

# THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

MARCH, 1905

## A STUDY IN THEORIES OF ART

---

S. B. ALLISON

Principal of the Walsh School, Chicago

---

Theories of art can be conveniently grouped about the different forms in which the art problem has presented itself at different times to the investigator.

### I

The first form the question assumed in modern times was: What is the nature or essence of art? This was put from the metaphysical standpoint common to the age. The problem was to determine the relation of art to the reality of things. There must be some peculiar property or quality in art that makes it what it is. As this was commonly agreed to be beauty, the question resolved itself into an inquiry into the relation of beauty to the entity supposed to constitute the reality of things. The method used was analytic and discursive, and therefore subjective.

One answer to the question from this point of view may be called the *intellectual theory of art*. Art is constituted as such by its embodiment of an idea. It must be representative of a thought. It must body forth the underlying unity of things. The beauty of the absolute shining through the media of representation constitutes the art object as such.

Beauty on this theory is an inherent and absolute quality of things. "Beauty," says Schiller, "is the infinite represented in finite form." "Beauty," says Hegel, "is the ideal as it shows itself to the senses."

This intellectual theory received its highest development with Hegel. It still very largely dominates the educated thought of the day.

This theory is entirely speculative. It has no support in psychological or sociological investigation. It is independent of any adequate notion of beauty. It would be impossible to square such a theory of art with evolutionary science, or to justify it as a sociological function. We have but to attempt to apply such a theory of art to the explanation of the art of primitive or savage people to see how inadequate it is to account for the facts.

Over against this high idea of art, but of the same objective character, a second theory stands out. Beauty is the essence of art, and beauty is that which pleases. Beauty is still thought of as something inherent in the object. Little, if any, distinction is made between beauty and the agreeable. To be such, an art object must please. The difficulty with this theory is that it fails to make distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful or separate art from the objects of personal satisfaction, such as well-cooked food or good clothes.

## II

A second fundamental question that may be asked about art is: What is the origin, nature, and relation of the art impulse? This is the form the art problem has assumed for the more modern scientific investigation. As opposed to the metaphysical methods of the older attack, this form seeks its answer in the realms of psychology and history. So far as art is connected with the beautiful or with æsthetics, this putting of the question and the method of its solution involves them all. If we could find some underlying uniform principle of such scope as to include all the phenomena in its comprehensive grasp, the riddle—such is the thought—would be in a fair way of solution. If such a principle or impulse derived from psychology were fortified by application to the explanation of all forms of art among all peoples at all times, then the problem would be such no longer.

The older investigators were satisfied to analyze and describe; to spin theories of mere speculative threads. In sharp contrast to

such proceedings, we have, under the second aspect of the question, the application of scientific methods to the art problem.

The question of the art impulse, or why we create and enjoy art, has been answered in various ways by different investigators. These answers may be grouped under five heads, including, for the sake of completeness, the views of Plato and Aristotle:

1. Plato held that art and the play impulse are identical. Art is a kind of play. Art is the play of the adult. There is a surplus of energy. This overflows into play, and later takes the form of art. This theory remained dormant until taken up by Schiller (1790). It was given scientific form by Spencer and others.

2. Aristotle held that imitation is the fundamental form of the art impulse. Man produces art because of the instinct to imitate or reproduce his surroundings.

3. Darwin traces the art impulse to the instinct of animals in attracting mates. It has its origin and development in sexual selection.

4. Attempt has been made to connect the art impulse with the "showing off" instinct of children.

5. The emotional theory of art holds that every feeling-state seeks adequate expression. A pleasant feeling-state is reinforced or enhanced by such expression; a painful one is inhibited or relieved. A sort of circular reaction is set up. Motor expression relieves the feeling-tension at the same time it heightens the original state. The entire organism is thus put in an enhanced state of efficiency which can be turned to account in practical ways. Of course, art is not the mere expression of feeling. But this theory holds that in this circular reaction set up by the manifestation of feeling we have the original form of the art impulse.

This empty form must get a material from the social life, and utter itself therein according to æsthetic principle, to be art.

The identification of art and play is a very seductive view. They have much in common. They seem to go on for their own sakes. They no doubt have reciprocal influence. But play ends in itself. Art is concerned with a product. However close the two activities may be traced to an identical impulse, they have separate lines of development. Originally, before the develop-

ment of specific lines of cleavage in the social life, they no doubt formed parts of the one action-continuum, so to speak. But in modern civilized life, art and play are certainly distinct in their impulsion.

