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Introduction

This anthology of writings, in effect, confronts one world with another; more particularly a traditional philosophy or wisdom about vocation with what has replaced it: a surrogate that began as a glorification of the human and ended, in due time—our time—as a justification of the subhuman. For millennia, matters of human vocation, art, work, skill, were placed within the matrix of an understanding of man as a creature made in the image of God. While fully admitting to his physical nature, man was none the less charged in his earthly life with the vocation of realizing his ultimately spiritual nature and indeed, the spiritual nature of all things. This vocation, by its very nature, was not the preserve of a specialized elite but the very signature of what it meant to be fully human. Art, as the norm or perfection of workmanship, was the instrumental means by which men and women realized, through the requirements of appropriate livelihood, their integral relationship to the sacred nature of reality.

Beginning with the Renaissance this traditional philosophy, in which art is understood to be a virtue or habit of the mind, was gradually replaced by an understanding of art as referring to a select category of things made by people called artists who possess an exceptional temperament, and create works that have special, aesthetic and emotional resonances.

This development has by now been pushed to explore the limits of the irrational potential that belonged to it from the beginning. The seeds of destruction were sown once it was accepted that art need not be based upon anything beyond the human as such: that is, the doctrine of art for art's sake. The result is that much of what is thought to be art is now incomprehensible to the majority, and seems to serve no purpose beyond promoting its creator's "exceptional" personality. At the same time it has become all but impossible to define art in a society where most men and women are excluded from an effective involvement with art of any kind. Although the present collection does not address such issues, we might note in passing that this exclusion of the majority from having anything to do with art both entails and promotes much social and economic injustice.

The immediate question that concerns us here is whether the traditional philosophy is merely of antiquarian interest, having been superseded by something wiser, more comprehensive, more effective in its ability to explain what man's spiritual and practical needs are and how they might be met; or whether the traditional philosophy can be shown to be a still living repository of wisdom that can effectively demonstrate, and chal-

lenge, the inadequacy of what has replaced it. Of one thing we can be sure: unless man's understanding of the physical world and his practical relationship to it are in harmonious accord with his spiritual aspirations, only ruin can result.

No philosophy of art can afford the luxury of being true only *in theory*. It must also be true *in practice*. What would be the point of a philosophy of art that did not seek to be both? In this last integral necessity are harbored all the complexities of the situation. Any philosophy of art must presuppose an artist and, as all art arises first of all *in* the artist, it must take account of the nature of man as artist, as "maker" of works *of* art. Only then could such a philosophy take account of the operation by which art is applied. And it is applied to a bewildering variety of situations; from almost any physical substance, to more subtle modes of reality—from stone (sculpture) to vibrations of air (music), from drain pipes to symphonies.

Moreover, a true philosophy of art must reckon with the evidence of history that there has never been a time when men and women have not been artists. In the way they interact through mind and body with the nature of the world, it is of the very essence of men and women that they are artists, are makers of things necessary to live a life in which the needs of the bodily life are satisfied at one and the same time as the needs of the spiritual life. This anthology, then, proposes that what Ananda K. Coomaraswamy called "the true philosophy of art" (outlined in the two essays included here) is precisely that, and that what has replaced it is too narrow an understanding of the proper nature of the artist as agent and, consequently, too specialized a notion of what art itself is.

The traditional philosophy of art was never extensively formulated except in the way in which it was for centuries practiced by the majority of men and women. There was no reason to articulate this need systematically, until such time as its absence, and the resulting confusion that replaced it, made a call to order imperative. This call to order was accomplished by Coomaraswamy who, going back to first principles, propounded the true philosophy of art on the basis of the *philosophia perennis*—the totality of the universal truths and metaphysical axioms that underlie the world's sacred traditions. Coomaraswamy did not work alone but was one of a group of independent scholars who have since come to be known as the traditionalist or perennialist school of thinkers. In addition to Coomaraswamy, the first generation of this group included René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Martin Lings, and Whitall Perry. Others have since followed in their footsteps. Such was Coomaraswamy's conviction—based on an unmatched scholarship—of the universal truth and normality of the *philosophia perennis* that, writing to Aldous Huxley in 1944, he described it as a body of doctrine of

"self-authenticating intelligibility [which] explains more things than are explained elsewhere." What I hope will emerge from the present collection is not only a sense of what the traditional philosophy of art is, but also, and incidentally, a sense of what has replaced this body of wisdom, and in what ways this substitute explains fewer things.

