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ROMANCE AND POETRY IN INDIAN PAINTING

The Sir George Birdwood Memorial Lecture

by

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*Keeper, Indian Section, Victoria and Albert Museum,
delivered to the Commonwealth Section of the Society
on Thursday, 6th June, 1957, with Sir Herbert Read,
D.S.O., M.C., Litt.D., M.A., President, Institute of
Contemporary Arts, in the Chair*

THE CHAIRMAN: It is appropriate that something should be said about Sir George Birdwood on this occasion, but I am going to leave that to the lecturer, who knows much more about Sir George Birdwood and his career than I do. I am going to confine myself to a few words about the lecturer himself.

I have known Mr. Archer for a number of years, both as a friend and as a colleague at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Before he was appointed to the post of Keeper of the Indian Section he had considerable experience in India, from which emerged a number of books with which you may be familiar. He combines, I think, in a unique way poetry and scholarship—rather an unusual combination. Some of his most remarkable work was done on the subject of the primitive poetry of India, the poetry of the Uraons, and in 1940 followed *The Blue Glove*, which is a collection of that poetry, and in 1948 *The Dove and the Leopard*. Both these books were distinguished not only for what one might call their rescue of a primitive poetry (poetry more primitive than anything we have in Europe), but for an appreciation from the point of view of a modern poet of the essential qualities of that poetry. I think that in everything that Mr. Archer has written there is this sense of the relevance of his research to the contemporary situation in the arts. He has published several books on the arts, more particularly *The Vertical Man*, which appeared in 1947 and is a study of primitive Indian sculpture, and then several books on Indian painting, amongst them *Indian Painting in the Punjab Hills* and *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta*, culminating in a book which appeared this year *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry*, a beautiful book in itself and distinguished for its sensitive handling of a very romantic theme. Mr. Archer is continuing that theme in his present lecture, and without any further introduction I am going to ask him to deliver it.

The following lecture, which was illustrated by lantern slides, was then delivered:

THE LECTURE

When Sir George Birdwood died in 1912, he was eighty years old, and more than half his life had been devoted to the study and preservation of Indian arts and crafts. His early training had not been very auspicious, for when he went to India in 1854 it was to join the Bombay Medical Service and later to serve as Professor of Anatomy and Physiology. He was, in fact, a doctor, and while most of us have reason to be grateful to that splendid profession, it is

not from doctors that we normally expect a keen enthusiasm for arts and crafts. Birdwood was different. He had a passionate love of India, especially of village India, and it was the romantic appeal of that lovely and beautiful land which aroused in him a deep sense of poetry. Yet although devoted to Indian crafts, he was oddly allergic to Indian painting and sculpture, and some of the most extraordinary remarks on Indian art ever voiced by an Englishman were made by Birdwood. When preparing the official handbook to the South Kensington collection of Indian arts and crafts—the collection of which, almost seventy years later, I myself have been privileged to hold charge—he roundly stated:

The monstrous shapes of the Puranic deities are unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic representation; and this is possibly why sculpture and painting are unknown, as fine arts, in India.

And at a famous meeting held in this very institution, he criticized that great Englishman, E. B. Havell, for suggesting that in Indian sculptures of the Buddha the world possessed one of its greatest forms of religious art, and proceeded to dismiss a particular figure of the Buddha in the following terms:

This senseless similitude is nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its thumbs and knees and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionless purity and serenity of soul.

Such forthright remarks are very indicative of Birdwood's character, but they must not blind us to the more positive aspects of his great achievement. For Indian objects of daily use—the art-manufactures, as they were then called—he had the sincerest and most fervent admiration. The India he wished to preserve and for which he consistently fought was, in essence, the India of Gandhi—an India uncontaminated by modern industrial methods, self-supporting and free. And in a passage which shows how deep in him lay the romantic and the poet, he describes the Indian village as he fondly regarded it:

