"BUT IT'S NOT A CIMABUE!"

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To a very remarkable extent the task of the staff of an art museum is what is called "explaining things" to audiences that are unfamiliar with them. This is as true of the writers of learned treatises as it is of those who merely write popular articles in bulletins or concoct labels to be placed on objects. It is also true of those who endeavor to teach by word of mouth in study rooms and museum galleries. In a way, it may be said that explanation of sorts, or rather what passes for it, is a principal function of the museum itself as well as of a large part of its staff.

Of all the jokes about artists and collectors that have gained currency in the world the following is doubtless one of the best known:

Conversation overheard in a picture gallery:
"But it's not a Cimabue!"
"How do you know it's not a Cimabue?"
"Because I am always silent in the presence of a Cimabue."

Today, two or more generations after it was first told, this charmingly silly anecdote still brings its rewarding smile. However, if we stop smiling and think about it, this apparent slice of fatuousness turns out to be really very sensible and serious art criticism.

Its last sentence contains two basic ideas very cleverly disguised. The word "always" indicates the idea that the only, and therefore the best, way for anyone to gain acquaintance with a work of art is through looking so often and so hard at it that he acquires an easy and familiar acquaintance with it. The word "silent" indicates the idea that no one can convey by words any conception of the unique and peculiar qualities that make a work of art either the work of a particular artist or a masterpiece. While many things about an object can be explained or adequately stated in words, as for example that it was made by A for B for use in a certain way at a certain time, the essential things about it as art can only be learned or known through first-hand sensuous experience of it and cannot be phrased in words—which is to say that they cannot be explained. To many people, as one has learned from sad experience, this seems just so much twaddle. If the insides of atoms can be explained, why surely works of art can be explained!

One interesting difference between atoms and works of art is that men actually see and handle works of art whereas no one has ever seen or touched an atom, much less taken a peek into its insides. The atom and its contents, whatever they may be, exist only by virtue of explanation or inference, for they have been reasoned out, one might even say intellectually created, very largely in an endeavor to "explain" the curious behavior of measuring instruments, vapor chambers, and photographic negatives when appositely placed in the neighborhood of very complicated electrical apparatus. If we were honest with ourselves we should recognize that atoms much resemble the ancient Chinese dragon who periodically swallowed the moon and thereby brought about the eclipses—that is to say, they have been invented by men who find it easier to accept many complicated things they can only imagine than a few relatively simple things they can actually touch and see. For some unknown reason the intellectual man has always run away from the concrete facts revealed by his senses and hid his head under a pile of intangible explanatory mechanisms made up out of whole cloth. When the Australian bushman does it on his level, we call it mumbo-jumbo—when we do it on our level, we call it "Science." All we really know is that when we do thus and so something happens. The recipe, however, is no more an explanation than is, let us say, baptism or the calling of names.

But to return to works of art, there is no pos-
sible explanation of their essential qualities just because there are no such things as second-hand adventures in acquaintance. Only stout Cortez on his peak in Darien sees the Pacific, and not Keats or anyone else who merely reads or listens to descriptions and explanations of it. You can give a man a complete practical course in whisky-making, but the only way you can get him to know the taste of a sound Pittsburgh rye of 1850 is by getting him to sip some of it slowly and thoughtfully and then to sip some more of it in the same way. Even if there were a sure-fire Boston Cook Book recipe for making masterpieces with definitely foreseen qualities, it would not constitute an explanation of these qualities.
An analysis or explanation of the process of explanation and of its limits is therefore a matter, it would seem, of peculiar interest. A great many scholars and students of art and archaeology, wishing to put their knowledge on a firm, objective foundation, have built up what are called modern scientific methods in the study of both art and archaeology. Comparatively few of these earnest students have ever critically examined their practice and their science from the point of view of the philosophical problems of knowledge and explanation. However, some philosophers, and especially some modern mathematical physicists, forced by the necessity of knowing, if possible, just what they were really talking about, have devoted a great deal of very hard and acute thought to an examination of these problems. Unfortunately their terminologies and the abstruse nature of their particular data have prevented many students of art from attempting to follow the results of their investigations. Moreover, even the most scientific of art students and archaeologists, when asked have they read what Professor So-and-so, who deals with atoms or nebulae at such and such a university, has to say about explanation, are very apt to retort with the indignant question: what has physics or astronomy to do with my problem in aesthetics? and to follow that exclamation up with the flat statement that serious students should confine themselves to their specialized fields and not go around being superficial and mixing up the few things they know with the many things they don’t understand. In spite of this widely prevalent attitude, the problem of explanation is a general one that is confined to no field narrower than the broad universe of human curiosity. Like those of elementary arithmetic, its basic rules and limitations are the same whether it deals with Cimabue, potatoes, or quantum theory.