Some years ago the British Museum in London published a catalogue on Romanesque Art in which there was an illustration of an eleventh-century Christian cosmological diagram showing the harmony of the microcosm and macrocosm in the constitution of the Universe. The caption to the illustration ended with the statement that this diagram, and others like it, "may be described as works of art in their own right." More recently a leading newspaper described the work of a lady who wove colored wools into pictures of scenery using a dining fork. The lady had met with no success until, instead of calling herself a craftsperson, she promoted herself as an "artist weaver." Elsewhere, a magazine devoted to "pop culture" spoke of the 1960s as a period when rock-music was becoming more conscious of its growing status as "art." All of these statements, chosen deliberately from very different sources, have something in common. While not entirely excluding the possibility that we must understand art as requiring skill in the making of things, each statement assumes that art has to do with a select category of objects valued for aesthetic reasons alone. For that reason they are prestigious and set apart from the normal things of life, which are none the less things made by men and women but are not art. Art, on this understanding, instead of being located in the artist, is applied to external objects. This shift of meaning has been going on for some time. From the ancient understanding of the word "art" as skill (or a virtue of the intellect that leads to the perfection of work), to the modern sense of art as an ill-defined but prestigious category of aesthetic objects, is a path with many subtle and devious turnings. As Owen Barfield noted in his *History in English Words*, it was not until the Renaissance that art (which anciently would have referred also to what we call science) was thought of as an activity unrelated to the many makings and doings that are necessary to life. Today, with bewildering regularity, we notice how often any discussion in the field of the arts stumbles headlong into the seemingly unanswerable question "What is art?" From this we must conclude that the word "art" in modern usage has clarified little or nothing.

To be sure we are mostly agreed that art is important. We are mostly agreed, though more tacitly, that accomplishment in the arts is somehow desirable for as many people as possible. But there are signs that we are uncomfortable with this consensus at a time when art has no significant place in the lives of most men and women. The more diligently the arts are promoted (by a growing army of arts administrators and entrepreneurs),

the more they are recommended for our passive consumption, sometimes for the economic benefits they bring, and sometimes as though they are a medicine we ought to take for our health. To add to the confusion, it is now established practice for the State to consign public funds to an artistic avant-garde whose primary motivation is to call into question any established notion of what art is. Our tacit agreement that the artist is somehow a special kind of person (or perhaps, more accurately, a person with a special kind of sensibility), implies that art has the power to alleviate the condition of commonplace ordinariness that is the life of the majority: non-artists. This assumption (in reality it is more in the nature of a superstition) is so deeply entrenched, that, even when we are faced with artifacts that are quite obviously a mirror image of our spiritual corruption and cultural decay, the idea that the artist is an elevated being persists.

To adulate "creativity" and innovation for their own sake, as is the case in our society, is tantamount to arguing that the work of an artist is not answerable to any intelligible principle or order of knowledge: that it cannot be assessed against any framework of values, or be assimilated to any order of meaning beyond itself. It is to agree that art is an end in itself. This self-imposed isolation, in the final analysis, is the measure of the unreality of the thing we attempt to label as art. We think of creativity as an open-ended extending of boundaries that are in need of being challenged lest they inhibit and curtail our need freely to explore new regions of the mind. But here is a paradox. What value can be attached to any such ideas of freedom and of boundaries in an artistic milieu of near anarchy? It would be salutary to recognize that this self-referring activity, which we think of as being creativity, is predicated on an entirely spurious sense of freedom which excuses it from any wider responsibility.

The scholastic understanding of art as a thing made, and of prudence as a deed done—the one being a skill in making, the other a skill in doing—makes a vital distinction that protects us from assuming that the end to which skill is applied is the same as the end to which life must be addressed. To do this is effectively to limit life to the perfection of work and thus to make work more important than man himself. Apart from coming dangerously close to defining man in terms merely of his own productions, it raises the further question: against what standard are human works to be judged? A bomb may be perfectly well made by the art of the bomb-maker, but is the lethal explosion which demonstrates his perfected skill a good that promotes the perfection of life? Such a question helps us to understand why, according to the traditional philosophy, the virtue of art, while not being confused with moral virtue, is nevertheless closely related to it. No one acts in isolation. No man or woman is so "free" as to make no contribution, good or bad, to the social and material

fabric and well-being of the world. This is to say that all actions have consequences and therefore engender responsibilities.