Outside the entrance, on an exposed rise of ground, the hereditary potter sits by his wheel moulding the swiftly revolving clay by the natural curves of his hands. At the back of the houses, there are two or three looms at work in blue and scarlet and gold. . . . In the street the brass-and-copper smiths are hammering away at their pots and pans; and further down, in the verandah of the rich man's house, is the jeweller working rupees and gold mohurs into fair jewellery, gold and silver earrings and round tires like the moon. . . . At half-past three or four in the afternoon the whole street is lighted up by the moving robes of the women going down to draw water from the tank, each with two or three water jars on her head: and so going and returning in single file, the scene glows like Titian's canvas, and moves like the stately procession of the Parthenaic frieze. Later the men drive in the mild grey kine from the jungle, the looms are folded up, the copper-smiths are silent, the elders gather in the gate, the lights begin to glimmer in the fast falling darkness, the feasting and the music begin. . . . The next morning with sunrise, after simple ablutions and adorations performed in the open air before their houses, their same day begins.

It is this Birdwood, the poet and romantic, the Birdwood of village India, whom we honour tonight; and in presenting some romantic Indian paintings, I should

like to think that these, if no others, might have caught his imagination and perhaps induced him to modify, if not rescind, his violent diatribes.

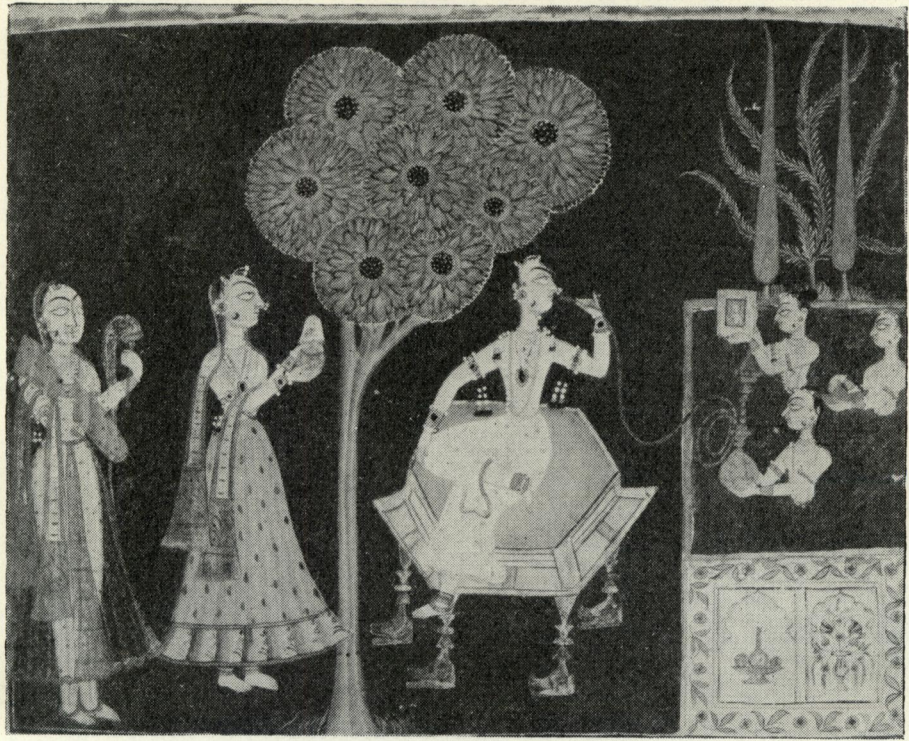
The purpose of this lecture is to trace the development of Indian painting in the Punjab Hills in Northern India during the eighteenth century. When Birdwood died in 1912, this kind of painting was only just beginning to be known and not until 1916, with Coomaraswamy's pioneer volume, *Rajput Painting*, was its existence fully revealed. It then became clear that here was an art—parallel in certain ways to Mughal miniatures—yet in others profoundly different. Its main subjects were poetry and romance. Line with its curling rhythm was employed for musical effects. Scarlet symbolized passion, and landscape was treated in a double manner—trees, flowers, rain, clouds, birds and animals all acting as symbols for the conduct and moods of human lovers. The emotional aspect of this love-painting was keenly appreciated by Coomaraswamy, but it is only during the last five to ten years that new research in India and this country has enabled us to distinguish the chief styles of painting and to reconstruct their development.

