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THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE OF DESIGN

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In the prospectus for this conference, the participants are admonished to reexamine the premise on which the whole discussion is based, the assumption "that the immediate environment does, in fact, have measurable effects on its inhabitants," so that there is really some sense in trying to shape it in ways that are socially and personally beneficial. "Environment" is a broad term, and so is "measurable effects." I shall narrow the term to the aspect of human surroundings in question here: the visual aspect of man-made things, from buildings, bridges, highways, and such, to the utensils in our kitchens and the chairs on our porches or patios. This is the meaning of "design" intended, I think, when we ask whether it really affects people for good or ill. The much wider sense in which some of the participants in the conference use "design"—the sense of social planning—would hardly take us to such

a question of value. As for the term "measurable effects," I think the effects of good or bad design would be exceedingly hard to measure, even if they should prove to be quite pronounced. Let me speak, therefore, rather of "appreciable effects," and inquire into the reality and importance of such aesthetic influences. What is the nature of design? What is the measure of goodness and badness in it? What relation can it possibly have to any important factors in human life, such as mental health, morality, intellectual advance, or even just personal happiness? Such questions really broach the whole issue of the nature and import of art. Yet without delving into some of these underlying conceptual foundations we are not likely to reach systematically grounded and logically far-reaching answers to specific questions such as, for instance, how the design of street lamps and their relation to trees or the profiles of corner buildings can affect the quality of city life, or why commercial signs, no matter what they advertise or what their pictorial merits or demerits, have such a vulgarizing effect on a daily life to which they reasonably and properly belong. We are a commercial people, and our cities are commercial centers; it cannot be commercialism that gives advertisements their degrading character. Store window displays are just as commercial, but they tend to enhance the scene of urban civilization.

I do not intend to pursue any such problem here, but adduce these particular ones only to illustrate what sort of special issue, baffling to common sense, may go right down to the philosophical roots of theoretical thinking to find its answer. Since these roots belong to the whole philosophy of art, I shall extend the meaning of "design," for purposes of this discus-

sion, to all products of art, in principle to all the arts, music and literature as well as plastic arts, but in practice just now only to visual forms. The social influence of design, which we have been urged to reexamine and reconsider, rests on the nature and essential function of art. As I have just spent several years with that subject, I am ready to take a stand on it. Naturally, in the compass of a single and isolated talk, I cannot present the steps leading from empirical observations—which we probably all have in common—to theoretical conclusions, but can only state the latter in the hope that they may be suggestive to your own ruminations.

Art has many functions in human life, public and private. The motifs on which compositions are based—that is, what is pictured in paintings, sculptures, and figural decorative designs—indicate the preoccupations of the artist, which normally have some connection with those of his public. The unconscious symbolism that creeps into them betrays his more strictly private concerns, and may recommend his work to some other persons because it rings a bell for them too, though they are no more aware of it than the ringer. Art may be more frankly a product of passion, a record of emotional experience; it may be conceived in moments of anger or love or sorrow, in resignation or revolt, and carried out under constant revivals of the original emotion to work off the ferment. Or a work may be made on commission, for money and reputation; it may have been ordered as a status symbol for the client, who may be a private person or a corporate one, civic or even national. Art may be a vehicle for opinions, social criticism, confession, or what has been called “public daydream.” It can and does serve all these purposes.

But so do many things other than art; and, most remarkably, bad art will generally serve them as well as, and often better than, good art. Representation, self-expression, display, preaching and teaching and dreaming can all be effected by *objets d'art* which we call "mediocre" by courtesy. Only one function belongs to good art alone, and is what makes it good: the objective presentation of feeling to a beholder's direct perception. This is something quite different from "expression of feeling" in the usual sense, which is the exhibition of emotions the artist is undergoing. Such emotions are conveyed either by their usual symptoms, or by representation of events and things that let one guess at what he must feel. Artistic expression is an expression of ideas: the artist's ideas of what feelings are like, how they rise and take shape, grow, culminate like breaking waves, and spend themselves. These are things that an artist knows about subjective reality, and projects in visual terms. Not the occurrence of emotional upheavals, but conceptions of feeling constitute the import of art.

A gloss may be in order here on the use of the word "feeling." By "feeling" I mean *everything that can be felt*, comprising sensibility as well as emotion. The word is often used in narrower senses—perception by touch as distinct from sight, hearing, smell, etc., or in quite a different special sense as feeling of pleasure and displeasure, or again as awareness of general bodily condition, feeling well or ill, or to designate moods, as feeling melancholy or sanguine or however else. I am using it in the widest sense, as we popularly use it, including all its accepted meanings. Our peripheral sense organs feel the impingements of the external world; we call this our perception of objective reality.

