

Reviews and Re-Estimations :

The Art History of T. J. Clark¹

Ray Watkinson

The period and generation which gave us Courbet and Baudelaire in France, and in Britain, Ford Madox Brown, George Eliot and Ruskin—gave us also the beginnings of scientific social research and the notion of history as embracing the whole of society from the bottom up, labourer as well as Emperor, Samuel Crompton at his mule as well as Cortes upon his peak in Darien; above all, the thoughts of Marx and Engels.

And after Macaulay had created Whig history for the new-fangled men, another historian, John Richard Green, High Anglican priest of Hoxton and Stepney, began to write history not only of but for the common people. He was, as Macaulay was not, deeply critical of his age, and was one of the few people in this country to recognise, at the very moment of the events, the full meaning of the Paris Commune, and to express himself clearly and absolutely on the side of the Communards.

"Besides my book," he wrote from Florence to his fellow historian Freeman, in 1872, "I am doing little save Florentine reading, for the most part about painters and sculptors whom I want to weave into my notion of certain periods of Florentine history. For whatever you may make of England, it is absolutely madness to try and dissociate the social and aesthetic from the political here." It is in Green's spirit that the two books, *Image of the People*, and *The Absolute Bourgeois*, self-contained but mutually supporting are written. Art historical studies of a rare, but not absolutely new kind, their original and penetrating examination of the new painting emerging in Paris between 1848 and 1851, will have a radical effect on any subsequent studies in the field, and not in studies of the nineteenth century, nor art history, alone: they are models of what art history should be.

Art History

The history of art has too often been abstracted, taken on an imagined plane of absolute scholarly elevation which removes it from the realities of human life not only as it flows around us in our living present, but from the realities of the life which created it in the past which is the source of historical study. This is in no area more true than

in that of visual and plastic works; wordless, they are at the mercy of the unscrupulous and insensitive in ways that documentary sources are not: ambiguous in the essence of their making, they lend themselves to misconception and falsification: displayed in galleries, they occupy situations so totally different from those for which they were conceived, and above all so far removed from any ostensible use, that it is all too easy for us to be deceived about them.

Art history—in this narrow sense of the visual arts—has undergone many changes since the days of such scholars as von Rumohr and his painter contemporary Passavant: and the German scholarship of the nineteenth century which they heralded did more than any other factor to lift the study of art from dilettante connoisseurship to a more scientific and objective state. Waagen, Kugler, Burckhardt and others followed: but artist-scholars and historians in this country too played a major part in the definition of this new and important field: Eastlake and his wife, Elizabeth Rigby; Anna Jameson (daughter of an Irish painter who was the friend both of Wolfe Tone and Thomas Bewick), Crowe and Cavalcaselle; Lord Lindsay, Stirling on Spanish painting, George Edmund Street, the master of William Morris, on Spanish Gothic, all produced books which remain authoritative, indispensable sources even under the correction of modern research. Above all they began to offer an effective alternative to the taste-ridden accounts of the lives of the artists, the inquiries into the sublime and the beautiful, previously available. But they produced also a disease of their own. The microscopic examination of documentation, without the least response to the actual work of art or the least acknowledgement of the social order behind it, is a process which may turn up invaluable facts for the art historian—and not him alone—but which is neither the study of history nor the study of art. And alongside of this, in the present century, we have had more than enough over-reaction to it

¹ T. J. Clark — *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Thames and Hudson, £4.50.

T. J. Clark — *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851*, Thames and Hudson £4.50.

in the lofty connoisseurship of the Berensons, the hyper-subjectivism of the Reads, as well as much merely mechanical so-called Marxist criticism.

In so far as the minutely researched archive-combing has provided us with method and technique, has put at our disposal a mass of detailed, authenticated and well-organised material, it has of course been invaluable; for ideas must in the end be derived from facts and the concept of the inviolability of the record is a necessary critical base, whatever insights and theoretical concepts we may bring to our art history. But this idea alone begs essential questions. *What* facts, *what* inquiries, *what* categories, are necessary to our research? Papal and ducal records, inventories of royal collections and the purchases of oil tycoons; the furnishings of great households, contacts between churchmen and craftsmen, painters and their patrons; letters and journals, writs for debt, legal reports, shop accounts and workbooks, bills and conveyances, wills and press reports—all this archive material is constantly quarried and raked over for illuminating grains of fact, for its revelation of possible patterns of relationship between people and the things we call works of art. And however often the same material may be raked over by another hand, each time this is done, new illumination is the reward, if not to the man with the muckrake himself, then to the onlooker: even the simplest fact is not exhausted by a single look. Historical research, historical meaning, are not only a matter of fact but of focus. Facts may be neutral, susceptible of rational and objective assessment; but we ourselves are not neutral before them, nor can the totally neutral stance elicit more than a fraction of available truth.

Connections of Art and Politics

Clark's two books, one dealing particularly with Gustave Courbet and Charles Baudelaire, the other more at large with art and politics of metropolitan Paris and rural France at the critical mid-century, in the *Year of Revolutions*, are admirable examples of the importance of focus not only for interpretation, but for the rudimentary production of relevant information.

