

A Defense of the Dilettante

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BY GEORGE CHAMBERS CALVERT



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HERE is no doubt that the dilettante needs a champion. He is in bad odor with both the artist and the business man. To the one he is a mere dabbler, a tyro, an 'amateur' with every scornful implication of the word. To the other he is an irrational person who neglects the serious concerns of life—the pursuit of money or professional celebrity—to follow a foolish enthusiasm for beauty. In the thought of the many he has fallen into bad company and is associated in a common opprobrium with the jack-of-all-trades. Verily the dilettante is in a bad case.

And has he any defense — this impertinent fellow who pretends to judge a picture and, in the more advanced stages, probably 'sketches a little himself'; who criticises Paderewski's interpretation and, it may be, 'plays a little for his own amusement'; who talks glibly about lines and values and composition and protests he is so sensitive to color that the sight of a magenta dress makes him ill; who shudders at a discord and seems possessed of a mania for collecting preposterous Japanese prints and old rugs that the Persians are glad to sell to the rag-man — is it possible to find an excuse for him?

The prophet of the political campaign is wont to claim for his favored candidate a landslide in every doubtful state and is jubilant if he wins by a scratch. The professional advocate claims for his client spotless innocence and is rejoiced if he succeeds in raising in the minds of the jury a more or less reasonable doubt of

guilt. It seems to be a well established custom to claim the earth and to be content with holding a quarter section. Following these precedents, I maintain for the dilettante not only that he has a good defense, but that he is entirely blameless—not an offender, but a victim—and that he is a worthy and desirable member of society who, in pleasuring his own tastes, contributes to the welfare of his fellowmen in a measure far larger than they usually appreciate.

There is a difference, of course, between the dilettante who is creative—who tries to do things in art—and one who is merely appreciative—observant, critical, feeling deep interest and enjoyment in the artistic creations of others, but himself attempting nothing. So, too, in fairness these dilettanti must be distinguished from the lorgnette type of aesthetes—those irritating poseurs who mask the most egregious philistinism under a false show of artistic enthusiasm consisting chiefly of ecstatic exclamations. Nothing should or can be said to mitigate the just scorn in which they are held. On the other hand little is said against the genuine lover of art except by the most sordid and indurated utilitarians, who think it a waste of time to read a poem or listen to a symphony or view a picture. The argument of this defense, therefore, must go chiefly to the case of the creative dilettante who is generally berated as a dabbler.

The business man has judged falsely because he has entirely failed to catch the dilettante's point of view. Fair judgment demands an examination of the validity of the indictment against him and an unbiased effort to understand the principle underlying his dilettantism. Motive is an element in crime. Back in the abysmal past when wise saws were being invented for copybooks some sage evolved the classic, "DE GVSTIBVS NON EST DISPVTANDVM." Nothing has happened to shake the truth of this adage that in matters of taste each individual must choose for himself. On the contrary, we have

specifically accepted the doctrine of individual right, and have modernized the form of its expression into 'it all depends upon the point of view'. The detractors of the dilettante have judged him by a false and philistine standard, and by pressure of public opinion seek to abrogate his inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness where he finds it. If there were a statute which made piety criminal it would not be hard to convict a saint. Indeed, history does not lack instances in which precisely that has been done, remembrance of which should give us pause. Not that the dilettante is in danger of martyrdom—far from it. The reproach which attaches to his name affects him not at all, and he continues to tread the primrose path of dalliance with the fine arts serene in his enjoyment and indifferent to the scorn of the world's Gradgrinds. It may be frankly admitted that the object of this argument is not to rescue the dilettante from ignominy. He feels none. Rather, its real object is to confound the philistine, and thus to save that benighted soul from longer dwelling in error.



MONG those who have charge of our mental and moral up-bringing there is a great deal of loose talk which goes unchallenged, all to the effect that each individual was designed by his Creator for a certain purpose and that his life is worthy only if he succeeds in accomplishing some useful work. One might easily accept part of this doctrine, were it not that its votaries insist upon our swallowing it whole, and insist, too, that they, alone, are able to define what is useful work and to determine when a man is or is not accomplishing the end for which his Creator designed him. This theory with its corollaries is embodied in a mass of proverbial wisdom so varied and extensive that by comparison the combined contributions of Solomon, Solon and Polonius are a mere bagatelle. Practically, it may be summed up in one word—utilitar-

