

3rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

Amsterdam - the Hague . July 2 - 10, 1951

1

" THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ART HISTORY AND ART CRITICISM "

Report of Bénédict Nicolson :

" CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ART HISTORY AND ART CRITICISM "

A. Broad definition of Terms.

- 1) Art History . Study of known or supposed facts, and theories deduced from those facts. "Facts" are not confined to the artist's life, temperament, and work, but include social and political framework of his age and his own situation, innate or assumed, within it.
- 2) Art Criticism . Subjective reaction of spectator to given artistic manifestations; or translation into words of expressions originally conveyed in totally separate language of colour and form.

B. Overlapping of two Branches of Activity.

One seldom encounters a pure art historian or a pure art critic . Historians tend to employ subjective language of criticism; critics tend to use factual data to support their arguments. In neither case is this trespassing essential to their method.

C. Responsability of Art Historian and Art Critic.

- 1) Historian . Main problems with which he is faced are to decide on the nature of given shapes, and then to weigh up the evidence and make up his mind from it how and why works of art came to take the shape that he has already supposed them to take possess . He must decide how much responsibility rests with the individual and how much with circumstances partly or entirely out side his control : such as patronage, the artist's unconscious or unformulated impulses, the state of his society.

2) Art Critic . He must give sight to those who are blind, try to destroy prejudices and ready-made opinions, force others to see what he sees, not so as to increase their knowledge but so as to heighten their imaginative perceptions.

D. Change of character of art history and art criticism.

The critic, being a kind of poet, obviously varies his approach from age to age. The views expressed by art historians also change - and not only because new facts come to light which disprove old theories . If he is brought up in a liberal tradition, he will attach most importance to the power of an individual artist to invent whatever takes his fancy (and, incidentally, will pick out as his subjects those artists who appear to prove his case); a historian brought up in a totalitarian society will tend to ascribe changes in style to hidden forces lying outside the individual's control . There is a history of art history as well as a history of art criticism.

E. Conclusion.

The two activities are basically separate but they can co-exist in one person and frequently do . Neither has anything important to learn from the other about his own job, the one being explanatory and interpretative, the other evocative . If either decides to encroach on the other's territory, this is nothing more than an ambition, often disastrous, to master both subjects.