In any event, it has seemed to one hardened explainer in the field of art that he has got much help towards clarification of his ideas from his halting and frequently most incompetent reading of the books of men who are authorities on subjects that lie far beyond his understanding. Particularly he is under a debt of gratitude to Professor P. W. Bridgman for several paragraphs that he wrote about explanation in his book called The Logic of Modern Physics (New York, 1927). Among other things, Professor Bridgman there said:

“I believe that examination will show that the essence of an explanation consists in reducing a situation to elements with which we are so familiar that we accept them as a matter of course, so that our curiosity rests. . . .

“As we extend experimental knowledge and push our explanations further and further, we see that the explanatory sequence may be terminated in several possible ways. In the first place, we may never push our experiments beyond a stage into which the elements with which we are already familiar do not enter. In this case explanation is very simple: it involves nothing essentially new, but merely the disentanglement of complexities. . . . Or, secondly, our experiments may bring us into contact with situations novel to us, in which we can recognize no familiar elements, or at least must recognize that there is something in addition to the familiar elements. Such a situation constitutes an explanatory crisis and explanation has to stop by definition. Or, thirdly, we may try to force our explanations into a predetermined mold, by formally erecting or inventing beyond the range of present experiment ultimates more or less like elements already familiar to us, and seek to explain all present experience in terms of these chosen ultimates. . . .

“The explanatory crisis which now confronts us in relativity and quantum phenomena is but a repetition of what has occurred many times in the past. . . . Every kitten is confronted with such a crisis at the end of nine days. Whenever experience takes us into new and unfamiliar realms, we are to be at least prepared for a new crisis.

“Now what are we to do in such a crisis? It seems to me that the only sensible course is to do exactly what the kitten does, namely, to wait until we have amassed so much experience of the new kind that it is perfectly familiar to us, and then to resume the process
of explanation with elements from our new experience included in our list of axioms. . . . All our knowledge is in terms of experience; we should not expect to erect or desire to erect an explanatory structure different in character from that of experience. . . .

“The first step in resuming our explanatory progress, after we have been confronted with such a crisis, is to seek for various sorts of correlation between the elements of our new experience, in the confident expectation that these elements will eventually become so fa-
miliar to us that they may be used as the ultimates of a new explanation. . . .

"There is no warrant whatever in experience for the conviction that as we penetrate deeper and deeper we shall find the elements of previous experience repeated, although sometimes we do find such repetitions, as in the behavior of gases. . . .

"It is difficult to conceive anything more scientifically bigoted than to postulate that all possible experience conforms to the same type as that with which we are already familiar, and therefore to demand that explanation use only elements familiar in everyday experience. Such an attitude bespeaks such an unimaginativeness, a mental obtuseness and obstinacy, which might be expected to have exhausted their pragmatic justification at a lower plane of mental activity."

Here we have the hardest-headed kind of professional science saying in its own so very different way and for its own immediate purposes the thing that lies at the center of the artly joke about the effete worshiper of Cimabue. There is not enough difference between the two to count. In any event, what Mr. Bridgman says corresponds with remarkable closeness to the statement once made by Bernard Berenson during the course of a long, rambling conversation on a Tuscan hillside. As remembered, what Mr. Berenson said was something like this—if you would understand a work of art you should read and hear little or nothing about it until after you have become thoroughly acquainted with it—and once that has happened any other man’s statements about it are statements about himself and not about it.

Needless to say, while there are other purposes that an art museum can have, the aesthetic one is of primary importance. In so far as its purpose is aesthetic the function of an art museum is to enable people to gain such familiar, first-hand acquaintance with works of art that they no longer feel any need to ask for explanations of them. From this point of view a so-called explanation is successful only in so far as it induces people to gain that acquaintance in the only way it can be done, that is, by and for themselves at first hand. Certainly all the verbal explanation in the world is no substitute for that acquaintance. Whenever it is accepted as a substitute it leads only to empty verbalism, parrot talk, which so far from proving that the speaker has any knowledge or taste merely demonstrates that many human beings have an unlucky habit of remembering and trusting to other people’s words instead of their own sensuous experiences. All this, probably, is only a gloss on the moral of Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the Emperor’s New Clothes.

In its curious way that story has something to do with “education.”

*The passages from Professor Bridgman’s book (pp. 37-47) are reprinted by permission of The MacMillan Company, publishers.*