THE HINDU VIEW OF ART

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HINDU VIEW OF ART

by

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY ON

ART AND REALITY

by

ERIC GILL

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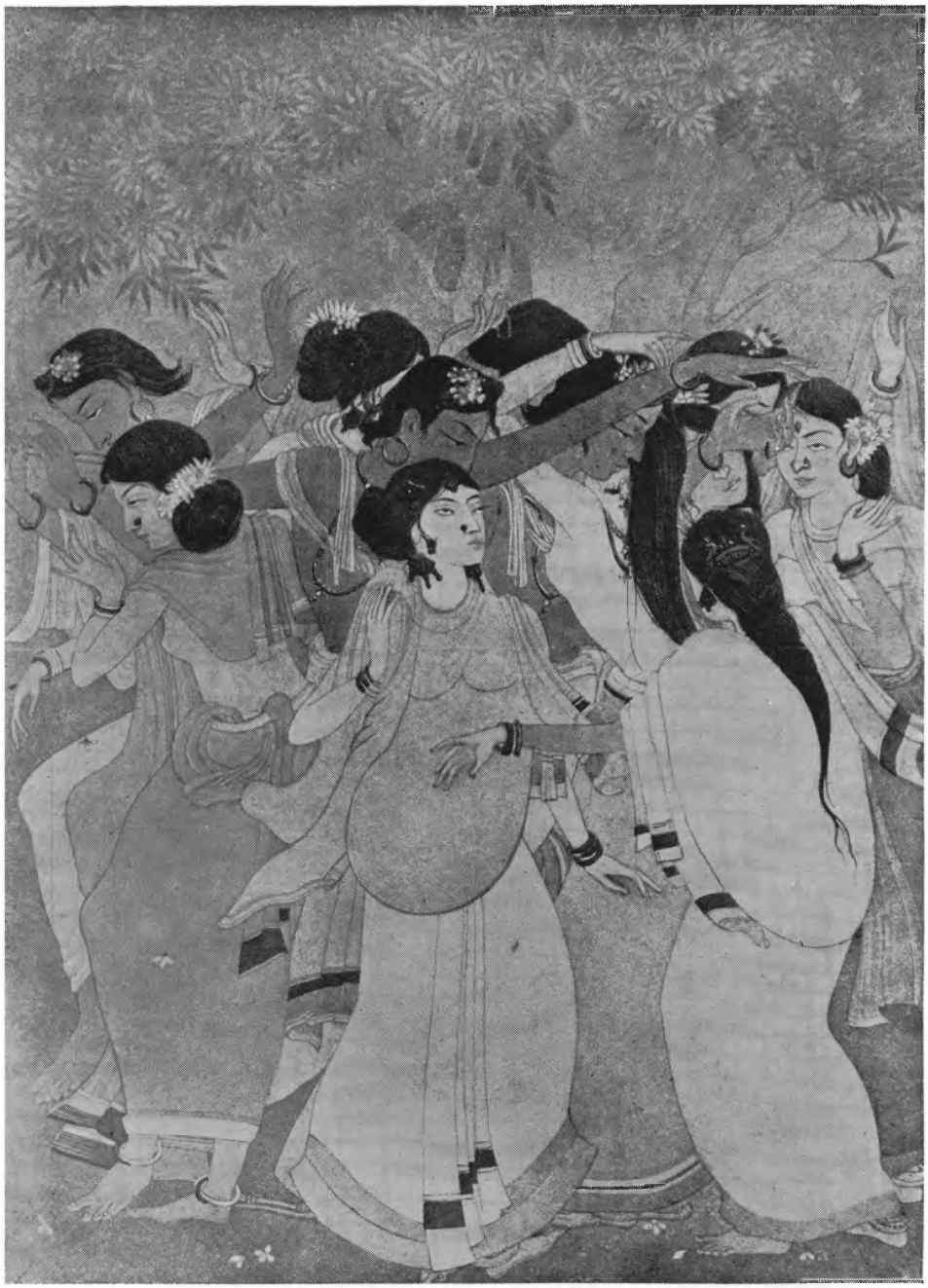

PLATE I.—RASA LILA KRISHNA DANCING WITH THE MAIDS

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY
ON
ART AND REALITY

By ERIC GILL

THE unity of the human race must be taken for granted. Differences between one person and another or between one race and another and between the people of one time and another are simply differences of emphasis. This being so, it is to be expected that all human beings and all races will pursue the same ends, and all differences of achievement are to be attributed not so much to differences of aim as to differences of temper and circumstance. It is the more important to grasp this fact with firmness when the subject of discussion is, as in the case of the arts, a thing of which the achievement has been so various and, as in the case of religion and philosophy, a thing of which the expression has been so apparently contradictory, and when, in addition, the subject is complicated by racial and geographical differences.

