



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## *What Use is Art?*

SOME PERSONS FIND IT DIFFICULT to associate art with such hard-headed facts of life as their daily jobs and the disorder of domestic and world politics.

If, indeed, the chores and the excitements are poles apart from the arts, that is not a bad thing. In our present civilization, mechanization and industrialization make the arts necessary as a counterpoise if we are to retain our balance, our culture and our sanity.

Art can take the chaos, the haphazard, the *mêlée* of daily life and set it before us in ordered simplicity, symmetry and perspective. It inserts evidence, as it were, between the shrieking headlines, that beauty, truth and goodness are not obsolete.

The arts are not to be judged by the standards of industrial efficiency, with its absorption in mass production. Unlike useful things or the tools used to produce them, works of art are designed to serve no function other than to give enjoyment. Under the utilitarian code, creation of beautiful things is looked upon as the pastime of persons who might be employed in useful labour.

Everyone knows that there are some things which we do because we must: these are our necessities. There are things we do because we ought to do them: these are our duties. There are other things we do because we like to do them: these are our play, a necessary offset to all the others.

The humanizing influence of art is one of the most positive forces in the development of a well-balanced mind, helping us to cope with and to rise above the multitude of mundane and materialistic affairs that absorb most of our attention and time.

Some persons are critical of present-day art, and put their dislike of it forward as a reason for brushing it to one side.

Art cannot be praised or blamed for holding up a mirror to the society in which it exists. If the reality is chaotic, so will the reflection be. If the reality is confusing or difficult, the painter may sublimate it or shroud it in metaphor, as did one who was painting a landscape. "When a cow came slouching by," he said, "another artist might have drawn it, but I

always go wrong in the hind legs of quadrupeds, so I drew the soul of the cow." Behind the mystery of much art today there are artists trying to draw the soul of society.

### *What art is*

Some people will say that art is real when it shows sound knowledge, mastered craft, vivid imagination, strong common sense, truth, and wise meaning. Others will say that the distinguishing characteristic of a work of art is that it serves no practical end, but is an end in itself. Or it may be said that if a painting appeals merely by the story it tells it is not art but an illustration. The ultimate test of worth is: does it give pleasure? To arouse the powers of enjoyment, of yielding to beauty, is the legitimate end of art.

Tolstoy said in his essay on art: "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them." This means that art is not an ornamental addition to life, but an organ of human life translating man's perception into feeling. Art is not a matter of deftness of hands only, but the work of the whole spirit of man.

The art described here can be enjoyed by gentle and simple men and women, by learned and unlearned, if they have a mind to it.

That the sense of beauty is inherent in most people without regard to the extent of their education is clearly seen when we look at the art of primitive people. It is also seen in the unconsciously aesthetic appreciation which today's man in the street will betray as he inspects the latest automobile, or in the presence of any beautiful building or machine which he is not asked to look at as "a work of art".

Many persons acknowledge that their attitude to art is purely emotional and inexpert, but nevertheless they enjoy the experience. If one does not feel deeply stirred in the presence of great pictures, great sculpture or great music, he can be certain that he is living

a vastly lower and more restricted life than he could be living. The mechanical world is of our own making, but the real world is one of deep emotional experience.

### *Everyone needs beauty*

The aesthetic sense should be deliberately and consciously cultivated in all sections and activities of life. We are all too likely to become highly developed in one faculty at the expense of other, more personal, parts of our nature. Top-notch executives, experts in electronics, designers of computers; all these have hard intellectual force, but many of them have not been careful to preserve and develop their real, their beauty-loving, selves.

Granting that the fine arts are those of which the end is beauty, the question next arises, what is beauty? It cannot be digested into general laws for all peoples and all times. Every person needs to form a philosophy of beauty for himself, making his own appraisal of what is lovely. Without that he will be tossed aimlessly on an ebbing and flowing sea of passing beliefs, emotions and ideas.

