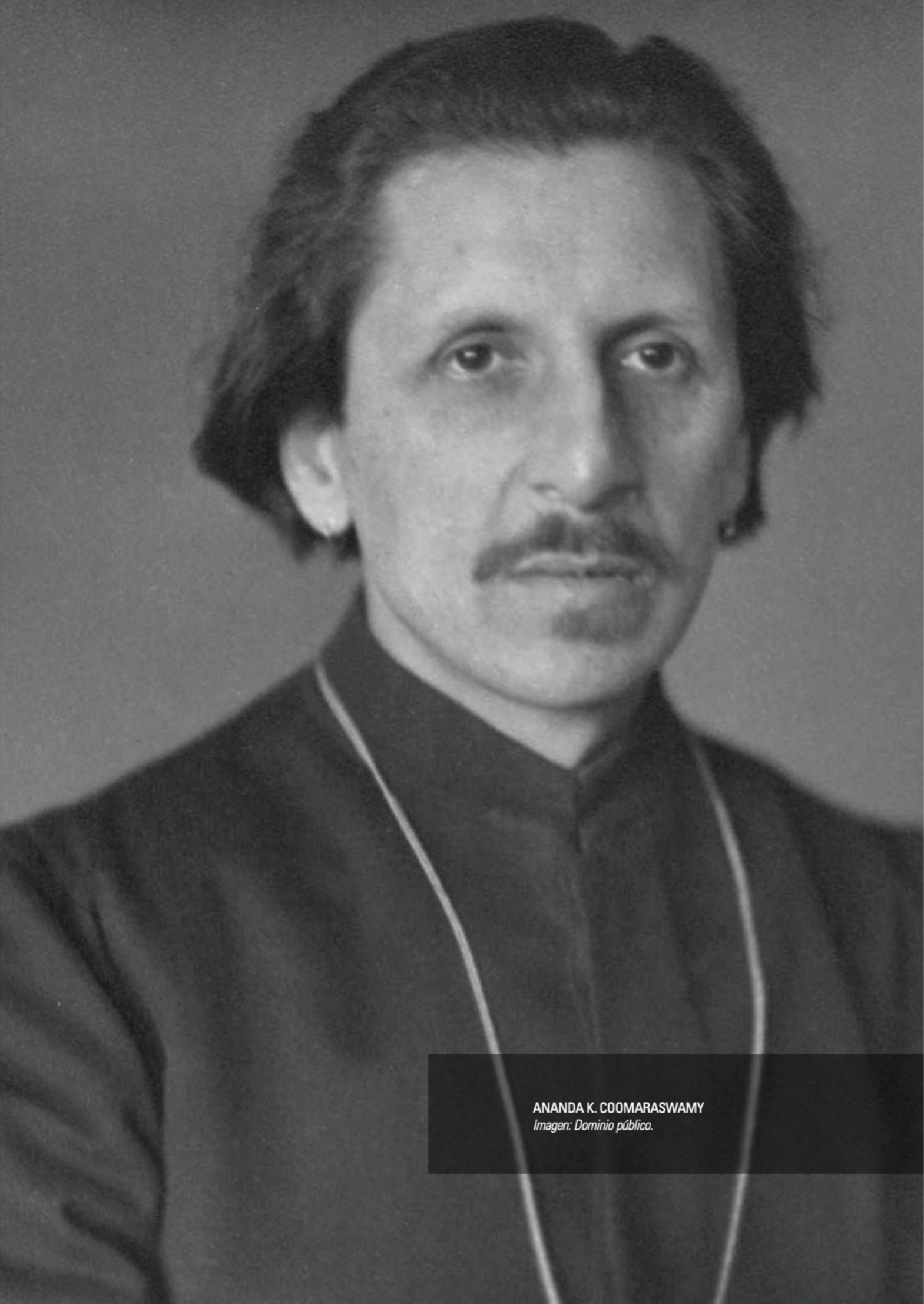
Conversaciones...

Conversaciones…
ISSN: 2594-0813
ISSN: 2395-9479
conversaciones@inah.gob.mx
Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
México

COOMARASWAMY, ANANDA K.
Christian and Oriental philosophy of art
Conversaciones…, no. 6, 2018, December, pp. 70-119
Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
México



ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY
Imagen: Dominio público.

Christian and Oriental philosophy of art

ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY

Original publication: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1956) *Christian and Oriental philosophy of art*, Dover Publications Inc., New York.

Chapter I. Why exhibit works of art?

What is an Art Museum for? As the word "Curator" implies, the first and most essential function of such a Museum is to take care of ancient or unique works of art which are no longer in their original places or no longer used as was originally intended, and are therefore in danger of destruction by neglect or otherwise. This care of works of art does not necessarily involve their exhibition.

If we ask, why should the protected works of art be exhibited and made accessible and explained to the public, the answer will be made, that this is to be done with an educational purpose. But before we proceed to a consideration of this purpose, before we ask, Education in or for what? A distinction must be made between the exhibition of the works of living artists and that of ancient or relatively ancient or exotic works of art. It is unnecessary for Museums to exhibit the works of living artists, which are not in imminent danger of destruction; or at least, if such works are exhibited, it should be clearly understood that the Museum is really advertising the artist and acting on behalf of the art dealer or middleman whose business it is to find a market for the artist; the only difference being that while the Museum does the same sort of work as the dealer, it makes no profit. On the other hand, that a living artist should wish to be "hung" or "shown" in a Museum can be only due to his need or his vanity. For things are made normally for certain purposes and certain places to which they are appropriate, and not simply "for exhibition"; and because whatever is thus custom-made, i.e., made by an artist for a consumer, is controlled by certain requirements and kept in order. Whereas, as Mr. Steinfels has recently remarked, "Art which is only intended to be hung on the walls of a Museum is one kind of art that need not consider its relationship to its ultimate surroundings. The artist can paint anything he wishes, any way he wishes, and if the Curators and Trustees like it well enough they will line it up on the wall with all the other curiosities."

We are left with the real problem, Why exhibit? as it applies to the relatively ancient or foreign works of art which, because of their fragility and because they no longer correspond to any needs of our own of which we are actively conscious, are preserved in our Museums, where they form the bulk of the collections. If we are to exhibit these objects for educational reasons, and not as mere curios, it is evident that we are proposing to make such use of them as is possible without an actual handling. It will be imaginatively and not actually that we must use the mediaeval reliquary, or lie on the Egyptian bed, or make our offering to some

ancient deity. The educational ends that an exhibition can serve demand, accordingly, the services not of a Curator only, who prepares the exhibition, but of a Docent who explains the original patron's needs and the original artists' methods; for it is because of what these patrons and artists were that the works before us are what they are. If the exhibition is to be anything more than a show of curiosities and an entertaining spectacle it will not suffice to be satisfied with our own reactions to the objects; to know why they are what they are we must know the men that made them. It will not be "educational" to interpret such objects by our likes or dislikes, or to assume that these men thought of art in our fashion, or that they had aesthetic motives, or were "expressing themselves" We must examine *their* theory of art, first of all in order to understand the things that they made by art, and secondly in order to ask whether their view of art, if it is found to differ from ours, may not have been a truer one.

EGYPTIAN BED. *Image: Public domain.*

Let us assume that we are considering an exhibition of Greek objects, and call upon Plato to act as our Docent. He knows nothing of our distinction of fine from applied arts. For him painting and agriculture, music and carpentry and pottery are all equally kinds of poetry or making. And as Plotinus, following Plato, tells us, the arts such as music and carpentry are not based on human wisdom but on the thinking "there."

Whenever Plato speaks disparagingly of the "base mechanical arts" and of mere "labour" as distinguished from the "fine work" of making things, it is with reference to kinds of manufacture that provide for the needs of the body alone. The kind of art that he calls whole some and will admit to his ideal state must be not only useful but also true to rightly chosen models and therefore beautiful, and this art, he says, will provide at the same time "for the souls and bodies of your citizens." His "music" stands for all that we mean by "culture" and his "gymnastics" for all that we mean by physical training and well-being; he insists that these ends of culture and physique must never be separately pursued; the tender artist and the brutal athlete are equally contemptible. We, on the other hand are accustomed to think of music, and culture in general, as useless, but still valuable. We forget that music, traditionally, is never something only for the ear, something only to be heard, but always the accompaniment of some kind of action. Our own conceptions of culture are typically negative. I believe that Professor Dewey is right in calling our cultural values snobbish. The lessons of the Museum must be applied to our life.

Because we are not going to handle the exhibited objects, we shall take their aptitude for use, that is to say their efficiency, for granted, and rather ask in what sense they are also true or significant; for if these objects can no longer serve our bodily needs, perhaps they can still serve those of our soul, or if you prefer the word, our reason. What Plato means by "true" is "iconographically correct." For all the arts, without exception, are representations or likenesses of a model; which does not mean that they are such as to tell us what the model looks like, which would be impossible seeing that the forms of traditional art are typically imitative of invisible things, which have no looks, but that they are such adequate analogies as to be able to remind us, i.e., put us in mind again, of their archetypes. Works of art are reminders; in other words, supports of contemplation. Now since the contemplation and understanding of these works is to serve the needs of the soul, that is to say in Plato's own words, to attune our own distorted modes of thought to cosmic harmonies, "so that by an assimilation of the knower to the to-be-known, the archetypal nature, and coming to be in that likeness, we may attain at last to a part in that 'life's best' that has been appointed by the Gods to man for this time being and hereafter," or stated in Indian terms, to effect our own metrical reintegration through the imitation of divine forms; and because, as the Upanishad reminds us, "one comes to be of just such stuff as that on which the mind is set," it follows that it is not only requisite that the shapes of art should be adequate reminders of their paradigms, but that the nature of these paradigms themselves must be of the utmost importance, if we are thinking of a cultural value of art in any serious sense of the word "culture." The *what* of art is far more important than the *how*; it should, indeed, be the what that determines the how, as form determines shape.

Plato has always in view the representation of invisible and intelligible forms. The imitation of anything and everything is despicable; it is the actions of Gods and Heroes, not the artist's feelings or the natures of men who are all too human like himself, that are the legitimate theme of art. If a poet cannot imitate the eternal realities, but only the vagaries of human character, there can be no place for him in an ideal society, however true or intriguing his representations may be. The Assyriologist Andrae is speaking in perfect accord with Plato when he says, in connection with pottery, that "It is the business of art to grasp the primordial truth, to make the inaudible audible, to enunciate the primordial word, to reproduce the primordial images–or it is not art." In other words, a real art is one of symbolic and significant representation; a representation of things that cannot be seen except by the intellect. In this sense art is the antithesis of what we mean by visual education, for this has in view to tell us what things that we do not see, but might see, look like. It is the natural instinct of a child to work from within outwards; "First I think, and then I draw my think." What wasted efforts we make to teach the child to stop thinking, and only to observe! Instead of training the child to think, and how to think and of what, we make him "correct" his drawing by what he sees. It is clear that the Museum at its best must be the sworn enemy of the methods of instruction currently prevailing in our Schools of Art.

It was anything but "the Greek miracle" in art that Plato admired; what he praised was the canonical art of Egypt in which "these modes (of representation) that are by nature correct had been held for ever sacred." The point of view is identical with that of the Scholastic philosophers, for whom "art has fixed ends and ascertained means of operation." New songs, yes; but never new kinds of music, for these may destroy our whole civilization. It is the irrational impulses that yearn for innovation. Our sentimental or aesthetic culture – sentimental, aesthetic and materialistic are virtually synonyms– prefers instinctive expression to the formal beauty of rational art. But Plato could not have seen any difference between the mathematician thrilled by a "beautiful equation" and the artist thrilled by his formal vision. For he asked us to stand up like men against our instinctive reactions to what is pleasant or unpleasant, and to admire in works of art, not their aesthetic surfaces but the logic or right

reason of their composition. And so naturally he points out that "The beauty of the straight line and the circle, and the plane and the solid figures formed from these... is not, like other things, relative, but always absolutely beautiful." Taken together with all that he has to say elsewhere of the humanistic art that was coming into fashion in his own time and with what he has to say of Egyptian art, this amounts to an endorsement of Greek Archaic and Greek Geometric Art –the arts that really correspond to the content of those myths and fairy tales that he held in such high respect and so often quotes. Translated into more familiar terms, this means that from this intellectual point of view the art of the American Indian sand-painting is superior in kind to any painting that has been done in Europe or white America within the last several centuries. As the Director of one of the five greatest museums in our Eastern States has more than once remarked to me, From the Stone Age until now, what a decline! He meant, of course, a decline in intellectuality, not in comfort. It should be one of the functions of a well organized Museum exhibition to deflate the illusion of progress.

KARNAK. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

NAVAJO SAND PAINTING. *Image: Public domain.*

At this point I must digress to correct a widespread confusion. There exists a general impression that modern abstract art is in some way like and related to, or even "inspired" by the formality of primitive art. The likeness is altogether superficial. Our abstraction is nothing but a mannerism. Neolithic art is abstract, or rather algebraic, because it is only an algebraical form that can be the single form of very different things. The forms of early Greek are what they are because it is only in such forms that the polar balance of physical and metaphysical can be maintained. "To have forgotten," as Bernheimer recently said, "this purpose before the mirage of absolute patterns and designs is perhaps the fundamental fallacy of the abstract movement in art." The modern abstractionist forgets that the Neolithic formalist was not an interior decorator, but a metaphysical man who saw life whole and had to live by his wits; one who did not, as we seek to, live by bread alone, for as the anthropologists assure us, primitive cultures provided for the needs of the soul and the body at one and the same time. The Museum exhibition should amount to an exhortation to return to these savage levels of culture.

A natural effect of the Museum exhibition will be to lead the public to enquire why it is that objects of "museum quality" are to be found only in Museums and are not in daily use and readily obtainable. For the Museum objects, on the whole, were not originally "treasures" made to be seen in glass cases, but rather common objects of the market place that could have been bought and used by anyone. What underlies the deterioration in the quality of our environment? Why should we have to depend as much as we do upon "antiques"? The only possible answer will again reveal the essential opposition of the Museum to the world. For this answer will be that the Museum objects were custom made and made for use, while the things that are made in our factories are made primarily for sale. The word "manufacturer" itself, meaning one who makes things by hand, has come to mean a salesman who gets things made for him by machinery. The museum objects were humanly made by responsible men, for whom their means of livelihood was a vocation and a profession. The museum objects were made by free men. Have those in our department stores been made by free men? Let us not take the answer for granted.

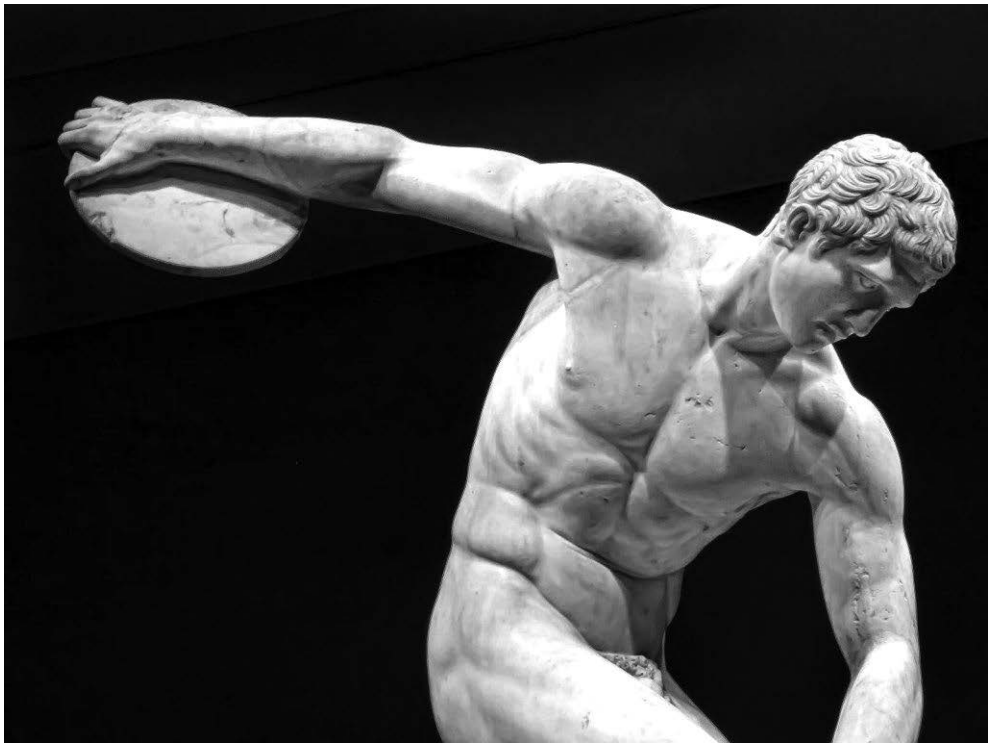
When Plato lays it down that the arts shall "care for the bodies and souls of your citizens," and that only things that are sane and free, and not any shameful things unbecoming free men, are to be made, it is as much as to say that the artist in whatever material must be a free man; not meaning thereby an "emancipated artist" in the vulgar sense of one having no obligation or commitment of any kind, but a man emancipated from the despotism of the salesman. If the artist is to represent the eternal realities, he must have known them as they are. In other words, an act of imagination in which the idea to be represented is first clothed in an imitable form must have preceded the operation in which this form is to be embodied in the actual material. The first of these acts is called "free," the latter "servile." But it is only if the first be omitted that the word servile acquires a dishonourable connotation. It hardly needs demonstration that our methods of manufacture are, in this shameful sense, servile, or can be denied that the industrial system, for which these methods are indispensable, is unfit for free men. A system of "manufacture," or rather of quantity production dominated by money values, presupposes that there shall be two different kinds of makers, privileged "artists" who may be "inspired," and under-privileged labourers, unimaginative by hypothesis, since they are asked only to make what other men have imagined. As Eric Gill put it, "On the one hand we have the artist concerned solely to express himself; on the other is the workman deprived of any self to express." It has often been claimed that the productions of "fine" art are useless; it would seem to be a mockery to speak of a society as free, where it is only the makers of useless things, and not the makers of utilities, that can be called free, except in the sense that we are all free to work or starve.

It is, then, by the notion of a vocational making, as distinguished from earning one's living by working at a job, regardless of what it may be, that the difference between the museum objects and those in the department store can be best explained. Under these conditions, which have been those of all non-industrial societies, that is to say when each man makes one kind of thing, doing only that kind of work for which he is fitted by his own nature and for which he is therefore destined, Plato reminds us that "more will be done, and better done than in any other way." Under these conditions a man at work is doing what he likes best, and the pleasure that he takes in his work perfects the operation. We see the evidence of this pleasure in the Museum objects, but not in the products of chain-belt operation, which are more like those of the chain-gang than like those of men who enjoy their work. Our hankering for a state of leisure or leisure state is the proof of the fact that most of us are working at a task to which we could never have been called by anyone but a salesman, certainly not by God or by our own natures. Traditional craftsmen whom I have known in the East cannot be dragged away from their work, and will work overtime to their own pecuniary loss.

We have gone so far as to divorce work from culture, and to think of culture as something to be acquired in hours of leisure; but there can be only a hothouse and unreal culture where work itself is not its means; if culture does not show itself in all we make we are not cultured. We ourselves have lost this vocational way of living, the way that Plato made his type of Justice; and there can be no better proof of the depth of our loss than the fact that we have destroyed the cultures of all other peoples whom the withering touch of our civilization has reached.

In order to understand the works of art that we are asked to look at it will not do to explain them in the terms of our own psychology and our aesthetics; to do so would be a pathetic fallacy. We shall not have understood these arts until we can think about them as their authors did. The Docent will have to instruct us in the elements of what will seem a strange language; though we know its terms, it is with very different meanings that we nowadays employ them. The meaning of such terms as art, nature, inspiration, form, ornament and aesthetic will have to be explained to our public in words of two syllables. For none of these terms are used in the traditional philosophy as we use them to-day.

