ART AND ACADEMISM

ACADEMISM in painting has been defined as a sort of formalism imposed on art by philosophers and men of letters through too exclusive an admiration for the works of Classical Antiquity. It might also be described as the expression of that which is officially sanctioned by a governing body of painter-professors, endeavouring to control and instruct public opinion and to regulate painting by a sort of schoolmastering system. The Renaissance gave birth to it, and the pedagogues and flatterers who have beset the person and fame of Raffaello Sanzio, living and dead, have fostered it. It grew up side by side with that dignification and ennoblement of painting that is so striking a feature of the sixteenth century, and to it is due the self-consciousness that has haunted the painter ever since. "To this enthronement of Raphael we owe many mediocre and even hateful works. To it we owe the taste for the simpering in religious art; the taste also for modelling that is at once photographic and blurred, . . . the taste for lowered eyelids or for eyes raised piously to Heaven (expressions that the Saints in ecstasy never had), the taste for noble old men, theatrical philosophers, apostles in paper togas; and all this at the expense of truth which has since been found ignoble, of fine colour which has since been thought too material, and of genius which we have treated as madness."[1]

Although the spirit of Academism has persisted for four centuries, during which time it has served as a form of arbitrary criterion whereby the art of an individual or of an epoch may be judged by the layman, there have, nevertheless, always been artists of temperament and of fine sensibility who have ignored the precepts of the Academism of their epoch, and who have sought expression by methods

[1] *La décadence de l'Art sacré,* Alexander Cingria (à l'Art Catholique, Paris), p. 75. In fairness both to Cingria and to Raphael it should be said that it is at the flatterers of Raphael and those who have, as it were, "canonized" him that Cingria aims, rather than at the painter.

that are less dictatorial and pedantic, and, in fact, more proper to art itself. For the outward appearance of Academism is always changing. The English or French Academism of to-day, for example, presents a very different aspect to that of the time of Frith or of Bouguereau, and the *primum mobile* of this apparent development, particularly during the last seventy years, is to be sought not within the academic body but without. It springs, in fact, from the influence of those men who have been inimical to the spirit of Academism, and who consequently, during their lifetime, have had to submit to some degree of neglect, contempt, or even acute mental persecution. To hold aloof from Academism has usually been to court obscurity and poverty; for submission to the academic doctrine of the century has proved in all ages to be the easy road, if not to lasting fame, at least to immediate recognition and preferment. The popularity even of Rembrandt was not proof against his desertion of the academic idiom of his day, and the story of the contempt and neglect that were heaped upon the head of the greatest painter of the nineteenth century is too well known to call for further notice.[2] But recognition, denied to a "rebel" artist during his lifetime, is very frequently given him after his death, and it is then that the very principles that the intractable painter has stood for are, to a limited and *safe* extent, integrated in the academic teaching of a future generation. In reality it is to the influence of a long line of "rebel" or semi-rebel artists that Academism has owed its ability to survive; it is from the rebels that eventually she derives the nourishment that enables her to preserve a respectable appearance of modernity combined with stability.

Arising, as we have seen, from the preciosity of the late Renaissance, Academism received official recognition in France under Louis XIV. The French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, founded by Richelieu and fostered by Colbert, was the precursor of our own Royal Academy,

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[2] Not only was Cézanne quite unable to dispose of his pictures, but he was regarded by certain of his countrymen as mad.

established in 1768 largely through the interest and generosity of George III. For some years past there had been a growing desire among English painters for some such foundation, and the phenomenal public interest in an exhibition of painting at the Foundling Hospital emboldened a number of them to petition the king to give his patronage to a scheme for the establishment of "a well-regulated school or academy of design for the use of students in the arts, and an annual exhibition open to all artists of distinguished merit." His Majesty not only approved the plan but nominated the original thirty-six members and guaranteed the institution against financial loss. Reynolds was appointed the first President, the "instrument" was drawn up defining its constitution and government, and within a month the schools were opened in Pall Mall near the site of the present Junior United Services Club. No change in the laws that govern this foundation is made without the Royal consent.

