Portrait of Michelangelo.

Preface to the twelfth edition

THIS BOOK was planned from the outset to tell the story of art in both words and pictures by enabling the reader as far as possible to have the illustration discussed in the text in front of him, without having to turn the page. Just as I relish the memory of the unconventional and resourceful way in which Dr Bela Horovitz and Mr Ludwig Goldscheider, the founders of the Phaidon Press, achieved this aim in 1949 by making me write another paragraph here or suggesting an extra illustration here.

The result of these weeks of intense collaboration certainly justified the procedure, but the balance arrived at was so delicate that no major alterations could be contemplated while the original lay-out was retained. Only the last few chapters were slightly modified for the eleventh edition (1966) when a Postscript was added, but the main body of the book was left as it was. The decision of the publishers to present the book in a new form more in keeping with modern production methods thus offered fresh opportunities but also posed new problems. The pages of The Story of Art, in its long career, have become familiar to a far greater number of people than I had ever thought possible. Even the majority of the twelve editions in other languages have been modelled on the original lay-out. It seemed to me wrong in the circumstances to omit passages and pictures which readers might want to look for. Nothing is more irritating than to discover that something one expects to find in a book has been left out of the edition one takes from the shelf. Thus, while I welcomed the chance of showing in larger illustrations some of the works discussed and of adding some colour plates, I have eliminated nothing and only exchanged a very few examples for technical or other compelling reasons. The possibility, on the other hand, of adding to the number of works to be discussed and illustrated presented both an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted. Clearly to turn this volume into a heavy tome would have destroyed its character and defeated its purpose. In the end I decided to add fourteen examples which seemed to me not only interesting in themselves — which work of art is not? — but to make a number of fresh points that enrich the texture of the argument. It is the argument, after all, that makes this book a story rather than an anthology. If it can again be read, and, I hope, enjoyed, without a distracting hunt for the pictures that go with the text, this is due to the help given in various ways by Mr Elwyn Blacker, Dr I. G. Graf and Mr Keith Roberts.
Preface to the thirteenth edition

There are many more illustrations in colour in this than in the twelfth edition, but the text (except for the bibliography) remains unchanged.

The other new feature is the chronological chart on pp. 50–9. Seeing the positions of a few landmarks in the vast panorama of history should help the reader to counteract the perspective illusion which gives prominence to recent developments at the expense of the more distant past. In thus stimulating reflections on the time scales of the story of art, the chart should serve the same purpose for which I wrote this book some thirty years ago. Here I can still refer the reader to the opening words of the original Preface on the opposite page.

E.H.G. July 1977

Preface to the fourteenth edition

‘Books have a life of their own.’ The Roman poet who made this remark could not have imagined that his lines would be copied out by hand for many centuries and would be available on the shelves of our libraries some two thousand years later. By these standards this book is a youngster. Even so, in writing it, I could not have dreamt of its future life, which as far as the English language editions are concerned, is now chronicled on the back of the title-page.

Some of the changes the book has undergone are mentioned in the Prefaces to the twelfth and thirteenth editions. These changes have been retained, but the section on books has again been brought up to date. To keep in step with technical developments and altered expectations of the public many of the illustrations previously primed in black and white now appear in colour. In addition I have added a Supplement on ‘New discoveries’, with a brief retrospect on archaeological finds (to remind the reader of the extent to which the story of the past has always been subject to revision and unexpected enrichment.

E.H.G. March 1984
TI-IIS BOOK is intended for all who feel in need of some first orientation in a stimulating and fascinating field. It may serve to show the newcomer the lie of the land without confusing him with details; to enable him to bring some intelligible order into the wealth of names, periods and styles which crowd more ambitious works, and so to equip him for consulting more specialized books. In writing it I thought first and foremost of readers in their teens who had just discovered the world of art for themselves. But I never believed that books for young people should differ from books for adults except for the fact that they must reckon with the most exacting class of critics, critics who are quick to detect and resent any trace of pretentious jargon or bogus sentiment. I know from experience that these are the vices which may render people suspicious of all writing on art for the rest of their lives. I have striven sincerely to avoid these pitfalls and to use plain language even at the risk of sounding casual or unprofessional. Difficulties of thought, on the other hand, I have not avoided, and so I hope that no reader will attribute my decision (to along with a minimum of the art historian's conventional terms) to any desire on my part of 'talking down' to him. For is it not rather those who misuse 'scientific' language, not to enlighten but to impress the reader, who are 'talking down' to us—from the clouds? Apart from this decision to restrict the number of technical terms, I have tried, in writing this book, to follow a number of more specific self-imposed rules, all of which have made my own life as its author more difficult, but may make that of the reader a little easier. The first of these rules was that I would not write about works I could not show in the illustrations; I did not want the text to degenerate into lists of names which could mean little or nothing to those who do not know the works in question, and would be superfluous for those who do. This rule at once limited the choice of artists and works I could discuss to the number of illustrations the book would hold. It forced me to be doubly rigorous in my selection of what to mention and what to exclude. This led to my second rule, which was to limit myself to real works of art, and cut out anything which might merely be interesting as a specimen of taste or fashion. This decision entailed a considerable sacrifice of literary effects. Praise is so much duller than criticism, and the inclusion of some amusing monstrosities might have offered some light relief. But the reader would have been justified in asking why something I found objectionable should find a place in a book devoted to art and not to non-art, particularly if
PREFACE

this meant leaving out a true masterpiece. Thus, while I do not claim that all the works illustrated represent the high csr standa rd of perfection, I did make an effort not to include anything which I considered to be without a peculiar merit of its own.

The third rule also demanded a little self-denia l. I vowed that I would resist any temp tation to be origina l III my selection, lest the well-known masterpi eces be crowded out by my own personal favourite s. This book, after all, is not intended merely as an anthology of beautiful things it is meant for those who look [or bearings in a new field, and for them the familiar appearance of apparentJy 'hackneyed' examp les may serve as welcome landmark s. Moreover, the most famous works are really often the greatest by many standa rds, and if this book can help read ers to look at them with fresh eyes it may prove more uscfullhan if 1 had neglected them for the sake of less well-known masterpieces.

