

HOW VERSUS WHY

The best one can say of American art criticism is that its *CLEVERNESS OFTEN CONCEALS ITS LACK OF PENETRATION*. But no doubt a large part of the public would rather have Mr. Hunecker as he is than not have him at all. The amusing has some justification, if only to meet the needs of that baneful American influence the tired business man.

Often—much more often alas—art criticism as it is published in our journals is nothing but the most unintelligent twaddle. Unfortunately it is not as harmless as it is silly for the written word subtly influences even the wary, especially if it is printed in a publication of standing and most people are perfectly willing to think about art in the terms of their favorite newspaper.

Be it clever or be it silly, one thing can be said of all our art criticism to-day: *IT IS OBSOLETE*. It measures a new product with old standards and is therefore insidiously pernicious for it clouds the issues and often befogs the mind of the public before the work of art has been able to make its own appeal. When it is too frank to use its antiquated wisdom, it substitutes a jest.

ART HAS ALWAYS PROGRESSED AS THOUGHT HAS PROGRESSED, the most revolutionary changes having taken place within the last fifty years as a natural pace-keeping with the tremendous development of thought. But American criticism has again demonstrated that our best brains are devoted to production and not to pure thought for criticism in its methods has lagged lamentably behind the product it presumes to estimate. The scientific influence has at last invaded the field of art but its critics still wander blissfully in the land of romance.

I must explain what I mean by the *SCIENTIFIC INFLUENCE IN ART* for I know that the critics whom you respect the most, such as Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Berenson, do not believe in an evolution of art. Ruskin says quite definitely: "*Art must remain what it was two thousand years ago in the age of Phidias.*" But hear him in the very next paragraph: "*For a long time the function of art was a religious one. That function has now passed away and none has taken its place. The painter has no profession, no purpose. He is an idler on the earth, chasing the shadows of his own fancies.*" And in an effort to give this useless person some *raison d'être* Ruskin thinks he ought to devote himself to "*recording objects of historical interest or beauty existing in his period.*" But we all know that since Ruskin's day the photographer has learned to fulfill this mission much better than any painter could. Consequently Mr. Ruskin says that art will always be the same, that it has already undergone several changes, and the slight function which he still attributes to his contemporaries in art has already been taken away from ours. According to the theories of our greatest critic art should have been dead long ago.

BUT ART IS NOT DEAD! It has not only outlived Mr. Ruskin but will continue to outlive all others who prophesy its end by defining its limitations. Having gone through the religious, and what might, broadly speaking, be termed the photographic era, it began to feel the influence of the reasoning and scientific era. The natural result was a constantly increasing emphasis of the new element until we get in Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso a *PERFECTLY CONNECTED CHAIN FROM APPLIED TO PURE REASON*. This does not by any means signify that the emotional side of art is eliminated. On the contrary, just as no scientific discovery was ever made without an *a priori* idea as its point of departure, so no convincing modern work of art no matter how thoroughly reasoned it may be, can come into existence without an emotion as its basis. We have then a *PERFECTLY CLEAR DEVELOPMENT OF THE AESTHETIC EMOTION* over which reason has assumed so increasing a domination that many of its latest products are highly scientific in origin, thus reflecting faithfully man's progress in mental development.

What is more logical than to demand that *SCIENCE IN CRITICISM MUST MEET SCIENCE IN ART*? The critics' reply naturally would be: "*What do you mean by scientific criticism?*" I can give the clearest answer to this question by turning to pure science for an illustration. When a scientist asserts that H_2O = water, he means that a certain quantity of hydrogen and a certain quantity of oxygen will produce water. He knows *HOW* water can be made, he does not know *WHY*. He knows moreover that he can not know *WHY*, that all the "*WHYS*" of life belong to another realm than his, namely, that of philosophy. In other words *HOW* a thing came into existence is usually analysable, *WHY* it came into existence is invariably a mystery. The *WHY* of art is its emotional, the *HOW* its reasoned element. Through all the ages art criticism has quite naturally occupied itself with the *WHY* of art, with its emotional side, this until now having been its main precipitant. "291" realizing that conditions were changing and that the element of reason was assuming as important, if not more important a rôle than the emotional element, has resolutely devoted its energy to explaining the "*HOW*" of art, content to let the romanticists continue their vague struggle as long as the battle with windmills and the *EXPLANATION OF THEIR OWN PERSONALITIES* might amuse them.