We shall have to begin by discarding the term *aesthetic* altogether. For these arts were not produced for the delectation of the senses. The Greek original of this modern word means nothing but sensation or reaction to external stimuli; the sensibility implied by the word *aisthesis* is present in plants, animals, and man; it is what the biologist calls "irritability." These sensations, which are the passions or emotions of the psychologist, are the driving forces of instinct. Plato asks us to stand up like men against the pulls of pleasure and pain. For these, as the word passion implies, are pleasant and unpleasant experiences to which we are subjected; they are not acts on our part, but things done to us; only the judgment and appreciation of art is an activity. Aesthetic experience is of the skin you love to touch, or the fruit you love to taste. "Disinterested aesthetic contemplation" is a contradiction in terms and a pure non-sense. Art is an intellectual, not a physical virtue; beauty has to do with knowledge and goodness, of which it is precisely the attractive aspect; and since it is by its beauty that we are attracted to a work, its beauty is evidently a means to an end, and not itself the end of art; the purpose of art is always one of effective communication. The man of action, then, will not be content to substitute the knowledge of what he likes for an understanding judgment; he will not merely enjoy what he should use (those who merely enjoy we call 'aesthetes' rightly); it is not the aesthetic surfaces of works of art but the right reason or logic of the composition that will concern him. Now the composition of such works as we are exhibiting is not for aesthetic but for expressive reasons. The fundamental judgment is of the degree of the artist's success in giving clear expression to the theme of his work. In order to answer the question, Has the thing been well said? it will evidently be necessary for us to know what it was that was to be said. It is for this reason that in every discussion of works of art we must begin with their subject matter.



DISCOBOLUS, BRITISH MUSEUM. *Image: Public domain.*

We take account, in other words, of the *form* of the work. "Form" in the traditional philosophy does not mean tangible shape, but is synonymous with idea and even with soul; the soul, for example, is called the form of the body.[1] If there be a real unity of form and matter such as we expect in a work of art, the shape of its body will express its form, which is that of the pattern in the artist's mind, to which pattern or image he moulds the material shape. The degree of his success in this imitative operation is the measure of the work's perfection. So God is said to have called his creation good because it conformed to the intelligible pattern according to which he had worked; it is in the same way that the human workman still speaks of "trueing" his work. The formality of a work is its beauty, its informality its ugliness. If it is uninformed it will be shapeless. Everything must be in good form.

In the same way *art* is nothing tangible. We cannot call a painting "art." As the words "artefact" and "artificial" imply, the thing made is a work *of* art, made *by* art, but not itself art; the art remains in the artist and is the knowledge by which things are made. What is made according to the art is correct; what one makes as one likes may very well be awkward. We must not confuse taste with judgment, or loveliness with beauty, for as Augustine says, some people like deformities.

Works of art are generally *ornamental* or in some way ornamented. The Docent will sometimes discuss the history of ornament. In doing so he will explain that all the words that mean ornament or decoration in the four languages with which we are chiefly concerned, and probably in all languages, originally meant equipment; just as furnishing originally meant tables and chairs for use and not an interior decoration designed to keep up with the Joneses or to display our connoisseurship. We must not think of ornament as something added to an object which might have been ugly without it. The beauty of anything unadorned is not increased by ornament, but made more effective by it. Ornament is characterization; ornaments are attributes. We are often told, and not quite incorrectly, that primitive ornament had a magical value; it would be truer to say a metaphysical value, since it is generally by means of what we now call its decoration that a thing is ritually transformed and made to function spiritually as well as physically. The use of solar symbols in harness, for example, makes the steed the Sun in a likeness; solar patterns are appropriate to buttons because the Sun himself is the primordial fastening to which all things are attached by the thread of the Spirit; the egg and dart pattern was originally what it still is in India, a lotus petal moulding symbolic of a solid foundation. It is only when the symbolic values of ornament have been lost, that decoration becomes a sophistry, irresponsible to the content of the work. For Socrates, the distinction of beauty from use is logical, but not real, not objective; a thing can only be beautiful in the context for which it is designed.

Critics nowadays speak of an artist as *inspired* by external objects, or even by his material. This is a misuse of language that makes it impossible for the student to understand the earlier literature or art. "Inspiration" can never mean anything but the working of some spiritual force within you; the word is properly defined by Webster as a "supernatural divine influence." The Docent, if a rationalist, may wish to deny the possibility of inspiration; but he must not obscure the fact that from Homer onwards the word has been used always with one exact meaning, that of Dante, when he says that Love, that is to say the Holy Ghost, "inspires" him, and that he goes "setting the matter forth even as He dictates within me."

---

[1] Accordingly, the following sentence (taken from the *Journal of Aesthetics*, I, p. 29), "Walter Pater here seems to be in the right when he maintains that it is the sensuous element of art that is essentially artistic, from which follows his thesis that music, the most formal of the arts, is also the measure of all the arts" propounds a shocking non sequitur and can only confuse the unhappy student.

Nature, for example in the statement "Art imitates nature in her manner of operation," does not refer to any visible part of our environment; and when Plato says "according to nature," he does not mean "as things behave," but as they should behave, not "sinning against nature." The traditional Nature is Mother Nature, that principle by which things are "natured," by which, for example, a horse is horsey and by which a man is human. Art is an imitation of the nature of things, not of their appearances.

DETAIL FROM THE PARTHENON FRIEZE, BRITISH MUSEUM. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

In these ways we shall prepare our public to understand the pertinence of ancient works of art. If, on the other hand, we ignore the evidence and decide that the appreciation of art is merely an aesthetic experience, we shall evidently arrange our exhibition to appeal to the public's sensibilities. This is to assume that the public must be taught to feel. But the view that the public is a hard-hearted animal is strangely at variance with the evidence afforded by the kind of art that the public chooses for itself, without the help of museums. For we perceive that this public already knows what it likes. It likes fine colours and sounds and whatever is spectacular or personal or anecdotal or that flatters its faith in progress. This public loves its comfort. If we believe that the appreciation of art is an aesthetic experience we shall give the public what it wants.

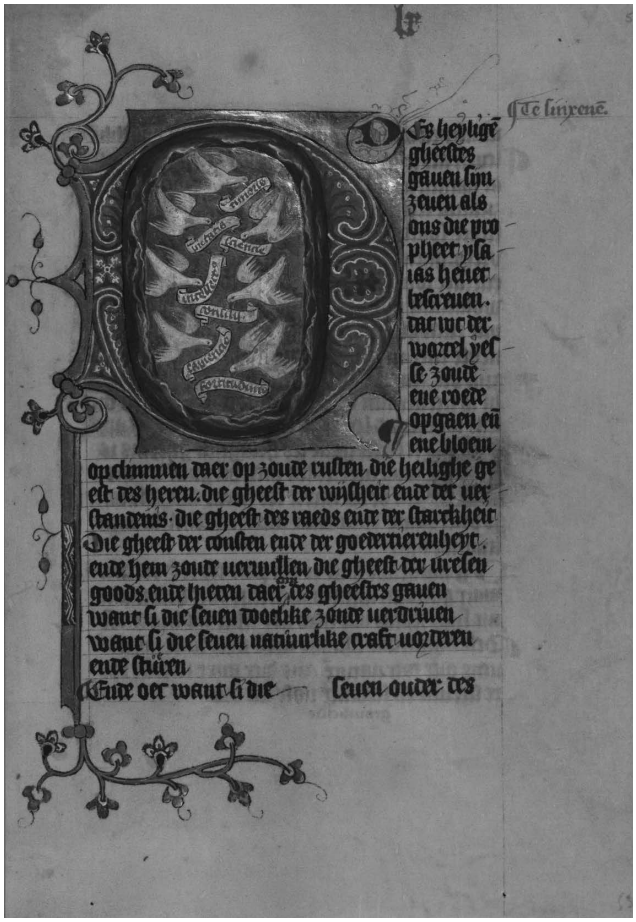
But it is not the function of a museum or of any educator to flatter and amuse the public. If the exhibition of works of art, like the reading of books, is to have a cultural value, i.e., if it is to nourish and make the best part of us grow, as plants are nourished and grow in suitable soils, it is to the understanding and not to fine feelings that an appeal must be made. In one respect the public is right; it always wants to know what a work of art is "about." "About what," as Plato asked, "does the sophist make us so eloquent?" Let us tell them what these works of art

are about and not merely tell them things about these works of art. Let us tell them the painful truth, that most of these works of art are about God, whom we never mention in polite society. Let us admit that if we are to offer an education in agreement with the innermost nature and eloquence of the exhibits themselves, that this will not be an education in sensibility, but an education in philosophy, in Plato's and Aristotle's sense of the word, for whom it means ontology and theology and the map of life, and a wisdom to be applied to everyday matters. Let us recognize that nothing will have been accomplished unless men's lives are affected and their values changed by what we have to show. Taking this point of view, we shall break down the social and economic distinction of fine from applied art; we shall no longer divorce anthropology from art, but recognize that the anthropological approach to art is a much closer approach than the aesthetician's; we shall no longer pretend that the content of the folk arts is anything but metaphysical. We shall teach our public to demand above all things lucidity in works of art.

For example, we shall place a painted Neolithic potsherd or Indian punch-marked coin side by side with a Mediaeval representation of the Seven gifts of the Spirit, and make it clear by means of labels or Docents or both that the reason of all these compositions is to state the universal doctrine of the "Seven Rays of the Sun." We shall put together an Egyptian representation of the Sundoor guarded by the Sun himself and the figure of the Pantokrator in the oculus of a Byzantine dome, and explain that these doors by which one breaks out of the universe are the same as the hole in the roof by which an American Indian enters or leaves his *hogan*, the same as the hole in the centre of a Chinese *pi*, the same as the luffer of the Siberian Shaman's *yurt*, and the same as the foramen of the roof above the altar of Jupiter Terminus; explaining that all these constructions are reminders of the Door-god, of One who could say "I am the door." Our study of the history of architecture will make it clear that "harmony" was first of all a carpenter's word meaning "joinery," and that it was inevitable, equally in the Greek and the Indian traditions that the Father and the Son should have been "carpenters," and show that this must have been a doctrine of Neolithic, or rather "Hylic," antiquity. We shall sharply distinguish the "visual education" that only tells us what things look like (leaving us to *react* as we must) from the iconography of things that are themselves invisible (but by which we can be guided how to *act*).

It may be that the understanding of the ancient works of art and of the conditions under which they were produced will undermine our loyalty to contemporary art and contemporary methods of manufacture. This will be the proof of our success as educators; we must not shrink from the truth that all education implies revaluation. Whatever is made only to give pleasure is, as Plato put it, a toy, for the delectation of that part of us that passively submits to emotional storms; whereas the education to be derived from works of art should be an education in the love of what is ordered and the dislike of what is disordered. We have proposed to educate the public to ask first of all these two questions of a work of art, Is it true? or beautiful? (whichever word you prefer) and what good use does it serve? We shall hope to have demonstrated by our exhibition that the human value of anything made is determined by the coincidence in it of beauty and utility, significance and aptitude; that artifacts of this sort can only be made by free and responsible workmen, free to consider only the good of the work to be done and individually responsible for its quality: and that the manufacture of "art" in studios coupled with an artless "manufacture" in factories represents a reduction of the standard of living to subhuman levels.

These are not personal opinions, but only the logical deductions of a lifetime spent in the handling of works of art, the observation of men at work, and the study of the universal philosophy of art from which philosophy our own "aesthetic" is only a temporally provincial aberration. It is for the museum militant to maintain with Plato that "we cannot give the name of art to anything irrational."



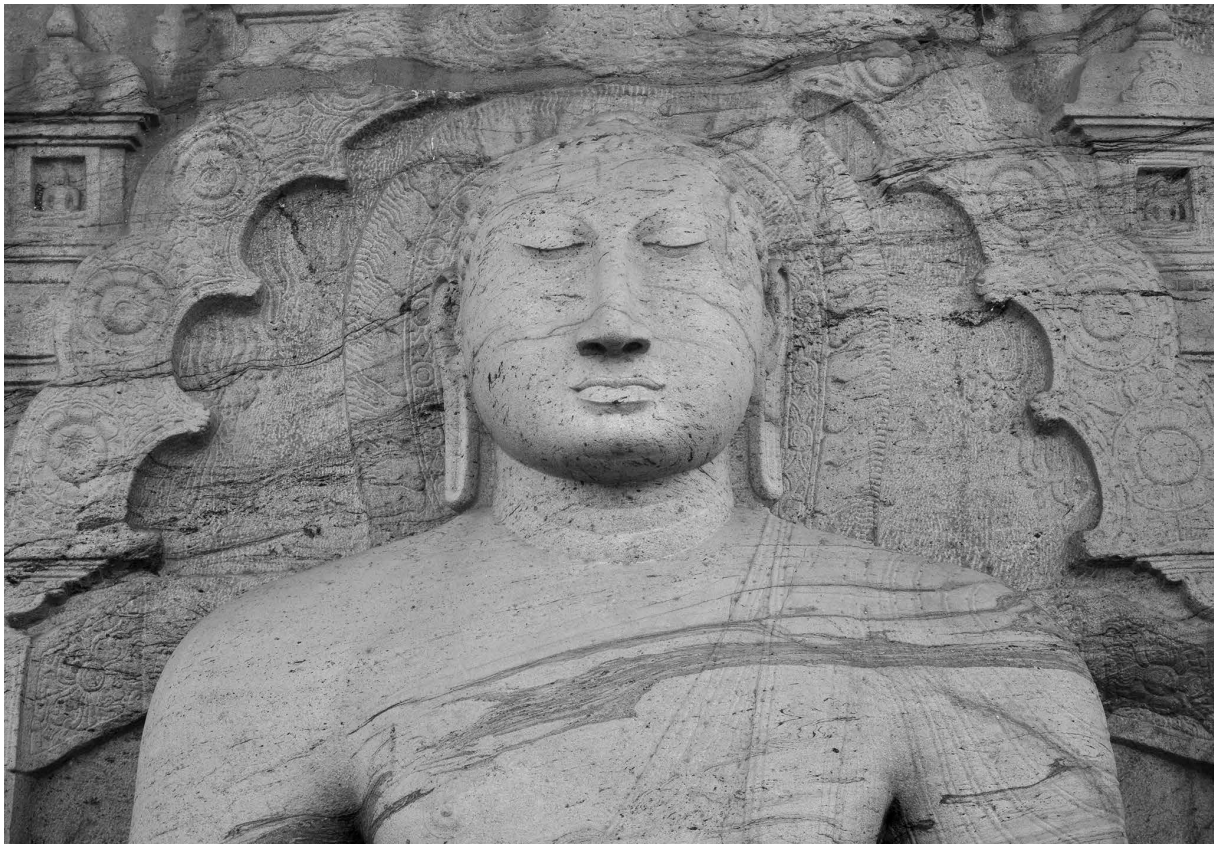
SEVEN GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, folio from Walters manuscript W.171 (15th century).
Image: Dirc van Delf, Walters Art Museum. Public domain.

Chapter II. The Christian and Oriental, or true philosophy of art

Cum artifex… tum vir, Cicero, *Pro Quintio*, XXV. 78.

I have called this lecture the "Christian and Oriental" philosophy of art because we are considering a catholic or universal doctrine, with which the humanistic philosophies of art can neither be compared nor conciled, but only contrasted; and "True" philosophy both because of its authority and because of its consistency. It will not be out of place to say that I believe what I have to expound: for the study of any subject can live only to the extent that the student himself stands or falls by the life of the subject studied; the interdependence of faith and understanding[2] applying as much to the theory of art as to any other doctrine. In the text of what follows I shall not distinguish Christian from Oriental, nor cite authorities by chapter and verse: I have done this elsewhere, and am hardly afraid that anyone will imagine that I am propounding any views that I regard as my own except in the sense that I have made them my own. It is not the personal view of anyone that I shall try to explain, but that doctrine of art which is intrinsic to the *Philosophia Perennis* and can be recognized wherever it has not been forgotten that "culture" originates in work and not in play. If I use the language of Scholasticism rather than a Sanskrit vocabulary, it is because I am talking English, and must use that kind of English in which ideas can be clearly expressed.

[2] *Crede ut inielligas, intellige ut credos.* "Through faith we understand" (Jas. V. 15). "The nature of faith… consists in knowledge alone" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.* II-II. 47. 13 ad 2).



BUDDHA, POLONNARUWA. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

Man's activity consists in either a making or a doing. Both of these aspects of the active life depend for their correction upon the contemplative life. The making of things is governed by art, the doing of things by prudence.[3] An absolute distinction of art from prudence is made for purposes of logical understanding:[4] but while we make this distinction, we must not forget that the man is a whole man, and cannot be justified as such merely by what he makes; the artist works "by art and willingly."[5] Even supposing that he avoids artistic sin, it is still essential to him as a man to have had a right will, and so to have avoided moral sin.[6] We cannot absolve the artist from this moral responsibility by laying it upon the patron, or only if the artist be in some way compelled; for the artist is normally either his own patron, deciding what is to be made, or formally and freely consents to the will of the patron, which becomes his own as soon as the commission has been accepted, after which the artist is only concerned with the good of the work to be done[7]: if any other motive affects him in his work he has no longer any proper place in the social order. Manufacture is for use and not for profit. The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man who is not an artist in some field, every man without a

[3] *Ars nihil quod recta ratio factibilium. Omnis applicatio rationis reciae ad aliquid factibile pertinet ad artem; sed ad prudentiam non pertinet nisi applicatio rationis rectae ad ca de quibuis est consilium. Prudentia est recta ratio agibilium.* (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.* I-II. 57. 5; II-II. 47. 2; IV. 3. 7 and 8. Aristotle *Ethic.* VI. 5).

[4] Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV. 3. 7.

[5] *Per artem et ex voluntate* (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I. 45. 6, cf. 1. 14. 8c).

[6] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I-II. 57. 5: II-II. 21. 2 ad 2; 47. 8; 167.2; and 169. 2 ad 4.

[7] Ib., I. 91. 3; and I-II. 57. 3 ad 2 ("It is evident that a craftsman is inclined by justice, which rectifies his will, to do his work faithfully").

vocation, is an idler. The kind of artist that a man should be, carpenter, painter, lawyer, farmer or priest, is determined by his own nature, in other words by his nativity. The only man who has a right to abstain from all constructive activities is the monk who has also surrendered all those uses that depend on things that can be made and is no longer a member of society. No man has a right to any social status who is not an artist.

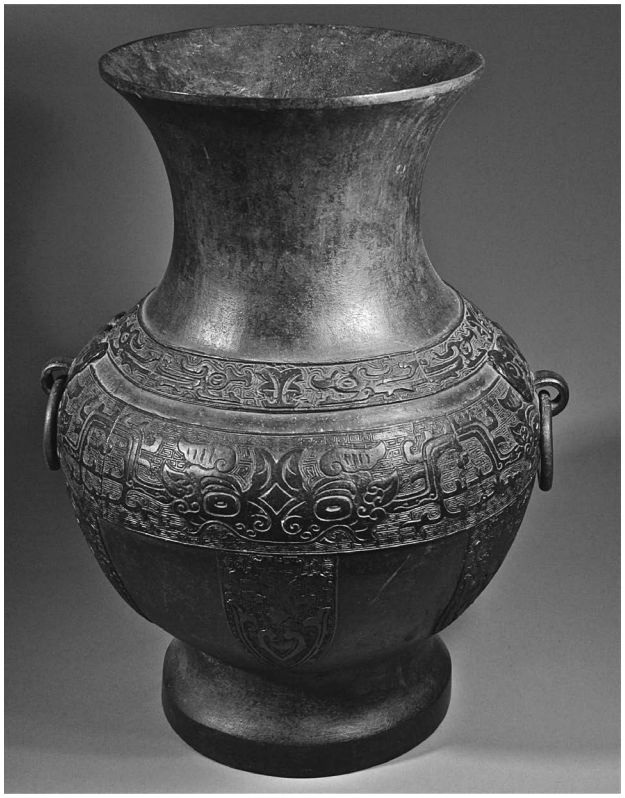
We are thus introduced at the outset to the problem of the use of art and the worth of the artist to a serious society. This use is in general the good of man, the good of society, and in particular the occasional good of an individual requirement. All of these goods correspond to the desires of men: so that what is actually made in a given society is a key to the governing conception of the purpose of life in that society, which can be judged by its works in that sense, and better than in any other way. There can be no doubt about the purpose of art in a traditional society: when it has been decided that such and such a thing should be made, it is *by art* that it can be properly made. There can be no good use without art[8]: that is, no good use if things are not properly made. The artist is producing a utility, something to be used. Mere pleasure is not a use from this point of view. An illustration can be given in our taste for Shaker or other simple furniture, or for Chinese bronzes or other abstract arts of exotic origin, which are not foods but sauces to our palate. Our "aesthetic" appreciation, essentially sentimental because it is just what the word "aesthetic" means, a kind of feeling rather than an understanding, has little or nothing to do with their *raison d'être*. If they please our taste and are fashionable, this only means that we have over-eaten of other foods, not that we are such as those who made these things and made "good use" of them. To "enjoy" what does not correspond to any vital needs of our own and what we have not verified in our own life can only be described as an indulgence. It is luxurious to make mantelpiece ornaments of the artefacts of what we term uncivilised or superstitious peoples, whose culture we think of as much inferior to our own, and which our touch has destroyed: the attitude, however ignorant, of those who used to call these things "abominations" and "beastly devices of the heathen" was a much healthier one. It is the same if we read the scriptures of any tradition, or authors such as Dante or Ashvaghosha who tell us frankly that they wrote with other than "aesthetic" ends in view; or if we listen to sacrificial music for the ears' sake only. We have a right to be pleased by these things only through our understanding use of them. We have goods enough of our own "perceptible to the senses": if the nature of our civilisation be such that we lack a sufficiency of "intelligible goods," we had better remake ourselves than divert the intelligible goods of others to the multiplication of our own aesthetic satisfactions.

