BEATTY JOHN WESLEY

THE RELATION OF ART TO NATURE

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Содержание

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Introduction

In his very convincing and lucid treatise on the fundamental principles of art, John W. Beatty gives us a most absorbing theme to follow – the relation of art to nature, as expressed in their own words by artists themselves, of different times and creeds; with, too, the opinions of philosophers and men of letters.

Himself a well-known painter, Mr. Beatty has been for almost thirty years the enlightened Director of Fine Arts of the Carnegie Institute, where, alone in our whole country, are held annually International Exhibitions of Art. Much of his life has thus been spent in intimate association with the very best painters and sculptors of our generation, and his and their opinions and observations are here to be read with much pleasure and profit by every one interested in art.

Mr. Beatty is quite right when he says, "Not many able artists have recorded their opinions." In conversation, or on the impulse of the moment they may often speak with great beauty and clarity of expression, but nearly always tersely and to the point. On the other hand, the man of letters is more given to analysis and finds more words, and more beautiful ones, to express his meaning.

Analysis is perhaps a dangerous thing for the craftsman to toy with. He must approach nature directly and simply, with concentration that is absolute. He dissects only that particular fragment of nature which is before him, and that unconsciously. The precious sensation of closeness to nature is so fleeting and so fickle, so often not there at all, and so frightened, that it is easily scared away by the cold voice of the man with a rule to follow. The ever changing aspect of nature, be it man or landscape, makes the first impression quickly recorded in the thumb-box sketch, or with a dozen lines on the back of an envelope, an invaluable document. Again and again in the painting of a picture we refer with respect to this first strong impression of nature.

The words character *and* beauty *are many times repeated in this book. Both terms are definite and yet how elastic! Rembrandt is the preëminent example of the complex meaning of the word beauty; many of his models he found in the Ghetto and among his friends and neighbors, or, for lack of a model, he painted himself. Surely he has proved to us that only that which has character is truly beautiful; and we must also feel in the presence of Rembrandt's works, his absolute fidelity to truth.*

On a certain occasion I was in Rodin's studio when reference was made to some harsh criticism of one of his nudes. After listening with impatience Rodin shrugged his shoulders and said: "Why find fault with me? they should find fault with nature!"

And so we return to Mr. Beatty's contention that the artist has succeeded when he has imitated the truth and beauty of nature.

The word imitation might seem to limit the artist's personal vision, which must be his very own. How very different this personal vision can be came vividly before me when I visited the Prado in Madrid. In one room are seen the immortal works of Velasquez, among which are the portraits of Philip IV and his consort; and in an adjoining room are portraits of this same Philip and his queen by Rubens, the Fleming, who happened to be temporarily in Madrid on a diplomatic mission. The Spaniard saw his sovereigns in all their splendor, but with a solemn dignity, dark haired and sallow complexioned. While the man from Antwerp saw the forms more round and amiable, the hair and flesh more blond and colourful, and unconsciously injected the blood of the Netherlands into the veins of his Spanish sitters.

Notwithstanding this personal expression, the predilection of a Rubens for the more florid colours, of a Velasquez for the more subdued, sober notes found in nature, it remains true that the end sought by both is the representation of character as it exists in nature.

Gari Melchers.

Belmont,
Falmouth, Virginia,
January 5, 1922.

"The realities of Nature surpass our most ambitious dreams."
Auguste Rodin

Argument

My purpose in writing this treatise is to establish, if this be found possible, a foundation for the belief that the art of the painter and sculptor is imitative, not creative; that the great masterpieces of art which have withstood the test of time rest firmly upon the supreme expression of character and beauty as these qualities are revealed in man and nature; that it is the mission of art to reveal and make plain these rare and lovely qualities. The truthful representation of these qualities constitutes a common factor which binds all great works together, a fact that is realized in every national gallery of art.

I have chosen to base my argument not upon theory or opinion but upon the evidence of eminent painters and sculptors who have produced great works of art.

