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MONTHLY LETTER

Devoted to Spiritual and Philosophical Problems -- by Manly P. Hall

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Dear Friend:

Esthetics is the sixth department of philosophy and may be defined as that branch of learning which is devoted to an examination of the substance of the beautiful and the effect of beauty upon the spiritual, intellectual and moral life of man. Under the general term esthetics are included the several arts devoted to the theory and practice of beauty cultivated by the ancients.

Beauty is the most civilizing force in nature. The theory of esthetics leads to the appreciation of beauty; the practice of esthetics leads to the interpretation of beauty. Under the theory of esthetics, therefore, are considered standards of symmetry and proportion, relations of value and form, and the harmonies of quality, sound, color, and such other media as are appropriate to the interpretation of beauty. Under the practice of esthetics are considered the several disciplines of interpretation by which beauty is released through skill, or, as it is more commonly termed, technique.

The departments of esthetic expression are generally termed the arts. Art differs from science in that art arises from the impulses of the soul and science from the reasonings of the intellect. We

may say that to do a thing skillfully is science, and when science and art contribute equally to the accomplishment of any desired end. Art adorns science and glorifies religion. Art perfects nature. A great artist is a high priest in the temple of the universe.

In ancient times esthetics included the art of music, vocal and instrumental; the art of drama, sacred and profane; the art of sculpture, architectural and impressionistic; the art of painting, drawing and coloring; the art of the dance, artistic and gymnastic; the art of decoration, including adornment, design, et cetera; the art of oratory, from which later evolved poetry and literature; and lastly, the sacred arts, including all the esthetics of veneration. Together these constituted one supreme art—the art of living.

In Egypt the priests evolved what is termed the Hermetic art which descended to medieval Europe as alchemy. According to Arthur Dee the Great Work of the Hermetic philosophers was to perfect nature through art. It is the refining influence of beauty and idealism that is gradually transforming animal man into a divine being. Esthetics is the

"My son, some Kings are commonplace, and not all laborers are worthy of their hire. But this I say to you; that if you are in league with gods to learn life and to live it, neither kings nor commoners can possibly prevent you, though they try their utmost. You shall find help unexpectedly, from strangers who, it may be know not why."

—TSIANG SAMDUP.

mysterious tincture of the alchemical philosophers by which the base elements of life are transmuted into the gold of truth and beauty. Esthetics is also the Universal Medicine, for only beauty and nobility can bring health to the human soul which is sickened with the evils of the world.

An individual or community which does not appreciate and practice beauty cannot long survive. The whole philosophy of esthetics can be summed up in the simple statement attributed to the great prophet of Islam, Mohammed:

"If I had two coats I would sell one of them and buy white hyacinths for my soul."

Civilization complicates all issues, and under the intensiveness of our modern culture even the simplest values become involved in a confusion of opinions. We have lost the power to enjoy beauty. The arts have become confused and for the most part discordant. They no longer minister to our common need; rather, they torment us with their complexities and discomfort our souls with their asymmetries. When false standards are set up the intrinsic fineness of things is sacrificed. Generally speaking, modern esthetics is corrupt. Artists are failing art, and for that reason art is failing man.

The first principle of art is beauty. It must be beautiful to be art. Technique and skill can exist apart from art, but technique and skill are not art in themselves. They are merely the means by which art is released into tangible expression. The beginning and end of art is always beauty.

What, then, is beauty?

The noblest speculations on this subject are contained in the celebrated treatise of Plotinus ON THE BEAUTIFUL. From this great Neo-Platonist we learn that beauty is essentially perfect order—in things and of things. Beauty is a certain virtue present in all bodies, in all forms, and in all substances. Beauty is the true being which animates all living creatures. It is the dynamic pattern, the esthetic framework by which the world is supported. Beauty is that peculiar fitness by which perfected natures are distinguished from imperfect natures, and perfect forms from imperfect forms. According to Plotinus, there is a certain divine consistency which is more evident in some structures than in other

structures. Beginnings move naturally towards certain ends; forces unfold through forms; wisdom blossoms in space; the Divine Will, projecting itself into matter, becomes a symmetrical geometric pattern in which all the elements of beauty are perfectly present.