The loss of the distinction between art and prudence is not felt only by the artist. The loss extends to the patron, who no longer has the knowledge to discern the good to which skillfully made things are to be directed. It extends also to the end-user who no longer has the cultural means to recognize how skillfully made things are properly to be used. Also lost is the interactive relationship between the artist, the patron and the end-user, by which art becomes livelihood in a series of mutually supportive actions throughout society.

Does it matter whether we manufacture things by machine or by hand? After all, these are simply different techniques for the production of necessary goods, and machine production is by far the most efficient. Yes, it does matter. The purely utilitarian standard of efficiency involved in machine production blurs the distinction between skill and technique. It makes no acknowledgment of the *intellectual* responsibility that is proper to man as a skilled maker of things. It has become necessary to have a clear understanding of what has been usurped in the domain of skill, since never before has the artist (as *homo faber*) had to work in a social milieu so completely dominated by the machine—that device of absolute utility whose form and function so ruthlessly excludes all human qualities in the way it equates means to ends. It is hardly a coincidence that the machine, in robbing the maker of his intellectual responsibility, has become the perfect instrument of that catastrophe that is the material world manipulated purely on quantitative terms.

Skill is a human ability applied to something in order to achieve a given end. Clearly, to be skilled is superior to being unskilled. This is still recognized in a society largely shaped by forms of mechanization that have de-skilled work. Skill envisages at the outset a given end or result, a goal for its application which is superior to what would be the case in its absence. Skill is, therefore, a knowledge and a discernment of an end to be achieved—in this sense it is indistinguishable from art in the traditional sense. Technique differs from skill in that it is the immediate *mode* of the application of skill. Technique is a practiced ability or facility by which the knowledge and discernment of skill (art) is effected in action. Skill must be understood more widely as being as much a function of intelligence as of practical ability. Technique is a more localized function of skill, not of mind. Technique may be operative in the absence of skill; skill is never operative without technique. Part of skill is in the mind, part of it is realized in application. All of technique is in application (a small part may be said to be residual in memory).

But there is another dimension to the notion of the maker's intellectual responsibility that needs to be considered. Intrinsic to the productive nature of skill and technique is repetition and therefore comparison. If a thing is repeated, comparison of like with like becomes possible whereas the thing made that is unique is by definition beyond comparison, it has no generic reality. That is to say, there is an intellectual, a conceptual and a practical wisdom about what, for instance, an icon or a chair is and how each is to be used. Each is a "type" that has intelligible form. The "unique piece" (that idol of the avant-garde) that is beyond compare is isolated beyond any context of wisdom or knowledge that informs us about what it is and how it is to be used. In the knowledge and discernment that is logically prior to the application of skill there must be a wisdom about the end to which skill is applied. This wisdom is a knowledge of what is fitting and appropriate in any given circumstance in which human skill is called for. By extension it is also a wisdom of how well or otherwise skill has been deployed. It is inconceivable that such a wisdom could be exercised without a wider agreement as to an acceptable context and standard by which a result can be measured. If the product of skill (art) is measured by a recognized standard of comparison, then the occasion of skill will be a convention as to the validity of its application. In the very application of skill the artist must be able to conceive of what it *is* that is the rightful end of his art. Otherwise there can be no effective correlation between intention and result, which is the basis of all artistic judgment, as well as being part of the reason we ask of a work of art we do not comprehend, "What is it?"

Wherever art is understood to be a virtue or habit of the mind that stays in the artist, these truths apply to every act of skillful making. Their "self-authenticating intelligibility" exemplifies Plato's claim that "we cannot fairly give the name art to anything irrational." Wherever these truths are operatively upheld, art is occasional and proceeds by conventions that make no distinction between artists and non-artists. It need hardly be pointed out that the mutuality of such truths is no more likely to be effectively present in the conditions of industrial manufacture than it is in the milieu of contemporary art. In the industrial system the machine operator is robbed of his responsibility to exercise the wisdom and discernment of skill that ought to be his by right, and is his integrally in virtue of his spiritual nature. The modern "fine" artist simply disowns such a responsibility, in so far as he flouts convention, aspires continually to produce works without precedent, and rejects the validity of any standard beyond aesthetic sensibility as such.

