

## THE ART THAT PAYS SERIES

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## Art From An Historian's Point of View

Speaker: Mr. Jacques Barzun

After the creator's approach to art, the most important is that of the historian. For historians can often puncture those generalizations which most of us take for granted and for which there are no scientific evidences of truth. For example, there is the generalization that in order to be a genius one must first be unbalanced. The historian can point out many men of genius who do not fulfil this. But to be an historian is not enough; one must also be a critic. For as the historian sees art from its quantitative aspects, so the critic is the judge of art from the point of view of its qualitative values. Therefore if one is to approach art intelligently, one must be both historian and critic. Tonight's discussion will attempt to deal with art from both approaches.

The program for **this** evening will consist of (1) some historical ideas about The Art That Pays; (2) some definitions of various terms which are often used in connection with art, such as Escape, Form, Taste, good and bad art, etc., and (3) the question period in which the audience will attempt to puncture the discussion of the lecturer. In this way we may reach some common understanding.

The important question is: ~~what~~ what is good and what is bad art? First we should see whether there is a difference in supporting the art and the artist. With architecture, for instance, there is the material support of the architect, his bread and butter, his room and board, and there is also the equipment which he needs to produce his art, in this case the material to build his house. In drama the same thing applies. The artist must be fed and his equipment payed for. In ancient Athens the theatre was supported by state patronage and "free will" patronage. This was

successful because art at this time used religious material which produced enthusiastic response from the populace. The same thing was true in the Middle Ages; cathedrals, plays and guilds were all supported by communities. The problem now, however, is that the religion of today is that of nationalism and patriotism. This means that in such countries such as France where the state supports art, the propaganda factors enter into art production and prevent the free expression of the artist. In considering the artist, we find him always resentful of patronage, for private patronage is supposed to be a highly serious affair. When an artist joins a foundation he has to fill out sometimes as many as 36 blanks stating exactly what he is going to do; in other words he has to sell his soul in advance in submitting to the demands of his patrons. But since it is the artist who is creating the art, we should submit to him and not he to us. Although there have been periods in art history when this was true, we do not often find them. It has been said that the history of Herodotus, for example, was delivered by soap-box orations. In the Middle Ages jugglers supplied the art entertainment, but the tricks and stories that have come down to us are dull and obscene. Today we have raised the public to the position of arbitor. Trustees of concerts and operas try their best to satisfy the public, but it is the trustees who take the initiative, not the public nor the artist. The artist has to decide what type of art shall be produced according to the standards which the trustees dictate. The serious question which the artist has to face is: in producing state art, will he have to keep to the party program, and in producing for the private patron will the patron want his name to live rather than the artist's. Thus all art must go through the bottle neck created by the necessity of support, either state, foundation, or private patronage; it can never be the direct, uninfluenced expression of the artist.

There are two main theories concerning art consumption. One is that

advertising will sell everything, and the other is that the public knows what it wants and can't be fooled. Shaw's charming play "Arms and the Man" although it was expected to be a great success turned out to be the opposite; and "Vanity Fair" which is popular even today, was turned down by eight publishers. On the whole, however, we may conclude that according to our standards, the public usually has eternal favorites that are trite and dull. But how is the public going to know the difference between good and bad art? Is it competent to judge? And how can we expect it to know these things when the mass of art production is so great that it would take more than a life time to make a fair selection. The result of this dilemma is bleak, the artist's life is miserable, and the public is unable to get the best.

But does the public want the best? <sup>Apparently</sup> ~~Obviously~~ not, since according to economic reasoning the purpose of economic function lies ultimately in satisfying the consumer. If there was public demand for the best in art, it <sup>then</sup> follows that that demand would be supplied. Take the case of football and baseball. The American passion for these sports is well known, and ~~the~~ the tremendous emphasis placed upon them in our American life together with their large scale production throughout the United States proves that this demand is supplied. But in the case of art, the public is apparently very willing to get along without it. Therefore to assume that the artist is useful and that art should be supported may be wrong. Good art, we have seen, is limited to the few. Then let those who love it have their art, let them support it, and not impose it on others. There is no reason why the public should be expected to support that which it does not use or even desire. Architecture reaches many people because it is useful but painting and poetry are not. If the lovers of art are not capable of supporting the artists then it is no wonder that the artist is in a bad state, (and there seems little that can be done about it.)

Now we come to the question of good and bad art. The discussion re-

solves itself into an attempt to define the two or to the exploration of other people's ideas. Because this question has always taken so long to discuss, the proverb, "according to taste there is no dispute" has been devised to settle the matter once and for all. But this was probably written by a man who was tired, for up to a certain point we should be able to reach a common definition. Every argument about art reveals metaphysical attitudes about the world. There are two schools of thought in regards to the relations of these attitudes to man. The Aristotelian or Absolutist point of view maintains that objects belong to real, fixed categories, that they have an existence outside the judging person, and may be criticized in relation to the category in which they belong. The second point of view is the Platonist theory, that there are no fixed standards but that all are the creation of man's mind and everything exists in relation to the individual. (But they tend to assume the superiority of their own ideals.) Shakespeare is assumed to be a world poet, and yet he is by no means read throughout the world. What we can do to remedy this situation will be left until later. We shall now turn to some suggestions of concept definitions.