Not many able artists have recorded their opinions touching the philosophy of art. On the other hand, writers in abundance have undertaken to define art. A few early and some modern philosophers have given profound thought to the subject and bequeathed to us their opinions. Painters and sculptors, with few exceptions, however, have confined their efforts to searching for, and revealing by their art, beauty and character. More is the pity, because opinion supported by achievement is always more valuable than judgment which rests solely upon theory or observation.

The great masters who have directed brush and chisel in the performance of their work must have known what their purpose was; they certainly knew better than any one else, and they undoubtedly realized how far they had succeeded, or how far they had fallen short of securing the qualities which they had discovered and which they had undertaken to reveal. The evidence of these men is invaluable. Its importance bears an exact relation to their success in producing great and enduring works. This is true in every other field of human endeavor and it is equally true in the field of art. The opinion of the great astronomer with reference to astronomy is more valuable than that of the layman; the opinion of the great painter than that of the amateur. The man who knows any science so perfectly that he can practice it successfully, the artist who knows his art and nature so well that he can produce great works of art, these have earned the right to express their opinions. I think this must be accepted as a fundamental truth. It is therefore to the painter and sculptor that I turn for judgment. I have been aided in this inquiry by knowledge of the opinions of many of the able painters and sculptors of our own time. Intimate discussion has stimulated further inquiry, and a conviction which was originally based upon familiarity with the methods and purpose of the painter has been confirmed.

The Artist and His Purpose

During all the great periods of art able men have striven earnestly to attain a knowledge of character and beauty and to achieve their truthful representation. Even when the purpose of the artist has been to express some specific idea or to record some incident or historical event, the work has lived, not because of the idea conveyed or the interest which attaches to the subject, but because it has portrayed character in a powerful manner, or because it has expressed the qualities of beauty which are inherent in nature. Upon these qualities, as they have been understood and translated by the artist, has depended the life of every great painting and work of sculpture. I believe this to be a fundamental and far reaching truth, accepted almost universally by painters and sculptors. This, I know, is equivalent to saying that the chief value of a work of art lies in its power to give aesthetic pleasure.

These observations may suggest a question as to the relative importance of a work of art which tells a story or records historical events as compared with one which appeals solely to the aesthetic sense or the love of beauty. Human language, it would seem to me, is the logical method for conveying thought from one mind to another and offers direct, untrammelled mental contact without the intervention of form or design of any kind, while the representation of beauty for beauty's sake alone is the

more direct and effective way of creating and stimulating in the human heart a love of nature and art.

This, however, is not the question considered in this work. The question raised is simply this: Has the artist, in representing the evanescent effects of nature, the manifold beauties and harmonies with which we are surrounded in this world, or predominant character as expressed by man, exceeded nature either by virtue of his exceptional power or as a result of any personal quality which he may impart to the work?

It is also manifestly true that the greatness of a work of art must depend upon the mental power of the artist, that power which enables him to apprehend or discover the essential qualities existing in nature. It is equally true that every artist, even though wholly absorbed in the effort to reveal the truth and beauty which exist in nature, expresses in some degree his own personality. He does this inevitably, first, by the type of subject he chooses to study and represent, and, second, but in a less important degree, by the technical manner employed. This is, of course, well understood by every one. It is not for a moment disputed. But beyond and above this personal expression stands, as the chief and highest purpose of the artist, the representation of truth and character as these do actually exist.

While the painter has used his art to record history, to tell stories, and to express emotions and convictions, his chief mission is to extract from nature her many beautiful forms and harmonies and to present these in pleasing fashion. In this way the

artisan, drawing upon the great multitude of beautiful forms and colours exhibited by nature and so lavishly spread everywhere in the animal and plant creations, cunningly fashions patterns and combinations, weaving these into rugs and adapting them to the many beautiful objects with which we are familiar.