ianism. Perhaps God intended this man to be a shoemaker and the temporary repository of a Shoemaking Providence. He does make shoes in fair quantity and quality; but he can also whittle out a very marvel of a toy ship, and he defeats the Divine Purpose—so these reflectors of the Divine Mind say—by giving so much of his time and energy to the whittling of ships that he fails to make an adequate number of shoes. Or perhaps God intended that man to be a merchant; but the violin hath so much charm to beguile him from the strenuous labor of commercial competition that his shop never wins the distinction of a full page advertisement. Or perhaps God intended that other man to be a lawyer; but he often leaves his office to spend an afternoon at the matinee and, worse yet, many a night when he might be employed in the preparation of a brief, he gives his time to rehearsals for private theatricals. As a consequence he never gets a thousand dollar retainer.

Proverbial Wisdom says that because the shoemaker spends his time in whittling toy ships, and the merchant plays the fiddle, and the lawyer struts and frets upon the amateur stage, each is a failure—each falls short of accomplishing the end of his creation. That is, Proverbial Wisdom assumes that such things as making the greatest number of shoes, selling the most merchandise, receiving the largest fees, constitute the chief end of man. Is not this a somewhat sordid and material interpretation of the Catechism? "It is certain that much may be judiciously argued in favor of diligence" said the prophet of Vailima, "only there is something to be said against it." Granting that in the foregoing examples Proverbial Wisdom does have a strong case, it does not follow that it is always and inevitably right. Indeed, it is not always consistent, which is much easier than being right. Proverbial Wisdom says, "A rolling stone gathers no moss;" but it also says, "Home-keep-

ing youth have ever homely wit." Proverbial Wisdom says, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder;" but it also says, "Out of sight, out of mind." Proverbial Wisdom says, "Look before you leap;" but it also says, "Nothing venture, nothing have." Proverbial Wisdom says, "Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves;" but it also says, "Penny wise and pound foolish." All of which would seem to indicate that Proverbial Wisdom is so wise because it is so paradoxical. Therefore, when Proverbial Wisdom scorns the dilettante because his enthusiasm for beauty diverts him from the vocation by which he supplies himself with the means of sustaining existence, we are not bound at once to assume that the final word has been spoken. As a matter of fact this same Proverbial Wisdom tells us that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Now, the dilettante is the man who plays with the fine arts.



At first glance this definition may seem somewhat loose, but an examination of authorities will support it as sufficiently exact. Dictionaries are generally esteemed in proportion to their size. Ponderosity gives sanction. We respect weighty authority. The Century Dictionary, which is the largest and most cumbersome thus far published in America, defines DILETTANTE as "an admirer and lover of the fine arts, science or literature; an amateur; one who pursues an art or literature desultorily and for amusement; often used in a disparaging sense for a superficial and affected dabbler in literature or art." The Oxford Dictionary, which is the largest and most cumbersome hitherto published in the world, defines DILETTANTE as "a lover of the fine arts, originally one who cultivates them for the love of them rather than professionally, and so amateur as opposed to professional; but in later use generally applied more or less depreciatively to one who interests himself in an art

or science merely as a pastime and without serious aims or study." It will be observed that in both of these definitions the element of contempt appears only at the end. In short, the dilettante is the victim of a false ideal which has operated so powerfully in the minds of his critics that they have even perverted the meaning of a word to give it a disparaging significance. It cannot be denied that modern dictionaries authorize this secondary scornful sense that has been imputed to the word; but if we press our investigation a little deeper into the wells of English we find that earlier usage does not justify any such meaning; and the suspicion grows upon us that, without any intrinsic reason for adding this baser import to the word our later lexicographers have simply yielded to the pressure of usage of a commercial people living in a very commercial age. Instead of admitting this meaning to be correct, it is for lovers of the language to restore the word to the pristine purity of its original sense.

The origin of DILETTANTE is through the Italian from the Latin *DELICERE* which means to delight. Or, to be very learned and go a step further in our etymological quest, it is derived from the frequentative form of the verb which is *DELECTARE* and which implies a delight that constantly repeats itself and grows in allurements. It has exactly the same source as our words, delight, delicious, delectable and so forth. It is practically a synonym for amateur, which cannot possibly mean anything but lover; and yet, amateur, too, has passed through the commercial ordeal and barely escaped disgrace. There is absolutely nothing in the origin of dilettante to suggest frivolity or superficiality—nothing to justify its use for any other purpose than to designate a person who pursues art purely for the love of it rather than as a means of livelihood.

