

ART IN DEMOCRACY

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ART we know. We move in chaos and darkness. The artist says: Let there be light,—and there is light. He shows to us the beauty of the world, shows to us that the creation is very good, shows it to us as the Arch-Architect and Artist saw it on the Seventh Day.

All men have eyes. The artist says to them: Be thou opened. Without art we are sitting in a cave with our faces to the earth. There is so much in the world to see, that we see nothing. The artist selects and arranges. He suppresses the ugly, the mean, the sordid, so that the beautiful may be revealed.

The world has never been left wholly without the desire for beauty, the desire to escape from the reality of things, the power to create an illusion in which the heart may find comfort, the belief that things are better than they really are, and the hope that they can be made so.

The earliest hunter embellished his weapons of flint or wood. He decorated his earthen home with pictures drawn from the chase. He adorned his person with fabrics of feathers, of grass, of skins, of wool, the spoil of the lower creation. To his surprise he soon learned that at the same time he gratified his sense of warmth. The desire for beauty preceded the desire for warmth. Out of this desire was developed the need of clothes, and of all other things by which we have attained to a superiority over the beasts, although these humble creatures are not wholly insensible to the charms of colour and form. In this generation alone the passion for ugliness has dominated even the desire for warmth.

Democracy we are only beginning to know. As we see it face to face, it is not at all the thing we dreamed of. We saw it for a moment during the French, the American, and every other Revolution. We see it now in Russia accomplishing its perfect work. What we have called democracy this century past was in England merely monarchy changing its form; in the United States, a rigid constitutionalism which was to be proof against radical change; in France, a natural conservatism against which democracy could make no regular headway. Real democracy in America showed itself as Tammany at the head of his Braves; in Russia as Lenin protected by his Mongolian guard; and in France as Marat amid

the Sans-culottes. We have been living upon the old traditions, the old amenities, the old conventions,—and we called that democracy. We had accumulated a reserve of art, of morality, of religion, of good manners, of modesty even. When that reserve is completely consumed, we too shall then know democracy for what it is.

History is very simple, and always the same. It is a record of the rise from democracy—for the original democrat was the savage in the lair—to an organized society; and of the descent into democracy again, from which the slow and laborious Sisyphus task had to be resumed once more. Civilization begins by substituting the family for the individual; it ends in democracy, when the individual is once more substituted for the family as the unit of society.

These western communities could be nothing but democratic. They were founded by men who were dissatisfied with their political life, discontented with their personal lot, distressed by the obligations of society, unwilling to bear their burdens, hating even the conventions of religion and the forms of art. Of such were the Puritans of New England; but when they saw democracy in the mass they recoiled in fear, and created institutions more rigid than any they had left.

Democracy never yet created a civilization, and without a civilization there can be no art. We deceive ourselves when we name Attica as a democracy, although it called itself by the name. Athens was an aristocracy in which nine out of ten persons were at best freemen; at worst, frank slaves. When Athens perished art was lost, and was not rediscovered for fifteen centuries.

There is a curious Hebrew fiction that God from time to time descends from heaven to observe how the men whom he has created are comporting themselves. At any time during those ages He would have walked in darkness in a democracy which existed from the fall of the Roman Empire until the idea of nationality was restored, and the idea of religion was restored. For art requires a civilized aristocracy, secure in its foundation, superior to base claims, interested only in itself, curious about the mind, with a passion for ideas; willing to build, paint, sing, fight, and love from their own sake and not for ulterior gain.

A man dies in himself. He lives in his family. The desire to survive death is the mainspring of human thought and action. Willing that, a man might as well eat and drink,—without any thought of living for a posterity which for him has no existence. This is the peril to which we who live in cities are exposed, for

cities are the birth-place of democracy and the grave of civilization. For this reason began He to upbraid the cities.

Art is always the last product of civilization and the measure of it. Where there is no civilization there is no art, and civilization is a thing of slow growth. It has always been confined to certain small areas where climate favoured the propagation of beauty. It has never appeared above certain latitudes,—not in Scotland, for example, where society never extended beyond the clan, and art stopped short with the production of the tartan. There must be ease and freedom from fear; and winter is the great enemy of the race. Therefore we in Canada must not expect too much. There is, of course, beauty in all things; it can be perceived only by an eye trained by continually regarding an abundance of beautiful forms.