Inwardly, we feel the rise and pulse and cadence of emotions, the strains of concerted thinking, and the more or less voluntary evocation of images from some unknown deep sources of memory and fantasy. Those internal events are known to each one of us as a private world of subjective immediacy.

Our imaginative conception, or humanized envisagement of things, places, acts and facts, is guided by the steady development of our feeling toward the world around us. Feeling is native, spontaneous, instinctive; but feeling is also developed, formed, and learned. This may seem to most people a strange proposition; how can feelings be learned? By what means are they formed and developed?

They are formed as our ideas of the world are formed: by the influence of images which articulate them and exhibit them for our contemplation, so that their rhythms become clear and familiar. The power of images has received a good deal of attention in recent literature, as a swift look at titles alone will show: *Icon and Idea*, *The Verbal Icon*, *The Image*, *The Image of Man in Dramatic Literature*, *Image and Meaning*, *Image and Idea*. These are only the few that happen to be on my own shelves.

Just as our vision is guided toward exact and intelligent perception of things by the way they are presented, in two or three dimensional projection or simplified graphs or however else, our feelings are guided and shaped by the forms in which various artists have projected them. They fall naturally into those forms, and develop in ways prepared by them. Moreover, we *learn* feeling from seeing it expressed in art, because that expression makes it conceivable. A work of art is a logical projection in which feeling appears

as a quality of the created object, the work. That quality is what good art has and bad art lacks; it is the artist's idea, inexpressible in verbal propositions, but clearly perceptible as the import of his presentation. To distinguish this sort of emotive expression from what is usually intended, we might call this *expressiveness*.

Expressiveness may belong to forms that represent no objects or beings or events at all—to pure lines, to compositions in space and light and color, to proportions, contrasts—any and all elements of design. It is always intuitively, and often unconsciously realized, so that many artists believe they are following quite different purposes. The history of art gives us a striking example of this, and an instructive one, for it entails not only the formation but the influence of artistic ideas on a rather grand scale, and may illustrate what I mean by the social influence of design.

During that golden age of painting, the Renaissance, and for several centuries after, the great painters always maintained that an exact copy of nature was their aim. Leonardo recommended the practice of holding up a glass and sketching on it the outlines of objects seen through it. Dürer made grills and geometric forms in which figures were to be proportionately inscribed. Alberti wrote books of advice on how to measure and render the shapes and relative positions of objects in space.

Actually, however, none of the masters recorded on their wall-spaces or canvases what a camera would have shown. None of their paintings prove to be "correct" when a geometric measure is applied to their perspectives, or to the degree of torsion in their human bodies. Friedrich Theodor Vischer was perhaps the first

person to remark that picture-space was not a simple projection of actual visual space, such as the mirror shows us, though with right and left reversed. This meant, of course, that objects in pictorial space were not simple transcripts from actual vision. But it was Gustaf Britsch who discovered that the laws of vision and the laws of representation of the visible world were not the same.¹

The development of the camera, and of photography as an art, came to corroborate his thesis. For the eye of the camera, the size of an object diminishes much faster with increasing distance from a frontal plane than it does for the eye of man; and the principles of representation follow the intellectualized, conceptual, interpreting perception of the human eye. That eye is part of a mind, and perceives whatever is given to it as the mind conceives it. Since we do not conceive everything in one single coherent system, we actually do not see all things in the same spatial projection. There are more deviations from purely physical vision than the neutralization of the loss of size with distance, which psychologists call "the principle of size-constancy" in visual experience. The eye is perpetually mobile, and scarcely one in a hundred of its shifts of focus registers in our consciousness as a new perceptive act. Yet the play of our glancing and returning focus on things is what acquaints us with them as specific visual entities, much as moving our hands over surfaces tells us the feel of them in a way that placing an open hand against them does not. Even the subtlest moving camera of modern cinematography has no such play as our eye in a single look at a newspaper on the table.

Renaissance painting grew up on the enterprise of

representing the visible scene. That is why its greatest pioneers and masters could believe that they were faithfully copying the appearance of nature, as it presented itself to all men alike. Actually, they were working out the principles of representation and their differences from principles of vision; and in so doing they stressed and abstracted an imaginative conception of the world—a horizon-bound space, vaulted over by heaven, and filled with solid, defined things, and the movements of living agents among things.

Feeling, intellect, imagination, and perception are not separable functions. When the great originators of Renaissance art revolutionized the modes of representation—not only the appearance of human figures, but also the range of things represented, which they extended to hills and waters, sunlight and shadow, trees and towns and groups of people in action—they created new perceptions which engendered new ways of feeling. The average man learned to see in nature what the painters and sculptors had fashioned for his eyes; and as they developed the image, they transformed his sense of reality and the scope and organization of his feeling for the objective world. They articulated what has been called a new *world-feeling*, a gradually achieved faith in the comprehensibility of the world with its geometric space, and in the importance of its absolutely given objects.

