

ANTONELLA TROTTA

WHY DO THEY GO TO THE PICTURES? Clive Bell and the New “Home” Audience

Buy pictures and make money!

In 1930, Clive Bell published a short portrait of the British public in the May issue of *Les Arts à Paris*.

The magazine had been founded in 1918 by the prince of modern art merchants Paul Guillaume and was influenced by the personality of its co-founder, Guillaume Apollinaire, whose eclectic style, polemical fervour and propaganda strategy it had assimilated. The magazine was a diary of the heroic years of the *rive gauche*, an extraordinary tool for spreading the message of modern art: its features, news items, correspondence, articles and illustrations were organized in such a way as to map art criticism and the art market, with the Galerie Guillaume, at 108 Faubourg Saint-Honoré, as its driving force (Giraudon 19-30).

Willing to absorb all manner of novelties into its programme, by the mid-1920s *Les Arts à Paris* had gained an international dimension. In the midst of the economic crisis that had threatened many galleries on the left bank of the Seine, Guillaume had purchased modern paintings and *art nègre*, had moved to 59 Rue La Boétie and become the agent of Albert Barnes, the diabolical American collector “un peu médecin, un peu psychologue, un peu altruiste tendance paranoïque” (Franck 545). In 1923, after an interval of two years, the magazine had resumed publication to cover the “Barnes effect” among the artists and art dealers of Paris, his purchases for the Barnes museum in Merion, Pennsylvania, and the educational projects of the Barnes Foundation, inspired by John Dewey and by Roger Fry’s *Vision and Design* (Greenfeld 103-11). From Fry and Clive Bell, Barnes had drawn the theoretical propositions for discussing paintings (Buermey-

er, "De quelques erreurs populaires en esthétique"; Buermeyer, "Pattern and Plastic") and not "archeology, literature, physics or the physiology of vision, or merely vague impressionistic reactions" (Krutch 259); the formulas for original aesthetic education programmes aimed at a broad audience; and the principles for displaying antique and modern works of art in wall compositions (de Mazia). Like the English industrialist and philanthropist Samuel Courtauld, Barnes had taken to heart the exhortation of Bloomsbury formalism to collect outstanding works, and not just those of the 20th century.

In 1929, *Les Arts à Paris* replaced the articles by Barnes and the members of his Foundation with letters from London, where the art market had been experiencing a boom for the past decade and which for less than a year had been home to the new Paul Guillaume Gallery (Giraudon 45).

From the mid-1920s until 1931, when the consequences of the Wall Street collapse were dramatically evident, London was the new centre of the art trade and Britain was "the best country for artists", as headlined an article by the painter Christopher Nevins (Stephenson 32): alongside the experts and foreigners, especially Americans, who had long been active on the art market, a new middle class audience had emerged that invested its savings in cultural emancipation rather than in stocks and shares. The Old Masters continued to be auctioned at record prices, but the general public fed the demand for the prints, engravings, sculptures and paintings of British modern art, more accessible and "always nicer to live with meanwhile than a bond" (Stephenson 32). According to the commentators who discussed this development in specialist journals, newspapers and leisure magazines, this was an unprecedented boom, surpassing Paris and poised to increase in the future. The same optimism was shared by art dealers, who opened new spaces or organized exhibitions to accommodate the interests of this new "home" art audience. In 1927, for example, the Leicester Galleries began to exhibit large selections of works by contemporary British artists alongside the French artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, with the aim of legitimizing British art in the eyes of collectors already accustomed to modern art or usually inclined to buy Old Masters (Carvey and Griffiths 14-17).

In the autumn of 1929, R. H. Wilensky, a militant art critic and author of *The Modern Movement in Art* (1927), invited his readers “of moderate means” but “who want oil paintings that are cheap now and likely to increase in value” to adhere to the slogan: “BUY modern pictures and make MONEY” (Stephenson 31).