Now the aim of the human race, in whatever time or place, the end to which all activity is ultimately directed is the discovery and grasping of the real. However variously this aim may be described or pursued; however erroneous may be the conclusions of reason; however distasteful may be the artistic achievements of one people to a people of another

time or place; nevertheless Reality, what is real and not illusory, is what is sought by each and by all.

Now, we may accept as the real, either what is immediately apparent to our senses or, at the other end of the pole, confronted by the countless evidences of the invalidity of conclusions drawn from immediate sensory experience, we may refuse the name of reality to anything but those things of which we have immediate interior knowledge. At the one end is the ordinary, unthinking, and, as he is in Western society called, "practical" man (though it may be doubted whether a perfect example of him really exists), at the other are they who hold that mind is the only reality, and that the universe only exists for him who perceives it. In between is every sort of mixture and compromise. The typical materialist of Western commercial civilisation is confused by the dregs of other traditions; moreover, he takes even his religion of science for the most part on the authority of journalists and popular writers, and very little or not at all on the evidence of his senses. The idealist, on the other hand, is constantly entrapped by circumstances, which, even to himself, seem to demand at least a temporary or conditional assent to the notion of material reality. Urgencies of appetite and of physical pain drag him away from his detachment, and as in the beginning "Adam sinned when he fell from contemplation," so men of all times and places have, whether willingly or unwillingly, become entangled in the net of the senses.

But while the materialist compromises with

spiritual things, and the idealist compromises with material things, and some men refuse any compromise whatever, it remains clear that all men are concerned to discover the truth. The materialist's denial of the reality of spirit is an affirmation of his belief in the reality of matter, and the idealist's denial of the reality of material things, except as ideas in his own mind, is at least an affirmation of his belief in the reality of his ideas. We are all realists in this sense: that we all believe something is real and the world may be categorically divided into these three classes of men: those who believe in the reality of matter and the validity of sensory experience and who deny the reality of spirit, those who believe in the reality of spirit and deny the reality of matter, and those who believe matter and spirit are both real—that both have existence and matter is not an illusion imposed upon purely spiritual beings or, spirit an illusion suffered by beings who have no existence except such as is measurable in terms of time and space.

We are all realists; we are all moved by enthusiasm to discover and embrace what is real. And however lacking in philosophical exactitude our statement of the case may be, we may agree without misgiving that, however little effort they give to its dialectical exposition, all men desire to live and act in accordance with the truth and all men abhor the notion that there is no truth anywhere discoverable. We are all realists; but according to our notions of reality so will our works differ. Could there be a

world of men in which God, pure being, were universally believed to be the only reality, such a world of men would, without doubt, produce a different civilisation from that produced by a world of men, could there be such, who universally believed the evidences of the senses to be the only valid evidence and matter the only reality—matter having no being but becoming, a flux of measurable motion. I am not here saying that either world would be right or wrong; I am simply saying that different forms of life, different shapes of things would result according as one or the other notion of the truth were paramount. Nor am I here saying that the things resulting would in either case be better or worse; I am simply saying that they would be different and that the notion that men are automata whose acts and works do not reflect their thought is as unthinkable as it is historically without foundation.

And if a completely atheist civilisation, could such exist, would inevitably produce different works from a civilisation completely God-fearing, so every civilisation will produce works reflecting the bent of its intellectual enthusiasm. The spiritual enthusiasm of mediaeval Europe, no less than that of more ancient and more modern India, was reflected in its works, its temples, and its laws. If many churches were built it was undoubtedly because many churches were wanted. So great an expenditure of time and treasure could not conceivably have been made upon things considered unimportant. Whatever we may think of their religion or philosophy, we cannot

imagine that they would have done or made the same things if they had had different ideas about man's place and destiny. The fact that to-day in England we spend more time and treasure erecting buildings for the conduct of commerce and less in erecting churches does not prove that we have neither religion nor philosophy, but simply that our religion and philosophy are different. We seek reality as much as at any time, but we hold it to reside more certainly in material things, in measurable things, in things for which the senses are evidence, than in spiritual things, immeasurable things, things which cannot be proved by experiment. The buildings of commerce are just as much evidence of our state of mind as are the buildings of mediaeval Europe or India.

