One Aspect of Art Work

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Our world goes to pieces, we have to rebuild our world. We investigate and worry and analyze and forget that the new comes about through exuberance and not through a defined deficiency. We have to find our strength rather than our weakness. Out of the chaos of collapse we can save the lasting: we still have our "right" or "wrong," the absolute of our inner voice,—we still know beauty, freedom, happiness . . . unexplained and unquestioned.

Intuition saves us examination.

We have to gather our constructive energies and concentrate on the little we know, the few remaining constants. But do we know how to build? Education meant to prepare us. But how much of education is concerned with doing and how much with recording? How much of it with productive speculation and how much with repeating? Research work and engineering work, when they are creative, are too specialized to give any general basis of constructive attitude.

We neglect a training in experimenting and doing; we feel safer as spectators. We rather collect than construct.

We have to learn to respond to conditions productively. We cannot master them but we can be guided by them. Limitation from the outside can stimulate our inventiveness rather than confine it. We need such flexibility of reaction in times of crisis. Too much of our education provides instead of prepares and thus loses its serving role and tends to become an end in itself. We are proud of knowledge and forget that facts only give reflected light.

Education in general means to us academic education, which become synonymous with an unproductive one. If we want to learn to do, to form, we have to turn to art work, and more specifically to craft work as part of it. Here learning and teaching are directed toward the development of our general capacity to form. They are directed toward the training of our sense of organization, our constructive thinking, our inventiveness and imagination, our sense of balance in form,—toward the apprehension of principles.
such as tension and dynamic . . . the long list of faculties which finally culminate in a creative act, or, more specifically in a work of art. On the basis of a creative attitude we can then add necessary information, the specialized studies. Art work deals with the problem of a piece of art, but more, it teaches the process of all creating, the shaping out of the shapeless. We learn from it, that no picture exists before it is done, no form before it is shaped. The conception of a work gives only its temper, not its consistency. Things take shape in material and in the process of working it, and no imagination is great enough to know before they are done what they will be like.

We come to know in art work that we do not clearly know where we will arrive in our work, although we set the compass, our vision; that we are led, in going along, by material and work process. We have plans and blueprints, a shorthand of material and its treatment, but the finished work is still a surprise. We learn to listen to voices: to the yes or no of our material, our tools, our time. We come to know that only when we feel guided by them our work takes on form and meaning, that we are misled when we follow only our will. All great deeds have been achieved under a sense of guidance.

We learn courage from art work. We have to go where no one was before us. We are alone and we are responsible for our actions. Our solitariness takes on religious character. This is a matter of my conscience and me.

We learn to dare to make a choice, to be independent; there is no authority to be questioned. In art work there is no established conception of work; any decision is our own, any judgment. Still, there is one right opinion as to quality of a work of art, spontaneous and indisputable—one of our absolutes. There is a final agreement upon it, of those initiated, no matter how much personal taste or trends of the time influence the judgment.

In making our choice we develop a standpoint. How much of today's confusion is brought about through not knowing where we stand, through the inability to relate experiences directly to us. In art work any experience is immediate. We have to apply what we absorb to our work of the moment. We cannot postpone the use of what we learn. Much of our education today prepares us for a later day, a day that never comes. Knowing for later is not knowing at all.

We learn to trust our intuition. No explaining and no analyzing can help us recognize an art problem or solve it, if thinking is our only relation to it. We have to rely on inner awareness. We can develop awareness, and clear thoughts may help us cultivate it, but the essence of understanding art is more immediate than any thinking about it. Too much emphasis is given today in our general education to intellectual training. An overemphasis of intellectual work suggests an understanding on a ground which is not the ground of our own experiences. It transposes understanding into assumed experiences which can be right but may be wrong. Our valuation in school and university is almost entirely a valuation of intellectual activity. Inarticulateness of the artistic person is interpreted easily as a lack of intelligence while it is rather an intelligence expressing itself in other means than words.

Our intellectual training affects our analytic—art work our synthetic ability. We are used to thinking of art work as developing taste or a sense for beauty if not as training artists. We think more of its aesthetic qualities than its constructive ones. But the constructive forces are the ones we will need today and tomorrow. We will have to construct, not analyze or decorate.

That field of art which is the least academic, the least fortified by authority, will be best fitted to prepare for constructive process. The fine arts have accumulated much dignity. The crafts? They have had a long rest. Industry overran them. We need too much too quickly for any handwork to keep up with. The crafts retreated, a defeated minority. We do not depend on their products now, but we need again their contact with material and their slow process of forming. The fine arts have specialized on a few materials today, oilpaints, watercolors, clay, bronze—mostly obedient materials. But any material is good enough for art work. The crafts, too, limited themselves, they kept to woodwork, weaving, etc. But their materials are less easily subordinated. The struggle with a rugged material teaches us best a constructive discipline.

Resistance is one of the factors necessary to make us realize the characteristics of our medium and make us question our work procedure. We have to parry the material and adjust our plans to those of this opponent. When experimenting, we are forced into flexibility of reaction to it:—we have to use imagination and be inventive.

We learn patience and endurance in following through a piece of work. We learn to respect material in working it. Formed things and thoughts live a life of their own, they radiate a meaning. They need a clear form to give a clear meaning. Making something become real and take its place in actuality adds to our feeling of usefulness and security. Learning to form makes us understand all forming. This is not the understanding or misunderstanding we arrive at through the amateur explaining to the amateur—appreciating—this is the fundamental knowing.

The difficult problems are the fundamental problems; simplicity stands at the end, not at the beginning of a work. If education can lead us to elementary seeing, away from too much and too complex information, to the quietness of vision, and discipline of forming, it again may prepare us for the task ahead, working for today and tomorrow.