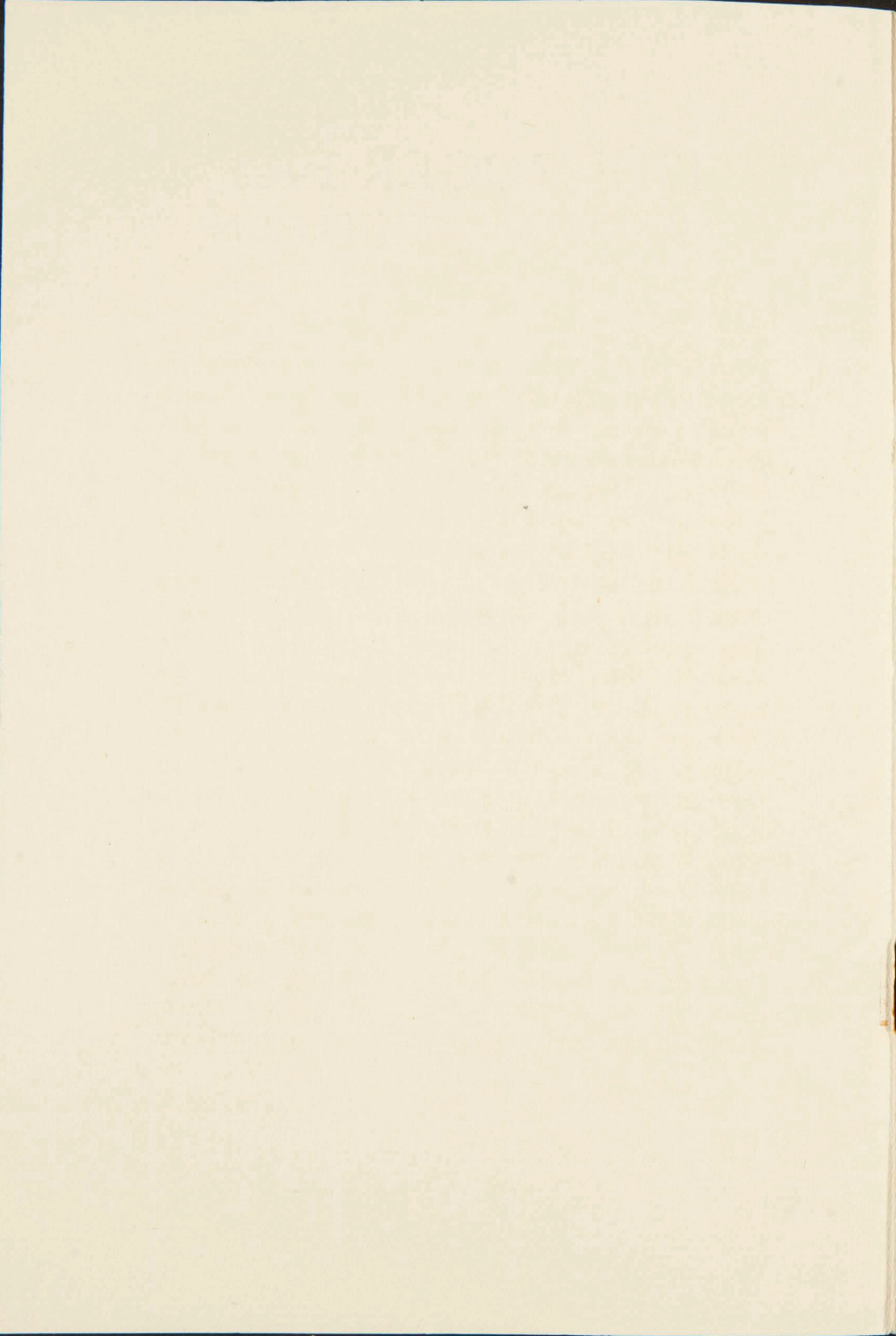


THE ROGER FRY MEMORIAL EXHIBITION

An Address given by Virginia
Woolf at the opening of the
Roger Fry Memorial Exhibi-
tion at the Bristol Museum
and Art Gallery on Friday,
July 12th, 1935