Notwithstanding these accepted facts, I am convinced that the great works of the painter and sculptor, those of supreme importance, rest not upon any of these devices or expressions of art, but upon the faithful, unerring and masterly representation of character and beauty as these do actually exist. The masterpieces of art as they live today in the national art galleries of the world establish this fact. They seem to possess a common factor without regard to subject or period which unites in a common family the great paintings of the entire history of art. This factor I believe to be the quality of truth. These great works owe their existence to the fact that they faithfully represent some great outstanding type, or because they truthfully reveal the characteristic and essential beauty of nature expressed in one of her many moods. They are important just in proportion as their masters have understood these qualities and recorded their impressions on canvas and in marble.

I know perfectly well that the opinion here expressed is not the one most widely accepted; it is not the popular view of art; it is not the view expressed by many writers upon this subject.

The opinion most widely accepted is that the artist creates beauty; that in some mysterious way, by virtue of a special gift, he

does actually evolve from within his own consciousness forms of grace and loveliness; that however deeply the artist sinks himself in nature, art yet remains intensely individual; that in representing nature he adds to that which he secures from nature a personal quality which becomes the most important part of the work. This is the theory of art accepted very generally, but it is not supported by evidence.

The main purpose of this writing is, in fact, to establish by the evidence of the men who are quoted that their reliance has been solely upon nature and their success in exact proportion to their knowledge of nature and their ability to portray her predominant qualities. Let me repeat, however, that the ability to see and understand nature is dependent upon mental power. The man of limited mental power will see little; the one of great power will see much. The latter will apprehend the subtle, elusive qualities in a way impossible to the former. This, I know, is equivalent to saying that the great artist must bring to his task a great mind. This assumption is quite correct. A great mind is that power which is vaguely described as genius; it is what enables men to accomplish great things in every field of human endeavor. The question, therefore, is not whether the great artist possesses superior power, but rather how important are the inevitable traces of personal predilection or technical manner revealed in nearly all works of art as compared with the truthful presentation of the fundamental qualities the artist has discovered and undertaken to represent.

Let us examine this phase of the question more fully. A painting by Corot for instance bears, first, the evidence of Corot's choice of subject. That which appealed to him in nature he painted. The kind of thing he loved, the phase of nature he chose, unquestionably bore evidence of his personal temperament or predilection. By this he expressed his personal taste, his discriminating judgment, himself, in fact. If the artist be a man of gentle and sensitive quality, he will select for representation, as Corot did, a phase of nature which is in accord with his feeling.

In the second place, a painting by Corot will exhibit in a very obvious way the manifest impress of the artist's technical method. In fact, the manner by which the work is performed, that which is termed technic, the very manner in which the artist touches the canvas, becomes a distinguishing and individual characteristic intimately associated with the artist and easily recognized. However, the technical treatment is of little significance. It is in an important sense pure mannerism, often the result of habit or early professional training. In a limited sense it is the handwriting of the artist. This technical side of a painting, the obvious and superficial aspect, is, I am convinced, given by the amateur an importance out of all proportion to its value.

We must, however, deal with this personal phase of a work of art. The question is how important is this personal expression as compared with the more profound truth of nature. If we may accept the testimony of the painters and sculptors who have produced enduring works of art, we will, I think, be

convinced that this quality is not important when compared with essential truth or predominant character. The artists whose opinions you will read seem almost without exception to attach greater importance to the expression of the character of the person or object represented than to the expression of personal temperament. Indeed, they seem to be oblivious to the qualities which attract and occupy the attention of the writer and amateur, but they are insistent upon the paramount importance of truth.

What this all-important quality is may be further explained by a simple illustration.

