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The Appreciation of the Unfamiliar Arts*

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We shall begin by making two assumptions implied in the title of this talk, viz. (1) that whether by choice or accident we have before us something made by art, such as a picture or a garment, of some strange kind, let us say Egyptian or Peruvian; and (2) that pleasure being always preferable to pain, we wish if possible to derive some pleasure from the sight of the object before us.

Now pleasure is of two kinds, either of the senses, or the mind, and as we shall want to have as much pleasure as possible, we shall desire both kinds. The two kinds of pleasure correspond to the two ways in which the 'beauty' of the object can be considered. Let us consider the two pleasures separately, and how best to secure both. The physical or sensible pleasure may itself be of two kinds: direct or imagined. If the 'decorative' value of the picture, or the texture of the garment pleases us, the pleasure is direct; if the picture be a representation of someone or something dear to us, or if we think the garment actually worn would become us, it will be indirect; and in the same way if the picture represents an activity agreeable to our moral taste or political prejudices. If we call it 'beautiful' accordingly, we mean lovely, lovable, or likeable, rather than beautiful in the philosopher's sense.

On the other hand, just because the object and its qualities are unfamiliar, and it may seem to us 'barbaric' or at least 'odd'; and because the works do not represent anyone or anything already dear to us, nor always such activities as we can approve of; and because we have no immediate use for the object; there remains a very fair chance that we may call it ugly, and not like it at all, but dismiss it as a curiosity. It was indeed from this point of view that Museums originally started, viz. as collections of 'curiosities'. Objects of 'curiosity' value are even nowadays sometimes offered as gifts to 'Art' museums, which to the would-be donor's bewilderment, decline them; and on the other

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hand, 'Art' museums, guided by experts, collect and exhibit as works of art many objects which the public 'knowing nothing about art, but knowing what I like' still continues to regard as curiosities—thereby missing the kinds of pleasure above referred to.

Evidently then, to secure the desired pleasure, we must learn to react to unfamiliar beauties, to enjoy new sensations, and endorse or allow activities in others which might be unbecoming in ourselves. This is one of the prices to be paid for culture; to judge all things only by an inherited taste is precisely to be 'provincial'. At the same time, this does not mean that we must become eclectic, or imitators of the unfamiliar works; that is the opposite of 'culture'; to be 'influenced' implies a fundamental misunderstanding of the significance of style, and can only result in caricature. We are not to try to do ourselves what is naturally done by others; but rather to be patient, and to recognize that what at first impresses us as merely odd may have been inevitable and right in its own environment, to respect the idiosyncrasies of others no less than our own.

Most of our difficulties arise from the consideration of things torn out of their context. It may readily be granted, for example, that even the finest Egyptian or Chinese figure of a deity will be incongruously related and in this sense unlovely on the drawing-room mantelpiece or even in a museum. One who actually sees its beauty does not really see it there on the mantelpiece, but in a mentally reconstructed original environment. As Goethe so truly said, 'he who would understand the artist must go there where the artist lived and worked'. If we cannot literally do this, either as to distant lands or past ages, we can do so in the spirit; it is here that the teacher of art appreciation and of the history of art ought to be of help to us, and mainly for this that our museum guides and catalogues ought to be written.

In this way we can become 'lovers of art', and not only of familiar arts; we can learn to admire, collect, and take pleasure in the very objects which may once have repelled us. We can learn to appreciate their refinement, or charm, and to recognize the artist's sensitivity, and the elegance or vigour of his taste, and to share in part his likes and dislikes. Thus we become more universally human, and less human in a merely private fashion. But all this still remains a matter of physical or sense pleasures, or moral approbation or disapprobation; taste has been educated and broadened, but it remains taste, rather than knowledge or judgment; we are still playing only half the game.

As Plato so well said of the mere lovers of art that 'they behold and love fine sounds and colours, but beauty itself they do not admit of as having any real existence'. Much the same will apply to the majority of those who labour to make themselves acquainted with the history of art, to be able to name and recognize and distinguish and date the different kinds of art, all of which has many advantages, but may perfectly well coincide with an almost complete indifference to actual works of art as an immediate source of pleasure. It is one thing to know a great deal *about* art, and another to enjoy it when seen, and to be able to judge of the actual quality of a given work. To partake of the second and intellectual pleasure afforded by works of art, it will not then suffice to build up a broad and educated taste, nor to be very learned about art, but rather to understand its reason, in accordance with the definition, 'Art is the right reason, or way, of making things'.