Academism, both in France and England, was for long almost entirely dominated by the taste for the Classical and the Antique; and indeed to this day, drawing from "the antique" is an important part of the instruction given in many schools. But as a connecting link between the purely Classical teaching of the early academies and the realistic landscape-painting of modern times, a somewhat curious phenomenon may be seen in the development of the Romantic treatment of the subject, the style associated with such names as Salvator Rosa and Claude le Lorrain, and of those painters who delighted in such subject-matter as crags, ruins, Pagan temples, rocky or mountainous wastes, and who would combine seas, woods, ships, cattle and figures in a single canvas. Turner, in his early years, was very much under the influence of this form of the academic development, but the growing English school of independent and non-academic painters, the Cromes, Cotman, Stark, Vincent and Thirtle, was soon to exert a powerful influence upon the accepted method of treating landscape and to prepare the way for the full development of Constable and of Turner himself, to whom Monet, Pissarro, and the French Impressionists of the 1860's were not ashamed to admit their in-

debtedness.[3] It fell to the lot of such Academicians as Sargent, Solomon and Tuke to reconcile (as far as this could be done) the appearance of Impressionism with the existing academical tradition, and the legacy that we have received from them forms the backbone of the academical idiom of to-day.

Such then, in the briefest possible terms and in so far as it affects our own country, is the history of Academism from the late Renaissance to our own times. But Academism has never been allowed to rest for long in peace, and the problems that are presented to her to-day are of a more disturbing nature than ever before. No matter what concessions she has felt called upon to make in the past, there has been, in every generation, a renewal of that disconcerting restlessness on the part of those troublesome spirits whom she would be so glad to be able to ignore, and who refuse to share with her that unruffled quiescence that she would be so happy to achieve. It is as if, for four centuries, the citadel of Academism has had to withstand successive waves of attack from successive generations of those who have justly resented her domination—and, strong though she is, the strain is beginning to tell. Seen in this light, the history of painting during these centuries would seem to be best represented not (as is generally supposed) as a forward progress, but rather as a gradual process of disintegration, a gradual breaking up of the principles imposed on her by pedants and archaeologists, a gradual freeing of painting from the constraint that has been unjustly put upon her. It is as if, in mid-Renaissance, the art of European painting had reached a certain peak, and that at this point *official* painting had, as it were, hardened and crystallized into Academism. At this point, too, there began that continuous conflict between such painters as could fit comfortably within the academic mould and those who have been in revolt against what has appeared to them as a lifeless and sterile tradition

[3] It was during the siege of Paris, when Monet and Pissarro were in London, that they became acquainted with Turner's work. Mirbeau, in *Des Artistes*, relates how, after their first London exhibition, the French Impressionists gracefully acknowledged their debt to Turner.

—between the attackers and the defenders of the academic ideal. Academism, meanwhile, has sought to safeguard herself by a two-edged policy; first, by the obvious expedient of excluding the innovators from her official exhibitions (as Cézanne was excluded from the Salon des Beaux Arts), and secondly, by granting concessions, that is, by a cautious and judicial assumption of such matter from the "new" men as she felt herself able to digest; and this she has done not only to placate a growing appreciation among the critics for the work of these same "new" men, but also in order to foster her own development. By this second expedient, Academism has kept intact her essential quality of authoritative pedagogism and, at the same time, has been able to make some show of keeping abreast of the times. By this means too she has incorporated within herself the legacy of the English landscapists and withstood the challenge of the English and French Impressionists. Whether or not she will be able to survive the onslaught of Cubism, and of abstract art generally, remains to be seen. But this is a point to which we shall return later.

The conflict, so far, has been purely a secular affair. The Church (since men have ceased to look to her as the guardian and inspiriter of art) has been, as it were, a spectator of all that action and reaction that have taken place in the affairs of art. Her treasury of the art of the past, greatly depleted by the violence of her enemies, is naturally enough insufficient for her needs, especially in countries where, as in England, there is a growing Catholic life. But since it has become an *idée fixe* among those who criticize and appreciate the things pertaining to art that art has no concern with either faith or morals, the chief artistic movements of the last three centuries have passed without taking Catholicism into account. Consequently the Church, and she alone, has had to rely for her needs simply and solely on a prolongation of the *old* academic idiom as it was known in the time of Raphael. The opponents of the Church, meanwhile, have seized with delight upon this same idiom and out of it have evolved a photographic and multiform religious art of their own (the very antithesis of the symbolic art of the Early

