When I spoke about Plato’s fear of art, and suggested that he had cause to fear it, it may have sounded as if I were trying to revive a ghost: for it is certain that the sacred fear of art has left us. We have, however, another fear which I believe was unknown to Plato—the fear that knowledge might hurt the imagination, that the exercise of artistic faculties, both in the artist and in the spectator, might be weakened by the use of reason. This is a modern fear and, if I am not mistaken, unfamiliar before the Romantic period; but for more than a century and a half it has dominated our view of art with such force that we have come to look upon it as a basic truth, supported by a strong philosophical and literary tradition.

Exquisite Phantom and Cold Philosophy

In Keats’s ‘Lamia’, for example, the exquisite phantom of the poet’s imagination is killed by the cold and analytical look of philosophy:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{and for the sage,} \\
&\text{Let spear—grass and the spiteful thistle wage} \\
&\text{War on his temples. Do not all charms fly} \\
&\text{At the mere touch of cold philosophy?}
\end{align*}
\]

The poet’s vision has no place ‘in the dull catalogue of common things’:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,...} \\
&\text{Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made} \\
&\text{The tender-person’d Lamia melt into a shade.}
\end{align*}
\]

In retrospect it has seemed to some classical scholars, who were still under the spell of the Romantic view, that Greek tragedy died of Greek philosophy, that the primitive inspiration which the tragic poets drew from myth and ritual could not survive the destructive talk of Socrates. In the \textit{Phaedo} Plato seems to suggest that Socrates felt a scruple on that account and sang a poetic swan-song before he died, as if to recant his inveterate addiction to reasonableness. He had been visited by certain dreams which intimated that he should ‘cultivate and make music’: so he composed a hymn to Apollo and turned Aesop’s Fables into verse. Whether this delightful story is true or not, Plato took the occasion to define the kind of poetry which Socrates would write: it is didactic poetry, a class of literature which every respectable treatise on modern aesthetics has taught us to despise.
A Didactic Ballet
Didactic poetry, we are told, is a kind of monster, a hybrid of intellect and imagination, in which art is sacrificed to the interests of reason, and reason betrayed by the use of art. It may well be that didactic poetry is today condemned unread. Yet a glance at the botanical verse of Erasmus Darwin, or a poem on ‘The Art of Preserving Health’ by John Armstrong, readily shows that the poetic schoolmaster defeats his own purpose: for his verses do not fire the reader’s imagination, they merely inspire him with a sound distrust of an argument that lends itself to rhyme. Nor is the prospect more encouraging in the other arts. Except for curiosity’s sake, one would hardly wish to see a ballet composed by Descartes for Christine of Sweden, in which the intellectual and moral virtues are said to have danced before the queen. I myself once saw a didactic ballet, an American piece composed by Martha Graham on the Declaration of Independence, in which the text, recited by a chorus, supplied the rhythmic foundation for the dance: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’, and so forth. It was a good ballet, and I must say in its defence that the huge leaps of the dancers, their heroic gestures and rhythmic contortions dispelled any thought that all men are created equal. Imagination here triumphed over didacticism, but I am not at all certain that this would have been the case in the more sober composition by Descartes.

As for didactic painting, that again would seem to be a discouraging subject. We think of Ingres’s picture of ‘The Apotheosis of Homer’, in which his flair as a painter deserted him because he was seized with the misguided ambitions of a pedantic pedagogue. Or we think of Kaulbach or the once famous Chenavard, a painter from Lyons, of whom Baudelaire said that his brain resembled his native city: it was foggy with vapours and soot from furnaces, and bristling with bell-towers and chimney stacks. While great at inventing encyclopaedic programmes which covered the history of mankind, he was remarkably bad at painting them. The gross incongruity between thought and image amused Baudelaire to such an extent that he began a critical essay which he intended to call ‘Philosophic Art’, but he left it unfinished for an excellent reason: he changed his mind in the middle of it. The plan was to show how in didactic painting crude images result from great ideas. ‘Pure, disinterested beauty’, he writes, ‘can be reached only by an art removed from instruction, whereas a desire to be philosophically clear necessarily degrades the artistic image’. But this familiar thesis is cancelled by an additional note which reads: ‘There is something good in Chenavard’s assumption, it is the disdain of prattle and the conviction that great painting rests on great ideas’.