And what applies to buildings applies equally to all other things made by men. If we confine our attention here to the sphere commonly called art, that is to say, to the sphere of painting and sculpture, music and poetry, it is not because we deny the influence of religion and philosophy in any other spheres, but simply because in the sphere of art the human state of mind is more evident. In art works the human being is a mentality at work; in such works mentality predominates, is ruler. In other works, as, for example, in the making of bicycles or sewing-machines, mentality plays a subordinate part. Such machines are little more than the contrivances of an ingenious animal. The bicycle is no more ingenious than the dam of a beaver or the hive of a bee, and only more intelligent because it is

consciously contrived. In such works man is simply moved by the needs of his animal nature, and he makes such things simply by the use of his physical powers. Such are for the most part the things, the works, for which we have in modern Europe and America most enthusiasm. This does not show that we have no religion or philosophy, but simply that we hold no end to be so excellent or so attainable as material success, and, as many of our writers bear witness, we worship matter with the same emotion that, in other times and places, is aroused by the worship of God. Or shall we say that for us God is Power, but formerly they said God is Love.

We hold, then, that every person and every people is concerned to lay hold of reality and that all the works of men display this concern. We hold that different peoples and different times display different works because among such peoples and in such times different notions of reality have been pursued.

Now the phrase "notion of reality" is simply another way of saying Religion and Philosophy. To say, therefore, that the works of men reflect and are the product of their "notions of reality" is the same as saying that the works of men reflect and are the product of their religion and philosophy. Religion and philosophy are as necessary to the production of such monuments as the Forth Bridge or the Aqueduct at Nîmes as they are to the production of such monuments as the Cathedral of Chartres, the Pyramids of Egypt, or the Temples of Ajanta. But

it is not possible to have both kinds of things. You cannot serve two masters or two Gods.

You can have a civilisation which produces works of material power, and incidentally, as a kind of hothouse flowers, works of love, and the things called works of art. Such is the civilisation of twentieth-century Europe and America. Its most complete development will be found in Soviet Russia, and nowhere else is the doctrine that works of art reflect and are the product of religion and philosophy more clearly exemplified. The essence of religion is the affirmation of absolute values. In Russia the absolute value of the State is affirmed. The worship of the communal State is the religion of Russia. Italy, Germany, France, England, and the United States of America—each in its degree is following in the same direction. In all these countries the subordination of the individual and the family to the central administration is becoming absolute. In all these countries the value of material power is receiving more and more absolute affirmation. The philosophy of materialism is the preamble to this religion of power. The existence of the soul is more and more doubted. When it is at last completely denied, what will be left but the determination to gain the whole world? Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die.

On the other hand, you can have a civilisation which, whether consciously or not, produces, as its primary and most obvious product, works of love and incidentally and in a primitive, amateurish kind of way works of convenience and works of power—

e.g. a primitive sort of sanitation, transport by animal power, handlooms and tools such as workmen make for themselves. Such have been the civilisations of all peoples not ruled by men of commerce, of all civilisations informed by a philosophy and religion in which the absolute value of the spiritual is affirmed.

Good men are common in both kinds of civilisation, and in any compromise between the two. It is no part of my contention here that all materialists are wicked men. Nor am I here concerned to say whether a philosophy of materialism contains more or less of truth than one in which the reality of the spiritual is affirmed. It is not here a question of good or bad, of true or false. The whole point of this essay is to show that whatever men do or make their philosophy and religion are at the back of it, and to affirm that those who deny this are compelled in consequence to admit that the works of men are either the product of purely animal instinct (that the Forth Bridge and the Venus of Milo are no more than a sort of beaver's dams) or they are the product of simple caprice.

It is not that I am saying that the works of men, Hindu or Christian, are good because there is this or that philosophy and religion behind them. I am saying more than that. I am saying that it is because there is this or that philosophy and religion behind them that they are there at all—that it is to this or that philosophy and religion that such works owe their very existence, their very being.