Church and of that of the Middle Ages) and, by a process of infiltration, this decrepit form of Academism has found its way into the commercialized and industrialized Repository art that is so unhappy a feature of our own times. "The Reformation," writes Alexander Cingria, "has for long destroyed religious art; nor will it permit it to be reborn until the Christian world shall have forgotten the principles that it owes to Protestantism," and further, "the Reformation determined certain tendencies of the spirit that are contrary to the development of religious art, and this not so much by direct action upon Protestantism as by infiltration among Catholics, particularly French Catholics." This he writes with particular reference to Jansenism, itself an enemy to sacred art, "a heresy coming out of the North and proceeding from the Reformation, and which corrupted (I will not say Catholicism itself, since here it found resistance) but the mentality of nearly all modern Catholics and especially French Catholics."[4]

The "art" which we connect with the shop-fronts of the Place St. Sulpice, the Rue Bonaparte, and with the Repositories generally at home and abroad is indeed no art at all, but a commercial substitute for the real thing, an impious and pathetic stop-gap. It is, nevertheless, a veritable prolongation of the idiom of the early academies, and its doll-like saints are in the direct line of spiritual descent from the pietistical Madonnas of Sassoferrato and Carlo Dolci. The post-Renaissance tradition of Raphaelesque art has worn very thin indeed, and yet, if we are to regard the modernist art of to-day, and especially Cubism, as that which is most vigorous and aesthetically commendable, we would indeed seem to be further than ever from reconciling the art of the Church with that of the century, or rather from converting the art of the century to the use of the Church.

The obvious danger of Cubism, and indeed of all forms of purely abstract art, is in its very apparent kinship to Manicheeism, and to all that group of heresies of which the aim has been to free the soul from a hateful entanglement

[4] *Op. cit.*, pp. 47 and 48.

with matter. Such heresies, all tending towards a supercilious pride of the intellect and a contemptuous abhorrence of the flesh and of the natural order in general, have raised their heads again and again in the history of Christianity. Manicheeism, extirpated from Europe in the fifth century, appears later as the Albigensianism or Catharism against which St. Dominic preached. In a milder form the contempt for nature is present again in the Puritanism of Calvin; and Catholics, not unnaturally, look askance at Cubism as a form of art of which the professed aim is to glorify the purity of the human intellect and to hold in contempt the natural created world.

Cubism is not, as some suppose, a "stunt," still less is it a form of idiocy. On the contrary, some of the most gifted and brilliant artists of our time, particularly in France, are deeply concerned with it; and in condemning as "bourgeois" or "academical" all painting that seeks to find beauty in nature rather than in pure intellectual concept, the leaders of the movement have been able to clothe it with a subtle fascination that acts powerfully upon certain minds. It is possible that in Cubism we find the artistic equivalent of Theosophy. Fülöp-Miller relates it to Bolshevism. But wherever it may find its inspiration, it is certain that in its present state of development it can find no reconciliation with the art of the Liturgy, despite the apologetics of Gleizes, Metzinger, and other of its defenders.

Its appearance in the world of art would certainly not seem to have facilitated the task of those who, scandalized by the feebleness of Repository art, are yet seeking a solution of the problem of revitalizing the art of the Church. Those gentle and timid souls who can see no harm in Repository art, and who already instinctively distrust *any* vigorous expression in art, have now a stronger reason than ever for cherishing the "safe," mass-produced objects of piety imported from France or Belgium. Cubism appears to have widened the gulf between the art of the century and that of the Church.

But this, after all, is by no means necessarily the case. Even Cubism may perhaps be found to serve. This form of art (and it is very definitely an art) may yet be an agent in

the rebuilding of a Christian expression in painting, even though its function be a negative rather than a positive one. Cubism is nothing if not dynamic, and it may well be that its destiny is to complete the disintegration of all that is fallacious in the academic ideal, and to enable the painters of a new generation to rebuild from the shattered fragments of art as we know it to-day. Since Berdyaev wrote *The End of our Time,* the notion that we are living even now in a Dark Age from which we are on the point of emerging into a new Middle Age, is one that has taken root in many minds, and a new Middle Age will demand a new Primitive art. The art of the Academies already merges into that of the Museums, and *"doit-on brûler le Louvre?"* is a question that has been the subject of half-serious debate among French artists for a whole generation. An art that can start afresh with the rebirth of a new age will need to forget Bouguereau, Frith and Reynolds. More than this, it must be free from the academism of Raphael and Poussin. And judging by certain works that are already appearing from the hands of English Catholic artists—monastic and lay—the advent of a new Primitive art, freed from archaism, and in our own country, is not to be long delayed.

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