Great Ideas and the Painter
If Baudelaire became doubtful about the foolishness of didactic art, we might be well advised to follow his example and retrace our own steps. Admittedly, it is a little perplexing to be told first that great ideas produce bad painting, and then to learn on the same authority that great painting rests on great ideas. But there is no need to choose between these two propositions, for we may find that both are true if they are carefully qualified. The pressure of thought upon art does not follow a simple and uniform law. Great ideas have a way of either quickening or clogging the spirit of a painter, with the result that the sort of intellectual excitement which proved the undoing of Chenavard or Kaulbach made Raphael rise to his greatest height in the painting of ‘The School of Athens’.
We all know that a painting and an argument are two different things, and that the best argument does not produce a good painting. Hence, if a painter becomes so enamoured of his thoughts that he allows them to overpower his vision, his pictorial imagination will be enfeebled by ideas which distract him from the art of painting. It is right, therefore, to say that flight into knowledge is an artistic weakness, because it substitutes intellect for imagination. However, flight from knowledge is also a weakness: it assumes that the artist’s imagination has not sufficient strength to respond actively to the pressure of thought. The insecure painter should indeed beware of distraction; his limited pictorial power may go by the board if he thinks too much; and the weak spectator might also do well not to let his thoughts roam while he looks at a painting. To that extent our habitual distrust of the intellect in art is sound. Yet there is something wrong with an aesthetics which explains why Chenavard and Kaulbach failed, but not why Raphael succeeded; which can account for the poetic weakness of Erasmus Darwin but not for the force of Lucretius or of Dante.

Since we are in the process of retracing our steps, let us face the fact that, in antiquity alone, the number of great didactic poems is disconcertingly large, far larger than it ought to be according to an aesthetics which dismisses the entire species as a contradiction in terms. In writing On the Nature of Things Lucretius borrowed ‘the sweet voice of song’ to explain the reasonable system of Epicurus. The poem taxes our intelligence; it addresses itself firmly to the understanding, but in verses of such great passion and beauty that our imagination is fully engaged. In the Georgics, Virgil teaches the cultivation of the land, with exact precepts addressed to the farmer concerning the best way of planting the vine or of tending crops or bees or cattle. In enjoying the rustic poetry of these instructions, even readers unfamiliar with agriculture and animal husbandry become seized with a passion for the land and willingly participate in the farmer’s cares. As for Ovid, that most forbidding of subjects, the Roman calendar, becomes a festive procession in his verses; not to speak of his eminently professional instructions how to be skilful in the art of love. And who can forget that Horace, in speaking of the poet as wishing to be useful as well as to delight, does so in a great poem, and a didactic one at that? If, finally, we remember that from the Renaissance down to the eighteenth century many didactic poems are pleasing, even if few of them are great, we may well wonder whether the estimate is true that within that genre the number of aesthetic failures is unusually large. Is it really true that there are more bad didactic poems than, say, bad poems on love, or bad patriotic or religious hymns? Is it true that in the visual arts the aesthetic failures in portraiture or in landscape painting are rarer than in didactic compositions?

A Picturesque Superstition
It is certainly not true before the nineteenth century. The great religious cycles of the past were almost all didactic, for example the sculptures and the coloured glass of the French cathedrals, or the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, or the tapestries designed by Rubens of the Triumph of the Sacrament. Portions of these cycles are often enjoyed as narratives, but they illustrate doctrine, and the doctrinal point must be learned and understood if the visual phrase is to be spelled out correctly, and the plastic articulation fully mastered. An equal degree of intelligence is needed to design, or understand, the great humanist allegories. If it is asked how so much learning could be absorbed into art, the answer is far from difficult: great artists have always been
intellectually quick. The popular belief that musicians cannot think, or that painters have no verbal facility, is a picturesque superstition completely disproved by the evidence of history, both past and present. Anyone reading the letters of Titian, Michelangelo, or Rubens, or perusing the verbal jests which it pleased Leonardo da Vinci or Mozart to invent, must be impressed not only by their literary ease, but by the mixture of learning, wit, and good sense which gives an individual style to their prose; and that has remained true right down to the present day. Not only were Cezanne and Manet well versed in literature, but, if I may speak from my own experience (which I am well aware may be purely accidental), I have never met a significant painter or sculptor who did not speak and think exceedingly well.

Nevertheless, with the approach of the nineteenth century, didactic subjects began to repel the artistic imagination; and the causes of that aversion are clear enough. As art withdrew into itself, and receded toward the margin of life where it could reign as its own master, it began to lose touch with learning, as it lost touch with other forces that shape our experience. Hence it was only the weaker painter, feeling uncertain in his seclusion, or the great painter in a moment of weakness, who accommodated himself to didactic needs. In other words, the Romantic revolt against reason was so effective in art that didactic art became a compromise. As a result, it declined, and for all practical purposes it has vanished altogether—a clear sign that imagination and learning have been driven apart.

