

# SOME THOUGHTS ON PICTORIALISM

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This paper, illustrated by prints, was read by Dr. Jouhar at the Western Conference on 29 February 1948.

● Those of you who have seen some of my pictures will probably know that I do not specialize in any particular kind of subject matter. I think a specialist tries to know more and more about less and less until he knows nothing at all. As I do not claim to be a specialist, I have chosen nothing special to talk about this afternoon, and I propose simply to give vent to some thoughts on pictorialism.

## Definitions

Wherever there is a photographic club or a society, some time or other they invariably discuss pictorialism under some such titles as—"What is Pictorialism?", "Whither Pictorialism?", "This Decadent Pictorialism?", "Fundamentals of Pictorialism", "Pictorialism and All That!", etc. Very animated discussions take place, but before starting the discussion nobody ever bothers to define what the speaker means by pictorialism. I feel that it is this that leads to confusion, and often to acrimony, in such discussions. Since we have no dictionary definition of pictorialism, I put forth my own for your consideration. Pictorialism is the Fine Art of making and appreciating mainly decorative spacial (static) pictures possessing aesthetic qualities. You will notice that this excludes an illustrative record, which is not necessarily decorative or purely aesthetic. Furthermore, while a record may be a picture under exceptional circumstances, a picture may not always be a record. This pictorialism is largely practised by *amateur* photographers all the world over. Relatively few professionals indulge in the art only for the sake of it and not for any monetary gain.

And what is Art? One dictionary meaning is: "Art is an employment of means to a desired end." Of course, "skill" and "cunning" are also synonyms, also, people sometimes talk about the "art of the pickpocket." We, however, are concerned with "Fine Art," which is essentially an expression of imagination, is creative, and aims solely at giving aesthetic pleasure. Hence, for our practical purpose, we may regard it as "an employment of

means," i.e. the camera, "to a desired end," which is a picture produced mainly to evoke aesthetic pleasure.

## A Fundamental Need ✓

Now you may well ask why people indulge in Fine Arts. Human nature is continually seeking pleasure and trying to escape and run away from unpleasant situations. The practice of Art, unconsciously, serves as a means of escape from the usual repellent, stern world of reality into a more congenial world of phantasy or make-believe. Moreover, it is a function of human nature to express itself somehow, since the very act of such expression results in personal gratification. There are, of course, other forms of escape. Some, for instance, escape into the "World of Sport" and may "go to the dogs" or play cricket or football. Others may escape into the local "Pub." These activities are uncreative, whereas, by making pictures, we not only perpetuate our own pleasureable experiences, but we also attempt to give pleasure to others without material profit to ourselves. Moreover, an artist is usually able to express certain themes which are the sum total of common human conflicts in a socially recognizable form, and other people with similar repressed impulses derive immense satisfaction from the resultant work of art.

## Appreciation ✓

The appreciation of Art, on the other hand, is an acquired faculty of going into raptures about aesthetic sophistications in our lives. All artistic enjoyment is a sort of deliberate self-deception. The artist interprets and casts the object or the scene in the mould of his personal imagination, so that to the beholder even a flat surface gives the illusion of a three-dimensional world.

Basically all Art is indivisible. The means or the tools employed in the exercise of the graphic arts do not matter. Some may use pencil or brush, others draw with light, i.e., photographically. In the case of the outstanding artists, an inherited germ is there which may develop and flourish later. A proclaimed artist

cannot only appreciate a beautiful scene himself, but is capable of transmitting some of the beauty to others as well. There are some, however, who are unable to appreciate beauty in any form; they are like the colour-blind who are unable to perceive or distinguish between the colours of the rainbow. As it is not possible to verbally describe or convey the beauty of colour to a blind man, similarly it is impossible to convince the mentally incapable of the subtle difference that does undoubtedly exist between, say, a pictorial photograph and a mere record. In such cases, argument is futile and settles nothing.

## Composition

The practice of pictorialism demands some knowledge of composition. If I were to embark on a full discussion of this conundrum of composition, I might bore you for a much longer time than is available this afternoon. It is maintained that a thorough study and application of the principles (not rules) is most necessary, especially to the monochrome worker, since the lure of colour is lacking and therefore one must make the most of the tool of composition.

