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we come to the "expert" who can talk fluently on what some other guy merely does. Travelling light, he moves quickly, takes short cuts, often forgets the earlier stages of his journey, and altogether is likely to prove an unreliable guide.

—Archibald Nicoll

ART is a universal language. It is unfettered by nationality or period. To those who will take the trouble to learn to understand the ideals of the artist and the methods of his craft, its message is clear whether the work be of Ancient Egypt, Medieval England or Modern France. Most of the great masterpieces are nationally-owned and normally may be seen and enjoyed by people of all countries. Improved facilities for travel and transport will make them more and more international possessions. It matters little that Michelangelo was an Italian, Rembrandt a Dutchman, or Turner an Englishman, and it matters still less who owns their masterpieces since, in reality, they belong to each individual in proportion to his capacity to appreciate them. Great art fosters a real democracy that breaks down the barriers of language, nationality, and time. In London, on the very eve of World War II, men of all races gathered at an International Congress of Art and mixed together in perfect goodwill. This is very different from the conception of democracy in art which would suggest that everyone, irrespective of qualification, should be entitled to pass judgment on works of art. We are all entitled to our opinions and are perfectly free to express or publish them. It matters little what the ignorant think or say of works of art beyond their comprehension, but there is danger when uneducated mass opinion is given publicity by writers on art and pseudo-critics who write for applause. Whether they pander to the man in the street who likes his art comfortable and easy, or to the high-brow who must have it modern, these impostors are a menace to art and artists. The artist has no means of reply and it is essential that the critic be possessed of, not only absolute integrity, but very wide knowledge and understanding as well. Only then can his praise or condemnation have any real value. It would be a poor democracy where ignorance could prevail. Such a sorry state can be avoided by wise education and the realisation that art is not merely an extra, but an essential part of cultural equipment. It takes at least eight years of full-time study to train an artist and such an extensive course can, of course, be undertaken only by the intending practitioner. The general aim should be to foster a sound and healthy attitude that would incidentally direct the student to genuine authority for further guidance, just as an educated person with an adequate knowledge of the laws of health would be immune to quackery.

Attempts to popularise art can have unfortunate results. "Art for all" can be just as dangerous as "art for art's sake."



Child art enthusiasts are apt to see in the charming artlessness of children an indication that art ability is universal, and that complete expression can be acquired without undue effort. This is disproved by studying the life of any artist who has achieved lasting distinction. Even the "naïve" artist produces his child-like drawings with sureness only after strenuous and serious training and it takes many years before the draughtsman can impart life to an apparent scribble.

No great art has ever resulted from giving the public what it wanted. It may be argued that the Dutch artists of the 17th Century painted for middle-class patrons without cultural background. It must be remembered, however, that these artists were eagerly exploring the possibilities of everyday subjects and that it happened that these were just the sort of things that suited the patrons. It must be remembered, too, that, of the vast number of paintings produced by hosts of little masters, much was mediocre and that the greatest artist of them all, Rembrandt, offended public taste by becoming incomprehensible as he developed his full powers. Both Hals and he died in poverty and oblivion. After Vermeer's death, it was necessary, in order to sell his works, to forge De Hooch's signature. Many great artists have had to forfeit public favour in order to achieve real greatness. Frances Hodgkins would undoubtedly be more popular were she less great. Actually the mass of the people have little opportunity for exercising discretion in art matters. Fashion dominates taste, and fashions are created as commercial propositions, the success of which depend upon their popularity with the mass. Cultural enlightenment is unlikely to prove a tempting financial investment.

The Art of a country or of an age is judged on the best art produced there or then—the mediocre is forgotten. To raise the standard of taste it is necessary that the best artists be given full opportunity to produce their best work, for quality is obviously more important than quantity. An exhibition of American Art selected by popular vote and sent to New Zealand would do little, I fear, to increase our respect for American painters or American standards. A real work of art is not equal to so many indifferent pieces, although this might seem so on a monetary calculation. A masterpiece that has stood the test of time and has won the recognition of eminent authorities through the ages surpasses all intrinsic value and its careful preservation is an international responsibility. The ordinary man often confesses frankly that he can see nothing in these great works to warrant the reputations they have acquired—if left to him they would have been scrapped long ago. He will just as ruthlessly condemn contemporary work that he cannot understand. If art is to be something more than entertainment, it is absolutely essential that its production and development be left to those most highly qualified and that their efforts be not obstructed by the voice of ignorance.

—S. B. MacLennan

ELECTRICITY 1947



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