Artists Treated as Intellectual Untouchables
Not that artists are less knowledgeable than they used to be. Quite the contrary, their imagination is easily seized by ideas, but compared to the artists of the past, they are at one great disadvantage. As artists they are obliged to think for themselves, their learning is essentially self-taught, they pick up their ideas wherever they can; but even the best mind is not at its best when it is sealed off from the science of its age. The isolation, which we think of as essential to artistic creation, has been pushed to the point where artists cerebrate far too much, because they are in need of thoughts, and those for whom thinking is the primary business do not supply them. Even in their intellectual lives, artists are treated as if they were untouchables: their genius must not be disturbed or distracted, and so they are forced to learn by themselves.

It is evident from the writings of the painter Paul Klee that he enjoyed looking at plant sections and all sorts of living or dead tissue through a microscope, and that he was a passionate collector of fossils. In a half-apologetic tone he asks whether these are proper occupations for an artist: microscopy and palaeontology. He excuses himself by saying that they set the artist’s imagination in motion. The traces of these forms are indeed unmistakable in some of Klee’s fantastical designs. And yet, how strange that none of the biologists who showed Klee any of their microscopic preparations thought of enlisting his sensitive hand to record these structures in the interests of science, instead of letting him wander off to play with them only in fantasies. Klee’s sly kind of humour is a precious bloom of Romantic irony: he made the most of being in a marginal position, and never pretended to be anywhere else, - carefully avoiding the grand manner. Yet one cannot help observing that a great artistic curiosity for science was here left unused, when it could have both illustrated the precise data of science and drawn new strength from them for imaginative creation.
How curious too, but characteristic, that Picasso, who is a masterful draughtsman of animals, should have turned to Buffon—an eighteenth-century naturalist—for inspiration in an enchanting series of animal sketches. Why to Buffon? Why not to a contemporary naturalist? I am not aware that George Stubbs looked for quaint graces in an outdated style of zoology before painting his splendid pictures of animals. He was passionately up-to-date, like Constable who provided his sketches of clouds with meteorological annotations. But Picasso had good reasons for reverting to Buffon, a text which is no longer science but ‘literature’: it gave to artistic licence its full range.

**Henry Moore and Geology**

The sculptures and drawings of Henry Moore suggest that he is fascinated by geology. One would like to see him in close contact with those who professionally explore volcanic shapes and various types of stratification, but this would probably be thought a sacrilege, because the artist is supposed to engage in research only for the sake of metaphor. It is known, moreover, that Moore has studied, quite on his own, in the celebrated jungle of the British Museum’s ethnographic collection. No one could possibly have a better sense than he for displaying these objects to their best advantage. Would a museum ever persuade itself that a great sculptor is the right person to perform such a task? Obviously not, as long as the naïve prejudice prevails that imagination and precision do not go together. But, in fact, precision is one of the ingredients of genius. Most artists would say with Samuel Butler: ‘I do not mind lying, but I hate inaccuracy’.

From the past we know that if artistic imagination is harnessed to a precise and well-defined task of instruction it can gain a sharp edge of refinement by responding to the pressure of thought. And what an advantage it would be to a modern naturalist if he could enlist the eye and hand of a great modern draughtsman! Some of the dreariness of scientific illustrations might vanish if they could be returned occasionally to the care of great artists as in the Renaissance. I think, in particular, of Calcar’s fantastical illustrations to the Anatomy of Vesalius: woodcuts which combine the utmost scientific accuracy with a stylish macabre magnificence, so that the learner receives his instruction in the vivid guise of pictorial figments which, no matter whether they amuse him or repel him, are bound to fascinate him at every step.

We are fortunately beginning, in the study of art, to come alive again to the artistic strength revealed in such remarkable combinations of intellectual precision and pictorial fantasy. Raphael is surely the supreme master of that kind of art. In The School of Athens he succeeded in painting what a less intelligent and less sensitive artist might have found to be an utterly unpaintable subject: an abstract philosophical speculation of weird intricacy but rigorous logic. In the philosophical circle to which Raphael belonged, a doctrine was current that any proposition in Plato could be translated into a proposition in Aristotle, provided that one took into account that Plato’s language was that of poetic enthusiasm, whereas Aristotle spoke in terms of rational analysis. Raphael placed the two philosophers, who ‘agree in substance while they disagree in words’, in a hail dominated by the statues of Apollo and Minerva: the god of poetry and the goddess of reason preside over the thoughts which, concentrated in Plato and Aristotle, are spread out and specified in a succession of sciences: these answer each other in the same discords and concords in which Plato and Aristotle converse. The theory is abstruse, perhaps even absurd, and I may say, from personal
acquaintance, that it is a rarefied form of mental torture to study it in Renaissance texts, but in Raphael’s figures it acquires a luminosity which overwhelms the spectator for at least three reasons.