Apparently the business man's idea is that the pursuit of art involves the expenditure of time and energy for study and work,

and, unless one is going to make money by it, the pursuit is bootless and a mere diversion from some remunerative occupation. My own creed is that every man should work at his task enough to accomplish his reasonable share of the world's labor—enough to supply himself and those who may be dependent on him with the means of sustaining existence so that none of them may become a charge upon society, and enough to make his fair contribution of time and effort to the common weal—to perform his individual and his social duty. This done, however, he may spend any remainder of time or energy in whatever occupation pleases him, subject only to the limitation that he shall do nothing to harm his fellow-men. And if the dilettante finds greater pleasure in dalliance with the fine arts than in accumulating more money or in building up a greater professional fame he has the right to choose.

“For most men in a brazen prison live,
Where in the sun's hot eye,
With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
Their lives to some unmeaning task-work give,
Dreaming of naught beyond their prison wall.
And as, year after year,
Fresh products of their barren labour fall
From their tired hands, and rest
Never yet comes more near,
Gloom settles slowly down over their breast.
And while they try to stem
The waves of mournful thought by which they are prest,
Death in their prison reaches them
Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest.”

The dilettante finds liberty, vision, felicity in the pursuit of beauty.

Who dare question the wisdom of his choice? And if it shall appear that he not only finds loveliness for the satisfaction of his own life, but aids in bringing it to the lives of his fellowmen, he also serves—there is virtue as well as wisdom in his pursuit of beauty.

The commercial contention is abundantly answered by citing the case of Midas who got gold so that whatever he touched turned to gold; and yet he was none the better for it. Indeed was he not really much the worse? In our childhood we read this fable with so little understanding that its horrid truth seldom reaches our vision; and, blinded by the dust of materialism, we go on "piling up the cankered heaps of strange-achieved gold" against the time when we shall have no use for it. A very rich man of our own time pungently stated the conclusion of the whole matter: "The trouble with most men is that by the time they think they have enough to retire on they have nothing to retire to." This is the fate of the man who all his life toils up the hill of endeavor, riches the sole aim of his striving. When he reaches the crest and stops to survey the fruition of his labor, his eye looks out over a desert of golden sand—glittering, it may be, with the brilliance of commercial achievement but utterly barren of beauty and incapable of sustaining a single spiritual impulse or intellectual joy. And if this be the desolate end of the man who pursues wealth with all his might and is successful, what can symbolize the disaster which befalls one who, with no less eagerness, no less effort, no less concentration of purpose, no less sacrifice of all that makes for charm and beauty and sweetness in life, pursues wealth and wins it not!

The reason for the artist's disdain of the dilettante seems to be his conviction that art is too serious an aim to be pursued lightly, for mere pleasure. It should be the mistress controlling all activities. There may be some shadow of reason in this view, but it is only

a shadow. It is true that art is a goddess to be worshiped with undivided zeal; but it does not follow that every man must render this whole-souled devotion. Long ago we adjusted the matter of religious worship so that the chief expression of it is intrusted to a small and special class known as the priesthood. The rest of us go about our daily affairs, not unmindful of Deity but serene in the belief that whatever good we do is a practical form of the same worship which underlies the rites and ceremonies of the priest, our delegate to God. So with art. By the process of natural selection there has grown up a class of artists—men gifted with special talents of the seeing eye and the devising mind, endowed in an extraordinary degree with aesthetic sensibility and expressiveness; and these men, by virtue of their special gifts, are dedicated to special training to the end that they may become the chief devotees of the goddess, Art. There are ministers of the gospel of goodness, and there are ministers of the gospel of beauty; but because there is a priest, shall the temple be closed to the layman? Because there are artists, shall any man be denied the right to enjoy beauty and to participate in its creation? The religious man gets a certain spiritual help and satisfaction from doing some of the things which on more important occasions he delegates to the priest. He reads the prayers and services of the church in his own home and instructs his household in the tenets of his faith. No one thinks that in so doing he is usurping a function that belongs exclusively to the priest. He may mumble his words and mispronounce the names of Biblical heroes. His prayer may be a stammer, and his interpretation of religious truth a platitude. Nevertheless, all the world acknowledges his right to express his religious impulse and to make his individual effort for spiritual growth—indeed, acknowledges not only his right but also the fact that it is solely by the exercise of his spiritual faculties that he can grow into a better life.

