Strange as it may seem, it will be found that the work of the most third-rate painter of the Post Impressionist school will stand the test better than that of the President of the Royal Academy, and the common household utensils of the Kaffirs better than the most showy wedding presents of the house of Mappin and Webb.

Are there any actions which are good in themselves? Are there any thoughts which are true in themselves? Are there any things which are beautiful in themselves? If so, those are the actions, thoughts and things which we are in honour and duty bound to love. There is no escape or excuse. Everyone is bound to make the attempt, and the test question to be applied in every case is this: What is it to God? By applying this test and faithfully abiding by the results we may make some beginning of the development of conscience. For the conscientious man is not he who merely avoids those actions which bring him up against the police, or he for whom "what" has no significance, but only "when" and "where," or he for whom the lovable is the only beautiful. The conscientious man is he who loves God with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

ERIC GILL.