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## THE NEW ART IN EUROPE

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Under the auspices of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, Bengal has been given an opportunity to make a first-hand acquaintance with some of the latest developments of Modern Art in Europe. This is the first time that original works of Continental Artists representing the latest phases of Post-Impressionism, Post-Cubism and Expressionism have been exhibited in India. The section devoted to this class of Exhibits has been contributed by Russian, Swiss, and German artists.

As was anticipated, the section evoked a great deal of adverse comment and severe criticism from visitors. It is well known that very strong epithets have been used to denounce these new tendencies in modern European Art. But this so-called anarchism or bolshevism in art shows no inclination to languish under our anathemas dismissing them as barbaric, hideous, clumsy, perverse, idiotic, insane or pathological. The exponents of the new movements have come forward with an elaborate philosophy and a comprehensive theory of art, to defend their points of view and their methods. If their practice have not attracted popular appreciation, their ideas and ideals have been welcomed in many quarters as a valuable contribution to a new theory of aesthetics. It may be useful to recapitulate them here in order to help to a realisation of their point of view, if not an appreciation of their achievements.

Centuries of realistic, imitative, and illustrative forms of Art, somewhat exaggerated in their tendencies since the art of the Renaissance, have been creating a distrust in the validity of these forms of expression as absolute ideals of art, and have been creating a thirst for new forms, in artists who were getting weary of the traditions of the Greek, Greco-Roman and Italian Art. The importation of the works of Art of the Far East into Europe, and their appreciation, meant but another step towards the depreciation of art ideals of the old European traditions and

She finds people's belief in the infallibility of the old standards.

This called for reconsideration of old values and the framing of a scheme of aesthetics, in which all possible forms of art contributed by man at different periods and different places should have their appropriate place,—a scheme in which a Turner could not elbow out a Sung landscape, nor an Academy sculpture shut out a Negro or a Polynesian icon, a scheme in which a Brahminic image and a sculpture by Rodin will occupy pedestals of equal heights and Kangra *ragini* pictures will claim a place by the best Italian Primitives.

A revised study and a new comprehension of all periods of artistic thought and attainments of the past, has necessitated a shifting of the accidental fashions and modes of the environment of the various artistic periods and the inevitable grasping of those essential elements which are the realities and fundamentals of art, irrespective of "periods" and "continents". These fundamental and basic principles have been found sufficiently comprehensive to explain and be applicable to, not only individual artists or periods, but all "artists" and "periods". They can, it has been claimed, account alike for our appreciation of and joy in the art of the Byzantines and that of the present day Royal Academy, of the Orient and of the Occident, of the animal paintings of the Ming Dynasty and the works of the latest "ism". It was at once conceded that any theory of art which fails to be thus comprehensive is wrong somewhere; while any doctrine which will yield criteria comprehending all, will prove invaluable to our real appreciation of art.

The analysis of numerous art forms and the study of different "periods" and "schools", as well as an examination of the psychological bases of aesthetic appreciation from this new point of view, convinced many that much of what passes for appreciation of pictures or sculpture is a literary or sentimental interest in the subject matter, entirely dissociated from aesthetics, or at least allied to it only in its crudest features. Beyond that we receive the thrill of the power over technique which accounts for so much of the enjoyment of cultured people; and finally we have the true aesthetic value which will prove the ultimate test.

This final test is the abstract art value. By its power the Egyptian sphinx, delicate Hindu carvings, the crude gods of Polynesia, the statues of a Michael Angelo, of a Mestrovic, and the works of the Modernists, alike become art—works of sculpture. The same principle applies to the graphic arts and to painting. In all branches of art apart from any question of subject matter there are evident certain qualities of pattern, of rhythm, of the relationship of part to part and of part to whole, which constitute the evasive quality which is vaguely suggested by the word "Art". In other words, works of art can only be judged by their "Pure Art Values," as compositions of essentially aesthetic significance, absolutely independent of religious, sexual or social sentiments, or of representative, illustrative or narrative functions.

Once this is conceded, Art becomes released from the necessity of being confined to a subject matter or of representing or describing any known forms or features of nature. On the contrary, the forms of nature become a sort of impediment to the realisation of absolute aesthetic forms. The artist, according to this new point of view, should be at liberty to create new forms which may not have any reference or relation to familiar aspects of nature. Incidentally he is vested with absolute liberty to modify the forms of nature for the purpose of realising his aesthetic aims. He is not only free to create new forms but to transform existing and familiar forms. Judged by this new standard, many schools and periods of art, hitherto accepted as supreme manifestations of artistic expression, lose their pre-eminence; and those formerly regarded as of lower or inferior artistic merit immediately achieve a pre-eminent place. The Renaissance and the Post Renaissance Painting, as also the Hellenistic schools, yield place to the older Italian Primitives and archaic Greek sculpture, as evidencing superior aesthetic values notwithstanding their deficiencies in imitative or representational qualities. The Negro sculptures and children's drawings come forward with their claims and cannot be ruled out merely on the ground of their poor imitative or representative skill. The old Indian and the Chinese sculptures likewise deserve an honourable place in aesthetic appreciation. If their

“pure art values” are of sufficient aesthetic merit, it does not matter, we repeat, if they misrepresent or even mutilate familiar forms of nature, for a correspondence to natural forms is no longer a criterion of value.