Doubtless there are many actions that men do and even many things that men make, which may plausibly be claimed to be the simple product of animal instinct; for man is a kind of animal even if he be also a kind of spirit. His appetites for food and shelter continue to operate even when his destiny as child of God and inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven is forgotten or denied. He will fly from physical danger even when he will not pursue spiritual safety. He will endeavour to crush what hurts him—as a snake in the grass—even when he will not bestir himself to make things for his delight. Let those who will develop our knowledge of the animal side of men's doings. The psychologists, from McDougall to Freud, may be trusted to leave no avenue unexplored. Everything that can be said for man as animal will be said sooner or later by them. There is no need for anything to be said here.

We take here the ground that, whether or no first in time or place, the most important motives for man's activity in doing or making are neither animal instincts nor caprice. We hold that love is more important and not merely prettier than instinct. Upon such a ground and from such a place of vantage we survey the works of men. We see all things as evidence of love. We make what we love—in accordance with our loves so we make. A pair of scissors, no less than a cathedral or a symphony, is evidence of what we hold good, and therefore lovely, and owes its being to love.

And this is no high-flown fancy incompatible with

hard sense. To cut something, whether it be the cloth of which we would make a coat, or only a thread of cotton, is to do something we hold to be good, and if good therefore Godly, and if Godly therefore lovely. The materialist philosopher sees all things in terms of physical force; for him mathematical laws are the ultimate laws and he seeks to bring into his mesh the whole world of movement and to explain it mathematically. Those, on the other hand, who from the beginning saw all things in God, saw all things in terms of love, and they seek to recapture from the materialist wider and wider and deeper and deeper spheres. I say recapture, for they do but regain what formerly they had. This great tide of materialist philosophy, with its resulting affirmation of the absolute good of material power and its accompanying commercialism and industrialism, mass production and financial rule, is a merely mushroom growth on the face of the earth, and the wide vista opened by the telescope, the depths probed by the microscope, both alike disclose at last nothing but the blank walls enclosing a finite universe. Beyond is nothing—nothing discoverable by experiment, nothing measurable, nothing that the materialist can know.

Nevertheless, materialism is as much a philosophy and a religion as Christianity or Hinduism—a philosophy without metaphysic, a religion without the infinite (for the mathematician infinity is a mathematical trick). But it is a religion, and the productions of post-Reformation Europe are as much

religious in their nature as the works of the Middle Ages, or those of Asia.

Insistence on this fact is necessary if we are to understand the works of either East or West, of the present or of the past. And, strange as it may appear at a time when artists profess complete indifference to religion and philosophy, Catholics are the best equipped to gain such understanding, for by the very nature of their religion and philosophy they are able to grasp both extremes. Unlike the Western materialists, "the Church proceeds confidently in her doctrine of God." Unlike the Hindu or the Buddhist, she holds that "matter and spirit are both real and both good." The Catholic can understand and approve the enthusiasm of the materialist for material good and goods, and that of the mystic for spiritual reality and the immersion of the individual soul in the being of God. The supremacy of matter over spirit or of spirit over matter is for the materialist or the idealist only achieved by the denial of the reality of one or the other. For the Catholic, no less religious and no less philosophic than either, the dominance of the spiritual over the material, of mind over matter, is an article of faith, but matter is not, therefore, either evil or an illusion. Neither the errors of the Manichaeans and the Puritans nor those of Bishop Berkeley hold him. The whole history of the Catholic Church is witness to her struggles against this greatest temptation of thinking man—the temptation to the belief that the material life is all or that it is nothing. She emerges from the

struggle the arbiter of East and West because she refuses the denials of either.

And the history of Catholic Art shows very clearly the Church's triumphant combination of the extremes. Buildings such as the Church of the Holy Wisdom at Constantinople, and the whole circle of mediaeval cathedrals and abbey churches, are as daring in their acceptance of material exigences as they are venerable on account of their spiritual sensibility. The cathedral church of Chartres or the parish church of St. Pierre in the same city may be viewed by the engineer or the sculptor with equal delight. It is true that the temples of India are great architectural monuments, and it is true that the steel bridges of Europe and America are objects of great beauty. Nevertheless, the temples are witnesses chiefly to the spiritual enthusiasm of contemplatives, and the bridges to the material enthusiasm of men of action. Catholicism gave scope to both enthusiasms.