A Canadian town in winter is, excepting for a few days, a sordid and ugly thing; and as most Canadians live in towns, we are surrounded for the greater part of the year by sordidness and ugliness, and no eye has yet pierced the civic veil to discover if there is any revelation to be made from within.

And yet we must not set bounds to artistic perception. Our own eyes may be blind to such beauty as there is, whilst a fresh eye may discover treasures on the barren hillside. Such an eye once surveyed a most unpromising region of Canada, and discovered in Nature and in the lives and character of the people scenes of matchless heroism and beauty. Many persons are at least superficially familiar with the region on the northern frontier of Quebec. It was a sealed book, but the seals were broken by a supreme artist, and all may now look within. This revelation was made by Louis Hémon. The record was printed ten years ago in a Parisian daily newspaper. It was reproduced in the form of a book two years later in Montreal, and is a most perfect example of the literary art. This picture will never fade; and so long as it endures, the remembrance of Quebec, as a place of beauty, will remain. The book may yet be unknown to some. *Marie Chapdelaine* is the title. The author, I may add in solemn sorrow for so exquisite an artist, was killed in a railway accident in Ontario. The cause and place is an allegory.

But pictorial, tonal, literary, or architectural forms are not the whole nor, indeed, the most important part of art, still less of life. To humanity have been given gifts other than the perception of that beauty which lies in form, colour, sound, and material. To us has been granted to discern between the beauty of good and the ugliness of evil. We have been left free to choose as much of

the good as it was ordained for us to know, to weave into the texture of life threads or strands of evil, and at the judgment reveal a pattern of beauty, a tissue of use in the eternal purpose of things; or a bloody and filthy rag, fit only to be reserved for the burning. That is the supreme artistry—to integrate into life so much of the material that besets us, and in such a manner that in the end our offering will be acceptable and well pleasing to God.

There need be no hesitation in naming the Holy Name in connection with art and democracy, since art has earned its highest fame in the service of religion, and democracy has gained its worst notoriety in its denial of God. It is not, of course, the common experience that artists are religious above all other men, although a keen observer and no poor judge in such matters gave it as his first impression that the Athenians, the most completely artistic of all peoples, were in reality too religious.

One does not need to be told that religion is an affair of the heart, an attempt to establish the relation which should exist between the individual soul and God. And one does not need to be told that religion must have a body, an organization, else it will vanish with the Person, and must be rediscovered anew, if it is to be rediscovered at all. This organization is the Church, and all churches are one Church. It has required all the forces of the human mind to create and maintain this physical fabric from which has issued every teacher, saint, and saviour with whom this poor world has been blessed.

In this task art has performed its highest service, and when it turns aside from that high calling it always becomes trivial, pretty, mediocre. A Church that is not served and adorned by art quickly passes into the void. The less Protestant churches are already sounding alarm. They have begun to fortify themselves with the art of architecture, of colour, of sound, of ceremonial, so that they may maintain the fabric until the Saint shall come.

We are for the moment concerned only with the immediate effect of religion upon art. What it does is this: it introduces into art a spirit of cheerfulness, of hope. When it decays there is an instant revival of the pagan spirit, a pensive brooding upon death, and a passionate protest against the inevitable end of all things rare. Western poetry is purely pagan. The summer fades; life is short; a settled melancholy falls upon the world.

Democracy is fatal to the artist because it measures all human effort by the same human standard, and offers only the same reward. It does not see that most human effort is useless, transitory, or harmful. The reward is always mercenary, taking no account of

the artist's reward which lies in the joy of creation, in the approval of his fellow workmen, in the consideration he receives in the minds of his fellow-men. Democracy takes no account, and has no understanding, of any work other than that which is done for a material wage. And when it receives its wages it has no fine sense in expenditure, no knowledge that art has anything to do with the pleasure of life. It merely entertains a suspicion that art may be employed to stimulate the senses; it seizes upon the coarser forms which minister to a coarse sense, whereby the senses become coarser still; and art put to base uses becomes itself debased.