Art no doubt is quite largely dependent on imitation. There is an instinctive tendency to imitate. We attempt to make the world a part of our experience by imitating, sometimes in a very subtle way, not only our social, but also our natural surroundings. There is an impulse to imitate whatever moves or engages attention. Many of the arts are directly imitative; witness painting, poetry, and sculpture. But a crucial fact is that not all the arts are to be explained on this principle. Architecture and music are not imitative, unless music is considered an imitation of the voice. Nor does the imitation theory do justice to the other factor in art — the creative. It is the common agreement that creation is a necessary element in art.

Darwin's connection of the art impulse with sexual selection presupposed a highly developed æsthetic judgment in the mate that does the selecting. It is well known that the male bird makes a great display of his fine plumage before the female. But to suppose that she compares the general or particular effect of the fine points in the plumage of her different suitors, and thus reaches a conclusion, is to endow the female bird with an intelligence which certainly on other grounds we are obliged to deny her.

There is always something personal in art, something of self-exhibition. There is certainly an instinct to attract notice, to desire the approbation of our fellows. But this is hardly sufficient ground upon which to base a theory of art.

There is left the emotional theory to account for the origin of art. It seems best to answer the demands of such a fundamental theory. It is not necessarily antagonistic to the others, but includes them as aids. It seems to synthesize the whole field. Art thereby is connected with a universal life-principle, and is thus given an importance that its universal distribution necessitates.

The expression of an emotional state heightens or relieves that state. When the expression is in such form that others share

in the feeling, there is double enhancement or double relief. Hence the universal impulse to seek relief in sorrow through sympathy, and the heightening of joy through sharing it.

This theory is ably advocated by the two most recent writers on art—Tolstoy and Hirn. Tolstoy's book is *What is Art?* Hirn's, *The Origins of Art*.

### III

A third basic question concerning art is the one that best fits in with the most recent currents of thought. It is: What is its use or function in the social life? This is the form the discussion has assumed in those circles interested in social amelioration. Led by Carlyle, Morris, Ruskin, Crane, and others, this way of looking at art supports the arts-and-crafts movement, or the movement toward the revival of artistic handiwork.

From this standpoint art must justify itself as a utilitarian factor in social life. It must be shown how art furthers the life-process. It would indeed be a startling anomaly if art, which absorbs such an immense amount of human energy, cannot be shown to be of practical value. If it had no social value, people producing it must long ago have been weeded out by natural selection. From the fact of its universal distribution among all people, in all times, the presupposition is that art must serve some important purpose in the community life. The problem is to discover it. It is no longer a question as to the metaphysical nature of art, nor wholly of the nature of the art impulse. Art theory must be stated in social terms.

The investigators along this line can be divided into two groups: (1) those who approach the problem from an ethical point of view, and (2) those who bring scientific methods to the solution of the question.

Among the first group are Ruskin, Morris, and Tolstoy. They find the answer concerning the social significance of art by emphasizing its moral or ethical aspect. They find the main social function in its raising and dignifying the character of labor. They deplore the decay of art consequent on the division of labor and the increasing use of machine-made goods.

They point to the "sweetening" effect of art on labor. It transforms into creative activity, and thus raises and ennoble the work and the worker, and enriches his life. Every hand-worker should be an artist, they claim. This is the only means of keeping work above depressing drudgery. Thus they advocate a reunion of art and craft. Hand-made goods are to be encouraged, not only because of their individuality, and therefore heightened artistic value, but because of the ennobling effect on the worker of creative artistic activity.

Tolstoy lays great stress on art as a language of the feelings. The social significance of art lies in being an instrument for the conveyance of feeling. Just as words convey intelligence, so art is the means of the transmission of feelings. Art harmonizes the feelings. Just as language tends to make people think alike, so art ends in socializing feelings, in unifying the emotional life of a people. Says Tolstoy: "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of external signs hands to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them."

The second group of investigators of art from the social point of view have approached the problem from the province of anthropology. They have treated art genetically from an evolutionary departure. They attempt a theory of art from the study of its occurrence among primitive and savage people. Art is set forth in historical perspective.

