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Essential considerations In designing a new system of art education for South African schools and universities

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In doing this, I am also concerned with my function as Lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand and the part which the Department of Fine Arts is destined to play in the cultural development of this country. As the greatest liberal university in South Africa, situated as it is in the heart of the continent and thus in a better position to influence the material and social development of Africa than any other seat of learning, I am convinced that it can also give the lead in this cultural matter of art training and education through art. So that, when the full recognition of the social value of aesthetics does come and action is taken, the younger teachers and Fine Arts students who have graduated from the Witwatersrand will have been trained to meet the requirements of the new educational system and that thereby - during the process of mutation - a complete or partial disruption of the new educational programme for the Union will be avoided.

2 THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS

"Art, however we may define it, is present in everything we make to please our senses."[1]

"The intelligent mechanic engaged on his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged."[2]

"Art as a virtue of the practical intelligence is the well-making of what is needed - whether it be drain pipes* or paintings and sculptures and musical symphonies...;

"Art is that which being seen, pleases."[3]

"...in a way, the doing of anything to the point of aesthetic satisfaction in the result is a work of art".[4]

"A work of art is an intrinsically satisfying and, at the same time, a meaningful organisation of some appropriate medium."[5]

1 Herbert Read: Education through Art (London 1943) p.15

2 John Dewey: Art as Experience (New York 1934) p.5

3 Eric Gill: (from "Art" - Blackfriars 1940) Last Essays (Lond. 1942) pp.15, 17

4 Arthur Pope: Art, Artist and Layman (Cambridge, Mass. 1937) p.4

5 Theodore Greene: The Arts and Arts of Criticism (Princeton 1940) p.11

*It is notable that no description of Etruscan and Roman art is complete without some reference to the significance of the Cloaca Maxima.

From the foregoing it would seem that there is a fairly general consensus of opinion among contemporary authorities as to the meaning of Art, and there would be little point in trying to improve on these definitions. (I say "contemporary authorities" deliberately, because it is only on such authorities that the whole of this work is based. During my original and abortive essay into the field of art education I learned a valuable lesson, namely, that so much impressive writing on the subject of art has been done throughout the ages that one is inclined to accept its validity without considering its relativity to environment, current prejudices, social, scientific and economic development and cultural background. Because of this inclination, my original dissertation was deviating into a comparative study for testing historical theories in the light of modern conditions. This in itself was becoming a work of major proportions with results that were purely academic, and it brought me no closer to my object. My problem in its very essence is a contemporary one and must be solved in terms of today. For assistance in presenting this thesis I have confined my references exclusively to the works of contemporary authorities. The theories and definitions with which I am here concerned have been extracted and edited from the writings of John Dewey, Thomas Munro, Herbert Read, Albert Barnes, Eric Gill, Walter Gropius and a number of leading educationalists in this field whom I met during my survey of the work done in the Eastern Universities and Art Schools of the U.S.A.)

It is easy enough to accept art as something which pleases our senses, something which gives light and colour to an otherwise drab existence, and therefore a desirable thing to possess. But - as is implied in Greene's definition that a work of art "is an intrinsically satisfying and, at the same time, a meaningful organisation of the medium" - there are many other theories and definitions that are common to art and aesthetics. (The term "meaningful" in Greene's definition suggests such things as values, content, communication through perception and a host of other complexities.)

Much of the present confusion as to the nature of art, Fine Arts and Aesthetics and the manifestations of these activities during the history of mankind can be traced to the haphazard methods of the use of the terminology of aesthetics by art critics, writers and artists who for some reason or other have strayed outside the realms of the practice of art by trying to improve their art - or appreciation thereof - by verbal explanation.

By the capitulation of the main theories and definitions with which I am concerned here, I hope to indicate those which as an artist and a teacher of art I have found acceptable; to avoid misunderstanding of the subsequent chapters; to avoid confusion of thought when I refer to the apparently conflicting tendencies in Ancient and Classic, Renaissance and Impressionist, Abstract, Realist and Surrealist art, and to develop my thesis on the social significance of art and its relation to modern education.

"In art criticism and esthetics the words 'art' and 'beauty' are interwoven in such a way that they can be most interestingly and profitably considered together; for in the first place, art and beauty are the two central components of esthetic theory; in the second, discussion of one of these terms usually involves the other, and in the third, the meanings of the terms - both connotative and denotative - frequently overlap."

