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\_The Relation of Art to Nature\_

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\_THE RELATION OF ART TO NATURE\_

\_by John W. Beatty\_

\_New York

William Edwin Rudge\_

1922

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by\_ JOHN W. BEATTY

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\_To my gentle wife this little volume

is affectionately dedicated.\_

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\_Introduction\_

\_In his very convincing and lucid treatise on the fundamental

principles of art, John W. Beatty gives us a most absorbing theme to

follow--the relation of art to nature, as expressed in their own words

by artists themselves, of different times and creeds; with, too, the

opinions of philosophers and men of letters.\_

\_Himself a well-known painter, Mr. Beatty has been for almost thirty

years the enlightened Director of Fine Arts of the Carnegie Institute,

where, alone in our whole country, are held annually International

Exhibitions of Art. Much of his life has thus been spent in intimate

association with the very best painters and sculptors of our

generation, and his and their opinions and observations are here to be

read with much pleasure and profit by every one interested in art.\_

\_Mr. Beatty is quite right when he says, “Not many able artists

have recorded their opinions.” In conversation, or on the impulse

of the moment they may often speak with great beauty and clarity of

expression, but nearly always tersely and to the point. On the other

hand, the man of letters is more given to analysis and finds more

words, and more beautiful ones, to express his meaning.\_

\_Analysis is perhaps a dangerous thing for the craftsman to toy with.

He must approach nature directly and simply, with concentration that is

absolute. He dissects only that particular fragment of nature which is

before him, and that unconsciously. The precious sensation of closeness

to nature is so fleeting and so fickle, so often not there at all, and

so frightened, that it is easily scared away by the cold voice of the

man with a rule to follow. The ever changing aspect of nature, be it

man or landscape, makes the first impression quickly recorded in the

thumb-box sketch, or with a dozen lines on the back of an envelope, an

invaluable document. Again and again in the painting of a picture we

refer with respect to this first strong impression of nature.\_

\_The words\_ character \_and\_ beauty \_are many times repeated in this

book. Both terms are definite and yet how elastic! Rembrandt is the

preëminent example of the complex meaning of the word beauty; many of

his models he found in the Ghetto and among his friends and neighbors,

or, for lack of a model, he painted himself. Surely he has proved to us

that only that which has character is truly beautiful; and we must also

feel in the presence of Rembrandt’s works, his absolute fidelity to

truth.\_

\_On a certain occasion I was in Rodin’s studio when reference was made

to some harsh criticism of one of his nudes. After listening with

impatience Rodin shrugged his shoulders and said: “Why find fault with

me? they should find fault with nature!”\_

\_And so we return to Mr. Beatty’s contention that the artist has

succeeded when he has imitated the truth and beauty of nature. The word

imitation might seem to limit the artist’s personal vision, which must

be his very own. How very different this personal vision can be came

vividly before me when I visited the Prado in Madrid. In one room are

seen the immortal works of Velasquez, among which are the portraits of

Philip IV and his consort; and in an adjoining room are portraits of

this same Philip and his queen by Rubens, the Fleming, who happened

to be temporarily in Madrid on a diplomatic mission. The Spaniard

saw his sovereigns in all their splendor, but with a solemn dignity,

dark haired and sallow complexioned. While the man from Antwerp saw

the forms more round and amiable, the hair and flesh more blond and

colourful, and unconsciously injected the blood of the Netherlands into

the veins of his Spanish sitters.\_

\_Notwithstanding this personal expression, the predilection of a Rubens

for the more florid colours, of a Velasquez for the more subdued, sober

notes found in nature, it remains true that the end sought by both is

the representation of character as it exists in nature.\_

GARI MELCHERS.

\_Belmont,

Falmouth, Virginia,

January 5, 1922.\_

\* \* \* \* \*

“\_The realities of Nature surpass our most ambitious dreams.\_”

AUGUSTE RODIN

\_Argument\_

My purpose in writing this treatise is to establish, if this be found

possible, a foundation for the belief that the art of the painter and

sculptor is imitative, not creative; that the great masterpieces of

art which have withstood the test of time rest firmly upon the supreme

expression of character and beauty as these qualities are revealed in

man and nature; that it is the mission of art to reveal and make plain

these rare and lovely qualities. The truthful representation of these

qualities constitutes a common factor which binds all great works

together, a fact that is realized in every national gallery of art.

I have chosen to base my argument not upon theory or opinion but upon

the evidence of eminent painters and sculptors who have produced great

works of art.

Not many able artists have recorded their opinions touching the

philosophy of art. On the other hand, writers in abundance have

undertaken to define art. A few early and some modern philosophers

have given profound thought to the subject and bequeathed to us their

opinions. Painters and sculptors, with few exceptions, however, have

confined their efforts to searching for, and revealing by their art,

beauty and character. More is the pity, because opinion supported by

achievement is always more valuable than judgment which rests solely

upon theory or observation.

The great masters who have directed brush and chisel in the performance

of their work must have known what their purpose was; they certainly

knew better than any one else, and they undoubtedly realized how far

they had succeeded, or how far they had fallen short of securing the

qualities which they had discovered and which they had undertaken to

reveal. The evidence of these men is invaluable. Its importance bears

an exact relation to their success in producing great and enduring

works. This is true in every other field of human endeavor and it is

equally true in the field of art. The opinion of the great astronomer

with reference to astronomy is more valuable than that of the layman;

the opinion of the great painter than that of the amateur. The man who

knows any science so perfectly that he can practice it successfully,

the artist who knows his art and nature so well that he can produce

great works of art, these have earned the right to express their

opinions. I think this must be accepted as a fundamental truth. It is

therefore to the painter and sculptor that I turn for judgment. I have

been aided in this inquiry by knowledge of the opinions of many of the

able painters and sculptors of our own time. Intimate discussion has

stimulated further inquiry, and a conviction which was originally based

upon familiarity with the methods and purpose of the painter has been

confirmed.

\_The Artist and His Purpose\_

During all the great periods of art able men have striven earnestly

to attain a knowledge of character and beauty and to achieve their

truthful representation. Even when the purpose of the artist has been

to express some specific idea or to record some incident or historical

event, the work has lived, not because of the idea conveyed or the

interest which attaches to the subject, but because it has portrayed

character in a powerful manner, or because it has expressed the

qualities of beauty which are inherent in nature. Upon these qualities,

as they have been understood and translated by the artist, has depended

the life of every great painting and work of sculpture. I believe this

to be a fundamental and far reaching truth, accepted almost universally

by painters and sculptors. This, I know, is equivalent to saying that

the chief value of a work of art lies in its power to give aesthetic

pleasure.

These observations may suggest a question as to the relative

importance of a work of art which tells a story or records historical

events as compared with one which appeals solely to the aesthetic

sense or the love of beauty. Human language, it would seem to me, is

the logical method for conveying thought from one mind to another and

offers direct, untrammelled mental contact without the intervention

of form or design of any kind, while the representation of beauty for

beauty’s sake alone is the more direct and effective way of creating

and stimulating in the human heart a love of nature and art.

This, however, is not the question considered in this work. The

question raised is simply this: Has the artist, in representing the

evanescent effects of nature, the manifold beauties and harmonies with

which we are surrounded in this world, or predominant character as

expressed by man, exceeded nature either by virtue of his exceptional

power or as a result of any personal quality which he may impart to the

work?

It is also manifestly true that the greatness of a work of art must

depend upon the mental power of the artist, that power which enables

him to apprehend or discover the essential qualities existing in

nature. It is equally true that every artist, even though wholly

absorbed in the effort to reveal the truth and beauty which exist

in nature, expresses in some degree his own personality. He does

this inevitably, first, by the type of subject he chooses to study

and represent, and, second, but in a less important degree, by the

technical manner employed. This is, of course, well understood by

every one. It is not for a moment disputed. But beyond and above this

personal expression stands, as the chief and highest purpose of the

artist, the representation of truth and character as these do actually

exist.

While the painter has used his art to record history, to tell stories,

and to express emotions and convictions, his chief mission is to

extract from nature her many beautiful forms and harmonies and to

present these in pleasing fashion. In this way the artisan, drawing

upon the great multitude of beautiful forms and colours exhibited

by nature and so lavishly spread everywhere in the animal and plant

creations, cunningly fashions patterns and combinations, weaving these

into rugs and adapting them to the many beautiful objects with which we

are familiar.

Notwithstanding these accepted facts, I am convinced that the great

works of the painter and sculptor, those of supreme importance, rest

not upon any of these devices or expressions of art, but upon the

faithful, unerring and masterly representation of character and beauty

as these do actually exist. The masterpieces of art as they live today

in the national art galleries of the world establish this fact. They

seem to possess a common factor without regard to subject or period

which unites in a common family the great paintings of the entire

history of art. This factor I believe to be the quality of truth.