The human mind, itself composed of the Divine Nature, and imbued at least subjectively with the principle of esthetics, accepts the proportions of nature as a certain artistic canon, thinking and estimating in terms of this canon. The intellect carries what may be termed a certain expectancy towards proportion, rhythm and normalcy. The intellect, therefore, experiences a definite disappointment if the expectancy is not fulfilled. We interpret this disappointment as displeasure or esthetic offense. If, on the other hand, the expectancy is fulfilled there is a satisfaction which we interpret as pleasure.

For example, a gently curving line presumes the continuance of that curve or its development into some logical form. If a sudden angle is interposed there is a definite shock to the esthetic sensibilities. A broken arch is a disappointment. It is true that a broken line is more powerful than a continuous one, because of the blow which it administers to the subjective awareness. But strength is not always beauty. The purpose of art is not merely to attract attention or to force comment. The true purpose of art is to satisfy soul hunger. So, the broken arch does not express the highest form of art and is not truly beautiful.

As another example, the mental expectancy of man may be focussed upon a massive column, finely proportioned, and giving the definite impression that it is intended to support a great weight. If this pillar is caused to support some small and inconsequential structure, the esthetic consciousness is again offended. Everything must have a purpose, and a column which has no purpose sufficient to justify its existence is not truly beautiful. As Socrates has so wisely observed, a thing must be necessary to be beautiful. Nature has devised nothing which does not serve some purpose. This is the highest form of art. The universe, which is a perfect example of utility, is also the most beautiful of all structures cognizable by man. In esthetics that

which is impossible, improbable or deformed offends. And in character that which is ignoble offends. That which offends cannot be beautiful. The grotesque may teach a lesson but it cannot serve as a direct inspiration to consciousness.

This brings up another question. Why is man offended by that which is not beautiful? According to Socrates, there exists within every human being a divine nature composed of the three qualities of unity, beauty and utility. The human soul, according to this old sage, is a perfectly symmetrical divine body containing within itself every element of beauty. Thus every man, regardless of the depravity of his outer life or the immaturity of his esthetic appreciation, possesses to some measure what may be termed an instinct towards the appreciation of beauty. That which is unbeautiful offends the soul because it offends the truth which abides in the soul. This offense against the symmetry of the inner Self causes the reaction of displeasure which is felt when in the presence of an asymmetrical structure.

We may then ask—is there an absolute standard of beauty? Is the human soul capable of recognizing ultimate perfection in the esthetic arts, or does man's sense of beauty grow up with his experience and evolution? If we examine the arts of the various nations, ancient and modern, we must acknowledge that esthetics is subject to the law of evolution. The human being is growing up to the appreciation of beauty even as he is evolving to a fuller comprehension of all abstract values. Genius has existed in every age and each civilization has produced a few exceptional individuals who have possessed a high measure of esthetic vision. As time goes on an ever greater percentage of persons will sense the subtle values which dignify life. The arts will finally flourish and in the Golden Age, which men have dreamed of since the beginning, we shall dwell together not only in peace but in a world made beautiful.

To the philosopher Divinity itself is the absolute standard of all perfection. One philosopher said, "Only God is good." And in another age another philosopher said, "Only God is beautiful." By the term God we must understand the all-knowing, all-animating Spirit of the world by whose wisdom uni-

versal law is maintained. The beauties of nature and of man, therefore, are really the beauty of God in nature and God in man. The word God means good and good infers perfection in all the virtues. To the ancients virtue inferred obedience. "The beginning of wisdom is to revere the gods through obedience," declared the Platonic doctrine. To be good, therefore, is not a platitudinous injunction. It means to fulfill the law, and to fulfill the law means, according to the Socratic philosophers, to do that which is necessary and beautiful.

Esthetics graces action by overcoming all excess and intemperance. Esthetics is the living of the principle of beauty and results in living beautifully. For this reason living is called an art. Scientists would have us believe that living is a science, and commercialists that living is a trade. But to the degree that men live well, they live according to esthetic standards. Esthetics as action is moderation—the Golden Mean, the temperate zone of the wise. Esthetics as morality is virtue—victory over inordinate emotions and desires. Esthetics as thought is wisdom, by which all exaggerations of attitudes are brought to a common order. Esthetics as form is symmetry, in which there is no disproportion of parts. Esthetics as civilization is concord and the dwelling together in cooperation and peace. Esthetics is rhythm, harmony and melody. In every course of action it is that desirable and happy state in which there is no discord or inconsistency.

