

## I

## ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

ALTHOUGH the University of Cambridge has shown such goodwill to a former pupil as to appoint me Professor of Fine Art under the Slade Foundation, I am anxious not to presume upon my position. Although I am a Professor, I am still somewhat of an outsider. For one thing I am a Professor without a Tripos, a fox without a tail. Now greatly as I appreciate the freedom which the absence of that appendage confers upon me, I am so far from wishing to persuade other Professors to have theirs amputated that I am tempted to put in a plea that one should be attached—not indeed to my own person—I am not likely to hold this post long enough to survive the operation—but to the person, or perhaps the office, of one of my successors.

It may be that the vision which I have conjured up in your minds of a Professor of Fine Art trailing after him a Tripos and all its impedimenta is far from enchanting you. Let me say at once how much I sympathize with your apprehensions—you probably imagine some undergraduate with a journalistic gift gaining first class honours because, without doing any solid work, he has picked up the latest fashionable gossip about Sur-realism and the Russian Ballet. You imagine questions the answers to which depend upon flattering the examiner's personal tastes.

It is possible that you may have had some such qualms before deciding to institute the English Literature Tripos—I am not sure that they have altogether subsided—but you probably feel that this is a far more perilous suggestion. Literature of one kind or another has always had an Academic status, but Art is a very different matter. Even more than English literature Art must appear to you to be a 'fancy' subject.

## ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

Even if no one here holds the opinion once maintained by the great Lord Salisbury, when he opposed spending public money on the Victoria and Albert Museum, that Art is nothing but a trivial amusement for the idle rich, one cannot deny that the visual arts have long lain under a shadow of disapproval in this country. That shadow is growing less, has indeed visibly diminished since a Royal Commission discovered that our incompetence in the arts of design was seriously impairing our export trade. But still something is left of that nineteenth-century attitude which regarded any attempt to think or talk seriously about Art as ridiculous and provoked such uproarious hilarity in the Law Courts whenever a question of artistic value was a subject of litigation. Nevertheless, something remains of that suspicion of the study of the visual arts, and it explains perhaps the indifference of our Universities to that study.

For about 100 years German Universities have made courses in Art-history a regular part of their curricula, and yet here, although the study of the art of letters has always formed a large part of our University education, and although Music has long since had its status and its special degrees, no opportunities for the study of the visual arts have ever been offered by British Universities until last year, when the Courtauld Institute opened its doors.

We are so familiar with this state of things that we scarcely appreciate how odd it is. The mere fact that we have no convenient word by which to designate that body of studies which the Germans call *Kunstforschung*—a body of studies of which the actual history of Art is only a part—is significant. I am obliged to use the awkward and inadequate word ‘Art-history’ for it.

Now ‘Art-history’ is inextricably involved in a number of studies which are regarded as eminently worthy of Academic status. It has indeed from an Academic point of view many advantages over Music, if only because its records go back so much further. In the study of pre-history paintings and artefacts form our chief data. In this period and in the study of primitive peoples Art-history is inextricably interwoven

#### ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

with Anthropology. Its importance in the history of the early Empires is paramount, and in the history of religion through all periods it offers indispensable assistance. It has indeed actually gained a footing in the Classical Tripos from the importance of its contribution to the understanding of Greek Life. At many points it is in close touch with Psychology. Sometimes we suspect the psychologists of rather unwarranted intrusions, as when Dr Freud explained the whole nature of the artist in a small pamphlet some years ago, but in the main it is we Art-historians who are more anxious to ask questions of the psychologists than they are to give us the answers.

If ever there was a study which, needing as it does the co-operation of so many sciences, would benefit by sharing the life of the University, it is surely that of Art-history, and I would make bold to claim that the benefits it would confer would be at least equal to those it would receive. If ever there was a liberal education, that of Art-history with its immense range of interests, its vast accumulation of learning and the necessity it imposes for delicacy and refinement of perception might claim to be such. And as for its being a soft subject, I could set a paper that would plough whole regiments of undergraduates and, what is more, I could not pass in it myself.

Perhaps the reason why I hope so much that before long Cambridge may, like London, set up a faculty of Art-history in its midst is that we are still so terribly ignorant, that we have such a crying need for systematic study in which scientific methods will be followed wherever possible, where at all events the scientific attitude may be fostered and the sentimental attitude discouraged.