In the philosophy that we are considering, only the contemplative and active lives are reckoned human. The life of pleasure only, one of which the end is pleasure, is subhuman; every animal "knows what it likes," and seeks for it. This is not an exclusion of pleasure from life as if pleasure were wrong in itself, it is an exclusion of the pursuit of pleasure thought of as a "diversion," and apart from "life." It is in life itself, in "proper operation," that pleasure arises naturally, and this very pleasure is said to "perfect the operation" itself.[9] In the same way in the case of the pleasures of use or the understanding of use.

[8] Ib. I-II. 57. 3. ad 1.

[9] Ib. I-II. 33- 4.

SHAKER FURNITURE.
Image: Public domain.



CHINESE BRONZE.
Image: Public domain.

We need hardly say that from the traditional point of view there could hardly be found a stronger condemnation of the present social order than in the fact that the man at work is no longer doing what he likes best, but rather what he must, and in the general belief that a man can only be really happy when he "gets away" and is at play. For even if we mean by "happy" to enjoy the "higher things of life," it is a cruel error to pretend that this can be done at leisure if it has not been done at work. For "the man devoted to his own vocation finds perfection. … That man whose prayer and praise of God are in the doing of his own work perfects himself."[10] It is this way of life that our civilization denies to the vast majority of men, and in this respect that it is notably inferior to even the most primitive or savage societies with which it can be contrasted.

Manufacture, the practise of an art, is thus not only the production of utilities but in the highest possible sense the education of men. It can never be, unless for the sentimentalist who lives for pleasure, an "art for art's sake," that is to say a production of "fine" or useless objects only that we may be delighted by "fine colours and sounds"; neither can we speak of our traditional art as a "decorative" art, for to think of decoration as its essence would be the same as to think of millinery as the essence of costume or of upholstery as the essence of furniture. The greater part of our boasted "love of art" is nothing but the enjoyment of comfortable feelings. One had better be an artist than go about "loving art": just as one had better be a botanist than go about "loving the pines."

In our traditional view of art, in folk-art, Christian and Oriental art, there is no essential distinction of a fine and useless art from a utilitarian craftsmanship.[11] There is no distinction in principle of orator from carpenter,[12] but only a distinction of things well and truly made from things not so made and of what is beautiful from what is ugly in terms of formality and informality. But, you may object, do not some things serve the uses of the spirit or intellect, and others those of the body; is not a symphony nobler than a bomb, an icon than a fireplace? Let us first of all beware of confusing art with ethics. "Noble" is an ethical value, and pertains to the a priori censorship of what ought or ought not to be made at all. The judgment of works of art from this point of view is not merely legitimate, but essential to a good life and the welfare of humanity. But it is not a judgment of the work of art as such. The bomb, for example, is only bad as a work of art if it fails to destroy and kill to the required extent. The distinction of artistic from moral sin which is so sharply drawn in Christian philosophy can be recognized again in Confucius, who speaks of a Succession Dance as being "at the same time perfect beauty and perfect goodness," and of the War Dance as being "perfect

---

[10] *Bhagavad Gītā,* XVIII. 45-46, *sve sve karmany-abhiratah samsiddham labhate narah,* etc. "And if man takes upon him in all its fullness the proper office of his own vocation (*curam propriam diligentiae suae*), it is brought about that both he and the world are the means of right order to one another… For since the world is God's handiwork, he who maintains and heightens its beauty by his tendance (*diligentia*) is cooperating with the will of God, when he by the aid of his bodily strength, and by his work and his administration (*opere curaque*) composes any figure that he forms in accordance with the divine intention (*cum speciem, quam ille intentione formavit… componit*). What shall be his reward?... that when we are retired from office (*emeritos*)… God will restore us to the nature of our better part, that is divine " (Hermetica, *Asclepius*, I. 10, 12). In this magnificent definition of the artist's function, it may be noted that *cura propria* corresponds to the *svakarma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and that *diligentia* (from *diligo*, to love) becomes "tendance" in precisely the same way that *ratah* (from *ram*, to take delight in) becomes "intent upon" or "devoted to." It is the man who while at work is doing what he likes best that can be called "cultured."

[11] *Nec oportet, si liberates artes sunt nobiliores, quod magis eis conveniat ratio artis* (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I-II. 57. 3 ad 3). "The productions of all arts are kinds of poetry and their craftsmen are all poets" (Plato, *Symposium*, 205 c).

[12] Plato, *Gorgias*, 503. In Rigveda IX. 112 the work of the carpenter, doctor, fletcher and sacrificial priest are all alike treated as ritual "operations," or "rites" (*vrata*).

beauty but not perfect goodness."[13] It will be obvious that there can be no moral judgment of art itself, since it is not an act but a kind of knowledge or power by which things can be well made, whether for good or evil use: the art by which utilities are produced cannot be judged morally, because it is not a kind of willing but a kind of knowing.

Beauty in this philosophy is the attractive power of perfection.[14] There are perfections or beauties of different kinds of things or in different contexts, but we cannot arrange these beauties in a hierarchy, as we can the things themselves: we can no more say that a cathedral as such is "better" than a barn as such than we can say that a rose as such is "better" than a skunk cabbage as such; each is beautiful to the extent that it is what it purports to be, and in the same proportion good.[15] To say that a perfect cathedral is a greater work of art than a perfect barn is either to assume that there can be degrees of perfection, or to assume that the artist who made the barn was really trying to make a cathedral. We see that this is absurd; and yet it is just in this way that whoever believes that art "progresses" contrasts the most primitive with the most advanced (or decadent) styles of art, as though the primitive had been trying to do what we try to do, and had drawn like that while really trying to draw as we draw; and that is to impute artistic sin to the primitive (any sin being defined as a departure from the order to the end). So far from this, the only test of excellence in a work of art is the measure of the artist's actual success in making what was intended.

One of the most important implications of this position is that beauty is objective, residing in the artefact and not in the spectator, who may or may not be qualified to recognize it.[16] The work of art is good of its kind, or not good at all; its excellence is as independent of our reactions to its aesthetic surfaces as it is of our moral reaction to its thesis. Just as the artist conceives the form of the thing to be made only after he has consented to the patron's will, so we, if we are to judge as the artist could, must already have consented to the existence of the object before we can be free to compare its actual shape with its prototype in the artist. We must not condescend to "primitive" works by saying "That was before they knew anything about anatomy, or perspective," or call their work "unnatural" because of its formality: we must have learnt that these primitives did not feel our kind of interest in anatomy, nor intend to tell us what things are like; we must have learnt that it is because they had something definite to say that their art is more abstract, more intellectual, and less than our own a matter of mere reminiscence or emotion. If the mediaeval artist's constructions corresponded to a certain way of thinking, it is certain that we cannot understand them except to the extent that we can identify ourselves with this way of thinking. "The greater the ignorance of modern times, the deeper grows the darkness of the Middle Ages."[17] The Middle Ages and the East are mysterious to us only because we know, not what to think, but what we like to think. As humanists and individualists it flatters us to think that art is an expression of personal feelings and sentiments, preference and free choice, unfettered by the sciences of mathematics and cosmology. But mediaeval art was not like ours "free" to ignore truth.

---

[13] *Analects*, III. 25.

[14] Plato, *Cratylus*, 416 c; Dionysius Areopagiticus, *De div. nom.* IV. 5; Ulrich of Strassburg, *De pulchro*; *Lañkâdvatāra Sūtra*, II. 118-9, etc.

[15] *Ens et bonum convertuntur.*

[16] Witelo, *Perspectiva*, IV. 148-9. Baeumker, *Witelo*, p. 639, fails to see that Witelo's recognition of the subjectivity of *taste* in no way contradicts his enunciation of the objectivity of beauty. Taste is a matter of the affections; beauty one of judgment, which is "the perfection of art" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, II-II. 47. 8.), where there is no room for preferences, art being comparable to science in its certainty, and differing from science only in being ordered to operation.

[17] Hasak, M., *Kirchenbau des Mittelalters*, *2nd ed.*, *Leipzig*, 1913, p. 268.

For them, *Ars sine scientia nihil*:[18] by "science," we mean of course, the reference of all particulars to unifying principles, not the "laws" of statistical prediction.

The perfection of the object is something of which the critic cannot judge, its beauty something that he cannot feel, if he has not like the original artist made himself such as the thing itself should be; it is in this way that "criticism is reproduction" and "judgment the perfection of art." The "appreciation of art" must not be confused with a psycho-analysis of our likes and dislikes, dignified by the name of "aesthetic reactions": "aesthetic pathology is an excrescence upon a genuine interest in art which seems to be peculiar to civilized peoples."[19] The study of art, if it is to have any cultural value will demand two far more difficult operations than this, in the first place an understanding and acceptance of the whole point of view from which the necessity for the work arose, and in the second place a bringing to life in ourselves of the form in which the artist conceived the work and by which he judged it. The student of art, if he is to do more than accumulate facts, must also sacrifice himself: the wider the scope of his study in time and space, the more must he cease to be a provincial, the more he must universalize himself, whatever may be his own temperament and training. He must assimilate whole cultures that seem strange to him, and must also be able to elevate his own levels of reference from those of observation to that of the vision of ideal forms. He must rather love than be curious about the subject of his study. It is just because so much is demanded that the study of "art" can have a cultural value, that is to say may become a means of growth. How often our college courses require of the student much less than this!

A need, or "indigence" as Plato calls it, is thus the first cause of the production of a work of art. We spoke of spiritual and physical needs, and said that works of art could *not* be classified accordingly. If this is difficult for us to admit, it is because we have forgotten what we are, what "man" in this philosophy denotes, a spiritual as well as a psychophysical being. We are therefore well contented with a functional art, good of its kind insofar as goodness does not interfere with profitable saleability, and can hardly understand how things to be used can also have a meaning. It is true that what we have come to understand by "man," viz., "the reasoning and mortal animal,"[20] can live by "bread alone," and that bread alone, make no mistake about it, is therefore a good; to function is the very least that can be expected of any work of art. "Bread alone" is the same thing as a "merely functional art." But when it is said that man does not live by bread alone but "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,"[21] it is the whole man that is meant. The "words of God" are precisely those ideas and principles that can be expressed whether verbally or visually by art; the words or visual forms in which they are expressed are not merely sensible but also significant. To separate as we do the functional from the significant art, applied from a so-called fine art, is to require of the vast majority of men to live by the merely functional art, a "bread alone" that is nothing but the "husks that the swine did eat." The insincerity and inconsistency of the

---

[18] Said by the Parisian Master Jean Mignot in connection with the building of the cathedral of Milan in 1398, in answer to the opinion *scientia est unum et ars aliud. Scientia reddit opus pulchrum.* St. Bonaventura, *De reductione artium ad theologiam* 13. *Nam qui canil quod non sapil, diffinitur bestia… Non verum facil ars cantorem, sed documentum*, Guido d'Arezzo. The actual distinction of science from art is drawn by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Sum. Theol.*, I. 14. 8 and I-II. 57. 3 ad 3: both have to do with cognition, but whereas science has in view a knowledge only, art is ordered to an external operation. It will be seen that the greater part of modern science is what the medieval philosopher would have called an art, the engineer, for example, being essentially an artist, despite the fact that "without science art would be nothing"—but guesswork. "The antithesis between science and art is a false one, maintained only by the incurably, if enjoyably, sentimental" (Professor Crane Brinton, in *The American Scholar*, 1938, p. 152).

[19] Firth, R., *Art and life in New Guinea*, 1936, p. 9.

[20] Boethus, *De consol.* I. 6. 45.

[21] Math. IV. 4.

whole position is to be seen in the fact that we do not expect of the "significant" art that it be significant of anything, nor from the "fine" art anything but an "aesthetic" pleasure; if the artist himself declares that his work is charged with meaning and exists for the sake of this meaning, we call it an irrelevance, but decide that he may have been an artist in spite of it.[22] In other words, if the merely functional arts are the husks, the fine arts are the tinsel of life, and art for us has no significance whatever.

Primitive man, despite the pressure of his struggle for existence, knew nothing of such merely functional arts. The whole man is naturally a metaphysician, and only later on a philosopher and psychologist, a systematist. His reasoning is by analogy, or in other words by means of an "adequate symbolism." As a person rather than an animal he knows immortal through mortal things.[23] That the "invisible things of God" (that is to say, the ideas or eternal reasons of things, by which we know what they ought to be like) are to be seen in "the things that are made"[24] applied for him not only to the things that God had made but to those that he made himself. He could not have thought of meaning as something that might or might not be added to useful objects at will. Primitive man made no real distinction of sacred from secular: his weapons, clothing, vehicles and house were all of them imitations of divine prototypes, and were to him even more what they meant than what they were in themselves; he made them this "more" by incantation and by rites.[25] Thus he fought with thunderbolts, put on celestial garments, rode in a chariot of fire, saw in his roof the starry sky, and in himself more than "this man" So-and-so. All these things belonged to the "Lesser Mysteries" of the crafts, and to the knowledge of "Companions." Nothing of it remains to us but the transformation of the bread in sacrificial rites, and in the reference to its prototype of the honour paid to an icon.

---

[22] Dante, *Ep. ad Can. Grand.* 15, 16: 2. "The whole work was undertaken not for a speculative but a practical end… The purpose of the whole is to remove those who are living in this life from the state of wretchedness and to lead them to the state of blessedness." Ashvaghosha, *Saundârananda*, colophon: "This poem, pregnant with the burden of Liberation, has been composed by me in the poetic manner, not for the sake of giving pleasure, but for the sake of giving peace, and to win over other-minded hearers. If I have dealt in it with subjects other than that of Liberation, that pertains to what is proper to poetry, to make it tasty, just as when honey is mixed with a sour medicinal herb to make it drinkable. Since I beheld the world for the most part given over to objects of sense and disliking to consider Liberation, I have spoken here of the Principle in the garb of poetry, holding that Liberation is the primary value. Whoever understands this, let him retain what is set forth, and not the play of fancy, just as only the gold is cared for when it has been separated from the ore and dross." "Dante and Milton claimed to be didactic; we consider the claim a curious weakness in masters of style whose true but unconscious mission was to regale us with 'aesthetic emotion'." (Walter Shewring in *Integration*, II. 2, Oct.-Nov., 1938, p. 11).
Dante's "practical purpose" is precisely what Guido d'Arezzo means by *usus* in the lines,

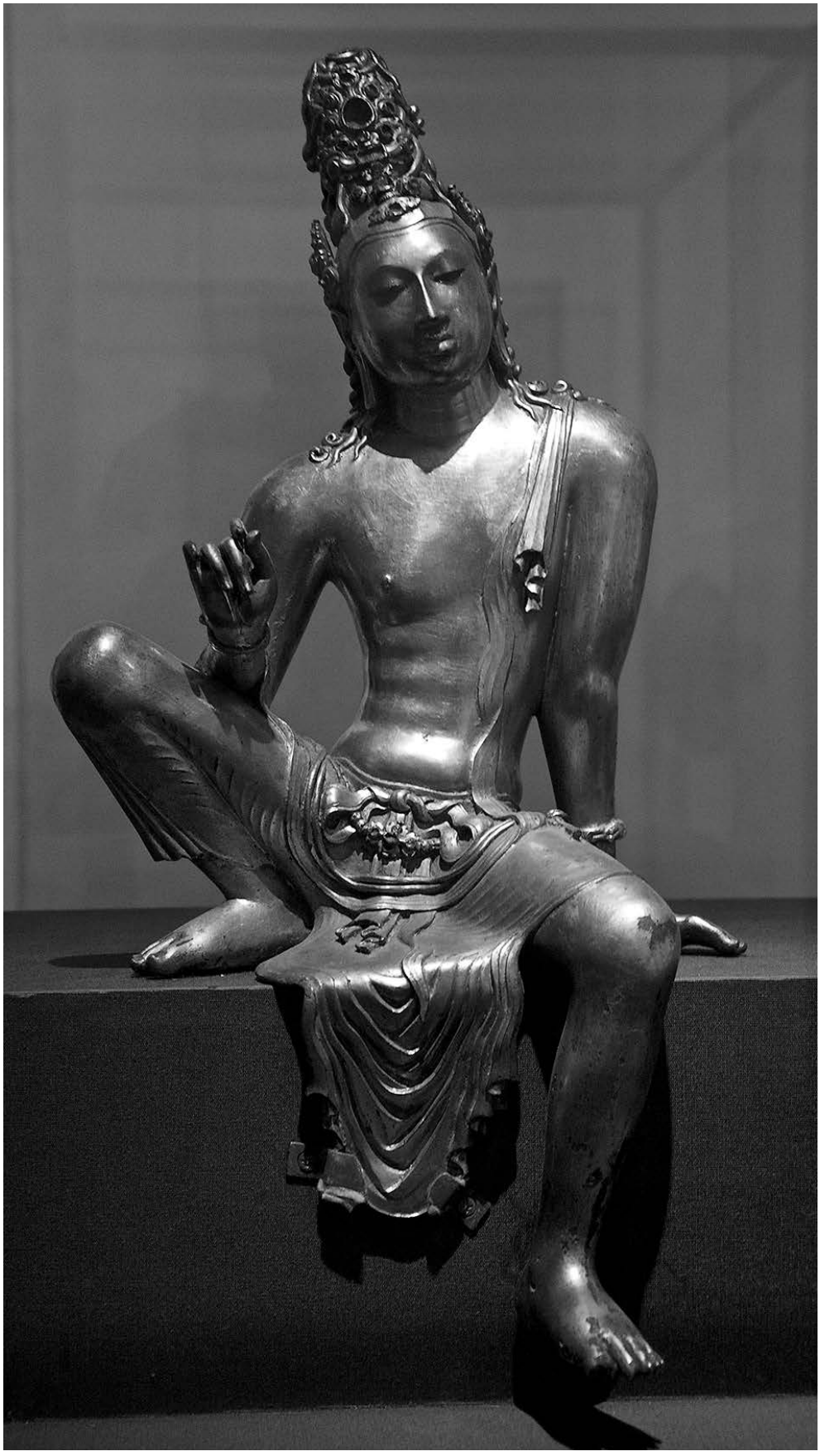
> Musicorum et cantorum magna est distancia: Isti dicunt, illi sciunt quae componit musica. Nam qui canit quod non sapit, diffinitur bestia; Bestia non cantor qui non canit arte, sed usu; Non verum facit ars cantorem, sed documentum.

I.e. "Between the 'virtuosi' and the 'singers' the difference is very great: the former merely vocalize, the latter understand the music's composition. He who sings of what he savours not is termed a 'brute'; no 'brute' is he who sings, not merely artfully, but usefully; it is not art alone, but the theme that makes the real 'singer'."
Professor Lang, in his *Music and Western Civilisation*, p. 87, misunderstands the penultimate line, which he renders by "A brute by rote and not by art produces melody," a version that ignores the double negative and misinterprets *usu*, which is not "by habit" but "usefully" or "profitably," ὠφελιμως. The thought is like St. Augustine's, "not to enjoy what we should use," and Plato's, for whom the Muses are. given us "that we may use them intellectually (μετα νου), not as a source of irrational pleasure (εφ'ηδονην α'λογον) but as an aid to the revolution of the soul within us, of which the harmony was lost at birth, to help in restoring it to order and concent with its Self" (*Timaeus* 47 D, cf. 90 D). The words *sciunt quae componit musica* are reminiscent of Quintillian's *Docti rationem componendi intelligunt, etiam indocti voluptatem* (IX. 4. 116), based on and almost a literal translation of Plato, *Timaeus* 80 B. *Sapit*, as in *sapientia*, "scientia cum amore."

