

The Role of the Critic in the Education of Taste

In the 1920s, very few people in Britain thought it was a good idea to like, let alone spend money on, contemporary art. By the 1960s, leading opinion almost unanimously believed otherwise. One of the reasons for this dramatic change was the tireless work of the critic Herbert Read, who wrote articles and books, appeared on the radio, mounted exhibitions, founded London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and travelled around the country giving lectures in defence of the virtues of great contemporary artists such as Ben Nicholson, Pablo Picasso and Barbara Hepworth. Like Jeremy Clarkson in the realm of cars, Read changed the dominant sense of what it might be good for us to love in art (97).

We like to pride ourselves on having our own taste, but the truth is, given the demands on our time and the flaws in our psychological make-up, it's very likely that we won't know what we like unless we are encouraged to look rather deep inside ourselves and benefit from the input of others to guide our enthusiasms in fruitful ways. Our doubts about our tastes can be the stuff of rich comedy. Consider the fun that Marcel Proust has with a Madame de Cambremer, who has trouble knowing what it is 'right' to like in art. Towards the end of *In Search of Lost Time*, she declares an enthusiasm for Monet and Degas but a deep suspicion of Poussin, a stance that Proust's narrator, a covert educator of taste, gently interrogates:

'But' I said to her, feeling that the only way to rehabilitate Poussin in the opinion of Madame de Cambremer would be to tell her that he was once again fashionable. 'Monsieur Degas insists that the Poussins at Chantilly are the most beautiful things he knows.'

'Really? I don't know the ones at Chantilly,' said Madame de Cambremer who did not wish to disagree with Degas, 'but I can speak for those in the Louvre, they're horrible.'

'He also admires them enormously.'

'I must go and look at them again. My memory of them is rather vague,' she replied after a moment of silence, as if the favourable judgment she would soon have of Poussin would depend not

on what I had just told her but on the additional and this time definitive examination to which she intended to submit the Louvre pictures.

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 4: 'Sodom and Gomorrah', 1921–2

We shouldn't let the relish with which Proust skewers Madame de Cambremer distract us from the more patient task of trying to understand what precisely her error is, and, since we're more like her than we might like to admit, our own. Madame de Cambremer doesn't know her own mind. This is a forgivable eventuality: how are we supposed to know from the outset which painter has talent? The problem here isn't really uncertainty, though. It is rather the refusal to humbly acknowledge an inability to know one's own concerns; a frailty masked by arrogance. Madame de Cambremer – like many other people – pretends she knows what is important in art and that she is making judgements on the basis of authentic experience, while in fact she hasn't taken the trouble to think and feel, and with a degree of panic simply tries to mimic what she imagines the current fashion to be.

If you were trying to turn the situation around for Madame de Cambremer, mockery wouldn't be the best starting point. After all, part of this woman's problem is that she thinks she should already have sound taste in art without ever having benefitted from a process of education. She thinks she should know the answer, and is therefore less inclined to work through her ignorance. Read knew this problem well. He began from a position of great sympathy for doubt and ignorance, and, in response, kindness was a key part of his educational strategy. He took it for granted that decent, intelligent, well-intentioned people might not know very much about art. Why should they? In particular, he knew that they might be very sceptical of abstract art, but he didn't chastise them for being idiots or nostalgic fools. He didn't have fun at their expense, as Proust would have done. All true education has this structure. The kindergarten teacher doesn't think children are contemptible because they cannot write or are confused about what number comes after fourteen. You are allowed to start,

*Learning to love Hepworth,
with Raphael and Read's help.*
— 98. Barbara Hepworth,
Pelagos, 1946



with honour, wherever you are. Read's tactic was to begin with things that people already acknowledged and approved of. In lectures, he liked to point out that a Madonna and Child by Raphael – one of the most respectable and widely admired artists in the 1930s – was in fact deeply devoted to abstract composition, just like Barbara Hepworth, a contemporary artist he was fond of (98). Read was a master at getting you to admit new works into your private pantheon by directing you towards subtle similarities with ones that had already won your trust.