That the question "What is art?" is so readily and frequently begged in discussion is only one of the many indications that modern culture is in

a state of confusion. The social and practical outcome of this amounts to a state of crisis that constantly forces the reformulation of principles and rules for the conduct of human affairs while at the same time failing to provide the philosophic and intellectual criteria that would make intelligible the necessary course of remedial action. This "erosion" of intelligibility that throws all in doubt, is the result of a subjectivity that is never called to account by objective criteria. In essence, the confusion comes down to this: if art is more or less anything anyone chooses it to be, one has only to claim that one is an "artist" in order to produce works of art. In which case every man and woman is an artist by so claiming. But if everyone is an artist where is the particular distinction and prestige (so evidently desired) of being an artist?

Have we, therefore, returned to the traditional understanding in which, by virtue of possessing the habit of mind that is the norm of workmanship, every person is an artist? Far from it. The arbitrary freedom appropriated by the self-governing subjectivity that is the ideal of the modern artist is nothing more than the enthronement of creativity and originality to rule without responsibility to the wider circumstances of vocation, livelihood, and justice exercised in the light of real human needs. What we are left with is a sort of parody of that inner freedom of the intellect and the will to achieve the good and the beautiful that is the final end of all perfectly made things, which is part and parcel of the traditional teachings.

From the traditional view of what constitutes human vocation, what specifically is the burden of our age?

Here it is necessary to understand two things that go far beyond questions of art, but which none the less have a profound and inescapable bearing on how art is conceived and practiced. Keeping in mind that in the sphere of the arts there are no absolutes, firstly, it must be acknowledged that we are living at the end of the cosmic cycle to which we have been destined. In terms of the metaphysical depreciation of history it is a time when everything is open to question, and no truth seems to stand firm. This tendency towards depreciation, in so far as it effects the arts, is manifest in the widespread passive acceptance of the most negative possibilities of the human state in our society. This cannot be avoided, seeing that the cycle at its end must be exhausted of the totality of those possibilities—both positive and negative—of which it is comprised.

Secondly, and contrarily, the human soul demands the recognition of a compensatory spiritual movement to counter this downward precipitation, in order that it be saved from a determinism that would set at nothing any attempt to transcend history. If the mere passage of time could of itself nullify spiritual aspiration, what would be the point of prayer, let

alone any effort to seek that Truth without which there can be no recognition of the contingent nature of the passing of time? Several of the contributors to this anthology allude to the Benedictine principle whereby "work is prayer." This refers to the interpenetration of cosmic and moral criteria in the laws of right-livelihood (a major preoccupation of Wendell Berry's work, for instance), which make it possible to shape the proper ordering of human life on a divine model.

Given that it is against such conditions that, so far as modern man is concerned, all human activity takes place, we must accept that there cannot be anything in the sphere of culture comparable with the accomplishments of the past. Notwithstanding the hope of Titus Burckhardt for a renewal of sacred art in the West, there is a time for the hieratic art of Egypt, in which the ego is entirely absent, a time for the harmonic crystallizations of the Gothic, a time for the titanic humanism of the Renaissance, a time for the "realism" of the nineteenth century and, it must be admitted (if only to measure the descent from a transcending of the human, to the demonstration of the subhuman), a time for the urinal hung on a string and signed R. Mutt.

All the voices in the final section of the present collection, and some in the middle section, express a sense of having to work against the grain, of struggling with a lack of coherence, of a certain impoverishment of context, when it comes to making effective the full practice their art requires. Nothing in modern art has gone beyond the radical challenge of Duchamp's calling into question the status and boundaries of art in modern society. But the appeal to first principles made by the traditional philosophy (by Coomaraswamy, for instance), in "explaining more and better," alone takes account of all the factors that contribute to a fully inclusive understanding of the nature and function of art. And art is, on this understanding, only one mode (the productive) of a much broader and deeper conception of vocation.

From the point of view of the contemporary artist or craftsman it is not wholly a question of the traditional doctrines providing a recoverable philosophy and working formula on which to base themselves. Nor is it wholly a question of the availability of individual talent either. The lack of coherence and impoverishment of context just mentioned clearly point to concerns beyond the actual deployment of an art or craft. On the internal side, so to speak, there would be many imponderables of education, aesthetic taste, and accumulated personal preference likely to have become habits of mind for the contemporary artist to proceed as if the traditional philosophy had instantly cleared away the confusions that now surround questions of vocation and art. Coomaraswamy said of Eric Gill that "he invented a human way of working and found it was that of all human societies." But Gill himself, perhaps more keenly aware of the practical

difficulties involved, is reported to have said that "What I achieve is of no consequence—it can only be a beginning—it will take generations."