Their style is energetic and lively; the author has his case to make and is committed to it: but neither enthusiasm for merit of works which he clearly admires (for he will say so and why) nor his concern to demonstrate the political content of prints, paintings, sculptures and poems, undermines or overrides the sobriety of his actual examination of identified works. Not the least merit of that examination is that, though he will elicit from the surface and forms of the work, the ways in which the artist penetrates and ex-

presses his subject—the actual business of making a physical object to convey meaning—he does not rely on the methods of connoisseurship or concentrate on the prestigious works of acknowledged masters. For this sort of examination, the banal and the anonymous, the ephemeral print and the abandoned sketch, are as valuable as the classic work which, like Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, not only were seen and made their impact at the time of making, but have since taken their place among the memorable emblems of that time both as historic witness and as works of art. Clark does indeed look at that particular painting—as how could he not?—and others like it; and out of that examination he offers the original and utterly right notion of the barricade as the special symbol of revolution in the mid-nineteenth century: but he offers no illusions about the simplicity of commitment of even the most committed either in art or revolution. Baudelaire elaborated the doctrine of 'art for art's sake'—but he fought on the barricades in 1848: Courbet, flaunting his realist doctrine of art and his socialism and in 1871 a member of the Commune, seems not to have been at Baudelaire's side.

Clark is concerned to demonstrate the complexity of the connections between art and politics; he has concerned himself in some detail with Baudelaire and Courbet, with the real nature of Courbet's socially critical, revolutionary stance, and with the character of his new, revolutionary art—the revolutionary quality of which consisted by no means only in its subject matter, its postures its defiant manners, but as much in the sources, not necessarily revolutionary, on which it drew. "We shall not understand Delacroix or Daumier or Baudelaire," Clark says, "until we put back the doubt into revolution, put back confusion and uncertainty, a sense that everything was at risk. All the signs could be read two ways."

But Clark takes others than these into account: not only the aggressive Courbet, but the conservative, rural-religious Millet; Daumier the devoted old-style republican, whose exposure of facts we take as caricatures: Ingres, survivor of the days of David and the first Napoleon: aristocratic Delacroix, and respectable Thomas Couture: he brings as witness too the anonymous makers of country woodcuts and broadsheets, the writers in the provincial press, the drawings and paintings of failed and forgotten artists, the lithographs of the Paris magazines, the stock religious paintings handed out to country parishes by the Ministry of Fine Arts.

In Terms of Painting

This sort of evidence is of the highest im-

portance, as is that of the letters and petitions of artists, the contemporary criticisms of their works, their success or failure in getting their paintings into the Salon, in making and maintaining sales. It enables us to assess the meaning which political events had for the artists and their patrons, and for those who were neither artists nor patrons; the new masses of the day, the heavily taxed and church-ridden peasants, the new-come bourgeoisie of Paris, first generation citizens of the metropolis, children (as were Courbet, Cézanne, Zola) of well-to-do provincial farmers, bankers, civil servants, lawyers: grasping peasants at one remove; kulaks, precisely, without sophistication, without taste, elbowing their way into society and if possible into political

power. What kind of political art could be attempted, how could any political art succeed—and with whom—how much could paintings, in particular, bear the full content of the times and throw up images of power and lasting validity? In asking and answering, if obliquely, these questions, which might often appear to be answered simply in terms of ideological and sociological examination, Clark never forgets that the particular art at which he is looking is that of the painter, nor to look at it in terms of how painting is actually made: this is no mere transference of literary criticism into the art gallery; it is a real examination of what the paintings have to say about the real world that made them, in terms of visual image and metaphor: a performance all too rare and much to be acclaimed.

The Expressionist Vision

James Pettifer

Of all the modernist literary and artistic movements that took place at the beginning of the century, the German Expressionist movement is probably the least known in Britain and also perhaps the most difficult to categorise. Unlike the Cubists or the Italian Futurists, it did not aspire to become a school and most of its participants would have been unaware of their designation as Expressionists. It encompassed a wide range of artistic activities, particularly in painting, poetry and drama but also affecting architecture and the cinema.

The first usage of the term "Expressionist" is much earlier than the movement itself, being defined in a lecture by Charles Rowley in Manchester in 1880 as "those who undertake to express particular emotions". Despite its vagueness, this offers a practical indication of the content of the concept, as a reaction against the phoney objectivity of the photographic naturalism and impressionism that dominated artistic activity in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Paul Raabe's book¹ offers an unprecedented opportunity to read original texts on the movement, generally in the form of recollections by participants. It can be seen from the book that the works the movement produced are not of anti-quarian interest only to art historians and literary

critics but should be seen as the source of many contemporary developments in the arts and raise a number of issues concerning the position of the artist in revolt against bourgeois society of particular interest to Marxists.

The Vision of Doom

A generation of German artists and poets saw, in and around 1910, a vision of the consequences of competing imperialisms that manifested themselves in the World War. Their view of Wilhelmitic bourgeois society was confused and, generally speaking, tinged with mysticism. But of one thing they were sure, that the existing order under the Kaiser was heading for its downfall. On the other hand, they did not have a clear idea of what was to replace it. Jacob Van Hoddiss's *Weltende* was one of the most typical poems of the early period of Expressionism:

"Dem Bürger fliegt vom spitzen Kopf der Hut,
in allen Lüften hallt es wie Geschrei.
Dachdecker stürzen ab und gehn entzwei
und an den Küsten liest man steigt die Flut."

(The bourgeois's hat leaps off his pointed head,
the air all around is echoing with shouts.
Tiles fall from the roofs, and break apart.
Along the coast (I hear) the tide's in flood.)

The confidence of the Expressionists in the downfall of bourgeois society was not shared by

¹ *The Era of German Expressionism*, edited by Paul Raabe, Calder and Boyars, £6.95.