WHEN I was asked to open this exhibition of Roger Fry's pictures my first instinct I admit was to refuse, for it seemed to me that an exhibition of paintings ought to be opened by a painter or by a critic of painting. But on second thoughts it struck me that this particular exhibition, this memorial exhibition of Roger Fry's pictures, might fitly be opened by someone who is not a painter or a critic because Roger Fry did more than anyone to make such people—such outsiders—enjoy looking at pictures. That was my experience, and I think I am right in saying that there are others in this room who have felt the same thing. Pictures were to many of us—if I may generalize—things that hung upon walls; silent inscrutable patterns; treasure houses with locked doors in front of which learned people would stop, and about which they would lecture, saying that they were of this period or of that, of this school or of that, probably by this master, but perhaps on the other hand by one of his disciples. And we would trail behind them, silent, servile and bored. Then all of a sudden

those dim pictures began to flash with light and colour; and our guides, those respectable professors, began to argue and to quarrel, called each other—if I remember rightly—liars and cheats, and altogether began to behave like living people arguing about something of vital importance. What had happened? What had brought this life and colour, this racket and din into the quiet galleries of ancient art? It was that Roger Fry had gathered together the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in Dover Street; and the names of Cézanne and Gauguin, of Matisse and Picasso, suddenly became as hotly debated, as violently defended as the names—shall we say?—of Ramsay MacDonald, Hitler, or Lloyd George. That is many years ago. The dust of that conflict has died down. But all the same pictures have never gone back to their walls. They are no longer silent, decorous and dull. They are things we live with, and laugh at, love and discuss. And I think I am right in saying that it was Roger Fry more than anybody who brought about this change. He did it, of course, by his writing and by his lecturing. Many of you will have read his books, and will have heard his lectures. You will know better than I can describe it how profoundly he felt about the roots of art; how subtly, with that long white wand of his, standing in front of his magic lantern, he would point to this line and to that and would

bring to the surface in new and startling revelation those qualities that lie deep sunk in pictures so that we saw them afresh. You will have felt this while he lectured; you will still find it, happily, in his books; but I would like, if I can, to give you some faint idea how he did it in his talk.

I remember an instance that struck me greatly one night last summer. It was at a friend's house, and someone had brought him a picture for his opinion. It was a question whether it was a genuine picture by Degas, or whether it was an extremely skilful imitation. The picture was stood on a chair, and Roger Fry sat and looked at it. His eye ranged over it, carefully, appreciatively. It was a very good picture beyond a doubt; it was signed by Degas; it was in the manner of Degas—he was inclined to think on the whole that it was by Degas. And yet there was something that puzzled him; something—he could not say what—that made him hesitate. As if to rest himself, he turned away and took part in a discussion that was going forward in another corner of the room—a difficult discussion upon some abstract question of æsthetics. He argued and he listened to others arguing. But now and again I saw his eye go back to the picture as if it were feeling it, tasting it, making a voyage of discovery on its own. Then there was a pause. Suddenly he looked up and said: “No. No. That is not by Degas.”

There it seemed to me one had a glimpse for a moment into the process that made him so great a critic. While he was arguing about the theory of art in the abstract his eye was ranging over the picture and bringing back its spoils. Then there was a moment of fusion, of comprehension; and his mind was made up. "No," he said. "It is not by Degas." But how was it done? By the union, it seemed to me, of two different qualities—his reason and his sensibility. Many people have one; many people have the other. But few have both, and fewer still are able to make them both work in harmony. But that was what he did. While he was reasoning he was seeing; and while he was seeing he was reasoning. He was acutely sensitive, but at the same time he was uncompromisingly honest. Was this integrity, this honesty, a quality that he owed in part to his Quaker blood? He came, as you know, of a great Quaker family, and I have sometimes thought that this clarity, this sobriety of judgment, this determination to get beneath the appearance to the bedrock beneath are qualities that go with a Quaker upbringing. At any rate he never allowed himself merely to feel; he always checked and verified his impressions. Whether he upset other people's views (as he did) or changed his own (and he did) he always used his brain to correct his sensibility. And what was of equal

importance he always allowed his sensibility to correct his brain.

