

TEACHING ART

BY ROGER FRY

THE words sound wrong, somehow, like 'baking ices,' 'polishing mud,' or 'sliced lemonade'; one has a suspicion that it is a fabulous monster. But for everyone who wants to learn there is a large number who want to be taught or want their children taught, and so there arises the profession of the 'Art teacher' and institutions like the Royal College of Art, which for many decades has absorbed considerable amounts of public money, and has produced, not artists, but — it breeds true to type — only more 'Art teachers.' And apparently the more 'Art teachers,' the less art. And the less art the more clamor for getting Art taught, and again more 'Art teachers.'

What has been overlooked is the fact that Art cannot, properly speaking, be taught at all. One can teach conventions like the conventions of language; one can teach facts like the dates of historical events or the results of scientific experiment; one cannot teach a thing which does not exist. And the whole essence of Art being the discovery by the would-be artist of something that never has existed before in the whole history of the world, this unknown quantity cannot possibly be handed over to him by any teacher, however learned and sympathetic. This unknown thing is the reaction of the individual with all his emotional and sensual idiosyncrasies to vision. This does not imply that Art is a purely subjective affair, that it is bound to be personal. On the contrary, the best critics have almost always agreed that the greatest art is singularly objective and impersonal. But none the less the odd thing about Art is that this objective reality can only be attained by the artist exploring

completely his own sensibility. What the artist does is to contribute to the general fund the record of that aspect of reality which is discernible from the particular angle of his own spiritual situation.

Everyone is potentially an artist, since everyone has a unique spiritual experience. This is too Christian a doctrine to be accepted: we are still too much dominated by moral concepts of life. We think of life in terms of merit and reward of industry, discipline, achievement. Art is, therefore, represented as a very difficult accomplishment (which is true enough, but for quite a different reason), a kind of conjuring trick or acrobatic feat needing a strict teacher, the most persistent practice, and the closest adherence to rules. Our praise of the acrobat is our reward for the moral qualities he has displayed in overcoming difficulties by industry, perseverance, and obedience. The schoolmaster is naturally enough anxious about morals, and he always hopes to combine moral training with the subjects which he teaches in class. He frequently teaches Latin and Greek in such a way that the boys never will be able to read the classics, but will, it is hoped, have received much moral gymnastic exercise in passing along this intellectual and æsthetic blind alley.

And so art, too, though a subject looked askance at by our upper-class schools as effeminate, can still be taught in such a way as to become amenable to moral praise and blame awarded through examination.

It is, indeed, very difficult to be an artist — much more so than the schoolmasters and men of good will who incite us to industry and application have any idea of. It is very difficult for a modern civilized man, because it is so difficult for him to be himself, to retain

under the immense compulsion of his surroundings the conviction of the value and importance of his own personal reaction. It is not difficult for savages and children to be artists, but it is difficult for the grown-up civilized person to be one. The whole process of education is in fact antagonistic to this personal reaction. Education consists, indeed, in extending the individual experience by communicating the accumulated stores of human experience. In face of the wealth and richness of this second-hand experience, the individual tends to lose sight of his own immediate contacts, so that it would be almost true to say that by maturity the average civilized man has replaced most of his sensations by opinions.

This process is obviously desirable in itself, and, indeed, necessary to prepare the individual for the complex and highly organized relations of civilized life. The question is whether there might not go on parallel with this another kind of education, the object of which would be the exploration and realization of the individual powers of reaction to experience. I know too little of education in general to know how far this idea is already at work modifying the methods in use, but for the question of Art teaching it is vital and fundamental.