The greatest critics help us find personally resonant reasons why we might like or dislike certain objects. They take seriously a very strange fact about experience: that we don't automatically know why we love or hate things. We often cannot explain accurately to ourselves or others what it is, really, that is at stake. For example, when we say that something is 'awesome', 'cool' or 'amazing', we are registering our positive reactions, but not explaining them (these words can be grating because we feel bullied rather than seduced into admiration). Criticism is the process of going behind the scenes in the hunt for true reasons.

Even when contemplating extremely celebrated and much-loved images, we are liable to feel painfully silenced by the basic question of why we like them. A good critic can track what is really going on when we are moved by a work, and can put the enthusiasm into words.

Even if we like it, it's a challenge to say what is nice about this picture.
— 99. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503–6



For example, many people have felt there is something special about Mona Lisa's smile (99). In 1869, however, the *Fortnightly Review* published an essay by the art critic and philosopher Walter Pater that gave an articulate, if slightly flowery, insight into what the power of this smile might actually be based upon:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy

of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.

In other, less ornate words, what we may like in Mona Lisa's face is an impression of a combination of vast experience and serenity; a sense that here is a human being who is aware of all sorts of eventualities and dynamics in other people, and is still able to be fond of them. It is really the kind of attitude we long to find in an ideal lover or a friend, someone who might know us for who we truly are, with all our secrets and our darkness, yet still regard us with tenderness and generosity.

There is a crucial continuity between the rather arcane task of teaching us what to look out for in Renaissance paintings and the more popular role of the educator of taste in relation to cars, houses or hamburgers. At root, the work of the critic involves getting people to grasp what is genuinely satisfying and pleasing about something, or what might be disappointing and half-baked about it. Criticism is the effort of being as clear as possible about the basis for our loves and hates. Sometimes it can seem as if it is only concerned with the hating part, with pointing out with derision what is sub-standard, but this negative stance should only ever be an incidental part of the far more important project of identifying what is worthy of admiration.

Nevertheless, improving taste should mean that people regularly get a little more unhappy about certain aspects of their lives. For example, rather than putting up with bad architecture, there should be a collective gasp of horror at the new poor-quality housing development or brutal shopping mall, a gasp which, to return to capitalism, should then translate itself into severe financial punishment for those responsible for desecrating the earth.

The largest and most commercially successful shopping centre in the southern hemisphere, Chadstone, in the suburbs of Melbourne, was built by a family business called Myer Emporium, which also happens to have a fine record of philanthropy (100). The leading members of this family are conspicuous for their gracious homes



Not enough people are annoyed by this.

—100. Main entrance to Chadstone Shopping Centre, Melbourne, Australia, 1960

and sophisticated outlook on life. In other words, they did not build a vast, mean-looking, architecturally disastrous complex because as individuals they thought it was a delight. It's just that they wanted to make a lot of money, and they believed that such a shopping centre would be the most reliable way to do so.

The original owners of Chadstone may well have preferred the style of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, the largest shopping centre in Italy (101). Despite this, they made the rational, accurate calculation that not enough of their customers would mind what it looked like, that not enough people would refuse to buy a toaster or tennis racket in it simply on the basis of its appearance. Myer Emporium were exploiting a vacuum of taste in which the public were still awaiting the Walter Pater, the Herbert Read or (more likely) the Jeremy Clarkson of shopping mall aesthetics, and in the meantime were unaware that they had any particular distress to articulate.

The history of the careers of critics shows us both the opportunities and the challenges facing anyone setting out to raise standards of taste in a new area. It took Read 40 years to accomplish his goal; he had



The people who built this knew they could make a profit from beauty.

—101. Giuseppe Mengoni, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, 1865

to write dozens of books and deliver hundreds of lectures. Still, all he managed to do was to get a very narrow section of British society to look more favourably on certain objects in museums. But that wasn't nothing. With enough determination, and in a wide range of commercial areas, good critical voices should be able to spur on a love of goodness and a hatred of mediocrity. In the process, and over time, this could be enough to substantially transform where money can be made, and hence how capitalism operates.