28 October 1953

“True art is a whole and an ensemble; it is one and of one piece with life. You see something of this intimate wholeness in ancient Greece and ancient Egypt; for there pictures and statues and all objects of art were made and arranged as part of the architectural plan of a building, each detail a portion of the whole. It is like that in Japan, or at least it was so till the other day before the invasion of a utilitarian and practical modernism. A Japanese house is a wonderful artistic whole; always the right thing is there in the right place, nothing wrongly set, nothing too much, nothing too little. Everything is just as it needed to be, and the house itself blends marvellously with the surrounding nature. In India, too, painting and sculpture and architecture were one integral beauty, one single movement of adoration of the Divine.”

Questions and Answers 1929–1931 (28 July 1929)

Mother, I did not understand what you have said: “True art is a whole and an ensemble; it is one and of one piece with life.”

What I have said? Nothing else but that true art is the expression of beauty in the material world; and in a world entirely changed spiritually, that is to say, one expressing completely the divine reality, art must act as a revealer and teacher of this divine beauty in life; that is to say, an artist should be capable of entering into communion with the Divine and of receiving inspiration about what form or forms ought to be used to express the divine beauty in matter. And thus, if it does that, art can be a means of realisation of beauty, and at the same time a teacher of what beauty ought to be, that is, art should be an element in the
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education of men’s taste, of young and old, and it is the teaching of true beauty, that is, the essential beauty which expresses the divine truth. This is the raison d’être of art. Now, between this and what is done there is a great difference, but this is the true raison d’être of art.

Have you understood? A little!

*Why are today’s painters not so good as those of the days of Leonardo da Vinci?*

Because human evolution goes in spirals. I have explained this. I said that art had become an altogether mercenary affair, obscure and ignorant, from the beginning of the last century till its middle. It had become something very commercial and quite remote from the true sense of art. And so, naturally, the artistic spirit does not come! It followed bad forms, yet it tried to manifest to counteract the degradation of taste which prevailed. But naturally, as with every movement of Nature in man, some having gone to one extreme, others went to the other extreme; and as these made a sort of servile copy of life — not even that, in those days it was called “a photographic view” of things, but now one can no longer say that, for photography has progressed so much that it would be doing it an injustice to say this, wouldn’t it? Photography has become artistic; so a picture cannot be criticised by calling it photographic; nor can one call it “realistic” any longer, for there is a realistic painting which is not at all like that — but it was conventional, artificial and without any true life, so the reaction was to the very opposite, and naturally to another absurdity: “art” was no longer to express physical life but mental life or vital life. And so came all the schools, like the Cubists and others, who created from their head. But in art it is not the head that dominates, it is the feeling for beauty. And they produced absurd and ridiculous and

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1 See Questions and Answers 1929–1931 (28 July 1929).
frightful things. Now they have gone farther still, but that, that
is due to the wars — with every war there descends upon earth
a world in decomposition which produces a sort of chaos. And
some, of course, find all this very beautiful and admire it very
much.

I understand what they want to do, I understand it very
well, but I cannot say that I find they do it well. All I can say is
that they are trying.

But it is perhaps (with all its horror, from a certain point
of view), it is perhaps better than what was produced in that
age of extreme and practical philistinism: the Victorian age or
in France the Second Empire. So, one starts from a point where
there was a harmony and describes a curve, and with this curve
one goes completely out of this harmony and may enter into
a total darkness; and then one climbs up, and when one finds
oneself in line with the old realisation of art, one becomes aware
of the truth there was in this realisation, but with the necessity of
expressing something more complete and more conscious. But
in describing the circle one forgets that art is the expression of
forms and one tries to express ideas and feelings with a mini-
mum of forms. That gives what we have, what you may see (I
believe we have reproductions of the most modern painters in
the University Library). But if one goes a little farther still, this
idea and these feelings they wish to express and express very
clumsily — if one returns to the same point of the spiral (only a
little higher), one will discover that it is the embryo of a new art
which will be an art of beauty and will express not only material
life but will also try to express its soul.

Anyway, we have not yet come to that, but let us hope we
shall reach there soon. So that's all.

*Why does evolution go in spirals instead of being a
constant progress?*

It is a constant progress. But if you made it in a straight line,
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you would cover only a single part — the world is a globe, it is not a line.

If it were a cylinder!

Even for a cylinder, if you drew only one line, one part of the cylinder would escape you altogether. This movement in a spiral is precisely to try and make everything enter this phenomenon of evolution — so that not only one thing may advance whilst the others remain behind. And so, according to the centre where the progress is concentrated, one seems to move away from one thing and enter into another. But in the long run, when one evolves consciously, one does not forget one thing in order to do another. What is bad at present is forgetfulness; it is that when following a certain activity for a realisation, one forgets all the others or they go into the background, they have no longer any intensity. But this is a human shortcoming which can be corrected — it ought to be corrected.

