CLIVE BELL: Excerpts from *THE AESTHETIC HYPOTHESIS*

...The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art. I do not mean, of course, that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognizably the same in kind; so far, at any rate, the best opinion is on my side. That there is a particular kind of emotion provoked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, by pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, etc., etc., is not disputed, I think, by anyone capable of feeling it. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of aesthetics. We shall have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects.

For either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of "works of art" we gibber. Everyone speaks of "art," making a mental classification by which he distinguishes the class "works of art" from all other classes. What is the justification of this classification? What is the quality common and peculiar to all members of this class? Whatever it be, no doubt it is often found in company with other qualities; but they are adventitious --it is essential. There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible--significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "Significant Form"; and "Significant Form" is the one quality common to all works of visual art.

At this point it may be objected that I am making aesthetics a purely subjective business, since my only data are personal experiences of a particular emotion. It will be said that the objects that provoke this emotion vary with each individual, and that therefore a system of aesthetics can have no objective validity. It must be replied that any system of aesthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing. We have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feeling for it. The objects that provoke aesthetic emotion vary with each individual. Aesthetic judgments are, as the saying goes, matters of taste; and about tastes, as everyone is proud to admit, there is no disputing. A good critic may be able to make me see in a picture that had left me cold things that I had overlooked, till at last, receiving the aesthetic emotion, I recognize it as a work of art. To be continually pointing out those parts, the sum, or rather the combination, of which unite to produce significant form, is the function of criticism. But it is useless for a critic to tell me that something is a work of art; he must make me feel it for myself. This he can do only by making me see; he must get at my emotions through my eyes. Unless he can make me see something that moves me; he cannot force my emotions. I have no right to consider anything a work of art to which I cannot react emotionally; and I have no right to look for the essential quality in anything that I have not felt to be a work of art. The critic can affect my aesthetic theories only by affecting my aesthetic experience. All systems of aesthetics must be based on personal experience--that is to say, they must be subjective.

Yet, though all aesthetic theories must be based on aesthetic judgments, and ultimately all aesthetic judgments must be matters of personal taste, it would be rash to assert that no theory of aesthetics can have general validity. For, though A, B, C, D are the works that move me, and A, D, E, F the works that move you, it may well be that x is the only quality believed by either of us to be common to all the works in his list. We may all agree about aesthetics, and yet differ about particular works of art. We may differ as to the presence or absence of the quality x. My immediate object will be to show that significant form
is he only quality common and peculiar to all the works of visual art that move me; and I will ask those
whose aesthetic experience does not tally with mine to see whether this quality is not also, in their
judgment, common to all works that move them, and whether they can discover any other quality of
which the same can be said.

Also at this point a query arises, irrelevant indeed, but hardly to be suppressed: "Why are we so
profoundly moved by forms related in a particular way?" The question is extremely interesting, but
irrelevant to aesthetics. In pure aesthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object, for the
purposes of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object into the
state of mind of him, who made it. Later, I shall attempt to answer the question; for by so doing I may be
able to develop my theory of the relation of art to life. I shall not, however, be under the delusion that I
am rounding off my theory of aesthetics. For a discussion of aesthetics, it need be agreed only that forms
arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular
way, and that it is the business of an artist so to combine and arrange them that they shall move us. These
moving combinations and arrangements I have called, for the sake of convenience and for a reason that
will appear later, "Significant Form."

A third interruption has to be met.
"Are you forgetting about colour?" someone inquires. Certainly not; my term "significant form"
included combinations of lines and of colours. The distinction between form and colour is an unreal one;
you cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space; neither can you conceive a formless relation
of colours. In a black and white drawing the spaces are all white and all are bounded by black lines; in
most oil paintings the spaces are multi-coloured and so are the boundaries; you cannot imagine a
boundary line without any content, or a content without a boundary line. Therefore, when I speak of
significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that
moves me aesthetically.

