

# COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

## ART FOR THE COMMON READER

*ART NOW*, by Herbert Read (Faber and Faber, 12/6d.).

*ART AND COUNTERFEIT*, by Margaret Bulley (Methuen).

*THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN ART*, by R. H. Wilenski (Faber and Faber).

If you trouble to talk or write about art at all, it means that you want to compare your experience in front of a picture with someone else's, and that you believe it's possible to. You believe also that one response to a picture may be more satisfying than another. This is enough, without any metaphysical implications which it may or may not have, to set the scene for the fundamental activities of education and persuasion. Both these activities consist in making it possible for someone else to see things from a new angle which you hope he will prefer to the old, and any authoritarian or propagandist measures that you may resort to in practical training and missionizing will always be more or less undesirable distortions of the simple underlying process. ('Persuasion' seems to be a useful word, if its senses of propaganda and irrational suggestion can be excluded, for the process of mutual education between people who already agree in much but who differ in the finer points of taste). The one essential for education and persuasion is the means of communicating your experiences.

But this by itself is not enough. Your experience is not a circumscribed fact to be either communicated or not; you have to communicate it in fuller and fuller detail and extension until

it makes sense to someone else. The neurotic patient who suffers a black depression at the sound of church bells can 'communicate his experience' to the extent of telling you that he is depressed. And the art critic may indicate his enthusiasm for a picture. Neither will succeed in persuasion because he will not have shown you how the picture or the sound of bells is related to what you already regard as adequate grounds for enthusiasm or depression. On the other hand you may for all sorts of reasons copy the art critic's habit of enthusiasm for the picture—his prestige, the attractive way he expresses his emotion, the chance of being in the fashion, these and endless other causes may lead you to agree and follow. 'Initiation' seems a good word for the process of getting people to become enthusiastic about, say, a picture for any causes of this sort; without, that is, showing them that the new liking is a natural and welcome outcome of the old.

If any art criticism can fairly be called initiation, Herbert Read's *Art Now* can be. What Herbert Read does in effect is to assert the value of 'modern' art and to provide fascinating theories and vocabularies with which you can rationalize your enthusiasm for it if you happen to accept his view or agree with him already. At no point throughout the book does he relate his enjoyment to any visible part of any picture. Instead we are given a haze of intellectual theory whose main effect on a docile reader will be to make him feel comfortable with a new fashion in painting without ever having to come face to face with the pictures and commit himself to a direct response.

It is best to admit at once that no one can state finally where the 'direct response' ends, at what point the theory behind painting becomes irrelevant, or how much exactly is 'visible' in a picture. It would be some help if art critics even recognized the existence of these problems. But few people will doubt that in *Art Now* the connection between the theories (whatever we may think of them) and the pictures has become altogether too tenuous. The notion of 'integral vision,' for instance, is developed in relation to Matisse, several of whose paintings are reproduced; yet not a single reference is made to any one of the reproductions, not even for the purpose of indicating where the all-important 'focal point' is located. Page 129 of the book seems unique in that it contains a reference to one of the illustrations, to two in fact. These are

reproductions of a painting by Picasso and another by Dali, and all that Herbert Read has to say of them is that they 'depend for their appeal on unconscious factors.' Other signs that the book must be regarded as initiation rather than education are the painstaking provision of an esoteric terminology and the inflation of simple ideas. The latter may be illustrated from the reference to ' . . . one of the primary functions of a work of art which is to objectify our sense of visual pleasure, simply to please the sight.' The structure of the sentence is uncertain, but apparently ' simply to please the sight ' is an alternative way of saying ' objectify our sense of visual pleasure.' Sham profundity of this kind comes out again and again, as for instance in the defence of abstract art (which anyhow needs no defence but discriminating enjoyment) by a glaringly invalid comparison between the art impulses of primitive man, in Worringer's speculative and unconvincing reconstruction of them, and the urges which Herbert Read imagines he can detect behind modern art.

