

## PAINTING AND THE PUBLIC

*(A speech at the opening of a picture exhibition at a restaurant.)*

MY immortal fellow guest<sup>1</sup> once said that it was 'funnier to have a nose than to have a Roman nose.' There are many things like that. For example: it is funnier to be a Catholic than a Roman Catholic—that is to say it is funnier that a man should have *any* religion than that he should have the true one. Again it is much funnier to wear trousers than to wear Bond Street trousers, and when I sit eating my lunch in a Lyons teashop it becomes abundantly clear that it is much funnier to eat anything at all than it is to eat even the Lyons 'portion.

But, thinking of this meeting, perhaps the funniest thing of all funny things is the thing called art. It is funnier that there should be *art* than that there should be any particular kind of art, however fantastic.

And this is specially true in these days. The word Art of course means first of all simply skill—human skill. Thus we have the art of the dentist and that of the pickpocket and thus we have the word 'artful,' which is much the same as 'crafty.' But there is a special sense of the word art which we are concerned with here and in this sense art is not mere skill, though it involves skill (for nothing can be done or made without at least a little skill). Art in the sense we are concerned with is the thing made rather than the skill in making—and further, it means the thing made delightfully rather than the thing made skilfully—the thing made for the delight of the person who sees it (or hears it, or touches it, or tastes it, or smells it) rather than made simply for the convenience of him who uses it. It is work raised above the plane of physical utility to the plane of intelligent pleasure or delight; to the plane of the beautiful (the beautiful thing is that which being seen pleases)—the beautiful more or less consciously willed by the workman and consciously sought by his customer.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mr. G. K. Chesterton.

## PAINTING AND THE PUBLIC

But until the era of industrialism (the approach of whose full development—it is not yet quite complete—we are now witnessing) the work of utility was commonly the occasion of the work of beauty, the delightful work, the work of 'Art.' The line of demarcation between workman and artist was not between the picture painters (sculptors, musicians and poets) on the one hand and, on the other, the people who made all the other things. There was no hard line of division. Every object of utility was in some degree a work of art.

This was necessarily so and without any self-conscious or 'high brow' fuss about it—in spite of war, pestilence and famine, battle, murder and sudden death; in spite of chattel slavery and serfdom; in spite of the tyranny of princes and the avarice of men of business—because, in the absence of a highly developed system of divided and subdivided labour, in the absence of elaborate machinery, in the absence of cheap drawing paper and therefore of measured drawings supplied by architects and engineers, every workman was in some degree a *responsible* workman—responsible not merely for doing what he was told but for the quality, the intellectual quality of what his deeds effected. He was a more or less independent person who was expected to use, and was paid to use his intelligence and, therefore (if only to make his work pleasant in the doing—for, as it says in the book of Ecclesiasticus, 'a man shall have joy in his labour; and this is his portion') he was a person who did to some extent, either more or less, regard the thing to be made as a thing to be made delightful as well as useful.

But we have undoubtedly changed all that—not quite, but very nearly completely—and when I say 'no ordinary workman is or could be an artist' no one will say I am lying; on the contrary everyone will say: 'of course not.'

The ordinary workman it is who by mass organization makes the ordinary necessities of life and even many of the luxuries; and whether or no it be necessary that *luxuries* be produced in mass, it is now clearly unnecessary that

## BLACKFRIARS

*necessities* should be produced one by one by independent individual artists.

The professor of fine arts in the University of Edinburgh has put the matter in a very small nut shell. He has said that Industrialism has released the artist from the necessity of having to make anything useful. All ordinary things are made for ordinary people by ordinary people working in factories. Artists are those special people who make special things for special people. Artists are the only responsible people left—because they are the only people who are really responsible for what they make—the only people you can still blame if what they make is bad. And as they are less and less called upon to make useful things (*i.e.* things physically useful), they are more and more sought after on account of their personal gifts of temper and sensibility. Hence the great insistence upon the artist's individuality, upon his personality. Hence the notion that Art is self-expression—the expression of the artist's self. As an emotion, feeling, sensibility, cannot be shown in machine-made things, it is thought that art exists specially for the expression of those things. As Clive Bell put it: what matters about a picture is not what you *think* about it but what it makes you *feel*. I don't say he's right, but that's what he said. And so Art, divorced from the common life in which men make useful things (whether hats or hammers, houses or ham-sandwiches) becomes a more and more fantastic or at least eccentric extra.

Now artists live by selling what they make and those who buy very naturally buy only what they like (what 'appeals' to them as they say). And because there is every sort of buyer there is every sort of artist—from the purveyor of the sweetest chocolate box pictures of creamy English beauty to the most fantastic kind of all—namely that which makes it appeal *exclusively* to the person of disinterested intelligence and sensibility.