Some people may be surprised at my not having called this "beauty." Of course, to those who define
beauty as "combinations of lines and colours that provoke aesthetic emotion," I willingly concede the
right of substituting their word for mine. But most of us, however strict we may be, are apt to apply the
epithet "beautiful" to objects that do not provoke that peculiar emotion produced by works of art.
Everyone, I suspect, has called a butterfly or a flower beautiful. Does anyone feel the same kind of
emotion for a butterfly or a flower that he feels for a cathedral or a picture? Surely, it is not what I call an
aesthetic emotion that most of us feel, generally, for natural beauty. I shall suggest, later, that some people
may, occasionally, see in nature what we see in art, and feel for her an aesthetic emotion; but I am
satisfied that, as a rule, most people feel a very different kind of emotion for birds and flowers and the
wings of butterflies from that which they feel for pictures, pots, temples and statues. Why these beautiful
things do not move us as works of art move is another, and not an aesthetic, question. For our immediate
purpose we have to discover only what quality is common to objects that do move us as works of art. In
the last part of this chapter; when I try to answer the question--"Why are we so profoundly moved by
some combinations of lines and colours?" I shall hope to offer an acceptable explanation of why we are
less profoundly moved by others.

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The hypothesis that significant form is the essential quality in a work of art has at least one merit
denied to many more famous and more striking--it does help to explain things. We are all familiar with
pictures that interest us and excite our admiration, but do not move us as works of art. To this class
belongs what I call "Descriptive Painting"--that is, painting in which forms are used not as objects of
emotion, but as means of suggesting emotion or conveying information. Portraits of psychological and
historical value, topographical works, pictures that tell stories and suggest situations, illustrations of all
sorts, belong to this class. That we all recognize the distinction is clear, for, who has not said that such
and such a drawing was excellent as illustration, but as a work of art worthless? Of course many
descriptive pictures possess, amongst other qualities, formal significance, and are therefore works of
art: but many more do not. They interest us; they may move us too in a hundred different ways, but
they do not move us aesthetically. According to my hypothesis they are not works of art. They leave
untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or
conveyed by their forms that affect us.

Few pictures are better known or liked than Frith's "Paddington Station"; certainly I should be the
last to grudge it its popularity. Many a weary forty minutes have I whiled away disentangling its
fascinating incidents and forging for each an imaginary past and an improbable future. But certain
though it is that Frith's masterpiece, or engravings of it, have provided thousands with half-hours of
curious and fanciful pleasure, it is not less certain that no one has experienced before it one half-second
of aesthetic rapture--and this although the picture contains several pretty passages of colour, and is by
no means badly painted. "Paddington Station" is not a work of art; it is an interesting and amusing
document. In it line and colour are used to recount anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the manners
and customs of an age: they are not used to provoke aesthetic emotion. Forms and the relations of
forms were for Frith not objects of emotion, but means of suggesting emotion and conveying ideas.

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...Still, they are not unpleasant, which is more than can be said for that kind of descriptive painting of
which "The Doctor" is the most flagrant example. Of course "The Doctor" is not a work of art. In it
form is not used as an object of emotion, but as a means of suggesting emotions. This alone suffices to
make it nugatory; it is worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is
not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity. It is
sentimental. Art is above morals, or, rather, all art is moral because, as I hope to show presently, works
of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it
ethically of the first importance and put it beyond the reach of the moralist. But descriptive pictures
which are not works of art, and, therefore, are not necessarily means to good states of mind, are proper
objects of the ethical philosopher's attention. Not being a work of art, "The Doctor" has none of the
immense ethical value possessed by all objects that provoke aesthetic ecstasy; and the state of mind to
which it is a means, as illustration, appears to me undesirable.