We are not here concerned to put forward the Roman Catholic religion or the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas as the way, the truth, or the life. Here our business is to show that some philosophy, some religion, is behind all human works and is their primary instigation. Without some philosophy, some religion, nothing is done, nothing made, because nobody knows what to do or what to make, nobody knows what is good or what is bad. It has been said that the Church exists in order that words may have a meaning; it is also true that without philosophy and religion there is no meaning in human action.

Now it is held by many, especially, of course, by sceptical minds, that whether or no this or that philosophy or religion is or has been the ruling and effective motive in the making of human works, nevertheless such philosophy and religion are of no importance in relation to the works themselves: that, whether the works be good or bad, it is nothing to do with either the religion or philosophy prevalent among the workers. It is held that there is an aesthetic sense which is independent of good or bad, true or false. "A profound sense of form" is said to account for the goodness of the works of mediaeval builders and sculptors. The paintings of Ajanta and the glass of Chartres owe nothing to the ideas prevailing with their makers except their negligible and unintelligible subject-matter. "A profound sense of form!" And what is profound, what sensible, what formal? The phrase itself is meaningless without religion, without philosophy to gauge height and depth, real and unreal, the seen and the unseen. To such critics the subject is nothing; to the workman, the artist, the subject is all in all. Unless he know what he is making he cannot make anything. Whether it be a church or only a toothpick he must know what it is; he must have it in his mind before he can begin, before he can even choose his material or lay his hand on a tool. And what a thing *is*, what things *are*, and, inevitably, whether they are good or bad, worth making or not, these questions bring him without fail to the necessity of making philosophical and religious decisions. We may accept the

conclusions of others; it may, indeed, be better that we should do so—provided "we know in whom we believe"—but conclusions must be accepted or there can be no beginning. So far from it being true that religion and philosophy have no concern for the artist or he for them, it is only when a religion and philosophy have become the unifying principle of a nation that any great works of art, whether steel bridges or stone shrines, are possible, and the decay of human art follows immediately upon the weakening of men's grasp upon the motives of action. The great art works of twentieth-century Europe are the product of the great materialist erection of post-Reformation, post-Renaissance thought. Without that thought and its enthusiastic acceptance by widespread populations there could be none of those great monuments of engineering and science which, while we may deplore the servile labour of the millions of workmen employed in their making, we unite to admire because in themselves they are admirable. Similarly the pyramids of Egypt could not have existed but for the theocracy of the ancient Egyptians, and, while we profess to loathe their system of slave-labour, we rightly admire the pyramids because they are in themselves admirable monuments. So it is with the sculptures of India and Easter Island. So it is with the plain-chant of the Roman Church and the building achievements of the European Middle Age. So indeed it is with wireless telegraphy and the telephone; and all these things are the product of human activity directed,

inspired, controlled, and only made possible by the religion and philosophy of their makers. And the crowning example will be post-Revolution Russia. It remains to be seen in what ways the product will be different from previous human achievements, but one thing is certain: it will be the direct expression of the religious idea and of the philosophy which is the unifying principle, the soul of the Russian Revolution.

Now there are many who say that they like the sculptures of Sanchi, but know nothing of Indian philosophy—that they like the windows of Chartres, but loathe the Catholic religion. They say that they know a good Chinese ivory when they see one, but care nothing for the ideas of Chinamen. They say that they like Westminster Abbey better than the Albert Memorial, but that they are very sure that the ideas of Prince Albert were in every way more enlightened than those of Edward the Third. Therefore, they hold, it is clear that ideas and works have little to do with one another. Thus they come to the conclusion that "a profound sense of form" is all that is required, and that the thing called "form" is independent of intellectual or religious content. This conclusion, however, seems to beg the question, for if a thing has a certain form (and a material thing must have some form) the form must be the right form or the wrong, a good form or a bad, and when we say that a certain thing has right or good form we can only mean that it has the form proper to it if it really is what it purports to be. A profound

sense of form means, therefore, a profound sense of what is right form, and that means a profound sense of what form a certain thing, being what it is, ought to have. But to know what form a thing ought to have involves the knowledge of what the thing that is to be made really is, and that involves knowledge of its significance and purpose, the place where it is to go, and the material of which it is to be made. But knowledge of the significance and purpose of things is, for man, i.e. a rational and not merely animal being, conditioned by general as well as particular considerations. And it is precisely a profound sense of these general considerations, as well as of the particulars, which is necessary to the production of any good and right work.

