

ARE THE ARTISTS GOING MAD?

BY GILBERT K. CHESTERTON

It is curious that while the word "camouflage" is incessantly used in numberless and needless applications, the thing itself finds no further use and is hardly applied at all. The term is a tag of journalese; some social or scientific movement is called camouflage, as if our noble language needed to search for a French word for humbug; or some great statesman is called a master of camouflage, when it would satisfy all our simple human needs to call him a liar. In this, perhaps, there is something of a national note, despite all the talk about the practicality of the British nation. In fact, no people is so easily fed with words instead of things, and with a sort of poetical justice instead of practical justice. For no people is satire so much a substitute for reform, instead of a spur to reform. Bumbledom has passed into a proverb without by any means passing out of a practice. And we gave Kaiser Bill, that noisy war-dog, a bad name instead of hanging him.

But in the lighter aspects, at least, it is obvious that camouflage was one of the newest and most curious of the arts of war; and it seems odd that it has not been adopted as one of the arts of peace. To paint things with invisibility would seem to be a military miracle almost as suggestive as the miracles of the latest surgery. It would be almost as humane an act to remove certain features in a landscape as to restore certain features in a face. Many of our large buildings, our public monuments, and even the statues of our great men might often with advantage be made to melt into a confused twilight of distance, so that their lines were indistinguishable. For that matter, whole cities in the wealthiest, most bustling, and businesslike districts of the British Empire seem to call for the subtle brush that would make them look like something else; that would enable the traveler to walk through a commercial high street with the illusion of one walking through a wild woodland glade; and to wander in Sheffield as if it were Sherwood.

Nor, indeed, is there any reason why the new kind of painting should not be applied to the old kind of painting. The entire exhibition of the Royal Academy might be painted in so subtle a manner that the pictures themselves were invisible. Outside landscape-painting and portrait-painting, there are forms of the pictorial art in which such an intervention would be highly interesting. The one school of painting in which the modern world certainly excels, at any rate in enthusiasm and energy, is the painting of the female face. It would be disrespectful to suggest that we often desire the face to be camouflaged, in the sense of completely conjured away and evaporated. But there are composed and even complacent human countenances, of gentlemen and even of ladies, which would be more soothing if they appeared to fade into a pattern like a portion of the wall-paper; or if they could be mistaken at the first glance for a bed-post or a sofa-cushion.

These are, perhaps, ideals too high and remote to be realized; but they

serve to introduce a real question about the technical condition of such arts to-day. It does appear strange that the galleries of advanced art have not shown us a camouflaged school along with the Cubist school or the Futurist or Vorticist schools. The conception of the next step in esthetic progress being an invisible art is very much in line with the others, or even with the very names of the others. A vortex is in its nature the empty center of something tending to vanish; and if, as humanity in its simplicity has hitherto supposed, the future is hidden from us, the thing after the future is presumably more invisible still. And as for Cubism, there is nothing beyond the cube unless there be a fourth dimension; and pictures in the fourth dimension would be happily beyond our vision. Well, let us suppose that this fact smooths a path for the fashionable triumph of the camouflage school of art. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that some practical joker has left the walls of Burlington House entirely bare, and then invited all society to the private view. Suppose he explains that the pictures of the new school are painted with such superb skill that they mix themselves with the atmosphere, that they are absorbed into the air and the environment, that they dissolve by their very sympathy with daylight, or, in short, that they create the delicate illusion of not being there at all. I wonder how many people in such a society crowd would submit to the new situation, and profess an understanding of the new metaphysic and the new technic.

I wonder if any would have the moral courage to say of the academy walls what the child alone had courage to say about the emperor. For the first thing to face about the progress of the arts at present is that, whatever the rights and wrongs of it otherwise, it is supported by masses of social hypocrisy.

Of the artists themselves, of those of them that can really be called artists, of such motives and meanings as can really be traced to a true artistic source, I shall try to take account in all fairness later on. But even if it be in originality and courage that they are admirable, it is in servility and cowardice that they are admired. Merely to wish for advanced art is not anarchism; it is simply snobbishness, and snobbishness more vulgar than the vulgarest worship of rank and wealth. For, after all, there is at least a low sort of sincerity in that sort of snobbery. Rich people can give their sycophants solid pleasure of a sort, for which they can be thanked without falsehood; and it is a shade more honest for men to praise a patron for the champagne and cigars they do enjoy than for the pictures and statues they only pretend to enjoy. But as these great revolutions in art are never patronized by anybody except the very rich, we shall all be relieved to hear that the two different types of snobbishness can generally be practised at the same dinner-table. Anyhow, the fashion in these things is almost always some form or other of intellectual cowardice, and many eminent persons say to one another, "A very interesting experiment," or, "An attempt to approach life from a new angle," when, if they were moved suddenly to candor, they would look at one another and say, "Are all the artists going mad?"