Wilensky was entrusted with the first “Letter from London” in the new series of *Les Arts à Paris*, devoted to an analysis of “the degree of appreciation of modern original work” in England. “The British nation as a whole derives no satisfaction from the formal content of works of art,” it read, but is proud to know that there have been and are British artists, that the Royal Academy exists, that British collections and museums possess art works of enormous value. Since the 18th century, art patronage had been the privilege of a large leisured class, though the professional classes often had the most intelligent appreciation of art works and artists came from middle class families. And since everyone had been so influenced by the wealthier classes as to mimic their attitudes, in England art had always been identified with that “amenity in social life that created the English country house, English furniture and silver, English hospitality and English comfort.” Now, however, thanks to the professionalism of a group of critics (a small fraction of the professional classes, of which Wilensky was the standard-bearer), artists could count on an audience of the “well-educated professional classes” and “middle class people of average education” not rich, but attentive. Once a trustworthy critic had pointed them out, this new audience was prepared to buy works of art costing up to £100 apiece (38).

But which artists did Wilensky support? At the end of the 1920s, the most up-to-date artists had begun to deliberately come to terms with the European Modernism of the pre-war years and to work in the belief that English art should participate directly in the modern movement. “Going modern” meant experimenting with new opportunities in the context of their own time, measuring themselves against the development of European art after the war, from Cubism to Surrealism, but without abandoning the quest for a specific identity. This was the aim, for exam-

ple, of the Seven & Five group, whose exhibitions, from 1920 to 1935, were followed attentively by a generation of young collectors and critics like Herbert Read, Adrian Stokes, Margaret Gardiner and R. H. Wilensky himself.

This new vanguard proposed an alternative solution to the variations on Post-Impressionism of the London Group, the avant-garde alliance established in 1913 around the Bloomsbury artists and art critics, who in the 1920s still had an important role in drawing attention to contemporary art. Although "apples have had their day" (Nash, "Giorgio di Chirico"), for much of the general public modern art was synonymous with Post-Impressionism.

However, the new larger professional and middle class audience had not been not won over: motivated by economic and commodity concerns and a conservative taste, they particularly appreciated oil paintings and the cheaper watercolours, frequently on English landscape subjects (Stephenson 32). Their sudden appearance on the market undermined the aesthetic values of art as defined by Bloomsbury, and, more generally, created a new relationship between the viewer and the artwork, as unstable and fluctuating as the spiralling boom market years of the Slump.

The Colonel's theory

To meet to the expectations of this broader public as well, the Paul Guillaume Gallery, at 73 Grosvenor Street, presented a careful selection of artists of the 19th and 20th centuries: in October 1928, for example, it opened a retrospective by Duncan Grant, accompanied by a selection of works by English artists. In April of 1929, the gallery inaugurated the Memorial Exhibition by Fred Mayor, a landscape painter and member of the NEAC, the group that had contributed to the development of modern art through "a gradual progress from moderate impressionism to moderate conservatism" (Harrison, *English Art and Modernism* 21-22). Belonging to the gallery's "estate" were works by Renoir, Douanier Rousseau, Sisley, Marie Laurencin, Modigliani, Paul Nash and Cézanne (Giraudon 45).

Almost everyone thinks himself fit to lay down the law on art. Laying it down, after a full meal, to some hundreds of their fellow creatures appears to be one of the rare pleasures in the lives of princes, bishops, judges, ministers, and mayors. [...] Amongst *ex-officio* aesthetes, royal, ecclesiastical, and judicial, I forgot to mention military; Count Tolstoy, besides being one of the greatest novelists that ever lived, was a retired colonel—or a lieutenant was it? (Bell, “The Colonel’s Theory” 779)

Thus, in 1925, Clive Bell had written on *Tolstoy on Art*, the first edition of the complete collection of Lev Tolstoy’s essays on art including *What Is Art?*, published in England in 1897 but at the time out of print. For Aylmer Maude, the work’s editor, the essay represented the “most lucid statement of the nature of artistic activity and of its relation to the rest of life” (vii), but for most specialized readers the text was the most vigorous attack on formalism ever launched by a “simple-minded and reactionary writer” (Tomas vii), “barbarous” or better yet a “philistine” (Bell, “The Colonel’s Theory” 779). The condemnation of the depreciation of subject matter and of the separation between art and life seemed incomprehensible and absurd to those who recognized in these trends the characteristics of the new art, but for “readers interested in the relation of art to life in general, and who wish to understand why art is of importance to mankind,” and for whom the primacy of form was synonymous with unintelligibility and exclusivity, it was still an enlightening text (Maude vi).