Artists are no longer concerned with forms derived or deduced from nature but are free to play with forms devised in their own imagination and arranged in a new order, with new emotional stresses and juxtapositions. Art thus becomes non-representational and secular on the one hand, and synthetic or creative, and subjective or spiritual, on the other. Incidentally it approaches the condition of music which, as an art and a science, has scarcely devoted itself to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist's soul in musical sounds. As the most non-material and spiritual of all the arts, the methods of music have been adopted by the exponents of the New Art. From the lessons of music are derived the passion for rhythm in modern painting, for mathematical abstract constructions in modern sculpture, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion,—so well known in the practice of the Cubists and the Futurists.

It will be seen that the leading tendency of this new ideal in Art is to step back from objective nature and confine itself to the fundamental element or alphabet of Art,—the value of colour, forms, mass and rhythm of line,—to devise forms answering to the artist's own emotions, and to evoke emotions, feelings and that quickening of the human spirit which we call “aesthesia”. The “Abstractionists” seek to create, from the pure language of Art, pictures and sculptures to this end. For the benefit of the average man the exponents of Abstract Art postulate certain principles which may shortly be enumerated as follows:—

- (1) Representational Art is nature seen through the lens of the eye; the new Art is nature seen through the lens of the mind.
- (2) All Art is the selection of symbolic essentials.
- (3) Great Art approximates to the condition of music.
- (4) Abstract form is the embodiment of an artist's ideas about a thing, freed from the reception of its

concrete appearance, thus revealing more clearly and intensely the dynamics which went to its creation.

- (5) The thing represented may have no concrete existence outside the artist's mind until he creates it.
- (6) Beneath the accidentals of individual surface lie the universals of basic forms.
- (7) Aesthetic pleasure is our joy in the realisation of a universe, harmonious beyond the accidents of forms, united in a rhythm which has an echo in our own inner self,—in our subconscious emotions. It is our appreciation of the thinness of the veil between the finite and the infinite.

It is not possible to illustrate all the phases and processes of the above exposition of their ideals and principles with reference to the actual examples of pictures exhibited in the present show, which consists mainly of contributions by Russian, Swiss, Austrian, German and a few English artists. Even if the principles enunciated above are conceded, it is apparent that much of the endeavours of the artists are by way of experiment,—a striving towards a realisation of their principles, rather than an absolute achievement of their ideals,—although the exponents themselves are not always prepared to admit this. Much of the present endeavours are in the way of destructive rather than actual constructive work.

Particularly, the works of the Cubists and Futurists, obviously appear to be a frank demolition of old ideals and traditions, a collection of debris out of which they are seeking "raw materials" for a new construction. Indeed their relation to the acknowledged old masters is somewhat anomalous and misunderstood. It is commonly asserted that they have no regard whatsoever for the ideas and ideals of the old Art and the forms of artistic beliefs which they represent. But that is not so. For, while they believe that the manners and ideals of the old masters have no authority or precedent for the "New Art," yet they concede that many valuable lessons may be extracted by subjecting the old masterpieces to a stringent analysis or rather a pitiless "dissection" of their essential art values. The

black and white sketches, for example, of M. Tery (No. 20—31) analyse the fundamental "form values" and "masses" of various well-known masterpieces such as those of Giotto, Tintoretto, Memling and El Greco, which, however, it must be confessed, are rather difficult to identify in the analysed skeletons exposed in these sketches. In these expositions of the anatomies of the compositions, thus laid bare, the religious, anecdotal or topical interest of the subject matter of the original pictures,—in one word, their intellectual appeal,—is absolutely eliminated; we are rather made to face the fundamental art value, independent of the irrelevant extraneous considerations which generally go to make up our appreciation of these pictures.

The somewhat similar studies of light,—for example "Passing through an open door" by Paul Klee (No. 67)— are in the nature of experiments to find out the essence of the volumes and forms of light. It is somewhat difficult for the average man to accept, as actual achievements in picture-making, these endeavours on the part of modern artists to find out the essence of appearances and the fundamental or basic principles of visible forms. They may be tolerated as, perhaps, a sincere endeavour, or a groping, towards a new language, the vocabulary of which is in process of formation.

But the works of the great Russian Artist, Wassily Kandinsky, and of Johannes Itten, a few of which are exhibited, stand on a somewhat different footing. Their works certainly throw out the challenge that they have actually evolved a new vocabulary of expression, capable of creating new forms and colour-harmonies absolutely independent of natural forms, and answering to their own emotional needs. Itten's water colour (No. 36) has certainly captivating power in its curiously organised pattern of colour surfaces juxtaposed in forms which do not recall any objects familiar to our visual experience. It has no subject, but is a mere musical symphony, or a harmony of colour surfaces. We try in vain to relate the forms in the composition to any known or recognisable forms in nature, but they elude identification and stand supreme in their originally devised shapes. Similarly the "creation" in water colour by Kandinsky (No. 61) is tantalising in its evasion of any attempt to parallel or

identify the meaningless patterns with known forms of nature and reminds one of the somewhat similar creations of design in a class of oriental rugs and carpets where the motifs of natural forms of birds and trees are conventionalised beyond all recognition.

In the patterns thus created all memory of known forms have been carefully effaced, yet they combine to evoke an emotion which is unadulterated with any extraneous associations irrelevant to aesthetic enjoyment. Their appeal is not to the comparative of the conscious intellect, but to the superlative of the subconscious emotions.