The analogy holds in the realm of art. By reason of pre-eminent ability, some men must always lead in the cultivation of the fine arts; but that is no reason why others should not follow. Indeed, to what end should there be leaders if there be not followers? And who can tell when a follower, pressing on with enthusiasm, taste and zeal, may seize the standard of leadership and carry his art forward to some new and nobler achievement? If a man have an impulse toward the expression of beauty, does anyone doubt that he has a right to give it scope as freely as another man may an impulse for the expression of piety? Ah, you say, there is just the point: so often it is not at all an impulse toward the expression of beauty, but of ugliness. And I ask, how do you know? Beauty is not absolute. It has no fixed and immutable standard. It is the remote ideal toward which all art moves. Veil after veil has been lifted, revealing new and undreamt-of loveliness, but the ideal of beauty still recedes into remoter heights. Even the ugliness of today may be a step toward the beauty of tomorrow. It is less than a hundred years since the Barbizon painters were known only to be contemned. Today, in all the blazonry of art there is no name more glorious than Corot. Within our own memory, the Impressionists were laughed to scorn, and their pictures were rejected as grotesque daubs. The "Purple Cow" of Gelett Burgess was hailed with a universal glee which exactly expressed the popular judgment of Manet and his followers. Who doubts now that they led us a long stride forward on the path to beauty? Jean Francois Millet etched about twenty plates which are the admiration of connoisseurs today: and yet Monsieur Cadart, who was an honest critic and a faithful follower of beauty as he saw it, rejected one of the finest of these etchings as unworthy of publication by the Société des Aqua-Fortistes. Just now, the tragic case of Ralph Albert Blakelock is very heavy on our hearts. Beauty revealed herself to him in a luminous, poetic vision

which he endeavored to represent on canvas; but his pictures found few to admire and fewer still to buy. Unable to obtain even a bare livelihood by his painting and overwhelmed by poverty and disappointment, his mind gave way. Twenty years which should have been full of productive work by this master were lost in unreason; and the world is immeasurably poorer for his disaster. Now, his name lends distinction to any collection, his pictures are sold for many times the prices which he asked in vain, while the artist himself, his vision fled, nears the end of life an inmate of an asylum for the insane, deluded by the belief that he possesses the wealth which others have reaped from the product of his genius. His case and countless others illustrate with painful poignancy the frequent error and instability of contemporary judgment. The ugliness of one generation has so often become the beauty of the next that the mere recounting of instances would be insufferably tedious. It is an old and most unhappy story.

"Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead

Through which the living Homer begged his bread."



RETURNING to the contention that the dilettante is producing ugliness rather than beauty, and, for the sake of argument, granting it to be true, is he any more at fault than the pious man who mispronounces Biblical names? Suppose that he does entirely lack originality and is a mere inferior imitator, wherein is he more to be condemned than the man who instructs his household with religious platitudes? His ugliness will not deceive and his efforts toward beauty may result in aesthetic growth.

Many years ago Mr. Prang, the art publisher of Boston, said that a great need of this country was that the people should be interested in pictures—not necessarily interested in the best pictures, although of course this was desirable as an aim, but that they

should be brought to know the power of pictures to adorn and beautify their lives. Taste and judgment, insight and appreciation would inevitably follow. The principle of evolution has come to be recognized as applying in some degree to all forms of life and life's activities. Everything must have a beginning, impulse and growth. Civilization begins with the pioneer. The appreciation of art begins with the dilettante. He is a pioneer in the realm of beauty and has the qualities of the pioneer. He is often crude but he is always sincere. The pioneer is seldom urbane but he is usually honest; and in art no less than in business, honesty is to be prized. It is better to have on the wall a newspaper 'color insert' which you understand and enjoy than a photograph of the Mona Lisa which you do not understand and only pretend to enjoy. The real appreciation and enjoyment of a crude picture will often lead to the intelligent enjoyment and appreciation of a better picture, and this progress will continue to develop artistic sensibility; but pretending to enjoy a masterpiece is no better than any other pretense, and leads to nothing but more and more hypocrisy.

