

CAN APPRECIATION OF ART BE TAUGHT?

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THE only way one can possibly judge as to whether there is an answer to this question of whether the appreciation of art can be taught, is by the observation of cases in which one has attempted to teach it; and one can never be certain in those cases whether it was not there before one began one's work. That is to my mind the great difficulty in finding an answer to the question, and I am afraid that careful observation, extending over the last fifteen years, has led me to the conclusion that in the widest sense of the words, the appreciation of art cannot be taught.

That may sound rather a counsel of despair; but I do think that there are certain means by which, if it exists even in the most embryonic form, it can be drawn out. I am thinking more particularly of drawing out, of discovering the power of art appreciation in quite young children; because to tell the honest truth, I think if one leaves it to a little bit later, if it is there and sprouts of its own accord, exactly like potatoes left in a dark cellar, it produces nothing more than a very weak and misdirected growth. I think, therefore, that the only really useful way of handling the existing power of appreciation of art in children is by starting very young.

The thing that first put the idea into my mind that it might be interesting, if not useful, to draw out children in this way, was when I was for my sins, and also I suppose for the sins of the public, the daily public lecturer in the National Gallery, and I used to have the experience of taking round the Gallery such an audience as would attach itself to me, on the principle of the man who begins to hawk a patent medicine in the fair and gradually acquires his audience as he goes on. That audience ranged over a very wide field. I used to get all kinds of adults in those crowds, and I found that the vast majority
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of them—I say this with great respect for the British public—had no conception that they were in the National Gallery for the purpose of anything but looking at and probably disliking pictures. The idea that they were there to discover, for themselves, sources of pleasure and education was a thing that simply had never got into their heads.

That, I think, exhibits the adult in painful contrast with the small child. On the whole the very small child is convinced at the very beginning of things that the world has been created for its express amusement, for its pleasure and enjoyment. It is always a shock to a child to find that anything in this world is not enjoyable. That, I think, is a general principle upon which we can rely. The child that has been banged about and driven from pillar to post is prepared to enjoy itself even under the most unpromising circumstances. When I was a little boy I used to go to tea with my great aunt week after week, and I always continued to expect to enjoy myself. I know that I never did, but it took me a long time to give up the hope that I should.

So when one brings children into their first contact with avowed works of art, I think we have a tremendous responsibility to see that their natural tendency to enjoy themselves gets its outlet. That is the only way I know of making the appreciation of works of art a natural thing to a child.

I am not going to bore you with a lot of theoretical methods. I am just going to tell you

about one method which caused me enormous amusement, and which I think produced good results. I remember having to do quite unofficially with some fifteen or twenty children of the most extraordinarily varying temperaments, and ranging from about the difficult age of six to the still more difficult age of fourteen. I really had no business to be interfering with those children at all, but I was asked to help in this very matter of getting them to look at the best pictures. What I did was to choose a set of pairs of pictures. It sounds a very stupid thing to do, but I chose a set of pairs of pictures, which were as like one another as possible in general appearance, and as unlike one another as possible in general feeling, and I relied upon the child's natural instinct to compare everything that comes within its purview. You know how they compare people. You know the disconcerting way in which they compare the characters of people they have

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only met once, and are painfully and astonishingly right sometimes.

I chose for them Bellini's "Doge Leonardo Loredano," and I put it side by side with Rembrandt's "Man in a Polish Head Dress." I left the pictures with them for a fortnight and did not say anything, but I put them where the children's attention could wander on to them when they were supposed to be doing something else; when they got weary of the restraint of trying to find the answer to a sum, when they knew perfectly well they could turn it up at the end of a book and were too honourable to do so, I knew their eyes would wander then on to these two pictures, and they would recognize they were both human beings in a different kind of atmosphere, producing upon them a different kind of reaction. They would find they were enjoying the colour in one and the light in another. They would ultimately ask questions. Some were swift to ask questions, some very slow, but inevitably they came to the point at which they wanted to know why those two pictures were different. What was the difference between them? They wanted to be told everything. It does not matter what you tell a child about a picture so long as it is true. It does not matter whether you talk to them about the subject or the colour or the light, but let them start doing the talking and induce them to do so by setting a trap of that kind, and just when they are getting interested, whip them away.

Never put different pictures together without having a hope that certain questions will be asked about them within a certain time, and do not attempt to stimulate those questions. Do not attempt to worry the child to look at the picture for a moment, because the moment you are asked to look at anything and admire, you know perfectly it is not either your critical or appreciative faculty that comes uppermost but a kind of sense of shutting into your shell, a kind of rebellion against dictation with regard to your sense of beauty.