Even so, the number of famous works and masters I had to excl ude is formidabl e e nough . I may as well confess that I have found no room for Hindu or Etruscan art, or for masters of lhe rank ofQ uercia , Signorelli or Carpaccio, of Peter Vischer, Brow er, Terborch, Canaletto, Corot , and scores of others who happen to interest me deeply. To includ e them would have doubled or treb led the length of the book and would, I believe. ha ve redu ced its value as a first guide to an.

One more rule I have followed in thi s heart-breaking task of eliminati on. When in doubt I have always preferred to discuss a work which I had seen in the origin al rather than one I knew only from photograph s. I should have liked to make iliis an absolute rule, but I d id not want the reader to be penalized by the accidents of travel restri ctions which someti mes dog the life of the art-lover. Mor eover, it was my final rule Not to have any abso lute rules whate ver. but to break my own sometimes, leaving to th e reader the fun of finding mc out.

These, then, were the negative rules I adopted. M y positive aims should be apparent from the book itself. In telling 
he s tory of art once more in simple lang uage, it should enabl e the read er L a see how it hangs toge ther and help him in his appreciation, nOt SO much by raprur ous descripti ons, as by providing him with some pointers as to the artists' prob-
ferent may not be the highest or profoundest element of the artist's equipment, but it is rarely lacking altogether. And the appreciation of this intentional difference often opens up the easiest approach to the art of the past.

I have tried to make this constant change of aims the key of my narrative, and to show how each work is related by imitation or contradiction to what has gone before. Even at the risk of being tedious.

PREFACE

I have referred back for the purpose of comparison to works that show the distance which artists had placed between themselves and their fore-runners. There is one pitfall in this method of presentation which I hope to have avoided but which should not go unmentioned. It is the naive misinterpretation of the constant change in art as a continuous progress.

It is true that every artist feels that he has surpassed the generation before him and that from his point of view he has made progress beyond anything that was known before. We cannot hope to understand a work of an without being able to share this sense of liberation and triumph which the artist felt when he looked at his own achievement. But we must realize that each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and that this subjective progress, in spite of its importance, does not correspond to an objective increase in artistic values. All this may sound a little puzzling when stated in the abstract. I hope the book will make it clear.

One more word about the space allotted to the various arts in this book. To some it will seem that painting is unduly favoured as compared to sculpture and architecture. One reason for this bias is that less is lost in the illustration of a painting than in that of a round sculpture, let alone a monumental building. I had no intention, moreover, of competing with the many excellent histories of architectural styles which exist. On the other hand, the story of an art here conceived could not be told without a reference to the architectural background. While I had to continue myself to discussing the style of only one or two buildings in each period, I tried to restore the balance in favour of architecture by giving these examples pride of place in each chapter. This may help the reader to co-ordinate his knowledge of each period and see it as a whole.

As a tailpiece to each chapter I have chosen a characteristic representation of the artist's life and world from the period concerned. These pictures form an independent series illustrating the changing social position of the artist and his public. Even where their artistic merit is not very high these pictorial documents may help us to build up, in our minds, a concrete picture of the surroundings in which the art of the past sprang to life.

This book would never have been written without the warm-hearted encouragement it received from Elizabeth Senior, whose untimely death in an air raid on London was such a loss to all who knew her. I am also indebted to Dr Leopold Ettlinger, Dr Edith Hoffmann, Dr Otto Kurz, Mrs Olive Renier, Mrs Edna Sweetman, to my wife and my son Richard for much valuable advice and assistance, and to the Phaidon Press for their share in shaping this book.
I.

RUBENS: Portrait of his son Nicholas. Drawing 1620.

OURER: Portrait of his mother. Drawing 1514.

Introduction

On art and artists

There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of "bison" on the wall of a cave; today some buy their paints, and design postcards for the hoardings; they did and do many other things. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that an with a capital A has no existence. For an with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish. You may crush an artist by telling him that what he has just done may be quite good in its own way, only it is not 'an'. And you may confound anyone enjoying a picture by declaring that what he liked in it was not the Art but something different.

Actually I do not think that there are any wrong reasons for liking a statue or a picture. Someone may like a landscape painting because it reminds him of home, or a portrait because it reminds him of a friend. There is nothing wrong with that. All of us, when we see a painting, are bound to be reminded of a hundred-and-one things which influence our likes and dislikes. As long as these memories help us to enjoy what we see, we need not worry. It is only when some irrelevant memory makes...
us prejudiced, when we instinctively turn away from a magnificent picture of an alpine scene because we dislike climbing, we should search our mind for the reason of the aversion which spoils a pleasure we might otherwise have had.

There are wrong reasons for disliking a work of art. Most people like what they would also like to see in reality. This is quite a natural preference. We all like beauty in nature, and our grateful the animals who have preserved it in their works. Nor would these artists themselves have rebuffed us for our taste. When the great Flemish painter Rubens made a drawing of his little boy (Fig. 1) he was surely proud of his good looks. He wanted us, too, to admire the child. But this bias for the pretty and engaging subject is apt to become a stumbling-block if it leads us to reject works which represent a less appealing subject. The great German painter Albrecht Durer certainly drew his self-portrait (Fig. 2) with as much devotion and love as Rubens felt for his chubby child. His truthful study of careworn old age may give us a shock which makes us turn away from it—and yet, if we fight against our first repugnance we may be richly rewarded, for Durer’s drawing in its tremendous sincerity is a great work.

In fact, we shall soon discover that the beauty of a picture does not really lie in its subject matter. I do not know whether the little ragamuffins whom the Spanish painter Murillo liked to paint (Fig. 3) were strictly beautiful or not, but, as he painted them, they certainly have great charm. On the other hand, most people would call the child in Pieter de Hooch’s wonderful Dutch interior (Fig. 4) plain, but it is an attractive picture all the same.
The trouble about beauty is that tastes and standards of what is beautiful vary so much. Figs. 5 and 6 were both painted in the fifteenth century, and both represent angels playing the lute. Many will prefer the Italian work by Melozzo da Forli (Fig. 5), with its appealing grace and charm, to that of his northern contemporary Hans Memling (Fig. 6). I myself like both. It may take a little longer to discover the inherent beauty of Memling's angel, but once we are no longer disturbed by his awkwardness we may find him infinitely lovable.