These great works owe their existence to the fact that they faithfully

represent some great outstanding type, or because they truthfully

reveal the characteristic and essential beauty of nature expressed in

one of her many moods. They are important just in proportion as their

masters have understood these qualities and recorded their impressions

on canvas and in marble.

I know perfectly well that the opinion here expressed is not the one

most widely accepted; it is not the popular view of art; it is not the

view expressed by many writers upon this subject.

The opinion most widely accepted is that the artist creates beauty;

that in some mysterious way, by virtue of a special gift, he does

actually evolve from within his own consciousness forms of grace and

loveliness; that however deeply the artist sinks himself in nature, art

yet remains intensely individual; that in representing nature he adds

to that which he secures from nature a personal quality which becomes

the most important part of the work. This is the theory of art accepted

very generally, but it is not supported by evidence.

The main purpose of this writing is, in fact, to establish by the

evidence of the men who are quoted that their reliance has been solely

upon nature and their success in exact proportion to their knowledge

of nature and their ability to portray her predominant qualities. Let

me repeat, however, that the ability to see and understand nature is

dependent upon mental power. The man of limited mental power will see

little; the one of great power will see much. The latter will apprehend

the subtle, elusive qualities in a way impossible to the former. This,

I know, is equivalent to saying that the great artist must bring to

his task a great mind. This assumption is quite correct. A great mind

is that power which is vaguely described as genius; it is what enables

men to accomplish great things in every field of human endeavor. The

question, therefore, is not whether the great artist possesses superior

power, but rather how important are the inevitable traces of personal

predilection or technical manner revealed in nearly all works of art as

compared with the truthful presentation of the fundamental qualities

the artist has discovered and undertaken to represent.

Let us examine this phase of the question more fully. A painting by

Corot for instance bears, first, the evidence of Corot’s choice of

subject. That which appealed to him in nature he painted. The kind

of thing he loved, the phase of nature he chose, unquestionably bore

evidence of his personal temperament or predilection. By this he

expressed his personal taste, his discriminating judgment, himself, in

fact. If the artist be a man of gentle and sensitive quality, he will

select for representation, as Corot did, a phase of nature which is in

accord with his feeling.

In the second place, a painting by Corot will exhibit in a very obvious

way the manifest impress of the artist’s technical method. In fact, the

manner by which the work is performed, that which is termed technic,

the very manner in which the artist touches the canvas, becomes a

distinguishing and individual characteristic intimately associated with

the artist and easily recognized. However, the technical treatment is

of little significance. It is in an important sense pure mannerism,

often the result of habit or early professional training. In a limited

sense it is the handwriting of the artist. This technical side of a

painting, the obvious and superficial aspect, is, I am convinced,

given by the amateur an importance out of all proportion to its value.

We must, however, deal with this personal phase of a work of art. The

question is how important is this personal expression as compared with

the more profound truth of nature. If we may accept the testimony of

the painters and sculptors who have produced enduring works of art, we

will, I think, be convinced that this quality is not important when

compared with essential truth or predominant character. The artists

whose opinions you will read seem almost without exception to attach

greater importance to the expression of the character of the person

or object represented than to the expression of personal temperament.

Indeed, they seem to be oblivious to the qualities which attract and

occupy the attention of the writer and amateur, but they are insistent

upon the paramount importance of truth.

What this all-important quality is may be further explained by a simple

illustration.

Abraham Lincoln was an outstanding type. The painter or sculptor

cannot by his art enhance either the beauty or strength of Lincoln’s

character. The utmost he can hope to do is to realize that character in

its richness and fullness of power. In everything the artist touches

in his effort to reproduce this character his taste will be displayed,

even in the treatment of details, the adjustment of draperies and

accessories, the appropriateness of gesture or movement; but all

these things, including the technic displayed, will be subordinate to

Lincoln’s character. The great, outstanding, dominant character of

Abraham Lincoln exists as a masterpiece of nature far outranking in

perfection any description or portraiture. The man who best reads or

comprehends this character and who most faithfully represents it, will

produce the greatest work of art. In the effort to do this, the painter

or sculptor will undoubtedly leave traces of his own individuality or

temperament, but these qualities must not be confused with the dominant

character of a Lincoln or given undue importance. The highest purpose

of the artist is to faithfully represent character.

\_Ancient Conceptions of Art\_

Closely allied to the thought that the painter creates beauty is the

ancient tradition that the artist is inspired to produce works of art.

This conviction had its origin very early in the history of art. In the

time of Praxiteles this belief was entertained by many; it was thought,

for instance, that in the production of the Aphrodite of Knidos the

sculptor was inspired by the goddess herself.

This conception of art doubtless grew out of the fact that the

early art of the Egyptians and Greeks was largely devoted to the

representation of deities and to the erection of temples which

should be their shrines. This association of art with the gods and

their temples doubtless contributed to the belief that the artist

was inspired or that he possessed a superior power or the gift of

inspiration.

[SN: \_Hegel\_]

Closely allied with this thought was the conception expressed by Hegel

with reference to a distinction between the external and material

forms of art and the spirit which he suggests permeates the work and

of which it is a manifestation. Hegel, although accepting the theory

that “art has the vocation of revealing the truth in the form of

sensuous artistic shape,” speaks of the union of the material with the

spiritual in a manner, which although quite true in abstract reasoning,

contributes to this impression. Discussing Architecture as a Fine

Art, he wrote: “The material of architecture is matter itself in its

immediate externality as a heavy mass subject to mechanical laws, and

its forms remain the forms of inorganic nature, but are merely arranged

and ordered in accordance with the abstract rules of the understanding,

the rules of symmetry. But in such material and in such forms the ideal

as concrete spirituality cannot be realized; the reality which is

represented in them remains, therefore, alien to the spiritual idea, as

something external which it has not penetrated or with which it has but

a remote and abstract relation.... Into this temple now enters the God

himself. The lightning-flash of individuality strikes the inert mass,

permeates it, and a form no longer merely symmetrical, but infinite and

spiritual, concentrates and molds its adequate bodily shape.” No one

today in the presence of a superb relic of architecture asks whether or

not it is the abiding place of a spirit. It is accepted as expressing

the spirit of beauty and is enjoyed for this alone.

Hegel’s conception of a work of art, frequently expressed in his

philosophy, was that the content or idea is the important thing. This

conception conformed to early art because painting and sculpture were

employed primarily to express ideas.

With the development of the Landscape School of Art and the enjoyment

of art on the purely aesthetic side, modern thought has materially

changed. Gradually our appreciation of the beautiful for its own sake

has developed. The influence of this movement has reacted upon all

phases of art expression, and even those works which express ideas in

the sense of subject matter have come to be judged upon the basis of

aesthetic beauty, rather than with reference to the idea or content as

thus defined.

Therefore what Hegel says applies to the early conception of art rather

than to that of the present time.

[SN: \_Socrates\_]

Another conception of art suggests the union of the beautiful with

the good. The philosophy of Socrates teaches this. He regarded the

beautiful as coincident with the good, and both of them as resolvable

into the useful. He does not seem to have attached importance to

the immediate gratification which a beautiful object affords to

perception and contemplation, but rather to have emphasized its power

of furthering the more necessary ends of life.

These early theories and conceptions with reference to art may in some

degree account for the prevalence of an impression, even in our own

time, that the artist is inspired or that he creates his masterpiece

as the result of some supernatural power. It has always seemed to the

inexperienced that the creation of a work of art implies an element of

mystery or represents something inexplicable. What is to the painter a

natural process becomes mysterious. Nothing existed on the blank canvas

and behold, presently, there appears a picture simulating life. Having

no knowledge of the methods employed, or of the years of patient labor

required to secure the technical ability to represent the actual truth

and spirit of natural objects, the result seems far removed from the

ordinary. Thence it is but a step to the point of view that the artist

is one “inspired.”

Although the conception of a work of art which places it above nature

is very old, I do not recall a definition made under this impression

which seems satisfactory. There is always apparent the effort to

compromise or bring together two distinct conceptions--the one

attributing to the work a quality superior to nature and the other

demanding that it be a truthful representation of nature. Defining

a work of art as something superior to nature, and at the same time

insisting that it represent nature faithfully is an inconsistency

eternally cropping out.