Tolstoy, wrote Bell, had conceived of a theory of art with the same blind determination with which one might attempt to demonstrate that “the earth is flat,” and without any love of art. His opinion was shared by millions of people, “born without the aesthetic sense” or, more accurately, “without eyes:” since in a work of art they seek above all the conformity of the subject depicted with what they have read in books or experienced in everyday life, these viewers can not appreciate its quality. Their lack of sensibility extends beyond modern art: “aesthetically blind,” they run their fingers over a Raphael, lick a Giotto, smell a Piero della Francesca, only to conclude that there is “nothing to make a fuss about,” and that those

who speak of them as masterpieces are "corrupt and decadent liars who should be exterminated."¹

Listen to them in a gallery before a primitive: "What a hideous picture!". They mean that if they met that Virgin at a tennis-party they would think her ugly, and they happen to have been born without the sense which carries one out of the world of values for life into that of aesthetic values. (Bell, "The Colonel's Theory" 779)

But why did this audience, generally educated, not rich but well-off, engaged in the professions or in the civil service, these disciples of the "Colonel," flock to exhibitions and museums? Why were they active on the art market?

This is the theme of the article that Bell, then an authoritative art critic, influential cultural figure, popular publicist and sought-after socialite, published in 1930 in the new series of *Les Arts à Paris*.

The occasion of the article—a brilliant and caustic, sometimes cruel text, in the aggressive and militant spirit of the magazine—was the outstanding success of the exhibition *Italian Art, 1200-1900*, opened in January of that year at the Royal Academy in London, and visited, in the two months for which it ran, by hundreds of thousands of people.

The political and cultural aims of the exhibition have been masterfully reconstructed by Francis Haskell; here suffice it to recall the personal involvement of Benito Mussolini in the success of the enterprise, the pressure he exerted on the Italian commissioner for the exhibition, Ettore Modigliani, to transfer to London works that should never have been allowed to travel, and the appalling catalogue, according to Kenneth Clark (its principal compiler) the worst catalogue of a great exhibition ever printed², which sold a hundred and fifty thousand copies (Haskell 107-27).

¹ As noted by Claudio Zambianchi in this volume, Roger Fry had already stated that Tolstoy was wrong in *An Essay in Aesthetics*, whilst appreciating the writer's attention to the emotion elicited by the work of art.

² Fry was a member of the organizing committee, had favourably reviewed the exhibition in *The Burlington Magazine* and the BBC, had spoken for at least one of the guided tours for visitors to the

The exhibition presented six hundred works, displayed in a simplified way: the history and nature of Italian art, said the catalogue, deserved an organization by chronology and historical geography, in which the artists who were “greatest and best beloved” by the public could shine like apparitions from another world (Witt xii). But since such an arrangement would confuse the ordinary visitor, “in accordance with the tradition of the Royal Academy” Room III was “devoted to some supreme masterpieces,” chosen among the most famous works of the masters of each school from the 15th to the 18th century. “If anything in the nature of a Tribuna is anywhere permissible,” wrote Robert Witt, “surely it is in this stately and noble gallery” (xvi). In the same room the visitor could see *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, Raphael’s *Woman with a Veil*, Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*, *The Tempest* by Giorgione, the *Portrait of Paul III* by Titian, the *Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca, Lorenzo Lotto, Correggio, Veronese and Tiepolo. Two rooms were dedicated to drawings, “vital” to the connoisseur’s understanding of the history of Italian art and needed to make the exhibition tolerable to the ordinary viewer: after kilometres of the “familiar sequence” of High Renaissance paintings, the interruption was “both restful and stimulating” (Witt xiv).