"...'art' and 'beauty' are used either to designate referents which are qualities or relations of things, or referents which are mental activities. 'Beauty' denotes now an objective or relatively objective property of an object, now a type of esthetic creation or response; and art refers sometimes to a physical work of art or to one of its qualities, sometimes to the process of creation or appreciation which in turn is of course interpreted in a number of different ways." 6

"Most of our misconceptions of art arise from a lack of consistency in the use of the words art and beauty. It might be said that we are only consistent in our misuse of them. We always assume that all that is beautiful is art, or that all art is beautiful, that what is not beautiful is not art, and that ugliness is the negation of art. This identification of art and beauty is at the bottom of all our difficulties in the appreciation of art, and even in people who are acutely sensitive to aesthetic impressions in general, this assumption acts like an unconscious censor in particular cases when

6 Bernard Heyl: New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism (New Haven 1943) pp.21,24,25

art is not beauty. For art is not beauty: that cannot be said too often or too blatantly. Whether we look at the problem historically (considering what art has been in past ages) or sociologically (considering what art actually is in its present-day manifestations all over the world) we find that art often has been or often is a thing of no beauty."[7]

However much we may flounder in the many definitions of beauty, we remain - uncomfortably - in the deep waters where art that is "ugly" like an African Negro woodcarving or an early Christian ikon is as capable of moving us aesthetically as art that is "beautiful" like Greek sculpture or High Renaissance painting. If we consider some of these definitions we also become aware of an objective as well as a subjective meaning: "Art is most simply and most effectively defined as an attempt to create pleasing forms. Such forms satisfy our sense of beauty, and our sense of beauty is satisfied when we are able to appreciate a unity or harmony of formal relations among our sense perceptions"[8] (my italics); "beauty is a quality of the object apprehended"[9]; "any formal relation or pattern that is intrinsically satisfying may be said to possess beauty"[10].

7 Herbert Read: The Meaning of Art (London 1931) p.3

8 Ibid. p.2

9 D.W.Prall: Aesthetic Judgement (New York 1929) p.22

10 Theodore Greene: The Arts and Arts of Criticism (Princeton 1940) p.7

My own inclination is to shy from such complexities, and to avoid them by dispensing with the word "beauty" in its association with "art". I also feel that it should be possible to pursue the practice and the appreciation of art without having to endure the mental torture which invariably arises out of semantic considerations.

When Greene says that a work of art is "intrinsically satisfying and, at the same time, a meaningful organisation of some appropriate medium", we can understand him and we can recognise the implication of the objective aspects that will be involved in the form, the material, the composition, the colour of the work, as well as the subjective aspects involved in the perception, the pleasure, the inspiration, the "empathy".

We can accept his explanation with gratitude when Herbert Read describes "empathy" as follows:

"For the work of art, however concrete and objective, is not constant or inevitable in its effect: it demands the co-operation of the spectator and the energy which the spectator 'puts into' the work of art has been given the special name of 'empathy' (Einfuhlung).

"By 'empathy' we mean a mode of aesthetic perception in which the spectator discovers elements of feeling in the work of art and identifies his own sentiments with these elements - e.g., he discovers spirituality, aspiration, etc., in the pointed arches and

spires of a gothic cathedral, and [illegible] then contemplate those qualities in an objective or concrete form: no longer as vaguely subjective feelings, but as definite masses and colours. But obviously such 'empathetic' perceptions will vary from individual to individual according to emotional or psychological disposition. This indeed is the next important fact to recognize: namely, that the appreciation of art, no less than its creation, is coloured by all the variations of the human temperament."11

And, finally, when Professor Boas neatly summarises various ways in which art is considered objective, we feel that we are getting somewhere: "From the artist's point of view the proper end of artistry has been said to be (a) self expression, (b) the expression of an emotion, (c) the expression of an idea, (d) the expression of an impression. From the observer's point of view there are four corresponding theories, according to which the end is (a) revelation of self, (b) the stimulation of an emotion, (c) the communication of an idea, (d) the transfer of impressions"12.

At this stage, before we venture further into the subjective jungle of perception, imagination, expression and their variations according to psychological types (which will be dealt with in Chapter 3), it may be well to consider certain definitions which are more objective in nature. From the selection it will be seen that, for the purpose of my thesis, I have confined myself to terms which

11 Herbert Read: Education through Art (London 1943) p.24

12 Franz Boas: Professor of Anthropology. Columbia University.

are used not only to describe aesthetic matters but ethical matters as well. The reason for this will become evident when I come to deal with the social significance of art in a subsequent chapter.