What is true of beauty is also true of expression. In fact, it is often the expression of a figure in the painting which makes us like or loathe the work. Some people like an expression which they can easily understand, and which therefore moves them profoundly. When the Italian seventeenth-century painter Guido Reni painted the head of Christ on the cross (Fig. 7), he intended, no doubt, that the beholder should find in this face all the agony and glory of the Passion. Many people throughout subsequent centuries have drawn strength and comfort from such a presentation of the Saviour. The feeling it expresses is so strong and so clear that copies of this work can be found in simple wayside shrines and remote farmhouses where people know nothing about Art. But even if this intense expression of feeling appeals to us we should not, for that reason, turn away from works whose expression is perhaps less easy to understand. The Italian painter of the Middle Ages who painted the crucifix (Fig. 8) surely fell as sincerely about the Passion as did Reni, but we must first learn to know his methods of drawing to understand his feelings. When we have come to understand these different languages, we may even prefer works of art whose expression is less obvious than Reni's. Just as some prefer people who use few words and...
gesture s and leave something to be gues sed, so some people arc fond of paintings or sculptures which leave them something to guess and ponder about. In the more 'primit ive' periods, when artists were nor as skilled in representing human faces and human gestures as they are now, it is often all the more moving to sec how th ey tried nevertheless to bring out the feeling they wanted to convey. But here newcomer s to art arc often brought up against another diffi-
culty. They want to admire the artist's skill in repre senting the things they sec. What they like best arc paintings which look ' like real'. I do not deny for a moment that thi s is an importam consideration. The patience and skill which go into the faithful rendering of the visible world are indeed to be admired. Great artists of the past have devoted much labour to works in which every tiny deta il is carefully recorded. Durer's watercolour study of a hare (Fig. 9) is one of the most famous examples of thi s loving patience. But who wou ld say that Rembrandt' s drawing of an elephant (Fig. 10) is necessa rily less good because it shows fewer details? Indeed Rembrandt was such a wizard that he gave us the feel of the elephant's wrinkly skin with a few lines of his chalk. But it is not sketchiness that mainl y offends people who like their pic-
tures to look 'real '. They are even more repelled by works which they consider to be incorrectly drawn, particu larly when they belong to a more modern period when the artist 'ougbt to have known better'. As a matter of fact, there is no mystery about these distortions of nature about which we still hear complaints in discus sions on modern art. Everyone who has ever seen a Disney film or a comic strip knows all about it. He knows that it is some time s right to draw lhing s otherwise [han they look, to change and distort them in one way or another. Mickey Mouse docs not

10. An elephant.

Drawn after...
look very much like a real mouse, yet people do not write indignant letters to the papers about the length of his tail. Those who enter Disney's enchanted world are not worried about Art with a capital A. They do not go to his shows armed with the same prejudices they like to take with them when going to an exhibition of modern painting. But if a modern artist draws something in his own way, he is apt to be thought a bungler who can do no better. Now, whatever we may think of modern artists, we may safely credit them with enough knowledge to draw correctly. If they do not do so their reasons may be very similar to those of Walt Disney. Fig. 11 shows a plate from an illustrated Natural History by the famous pioneer of the modern movement, Picasso. Surely no one could find fault with his charming representation of a mother hen and her fluffy chicks. But in drawing a cockerel (Fig. 12), Picasso was not cooped up with giving a mere rendering of the bird's appearance. He wanted to bring out its aggressiveness, its cheek and its stupidity. In other words he resorted to caricature. But what a convincing caricature it is! There are two things, therefore, which we should always ask ourselves if we find fault with the accuracy of a picture. One is whether the artist may not have had his reasons for changing the appearance of what he saw. We shall hear more about such reasons as the story of art unfolds. The other is that we should never condemn a work for being incorrectly drawn unless we have made quite sure that we are right and the painter is wrong. We are all inclined to be quick with the verdict that 'things are not as they should be.'
We have a curious habit of thinking that nature must always look like the pictures we are accustomed to. It is easy to illustrate this by an astonishing discovery which was made not very long ago. Generations have watched horses gallop, have attended horse-races and hunts, have enjoyed paintings and sporting prints showing horses charging into battle or running after hounds. Not one of these people seems to have noticed what it really looks like when a horse runs. Pictures and sporting prints usually showed them with outstretched legs in full flight through the air — as the great French nineteenth-century painter Gericault painted them in a famous representation of the races at Epsom (Fig. 13). About fifteen years later, when the photographic camera had been sufficiently perfected for snapshots of horses in rapid motion to be taken, these snapshots proved that both the painters and their public had been wrong all the while. No galloping horse ever moved in the way which seems so 'natural' to us. As the legs come off the ground they are moved for the next kick-off (Fig. 14). If we reflect for a moment we shall realize that it could hardly get along otherwise. And yet, when painters began to apply this new discovery, and painted horses moving as they actually do, everyone complained that their pictures looked wrong. This, no doubt, is an extreme example, but similar errors are by no
mean s as rar e as one might think. We are all inclined to accept conven-
uuional forms or colours as the only correct ones. Children sometimes think
!.hat stars must be star-shaped, though
naturally they are not. The people
who insist lhat in a picture the sky must be blue, and the grass green,
arC not very different from these chi ldren . Tbey get indignant if they
sec other colour s in a picture, but if we try to forget
all we have heard
about green grass and blu e skies, and look at the world as if we had just
arrived from another planet on a voyage of discovery and were seeing
hiogs are apt
[Q have the most

teresting colours. Now painters some time s feel as if they were
00 such
a voyage of discovery. They want to sec the world afresh, and to discard
all the accepted notion s and prejudices about flesh being pink and app les
yellow or red . It is not easy to get rid of these preconceived ideas, but
the artists who succeed best in
doing
the most exciting
works. It is
they who teach us to see in nature new beauties of whose
existence we have never dreamt. If we follow them and learn from them,
even a glance out of our own window may become a thrilling adventure.