Indeed, the visit required considerable effort: the concentration of the works and the overcrowding of the rooms forced visitors to walk at double speed and to entrust their aesthetic experience to photographs, the short illustrated guide, the catalogue or the colour prints offered for sale at reasonable prices in the exhibition rooms. Outside the Royal Academy, furthermore, the visitors queueing were so numerous and determined as to recall the indistinct crowd marching off “to enjoy themselves” at the Great Exhibition of 1851, whose misfortunes had been portrayed with irony in George Cruikshank’s engravings. Inside the rooms, the impression of stuffiness could be compared without exaggeration to the images of thronging crowds, exhausted and bored, in Feliks Topolski’s drawings, which in those years depicted the essential whatever-it-is of British cultural institutions.

But why was the exhibition such a success?

Royal Academy and had published a more correct *Commemorative Catalogue*.

Why do they go to the pictures?

It is clear, wrote Clive Bell, that the crowd of men, women, children who arrived at the Royal Academy by all means and from every corner of the United Kingdom "have not come because they like Italian pictures." If they had really wished to see them, they would have gone to the National Gallery, open every day of the year and almost always free of charge, without being disturbed by the bad lighting and the questionable colour of the walls of Burlington House.

Indeed, the National Gallery was never crowded: with the exception of the guards, some connoisseurs and tourists armed with Baedekers, the museum was one of the emptiest places in the world despite the high quality Italian Renaissance paintings in its collection, just as in the two months of the exhibition Burlington House was the most crowded. "And since the public does not go there for pleasure, for what does it go?"

The ordinary viewer, continued Bell, like Mr Jones (an honest linoleum manufacturer) and his family "go to see the Italian pictures because everyone goes; and Mr Jones (possibly accompanied by Mrs Jones) goes to the Derby for much the same reason" (Bell, "Why Do They Go to the Pictures?" 33). But since appreciating paintings, like predicting the victory of a thoroughbred race horse, requires "a rare native sensibility," the outcome of the visit (like that of betting on the Derby) is not always successful: "Meanwhile Jones traipses round the rooms of Burlington House, his wife reading from the catalogue, the children shuffling in the rear. He has been there only an hour and never in his life was more tired" (34).

So why did the public go to exhibitions? The most immediate answer is that the papers "tell him or her to go" (33). In the 1920s, newspapers had done much to attract the general public to the art world, encouraging the commercial marketing and advertising strategies that the art world had copied from the retail trade precisely to appeal to this new audience. The exhibition of Italian art in London, for example, was supported by an excellent press campaign, which also saw the participation of left-wing periodicals such as *The New Republic*. In May 1930, moreover,

the newspapers covered (and popularized) the exhibition by sculptors of the London Group held at Selfridges. Jacob Epstein and Barbara Hepworth had created small site-specific works for the ornamental garden on the rooftop of the department store, to which the press had devoted sensational titles, such as: “Pan–Not for Frying.” Specialist journals like *The Architectural Review* had questioned its readers on the unpredictable consequences of “Giving the Public What It Wants” (Stephenson 40).

But “[w]hy does everyone tell everyone to go?” The fact is, Bell continued, that the battle of Post-Impressionism had shown that for some individuals, for artists and aesthetes, the experience of art could induce a happiness that was “manifestly real.” Now a large group of educated people hoped to tap into this same state of mind, but the outcome was a distressing lack of comprehension (Bell, “Why Do They Go To The Pictures?” 33).

On the other hand, it had become clear in as early as 1913 that England was home to “two absolutely separate cultures,” wholly indifferent to one another: one year after the second exhibition of Post-Impressionism and when the Armory show opened in New York, the Royal Academy hosted a retrospective of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The purpose of the exhibition was to set a standard for the nation’s artistic values, to which the public could entrust their aesthetic education, endangered by the disorderly market, passionate about all things foreign, that the exhibitions of Post-Impressionists had helped to bolster. The Royal Academy, wrote Roger Fry at the time, tried to meet the expectations of the average visitor, who found in the paintings of Alma-Tadema the immediate satisfaction of a superficial archaeological curiosity: the artist represented drapes, furniture and clothing in the antique style made of “highly-scented soap” for viewers who were “accustomed to buy and sell” (Fry, “The Case of the Late Sir Alma-Tadema” 147).