There is no absolute and accepted scale of beauty, and some beauties are more easily discernible by some people than by others. The delicate carvings in wood of French Canada and the soap-stone and bone carvings of the Eskimos are more quickly and easily understandable than the clay figurines of China in the Royal Ontario Museum, but there is beauty in all of them.

When thinking of fine art, we can say that any material object which gives us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities is in some degree beautiful. When we say that there is beauty in a picture or in a piece of sculpture, what we really mean is that this particular arrangement of colours and forms causes a state of mind in us that is good.

Much of our appraisal of beauty is influenced by the conditions under which we view the object, and also by our personal make-up. Some persons who write or think poetically about the redness of a rose will faint at the sight of the same redness flowing from a wound.

### *Down to earth*

The fine arts have been brought down from the elevated regions of the religious and the classical societies, and launched upon their secular, their democratic, career.

The term "fine arts" is conventionally used to designate those arts which are concerned with line, colour and form (painting, sculpture and architecture); with sound (music) and with the exploitation of words for both their musical and expressive values (prose and poetry). Architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry are by common consent the five principal or greater fine arts.

The mechanical arts can be practised by strict adherence to rule and precept, but the fine arts,

though they, too, have technical foundations which are matters of rule and precept, can be practised only by following, in a region outside the reach of rule and precept, the free prompting of some of the finest faculties of the spirit. They call for imagination: for, as Aristotle put it, bringing something into existence.

An artist's eye sees the surface of things but also discerns and interprets the organic structure and the potentiality that lie underneath. It is when a work of art achieves a synthesis of these that it becomes a contribution to the viewer's understanding and opens up a wealth of cultural beauty.

For art to live it must communicate. It needs both form and meaning. It is not enough that it mean something special to the artist: it must convey meaning or feeling to the viewer.

The artist painting a landscape is not trying to describe the visible appearance of the landscape as a photograph would show it, but to tell us something about it, an original discovery made by him which he wishes to communicate to us.

This is why looking at fine art is different from looking at an illustration. We do not seek photographic accuracy but a portrayal of a slice of life that is intelligible, informative and perhaps elevating.

### *"The Last Supper"*

The artist groups and co-ordinates a diversity of parts into a unity, with every part relevant to the whole, in order to make his point clear. The edges of his canvas form the boundary of his painting. He must make everything he depicts relate to the size and shape he has chosen, and every object must have a definite relationship to the other objects.

This is illustrated in Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper", probably the most famous painting in the world. It illuminates a moment of unparalleled human drama, and Leonardo directed every element of his composition toward communicating it. He made use of the architectural features of the room: lines radiating from the rafters of the ceiling meet at the head of the central figure; the other figures are so disposed, in a wave-like pattern, as to move the current of excitement toward the centre of the table where it seems to break against the serenity of the central figure.

Not all that is optically possible to be seen is to be shown in every picture. Care must be taken not to emphasize particularities, for that would be confusing. A painting of a building in which every brick is reproduced with the greatest fidelity has left no scope for poetry in the artist's conception of his piece.

Art is a response to the demand for stimulation of our senses and imagination, and truth enters into it only as it is useful in arriving at these ends.

Truth in art has almost as many aspects as in morals or philosophy. The painter may understand it as truth of general effect, possibly to the neglect of truth of detail. Not everyone concedes to the

artist or the poet the right to subordinate actuality to his point of view, or to suppress some externals in order to reveal the deeper, simpler truth as he sees it.

The first Canadian Christmas Carol, for example, adapts an ancient story to the understanding, environment and way of life of the Huron Indians of Georgian Bay 300 years ago. It was written by Father Jean de Brébeuf in the Indian dialect.

The illustrations for the Carol on slides by the National Film Board repeat the setting of the words: "a lodge of broken bark" instead of "a stable"; "a ragged robe of rabbit skin" instead of "swaddling clothes"; and "gifts of fox and beaver pelt" instead of "gold and frankincense and myrrh."

