

THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC MONUMENTS

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I AM sure you will pardon me if I begin my address with a short reference to the aims and objectives of our Society. In doing this I am simply following precedent, for since the time when cultural societies were first invented (I believe in the late seventeenth century) most of the addresses began in this way.

We have to recapitulate to some extent and to say quite proudly that we aim at co-ordinating many interests connected with the visual history of this grand old country. We have through our efforts bridged a gap by increasing public ideas on the artistic merits of buildings and monuments. We know that fashion plays a considerable part in the viewpoint and that some epochs are more popular than others. But I know also that this Society does not allow its views to be biased either by fashion or prejudice. It is also a fact that the limit of time by which monumental objects can be deemed ancient has been extended to the middle of the 19th century. I would go further and I would include all works of art that are acceptable to ordinary well-thinking men and women. For we are making history ourselves and in this changing world we occupy positions formerly held by great patrons of taste. In very simple terms indeed, what is it we have been privileged to do? We have recorded and we have protected works which are universally esteemed as being of national importance. We have done much to instruct by inviting lecturers to give us the fruits of their researches. But we have done something more; we have inspired others to look around and to enter a path of English history which but for our efforts might have remained unexplored. No small contribution this and one which is now regarded with respect if not with awe.

A study of history, especially when it embraces the fine arts, is

one of the finest methods of training the mind to select and adjust aesthetic values. It is also very useful for gaining information on most things essential to cultural living.

The arts, both plastic and intellectual, cover all the activities of human existence. We have houses, churches, public buildings, civics and utility needs. We are faced with questions of amenities and amusements, in fact all that is worth living for. In addition we know that the industries and commerce of the kingdom depend for their vitality upon the fine arts.

When we look around we find that we are enmeshed by circumstances which call for discipline in artistic expression. By reference to historical precedent we are the better enabled to give an opinion as to relative values. It is in fact the association of ideas and values that proves to be so essential to the forming of human character.

Because we are often called upon to exercise a choice based upon our individual experience of what is appropriate and attractive we wish to know more of history. In this regard especially a knowledge and understanding of the basic principles of the arts fit us better than anything else for raising the general standard of taste.

There is no doubt of the fact that the attitude of the public towards the fine arts is growing more favourable. The arts form part of the curricula of almost every school; the great national museums now attract larger numbers, they are growing in popularity. It is seen that collectors are not such eccentric beings after all.

These are the real signs of cultural progress. Were it not so the future would be very dark indeed.

Do not suppose for a moment that this Society concentrates its attention entirely on ancient monuments. It deals with the byways of history as well as with the grand routes. History shows that this nation in the past led the world not only in adventure and trade but also in literature and the plastic arts. It became renowned for its historians, poets, novelists, painters, sculptors and architects. It is also of the greatest significance that the contributions made by England were productive of similar movements and expressions in Europe and America. No small achievement this, and I can reassure you that this desire to excel in these matters is as vital today as it was during those periods when the few directed the taste of the many.

All this goes to prove that we in England at least realise that history is worthy of the fullest consideration and that a fuller comprehension of what it implies would bring a finer realisation of the joy of living.

Can it be ignored that the members of this Society have undertaken to widen popular interest and to make the purpose of history in connection with the visual arts more esteemed?

Now, it is possible that some critics, who are societies in themselves, might say "What is the use of increasing public knowledge? The press, the newsreel, and television, as well as mass participation in matters of public account, can be left to instruct ordinary folk." But this would be merely burking the issue. I venture to say that the aims of this Society are far more careful.

Let us pass, then, to those greater issues which have been occupying public attention from the time when Addison and Steele were issuing the numbers of the *Spectator* to the days of the *Edinburgh Review* and to the issue of many other authentic journals. For more than two centuries very sound foundations have been laid for historians.

We have, then, a long sequence of facts upon which we can draw to our advantage, but there remains the duty which membership of this Society imposes on all its members and associates to add to those facts. In truth, the task before us is to make our historical references contemporary.

History, especially those visual evidences which we class as monuments, is of common interest to all human beings who are gifted with power to reason. Once a period is studied it provides a key to all previous periods and an index to those of subsequent date. The student becomes part of the great theory of human endeavour; a minor agent, perhaps, but nevertheless a projector of ideas of common value. History is the record of the mind and genius of the human race. It covers all ranks and knows no distinctions. The historian begins to understand why certain events took the course they did, why some events were national and others merely expressions of individual emotion. It is seen that all the great facets of history express the observance of certain fundamental laws.

Individuals and their works stand forth as the crystallisation of whole ranges of facts. There is evidence of sequence during the centuries which separate the earliest indications of civilization from the mechanised progress of the present day.

The greatest historical volume for every man is the world. Everything that is done can be traced to precedent. As the Bible says: "Precept upon precept, line upon line. Here a little, there a little." Everything is reduced to a simplicity which can only be glimpsed by the studious. Thus everyman, be he well read, semi-

literate or endowed with god-like intuition, has the knowledge that he possesses a secret sense of all that existence implies.