The works of those enterprising young men, the Italian Futurists, are notable examples of descriptive
painting. Like the Royal Academicians, they use form, not to provoke aesthetic emotions, but to convey
information and ideas. Indeed, the published theories of the Futurists prove that their pictures ought to
have nothing whatever to do with art. Their social and political theories are respectable, but I would
suggest to young Italian painters that it is possible to become a Futurist in thought and action and yet
remain an artist, if one has the luck to be born one. To associate art with politics is always a mistake.
Futurist pictures are descriptive because they aim at presenting in line and colour the chaos of the mind at
a particular moment; their forms are not intended to promote aesthetic emotion but to convey information.
These forms, by the way, whatever may be the nature of the ideas they suggest, are themselves anything
but revolutionary. In such Futurist pictures as I have seen--perhaps I should except some by Severini--the
drawing, whenever it becomes representative as it frequently does, is found to be in that soft and common
convention brought into fashion by Besnard some thirty years ago, and much affected by Beaux-Art
students ever since. As works of art, the Futurist pictures are negligible; but they are not to be judged as
works of art. A good Futurist picture would succeed as a good piece of psychology succeeds; it would
reveal, through line and colour, the complexities of an interesting state of mind. If Futurist pictures seem
to fail, we must seek an explanation, not in a lack of artistic qualities that they never were intended to
possess, but rather in the minds the states of which they are intended to reveal.
Most people who care much about art find that of the work that moves them most the greater part is what scholars call "Primitive."...As a rule primitive art is good--and here again my hypothesis is helpful--for, as a rule, it is also free from descriptive qualities. In primitive art you will find, no accurate representation; you will find only significant form. Yet no other art moves us so profoundly. Whether we consider Sumerian sculpture or pre-dynastic Egyptian art; or archaic Greek, or the Wei and T'ang masterpieces, or those early Japanese works of which I had the luck to see a few superb examples (especially two wooden Bodhisattvas) at the Shepherd's Bush Exhibition in 1910, or, whether coming nearer home, we consider the primitive Byzantine art of the sixth century and its primitive developments amongst the Western barbarians, or, turning far afield, we consider that mysterious and majestic art that flourished in Central and South America before the coming of the white men, in every case we observe three common characteristics--absence of representation, absence of technical swagger, sublimely impressive form. Nor is it hard to discover the connection between these three. Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning.

Naturally, it is said that if there is little representation and less saltimbantry in primitive art, that is because the primitives were unable to catch a likeness or cut intellectual capers. The contention is beside the point. There is truth in it, no doubt, though, were I a critic whose reputation depended on a power of impressing the public with a semblance of knowledge, I should be more cautious about urging it than such people generally are. For to suppose that the Byzantine masters wanted skill, or could not have created an illusion had they wished to do so, seems to imply ignorance of the amazingly dexterous realism of the notoriously bad works of that age. Very often, I fear, the misrepresentation of the primitives must be attributed to what the critics call, "wilful distortion." Be that as it may, the point is that, either from want of skill or want of will, primitives neither create illusions nor make display of extravagant accomplishment, but concentrate their energies on the one thing needful--the creation of form. Thus have they created the finest works of art that we possess.

Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it [is] as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested, we are lifted above the stream of life....Before we feel an aesthetic emotion for a combination of forms, do we not perceive intellectually the rightness and necessity of the combination? If we do, it would explain the fact that passing rapidly through a room we recognize a picture to be good, although we cannot say that it has provoked much emotion. We seem to have recognized intellectually the rightness of its forms without staying to fix our attention, and collect, as it were, their emotional significance. If this were so, it would be permissible to inquire whether it was the forms themselves or our perception of their rightness and necessity that caused aesthetic emotion. But I do not think I need linger to discuss the matter here. I have been inquiring why certain combinations of forms move us; I should not have travelled by other roads had I enquired, instead, why certain combinations are perceived to be right and necessary, and why our perception of their rightness and necessity is moving. What I have to say is this: the rapt philosopher, and he who contemplates a work of art, inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life. In this world the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own.

To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space. That bit of knowledge, I admit, is essential to the appreciation of many great works, since many of the most moving forms ever created are in three dimensions. To see a cube or a rhomboid as a flat pattern is to lower its significance, and a sense of three-dimensional space is essential, to the full appreciation of most architectural forms. Pictures which would be insignificant if we saw them as flat patterns are profoundly moving because, in fact, we see them as related planes. If the
representation of three-dimensional space is to be called "representation," then I agree that there is one kind of representation which is not irrelevant. Also, I agree that along with our feeling for line and colour we must bring with us our knowledge of space if we are to make the most of every kind of form. Nevertheless, there are magnificent designs to an appreciation of which this knowledge is not necessary: so, though it is not irrelevant to the appreciation of some works of art it is not essential to the appreciation of all. What we must say is that the representation of three-dimensional space is neither irrelevant nor essential to all art, and that every other sort of representation is irrelevant.