The position, as we see it today, may be summarized as follows: When we survey the period as a whole, we are confronted by two problems. At the commencement of the century, the greatest centre of painting in the Punjab Hills was a small State called Basohli. At the end of the century, Basohli had no painting and two other States, Kangra and Garhwal, had become the chief centres. Garhwal was far to the East and Kangra, although much nearer, was separated from Basohli by a wall of mountains. We are at once faced, therefore, with a major problem. Why should Basohli have relinquished its lead and why should Kangra and Garhwal have moved up in its stead?

The second problem concerns style. When we look at Basohli painting in 1700 and then at Kangra and Garhwal painting in 1800, it is clear that a vital transformation has taken place. A Basohli picture of about the year 1700 (Figure 1) shows a lady completing her toilet assisted by three maids. Above her is a tree and behind a bathing-pool are cypresses. The subject is, at first sight, romantic to a degree yet the style is stiff, savage and angular. The ladies have large fierce eyes and long straight noses. The pool is a simple flat rectangle and even the tree is shown as a group of circles. There is no attempt at portraying the body as soft and round, and the cypresses are tall and sharp as spears. The picture, in fact, is not at all concerned with feminine grace but rather with love conceived of as a fierce and terrible passion.

The same scene, or one very like it, was painted about a hundred years later by a Kangra artist.¹ The same lady is shown attended by maids and seated by a pool, yet in style no picture could be more different. The stiffness, angles and great wild eyes have gone and in their place is a series of tender graceful forms, painted with subtle feeling for delicacy of shape. The water in the pool is strewn with flowers, and these in turn suggest the flower-like beauty of the lady and her maids.

The same qualities appear in a picture from Garhwal.² This also was painted in about the year 1800 and shows a bevy of girls swimming in a pond filled with



[Municipal Building, Allahabad

FIGURE 1. *Lady attended by her maids*. Basohli, c. 1700

lotuses. They are using pitchers to buoy them up in the water, and although the style is slightly different, its aim is exactly similar to that of the painting from Kangra. There is the same delight in graceful feminine form, the same delicacy of treatment and the same insertion of poetic images. The problem which confronts us then is this: why was the wild fierce style of Basohli discarded and from what antecedents did the graceful tender style of Kangra and Garhwal evolve?

To answer these questions will be the object of this lecture, but first we must bear in mind certain points. In the Punjab Hills there were 36 States, each ruled by a separate raja, each committed to its own type of Rajput culture, each proudly jealous. Not every State possessed painters. In fact, only when a particular ruler was keenly interested in art does painting appear to have flourished. In this connection, the size of a State was quite irrelevant, the smallest States sometimes possessing artists, the largest and greatest no artists at all. It was the personality of the ruler-patron which provided the one essential element.

With the patron bulking so large, it followed that any change of interest on the part of his successor might easily divert the local artists or affect their style.

And although no rigid rule can be framed, it appears to have been normal for the son or successor of a ruler-patron to reduce or modify existing patronage. In such circumstances, artists sometimes migrated from a court or, if they remained, adjusted their styles.

It is these two factors which probably explain the course of events at Basohli. The great Basohli style with its savage ferocity seems to have reflected the interests and personality of Raja Kirpal Pal (1678-93), and with his death a powerful stimulus abruptly ended. During the next thirty years, therefore, painting continued at Basohli, but there was a gradual mellowing of manner.

A picture in the Victoria and Albert Museum reproduced in colour in Basil Gray's *Rajput Painting* illustrates this tendency. It shows a prince embracing two girls. His arms, flung widely out, form two abrupt angles. The background is a hot yellow, the bed and canopy a flaming scarlet. The whole picture has an air of frantic violence. The faces, however, are no longer quite so ferocious, the bodies are somewhat rounder and the total impression is more gentle.

The same tendency is apparent in a picture of Radha and Krishna sitting in a wood.³ Here also the faces have lost their former sense of nervous strain. The trees have a new luxuriance, and the early liking for sharp aggressive angles has disappeared. Both pictures were painted between 1700 and 1730, and we must recognize, therefore, that even at Basohli a softening process had set in by the early decades of the century. This process did not itself evoke the delicate styles of Kangra and Garhwal but it may well have rendered easier their ultimate appearance.