"Some artistic categories are, in a sense, more basic than others because they refer to characteristics which every work of art must, by definition, possess. 'Matter', 'form' and 'content' are categories of this type"13 since every work of art exists in some medium, possesses some form, and if it has any artistic merit whatever, has expressed some content. (Some artists and critics with a predilection for abstract art will argue that abstract art has no content since it is non-representational organisation of the elements of matter and form, but not content. There is no validity in this argument because abstract art is the artist's personal arrangement, in terms of his media, of colours, shapes, lines, masses, etc. into a form which is intrinsically satisfying to himself. It possesses therefore an egocentric content which may be communicated (by empathy) to the spectator and thereby completing the process of aesthetic activity).

MATTER "includes all the material, of whatever kind, which is available to the creative artist for artistic manipulation. Prior to its formal organisation it has no artistic value whatever, though it may have an aesthetic character of its own. But it has certain artistic potentialities which are normally hidden from the layman but of which

13 Theodore Greene: The Arts and the Arts of Criticism (Princeton 1940) p.31

the creative artist must be aware, since only such awareness can dictate his choice of materials suited to artistic organisation".[14]

CONTENT. "Artistic form is never merely an end in itself. It is a means of expression. Expression, in turn, must be the expression of something.....something which a sensitive and well trained observer should be able to discover in the work of art itself. Whatever is then actually expressed in a work of art constitutes its artistic content".[15] This content may be religious (theocentric), social (anthropocentric) or introspective (egocentric), or combinations or relations of these expressions.

PATTERN. "In its ordinary use - the pattern of a piece of cloth, for example - it implies the distribution of line and colour in certain definite repetitions. Pattern implies some degree of regularity within a limited frame of reference - in a picture, this is quite literally the picture frame. Beyond this simple conception of pattern we get increasing degrees of complexity, the first of which is symmetry; instead of repeating a design in parallel series, the design is reversed or counterchanged. The method was perhaps evolved from certain technical conveniences in the process of weaving. Instead of repetition, we get exact balance, as in the motive of confronted animals so common in Oriental art. The next complexity was to abandon symmetrical balance in favour of distributed balance. The work of art

14 Theodore Greene: The Arts and the Arts of Criticism (Princeton 1940) p.32

15 Ibid p.33

has an imaginary point of reference (analogous to the centre of gravity) and around this point the lines, surfaces and masses are distributed in such a way that they rest in perfect equilibrium. The structural aim of all these modes is harmony, and harmony is the satisfaction of our sense of beauty".16

UNITY. "In a perfect work of art all the elements are interrelated; they cohere to form a unity which has a value greater than the mere sum of these elements.... the elements cohere by virtue of the personality which dominates them and moulds them into a unity which is the painter's direct emotional apprehension of the subject before him. When we have finished analysing all the physical elements in a picture, we still have to account for this intangible element which is the expression of the artist's individuality, and which, when everything else is shared in common - subject, period, generation and materials - still leads to totally different results."17

COLOUR "..is a positive force which affects our nervous systems, probably by electro-chemical activity. Every person with normal eyesight feels its influence. This influence is based upon the stimulation of the senses which results when white light broken by reflection or refraction into its various wave-lengths falls upon our vision so that instead of sombre grays we see varying hues which appear to add a kind of vitality to forms".18

16 Herbert Read: The Meaning of Art (London 1931) pp.15, 16

17 Ibid pp.30, 31

18 Walter Sargent: The Enjoyment and Use of Colour (New York 1923) p.1

"Some people like or dislike colours because they associate them with their general likes and dislikes - they like green because they associate it with springtime, or blue because it reminds them of Italian skies; they dislike red because they associate it with danger, or mad bulls. These likes and dislikes perhaps have their source in the unconscious, and are, at any rate, part of the temperamental disposition of each individual. Such associative values have nothing to do with the aesthetic value of colour as such, though they may have a great deal to do with any particular individual's reaction to a particular work of art. The aesthetic relation to colour is simply this: that we enter intuitively into the nature of colour, appreciate its depth, or warmth or tonality - that is to say, its objective qualities - and then proceed to identify these qualities with our emotions.