Knowledge of anything is peculiar, in that, what we know, we know, and what we do not know, we know not where to look for, unless we learn by a process of "trial and error" or unless someone shows us. I am here only to point out what you may already know or, here and there something that may be new to you. The sense of composition, like all other education, can be acquired and learned. It may be a trifle more easy for some to learn than others, but learned it can be, like learning to write. All learning and knowledge are acquired faculties. All our sense of right and wrong, good or bad, ugly or beautiful, sacred or profane, including all our aesthetic judgments, likes and dislikes are primarily based and moulded on the characteristic and general attitude of our parents, particularly that of the mother. Later on our ideas and conceptions may be modified or conditioned by the attitude of our teachers, brothers,

sisters, school-mates, other immediate relations, and then by associates, friends, neighbours, environments and society at large. Moreover, every day of our lives, we are being influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by so-called civilized surroundings: daily papers, posters, propaganda, the radio, the kinema, and books. In fact, our concepts and mental make-up are conditioned entirely by the sum of all our immediate and remote impressions and experiences.

Now one might ask "What does composition mean?" The word "compose" is derived from Latin "conpono," "con" meaning together, "pone" meaning "I place." So composition, for our purpose, may be taken to mean "placing together symbols and images on a flat surface to express ideas and emotions." A picture may be described simply as "an intelligible idea in a frame." To make a picture is like writing a short story. In order to be able to write we have to know the language, which must be understood by the person for whom it is intended, otherwise it will not be appreciated. But to write a language we must first learn the alphabet and spelling. Learning the technique of photography is analogous to learning the "ABC" in the process of writing. After we have learnt the alphabet we have then to learn the grammar which is equivalent to learning the principles of composition. It is only after the alphabet and the grammar have been mastered that we can ever hope to write a story or make a picture. Most photographers, without realizing it, spend all their time trying to learn the ABC of photography. These are the "Technical Thomases," as Mr. Percy Harris once so aptly described them.

It may be further said that all sense of composition or pictorialism, in fact all education in Art or Culture, is a process of habit formation which, when once acquired, becomes pre-conscious and later unconscious.

In order to make my point clear, I think I should briefly explain the meaning of the terms "pre-conscious" and the "unconscious." Suppose I were to ask you "What did you have for breakfast this morning?" You would at once recall the answer, but you would not be aware of it until I sprang the question. This memory would be in your pre-conscious mind. Now if I were to put another question: "How did you spend the 29th June 1938?" Very few, if any, would be able to answer that; yet you must have lived that day, more or less in the same sort of way you are doing today. What happened some ten

years ago has gone into your unconscious mind. It is possible, however, that what happened that day may have determined your liking for a picture depicting sunshine. You may have spent a happy holiday at the seaside, which was made all the more pleasurable because it was bright and sunny. The happenings of that day have passed into the unconscious, but a certain association of ideas persists. Now when you look upon a sunny picture, it gives you pleasure, because sunshine has become an unconscious reminder of the long forgotten (repressed) pleasant memories. Of course, a sunny picture will not evoke a similar reaction in everybody. An Arab, who has unpleasant associations because he has too much sun, is not likely to go into raptures on seeing a picture depicting sunshine. Similarly, all our likes and dislikes concerning various types of picture are conditioned by the sum total of a number of association of ideas in the unconscious mind. Human beings, nay, all forms of life, never really forget anything. We only selectively suppress those things or incidents that we would rather not remember. We even remember to repeat the peculiar physical and mental characteristics of our ancestors. It is not a coincidence that we huddle up in a characteristic manner when we wish to be most comfortable during sleep. We mimic and recall the comfortable attitude we experienced during our sheltered existence in our mother's womb. Similarly, forgetting to notice one single salient feature in a picture is not an accident. In our everyday life, if most of us forget to pay our bills, it is not an accident. It is generally an unconscious wish-fulfilment: "I wish I did not have to pay this bill," the unconscious prompts, so we conveniently forget to pay.