### *What pleases the eye*

Fine art addresses itself not only to the eye but also to the imagination. The eye takes notice of ten different qualities of objects: light and darkness, colour and substance, form and position, distance and nearness, movement and rest. It is through his depiction of these in his painting that the artist reaches our minds and animates our thoughts.

Many pictures owe their permanent value in art and their chief charm in our eyes to the artist's excellent feeling for line, and his facility and skill in draughtsmanship. Others please us by richness or harmony of colour, or by the delicacy of their effects of light and shade. The human eye tires of machine-drawn straight lines. The curve is the line of beauty, whether in the draperies in portraiture or the profile of a landscape or ocean waves.

Perhaps in nothing else is the skill of the landscape artist more put to the test than in his rendering of the effects of distance. Perspective, said Leonardo, is the bridle and rudder of painting, but perspective has been renounced by some abstract artists. They seek to stress the independence of the world they create from the laws which govern appearance in the natural world.

### *Architecture: science and art*

The stuff of an artist's dreams is easier to conjure up in paint on canvas than in bricks and concrete. Architecture is the greatest and most complex of all the arts, being both an art and a science. By it are erected and adorned the buildings raised by man, and we require of these buildings that they fulfil two kinds of goodness: the doing of their practical duty well, and their being graceful and pleasing in appearance.

People of today demand practicality in architecture. Were Pheidias, the celebrated statuary of Athens, commissioned to supervise the building of a Parthenon to crown Mount Royal in Montreal, or Signal Hill in St. John's, or Grouse Mountain at Vancouver, there would be without doubt a demonstration of citizens asking why he was not engaged on something useful, like a housing project.

An architect who is creating churches or office

buildings does not use the trimmings taken over from past styles because they cannot be considered an honest expression of our period. He must take into account the environment, the purpose of the building, the style of the other buildings near by, the climatic conditions, and the cost.

Prettification is avoided. Beauty is cubical and severe. Square sections are used even for rain-water heads—the sturdy man-figures supporting rain spouts on St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice find no place in architecture today.

Yet if it is to remain pleasantly in the memory, a good building must have a memorable personality, not merely mass and height. The architect needs to provide focal points and resting places for the eye, with some arresting intersections.

Besides painting, sculpture and architecture, there are many other ways of expressing artistic sense. Historically, pottery is among the first of the arts. It is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract. Pots, to many early races, had souls which cried out and fled when the pots were broken. The value of the potter's product was as much in its beauty as in its capacity to hold water or wine.

In primitive tribes the basket-work and textiles, although industrial in the sense that they were made to be used, were none the less the work of craftsmen making the whole object with reference to beauty as well as to use.

Behind the mechanical industry of the weaver's loom there is the fine art of the designer who has contrived the pattern. Medieval tapestries can set the heart a-pounding. These status symbols of royal personages, in shaded wool or silk and metal thread, have whimsy and wit. In the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence there is a tapestry depicting the naming of the animals by Adam. In front, setting the pace of the parade, are snails; then come a lion with a haughty look and a lioness with her head turned toward him with a comical look of affection.

### *Changing art*

The changing art in our time is rather confusing to the lay observer, as when people from one dream start dribbling into another dream. Every civilization creates an artistic style of its own, but bits and pieces from former eras keep showing up.

Art changes its outlook, just as so many other parts of life do. It is the expression of an age, perhaps even a revolt against the civilization of the age. One generation despises what its predecessor applauded, yet it would be a great mistake to suppose that the latest is always the best.

What is displayed as the art of today may indeed depict the churned-up or the squared-off conceptions of life held by modern man. The artist realizes that life, especially mental life, exists on two planes, one definite and visible in outline and detail, like the

part of the iceberg above water; the other, the greater part of life, is submerged, vague and indeterminate.

It is the advanced artist's aim to try to realize some of the dimensions and characteristics of mankind's submerged being, and to do this he resorts to various kinds of symbolism. This presents enormous difficulty to the average lover of art. Even if one possesses what may be called "a modern point of view" one must still work oneself slowly into this world of strange forms.