A debased currency will drive away the fine silver and the shining gold. A general debauch of reading will destroy the art of letters. The vast and facile pictures on the screen are ignorant of colour, and in their distortion destroy any sense of form or delicacy in line. An ear that is excited by piercing sounds and monstrous rhythm is deaf for ever to the intricate harmonies and complex movement of music. In such a clamour what chance has art, with its still small voice, of being heard?

Art thrives only in an atmosphere of freedom; but democracy and freedom are not at all identical. As democracy grows, liberty disappears. The battle for freedom is lost as soon as won, and each generation must achieve it for itself. We in our time escaped from the Scylla of German domination only to fall upon the Charybdis of democracy. It is a base slander upon those who are fallen to say that they fought to make the world safe for democracy. They fell in an attempt to make the world safe for themselves. Germany at its worst was a safer place for a sane man than is Russia to-day, where democracy itself, for the present at least, is safe.

For the large freedom of the early nineteenth century we have exchanged the numerous and hidden tyrannies of this. The modern industrial system is a form of servitude none the less real because it appears to be voluntary. The worker goes in fear not of his rulers, nor of his employer, but of the clever rogue who has made of himself a leader and a "boss". There is no place for the display of art in the work of his hands. There is not even room for that free and generous effort which brings its own reward, or rest that is well deserved. In such an atmosphere, heavy with suspicion and dark with hate, the large, free spirit of the artist goes with soiled and trailing wings.

I am well aware that up to this moment I have been speaking into the void. Let us now address ourselves to the facts as they arise in any Canadian city before anyone who cares to look. At

the moment all attention is fixed not upon beauty,—but upon the ugliness of disease, delinquency, and crime. The crippled, the tubercular, the degenerate, the criminal, in hospital, refuge, court-room, school, and prison, absorb all the attention that can be spared from the daily task. This stream of tendency is directed by women who, having spent years at a university, find themselves without means of livelihood, and by men of pious aspiration who are unwilling to endure the hard rule of the religious life. They console themselves with the new “profession” of “social service,” by which is meant a desire to “uplift” humanity in the mass by changing their environment, in the hope that their characters may be changed thereby.

The suggestion of the present writing is that a part at least of the public mind should abstract itself from the abnormal and become fixed upon beauty, that it should concern itself a little less with disease and crime, and a little more with art. There is, of course, in every considerable city an Art Association; and these Associations might well consider what they can do to dispel the darkness of democracy that is coming upon the world. They have for the most part contented themselves with painted pictures; but painted pictures are not the whole of art, as art is not the whole of life.

There is no permanent interest in pictures of scenes which have never come under one's own observation, unless they are of scenes which no earthly eye has ever beheld; but even religious pictures cannot be rightly or fully apprehended unless one knows something of the human life which brought them forth. The eye must be supplemented by the memory. There is still less interest or value in scenes which have been witnessed and recorded by the outward eye of an alien artist.

It was only after two years residence in Flanders that one obtained an adequate apprehension of the forms, the lights, and colours that go to make up the pictures painted by artists in the Low Countries. We have no background of the mind to these foreign pictures. We can see them only through the eyes of our own artists, who have already shown us pictures we could understand.

It is quite true that once a year these Associations hang upon their walls a collection of Canadian pictures; but it is done as a concession to the artists with the amiable intention of doing them good, to encourage art, as the saying is. This is not the reward the artist demands. His task is difficult and delicate. It breeds doubt and scepticism in his own mind. He requires an understand-

ing of his end, an assurance that his labour is not in vain,—not approval so much as appreciation.

In a community that is too careless to notice, and too ignorant to understand, there is no place for the artist. He goes to France or England; but to what place may the musicians now go? The business of an Art Association is to make itself a little less ignorant and a great deal less careless, to make of itself an aristocracy of taste, curious about things of the mind, to do for the artists what they cannot do for themselves.

The only encouragement we can give to art is to develop the sense of beauty in ourselves, to consider the artist as our benefactor when he shows us the thing of beauty he has made. To display a collection of unfamiliar scenes upon the walls is merely to confuse and bewilder all but the artists. The real Art Association of Montreal, for example, is a little club so humble that few have even heard its name, although it has assembled with extreme regularity for more than forty years. To this club everything in Montreal that has been painted or written or fabricated has first been brought. The suggestion then is that artists be persuaded to display upon the walls at any time everything they have done, and not alone at set times what a Committee thinks it good for the public to see.