[SN: \_John Constable\_]

John Constable touched this subject with remarkable acumen and

expressed his conviction with precision when he said: “It appears to me

that pictures have been over-valued; held up by a blind admiration as

ideal things, and almost as standards by which nature is to be judged

rather than the reverse; and this false estimate has been sanctioned by

the extravagant epithets that have been applied to painters, as ‘the

divine,’ ‘the inspired,’ and so forth. Yet, in reality what are the

most sublime productions of the pencil but selections of some of the

forms of nature, and copies of a few of her evanescent effects; the

result, not of inspiration, but of long and patient study, under the

direction of much good sense.”

This, then, is my argument: First, that art is the expression of

supreme or predominant character and the representation of grace and

harmony as these qualities exist in nature; and, second, that the

truthful rendering of these qualities is the high mission of the

painter and sculptor.

\_Evidence of Painters and Sculptors\_

If we will now turn to the evidence bearing upon this subject, we will

discover what I have already indicated, namely, that the able artists

who have expressed opinions touching the philosophy of their art have

done so in no uncertain terms, and that the opinions which refer art

to nature as the highest source seem convincing. We will also discover

that not only do the majority of able painters agree upon what art

really is, and express their opinions with clearness and precision, but

that many of the philosophers of recent and ancient times define art in

the same forceful way.

Let us first examine opinions expressed by painters and sculptors.

[SN: \_Michelangelo\_]

Michelangelo wrote: “In my judgment that is the excellent and divine

painting which is most like and best imitates any work of immortal God,

whether a human figure, or a wild and strange animal, or a simple and

easy fish, or a bird of the air, or any other creature.... To imitate

perfectly each of these things in its species seems to me to be nothing

else but to desire to imitate the work of immortal God. And yet that

thing will be the most noble and perfect in the works of painting which

in itself reproduced the thing which is most noble and of the greatest

delicacy and knowledge.” Michelangelo thus reduces the philosophy of

art to the simple problem of selection, and the faithful and truthful

representation of the dominant, the graceful, the harmonious, and the

beautiful in nature. His statement, which so simply, even quaintly,

expresses the opinion of a great master whose works have commanded

the homage of the world during nearly four centuries, is worthy of

the most careful consideration. It reveals his reliance upon nature

without confusion of thought or pretension of any kind. There are here

no intricate definitions of art or complex theories concerning his

method of creating his masterly representations of the best he found in

nature--“the thing which is most noble!”

The universality of this profound truth and of its independence of

local conditions and circumstances is emphasized by the fact that

another great master of another race, one whose technical methods

and choice of subjects differed widely from those of Michelangelo,

expressed the same reliance upon nature. [SN: \_Albrecht Dürer\_]

Albrecht Dürer was a contemporary of Michelangelo, but he worked under

widely different conditions. It is the great fundamental quality of

truth so quaintly commended by Michelangelo that distinguishes the

works of Albrecht Dürer. Albrecht Dürer wrote: “Life in Nature proves

the truth of these things; therefore consider her diligently, guide

thyself by her, and swerve not from Nature, thinking that thou canst

find something better of thyself, for thou wilt be deceived. For Art

standeth firmly fixed in Nature, and whoso can thence rend her forth,

he only possesseth her.”

[SN: \_Leonardo da Vinci\_]

We find in Leonardo da Vinci’s notebook reference to this same

principle. He recommends application to the study of the works of

nature and advises the student to withdraw as far as possible from

the companionship of others in order that he may more earnestly

and effectively do this. His sage advice emphasizes the importance

of study. “The eye, which is called the window of the soul, is the

chief means whereby the understanding may most fully and abundantly

appreciate the infinite works of nature.... All visible things derive

their existence from nature, and from these same things is born

painting.”

[SN: \_William Hogarth\_]

Another painter who has written his opinion upon this subject is

William Hogarth, who said: “Nature is simple, plain, and true, in all

her works, and those who strictly adhere to her laws, and closely

attend to her appearances in their infinite varieties, are guarded

against any prejudiced bias from truth.”

[SN: \_Sir Joshua Reynolds\_]

Of the great painters who have touched upon the philosophy of art in

their writings, no one has written, shall I say, more fluently than

has Sir Joshua Reynolds. He may even be said to have been eloquent.

His lectures prepared for the students of the Royal Academy have

been famous for a century and a half. They have not only inspired

generations of art students with a keener interest in art, but they

are probably the most helpful utterances upon the subject given to the

world in his time or since. It seems to me, however, that, as is often

the case where great facility of expression is practiced, Reynolds

employs a term which, without clear definition, confuses the mind.

This is true where he frequently uses the term “genius.” The term is

associated in popular belief with the power to create works of art.

Although using a term which is at least subject to this interpretation,

Reynolds definitely denies to the human mind this power, asserting that

the power to create is simply the power to imitate nature. Reynolds

wrote: “I am on the contrary persuaded that by imitation only, variety,

and even originality of invention, is produced. I will go further;

even genius, at least what generally is so called, is the child of

imitation.” He further says: “The study of nature is the beginning and

the end of theory. It is in nature only we can find that beauty which

is the great object of our search; it can be found nowhere else; we can

no more form any idea of beauty superior to nature than we can form an

idea of a sixth sense, or any other excellence out of the limits of

the human mind.” Reynolds again writes: “Invention, strictly speaking,

is little more than a new combination of those images which have been

previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of

nothing: he who has laid up no materials can produce no combinations.”

[SN: \_John Constable\_]

John Constable, a contemporary of Reynolds, and to whose judgment we

have already referred, further expressed his opinion upon this subject.

A statement of principle by him seems to be conviction crystallized.

Constable, although unaccustomed to writing, even unaccustomed to

discussion, because he was a man of quiet and simple life, seems to

have thought profoundly; and when the rare occasion to express his

opinion did come he condensed within a few words a great fundamental

principle with unerring precision. His definition of the purpose

and method of the artist cannot, I think, be excelled for accuracy

or fullness of meaning. He wrote: “In art, there are two modes by

which men aim at distinction; in the one, by a careful application to

what others have accomplished, the artist imitates their works, or

selects and combines their various beauties; in the other, he seeks

excellence at its primitive source, nature. In the first, he forms a

style upon the study of pictures, and produces either imitative or

eclectic art; in the second, by a close observation of nature, he

discovers qualities existing in her which have never been portrayed

before, and thus forms a style which is original. The results of the

one mode, as they repeat that with which the eye is already familiar,

are soon recognized and estimated, while the advances of the artist

in a new path must necessarily be slow, for few are able to judge of

that which deviates from the usual course, or qualified to appreciate

original studies.” There is here no mystery or ambiguity. This is the

statement of a profound truth by a great painter who knew perfectly his

reliance upon nature. It was prompted by the conviction of a great mind

which saw only the underlying fact and abjured all trivialities and

hair-splitting theories. In his mental attitude and grasp, Constable

was like Winslow Homer, a man of few words, one given to much thought

and to firm convictions.

[SN: \_Sir Thomas Lawrence\_]

In one of his lectures at the Royal Institution of Great Britain,

Constable said: “It was said by Sir Thomas Lawrence, that ‘we can never

hope to compete with nature in the beauty and delicacy of her separate

forms or colours, our only chance lies in selection and combination.’”

[SN: \_Gilbert Stuart\_]

Gilbert Stuart expressed a like reliance upon nature when he said: “You

must copy nature, but if you leave nature for an imaginary effect, you

will lose all. Nature cannot be excused, and as your object is to copy

nature, it is the height of folly to work at anything else to produce

that copy.”

[SN: \_Corot\_]

Corot was equally assured of the importance of this principle to an

artist. He said: “Truth is the first thing in art, and the second, and

the third.”

[SN: \_Millet\_]

Let us take the opinion of another able painter, that of Millet, who

said: “Men of genius are, as it were, endowed with a divining-rod.

Some discover one thing in nature, some another, according to their

temperament.... The mission of men of genius is to reveal that portion

of nature’s riches which they have discovered, to those who would

never have suspected their existence. They interpret nature to those

who cannot understand her language.”

“I should like to do nothing which was not the result of an impression

received from the appearance of nature, either in landscape or figures.”

“I should express the type very strongly, the type being, to my mind,

the most powerful truth.”

These opinions are at once simple and comprehensive. They express the

thoughts of men who have achieved great works. Indeed, I have never

heard the able master of art say otherwise than that he has striven

with all his power, sometimes in despair, to wrest from nature the

subtle beauties of form and colour possessed by her and discovered by

those who have the power to perceive and understand these qualities.

Nature is the supreme standard, attained to only in part. We may accept

nature as the source of all beauty and harmony in art and rest assured

that the stream has never risen above its source.

The opinions here quoted do not differ materially from those expressed

by painters of our own time.

