# ROGER FRY : LAST LECTURES

# LAST LECTURES

BY

ROGER FRY

SLADE PROFESSOR OF FINE ARTS
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, 1933–1934

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

KENNETH CLARK

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# PREFACE

This volume contains part of an unfinished series of lectures which Roger Fry had been preparing for some years before his death. He had given most of these lectures at Cambridge in his capacity as Slade Professor, and some, with variations, in London at the Courtauld Institute. Only the first of them, which was in fact his inaugural lecture as Slade Professor, had been revised for publication; and the rest could not be printed exactly as they stood, for like any experienced lecturer he had left in note form those parts which were to be spoken in front of the slides. His notes are curiously personal and could not be expanded without introducing another voice; so it was decided to put in a minimum of main verbs and prepositions, trusting that a sense of authenticity would outweigh an occasional scrappiness. The next problem was to find the illustrations referred to in Fry's notes. He had shown a large number of slides, but the text seldom gave any indication of the sources from which the slides had been made. In consequence almost a year was spent in hunting through books which Fry was likely to have consulted when he was writing the lectures. This research and, to a large extent, the editing of the text, was undertaken by a friend who wishes to remain anonymous. Our warmest thanks are due to the collectors and museum curators who helped in identifying the illustrations, and gave permission to publish photographs of objects in their charge. In particular the editor wishes to thank Dr Oswald Siren for allowing us to use photographs from his books on Chinese art.

My introduction was written some three and a half years ago, and even in this short time feelings about life and art have changed so much that I would gladly rewrite a part of it. In particular I should like to show how Roger Fry's doctrine of detachment can survive in a world of violence. In the last few years we have seen the extent to which

political conditions can exert pressure on an artist, and we have seen a series of events so tragic and horrible that our indignation can hardly fail to overflow and swamp out detached contemplation of shapes and colours. To be a pure painter seems almost immoral. It may be many years before Roger Fry's sense of values is once more widely acceptable. Yet I am convinced that they represent a lucid interval in the history of the spirit. Montaigne lived in a period comparable in its bloody fanaticism to our own, and achieved the perfect expression of scepticism and liberal curiosity. I wish it were possible for me to rewrite the introduction from this point of view; but the publication of the lectures has been too long delayed already.

KENNETH CLARK

*April*, 1939

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# INTRODUCTION

By KENNETH CLARK

WHEN, in 1933, Roger Fry was elected to the post of Slade Professor at Cambridge University, he was sixty-seven years of age and had long been known as the best living English writer on art. Though he had never been as widely read as Ruskin, his influence on taste and on the theory of art had spread to quarters where his name was barely known. A large, confused section of the public, dimly desiring to appreciate works of art, had begun to prefer coloured reproductions of Cézanne and Van Gogh to the meagre, respectable etchings which had furnished houses of a preceding generation; and many of Fry's theories had been assimilated by those who had never read a word of his writings. In so far as taste can be changed by one man, it was changed by Roger Fry. When, therefore, he was at last given an official pulpit, his doctrines might seem to have been already well known. But Fry was the last man in the world to become set and formal. Although he was remarkably consistent in the main outlines of his beliefs, his mind was invincibly experimental and ready for any adventure, however far it might lead him beyond the boundaries of academic tradition. There can never have been a less professorial Professor. 'I must confess', he says in the lecture on Vitality, here published, 'that I have the habit, perhaps rather reprehensible in a Professor, of lecturing about subjects of which I know very little in the hope of gaining some clearer notions of them. I dare say we shall not get very far to-day, but we shall at least have looked inquisitively at a number of works of art, and we may note some rather strange facts, and with luck arrive at some suggestions of correlated ideas.' With luck. It is a form of words which seldom occurs in the pedagogic style.

# INTRODUCTION

Only creative minds admit how great a part luck plays in the discovery of truth. In his course of lectures at Cambridge Fry had promised himself the sort of intellectual adventure which he loved. He was going to apply his theories of aesthetics to the visual art of the whole world, in roughly chronological sequence, from Egypt to the present day. He had arrived at the later period of Greek art when he died.

To survey the whole art of the world from the standpoint of a consistent aesthetic theory requires rare gifts of detachment, curiosity and alertness. Few of us are responsive to more than a limited number of works of art, and for those which do not interest us we are ready to adopt the conventional verdicts. We accept out of inertia judgments which are inconsistent with our real feelings, and which owe their prestige to ethical and aesthetic systems long ago discarded. Moreover we are all influenced by the archaeological values of rarity and great antiquity, and in fact time frequently does increase what may legitimately be described as the beauty of an object by softening contours, by patinating the surfaces of stone and bronze, even, perhaps, by lopping off excrescent arms and legs. The critic who wishes to maintain his aesthetic integrity must add a self-regarding austerity to his other qualities. He must also be something of a scholar: for although the language of forms may be universal, it is capable of great modifications in idiom and emphasis, and the detachment of mere ignorance is deaf to any inflection which cannot be immediately understood.