There is no greatcr obstacle to the enjoy ment of great works of art
than
our unwillingness to discard habits and prejudices. A painting which
represents
a
familiar subject in an unexpected way is often condemned
for no bener reason than that it does nOl seem right. The more often
we have seen a
story
represented in art, the more firmly do we become
convin ced that
it
must always be represented on similar lines. About
biblical
subjects, in particular, feelings arc apt to run high. Though we

INTRODucnON
14. A galloping
horse in motion.
Photographed
by
EADWEARD
MUY8RIDGIl in
1872.
Kingston
ulxm Thames,
INTRODUCTION

All know that the Scriptures tell us nothing about the appearance of Jesus, and God Himself cannot be visualized in human form, and though we know it was the artists of the past who first created the images we have become used to, some are still inclined to think that to depart from these traditional forms amounts to blasphemy.

As a matter of fact, it was usually those artists who read the Scriptures with the greatest devotion and attention who tried to build up in their minds an entirely fresh picture of the incidents of the sacred story. They tried to forget all the paintings they had seen, and to imagine what it must have been like when the Christ Child lay in the manger and the shepherds came to adore Him, or when a fisherman began to preach the gospel. It has happened time and again that such efforts of a great artist to read the old text with entirely fresh eyes have shocked and outraged thoughtless people.

A typical 'scandal' of this kind flared up round Caravaggio, a very bold and revolutionary Italian artist, who worked round about 1600. He was given the task of painting a picture of St Matthew for the altar of a church in Rome. The saint was to be represented writing the gospel, and to show that the gospels were the word of God, an angel was to be represented inspiring his writings. Caravaggio, who was a very imaginative and uncompromising young artist, thought hard about what it must have been like when an elderly, poor, working man, a simple publican, suddenly had to sit down to write a book. And so he painted a picture of St Matthew (Fig. 15) with a bald head and bare, dusty feet, awkwardly gripping the huge volume, anxiously wrinkling his brow under the unaccustomed strain of writing. By his side he painted a youthful angel, who seems just to have arrived from on high, and who gently guides the labourer's hand as a teacher may do to a child. When Caravaggio delivered this picture to the church where it was to be placed on the altar, people were scandalized at what they took to be lack of respect for the saint. The painting was not accepted, and Caravaggio had to try again. This time he took no chance.

He kept strictly to the conventional ideas of what an angel and a saint should look like (Fig. 16). The outcome is still quite a good picture, for Caravaggio had tried hard to make it look lively and interesting, but we feel that it is less honest and sincere than the first had been.

This story illustrates the harm that may be done by those who dislike and criticize works of art for wrong reasons. What is more important, it brings home to us that what we call 'works of art' are not the results of some mysterious activity, but objects made by human beings for human beings. A picture looks so remote when it hangs glassed and framed on the wall. And in our museums it is—very properly— forbidden to touch the objects on view. But originally they were made to be touched and handled, they were bargained about, quarrelled about, worried about. Let us also remember that everyone of their features is the result of a decision by the artist: that he may have pondered over them and changed them many times, that he may have wondered whether to leave that tree in the background or to paint it over again, that he may have
been pleased by a lucky stroke of his brush which gave a sudden unexpected brilliance to a sunlit cloud, and that he pm in these figures reluctantly at the insistence or buyer. For most of the paintings and statues which are now strung up along the walls of our museums and galleries were not meant to be displayed as Art, They were made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose which were in the artist's mind when he set to work. Those ideas, on the other hand, we outsiders usually worry about. ideas about beauty and expression are rarely mentioned by artists. It was not always like that, but it was so for many centuries in the past, and it is so again now. The reason is partly that artists are often shy people who would think it embarrassing to use big words like 'Beamy'. They would feel rather priggish if they were to speak about 'expressing their emotions' and to use similar catchwords. Such things they take for granted and find it useless to discuss. That is one reason, and, it seems, a good one. But there is another. in the actual everyday worries of the artist these ideas play a much smaller part than ombers would, I think, suspect. What an artist worries about as he plans his pictures, makes his sketches, or wonders whether he has completed his canvas, is something much more difficult to put into words. Perhaps he would say he worries about whether he has got it 'right'. Now it is only when we understand what he means by that modest little word 'right' that we begin to understand what artists are really after.
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I think we can only hope to understand mis if we draw on our own experience. Of course we are not artists, we may never have tried to paint a picture and may have no intention of ever doing so. But mis need not mean that we are never confronted with problems similar to those which make up the artist’s life. In fact, I am anxious to prove that there is hardly any person who has not at least got an inkling of this type of problem, be it in ever so modest a way. Everybody who has ever tried to arrange a bunch of flowers, to shuffle and shift the colours, to add a little here and take away there, has experienced this strange sensation of balancing forms and colours without being able to tell exactly what kind of harmony it is he is trying to achieve. We just feel a patch of red here may make all the difference, or this blue is all right by itself but it does not go with the others, and suddenly a little stem of green leaves may seem to make it come right. ‘Don’t touch it any more,’ we exclaim, ‘now it is perfect.’ Not everybody, I admit, is quite so careful over the arrangement of flowers, but nearly everybody has something he wants to get right. It may just be a matter of finding the right belt which matches a certain dress or nothing more impressive than the worry over the right proportion of, say, pudding and cream on one’s plate. In every such case, however trivial, we may feel that a shade too much or too little upsets the balance and that there is only one relationship which is as it should be.