Through the esthetic impulse in the human soul man is impelled to the perfection of the arts. He seeks to beautify his body, his home, his community and his world. But art involves not only appreciation but also discipline. Discipline is the development of the skill to interpret, and also, the development of the value-sense, the power to discriminate. In music discipline is the training of the voice or the hand and the ear. In sculpture the faculties of form and perception must be developed, and a certain technique of procedure mastered. Drama and the dance demand the disciplining of the emotional faculties and perfect control of the physical body, also to some degree adornment. Appropriate disciplines are also necessary in the sacred arts and oratory.

It should be remembered, however, that discip-

line does not confer art; it merely supports and rationalizes artistic impulse. Discipline comes to nothing, and all training is ineffectual, unless technique is vitalized by soul power. Esthetics is a universal principle which men can partake of in varying degrees, according to their development. Artists are not made by discipline, but genius can go to seed for lack of order and technical direction.

We must try to understand the evolution of esthetic appreciation, for without appreciation there can be no interpretation and art is interpretation. Two forces are constantly at work in the molding of human character. The early Church called these two forces good and evil, or God and the devil. Philosophy, which impersonalizes all universal principles, interprets these contending forces as inner impulse and outer circumstance. There is a constant conflict between man and his world, between the individual and the mass.

The two irreconcilable opposites in civilization today are truth and the majority.

This brings us to one of the major issues of esthetic philosophy: idealism versus realism. The idealist affirms that all things are essentially good and that a divine wisdom, essentially beautiful in its workings, is present throughout nature. All life is moving towards unity, beauty and virtue. The realist, on the other hand, maintains that nothing is really any better than it seems to be. Realism as a doctrine is the most disillusioning of all codes. Realism is established upon the testimony of unrefined sense perceptions, while idealism is established upon a sympathetic and enlightened recognition of the true values which lie beneath appearances.

What then, asks the modern artist, is the highest expression of art? Is it the effort to depict a beauty which is often not apparent or the attempt to copy asymmetry which is usually painfully evident? This argument brings up still another issue. When considering esthetics as art, how shall we define an artist? Is he a creator or a copyist? Is he a depicter or an interpreter? Is he an educator or merely a technician? Should he portray what he sees or what he feels? If he portrays what he sees, with what kind of eyes does he see? If he portrays

what he feels, with what kind of a soul does he feel? Is art merely design, a distribution of masses, or a clever combination of light and shadow? These questions are seldom satisfactorily answered in the schools of modern art.

There is a great division in modern opinion as to whether or not art should serve as a medium for the communication of ideas. In other words, should painting, sculpture, music or the dance tell a story or does its excellence depend upon its meaninglessness? The modern tendency in art is to depart from all preachment and interpretation. To the average critic a picture is worthless if it tells a story. To the true esthetician modern art is therefore for the most part unsatisfying because it contributes nothing to the intellectual or spiritual values of life. In a recent exhibition a place of honor was awarded to a painting which represented a side of beef hanging in a butcher's window. A small canvas of a badly drawn orange on a cracked plate was also regarded as exceptional. Fried eggs are also regarded as an enchanting form of still life, while paintings resembling Spanish omelettes are labeled as creative realizations of sunsets.

Such productions not only lack interest, they actually lack technical merit. The creators of these so-called pictures have never mastered the technique of draughtsmanship, and for the most part have no fundamental knowledge of color. Even these shortcomings might be forgiven, however, if the artist really possessed an idea. There is something glorious in even an imperfect effort to do something that is noble and beautiful. We are all imperfectly striving towards noble and beautiful ends. The greatest shortcoming of the average modern artist is lack of an idea. They break the ancient Chinese axiom that nothing should be done without an adequate reason.

There is good modern art but it is comparatively rare due to the present superficial attitudes which dominate racial culture. All modern artists to the contrary notwithstanding, there is no satisfying art which does not tell a story, create a beautiful mood, or reveal a high inspirational quality in the soul of the artist.

(Continued in Supplement)