Here I come to a point in speaking of him where I doubt if he would let me go on. For I want to say that his understanding of art owed much to his understanding of life, and yet I know that he disliked the mingling and mixing of different things. He wanted art to be art; literature to be literature; and life to be life. He was an undaunted enemy of the sloppiness, the vagueness, the sentimentality which has filled so many academies with anecdotes of dogs and duchesses. He detested the story-telling spirit which has clouded our painting and confused our criticism. But I will venture to say that one of the reasons why his criticism always grew, always went deeper, always included more, and never froze into the rigidity of death was that he himself breasted so many different currents of the stream of life. He was a man of many interests and many sympathies. As a young man he had been trained as a scientist. Science interested him profoundly. Poetry was one of his perpetual delights. He was deeply versed in French literature. He was a great lover of music. Anything that he could touch and handle and fashion with his fingers fascinated him. He made plates and pots with his own hands; he dyed stuffs; he designed furniture; he would come into the

kitchen and teach the cook how to make an omelette; he would come into the drawing-room and teach the mistress how to arrange a bunch of flowers. And just as connoisseurs would bring him a picture for his opinion, so people of all kinds—and he had friends of all kinds—would bring him their lives—those canvases upon which we paint so many queer designs—and he would bring to bear upon their muddles and misfortunes the same rare mixture of logic and sympathy that made him so invigorating as a critic. He would start people living again just as he would start them painting again. And though I do not want to mix up different things, still I believe it was because so many interests, so many sympathies lived together in him that his teaching remained so fertile and so fresh.

But there was another reason why his criticism never became, as criticism so often does become, the repetition of a fixed idea. And that was of course that he always painted himself. He cared more for his painting than for his writing. The writing was done with many groans in the afternoon when the light was bad; on the tops of omnibuses; in the corners of third-class railway carriages. But painting was an instinct—a delight. If one were walking with him through the English fields, or driving with him along the roads of Italy or Greece, suddenly he would stop, and look. “I must just make a note of that,” he

would say, and out would come a pencil and a piece of paper and he would make a rough-and-ready sketch on the spot.

Many of the pictures on these walls are the results of those sketches. And because he painted himself he was perpetually forced to meet with his own brush those problems with which he was dealing with his pen. He knew from his own experience what labours, joys, despairs, go to the making of pictures. A picture was to him not merely the finished canvas but the canvas in the making. Every step of that struggle which ends sometimes in victory but more often in defeat was known to him from his own daily battle. It was because he painted himself that he kept so keen a sense of all the intricate processes of painting; and that was why he had so high a standard of what I may call the morality of art. No one knew better than he did how hard it is to paint well; no one knew better than he did how easy it is to palm off upon the public something that does instead. That is why his criticism is so trenchant, so witty, often so devastating in its exposure of humbug and pretence. That too is why it is so full of respect and admiration for the artist who has used his gift honourably and honestly even though it is a small one.

He was never, I think, satisfied with his own painting; he never met with the success which he deserved. But that made no difference to his

interest, to his activity. He went on painting; he went on tearing up his pictures; he threw them away; he began them again. And his devotion to his art seemed, if possible, to grow stronger with the years. Had he lived to be a hundred he would have been found, I am sure, sitting in front of a canvas with a brush in his hand.

Therefore there is nothing that he would have liked more than that you should have brought together this collection of his paintings. And there is no exhibition that could rouse questions of greater interest. We may ask ourselves, as we look at these pictures, is it a good thing that an artist should be also a critic, or does it inhibit his creative power? Is it necessary that an artist, in order to use his genius fully, should live half submerged in the dim world of ignorance, or on the contrary does knowledge and the consciousness that comes with it, lead him to be more daring and more drastic in his researches and discoveries, and so prolong his artistic life and give it new power and direction? Such questions can be answered here as in no other room in England; for no artist, I think I am right in saying, knew more about the problems of his art than Roger Fry, or pursued them with a deeper curiosity or with greater courage.

But here I touch upon questions that lie beyond my scope—here I come to the pictures

themselves; and I am not able to speak of Roger Fry's pictures as a fellow painter or as a fellow critic would speak of them. But speaking unprofessionally, as an outsider, I am sure that Roger Fry, were he here, would have made us all welcome equally to his exhibition. He would have asked only that we should come to it, whatever our calling, whatever our interests, with open eyes and open minds in the spirit of enjoyment. He believed that the love of art lives in most people if they will but give scope to it. He believed that the understanding of art, the enjoyment of art, are among the most profound and enduring pleasures that life has to give. I feel then that I am now asking you to embark upon a voyage—upon a voyage in which he will always be one of the great leaders, the great captains—a voyage of discovery into the mind and art of a remarkable man; and I have great pleasure in declaring this exhibition open.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

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