



## Art and Common People Leo Tolstoy

It has come finally to this: that not only are haziness, mysteriousness, obscurity, and exclusiveness (shutting out the masses) elevated to the rank of a merit and a condition of poetic art, but even inaccuracy, indefiniteness, and lack of eloquence, are held in esteem. Theophile Gautier in his preface to the celebrated *Fleurs du Mai* says that Baudelaire as far as possible banished from poetry eloquence, passion, and truth too strictly copied (l'eloquence, la passion, et la verite, calquee trop exactement').

And Baudelaire not only did this, but maintained this thesis in his verses, and yet more strikingly in the prose of his *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, the meanings of which have to be guessed like a rebus and remain for the most part undiscovered . . .

And among the Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Italians, and us Russians, similar verses are printed. And such productions are printed and made up into book-form if not by the million then by the hundred-thousand (some of these separate works sell in tens of thousands). For typesetting, paging, printing, and binding these books, millions and millions of working days are spent—not less, I think, than went to build the Great Pyramid. Nor is this all. The same is going on in all the other arts : millions and millions of working days are being spent on the production of equally incomprehensible works in painting, in music, and in drama.

Painting not only does not lag behind poetry in this matter, but rather outstrips it. Here is an extract from the diary of an amateur of art, written when visiting the Paris exhibitions in 1894:

“I was to-day at three exhibitions: the Symbolists', the Impressionists', and the Neo-Impressionists'. I looked at the pictures conscientiously and carefully, but again felt the same stupefaction and ultimate indignation. The first exhibition, that of Camille Pissarro, was comparatively the most comprehensible, though the pictures were out of drawing, had no content, and the colourings were most improbable. The drawing was so indefinite that you were sometimes unable to make out which way an arm or a head was turned. The subject was generally, 'effets'—Effet de brouillard, Effet du soir, Soleil couchant. There were some pictures with figures but without subjects.

“In the colouring, bright blue and bright green predominated. And each picture had its special colour with which the whole picture was, as it were, splashed. For instance in 'A Girl guarding Geese' the special colour is vert de gris, and dots of it were splashed about everywhere: on the face, the hair, the hands, and the clothes. In the same gallery—that of Durand-Ruel—were other pictures: by Puvis de Chavannes, Manet, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, who are all Impressionists. One of them, whose name I could not make out—it was something like Redon—had painted a blue face in profile. On the whole face there is only this blue tone, with white-of-lead. Pissarro has a water-colour all done in dots. In the foreground is a cow entirely painted with various-coloured dots. The general colour cannot be distinguished, however much one stands back from, or draws near to, the picture. From there I went to see the Symbolists. I looked at them long without asking any one for an explanation, trying to guess the meaning; but it is beyond

human comprehension . . .”

As soon as ever the art of the upper classes separated itself from universal art a conviction arose that art may be art and yet be incomprehensible to the masses. And as soon as this position was admitted it had inevitably to be admitted also that art may be intelligible only to the very smallest number of the elect and eventually to two, or to one, of our nearest friends, or to oneself alone—which is practically what is being said by modern artists:—

“I create and understand myself, and if any one does not understand me so much the worse for him.”

The assertion that art may be good art and at the same time incomprehensible to a great number of people, is extremely unjust, and its consequences are ruinous to art itself; but at the same time it is so common and has so eaten into our conceptions, that it is impossible to make sufficiently clear its whole absurdity.

Nothing is more common than to hear it said of reputed works of art that they are very good but very difficult to understand. We are quite used to such assertions, and yet to say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men, is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but most people can't eat it. The majority of men may not like rotten cheese or putrefying grouse, dishes esteemed by people with perverted tastes; but bread and fruit are only good when they are such as please the majority of men. And it is the same with art. Perverted art may not please the majority of men, but good art always pleases everyone.

It is said that the very best works of art are such that they cannot be understood by the masses, but are accessible only to the elect who are prepared to understand these great works. But if the majority of men do not understand, the knowledge necessary to enable them to understand should be taught and explained to them. But it turns out that there is no such knowledge, that the works cannot be explained, and that those who say the majority do not understand good works of art, still do not explain those works, but only tell us that in order to understand them one must read, and see, and hear, these same works over and over again. But this ,’s not to explain, it is only to habituate! And people may habituate themselves to anything, even to the very worst things. As people may habituate themselves to bad food, to spirits, tobacco, and opium, just in the same way they may habituate themselves to bad art—and that is exactly what is being done.

Moreover it cannot be said that the majority of people lack the taste to esteem the highest works of art. The majority always have understood and still understand what we also recognize as being the very best art: the epic of Genesis, the Gospel parables, folk-legends, fairy-tales, and folk-songs, are understood by all. How can it be that the majority has suddenly lost its capacity to understand what is high in our art?

