

## TWO VIEWS OF ART

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In the course of the present century, many different theories of what art is and how art functions have been put forward. They often throw an interesting light on a particular aspect of the question, but nearly all of them fail to provide a convincing, broad definition of art, such as we need in the actual business of living our lives and giving art a place in them.

So what I want to put before you is two views of art which seem to me to be, in an important respect, different from most of the others. What distinguishes them is that they are not simply academic theories, however interesting these might be, but that they have been the way in which art has *in practice* been understood and grasped by great numbers of people, by whole cultures - the way in which, within these, art has for a time been almost universally understood.

Both of these views remain, at least in part, current today, and it is their coming together, or, as we shall see, their confusion, which makes up our contemporary view of art. If we can see the difference between them, and understand how they have come to be confused and what the effect of this has been, then I think that some of the obscurities which have collected round questions to do with art will start to be dispelled.

Let us begin by forgetting for the moment our contemporary ideas about art and recalling the view of many - indeed most - of the great cultures of the past. We find in these societies a single view which, although it now seems strange and surprising to many, has been that of the great majority of mankind for by far the greater part of time. This is the view of art which was held in medieval Europe and the ancient world, by Plato, Plotinus, and Dante - and indeed by a twentieth century poet such as Yeats; which is found in old Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist sources; and which continues to be held by many traditional peoples throughout the world. It can therefore lay claim to being a norm, a universal and perennial philosophy of art, which has been progressively forgotten in the West as the modern world has come into being. I will call it the traditional view.

In exploring it we might start with the related questions of originality and genius. From the standpoint of traditional art, the value which is now placed upon originality is an error. Although it at first acted as a stimulus, it

has at length produced a fragmentation and dispersal which we can see very clearly in twentieth-century painting. Originating in the humanism of the Renaissance, and boosted by Romantic individualism, it is the equivalent in the arts of the idea of Progress. It is the inversion of the traditional attitude, which has always been to look for guidance towards the universal experience of mankind and to the great figures of the past, sometimes collectively symbolised as the Golden Age.

On this view of art, the truly creative artist is not he who is original, in the sense of inventing his own imagery. Rather, the truly creative artist is he who, in St. Augustine's words, 'sees within what he has to do without'.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, he does not simply copy a traditional image, but works from his own inward vision of it. That this should be alive for him, and that he should be true to it, is what matters. The image he represents - a seated Buddha perhaps, a Christ in Majesty - is one common to all who live within the same culture, but now, and herein lies the true originality, crystallised anew in the artist.

For example, the detailed descriptions of gods we find in the old Hindu artistic manuals, the *Silpa-sastras*, are not direct instructions for making the representations. They are there to assist the full achievement of an interior vision of the deity, and it is this living vision, the result of contemplation, which is then translated into the work of art. The artist's objective is identity of consciousness with the archetype, and it is out of this that his work comes.<sup>2</sup> If, as frequently happens, the result is close to that of another artist, that, far from being a criticism, merely confirms the rightness of his vision. 'The value of uniformity for the development of styles', wrote Jacob Burckhardt, 'is incalculable. It challenges art to remain eternally youthful and fresh within the circles of ancient themes, yet at the same time monumental and adequate to the sanctuary'.<sup>3</sup> The arts, he adds, are 'the outward image of inward things,' and therefore a form of revelation.<sup>4</sup>

The artist conforms *himself* to the idea which he will represent; he enters into it and becomes one with it, understands its meaning, lives it inwardly. In this way his activity is a matter not of thought, but of contemplation. The traditional Indian actor prepares for his performance by prayer. The Indian architect is spoken of as visiting heaven and imitating the forms he sees there.<sup>5</sup> Nor is there anything strange about this. It is from the supra-individual life of the artist himself, as opposed to his personality or individual self, that the vitality of the work is derived. The idea of the thing to be made is not invented by the artist, but found and brought to life within him. The model is not extrinsic to himself; hence, even when his

work conforms closely to an iconographic type, his freedom is unimpaired. After the vision, the physical work proceeds: he makes, as A. K. Coomaraswamy has said, 'what was shown him upon the Mount'.<sup>6</sup>

It follows, for this theory of art, that what is called 'genius' is not, as many have come to suppose, the exploitation of an exceptionally developed individuality. It is, on the contrary, the appearance and action of the non-individual, the *daimon*, the immanent spirit, in the artist. Inspiration is not the uprush of an instinctive and subconscious will. It is precisely the leaving of the will, and the elevation of the artist's being to the supra-individual level: 'I am one,' declared Dante, 'who when Love inspires me takes note, and go setting it forth in such wise as He dictates within me'.<sup>7</sup> And a modern painter, Mondrian, has written:

the universal although its germ is already in us towers far above us; and just as far above us is that art which directly expresses the universal... Through our intuition the universal in us can become so active... that... it pushes aside our individuality. Then art can reveal itself.<sup>8</sup>

This is the secret of genius.