Do all progress in a spiral, and all together or separately?

I fear it is not very harmonious, for the world seems to me rather chaotic! If indeed the march were totally organised, it would be a harmonious development, and if one could see where one is going — having the line of what has been done, one could prolong these lines and see what would come. But for the moment this is open only to an elite. And the mass follows the movement, and all the movements are not homogeneous and simultaneous — certain things are slower to put into line and movement than others. So, even a little difference like this suffices for it to create an immense difference in the movement.

There is even a considerable number of spirals intersecting and giving the impression of contradiction. If one could follow in its totality the movement of universal progress, one would see that there is such a great number of spirals which intersect, that
finally one does not know at all whether one is advancing or going back. For, at the same moment some things are going up and others falling back into the darkness, and all these are not absolutely independent of one another. There is a kind of coordination, so that instead of imagining a spiral like that, we should have to think of spherical spirals. If this could be described, all these spirals taken together would form an immense globe. And it is at the intersection of these spirals that there are moments of progress. But before the progress is coherent, total, there must be an inner organisation of life, different from that of Nature, arranged in accordance with a plan. For Nature — her plan is only made with an aspiration, a decision and a goal. And the road seems quite fantastic, following the impulses of every minute — trials, set-backs, contradictions, progress and demolition of what has already been done; and it is such a chaos that one can understand nothing there. She has the air of somebody doing things impulsively — giving out certain impulses and destroying them, beginning others again, and going on and on like that. She makes and unmakes, she remakes and again demolishes, she mixes, destroys, constructs and all this at the same time. It is incomprehensible. And yet, she evidently has a plan, and herself goes towards a certain goal which is very clear to her but quite veiled to human consciousness.... It is very interesting. If one could construct something like that, it would give an idea: a globe made of intersecting spirals of different colours, and each representing one aspect of Nature’s creation. And these aspects are made to complete one another — but so far they are rather in competition than collaboration, and it seems she is always obliged to destroy something in order to make another, which makes for a terrible wastage, and a still greater disorder. But if all this were seen in its totality, it would be extremely interesting. For it is an extremely complex criss-crossing, in all possible directions, of a spiralling ascent.

Now, for your question, there could be another answer. What I have said just now is also exactly the same for art, it
also follows an evolution and at a certain moment seems to drift away from its goal and at others it draws close to a greater height. But there is something else, that is a social point of view: there is a period, like the Age of Louis XIV for example, in which what predominated was the sense of artistic creation, and this sense seems to have given a certain perception of beauty at that moment; but afterwards social evolution brought in other needs and other ideas, and now, for more than a century it is commercialism which is uppermost in the world, and there is nothing more in contradiction with art than commerce. For it is precisely the vulgarisation of something which ought to be exceptional. It is putting within everybody’s range something which could be understood only by an élite. And as we are in an age of mechanisation and commercialism, it is a time altogether uncongenial for a blossoming of art. And probably this is why art, not finding the conditions necessary for its full flowering, tries to seek another outlet and enters the mental and vital field for its expression. That is the reason. When the time comes to shake off, so to say, to reject this mercantilism and to wake up to a more beautiful reality, then art too will be reborn in a greater consciousness of harmony.

**Is self-complacency an obstacle to art?**

Yes, it is even an obstacle to intelligence. Fatuity is one of the greatest of human stupidities. There is a very great difference between having faith in what can be done, the will to realise it, the certitude of the possibilities open in creation (and also the certitude that these possibilities will be realised), and self-complacency; these are two things which turn their backs completely on each other. To be convinced that nothing is impossible if one puts in the time, energy, will, trust, sincerity and all else, is very essential, but to be self-satisfied in any way whatever is always, without exception, a stupidity. And this is one of the things that takes you farthest away from the divine realisation,
for it makes you foolish. And it is at the same time one of
the things most contrary to the goodwill of Nature, for Nature
laughs at you immediately. You become an object of ridicule at
once. For, in truth, there is no human being who is something
by himself. He is only a possibility created by the Divine and
one which can be developed only by the Divine, which exists
only by the Divine, and which should live only for the Divine.
And so, in this I do not see any place for self-complacency;
for, as we are nothing in ourselves but what the Divine makes
of us, and as we can do nothing by ourselves except what the
Divine wants to do through us, I don’t see what satisfaction
one can have in that. One can only have the feeling of one’s
perfect powerlessness. Only, what is very bad is to have this the
wrong side out — for there is always a wrong side and a right to
every state of consciousness — and, fundamentally, it is the same
vanity which makes you say: “I can do nothing, I am good for
nothing, I am incapable of doing anything whatsoever”; that,
that is the wrong side of “I can, I am great, I have all sorts of
powers in me.” It is the same thing. One is the shadow and the
other the light, but they are exactly alike: one is no better than
the other. And if really one were aware of being nothing at all,
one would not bother to know what one is like. That would
already be something. But truly, sincerely, I tell you, and I have a
sufficiently long experience of life, I know nothing so grotesque
as people who are satisfied with themselves. It is truly ridiculous.
They make themselves utterly ridiculous. There are people like
that; some of them came to see Sri Aurobindo telling him all that
they were capable of, all that they had done and all they could
do, all that they had realised — and so Sri Aurobindo looked at
them very seriously and replied: “Oh! you are too perfect to be
here. It would be better for you to go away.”