[SN: \_Whistler\_]

I recall that Whistler upon the occasion of one of my visits expressed

an opinion upon this subject. Whistler’s “White Girl,” “Girl at the

Piano” and many other works are such notable examples of truthful

representation as to give weight to his opinion. The absolute certainty

with which the several parts of these pictures exist in relation to

each other cannot be overstated.

In response to my inquiry regarding the most important quality in

the art of the painter, Whistler said: “Art is the science of the

beautiful. The parts of nature bear a certain relation to each other,

and this relation is as true as a mathematical fact. People sometimes

say my pictures are dark. That depends upon whether or not the subject

was dark; whether the conditions made it dark. If a dark or low toned

phase of nature is selected, then the picture must be absolutely true

to those conditions.”

“There it is, the subject. Certain relations exist between the value

notes, and these relations must be reproduced absolutely. Two and two

make four--that is a simple truth in mathematics as it is in nature.

Two and two make four--the trouble is that many painters do not see

that two and two make four. They do not see this fine relationship

which results in a simple truth. Not seeing, they try all kinds of

numbers.”

Turning from the easel in front of which we were standing, Whistler

lifted a book from the table with a quick, almost nervous action, and

as he opened it said with a quizzical expression, “It is all in here.”

The book was the “Gentle Art of Making Enemies.” Tuning quickly to the

paragraph he had in mind, he read, “Nature contains the elements, in

colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes

of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group

with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful.” He

continued to read for a good part of an hour. Whistler by Whistler

was an inimitable and rare treat. The slightest shade of meaning was

expressed with great delicacy, by inflection and gesture.

At the end of very many years of study and observation, Whistler’s

sensitive appreciation and power of selection were extraordinary. The

most subtle and harmonious qualities in nature made an irresistible

appeal to him. He has described this faculty as the power to pick and

choose. By the very choice of many of his subjects he was enabled to

eliminate all insignificant details and thereby to render the harmonies

of nature as they appeared to him. He described his method or mental

attitude with reference to nature when he said: “As the light fades and

the shadows deepen all petty and exacting details vanish, everything

trivial disappears, and I see things as they are, in great strong

masses.”

This represents Whistler in the presence of subdued and gentle

qualities in nature, but it was the same Whistler, without modification

or change in his attitude with respect to nature, who rendered with

such startling realism and absolute fidelity to truth in his marvellous

etchings the shipping, the city, and the river Thames. Under the

blazing light of noonday the masts and rigging of the ships, the forms

and details of the hulls, even the tile upon the roofs of the city

houses were distinctly seen. He recorded his impressions manifestly

without the slightest deviation from the simple truth of form and

value. No one who has studied Whistler’s set of the Thames etchings

will for an instant dispute this statement. The quality of simple truth

is so astonishingly present in every line and form in these works that

no argument is needed touching this point. The Whistler who made these

etchings, the Whistler who painted the “White Girl” and the “Girl

at the Piano,” must be reconciled with the Whistler who painted the

evening symphonies representing the river, the “Portrait of Sarasate,”

and other works of subdued and gentle qualities. The simple truth is

that Whistler was as faithful and scientific in the one case as in the

other, and that the result depended upon his choice of subject, and

the time, and effect observed. I am told that in his later period

he sought after and discovered means of securing the more gentle

aspects of nature; that he toned and diffused the light in his studio

scientifically by the use of semi-transparent window curtains. However

this may be, it is undoubtedly true that he did rely upon the effect

actually before him and that he sought to represent the subdued effect

in his studio or the gentle light of evening so beautifully described

by him in his “Ten O’Clock.” It would be difficult to imagine a more

beautiful pen picture than this description by Whistler. It indicates

his love for the gentle and harmonious qualities in nature.

“When the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a

veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the

tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses palaces in the

night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairyland is before

us--then the wayfarer hastens home; the workingman and the cultured

one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand, as they

have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings

her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master--her son

in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.”

[SN: \_Abbott Thayer\_]

This power to select and represent the beautiful qualities in nature,

a power which is the result of repeated efforts, has been defined by

Abbott H. Thayer with rare skill and poetic beauty. “It is as though

a man were shown a crystal, a perfect thing, gleaming below depths of

water--far down beyond reach. He would dive and dive again, driven by

his great desire to secure it, until finally, all dripping, he brought

it up. But that in the end he could bring it--a perfect thing--to us,

was possible solely because he had first seen it, gleaming there.

Others might dive and dive, might work and labor with endless patience

and endless pain, but unless they had first seen the crystal--unless

they had been given this divine gift of seeing--this vision--they would

come up empty-handed. The occasional so-called genius does not make

the crystal, but he alone sees it, where it lies gleaming below depths

of water, and by his effort brings it to us. The whole question is how

absolutely, how perfectly, the artist sees this vision.”

“After the artist has lived, for a certain period, in worship of some

particular specimen or type of the form of beauty dearest to him,

this crystal-like vision forms, clearer and clearer, at the bottom

of his mind, which is, so to speak, his sea of consciousness, until

at last the vision is plainly visible to him, and the all-strain and

danger-facing time has come for putting it into the form in which as

one of the world’s treasures it is to live on.”

When asked whether the artist has ever been granted a vision of any

beauty which is not based upon the beauty of nature, Thayer exclaimed

emphatically, “No, no, no! I don’t see the slightest material for any

such conception.”

And when the question was further put--granted that the artist has

the gift of seeing beauty in nature to which others are blind, is

his picture Art in proportion as he truthfully records the beauty of

the nature that he sees? Mr. Thayer answered, “Yes. Everything in

art, in poetry, music, sculpture, or painting, however fantastic it

looks to people who are not far enough on that road, is nothing but

truth-telling, true reporting of one or another of the great facts of

nature--of the universe.”

The ability to see, as Thayer suggests, is the very foundation of

the artist’s power. It is this power of seeing which enables him to

discover truth and beauty, and it is the skill of the trained master

which enables him to reproduce these for the delight and inspiration of

his fellows.

That men are endowed by inheritance with varying degrees of mental

power is a self-evident fact. No one will dispute this; it comes within

our common experience. Providence has been lavish in the bestowal of

extraordinary powers upon the few, but it remains everlastingly true

that even with these success depends upon effort. Nothing is more fully

established than this truism. The records of successful men in all

periods and in every avenue of life bear testimony to this fact.

To the artist, seeing is the all important thing, and to him there is

no mystery either in the development of this power or in the result

obtained. To him it is simply a matter of logical evolution, the result

of the day’s work well done. He begins his career as a student by

laboriously copying nature. His first studies are, as a rule, hard and

unsympathetic. I have not discovered an exception to this rule. In the

beginning the art student does not even see colour in its fullness and

beauty. Gradually he acquires greater power of perception. He discovers

beautiful and harmonious colours in nature which were unseen at first.

He realizes the exquisite grace of line to be found on every hand but

unperceived before--the movement, charm, and beauty of natural forms.

New beauties are revealed from day to day; new harmonies are seen

and felt. Presently the inharmonious becomes distasteful; the ugly,

intolerable; the offensive, a distress. He comes into the presence of

nature with a new vision. Her beauties are revealed to him. He feels a

thrill in the love he bears for the exceptional and profound beauty of

an evening sky or a grey day. He never talks about inspiration or soul,

although he has searched out the very soul of the landscape. He simply

seeks with every power at his command, as Constable, borrowing the

thought from Wordsworth, expressed it, “to give ‘to one brief moment

caught from fleeting time’ a lasting and sober existence, and to render

permanent many of those splendid but evanescent Exhibitions which are

ever occurring in the endless varieties of Nature.”

The sculptor, I think, in some such manner lies in wait for the grace

and charm of movement, the supreme expression of character and of

harmony, as an animal lies in wait for its prey. When one or all of

these qualities are seen he seizes his chisel and strives to fix what

he has discovered in permanent form.

The artist, looking back over twenty or thirty years of continuous and

earnest study, of repeated and laborious effort, and of failures and

successes, realizes that the power of perception and selection which he

now possesses is the result of these years of observation and labor. He

also realizes that he has never quite attained to the full height of

his ambition to represent truthfully the supreme qualities of beauty

which he has learned to discover in nature.

In the selection of subjects for his works and in the production of

arrangements or combinations representing either grace, beauty of

colour and form, or essential character, the painter or sculptor is

aided by two very powerful influences.

The first of these is his inherited or acquired taste. Step by step,

precept upon precept, first as a student in the art school, then as

an artist, this faculty known as taste is cultivated, increased,

until with rare discrimination and judgment he selects, “picks and

chooses,” as Whistler said, the things of beauty and harmony, being

guided all the while by the unwritten law of harmony of which we are

all conscious. To arrive at this consummation of the artist’s highest

endeavors is not an easy task.