All these qualifications Roger Fry possessed. The independence and alertness of his mind were beyond question, and there can seldom have been a critic with a more universal aesthetic curiosity. No form of artistic expression was too remote, too humble or too unprepossessing for him to give it enthusiastic attention. It is characteristic of his freedom from conventional standards of value that his collection of pottery included, beside specimens of the Wei dynasty, of fourteenth-century Persia and sixteenth-century Italy, modern plates and bowls bought for farthings at village fairs in France and Spain. In his com-

pany one felt sometimes that the proper answer to Tolstoy's 'What is art?' was the counter question 'What isn't ?' so freely could he read in every visible object the expression of a will to form. Nor could there be any doubt that he had inherited from his Quaker ancestors an austerity, which made him quick, sometimes almost too quick, to resist superficial charm. In addition he was a considerable scholar. He had not, it is true, the scholar's temperament. He was impatient and optimistic. But his quick mind cheated the wearisome labour of scholarship, and he had a good visual memory which made him, when he chose, an excellent connoisseur. Although he came to be known as the champion of modern art, he first made a name as a student of early Italian painting, and he was one of the small body of connoisseurs—including Herbert Horne and, above all, Mr Berenson—who introduced into England a more scientific approach to the history of that subject, and especially of the period popularized in England by Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites. The two pieces of work which he himself would probably have preferred to survive from that period, the short monograph on Giovanni Bellini (1900) and the article on Giotto at Assisi (*Monthly Review*, reprinted in *Vision and Design*), are both good examples of art-research. But what gives them their value and distinguishes them from the work of a pure scholar like Horne, is the quality of the criticism, showing already the sensitive analysis of technique and construction which illuminates all his subsequent writing. These early essays differ from his later work only in that the writer does not yet insist on a coherent aesthetic theory. But the impulse to theorize, to expound ideas, was rooted in his mind, and at the same period Fry was able to exercise this talent in a critical edition of Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*. The subject suited him. He shared Reynolds's belief in the high seriousness of art and the importance of the classical tradition; and throughout his life he was never happier than when annihilating the trivial productions of the contemporary Royal Academy by quotation from the writings of its first President.

This edition of the *Discourses* had another valuable result. It turned his attention to a style of painting—that of the seventeenth-century classicists—which gave him opportunity for more systematic analysis than was possible in treating of the *quattrocento*. Moreover, that school was then out of favour, and in the notes on the illustrations he was able to practise an art in which he was supreme—the art of persuasion. Roger Fry could take an unfashionable, a disturbing, or, most wonderful of all, an obviously boring picture, and persuade one by objective analysis that it was important. Occasionally the effect wore off. What one had taken for logic turned out to have been magic, the magic of an unusually urbane and seductive style. But this happened only when the picture was of a kind not susceptible to analysis. With painters in the classical tradition, with Fra Bartolommeo, for example, or Poussin, his skill in discovering the formal analogies and echoes upon which an elaborate composition depends, opened our eyes to beauties which lay outside the scope of casual appreciation and permanently enlarged the range of our aesthetic understanding.

The great test of Fry's powers of persuasion came a few years later when he attempted (ultimately with success) to make his countrymen accept the post-Impressionist movement. His support of post-Impressionism played such an essential part in the formation of his aesthetic theories that it influenced his subsequent criticism of earlier periods. Before his discovery of that movement his interest in the art of his contemporaries had been languid and uncertain. He had looked in modern painting for the qualities of structure and design which he admired in Poussin or in the fifteenth-century Florentines, and had found on one hand the feeble fashionable archaism of Burne-Jones, on the other Impressionism, which then seemed to him the negation of all his beliefs. This temporary misunderstanding of Impressionism was responsible for a certain delay in his recognition of the dominant forces in modern art. He had taken it at face value, as the school which recorded impressions, and had not realized that there were painters, nominally within its ranks, who had long recognized the necessity of

pictorial architecture. We have only to look at the early apologias of Impressionism, those of M. Duret and M. Camille Mauclair, for example, to see that Cézanne was then classed as a provincial imitator of Pissarro. When Fry brought himself to look past this misleading label at the works themselves he realized that the qualities of classical order and coherence which he valued in old masters were there revealed in contemporary colour and intensity. He was immediately converted, and made up in enthusiasm and insight far more than he had lost in priority.

I need not describe his efforts to make his countrymen share his discovery. All his energy and enthusiasm, all his prestige as a scholar and his skill as a dialectician were thrown into a struggle with academic prejudice and bourgeois apathy. He lived to see a Cézanne in the National Gallery.