[23] *Aitareya Āraṅyaka*, II. 3. 2: *Aitareya Brāhmana*, VII. 10; *Kaṭha Upanishad*, II. 10 b.

[24] Rom. I. 20. St. Thomas Aquinas repeatedly compares the human and divine architects: God's knowledge is to his creation as is the artist's knowledge of art to the things made by art (*Sum. Theol.* I. 14. 8: I. 17. 1; I. 22. 2; I. 45. 6; I-II. 13. 2 ad 3).

[25] Cf. "Le symbolisme de l'épée" in Études Traditionelles 43, Jan., 1938.



BRONZE BUDDHA, SRI LANKA. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

The Indian actor prepares for his performance by prayer. The Indian architect is often spoken of as visiting heaven and there making notes of the prevailing forms of architecture, which he imitates here below. All traditional architecture, in fact, follows a cosmic pattern.[26] Those who think of their house as only a "machine to live in" should judge their point of view by that of Neolithic man, who also lived in a house, but a house that embodied a cosmology. We are more than sufficiently provided with overheating systems: we should have found his house uncomfortable; but let us not forget that he identified the column of smoke that rose from his hearth to disappear from view through a hole in the roof with the Axis of the Universe, saw in this luffer an image of the Heavenly Door, and in his hearth the Navel of the Earth, formulae that we at the present day are hardly capable of understanding; we, for whom "such knowledge as is not empirical is meaningless."[27] Most of the things that Plato called "ideas" are only "superstitions" to us.

To have seen in his artefacts nothing but the things themselves, and in the myth a mere anecdote would have been a mortal sin, for this would have been the same as to see in oneself nothing but the "reasoning and mortal animal," to recognize only "this man," and never the "form of humanity." It is just insofar as we do now see only the things as they are in themselves, and only ourselves as we are in ourselves, that we have killed the metaphysical man and shut ourselves up in the dismal cave of functional and economic determinism. Do you begin to see now what I meant by saying that works of art consistent with the *Philosophia Perennis* cannot be divided into the categories of the utilitarian and the spiritual, but pertain to both worlds, functional and significant, physical and metaphysical?[28]

II

The artist has now accepted his commission and is expected to practise his art. It is by this art that he knows both what the thing should be like, and how to impress this form upon the available material, so that it may be informed with what is actually alive in himself. His operation will be twofold, "free" and "servile," theoretical and operative, inventive and imitative. It is in terms of the freely invented formal cause that we can best explain how the pattern of the thing to be made or arranged, this essay or this house for example, is known. It is this cause by which the actual shape of the thing can best be understood; because "similitude is with respect to the form"[29] of the thing to be made, and not with respect to the shape or appearance of some other and already existing thing: so that in saying "imitative" we are by no means saying "naturalistic." "Art imitates nature in her manner of operation,"[30] that is to say God in his manner of creation, in which he does not repeat himself or exhibit deceptive illusions in which the species of things are confused.

---

[26] Lethaby, W. R., *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, London, 1892: my "Symbolism of the Dome," *Indian Historical Qtly.* XVI, 1938, pp. 1-56.

[27] Keith, A. B., *Aitareya Araṅyaka*, p. 42. "The first principle of democracy... is that no one knows the final truth about anything" (W. H. Auden, in the *Nation*, March 25, 1939, p. 353). "For there is a rancour that is contemptuous of immortality, and will not let us recognize what is divine in us" (Hermetica, *Asclepius*, I. 12 b).

[28] "To make the primordial truth intelligible, to make the unheard audible, to enunciate the primordial word, to represent the archetype, such is the task of art, or it is not art" (Andrae, W., "Keramik im Dienste der Weisheit" in *Berichte der Deutschen Keramischen Gesellschaft*, XVII, Dec, 1936, p. 623): but "The sensible forms, in which there was at first a polar balance of the physical and metaphysical, have been more and more voided of content on their way down to us, and so we say 'This is an ornament'" (Andrae, W., *Die ionische Saüle, Bauform oder Symbol?* 1933, p. 65).

[29] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I. 5. 4: St. Basil, *De Spit. Sanct.* XVIII. 45. "The first perfection of a thing consists in its very form, from which it receives its species" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *ib.* III. 29. 2 c). The form that is the perfection of the thing (its exemplary form) is the standard by which the actual form of the thing itself is judged: in other words, it is by their ideas that we know what things ought to be like (St. Augustine, *De Trin.*, IX. 6, 11), and not by any observation or recollection of already existing things. Our authors commonly speak of the arch as an illustration of an exemplary form; thus St. Augustine, *ib.*, and St. Bonaventura, *II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q ad 3, 4 *Agens per intellectum producit per formas, quae sunt aliquid rei, sed idea in mente sicut artifex producit arcam.*

[30] Natura naturans, Creatrix Universalis, Deus, from whom all natured things derive their specific aspect.

How is the form of the thing to be made evoked? This is the kernel of our doctrine, and the answer can be made in a great many different ways. The art of God is the Son "through whom all things are made";[31] in the same way the art in the human artist is his child through which some one thing is to be made. The intuition-expression of an imitable form is an intellectual conception born of the artist's wisdom, just as the eternal reasons are born of the Eternal Wisdom.[32] The image arises naturally in his spirit, not by way of an aimless inspiration, but in purposeful and vital operation, "by a word *conceived* in intellect."[33] It is this filial image, and not a retinal reflection or the memory of a retinal reflection, that he imitates in the material, just as at the creation of the world "God's will beheld that beauteous world and imitated it,"[34] that is to say impressed on primary matter a "world-picture" already "painted by the spirit on the canvas of the spirit."[35] All things are to be seen in this eternal mirror better than in any other way:[36] for there the artist's models are all alive and more alive than those that are posed when we are taught in schools of art to draw "from life." If shapes of natural origin often enter into the artist's compositions, this does not mean that they pertain to his art, but they are the material in which the form is clothed; just as the poet uses sounds, which are not his thesis, but only means. The artist's spirals are the forms of life, and not only of this or that life; the form of the crozier was not suggested by that of a fern frond. The superficial resemblances of art to "nature" are accidental; and when they are deliberately sought, the art is already in its anecdotage. It is not by the looks of existing things, but as Augustine says, by their ideas, that we know what we proposed to make should be like.[37] He who does not see more vividly and clearly than this perishing mortal eye can see, does not see creatively at all;[38] "The city can never otherwise be happy unless it is drawn by those painters who follow a divine original."[39]

What do we mean by "invention"? The entertainment of ideas; the intuition of things as they are on higher than empirical levels of reference. We must digress to explain that in using the terms intuition and expression as the equivalents of conception or generation, we are not thinking either of Bergson or of Croce. By "intuition" we mean with Augustine an intellection extending beyond the range of dialectic to that of the eternal reasons[40]—a contemplation, therefore, rather than a thinking: by "expression" we mean with Bonaventura a begotten rather than a calculated likeness.[41]

---

[31] "The perfect Word, not wanting in anything, and, so to speak, the art of God" (St. Augustine, *De Trin.* VI. 10). "Der sun ist ein verstentnisse des vaters und ist bildener (architect) aller dinge in sinem vater" (Eckhart, Pfeiffer, p. 391). "Through him all things were made" (John I. 3).

[32] *Omnes enim rationes exemplares concipuntur ab aeterno in vulva aeternae sapientiae seu utero*, St. Bonaventura, *In Hexaem*, coll, 20, n. 5. The conception of an imitable form is a "vital operation," that is to say, a generation.

[33] *Per verbum in intellectu conceptum*, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I. 45. 6c.

[34] *Hermetica*, *Lib.* I. 86, cf. Boethius, *De consol.* III, "Holding the world in His mind, and forming it into His image." "The divine essence, whereby the divine intellect understands, is a sufficient likeness of all things that are" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I. 14. 12c). Cf. my "Vedic Exemplarism" in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, I, April, 1936.

[35] *Śaṅkarācārya, Svātmanirūpana*, 95. On the world-picture as an actual form see Vimuktatman, as cited by Das Gupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, II. 203. The perfection of judgment is represented in Genesis I. 31, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good." This judgment can only have been with respect to the ideal pattern pre-existent in the divine intellect, not with reference to any external standard.

[36] St. Augustine, as cited by Bonaventura, *I Sent.* d. 35, a. unic, q. 1, fund. 3 see Bissen, *L'exemplarisme divin selon St. Bonaventura*, 1929, p. 39.

[37] St. Augustine, *De Trin.* IX. 6, II; see Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de St. Augustin.*, 1931, p. 121.

[38] William Blake.

[39] Plato, *Republic*, 500 E.

[40] Gilson, *loc. cit.*, p. 121, note 2.

[41] St. Bonaventura's "expressionism" see Bissen *loc. cit.*, pp. 92 y 93.

It may be asked, How can the artist's primary act of imagination be spoken of as "free" if in fact he is working to some formula, specification or iconographic prescription, or even drawing from nature? If in fact a man is blindly copying a shape defined in words or already visibly existing, he is not a free agent, but only performing a servile operation. This is the case in quantitative production; here the craftsman's work, however skilful, can be called mechanical rather than artistic, and it is only in this sense that the phrase "mere craftsmanship" acquired a meaning. It would be the same with the performance of any rite,[42] to the extent that performance becomes a habit, unenlivened by any recollection. The mechanical product may still be a work of art: but the art was not the workman's, nor the workman an artist, but a hireling; and this is one of the many ways in which an "Industry without art is brutality."

The artist's theoretical or imaginative act is said to be "free" because it is *not* assumed or admitted that he is blindly copying any model extrinsic to himself, but expressing himself, even in adhering to a prescription or responding to requirements that may remain essentially the same for millennia. It is true that to be properly expressed a thing must proceed from within, moved by its form:[43] and yet it is not true that in practising an art that has "fixed ends and ascertained means of operation"[44] the artist's freedom is denied; it is only the academician and the hireling whose work is under constraint. It is true that if the artist has not conformed *himself* to the pattern of the thing to be made he has not really known it and cannot work originally.[45] But if he has thus conformed himself he will be in fact expressing *himself* in bringing it forth.[46] Not indeed expressing his "personality," himself as "this man" So-and-So, but himself *sub specie aeternitatis*, and apart from individual idiosyncracy. The idea of the thing to be made is brought to life in him, and it will be from this supraindividual life of the artist himself that the vitality of the finished work will be derived.[47] "It is not the tongue, but our very life that sings the new song."[48] In this way too the human operation reflects the manner of operation *in divinis*: "All things that were made were life in Him."[49]

"Through the mouth of Hermes the divine Eros began to speak."[50] We must not conclude from the form of the words that the artist is a passive instrument, like a stenographer. "He" is much rather actively and consciously making use of "himself" as an instrument. Body and mind are not the man, but only his instrument and vehicle. The man is passive only when he identifies himself with the psychophysical ego letting it take him where it will: but in act when he directs it. Inspiration and aspiration are not exclusive alternatives, but one and the same; because the spirit to which both words refer cannot work in the man except to the extent that he is "in the spirit." It is only when the form of the thing to be made has been known that the artist returns to "himself," performing the servile operation with good will, a will directed solely to the good of the thing to be made. He is willing to make "what was shown him upon the Mount." The man incapable of contemplation cannot be an artist, but only a skilful workman; it is demanded of the artist to be both a contemplative and a good workman. Best of all if, like the angels, he need not in his activity "lose the delights of inward contemplation."

---

[42] Every mimetic rite is by nature a work of art; in the traditional philosophy of art the artist's operation is also always a rite, and thus essentially a religious activity.

[43] Meister Eckhart.

[44] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, II-II. 47. 4 ad 2.

[45] Dante, *Convito,* Canzone III. 53-54 and IV. 10.106. Plotinus, Enneads, IV. 4. 2. My "*Intellectual operation in Indian art*," *Journ. Indian Society of Oriental Art*, III, 1935, p. 6, note 5.

[46] Since in this case "Die künste sint meister in dem meister" (Eckhart, Pfeiffer, p. 390).

[47] St. Bonaventura *I Sent.*, d. 36, a. 2 q. 1 ad 4 citing St. Augustine, *res factae… in artifice creato dicuntur vivere*.

[48] St. Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps. XXXII*: cf. in Ps. CXLVI *Vis ergo psallere? Non solum vox tua sonet laudes Dei, sed opera tua concordant cum voce tua*. It is by no means necessary to exclude from "opera" here whatever is made *per artem et ex voluntate*.

[49] John I. 3, as cited by Sts. Augustine, Bonaventura, Aquinas, etc., see M. d'Asbeck, *La mystique de Ruysbroeck l'Admirable*, 1930, p. 159.

[50] Hermetica, *Asclepius*, prologue.

What is implied by contemplation is to raise our level of reference from the empirical to the ideal, from observation to vision, from any auditory sensation to audition; the imager (or worshipper, for no distinction can be made here) "taking ideal form under the action of the vision, while remaining only potentially 'himself'".[51] "I am one," says Dante, accounting for his *dolce stil nuovo*, "who when Love inspires me take note, and go setting it forth in such wise as He dictates within me."[52] "Lo, make all things in accordance with the pattern that was shown thee on the mount."[53] "It is in imitation of angelic works of art that any work of art is wrought here":[54] the "crafts such as building and carpentry take their principles from that realm and from the thinking there."[55] It is in agreement with these traditional dicta that Blake equated with Christianity itself "the divine arts of imagination" and asked "Is the Holy Ghost any other than an intellectual fountain?" and that Emerson said, "The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colours of affection. "Where we see" genius "as a peculiarly developed" personality" to be exploited, traditional philosophy sees the immanent Spirit, beside which the individual personality is relatively nil: "Thou madest," as Augustine says, "that ingenium whereby the artificer may take his art, and may see within what he has to do without."[56] It is the light of this Spirit that becomes "the light of a mechanical art." What Augustine calls *ingenium* corresponds to Philo's Hegemon, the Sanskrit "Inner Controller," and to what is called in mediaeval theology the Synteresis, the immanent Spirit thought of equally as an artistic, moral and speculative conscience, both as we use the word and in its older sense of "consciousness." Augustine's ingenium corresponds to Greek *daimon*, but not to what we mean to-day by "genius." No man, considered as So-and-so, can *be* a genius: but all men *have* a genius, to be served or disobeyed at their own peril. There can be no property in ideas, because these are gifts of the Spirit, and not to be confused with talents: ideas are never made, but can only be "invented," that is "found," and entertained. No matter how many times they may already have been "applied" by others, whoever conforms himself to an idea and so makes it his own, will be working originally, but not so if he is expressing only his own ideals or opinions.

To "think for oneself" is always to think of oneself; what is called "freethought" is therefore the natural expression of a humanistic philosophy. We are at the mercy of our thoughts and corresponding desires. Free thought is a passion; it is much rather the thoughts than ourselves that are free. We cannot too much emphasize that contemplation is not a passion but an act: and that where modern psychology sees in "inspiration" the uprush of an instinctive and subconscious will, the orthodox philosophy sees an elevation of the artist's being to *super*conscious and *supra*individual levels. Where the psychologist invokes a demon, the metaphysician invokes a daemon: what is for the one the "libido" is for the other "the divine Eros."[57]

---

[51] Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV. 4. 2.

[52] *Purgatorio*, XXIV. 52-54. "In the making of things by art, do we not know that a man who has this God for his leader achieves a brilliant success, whereas he on whom Love has laid no hold is obscure?" (Plato, *Symposium*, 197 A). "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me… He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory," John VII. 16, 18.

[53] Exodus, XXV. 40.

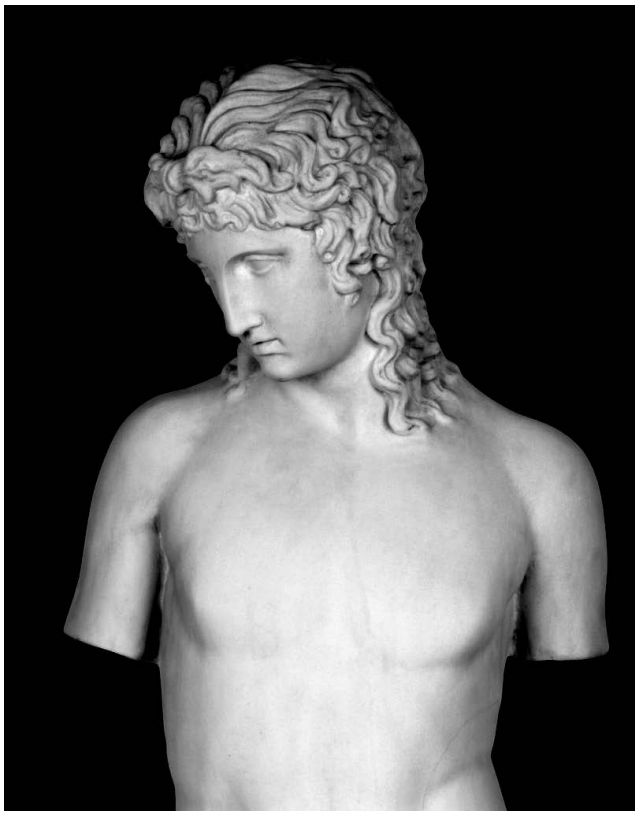
[54] *Aitareya Brāhmana*, VI. 27. Cf. *Śāṅkhāyana Āraṅyaka*, VIII. 9. "There is this celestial harp: this human harp is a likeness of it."

[55] Plotinus, *Enneads*, V. 9. 11. The builder and carpenter are then doing the will of God "on earth *as* it is done in heaven."

[56] Conf. XI. 5.

[57] "As regards the most lordly part of our soul, we must conceive of it in this wise: we declare that God has given to each of us, as his daemon, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us—seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant—up from earth towards our kindred in heaven" (Plato, *Timaeus*, 90. A.).

HERMES. *Image: Public domain.*



EROS. *Image: Public domain.*

There is also a sense in which the man as an individual "expresses himself," whether he will or no. This is inevitable, only because nothing can be known or done except in accordance with the mode of the knower. So the man himself, as he is in himself, appears in style and handling, and can be recognized accordingly. The uses and significance of works of art may remain the same for millennia, and yet we can often date and place a work at first glance. Human idiosyncracy is thus the explanation of style and of stylistic sequences: "style is the man." Styles are the basis of our histories of art, which are written like other histories to flatter our human vanity. But the artist whom we have in view is innocent of history and unaware of the existence of stylistic sequences. Styles are the accident and by no means the essence of art; the free man is not trying to express himself, but that which was to be expressed. Our conception of art as essentially the expression of a personality, our whole view of genius, our impertinent curiosities about the artist's private life, all these things are the products of a perverted individualism and prevent our understanding of the nature of mediaeval and oriental art. The modern mania for attribution is the expression of Renaissance conceit and nineteenth century humanism; it has nothing to do with the nature of mediaeval art, and becomes a pathetic fallacy when applied to it.[58]

In all respects the traditional artist devotes himself to the good of the work to be done.[59] The operation is a rite, the celebrant neither intentionally nor even consciously expressing himself. It is by no accident of time, but in accordance with a governing concept of the meaning of life, of which the goal is implied in St. Paul's *Vivo autem jam non ego*, that works of traditional art, whether Christian, Oriental or folk art, are hardly ever signed: the artist is anonymous, or if a name has survived, we know little or nothing of the man. This is true as much for literary as for plastic artefacts. In traditional arts it is never Who said? but only What was said? that concerns us: for "all that is true, by whomsoever it has been said, has its origin in the Spirit."[60]

So the first sane questions that can be asked about a work of art are, What was it for? and What does it mean? We have seen already that whatever, and however humble, the functional purpose of the work of art may have been, it had always a spiritual meaning, by no means an arbitrary meaning, but one that the function itself expresses adequately by analogy. Function and meaning cannot be forced apart; the meaning of the work of art is its intrinsic form as much as the soul is the form of the body. Meaning is even historically prior to utilitarian application. Forms such as that of the dome, arch and circle have not been "evolved," but only applied: the circle can no more have been suggested by the wheel than a myth by a mimetic rite. The ontology of useful inventions parallels that of the world: in both "creations" the Sun is the single form of many different things; that this is actually so in the case of human production by art will be realised by everyone who is sufficiently familiar with the solar significance of almost every known type of circular or annular artefact or part of an artefact. I will only cite by way of example the eye of a needle, and remark that there is a metaphysics of embroidery and weaving, for a detailed exposition of which a whole volume might be required. It is in the same way by no accident that the Crusader's sword was also a cross, at once the means of physical and symbol of spiritual victory. There is no traditional game or any form of athletics, nor any kind of fairy-tale properly to be so called (excepting, that is to say, those which merely

---

[58] "The artist in Viking times is not to be thought of as an individual, as would be the case to-day... It is a creative art" (Strzygowski, *Early Church Art in Northern Europe*, 1928, pp. 159-160): "It is in the very nature of Medieval Art that very few names of artists have been transmitted to us… The entire mania for connecting the few names preserved by tradition with well-known masterpieces, -all this is characteristic of the nineteenth century's cult of individualism, based upon ideals of the Renaissance" (H. Swarzenski, in *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, I, 1938, p. 55). "The academic styles that have succeeded each other since the seventeenth century, as a consequence of this curious divorce of beauty from truth, can hardly be classified as Christian art, since they recognize no inspiration higher than the human mind" (C. R. *Morey, Christian Art*, 1935).