His course may be, and often is, a very delightful and agreeable

one, but it is one of infinite effort and labor. Before the painter

acquires this knowledge or power which enables him to discriminate

with judgment and taste, selecting those forms and colours expressive

of harmony, grace and beauty, he must have served an apprenticeship of

many long years. The sculptor who would aspire to the exquisite and

discriminating taste of a Rodin, who observes with patience and who

seizes with marvellous skill upon the very essence of grace as it is

expressed by the human figure, must travel the same tedious road. If

the sculptor would read and know character as does a Saint-Gaudens, he

must travel many a weary mile over the path which leads to perfection

in art.

The second powerful influence helping the artist to acquire knowledge

is, as Constable suggested, art itself. The student while pursuing the

plodding course of training in the art school and later in a wider

field as an artist, is not only searching out in nature the qualities

of grace and harmony, but his eyes are constantly turned in the

direction of the accumulated records of art. He studies with assiduous

care and thought in the great works of all times, the qualities, the

harmonies, the character wrested from nature by the able painters

and sculptors of the past. Myriads have tried and failed to know and

master nature during the past few hundred years, and only the few who

have succeeded have left the record of their success. All the weak

productions have gone into oblivion. To these really great works the

painter and sculptor turn again and again, patiently, persistently,

unfalteringly, sometimes through hours of silent study at other times

by earnest effort to copy, but always with a single purpose in

mind--to know and master the secrets of the masters. Little by little,

always referring the master to nature for confirmation or proof, the

artist struggles upward to a more consummate understanding of the works

of nature, but he never forsakes or belittles this supreme source of

all his power and knowledge.

[SN: \_Winslow Homer\_]

I recall asking Winslow Homer if he did not think the beauty existing

in nature must be discovered and reproduced by the painter. Quick as a

flash he answered: “Yes, but the rare thing is to find a painter who

knows a good thing when he sees it.”

On another occasion we were picking our way along the Maine coast, over

the shelving rocks he painted so often and with such insight and power,

when I suddenly said: “Homer, do you ever take the liberty, in painting

nature, of modifying the colour of any part?”

I recall his manner and expression perfectly. He stopped quickly and

exclaimed: “Never! Never! When I have selected the thing carefully I

paint it exactly as it appears.”

During our talk he emphasized, however, the importance of selection.

“You must not paint anything you see--you must wait and wait patiently

for a particular effect, and then when it comes, if you have sense

enough to know it when you do see it--well, that’s all there is to

that.”

At another time, referring contemptuously to the calm ocean under a

vacant sky, he said: “I take no interest in that.” There came, however,

one morning while I was at Prout’s Neck a misty and threatening sky.

Grey clouds bewitching in their silvery tones went hurrying across the

troubled sea. By noon it was blowing a gale and the waves were lashing

the coast, sending spray high into the air. Once and again great clouds

of mist drove across the deserted rocks, and the music of old ocean

rose to an ominous and resounding tone. Presently Homer hurried into

my room, clad from head to foot in rubber, and carrying in his arms a

storm coat and a pair of sailor’s boots. “Come,” he said, “quickly! It

is perfectly grand.”

For an hour we clambered over rocks, holding fast to the wiry shrubs

which grew from every crevice, while the spray dashed far overhead.

This placid, reserved, self-contained little man was in a fever of

excitement, and his delight in the beautiful and almost overpowering

expression of the ocean as it foamed and rioted was inspiring. To him

this was the supreme expression of beauty and power. The moment he had

patiently waited for had come.

Homer’s love for and appreciation of those rugged, elemental qualities

in nature resulted in the production of forceful works of great beauty.

In the selection of subjects he expressed his individual taste.

[SN: \_Henry W. Ranger\_]

I recall an opinion expressed by the late Henry W. Ranger to the

effect that Tolstoi’s definition of art had never been excelled. He

referred to Tolstoi’s definition of art as the power to pass on a

sensation. Ranger maintained the opinion that art is the expression

of the individual’s feeling, that the artist uses the facts of nature

to express his own sensation and that no great landscape was ever

painted directly from nature. “The technical difficulties,” he said,

“and the rapidly changing effects made it hard to paint out of doors.

He could do better by depending upon his memory.” It was his opinion

that the deeper qualities were secured in the studio; that nature only

furnishes the hooks upon which the painter hangs his work; that he

in reality expresses his own feeling, the poetry or sentiment which

is in himself. Ranger here describes a vague or not clearly defined

quality which is referred to as personal temperament. His opinion is

in direct contradiction to the almost universal testimony of painters

and sculptors, and Ranger himself in his practice failed to maintain

it. Although he did not complete his works in the presence of nature,

he made many sketches from nature and copied his larger canvases from

these.

I think Ranger at the end of a long career had the power of discovering

beautiful qualities in nature and of seeing them profoundly. I knew

him well, and many times we discussed art and artists. I found his

knowledge broad and intimate. His view that a painter simply passes

on a sensation was repeated to me many times. I think one may frankly

agree with this opinion, but I do not think a painter originates or

creates a sensation. In the presence of nature he simply receives it

and then transmits it, the result being dependent upon his natural or

acquired power of perception, his memory, and his technical ability.

Ranger’s paintings are characterized by an understanding of nature,

and this was the result of a lifetime of the most earnest, patient,

and persistent study. Probably no modern artist was more industrious,

for his studio was filled with studies in colour and many thousands

of pencil drawings. Indeed, so familiar was he with the colours and

characteristic forms of nature that he frequently reproduced these

with much delicacy, relying solely upon his memory and a few accurate

pencil notes. In discussing his method, I recall his remark that he

painted in the studio because he could get closer to nature that way

than by painting out of doors. Painters universally understand the

difficulties of painting in the open because of conflicting lights.

They also realize the more certain judgment of the experienced eye when

painting in a quiet or more subdued light; but to do this requires

great knowledge and a retentive memory.

As illustrating Ranger’s method of study and his reliance upon memory,

I recall an occasion when he studied long and patiently the union

or combination of two colour notes, the sky and water--for we were

sailing at the time. He remarked upon the beautiful harmony expressed

by these colours. He studied them intently, evidently with the thought

of reproducing them later. I also remember a painting expressive of the

charm and beauty of a moon-light night. It was painted at his Noank

home. I believe this picture was painted almost wholly in his studio. I

think it was the result of an infinite number of impressions received

as he studied, evening after evening, the ocean and the sky. By this I

mean that while Ranger in this painting was passing on a sensation, he

was only passing on the truth and beauty of nature as realized by him

night after night, and recorded in his memory.

The point here raised is one of vital importance with reference to the

subject under consideration. It is that the painter does not express

anything he has not received. He pursues one of two methods: he either

secures beautiful qualities in the presence of nature or he reproduces

qualities stored in his memory.

[SN: \_John La Farge\_]

John La Farge referred to these two methods, the one by which the

painter works directly from nature and the other by which he depends

upon his memory, and his opinion bears directly upon the point raised.

La Farge wrote: “He [the painter] will then go again to nature, perhaps

working directly from it, perhaps only to his memory of sight, for

remember, that in what we call working from nature--we painters--we

merely use a shorter strain of memory than when we carry back to our

studios the vision that we wish to note. And more than that, the very

way in which we draw our lines, and mix our pigments, in the hurry of

instant record, in the certainty of successful handling, implies that

our mind is filled with innumerable memories of continuous trials.”

As La Farge points out, the difference between painting in the presence

of nature and painting from memory is only a different span of memory.

One painter pursues one way, another a different method. The end sought

is the same.

[SN: \_Segantini\_]

Giovanni Segantini’s method was to go to nature \_finally\_. He began his

paintings in the studio, working from studies, and finished them in the

presence of nature. I recall a delightful visit with this able Italian

painter at his home at Maloja, and also his interesting description of

his method. His art was little known at that time, some twenty years

ago. His works are now well known to art lovers throughout the world.

I had but recently seen his “Ploughing in the Engadine” at an

exhibition in the Bavarian capital. It impressed me as possessing a

very vital quality. The technical manner seemed at that time strange

and unusual. Like worsted, the colours stretched across the sky.

The earth clods were small strands of colour, revealing, on close

examination, a rarely prodigal palette. This phase of Segantini’s art

interested me on the purely technical side. The effect of the picture

was startling. It was like a breath of fresh and fragrant air from the

mountains of Switzerland.

It was following this impression received from his painting that I

visited the painter at Maloja. Leaving Chiavenna early one morning,

the coach slowly climbed the mountainside and, presently, crossed the

apex of the range. There lay at our feet the beautiful valley of the

Engadine. I carried away from Maloja many delightful impressions,

but the two dominating all others were these: the earnestness of the

painter, and his unwavering dependence upon nature.