Napoleon once said: "What is history but a fable agreed upon." Today the universities have departments devoted to special branches of history. We are encouraged to regard the historical significance of geography as of equal if not of superior importance to military conquests. By studious research we realise that Greece, Rome, Byzantium, flourished for a time in order that the faith and the arts of the middle ages should have evolved as they did and that the Renaissance in due course should spring from the inevitable contrasts and changes.

And so we proceed to the spirit which accompanied the eighteenth century in Europe, directing attention to the Orient but itself encouraging a fresh approach to scientific attainment. All history is subjective. It was produced for the advantage of posterity by nations and individuals who had little time to enjoy the fruits of the labours then toward. The determining factor is the creative energy of man, no matter what the manifestation in literature, art or science. Today the great difference from the past is to be seen in the wider participation of myriads of human beings in this general knowledge. Here is to be seen the true meaning of progress, namely that clearer idea of causations and the right assessment of the spectacular. Can it be doubted that this Society is not of use in an age when general knowledge demands discipline and direction?

I personally incline to the view that artists rank among the greatest of historians. This has been proved through the ages from the time when the representations of animals were painted on the walls of caves to the time when Michael Angelo gave new character to the human form and even today when the plastic arts yearn to express fresh excitements. I do not mean to be controversial for there is no disputing about taste. But I do feel, however, that nature is the great mentor in art and that if you paint a tree you must take on the personality of the tree, root, branch and leaf, when you essay to place it on paper or canvas.

The triumphs of civil and natural history are associated with periods and individuals. We are all related to these things from the time when we begin to apprehend their values. The long story of this island, the evolution of the race, of language, of literature and of architecture all bear on the subject of social life and integrity.

Because we are becoming more and more sophisticated we no longer attach importance to nature. If you refer to the old tapes-

tries of the 17th century, those of Mortlake for preference, you will find them abounding not only in classical allusions but with an intricate lacework of trees and distant hills. Even the clouds are shown in cumulous form. The gods and the goddesses, the nymphs and the satyrs all derive from the hierarchy of mythology. They were composed when men were still content with make-believe, when historical precedent was at least as accurate as the ascertainable facts of history. These transcripts in woolwork, together with the decorative landscape paintings of Poussin and Claude, were based on observation of nature.

There was a time, too, when architects were content to study the original forms of classical architecture and to compose them anew. They did this in a spirit of emulation but they could not escape the dominating influence of their own day. The outcome of this was the dynamic style we call Baroque. With the opening of the 19th century came plainer buildings, plainer costumes for men and women and cheaper furnishings. This corresponded with the greater facilities afforded by steam locomotion. History recorded all these eventful changes. At the same time men began closer investigations of the historical styles. The time had not yet arrived for experimenting with abstractions (which, by the way, are all based on precedent).

Now came the great crusade of investigation when men found that Chinese art was as old as classical art and that the pagoda was a stylised form of Tartar tent. Thanks to the investigations of Dr. Ferguson they became familiar with Indian architecture. In the meantime the historical interest embraced a complete review of English mediaeval art. It was natural, therefore, for historical research to form the basis of 19th century design in the arts. This is what it was, nothing more.

It was seen for the first time that the works of man are identical, despite period or place. The laws are the same; the results are merely those of surface distinction.

It was seen at once that history was important because it was true. The historian of the 19th century demonstrated the results of the historical styles. Today we view their useful researches as aids to an analysis of form. We have not realised that history also provides studies in qualities of art and form. Put briefly, we now admire past art because it is natural, related to ourselves. It is the humanistic qualities that appeal. For this reason we view departures from the familiar with a certain suspicion. I think this is because contemporary art lacks grace.

I have dwelt on this theme far longer than was my intention when I started to speak but I was anxious to stress the valuable work done by this Society in concentrating on national monuments and records. I would suggest that the Society should encourage historians of art to extend their researches to within living memory. When we think of the magnificent buildings and monuments erected in this Kingdom during the past hundred years we realise what a wealth of material is in existence for our delight. We have things and objects which are especially national and worthy of the genius of the race. True, there are many less worthy sights and objects but these need not be brought into prominence.

Little is to be gained by making contemptuous comparisons; pitting one thing against another is childish and inconclusive. We no longer smile when sacred things are whittled to nothingness.

We have become sophisticated, it is true, but we carry with us the story of our past. In this we are fettered for we are the product of time and of nature. The heart of man is the centre from whence radiates everything pertaining to organic and inorganic being. We are the centre of all things as individuals and as individuals with ideas we are the cells of nations and of the world. We cannot exist without our fellow beings and we cannot invent without referring to diverse experiences and previous experiments.

Thus the historian is the medium necessary to the artist, the writer, the actor and the deviser of machinery. He it is who collects information and whose task it is to guide and comfort wise and earnest men. The historian shows that man exists by the spirit which prompted his forbears to cast around in the battle of life. For man proceeds through life in the trappings of all that is known of human character. It is clear, then, that the historical monuments are infinite in their variety and that if we would advance we must continually return, forgetting the overweening pride and vanity which blinds us to our shortcomings. What we enjoy from day to day is perhaps a mechanised view of little lasting value. Is it possible that the untutored man stands nearer to the truths of historical art?