[59] Plato, *Republic*, 342 B.C.

[60] St. Ambrose on 1 Cor. 12. 3, cited by St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I-II. 109. 1 ad 1.

reflect the fancies of individual litterateurs, a purely modern phenomenon) nor any sort of traditional jugglery, that is not at the same time that it is an entertainment, the embodiment of a metaphysical doctrine. The meaning is literally the "spirit" of the performance or the anecdote. Iconography, in other words, is art: that art by which the actual forms of things are determined; and the final problem of research in the field of art is to understand the iconographic form of whatever composition it may be that we are studying. It is only when we have understood the *raisons d'être* of iconography that we can be said to have gone back to first principles; and that is what we mean by the "Reduction of Art to Theology."[61] The student understands the logic of the composition; the illiterate only its aesthetic value.[62]

TEMPLAR CROSSES. *Image: Public domain.*

The anonymity of the artist belongs to a type of culture dominated by the longing to be liberated from oneself. All the force of this philosophy is directed against the delusion "I am the doer." "I" am not in fact the doer, but the instrument; human individuality is not an end but only a means. The supreme achievement of individual consciousness is to lose or find (both words mean the same) itself in what is both its first beginning and its last end: "Whoever would save his *psyche*, let him lose it."[63] All that is required of the instrument is efficiency and obedience; it is not for the subject to aspire to the throne; the constitution of man is not a democracy, but the hierarchy of body, soul and spirit. Is it for the Christian to

[61] The title of a work by St. Bonaventura.

[62] Quintillian, IX. 4.

[63] Luke, XVII. 33. Hence the repeated question of the Upanishads, "By which self is the *summum bonum* attainable?" and the traditional "Know thyself."

consider any work "his own," when even Christ has said that "I do nothing of myself"?[64] or for the Hindu, when Krishna has said that "The Comprehensor cannot form the concept 'I am the doer'"?[65] or the Buddhist, for whom it has been said that "To wish that it may be made known that I was the author" is the thought of a man not yet Adult?[66] It hardly occurred to the individual artist to sign his works, unless for practical purposes of distinction; and we find the same conditions prevailing in the scarcely yet defunct community of the Shakers, who made perfection of workmanship a part of their religion, but made it a rule that works should not' be signed.[67] It is under such conditions that a really living art, unlike what Plato calls the arts of flattery, flourishes; and where the artist exploits his own personality and becomes an exhibitionist that art declines.

There is another aspect of the question that has to do with the patron rather than the artist; this too must be understood, if we are not to mistake the intentions of traditional art. It will have been observed that in traditional arts, the effigy of an individual, for whatever purpose it may have been made, is very rarely a likeness in the sense that we conceive a likeness, but much rather the representation of a type.[68] The man is represented by his function rather than by his appearance; the effigy is of the king, the soldier, the merchant or the smith, rather than of So-and-so. The ultimate reasons for this have nothing to do with any technical inabilities or lack of the power of observation in the artist, but are hard to explain to ourselves whose pre-occupations are so different and whose faith in the eternal values of "personality" is so naive; hard to explain to ourselves, who shrink from the saying that a man must "hate" himself "if he would be My disciple."[69] The whole position is bound up with a traditional view that also finds expression in the doctrine of the hereditary transmission of character and function, because of which the man can die in peace, knowing that his work will be carried on by another representative. As So-and-so, the man is reborn in his descendants, each of whom occupies in turn what was much rather an office than a person. For in what we call personality, tradition sees only a temporal function "which you hold in lease." The very person of the king, surviving death, may be manifested in some way in some other ensemble of possibilities than these; but the royal personality descends from generation to generation, by hereditary and ritual delegation; and so we say, The king is dead, long live tie king. It is the same if the man has been a merchant or craftsman; if the son to whom his personality has been transmitted is not also, for example, a blacksmith, the blacksmith of a given community, the family line is at an end; and if personal functions are not in this way transmitted from generation to generation, the social order itself has come to an end, and chaos supervenes.

We find accordingly that if an ancestral image or tomb effigy is to be set up for reasons bound up with what is rather loosely called "ancestor worship," this image has two peculiarities, (1) it is identified as the image of the deceased by the insignia and costume of his vocation and the inscription of his name, and (2) for the rest, it is an individually indeterminate type, or what is called an "ideal" likeness. In this way both selves of the man are represented; the one

---

[64] John, VIII. 28.

[65] *Bhagavad Gītā,* III. 27; V. 8. Cf. *Jaiminlya Upanishad Brāhmana*, I. 5. 2; *Udāna,* 70.

[66] *Dhammapada*, 74.

[67] E. D. and F. Andrews, *Shaker Furniture*, 1937, p. 44.

[68] See Jitta-Zadoks, *Ancestral portraiture in Rome,* 1932, pp. 87, 92 f. Tomb effigies about 1200 "represented the deceased not as he actually appeared after death but as he hoped and trusted to be on the Day of Judgment. This is apparent in the pure and happy expression of all the equally youthful and equally beautiful faces, which have lost every trace of individuality. But towards the end of the XIIIth century… not how they perhaps appear one day but how they had actually been in life was considered important. ... As the last consequence of this demand for exact likeness the death mask, taken from the actual features, made its appearance… rationalism and realism appearing at the same time." Cf. my *Transformation of Nature in Art*, p. 91 and note 64, and "The traditional conception of ideal portraiture," *Twice a Year*, No. 3/4 (Autumn, 1939).

[69] Luke, XIV. 26.

that is to be inherited, and that which corresponds to an intrinsic and regenerated form that he should have built up for himself in the course of life itself, considered as a sacrificial operation terminating at death. The whole purpose of life has been that this man should realise himself in this other and essential form, in which alone the form of divinity can be thought of as adequately reflected. As St. Augustine expresses it, "*This* likeness begins now to be formed again in us."[70] It is not surprising that even in life a man would rather be represented thus, not as he is, but as he ought to be, impassibly superior to the accidents of temporal manifestation. It is characteristic of ancestral images in many parts of the East, that they cannot be recognized, except by their legends, as the portraits of individuals; there is nothing else to distinguish them from the form of the divinity to whom the spirit had been returned when the man "gave up the ghost"; almost in the same way an angelic serenity and the absence of human imperfection, and of the signs of age, are characteristic of the Christian effigy before the thirteenth century, when the study of death-masks came back into fashion and modern portraiture was born in the charnel house. The traditional image is of the man as he would be at the Resurrection, in an ageless body of glory, not as he was accidentally: "I would go down unto Annihilation and Eternal Death, lest the Last Judgment come and find me Unannihilated, and I be seiz'd and giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood." Let us not forget that it is only the intellectual virtues, and by no means our individual affections, that are thought of as surviving death.

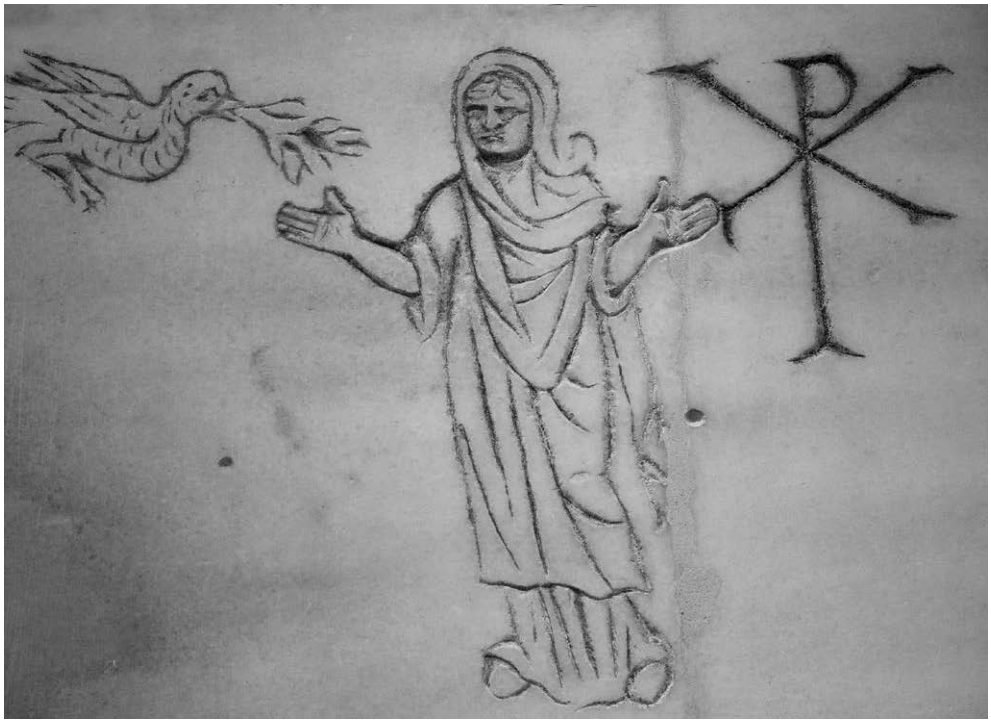
The same holds good for the heroes of epic and romance; for modern criticism, these are "unreal types," and there is no "psychological analysis." We ought to have realised that if this is not a humanistic art, this may have been its essential virtue. We ought to have known that this was a typal art by right of long inheritance; the romance is still essentially an epic, the epic essentially a myth; and that it is just because the hero exhibits universal qualities, without individual peculiarity or limitations, that he can be a pattern imitable by every man alike in accordance with his own possibilities whatever these may be. In the last analysis the hero is always God, whose only idiosyncracy is being, and to whom it would be absurd to attribute individual characteristics. It is only when the artist, whatever his subject may be, is chiefly concerned to exhibit himself, and when we descend to the level of the psychological novel, that the study and analysis of individuality acquires an importance. Then only portraiture in our sense takes the place of what was once an iconographic portrayal.

All these things apply only so much the more if we are to consider the deliberate portrayal of a divinity, the fundamental thesis of all traditional arts. An adequate knowledge of theology and cosmology is then indispensable to an understanding of the history of art, insofar as the actual shapes and structures of works of art are determined by their real content. Christian art, for example, begins with the representation of deity by abstract symbols, which may be geometrical, vegetable or the riomorphic, and are devoid of any sentimental appeal whatever. An anthropomorphic symbol follows, but this is still a form and not a figuration; not made as though to function biologically or as if to illustrate a text book of anatomy or of dramatic expression. Still later, the form is sentimentalised; the features of the crucified are made to exhibit human suffering, the type is completely humanised, and where we began with the shape of humanity as an analogical representation of the idea of God, we end with the portrait of the artist's mistress posing as the Madonna and the representation of an all-too-human baby; the Christ is no longer a man-God, but the sort of man that we can approve of. With what extraordinary prescience St. Thomas Aquinas commends the use of the lower rather than the nobler forms of existence as divine symbols, "especially for those who can think of nothing nobler than bodies"![71]

---

[70] *De spiritu et littera*, 37.

[71] *Sum. Theol.*, I. 1. 9.



EARLY CHRISTIAN ART. *Image: Public domain.*

The course of art reflects the course of thought. The artist, asserting a specious liberty, expresses himself; our age commends the man who thinks for himself, and therefore of himself. We can see in the hero only an imperfectly remembered historical figure, around which there have gathered mythical and miraculous accretions; the hero's manhood interests us more than his divinity, and this applies as much to our conception of Christ or Krishna or Buddha as it does to our conceptions of Cuchullain or Sigurd or Gilgamesh. We treat the mythical elements of the story, which are its essence, as its accidents, and substitute anecdote for meaning. The secularisation of art and the rationalisation of religion are inseparably connected, however unaware of it we may be. It follows that for any man who can still believe in the eternal birth of any avatar ("Before Abraham was, I am") the content of works of art cannot be a matter of indifference; the artistic humanization of the Son or of the Mother of God is as much a denial of Christian truth as any form of verbal rationalism or other heretical position. The vulgarity of humanism appears nakedly and unashamed in all euhemerism.

It is by no accident that it should have been discovered only comparatively recently that art is essentially an "aesthetic" activity. No real distinction can be drawn between aesthetic and materialistic; *aisthesis* being sensation, and matter what can be sensed. So we regard the lack of interest in anatomy as a defect of art, the absence of psychological analysis as evidence of undeveloped character; we deprecate the representation of the Bambino as a little man rather than as a child, and think of the frontality of the imagery as due to an inability to realise the three-dimensional mass of existing things; in place of the abstract light that corresponds to the gnomic aorists of the legend itself we demand the cast shadows that belong to momentary effects. We speak of a want of scientific perspective, forgetting that perspective in art is a kind of visual syntax and only a means to an end. We forget that while our perspective serves the purposes of representation in which we are primarily interested, there are other perspectives that are more intelligible and better adapted to the communicative purposes of the traditional arts.

CHRIST, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON. *Image: Public domain.*

In deprecating the secularisation of art we are not confusing religion with art, but seeking to understand the content of art at different times with a view to unbiased judgment. In speaking of the decadence of art, it is really the decadence of man from intellectual to sentimental interests that we mean. For the artist's skill may remain the same throughout: he is able to do what he intends. It is the mental image to which he works that changes: that "art has fixed ends" is no longer true as soon as we know what we like instead of liking what we know. Our point is that without an understanding of the change, the integrity of even a supposedly objective historical study is destroyed; we judge the traditional works, not by their actual accomplishment, but by our own intentions, and so inevitably come to believe in a progress of art, as we do in the progress of man.[72]

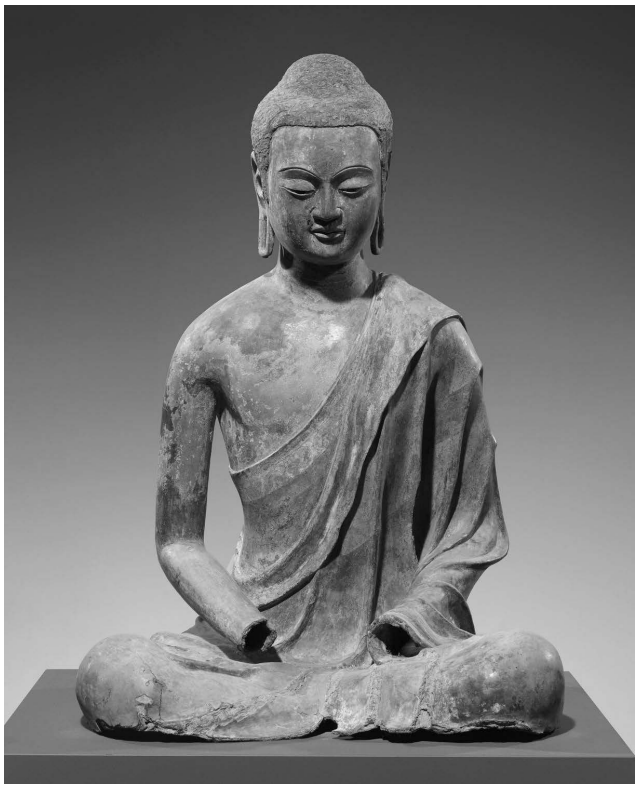
Ignorant of the traditional philosophy and of its formulae we often think of the artist as having been trying to do just what he may have been consciously avoiding. For example, if Damascene says that Christ from the moment of his conception possessed a "rational and intellectual soul,"[73] if as St. Thomas Aquinas says "his body was perfectly formed and assumed in the first instant,"[74] if the Buddha is said to have spoken in the womb, and to have taken seven strides at birth, from one end to the other of the universe, could the artist have intended to represent either of the newborn children as a pulling infant? If we are disturbed by what we call the

[72] John VIII. 58. Cf. *Bhagavad Gītā* IV. 1, 4, 5; *Saddharma Puṅdarīka*, XIV. 44 and XV. 1.

[73] *De fid. orthod.* III.

[74] *Sum. Theol.*, III. 33. 1.

"vacancy" of a Buddha's expression, ought we not to bear in mind that he is thought of as the Eye in the World, the impassible spectator of things as they really are, and that it would have been impertinent to have given him features moulded by human curiosity or passion? If it was an artistic canon that veins and bones should not be made apparent, can we blame the Indian artist as an artist for not displaying such a knowledge of anatomy as might have evoked *our* admiration? If we know from authoritative literary sources that the lotus on which the Buddha sits or stands is not a botanical specimen, but the universal ground of existence inflorescent in the waters of its indefinite possibilities, how inappropriate it would have been to represent him in the solid flesh precariously balanced on the surface of a real and fragile flower! The same considerations will apply to all our reading of mythology and fairy tale, and to all our judgments of primitive, savage or folk art: the anthropologist whose interest is in a culture is a better historian of such arts than is the critic whose only interest is in the aesthetic surfaces of the artefacts themselves.



BUDDHA, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.
Image: Public domain.

In the traditional philosophy, as we cannot too often repeat, "art has to do with cognition";[75] beauty is the attractive power of a perfect expression. This we can only judge and only really enjoy as an "intelligible good, which is the good of reason"[76] if we have really known what it was that was to be expressed. If sophistry be "ornament more than is appropriate to the thesis of the work,"[77] can we judge of what is or is not sophistry if we ourselves remain indifferent to this content? Evidently not. One might as well attempt the study of Christian or Buddhist art without a knowledge of the corresponding philosophies as attempt the study of a mathematical papyrus without the knowledge of mathematics.

[75] Ib. I. 5. 4 ad 1.

[76] Ib. I-II. 30. 1 c. Cf. Witelo, *Lib. de intelligentiis*, XVIII, XIX.

[77] St. Augustine, *De doc. christ.*, II. 31.

III

Let us conclude with a discussion of the problems of voluntary poverty and of iconoclasm. In cultures moulded by the traditional philosophy we find that two contrasting positions are maintained, either at any one time or alternately: the work of art, both as a utility and in its significance is on the one hand a good, and on the other an evil.

The ideal of voluntary poverty, which rejects utilities, can be readily understood. It is easy to see that an indefinite multiplication of utilities, the means of life, may end in an identification of culture with comfort, and the substitution of means for ends; to multiply wants is to multiply man's servitude to his own machinery. I do not say that this has not already taken place. On the other hand, the man is most self-sufficient, autochthonous and free who is least dependent upon possessions. We all recognize to some extent the value of living simply. But the question of possessions is a matter relative to the individual's vocation; the workman needs his tools and the soldier his weapons, but the contemplative is the nearer to his goal the fewer his needs. It was not until after the Fall that Adam and Eve had occasion to practise the tailor's art: they had no images of a God with whom they daily conversed. The angels, also, "have fewer ideas and use less means than men."[78] Possessions are a necessity to the extent that we can use them; it is altogether legitimate to enjoy what we do use, but equally inordinate to enjoy what we cannot use or to use what cannot be enjoyed. All possessions not at the same time beautiful and useful are an affront to human dignity. Ours is perhaps the first society to find it natural that some things should be beautiful and others useful. To be voluntarily poor is to have rejected what we cannot both admire and use; this definition can be applied alike to the case of the millionaire and to that of the monk.