People who worry like this over flowers, dresses or food, we may call fussy, because we may feel that things do not warrant so much attention. But what may sometimes be a bad habit in daily life and is often, before, suppressed or concealed, comes into its own in the realm of art. When it is a matter of mixing forms or arranging colours an artist must always be fussy or rather fastidious to the extreme. He may see differences in shades and texture which we should hardly notice. Moreover, his task is infinitely more complex than any of those we may experience in ordinary life. He has not only to balance two or three colours, shapes or tastes, but to juggle with any number. He has, on his canvas, perhaps hundreds of shades and forms which he must balance till they look right. A patch of green may suddenly look too yellow because it was brought into too close proximity with a strong blue—he may feel that all is spoilt, that mere is a jarring note in the picture and that he must begin it all over again. He may suffer agonies over this problem. He may ponder about it in sleepless nights; he may stand in front of his picture all day trying to add a touch of colour here or there and rubbing it out again, though you and I might not have noticed the difference either way. But once he has succeeded we all feel that he has achieved something (of which nothing could be added, something which is right—an example of perfection in our very imperfect world.

Take one of Raphael’s famous Madonnas: ‘The Virgin in the Meadow,’ for instance (Fig. 12). It is beautiful, no doubt, and engaging; the figures are admirably drawn and the expression of the Holy Virgin as she looks down at the two children is quite unforgettable. But if we
 Raphael:
The Virgin in the Meadow.
Painted 1505. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
Introductory remarks.

RAPHAEL: Leaf from a sketch-book with four studies for 'The Virgin in the Meadow'.

1505. Vienna, Alberina.

Look at Raphael's sketches for the picture (Fig. 18) we begin to realize that the second was not the third he took most trouble about. These he took for granted. What he tried again and again to get was the right balance between the figures, the right relationship which would make the most harmonious whole. In the rapid sketch in the left-hand corner, he thought of letting the Christ Child walk away looking back and up at His mother. And he tried different positions of the mother's head to answer the movement of the Child. Then he decided to turn the Child round and to let Him look up at her. He tried another way, this time introducing the little St John—but, instead of letting the Christ Child look at him, made Him turn out of the picture. Then he made another attempt, and apparently became impatient, trying the head of the Child in many different positions. There were several leaves of this kind in his sketch-book, in which he searched again and again how best to balance these three figures. But if we now look back at the final picture we see that he did get it right in the end. Everything in the picture seems in its proper place, and the pose and harmony which Raphael has achieved by his hard work seems so natural and effortless that we hardly notice it. Yet it is just this harmony which makes the beauty of the Madonna more beautiful and the sweetness of the children more sweet.

It is fascinating to watch an artist thus striving to achieve the right balance, but if we were to ask him why he did this or changed that, he might not be able to tell us. He does not follow any fixed rules. He just feels his way. It is true that some artists or critics in certain periods have tried to formulate laws of their art; but it always turned out that poor artists did not achieve anything when trying to apply these laws, while great masters could break them and yet achieve a new kind of harmony.
no one had thought of before. When the great English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds explained to his students in the Royal Academy that blue should not be put into the foreground of paintings but should be reserved for the distant backgrounds, for the fading hills on the horizon, his rival Gainsborough—so the story goes—wanted to prove that such academic rules are usually nonsense. He painted the famous 'Blue Boy', whose blue costume, in the central foreground of the picture, stands out triumphantly against the warm brown of the background.

The truth is that it is impossible to lay down rules of this kind because one can never know in advance what effect the artist may wish to achieve. He may even want a shrill, jarring note if he happens to feel that that would be right. As there are no rules to tell us when a picture or statue is right it is usually impossible to explain in words exactly why we feel that it is a great work of art. But that does not mean that one work is just as good as any other, or that one cannot discuss matters of taste. If they do nothing else, such discussions make us look at pictures, and the more we look at them the more we notice points which have escaped us before. We begin to develop a feeling for the kind of harmony each generation of artists tried to achieve. The greater our feeling for these harmonics the more we shall enjoy them, and that, after all, is what matters. The old proverb that you cannot argue about matters of taste may well be true, but that should not conceal the fact that taste can be developed. This is again a matter of common experience which everybody can test in a modest field. To people who are not used to drinking tea one blend may taste exactly like the other. But if they have the leisure, will and opportunity to search out such refinements as there may be, they may develop into true 'connoisseurs' who can distinguish exactly what type and mixture they prefer, and their greater knowledge is bound to add to their enjoyment of the choicest blends.

Admittedly, taste in art is something infinitely more complex than taste in food and drink. It is not only a matter of discovering various subtle flavours; it is something more serious and more important. After all, the great masters have given their all in these works, they have suffered for them, sweated blood over them, and the least they have a right to ask of us is that we try to understand what they wanted to do.

One never finishes learning about art. There are always new things to discover. Great works of art seem to look different every time one stands before them. They seem inexhaustible and unpredictable as real human beings. It is an exciting world of its own with its own strange laws and its own adventures. Nobody should think he knows all about it, for nobody does. Nothing, perhaps, is more important than just this: that to enjoy these works we must have a fresh mind, one which is ready to catch every hint and to respond to every hidden harmony: a mind, most of all, not cluttered up with long high-sounding words and ready-made phrases. It is infinitely better not to know anything about an than to have the kind of half-knowledge which makes for snobbishness. The danger is very real. There are people, for instance, who have...
INTRODUCTION

I have tried to make in this chapter, and who understand that there are great works of art which have none of the obvious qualities of beauty of expression or correct draughtsmanship, but who become so proud of their knowledge that they pretend to like only those works which are neither beautiful nor correctly drawn. They are always haunted by the fear that they might be considered uneducated if they confessed to liking a work which seems too obviously pleasant or moving. They end by being snobs who lose their true enjoyment of art and who call everything 'very interesting' which they really find somewhat repulsive. I should hate to be responsible for any similar misunderstanding. I would rather not be believed at all than be believed in such an uncritical way.

In the chapters which follow I shall discuss the history of art, that is, the history of building, of picture-making and of statue-making. I think that knowing something of this history helps us to understand why artists worked in a particular way, or why they aimed at certain effects. Most of all it is a good way of sharpening our eyes for the particular characteristics of works of art, and of thereby increasing our sensitivity to the finer shades of difference. Perhaps it is the only way of learning to enjoy them in their own right. But no way is without its dangers.

One sometimes sees people walking through a gallery, catalogue in hand. Every time they stop in front of a picture they eagerly search for its number. We can watch them thumbing their books, and as soon as they have found the title or the name they walk on. They might just as well have stayed at home, for they have hardly looked at the painting. They have only checked the catalogue.