Wherever a purely historical question is at issue there is no excuse for anything but a disinterested search for truth. In that respect Art-history is exactly on a par with other histories. An enormous amount of work has been done, and perhaps still more remains to be done, in arranging works of art in exact sequence of time. It is here that the Germans have done so much pioneer work, and indeed the whole tendency of their art-historical studies has been to regard works of art

#### ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

almost entirely from a chronological point of view, as coefficients of a time sequence, without reference to their aesthetic significance. Now it is easy enough to maintain such an attitude in the earlier periods of human society—at this stage there are so few artefacts that we examine all with equal curiosity and merely note by the way that some show technical improvement as compared with others. And this we note mainly in order to mark stages in the evolution of a culture. We are rarely even tempted into acrimonious discussions of whether the work of one tribe or period is better than another.

Theoretically, of course, such an attitude might be persisted in throughout more recent history, only that when we come to later periods the number of artefacts is so great and the distinction between works made to satisfy aesthetic cravings and those designed for use becomes so obvious, that we inevitably direct our enquiries along the lines of our aesthetic reactions; we begin to think the aesthetic valuations of works of art part of the business of the Art-historian, perhaps somewhat in the same way that the political historian is induced to make judgments of moral value.

But in any case, when once this question of Beauty comes in, we find ourselves in a world of strong convictions based on no demonstrable reasons, of feelings vehement in proportion to their insecurity—a world where intensity of conviction, force of character and eloquence of expression sway opinion in default of more solid arguments. In short, we behave much more like the theologians of past time than like men of science of to-day. I do not say that we push things so far as they did. I have never had the faintest wish to burn alive or even to torture any one for denying that Cézanne was a great artist. Nor do we predict for our opponents such painful experiences in another life. None the less, like them, we all tend to believe that there is an orthodox standard of values—that Michelangelo really *is* greater than Meissonier and Raphael than Raffaelli in some objective sense. Only when we come to discuss this scale of values more closely, even with those whose general training and outlook is similar to our own, we discover serious dis-

#### ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

crepancies of opinion and in the end each of us goes his way saying to himself, 'I alone hold the orthodox faith' and, if he is honest, he adds, 'but since I am always revising and changing my opinions I know that at any given moment even my belief is not perfectly sound'. Thus we push sectarianism even further than the Scottish lady, who had doubts about the minister, because, if we are honest, we have doubts about our own aesthetic salvation whilst being certain that every one else is damned.

It may be imagined then with what envy from time to time we cast a sidelong glance at our scientific colleagues and note how calm reason presides at their assemblies and results of objective validity are constantly being brought forth.

Let us consider for a moment this much coveted objectivity which distinguishes the judgments of science, and see how it is established. We generally say that it is due to the fact that the man of science appeals to experience and that when experience confirms his statements we judge them to be true—they gain universal acceptance. But do not we also, who seek to establish aesthetic judgments, do not we also appeal to experience? If I make the statement that Cézanne was a great artist, I say to any one who disputes that—'Look at such and such a picture', and I appeal to my experience of that picture—I say 'If you will repeat my experiment, you will find that the colours are related together in a harmony of extraordinary richness; that the forms cohere together in a perfectly balanced system; that the texture shows a delicately sensitive apprehension on the artist's part and communicates that feeling to us'. But my adversary comes to me next day and says 'I did as you told me, I went to look at that picture with a free and unbiased mind and I now appeal to *my* experience, which is that the man who painted that was an incompetent bungler and botcher, whose forms are shapeless and incoherent, whose colour is heavy, leaden and dull; he communicated nothing to me but a sense of pity for his clumsy and pathetic efforts to exercise a function for which the gods had denied him the most ordinary aptitude'.

## ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

Those of you who remember the observations which were made when Cézanne was first revealed to the British public, now more than twenty years ago, will recognize that this is no exaggeration of what took place in arguments even between highly trained and gifted spectators.