§ 2

In one respect at least the artists are really to blame. The artists, in the narrower sense of the painters, are in one sense very narrow indeed. They are

progressive: that is, they deal in terms of time and not of eternity. It is odd to notice how the very titles given to the new schools have often referred only to the sequence of time; just as if one controversialist were called a Thursdayite, and the other completely eclipsed him by being a Fridayite. We see this in the very name of Post-Impressionist and in the very name of Futurist. It is equally idle for a man to boast of coming after something he does not like, and of coming before something he cannot know. In the latter case a man is merely fleeing to the future as to a sort of refuge. In the former case it is clear that a Post-Impressionist style cannot score by being after Impressionism, any more than Preraphaelite style can by being before Raphael. The value must be in some intrinsic qualities apart from order or sequence, and in that sense the names of Cubist and Vorticist are more rational, even if the things themselves do not convince every one of their rationality.

But touching this matter of time, there does seem to be a rather peculiar quality about modern painters. I have never understood why painters are so much more terrified than poets or prose writers of the notion of being behind the times. It seems probable, at present, that they will really find themselves behind the times. They will find themselves the last people left alive, to believe in this silly nineteenth-century notion of being in advance of the times. All the thinkers who really think, and all the theorists whose theories seriously count, are growing more and more skeptical about the very existence of progress, and certainly about the desirability of this sort of self-swallowing and suicidal kind of progress. The notion that every generation proves worthless the last generation, and is in its turn proved worthless by the next generation, is an everlasting vista and vision of worthlessness which is fortunately itself worthless.

Curiously enough, there is scarcely any group left that really thinks it worth worrying about except this particular group of the painters of pictures. When Mr. Hugh Walpole first showed his fine talent as a young novelist, he did not think it necessary to maintain that Mr. Thomas Hardy was an old fool. Recognizing that Mr. W. B. Yeats was a good poet did not involve regarding Swinburne as a bad poet. But Whistler and the Impressionists were wildly anxious to show that they were in revolt against the Preraphaelites, and Post-Impressionists were equally crazy about having cut themselves clear of the Impressionists. In their case indeed, as I have suggested, the very name given to them seemed to denote a monomania of rivalry. Impressionism, at least, meant something, if it meant something like skepticism.

"The gentlemen of the jury want none of the impressions on your mind," said the barrister to *Mr. Winkle*, "which, I fear, would be of little service to honest, straightforward men." Still, the Impressionist obviously had received an impression; even if the honest, straightforward men of the Philistine world, gazing at his misty river or cloudy woodland, felt that it had made rather a faint impression. It is human to receive an impression of something, but it is doubtful if anybody ever received a post-impression of anything. The new schools soon learned to secure less progressive, and therefore more logical, names; but that first accident of nomenclature revealed the strange theory of revolutionary succession on which esthetic thought was running at the time. For this preliminary progressive pose the painters themselves are largely responsible;

nevertheless the first step toward justice to their originality must be to ignore their novelty. The only way of judging the schools that call themselves new is to imagine what we should think of them if they were old.

Before attempting to set these new studies in these ancient lights, there is a parenthesis here. In the philosophy of art, certainly, there has recently been an abrupt revolution, and in my view a most beneficent revolution. But by being revolutionary it proves it is not progressive. Revolution is always the reverse of progress; for revolution is reversal of direction. By no possibility can the Impressionist's progress in optics be continued in the Cubist's contempt for optics; but the division is even deeper. It was the whole point of Whistler and his school that they produced the picture without troubling about the meaning. We may say it is the point of Picasso and the rest that they paint the meaning without troubling to paint the picture. With them the inmost idea is everything, and the impression is nothing. A scoffer might be content to say that the Impressionist called a woman an arrangement, and the Futurist calls an arrangement a woman. At the one extreme was "A Portrait of a Lady" in which the face was actually left out lest it should look intelligent, and so rival the tones of dress and background. At the other is the "Portrait of an Englishwoman" in the little brochure called "Blast," which consisted wholly of rods and squares mathematically symbolizing merely the mystery of her soul. One may fancy that her soul escaped even this analysis; but it is something that men are now searching for the soul. It is something that the materialism of the "technical" time has given place to such shameless mysticism.