In 1914, Clive Bell’s *Art* had gained new viewers for the new art thanks to the formula of the *significant form*, the mysterious system of relationships between lines and colours that triggers the aesthetic emotion and explains Piero della Francesca, Cézanne, the mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Persian bowls. This novelty had also affected traditional cultural institutions: the public had begun to pester the guards because

they wished to visit the most recondite rooms of the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert (Bell, “How England Met Modern Art” 27). The wave of internationalism had sparked debate on the future of the Tate Gallery, which was founded in the late 19th century to preserve and promote British art, and now intended to equip itself with new galleries for foreign art.

But the audience for modern art remained limited and still represented a vanguard of taste, whose social background was no different from the intellectual *haute bourgeoisie* that in 19th-century France had upheld the values of the new art (Harrison, “‘Englishness’ and ‘Modernism’ Revisited”).

Between the wars, this social and cultural aristocracy (highbrow) was joined by a new middle class audience (middlebrow) that was opening up to the consumption of art and literature. At the end of the 19th century, Benjamin Disraeli had stated that in Britain there were “two nations,” lacking any shared inclinations and completely incomprehensible to one another, but by the first half of the 20th century they had drawn closer thanks to the effects of a “bloodless revolution” (Huizinga 19). From the late 1920s and to an even greater extent in the ’30s, when public despair went hand in hand with increasing wages, rapidly rising living standards and growing domestic consumption, the middle class used its free time to go to the cinema, the theatre and to exhibitions, and to follow the press, and shared with the minority the “confident belief that modernity had provided the tools with which to fashion a better future” (Gardiner 12). For this reason, the exhibition of Italian art was conceived as a constellation of free or cheap events—guided tours, lectures and radio broadcasts entrusted to historians and specialists, concerts—with which to occupy leisure time well beyond the duration of the visit.

The majority, however, did not share the values of Modernism: concrete and conformist, it judged the continental inclinations of modernist intellectuals to be deliberately elitist, avidly read popular novels and loved narrative painting. In honour of these new viewers, R. H. Wilensky published a highly favourable (and equally self-serving) review of the exhibition of Italian art in London, since the worsening of the economic crisis allowed the public to redefine the roles and prerogatives of the art system.

In *The Modern Movement in Art*, Wilensky had already expressed the conviction that art from Cézanne to Picasso was a natural development of the principles established by the artists of the Renaissance, according to which the “architectural” experience of form should be combined with the human experience of life. Now, after appreciating the accrochage of the great hall of the Royal Academy as “a sort of Salon Carré”, he wrote that “le véritable centre d’attraction de la *Mostra*” was Vittore Carpaccio, the favourite painter of the proper Victorian critic John Ruskin. Furthermore, certain that he was addressing the “jeunes gens” who had also flocked to the recent exhibition of Russian icons at the Victoria and Albert Museum³, Wilensky recommended an attentive visit to the two rooms of the Italian Primitives. These painters, indeed, demonstrated the flimsiness of the theoretical opposition between “un art ennemi de la nature et créateur de formes abstraites” and “un art sensible à la nature dont il reproduit les apparences réelles.”

[F]ormelles qu’une mosaïque byzantine, he wrote, tout en dégagant le caractère d’intimité des oeuvre du type Hollandais. Et ce qui par-dessus tout est exquis—ineffablement exquis—c’est leur couleur. (“Lettre d’Angleterre” 22)

For Wilensky the exhibition of Italian art was a triumph and augured well for the future, whilst for Bell the visitors to the Royal Academy were victims of a pathetic delusion, namely the belief that “the best things in life can be bought, if not for cash, at any rate for good will and courage” (“Why Do They Go to the Pictures?” 33). At the exhibition, Mr Jones is “performing an act of culture,” the tribute that matter pays to the spirit “in the touching and ever disappointed hope of getting something for its pains.” In exchange for his sacrifice, unfortunately, he will not enjoy aesthetic ecstasy, which is the prerogative of the fanatics who derive from art an experience so thrilling that the pleasures and activities of life become insignificant, but merely “the bad mouth,” a severe headache and the perseverance of a cruel misunderstanding (34).