Post-Impressionism brought to a point Fry's growing conviction that the literary element in painting, its dramatic or associative content, was aesthetically insignificant. It led him for the first time to entertain the idea of an art depending for its effect solely on the relations of forms and colours, irrespective of what those forms or colours might represent. With his training in the art of fifteenth-century Italy and his taste for severe intellectual design, Fry had never accepted the facile naturalism of his day, and even in his early writings he had laid great stress on the non-representational elements in painting. Such a passage as the following, from the article on Giotto, might have been written at any period in his life, might even have occurred in the lectures now published, though actually it dates from 1901. 'In considering the qualities of line, three main elements are to be regarded: First, the decorative rhythm, our sense of sight being constructed like our sense of sound, so that certain relations, probably those which are capable of mathematical analysis, are pleasing, and others discordant. Secondly, the significance of line as enabling us imaginatively to reconstruct a real, not necessarily an actual, object from it. The greatest excellence of this quality will be the condensation of the greatest possible sug-

gestion of real form into the simplest, most easily apprehended line; the absence of confusing superfluity on the one hand, and mechanical, and therefore meaningless simplicity, on the other. Finally, we may regard line as a gesture, which impresses us as a direct revelation of the artist's personality in the same way that handwriting does.'

But the same essay lays an emphasis on Giotto's sense of drama, for which the author, when reprinting it in 1920, felt bound to apologize. He can allow, he says, that 'the dramatic idea may have inspired the artist to the creation of his form', but he no longer believes that 'the value of the form for us is bound up with our recognition of the idea'. In this antithesis lies the essence of the theory which informs most of his mature criticism; though it is worth noticing that in some of his latest writings, for example his appreciation of Watteau in *Characteristics of French Art* (1932), recognition of the dramatic idea is given its old importance.

The most complete expression of his theories of art during the period when he was discovering post-Impressionism is to be found in the *Essay on Aesthetics*, published in 1909, one of the most coherent and satisfactory of all his writings. In it he goes far towards freeing the painter from the necessity of imitating Nature, but he does not completely foresee the abstract art or the theory of pure aesthetic emotion which were the ultimate outcome of his position. Instead he sees in the artist 'the discoverer of those emotional elements inherent in natural form which can be made the basis of a design'; and a list of these elements shows that he conceived them as similar to the 'ideated sensations' invented by Hildebrandt and developed by Mr Berenson.

In the same essay, however, he states the theory which was to remain the foundation of his subsequent writings on art: I mean the theory that the aesthetic attitude is exactly the reverse of the practical, that the artist contemplating an object does so for the sake of the immediate sensations aroused, and not with a view to its past associations or its future utility. 'Morality appreciates emotion by the standard of resultant action. Art appreciates emotion in and for itself.' It is inter-

esting to find that Fry uses the word 'morality', a word which does not often appear in his later writings on aesthetics. Throughout the whole essay he is at pains to find some theory which can be used as a justification for art, and yet leave art free from morality; and this preoccupation with morality suggests to us the historical setting in which his theories should be viewed. The later nineteenth century had seen a conflict between two rival conceptions (they can hardly be called theories) of beauty. One, supported by Ruskin, maintained the inviolable union of art and morality, the other the belief that art must be freed from moral chains. The latter had, as can be imagined, less respectable champions, and less popular success, but through the unsystematic melodious pages of Pater's *Renaissance*, it had appealed to the intelligent young; and it had the advantage of being obviously closer than its rival to the facts of experience. Whistler's *Ten O'clock Lecture* by attacking, and Tolstoy's *What is Art* by defending had shown, in very different ways, that the moralistic theory of art could be made to look ridiculous. In a sense, therefore, Fry was only giving systematic statement to ideas which had long been current in the parrot cry of 'art for art's sake'. But his deliberate candour and his constant appeal to experience are so different from the paradoxical and poetical treatment of his predecessors, that the general impression of his essay is one of great originality; and, gradually, as he explored his position, he found it to contain implications which had not hitherto been developed.

