

exquisite command of the resources of the instruments' tonal colour. Never was 'loveliness of sound' more completely inseparable from mastery of a technical problem, itself implying mastery of experience, for Brahms's autumnal gentleness and magnificent melancholy in these final works are also aspects of his position in the history of the 'technique' of composition.

Performance and recording of this noble work are admirable.

W.H.M.

MR. NEWTON AND THE CONQUEST OF APPEARANCES

EUROPEAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, by *Eric Newton*
(*Pelican Books*, 6d.).

Mr. Newton announces his aim in the following terms, 'It is not the ingredients but the flavour of paintings and carvings I have tried to communicate . . . My hope in writing this book is not so much to set forth the facts of the story of art as to communicate my enthusiasms about it.' Although one might dispute the wisdom of this aim, in that surely what is most wanted from the Pelicans is not another handbook to the galleries, but some attempt to weave the present welter of schools and movements into an intelligible design?—nonetheless it would be as well to examine Mr. Newton's account in the light of his own intentions.

At the end of the book is a table of artists each of which is represented by a line which varies in width according to Mr. Newton's estimate of their 'importance.' He attempts to be as impartial as possible in determining the correct width of these lines, for instance although he does not much enjoy Rembrandt himself, he nonetheless honours him with the thickest line. 'By the examiner's standards' he says, 'Rembrandt has no rival. But yet how I wish he could give me more pleasure!' Or again of Michelangelo 'Such men do not occur often. One's admiration of them is always mingled with a certain sense of discomfort.' But what are the examiner's standards? The examiner, he says, is one who 'coldly accords marks of excellence . . . If a list of qualities essential to the make-up of every painter were to be drawn up . . . Rembrandt would head the list with an accumulation of marks which no other painter could touch.' The fact that Mr. Newton can

seriously suppose that such a method of assessing the value of an artist's work could possibly produce any results of importance, is indeed staggering in a critic apparently so widely read and admired. But what must appear as still more revealing is that it is precisely this method which he adopts in dealing with the vast majority of the other great painters. Thus he says of Raphael 'whichever of his qualities one selects as typical of him, one can always think of some other Florentine painter who possessed the same qualities to a greater degree. His sweetness? But Perugino, his master, was even sweeter. His power to organize a big composition? But Leonardo had even higher powers of organization. His sense of balance? But it was no greater than Piero's. His power to invent rhetorical gesture? But there he was a weak imitator of Michelangelo.' Are we to assume then that when confronted with Raphael Mr. Newton fails, as with Rembrandt, to light up in the appropriate manner or merely that he is entirely unable to resolve his feelings into words? It is impossible to tell; but presumably if he can conceive of the possibility of dissecting the work of art in this way it is only because he is fundamentally unable to feel its impact as a unified experience—a stab rather than a series of pin-pricks—and that therefore, in the last resort, he is unable fully to appreciate not merely Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and Raphael, but any artist of merit.

It seems reasonable to assume that the various qualities Mr. Newton has attributed to Raphael react upon each other, and that his sweetness (whatever that may be) is modified by being in contact with his rhetorical gesture, and is therefore no longer comparable to the sweetness of Perugino. Mr. Newton suggests that Raphael was at bottom an eclectic, but for anyone who has eyes to see the distinctive feature of Raphael's art is its remarkable purity, a purity so uncompromising as to lead even to impoverishment. It is an art which reveals itself slowly: as Keats has said 'A year ago I could not understand, in the slightest degree, Raphael's cartoons—now I begin to read them a little—and how did I learn to do so? By seeing something done in quite an opposite spirit . . . canting . . . melodramatic.' But if the art of Raphael seems to lack something in fecundity it is not because it is 'a mere amalgam of elements invented by Perugino and Michelangelo,' but because he was ruthlessly overworked and rarely permitted to leave his

dungeon studio to widen the range of his experience in any way.