Why is it then that, when two men of science dispute about some question, the appeal to experience has such effect that even that violent partisanship to which man—and even scientific man—is prone, is instantly calmed and agreement is accepted, however reluctantly, whilst we poor searchers for aesthetic values go on disputing indefinitely? The reason is, of course, that in the last resort the searcher for scientific truth can appeal to a sensation so simple that all normal human beings react to it in the same way. When it comes down to the question of whether a pointer is opposite a particular mark on a scale or not, no two human beings will differ, unless one of them is suffering from such grave disturbances of his vision or his mental powers that he would long ago have been incapacitated for ordinary life.

Now certain scientific experiments depend upon the recognition of a particular colour appearing at a certain moment in the process and here we can establish the objective validity of our results only because colour-blindness affects a relatively small minority of people. We have only to imagine colour-blindness to be commoner than our normal vision—and let us suppose it to be of many varying kinds—for it to become nearly impossible to establish truths based on colour observation. Doubtless, in reality, we should circumvent this by various devices, and be able to fix on some particular kind of colour vision which gave us results most concordant with truths established by other means and agree to regard that as veridical. Now if a slight difference of reaction to so relatively simple an experience as the recognition of a particular colour would be so disturbing to our search for objective validity, what hope have we of that universal concordance of opinion when we consider anything so complex as a work of art? Take the question of colour alone: instead of the recognition of a single colour we have in a picture a great many colours combined in all sorts of compli-



#### ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

cated ways and intended, not merely to be recognized as such and such colours, but as having quite special relations to each other.

It so happens that quite recently there was a dispute about colour which illustrates my point. Mr Herbert Read, speaking of Frith's 'Derby Day', described its colour as drab. An indignant letter of protest appeared in *The Listener* from someone who declared that the critic either had no eyes or had not used them, for Frith's 'Derby Day' was full of bright colours. Here the disputants were at cross purposes because they spoke of different things. Undoubtedly there are many patches of bright local colour in Frith's 'Derby Day', but as these are not bound together in any consistent scheme and as the artist has relapsed, wherever there was no excuse for bright local colour, into a vague neutrality, the total effect is certainly drab.

It seems then that we must abandon all hope of making aesthetic judgments of universal validity. If we are perfectly honest, we must accept an attitude of complete scepticism about even the most widely accepted judgments. If a person persists, in spite of all proofs to the contrary, that the earth is flat, we relegate him to the class of hopeless cranks or lunatics and disregard him entirely; but if a person declares Raphael to be a very inferior painter whose reputation is based on a misunderstanding, we may in fact disregard him, but we have no evident right to do so, since the history of taste will furnish instances of reversals of generally accepted judgments scarcely less striking than this would be.

Let me give an instance of this because it is a phenomenon that we shall do well always to keep in mind. After the Renaissance the supreme value of Classic Sculpture became a dogma universally accepted—from 1500 to 1800 it would probably have been impossible to find any dissentient voice, and throughout the nineteenth century relatively few heretical doubters could be found. This dogma was believed so wholeheartedly and so uncritically that almost anything that could claim to derive from Greece, even through Roman copies, inspired profound admiration. Under the compulsion of this dogma many cultured

## ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

English noblemen made collections of Classical sculptures at great expense and enjoyed universal admiration for their enlightened taste—and yet when, in the later nineteenth century, the systematic study of Classical art was at last undertaken, it became quite evident that most of these admired masterpieces were second- and third-rate copies largely restored and reconstructed by eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century forgers. And many of these statues which had received the votive offerings of generations of conosciuti are now relegated to remote corridors or fulfil a more humble and appropriate service as little noticed garden ornaments.

This is a sufficiently striking case of reversal of an aesthetic dogma, but I myself have lived long enough to see what we may call the ‘focus of appreciation’ shift from one period of an art to another. When I was young all Greek art of the fifth century B.C. was sacred. One did not ask, ‘Is that a beautiful statue?’ one asked, ‘Is it of the fifth century?’ and the answer to that question sanctioned or forbade one’s enthusiasm. Fourth-century work, however attractive, was to be austere shunned as being decadent. On the other hand, our appreciation was allowed to stray backwards to the later archaic work—it was still not quite ‘the thing’ but it was admirable in its own honest, if slightly incompetent, way. This process went on until, little by little, the enthusiasm for the archaic period became more vocal and more sincere than that felt for the once supreme century.