The most important of these is the idea of the pure artist and the pure aesthetic sensation, terms which at one time appeared very frequently in his writings, and are still to be found in the following lectures. They are, perhaps, his most debateable contribution to criticism. Purity is a dangerous word to apply to such a complex and vital matter as art unless it is used simply as an instrument of analysis, and although Fry was conscious of this danger I do not think he always avoided it. He sometimes gave the impression, to a casual reader at least, that a work of art could be perfectly pure, by which he meant that it could appeal solely and directly to a special kind of perception, as

different from our ordinary perceptions as the sensitivity of wireless is different from our ordinary sense of hearing. And he seems to imply that this purity is a desirable end to which all works of art should aspire. The danger of his position was brought home to him when it was attacked by Mr I. A. Richards in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*,[1] and Fry's defence[2] may be taken as his last word on the aesthetic theory which underlay his later historical and critical writings. He insists on his distinction between pure and impure works of art. 'It in no wise invalidates this conception', he says, 'if such a thing as an absolutely pure work of art has never been created: the contention is that some works approximate much more nearly than others to this ideal construction.' He then appeals to his own experiences before works of art of all kinds and says: 'The crucial fact which appears to me to arise from a number of these experiences . . . is that in all cases our reaction to works of art is a reaction to a relation and not to sensations, or objects, or persons, or events.' So that far from abandoning his pure aesthetic state in face of attack, he has made it purer still. It does not even include those ideated sensations, or, as he called them, emotional elements of design which gave a certain material foundation to his earlier theory. Ultimately it is a mystical, we might even say a Pythagorean aesthetic. Certain forms agree, and our joy is not in the forms themselves, but in their agreement. Now I suppose it would be easy for a trained philosopher to point out flaws in Roger Fry's aesthetic theory; but he would have to remember one important fact: that it really did represent Fry's own experience. He did in fact enjoy works of art primarily for their relations of forms and colours, and he could apprehend these at once, undistracted by the numerous elements which would be the first to strike an ordinary spectator. How often, in looking at a picture in his company, I have been delighted by a pretty face, a charming gesture, an agreeable association or an unusual skill of hand, and, turning to my companion, have found him groaning in despair at the lack of formal

[1] *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).
[2] "Some questions of Aesthetics" in *Transformations* (1926).

coherency, and impervious to the ephemeral seductions of which I had been the victim. But in recompense for these salutary experiences, there were the times when a work of formidable dullness or obscurity was suddenly made intelligible by his wonderful skill in pointing out the fundamental greatness of its construction, times when one seemed to have gained a new sense, or learnt a new language. These moments remain in my mind like glimpses through a half-open door into a room full of beautiful pictures, which I shall not see again.

Relations of form and colour is an expression allowing of very wide interpretation; and it is necessary to describe the kind of formal complex which Fry preferred, since in his current criticism his theories and his preferences were apt to become involved. He believed that art at its highest was concerned with the creation of forms which should convince us of their solidity; that these forms should be largely seen and easily apprehended; and that they should be combined into a unity like that of a musical chord. In Western art, at least,[1] he came more and more to insist on this condition of plastic continuity and coherency. Forms must be seen as a whole. It was this which made him place the great Italians—Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael—at the summit of his Parnassus, and allow even modest members of the Florentine school a higher place than their contemporaries in Flanders. To him the Flemish passion for detail was mere description, done piece by piece, with no sense of the main relations of the forms. A good example of his formal preferences, which occurs early in the following lectures, is his appreciation of King Narmer's Ape (p. 55). 'The artist', he says, 'has seized the main plastic relations with extraordinary grip...and he has felt the transitions from one plane to another with extreme sensitiveness and stated them with a reticence and subtlety which show...how little

[1] In Oriental painting, of course, his love of plasticity had to be modified, though he demanded the same subordination to a dominant rhythm. While on the subject I may add that Roger Fry's admiration for Persian sixteenth-century miniatures seems to me his one and only real inconsistency. To my eye they are descriptive, decorative, finished and lacking in formal unity—everything he most disliked except vulgar.

he felt the need to exaggerate or underline. Moreover, he has refused to add any picturesque details either to convince one of the reality of his image or as an excuse for decorative display. Think what pretty patterns might be made out of the hair or the wrinkles on the nose, here only just adumbrated, but with what extraordinary effect.' How many of us might have enjoyed the pretty patterns on the ape's nose and overlooked the subtlety of transition from one plane to another.

In reading the following lectures, Fry's extraordinary sensibility to the main formal relations must always be remembered. It explains comparative estimates which might otherwise seem paradoxical or even insincere: though I need hardly remind the reader of Fry's complete sincerity in every one of his judgments. An instance of this is the relative value he places on the figures from the pediment of Olympia and some primitive Chinese bronzes. For the latter no praise is too strong. He uses the utmost ingenuity to describe the nicety of relation between the body of the bronze vessel and its neck, or even between the lid and its knob. Whereas the Olympian pediment receives several pages of very severe criticism, unrelieved by a single word of praise. The superhuman majesty of those gods and heroes could not blind him to their slackness of modelling, their lack of rhythmic unity and 'the absence of inner tension either of mind or muscle'; they lacked just those qualities which seemed to him the substance of art. We are all naturally suspicious of faculties we do not ourselves possess. The same instincts which led our ancestors to persecute saints and witches leads us to regard with alarm or amusement anyone who can derive profound satisfaction from the relation of a handle to a jar. And I confess that a few of the judgments expressed in these lectures seem to me rather fantastic. The Han painting in Fig. 195 looks to me like a scribble on a piece of well-used blotting paper, but Fry (p. 131) compares it to Giotto, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. Perhaps in this instance he gave too full a rein to his enthusiasm (he adds disarmingly 'I do not think I am being extravagant'), but in the majority of cases where we cannot follow him I am convinced that the fault is ours. We have