Which brings me to Mr. Newton's interpretation of 'the facts of the story of art' which (perhaps wisely as it now appears) he relegates to a place of secondary importance in his general scheme. The history of art, he claims, is checkered by varying attempts on the part of the artist 'to reconcile the conflicting claims of symbolism and realism.' 'The pendulum' he says 'constantly swings backwards and forwards between the two.' Thus it swung backwards, *i.e.*, towards the symbolic, in the Byzantine era 'until Giotto stopped it dead and started it swinging back through the cycle Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, Monet, Cézanne. Draw a line through those seven names and you get a curve which is the last full swing of the pendulum . . . Those six centuries mark the gradual solution of one problem after another in the conquest of appearances . . . The pendulum has now begun to swing back again.' In other words he regards the creative impulse which moulds the history of post-Giotto art as a desire for a more complete naturalism. He evinces a certain concern for the slowness of the progress made, but satisfies himself by saying that 'it is useless for the artist to tell himself that the whole visible world in all its aspects is at his disposal. The sentry in his brain stands on guard in spite of him.' But surely if one can talk in terms of a sentry on guard, he stands not within the artist's brain but in the social organism of which he is a part? Indeed the great artist will always be able (if he so chooses) to utilize to the full any resources which society places at his disposal. If at certain times he chooses not to do so, it is only because he feels that the pressure of his experience does not, in any way, merit a widening of the means of expression. Just as the composer may well be satisfied with a solo instrument or a quartet, so at any given moment is the painter with the limited means at his disposal. The fact that the history of recent European art has been so much characterized by a gradual expansion of the painter's means, rather than the reverse as in Byzantium, can be explained by a similar expansion and in many cases disintegration of the social organism. The greater the variety and complexity of the contemporary life the more complex and comprehensive must become the means by which the artist intends to cope with it. But this is not necessarily progress or evolution, in many cases it may result in decay and loss of contact. Indeed it

it interesting to note that the process of expansion has frequently taken place away from the current centre of culture. Thus in the 16th century while Venice, then the only Italian state which retained her independence against foreign invasion and the stultifying influence of the counter-reformation, remained faithful to the *classical* tradition of Giotto and Masaccio, it was elsewhere—in the now enslaved Florence, Rome, and Spanish Naples—that the followers of Michelangelo and Caravaggio pressed on towards the establishment of a style of greater violence and dramatic intensity, and in so doing discovered the new possibilities of recession and chiaroscuro. And likewise it was France in the 17th century which remained the stronghold against the illusionism of Rubens, and England in the 18th century.

The creative impulse behind the many changes of plastic vision is, then, the desire to remain veracious to the spirit of the age. The 'solution of one problem after another in the conquest of appearances' is a mere by-product of this activity. To say as Mr. Newton does that 'both Florence and Venice had drawn their vitality from excitement at their own visual discoveries' is tantamount to placing the arts of painting and sculpture on the level of some branch of astronomy. But at the same time it would equally be fallacious to suppose that each period is a separate study in itself, and that what one age does has no connection with the activities of the next. The task of the historian-critic is to reveal not merely the nature of the social context as it touches the artist, but also the manner in which he is influenced by the various artistic traditions of the past. Thus he will supply an imperfect or blurred account of why the art of Delacroix took the form it did if he merely talks about the French Revolution and the Romantic Revival, it is necessary for him also to examine the painting of Rubens and to discover in what way Delacroix was so much influenced by it.

Professor Wolfflin, in his *Principles of Art History*, even goes so far as to contend that fundamentally all plastic expression tends to divide itself into two main stylistic categories: the *classical* which satisfies the need for regularity and symmetry and which may be represented by a circle, and the *baroque* which is actuated by a single rhythmic idea, comparable to the *idée fixe* of romantic music and literature, and which may therefore be said to follow a straight line to infinity, never satisfied with its acquisitions. The implica-

tion of this theory being that the *classical* style tends to reflect a background of social harmony and balance, as in 15th century Florence, whereas the *baroque* corresponds to a period of comparative disruption, such as was experienced in Europe during the 17th century. But this does not in any way rule out an attempt to revive any of these styles at moments when the state of society happens to be inappropriate for their general acceptance. Such attempts will, of course, prove more or less successful according to the individual temperament of the artist concerned and his ability to create a local milieu suitable to his ends. Thus Ingres succeeded only in producing a sort of parody (though eminently skilful) of the classical tradition, whereas Cézanne, for reasons which derived both from his personality and the peculiar conditions of his life, proved better fitted for a similar enterprise. The achievements of Cézanne were in every way exceptional, and the failure to realize this fact has resulted in the vacuity of so much cubist and abstract art, which has been produced in an environment wholly alien to its aspirations. Thus rather than representing the progressive elements of the age, as they imagine, the Cubists are in fact symptomatic of its most backward aspects; and far from reinstating a classical symmetry into things, they have merely evolved the artistic equivalent of the sterile order of the machine.

I have referred to Wofflin's principles because I believe that, with certain modifications, they offer an alternative method of bringing some order into the chaos of art history, from that postulated by Mr. Newton in his conception of the symbolic and naturalistic. The absurdity of which is finally established when, on reaching the 20th century, Mr. Newton finds himself obliged to suppose that 'the artist's six-century-long attempt to capture the truth of appearances . . . has come to an end' and that now the pendulum has begun to swing back again towards the symbolic. Modern art, he says, 'is the expression of the inner vision of a man who has no longer any need to bother about society.' In brief, Mr. Newton's failure to understand the art of to-day gives us an additional reason for questioning his qualifications for examining the art of the past, if indeed that matter was still in any doubt.

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