

Full Canvases, Empty Palettes

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (May 2021)



Le voyageur égaré, Jean Dubuffet, 1950

It is more blessed to give than to receive, perhaps, but it is also necessary to know how to receive with a good grace, even from people who can ill-afford to give anything. Not to accept gifts (I am not talking of bribes, which I have never been important enough to be offered) is a means of humiliating or asserting superiority over the person who wants to give them.

But recently I had little choice but to accept with a good grace a gift sent me by post of two books. They had been sent by I knew not who, and whom I therefore could not thank

as a well-brought-up person should thank those who send him gifts. How well I remember being more or less forced by my mother into writing thank you letters to my aunts and uncles who sent me ten shillings for my birthday in a birthday card. I am sorry to have to report that, had she not done so, I doubt—in fact, I am sure—that I would not have done so. Gratitude, or at least the expression of gratitude, has to be taught, and is a learned social virtue like many another. It is not an instinct.

The two books were about African fabrics, copiously and beautifully illustrated. I am not sure why the donor chose them for me (and my wife), but it was a good choice because I had not given much attention to the subject before. Anything that causes you to examine an aspect of the world more closely, rather than take it for granted, even at my comparatively late stage in life, is enriching and worthwhile.

Many of the textiles were of great beauty, and their variety was astonishing. But I appreciated this only when they were held up individually for my attention in the pages of these books so that I would look at them more closely. Otherwise, I would hardly have noticed them, and it is due to the wisdom of collectors that these books were possible. The urge to collect is often derided as being, in a psychoanalytic term that I hesitate to use *anally retentive*, but in fact collection is a way of enlarging the mind, not only of the collector but of those who look at collections. One has only to think of a world without collections to realise how mentally impoverished we should be without them, even if we never look at the vast majority of them.

But to return to African fabrics. They seemed to me all of a good taste, though of course I recognise that the authors or compilers of the books had obviously chosen attractive examples for their illustrations. And yet I doubt that the impression that they gave was altogether a misleading one; I noticed during the era of my travels in Africa that

traditional housing, made of locally-gathered and transformed materials, was invariably tasteful as to shape, disposition in relation to disposition to other dwellings, and in colour. It is true, of course, that local materials were probably of subdued or pastel shades in the first place, such that garishness was not easy to achieve; but bad taste is protean and can always be put into practice with a little effort. Even the simple home-made tools of the villages were of graceful shape.

In other words, Mankind has instinctive good taste which has to be destroyed by advancing, or advanced, material civilisation. I do not want to sound like Rousseau, who thought that all Man's moral failings arose from civilised society, or alternatively like those development economists who ask not where wealth, but where poverty, comes from, as if Man were born rich and poverty were only dissipation of the expropriation of it by others. But in the matter of aesthetic awareness, there is definitely something destructive of it in our current material civilisation. No sooner does an African peasant migrate to a town or city, than kitsch becomes his preference.

In a strange way, this is paralleled—though not, of course, exactly—in the art world. I find that what is known as *art brut*, raw, naïve or outsider art, is often very much more interesting, with greater aesthetic appeal, awareness and ability, than the products of the graduates of our art schools. I do not claim for *art brut* that it is the superior of, say, Netherlandish or Italian art of the fifteenth century, that would be absurd; but it is often greatly more worth looking at than much of what now passes for high art that commands astronomical prices.

It was in Heidelberg, in Germany, that *art brut* crossed my radar screen, as it were. The city is home to the Prinzhorn Collection, named after the psychiatrist who formed it. Dr Prinzhorn was one of the first people to take the art

produced by the mad seriously. He died in 1933, and though he was a member of the Nazi Party, I like to think that, had he survived, he would have resisted the Party's programme to eliminate the inmates of psychiatric hospitals as 'useless eaters' and 'life unworthy of life.' After all, he had gone to the trouble of collecting and preserving the artistic expression of his patients, which might now seem an obvious thing to have done but was by no means obvious in his time. And the fact is that many of his patients exhibited artistic ability and a strong aesthetic sense. Some, it is true, had had artistic training before they were admitted to the asylum, but by no means all; and they too often exhibited an almost exquisite sense of design and colour that was awakened, presumably, either by their madness or the expanses of free time (to put it optimistically) that asylum life gave them. Their working medium, such as pastel on lavatory paper, was often strange and innovative, but they were not being deliberately *avant garde* in an attempt to shock the complacent bourgeoisie; they were being strictly pragmatic and using whatever came to hand. The precise fate of many of the mad artists of the Prinzhorn Collection is unknown, but mostly they died in the murderous programme to rid Germany of its chronic psychiatric patients.