neither his sensibility to form nor his vast experience of varying modes of aesthetic expression. For this reason his postulate of a pure work of art, though of doubtful philosophical value, was a real gain to criticism, for it led him to point out those elements in a work of art which the superficial eye overlooks, and which, if they be not the only, are certainly amongst the most profound sources of aesthetic pleasure.

From the application of his main theory to the history of art, Fry drew an inference which plays an important part in the following lectures. This is the idea that art must be free. Biologically considered art is a useless activity. But, seeing that it absorbs a large amount of human energy, commands a certain respect and even affects men's actions through their imaginations, the forces of active life—the state, commerce, religion—are always trying to harness art for their own ends. On Fry's theory the use of the artist for what he calls biological ends must of necessity be harmful, since it will prohibit a disinterested contemplation. This theory he made the basis of a short history of art,[1] published in 1931, and it occurs frequently in these lectures, especially in those dealing with Egypt and Mesopotamia. Applied to Egyptian art it has considerable value. It explains why those long centuries of stiff academism were so seldom broken by vital works of genius. But I cannot believe that this idea has the universal validity which Fry attributed to it. He himself was forced to admit that the civilization in which the artist was apparently allowed the greatest freedom, that of Minoan Crete, produced the feeblest works of art. How, we may wonder, would his theory have survived had he lived to apply it in detail to the Middle Ages, when art was almost entirely in the service of religion? We know from the short survey just mentioned that he was at most a half-hearted admirer of Gothic art, and the merit he conceded to it he explained in a curious way. The Church, he maintained,[2] would have corrupted art far sooner if she had known how. 'But knowledge of the elementary crudity of man's sentimental re-

[1] Reprinted as *The Arts of Painting and Sculpture* in 1932.
[2] *The Arts of Painting and Sculpture*, p. 112.

actions could only be attained by a long process of trial and error.' The portals of Chartres and Rheims were the errors, and it was only quite recently that the Church had evolved what the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had tried in vain to produce, the painted, waxen, simpering *bondieuseries* of modern Catholicism.

In the face of this entertaining but extravagant hypothesis we must, I think, be aware that Fry's theory of the freedom of art was not founded solely on pure aesthetic experiences. It was, indeed, deeply coloured by his moral ideas. This interference of moral ideas was never obvious. He could look with generous detachment at works of art conceived in a spirit contrary to his beliefs. Morality did not bedaub his judgments, but tinted them with a subtle transparent glaze which is not the less important for being almost invisible at the first glance. Let me give an instance which may seem far-fetched, but which I believe is an important clue to the workings of his mind. Throughout the following pages, the reader will find a few terms of abuse recurring whenever an object meets with the author's disapproval, and amongst them he will notice the word 'finish'. Finish is used as the antithesis of that sensibility which Fry valued so highly and which he made one of the touchstones of his enquiry. Now there is no doubt that it is possible to dislike finish on purely aesthetic grounds. The polishing of a material till all trace of its true nature or its maker's hand has been obliterated is one of the commonest symptoms of bad art; an insistence on detail is the most familiar proof of a trivial and uncreative mind. But finish may also be the expression of a heightened intensity; it may be in itself a formal language in which some moods can find their only possible utterance. In condemning finish as a whole Fry was influenced by his deep love of individual freedom. As an artist he himself felt no impulse to finish and was impatient of the drudgery involved; and so at the back of his mind was the feeling that all finish was the result either of stupidity or of slavery, the stupidity of the craftsman who wishes to conceal his lack of invention, or the slavery of an artist forced by his vulgar patrons to polish away every trace of his sensibility. For, since

the possession of an art object was a proof of power, the rich man wished to show what a superfluity of labour had gone to the making of his possession.[1] It is fair to add that Fry's dislike of finish was chiefly evident when dealing with what used to be called the minor arts. In a great work of art, a picture by Ingres for example, he could tolerate or even enjoy a degree of finish which would have horrified him in a piece of porcelain; and for finish combined with breadth he had the deepest admiration. I remember his delight in Rubens' Château de Steen. 'Look', he would say, 'at the high lights in the partridge's eyes'.