**ESCAPE\*** The assumption that most critics make over and over again is that to escape reality is a bad thing. What then is reality? To most of us it seems to mean what you do to get along in the world, but there is no good reason why livelihood should be any more real than contemplating the stars, for instance. The magnitude of one's attitude is measured by the individual's imagination. But what is imagination? Imagination is seeing what is to be inferred from a stimulus. Arts exercise the imagination. Escape is the attitude towards ~~towards~~ a thing in which the imagination is asleep; but this still makes it difficult to recognize escape art, as one cannot judge a work of art by what one does with it, because different people do different things.

**FORM-** Everything has some form. When we speak of form in art we

mean a particular kind of form that can be recognized. The habit of looking for form when attempting to judge a work of art, is absurd, as it is just like appreciating a piece of music because it was written in A B A. Looking for form is a last resort when judging a work of art.

**TASTE-** Taste is no more than a social convention in art. It is a kind of life in others which pleases us. It is therefore a wickedly subjective standard of criticism and had better be left to clothing and spinach.

Though these accepted criteria for judging art are really not significant enough to hold any value, when taken separately, nevertheless there are judges in art and we do tend to rely on their opinions when ~~making up our own minds.~~ <sup>deciding for ourselves.</sup> We know, for instance, the difference between Goethe and ~~the~~ dime novel, likewise there are certain criteria which prevent us from ignoring Shakespeare although he is dead to some people. But there is no concensus of opinion about this for we do not know what our neighbor really thinks and even judges don't agree. It is the political impulse which keeps people from attacking other people's opinions. There is always the feeling that we know what is good, but this proves nothing. The way out of this difficulty is to assume that the relation of art to any one person is unique, and that a certain individual imaginative, emotional satisfaction is gotten out of works of art. Every person has some ability for artistic appreciation which varies according to his mood and environment. The more developed a person is artistically the more ~~he is able~~ to get out of a work of art, but if a man is going to war a Sousa band march will appeal to him more than Beethoven's funeral march although the funeral march would probably be considered a greater piece of music.

In conclusion it can only be said that the person who appreciates Beethoven has gone through enough years of that type of experience to enable him to receive a strong emotion from that music. Art is a plea-

sure and a necessity to the minority, therefore it should be paid for and supported by that minority, but should not be imposed upon others, for there are too many people who are educated beyond their intelligence and this so often produces disastrous results.

#### QUESTION PERIOD

The most satisfactory way of describing the question period in this lecture is to give the questions and their answers. At times the discussion became so involved that it <sup>was</sup> ~~became~~ impossible to write down the whole **content** of every argument. I have tried rather to give the essence of the questions and answers and leave it to the reader to supply his own material for discussions.

Question: Is there any valid quality that makes art inevitably recognized?

Answer: No, because in every generation people can be <sup>always</sup> fooled.

Question: If we balance the commercial and high-brow arts by saying that Beethoven means more to less people and Sousa less to more people, aren't they both equally great since they balance each other?

Answer: No, for it may be said that when 120,000 people listen to Sousa, the sum of their impressions would not be as much qualitatively as that of 500 people listening to Bach. In other words there is more to be gotten from the study of Bach than from the study of Sousa.

Question: Is it better, then, to be among the 500?

Answer: Is it better to be a higher vertebrate or a lower one? Is it better to be man or monkey? The individual must choose.

Question: Should any attempt be made to educate taste, and if so, why?

Answer: Yes, for the same reason that the environment should be changed and bettered, but one should not push one's own ideas down other people's throats.

There followed a discussion on the value of **Form** versus **Significance**

in art. The outcome was that it was easier to judge from Significance than Form- that the form meant very little in comparison with the content.

Question: Is'nt it conceivable that the community at large can be responsible for art form rather than the minority?

Answer: It is not probable that the population is unanimously devoted to art. It is the small group that coerces the large, the population pays the taxes whether or not it appreciates art.

Question: But in the production of a great work of art isn't there often a common, united emotion that is responsible for its existence, such as the cult of the Virgin in the case of the Chartres cathedral?

Answer: Probably not. Rather it is the result of mixed expressions, The reasons are probably more material than spiritual, a mixture of snobbery, desire for power, political reasons etc.

Question: Do you consider Commercial art an art?

Answer: Yes it is an art and requires talent as everything else does.

Question: How then, is it possible to tell good from bad art?

Answer: You can only judge for yourself but you can say that the more art experience you have to give the more you receive in return. What you are able to put into a thing, you can get out of it. There is more qualitative content in Beethoven, for instance, than there is in Sousa, therefore it demands more experience on the part of the receiver to appreciate it, and the receiver, in return, is able to get more for his effort.

There followed a discussion of the Absolutist's view of art versus the Platonist's. The Absolutist, it was explained, stands for set standards, morals, and rules in judging art. The Platonist believes that names are only meanings for things that exist in the mind of man. The Absolutists are responsible for Classicism in art and the Platonists for Romanticism.

Question: You say that the meaning of art changes through the different ages, and that therefore there is no valid quality which every generation agrees upon. But don't you feel that the beauty ~~in~~ Egyptian art means the same to us today ~~as~~ it did thousands of years ago?

Answer: Do you believe in Osiris?!

Report by Carolyn Clement

May 18, 1936.