

THE LOVE OF ART¹

MOST of us take a certain pride in the great collections of works of art preserved in our museums, and in the systematic efforts that are made in schools and universities to teach the appreciation of art and to bring about improvements in taste; we congratulate ourselves upon the presence amongst us of individual collectors and "lovers of art." I am not going to maintain that these cultural activities are, humanly speaking, altogether insignificant, but I am going to suggest that they represent very little more than palliative measures applied to symptoms of what is really a fundamental spiritual deficiency in ourselves, too deep-seated to be dealt with by such indirect methods. I am going to suggest that the love of art, and the collection of works of art, when regarded as ends in themselves, imply the view that art is essentially an emotional luxury, that art can be divided off from and known apart from every-day social, industrial, and political activity, and should be seen only in museums and private collections, or heard only in great concert-halls; just as we have come to think of religion as a luxury product, distinct from social, industrial, and political functions, and to be considered only in church and on Sundays.

What we have to say may be summed up in Ruskin's devastating criticism of modern life, "Industry without art is brutality," a saying comparable to that of St. Thomas Aquinas, that "There can be no good use without art": and in the incisive words of William Morris, who pointed out that the objects that we now exhibit in museums were "once the common objects of the market place." In what were called the Dark Ages, and amongst all those whom we dare to call "uncivilized" peoples, "art" had no other meaning than "the right way of making things," "things" being anything whatever required by man to serve his needs, whether physical or spiritual; the maker of things was therefore called an "artist" or, to use the mediæval word, an "artificer," or

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“maker by art.” Whatever was made, was made by the artist, not for connoisseurs, but for consumers, not for exhibition but for use. It was taken for granted that the consumer is the critic: as Plato expresses it, “the judge of shuttles is the weaver, the judge of ships the pilot.”

Man as artist was then the servant of man in general: what was to be made, and what was to be expressed, was determined by man as Man, for as Plotinus says, “In the matter of the arts and crafts, all that are to be traced to the needs of human nature are laid up in the Absolute Man.” The artist’s peculiarity lay only in knowing how the particular work could be done, and this knowledge was called his art. Man thus came first: the artist claimed no right to use the consumer’s need as the opportunity for the expression of his private personality, views, or tastes. Artist and consumer were culturally unanimous; they shared the same views and tastes and recognized the same needs. They had a common interest, but it was not in one another’s personalities, unless they happened to be personal friends; their mutual interest was in “the good of the thing to be made.” No one supposed that the artist was a more sensitive or more intelligent being than other men, but simply that he was expert in some department of manufacture, either as a blacksmith, painter, architect, or in some other field. There were once no trades that were not also vocations, and this is how it was when the works of art that we now preserve in museums, perhaps I should say in cold storage, were common objects of the market place: for as Plato says in words which are effectively a definition of caste, “more will be done, and better done, and with more ease, when everyone does but one thing, according to his genius, and this is justice to each man in himself.”

It is we—you and I as consenting members of a society based upon the principle of competitive production not for better use but for more profit—who have been, historically speaking, the first to take for granted the propriety of an industry without art: the first to bring into being a recognized proletarian class of unskilled labourers, working without intellectual responsibility for what they produce, and to

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whom we are therefore forced to make the pious recommendation to cultivate the higher things of life in those hours of leisure which have been so providentially increased by the continual invention of labour-saving devices. We, within the terms of Ruskin's definition, are the first 'civilized brutes.'

In thus appointing one large class of men, workers in factories and offices, to mindless labour, and in consenting to the parasitic existence of a smaller class of men called artists (in our restricted modern sense of the word) it is we ourselves who have brought about that very lack of artistic understanding and want of taste that we are now so laboriously attempting to correct in our educational institutions. We seem to think that a few hours of instruction, the hearing of a few lectures, or the reading of a few volumes on the appreciation of art will set a man in the right way to be an artist at heart for the rest of his life, even though the greater part of his waking hours be spent in a factory moving a lever to and fro. The only men who can nowadays be called artists in the original sense of the word are the engineers, and independent plumbers or carpenters who still like to do a job "right," which corresponds to the old idea of working for "the good of the work to be done," and not at all to that of "art for art's sake," which is as much as to say "talking for the sake of hearing one's own voice." When therefore we propose to bring about such a state of affairs as is implied in the expressions "art for everyone," and "everyone an artist," we are not trying to bring about something new in the world, but to restore something very old and very normal.