On the external side, it is not for the "maker" to determine the quality in his patron. Social and economic forces are a significant part of patronage, as well as an understanding of the nature of vocation—a more or less obsolete concept in our post-industrial age. The maker's sole concern, as maker, is to look to the good of the work to be done.

The challenge posed by the traditional philosophy must be that of refocusing attention upon the ultimate instrument of art: man himself. What is man? No amount of elaboration of aesthetic theory can hide the fact that art, craft, work (they all grow from the same root), rest upon wider questions of beauty and truth, good and evil, justice, morality, and ethics. It is in the mind of man that errors arise and falsehood is granted an acceptable presence. It is in the mind of man that the illusions of modernity must be dispelled by a knowledge and a wisdom in accord with the enduring nature of these wider issues.

To reply to the well-rehearsed criticism that the advocacy of the traditional view of art is to invoke a past, dead order of things that can do little or nothing to remedy current ills and confusion: this is to misconceive the level on which remedies might be effective. Any adjustment or change of direction on the level merely of aesthetics or practicality is bound to carry with it the same confusions that beset us now, if those changes do not touch upon the first principles (formulated in section I and II herein) of knowing and being from which all human actions emerge. We need to be re-awakened to those fundamental truths which give value and meaning to our thoughts and actions. The traditional philosophy, far from invoking some relic from the museum of history, points to the need for an ever-living witness, a direct intuition, of those realities of intellect that are the true basis upon which art proceeds.

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The universality of the traditional or "true" philosophy of art has been coherently expounded, in essence, in the writings of A. K. Coomaraswamy. To demonstrate this universality on a comprehensive scale, with all the differing formulations needed in order to take account of the variety of spiritual and practical conditions of its outward application, would require a whole series of volumes. No attempt of this kind is made here. The present collection, by limiting itself mainly to the West and by addressing a predominantly western (or "westernized") audience, attempts to give a sharper focus to the interaction of the traditional and the modern in a volume of manageable compass.

The short section "Intimations" does nothing more than sow a few seeds. Seeds, none the less, in which whole areas of philosophic discourse are held *in potentia*, to grow into major themes in the subsequent theoretic exposition of the nature and place of art in human life.

The core of the collection as a whole is in the two great, synoptic essays of Coomaraswamy in the section "Formulations." These two essays cover the period from Plato to the scholastic formulation of the theory in the High Middle Ages. In their sweep and penetration, and drawing from contemporary sources, Coomaraswamy demonstrates that the traditional view of art is dependent upon, and embedded within, the wider body of doctrine that is the *philosophia perennis*. It is precisely this dual support and dependence that enables the "true" philosophy of art to explain more and better than later philosophies.

Other contributors to this section, often working from a knowledge of Coomaraswamy's writings, make their "formulations," sometimes out of a need for theoretic clarity (Schuon, Burckhardt), and sometimes out of a perceived need to marry practice with first principles. Eric Gill, for instance, saw no contradiction between his practice as a pioneer twentieth-century sculptor, engraver, and polemicist and his deeply held beliefs as a Catholic. Indeed, the one was a necessary support of the other.

The polemical edge of the collection—and this is intended—comes mainly in the last section, "Reverberations." This section demonstrates, I hope, the continuing relevance of the traditional teachings. Each of the contributors here is a major practitioner in his or her respective field—that includes painting, poetry, pottery, calligraphy, music, and, in the case of Wendell Berry, agriculture, the most fundamental of all the arts. All of these practitioners have felt within the practice of their very different arts the internal tensions of a double necessity: to free themselves from the contemporary morass of vague and ill-defined ideas as to what constitutes art; and then to shape their actual practice on a model which takes account of the inherently spiritual dimension of the human vocation.

David Jones's "Art and Sacrament" gives the most responsive and detailed overview known to me, of the many tensions and dilemmas faced by the contemporary artist who wishes to remain faithful to the ultimately sacramental nature of art whilst having a legitimate relevance to his own historical situation.

The final word, a piece written especially for the present occasion, is given to Sir John Tavener, whose music has been widely recognized as being relevant to its own time, while providing an authentic support for the contemplation of sacramental reality.

Brian Keeble

"Introduction" to Every Man An Artist

Every Man An Artist:
Readings in the Traditional Philosophy of Art
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