It is a kind of mental short circuit which has nothing to do with enjoying a picture.

People who have acquired some knowledge of art history are sometimes in danger of falling into a similar trap. When they see a work of art they do not stay to look at it, but rather search their memory for the appropriate label. They may have heard that Rembrandt was famous for his chiaroscuro - which is the Italian technical term for light and shade - so they nod wisely when they see a Rembrandt, mumble 'wonderful chiaroscuro', and wander on to the next picture. I want to be quite frank about this danger of half-knowledge and snobbery, for we are all apt to succumb to such temptations, and a book like this could increase them.

I should like to help to open eyes, not to loosen tongues. To talk cleverly about art is not very difficult, because the words critics use have been employed in so many different contexts that they have lost all precision.

But to look at a picture with fresh eyes and to venture on a voyage of discovery into it is a far more difficult but also a much more rewarding task. There is no telling what one might bring home from such a journey.
Strange beginnings

Prehistoric and primitive peoples... Ancient America... We do not know how art began any more than we know how language started. If we take art to mean such activities as building temples and boulevards, making pictures and sculptures, or weaving patterns, there is no people in all the world without... On the other hand, we mean by art some kind of beautiful luxury, something to enjoy in museums and exhibitions or something special to use as a precious decoration in the best parlour. We must realize that this use of the word is a very recent development and that many of the greatest builders, painters, or sculptors of the past never dreamed of it. We can best understand this difference if we think of architecture. We all know that there are beautiful buildings and that some of them are true works of art. But there is scarcely any building in the world which was not erected for a particular purpose. Those who use these buildings as places of worship or entertainment...
or as dwellings, judge them first and foremost by standards of utility. But apart from this, they may like or dislike the design or the proportion of the structure, and appreciate the efforts of the good architect to make it not only practical but 'right'. In the past the attitude towards paintings and statues was often similar. They were not thought of as mere works of art but as objects which had a definite function. He would be a poor judge of houses who did not know the requirements for which they were built. Similarly, we are not likely to understand the art of the past if we are quite ignorant of the aims it had to serve. The further we go back in history, the more definite but also the more strange are the aims which art was supposed to serve. The same applies if we leave towns and cities and go to the peasants or, better still, if we leave our civilized countries and travel to the peoples whose ways of life still resemble the conditions in which our remote ancestors lived. We call these people 'primitives' not because they are simpler than we are - their processes of thought are often more complicated than ours - but because they are closer to the state from which all mankind once emerged. Among these primitives, there is no difference between building and image-making as far as usefulness is concerned. Their huts are there to shelter them from rain, wind and sunshine and the spirits which produce them; images are made to protect them against other powers which are to them, as real as the forces of nature. Pictures and statues, in other words, are used to work magic.

We cannot hope to understand these strange beginnings of an art unless we try to enter into the mind of the primitive peoples and find out what kind of experience it is which makes them think of pictures, not as something nice to look at, but as something powerful to use. I do not think it is really so difficult to recapture this feeling. All that is needed is the will (or be absolutely honest with ourselves and see whether we, too, do not retain something of the 'primitive' in us. Instead of beginning with the Ice Age, let us begin with ourselves. Suppose we take a picture of our favourite champion from today's paper—would we enjoy taking a needle and poking out the eyes? Would we feel as indifferent about it as if we poked a hole anywhere else in the paper? I do not think so. However well I know with my waking thoughts that what I do to his picture makes no difference to my friend or hero, I still feel a vague reluctance to harm it. Somewhere there remains the absurd feeling that what one does to the picture is done to the person it represents. Now, if I am right there, if this queer and unreasonable idea really survives, even among us, into the age of atomic power, it is perhaps less surprising that such ideas existed almost everywhere among the so-called primitive peoples. In all parts of the world medicine men or witches have tried to work magic in some such way—they have made little images of an enemy and have then pierced the heart of the wretched doll, or burnt it, and hoped that their enemy would suffer. Even the guy we burn in Britain on Guy Fawkes Day is a remnant of such a superstition. The primitives are sometimes even more vague about what is real and what is a picture.

On one occasion, when a European artist made drawings...
Paintings made some 15,000 years ago:

20. (above) Bison, found in the cave of Altamira (Spain).

21. (below) Animals on the roof of the cave at Lascaux.
Strange Beginnings of cattle in an African village, the inhabitants were distressed: 'If you take them away with you, what are we to live on?' All these strange ideas are important because they may help us to understand the oldest paintings which have come down to us. These paintings are as old as any trace of human skill. And yet, when they were first discovered on the walls of caves and rocks in Spain (Fig. 20) and in southern France in the nineteenth century, archaeologists refused at first to believe that such vivid and lifelike representations of animals could have been made by men in the Ice Age. Gradually the rude implements of stone and of bone found in these regions made it increasingly certain that these pictures of bison, mammoth or reindeer were indeed scratched or painted by men who hunted this game and therefore knew it so very well.

II is a strange experience to go down into these caves, sometimes through low and narrow corridors, far into the darkness of the mountain and suddenly to see the electric torch of the guide light up the picture of a bull. One thing is clear, no one would have crawled so far into the eerie depth of the earth simply to decorate such an inaccessible place. Moreover, few of these pictures are clearly distributed on the roofs or walls of the cave except some paintings in the cave of Lascaux (Figs. 19, 21). On the contrary, they are sometimes painted or scratched on top of each other without any apparent order. The most likely explanation of these finds is still that they are the oldest relics of that universal belief in the power of picture-making; in other words, that these primitive hunters thought that if they only made a picture of their prey—and perhaps belaboured it with their spears or stone axes—the real animals would also succumb to their power.