I will give one more instance of an ethical belief which had considerable influence on Roger Fry's aesthetic judgments, his love of truth. Truth is a word of many meanings, and in some sense, no doubt, it is a necessary condition of all works of art. It is in this cloudy region that ethics and aesthetics meet. But truth as it influenced the aesthetics of Roger Fry was a relatively simple concept, the antithesis of fraud. 'Useful and even necessary as lying may be in ordinary life, it is always disastrous in art.'[2]

The reader will easily discover for himself instances in which Fry's concept of truth influenced his judgment. He had a horror of any expression which he suspected of going further than the original emotion would warrant, and this led him to mistrust *a priori* almost all romantic works of art and to show considerable leniency to the prosaic. That the prophet of Cézanne should have held such a low opinion of Delacroix is a remarkable proof of this prejudice. And his love of truth can also be felt in his use of the word 'decorative'. At first sight it is rather surprising to find that throughout the following lectures 'decorative' is used in an unfavourable sense. We might have expected that a decorative, as opposed to an informative, use of shapes and colour was implicit in

[1] Cf. *The Arts of Painting and Sculpture*, p. 17, which shows that the idea is taken from Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. He might have argued the exact opposite: that the rich man wished all signs of labour to be expunged from his possessions because any evidence of honest toil gave him a bad conscience.

[2] From a lecture on Chardin. The same sentiment is expressed rather differently in the section dealing with Chardin in *Reflections on French Art*.

his aesthetic. But to Fry the word came to denote a trick of style by which the artist sought to make his work effective, while shirking the main issue of art, the creation of plastic sequences. And effectiveness cheaply won by the sacrifice of truth was the quality which he most disliked. One whiff of it—Gudea's eyebrows for example (see p. 67)—would taint his whole pleasure in a work of art, however sublime, and when this style was freely used, as in the Assur-bani-pal reliefs, he was blind to other qualities.

It is worth emphasizing the influence of Fry's moral ideas upon his critical judgments, because his theory of pure aesthetic reactions might give those who did not know him a very false notion of his writings. It conjures up a picture of a robot critic—cold, passionless, remote—which is ludicrously far from the truth. Though he often achieved intellectual detachment, he never succeeded in banishing his sense of right and wrong. He was easily moved to pity and indignation, and his criticism, far from being the graph of an aesthetic recording-machine, is the revelation of a rich and lovable personality.

I have called these lectures an intellectual adventure, and I do not think Fry would have objected to this expression, though he might have preferred 'experiment', a word to which his early training as a scientist had given a slightly magical potency. The importance of an experimental attitude is, indeed, the theme of his inaugural lecture. He begins by showing how the attempt to lay down fixed objective standards of beauty is futile, and would, if it could succeed, be disastrous. '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 . . . in a very different posture.' He goes on to show that even an experimental approach, through the comparison of our responses to works of art, is made almost impossible by the extreme

complexity of the responses themselves, and he suggests the method which he intends to employ in the following lecture. 'I propose to narrow down our enquiry by isolating particular qualities in various works of art and comparing them with one another solely in regard to one or two qualities at a time.' We may thus check the too immediate response of "I like this" and "I dislike that", and substitute the question, "Does this work give evidence of the special quality we are considering?" No one who knew Roger Fry would expect, or desire, him to follow this scheme very strictly. He had not formed the habit of concealing his preferences, and he certainly does not do so in these lectures. He does attempt to isolate two qualities, sensibility and vitality, and he conscientiously applies this criterion to most of the objects considered: but while doing so he leaves us in no doubt as to which of these objects please him.

The second lecture, in which the quality of sensibility is defined, gives the key to the whole series. The original definition of the term, the examination of intellectual pleasure in art, and of the necessary balance between order and variety—these are examples of critical analysis at its best, revealing to us the causes of our own response. And if some of his speculations seem rather surprising, the reader must remember the words quoted in the first paragraph of the introduction. When Fry himself showed so clearly that he intended his conclusions to be provisional it would be unfair to isolate and analyse them as if they were ultimate truths. But it is perhaps worth pointing out that the lecture might have conformed more closely to an experiment if the word 'sensibility' were not made to carry so wide a meaning, if its definition had taken shape immediately after the comparison between the original and the diagrammatic version of a Paul Klee—in fact that the quality investigated had been what Fry called sensitivity rather than sensibility. By including in his definition the concept of rhythmic organization he gave to sensibility an imponderable and universal value which almost precluded scientific application.