When I was packing to attend this Conference, I "forgot" my razor. Now, my razor is very old and I do not like it. Many times, when I have been passing shops in a hurry, I have caught sight of shining new razors and have said to myself: "You must buy a new razor." So, my old razor was the one thing I left behind and, if Mr. Hallett had not come to my rescue, I should have appeared before you this afternoon with a "New Look!" You see, I really *wished* that I did not have an old razor.

Whenever we do not like a picture, or the face of a person that we may never have seen before, there is always a reason—all our spontaneous likes and dislikes are based on the fact that we never forget to remember!

### Technical Qualities

Most pictorialists are cooks as well as connoisseurs in the art of picture making. We must have a thorough practical knowledge of how to produce a technically competent print apart from any aesthetic considerations. The art of looking at pictures can only be properly acquired by looking at pictures. So visit exhibitions, scan periodicals and books. Quite a number of us do not get the best out of a bromide print and are often satisfied with the second best. Some are unable to distinguish between a really first-grade photograph and one that might be slightly inferior.

The main factors for print quality are:—

1. Work within the limitations and capabilities of the photographic medium.
2. Understand your camera and lens.
3. Avoid camera-shake: use a rigid tripod.
4. Get used to one or two brands of film stock and developer.
5. Realize that the density of the negative depends on the length of exposure and the contrast on the length of development time. Correct exposure and the development time should be learned by trial-and-error.
6. Use a good enlarger and enlarging lens. Avoid shake.
7. Try and match the *contrast* of the negative to that of the paper.
8. With "M.Q." always develop at 70°F.
9. If unsatisfactory print, proceed either by bleaching and redeveloping the print, or if necessary, clear high lights by an over-all reduction of the print.

### Aesthetic Qualities

Further differences between a pictorial photograph and a record are:—

A pictorial photograph is mainly an aesthetic symbolic record of a scene, *plus* the artist's personal comment and interpretation, capable of transmitting an emotional response to the mind of a receptive spectator. It should show originality, imagination, unity of purpose, a quality of repose, and have an infinite quality about it.

A photographic record, on the other hand, is an illustrative diagram of an object having scientifically accurate presentation in form and tone values, but not necessarily possessing an emotional appeal. It has technical, documentary, scientific, or topical interest, and usually tells "by whom," "where," "why," and "when" the illustration was made.

Pictorialists usually employ various

methods of evoking emotions, viz. by a choice of subject matter, e.g. human interest, sex, sentiment, or "wonder themes"; abstract imaginative shadow patterns, imaginative "table top" work; dream-shapes and surrealist designs.

The kind of Art, that certain non-photographic artists like Salvador Dali, Picasso, and Chagall indulge in, would appear to indicate to the observant that the practice of Art probably keeps most of us from going completely mad. In present-day society there is, after all, only an arbitrary difference between the sane and the insane. Sanity appears to be nothing but the faculty of keeping out of prisons and lunatic asylums! Some of Picasso's perpetrations have been sold for thousands of pounds. Now, I do not know whether you think Picasso "potty" for his peculiar paintings, or the person who buys them! A surrealist is not concerned with what people think of his work. He is an egotist of the extreme degree, who is concerned only with expressing himself and probably painting the manifest content of his morbid dreams. To interpret their meaning, that is to say their latent content, would require the exhaustive investigation of a psycho-analyst, which is a matter quite beyond the understanding or scope of an average person. This form of expressionism may be compared with the dance of the jitterbug, who, in his ecstasy, indulges in violent (though rhythmic and extempore) movements, irrespective of how they appear to the onlooker. Thus a surrealist performs a sort of jitterbug dance on canvas. Pictorialist's Art, on the other hand, may be likened to the more highly evolved, sophisticated ballet, in which the studied movements, the music, poise, and forms, are all in harmony: orderly and well composed. They are the result of years of training and planning, and are best appreciated only by those who may have acquired the faculty of doing so.