He showed me large drawings or cartoons of some of his well known

subjects representing the arrangement of the compositions and the

balancing of the various parts of his pictures. The drawings were

made in crayon and suggested in line the technical treatment of

his paintings. From these sketches he transferred the drawings to

canvas. In this way he saved time and labor. When a drawing was thus

transferred to a canvas he carried the canvas to the scene of his

subject, where he painted invariably directly from nature. When I asked

if he ever completed a picture in the studio, he said: “Absolutely no!

I always finish my pictures in the presence of nature.”

Segantini spoke his last word, if I may adopt this form of expression,

in the very presence of and under the influence of nature. This to him

was the supreme moment in the execution of his work.

[SN: \_Anton Mauve\_]

Another illustration of the method of a great painter in relying upon

his memory for the truths and facts of nature is found in Anton Mauve.

Mauve’s power is unquestioned. He was one of the great modern Dutch

painters. His pictures are always direct and forceful. His knowledge

of nature was profound. This knowledge was the result of effort and

study. Among his early drawings are found studies from nature which,

in spirit, are wholly unlike his later productions. They reveal Mauve

as a student of nature who was untiring in his effort to draw minute

details with unflinching accuracy. I recall pencil studies of sheep,

horses, cows, and plants which have rarely ever been excelled in the

delineation of detail, not even by a master draughtsman like Barque.

Mauve’s knowledge of nature acquired by this method was intimate and

deep. His later manner was based upon a solid foundation. It was

by this knowledge he was enabled to depict the more characteristic

forms with a few hastily drawn lines. He knew well how important are

broad, essential masses in art and he rendered these, eliminating

non-essentials and trivial details. His sense of design or appropriate

balance of parts was keen and sure; nearly all his pictures possess

the distinguishing quality of simplicity. Like Ranger, he preferred to

paint his pictures in the studio, but his reliance was, in the highest

sense, upon nature.

I recall a visit to Mauve’s country, a country of sand dunes and

pastures. These he loved and painted. One of Mauve’s students, an able

etcher, was probably more familiar with the artist’s method than any

other person. “His [Mauve’s] best pictures, before Laren,” he wrote me,

“were all made in his studio from memory, aided with sketches in chalk.

Then he went every day, if possible, to the spot he had sketched, to

study the effect, the ‘moment,’ and he tried to fix that impression on

his canvas when back home.”

[SN: \_Rodin\_]

Let us turn from the art of the painter to the art of the sculptor.

Probably no modern sculptor has taken a higher place in the estimation

of his fellow artists than has Rodin. As expressions of his art, his

“Thinker” stands at one extreme end of the scale and such graceful and

beautiful forms as “Eternal Spring” at the other. It is interesting,

therefore, to know that Rodin has acknowledged his absolute dependence

upon nature for the widely divergent expressions of character rendered

by him. He is quoted as saying: “Seeker after truth and student of

life as I am, ... I obey Nature in everything, and I never pretend to

command her. My only ambition is to be servilely faithful to her.”

“I have not changed it [nature]. Or, rather, if I have done it, it was

without suspecting it at the time. The feeling which influenced my

vision showed me nature as I have copied her.”

“If I had wished to modify what I saw and to make it more beautiful I

should have produced nothing good.”

“The only principle in Art is to copy what you see. Dealers in

aesthetics to the contrary, every other method is fatal. There is no

recipe for improving Nature.”

“The only thing is \_to see\_.”

“The ideal! The dream! Why, the realities of Nature surpass our most

ambitious dreams.”

\_Opinions of Philosophers and Writers\_

The opinions here referred to are those of masters who have produced

works of art. They seem to be supported by the opinions of able

writers and philosophers who have dealt with this subject. If the

opinions of these writers are less authoritative, they are nevertheless

important as representing the thought of profound scholars. They cover

practically the entire period of writing upon art. While diversified in

the manner of approach, they will be found to unite in a common theory.

These writers naturally deal with mental processes; with the attributes

of the mind; with the philosophy of the subject.

[SN: \_Schopenhauer\_]

Schopenhauer defines genius as pre-eminent capacity for contemplation

which ends in the object. “Now,” he says, “as this requires that a

man should entirely forget himself and the relations in which he

stands, genius is simply complete objectivity, i.e., the objective

tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective, which is directed

to one’s own self--in other words, to the will. Thus genius is the

faculty of continuing in the state of pure perception, of losing one’s

self in perception, and of enlisting in this service the knowledge

which originally existed only for the service of the will; that is

to say, genius is the power of leaving one’s own interests, wishes,

and aims entirely out of sight, and thus of entirely renouncing one’s

own personality for a time, so as to remain pure knowing subject,

clear vision of the world--and this not merely at moments, but for a

sufficient length of time and with sufficient consciousness to enable

one to reproduce by deliberate art what has thus been apprehended, and

‘to fix in lasting thoughts the wavering images that float before the

mind.’”

Schopenhauer’s definition of genius is probably more accurate and more

logical than that of any other writer. In his opinion, genius is the

power of pre-eminent perception. The artist only exceeds his fellows in

that his perception is keener; that he is able to see and understand

more perfectly than others. When an able painter approaches nature in

this spirit, forgetting all else, as Schopenhauer suggests, the result

is usually a masterpiece. To such a painter is attributed the quality

known as genius.

[SN: \_Taine\_]

Taine defines art as the power of perceiving the essential character

of an object. Taine says: “The character of an object strikes him

[the artist] and the effect of this sensation is a strong, peculiar

impression.... But art itself, which is the faculty of perceiving and

expressing the leading character of objects, is as enduring as the

civilization of which it is the best and earliest fruit.... To give

full prominence to a leading character is the object of a work of art.

It is owing to this that the closer a work of art approaches this

point the more perfect it becomes; in other words, the more exactly

and completely these conditions are complied with, the more elevated

it becomes on the scale. Two of these conditions are necessary; it

is necessary that the character should be the most notable possible

and the most dominant possible.... The masterpiece is that in which

the greatest force receives the greatest development. In the language

of the painter, the superior work is that in which the character

possessing the greatest possible value in nature receives from art

all the increase in value that is possible.... It is essential, then,

to closely imitate something in an object; but not everything.” After

defining the essential quality by two illustrations--the illustration

of the lion and the illustration of the dominant characteristics of a

flat country like Holland, Taine continues: “Through its innumerable

effects, you judge of the importance of this essential character. It

is this which art must bring forward into proper light, and if this

task devolves upon art it is because nature fails to accomplish it. In

nature this essential character is simply dominant; it is the aim of

art to render it predominant.... Man is sensible of this deficiency,

and to remove it he has invented art.”

[SN: \_Froude\_]

Froude touches upon this point in his reference to the art of the

writer. He said he would turn to Shakespeare for the best history of

England because of his (Shakespeare’s) absolute truth to character and

event. “We wonder,” Froude wrote, “at the grandeur, the moral majesty,

of some of Shakespeare’s characters, so far beyond what the noblest

among ourselves can imitate, and at first thought we attribute it to

the genius of the poet, who has outstripped Nature in his creations.

But we are misunderstanding the power and the meaning of poetry in

attributing creativeness to it in any such sense. Shakespeare created,

but only as the spirit of Nature created around him, working in him

as it worked abroad in those among whom he lived. The men whom he

draws were such men as he saw and knew; the words they utter were

such as he heard in the ordinary conversations in which he joined. At

the Mermaid with Raleigh and with Sidney, and at a thousand unnamed

English firesides, he found the living originals for his Prince Hals,

his Orlandos, his Antonios, his Portias, his Isabellas. The closer

personal acquaintance which we can form with the English of the age of

Elizabeth, the more we are satisfied that Shakespeare’s great poetry is

no more than the rhythmic echo of the life which it depicts.”

[SN: \_Baumgarten\_]

Baumgarten concluded, from Leibnitz’ theory of a pre-established

harmony and its consequence, that the world is the best possible, that

nature is the highest embodiment of beauty, and that art must seek as

its highest function the strictest possible imitation of nature.

[SN: \_Leibnitz\_]

Bosanquet says: “The greatest degree of perfection was to be found,

according to Leibnitz, in the existing universe, every other possible

system being as a whole less perfect.”

[SN: \_Kant\_]

Kant deals with a phase of this subject which is of great interest.

In many strong works of art there remain incomplete and often

unsatisfactory details. These are permitted to remain because the

artist knows that to remove them would weaken or affect the strength

of the whole. These, Kant says, are “only of necessity suffered to

remain, because they could hardly be removed without loss of force

to the idea. This courage has merit only in the case of a genius. A

certain boldness of expression, and, in general, many a deviation from

the common rule becomes him well; but in no sense is it a thing worthy

of imitation. On the contrary it remains all through intrinsically a

blemish which one is bound to try to remove, but for which the genius

is, as it were, allowed to plead a privilege, on the ground that a

scrupulous carefulness would spoil what is inimitable in the impetuous

ardor of his soul.”