Although this is an intensely personal process, it is also a communal one. The image which an artist in a traditional society brings to life within himself is not a private one, but a communal and collective one: others can relate to it in the same way as he did. Thus one way of defining genius is as that quality which identifies more deeply with, and penetrates further into, the collective images of a culture, and so renews or extends their meaning.

This is where the modern artist, particularly the visual artist, suffers his most crippling disadvantage. He too, like Mondrian - or like Rothko and many others - may follow the same process of turning inwards, but unless he is able to draw on the vital collective imagery of a culture, his visions, however inspired, will remain private. Perhaps, if he is fortunate, the meaning of his imagery will become known to a few connoisseurs; even, in time, to a small educated public. But it can never speak to a whole people, to an entire civilisation, with the splendour and authority of a traditional image.

This, then, in outline, is the first of our two views what we have called the traditional view of art. Art is a means which opens for us realms of experience and understanding not otherwise available; realities which lie behind the surface of human life, and the substance of which we cannot otherwise grasp. It opens to us a fuller consciousness. It is thus supremely

valuable. What falls below this level is not worthy of the name of art.

It will be seen at once that, even though elements of it survive, this is not now a generally current view of art, and that it is one which can prevail only in a society in which contemplation is accorded a central role.

But let us pass now to the second view of art I want to consider. This results in an altogether broader interpretation. Tolstoy describes it as follows: 'To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and, having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art'.<sup>9</sup> In short, art is that which communicates emotion. While it may also convey ideas or simply information, that is incidental: what makes it art is the fact that it recreates in the spectator a certain emotion experienced by the artist.

Thus a painting which merely conveys ideas, but not emotion for example, some of the Neo-classical work of the eighteenth century, as it now appears to us - is cold and dead. It does not succeed as art. Or again, if we are engaged in writing, the moment we wish to convey an emotion to the reader, to move him, to make him feel with us, we have recourse to the devices of art - to simile, metaphor, contrasts, patterns of rhythm, and the rest. Nor does it matter in the least what emotions are conveyed. They may be pleasing or painful, elevating or depressing: whether it is a work by Fra Angelico or Francis Bacon, so long as it communicates emotion from one human being to another, it is art.

Much more than the traditional view, this second way of understanding art immediately strikes a chord in us, for it is the one which prevails today. We now define art almost exclusively in this broader way. Moreover, it is an entirely valid definition. Even traditional art, as we have described it, must and does conform to it: the symbolism it employs, the inward vision and knowledge it conveys, these must always come to us in a form that moves us, or it fails as art. And we may note in passing that it is here that the distinction between art and craft may lie. Many finely-made objects give expression, in their form or decoration, to traditional symbolism, and in this way transmit knowledge, even esoteric knowledge, just as does traditional art - yet we do not recognise them as works of art unless they also have the property of moving us.

Art, then, on this second view, is the means by which human beings communicate emotions to one another, and in this way it can change us and may at times promote human sympathy and understanding. As in language

we have a common heritage of human thought, Tolstoy argued, so in art we have a common heritage of human feeling. Art is the language of emotion, the means by which it is transmitted across time and space.<sup>10</sup>

These, then, are the two views of art I want to put before you. Each is valid on its own terms. But we should not, of course, think that they define the same thing, or that the word 'art' carries the same meaning in the two cases. Whereas the first is an exacting definition which ultimately relates art to contemplation, the second is the broadest possible definition. It represents the lowest common denominator by means of which art may be defined.

Many contemporary confusions about art arise because this distinction is not observed. It is not sufficiently realised that Western culture has shifted, more or less unconsciously, from the first, more demanding definition of art to the second and much broader one. The shift in itself is perfectly legitimate, though we may think it indicative of a certain lack of aspiration. What is not legitimate is that we have contrived to retain the prestige - the implication of high purpose and ultimate value - which belonged to the more demanding definition of art, and attach it to the second, much broader one, that which defines art by its lowest common denominator.