“Music too is an essentially spiritual art and has al-
ways been associated with religious feeling and an inner
life. But, here too, we have turned it into something
independent and self-sufficient, a mushroom art, such as is operatic music. Most of the artistic productions we come across are of this kind and at best interesting from the point of view of technique. I do not say that even operatic music cannot be used as a medium of a higher art expression; for whatever the form, it can be made to serve a deeper purpose. All depends on the thing itself, on how it is used, on what is behind it. There is nothing that cannot be used for the Divine purpose — just as anything can pretend to be the Divine and yet be of the mushroom species."

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What do you mean by “mushroom species”?

Don’t you know what a mushroom is? how mushrooms grow? Mushrooms spring up anywhere and seem not to belong to any cultivation. The idea is of a kind of spontaneous growth which has no roots in the totality of creation. These are things which do not belong to a whole, which are as though extraneous. Instead of mushrooms I could have said parasites on trees. You know there are parasites on trees, like the mistletoe on the oak; here too I have seen them on certain trees; I have seen plants grow clinging to the tree, plants which lived on the life of the tree, which did not have their own separate life, their own roots, which did not take their food directly from the soil; they clung to another plant, as though they made use of others’ work. The others work to obtain the food and these cling upon them and live by it. Really, how parasites live on animals!

I don’t know, I thought I went into great detail. But I have said enough about it for those who know.... In the old days, I mean in the artistic ages, as for instance in Greece or even during the Italian renaissance (but much more in Greece and Egypt), buildings were made for public utility. Mostly too, in Greece and Egypt, a kind of sanctuary was built to house their
gods. Well, what they tried to do was something total, beautiful in itself, complete. And in that they used architecture, that is to say, the sense of harmony of lines, and sculpture to add to architecture the detail of expression, and painting to complete this expression, but all this was held in a coordinated unity which was the created monument. The sculpture formed a part of the building, the painting was a part of the building. These were not things apart, just put there one knew not why — they belonged to the general plan. And so, when these people made a temple, for example, it was a whole wherein were found almost all the manifestations of art, united in a single will to express the beauty they wished to express, that is, a garment for the god they wished to adore. All the beautiful periods of art were of this kind. But precisely, these days, though not quite recently — at the end of the last century, art became commercial, mercenary, and pictures were made to be sold; they were painted on canvas, a frame was put and then, without any definite reason, a picture was put here or another there, or else some sculpture was made representing one thing or another, and it was put no matter where. It had nothing to do with the house in which it was placed. It did not fit in. Things could be beautiful in themselves but they had no meaning. It was not a whole having cohesion and attempting to express something: it was an exhibition of talent, cleverness, the ability to make a picture or a statue. So too the architecture of those days, it had no precise meaning. One did not build with the idea of expressing the force one wanted to incarnate in that building; the architecture was not the expression of an aspiration or of something that uplifts your spirit or the expression of the magnificence of the godhead one wanted to house. They were nothing else but mushrooms. They put up a house here, a house there, made this and that, pictures, statues, objects of all kinds. So, on entering a house one saw, as I have just told you, a bit of sculpture here, a bit of painting there, show-cases with a heap of bizarre objects having no connection with one another. And wherefore all this? To make a sort of exhibition, a show
of art-objects which had nothing to do with art and beauty! But that — one must understand the deep meaning of art to feel to what an extent this was shocking. Otherwise, when one is accustomed to it, when one has lived in that period and that milieu, it seems quite natural — but it is not natural. It is a commercial deformation.

There is only one justification, that is to make it a means of education. Then it becomes a museum. If you make a museum, it is a historical sampling of all that has been done. It serves to give you a historical knowledge of things. But a museum is not something beautiful in itself, far from it! For an artist it is something quite shocking. From the point of view of education it is very good, for specimens of all kinds of things have been collected there in a single place; and in this way you may learn, acquire erudition. But from the point of view of beauty, it is frightful.