An inevitable corollary of the precedence of initiation over education is the erratic fluctuation of fashion in art taste. It is this that makes possible amongst our desperate nationalist boosting of the moment the more or less hesitating return to the pre-Raphaelites. From *The Spectator* of January 19th, one learns that this return is possible because ' we ' no longer concern ourselves entirely with design but look for texture and finish as well (having apparently managed to exclude these from consideration during the previous fashion). ' We ' in fact can tolerate the pre-Raphaelites' feebleness because we never had any good reasons for disliking them—or anything else.

Genuine education and ' persuasion ' are of course to be found, and there is every reason to feel gratitude for, say, Roger Fry's *Cézanne* (1927) and R. H. Wilenski's *Modern Movement in Art* (1927), in so far as they do redirect our attention while we actually look at the pictures and do therefore offer us a new way of experiencing them. Among the devices which Wilenski makes good use of for discussion is that of pairing illustrations in order to indicate his points by means of comparisons and contrasts. The same method was employed, for a rather simpler purpose, by Margaret Bulley in *Art and Counterfeit* (1925). There can be little doubt of the enormous value of this device for communicating

a discrimination. It seems in fact to be one of the fundamental methods of education and persuasion, not only in art but in other subjects too.

But merely to draw attention, even by this method, to the pictures you are talking about is not in itself an insurance against one very serious danger which faces the educator. In training taste in art this is the danger that discrimination will rest not on a direct response to the picture but on indirect clues. Margaret Bulley has more than once quoted the crudest instance of this, that of the boy who said that whenever he saw a picture he didn't like he called it art and could then be sure of being right. The danger of course exists in much subtler forms. The slight misproportioning, the faintly wooden expression, the lack of suavity of line, and other hints of archaism in a Madonna may be enough to lead the spectator to a perfectly 'correct' preference. His choice is by inference in relation to social standards which he has accepted, and not by direct personal preference for the picture. This is a danger which will always be greater when, as in art appreciation, the educator has difficulty in finding explicit and intelligible standards. If he merely ejaculates 'harmony,' 'creative energy,' 'painted with feeling,' 'quality of rhythm' in front of some pictures and not others, the docile learner easily discriminates by *indirect* clues which is to be approved and which not. Learning to do this trains one's aesthetic sensibility just about as much as learning to distinguish between one breed of dog and another.

This is in fact an obvious weakness in Margaret Bulley's book. Secure in the conviction of the elusiveness and indefinability of the informing spirit of art she makes too little attempt to formulate her standards of judgment. In comparing photographs of the same objects her comment is ' . . . the work of the artist has a unity, a density of matter, an order, a sense of purpose, and above all a vitality.' All these terms may mean something, but what exactly they mean, and how they apply to observable features of the pictures, we are not told. The more evident difference between the painting and the photographs, the one which the uninitiated sees at once, is the sort of muddiness and blurredness of the paintings ; and so he has his first indirect clue to what are the right noises to make. Much more exact indications of the features that seem important are necessary if one's appreciation of a picture is to be

made accessible to someone else. This greater exactness is possible: Fry and Wilenski, for example, occasionally suggest that you should cover up one feature of a painting and see whether that makes certain specified differences. And still more detailed demonstration is possible and desirable.

The attempt to be more definite would have brought to the fore and challenged a weakness which runs through most of the criticism considered here: that is, the disproportionate stressing of the design or 'formal aspects' of pictures, of the unity presented by the picture at the perceptual level, apart from any conceptual significance its forms may have. Even within the limits of this aspect of art the stress has often been uneven. Following Roger Fry's preoccupation with volume and recession, Margaret Bulley makes solidity and firmness virtues in themselves, and anyone who absorbed her teaching and nothing else would almost inevitably fail to enjoy much of the best Chinese painting and any other work, Francis Towne's for instance, which relies chiefly on two-dimensional design. No one need dispute the importance of the formal aspects of art and it may be arguable that they are the most important aspects. Undoubtedly, too, the emphasis given by writers like Fry and Wilenski to three-dimensional design enriches one's liking for much art.