The genius here referred to by Kant is well understood and his power

is fully recognized, but he is not separated from his fellow craftsmen

except in the degree of his knowledge and ability. He is a man of

superior ability and power who, driving straight to the object of

his labor, represents character in a direct and forceful way. To

this end he brings to his assistance his superior technical skill,

but often in the very impetuosity of his ardor, as Kant suggests, he

leaves unfinished parts because he well understands that to labor over

these parts would be to reduce the force or power of the whole. This

impetuous manner which strives to render the character of the object

or person, or of the scene, or of the ephemeral effects of nature,

quickly and directly, is well understood by the painter. I recall a

large sketch of Daubigny’s owned by Mesdag, probably purchased from

the painter. This sketch represents a green hillside with a canal and

horses in the foreground. For absolute power and truth of beautiful

quality and colour it was probably never surpassed by Daubigny, but it

is what the public would call an unfinished picture. In truth, force,

and beauty, it might fairly be considered “inspired” as compared with

Daubigny’s finished or carefully painted pictures so widely known.

In this painting there are many unsatisfactory parts, such as are

referred to by Kant as “deformities,” but Daubigny well understood

that to remove them or to work over this sketch, which was doubtless

made rapidly in the presence of nature and under the influence of the

particular mood expressed by nature, would have weakened its power.

I recall another painting that will illustrate this point--a study by

Anton Mauve. This study was found among Mauve’s possessions after his

death, and was probably never offered for sale during his lifetime

because, in minor parts, it is incomplete. Rough lines of the original

drawing were permitted to remain. These are the kind of blemishes to

which Kant refers, but they do not detract from the supreme beauty

and power of the study. Indeed, this picture is considered by many

painters to be one of Mauve’s masterpieces, so true and just is it in

the representation of a momentary effect in nature. Mauve doubtless

recognized the importance of the study and refused to make corrections

of minor defects. I have been told that he replied to Weissenbrouck, a

fellow painter who urged him to finish this work: “I will leave it as

God made it in nature. It is finished.” Mauve had secured the broad,

essential truth of nature and with this he was content.

[SN: \_Maeterlinck\_]

Maurice Maeterlinck tersely expressed the same thought when he said:

“I myself have now for a long time ceased to look for anything more

beautiful in this world, or more interesting, than the truth....”

The reader will not have failed to observe the significant note of

agreement running through these opinions touching the importance of

selection, the power to perceive and select from among the multitude of

forms those which are exceptional or dominant.

“Pure perception”; “the faculty of perceiving and expressing the

leading character of objects”; “In nature this essential character is

simply dominant; it is the aim of art to render it predominant ...”;

these expressions of philosophers are in perfect accord with the

expressions of painters, as for instance, “The only thing is \_to see\_”;

or “our only chance lies in selection and combination.”

\_Symmetry\_

If what has been written is true, if art is but the revelation of grace

and beauty inherent in nature, the making plain that which is revealed

to the artist and obscure to the less observant, or to those with less

power, it still remains to account for the universal distinction in

form which characterizes all great works of art. Reference has been

made to the common factor of truth, but there is a second factor or

quality possessed by works of art, that of symmetry. This attribute

lifts a work above the commonplace and, combined with truth, places it

among the masterpieces of art.

There are certain fundamental laws of symmetry existing in nature and

these, consciously or unconsciously, govern the masters of art in the

production of their works. These undefined laws have been recognized

from the earliest time, and the artist who is governed by them in the

selection of his subjects and controlled by them in the execution of

his work makes a universal appeal to which the aesthetic sense in man

responds. These laws are not of man’s creation. They belong to nature.

They exist in form and colour. They also exist in sound. Whether or not

the Greeks had reduced these laws to definite principles or rules, and

were governed by them in the construction of their temples and in the

creation of their masterly works in sculpture, is a doubtful question;

but certain it is that Hambidge has shown quite conclusively that

certain fundamental proportions existing in natural forms are repeated

in the Parthenon and in other great architectural structures belonging

to the Grecian period.

This does not mean that every great work of art must of necessity be

based upon clearly defined, rigid rules of proportion, on what is

called Dynamic Symmetry, but rather that works made to conform to these

rules do possess a degree of distinction and that the result is an

orderliness of arrangement or an agreeable disposition of spaces with

relation to each other which produces an aesthetic effect upon the

human mind.

Therefore, while truth is essential, it is conceded that symmetry must

be added to secure distinction. Commonplace expressions of nature,

while satisfying the ignorant, have never been accepted as art by

those who have given this subject serious thought.

The quality of design, of pattern, of appropriate and harmonious

arrangement, must be taken into account in any discussion touching

the philosophy of art. The universal appreciation and enjoyment of

design as revealed in rugs, in tapestries, and in a hundred other art

forms, may only be accounted for upon the theory of the existence of a

universal law of nature governing the judgment of man with reference to

these things.

This law is found in nature just as certainly as is found the law of

gravitation. The art of design when not literally transcribed from

the beautiful forms presented by nature herself is found to rest upon

some adaptation of this universal law of symmetry and harmony. With

symmetrical forms in nature we become familiar even in our childhood.

Take for instance the symmetrical forms of leaves. The grace and

symmetry of the leaf of the elm tree is well known, as is also the

character of the oak leaf and its almost invariable symmetrical form.

When a form that is not symmetrical appears, such, for instance,

as that of the leaf of the sassafras tree--one of the three leaf

forms borne by this tree being shaped like a mitten--we instantly

recognize this exception to the almost universal rule and reject it

as unsymmetrical and inharmonious. Illustrations of symmetry might

be multiplied, because they are found in flower and animal forms

everywhere. With harmony and colour we are made familiar by the passing

seasons. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter are successive expressions

of harmony.

How far this universal law of symmetry extends throughout nature and

what influence it has upon the human mind in its appreciation of the

beautiful in nature it would be difficult to estimate. It is sufficient

for our purpose to know that it is universal and far reaching in its

application and influence. [SN: \_J. Henri Fabre\_] It is interesting

in this connection to note that J. Henri Fabre, the eminent French

naturalist, makes reference to this law in describing the uniformity

with which certain bees act, their actions seeming to be governed by a

mysterious law. In his book on “Bramble Bees and Others” Fabre says:

“The first time that I prepared one of these horizontal tubes [for

bramble bees] open at both ends, I was greatly struck by what happened.

The series consisted of ten cocoons. It was divided into two equal

batches. The five on the left went out on the left, the five on the

right went out on the right, reversing, when necessary, their original

direction in the cell. It was very remarkable from the point of view

of symmetry; moreover, it was a very unlikely arrangement among the

total number of possible arrangements, as mathematics will show us.”

Fabre elucidates this fact by mathematical calculation proving that

there had been a spontaneous decision, one half in favor of the exit

on the left, one half in favor of that on the right, when the tube was

horizontal and gravity ceased to interfere.

This law of harmony has been recognized and to some extent defined by

early philosophers and writers as well as by those of recent date.

[SN: \_Plato\_]

It was recognized and referred to by Plato, who said that the world

offers the material in graceful and beautiful forms; or again that

there is no difficulty in seeing that grace or the absence of grace is

an effect of good or bad rhythm ... that beauty of style and harmony

and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity. He also refers to art

as representing proportion, harmony, or unity among the parts. His

thought is that there is an absolute principle of beauty which reveals

itself in natural objects. [SN: \_Aristotle\_] Aristotle expressed the

opinion that the essential qualities of beauty are order and symmetry.

[SN: \_Knight\_] Knight refers to the appreciation of symmetry and

proportion on the part of the Greek people and he concludes that the

knowledge of this same law of symmetry and its appreciation was

doubtless the basis of Greek art. [SN: \_Kant\_] Kant in his philosophy

refers to this same law of symmetry, grace, and beauty in nature. He

says: “The beautiful forms displayed in the organic world all plead

eloquently on the side of the realism of the aesthetic finality

of nature in support of the plausible assumption that beneath the

production of the beautiful there must lie a preconceived idea in the

producing cause--that is to say, an end acting in the interest of our

imagination. Flowers, blossoms, even the shapes of plants as a whole,

the elegance of animal formations of all kinds, unnecessary for the

discharge of any function on their part, but chosen as it were with an

eye to our taste; and, beyond all else, the variety and harmony in the

array of colours (in the pheasant, in crustacea, in insects, down even

to the meanest flowers) so pleasing and charming to the eye, but which,

inasmuch as they touch the bare surface and do not even here in any way

affect the structure of these creatures--a matter which might have a

necessary bearing on their internal ends--seem to be planned entirely

with a view to outward appearance: all these lend great weight to the

mode of explanation which assumes actual ends of nature in favor of

our aesthetic judgment.” [SN: \_Blackie\_] John Stuart Blackie refers

to qualities in nature which create spontaneously in the mind a degree

of pleasure because of their symmetry and beauty. He says: “There must

be, therefore, in nature and in the constitution of things certain

qualities which, being superinduced upon the useful, or mere fitness

to achieve a practical end, create in the mind the pleasant sensations

which arise spontaneously on the perception of a beautiful object.”