First, as a painter Raphael makes us feel the spirit in which that curious doctrine was conceived: dialectic is reduced to visual counterpoint; we suddenly take part in the drama of rethinking the propositions which those figures enact, with and against each other. Secondly, in guiding our eye, the artist focuses our mind, and if any modern philosopher should be so perverse as to take an interest in the Renaissance concordance of Plato and Aristotle, he could learn from Raphael how to find his way through these horribly diffuse speculations. Raphael has produced a visual commentary on them which is of unmatched lucidity.

That, however, is of only historical interest. The third and artistically crucial point is that by following the argument in Raphael’s painting we discover visual accents, modulations and correspondences which no one would notice who did not follow the thought. The visual articulation of the painting becomes transparent and reveals itself as infinitely richer than a detached vision, which moves along the figures without grasping their sense, could possibly perceive. The eye focuses differently when it is intellectually guided.

We arrive here at a theory of vision exactly the reverse of that which the youthful Mr. Clive Bell so confidently propounded in 1913. ‘The representative element in a work of art’, he wrote, ‘may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant’. As a matter of fact, it is so relevant that whenever we ignore or misunderstand a subject, we are likely to misconstrue the image by putting the accents in the wrong places. Our eye sees as our mind reads. A large anthology could be compiled of visual errors committed by critics who thought that the right way to look at paintings is to disregard the representative element in them. Misunderstanding of factual detail can cause the whole tonality of a painting to shift, as we know, for example, from Bellini’s ‘Feast of the Gods’, which is not a solemn but a facetious painting, or from the famous Botticellesque painting mistakenly called ‘La Derelitta’, which does not represent a weeping woman shut out from a house, but the grave biblical figure of Mordecai (from the Book of Esther), dressed in sackcloth and mourning before the King’s gate.

It has been said that while such rediscoveries of the exact subject of a painting are historically interesting, they do not affect our aesthetic judgment. These pictures were always regarded as great; our response was not diminished by our ignorance. That is not entirely the case. Great works of art, we must remember, are as tough as they are fragile. Even if we look rather loosely, or even confusedly, at ‘The School of Athens’, the force of Raphael’s diction somehow comes through, just as the force of Shakespeare is not completely obliterated in an eighteenth-century version. Many of Shakespeare’s lines are flattened out, some of his images become dim and thin, horrifying scenes are timidly omitted, scenes which he never wrote are tactlessly introduced to calm the sensibilities of an eighteenth-century audience, and yet Shakespeare’s greatness still makes itself felt; just as certain melodies by Mozart, when they are vulgarized in folksongs or drinking songs, retain an echo of his spirit although all the subtle articulation has vanished. Inadvertently we trivialize the works of art of the past when we take them at their face value.
We should therefore not underestimate the degree to which our aesthetic perception is quickened by knowledge. But while pleading for a mode of vision which rests the sense of form on the sense of meaning, we must remember that what quickens our vision can also clog it. The fashion of so-called ‘iconography’ at this moment has produced many cumbersome interpretations, according to a pattern which Professor C. S. Lewis has so well characterized in literary studies. ‘It is impossible’, he says, ‘for the wit of man to devise a story which the wit of some other man cannot allegorize’. There is one—and only one—test for the artistic relevance of an interpretation: it must heighten our perception of the object and thereby increase our aesthetic delight. If the object looks just as it looked before, except that a burdensome superstructure has been added, the interpretation is aesthetically useless, whatever historical or other merits it may have.

We thus come back to the fact that ideas in art can quicken as well as clog the imagination. But that does not justify our fear of knowledge. The pressure of thought on art is vital. Perhaps we should remember the fable of the philosophic dove: the bird found that the air resisted its flight, and decided that it would fly better if there were no air.

Some years ago an editorial in the Burlington Magazine expressed some impatience with learning in art. The writer suggested that a high degree of literacy would seem to be unnecessary to an artist since very great art was produced by people who did not even have an alphabet. It is true that people without an alphabet have produced great art; but it is equally true that great art was produced, for people who did have an alphabet, by artists of the highest degree of literacy, and this fact seems to have more relevance to ourselves, because it so happens that we live with an alphabet, and not without one. We cannot solve our problems, even in art, by pretending that we can act as primitives. The gate to that old paradise is shut (assuming that it ever was a paradise). We must look for a new gate at the other end.