Could an Art teacher not *teach* anything at all, but educate the native powers of perception and visualization of his pupils merely by exciting and fixing their attention? The question was answered for me some years ago when I first came across the drawings done by the Dudley High School girls under the tuition of Miss Marion Richardson. I say 'under the tuition' by mere conventional habit. 'Intuition' would be nearer the mark, because Miss Richardson, being a peculiarly honest, hard-headed, and skep-

tical young woman, reflected, when she found herself appointed Art teacher to a large school, that she did n't know what Art was, and had certainly nothing that she could confidently hand over to her pupils as such. She therefore set to work to interest them in their own personal vision, especially the mental vision which occurs with the eyes shut, without giving them any hints as to what that vision should be. In this way she has encouraged in her pupils the most extraordinary acuteness and definiteness of mental imagery, so that a poem read to them or a description given sets up in their minds such vivid images that they can draw and color them with an ease and sureness of hand and a logical use of their material that go far beyond the skill acquired by laborious practice in the ordinary way.

That the children get by this process an intense interest in Art and poetical imagery is surely in itself a satisfactory result, and one that can hardly be claimed for the orthodox methods of teaching. But I think what would surprise the schoolmaster most would be that, so far from Miss Richardson's complete abandonment of all ideas of discipline producing careless or casual work, every drawing that I have seen shows a passionate application, and often a research for new technical possibilities, such as could never be got out of the best pupil from a sense of duty. And when one reflects that most of these drawings are done in spare hours out of school, one cannot deny the efficacy of the method for the self-discipline of hard work. The fact is that the work the artist sets himself demands of him a much more concentrated effort than any that can be got out of a pupil by moral stimulus.

It is evident to any who have studied children's drawings that the majority of them are more or less artists until

they begin to be taught Art. It is also true that most savages are artists. But both children and savages are so easily impressed by the superior powers of civilized grown-ups that they can, with the greatest ease, be got to abandon their own personal reactions in favor of some accepted conventions. So that although they are artists they are weak and imperfect artists. The wider outlook and deeper self-consciousness which education gives to the civilized provide them at once with a richer spiritual material to draw upon and a firmer hold upon any direct experience which they may succeed in retaining. So that though it is, as I said, much more difficult for the civilized man to become an artist, yet when once he is one he is more sure of his ground, less affectible and less capricious; and, finally, having had to digest a much wider experience his art is altogether richer and more complete than that of savages and children.

The problem for Art teaching, then, must be how to preserve and develop the individual reaction to vision during the time when the child is also receiving the accumulated experience of mankind, and so to enable at least a few of them to pass from being child-artists to being civilized artists. That this would be the case with only a small minority is probable, but such a training as I have suggested would provide even the average child with a possibility of understanding and enjoying Art far more keenly than the ordinarily educated man does at present.

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TO-DAY AND DISILLUSION

BY OSBERT BURDETT

ONE of the notes of our modern literature which, perhaps, can be best observed in the nineteenth century, is the note of disillusion. How far we

seem now from the jubilant crowing of Macaulay, whose 'rejoicings' a slightly later writer has compared 'to those of a prosperous shopman over the increase of his business.' The same critic went on to say that recent advances of science were 'mainly mighty means for petty ends,' an observation which, however just, is not one that Macaulay would have thought of. The note of disillusion is struck in different keys and for different reasons by Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Swinburne; but though it may be heard, of course, in previous poets, too much, indeed, having been made of Shakespeare's personal 'sadness,' yet this disillusion is not exactly a personal thing. It is the absence of a positive quality rather than a sense of personal loss, and in this sense nineteenth century literature is dominated by it. Disillusion, indeed, is symptomatic of the modern mind, of which Shakespeare is the first example. This modern mind dates roughly from the Council of Trent, because that Council was the last attempt to order life upon a general theory. Since that time, as Shakespeare's works show, men have been occupied not with a theory of life but with its fragments, not with man (and a theory of virtue) but with one another, so that people have opinions not ideas, and for the most part are unaware of the premises which their opinions imply, and how these opinions react upon, or (it may be) contradict, one another. It is this absence of a general theory of life which lies at the root of modern disillusion. It is this which makes us unable to see the wood for the trees, and leads us in the end to see in thought itself an intellectual malady. Without a general theory we are as one who has lost his way in a wood, fatigued, not knowing which way to turn, and without hope of discovering our true direction. The