But in practice this has entailed a comparative neglect of techniques for criticizing the sentiments and attitudes conveyed by pictures; this is probably the reason for the rareness of relevant criticism of *surréaliste* painting. Wilenski has a vaguely derogatory section on 'Romantic' art in which he puts painters whose concern with emotion is too insistent to be ignored, but he attempts no critical examination of their work; of say, Renoir's sentimentality or the apparent irony of Dégas. Margaret Bulley, having left 'design' a nebulous concept, attempts to sum up all she thinks about a picture, including her judgment on the attitudes it offers, under emotive statements concerning its design and 'harmony.' In comparing Millais' 'Christ in the House of His Parents' with a Pietà she says: 'Emotional intensity is expressed in both pictures, but in [the Millais] the emotion is limited to the occasion described, while in [the Pietà] it takes on a universal character. Grief and pain are lost in an underlying and transfiguring harmony, order, and significance.' For any except the most suggestible hearers, or

those who already agree, this is a most ineffectual way of contrasting the weak pathos of the one with the tragedy of the other. But the features which make for these qualities could without any doubt be indicated. They would not, however, be limited to the formal aspects of the picture.

Before there can be adequate discussion of questions of this kind there must be a much closer definition of design and a much closer study of the relation between the formal aspects of art and the emotions conveyed. It is important to consider, for instance, how far and in what way a design can be sentimental when it is not representational. Though it almost certainly may be, still it seems essential to recognize that a picture may give or withhold two distinguishable kinds of satisfaction: that which comes from the experience of integrated unity in sufficiently complex perceptual presentations, and that coming from the provision of an adequate attitude to an interesting situation which has conceptual significance. Or, more simply and perhaps more accurately, from design and from the expression of attitudes and feelings towards something other than the design. But the problems raised here and the terms needed for discussing them demand a much more careful examination than they seem so far to have had.

The question of terminology goes deep. For education and persuasion it is essential to begin from the spectator's genuine interest and likings, whether he likes naturalistic representation, 'pastel shades,' or anything else. If you can then demonstrate some other way of looking at a particular picture, and if that way pleases him more than the old, a beginning at education has been made. If on the other hand you state as a general principle, emotionally or authoritatively, that what he now likes is 'not art' and that he should look for something else, then you have merely begun initiation. What seems to be most needed in art criticism is detailed discussion of particular pictures from as many points of view as possible. But before detailed discussion is profitable a few intelligibly defined terms are necessary. The point may be illustrated from *Art Now*, where Herbert Read quotes a passage by Roger Fry: 'What happens to us when we are thrilled by the beauty of Rembrandt's drawing is that the peculiar rhythms of his lines transmit to us, not only the likeness of a sow, but also Rembrandt's imaginative excitement as he apprehended certain

relations of form in what he contemplated, and that excitement and exaltation depended upon his peculiarly intense emotional reaction to life, an emotion expressed in his case through his specific sense of visible form.' Herbert Read has no difficulty in showing that with a few verbal changes the same argument will justify the kind of painter Roger Fry was condemning. What he ignores, however, is the fact that the same 'argument' could just as plausibly be brought forward for a magazine cover—for any picture whatever. By means of the same verbal formula he and Roger Fry are merely ejaculating antithetic opinions ; neither has taken one step towards telling the other what in the pictures his enjoyment springs from.

J. M. HARDING and D. W. HARDING.

## MUSIC AND THE COMMUNITY

*MUSIC AND THE COMMUNITY, The Cambridgeshire Report on the Teaching of Music (Cambridge University Press, 3/6d.).*

Music is probably the art that can record the most definite advance in England during the last thirty years and particularly since the war. The minority that concerns itself with culture has so little encouragement at the moment that I shall not apologise for repeating the rather trite comparison between the position to-day and the position at the end of the last century : it suggests many things that are not the sole care of musicians but are of interest to all artists. At the turn of the century music was still very far from the centre of English culture ; the majority of educated people were not ashamed to admit ignorance of it, and it was still tolerated rather as an innocent diversion for young ladies than as a valuable mode of experience. The truth is that the period of bourgeois rule had only a very feeble hold on either the popular or the educated traditions that had sustained English life before the Industrial Revolution, and music was suffering