

Why is an Artist?

MOST people probably are familiar with the foolish and unanswerable question, "Why is a hen?" A question almost equally foolish and unanswerable periodically vexes artist and public alike, "Why is an artist?" And, useless though the attempt may be, the artist continually tries to find some sort of answer to this question, or at least to find some extenuating circumstances that may justify his existence in a world that considers itself serious and strenuous.

There comes a time to every artist, when he begins to wonder why. It matters not whether he be a success or a failure (as success and failure are commonly understood); the time comes and the question must be faced, and if the artist doesn't ask it, the public will. "The first fine careless rapture" of his instinctive early years fades, and his development makes him analytical and self-conscious. It is then that he begins to theorise about art. These remarks are evidence that I for one have reached that period.

How does it happen that we get ourselves "into the complications and entanglements of an artist's life?" I fancy that most of us drift into it gradually as into any other bad habit, and that its beginnings lie so far back in the past that we cannot remember when we scribbled our first caricature on the margin of a school book. Very few men, in the full possession of their faculties, or who have arrived at years of discretion, set themselves deliberately to become artists, and of those who do start thus belated on the journey few arrive anywhere. A man may perhaps deliberately abstain from becoming the artist he might be; but as our bromidic friends so frequently remind us, "it's a gift"; and without it, who, by taking thought, can add a cubit to his stature?

The first conclusion to which the artist comes, when he reaches the self-conscious, auto-inquisitorial stage to which I have referred, is that really he can't help himself, or the predicament into which he has fallen. He adopts what may be called the Calvinistic theory of art which implies a belief that a man may be born to doubt, no less than to be damned, and that his destination is art or hell. It is not a very cheerful or inspiring creed, and while it may foster a certain rugged stoicism, it lies open to the objection that it applies with equal force and completeness to a Michael Angelo and to an idiot, and the personal application of the theory is apt to be disturbing.

But not every artist is content with this somewhat negative reason for his existence. Some of us are bold enough, foolish enough, selfish enough, to say that we are artists because we want to be and because we like it. And this, of course, may be a quite sufficient excuse to the artist himself, but it is not likely that such a reason will satisfy anxious parents, creditors, or critics. To be perfectly consistent, an artist whose sole claim is his own artistic inclination should never exhibit his work to others, save on sweet persuasion or under extreme compulsion and protest.

But this rather sensuous and Epicurean explanation will not serve as an adequate apology for one's existence to those who look for moral purpose, deep thought or high aspiration in everything, art included. 'Art for art's sake' won't satisfy either Puritan or Philistine. How are you going to reconcile such butterfly flutterings as these with the demands of the Anglo-Saxon conscience? Should not the artist have a mission, a message? Should not art create and disseminate sympathy, brotherly love and so forth, as Tolstoi insists?

Undoubtedly, replies our cross-examined self, some such purpose does inspire many artists, and to all of us some faith in a purpose other than paint seems necessary for our complete justification, and for our development, even in paint. And then we run into the difficulty: Is it a purpose that paint or pencil can serve without violence to itself? Is it a message that can be translated into pictorial expression? Some instances we can all call to mind where words would have served the purpose better than lines, colours, shapes and tones. The art of every country includes many painted sermons. And yet—that faith in the ulterior purposes of art has been the justification for the existence of many artists who painted perhaps better than they knew, or than their detractors will admit.

But when the artist is, because, in the first place, he couldn't be anything else, because he wouldn't if he could, because he believes he has a purpose, because he really has a purpose, and finally because he can express that purpose in terms of his own art, he has pretty well justified his right to exist, at any rate, from the artist's point of view.

What of the public's point of view? Why is an artist to his fellow men, and where does he fit in with society? Does he know? Do they know? This is the question which never dies, and never sleeps for such short intervals as those wherein the artist's

own self-questioning slumber. Since, as a social phenomenon he exists, I have no doubt the political economist, the philosopher and the psychologist can find reasons plentiful enough to account for him; but to the artist himself, too often, the question presents itself in all its illogical absurdity.

But this seems clear: to satisfy the demands both of his own conscience and of the collective conscience of mankind he *must* be a real artist, a *maker*, a creator, big or little. Men and nature are his raw material; he must know them better than they know themselves. If he fails to convince, where lies the fault, in the hand that built, or the eye which sees the fabric? And what is the artist going to do about it? He may drive, or he may persuade, but in either case, if he's the real thing, to the extent of his ability, he leads. And he always gives good measure, his dozen is always thirteen. And perhaps that's what art is, that extra egg which was not bargained for, that "joker" that was not in the contract, but which, whether welcomed by the recipient or not, is the one thing that gives the thrill, the surprise, and that justifies the artist's existence. Perhaps after all there is an answer. Why is a hen? Eggs! Why is an artist? Art! ! ?

New Year's Morning, 1918

The year is dead. Of its raven-spread
 The last black plume has passed.
 Death, that remorselessly it shed,
 Has taken itself at last.
 So the bearer of death, like a mortal, dies—
 There is dying that brings relief; ●
 And the shadow of doom, like a shadow, flies—
 There is ending that ends our grief.

The year is dead. What new wing-spread
 Takes now its youngest flight?
 Raven or dove? More death to shed?
 Or restoration bright?
 We watch, and the gloom of our evil days
 Still troubles our longing eyes;
 We watch together—your upward gaze
 Grows clear to the Eastern skies.