Now, I am well aware that there is a mass of new literature devoted to the exposition of the new art, and that in this all sorts of metaphysical and psychological explanations can be found for each of the different schools in turn. Thus, to take the simplest example, I have seen a picture by an eminent painter representing the dazzle and vivacity of a café, in which a lady, possibly the barmaid, had one eye in one corner of the picture while her teeth smiled in a similar isolation in another corner. I have also seen a printed philosophical explanation of this picture, which appeared to be pointing out that the impression of rush and rapid gesture could be conveyed only by distributing the lady in this way. It was dynamic art, as distinct from the static art to which humanity has hitherto been harshly limited. In the same way I have seen an explanation of Cubism, as giving to painting the dimensions hitherto confined to sculpture, just as the scattered features described above were supposed to give to painting the dynamics hitherto confined to drama. To all of which I am quite content to answer that they do not give it. I venture to put aside all these metaphysical and psychological arguments, because in such a case they are arguments in a circle. These men may be justified in using an eccentricity for the sake of an effect; but they cannot go back and prove the effect from the eccentricity. It cannot be logical to excuse a method because it makes a point so plain, and then to explain that the point must remain obscure until we understand the method.

Rush and rapidity of movement are very vivid things, and if there is a way of producing them, even an unscrupulous or unbalanced way of producing them, we shall know when they are produced. But when I meet with a human eye in my

travels round one corner of a canvass, and later on encounter a smile, all by itself, like the Cheshire cat, in another corner, I do not receive any sense of rush or rapidity. It has no suggestion of dynamics, though to some humorists it might suggest dynamite. To me it does not suggest even that, but merely a sort of meaningless and untidy pattern. I leave out the question of whether in any case a picture ought to be dynamic, when it is obviously destined to be static. I can imagine that the most sympathetic critic, when he had sat opposite that striking picture for ten or twelve years, where it hung in the place of honor in his dining-room, would at last begin to think that the crisis of the scattered lady might well be passed; and that she might possibly, so to speak, pull herself together. But I willingly admit that this applies in a lesser degree to any picture of action, as action is expressed in sloping limbs or flying drapery. The point here is that the philosophers certainly have not proved, either in theory or practice, that lost teeth and lonely eyeballs are a better image of motion than the limbs or drapery in the sense of a more immediate or informing image. I think they mean at best that it is a fresher image for those who are tired of the limbs and drapery, having had them in the dining-room for ten years. And that brings us back to the point reached before the beginning of this parenthesis.

§ 3

The only sense in which any art has any business to be new is that in which the most ancient, even the most antiquated, art is new. If a young artist can really assure us it has all the novelty of the Pyramids, or that it is as fresh and up to date as the Parthenon, we may really look forward to his doing something unexpected. For it is the definition of the old masterpieces that we cannot expect them even when we have seen them. About all great work there lingers a white light as of morning, which is the original wonder at their being done at all. The mystical way of putting it is to say that any act of creation has in it something which shows man as the image of his Creator. The practical way of putting it is that another man can often see the thing depicted more clearly in the copy than in the original. And it is perfectly true, as the modern artists say more excitedly, but all artists say more or less moderately, that in order to waken this spirit of wonder, the copy must never be quite a correct copy. There must always be something in it to show that it has passed through the wondering mind of man; that man has deliberately set it in a new light, sometimes by selection and omission, sometimes by the wildest exaggeration.

These are the truisms of the topic, but, like other truisms, they tend to be hidden much more deeply than heresies. It is not a condemnation of a work of art to say that it is not realistic; but it is a condemnation of it to say it is not idealistic, in the sense of pointing toward this ancient ideal of art, the awakening of the mood of wonder. Whether the more ungainly modern tricks do awaken it we will discuss in a moment; but the distinction between the idealistic criticism of them and the merely realistic criticism which many would offer, must first be made clear.

It can be made clear enough for convenience by an old and familiar anecdote of the arts. It has often been recalled, in reply to realistic complaints,

that Turner answered a critic who complained that he had never seen such clouds by saying, "Don't you wish you could?" It is not so often realized that the phrase does actually provide a very practical test for a distinction between some artistic falsifications and others. It really is true that any man of moderate imaginative culture does wish he could see some of Turner's sunset clouds, too scarlet to be mortal blood and too bright to be earthly fire. But it is not equally self-evident, to say the least of it, that any man wishes he could see one of Mr. Epstein's statues walking about the street in the monstrous function of a man. I am not here denying that the Epstein monster may touch the nerve of wonder in another way; I am only pointing out that Turner's saying, so often quoted and so seldom applied, does subject these things to another test, which is perfectly rational, but not in the least realistic. There is a real difference between the exaggeration of which we can effectively ask, "Don't you wish you could?" and the other exaggeration of which we can promptly reply, "No; I thank God I can't."