There is a time and place for everything. Now suppose I jumped on a table and started to jitterbug in the nude, what would you do or think of me? Some of you might be amused, ladies might shriek and run out, and some of you would most certainly dash out for the police and have me locked up. You would say I had gone mad! If I performed similar antics in the seclusion of my bathroom, I would certainly have expressed myself, I would still be considered sane, and could still remain an F.R.P.S. The inference is, that if you keep sending purely illustrative or record pictures to exhibitions of pictorial photography,

do not be surprised if they are rejected!

#### Exhibitors and Exhibitions

Why do we exhibit? The answer is that we are all born with an inherent urge to "show off" and display. Human beings wear clothes, not because of any motives of modesty or for protection against inclement weather. They wear them because they wish to display themselves at their best. This is a pure, simple, and direct form of sensual display. The cultured mind, in order to show off its superiority, sometimes resorts to a sublimated form of indirect display and, by making and displaying pictures, seeks satisfaction through the approbation of others. This is where the exhibitions come in. The primary reason is not "pot hunting" as some frustrated people like to think. The biggest shows in this country and in America have no "pots" to offer: the reward is the very acceptance of the picture, and perhaps a label on the back which implies a sort of symbol of approval capable of giving extreme satisfaction.

When people criticize exhibitions, they forget that in essence most of them are competitions. Competitions, like all games, are held between individuals who try to display and assert their power and supremacy over others in some particular direction or other. All competitions must of necessity have a suitable organization and arbitrary rules, and the participants must observe certain practical limitations if they wish to play successfully and enjoy the game. If it be argued that most of the photographic exhibition are supposed to be run for the benefit of the exhibitors who usually foot the bill in the form of an entry fee, the exhibitors should not forget that the organizers of an exhibition are holding it, in most cases, altruistically without any thought of personal monetary gain.

#### Modern Trends and Modern Photography

I am aware that certain individuals and groups today sneer at pictorialism and are trying to get away from sentimental forms of expression which to them seem old-fashioned. They want nothing but "Modern Photography." Most of them cannot tell the difference between a work of art possessing aesthetic qualities and a mere photographic record. Periodically they are extremely vociferous in certain quarters and clamour for recognition of their work, which (they claim) is entirely new! When their half-baked efforts are turned down

at some of the more important pictorial exhibitions, they abuse the selection committees. I think they are ignorant of the fact that they are ignorant. Their attitude is mainly based upon the lack of awareness of their own shortcomings, want of general knowledge and information, and their consequent behaviour is due entirely to a sense of frustration and an inferiority complex. Work said to be "original" shows no original treatment: in most cases it is a technically competent, but ill-considered, unimaginative record of a modern object, such as a machine, an aeroplane, a modern building, or perhaps a crow's eye view of the earth beneath. At best such efforts have a pattern, but no purpose, except a sort of stunt designed to catch the eye, and possessing no permanent pictorial value. Such pictures may be useful as records, but these gentlemen invariably appear to confuse technical excellence with artistic achievement. Moreover, they believe in touring round and telling people what kind of photographs the pictorialists should make. They forget that both the urge for the practice of any art and the choice of the subject matter come from within: no amount of preaching from without can ever turn a person into an artist. Michael Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Shaw, Misonne, Mortimer, Alexander Keighley, Julian Smith, and Walt Disney, did not require prototypes of such preachers to tell them what kind of art they should indulge in or what kind of pictures they should produce.

This "Modern Movement" business is not modern at all. If you refer to the 1895 *Photograms of the Year*, you would find that the very first chapter of it begins with a controversy on similar lines! This sort of debate appears to break out every decade or so and usually dies a natural death. I cannot help feeling that this modern business is probably a conscious or unconscious reaction on the part of certain professional photographers (with due respect to their other very useful work), who sorely feel that the amateur is ousting them in at least one particular branch of photography. The modernists say that "the camera is a fact-recording machine with a cold objective eye." I contend that it is a false belief that a camera can record a fact, any more than can pencil and paper. In competent hands, this "cold objective eye" is entirely subservient to the "subjective eye" that controls it. A piano is a complicated note-recording machine, and will sound an "objective note" if you accidentally sit on it! The

Pictorialism is not that

kind of music it will produce depends ultimately on the capacity or "subjective control" of the pianist.