Of course, this is guesswork— but guesswork properly well supported by the use of an among those primitive peoples of our own day who have still preserved their ancient customs. True, we do not find any now, as far as I know, who try to work exactly this kind of magic; but most for them is also closely bound up with similar ideas about the power of images. There are still primitive peoples who use nothing but stone implements and who scratch pictures of animals on rocks for magical purposes. There are other tribes who have regular festivals when they dress up as animals and move like animals in solemn dances. They, too, believe that somehow this will give them power over their prey. Sometimes they even believe that certain animals are related to them in some fairy-tale manner, and that the whole tribe is a wolf tribe, a raven tribe or a frog tribe. It sounds strange enough, but we must not forget that even these ideas are not as far removed from our own times as one might think. The Romans believed that Romulus and Remus had been suckled by a she-wolf, and they had an image in bronze of the she-wolf on the sacred Capitol in Rome. Even now they keep a living she-wolf in a cage near the steps to the Capitol. No living lions are kept in Trafalgar Square—but the British Lion has led a vigorous life in the pages of Punch.

Of course, there remains a vast difference between this kind of heraldic or cartoon symbolism and the deep seriousness with which tribesmen
look on their relationship with me totem, as runey call mcir animal relatives. For it seems nat they sometimes live in a kind of dream-world in which they can be man and animal at me same time. Many tribes have special ceremonies in which they wear masks with the features of these animals, and when they put them on they seem to feel that they are transformed, that they have become ravens, or bears.

II is very much as if children played at pirates or detectives till my CY no longer knew where play-acting ended and reality began. But with children there is always me grown-up world about them, the people who tell them 'Don't be so noisy', or 'It is nearly bed-time'. For the primitive there is no such other world to spoil the illusion, because all the members of the tribe take part in me ceremonial dances and rites with their fantastic games of pretence. They have all learned their significance from former generations and are so absorbed in them that they have little chance of stepping outside it and seeing their behaviour critically.

We all have beliefs which we take as much for granted as the 'primitives' take theirs—usually so much so that we are not even aware of them unless we meet people who question them.

All this may seem to have little to do with art, but in fact these conditions influence art in many ways. Many of the artists' works are meant to play a part in these strange rituals, and what matters then is not whether the sculpture or painting is beautiful by our standards, but whether it 'works', that is to say, whether it can perform the required magic. Moreover, the artists work for people of their own tribe who know exactly what each form or each colour is meant to signify. They are not expected to change these things, but only to apply all their skill and knowledge to the execution of their work.

Again we have not to go far to think of parallels. The point of a national flag is not to be a beautifully coloured piece of cloth which any maker can change according to his fancy—me point of a wedding ring is not to be an ornament which can be worn or changed as we think fit. Yet even within the prescribed rites and customs of our lives, there remains a certain element of choice and scope for taste and skill. Let us think of me Christmas tree. Its principal features are laid down by custom. Each family, in fact, has its own traditions and its own predilections without which the tree does not look right. Nevertheless, when the great moment comes to decorate the tree there remains much to be decided. Should this branch get a candle? Is there enough tinsel on top? Does not this star look too heavy or this side too overloaded? Perhaps to an outsider the whole performance would look rather strange. He might think that trees are much nicer without tinsel. But to us, who know the significance, it becomes a matter of great importance to decorate the tree according to our idea.

 Primitive art works on just such pre-established lines, and yet leaves the artist scope to show his melle. The technical mastery of some tribal craftsmen is indeed astonishing. We should never forget, when talking of primitive art, that the word does not imply that the artists have only
22. Carved wooden lintel from a Maori chieftain's house. Loddm, British Museum, a primitive knowledge of their craft. On the contrary; many remote tribes have developed a truly amazing skill in carving, in basket work, in the preparation of leather, or even in the working of metals. If we realize with what simple tools these works are made we can only marvel at the patience and sureness of touch which these primitive craftsmen have acquired through centuries of specialization. The Maoris of New Zealand, for instance, have learned to work veritable wonders in their wood-carvings (Fig. 22).

Of course, the fact that a thing was difficult to make does not necessarily prove that it is a work of art. If it were so, the men who make models of sailing ships in glass bulbs would rank among the greatest artists. But this proof of tribal skill should warn us against the belief that their work looks odd because they cannot do any better. It is not their standard of craftsmanship which is different from ours, but their ideas.

It is important to realize this from the outset, because the whole story of art is not a story of progress in technical proficiency, but a story of changing ideas and requirements. There is increasing evidence that under certain conditions tribal artists can produce work which is just as correct in the rendering of nature as the most skilful work by a Western master. A number of bronze heads were discovered a few decades ago in Nigeria which are the most convincing likenesses of Negroes that can be imagined (Fig. 23). They seem to be many centuries old, and there is no evidence to show that the native artists learned their skill from anyone outside.

What, then, can be the reason for so much of tribal art looking utterly remote? Once more we should return to ourselves and the experiments we can all perform. Let us take a piece of paper or ink-blotter and scrawl on it any doodle of a face. Just a circle for the head, a stroke for the nose, another for the mouth. Then look at the eyeless doodle. Does it look unbearably sad? The poor creature cannot see. We feel we must 'give it eyes' — and what a relief it is when we make the two dots and at last it can look at us! To us all this is a joke, but to the native it is not. A wooden pole to which he has given a simple face looks to him totally transformed. He takes the impression it makes as a token of its magic power. There is no need to make it any more lifelike provided it has eyes to see. Fig. 24 shows the figure of a Polynesian 'God of War' called Oro. The Polynesians are excellent carvers, but they obviously did not find it essential to make this a correct representation of a man. All we see

24. Right: Oro, God of War, from Tahiti. Lined covered with si"allet. London, British Museum. Is a piece of wood covered with woven fibre. Only its eyes and arms are roughly shown by this fibre braid, but once we notice them, this is enough to give the pole a look of uncanny power. We are not quite in the realm of art, but our doodle experiment may teach us something more. Let us vary the shape of our scribbled face in all possible ways. Let us
25. Ritual mask from Alaska representing a man-eating mountain demon with blood-stained face.