The enlightenment of our time is with regard to the things of interest to a shop-keeping civilisation whose philosophy is materialism. The religion of commercial England finds its profoundest expression in its great works of engineering and applied science. Such a monument as the memorial to Prince Albert in Hyde Park is simply a mistake—a thing the nineteenth century was foolish to attempt. The Albert Bridge across the Thames at Chelsea is that prince's better memorial. On the other hand, the enlightenment of the thirteenth century in Europe, or of the fifth century before Christ in India, was with regard to the things of interest to men among whom commerce was little developed and even less venerated. We have princes of commerce; they had princes of states. We have soap and marmalade

kings; they had kings of men. They believed in a future life for which this life was a preparation—a life described in terms of love: as, for instance, that heaven consists in the marriage of the soul with God, that eternal bliss consists in the union of the lover and the beloved. We believe that this life is all.

The religion and philosophy of mediaeval Europe or India find their profoundest expression therefore in quite different works from ours. We do wrong to compare the Albert Memorial with Westminster Abbey, or the Houses of Parliament with the tope of Sanchi. We do wrong because we do ourselves an injustice. Imitation Gothic architecture is a monument to our sentimental regard for our ancient past and does not represent the religion and philosophy which inspire our civilisation. But, for example, the bridge across the St. Laurence at Quebec (an improved version of the bridge across the Firth of Forth) will stand comparison with any Gothic cathedral or Eastern temple. And in making such a comparison the important, the fundamental, part borne by religion and philosophy in the conception and execution of human works becomes evident. Would such a thing as the Quebec bridge have been built at any other time than ours or under the inspiration and direction of any other enthusiasms? Could the church at Chartres have come out of any other womb than that of the Catholic religion? But there is Catholicism to-day and there were moneylenders in the eleventh century. Yes, but Catholicism is as powerless to-day as moneylenders

were despised then. Catholicism is powerless now because it commands nothing but its altars and its confessionals. Financiers were powerless then because they commanded nothing but their gold and went about in danger of their skins. These things were all changed because religion and philosophy were changed. Among the early Christians the desire of money was held to be the root of all evil; to-day, that desire is instilled into every schoolboy. This may be right or wrong, but it cannot be called the same. And as religion and philosophy lose their hold on men's minds, so the works done under their inspiration become decadent—fanciful, vulgar, pretty, elegant, extravagant, grandiose—until a new religion and a new philosophy enthrall us and a new enthusiasm inspires new works.

These things being so, the whole business of modern "art" education is clearly foolishness, and a stumbling-block to artists. Painting and sculpture, music and letters are in our time necessarily idiosyncratic. The works of men which we call works of "art" are necessarily merely "self-expression." Our age expresses itself best in great communal works of mechanical skill. These are our works of art. The factory is our art-school. Painting and sculptures are for us mere ornaments, mere fal-lals suitable for museums. There is no public place for them. They mean nothing to anybody but their makers and a coterie of aesthetes.

And strange as it may seem, painters and sculptors were not very great dukes even in mediaeval Europe

or India. The great works of those ages also were great communal efforts. There was no such thing as a school specially devoted to the learning of a thing called art. Buildings and workshops were their art-schools, and the ideas to be expressed, made manifest in material, were not specially those of the workmen but, as to-day in the case of science and mechanics, of whole populations. Individual prowess was doubtless applauded, but it was seen in right perspective—a thing of small importance compared with the right-thinking of the community. A mediaeval cathedral, like the Quebec bridge or a common microscope, expresses the genius of a people.

And if our steel engineering may stand comparison with mediaeval stone building, inasmuch as both are authentic expressions of the peoples who made them, and show the differences of religion and philosophy in our age as compared with another, so may the works of mediaeval Europe be compared with those of the Hindus and Buddhists. But in this case what is chiefly notable is similarity not difference. Hindu and mediaeval images are the same in *kind*. Both are made according to hieratic canon, both are devoid of idiosyncrasy. Both are negligent of anatomical verisimilitude. Both are of public rather than private significance. Both are concerned with the expression of conceptions of general importance and widespread belief and not with personal and particular likings. "Life-like" portraiture is rare (the Great Seal of Henry IV is