³ The exhibition *Masterpieces of Russian Painting* was inaugurated in the summer of 1929 and in six weeks had been visited by thirty thousand people. Roger Fry was the first to propose holding it (see Salmond 132).

[T]he fantastic prices paid for old masters confirm his disquieting belief; for Jones cannot realise that millionaires covet Rembrandts, not for their artistic significance, but because they are rarest kind of postage-stamp on the market. (33)

At most, when he goes back out into the open air and is able to smoke or think about lunch, he will be grateful to the Italian paintings for leaving him free to enjoy the traffic of Piccadilly Circus (34).

Enjoying pictures

In 1930, a few months after the publication of the articles by Wilensky and Bell in *Les Arts à Paris*, the Paul Guillaume Gallery in London closed for business after the sudden death of the collector Brandon Davis, Guillaume's partner in the company (Giraudon 46). In 1934, Paul Guillaume died unexpectedly, leaving a large estate and a project to donate his extraordinary collection to the state. In 1935 *Les Arts à Paris* published its final issue.

In England in these same years the economic, social and political crisis worsened and the art market saw a marked contraction in transactions. The rich, wrote the critic P. G. Konody in a lucid summary, still buy Old Masters, but the modern art audience had shrunk to a small group of experts (Stephenson 39). By 1931, even the most financially solid galleries and auction houses were in serious trouble. In 1932 the devaluation of the pound and the effects of the stock market collapse had forced many artists working abroad to return and convert to creating conventional portraiture or landscapes, to working in commercial design, photo-advertising, advertising and interior decoration, for consumers able to invest in furnishing their homes in the London suburbs and purchasing original works instead of the copies on which they would have spent their money a few years earlier. Despite the crisis, in fact, the middle classes enjoyed a marked prosperity that enlarged the consumer market and stimulated the production and distribution of "standard commodities" that "led to a converging of interests among those concerned with style" (Harrison, *English Art and Modernism* 238).

In 1932, for Paul Nash “it might be possible to regard the artist in a new light, that of a member of the community or even what is called a useful member of society, wherein his potentialities rather than his present achievement may become a matter of general interest” (“The Artist and the Community” 68). In 1934, the press decreed the success of the first (and only) collective exhibition by Unit One at the Mayor Gallery, the space opened in 1925 by Fred Mayor, the son of the NEAC painter and the boldest art-dealer in London. The exhibition presented works by Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, John Armstrong, John Bigge, Edward Burra and Edward Wadsworth, whose purpose was to express “a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly of today” (Nash, “Unit One. A New Group of Artists”), starting from the relationships between art, design, architecture and industry. The catalogue, or more accurately the collection of photographs of works by the artists that accompanied the exhibition, was edited by Herbert Read.

The protagonists of the new modern movement reinterpreted the processes of artistic production, reformulated the terminology of criticism and the principles of art theory, and negotiated cultural values with the new audience, implicitly rejecting the “Bloomsbury-inspired interests which had prevailed during the twenties” (Harrison, *English Art and Modernism* 241).

‘Post-Cézannism’ and ‘Derainism’ have ceased to be of the first interest; they no longer hold our attention. A desire to find again some adventure in art seems more and more cogent to our sculptors and painters and, now, to our architects. This seems to suggest, as well as any explanation, the meaning of ‘the contemporary spirit’. It is the adventure, the research, the pursuit in modern life. (Nash, “Unit One” 104)

So, in 1934, Clive Bell republished his tragicomic tale of the Jones family’s visit to the exhibition of Italian art in a new book, *Enjoying Pictures*, but this time to offer a (disinterested) approach to the experience of art through a new critical method, descriptive rather than normative, hierarchical and non-exclusive, and a new and reassuring test case, Italian Renaissance painting.

