WHAT DRAWING IS

On account of its being used in two or three different senses, the word drawing is not at all well understood. Sometimes it means reproducing visualities—copying the model. Sometimes it means visualizing ideals, either pictorial or as in abstract design. As these two meanings of the word stand for polar opposites the first thing intelligent art criticism must do is to clear the ground of this confusion. I say, not drawing criticism, but art criticism. For since art is what I am interested in, I want to distinguish between drawing which is art and drawing which is not. The only way to do this is to look at the drawing of men about whose artistry there is no doubt, and see what is its character.

A man draws for one of two things: either his aim is to depict an existing physical object—as the camera does—or it is something else than this. The American populace of today seems to think the first aim is that of artists, and that work resulting from this aim is art. They confuse the meaning of the word drawing with the word art. But looking to the work of great artists, who are in the final authority, do we find it agreeing with this idea? No. We do not. Raphael, Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, Turner, Hokusai—not one of these men drew photographically. Their aim was something quite different. What was their aim? Let us see.

A mere exact representation of a physical thing is, of course, simply a copy of an appearance. It involves none of the mental powers which distinguish artists. It, therefore, is not art. For art is an expression of ideas.

A copy of a physical thing must result in a representation of that thing. Whereas a drawing that tells the artist’s ideas is not re-presenting anything—for these do not exist outside his head—but is presenting what is not physical at all—viz., thought.

Between physical things and mental things there is always this infinitely wide difference, that the first is always an individual specimen, whereas the second is always a generalization—a type. The mind—and the larger the mind the better it does it—arranges all its stores, that is, all its memories of sense-impressions, in classes and categories. And these come forth in consciousness as composite memories, or types, or ideas,—whatever name you choose.

In fact, the mere act of recognition, in a bundle of ocular sensations, of, say a hickory tree, is possible only by bringing into consciousness for comparison a type, a pre-existing mental property built up out of the overlayed impressions of all previously-seen hickory trees. And therefore when the specimen before us is no longer present, what we remember of it is largely made of the points wherein it agrees with the type, so that it practically blends with and becomes a part of that composite idea.

And what is true of a hickory tree, as a whole, is equally true of a hickory leaf, or of the butt end of the stem, or of the upper side of the butt end of the stem—
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it is true, in fact, of the entire universe of which we have sensuous knowledge. It is true not only of organic units, such as trees and leaves, but of qualities and properties such as roundness, squareness, straightness, redness, flatness, shininess, singleness, complexity, etc., ad infinitum. These are ideas. They are composite memories of sense impressions. Drawing that presents these ideas is art.

Of course, drawing has of itself no necessary connection with representation of external objects at all. Here I draw a circle and there I draw a square. It is drawing and it is art. It represents an idea—the idea of a circle and of a square.

Exactly in the same way is all drawing by artists an expression of ideas. Millet never copied a peasant. His pictures are full, not of peasants, but of Millet's ideas of them. Greek sculpture owes its greatness to this principle. It is pure thought—nothing else. Every mass is an abstraction, every line is a generalization, every curve is a universal curve. It is a purely mental product—pure art.

Yes, it is completely true,—the saying that in his art what the artist expresses is himself. In fact, what am I as a spiritual entity but a bundle of ancestral and personal memories—that is, of ideas? Nothing. But, though self-expression makes a man's work art it does not make it important art unless the man himself is important. However truly he expresses himself, his work is no more than he is.

In art, draughtsmanship is a purely intellectual power. Take it in Michael Angelo, for example. It has nothing to do with depicting an external model—something it never dreams of. And this great artist's mind is the same as your mind or mine, only bigger. The essential principles are identical. In art all power, as is all other human power outside man's mere beef,—is of the intellect.

And what is the mark of intellect? It is this: to observe one's sensations accurately, to group them by characters which are essential, and to subdivide these groups by finer and finer differences in the sensation. This means self-knowl-
edge, self-discipline and self-control. Expressed in drawing, the result is art.

In conversation, Whistler said to me, though I thought it rather trite: "There is no such thing as painting without drawing; it is all the same thing." Of course. Why not? How could it be otherwise? Whether the movement of the hand is recorded by a pencil or a paint brush is certainly a matter of indifference. In both cases the record is drawing. More than this, coloring is drawing, too. History tells us of not one great colorist who was not also a draughtsman. It could not be otherwise; for beautiful coloring is based on the intellectual power to see and to arrange chromatic relationships in exact accord with an idea of beauty which pre-exists in the mind and which the painting exists to present. And a mind possessing this kind of power over the one visual element of color naturally does not lack it in dealing with the element of form. Indeed, even if we suppose to exist the case of a person with a color-gift alone, he would be helpless to express it unless he could draw. For serious color demands that tones be distributed over a surface with an exactness which implies a firm mental grasp of spaces, and an accurate laying of tones into these spaces,—that is to say, it demands the same powers as does draughtsmanship.

Coloring is a question of brains—simply—just as drawing is. In either case, the degree of excellence is simply the measure of the mind back of it. Mental power is shown by the ability to think, which is to see relationships among ideas. The wider, the more nearly universal the relationship observed, the bigger is the mind.

Said Ruskin fifty years ago, "No person trained to the superficial execution of modern water-color painting can understand the work of Titian or Leonardo; they must forever remain blind to the refinement of such men's penciling, and the precision of their thinking." It is delightful to find a critic, even if we must go back half a century to find him, who knows and says that Titian's color is based on "precision of thinking."