A moment's thought reveals that this is merely semantic legerdemain, and that the word 'art' in the two definitions does not carry the same value. Only if we adopt the traditional view can we say that art is always a good. On that view, it is so by definition for its function is to heighten our consciousness and assist the development of our inward being: 'The whole work was undertaken,' wrote Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, 'not for a speculative but a practical end... to remove those who are living in this life from the state of wretchedness and to lead them to the state of blessedness'.<sup>11</sup>

But if, on the other hand, we adopt the second and broader definition of art a different set of consequences results. On this definition art retains much less inherent value. It is the means by which human beings communicate emotions to one another, and in this way it can change us and may at times promote human sympathy and understanding. While this has a certain value, there is no guarantee that the change is necessarily for the better. Emotions may be either ennobling or destructive, they may refine or blunt our sensibility, and accordingly art, when defined in this manner - and no matter how excellent it may be *qua* art; that is, how effectively or subtly it conveys the emotions in question may be either beneficial or harmful.

Coomaraswamy has put it as follows: the poet or painter's task *as an artist* is to express what he has to tell us as perfectly as possible. His task *as a person* is to choose well what it is that he expresses. This latter is an ethical, not an artistic, judgement. The two spheres are not to be confused. A work can be at the same time admirable as art, but ethically and socially disastrous - we may think, for example, of certain films produced in Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Thus, Coomaraswamy tells us, Confucius speaks of the Succession Dance as being 'at the same time perfect beauty and perfect goodness', but of the War Dance as being 'perfect beauty, but not perfect goodness'.<sup>12</sup>

The one sphere does not validate the other. Neither does the ethically valuable become for that reason significant art - that of course was the great fallacy of the Victorian age; nor does the artistically accomplished become for that reason ethically and socially valuable - that is our own contemporary fallacy and misunderstanding. To confuse the two, as we have done for almost two centuries, is destructive in both spheres.

Tolstoy tells us the same thing with absolute clarity: we must separate what is valuable in art from what is not; the 'real, important, necessary spiritual food,' as he puts it, from harmful or useless art. Art which is good as art, may be morally and spiritually bad.<sup>13</sup>

But this, of course, is just what we are unwilling to admit. Why should we feel this reluctance? We are reluctant to admit it, I suggest, because unconsciously we remain influenced by the traditional view of art according to which, as we have seen, art is always and by definition a good.

It seems, then, that what we habitually do, without being aware of it, is to mix together the two views of art I have outlined. We define art according to the second and broader view: art is that which communicates emotion. But we do not draw the conclusions with regard to value which follow from this. Instead we continue to attach a higher, indeed a mystical value to art, which derives from the first view, the traditional view. The result, of course, is confusion. The definition and the value do not balance; they belong to different worlds of thought.

It is as a residue from the traditional understanding that art continues to enjoy its tremendous prestige. But the idea of art from which that prestige derives is no longer accepted or understood. In this way art becomes a kind of superstition something which 'stands over' from a past view, the significance of which has been forgotten. 'Art and poetry themselves are in our day,' wrote Burckhardt, well over a century ago, 'in the most wretched plight, for they have no spiritual home.'<sup>14</sup>

And about the same time, Nietzsche, in speaking of the 'death of God' which had taken place in the West, predicted that the process of cultural destruction which would follow would be slow, lengthy and vast, for the implications were so great that it would be many decades, if not centuries, before people understood how much of civilisation and culture they had lost.<sup>15</sup> Our present attitude to art exemplifies this. Having set aside, along with God, the traditional, religiously-based understanding of art, it appears that we still cling in desperation to the values which rest upon it.

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, XI, 5. Cited in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974), p. 38.
- <sup>2</sup> James Mahood, 'Imaginal Yoga in India', in *Temenos* 5 (London: 1984), p. 207.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (trans. M.D.H. London:1943), p. 92.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- <sup>5</sup> Coomaraswamy, p.32. The historian of Indian art, E.B. Havell, writes: 'Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic, and transcendental. The artist is both priest and poet. In this respect Indian art is closely allied to the Gothic art of Europe' (*Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London: 1928, p. 10).
- <sup>6</sup> Coomaraswamy, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>7</sup> *Purgatorio*, XXIV, 52-54. Quoted in Coomaraswamy, p. 37.
- <sup>8</sup> *The New Art - The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (ed. and trans. by H. Holtzman and M.S. James, Boston, 1986), pp. 42 and 70 (quoted in Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own* [Boston: Shambhala, 1989]).
- <sup>9</sup> *Tolstoy on Art* (ed. & transl. A. Maude. Oxford: 1925), p. 173.
- <sup>10</sup> L. Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 1896 (cited in my Notebook 3, items 9, 3 & 4).
- <sup>11</sup> Cited in Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 54, note 21.
- <sup>12</sup> *Analects*, III, 25. Cited in Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- <sup>13</sup> Tolstoy (cited in my Notebook 3, items 14 & 12).
- <sup>14</sup> Burckhardt, p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, aphorism 343.