But if the artist wants to live more or less in the same way as his contemporaries (according to the same standard of living), wear the same kind of clothes, have baths as the

best people in Wimbledon do, eat similar food and dwell in houses such as will pass the building regulations, then he must, he simply *must* make things which his contemporaries like, even if he makes things which they can only like for the wrong reasons.

Making things which people like for the wrong reasons is, indeed, the first trick to be acquired by the artist unless he be content either to live as a hermit in a desert or to depend for his livelihood upon the favour of a special coterie of wealthy aesthetes.

What is commonly thought and often said about the artist's function is mostly nonsense—that it is his business to teach, to lead, to guide the world out of its natural and muddy ditch into the cultivated fields. This pedestal or pulpit upon or in which the artist has been placed is an erection of very recent, almost contemporary design. The artist as prophet and seer and teacher is the creation of very modern times—times which are once again witnessing the submergence of all interests beneath commercial interests.

But the kindly and very sentimental man of business is frightened, and no wonder! at the consequences and accompaniments of his rule. And, as everyone wants to have his pudding and eat it as well, we have the spectacle of Mr. Henry Tate building the Tate Gallery, Mr. Carnegie founding libraries and all sorts of lesser men going in for 'a spot of culture' in their spare time. But we do not witness any attempt on their part to destroy the commercial system itself—the system of usury which we politely call Capitalism and the system of slavery which we politely call Industrialism. I doubt if there are more than half a dozen people even here who wish to destroy either of those things.

Nevertheless everybody is agreed that there are some things which they cannot produce in factories, which can never be produced in factories, very desirable things—at least things which very many people desire, things the very nature of which is that they are the product of responsible workmen, workmen working as human beings for human beings and not as irresponsible tools for the benefit of an

## BLACKFRIARS

impersonal thing called 'the common good.' Paintings and engravings are among such things. They cannot be produced by the factory system.

It is not primarily a question of machinery; it is not that painting could not be done with the aid of a gas engine. It is primarily a question of the responsible workman. For the production of a painting you must have a responsible painter—someone whose will it is that the paint shall be put on just here and not just there. The very *essence*, the great *charm* of the factory is that you do *not* need workmen who want to impose their free wills, their idiosyncrasies, their emotions and sensibilities upon the design and manufacture of razor blades.

I say the great 'charm'—for it makes the business so much simpler from the point of view of management and, ever since Adam said 'Eve did it,' shirking responsibility has been the chief temptation of ordinary men and women.

It is true that the Medici Society can have a factory for the reproduction of existing paintings—thus making painters even rarer birds than before; but though artists become rarer and rarer they can never be replaced, because there must be originals before there can be reproductions.

However, do not let us be deceived by this rosy picture. The artist, as such, is irreplaceable; but the public, the thing which pays the money, is quite content with substitutes. If the walls of the Lyons tea shop are covered with marble and the wireless is 'on,' the public is quite happy and there is simply nothing in its daily life and work to develop any capacity for knowing a good painting from a bad one.

A painting consists of two things: its subject matter and its paint. You may, if you like, forget about the paint or, if you prefer, you can forget about the subject. If the former line be your enthusiasm, if you are not interested in the possibilities of paint as paint, you can go to an art school and gain the skill necessary to make your painting look so like the life of flesh and blood that, from a short distance away, people will not know that it is made of paint at all.

## PAINTING AND THE PUBLIC

If your subjects are 'popular' ones you will be a 'popular' painter. (But what sort of subjects are likely to be popular with men of business and factory hands?)

If, on the other hand, your enthusiasm leads you in the other direction—that is if you are so intelligent as to recognize that the popular subject business has gone to pot, if you are too intelligent to take upon yourself the business of prophet and seer in addition to that of painter and yet not intelligent enough to become 'as a little child' and have your subjects given to you by 'authority'—then you can devote yourself to pure aesthetics and problems of the studio and make your 'appeal' to the few aesthetes who have money enough as well as the will to support you. It is remarkable how many there are of them; but it still remains funnier that there should be *any* people who like Art than that there should be many people who like *fine* art.

### POSTSCRIPT.

I should like to add by way of postscript that nothing I have said implies any denial that motor-cars and fountain pens, telephones and air-planes and iron girders and typewriters and electric light and wireless and type-setting machines and all the other gadgets profitably exploited by men of commerce (for of course they never invented anything themselves) are all clever things and wonderful things—everybody agrees that machinery is marvellous, 'jolly fine,' splendid, and even beautiful to look at.