It is also said that "The popular place for photographs is in books and not on walls, and who wants to live with them!" It is contended that exhibition pictures are meant to be viewed in a vertical plane, but the fact that they are universally displayed on the walls proves the point. Decorative pictures in most homes are displayed similarly. Famous paintings and "Old Masters" are not primarily intended to be made into folders or books. If they do find their way into books, they neither remain paintings nor Old Masters. Similarly an exhibition pictorial photograph, because of its limited function of wall decoration, must be viewed, as intended, in its original form. If some choose to produce a facsimile of it in a book, periodical or a catalogue, it at once loses its primary function and becomes an inferior copy of the original.

#### More Technical Thomases

Now to touch upon another matter. In the field of photographic journalism, there are certain pseudo-scientific though well-wishing writers, who appear to know more than the very makers of the materials! They advocate, for instance, all sorts of wonderful concoctions and "speed-increasing soups." Never satisfied with one bath, they must have two! They are like nitwits preaching to half-wits. Their writings, on matters about which they know very little, create a lot of unnecessary confusion amongst amateur photographers all over the country, who, instead of producing prints as the ultimate result, get entangled in futile technicalities and produce nothing but headaches. These remarks, of course, do not apply to the genuine scientific or expert technician. In the hands

of the expert, because he must get "the goods" somehow (his bread and butter depend upon it) under poor and under very contrasty lighting conditions, the two-bath developer may have special applications, but to glamorize and boost it for all-round photography, where there is no earthly fear of under-exposure, is merely to misguide people. But that, I suppose does not matter, because it is good for business.

#### In Conclusion

I want to reiterate that if only people were clear in their minds about the various types and functions of photography, controversy should never arise. There are innumerable useful applications of scientific, clinical, record, illustrative, press photography, and so on. There is also purely pictorial and decorative photography, practised for aesthetic considerations only. When conceiving a picture, there is no thought whatever whether it will bring any £ s. d. or whether it will be useful to posterity. The artist sees a scene, is moved by it, photographically "paints" a passing moment, and, if he can transmit even a fraction of his feeling to the beholder of his picture, he is quite happy.

Now, to conclude these thoughts on pictorialism, I should like to suggest an "S" Plan for success in this field:—

STUDY books, periodicals, exhibitions of graphic arts, etc.

SEE and develop the faculty of observing and seeing the world around you. Be interested in other people.

STOP and think before pressing the button.

SELECT your scene or object with foresight and discrimination.

SELECT your stock of film or plate, stop of the iris, suitable exposure, and suitable paper.

SIMPLIFY composition and every procedure as far as possible.

"S CURVES" usually make pictures and not angles.

STATE BOLDLY your theme, show contrast in tone and form.

STANDARDIZE your technique.

STRAIN solutions before use (i.e., filter).

SPECULATE sometimes: i.e., experiment.

SELF-CRITICIZE severely.

SPECIALIZE if you wish to become famous in a short time.

SHOW your pictures at exhibitions, in portfolios, etc.

SOCIETY and club membership is most helpful, which you should actively

SERVE and SUPPORT.

SWEAT, since success, like happiness, is a by-product of hard work.

[Dr. Jouhar then showed a number of large prints and described some of them as his "failures."]

#### Discussion

MR. PERCY HARRIS: I would like to remind Mr. Adams that the prints we have just seen were all made from miniature negatives [Laughter].

MR. GILBERT ADAMS [at the back of the room]: From where I am sitting, they look it!

A MEMBER: Would not a meter be better than "trial and error" and also avoid wasting so much paper?

DR. JOUHAR: I do not like meters and I have a large stock of paper, which I intend to go on using as I please. An artist must not think of economy.

THE PRESIDENT: Dr. Jouhar has given us a delightful talk and we all hope that we shall hear him again very soon. [Applause].

[At the end of this session, a fine new safety razor was produced by a member, and was duly presented by the President and received with thanks and characteristic good humour by Dr. Jouhar.]