Actually, in a work of art, we are rarely concerned with a simple reaction to a single colour, though it has been demonstrated that the apprehension of appreciation of a single colour may be aesthetic. But more generally we are concerned with several colours, and it is according to whether they make a harmony or a discord that we judge a visual work of art. But again there is probably a physical explanation, as there is in the case of music. Just as from a scale of tones you can, in accordance with certain laws of tonality, produce either harmony or discord of music, so from the scale of the spectrum you can produce a similar harmony or discord of colour."[19]

19 Herbert Read: Education through Art (London 1943) pp.22, 23

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19 Herbert Read: Education through Art (London 1943) pp.22, 23

HARMONY. "The just adaptation of the parts to each other, in any system or combination of things, or in things intended to form a connected whole; such an agreement between the different parts of a design or composition as to produce unity of effect; as the harmony of the universe."[20]

Dr. Wilhelm Oswald presents a definition of harmony which, although artists may be inclined to accept it with considerable reserve because of the implication of rigid rules and regulations, is interesting in so far as it contributes to our thesis that in problems of art are reflected problems of living and that in the solution of one we may find the solution of the other.

"The notes of the musical scale, defined by simple relations of their frequencies, possess as is well known, the characteristics that they, and they only, are harmonious, i.e. that whether experienced consecutively or simultaneously, they produce an agreeable or euphonious effect. In other words, only those notes whose frequencies bear simple relations to each other are harmonious, and conversely all notes which are harmonious exhibit these simple relations. We may therefore ask 'does the law here set up admit of generalization?'

The reply must be in the affirmative. In all other domains it is also true that simple relations between the governing values determine harmonious effects. A similar investigation shows that Art, in all its varied manifestations, depends on the principle that Harmony = obedience to Law, or in other words everything that is harmonious is law-abiding, and everything law-abiding is harmonious."[21]

20 Websters International Dictionary

21 Wilhelm Ostwald: Colour Science (Lond.) Vol.1 p.71

COMPOSITION. "Composition involves the relation of parts in an artistic unity to each other, and to the whole. If this relation is pleasing, then the composition is beautiful. The...object must present itself in such a form that we apprehend it as a single thing."[22]

CONTRAST. "Opposition or dissimilitude of things or qualities; unlikeness, especially as shown by juxtaposition or comparison."

"(Fine Arts) n. The opposition of varied forms, colors, etc., by which such juxtaposition more vividly express each other's peculiarities."[23]

(It should be noticed that contrasting elements in a work of art are desirable rather than the opposite, and give strength and significance to the contribution of each to the whole).

GRADATION. In the juxtaposition of both harmonious and contrasting elements it is sometimes necessary to grade their opposition by a period of gradual transition in order to maintain the rhythm (co-ordination of movement) or to avoid harshness; e.g. "If two straight lines meeting in opposing directions give an impression of abruptness, severity or even violence; the difference of movement being emphasised. But if a third line is added, the opposition is softened and an effect of unity and completeness is produced which is called transition."[24]

22 Baldwin Brown: The Fine Arts (New York 1916) p.239

23 Websters International Dictionary

24 Arthur Dow: Composition (New York (1923) p.22

(The two lines can also avoid a violent impact by being deflected to meet each other on a gentle curve which need not greatly influence their directional value.)

RHYTHM. "If natural rhythm be defined as regular recurrence or periodic movement, nature abounds in rhythmic manifestations - in the movement of the heavenly bodies and the recurrence of the seasons, in intra atomic activity, in the cycle of organic germination, growth and decay, in such phenomena as breathing and the beating of the heart, etc.....

"Natural rhythm, like other non-artistic phenomena, is merely part of the artist's raw material, or, in proportion as he recognizes its artistic potentialities, a part of his artistic medium. In both the temporal and the non-temporal arts, natural rhythm acquires an artistic character by being artistically transformed and controlled....

"Musical rhythm is never merely a function of tempo and beat but is determined also by the musical relation of larger and smaller musical units to one another and by innumerable melodic, polyphonic and harmonic devices which, in combination, give the composition its dynamic forward-moving momentum and its musical vitality. Similarly in the visual arts, the rhythm of a building, a statue, or a picture is based....on volumes and areas, shapes, colours and 'values', and upon their physical relation to one another. But the artistic rhythm of a colonnade, a statue, or a picture is the product of artistic organization carefully designed to

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