Nor does anything I have said imply that all the paintings of the twentieth century, and the sculptures, music and poetry, are mere charlatanry or even mere essays in practical aesthetics. I do not wish to mention names, but I think there is no doubt that the work of modern artists has carried the business of the expression of human sensibility, the sensibility of human beings to the spiritual implications of their physical environment, very much further than it was carried by most artists of earlier periods, artists who by the condition of their times and by their traditions

## BLACKFRIARS

were more concerned with what is called 'literary content' (or as I should say 'subject-matter') and with the service, even the physical service, of their customers than the modern artist is. 'What I ask of a painting,' said Maurice Denis, 'is that it shall look like paint,' and *I* might say: 'what I ask of a stone-carving is that it shall look like stone.' Modern artists have, very rightly and in the face of much contumely, at least set themselves to explore their materials. They have in fact rediscovered their materials. They have rediscovered the fact that a painting or a sculpture has a value for what it *is* as well as, and even independently of its value, producing an illusion of being something else. They have rediscovered the fact that the artist's business is to make *things*, rather than to produce *effects*.

As to 'subject-matter,' that is properly the customer's business; in the first place because the customer only orders what he *wants*, and, in the second, because he only buys what he *likes*—in the second case it is simply as though the painter had anticipated the customer's order. If you paint something with the idea of selling it, you are, in effect, doing the same as a manufacturer who makes Christmas cards six months before Christmas. And from the point of view of the customer it is, with the rarest possible exceptions, always the subject-matter which is the important thing. When you show him a picture he asks 'What is it?'—unless, of course, he can see at a glance . . . and the exceptions are only apparent, for even in a picture which has no subject-matter or literary content in the ordinary sense, there is still a subject even if it can only be described in such terms as: 'The visual relations between a top-hat, a banana and a glass door.' Such a subject may appeal only to the few—it is none the less a subject and it remains true that it is for the *subject* that the customer normally puts down his money.

It should be added, by way of warning to both buyers of pictures and those who merely look at them, that the sub-

ject of a picture is not merely what it is stated to be in the catalogue or in verbal descriptions.

Catalogue titles are often only 'catch' names to distinguish one picture from another, and when a customer says: paint me a 'Madonna,' or a picture of 'the Derby,' or some 'roses in a bowl,' the painter must know, and *this is the crux of the matter*, what precisely those words mean in the mind of the customer. The word 'Madonna' may mean no more than a 'simpering maiden in the conventional attitude of the church-furniture shop.' A picture of the Derby may mean anything from a photograph of the winner to a representation of the whole universe. A painted bowl of roses may mean only a naturalistic painting of roses such that I, who live in a flat, can think I have a bit of garden on my sitting room wall, and very pleasant, too! or it may mean the concentrated essence of all the roses God ever made, or it may mean that the roses are only a *spring-board* from which the mind has jumped and the painting is the consequent *splash*. It may mean almost anything else also. But, whatever it means, the artist must know or guess. Heaven help him!

The trouble to-day is *not* that the artists do not take any interest in subject matter. The trouble is that the mind of to-day is, roughly speaking (and not very roughly), the *Daily Mail* mind. The trouble is that so few customers can put forward a subject worthy of an intelligent artist's attention.

Nevertheless, in spite of the great quantity of fine works produced by the reaction against the banality of the academic subject-picture, the pure aesthetic line of business is, in the nature of things, a cul-de-sac—a blind alley at the end of which is a sort of hot-house for the cultivation of man-eating orchids.

The divorce of art from common life, the divorce of the artist from the company of ordinary workmen, the absence of any subject matter exciting enough, even interesting enough to command and control their enthusiasm, and the consequence that artists are thrown back upon pure sensi-

## BLACKFRIARS

bility or else pure charlatanism—such is the state of affairs. I am not a politician that I should suggest remedies. I can only hope that under the benign influence of good food and good drink people will continue to buy the works of those who, in spite of everything, are the only responsible workmen left.

I apologise for the extremely elementary nature of my remarks. I confess I like elementary lectures much better than the advanced kind. As Mr. Belloc used to say during the war: 'two come from the left, and two come from the right—making four in all.'

ERIC GILL.

## PICTANTIAE

As a Freethinker, I am still waiting for a Freethought lecture from Boadcasting House.—Letter in *The Listener*.

In the West, as everywhere else, the people who have something to lose are anxious for the return of the Cosgrave régime. Those on the other side are immature, and it is unfortunate that the channels of emigration which afforded an outlet to Irish youth in the past are now virtually closed.—*The Times*.

With regard to Anglican relations with the Roman Catholic Church, he maintained that a re-union which omitted half of Christendom would be Hamlet without the ghost.—*Church Times* report of an E.C.U. lecture.

Even a Catholic review does not always express the mind of the Church.—*Blackfriars*.

To the general level of uninspired mediocrity in the New Year's Honours List there are a few intelligent exceptions. Sir Thomas Horder will bring his courageous views on birth control into the Upper House of Parliament.—*The Week-end Review*.