To declare that a work of art is a work of art, he had already written in 1921, is useless and foolish; what is essential is "to show" the quality of the form. The critic must thus possess some uncommon qualities, like sincerity and persuasiveness, quick thinking, brilliant communication skills and a sense of humour. Criticism consists of devising relative judgments rooted in the individual response and, therefore, subject to revision: the pure aesthetic experience comes suddenly and bowls us over (Bell, "De Gustibus" 138), but most of our experience of art is halved, conditioned by the times, by our culture, by our predilections and prejudices, by our state of mind. The task of the critic is not to handle "a whole system of absolutes" (140) but consists of "pointing to what he likes and trying to explain why he likes it" (141).

Thus, this new book was the story of a happy visit to the National Gallery and elsewhere aimed at readers who could compare their experiences with his and "probably feel that theirs are different, richer, more intense, and more precious," but also with the "ninety-nine out of a hundred of their friends" for whom a visit to a museum or an exhibition is as frustrating as the misadventures of Mr Jones and his family (*Enjoying Pictures* 12). This is true of the globe-trotters, the Baedeker-bearers, and the retired Colonel, an educated reader of biographies, historical essays and erudite poetry, who "laugh heartily over Low's graphic journalism but get no good of Lorenzo Monaco" (20) and who are "bored to tears in a picture-gallery" (21).

So why did everyone insist on making this pointless sacrifice?

The truth is that the battle of Post-Impressionism had shown that for a group of fanatics the experience of art was one of true joy, set apart from the world of crude factuality as only the happiness of love or the heights of pure thought could be for all others. Now, right in the midst of the "battle of brows," a substantial group of "cultured" people (98) hoped to tap into the same state of mind and rise, at least for a moment, into that world of the spirit from which the lucky few sensitive to aesthetic experience "look down on the world of our sorrow" (93). Because "it is a question of values" (98), the result was a distressing failure to comprehend the art world and society: excluded from the world of the spirit because for them art is an accident to be measured

against life, cultured viewers—wrote Fry—are prepared to fake aesthetic emotion, to show off “what they know about the history of a work of art” and hide what they feel—or, rather, do not feel—in front of it (“Culture and Snobbism” 97-106)⁴. Conversely, artists and aesthetes are entirely uninterested in the values and the “variety of entertainments provided this side the barrier:” they do not thirst for power, they look with ironic detachment at political and economic life, and do not hesitate to pass the time in socially unacceptable entertainments that earn them the censure of right-thinking people (Bell, *Enjoying Pictures* 99).

But for Bell, despite this unbridgeable distance, all was not lost: he was now ready to say that “nevertheless, even from an impure interest in art something is gained” (98), but aimed to show it not to the “professional low-brow” who, with his obtuse certainties “makes an excellent butt, a chopping-block or laughing-stock” (4), but to “many an open-minded gentleman,” to the prejudiced middlebrow scholar who looks at paintings as he reads a book (12), and therefore in an art gallery suffers from boredom, “which is one of the worst kinds of unhappiness” (4).

Recalling the pleasure and dismay with which he had followed Fry at a marching pace around museums and galleries (“The Critic as Guide” 149), Bell devoted to this ordinary visitor a guided tour and “a kind of criticism vastly different” (*Enjoying Pictures* 5), descriptive rather than normative, hierarchical and non-exclusive, which would guarantee at least a partial aesthetic experience.

Whilst Fry invited future art historians to work hard to increase their own sensitivity to the “specific idiom of pictorial design” as the only way of understanding painting (*Art History as an Academic Study* 44), Bell was willing to come to terms with “the Colonel” and to declare openly the role of non-aesthetic elements—the recollection of biographical and historical concepts, technical data and comparative studies—in his personal response to the work of art. Starting from “How I look at pictures,” he thus offered an accessible definition of “How to look at pictures” (*Enjoying Pictures* 4). Now that his youthful dogmatic state-

⁴ For Reed, however, Fry’s target was not the ordinary member of the public, but the refined socialite, like Bell (Reed 121).

ments seemed "fabricated reactions of sensibility at the service of a theory" (55), he was ready to use as his test case the Italian Renaissance, which he had excluded from *Art* and which now came in handy precisely as a pleasure palace for the audience of the latest exhibitions.

