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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

THEODORE MEYER GREENE, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1939. Pp. 506; 299 figs. \$5.00.

The problem of reviewing this compendious volume for the readers of the ART BULLETIN is a quite special one. For Professor Greene is a professional philosopher, interested in the plastic arts and obviously far from inexpert in them. But he is interested in the other arts as well, and, since he is a philosopher, he is interested in the general issues which are raised by all the arts and the categories involved in the understanding of all and of each of them. To the readers of this journal, doubtless, the paramount question will be what contribution the book makes to an appreciation and criticism of the plastic arts. The answer may be given at once. No student of painting, sculpture, and architecture can neglect a study whose analysis, I suspect, is particularly fruitful with respect to these arts. Furthermore, no student of the plastic arts can afford to ignore the general issues which Professor Greene's analysis raises, the demands of the special medium in each art, the intra-medial relations of the arts, and the troubled relations of form and content, of subject matter and medium, and above all, of the "unity" of a work of art, of artistic form. He provides also, in possibly the most important section of the book, on "Principles of Criticism," norms, modest, tentative, and (it must be confessed) debatable, of the operative principles of criticism.

Students of the plastic arts know well enough in what a parlous state aesthetic theory has been. On the one hand, it has been in the hands of lyric appreciators, the brewers of purple passages. It has, on the other hand, been the special province of professional philosophers, often scandalously innocent of either information or love of the arts, and interested only in rounding out a system of metaphysics, logic and ethics with a cluster of after-thoughts called aesthetics. They have been often more sedulously concerned with being sure that their aesthetics fitted into the rest of their system than in being certain that their principles derived from a study of the arts themselves. Meanwhile, despite the remarkable growth of special studies in the history of the arts and the development of principles of art history, principles of art criticism have been hard to find. The lover of the arts seeking for rational understanding has been given a choice between dithyramb and dialectic.

Professor Greene has provided an unmistakable service in furnishing this large and handsomely printed volume. Students of the fine arts, incidentally, will be not least grateful for the nearly hundred and fifty pages of illustrations of painting, sculpture, and architecture provided as apposite illustrations for the text. The inspection of these illustrations, very effectively reproduced, will convince the reader that, among other things, Professor

Greene has his eye on the object, and that his theory does not hang without points of empirical support, in the empty philosophical ether. It must be added, however, that in the best sense Professor Greene's interest is theoretical, that is, is solicitous for the development of a set of categories derived from the arts and from their functioning in our experience, a scheme that shall be at the same time precise and consistent. He thinks, properly enough, that a real service to criticism may be rendered by discerning and defining "basic categories" of art and basic principles of criticism. He is not under the illusion that everyone will accept his basic principles or categories. But he does think that such enunciations and definitions will at least render clear points at issue between various critics, clarify the whole direction and delimit the scope of the whole critical enterprise. In two respects such an undertaking is bound to be, or appear to be, a failure. No categories of analysis can be final and no treatment of the arts exhaustive.

Students of the arts, no less than philosophers, have, however, been looking for something more than amorphous rhetoric, and something like an intellectual organon for critical analysis. Professor Greene's categories are not by any means final; how could they be? His cornucopia of illustrations does not intend to be exhaustive, but it is patently rich and rich enough, too, to point up the appositeness of his critical distinctions.

In a book of this character, it is, perhaps, best to postpone certain important qualifications that a reviewer may have. It is important that the reader be first sympathetically acquainted with the general temper of the book and the scope and structure of the intellectual scheme. For the last Professor Greene has himself provided an impressive and carefully worked out chart of "basic artistic categories" in a folder at the close of the volume. The chart is almost too architectonic, leading to the suspicion that Professor Greene was more interested in making it itself a work of art, rather than, what is its chief intention, an *analysis* of the "work of art."

The key to Professor Greene's whole analysis comes in his conception of "artistic form." By that he means no static pattern, no mathematical formula, no intellectual concept, no surface arrangement of materials. He means by form something very like what Aristotle meant by it. He means what Aristotle meant by "plot" in a tragedy, and he means what Aristotle meant by calling the plot the soul of a tragedy. Artistic form is the life of the work of art, it is its organic character, its coherence, its unity, its being. No formula about an artistic form *is* that form. No artistic form exists in general; it is always specific to, incarnate in; it is the form of a specific work of art. All analysis of a work of art is, in essence, an analysis of this artistic unity. It is an attempt to understand the elements that enter into it, the materials that constitute it, the orders and

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