London, British Museum, change the shape of the eyes from dots to crosses or any other form which has not the remotest resemblance to real eyes. Let us make the nose a circle and the mouth a scroll. It will hardly matter, as long as their relative position remains roughly the same. Now to the native artist this discovery probably meant much. For it taught him to build up his figures or faces out of those forms which he liked best and which were most suited to his particular craft. The result might not be very lifelike, but it would retain a certain unity and harmony of pattern which is just what our first doodle probably lacked. Fig. 26 shows a mask from New Guinea. It may not be a thing of beauty, but it is not meant to be—it is intended for a ceremony in which the young men of the village dress up as ghosts and frighten the women and children. But, however fantastic or repulsive this 'ghost' may look to us, there is something satisfying in the way the artist has built up his face out of geometrical shapes.

In some parts of the world primitive artists have developed elaborate systems to represent the various figures and totems of their myths in such ornamental fashion. Among the Red Indians of North America, for instance, artists combine a very acute observation of natural forms with...
this disregard for what we call the real appearance of things. As humans, they know the true shape of the eagle's beak, or the beaver's ears, much better than any of us. But they regard one such feature as quite sufficient. A mask with an eagle's beak is just an eagle. Fig. 27 is a model of a chief's house among the Haida tribe of Red Indians with three so-called totem poles in front of it. We may see only a jumble of ugly masks, but to the native this pole illustrates an old legend of his tribe. The legend itself may strike us as equally as odd and incoherent as its representation, but we ought no longer to feel surprised that native ideas differ from ours.

Once there was a young man in the town of Gwais who used to laze about on his bed the whole day till his mother-in-law remarked on it; he felt ashamed, went away and decided to slay a monster which lived in a lake and fed on humans and whales. With the help of a fairy bird he made a trap of a tree trunk and dangled two children over it as bait. The monster was caught, the young man dressed in its skin and caught fishes, which he regularly left on his critical mother-in-law's doorstep. She was so flattered at these unexpected offerings that she thought of herself as a powerful witch. When the young man undeceived her at last, she felt so ashamed that she died.

All the participants in this story are represented on the central pole. The mask below the entrance is one of the whales the monster used to eat. The big mask above the entrance is the monster; on top of it there is a human (arm of the unfortunate mother-in-law). The mask with the beak over her is the bird who helped the hero, he himself is seen further up dressed in the monster's skin, with fishes he has caught. The human figures on the end are the children the hero used as bait.

I wish to regard such a work as the product of an odd whim, but to those who made such things this was a solemn undertaking. It took years to cut these huge poles with the primitive tools at the disposal of the natives, and sometimes the whole male population of the village helped in the task. It was to mark and honour the house of a powerful chieftain. Without explanation we could never understand the meaning of such carvings, on which so much love and labour were spent. It is frequently so with works of primitive art. A mask such as Fig. 25 may strike us as witty, but in meaning is anything but funny. It represents a man-eating mountain demon with a blood-stained face. But though we may fail to understand it, we can appreciate the thoroughness with which the shapes of nature are transformed into a consistent pattern. There are many great works of this kind dating from the strange beginnings of art whose exact explanation is probably lost for ever but which we can still admire. All that remains to us of the great civilizations of ancient America is their 'art'. I have put the word in quotation marks not because these mysterious buildings and images lack beauty - some of them are quite
fascinating—but because we should not approach them with the idea that they were made for the sake of pleasure or 'decoration'. The terrifying carving of a death bead from an altar of the ruins of Copan in present Honduras (Fig. 28) reminds us of the gruesome human sacrifices which were demanded by the religions of these peoples. However little may be known about the exact meaning of such carvings, the thrilling efforts of the scholars who have discovered these works and have tried to get at their secrets have taught us enough to compare them with other works of primitive cultures.

Of course, these people were not primitive in the usual sense of the word. When the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors of the sixteenth century arrived, the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru ruled over mighty empires. We also know that in earlier centuries the Mayas of Central America had built big cities and developed a system of writing and of calculating calendars which is anything but primitive. Like the Negroes of Nigeria, the pre-Columbian Americans were perfectly capable of representing the human face in a lifelike manner. The ancient Peruvians liked to shape certain vessels in the form of human beads which are strikingly true to nature (Fig. 30). Most works of these civilizations look remote and unnatural to us, the reason lies in the ideas they are meant to convey.

Fig. 29 represents a statue from Mexico which is believed to date from the Aztec period, the last before the conquest. Scholars think that it represents the rain-god, whose name was Tlaloc. In these tropical zones...
rain is often a question of life or death for the people; for without rain
their crops may fail and they may havc to starve. No wonder that the
god of rains and thunderstorms assumed in their minds the shape of a
terrifyingly powcrful demon. Thc
lightning in the sky appeared to their
imagination like a big serpent, and many American peoples therefore con-
ssidered the rattlesnake be a sacred and mighty being. If we look more
closely at the figure of Tlaloc we
sec, in fact, that his mouth is formed
of two heads of ranlcsnakes facing each other, with their
big, poisonous
fangs protruding from their jaws, and that his nose, too, seems to be
formed of the twisted bodies of the snakes. Perhaps even his eyes
might be seen as coiled serpems. We see how far the idea of ‘building
up’ a face out of given forms can lead away from our ideas of lifelike
sculpture.

We also get an inkling of the reason s which may sometimes
have led to this
method. It
certainly
fining to form the image of the
rain-god out of the body of the sacred snakes which embodied the power
of lightning. If we try
to
enter into the mentality which created these
uncanny idols we may begin
to
understand how image-making in these
early civilizations was not only connected with magic and religion but
was also the
first
form of writing. The sacred serpent
in
ancient Mexican
art
was not only the picture of a rattlesnake but could also develop into
a sign for lightning, and so into a character by which a thunderstorm
could be commemorated or, perhaps, conjured up. We know very l.ittle
about these mysteriou s origins, but if we want to understand the story
of arl we do well to remember, once in a while, that
pictures
and letters
arc really blood-relations.

Australian
native, drawing a totemic opossum
pattern on a rock.
This is a reproduction of the first 35 pages, including the introduction and first chapter, of E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*. All text has been removed.
Some opinions

THE STORY OF ART

'Dr Gombrich's learning, though very perceptible to any student of the subject, is worn lightly, but he has something new to say on almost every subject. He can illuminate with a few words the whole atmosphere of a period. This is a book which may well affect the thought of a generation.'

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