In the meantime the contagion of competitive industrialism is very rapidly destroying every remaining vestige of this old and normal life in the farthest corners of the world where the arts of the people still maintain a precarious existence. It is just because the folk arts are now *in extremis* that we feel it so urgent to preserve examples of them in museums before it is "too late." Humanly speaking, it is already "too late"; we have already confessed that it is a pity that St. Thomas Aquinas, who knew so much about art, "did not understand business," though we are much too

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sentimental to admit that "business," i.e. production for profit, and art, i.e. production for use, are incompatible. Humanly speaking, it is too late; for when men can no longer sing at their tasks, it is poor consolation to offer them the songs of labour preserved between the covers of printed books. Our whole attempt to "bring contemporary movements in art to those who live in remote places where museums and libraries are inaccessible" is based on false assumptions, and presents a sorry case of the right hand seeking to build up what the left destroys. As Professor Cox lately remarked: "Our main streets have grown nightmarish, our suburbs slatternly, and our cities almost wholly deprived of any claim to represent an intelligent civilization." It is our own senile indifference to disorder and ugliness that we are really introducing to the remote places of the world; for as Blake expresses it: "When nations grow old, the arts grow cold, and commerce settles on every tree." For example, as Mr. Iklé says of what has been called one of the most delicate and intricate arts that has ever been invented: "It is a question whether the beautiful art of *ikat* weaving can long survive in the Dutch East Indies. Like many other crafts it does not find sufficient appreciation in the Western World, this same world which is so ready to flood the remainder of our globe with inferior mass products, thus destroying among native peoples the concepts of quality and beauty, together with the joy of creation. . . . Only on the remote islands . . . not so easily reached by foreigners, do arts and crafts preserve their ancient beauty." Civilizations such as ours, founded on economic slavery and the prostitution of science—which is not a matter of this or that political system, but simply one of spiritual inhibition—can neither rectify their own errors by calculated educational procedures, nor offer anything of value to their victims.

I am by no means making an indiscriminate attack on mechanized production, or pretending that things made by machinery can be anything but works of art, or may not be beautiful. A thoroughly modern kitchen, or anything made in the vitally contemporary modern style, which is that of the laboratory or operating room, is not only adapted to use,

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but also pleases when seen. A flight of aeroplanes, a modern bridge, or the New York skyline, with its spires, may be very beautiful. What I am trying to point out is that in making the majority of individual men themselves a part of the machinery, in denying to all but the engineer a share in the creative and most godlike part of art, we are making machines of men themselves. I am suggesting that the price of our so-called standard of living is too high, and that we are sacrificing realities for shadows, happiness for pleasures, eternities for temporalities, and cannot make up for this by introducing a reproduction of "Whistler's "Mother" and a copy of the "Five-foot shelf" into every workman's tenement. I am suggesting that of all our lovers and collectors of art, only an infinitesimal fraction feel in their very hands the instinct of workmanship, on which is founded that "good taste" which demands in everything made that it be well and truly made. I am suggesting that by and large we get just what sort of art that we deserve: that it is vain to speak of "art for everyone" so long as we deny to the majority of men an individual responsibility for all they make.

The productions of robots may be beautiful. But to make something beautiful has never been the aim of art or artists. The artist is concerned with uses, physical and spiritual; it is the philosopher who speaks of beauty. For him the beauty of the thing well made is not its use, but an invitation to use, whether physical or spiritual. If now those who make things are themselves rather machines than men, it follows that what they make, although it may be beautiful, can only have that kind of beauty that invites to comfort and physical uses, and not that kind of beauty that is intellectual. It is precisely at this point, and not simply because we make use of machines, that our industrial production differs from that of the Dark Ages and uncivilized peoples, to whom it had never occurred that man could live by bread alone. It is not a matter of indifference from the consumer's point of view; for as William of Thierry has said: "The inward things of us are touched not a little by the things without us, which are made and shapen unto the likeness of the mind and after their own fashion answer to a good (or evil) intent."

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At the opposite extreme we have the modern artist, whose productions are supposed to serve *only* intellectual and spiritual uses. These social parasites are expected to provide for other men what their own occupations forbid; very much as the football star provides them with exercise. If you cannot afford an original, buy one of our admirable reproductions; if you must work in an office, you can pay the star to play your games, and everyone will be pleased. But the modern artist has long since renounced his allegiance to the world and duty to the patron, and asserted his independence. Every one of these artists must have a biography, must be separately studied, and separately misunderstood. Meanwhile the normal human being remains uninterested in artistic personalities, and is no more inclined to go to one man shows than to go to church on Sunday. It is in fact far more reasonable to accept the arts of physical comfort and resign ourselves to do without the higher things of life, than to pretend that the exhibitionism of peculiar people has really any serious intellectual or spiritual value.

It will be another matter if one proposes not merely to be a lover of fine sounds and colours, not merely to be a connoisseur and collector, but to understand the reason of art, to understand that all peoples and all ages other than our own have created works of art, not for ornament, but use; and that to make anything solely for physical and not at the same time for spiritual uses is something rather less than human. But everyone who becomes a lover of art in this sense must realize that he can only do so as an enemy of all that we generally mean by civilization; he cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time.

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