The reference of iconoclasm is more particularly to the use of images as supports of contemplation. The same rule will apply. There are those, the great majority, whose contemplation requires such supports, and others, the minority, whose vision of God is immediate. For the latter to think of God in terms of any verbal or visual concept would be the same as to forget him.[79] We cannot make one rule apply to both cases. The professional iconoclast is such either because he does not understand the nature of images and rites, or because he does not trust the understanding of those who practice iconolatory or follow rites. To call the other man an idolater or superstitious is, generally speaking, only a manner of asserting our own superiority. Idolatry is the misuse of symbols, a definition needing no further qualifications. The traditional philosophy has nothing to say against the use of symbols and rites; though there is much that the most orthodox can have to say against their misuse. It may be emphasized that the danger of treating verbal formulae as absolutes is generally greater than that of misusing plastic images.

We shall consider only the *use* of symbols, and their rejection when their utility is at an end. A clear understanding of the principles involved is absolutely necessary if we are not to be confused by the iconoclastic controversies that play so large a part in the histories of every art. It is inasmuch as he "knows immortal things by the mortal" that the man as a veritable

---

[78] Eckhart.

[79] Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV. 4. 6, "In other words, they have seen God and they do not remember? Ah, no: it is that they see God still and always, and that as long as they see, they cannot tell themselves they have had the vision; such reminiscence is for souls that have lost it." Nicolas of Cusa, *De vis. Dei*, Ch. XVI "What satisfies the intellect is not what it understands." *Kena Upanishad*, 30, "The thought of God is his by whom it is unthought, or if he thinks the thought, it is that he does not understand." *Vairacchedika Sutra*, f. 38 XXVI, "Those who see me in any form, or think of me in words, their way of thinking is false, they do not see me at all. The Beneficent Ones are to be seen in the Law, theirs is a Lawbody: the Buddha is rightly to be understood as being of the nature of the Law, he cannot be understood by any means."

person is distinguished from the human animal, who knows only the things as they are in themselves and is guided only by this estimative knowledge. The unmanifested can be known by analogy; His silence by His utterance. That "the invisible things of Him" can be seen through "the things which are made" will apply not only to God's works but also to things made by hands, if they have been made by such an art as we have tried to describe: "In these outlines, my son, I have drawn a likeness of God for you, as far as that is possible; and if you gaze upon this likeness with the eyes of your heart… the sight itself will guide you on your way."[80] This point of view Christianity inherited from Neoplatonism: and therefore, as Dante says, "doth the Scripture condescend to your capacity, assigning foot and hand to God, with other meaning." We have no other language whatever except the symbolic in which to speak of ultimate reality: the only alternative is silence; in the meantime, "The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled."[81]

"Revelation" itself implies a veiling rather than a disclosure: a symbol is a "mystery."[82] "Half reveal and half conceal" fitly describes the parabolic style of the scriptures and of all conceptual images of being in itself, which cannot disclose itself to our physical senses. Because of this Augustine could say that in the last analysis "All scripture is vain." For "If anyone in seeing God conceives something in his mind, this is not God, but one of God's effects":[83] "We have no means for considering how God is, but rather how he is not";[84] there are "things which our intellect cannot behold... we cannot understand what they are except by denying things of them."[85] Dicta to this effect could be cited from innumerable sources, both Christian and Oriental.

It does not follow that the spiritual tradition is at war with itself with respect to the use of conceptual images. The controversy that plays so large a part in the history of art is maintained only by human partisans of limited points of view. As we said before, the question is really one of utility only: it parallels that of works and faith. Conceptual images and works alike, art and prudence equally, are means that must not be mistaken for ends; the end is one of beatific contemplation, not requiring any operation. One who proposes to cross a river needs a boat; "but let him no longer use the Law as a means of arrival when he has arrived."[86] Religious art is simply a visual theology: Christian and Oriental theology alike are means to an end, but not to be confused with the end. Both alike involve a dual method, that of the *via affirmativa* and of the *via negativa*; on the one hand affirming things of God by way of praise, and on the other denying every one of these limiting descriptive affirmations, for though the worship is dispositive to immediate vision, God is not and never can be "what men worship here."[87] The two ways are far from mutually exclusive; they are complementary. Because they are so well known to the student of Christian theology I shall only cite from an Upanishad, where it is a question of the use of certain types of concepts of deity regarded as supports of

---

[80] Hermetica, *Lib.* IV. 11 b.

[81] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I. i. 9.

[82] Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* II. 15. Cf. René Guénon, "Mythes, Mystères et Symboles," in *Voile d'Isis* (Études Traditionelles) 40, 1935. That "revelation" means a "displaying" depends upon the fact that an exhibition of the principle in a likeness, and as it were clothed in the veil of analogy, though it is not an exhibition of the principle in its naked essence, is relatively to what would otherwise be the obscurity of a total ignorance, a true "demonstration."

[83] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, III. 92. 1 ad 4.

[84] Ib. I. 3. 1. Cf. *Brhadāraṅyaka Upanishad*, IV. 4. 22; *Maitri Upanishad* IV. 5, etc.

[85] Dante, *Convito*, III. 15. Nicolas of Cusa, De fil. Dei, *Deus, cum non possit nisi negative, extra intellectualem regionem, attingi.* Eckhart, "wiltû Komen in die kuntschaft der verborgenen heimelicheit gotes, sô muostû übergân alles, daz dich gehindern mac an lûterr bekentnisse, daz du begrifen maht mit verstentnisse" (Pfeiffer, p. 505).

[86] Parable of the raft, *Majjhima Nikāya*, I. 135; St. Augustine, *De spir. et lit.*, 16.

[87] *Kena Upanishad*, 2-8.

contemplation. Which of these is the best? That depends upon individual faculties. But in any case, these are pre-eminent aspects of the incorporeal deity; "These one should contemplate and praise, but then deny. For with these one rises from higher to higher states of being. But when all these forms are resolved, then he attains to the unity of the Person."[88]

To resume: the normal view of art that we have described above, starting from the position that "Though he is an artist, the artist is nevertheless a man," is not the private property of any philosopher, or time, or place: we can only say that there are certain times, and notably our own, at which it has been forgotten. We have emphasized that art is for the man, and not the man for art: that whatever is made only to give pleasure is a luxury and that the love of art under these conditions becomes a mortal sin;[89] that in traditional art function and meaning are inseparable goods; that it holds in both respects that there can be no good use without art; and that all good uses involve the corresponding pleasures. We have shown that the traditional artist is not expressing himself, but a thesis: that it is in this sense that both human and divine art are expressions, but only to be spoken of as "self-expressions" if it has been clearly understood what "self" is meant. We have shown that the traditional artist is normally anonymous, the individual as such being only the instrument of the "self" that finds expression. We have shown that art is essentially symbolic, and only accidentally illustrative or historical; and finally that art, even the highest, is only the means to an end, that even the scriptural art is only a manner of "seeing through a glass, darkly," and that although this is far better than not to see at all, the utility of iconography must come to an end when vision is "face to face."[90]

Short bibliography for the philosophy of medieval and oriental art

Adler, M., *Art and Prudence*, Chicago, 1935.

Anitchkoff, E., "L'estétique au moyen-âge," *Le Moyen Age*, XX (1917-18), 221-258.

Andrae, W., *Die ionische Saüle, Bauform oder Symbol?* Berlin, 1933.

"Keramik in Dienste der Weisheit," in *Berichte der Deutschen Keramischen Gesellschaft*, December, 1936.

Bauemker, C, *Witelo*, Munster, 1908.

Baldwin, C. S., *Mediaeval Rhetoric and Poetic*, New York, 1928.

Bissen, J. M., *L'Exemplarisme divin selon St. Bonaventura*, Paris, 1929.

St. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana,* Catholic University of America, Patristic Studies, Vol. XXXIII.

St. Bonaventura, *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, in Opera Omnia.

Carey A. Graham, "The Catholic attitude towards art," in *Catholic Social Art, Qtly.* Vol. I, pt. 4, 1938.

Pattern Newport 1938.

Coomaraswamy, A. K., *The Indian craftsman*, London, 1909.

The transformation of nature in art, Cambridge, 1935.

The Mirror of Gesture, New York, 1936.

"The technique and theory of Indian painting," in *Technical Students in the Field of the Fine Arts*, III, 1934.

"The intellectual operation in Indian art," in *JISOA*, June 1935.

---

[88] *Maitri Upanishad*, IV. 5.

[89] For the conditions under which ornamentation becomes a sin, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, II-II. 167. 2 and 169. 2 ad 4. Cf. my "On the relation of beauty to truth" in *Art Bulletin*, XX, pp. 72-77, and "ornament," *d.* XXI.

[90] I Cor. 13. 12.

Is art a superstition or a way of life? Newport, 1937.
"Mediaeval Aesthetic," pts. I and II, *Art Bulletin*, vols. XVII, XX.
"The nature of Buddhist art," in Rowland and Coomaraswamy, *Wall paintings of India, Central Asia and Ceylon*, Boston, 1938.
Asiatic Art, Chicago, 1938.
"The part of art in Indian life," in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Calcutta (1937), Vol. III, pp. 485-513.
"The philosophy of Mediaeval and Oriental Art," in *Zalmoxis*, I, 1938.
"Ornament" in *Art Bulletin*, XXI, 1939.
Coomaraswamy and Carey, A. Graham, *Patron and Artist*, Norton, 1936.
Coomaraswamy, Benson and Carey, *What use is art anyway?* Newport, 1937.
De Fonseka, L., *On the truth of decorative art*, London, 1913.
Gleizes, A., *Vers une conscience plastique, La forme et l'histoire*, Paris, 1932.
Homocentrisme, Sablons (*Isère*), 1937.
Ghyka, M. C., *Le nombre d'or*, 2 vols., Paris, 1931.
Gill, E., *Beauty looks after herself*, London, 1933.
Work and leisure, London, 1934.
Art, London, 1934.
Work and culture, Newport, 1939.
Autobiography, London, 1941.
Guénon, R., "Mythes, Mystères et Symboles," in *Études Traditionelles*, 40, 1935.
"Initiation and the Crafts," *Journ. Indian Society of Oriental Art*, VI, 1938.,
Healy, E. Th., *Saint Bonaventura's De reductions artium ad theologiam*, New York, 1940.
Lang, P. H., *Music in Western Civilization*, New York, 1941.
La Meri, *The Gesture Language of the Hindu Dance*, New York, 1941.
Lebasquais, É., "L'architecture sacrée," in *Études Traditionelles*, 41, 1936.
Lethaby, W. R., *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, London, 1891.
Longinus, *On the Sublime*.
Lund, F. M., *Ad Quadratum: a study of the geometrical bases of classic and mediaeval religious architecture*, 2 vols., London, 1921.
Maritain, A., *Art and Scolasticism*, London, 1931.
Masson, Oursel, "L'esthétique indienne," *Rev. de Metaphysique et de Morale*, July, 1936.
Plotinus, *Enneads*.
Renz, O., *Die Synteresis nach dem hl. Thomas von Aquin*, Munster, 1911.
Schlosser, J., *Die Kunstliteratur*, Vienna, 1924.
Shewring, W., "Booklearning and education," *Integration*, II, pt. 2, October-November, 1938.
Spinden, H., "Primitive Arts," in *Brooklyn Museum Qtly.*, October, 1935.
Strzygowski, J., *Spüren indo-germanisches Glaubens in der bildenden Kunst*, Heidelberg, 1936.
Svoboda, K., *L'estétique de St. Augustin*, Brno, 1933.
Takacs, Z., *The art of Greater Asia*, Budapest, 1933.
Tea, E., "Witelo," in *L'Arte*, XXX, 1927.
St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.
De pulchro (on Dionysius, *De div. nom.*, IV. 5), in Opera Omnia, Parma, 1864 (as op. vii.c.iv, lect. 5). (See *Art Bulletin* XX, 1938, pp. 66-72).
Ulrich of Strassburg, *De pulchro* (on Dionysius, *De div. nom.*, IV. 5) (see *Art Bulletin*, XVII, 1935, pp. 31-47).
Warner, L., "On teaching the Fine Arts," in *American Review*, March, 1937.

Chapter IV. What is the use of art anyway?[91]

We are familiar with two contemporary schools of thought about art. We have on the one hand a very small self-styled elite which distinguishes "fine" art from art as skilled manufacture, and values this fine art very highly as a self-revelation or self-expression of the artist; this elite, accordingly, bases its teaching of aesthetic upon style, and makes the so-called "appreciation of art" a matter of the manner rather than of the content or true intention of the work. These are our Professors of Aesthetics and of the History of Art, who rejoice in the unintelligibility of art at the same time that they explain it psychologically, substituting the study of the man himself for the study of the man's art; and these leaders of the blind are gladly followed by a majority of modern artists, who are naturally flattered by the importance attached to personal genius.

On the other hand we have the great body of plain men who are not really interested in artistic personalities, and for whom art as defined above is a peculiarity rather than necessity of life, and have in fact no use for art.

And over against these two classes we have a normal but forgotten view of art, which affirms that art is the making well, or properly arranging, of anything whatever that needs to be made or arranged, whether a statuette, or automobile, or garden. In the Western world, this is specifically the Catholic doctrine of art; from which doctrine the natural conclusion follows, in the words of St. Thomas, that "There can be no good use without art." It is rather obvious that if things required for use, whether an intellectual or a physical use, or under normal conditions both, are not properly made, they cannot be enjoyed, meaning by "enjoyed" something more than merely "liked." Badly prepared food for example, will disagree with us; and in the same way autobiographical or other sentimental exhibits necessarily weaken the morale of those who feed upon them. The healthy patron is no more interested in the artist's personality than he is in his tailor's private life; all that he needs of either is that they be in possession of their art.

The present series of talks about art is addressed to the second kind of man above defined, viz., to the plain and practically-minded man who has no use for art, as art is expounded by the psychologists and practised by most contemporary artists, especially painters. The plain man has no use for art unless he knows what it is about, or what it is for. And so far, is perfectly right; if it is not about something, and not for anything, it *has* no use. And furthermore, unless it is about something *Worth while*,—more worth while, for example, than the artist's precious personality—and for something worth while to the patron and consumer as well as to the artist and maker, it has no *real* use, but is only a luxury product or mere ornament. On these grounds art may be dismissed by a religious man as mere vanity, by the practical man as an expensive superfluity, and by the class thinker as part and parcel of the whole bourgeoisie fantasy. There are thus two opposite points of view, of which one asserts that there can be no good use without art, the other that art is a superfluity. Observe, however, that these contrary statements are affirmed with respect to two very different things, which are not the same merely because both have been called "art." Let us now take for granted the historically normal and religiously orthodox view that, just as ethics is the "right way of doing things," so art is the "making well of whatever needs making," or simply "the right way of making things"; and still addressing ourselves to those for whom the arts of personality are superfluous, ask whether art is not after all a necessity.

---

[91] Originally two Broadcasts.

A necessity is something that we cannot afford to do without, whatever its price. We cannot go into questions of price here, except to say that art need not be, and should not be expensive, except to the extent that costly materials are employed. It is at this point that the crucial question arises of manufacture for profit versus manufacture for use. It is because the idea of manufacture for profit is bound up with the currently accepted industrial sociology that, things in general are not well made and therefore also not beautiful. It is the manufacturer's interest to produce what we like, or can be induced to like, regardless of whether or not it will agree with us; like other modern artists, the manufacturer is expressing himself, and only serving our real needs to the extent that he must do so in order to be able to sell at all. Manufacturers and other artists alike resort to advertisement; art is abundantly advertised in schools and colleges, by "Museums of Modern Art," and by art dealers; and artist and manufacturer both alike price their wares according to what the traffic will bear. Under these conditions as Mr. Carey, who speaks in this series of talks, has so well expressed it, the manufacturer works in order to be able to go on earning; he does not earn, as he ought, in order to be able to go on manufacturing. It is only when the maker of things is a maker of things by vocation, and not merely holding down a job, that the price of things approximate to their real value; and under these circumstances, when we pay for a work of art designed to serve a necessary purpose, we get our money's worth; and the purpose being a necessary one, we *must* be able to afford to pay for the art, or else are living below a normal human standard; as most men are now living, even the rich, if we consider quality rather than quantity. Needless to add that the workman is also victimised by a manufacture for profit; so that it has become a mockery to say to him that hours of work should be more enjoyable than hours of leisure; that when at work he should be doing what he likes, and only when at leisure doing what he ought— workmanship being conditioned by art, and conduct by ethics.

Industry without art is brutality. Art is specifically human. None of those primitive peoples, past or present, whose culture we affect to despise and propose to amend, has dispensed with art; from the stone age onwards, everything made by man, under whatever conditions of hardship or poverty, has been made by art to serve a double purpose, at once utilitarian and ideological. It is we who, collectively speaking at least, command amply sufficient resources, and who do not shrink from wasting these resources, who have first proposed to make a division of art, one sort to be barely utilitarian, the other luxurious, and altogether omitting what was once the highest function of art, to express and to communicate ideas. It is long since sculpture was thought of as the poor man's "book." Our very word "aesthetics," from "aesthesis," "feeling," proclaims our dismissal of the intellectual values of art.

Two other points can only be touched upon in the time available. In the first place, if we called the plain man right in wanting to know what a work is about, and in demanding intelligibility in works of art, he is no less certainly wrong in demanding likeness and altogether wrong in judging works of ancient art from any such point of view as is implied in the common expressions, "That was before they knew anything about anatomy," or "That was before perspective had been discovered." Art is concerned with the nature of things, and only incidentally, if at all, with their appearance; by which appearance the nature of things is far more obscured than revealed. It is not the artist's business to be fond of nature as effect, but to take account of nature as the cause of effects. Art, in other words, is far more nearly related to algebra than to arithmetic and just as certain qualifications are needed if we are to understand and enjoy a mathematical formula, so the spectator must have been educated as he ought if he is to understand and enjoy the forms of communicative art. This is most of all the case if the spectator is to understand and enjoy works of art which are written, so to speak, in a foreign or forgotten language; which applies to a majority of objects exhibited in our museums.

This problem presents itself because it is not the business of a museum to exhibit contemporary works. The modern artist's ambition to be represented in a museum is his vanity, and betrays a complete misunderstanding of the function of art; for if a work has been made to meet a given and specific need, it can only be effective in the environment for which it was designed, that is to say in some such vital context as a man's house in which he lives, or in a street, or in a church, and not in any place the primary function of which is to contain all sorts of art.

The function of an art museum is to preserve from destruction and to give access to such ancient works of art as are still considered, by experts responsible for their selection, to be very good of their kind. Can these works of art, which were not made to meet his particular needs, be of any use to the plain man? Probably not of much use at first sight and without guidance, nor until he knows what they are about and what they were for. We could rather wish, although in vain, that the man in the street had access to such markets as those in which the museum objects were originally bought and sold at reasonable prices in the every-day course of life. On the other hand, the museum objects were made to meet specific human needs, if not precisely our current needs; and it is most desirable to realize that there have been human needs other than, and perhaps more significant than, our own. The museum objects cannot indeed be thought of as shapes to be imitated, just because they were not made to suit our special needs; but insofar as they are good of their kind, as is presupposed by the expert selection, there can be deduced from them, when considered in relation to their original use, the general principles of art according to which things can be well made, for whatever purpose they may be required. And that is broadly speaking, the major value of our museums.

Some have answered the question "What is the use of art"? by saying that art is for art's sake; and it is rather odd that those who thus maintain that art has no human use should at the same time have emphasized the value of art. We shall try to analyse the fallacies involved.

We referred above to the class thinker who has no use for art, and is ready to dispense with it as being part and parcel of the whole bourgeoisie fantasy. If we could discover such a thinker, we should indeed be glad to agree with him that the whole doctrine of art for art's sake, and the whole business of "collecting" and the "love of art" are no more than a sentimental aberration and means of escape from the serious business of life. We should be very ready to agree that merely to cultivate the higher things of life, if art be such, in hours of leisure to be obtained by a further substitution of mechanical for manual means of production, is as much a vanity as the cultivation of religion for religion's sake on Sundays only could ever be; and that the pretensions of the modern artist are fundamentally wishful and egotistic.

Unfortunately, when we come down to the facts, we find that the social reformer is not really superior to the current delusion of culture, but only angered by an economic situation which seems to deprive him of those higher things of life which the wealthy can more easily afford. The workman envies, far more than he sees through, the collector and "lover of art." The wageslave's notion of art is no more realistic or practical than a millionaire's: just as his notion of virtue is no more realistic than that of the preacher of goodness for goodness' sake. He does not see that if we need art only if and because we *like* art, and ought to be good only if and because we *like* to be good, art and ethics are made out to be mere matters of taste, and no objection can be raised if we say that we have no use for art because we do not like it, or no reason to be good, because we prefer to be bad.