I think there was some kind of unifying characteristic in their art which made it recognisably different from other types of art. It was mainly small-scale, and I suspect not only because materials for large scale work was not available to them; there was often a microscopic intensity to their productions, as well as an obsessive repetitiousness. But for all that, the overall design was not lost and was almost always pleasing on the eye.

One can see that same microscopic obsessiveness in the work of one of the most famous of mad artists, Richard Dadd. He, of course, was a professional artist before he became psychotic and killed his father, spending the rest of his days

first in Bedlam and then in Broadmoor, the newly-opened prison-hospital for the criminally insane. The administration must have been comparatively enlightened, for it allowed Dadd the opportunity and materials to produce his mad masterpieces, among them *the Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, so minutely detailed that it took him ten years to complete it though it was slightly less than four square feet in size. Dadd was a very accomplished watercolourist before he went mad during a trip to the Middle East. It was in Egypt that he began to show signs of madness, and I wonder whether he might have smoked a little too much hashish while he was there. He had an undoubted familial tendency to madness and hashish, at the time smoked in Egypt as alcohol was drunk in Europe, might have tipped him over the edge.

In Paris, there is an exhibition hall, the *Halle St Pierre*, in which—in those days far-off when exhibitions were still held, I can hardly remember what they were like—there were exhibitions devoted to *art brut* from around the world, from Serbia to Japan and the Americas. A few of the exhibiting artists, but not many, had had formal training in art, which seemed to me to be cheating, rather; these artists had adopted the manner of naïve artists, but you can't *choose* to be naïve. I am reminded of photographers who tell their subjects to be natural. The effort to be natural destroys all spontaneity, of course, and makes you feel awkward at once; you cannot be natural *deliberately*.

Be that as it may, the naïve artists seem to me often to display not only a superior sense of form, design and colour to that of professional artists as instantiated by the current-day laureates of, say, the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris* (which in all conscience is not very difficult), but their subject matter is always more interesting. Their draughtsmanship may not be first-rate, but at least they seem to be trying to be draughtsmen. The same cannot be said of the students of the *Beaux-arts*, who are

unaware of the need and seem to me scarcely to rise above the kindergarten level of technical accomplishment, no doubt for deliberate lack of tuition. This problem is not confined to the *Beaux-arts*, of course: it is a problem of art education throughout the west. Whether the situation is recoverable I cannot say: but when skills have been lost for two or three generations, it seems to me likely that they could only be recovered by recapitulating the history of art slowly and painfully. History, said Marx, is first tragedy, then farce. With art, it is the other way round; first farce, then tragedy.

The *art brut* exhibited at the *Halle St Pierre* seems to me to have an urgency and sincerity entirely lacking in the prize productions of the students of the *Beaux-arts*, which are not only technically incompetent but lack sincerity as to their subject matter. Writing about their work, the students claim that 'I'm interested in...', and then list something like quantum mechanics or the relationship between representation and witchcraft. It is obvious to me that these students want to be artists and to express themselves in public more than they have anything to communicate. It is the social role of artists that they seek, not art. With the naïve artist, it is quite otherwise. They have something to express, arising from an inner compulsion, which is expressible only through art.

I am far from supposing that sincerity or inner compulsion is a sufficient condition for the production of worthwhile art, but falsity surely vitiates most of what it touches. A man may be as sincere as you like, burningly sincere in fact, but if he lacks artistic ability, taste or sensibility, what he produces will be of little value.

There is the opposite problem, of course, that is to say of technical accomplishment for its own sake, or rather for the sake of the ambition of the artist, such technical accomplishment being unlikely to be achieved without ambition. The technical mastery of a painter like Alma-Tadema, for

example, who lacked taste or true subject matter, appals rather than impresses.

Of the three desiderata in an artist, namely taste, accomplishment and something urgent to communicate, the naïve artists often have two or, rather, two and a half. But we have raised up generations of artists who lack all three and who are, in effect, publicists playing at being artists rather than real artists; it is the social role that they crave. If they have an inner compulsion, it is to play that role.

But a supply cannot persist in the absence of a demand, and we have therefore to ask why it is that these artist-publicists are able to survive and, in some cases, to thrive mightily.

In part it is because of the speculative nature of the art market. Works of new artists, like shares in companies brought to the stock exchange, are bought in the hope of a return on investment, and the small coterie of investors at the highest level have an interest in preventing a collapse in prices in general. Artistic merit doesn't come into it.

In part, also, it is because there has been a collapse in taste and powers of discrimination. We are like the Africans who, in moving from traditional villages to shanty towns, lose their sense of form, design and colour, and gravitate to the meretricious.

[Table of Contents](#)

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)