A second factor, however, concerns us more. If, as seems certain, a number of Raja Kirpal Pal's artists remained at Basohli after his death, it seems at least as certain that a number migrated to nearby States. Among these States were Jammu, Chamba, Nurpur and Guler, and in this connection we must concede a third important point. When artists left one court and went to another, they took with them the style of painting to which they were accustomed. When, however, they reached another court and began to paint for a new patron, their styles began to alter. We have seen that rulers in the Punjab Hills were jealous of each other, and if an artist was to excite a ruler's fancy, he had to make the latter feel that his painting was not just the style of some other State but a definite reflection of his new patron's glory. It happens, therefore, that between the years 1700 and 1740 the Basohli style spread to other States, but in the process developed novel characters. The resulting styles were by no means equally important, but one of them, the style which evolved at Guler, is of special relevance to painting in Kangra and Garhwal.

The reasons why painting in Guler is important are fourfold. In the first place, the State is in the same valley as Kangra itself and, provided circumstances in Kangra were favourable, the style of Guler might well condition Kangra painting. Secondly, in about the year 1720, Basohli artists at Guler executed a series of large-scale pictures illustrating the *Ramayana*. One of them, formerly in the J. C. French collection and now in the British Museum, shows Rama surrounded by an army of bears and monkeys confronting a horde of demons.⁴

Various aspects of this picture connect it with Basohli—the hot red background, the Basohli-like faces. Others, however, suggest a new Guler character—the broken rim of the curving hillside, the realistic demons. If we imagine this life-like character greatly intensified, we begin to approach the naturalism of Kangra and Garhwal. The third reason involves the patron-ruler who succeeded to the Guler throne in 1744. Raja Govardhan Singh (1744–73) had no military ambitions but delighted in cultivated amusements. Among them was a keen pleasure in art, and this explains the fourth reason why Guler should have played so vital a part in the century's painting. During the early years of the eighteenth century, the Punjab Plains and Delhi itself were much disturbed by invasions. There were inroads by the Persian Nadir Shah in 1739, repeated incursions of the Afghan Ahmad Shah Durrani, and finally the sack of Delhi in 1756. We know that because of these disturbances, merchants, traders and craftsmen migrated. Artists also were caught up in these mass movements, one particular family going to Jasrota, an appendage of Jammu. From there it was tempted by Raja Govardhan Singh's enthusiasm to settle in Guler, and with the coming of these new artists a vital change ensued. The style of these new arrivals is best described as a late version of the naturalistic Mughal painting which had developed under the Emperor Akbar in about the year 1600. It was much more life-like and sophisticated, much more sensitive to personality and character than the savage Basohli manner, but at the same time it was lacking in poetry or the feeling for romance. The purpose of Mughal painting was to record actual people or actual scenes, and for this purpose the new artists at Guler had developed a style of supple outline, a flair for noting individual postures and a fluent skill in detail. On their arrival, they mingled with the local artists, and the result is the emergence of two distinct strands of art. The Mughal artists became more poetic and romantic, the immigrants from Basohli less savage and brusque. Out of this new kind of Guler painting the styles of Kangra and Garhwal were presently to emerge.

A picture reproduced in Gangoly's *Masterpieces of Rajput Painting* (pl. 35) illustrates the Mughal style acquiring Guler features. Its subject is the birth of Krishna, and we notice at once how smoothly all the figures are drawn, how subtly each person is characterized, and how full and round is each body. At the same time the composition is less congested than in much Mughal painting and already there are signs of a romantic delight in feminine form.

Simplicity of structure is even more evident in a picture of the Punjabi heroine Sohini swimming across a river to keep her tryst with Mahinwal (Gangoly, *Masterpieces*, pl. 29). The river is shown as a great open space, rimmed by jagged banks—the whole resembling the curving hillside in the picture of Rama with the bears and monkeys. The prime purpose of the picture, however, is to celebrate the girl's youthful charm, to recreate her sensitive lines and thus communicate a sense of rapture.

A similar delight in poetic romance is expressed in a picture from the Victoria and Albert Museum, *The Lady with the Hawk*.⁵ In this picture, Mughal influence can be seen in the exquisitely evoked person of the lady herself. Yet the early

Basohli strand is vigorously present in the flat background of flaming red, symbolizing the ardent passion raging in her heart and in the cypress trees pricking the background like thin black spears. Moreover, the inclusion of the hawk reminds us of the prime purpose of this painting—the interpretation of poetry. The hawk is a symbol of the lover and we thus obtain an art exquisite and delicate in execution yet availing to the full of romantic idiom.