I led a man most gently the other day, most—I thought—tactfully, most gradually, up to a rather remarkable modern picture. I did not talk about the picture. I waited for him to make the first remark, and I steered him so that the picture came across him when he was in the middle of a sentence about something else. He stopped in the middle of that sentence and said, "Oh, good Lord." That inhibited the man from the moment he felt he had been led up to that picture. He felt

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he had had a shock, in the way of asking him to assimilate something utterly unfamiliar to him, and from that moment it was hopeless. I shall never get that man to look at a picture painted since 1890 again.

That is the kind of shock we have to avoid in the case of children. We want to let these things steal in on them unawares. We want their sense of beauty to be part of their sense of enjoyment, not a thing that they are going to be taught by line and rule. Until they have begun for two or three years to get accustomed to expect something new to think about or something pretty to look at, it is not a bit of good trying to help them in the direction of what kind of question they are going to ask.

But the moment they begin to ask the same kind of questions about a series of different pairs of pictures, you may put six pictures in the room instead of two, and you may begin to point out contrasts and differences of point of view in pictures with which they are familiar.

I want to point out very carefully that I am not talking about the teaching of art history. That will come later, and come at a point at which the child is already interested in pictures, has begun to realize the extraordinary differences of outlook, period, point of view which they express, and wants to know the history of them, exactly as he wants to know, if he is at all a natural child, something about the history of the place he lives in and the people he knows, and gradually extends his ideas to the fully developed historic sense.

All this sounds, and is, a little confused, a little without direction, but the main principle, the thing that I am sure you will all agree about is this, that æsthetic appreciation is definitely a form of enjoyment. It is not a mental exercise. It is an emotional release, and the moment that you begin to try to create an emotional atmosphere by deliberate means, you are absolutely turning it into an intellectual exercise.

The whole of the educational side in relation to the enjoyment of pictures, the enjoyment of sculpture or architecture, must arise out of the knowledge of the subject, the realization of the principles upon which order, balance, rhythm are based in common life. When a child realizes that every movement that he makes has to be controlled by both brain and instinct together in order to get balance and rhythm, he will be able to appreciate balance and rhythm when he finds

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them in a picture—but not until they are part of this, of his ordinary life. It is no good giving them names; they have to be facts before the names mean anything at all.

Further, we must always try to realize that the appreciation of art is a totally different thing from the knowledge of the principles of art, although this will help one later. But really the joy in a good picture is a thing which must come first, before one knows that it is a good picture.

The final important thing about the development of the appreciation of beauty and art in children is that they must never, so far as you can help it, see a bad picture. I have often been asked whether in this comparative system it would not have been a good thing to show them a really bad picture alongside of a really good one. I could not think of any other analogy but to say that I did not think it would be a very good way of teaching children to enjoy good food for you to mix it with poisons. Although a child might enjoy the good picture instinctively and turn with horror from the bad one, I think it is a dozen to one that he would probably enjoy the bad one more than the good, for the simple reason that it would have some aggressive, some abnormal, some ridiculous element in it which would attract him; and in that fact, in the fact that children are not necessarily moved by the finest and the highest kind of beauty, appears to me to be what I might call the æsthetic reflex of the doctrine of original sin. Although I do think

that children have good instincts, I think also they have bad ones exactly like ourselves. I think that we become civilized people by gradually co-ordinating our bad instincts so that they are the same as those of our neighbours, and developing our good ones as far as we possibly can.

We have arrived at a certain standard of beauty in the arts, and we have got to steer children towards that by making them so accustomed to find their natural emotional outlet in things which have established their right to the term of beauty that they will really be quite revolted by anything which transgresses those principles, and at the end of two or three years of gradual training of their power of enjoying balance and rhythm and ordered beauty, they will turn in disgust from things which transgress those laws of order to which they have become accustomed. But it is no good trying to make a child have any emotion of any kind whatever to order. Emotions are very often the result of the laws of conduct, but

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the laws of conduct must not be laid down as being destined to be rewarded by resultant emotions. Neither is the child's logical faculty keen enough to arrive at the comprehension of any such proposition.

Teach a child to see, and it will learn to enjoy the result of seeing; if you can tell it afterwards why it enjoys, then you have set its feet well on the road towards the understanding of principles of beauty. But the great thing is, first of all to teach them, not what to enjoy nor how to enjoy it, but to teach them that their natural instinct to find enjoyment in everything is not going to be deceived or inhibited when they come to look at things which were made deliberately for the purpose of enjoyment—pictures, sculpture, architecture, music—which are after all primarily expressions of joy, and designed to evoke joy.

The moment you bring them into the presence of those things merely in order to fill their minds up with a lot of historical facts and methods and processes of production, it is obvious that you are building a wall between them and their enjoyment instead of opening a road to it. The only way to teach the appreciation of art is never to let the child have anything unfit for its appreciation put before it as a relaxation from the harder task of developing its intellectual side. Let every one of its excursions into idleness be along the road of beauty, and ultimately you will find that it has a world of beauty, in which not merely to be idle but to create.