From this point of view the quality defined in the third lecture, that of

vitality in artistic images, is more satisfactory simply because it is aesthetically less important. We can admit that an image is devoid of vitality without condemning it as a work of art; and, in fact, Fry noted the absence of this quality in the work of artists whom he admired profoundly, Raphael and Fra Bartolommeo, and discovered it in objects for which he could hardly claim any other merit (Pl. 45). Although in the course of the later lectures this test is sometimes used with qualitative implications (as in the comparison of Greek and Scythian animal sculpture) it remains genuinely experimental; almost too experimental, in fact, for the idea of vitality as an important ingredient in works of art lay outside Roger Fry's system. The definition of a quality which involves the whole question of representation in art, and has been the subject of so many speculations from Aristotle to Lipps, needed fuller and more careful handling than it receives in the third lecture. Vitality in art is a peculiarly German preoccupation, and with German aesthetic philosophy, as with German culture in general, Fry was completely out of sympathy. And, as if to be revenged on the numerous books on the theory of *einfühlung* which he had refused to read, he ends this lecture with a shrewd but unflattering analysis of that typically German contribution to art, expressionism.

The remaining lectures in which he examines the history of art with special reference to these two qualities, sensibility and vitality, require less detailed comment. The main themes are stated in the lecture on Egyptian art, and if at the end we feel that they are repeated rather too often, we must remember that such repetition is inherent in the lecture form. Radiant enthusiasm and a sonorous voice combined to make Fry even more persuasive as a lecturer than as a writer, and most of his later work was conceived in lecture form. He was an excellent natural writer—clear, witty and eloquent—but like all good lecturers he knew that the phrase of the moment was usually more arresting than a carefully balanced period; and although his lectures were the result of prolonged reflection, they were hastily written. In consequence these lectures contain redundancies and an occasional looseness of expression

not to be found in his printed works, and which, had he lived, he would have corrected.

The sections on Mesopotamian, Aegean and early American art require no comment; but it is worth drawing attention to the sixth lecture, since Negro art provided in concentrated form the qualities which Fry most admired. To him these nameless, dateless masterpieces were as near as anything could be to his 'ideal construction', a perfectly pure work of art. They have, he says, the same sort of control of the expressive elements of plastic form as the musician has of the relations of notes; they have delicate tact and restraint; they have sensibility and vitality in the highest degree. Nothing shows more clearly the independence of his aesthetic judgments from all associative and literary elements than this impassioned admiration for the art of a people with whom he can have had no single idea or association in common. The very existence of these sculptures depended on beliefs and emotions which he must have regarded as mere madness, yet their forms spoke to him more intelligibly and persuasively than the sculpture of his own contemporaries, or of fifth-century Greece. No wonder he could not agree with Mr Richards that our responses to works of art are the same as our responses to ordinary life.

The three lectures on Chinese art differ from the rest of the series in giving a fuller treatment to the historical background. I am not competent to say how far the history is accurate, but there can be no two opinions about the brilliance and clarity with which the main issues of this long and complex period are brought before us. In particular, the outside influences on Chinese art, involving digressions on the Scythian style and Hellenistic Buddhism, are treated with a mastery which shows what a fine historian of art he would have been had he chosen to devote continuous attention to the subject. It is in these lectures that Fry's enthusiasm finds its fullest and most varied expression. Like all good critics he was continually falling in love with a style or an artist, and while the fit was on he could find all his ideal qualities in the mistress of the moment. It is fair to add that although his passion

might cool, it seldom evaporated altogether, and in consequence the range of his affections was continually widening. Chinese art of the Buddhist period was an old flame, but in the last years of his life it had been supplanted by an infatuation for the bronzes of the Yin and Chou dynasties. In consequence the section dealing with this period may seem disproportionately long; especially as Chinese archaeology has made considerable advances since Fry wrote. But although more is known about the subject, no one else has studied it in relation to such a wide background of aesthetic experience.

The lectures on Greek art are amongst the most interesting of all Fry's later writings. They reverse accepted values; but they do so in a manner very different from the familiar attempts to debunk a canonized subject. Far from questioning the greatness of the Greek intellect they insist that it was this very quality, this unique blend of curiosity and the power of generalization, which prohibited the free functioning of plastic sensibility. For to such a sensibility the apprehension of formal relations was immediate and instinctive, whereas the Greek approach to form was conceptual and geometric. He had already pointed out in the lecture on Egyptian art that such a conceptual approach was essentially literary, and this objection was, of course, even more relevant to the Greeks. It is here that Fry's theory of a pure aesthetic response is seen at its most austere, for he will make no concessions whatsoever on account of the unequalled greatness of Greek literature. Our first reactions to such a theory must, I think, be unfavourable. We can with difficulty admit that the genius of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Pindar and Plato should have left no mark on the visual arts. But put Shakespeare for Sophocles, Milton for Pindar, Hume and Berkeley for Plato, and what reflection does English painting show of all this marvellous array of national talent? No doubt Fry was right to insist that a people could achieve the highest degree of culture without having any instinctive sense of plastic expression. Yet even on this ground his case against Greek art is far from convincing. Greece and England do not present a parallel. The English are so

unusually devoid of plastic sense that they have not even attempted to realize in form the moods and ideas of their more important poets and philosophers; whereas the Greeks did continually make such an attempt, and from this point of view Fry never denied their success. He granted that Greek sculpture expressed the high moral and imaginative qualities which illuminate their other activities, yet denied it aesthetic value. Such was the logical outcome, some may think the *reductio ad absurdum*, of the pure aesthetic response.