The story of the Italian Primitives is equally instructive. Almost neglected from 1500 to, say, 1850, by the time I was a young man they had become of a supreme holiness—not to admire Botticelli was to own oneself an outcast, and even the products of the purely commercial picture factories of the day shared in the diffused sanctity of the period. Although, as a critic, I make a constant effort to test aesthetic values by direct experience, I am certain that I did not escape the contagion of that enthusiasm and that it biased my judgment and closed my eyes to much that I might have admired. And whilst the Primitives were all holy, the artists of the Seicento, which had ruled supreme throughout



#### ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

the eighteenth century, were almost taboo. Morelli, who was the great prophet of the day, allowed, it is true, a passing glance of recognition at Scarsellino who showed reminiscences of earlier art, but no one dared to recognize how good a painter Guido Reni was.

And now, I notice, that the younger critics are becoming more and more difficult about the Primitives; are ready to see that even in that period the mass of merely imitative and second-rate work outweighs the good, and at the same time the Seicento has become once more the object of serious study and even a second-rate artist like Magnasco has a society devoted to his cult.

Such changes of valuation occurring within so relatively short a space of time must warn us that not even the most established reputations can be held exempt from the changes and chances of mortal life. What is strange is that, with such palpable evidence of mutability before our eyes, we should cling so desperately to the feeling that our aesthetic judgments have some objective value, that, however mistaken they may be, they are approximations to some absolute scale of values.

But let us consider what results would follow if, by some device or other, we were able to establish such an absolute scale. Suppose that we could demonstrate, by reasoning as cogent as that which forbids us to believe that the earth is flat, that, let us say, Rembrandt was the greatest artist that ever lived and, by the same method, could establish an exact scale for valuing any particular work of art, we should in fact find ourselves in a very deplorable condition. For the *knowledge* that a work of art has a high aesthetic value is absolutely useless to us—what matters is the intensity and significance of its effect upon us. No doubt after we had experienced intense aesthetic pleasure from a work it might be a satisfaction of our self-esteem to know that its absolute aesthetic value was 75 out of a possible 100 marks. We might enjoy *ourselves* more, but it would not increase by a tittle our enjoyment of the work itself. And then, supposing that before visiting a foreign gallery we were to look at our Baedeker and note that a certain picture was marked 88, and then were to find that it left us absolutely cold—what a shock to our

## ART-HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC STUDY

pride, and, if we were with companions, with what haste we should improvise a few glowing epithets wherewith to conceal the emotional deadness within. Goodness knows there is enough aesthetic hypocrisy as it is—even the flimsy dogmas and snobberies of the day are powerful enough to compel many insincere expressions of aesthetic fervour; but if they were no dogmas but demonstrable truths, there would be more hard swearing in a picture gallery than in all the law courts. And for those more sincere and sensitive minds who could not bring themselves to bluff it out, what despair might ensue from the ineluctable evidence of their aesthetic inaptitude. How many in despair would throw themselves from the terrace of the National Gallery to perish in the traffic of Trafalgar Square.

Whereas, as things are, I know several people who can see nothing in Raphael who nevertheless lead happy and contented lives and are not ashamed to give me the benefit of their opinion on any work of art that may come to their notice. Let us then be grateful that, however earnestly we may strive to establish true aesthetic values, their truth or falsity can never be established beyond cavil; that matters of taste—so far from being unfit subjects for disputation as the Romans, with their incurable obtuseness, maintained—so far from being *non disputanda* are precisely the questions on which humanity may dispute and argue, more or less profitably, till the end of time.

In fact, when we ask for objective validity in aesthetic judgments, we are somewhat like the Frogs in the fable. We have an excellent King Log who lies there quite imposingly in our pond and each of us is convinced that *if* the King ever spoke it would be to establish the truth of his own judgments. If, however, Jupiter were ever to answer our prayers for King Stork we should find ourselves, as I have shown, in a very different posture.

Now when we come to compare our attitude towards scientific truth on the one hand and the truth of aesthetic judgments on the other we note one fundamental difference of supreme importance. Nature levies a very heavy tax on those who fail to acquire exact scientific truth