The result has been startling in its effects on art theories. The main conclusion arrived at is that no form of art has had a purely aesthetic origin. All art in the beginning has served foreign purposes. That is, art in its beginning was not its own end, but all objects that now appear to us as produced as art were originally for some utilitarian purpose, or supposedly so.

Art from this point of view can hardly be comprehended in a definition. The following is a summary of the main facts and conclusions of the more recent scientific study of the social side of art:

1. *Art activity* is a common trait of all tribes and peoples. That is, there is a common art impulse or impulses. This argues

that every individual is endowed with an instinct to produce or enjoy art.

2. *Art, as we know and experience it*, is a product of highly civilized people and of highly specialized conditions, and has, therefore, pretty much the characteristics with which it started. It had a far other import and function in primitive life than among the highly civilized nations.

3. *Art defined as activity in conformity with æsthetic values* has been a gradual growth and development from non-æsthetic activities. That is, no form of art has had a purely æsthetic origin with the possible exception of music. All forms of art at first served some useful function. Tattooing was primarily connected with clan, group, and tribe marking, and with rendering one terrible to enemies in war. The graphic arts have grown up through pictographs and ideagrams, whose purpose was the transmission of information, to representation controlled entirely by æsthetic ends, as in modern painting. Ornamentation was at first marks of ownership, magic or religious symbol. Dancing had its utilitarian aspect in inciting to war, or in the imitation of animals as a magic to entice them within a hunting distance. Poetry, epic and dramatic, had its origin in the celebration of hunting and war adventures and their heroes.

4. *Art and the beautiful*.—While every form of art can be traced to some utilitarian motive, in whole or in part, in its origin, yet these activities were not wholly divorced from æsthetic values. There are certain psychological and physiological principles that controlled the form which these social activities took on. These are the æsthetic value or laws of the beautiful. Æsthetic value is value for the organism in lower forms of feeling at first. Ideal or associative or intellectual value is a product of higher levels, or at least reaches strength later in the history of the race. It is pretty certain that beauty of form is related to ease of adjustment of the muscular apparatus of the eye. Color has also a psychophysical value, while rhythm, the basis of the agreeable in music, has obvious relation to certain bodily functional rhythm. Symmetry and repetition may have also a somatic reference. As the most pleasing interval in music was earlier the

octave, so the most pleasing form was the symmetrical. These simple psychophysical requirements gave form to activities and products whose aim was not simply the realization of these laws but which had their purpose in the practical affairs of a rude and strenuous living. As civilization and wealth increased, production was more and more controlled by these subjective laws, rather than by the really objective utilitarian conditions. The whole field of industry has yielded somewhat to the sway of æsthetic principle. There is nothing produced without some reference to its appearance from the point of view of art.

Beauty, then, is really subjective and relative. It is not a quality of things, as regarded by the older metaphysical theories of art. "Beauty is our pleasurable feeling, projected as qualities of things." These feelings, of course, include what are sometimes called our higher and lower feelings. There is spiritual beauty as well as beauty of form, color, and rhythm. That is an ideal or intellectual beauty—a beauty of relations, which form and color serve only to manifest. And with many persons this is the only art value—the meaning, associative, or content value as opposed to the sensuous values. These two kinds of art values are present in every work of art, but in varying degrees. In the art of primitive men and among rude people the sensuous side of art is emphasized. Among cultured people art becomes more and more refined, symbolic, and ideal.

It will be seen how far such a view of beauty is from the older metaphysical one which regarded it as objectively inherent in things. Beauty, too, so far from being the essence of art, is rather a by-product, a form which all activity takes on, when free from external constraint. Thus a comprehensive definition of art—such a one as would cover the activity at all levels of development—could not make beauty its essential quality. So we have such definitions of art as Sully's, Tolstoy's, and Hirn's, wherein no mention is made of beauty.

The field of beauty is not coincident with art. The appreciation of natural beauty, aside from color effects, is of very recent growth and is largely associative or ideal; and so is an activity of the adult consciousness. Children enjoy nature from the



psychophysical plane. Their art is naïve and simple. Associative or ideal value with them is at a minimum. Therefore, the attempt to teach nature-study from a refined æsthetic point of view is largely abortive.