Most of those objects had never seemed important simply for their own appearance and substance before, but had always been noted only in use, or as instruments of God's will. Foliage and animal forms had decorated medieval architecture; vessels and homely objects had figured in the hands of saints to identify them, curtains and pillars were sometimes represented

to enshrine sacred or noble personages; but to treat such accessories as interesting in their own right bespoke a new attitude toward the material world. To the painters of the Quattrocento, the principles of representation which they were engrossed in discovering were also the principles of revelation of the new world toward which human emotions were turning.

Long before our day, the concept of nature as a system of self-identical bodies, related to each other according to a strict law of physical causality, was established and taken for granted in European culture and its offshoots. The excitement of its discovery gradually abated for the ordinary man of affairs. He had learned Euclidean geometry and some smattering of Newtonian physics in school, and they supported his sense of reality. His much older religious concepts somehow had to be fitted into the world of things, people, possible aims, and the standards of good and evil toward which he had natural feelings of trust; where they did not fit, he probably allowed them to grow pale and uncertain beyond the confines of his emotionally accepted world.

The industrial revolution, even at a fairly early stage, made a break in that world of reality, and the break has been widening and deepening ever since with increasing speed and with offshooting cracks in all directions, so that by this time the speed is vertiginous and the world our own generation still accepted is fairly well fragmented and crumbling. We tell ourselves that we live in a new world; but, in fact, that new world does not yet exist. We do not even know just where it is lying in embryo. We are witnessing the transition from one order of human existence to another, but have no clear conception of where the

transit is taking us and what the new order is to be.

One of the serious effects of this rapid change in modes of human life all over the earth—the sudden replacement of traditional techniques, tools, materials, and furnishings, and the buildings which housed them, by new industries, machines, buildings, and landscapes—is the loss of familiar expressive forms without immediate replacement. Emotional development has its own pace, which is seldom precipitous. The recognition of new forms as images of feeling and the consequent unfolding of emotional life in harmony with perceptual experience cannot be attained by an intensive course of retraining, as practical adaptations frequently can. Inevitably there is an interim period of subjective strain, which affects such vast numbers of individuals that it emerges at a social level as a widespread moral uncertainty, confusion or loss of all human values, a great increase of mental imbalance, and a nightmarish sense of more or less constant and pervasive insecurity. The insecurity, of course, really exists in a time of change; political and economic insecurity are objective enough. But when such precarious outward conditions coincide with a general loss of inward certainty they are harder for people to meet than in times of general confidence and directedness. Contradictory sentiments and the conflict of new needs with traditional ideals make a chaos in which all emotional commitments are unsafe.

The psychological effects are extremely varied, and sometimes not only unpredictable but incomprehensible. In the main, however, they are of two opposite kinds: on the one hand, indifference, with superficial frivolity and recklessness masking moral defeat and surrender; and on the other, an increase of seriousness

and moral searching to the point of general anxiety—the *Angst* of the Existentialists, which is undirected emotional tension. The cavalier reaction is apt to end in irresponsible behavior, casual delinquency, and economic drifting; the intellectual reaction, in a nostalgic desire for medieval disciplines and institutions, return to religious traditions, a sentimental search for old customs and “grass roots,” and preoccupation with the meaning of existence and the reality of human attachments. Both syndromes are equally neurotic.

In such a time, art as the formulation of feeling takes on a special importance. The spearhead of a new cultural epoch is always a new world-feeling; until that takes shape, the altered scene, the projects and operations, all the wonders of technology and organization cannot initiate a culture. The art of our day is still in ferment; to most people so-called “modern art” is cold, senseless, even ugly. They are still steeped in the dying tradition, and although very little of that great old art can move them deeply, they do not realize that its rhythms and even its subject matter (which is what most of them now cling to) have become history. Contemporary painting and sculpture are still too adolescent, too protean themselves to guide timid souls.

But there are other, less recognized expressive forms which are nearer and more accessible to the average person's feeling: works of architecture, and the products of humbler arts, the things one lives with, that comprise the immediate environment. By far the most important is, of course, architecture, which gives shape to the new human scene as a whole. It is the one great art which the public accepts, largely because ex-

posure to it is ineluctable, obvious, and persistent; one does not go and look at the work and come away baffled. Familiarity soon overcomes the initial rejection of what is deemed "radical," while utilitarian explanations excuse it. In our best architecture a new rhythm and life and sense of mass movements are already very articulate. When we learn how to deal with the old scene that is still with us, how to continue its life in steady transformation instead of spotty destruction or crazy juxtapositions, we shall be well on the way to a new culture.