There is another point about Turner's appeal to the imagination of the spectator himself, and even of the carping critic himself. The tragedy of humanity has been the separation of art from the people. Indeed, it is a queer fact that the same progressives who insist that government shall be democratic often insist that art must be oligarchical, and "the public," which is a god when they are talking about votes and statues, becomes a brute when they are talking about books and pictures. But there are wiser men of genius, such as Tolstoy and William Morris, who have clearly perceived the inhumanity and perilous pride of merely aristocratic art. They have sought to bridge the abyss between the sense of beauty and the sentiment of humanity, and those who have most studied it have agreed with Morris that it was most nearly bridged in the Middle Ages. The medievals knew that a normal man does wish he could see a cloud of scarlet and gold, and therefore they were not sparing of scarlet and gold in their illuminated manuscripts or their church windows. If any one had complained that he had never seen St. Michael in golden armor with crimson wings, they would certainly have answered, with the most orthodox propriety, "Don't you wish you could?" They also knew that the normal man likes monsters, grotesque and fantastic forms as strange as any in the studio of a modern sculptor. Only from motives of lucidity, they labeled them dragons and demons instead of admirals and society ladies. In other words, they did it in such a way that, while the angel was quite free to soar and the devil to dance far out of the reach of the realist, the meaning of these things was not missed by a class more numerous than realists, and that is, real men and women. They united all men in the spirit of wonder, from the most cunning craftsman who wondered at the thing being carved beautifully, to the most ignorant rustic who wondered at it being carved at all. And this was sound philosophy; for, properly considered, the wonder of the rustic is even more reasonable than the wonder of the craftsman. It is really in that sense a miracle that it should be carved at all. A monkey cannot do it; and when a man does it, he is exercising a divine attribute. This is what gives their strange poetry to the primitives, that the people were in a certain simple, but very sane, mood in which they could wonder at the most primitive work. In that sense they could wonder even at bad work. And we may fairly say that the moderns are now trying to do bad work in order to have something to wonder at.

§ 4

I do not make it as a point against them; on the contrary, I think it is the only real case for them. The wisest among them saw that the power of the primitives consisted in being primitive, in awakening the primal wonder; they saw that their very crudity somehow records the great creative birth or transition. It amounted in practice to the experiment of making ugly things, that they might recover an astonishment no longer accorded to beautiful things. One of those few great Frenchmen who founded all that was sincere in the movement said to somebody, "I am trying to surprise myself." When we have understood that sentence, we have understood everything that can rightly and sympathetically be urged for the eccentricities of the new art. All the rest of it, and by far the greater part of it, is vulgar quackery and brazen incompetence. The average artist of the sort is a man who paints an unconventional picture because he has not enough originality to paint a conventional one. But the few men of genius who began the dance had an idea in their heads; and it is only by understanding it that we can understand the answer to it.

The real weakness of the best of the new Primitives is that their quaintness does not arise out of a universal world of wonder, but rather out of a world without wonder; it comes not from simplicity, but from satiety. The shepherds who watched the first sketches of Giotto were surprised that he could draw a face, and therefore still more surprised that he could draw a beautiful face. But the modern Giotto is tired of beautiful faces, and feels that there might yet be a surprise in the drawing of ugly faces. The modern painter, in the phrase I have already quoted, is trying to surprise himself. To judge by some of the society beauties he paints, we might say that he is trying to frighten himself. And there would be this degree of serious truth in it, that this typical sort of modern artist, whatever else he is, is primarily a self-tormentor. At the best he is pinching himself to see if he is awake, not having about him the real white daylight of wonder to keep him wide-awake. At the worst he is sticking pins all over himself to find the one live spot, as the witch-finders of a livelier age did it to find the one dead spot. I am not sure that even the old picture of the live people brought to death is more horrible than the new picture of such dead people brought to life. Anyhow, it is surely obvious that there is no permanent progress that way; that we cannot really be rejuvenated by becoming more and more jaded, or making mere insensibility a spur to sensations. Still less, of course, do we so come any nearer to our problem of the revival of popular art. If the mob does not always enter into the feelings of geniuses, at least it cannot be asked to enter into all the feelings of lunatics, or men whose methods are as individual and isolated as the maniacs of an asylum. The real solution does not lie that way, but exactly the opposite way. It does not lie in increasing the number of artists who can startle us with complex things, but by increasing the number of people who can be startled by common things. It lies in restoring relish and receptivity to human society; and that is another question and a more important one.

It is enough to say here that it not only means making more Giotto's, but also making more shepherds. It might be put defiantly by saying that the great modern need is to uneducate the people. I do not mean merely uneducate the

populace; I mean more especially uneducate the educated. It might be put much more truly by saying, as we have to say at the end of so many entirely rationalistic inquiries, that what the modern world wants is religion or something that will create a certain ultimate spirit of humility, of enthusiasm, and of thanks. It is not even to be done merely by educating the people in the artistic virtues of insight and selection. It is to be done much more by educating the artists in the popular virtues of astonishment and enjoyment. It is not to be achieved by the artist leaving the crowd further and further behind in his wild-goose chase, nor even by the crowd running hard enough to keep up with the artist; but rather by the artist turning round and looking at the crowd, and realizing that it is rather more interesting than a whole flock of wild geese.