

VISUAL ARTS AND DAILY BREAD

The interaction between the artist and the patron will always remain a very important factor in the formation of any art work, and the quality of this relationship reveals itself in the completed work. On the basis of this theory, we can conclude that the relationship between the patrons and the practitioners during the Renaissance must have been a happy one.

During that period in history, many of the merchants, bankers, civic and religious leaders were patrons of the arts. This patronage and the ways in which the artists responded to it produced many highly developed art forms.

After many centuries we still look upon the Renaissance as the high point in the development of western civilisation. We look at the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Paolo Ucello, Donatello, Piero della Francesca, Masaccio, Botticelli, Giotto, Michaelangelo and so on, and we cannot help wondering why there were so many great masters within such a short period of time.

There is no need to list the answer to that question here. It will suffice to point out that there was a need for wealthy patrons to express their sense of well-being by providing a highly sophisticated living environment demanded by their sensitivities, and their wish to have the people share the results of their expression with them.

In real terms, there was nothing extraordinary about the Renaissance period, as it was in the final analysis a simple solution of supply and demand, as had been the case as far back as we can look into the history of mankind. In basic terms, art enriches our environment and satisfies our sensitivity in the way that food will satisfy our stomach.

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Many art forms have been produced since the dawn of history, but only items with purposeful intent have survived the trials of time. From this we can establish that the appreciation and acceptance of recognized aesthetic qualities are similar in all people from all periods of time, different forms and degrees of sophistication being only a temporary barrier.

To be unable to appreciate the art of one's own time, or the art forms from a foreign culture, or any art form at all, is not a biological handicap. To appreciate art is an intellectual necessity for the understanding of its development. If we should accept this concept, it would require discipline to gain the rewards which will give us a fuller and richer life. There is no short cut to this learning process as it can be likened to your bank account - you may only take out what you put into it.

Art, the mistress of delight, has served mankind well in the past. There is no reason to think that this will not continue if we treat her with due respect and put her in her rightful place. In every activity with human history there have been few areas where art did not enhance the events. Indeed, if we did not have art it would not have been either possible or necessary to have a recorded history.

Treating our 'mistress of delight' with respect does not mean we should put her on a pedestal and house her in a museum or art gallery. Art should be part of our every day living; in our homes, our offices, our factories; in our towns and cities, and on our buildings as an integral part of the structure. In recent years some of us have already accepted this concept, but it will take many more years before this can become a general practice.

To provide ourselves with a richer environment by the use of art will certainly be a wonderful development, but it will take time to learn how to go about it objectively. Initially, we will have to train

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specialists to advise us, and we will have to train more artists to produce appropriate work for our purpose. We will have to develop a new profession, with practitioners whom we can respect and trust as we already respect and trust people in established professions.

To be objective in selecting a work for your place of work is especially important. This is where we come into contact with other people on an average of eight hours a day on at least five days of the week. To have an appropriate work in your office is more important than to have a great work of art. The works you select must enhance your surroundings and project an image that is compatible with the status of your office. The same objectivity should be applied when you select a work for the exterior of your premises, with the added consideration that it will be exposed to the view of the general public, and take the position of a landmark for your town or city.

Do not have the impression that we have few artists who are practising in New Zealand. We have more artists and crafts-people in this country in proportion to the population than most other countries. It is when we try to find an appropriate work for a specific situation that we find it limited. Given time, the law of supply and demand will effect the necessary adjustments to rectify this situation.

Please do not demolish our museums and art galleries as they are providing an excellent service within our education system. In recent years with public interest, local and central government funding, and Golden Kiwi Lottery Board contributions, we have more galleries and museums on a per capita basis than anywhere else in the world, and they play an important part towards our attainment of cultural maturity.

We are a progressive people with a highly developed social system but we do have to look at where visual art fits into our social structure.

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Pondering on this standpoint, we must conclude that we could learn much from history. We should look at the early Greek culture, the Han and Tang dynasties in China, the Renaissance period in Europe, and the highly sophisticated society of Georgian England. We should focus particularly at the ways in which those eras utilized the creative energy of their time to the fullest advantage for the benefit of their cultural development. But we must remember at all times that this exercise is aimed mainly at learning how best we can benefit from the enormous reserve of creative energy that we are so fortunate in having in New Zealand today.

There is an urgent need for New Zealanders to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the art forms being produced in this country. With improved audience and consumer participation, the recent emergence of a New Zealand image in art will consolidate and provide a strong foundation for future development.

To obtain a national identity in art is not easy for a small country like New Zealand where we have such good communications with the rest of the world and its influences, but with well considered support from the public there is no reason why this cannot be achieved. There are many areas in which all sectors of the community can help to make the visual art scene healthier. The most important area for us to direct our attention on is ensuring that art is included in our general education system at all levels. In everyday living we must aim at providing ourselves with stimulating conditions. We should allocate time to attend classes, lectures and exhibitions, thus gaining a better understanding of as many art forms as possible. We should support our local groups, art societies, art galleries etc., so that they can continue to provide a meaningful service to the community. We should sponsor in a responsible manner art awards, bursaries and scholarships that will enable potential artists to work towards a goal.

Most important of all is learning to understand that having art as a part of our everyday living should be as natural and normal as having our daily bread.

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