5. *Stages of development in art.*—Art may be defined from the psychological side as production in accord with æsthetic principles or values, and in its most refined and specialized forms, as in painting and sculpture, it may be considered as production whose objects have emancipated themselves from all economic utility and exist as ends in themselves. But this significance is for adult consciousness and for the highest levels of development only. Neither the conscious production in the interests wholly of æsthetic values, nor production of objects independent of utility, is characteristic of art in its earlier phases, nor for children in the elementary schools.

Art has passed through at least three stages of development, and happily a record of at least two of these stages lies imbedded in the language. If we trace the etymological history of the word “art,” we find that the use of the word as confined to certain narrow and specialized lines is a recent one. In the Middle Ages art had no such specialized meaning. It included all that we now mean by the words “artist” and “artisan.” Workers were not divided into artists and artisans, nor work into art and employment. The great artists of the golden age of art were artisans as well. All production was under the conscious sway of æsthetic values. But little of it was entirely independent of foreign purposes. The world’s great paintings are mural decorations; its great sculptures are adjuncts of architecture. The easel picture is a recent development. It is a question whether art has won or lost in power and influence by setting up on its own account. The presence in the word “art” of the root *ar* points to a still wider use of the word, wherein is included all production requiring skill. This seems to indicate a still earlier undifferentiated condition of production wherein there was little division of labor, but an all-around individual capability. Every man was his own artist. As in the preceding stages, art and utility went hand in hand. This manifold capability constituted a sort of

action-continuum out of which the later highly specialized conditions have come. It was only gradually, and after a long course of development, that the word came to mean distinctively conscious productions in strict accord with æsthetic laws; and only gradually, and after a shorter time, that it came to signify autotelic production, or production whose end is in itself.

The three stages of development, then, are: (1) An early undifferentiated condition, before there was any great development of commerce or manufacture, wherein each individual took part in some form of artistic production. In the story of Caedmon we have a social condition depicted where each member of the social gathering was supposed capable of extemporizing both words and music. (2) A stage that is distinguished by the universal and conscious application of æsthetic principles to production. This was the golden age of modern art. It was the period of the production of the great European church edifices, the period of the identity of artist and artisan. (3) A final stage now characterizes our own age. Art has come to be narrowed and limited in its significance to the so-called fine arts, which in the narrowest usage include painting and sculpture. There is complete divorce from any but æsthetic considerations. These art objects are an end-all in themselves. They exist for purely æsthetic contemplation. They are autotelic.

6. *The autotelic aspect of art.*—It is the universal agreement among art writers of the nonscientific school that art is not art unless it is purely in the interest of beauty. Foreign purposes must not come in. The product must proceed with an eye single to the æsthetic value. This position has reacted on the art-work in the school, and limited it largely to pictorial art, to the neglect of ornamentation or the applied arts. The theory in question has operated to put a sort of social ban on decorative arts. Picture-making conformed best to art defined as the object which existed for its own sake.

Much might be said against making this a universal criterion of art. It leaves out of the category the art of primitive men and decorative art. Indeed, were it applied strictly, there would be little art left. An investigation into the motives of artists would,

no doubt, find many motives urging to activity besides the purely æsthetic one. But, as a recent writer remarks, "it is as impossible to explain away the artistic purpose as it is to detect it in a pure state in any concrete work of art." To use it as a universal criterion of art is destructive, and yet it seems a necessary element.

This puzzle has a flood of light thrown upon it by the genetic studies in the history of art, as above sketched. It is seen that such a criterion cannot be applied at all levels of development. Art has struggled up in the fetters of utility. It has been the servant of social needs. It is only after a severe apprenticeship that it has become free and ready to produce in its own name.

The autotelic criterion is an ideal toward which art production has been making through all the centuries. The ideal of pure art production has not yet been attained. It is for the future to realize. Such an ideal can become operative only in a society on a higher ethical and economic plane than ours.

With the authority of this dictum undermined, art in the schoolroom has a different aspect. One need no longer be afraid to call the art-work of children art. It is art, though its motive may not be pure or its technique beyond criticism. Such crude impulse and endeavor are and have been a necessary stage in the growth of autotelic art. Of course, the time comes when the child becomes conscious of ideals and æsthetic values, and is ready for pure art production. But unless he has had abundant exercise throughout his naïve period, this very consciousness of æsthetic ideals is fatal to his further æsthetic production.