That there is an irrelevant representative or descriptive element in many great works of art is not in the least surprising. Why it is not surprising I shall try to show elsewhere. Representation is not of necessity baneful, and highly realistic forms may be extremely significant. Very often, however, representation is a sign of weakness in an artist. A painter too feeble to create forms that provoke more than a little aesthetic emotion will try to eke that little out by suggesting the emotions of life. To evoke the emotions of life he must use representation. Thus a man will paint an execution, and, fearing to miss with his first barrel of significant form, will try to hit with his second by raising an emotion of fear or pity. But if in the artist an inclination to play upon the emotions of life is often the sign of a flickering inspiration, in the spectator a tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always. It means that his aesthetic emotions are weak or, at any rate, imperfect. Before a work of art people who feel little or no emotion for pure form find themselves at a loss. They are deaf men at a concert. They know that they are in the presence of something great, but they lack the power of apprehending it. They know that they ought to feel for it a tremendous emotion, but it happens that the particular kind of emotion it can raise is one that they can feel hardly or not at all. And so they read into the forms of the work those facts and ideas for which they are capable of feeling emotion, and feel for them the emotions that they can feel--the ordinary emotions of life. When confronted by a picture, instinctively they refer back its forms to the world from which they came. They treat created form as though it were imitated form, a picture as though it were a photograph. Instead of going out on the stream of art into a new world of aesthetic experience, they turn a sharp corner and come straight home to the world of human interests. For them the significance of a work of art depends on what they bring to it; no new thing is added to their lives, only the old material is stirred. A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy: to use art as a means to the emotions of life is to use a telescope for reading the news. You will notice that people who cannot feel pure aesthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can, as often as not, have no idea what the subject of a picture is. They have never noticed the representative element, and so when they discuss pictures they talk about the shapes of forms and the relations and quantities of colours. Often they can tell by the quality of a single line whether or not a man is a good artist. They are concerned only with lines and colours, their relations and quantities and qualities; but from these they win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than any that can be given by the description of facts and ideas.

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...The good faith of people who feel pure aesthetic emotions is called in question by those who have never felt anything of the sort. It is the prevalence of the representative element, I suppose, that makes the man in the street so sure that he knows a good picture when he sees one. For I have noticed that in matters of architecture, pottery, textiles, etc., ignorance and ineptitude are more willing to defer to the opinions of those who have been blest with peculiar sensibility....For I am certain that most of those who visit galleries do feel very much what I feel at concerts. They have their moments of pure ecstasy; but the moments are short and unsure. Soon they fall back into the world of human interests and feel emotions, good no doubt, but inferior. I do not dream of saying that what they get from art is bad or nugatory; I say that they do not get the best that art can give. I do not say that they cannot understand art; rather I say that they cannot understand the state of mind of those who understand it best. I do not
say that art means nothing or little to them; I say they miss its full significance. I do not suggest for one moment that their appreciation of art is a thing to be ashamed of; the majority of the charming and intelligent people with whom I am acquainted appreciate visual art impurely; and, by the way, the appreciation of almost all great writers has been impure. But provided that there be some fraction of pure aesthetic emotion, even a mixed and minor appreciation of art is, I am sure, one of the most valuable things in the world--so valuable, indeed, that in my giddier moments I have been tempted to believe that art might prove the world's salvation.

Yet, though the echoes and shadows of art enrich the life of the plains, her spirit dwells on the mountains. To him who woos, but woos impurely, she returns enriched what is brought. Like the sun, she warms the good seed in good soil and causes it to bring forth good fruit. But only to the perfect lover does she give a new strange gift--a gift beyond all price. Imperfect lovers bring to art and take away the ideas and emotions of their own age and civilization. In twelfth-century Europe a man might have been greatly moved by a Romanesque church and found nothing in a T'ang picture. To a man of a later age, Greek sculpture meant much and Mexican nothing, for only to the former could he bring a crowd of associated ideas to be the objects of familiar emotions. But the perfect lover, he who can feel the profound significance of form, is raised above the accidents of time and place. To him the problems of archaeology, history, and hagiography are impertinent. If the forms of a work are significant its provenance is irrelevant. Before the grandeur of those Sumerian figures in the Louvre he is carried on the same flood of emotion to the same aesthetic ecstasy as, more than four thousand years ago, the Chaldean lover was carried. It is the mark of great art that its appeal is universal and eternal. Significant form stands charged with the power to provoke aesthetic emotion in anyone capable of feeling it. The ideas of men go buzz and die like gnats; men change their institutions and their customs as they change their coats; the intellectual triumphs of one age are the follies of another; only great art remains stable and unobscure. Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world. To those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form, what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago? The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy.