

E. H. Gombrich, Winston Churchill as Painter and Critic, *The Atlantic*, Vol. 215, 1965, pp.90-3 [Trapp no.1965G.1]

Art criticism can never be objective. No critic is free of prejudices in the original sense of the word, of judgements, that is, that were before him and determine his outlook and approach. When it comes to the work of an amateur who is also one of the most famous and controversial figures of his age, objectivity becomes doubly impossible. His fame enlists our interest but makes us suspicious; his amateur status spikes the critic's guns. To judge these paintings by professional standards would be unfair; to make allowances would be patronising. No wonder that crowds flocked, but critics frowned, when a group of Churchill's landscapes and still lifes toured the United States. Such paintings may have their value as personal documents, but are they art?

Winston Churchill tried several times to force the issue of objectivity. In 1921 he exhibited in Paris under the pseudonym of Charles Morin and sold four out of five landscapes for thirty pounds each. After World War II he submitted two paintings to the Royal Academy under the name of Winter and got them accepted by the jury. Clearly, this amateur who had begun painting in his forties had reached a standard of competence that satisfied the guardians of traditional skills.

Things being what they are, however, this test will hardly satisfy those who denied Churchill's paintings the status of art. If the Academy accepted them, so much the worse. It can only mean that Churchill was far behind the times.

Now, this fashionable criterion of up-to-dateness need not be taken too seriously either. After all, paintings are not models of motorcars. But it so happens that any critic who uses this touchstone delivers himself into the hands of the historian. History can be objective where dates and datedness are at issue. It finds that Winston Churchill's basic idiom was that of his whole generation of British painters, a group of artists who were Picasso's seniors by some ten years.

For these men, born in the eighteen seventies, Paris was already the mecca of painting, but it was the Paris of the impressionists rather than that of the cubists. After the subdued tones of Whistler and of Sickert, they were beginning to discover the joy of painting boldly in strong colours without retreating from likeness. None of these artists is well known outside England, except possibly Augustus John, who was four years younger than Churchill. But John was mainly a portraitist, whose range would certainly elude the grasp of the aspiring amateur. Churchill found his inspiration in the landscapes and still lifes of one of the most gifted of this age group, Sir William Nicholson (1872-1949), the father, by the way, of the abstract artist Ben Nicholson. A future Bernard Berenson might well classify some of Churchill's best landscapes (such as the Loup River, Quebec, exhibited in the London Tate Gallery) as "Amico di Sir William," and he would be right, because Nicholson was a frequent guest at Chartwell, Sir Winston's country home, which houses two of his most attractive works.

Here as elsewhere Churchill was favoured by luck, and here as elsewhere he knew how to exploit his good fortune. He was lucky to be born into a generation whose artistic idiom was more easily accessible to the amateur than was any previous style of painting. The tonal painting of the genuinely academic tradition requires a mastery of conventions and a discipline in their application that easily defeat amateurs. Jane Austen's ladies painted small watercolours. Oil paintings were beyond them. To build up a large structure of tonal relationships demanded, if not a genius, at least a professional.

When the impressionists left their studios to paint out of doors, they abandoned this whole procedure of tonal gradations. Their work was done *alla prima*; indeed, their concern was to preserve the beauty

and strength of unmixed paint. No one would contend, however, that the idiom of a Monet or a Renoir is easy. Their research into the alchemy of light effects, their concern with optical mixture that led to the experiments of the pointillists demand at least as sure an eye and as skilled a hand as the traditional method had. It was not until the next generation that these skills were somewhat at a discount. What mattered increasingly was spontaneity, boldness and a certain freshness of vision that was summed up in the catchword of the "innocent eye." These painters were determined to observe the local colours and to sing their beauty, regardless of academic rules or scientific caution. At last, meadows could be painted green and the sea a proper luminous blue.

It must be admitted that this liberation brought its own danger, the danger of triviality. Born as we are into the succeeding period, we may be particularly sensitive to this proximity of the travel poster, and even the picture postcard, and therefore prone to overlook the difference between the masters and the vulgarisers. But a certain risk of obviousness may be inherent in the idiom itself and must have contributed to the rapid decline in the prestige of the Royal Academy.

It would be an insult to the artist concerned, however, to imagine that they were not aware of these pitfalls. On the contrary, the traditional problems of painting, questions of tone, of relationships, of musical composition, and of the sensitive touch, were rarely pondered with more concern and discussed with more subtlety than by this generation, who were old enough to remember the earlier values and young enough to divine new possibilities. The volume on Sir William Nicholson in the Penguin series on Modern Painters contains an introduction by the late Robert Nichols which admirably catches the painters' conversation about these imponderables: "Tone exists when . . . everything in your picture sings in harmony"; "the value of the pattern depends on the interestingness of the shape and relative placings of the dark to the light."

This was the historical moment in which Winston Churchill was initiated into the pleasures and agonies of painting. He was in his middle forties, a member of the War Cabinet in World War I, and yet, so he thought, condemned to momentary inactivity. He took up the new hobby with that zest that was all his own and grasped the whole situation with a clarity and an insight that mark the great statesman and historian.

For, let not one suppose that he just dabbled with paint with the naïve self-satisfaction of the nonartist. He knew as well as his critics what he owed to his time. His supreme intelligence was certainly never fooled by the relative ease with which he learned to sketch from nature in the manner of his friends. Anyone who wants to get a measure of Churchill's mind must read and savor the two astounding essays, one on "Hobbies," one on "Painting as a Pastime," which he included in *Thoughts and Adventures* in 1932 and issued as a little volume in 1948.

There is nothing amateur about these meditations on painting. They beat most professional critics hollow. He had evidently eavesdropped on the conversations of his painter friends to good purpose. He had also studied Ruskin and had learned from the great Victorian critic what masters such as Turner were about. Any British Minister worth his salt must be able to listen to the experts and to translate and present their findings in more lucid and more vivid terms. To this skill Churchill brought his genius; with that touch of self-irony that always reconciles us to his rhetoric, he pretended to understand the painter's problem in terms of a supreme commander fighting a major battle. Maybe he wanted to reverse the equation: If painting is like generalship, then generalship is like painting, and a certain great war leader might claim to be a great artist after all. But what matter? For out of this unpromising comparison he extracts a picture of artistic mastery that deserves to be called classic:

It is in the use and withholding of their reserves that the great Commanders have generally excelled In painting, the reserves consist in Proportion or Relation At one side of the palette there is white, at the other black; and neither is ever used "neat". Between these two rigid limits all the action must lie, all the power required must be generated. Black and white themselves, placed in juxtaposition, make no great impression; and yet they are the most that you can do in pure contrast. It is wonderful – after one has tried and failed often – to see how easily and surely the true artist is able to produce every effect of light and shade, of sunshine and shadow, of distance or nearness, simply by expressing justly the relations between the different planes and surfaces with which he is dealing. We think that this is founded upon a sense of proportion, trained no doubt by practice, but which in its essence is a frigid manifestation of mental power and size. We think that the same mind's eye that can justly survey and appraise and prescribe before hand the values of a truly great picture in one all-embracing regard, in one flash of simultaneous and homogeneous comprehension, would also with a certain acquaintance with the special technique be able to pronounce with sureness upon any other high activity of the human intellect. This was certainly true of the great Italians.

In this comprehension of the psychological background of great art, Churchill certainly was far superior to the purely expressionist school of criticism that is current today. Indeed, some of his further formulations of the psychological problems of image building and image reading are so acute and so profound that, as a student of these matters, I could do no better than build them into the fabric of my book *Art and Illusion*.

A critic of such acumen surely cannot be suspected of having overlooked the difference between the artist and the amateur. For those who "go on a joyride in a paintbox . . . audacity is the only ticket." "Even if only four or five main features are seized and truly recorded, these by themselves will carry a lot of ill-success or half-success." Churchill knew, of course, that these features must be observed where alone they can be found – in the museum rather than in nature; and he decisively forestalled any future critic or historian who might accuse him of lack of originality. "The galleries of Europe take on a new . . . interest." "This, then, is how – painted a cataract. Exactly, and there is that same light I noticed last week in the waterfall at –" And so on. "You see the difficulty that baffled you yesterday; and you see how easily it has been overcome by a great or even by a skilful painter." Observe the distinction between "great" and "even . . . skilful." It was skill he aimed at, and this he surely achieved in precisely such effects as the gleam of water he described. "Leave to the masters of art trained by a lifetime of devotion the wonderful process of picture-building and picture creation. Go out into the sunlight and be happy with what you see."

But even this love of sunshine carried him beyond the confines of traditional English reserve. For him it was the French – and he includes Matisse – "who have so wonderfully vivified, brightened and illuminated modern landscape painting . . . they have brought back to the pictorial art a new draught of joie de vivre." His encounter in southern France with "disciples of Cézanne," whose manners and mannerisms are shrewdly observed in his essay, must have opened new horizons to Churchill the critic.

Whether it really benefited Churchill the painter is a different question. That precarious balance between traditionalism and modernism sought by the English masters of Churchill's generation can be so easily upset by apparently innocent concessions. Temperamentally, no doubt, Churchill would have loved to join the Fauves, the "wild beasts" of the great revolution, but a right instinct, or the wisdom of age, held him back from what would have been a disastrous flirtation with youth.

Whatever his ultimate achievement, Churchill certainly possessed that quality that is a necessary – though not a sufficient - condition for any artistic genius: the very act of painting was charged for him with the whole gamut of human emotions. His formulations would find an echo in the heart of many a young painter who would scarcely waste a glance on his sketches: Just to paint is great fun. The colours are lovely to look at and delicious to squeeze out . . . I cannot pretend to feel impartial about the colours, I rejoice with the brilliant ones, and am genuinely sorry for the poor browns. When I get to heaven I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting, and so get to the bottom of the subject. But then I shall require a still gayer palette than I get here below. I expect orange and vermillion will be the darkest, dullest colours upon it, and beyond them there will be a whole range of wonderful new colours which will delight the celestial eye. Nor would Churchill have needed a psycho-analyst to reveal to him some of the deeper psychological sources that fed his pleasures in the painting. His description of his first day at the easel tells its own story as openly and as reticently as only an artist can who has access to these insights and is so obviously in charge that he has no reason to fear them: "Fair and white rose the canvas; the empty brush hung poised, heavy with destiny, irresolute in the air. My hand seemed arrested by silent veto" – and then his initiation by a casual visitor who "splashed into the turpentine" and subdued the "absolutely cowering canvas. Any one could see that it could not hit back . . . The sickly inhibitions rolled away. I seized the largest brush and fell upon my victim with Berserk fury. I have never felt any awe of a canvas since."

It is clear that the emotions and instincts that were soon to break through in abstract expressionism would not have surprised the writer of those lines. What might have surprised him is identification of such a breakthrough with art. And, in a certain sense, an amateur of genius such as Churchill might indeed be a test case for any expressionist doctrine of art. This is not the occasion for such a discussion. Suffice it to say that if art is self expression, this goes for bad no less than for good art. But expression to whom? That flamboyance that we all associate with Winston Churchill, the streak of rhetoric can certainly be found in his pictures by those who know them to be Churchill's.

It may be argued that these correspondences between a personality and its expression are both trivial and deceptive. Hitler, the screaming demagogue, painted tame water-colours. No doubt these too reflected one side of his character. He would not have painted them otherwise. But nobody could learn much worth knowing about either of the protagonists of World War II from a contemplation of their works. Not that the biographer might not enjoy such links as he can discover between Churchill the man and Churchill the painter. An amateur who could take on the Mont Sainte Victoire, immortalised by Cézanne, may not be a great painter, but he must be a daring one; a statesman who selects a Beguinage as his motif after the strain of the war years may well express a wistful longing for a calm haven of retirement.

But such psychologising merely projects into the pictures the extraneous knowledge which the objective critic wants to avoid. Need he try? Their maker did not. To him, no doubt, his paintings were records of pleasures, memories of moments of relaxation from the grimmest of cares during the dark days when he had to watch the approach of what he called "the unnecessary war," and the even darker ones when he had to fight it through. "If it weren't for painting I could not live," he said. "I couldn't bear the strain of things." If he was right, his painting may have helped to save Western civilisation.

Yet Churchill, whose character and outlook have always offended the puritans, has offended most through this most innocent of his pleasures. There is little love lost, at the best of times, between the artist and the amateur. The master who has spent another agonising day in front of his canvas, perspiring with concentration in a desperate effort to get it right, must always be galled by the

enthusiast who tells him painting is relaxing. Indeed, the greater the superficial similarity between the ultimate outcome of his struggles and the amateur's lucky hit, the tenser the situation will be likely to get. There may well be an element of understandable envy in this reaction. The amateur is free to enjoy his successes and to forget about his failures. The artist, alas, cannot afford this privilege of the irresponsible.

There is an episode from the life of Sir William Nicholson that reminds us of this all-important difference. When, toward the end of his life, he was honoured with a large retrospective exhibition in the National Gallery, he was, as he confessed to Robert Nichols, rather pleased with it. "But I said to myself: 'One never knows....perhaps I'm repeating myself.' And on that I went straight home and I set myself the hardest possible problem I could find. It entailed between two and three months' solid painting. Everyday I'd say to myself, 'There - I've got it,' and every morning I'd come down and see I hadn't. Yes, it was a real jaw-cracker. But I think I've got it."

Surely there are no such "real jaw-crackers" among Churchill's paintings. He found them elsewhere – in the supply of tanks to the Army of the Nile, for instance. But precisely for that reason, Churchill would have understood his friend Nicholson, and even tried to learn and progress so as to give his "joyride in a paintbox" a sense of purpose and direction. When Sir John Rothenstein visited the ageing Prime Minister at Chartwell, his host asked him to criticise the paintings without holding back. No sooner had the director of the Tate Gallery pointed to a weakness in one of the earlier canvases than Churchill fetched brush and paint to correct it then and there. We are told that he was most unwillingly persuaded by the historically minded professional that such belated correction would only upset the unity of mood.

Maybe he was right in distrusting this critical cliché. For one of the things that made Churchill great was his persistent distrust of the expert. Of course, the distrust was mutual. We need not adjudicate. But whenever we hear one of the accredited experts calling Churchill names, let us at least remember that an "amateur" is really a lover, and a "dilettante," one who delights.