I have already hinted that this theory in its more severe forms does not seem to cover the whole range of responsiveness as I am aware of it. As applied to Greek art it has for me a double weakness. In the first place, the magnificent imagery of Greek sculpture, the actual choice and treatment of the subjects, seems to me an integral part of its aesthetic effect; and secondly, I feel that Fry underrated the value of the forms themselves. We may agree that vitality is a secondary aim in much of the Greek art which has come down to us—the work of those sculptors who were chiefly preoccupied with it, Myron for example, having wholly disappeared. And we may agree that an art which is chiefly known to us through copies cannot, on Fry's own definition, show great evidence of sensibility. But in the few originals which remain, defaced, discoloured, selected for us by a blind chance, there is surely evidence enough of plastic power and sensibility. Perhaps he is right in saying the Greeks lack the art of building up large and complex compositions: but in smaller formal constructions they achieved a finality which, more than anything else, has contributed to the prestige of Greek art. It was this finality and completeness, perceptible in the meanest and smallest copies, which led the men of the Renaissance to look upon antique art as a repertory of formal motives. When we remember that both Rubens and Poussin made careful copies of every antique gem they came across in order to utilise the motives in their own compositions, we cannot believe that the authority of Greek art depended simply on its reflection of Greek literature.

But although it can hardly be swallowed whole, Fry's view of

## INTRODUCTION

Greek art contains many valuable truths. In particular, his low estimate of the archaic style is a valuable antidote to a snobbish movement in taste which has had a bad effect on modern sculpture. We flatter ourselves that we are no longer deceived by the rubbed down and restored fragments of copies which were the pride of our ancestors. But as works of art they could hardly be worse than some of the sixth-century Apollos which the fashion for archaism has persuaded us to admire. I remember with real relief the moment when it was no longer necessary to simulate admiration for those stiff, swollen, grinning monsters, and I believe that others who are persuaded by these lectures to look at Greek art with a free and innocent eye will experience one of the great pleasures of life, liberation from an unconscious insincerity. And it is a pleasure to think that these lectures were delivered at Cambridge. The prestige of antique art in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge is still unbounded. It has been conceded a place in the curriculum of humanist education; and from its close connection with literature it has a special appeal to English taste. In attacking Greek sculpture the Slade Professor was attacking the one branch of the visual arts which in the Universities had ever constituted a serious subject; and the picture of Fry—thin eager face, tall thin body, pointer in hand—persuading a University audience that Greek art is relatively poor stuff, cannot but remind us of the Knight of la Mancha: though in this case the Windmills really were giants, the indestructible giants of prejudice.

But when all is said, Fry was a greater critic when praising than when condemning, and it is difficult not to feel that the most interesting lectures of the series were still to come. In particular the confusing period between the decay of classical and rise of medieval art needs to be treated with his ever-present sense of aesthetic value. The whole problem of that period lies in a distinction between the two forms of departure from the classical tradition; the one due to provincial incompetence, the other to a new aesthetic intuition. In making that distinction the tests of sensibility and vitality would have had an historical

as well as a critical value. Byzantine art, too, requires detached critical examination. After centuries of neglect it has become irradiated with fashionable approbation, and practically no attempt is made to discriminate between its rare masterpieces and the mass of effete and insignificant objects which have only a certain negative good taste to recommend them. Who but Fry had the equipment and the authority for such an undertaking? His views on the arts of the Renaissance and modern world had been expressed more often, and the lectures on those periods would necessarily have contained fewer revaluations. But how gladly we should have seen these familiar subjects take their place in the whole scheme; how eagerly we should have welcomed some heroes of the old world to redress the balance of the new. For as the lectures stand at present, the new worlds of aesthetic responsiveness, Negro, Maya, Chinese, have a disproportionate prominence over the arts of our Western European civilization which once seemed so complete and all-embracing. To see these lectures in true perspective we must re-read his appreciations of Giotto, Donatello, Giorgione, Rembrandt or Cézanne. In discussing these men his criticism grew in richness and subtlety, in proportion as the subject was more complex and closer to his own imaginative experience. His emotions before a bronze pot might be keen and sharp, but if the quality of his writing is any guide, they were less profound and lasting than his emotions before a Rembrandt. Such is the measure of our loss.