And so there was an attempt, later, to return (for instance, at the beginning of this century — I am speaking of the first years of this century) an attempt to create what was called “decorative art”, that is, to try to get back to a vision of the ensemble and to make, when arranging a house, a coordinated whole in which things were in a certain place because they were meant to be there, and where every object had not only its raison d’être but its exact place and could not be displaced. An ensemble was created, a whole. So that was already a little better. They were trying.

Here (in India), it is altogether different, for there is a tradition of art which has remained, the whole country is full of things which were made at a fine moment of the artistic history of the country. One lives in its midst. One has hardly undergone the after-effects of what happened in the rest of the world, above all in Europe. Only those parts of India which are a little too anglicised have lost the sense of beauty. There are certain schools in Bombay, schools of artists, which are frightful. And then, there was that attempt of the Calcutta School to revive Indian art, but that was only on a very small scale. From the point of view of
art what you have most within your reach are the old creations, the old temples, old pictures. All that was very good. And that had been made to express a faith. And it was done precisely with a sense of the whole, not in disorder.

You have followed very little of this movement of art I am speaking about, which is related to European civilisation, it has not been felt much here — just a little but not deeply. Here, the majority of creations (this is a very good example), the majority of works, I believe even almost all the beautiful works, are not signed. All those paintings in the caves, those statues in the temples — these are not signed. One does not know at all who created them. And all this was not done with the idea of making a name for oneself as at present. One happened to be a great sculptor, a great painter, a great architect, and then that was all, there was no question of putting one’s name on everything and proclaiming it aloud in the newspapers so that no one might forget it! In those days the artist did what he had to do without caring whether his name would go down to posterity or not. All was done in a movement of aspiration to express a higher beauty, and above all with the idea of giving an appropriate abode to the godhead who was evoked. In the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, it was the same thing, and I don’t think that there too the names of the artists who made them have remained. If any are there, it is quite exceptional and it is only by chance that the name has been preserved. Whilst today, there is not a tiny little piece of canvas, painted or daubed, but on it is a signature to tell you: it is Mr. So-and-so who made this!

*It is said that a synthesis of western and eastern art could be made?*

Yes. One can make a synthesis of everything if one rises sufficiently high.

*What will come out of it?*
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If it is necessary, it will be done. But fundamentally, these are things in the making. For, the advantage of modern times and specially of this hideous commercialism is that everything is now mixed up; that things from the East go to the West, and things from the West to the East, and they influence each other. For the moment this creates a confusion, a sort of pot-pourri. But a new expression will come out of it—it is not so far from its realisation. People cannot intermix, as men today are intermixing, without its producing a reciprocal effect. For instance, with their mania of conquest, the nations of the West which conquered all sorts of countries in the world, have undergone a very strong influence of the conquered countries. In the old days, when Rome conquered Greece it came under the influence of Greece much more than if it had not conquered it. And the Americans—all that they make now is full of Japanese things, and perhaps they are not even aware of it. But since they occupied Japan, I see that the magazines received from America are full of Japanese things. And even in certain details of objects received from America, one now feels the influence of Japan. That happens automatically. It is quite strange, there always comes about a sort of equilibrium, and he who made the material conquest is conquered by the spirit of the vanquished. It is reciprocal. He made the material conquest, he possesses materially, but it is the spirit of the conquered one who possesses the conqueror.

So, through mixing... The ways of Nature are slow, obscure and complicated. She takes a very long time to do a thing which could probably be done much more rapidly, easily and without wastage by means of the spirit. At present there is a terrible wastage in the world. But it is getting done. She has her own way of mixing people.

Is it intentional?

Not the way men understand “intentional”. But it is certainly the expression of an intention and a goal towards which one is
going. Only, all depends on the amount of consciousness. For a man this seems a confusion, for he can see only details, and it appears to be a terrible loss of time, because for him the idea of time is limited to the duration of his person. But Nature has eternity before her. And it is all the same to her to waste, for she is like someone who had a huge cauldron; she throws things in and makes a mixture, and if that does not succeed she throws all this out, for she knows that by taking back the same things she will make another mixture. And that is how it is. Nothing is lost, for it comes into use again all the time. Forms are broken and the substance is taken back, and it goes on constantly like that. It is made, it is unmade, it is turned inside out — what harm can it do her to try a hundred thousand times if it so pleases her! For there is nothing that is wasted, except her work. But her work is her pleasure. Without work she would not exist.

It is a pleasure for her, not for people!

No, certainly, I quite agree. I find it a little too cruel an amusement. Voilà.