

XXVIII

CONCLUSION

I. *Summary*

AN aesthetic has been enunciated for which some merits may be claimed: it is made up out of old stuff; it seeks to reconcile long-standing difficulties; it avoids the creation of new ones. While accepting the identity of aesthetic activity with general linguistic, it goes far beyond what the coinage of that famous phrase admits. For this aesthetic, expression is universal in nature, of which man and his activities are a part. But it makes a sharp distinction between the expression that is found universal in design, wherever manifest, and the artistic activity of man which is expression restricted to the phenomena of his state of mind or mood. Nature is always an engineer; man is also an engineer, a discoverer of form in word and deed; but man can be an artist too—yet never independently of the engineer in him. He can only 'express himself', to use a trite phrase, when expressing something quite extraneous to himself as well.

Croce's schematic diagram of the four steps of spiritual (or mental) activity can be left standing; but it seems necessary to extend the area of the lowest step till it becomes a very wide platform; his steps would then conform to the aesthetic here enunciated. On this wide platform carpets may be laid. The platform is expression, the carpeting is art. The platform has been investigated and the carpets as well. These carpets, we find, can only be trodden when unrolled upon the platform, of which they then become an integral part. The expression of emotion remains mere ejaculation, when unsupported by expressional exposition of something else. The carpet needs a floor, or, to use another simile, the garden is made on the field.

A statement on the phenomena of form and colour vision has been attempted; partly with a view to the bearings that form and colour have on the technique of expression and of artistry; and partly to release the later discussion of design from the hedonic bondage that results from that superficial view of vision which names it one of the old five senses, or of the ten new ones. Once

vision is understood to be a mental synthesis, or form of knowledge, the way is open to an understanding of form in creation, in design, and in art.

The exposition of the sciences of art in the first part of this volume went little farther than to define their scope and to categorize their problems, in the hope of narrowing the gap to be bridged between theory and practice. In the second part of the book some preliminary scaffolding was set up for the bridging of this gap, by such as are concerned with the design of objects constituting the apparatus of life. Distinctions have been noted between pure design (engineering); and the artistic elaboration (architecture) of that form which pure design discovers; and the adornment of objects once their form, pure or elaborated, has been established (ornament). The intention throughout in dealing with these matters has been to make clear what we do as engineers, what we do as architects, and what we do as ornamentalists; also why we act in these several capacities.

In the third part of the book the mental process of discovering pure form has been described by the consideration of a series of progressively complicated problems of accommodation. These seven chapters have furnished a detailed proof of the main thesis on which the aesthetic put forward is founded. They serve to demonstrate that the discovery of pure form is expression, but not art; thus they prepare the way for the consideration of such loss of purity in the form as may be compensated for by its artistic elaboration, or by the incorporation with it of extraneous subject-matter by way of adornment.

We thus arrived at the last part of this treatise, duly prepared to regard form—the synthesis of purpose, material, and technique—as the raw material of art, both in the case where the artist is himself put to the pain of discovering form, and where he is in a position to draw on the bountiful supply of all creation for raw material. The positions of the architect, of the painter, and of the sculptor, in their several traffickings and dealings with form, are all found to be analogous and in harmony with what had been said in the opening chapters with respect to the artistic impulse.

It may well be that, in the discussion of the critical appreciation of form, a certain impatience has been shown with those whose philosophies of art are based on an experience far different from the writer's. This defect of temper may have left the impression

that critical appreciation of form is not as valuable and important as the writer actually regards it to be. A public, insensitive to form, will provide itself with an apparatus of life in which the designer-artist can have neither responsibility nor opportunity. Those residues of past experience on which taste is so largely founded then become vitiated, and the foundations of culture suffer deterioration. A spirit of critical appreciation must be kept alive for the general good.

2. *Tradition*

Intelligent appreciation of form has a most important place in the mental equipment of the designer who aspires to be artist. Without it the heritage of the past can only be a source of confusion to him, and he is left to choose between becoming a 'style-monger' on the one hand, or a primitive experimentalist on the other. The designer with a well-developed critical sense is not likely to be content to devote his energies either to archaeological reconstructions, or to meaningless novelties. His critical faculty should enable him to derive from the old those eternal principles that apply to the new. He may then realize that the construction of a replica of an Athenian Doric temple is a fatuous way to memorialize a dead president of the United States of America; and repudiate a replica of a Tudor dining-hall—with wainscot, mullions, hammer-beams, and all—as mere stage setting when it finds embodiment in a modern educational institution in the western world.

A critical appreciation of form, that enables one to separate the wheat of reality from the chaff of incongruity, can further be relied on to indoctrinate an evolutionary instinct. This enables the designer to discriminate between the old expression that cannot be improved upon, and the new expression, when there is need of it; between the matter in which tradition is available to help, and the matter in which tradition must be discarded lest it hinder. This faculty of analysing purpose, material, and technique and acting in accordance with the analysis is at the root of all progress in design. When the designer seeks to analyse the old problem with the same vigour that he applies in his analyses of the new, the old may on occasion be of great service. But we must come with fresh minds to the analysis of the old, ready at all times to put the pretty writing about it to the acid test, and 'prove all things' with such gifts as we come by or can acquire. An acquaintance with the methods

of zoology, botany, and biology will go far to equip the designer with an understanding of form in things made for a purpose.

No one who has persevered thus far can be in any doubt that the writer has not a jot of sympathy for the eighteenth-century conception of an absolute beauty—form so potent that it must compel appreciation. Throughout he has been quite content to substitute for an 'aesthetic ought' a mere 'aesthetic may'; and, further, he readily admits the phenomenon of a sincere appreciation lavishly accorded in many cases where there is no form at all, but only an illusion of its presence. The lack of observation that makes it possible to pass false coin is, however, not the affair of a mint master. His business is to see to it that true coin is issued. It is for the police to warn the unwary when false coin is uttered; and it is the function of the critic to warn the unobservant when design does not bear the stamp of reality. In the long run it makes little difference whether the police and the critics intervene; for the spurious, in either case, is always bound to be found out.

One may be all for realism, and yet have little patience with a make-believe realism which denies that reality has been found in the past. Tradition, duly sifted, is as potent a force in art to-day as ever it was. There can be no progress without it. It would require a cataclysm, that reduced six continents to a no man's land, to make a really new beginning possible. One must distinguish between modernistic absurdity and modern genius in design—the one denies the past, the other realizes the present as the step between the past and future.



FIG. 177. Church at Rhuis, near Compiègne, France.