Any painting that is a work of art, he wrote, possesses an *aesthetic quality* sufficient to induce in the viewer if not the *aesthetic thrill* of the masterpiece then at least a moderate *aesthetic emotion* and the resulting *aesthetic mood*, in other words the willing, receptive and enduring state of mind that characterizes the pleasure of painting. This state of mind is the place of *enthusiastic analysis*, in other words of critical discourse, and is supported by a mixture of ingredients, including historical curiosity, a limited exercise of connoisseurship and general knowledge. At the National Gallery, for example, *The Baptism of Christ* by Francesco Zaganelli is in no way thrilling, but catches the eye for the time needed for the critic to assess (and point out to the viewer) the differences in the composition and the figures compared to Raphael, Francia, Signorelli or Piero della Francesca; to appreciate the accuracy of the anatomical representation but be disappointed by the expression of the faces; to suspect an overly intrusive intervention on the part of the restorer and be amused by the caprices in the background (32-34). By contrast, before Romney's *The Beaumont Family* he will remain "cold and lonely as a stuffed fish" and walk straight on, unrestrained by the biographical notions and cultural considerations that the painting calls to mind through its subject (43).

But the most methodologically eloquent example is Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican. In 1920, Fry had based on the paintings of Raphael not only the discussion of the difference between what you know and what you feel in front of a painting, but also the question of the relationship between the reaction to the content and the response to an understanding of form in the appreciation of an artwork. However, he left the issue unresolved ("Retrospect" 188-99).

Bell, by contrast, wrote that in the Stanza della Segnatura, thanks to Raphael's ability to render human relations in perfect

visual relationships, it is almost impossible to determine if memory, historical erudition, “the kunstforschend daemon” or the aesthetic mood is activated first (*Enjoying Pictures* 62). And though, generally speaking, the impatience with which tourists wait for the guide to recite the names of all the characters in the *School of Athens* is blameworthy, there is no doubt that “to know that the head of a young man, dreamy and thoughtful, was ever reckoned a good likeness of Raphael himself” adds “a little adscititious thrill” (70). The “delight in the recognition, this pleasure of jumping from the shin-bone to the monster, is shared [...], by all bright people be they colonels or aesthetes” (28).

It is necessary, then, to develop “a possible method of classification” (42) based on the quality and quantity of “food” provided for *enthusiastic analysis* (38) and attributing to content a role that is in no way marginal. In conclusion, whereas in *Art* the critic-aesthete had established an—albeit temporary—community of vision thanks to the circular notion of *significant form*, his task now was to suggest the possibility of a broader community of taste. “Good criticism,” wrote Bell a few years earlier, transmits the special pleasure of the life of the spirit (“Criticism” 179), and he was now ready to assert that there is no reason why the average public should not enjoy art as “just good things amongst the other good things of life” (*Enjoying Pictures* 97), partly in response to their own preferences, idiosyncrasies, predilections, prejudices, literary and philosophical inclinations. For Bell and the sensitive and gifted minority, “art does work miracles” (106), but for others it is fair to assume that it gives a “fillip” to common experience (98). Entering the National Gallery, wrote Virginia Woolf, can be very disappointing: the paintings “are too still, too silent” to respond to “our loves, our desires, the moment’s eagerness, the passing problem” and “to pass through a turnstile, and some days of a week, to part with a sixpenny bit” cannot fight off the urgency of “the pressure of humanity” (“Pictures and Portraits” 163). For Fry, many visitors would have gladly thrown themselves from the terrace of the museum to die in the traffic of Trafalgar Square when confronted with the fatal evidence of their “aesthetic inaptitude” (*Art History as an Academic Study* 24). But for Bell, a visit to the National Gallery or the exhibition of

Italian art at Burlington House could be, for everyone, a complex experience, briefly intense and as pleasurable as the happiness of lovers or "a successful 'weekend'" (Bell, *Enjoying Pictures* 8).

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