

ART IN THE AGE OF COVID

Few global catastrophes since WW2 have threatened to affect our social mores more radically than the Coronavirus. In a matter of days we went from greeting family and friends with customary embraces and hand shaking to waving at them from a distance, or often simply not seeing them any more. During lockdown a stillness settled, and with that came lingering melancholy.

For a privileged few the ensuing peace and quiet worked well. Suddenly there was more time to get on with projects around the house, burgeoning spring and summer gardens could be enjoyed to the full, and the absence of traffic was a boon for walkers.

But for the vast majority it was a time of hardship, disorder and loneliness. And for many it is still a daily struggle to remain positive in what continue to be challenging times. Moreover, the prospect of light summer evenings giving way to dark winter ones is daunting in the extreme.

Like quite a few people I suspect I can find things in common with both these categories, for whilst I have enjoyed the gentler pace of lockdown, it has been devastating to be cut off from family and friends. Furthermore, the lack of certainty has meant that there was little to look forward to in the immediate future. At such difficult times one reaches out for help and stimulation, and I found both through recourse to art - in particular the study of a few celebrated 20th century paintings I did not like very much. It may seem odd to want to revisit things one doesn't care for at a time of crisis, but I wanted to understand why they stood outside my artistic comfort zone. I must confess though that my sudden interest in reevaluating a few paintings did not come about entirely of its own accord.

I credit the excellent Arts Society and its efforts to keep its members occupied during lockdown and beyond with encouraging us all to be critics of art as opposed to simply bystanders. Through recommending reading materials, cultural sources and superb lectures, they have raised awareness of art and provided an extraordinarily rich array of educational tools with which to view and appreciate many different art forms.

One of the things I learned from my private study is that one's appreciation of a work of art is greatly influenced by circumstances. This was never more evident than when I took another look at the 20th century American realist painter, Edward Hopper's "Sun in an Empty Room" of 1963. Whilst I quite liked the colours, I had always found this painting pretentious in its rather obvious emptiness. But in the confinement of lockdown, with its emphasis on space and light and the subtle hint of infinite possibility, it suddenly made my spirits soar. The absence of any action no longer left me indifferent. On the contrary, the apparently empty room bathed in brightness with the big window suddenly became compelling. There seemed to be a suggestion that something interesting might be just around the corner, perhaps outside or even in the next room, and that was curiously exciting. To others this painting may still prove disquieting, even eerie and threatening in its sun flooded emptiness where action is

apparently suspended. Or it may simply seem pointless and boring, because why after all would anyone bother to paint a picture of sunny nothingness. But for me the result of seeing it again and at such a time was a much-needed jolt of positivity at a low moment.



The idea that art might be a therapy for depression is hardly new, and for the artist it can be equally healing in traumatic times. When the contemporary painter, Stephen Taylor, suffered a triple bereavement in 2006 he literally painted his way out of depression. His subject was an ancient oak tree on the edge of a field in West Bergholt in Essex, which he proceeded to paint fifty times over three years in different seasons. The result is an extraordinarily beautiful collection of paintings of the same tree that escapes sameness, chiefly through Taylor's preoccupation with varying degrees of light and texture.

If ever we could benefit from seeking comfort in the field of creativity surely it would be now, faced as we are with the confusion of a destructive pandemic and its uncertain aftermath – one that has put the greatest strain on mental health services in the United Kingdom in living memory.

This autumn the Arts Society has risen to the challenge of social distancing and the impossibility of scheduling monthly meetings by planning an impressive selection of Zoom lectures that promise to delight and bring us together virtually as we await a return to normality whenever that may be. Interestingly, one of the more positive effects of the pandemic is that it is now considered as normal to attend a lecture, go to a gallery or museum, see a play or hear an opera live via Zoom as it once was to go to these events in person. It is a compromise we may well get used to.

Ann Boyer

Bircham, 31-8-2020