Of a speech it may be said that it is admirable but incomprehensible to those who do not know the language in which it is delivered. A speech delivered in Chinese may be excellent, and yet remain incomprehensible to me if I do not know Chinese; but what distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that its language is understood by all, and that it infects all without distinction. The tears and laughter of a Chinaman infect me just as the laughter and tears of a Russian; and it is the same with painting and music, and also poetry when it is translated into a language I understand. The songs of a Kirghiz or of a Japanese touch me, though in a lesser degree than they touch a Kirghiz or a Japanese. I am also touched by Japanese painting, Indian architecture, and Arabian stories. If I am but little touched by a Japanese song and a Chinese novel, it is not that I do not understand these productions, but that I know and am accustomed to higher works of art. It is not because their art is above me. Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to every one. The story of Joseph translated into the Chinese language touches a Chinese. The story of

Sakya Muni (Buddha) touches us. And there are, and must be, buildings, pictures, statues, and music, of similar power. So that if art fails to move men, it cannot be said that this is due to the spectators' or hearers' lack of understanding, but the conclusion to be drawn may be, and should be, that such art is either bad or is not art at all.

Art is differentiated from activity of the understanding, which demands preparation and a certain sequence of knowledge (so that one cannot learn trigonometry before knowing geometry), by the fact that it acts on people independently of their state of development and education, that the charm of a picture, of sounds, or of forms, infects any man whatever his plane of development.

The business of art lies just in this: to make that understood and felt which in the form of an argument might be incomprehensible and inaccessible. Usually it seems to the recipient of a truly artistic impression that he knew the thing before, but had been unable to express it.

And such has always been the nature of good, supreme art; the Iliad, the Odyssey; the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; the Hebrew prophets, the psalms, the Gospel parables; the story of Sakya Muni and the hymns of the Vedas, all transmit very exalted feelings and are nevertheless quite comprehensible now to us, educated or uneducated, just as they were comprehensible to the men of those times, long ago, who were even less educated than our labourers. People talk about incomprehensibility; but if art is the transmission of feelings flowing from man's religious perception, how can a feeling be incomprehensible which is founded on religion, that is, on man's relation to God? Such art should be, and has actually always been, comprehensible to everybody, because every man's relation to God is one and the same. This is why the churches and the images in them were always comprehensible to every one. The hindrance to an understanding of the best and highest feelings (as is said in the Gospel) lies not at all in deficiency of development or learning, but on the contrary in false development and false learning. A good and lofty work of art may be incomprehensible, but not to simple, unperverted, peasant labourers (what is highest is understood by them)—it may be and often is unintelligible to erudite, perverted people destitute of religion. And this continually occurs in our society in which the highest feelings are simply not understood. For instance, I know people who consider themselves most refined, and who say that they do not understand the poetry of love of one's neighbour, of self-sacrifice, or of chastity.

So that good, great, universal, religious art may be incomprehensible to a small circle of spoiled people, but certainly not to any large number of plain men.

Art cannot be incomprehensible to the great masses only because it is very good—as artists of our day are fond of telling us. Rather we are bound to conclude that this art is unintelligible to the great masses only because it is very bad art, or even is not art at all. So that the favourite argument (naively accepted by the cultured crowd), that in order to feel art one has first to understand it (which really only means habituate oneself to it), is the truest indication that what we are asked to understand by such a method is either very bad, exclusive art, or is not art at all.

People say that works of art do not please the people because they are incapable of understanding them. But if the aim of works of art is to infect people with the emotion the artist has experienced, how can one talk about not understanding?

A man of the people reads a book, sees a picture, hears a play or a symphony, and is touched by no feeling. He is told that this is because he cannot understand. People promise to let a man see a certain show; he enters and sees nothing. He is told that this is because his sight is not prepared for this show. But the man knows for certain that he sees quite well, and if he does not see what people promised to show him he only concludes (as is quite just) that those who undertook to show him the spectacle have not fulfilled their engagement. And it is perfectly

just for a man who does feel the influence of some works of art, to come to this conclusion concerning artists who do not by their works evoke feeling in him. To say that the reason a man is not touched by my art is because he is still too stupid, besides being very self-conceited and also rude, is to reverse the roles, and for the sick to send the hale to bed.

### FOR ANALYSIS

1. What is the function of art, according to Tolstoy? What art can you think of that fit his definition?
2. What is Tolstoy's objection to modern art? Can you find any objections to his point of view?
3. What does Tolstoy mean by people "habituating" themselves to bad art? Do you think it possible? If so, can you cite any examples of it?
4. Why, according to Tolstoy, are religious writings genuine art?
5. Art "infects any man whatever his plane of development," writes Tolstoy. What does he mean by this? What connotations does the word "infects" have that help reinforce Tolstoy's arguments?
6. What is Tolstoy's conclusion about art which the common people cannot understand? How fully do you agree with him? How specifically can you defend your own viewpoint?
7. According to Tolstoy's definition, are Shakespeare's plays art? Is opera? Modern jazz? Edgar A. Guest? Are magazine illustrations?

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. What social changes at the turn of the twentieth century caused Tolstoy to say what he does about art? How accurately do you think he has interpreted those social changes?
2. Tolstoy's definition of art, although a plea in favor of the tastes of the common man, has not convinced the majority of people of our time. How do you account for this?

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Leo Tolstoy. *What is Art?* Trans. Aylmer Maude. Boston: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1898. Questions from Joseph Henry Satin. *Ideas in Context*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. Text in public domain.

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