Perhaps the greatest innovation in modern art occurs when the painting or sculpture is itself the event, that is, when there is no object to serve as a model or point of departure.

In some circles this movement has extended almost to a worship of the meaningless, and this does not appeal to the man in the street. If the message cannot be deciphered except by those who hold the key or the code the bulk of the public is disquieted.

### *Looking at pictures*

Nevertheless, every person who seeks to be cultured and to understand life needs to become acquainted with the work of today's artists as well as the work of the great masters of the past.

It is necessary to approach an exhibition of art with an open mind. You may not feel in sympathy with every exhibit, but you will at least appreciate admirable qualities.

Students can learn much of technique by studying, nose to canvas, the brush strokes of a master, but the essential character of the artist's operation lies in those parts of it which fall outside the rules, precepts, measurements, and other communicable laws or secrets. Rembrandt remarked to someone who was looking too closely into one of his paintings: "Pictures are intended to be looked at, not smelled."

Do you have to visit the National Gallery in Ottawa, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Louvre in Paris, or the Pitti Gallery and the churches in Florence to see and enjoy art? Not at all.

Art has been brought out of its privacy in palace, cathedral and gallery into the world for the enjoyment of all. While simply putting more art in more places will not make aesthetes of us all, it gives us a chance to enjoy what was once the privilege of the few.

There are galleries and museums in every province. Commercial and industrial offices display art pieces, some the product of Canadian artists and others imported from abroad. Reproductions of the best of the world's art are to be had at little cost.

We should not approach our adventure into art without some preparation. It is commonly said that the onlooker sees most of the game, but it is small benefit to him unless he knows the rules of the game being played. The acuteness of our perception and of our judgment depends upon the wealth of our knowledge. The more comparisons we are able to make, the

more qualified we are to enjoy art and to express our opinions.

In addition to being open minded when appraising art, you need to be independent. "To know what you prefer," said Robert Louis Stevenson, "instead of humbly saying 'Amen' to what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to have kept your soul alive."

### *Try self-expression*

Nearly everyone has the capability to express himself or herself in some art form. Perhaps your product will not be of exhibition class, but its production will give you pleasure even if you hide it in a clothes closet.

Painting, sculpture, pottery and needlework provide refreshment of the spirit to many thousands of men and women who do them seriously enough to take pride in their product. They learn how to approach life in an original and personally expressive way.

The necessary technique of an art may be studied in day or evening classes operated by the continuing education branches of universities, the Y's, adult education groups and community associations. The comradeship of an art group in a church hall, a schoolroom or a home, engaged in sculpture, painting, ceramics, or some other art, is worthwhile aside from what a member produces. Here are people of kindred minds, with similar aspirations, interested in a fascinating activity.

Art is useful because it raises men's minds to a level higher than merely existing. Here are activities that men and women put forth not because they need but because they like. In an age when material things have such prominence and such a deep influence on people's minds, it is increasingly important to be able to seek the relief to be found in aesthetic activity. It releases them from the arbitrariness of life.

One artist follows his star, and another his will-o'-the-wisp. Both are members of society who are so constituted as to feel more acutely than others certain classes of pleasures which all of us can feel in our own degree. Their talents are not useful in the sense that a plumber's are, or a truck driver's, or an auto mechanic's, or a computer programmer's. But if out of their brooding on the sprawling incoherence of life they produce a coherent expression of normality, they have performed a service that is very valuable to their own peace of mind and to that of others.

Their art is not an escape from reality. To ignore the dark and sometimes terrible side of life would doom the artist to shallowness. But horridness for the sake of horridness is anathema to artists who seek to contribute something toward the redemption of life from brutality.

Appreciation of art releases us from our claustrophobia and gives us a wider outlook. It helps us to rise above life's trivialities and to subdue its turbulence. Its purpose is not to help us to escape from life but to enter into a larger life.