The man who dabbles in art is usually crude in his early efforts, but it is a law of life that what we do for the joy of doing it we come in time to do well; and the dilettante is no exception to this rule. Just as experience is the most effective teacher example is the most forceful argument. Consider the work of a few of these dabblers. Oliver Wendell Holmes was a physician, esteemed by his associates as an authority in medicine, but he found relaxation and pleasure in writing. The doctor and his patients are dead, and many of his remedies have been superseded; but *The Chambered Nautilus* lives, an imperishable message to youth. Charles E. Dodgson was a lecturer in mathematics in Christ Church, Oxford, but he was also a literary dilettante writing under the pen name, Lewis Carroll. Who do you think made the greater contribution to the world's well-

being, the author of *A Syllabus of Plane Algebraical Geometry* or the author of *Alice in Wonderland*? Sir Francis Seymour Haden was a surgeon in London with a large practice and great professional distinction. He, too, was a dilettante—a dabbler, if you please—in etching. He dabbled with so much love for his avocation and with so much genius and joy in the pursuit of it that he has come to be recognized as the greatest of modern landscape etchers. And in an earlier time, David, son of Jesse, was doubtless a very good shepherd boy; but to while away the tedium of his solitude he cultivated such skill in wielding the sling-shot and playing the lute that by these accomplishments he was able to rescue Israel from the Philistines and become her king.



THESE are extreme illustrations but memory will supply many other examples of men who have pursued one or more of the fine arts as a pastime, for relaxation from other work, and have made notable achievement in the arts which they have sought primarily for pleasure. No one will pretend to deny that these men have made great contributions to the beauty of the world and the charm of life. Although the value of such contributions is incalculable, I venture to believe that by indirect influence, by serving as personal exponents and apostles of art among many that the great masters rarely reach, by aiding in the refinement of people through the application of principles of beauty to practical things, the dilettanti have accomplished a sum-total of good not greatly less than that of the masters themselves. Moreover, they are the first to appreciate and applaud the artist; and it is impossible to guess how much their appreciation and applause sustain and carry on to fulfillment the creative impulse of the master.

However, the chief justification for the dilettante [whether creative or merely appreciative] is not in external achievement, but in

the effect of his dilettantism on himself. Generally his best contribution is his own personality and its leavening influence in the world. Burke said: "I trust that few things which have a tendency to bless or to adorn life have wholly escaped my observation in my passage through it." There spoke the true dilettante. Of an eminent art critic, we are told, "He was curious in viands and vintages as well as in buildings and statues, as well as in carvings and bookbindings." Such curiosity is the impulse to the widest culture. It is a truism to say that acquaintance with the fine arts enriches life and adds to its charm. And that acquaintance comes most intimately to the man who seeks it most zealously. The more varied his knowledge, the more pleasant points of contact he has with the world. To know something of all the arts is greatly to be desired—to know enough to enjoy the best, and to enjoy understandingly, so that to ourselves at least we may be able to give a reasonable account of our enjoyment—to be fastidious rather than capricious—really and reasonably to appreciate beauty, and not to rest content with vague and fugitive pleasurable sentiment which must inevitably be slight and transitory because it has no rational basis in knowledge. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"—to no one so great a joy as to the man who conceives it and brings it into being. Nothing reveals beauty so much as the effort to create it. The dilettante increases his enjoyment and enlarges his capacity for it in proportion as he gives himself—his thought and his effort—to the realization of his ideal: his own earnest endeavor to produce an object of beauty enhances his power to admire and appreciate the work of the masters.

Stevenson relates that Saint Beuve, as he grew older, "came to regard all experience as a single great book in which to study for a few years ere we go hence: and it seemed all one to him whether you should read in Chapter XX, which is the differential calculus or in Chapter XXXIX, which is hearing the band play in the garden."

Pater, in *Marius*, restates the doctrine of Aristippus: "Given the hardest terms, supposing our days are indeed but a shadow, even so, we may well adorn and beautify, in scrupulous self-respect, our souls and whatever our souls touch upon." "We live by admiration, hope and love," said Wordsworth: and to live fully, generously, richly, we must keep gates open into all the avenues of the soul. The effort of the dilettante is his striving toward this catholicity of spirit; but his success is not to be measured by any outward and visible accomplishment: it is the effort and intention which count in the man himself.

The personal reward of the dilettante comes in every form and with every experience of beauty; and it multiplies with the years. There is an old anecdote of Talleyrand that he once said to a companion who confessed himself ignorant of whist, "Ah, what a sad old age you are laying up for yourself." Not so, the dilettante. He is the one man who can eat his cake and have it too. With increasing years come new experiences of beauty crowding upon the memories of earlier enjoyment—new vision to see, new power to create; and the lover of art accumulates joy for his old age. Who can doubt that if man live again, his zeal for beauty will survive to bloom into better realization: if man die the death, the love of beauty will have received some nurture even from the veriest tyro who pursues his ideal with the true spirit of the dilettante.

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