It would seem, therefore, that nature has furnished those forms and

colours which are symmetrical and harmonious, and that familiarity with

these has created in man, in varying degrees, a love for the beautiful

and an appreciation of the symmetrical and orderly. This law of

symmetry and proportion not only appeals to our own consciousness but

has become a part of our daily life.

It frequently happens that the repetition of beautiful forms results in

what comes to be recognized as a conventional or national expression of

art. This is especially true of Chinese and Japanese art. Conventional

forms adopted by one generation of Chinese or Japanese artists were

often handed down to succeeding generations of artists. Not only was

this true, but the repetition of these conventional forms, generation

after generation, resulted in the adoption of certain arbitrary

rules governing the composition and construction of their works of

art. [SN: \_Sei-ichi Taki\_] Sei-ichi Taki in his “Three Essays on

Oriental Painting” noted eighteen rules for the painting of “mountain

wrinkles.” Among these rules the following may be mentioned: “Wrinkled

like eddying water.” “Wrinkled like a horse’s tooth.” “Wrinkled like

bullock’s hair.” “Wrinkled like the veins of a lotus leaf.”

Notwithstanding these conventions, the fundamental or underlying

qualities in Chinese and Japanese art do not differ from those

characterizing works by artists of other nations. There was the same

reliance upon nature and insistence upon selection and the expression

of essential character. [SN: \_Kuo Hsi\_] For instance, Kuo Hsi, himself

a landscape painter, in his work on art criticism, “Noble Features

of the Forest and Stream,” wrote as follows: “Observe widely and

comprehensively.” And again: “Take in the essentials of a scene and

discard the trivialities.”

[SN: \_Lafcadio Hearn\_]

With Chinese and Japanese artists it was always a question of

discriminating selection. Lafcadio Hearn, a keen observer and a

charming writer upon Japanese life and art, referred with unusual

penetration to the importance of selection when he wrote: “The artist

looked for dominant laws of contrast and colour, for the general

character of nature’s combinations, for the order of the beautiful. He

drew actualities but not repellent or meaningless actualities, proving

his rank even more by his refusal than by his choice of subjects.”

It will be seen from these expressions that Chinese and Japanese art

was in fact based upon an intimate and thorough knowledge of nature,

influenced by certain conventions which were clearly defined and

understood.

[SN: \_La Farge\_]

John La Farge, the American artist who was a profound student of

oriental art, suggests this undefined law of harmony in the universe

when he says: “I might acknowledge that I have far within me a belief

that art is the love of certain balanced proportions and relations

which the mind likes to discover and to bring out in what it deals

with, be it thought, or the action of man, or the influences of nature,

or the material things in which the necessity makes it to work. I

should then expand this idea until it stretched from the patterns of

earliest pottery to the harmony of the lines of Homer. Then I should

say that in our plastic arts the relations of lines and spaces are, in

my belief, the first and earliest desires. And again, I should have to

say that, in my unexpressed faith, these needs are as needs of the soul

and echoes of the laws of the universe, seen and unseen, reflections

of the universal mathematics, cadences of the ancient music of the

spheres.”

“For I am forced to believe that there are laws for our eyes as well as

for our ears, and that when, if ever, these shall have been deciphered,

as has been the good fortune with music, then shall we find that all

best artists have carefully preserved their instinctive obedience to

these, and have all cared together for this before all.”

“For the arrangements of line and balances of spaces which meet these

underlying needs are indeed the points through which we recognize the

answer to our natural love and sensitiveness for order, and through

this answer, we feel, clearly or obscurely, the difference between what

we call great men and what we call the average, whatever the personal

charm may be.”

\_Conclusion\_

It may seem ruthless to destroy the old conception which attributed to

the works of the painter and sculptor a place superior to or above the

works of men in the field of science or in other spheres of activity,

but this, I think, is rapidly being done. The idea that man is capable

of adding anything to or improving upon the supreme qualities of beauty

as these exist in nature is disappearing. The spirit of a scientific

age is dispelling the old conception of art. Men now realize in art as

in science that the quality of truth is the sole object to be sought.

[SN: \_Lord James Bryce\_]

Lord James Bryce, the eminent English statesman and author, recently

called attention to the dominating influence of the scientific spirit

as felt in the various activities of our time. He referred to the

effect which the enormous increase in knowledge in the scientific world

has had upon our intellectual life and upon the ideas, the habits and

ways of thought of mankind. He said that the scientific investigations

during the past century and a half have occupied a larger proportion

of the energetic intellects of the world than ever before. The

results of these investigations have been more read than they ever

were before, and by a widening circle. They have more affected men’s

minds and become part of our thinking--part of the mental furniture

of educated men and women. Lord Bryce pointed out that through the

everlasting searching after truth and the facts of nature “the methods

and the spirit of science have undoubtedly affected such subjects as

metaphysical and ethical philosophy, as economic science and history,

as political theory, as oratory, as philology, as literature.” And he

added that for some reason (he would not call it inscrutable, because

he said that everything is more or less discoverable by sufficient

study and attention--everything in the human sphere at least) he

believed that there did, in the Eighteenth Century, begin to come over

the human mind a change, the results of which are seen in all these

fields. The novelty of this method, Lord Bryce said, “lies in the

scrupulous care which we bestow upon phenomena, in the determination to

examine the minutest details and to record exactly what we see, that

and nothing more.” Lord Bryce had also expressed the thought that

with all careful study we must strive to communicate an impression,

which is much more difficult than merely to state facts. For example,

he says, the historian’s general impression of a people is no less an

expression of truth and no less accurate than is the presentation of

many minor facts. Lord Bryce here states a profound truth, namely, that

the impression of the whole is of greater importance than the literal

representation of detail. This truth applies to art. The elimination of

trifling details but emphasizes the power and beauty of the whole.

I think it is this scientific spirit which has influenced modern art

and which is very clearly exemplified in the history of the School of

Impressionists. This school has exerted a powerful influence upon the

art of painting of the present day. I know that the general opinion has

been that the so-called Impressionist painters have departed from the

representation of the truths of nature and that their paintings are not

faithful representations of nature; but I believe the very reverse of

this to be true. I think, in their search for the essential truth of

nature, or the essential fact, that they have, in their very intensity

of effort, departed from the representation of minute details and of

many forms, in order that they might the more fully and perfectly

represent the less obvious and more subtle truth.

Take, for instance, the purpose which actuated Monet, probably the

leader of this group of painters, in his effort to represent the very

truth of nature by a few masses of vibrating colour. For example,

his haycock series of pictures was but an effort to represent the

most essential qualities of the subjects which he had chosen for his

experiment. I recall very well the first painting by Monet which I had

the opportunity to see, some thirty years ago, and the impression I

received then remains fresh in my memory. It was not the pleasurable

or childish sensation created by recognizing the forms of familiar

objects, but rather the delight created by an impression of vibrating,

sunlit atmosphere. This effect was the result of scientific research.

Monet simply applied his power and his wealth of technical ability

to reproduce another kind of truth, the truth of nature as broadly

represented by beautiful colours in relation to each other. I mention

Monet in this connection because he seems to represent, in an important

sense, the influence of a scientific age upon the art of the painter.

This view of Claude Monet’s art and the art of the so-called

Impressionists is the very opposite of that entertained by many writers

who have attributed to these painters careless rather than scientific

methods.

If the principles laid down in this work are true, they become of vital

importance. We will not think less of art, but we will be inspired by

a new devotion to nature and the great laws which govern her. We will

seek more diligently after the subtle harmonies and beauties in nature,

those qualities which have been discovered by the great masters and

translated with measurable success. We will go to nature with more

intelligence and devotion, that we may there enjoy these things for

ourselves at the source of all beauty. The student may lay aside all

preconceived notions with reference to inspiration and creation, and

address himself to his task as would any other workman. The result

should be a more profound appreciation of all beauty and more joy in a

world too often made commonplace by man.

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