Before we proceed to consider the second or mental pleasure which the contemplation of the unfamiliar object may afford us, we must refer to one obstacle that stands in our way, that of the style or language of a work of art. Every work of art has an import, which it expresses, and must not be confused with what the work may happen to resemble, whether intentionally or accidentally. Now to take an extreme case, and the art of words, suppose that a Chinaman wants to say the same thing that we likewise want to say, he will say it in Chinese, and we in English. It is in fact a recognized axiom, that nothing can be known or expressed except in some way. The Chinese way will be intelligible to other Chinamen, but not immediately to us; we have to learn Chinese. The difficulties are not quite so obvious in the case of the musical or visual arts. But they are nevertheless present; there is no such thing as an absolutely universal language of any art. We can indeed recognize that there are mountains or rivers in a Chinese landscape, and be interested or uninterested accordingly; but all this belongs to the matters of taste and association of which we have already spoken. What we are now concerned with is what the Chinese artist means by his mountains or rivers, which may or may not be the same that we might mean. The point is that he expresses himself in a certain way, by means of what are called 'conventions', which are perfectly intelligible to his fellows, but not at first sight to us. We must then take a little trouble to familiarize ourselves with the artist's language, so that we can take it for granted, and catch his meaning as

readily as do his fellows. We must learn to take for granted unfamiliar kinds of perspective, and new types of composition, so as to be able to understand without stopping to spell out every symbol in his repertoire. As a general rule we shall have at least this great advantage, that whereas in studying the works of individual modern artists we have to learn this all over again for each one separately, in the case of Chinese or Egyptian art, the greater part of the vocabulary, or conventions of the art, are the common property of the whole school and remain fundamentally the same throughout long periods of time.

We have spoken of 'meaning': not in the popular sense of what the work is 'about' or what it is 'like', all of which belongs to the interests of association of which we spoke at first, but in the sense of what it signifies, what it was made *for*, and what it was expected to *do* for the spectator, or rather what he is expected to be able to do *with* it. All this makes up what is called the final cause of the work of art, its reason for being at all. This cause is the occasion moreover of what the philosopher means by the beauty of the work; viz. the clear expression of its function, by which it invites us to make use of it.

It is true that we are accustomed on the one hand to be contemptuous of subject meaning in a work of art, and on the other unaware of significance, whether in nature or art. We must however realize that in almost all other times than the present, everything has been considered not only for *what* it is, but for what it *means*. For example, not merely is the sky blue, but 'The Heavens declare the glory of God'. Not in a vague and sentimental way, that is, but in some specific way. The lotus or rose is not merely a charming flower, but naturally represents the ground of being. Thus we arrive at one of the most characteristic aspects of the unfamiliar arts, viz. their symbolism, or iconography, as it is called when images of deities are considered. This symbolism or iconography is then the expression of their purpose, and the immediate vehicle of their beauty; which beauty, in this philosopher's sense, has to do, not with feeling, but with knowing.

Now at last we are approaching the sources of the second or intellectual kind of pleasure that can be derived from the unfamiliar arts—a much keener pleasure than the other sort, and one that can be enjoyed regardless of whether or not the work itself appeals to our taste. The intellectual pleasure will be twofold: in the first place we shall understand what is being said, which is a greater pleasure than that of merely hearing the dulcet tones of the speaker's voice, and in the

second place we shall enjoy the keen pleasure of judgment, which has been called 'the perfection of art'.

It is evident that we could not enjoy these pleasures of understanding what is said, and judging whether or not it has been well said, unless we know what it was that had to be said, that is, what the work of art was for and what the patron had in mind to do with it when he commissioned the artist, whose only business it was to make a good job of the work entrusted to him. Even if the artist is building his own house, and is thus both patron and artist, the principle remains the same. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. We cannot know if it is a good house unless we know the particular purposes it has to serve, how many people are to live in it, and so forth; unless it fills the bill it will be devoid of formal beauty, and can only be a piece of 'fine art' without relation to life, and thus entirely useless. In the same way we cannot know whether a given icon, representing the Madonna, or Zeus, is 'good' unless we know something about the Madonna or Zeus idea which the patron entrusted to the artist to be embodied in paint or stone. So it will often happen that the man who is going to live in the house, or use the icon in actual devotions, will be a better judge of the art than the aesthetician, whose knowledge of the object is necessarily accidental and analytical.

Nor are the difficulties in the way of these intellectual pleasures nearly so great as might be supposed. Human nature itself provides an essential basis of agreement on fundamentals, once we have realized that our own prejudices and tastes are only of some one kind amongst others. Tastes may differ in detail but that about which tastes differ remains the same. Even the ideas to be expressed and the symbols by which they are expressed are far more alike than we suppose; the symbols indeed are more nearly a universal language, and more nearly the same all over the world than anything else in art that we have referred to. Thus at last those very differentiations which at first interfered with sympathy become the means of mutual understanding, and being attracted by the specific beauties of one another's arts, the barriers of race and language are broken down.