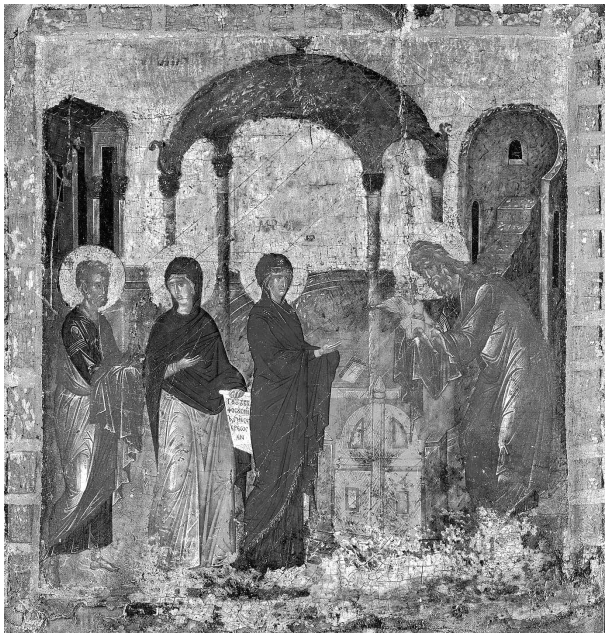
The subject of art for art's sake was taken up the other day by an Editor of the *Nation* who quoted with approval a pronouncement by Paul Valery to the effect that the most essential characteristic of art is *uselessness*, and proceeded to say that "No one is shocked by the statement that 'Virtue is its own reward'… which is only another way of saying that virtue,

like art, is an end in itself, a final good." The writer also pointed out that "Uselessness and valuelessness are not the same things"; by which, of course, he meant, "are not the same thing." He said further that there are only three motives by which an artist is impelled to work, viz., either "for money, fame, or 'art.'"

We need not look farther for a perfect example of the class thinker stupefied by what we have called the whole bourgeoisie fantasy. To begin with, it is very far from true that no one is shocked by the statement that "Virtue is its own reward" If that were true, then virtue would be no more than the self-righteousness of the *uncó guid*. That "Virtue is its own reward" is actually in direct opposition to all orthodox teaching, where it is constantly and explicitly affirmed that virtue is a means to an end, and not itself an end; a means to man's last end of happiness, and not a part of that end. And in just the same way in all normal and humane civilisations the doctrine about art has been that art is in the same way a means, and not a final end.

For example, the Aristotelian doctrine that "the general end of art is man" was firmly endorsed by the mediaeval Christian encyclopaedists; and we may say that all those philosophical and religious systems of thought from which the class thinker would most like to be emancipated are agreed that both ethics and art are means to happiness, and neither a final end. The bourgeoisie point of view to which the social reformer in point of fact assents is sentimental and idealistic; while the religious doctrine which he repudiates is utilitarian and practical! In any case, the fact that a man takes pleasure, or may take pleasure, in doing well or in making well, does not suffice to make of this pleasure the purpose of his work, except in the case of the man who is selfrighteous or that of the man who is merely a selfexpressionist: just as the pleasure of eating cannot be called the final end of eating, except in the case of the glutton who lives to eat.

If use and value are not in fact synonymous, it is only because use implies efficacy, and value may be attached to something inefficient. Augustine, for example, points out that beauty is not just what we like, because some people like deformities; or in other words, value what is really invalid. Use and value are not identical in logic, but in the case of a perfectly healthy subject, coincide in experience; and this is admirably illustrated by the etymological equivalence of German *brauchen* "to use" and Latin *frui* "to enjoy."



ICON BYZANTINE, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.
Image: Public domain.

Nor can money, fame, or "art" be called explanations of art. Not money, because aside from the case of manufacture for profit instead of for use, the artist by nature, whose end in view is the good of the work to be done, is not working in order to earn, but earning in order to be able to go on being himself, viz., to be able to go on working as that which he is by nature; just as he eats to be able to go on living, rather than lives to be able to go on eating. As to fame, it need only be pointed out that the greater part of the greatest art of the world has been produced anonymously, and that if any workman has only fame in view, "any proper man ought to be ashamed for good people to know this of him." And as to art, to say that the artist works for art is an abuse of language. Art is that by which a man works, supposing that he is in possession of his art and has the habit of his art; just as prudence or conscience is that by which he acts well. Art is no more the end of his work than prudence the end of his conduct.

It is only because under the conditions established in a system of production for profit rather than for use we have forgotten the meaning of the word "vocation," and think only in terms of "jobs," that such confusions as these are possible. The man who has a "job" is working for ulterior motives, and may be quite indifferent to the quality of the product, for which he is not responsible; all that he wants in this case is to secure an adequate share of the expected profits. But one whose vocation is specific, that is to say who is naturally and constitutionally adapted to and trained in some one or another kind of making, even though he earns his living by this making, is really doing what he likes most; and if he is forced by circumstances to do some other kind of work, even though more highly paid, is actually unhappy. The vocation, whether it be that of the farmer or the architect, is a function; the exercise of this function as regards the man himself is the most indispensable means of spiritual development, and as regards his relation to society the measure of his worth. It is precisely in this way that as Plato says, "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 the tragedy of a society industrially organised for profit that this justice to each man in himself is denied him; and any such society literally and inevitably plays the Devil with the rest of the world.

The basic error in what we have called the illusion of culture is the assumption that art is something to be done by a special kind of man, and particularly that kind of man whom we call a genius. In direct opposition to this is the normal and humane view that art is simply the right way of making things, whether symphonies or aeroplanes. The normal view assumes, in other words, not that the artist is a special kind of man, but that every man who is not a mere idler and parasite is necessarily some special kind of artist, skilled and well contented in the making or arranging of some one thing or another according to his constitution and training.

Works of genius are of very little use to humanity, which invariably and inevitably misunderstands, distorts, and caricatures their mannerisms and ignores their essence. It is not the genius, but the man who can produce a masterpiece, that matters. For what is a masterpiece? Not as commonly supposed an individual flight of the imagination, beyond the common reach in its own time and place and rather for posterity than for ourselves; but by definition, a piece of work done by an apprentice at the close of his apprenticeship and by which he proves his right to be admitted into the full membership of a guild, or as we should now say trade union, as a master workman. The masterpiece is simply the proof of competence expected and demanded from every graduate artist, who is not permitted to set up a workshop of his own unless he has produced such proof. The man whose masterpiece has thus been accepted by a body of practising experts is expected to go on producing works of like quality for the rest of his life; he is a man responsible for everything he makes. The whole thing lies in the normal course of events, and so far from thinking of masterpieces as merely ancient works preserved in museums, the adult workman ought to be ashamed if anything he makes falls short of the masterpiece standard or is less than fit to be exhibited in a museum.

Genius inhabits a world of its own. The master craftsman lives in a world inhabited by other men; he has neighbours. A nation is not "musical" because of the great orchestras that are maintained in its capitals, and supported by a select circle of "music-lovers," nor even because such orchestras offer popular programmes. England was a "nest of singing birds" when Pepys could insist on an under parlour-maid's ability to take a difficult part in the family chorus, failing which she would not be engaged. And if the folksongs of a country are now collected between the covers of books, or as the singer himself expresses it "put in a bag," or if in the same way we think of art as something to be seen in a museum, it is not that something has been *gained*, but that we know that something has been *lost*, and would fain preserve its memory.

SHEPERDESS MAKING MUSIC DETAIL TAPESTRY, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. *Image: Public domain.*

There are, then, possibilities of "culture" other than those envisaged by our universities and great philanthropists, and possibilities of accomplishment other than those that can be displayed in drawing-rooms. We do not deny that the class thinker may be perfectly justified in his resentment of economic exploitation; as to this it will suffice to point out once and for all that "the labourer is worthy of his hire." But what the class thinker, as a man, and not merely in his obvious role of exploitee, ought to demand but hardly ever dares to demand is a human responsibility for whatever he makes. What the trade union should require of its members is a master's accomplishment. What the class thinker who is not merely an underdog, but also a man, has a right to demand is, neither to have less work to do, nor to be engaged in a different kind of work, nor to have a larger share in the cultural crumbs that fall from the rich man's table, but the opportunity to take as great a pleasure in doing whatever he does for hire, as he takes in his own garden or family life; what he should demand, in other words, is the opportunity to be an artist. No civilisation can be accepted that denies him this.

With or without machines, it is certain that work will always have to be done. We have tried to show that while work is a necessity, it is by no means a necessary evil, but in case the workman is a responsible artist, a necessary good. We have spoken so far from the workman's point of view, but it need hardly be added that as much depends on the patron as upon the artist. The workman becomes a patron as soon as he proceeds to buy for his own use. And to him as consumer we suggest that the man who, when he needs a suit, does not buy two ready made suits of shoddy material, but commissions a skilled tailor to make one suit of fine material, is a far better patron of art and better philanthropist than the man who merely acquires an old master and gives it to the nation. The metaphysician and philosopher are also involved; it should be a primary function of the Professor of Aesthetics to break down the superstition of "Art," and that of the "Artist" as a privileged person, of another sort than ordinary men.

What the exploitee should resent is not merely the fact of social insecurity, but the position of human irresponsibility that is forced upon him under conditions of manufacture for profit. He has to realise that the question of the ownership of the means of production is primarily of spiritual significance, and only secondarily a matter of economic justice or injustice. In so far as the class thinker proposes to live by bread alone, or even with cake, he is neither better nor wiser than the bourgeoisie capitalist whom he affects to despise; nor would he be any happier at work by an exchange of many masters for few. It makes but little difference whether he proposes to do without art, or to get his share of it, so long as he consents to the inhuman deification of "Art" implied in the expression "Art for art's sake." It is no more conducive to man's last, and present, end of happiness that he should sacrifice himself on the altar of "Art," than for him to sacrifice himself on the altars of a personified Science, State, or Nation.

On behalf of every man we deny that art is for art's sake. On the contrary, "Industry without art is brutality"; and to become a brute is to die as a man. It is a matter of cannon fodder in either case; it makes but little difference whether one dies in the trenches suddenly or in a factory day by day.

Chapter VI. The nature of Mediaeval art

Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation: Art is the principle of manufacture. –St. Thomas Aquinas.

DAMBULLA. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

The modern mind is as far removed from the ways of thinking that find expression in Mediaeval art as it is from those expressed in Oriental art. We look at these arts from two points of view, neither of them valid: either the popular view that believes in a "progress" or "evolution" of art and can only say of a "primitive" that "That was before they knew anything about anatomy" or of "savage" art that it is "untrue to nature"; or the sophisticated view which finds in the aesthetic surfaces and the relations of parts the whole meaning and purpose of the work, and is interested only in our emotional reactions to these surfaces.

As to the first, we need only say that the realism of later Renaissance and academic art is just what the Mediaeval philosopher had in mind when he spoke of those "who can think of nothing nobler than bodies," i.e., who know nothing but anatomy. As to the sophisticated view, which very rightly rejects the criterion of likeness, and rates the "primitives" very highly, we overlook that it also takes for granted a conception of "art" as the expression of emotion, and a term "aesthetics" (literally, "theory of sense-perception and emotional reactions"), a conception and a term that have come into use only within the last two hundred years of humanism. We do not realise that in considering Mediaeval (or Ancient or Oriental) art from these angles, we are attributing our own feelings to men whose view of art was quite a different one, men who held that "Art has to do with cognition" and apart from knowledge amounts to nothing, men who could say that "the educated understand the rationale of art, the uneducated knowing only what they like," men for whom art was not an end, but a means to present ends of use and enjoyment and to the final end of beatitude equated with the vision of God whose essence is the cause of beauty in all things. This must not be misunderstood to mean that Mediaeval art was "unfelt" or should not evoke an emotion, especially of that sort that we speak of as admiration or wonder. On the contrary, it was the business of this art not only to "teach," but also to "move, in order to convince": and no eloquence can move unless the speaker himself has been moved. But whereas we make an aesthetic emotion the first and final end of art, Mediaeval man was moved far more by the meaning that illuminated the forms than by these forms themselves: just as the mathematician who is excited by an elegant formula is excited, not by its appearance, but by its economy. For the Middle Ages, nothing could be understood that had not been experienced, or loved: a point of view far removed from our supposedly objective science of art and from the mere knowledge about art that is commonly imparted to the student.

Art, from the Mediaeval point of view, was a kind of knowledge in accordance with which the artist imagined the form or design of the work to be done, and by which he reproduced this form in the required or available material. The product was not called "art," but an "artefact," a thing "made by art"; the art remains in the artist. Nor was there any distinction of "fine" from "applied" or "pure" from "decorative" art. All art was for "good use" and "adapted to condition." Art could be applied either to noble or to common uses, but was no more or less art in the one case than in the other. Our use of the word "decorative" would have been abusive, as if we spoke of a mere millinery or upholstery: for all the words purporting decoration in many languages, Mediaeval Latin included, referred originally not to anything that could be added to an already finished and effective product merely to please the eye or ear, but to the completion of anything with whatever might be necessary to its functioning, whether with respect to the mind or the body: a sword, for example, would "ornament" a knight, as virtue "ornaments" the soul or knowledge the mind.

Perfection, rather than beauty, was the end in view. There was no "aesthetic," no "psychology" of art, but only a rhetoric, or theory of beauty, which beauty was regarded as the attractive power of perfection in kind and as depending upon propriety, upon the order or harmony of the parts (some would say that this implied, dependent upon certain ideal mathematical relations of parts) and upon clarity or illumination — the trace of what St. Bonaventura calls "the light of a mechanical art." Nothing unintelligible could have been thought of as beautiful. Ugliness was the unattractiveness of informality and disorder.

The artist was not a special kind of man, but every man a special kind of artist. It was not for him to say what should be made, except in the special case in which he is his own patron making, let us say, an icon or a house for himself. It was for the patron to say what should be made; for the artist, the "maker by art," to know how to make. The artist did not think of his art as a "self-expression," nor was the patron interested in his personality or biography. The artist was usually, and unless by accident, anonymous, signing his work, if at all, only by way of guarantee: it was not who, but what was said, that mattered. A copyright could not have been conceived where it was well understood that there can be no property in ideas, which are his who entertains them: whoever thus makes an idea his own is working originally, bringing forth from an immediate source within himself, regardless of how many times the same idea may have been expressed by others before or around him.

Nor was the patron a special kind of man, but simply our "consumer." This patron was "the judge of art": not a critic or connoisseur in our academic sense, but one who knew his needs, as a carpenter knows what tools he must have from the smith, and who could distinguish adequate from inadequate workmanship, as the modern consumer cannot. He expected a product that would work, and not some private *jeu d'esprit* on the artist's part. Our connoisseurs whose interest is primarily in the artist's personality as expressed in style –the accident and not the essence of art– pretend to the judgment of Mediaeval art without consideration of its reasons, and ignore the iconography in which these reasons are clearly reflected. But who can judge whether anything has been *well* said or made, and so distinguish good from bad as judged by art, unless he be fully aware of *what* was to be said or done?

The Christian symbolism of which Emile Mâle spoke as a "calculus" was not the private language of any individual, century, or nation, but a universal language, universally intelligible. It was not even privately Christian or European. If art has been properly called a universal language, it is not such because all men's sensitive faculties enable them to recognize what they see, so that they can say, "This represents a man," regardless of whether the work has been done by a Scotchman or a Chinaman, but because of the universality of the adequate symbolism in which its meanings have been expressed. But that there is a universally intelligible language of art no more means that we can all read it than the fact that Latin was spoken in the Middle Ages throughout Europe means that Europeans can speak it to-day. The language of art is one that we must relearn, if we wish to understand Mediaeval art, and not merely to record our reactions to it. And this is our last word: that to understand Mediaeval art needs more than a modern "course in the appreciation of art": it demands an understanding of the spirit of the Middle Ages, the spirit of Christianity itself, and in the last analysis the spirit of what has been well named the "Philosophia Perennis" or "Universal and Unanimous Tradition," of which St. Augustine spoke as a "Wisdom, that was not made, but is now what it always was and ever shall be"; some touch of which will open doors to the understanding of and a delight in any traditional art, whether it be that of the Middle Ages, that of the East, or that of the "folk" in any part of the world.

Chapter VIII. The nature of "folklore" and "popular art"

A sharp distinction is commonly drawn between "learning" and folklore, "high art" and popular art; and it is quite true that under present conditions the distinction is valid and profound. Factual science and personal or academic art on the one hand, and "superstitition" and "peasant art" on the other are indeed of different orders, and pertain to different levels of reference.

We seem to find that a corresponding distinction has been drawn in India between the constituted (*saṁskrta*) and provincial (*deśī*) languages and literatures, and between a highway (*mārga*) and a local or byway (*deśī*) art; and what is *saṁskrta* and *mārga* being always superior to what is *deśī*, an apparent parallel is offered to the modern valuation of learning and academic

art and relative disparagement of superstition and folk art. When, for example, we find in *Saṁgītadarpana*, I. 4-6, "The ensemble of music (*saṁgītam*) is of two kinds, highway (*mārga*) and local (*deśī*): that which was followed after by Siva (*druhinena*)[92] and practised (*prayuktam*) by Bharata is called 'highway' and bestows liberation (*vimukti-dam*); but that which serves for worldly entertainment (*lokânurañjakam*) in accordance with custom (*deśasthayā-rityā*) is called 'local,'" and when similarly the *Daśarūpa*, I. 15, distinguishes *mārga* from *deśī* dancing, the first being "that which displays the meanings of words by means of gestures,"[93] it is generally assumed that the modern distinction of "art" from "folk" music is intended. It is also true that the modern *ustād* looks down upon what are actually folk-songs, very much in the same way that the academic musician of modern Europe looks down upon folk music, although in neither case is there an entire want of appreciation.

A pair of passages parallel to those above can advantageously be cited. In the *Jaiminīya Brāhmana*, II. 69-70, where Prajāpati and Death conduct opposing sacrifices,[94] the protagonists are aided by two "armies" or "parties," Prajāpati's consisting of the chanted lauds, recitative, and ritual acts (the sacerdotal art), and Death's of "what was sung to the harp, enacted" (*nrtyate*),[95] or done, "by way of mere entertainment" (*vrthā*. When Death has been overcome, he resorts to the women's house (*patnīśālā*), and it is added that what had been his "party" are now "what people sing to the harp, or enact, or do, to please themselves" (*vrthā*). In the *Śukranītisāra*, IV. 4. 73-76, we find that whereas the making of images of deities is "conducive to the world of heavenly light," or "heavenward leading" (*svargya*), the making of likenesses of men, with however much skill, is "non-conducive to the world of heavenly light" (*asvargya*). The common reference of *vrthā* (lit. "heretical" in the etymological sense of this word) and *asvargya* here to what is connoted by our word *deśī*, previously cited, will be evident.

A similar distinction of sacred from profane musical art is drawn in *Śatapatha Brāhmana*, III. 2. 4, in connection with the seduction of Vāc, who is won over from the Gandharvas by the Devas; Vāc, the feminine principle, turns away from the Vedic recitations and the hymnody and lauds in which the Gandharvas are occupied, and turns to the harp-playing and singing with which the mundane Devas propose to please her. It is significant that whereas the Gandharvas invite her attention by saying, "We verily know, we know," what is offered by the gods is to "give you pleasure" (*tvā pramodayisyāma*). And so, as the text expresses it, Vāc

---

[92] Brāhma may be meant, but the word suggests rather Śiva Both of these aspects of deity are traditionally "authors" of the principles of music and dancing; the former in the *Nātya Śāstra*, the latter in the *Abhinaya Darpana*.

[93] The *Abhinaya Darpana* similarly distinguishes *nṛtya*, or mimesis viz., that form of the dance which has flavour, mood, and implied significance (*rasa, bhāva, vyañjana*) –from *nṛita*, or decorative dancing, devoid of flavour and mood.

[94] It need hardly be pointed out that the Vedic sacrifice, constantly described as a mimesis of "what was done in the beginning," is in all its forms and in the fullest sense of the words a work of art, and a synthesis of arts liturgical and architectural, just as the same can be said of the Christian Mass (which is also a mimetic sacrifice), in which the dramatic and architectural elements are inseparably connected.

