

Heard and Seen

LOOKING AT PICTURES WITH SIR KENNETH CLARK

By way of respite from their indefatigable re-fighting of the battles of 1939-45 (I take it that by about 1971 we shall be getting down to 'I Was Rommel's Batman's Uncle,' No. 368 in the series *Now It Can Be Told, And Just You Try And Stop Us Telling It*) the editors of the *Sunday Times* occasionally suborn some eminent personage to act as guide to the British middle classes in a brief tour round quite another battlefield—admittedly a peripheral one and of no strategic importance—that of painting. Sometimes, I suspect, they don't get quite what they bargained for. Thus Professor Lawrence Gowing, asked to provide some useful tips on sketching for the amateur, offered a ruminative, elliptical, and, to his professional colleagues, fascinating, account of his own profound researches and procedures in the landscape art. Thus Victor Pasmore, of whom it had perhaps been hoped that he would mitigate the austerities of pure abstraction with a little apologetic honey, came up with a difficult, uncompromising and disdainful manifesto with as little of the glad-hander about it as a curled-up hedgehog.

But when Sir Kenneth Clark agreed to contribute a series of articles on important pictures of his own choosing, I think *everyone* must have been delighted with the result. He could not be faulted on matters of fact by the art-historians, being himself an illustrious elder of their tribe. The generality of painters might dissent in detail from his judgments, but they could not dismiss or deride them, based as they are on scrutiny of the works at least as long and acute as any which they themselves would be capable of, and on a far wider frame of historical and cultural reference. And I cannot but think that the rank-and-file readers of the *Sunday Times*, momentarily withdrawing their attention from the re-scuttling of the *Graf Spee* or the re-busting of the Mohne dam, must have been notably enlightened and refreshed.

This astonishing—one would have said impossible—achievement is the outcome of Good Manners presiding firmly over a unique aggregation of talents. Sir Kenneth is learned, but he neither obtrudes the fact nor deprecates it. He is sensitive, but will never hint at states of mind or soul which he is not prepared to help his readers share. His mode of address is friendly without chumminess and detached without aloofness: it enables him to change gear noiselessly and always at the right moment from the factual to the interpretative, from the erudite to the lyrical, from a mood of tart and witty polemic to one of deep appreciative reverence. A short extract from the essay on Vermeer will serve to show the shapely yet pointful excellence of his writing:

‘ . . . To see pattern and depth simultaneously is the problem that exercised Cézanne throughout half his career, and many layers of agitated paint were laid

on the canvas before he could achieve it. Vermeer seems to glide through these deep waters like a swan. Whatever struggles took place have been concealed from us. His paint is as smooth, his touch as uncommunicative, as that of a coach-painter. It is impossible to tell what calculations underlay these beautifully tidy results. His rectangles, for example—pictures, maps, chairs, spinets—fall together with the same kind of harmonious finality that we find in the work of Mondrian. Is this the result of measurement or of taste? Perhaps geometry played a part, but in the end the harmony of shapes must flow from the same infinitely delicate sense of relationships as the harmony of colours.’

The little monographs are in consequence as easy and appetising to read as a good novel. Those who relished them when they first appeared, but were too lazy or disorganized to preserve them from the dustbin, will now be grateful for the chance of acquiring them in the form of a handsome book¹, and moreover added to and enriched both textually and pictorially. There must likewise be many people who feel drawn towards painting but are intelligent enough to realize that it is a labyrinth not to be penetrated without guidance. Such persons should rush, if they haven’t already, to secure their copy. They could not possibly want a better introduction. They have but to surrender themselves to Sir Kenneth’s incomparably persuasive voice; to note well the methodology of his analysis and response; and to gaze unhurriedly at the numerous and excellent reproductions he provides, and they are already well inside the subject. They will find, to their legitimate amazement, that by reading four or five pages and examining as many illustrations they have not only begun to look with understanding and participation at a Van der Weyden, a Goya or a Seurat, but that they have been painlessly instructed in the painter’s biography and character and the relation of the picture in question to his *oeuvre*. There will even be a footnote giving its date, dimensions, provenance and other relevant particulars—O admirable practice!

However, since it is expected of a critic that he should say at least something derogatory about a work under review in order to disarm the suspicion that he is the hireling of author or publisher, I must here avow that, though I have read more books on art by Sir Kenneth, and with more enjoyment, than by any other writer of his stature, I remember surprisingly little of any of them. Making due allowance for obtuseness and inattention on my part, I think that this fact points to the existence of a psychological principle which we might call the Inverse Law of Impressionability, and summarize in the formula *easy in, easy out*. The corollary phenomenon may be observed in those books (usually of central European authorship) which we find exceedingly *difficult* to read: those that by the spikiness of their style and the inspissateness of their argument insist on testing our intellectual equipment to destruction. We fall asleep three or four times over each page, we keep losing the thread, we are pestered and weighed down with footnotes and cross-references. But if we do struggle through to the end our

¹*Looking at Pictures*, John Murray, 37s. 6d.

gain is permanent. Scratched and exhausted we may be, but exhilarated also. We know that we have been through something, that we are entitled to a campaign medal, that we have made an investment, that we have contributed a mite to a collaborative endeavour. Not only shall we securely retain much of what we have learned: we shall be nerved and hardened for the next ordeal.

But if Sir Kenneth's more specifically scholarly writings may be to some extent criticized in the light of this principle, it would be most unfair to do so in the case of the present work—for the obvious reason that his aim in the given context was, quite rightly, to seduce and enchant his readers, and not to put them through an aesthetic-historical assault-course. He was asked for a job of popularization: and we should rather reiterate our admiration and gratitude for the consummate mastery, tact and charm with which he has done it.

CHRISTOPHER CORNFORD

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

Mr Christopher Cornford's criticism in the February issue of *BLACKFRIARS* of the recent exhibition by the Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen at the Building Centre was blistering in its intensity: no gentle roasting, but a real Laurentian affair; and as the Guild, so far as we know, has no saint among its members, our reactions have probably gained us very little merit. However, though I can speak neither for the Guild nor any other of its members, I must admit to having found myself in agreement with a good four-fifths of Mr Cornford's animadversions.

One or two points should in fairness be made. No exhibition of this kind can be planned in advance, as most of the works are an unknown quantity until sending-in day. In this instance, having been invited to hold it in the Building Centre and asked to give it the title of 'Church Building and Art,' it would probably have been wiser to make it an architectural and liturgical exhibition, rather than a general one; and it is to be hoped that one day we may be given this opportunity again, with time to plan it thoroughly in advance and invite appropriate works.

The weakness of the Guild lies in the fact that it is not sufficiently supported by eminent Catholic artists. Why, for instance, is not Mr Cornford himself a member? We need more architects, too, and I would appeal to anyone dissatisfied with the exhibition to come and help us make the next one more creditable.

Mr Cornford's criticism of the weak *faux-naïf* and pseudo-modern works are all justified; but does he look to a future entirely in the hands of the abstract expressionists? His criticism of Michael Mason's 'St Teresa' is interesting: obviously he thinks it would be a better painting if it had no head. In this case, could it have been called St Teresa and would it convey any meaning to the spectator? Abstract impressionism, though an extremely interesting develop-