Architecture, however, cannot carry the burden alone. One cannot lead where there is none to follow. In the past, particular cultures were built up largely by their artisans, who were craftsmen, and predominant feelings—not only emotions, but the pulse of work and of surrounding nature—recorded themselves in the design of weapons and implements as a general style.

In our world, the artisan has disappeared, but his responsibility has not. Someone has it, even if "someone" does not avow or discharge it. The artisan-craftsman has been superseded by the industrial designer; and industrial design is next to architecture in shaping the visual scene. So it is in our things—our countless things, multiplied fantastically *praeter necessitatem*—that we must find some significance: a look of simple honesty in ordinary utensils, of dignity in silverware, and of technological elegance in our machines. Undoubtedly you can see—whether or not you agree with me—why I insist that the form and placement of street lamps, quite apart from the adequacy of their light, can affect the quality of city life.

The confusion of style or utter absence of it is probably inevitable in the turmoil of our expanding commercial world and exploding population; we just have to put up with it, until our artists—especially our architects, planners and designers—have shaped a new vision of reality that will embody a new world-feeling, as yet enigmatic and inarticulate. There is no patent remedy for the general stress of such a change as we have witnessed in a single lifetime—the shift from horsepower to atomic power, from the buggy and the Victoria to jet plane and spacecraft. Our large and general problem is to foresee, as soon as possible, some contour of the world toward which we are moving, and meanwhile to tide over the present and closely following generations as best we may by giving them at least some examples of good plastic form, especially in public buildings, bridges and ramps, and modern installations. There is no need to clear away old symbols in order to set new ones in their place; the vitality of the new, once it becomes manifest in a true expressive form, will supplant the old. We can tolerate their lingering clutter if we see a new spirit rising out of them.

But there are some areas of life where contemporary design is not merely inadequate to our needs, but is pernicious and cries for reform: the most glaring instance is in the nursery, and more particularly in the design of dolls. The new dolls, bought by thousands in every dime-store, are not little girls for little mothers to dress and wheel and bring up, but teenager puppets, sold in boy-friend and girl-friend pairs, apparently on the half-baked psychological theory that a young child identifies itself with its doll, and that its

ideal is the teen-ager. This is, of course, utterly untrue; such play is forced upon the child by the nature of the doll she is given by her elders, and it is to them that the doll appeals. If you look at the dolls you see the epitome of vulgar feeling; a smart and smirking high school boy in tapered pants and an incredibly provocative girl with a wardrobe chiefly of bathing suits, underwear, high-heeled shoes, and similar items. Turn from these doubtful educational materials to the more standard cuddle toys which have replaced the Teddy bear and the more recent baby panda: it is hard to find even one in the popular price range (which excludes such things as the Steiff animals), that does not have a human face with an arch or clownish expression. The child has no innocent companion in its playpen, no schematic simplified image which his own mind makes realistic and alive. Here I believe something ought to be done about the education not of the child, but of the designer, and also of the public. Toys are perhaps the most important products of popular art, because they impinge on a completely receptive being; and the effect of predominantly vulgar toys cannot fail to be what Collingwood aptly called the "corruption of consciousness."²

This example of vicious influence may be more convincing than all claims for the beneficial functions of art; but if the one is valid, so is the other. Art is the mold of feeling as language is the mold of thought.

So far, I have stressed the role of what we specifically call "design" above that of pictorial and sculptural art, music, dance, and literature, which are all forging ahead to a new life; and I have said that their influence is still slight or even negative right now,

which adds to the average man's confusion, because he has not yet outgrown his old visual categories enough to see the new. But there is one very interesting development at his level, or rather, at a level to which he has risen: the appreciation of beautiful forms revealed by the camera. (See Plate 1) Here the naïve beholder has no difficulty in seeing and admiring forms which are not, in the old sense, representational, because they do not show things as he knows them; yet in a new sense they are representational, and he is wholehearted in accepting them, for they are revealing. He may never have seen what they represent, but he believes in it; he trusts the eye of the camera with any sort of spectacles it may wear. Also, the revelations he finds in artistic photographs often lead him directly to the beauties of an environment he has been coldly rejecting and deploring—to the shadows of girders, the strange forms of industrial slags, the rhythmic paths of motion, the lights in glass and plastic; they are as satisfying to him as the natural forms he has always found significant, and the convergence of natural and machine-engendered designs opens his mind to the latter, often with wonder. This may well be his bridge between the world and the pictorial art of his future, the great non-utilitarian art which finally gives security and freedom to the mentality of an age.

I think the social importance of design may be safely assumed, and with it the responsibility of the artist in a difficult world. The function of art is the articulation of feeling, and therewith the concertment and support of emotional life, the presentation of inward reality for our self-knowledge, which is the true measure of culture.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gustaf Britsch, *Theorie der bildenden Kunst* (2nd ed., Munich, 1930).
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 219.