Recognizing that absolute knowledge is possible in no field of human endeavor and that reason in serving as a corrective to the emotions by no means does away with them, we have deemed it of infinitely greater value to *STRIVE FOR THE KNOWABLE* than to join the ranks of those who

continue to seek the unknowable. In other words we maintain that *SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM IS POSSIBLE*. Science is nothing but a systematizing of the knowable and we insist that this is just as possible in art as in any other field of phenomena. Our first attempts may be just as crude as all first attempts along scientific lines, but we are convinced that the direction being right and in accord with modern needs, our method of judging modern works of art is temporarily at least the only one that can have results of any value. At the same time we do not presume to establish permanent dogmatic rules for criticism. On the contrary, just as the scientist must change his ideas as science progresses so we shall be ready to give up all theories of "Scientific" criticism as soon as art changes its rôle in our lives and begins to interpret a different mental state.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM? In what manner can the "*HOW*" and the "*WHY*" of art, the knowable and the unknowable elements be distinguished? Once it is granted that there is such a thing as an evolution in art, immediately two points of view are established from which all works of art must be judged, first from the point of view of the producer, and secondly from the point of view of the evolutionary development. Under the first aspect we must determine what the artist wishes to express and how adequately he succeeds in that expression; under the second aspect we must decide upon the value of that expression as an addition to what has already been said. Criticism of modern art must analyze the thought-process of the artist's mind, the way in which he thinks, how adequately he translates his thoughts into the symbols of his trade and what his relationship is to his fellow artists. *IT MUST DETERMINE THE VALUE OF THE ARTIST'S CONCEPTION PER SE AND ALSO ITS VALUE IN THE EVOLUTIONAL CHAIN.*

Such a point of view inevitably does away with the old emotional attitude of "*Why I like it and why I don't.*" Likes and dislikes are completely swept aside by the scientific critic not as unimportant but because he will not permit the intrusion of mere personal bias in view of the fact that modern psychology has made it impossible for him to believe in objective beauty in art. Since it is extremely unlikely that any two persons get the same impression of the commonest article of daily use, how can they possibly get the same emotional reaction from so complex a thing as a work of art? And even if such a thing were thinkable, how can any one hope to translate the beauty of painting into the totally unrelated beauty of words? The most that the emotional school of critics has ever accomplished, even in its very distinguished exponents, has been the revelation of a great and sensitive personality or the creation of literature sometimes of rare loveliness, sometimes of deep moral and philosophic import. This may be infinitely more valuable than a *COLD DISSECTION OF AN ARTISTIC MENTALITY* and a weighing of its relative worth in the onward march of human development, but the latter method has the advantage of sticking to the business at hand, of accomplishing a well defined task, of understanding and frankly admitting its limitations, thereby rendering the double service of helping where help can be given and then pointing out the regions where all who enter must win each his own salvation.

With so impersonal and reasoned a basis for his criticisms the modern critic has every right to assume a constructive attitude towards art and *WORK CONSCIOUSLY TO HELP BUILD UP THE FUTURE*. I personally believe that we are at present in what may be called the *SCHOLASTIC PERIOD OF ART*. I believe that exactly the same thing has happened in the aesthetically emotional world of to-day that happened to thought in the middle ages when reason, rediscovered, took the religiously emotional world by storm. The result now as in the age of scholasticism is a *PERIOD OF SYSTEMS*, impressionism, cubism, futurism, what you will, but such a state of things can be helped or combated, the point of view matters little, only by a constructive or destructive analysis along the lines indicated and not by uncritical admiration or unintelligent abuse. The human mind has had three stages of development, the emotional, the rational and the experimental. Art has arrived at the rational stage, the overrational stage perhaps, but the critic must go one step further and *BECOME AN EXPERIMENTALIST* for an impersonal consideration of all the products of scholasticism is the only method by which its spell can be broken, the only way in which its artificial products can be discovered and eliminated and its truth pointed out and retained. *HE MUST WELCOME ALL THE NEW SYSTEMS* in turn no matter how mad they may seem, but after a careful analysis of each, he should state with adequate reasons just what has been accomplished and what has not or cannot be done. With such an attitude the critic will have as clearly defined a right to carry his *EXPERIMENTALLY OBTAINED DEDUCTIONS* into the future as has the scientist who, having confirmed the working of a law after observing sufficiently great a number of phenomena, gains the world's acceptance of his discovery until new phenomena prove him to be wrong. And let us hope that experiment in art as in science will tend to throw all systems overboard leaving the artist free once more to find his own truths with an untrammelled mind. Who knows, with such intelligent coöperation on the part of the critic, art may even discover, not its future, but at least its present limitations which now it certainly does not know. Literary painting, musical color and form interpretations, mathematical and fourth-dimensional somersaults may all be relegated to the scrap heap but from it would arise a new art that would be *NOT THE PRODUCT OF FOREIGN LAWS BUT A LAW UNTO ITSELF*.

AGNES ERNST MEYER