It is not enough that we undertake to afford safe housing for painted pictures. Any warehouse will do as much. A beginning of larger duties has been made in Ottawa, in Montreal, and Toronto; but too few are aware that one may now see and examine, especially in the Ontario Museum, the product of craftsmen other than those who work in line and colour. The immediate business of any Association is to enlarge the collection of all beautiful things whether wrought in colour, in iron, in textiles, or in stone, so that the spacious rooms shall surrender the impression of mere emptiness.

Artists already submit pictures on loan, but every member should be persuaded that he should exhibit within the walls any beautiful thing that comes into his possession. It is quite possible that when he sees it side by side with its neighbours he will discover that it is not beautiful at all, that he was ignorant of beauty, and that he had been swindled in the purchase. That I conceive to be the first purpose of any Association, the education of its own members. The trouble in the past has been that we have been invited to assemble merely to admire a collection which higher authority had pronounced to be very good, instead of being encouraged to perceive for ourselves what is good, and to eschew what is ugly and evil.

The social fabric is falling. The old are left in gloomy isola-

them. The young of the rich follow their youthful devices, more devoted of wholesome entertainment than the children of the slums. The dance is their only refuge; colour is for facial decoration; and the denizen of the African jungle is their arbiter in music. There is an art in movement, but it is the most primitive of all forms, and is practised best by those who have never learned or have forgotten any higher form of art. The charm of the Canadian winter, of the huge and starlit night, of the open air, has succumbed to the hot seductiveness of the African tropic; and the old have stood by, consenting.

I have no warrant for assuming the rôle of the preacher or the mouth of the prophet; but I would be misusing the opportunity of these pages did I not declare that it is the business of all Art Associations, as never before, to infuse some sense of art into the life of their city; or at least to inform the young that such a thing as art exists, by which life may be enriched and made more interesting. The young, like bees, will swarm into any hive. Let them swarm into the Art Associations. Let them practise the art of movement upon those floors to music that is not degrading; and in the gyrations the eye may be arrested by a picture, a figure, or a piece of beautiful craftsmanship. The dance is good to look upon, and the old also would be attracted, provided they were not obliged to remain until four o'clock in the morning. Both young and old might be inveigled in the afternoon from the streets to tea tables set amongst the pictures, where they may mutually learn that the young are not entirely foolish nor the old entirely futile.

One is ready to be told that there may be technical difficulties, but all that is required is a declaration of policy; and the members may well be left to carry it out at their own charge, as is done in every other club which has a habitation. After this manner will be created an atmosphere of art to which each will bring all that thrives in such an atmosphere, leaving outside the more transitory and trivial concerns of life.

The prophet and the artist may seek the desert for contemplation; the desert has never bred a prophet or artist of its own. They are the flower of life, and can bloom only in congenial soil. It is the business of an Art Association to develop a soil and create an atmosphere round about the members. In their halls the artist is now the last person to be found. In Canada all artistic effort is dissipated in the vast continental space. An artist in line, colour, or words, who works in seclusion perishes of inanition.

The present plea is that the Art Associations attract into their rooms—many of which are spacious and beautiful—all who have

any desire for beautiful things, going out into the highways, if need be, and compelling them to come in. There they may learn what is being thought and done; and they will be astonished to know how many workers there are, how scattered, and how diverse.

Arts decay. They do not wholly perish. Like the vine in the Greek fable, they may be eaten to the root by the goat; but the vine will grow again, and yield an oblation to be poured upon the goat when his body lies dead upon the altar. The drama at this moment is the worst gnawed vine. The machine that makes the dead pictures of living emotions is the goat. It too will pass; but in the meantime let us not depise those humble painters, writers, and players who are doing their poor best to nourish this root of art out of a ground that is exceedingly dry. The least you who read these pages can do is to look with eye, and mind, and heart upon their performance. It will do them good; it will do good to art; and, best of all, it will do good to yourselves. For all art is one; and the kingdom of art also is within you.