[95] It should not be supposed that it is only on Death's side that there is singing to the harp, enactment (*nṛt)*, and a doing (*kṛ*); the point is that all of these acts are done by him *vṛtha*, "wantonly," for mere pleasure, and not in due form. As already remarked, the sacrifice is mimetic by nature and definition, and it is for this reason that we render *nṛtyate* by "enacted" rather than by "danced"; for though there can be no doubt that the ritual, or portions of it, were in a certain sense "danced," (as "Indra danced his heroic deeds," RV. V. 33. 6), this expression would hardly convey to a modern reader the significance of the root *nṛt* as employed here as well as in later stage directions, where what is intended is a signification by means of formal and rhythmic gestures. That the ritual must have been, as we said, at least in parts, a kind of dance, is evident from the fact that the gods themselves, engaged in the work of creation, are compared to dancers (*nṛtyatam iva*, RV. X. 72. 6), and that in KB. XVII. 8 the sacrificing priests are spoken of as "dancing" (*ninartyanti*), Keith justly commenting that this implies a "union of song, recitation, and dancing"—that is to say, what is later called the ensemble of music, *saṁgīta*. It may be added that ritual dancing survived in the Christian sacrifice at least as late as the eighteenth century in Spain.
The contests of Prajapati with Death parallels that of Apollo with Marsyas, as to which Plato says that the man of sound mind will "prefer Apollo and his instruments to Marsyas and his" (*Republic* 399 E).

indeed inclined to the gods, but she did so "vainly" (*mogham*) inasmuch as she turned away from those who were occupied with celebration and laudation, to the dancing and singing of the gods. And "This is why women even here and now (*itarhi*) are addicted to vanity (*mogham-saṁhitāh*) for Vāc inclined thereto, and other women do as she did. And so it is that they take a liking most readily to one who sings and dances" (*nrtyati, gāyati*).[96] It is quite clear that *mogham* here corresponds to *vrthā* in the *Jaiminīya* text, and that in both cases the worldly and feminine arts of mere amusement are contrasted with the sacred liturgical arts. It is also perfectly clear that the worldly arts of mere amusement are regarded literally as "deadly" –it must not be forgotten that "all that is under the sun is under the sway of death" (*mrtyun-āptam, Śatapatha Br.*, X. 5. 1. 4)– and that such disparagement of the arts as can be recognized in Indian thought (especially Buddhist) from first to last is a disparagement not of the arts as such, but of the secular arts of mere amusement as distinguished from the intellectual arts that are a very means of enlightenment.[97]

Before going further, it will be desirable to examine more closely some of the terms that have been cited. In connection with the passage quoted above, Dr. Bake has remarked that "The religious value of art music –*mārga*– is clearly apparent from this quotation, and actually this music, as conceived by the highest God and handed down through a succession of teachers, is felt as a means of breaking the cycle of birth." Apart from the questionable rendering of *mārga* by "art," this is absolutely true. The doctrine that human works of art (*śilpānī*) are imitations of heavenly forms, and that by means of their rhythm there can be effected a metrical reconstitution (*saṁskarana*) of the limited human personality, dates at least from the Brāhmana period (*Aitareya Brāhmana*, VI. 27, etc.), and is implied in the Rgveda. "Sanskrit" itself is "constructed" (*saṁskrtam*) in just this sense; it is something more than merely "human" speech, and when the corresponding script is called *devanāgarī* this undoubtedly implies that the human script is an imitation of means of communication in the "city of the gods."

Since the Rgveda has to do only with what is incessant (*nityam*), it is evident that all its terms are symbols rather than signs, and must be understood in their transfigured senses. Now the word *mārga*, rendered above by "highway," derives from *mṛg*, to chase or hunt, especially by tracking.[98] In the Rgveda it is familiar that what one hunts and tracks by its spoor is always the deity, the hidden light, the occulted Sun or Agni, who must be found, and is sometimes referred to as lurking in his lair. This is so well known that a very few citations will suffice. In Rv. VIII. 2. 6 men are said to pursue (*mṛgayante*) Indra, as one pursues a wild beast (*mṛgamna*) with offerings of milk and kine (which may be compared to bait); in Rv. VII. 87. 6, Varuna is compared to a "fierce beast" (*mṛgaś tuviṣmān*); in Rv. X. 46. 2 the Bhrgus, eager seekers after Agni, track him by his spoor (*padaiḥ*) like some lost beast (*paśun na naṣṭam*). *Mārga* is then the creature's "runway," the "track to be followed" (*padavīya*) by the *vestigium pedis*. One

---

[96] Similarly but more briefly in the *Taittirīya Samhitā*, VI. VI. 1. 6. 5. 6, where also the Gandharvas who utter incantations are contrasted with the (mundane) deities who merely "sing," and Vāc follows the latter, but is restored to the former as the price of Soma. The mundane deities are, of course the immanent Breaths, the powers of the soul; it is only when they restore the Voice to the Sacerdotium that they are enabled to partake of the Water of Life; as in RV. X. 109. 5-7, where the (mundane) deities, restoring his wife (i.e., Vāc) to Bṛhaspati, obtain the Soma in exchange, and are made free of their original sin.

[97] The modern iconoclastic attitude towards the arts of imagery and dancing, according to which attempts are made to abolish "idolatry" and the service of Devadāsis in temples, is of a deformative rather than a reformative nature. The intellectual limitations of the iconoclast are such that he interprets in a worldly and moralistic sense what are in themselves by no means vain and deadly but truly *mārga* and *svargya* arts; contemporary mentality reduces all things to its own *deśī* level.

[98] *Mṛga* is "deer," but in the Old English sense of "four-footed game," without necessary reference to the Cervidae—a usage that survives in the expression "small deer." The relation of *mṛga*, animal, to *mṛg*, to hunt, may be compared to that of our "fowl" to "fowling."

sees thus clearly what values are implied in the expression *mārga*, "Way," and how inevitably that which is *mārga* is likewise *vimukti-da*, since it is precisely by the finding of the Hidden Light that liberation is effected.[99]

Deśī, on the other hand, deriving from *diś*, to "indicate," and hence *diś*, "region" or "quarter," is "local"; cf. *deśaṁ niviś*, to "settle" in a given locality, *deśa vyavahāra* or *deśâcāra*, "local custom," "way of the world," and *deśya*, "native." But these are not merely terms that could be derogatively employed by city people or courtiers to countrymen in general, but that could be employed by dwellers in the city of God or in any Holy Land with reference to those beyond the pale. Heaven lies "beyond the falcon," the worlds are "under the sun," and "in the power of death"; *loka* "world," is etymologically Latin *locus*, a place defined by given conditions; and *laukika*, "mundane" is literally "local"; it is precisely here (*iha*) in the worlds that the kindreds are "settled," "localized," and "native." From the celestial or solar point of view, *désī* is thus mundane, human and devious, as distinct from super-mundane, divine and direct; and this distinction of *mārga* (= *svargya*) from *deśi* as sacred from profane is in full agreement with the sense of the expressions *rañjaka* (pleasing, impassioning, affecting, etc.) and *vrthā* (wanton, random, "as you like," etc.), by which the value of *deśī* has been explained above.

If we now consider the terrestrial analogy, then, looking at the matter from the Brahmans' point of view (who are "gods on earth"), whatever is geographically and-or qualitatively removed from an orthodox centre, from a Holy Land (such as *Aryāvarta*) where the heavenly pattern is accurately imitated, will be at the same time geographically and spiritually "provincial"; those are pre-eminently *deśī* who are outer barbarians beyond the pale; and in this sense *deśī* is the equivalent of "heathen" or "pagan" in the primary sense of "pertaining to the heaths or wastes," as well as "pagan" in the secondary sense of worldly or sentimental (materialistic).

Highway and local or byway cultures can be pursued at one and the same time and in one and the same environment; they are not so much the cultures of ethnically different peoples or of given social strata as they are the cultures of qualitatively different kinds of people. The distinction is not nearly so much of aristocratic from peasant culture as it is one of aristocratic and peasant from bourgeoisie and proletarian cultures. Mughal painting, for example, even when more refined than Hindu painting, is a byway rather than a highway art; it is essentially an art of portraiture (from the *mārga* point of view, then, *asvargya*), and a "dated" art, which is as much as to say a "placed" (*deśī*) art, for we cannot logically restrict the idea of "local" to a merely spatial significance, and indeed the two commonly associated words *kāla-deśa* imply one another. From the Indian point of view, then, it is not the "primitive" (but abstract) art of the American Indian, or the peasant cultures of Europe or India, but rather the anti-traditional, academic, and bourgeoisie culture of modern Europe, and the proletarian culture of Soviet Russia, that can properly be called a devious and "byway" culture, "not heavenward leading." A traditional must not be confused with an academic or merely fashionable art; tradition is not a mere stylistic fixation, nor merely a matter of general suffrage. A traditional art has fixed ends and ascertained means of operation, has been transmitted in pupillary succession from an

---

[99] It may be noted that *pada* as a "word" or "phrase" is a naturally developed meaning, all formal language being a trace of the unspoken Word— "the lovely tokens (*lakśmīḥ*) are inherent in the seers' speech," RV. X. 71. 2. In casual conversation, worldly speech, on the other hand, there is nothing more than a literal indication of perceptions, and only the estimative understanding is involved. This distinction in the verbal field corresponds to that of *mārga* from *deśī* dancing, the former having an intelligible theme and embodying more than literal meanings, as is implied by the word *vyañjana*. The one kind of communication is formal (ideally informed) and intellectual, the other informal and sensitive: "Were it not for Intellect, the Word would babble incoherently" (SB. III. 2. 4. 11). It is from this point of view, and only accidentally geographically, that Sanskrit is distinguished from the vernaculars (*deśī bhāsā*), of which one may say that *Apabhraṁśa* is most of all a "byway" or "devious" and non-significant (*avyakta*) manner of communication, and that such as *Braj Bhāsā*, or Tamil are *desi* in the geographical sense only. In the same way one may say that all sacred languages employed in the transmission of traditional doctrines are "highway," and that languages designed or employed for purely practical purposes (Esperanto would be a good example) are "byway" tongues. Pali, Nevertheless, by its confusion of certain words (e.g. *dipa=dīpa or dvīpa*) is not *as* well fitted as Sanskrit for precise communications of ideas.

immemorial past, and retains its values even when, as at the present day, it has gone quite out of fashion. Hieratic and folk arts are both alike traditional (*smārta*). An academic art, on the other hand, however great its prestige, and however fashionable it may be, can very well be and is usually of an anti-traditional, personal, profane, and sentimental sort.

We think it has now been made sufficiently clear that the distinction of *mārga* from *deśī* is not necessarily a distinction of aristocratic and cultivated from folk and primitive art, but one of sacred and traditional from profane and sentimental art.

We may then very well ask what is the true nature of folk and peasant art, and whether such an art differs from that of the *kavi* and *ācārya* in any other way than in degree of refinement. In traditional and unanimous societies we observe that no hard and fast line can be drawn between the arts that appeal to the peasant and those that appeal to the lord; both live in what is essentially the same way, but on a different scale. The distinctions are of refinement and luxury, but not of content or style; in other words, the differences are measurable in terms of material value, but are neither spiritual nor psychological. The attempt to distinguish aristocratic from popular motifs in traditional literature is fallacious; all traditional art is a folk art in the sense that it is the art of a unanimous people (jana). As Professor Child has remarked in connection with the history of ballads, "The condition of society in which a truly national and popular poetry appears... (is one) in which the people are not divided by political organizations and book-culture into marked distinct classes;[100] in which, consequently, there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form one individual."

It is only because we regard these problems from the narrow standpoint of present circumstances that we fail to grasp this condition. In a democratic society, where all men are theoretically equal, what exists in fact is a distinction between a bourgeoisie culture on the one hand and the ignorance of the uncultured masses on the other, notwithstanding that both classes may be literate. Here there is no such thing as a "folk" (*jana*) for the proletariat is not a "folk," but comparable rather to the outcaste (*caṇḍāla*) than to a fourth estate (*śūdra*): the sacerdotal (*brāhmana*) and chivalrous (*kṣatriya*) classes are virtually lacking (men are so much alike that these functions can be exercised by *anyone* –the newsboy, for example, becoming a President); and the bourgeoisie (*vaiṣya*) is assimilated to the proletarian (*caṇḍāla*) masses, to form what is in effect an unanimously profane "herd" (*paśu*) whose conduct is governed only by likes and dislikes, and not by any higher principles.[101] Here the distinction of "educated" from "uneducated" is merely technical; it is no longer one of degrees of consciousness, but of more or less information. Under these conditions the distinction of literacy from illiteracy has a value altogether different from its value in traditional societies in which the whole folk, at the same time that it is culturally unanimous, is functionally differentiated; literacy, in the latter case, being quite unnecessary to some functions, where, moreover, its absence does not constitute a privation, since other means than books exist for the communication and transmission of spiritual values ; and, further, under these circumstances, the function itself (*svadharma*), however "menial" or "commercial," is strictly speaking a "way" (*mārga*) so that it is not by engaging in other work to which a higher or lower social prestige may attach, but to the extent that a man approaches perfection in his own work and understands its spiritual significance that he can rise above himself—an ambition to *rise above his fellows* having then no longer any real meaning.

---

[100] It need hardly be pointed out that a caste or feudal organization of society is no more a division in this sense than is the complex organization of the physical body the mark of a disintegrated personality.

[101] A condition of the individual can be imagined that is superior to caste; an absolute *pramāna*, for example, is predicated of deity, for whom no function (*dharma*) is too high or too low. The proletarian condition, on the other hand, is not of this nature, but *inferior* to caste, alike from a spiritual and from an economic point of view; for as Plato has expressed it, "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 as he is in himself."

In democratic societies, then, where proletarian and profane (*i.e.*, ignorant) values prevail, there arises a real distinction of what is optimistically called "learning" or "science" on the part of the educated classes from the ignorance of the masses; and this distinction is measured by standards, not of profundity, but of literacy, in the simple sense of ability to read the printed word. In case there survives any residue of a true peasantry (as is still the case in Europe, but scarcely in America), or when it is a question of the "primitive" culture of other races, or even of traditional scriptures and metaphysical traditions that are of anything but popular origin, the "superstitions" involved (we shall presently see what is really implied by this very apt term) are confounded with the "ignorance" of the masses, and studied only with a condescending lack of understanding. How perverse a situation is thus created can be seen when we realize that where the thread of symbolic and initiatory teaching has been broken at higher social levels (and modern education, whether in India or elsewhere, has precisely and very often intentionally, this destructive effect), it is just the "superstitions" of the people and what is apparently irrational in religious doctrine that has preserved what would otherwise have been lost. When the bourgeoisie culture of the universities has thus declined to levels of purely empirical and factual information, then it is precisely and only in the superstitions of the peasantry, wherever these have been strong enough to resist the subversive efforts of the educators, that there survives a genuinely human and often, indeed, a superhuman wisdom, however unconscious, and however fragmentary and naive may be the form in which it is expressed. There is, for example, a wisdom in traditional fairy tales (not, of course, in those which have been written by "literary" men "for children") that is altogether different in kind from such psychological sense or nonsense as may be embodied in a modern novel.

As has been justly remarked by M. René Guénon, "The very conception of 'folklore,' as commonly understood, rests on a fundamentally false hypothesis, the supposition, viz., that there really are such things as 'popular creations' or spontaneous inventions of the masses; and the connection of this point of view with the democratic prejudice is obvious… The folk has thus preserved, without understanding, the remains of old traditions that go back sometimes to an indeterminably distant past, to which we can only refer as 'prehistoric.'" What has really been preserved in folk and fairy tales and in popular peasant art is, then, by no means a body of merely childish or entertaining fables or of crude decorative art, but a series of what are really esoteric doctrines and symbols of anything but popular invention. One may say that it is in this way, when an intellectual decadence has taken place in higher circles, that this doctrinal material is preserved from one epoch to another, affording a glimmer of light in what may be called the dark night of the intellect; the folk memory serving the purpose of a sort of ark, in which the wisdom of a former age is carried over (*tiryate*) the period of the dissolution of cultures that takes place at the close of a cycle.[102]

---

[102] Cf. Luc-Benoist, *La Cuisine des Anges*, 1932, pp. 74-75, "L'interêt profond de toutes les traditions dites populaires réside surtout dans le fait qu'elles ne sont pas populaires d'origine. ... Aristote y voyait avec raison les restes de l'ancienne philosophie. Il faudrait dire les formes anciennes de l'eternelle philosophie"—i.e., of the *philosophia perennis*, Augustine's "Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was and the same to be for evermore." As pointed out by Michelet, V.-E., it is in this sense—viz., inasmuch as "les Maîtres du Verbe projettent leurs inventions dans la mémoire populaire, qui est un receptacle merveilleux des concepts merveilleux" (*Le Secret de la Chevalerie*, 1930, p. 19) —and not in any "democratic" sense, that it can properly be said, *Vox populi, vox Dei*.
The beast fables of the *Pañcatantra*, in which a more than merely worldly wisdom is embodied, is unquestionably of aristocratic and not of popular origin; most of the stories in it have, as Edgerton says, 'gone down' into Indian folklore, rather than been derived from it *Amer. Oriental Series*, III, 1924, pp. 3, 10, 54). The same applies, without question, to the *Jātakas*, many of which are versions of myths, and could not possibly have been composed by anyone not in full command of the metaphysical doctrines involved.
Andrew Lang, introducing Marian Roalfe Cox's *Cinderella* (1893), in which 345 versions of the story from all over the world are analysed, remarked, "The fundamental idea of Cinderella, I suppose, is this: a person of mean or obscure position, by means of supernatural assistance, makes a good marriage." He found it very difficult to account for the world-wide distribution of the motive; of which, it may be added, there is a notable occurrence *in a scriptural context* in the Indian myth of Apālā and Indra. Here I will only ask the reader, of *what* "person in a mean or obscure position" is the "good marriage" referred to in the words of Donne, "Nor ever chaste until thou ravish me?" whom did Christ "love in her baseness and all her foulness" (St. Bonaventura, *Dom. Prim. post Oct. Epiph.* II. 2)? and what does the *ιερος γαμος* imply in its final significance? And by the same token, *who* is the "dragon" disenchanted by the *fier baiser*? Who emerges with a "sunskin" from the scaly slough, who shakes off the ashes and puts on a golden gown to dance with the Prince? *Pra vasīyāñsaṁ vivāham āpnoti ya evaṁ veda*, "More excellent is the marriage that one makes who understands that" (*Pañcavimsa Brahmana*, VII. 10. 4)!

It is not a question of whether or not the ultimate significance of the popular legends and folk designs is actually understood by those who relate or employ them. These problems arise in much higher circles; in literary history, for example, one is often led to ask, when we find that an epic or romantic character has been imposed on purely mythical material (for example in the Māhābhārata and Rāmâyana, and in the European recensions of the Grail and other Celtic material), how far has the author really understood his material? The point that we want to bring out is that the folk material, regardless of our actual qualifications in relation to it, is actually of an essentially mārga and not a deśī character, and actually intelligible at levels of reference that are far above and by no means inferior to those of our ordinary contemporary "learning." It is not at all shocking that this material should have been transmitted by peasants for whom it forms a part of their lives, a nourishment of their very constitution, but who cannot explain; it is not at all shocking that the folk material can be described as a body of "superstition," since it is really a body of custom and belief that "stands over" (*superstat*) from a time when its meanings were understood. Had the folk beliefs not indeed been once understood, we could not now speak of them as metaphysically intelligible, or explain the accuracy of their formulation. The peasant may be unconscious and unaware, but that of which he is unconscious and unaware is in itself far superior to the empirical science and realistic art of the "educated" man, whose real ignorance is demonstrated by the fact that he studies and compares the data of folklore and "mythology" without suspecting their real significance any more than the most ignorant peasant.[103]

All that has been said above applies, of course, with even greater force to the *sruti* literature and, above all, the Rgveda, which so far from representing an intellectually barbarous age (as some pretend) has references so far abstract and remote from historical and empirical levels as to have become almost unintelligible to those whose intellectual capacities have been inhibited by what is nowadays called a "university education." It is a matter at the same time of faith and understanding: the injunctions *Crede ut intelligas* and *Intellige ut credas* ("Believe, that you may understand," and "Understand, in order to believe") are valid in both cases –*i.e.*, whether we are concerned with the interpretation of folklore or with that of the transmitted texts.

*

[103] Strzygowksi, in *JISOA*. V. p. 59 expresses his complete agreement with this statement.