The Lady with the Hawk is notable for a type of face quite different from the female faces in *The Birth of Krishna*, and indeed it is clear that between the years 1745 and 1770 Guler artists made many efforts to devise a satisfactory formula for female charm. The results are apparent in a picture, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where the face of a princess closely resembles that of *The Lady with the Hawk*, but the faces of her maids disclose a third distinct type. This new third type is particularly important for in it we recognize the features which were shortly to be standardized at Kangra.

In a picture of Radha at her toilet (Gangoly, *Masterpieces*, pl. 38), this third new type has come into its own. Not only Radha but all the ladies in the picture conform to it; yet, although the trees are painted with unassuming naturalism—the cypress is no longer a spear but a gently drooping spire—the great scarlet screen which serves as a background perpetuates the Basohli convention. Despite its close approximation to Kangra painting, the picture is therefore still from Guler, but the style has reached a point from which both Kangra and Garhwal paintings are now to develop.

The reasons for the sudden transplantation of Guler painting to these two great States can be inferred when we recall a point which we considered a little earlier. There can be hardly any doubt that the personality of Raja Govardhan Singh was a key factor in evolving the Guler manner, and his death in 1773 may well have brought about the same kind of situation as occurred in Basohli in 1693 with the death of Raja Kirpal Pal. It is even possible that before his death a few artists may have ventured to migrate, and that after his death others followed their example.

At Kangra, the crucial factor affecting their migration was the accession to the Kangra throne of a new young ruler, Raja Sansar Chand (1775–1823). Unlike his grandfather, Raja Ghamand Chand, who had made Kangra the terror of the hills, Raja Sansar Chand possessed a great flair for painting, perhaps the greatest possessed by any Indian ruler in the eighteenth century. He began to attract artists to his court, and the artists most readily available were those at Guler. Their style appears to have excited his discerning approval, but once again the very fact of migration—with its corollary, a change of patron—seems to have resulted in new stylistic forms.

A picture in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows a group of ladies performing the spring fertility festival of Holi, throwing red powder at each other and shooting coloured water out of syringes.⁶ The faces correspond to those in the Guler picture of Radha at her toilet. All possess serene nobility but there is a new delight in rhythmical line.

At the same time, as we can see from another picture in the Victoria and

Albert Museum, poetic considerations were given greater stress. This picture shows a girl swinging (Figure 2). Her posture is full of elegance, but it is the great clouds high in the sky which imbue the picture with poetry. In Indian poetry, clouds, rain and lightning were all symbolic of love-making, and thus in showing a girl gently swinging against a background of impending storm, the artist is hinting with exquisite discretion at the passionate thoughts which are passing in her mind.

A similar use of poetic imagery characterizes another Kangra picture in the Victoria and Albert Museum where a lady is shown attended by her maids. A maid-servant strives to comfort her, for she is lonely as the pet buck which rests in the courtyard. It is two maids in the left-hand corner of the picture, however, who disclose the underlying situation. Each holds in her hand a small doll or puppet, one dressed as a prince, the other as a lady. The faces of the dolls



[Victoria and Albert Museum

FIGURE 2. *Girl swinging*. Kangra, c. 1820

are turned in opposite directions, a gap yawns between them and we realize that the cause of the lady's distress is the abrupt departure of her lover, the quarrel that has taken place between them and her anguished uncertainty as to where he has gone.

This emphasis on poetic symbols was to prove a leading aspect of Kangra painting. But it was not the only means by which Guler artists at Kangra strove to interpret the phases of romance. Recalling the symbolic associations of colour, they occasionally supplemented their evocations of graceful form by a subtle and poetic use of scarlet. A picture reproduced in N. C. Mehta's *Studies in Indian Painting* (pl. 22) shows Krishna, the divine lover, sitting on a terrace engaging a duenna in light-hearted chat. Below him stretches a field with ripening crops and by it stands a village beauty, notable for her fluid grace and scarlet skirt. Scarlet is supremely significant, for behind the house are ranks of red storm clouds, their colour establishing an intimate connection between the girl loitering in the field and the passionate meeting which will presently ensue when Krishna has concluded his banter. It was in ways such as these that romantic situations were charged with poetry, and painting in Kangra acquired its special form.