Abraham Lincoln was an outstanding type. The painter or sculptor cannot by his art enhance either the beauty or strength of Lincoln's character. The utmost he can hope to do is to realize that character in its richness and fullness of power. In everything the artist touches in his effort to reproduce this character his taste will be displayed, even in the treatment of details, the adjustment of draperies and accessories, the appropriateness of gesture or movement; but all these things, including the technic displayed, will be subordinate to Lincoln's character. The great, outstanding, dominant character of Abraham Lincoln exists as a masterpiece of nature far outranking in perfection any description or portraiture. The man who best reads or comprehends this character and who most faithfully represents it, will produce the greatest work of art. In the effort to do this, the painter or sculptor will undoubtedly leave traces of his own individuality or temperament, but these qualities must

not be confused with the dominant character of a Lincoln or given undue importance. The highest purpose of the artist is to faithfully represent character.

Ancient Conceptions of Art

Closely allied to the thought that the painter creates beauty is the ancient tradition that the artist is inspired to produce works of art. This conviction had its origin very early in the history of art. In the time of Praxiteles this belief was entertained by many; it was thought, for instance, that in the production of the Aphrodite of Knidos the sculptor was inspired by the goddess herself.

This conception of art doubtless grew out of the fact that the early art of the Egyptians and Greeks was largely devoted to the representation of deities and to the erection of temples which should be their shrines. This association of art with the gods and their temples doubtless contributed to the belief that the artist was inspired or that he possessed a superior power or the gift of inspiration.

Hegel

Closely allied with this thought was the conception expressed by Hegel with reference to a distinction between the external and material forms of art and the spirit which he suggests permeates the work and of which it is a manifestation. Hegel, although accepting the theory that "art has the vocation of revealing the truth in the form of sensuous artistic shape," speaks of the union of the material with the spiritual in a manner, which although quite true in abstract reasoning, contributes to this impression. Discussing Architecture as a Fine Art, he wrote: "The material

of architecture is matter itself in its immediate externality as a heavy mass subject to mechanical laws, and its forms remain the forms of inorganic nature, but are merely arranged and ordered in accordance with the abstract rules of the understanding, the rules of symmetry. But in such material and in such forms the ideal as concrete spirituality cannot be realized; the reality which is represented in them remains, therefore, alien to the spiritual idea, as something external which it has not penetrated or with which it has but a remote and abstract relation… Into this temple now enters the God himself. The lightning-flash of individuality strikes the inert mass, permeates it, and a form no longer merely symmetrical, but infinite and spiritual, concentrates and molds its adequate bodily shape." No one today in the presence of a superb relic of architecture asks whether or not it is the abiding place of a spirit. It is accepted as expressing the spirit of beauty and is enjoyed for this alone.

Hegel's conception of a work of art, frequently expressed in his philosophy, was that the content or idea is the important thing. This conception conformed to early art because painting and sculpture were employed primarily to express ideas.

With the development of the Landscape School of Art and the enjoyment of art on the purely aesthetic side, modern thought has materially changed. Gradually our appreciation of the beautiful for its own sake has developed. The influence of this movement has reacted upon all phases of art expression, and even those works which express ideas in the sense of subject matter have

come to be judged upon the basis of aesthetic beauty, rather than with reference to the idea or content as thus defined.

Therefore what Hegel says applies to the early conception of art rather than to that of the present time.

Socrates

Another conception of art suggests the union of the beautiful with the good. The philosophy of Socrates teaches this. He regarded the beautiful as coincident with the good, and both of them as resolvable into the useful. He does not seem to have attached importance to the immediate gratification which a beautiful object affords to perception and contemplation, but rather to have emphasized its power of furthering the more necessary ends of life.

These early theories and conceptions with reference to art may in some degree account for the prevalence of an impression, even in our own time, that the artist is inspired or that he creates his masterpiece as the result of some supernatural power. It has always seemed to the inexperienced that the creation of a work of art implies an element of mystery or represents something inexplicable. What is to the painter a natural process becomes mysterious. Nothing existed on the blank canvas and behold, presently, there appears a picture simulating life. Having no knowledge of the methods employed, or of the years of patient labor required to secure the technical ability to represent the actual truth and spirit of natural objects, the result seems far removed from the ordinary. Thence it is but a step to the point

of view that the artist is one “inspired.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.