If the accession of a new patron to the Kangra throne explains the movement of Guler artists to Kangra, it is possibly the wedding of a Garhwal prince to a Guler lady which accounts for a parallel development at Garhwal between 1770 and 1800. During this time, artists whose style is obviously rooted in Guler painting were stimulated to produce similar interpretations of poetry and romance. Characteristic idioms were curling lines used for suggesting the play of water, leafless branches, and spikes of thickly clustering flowers. It is in the work of a particular master, however, that Garhwal painting reaches its greatest height. In a picture by him in the British Museum,⁷ a girl is shown hurrying through the night to meet her lover. Lightning, frail and gentle as the girl, flickers in the sky. Rain pours down and the groping trees seem almost to hide and cover her. Sprays of flowers, echoed in the pattern on her dress, suggest her youthful curves. But it is the cobras slithering in her path who mysteriously enhance the total effect of overwhelming charm. In Indian poetry snakes were often invoked as images of beauty, and village songs translated by Verrier Elwin have lines such as 'Your body is lovely as a cobra', 'A snake shines like lightning in the stream', 'Your body is soft and lustrous as a snake'. In the picture, each detail is introduced for only one purpose—to suggest the magnetic charms of the central figure.

This objective appears in another picture by the same master, in the Kasturbhai Lalbhai collection, Ahmedabad. The same girl as in the previous picture is shown seated on a bed of leaves restlessly waiting. A solitary deer represents the lover who has still to come, and pairs of birds suggest the innocent rapture which will follow their meeting.

It is in a painting of the great lovers of Rajput legend, Baz Bahadur and Rupmati, however, that Garhwal painting achieves perhaps its most poetic expression.⁸ The two lovers are shown resting on a hillside. Rupmati is sleeping

on a red coverlet, while Baz Bahadur gazes at her eyes. Two horses tethered to the left suggest the stalwart nature of their passion, two birds perching in a tree convey its tenderness, while two leopards in a distant cave express the wild ferocity of their love-making. Yet once again it is woman, the supreme object of romantic poetry, whose beauty is the picture's chief concern. A young moon hanging in the sky, a tree with frail and leafless branches parallels the innocent freshness of Rupmati's lovely form. It is with such a picture that the early style of Basohli is superseded, the graceful experiments of Guler are transformed and painting in the Punjab Hills reaches the very greatest heights of poetry and romance.

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THE CHAIRMAN: I do not propose to dispel the atmosphere of romance which Mr. Archer has created by discussing what he has said or even by inviting you to discuss it. I will just confine myself to expressing our deep appreciation of his lecture, which was not only informative, but remarkable for the beautiful choice of illustrations and the beautiful presentation of them, and our thanks for a pleasure which I am sure we have all experienced and which members of the audience would like to express again in the usual manner.

The vote of thanks to the Lecturer was carried with acclamation.

SIR SELWYN SELWYN-CLARKE, K.B.E., C.M.G., M.C. (Chairman, Commonwealth Section Committee): Before asking you to thank our Chairman for so ably conducting the proceedings, I should like to tell you something about him and why we invited him to preside this afternoon. After a distinguished career in the army in the First World War, Sir Herbert Read joined the Victoria and Albert Museum, and remained there from 1922-31. During this period he wrote a number of books on art, poetry and criticism, earning a high reputation as a poet and as a critic of art and literature. His eminence as an interpreter of the arts was recognized by his appointment as Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art at Edinburgh in 1931, in which year he published a work of major importance in this field, entitled *The Meaning of Art*, an account of the chief periods of artistic expression from prehistoric to modern times. Two years later came Sir Herbert's *Art Now*, concerned with the æsthetic background of contemporary art. His Honorary Fellowship of the Society of Industrial Artists is a proof of his interest in applied arts, about which he wrote in 1934 in *Art in Industry*. I think Sir Herbert's chief concerns as an art critic have been with the nature of art as a creative activity, with the psychology and philosophy of the artist and his place in society, and with the educational value of art. The main direction of his writings seems to be towards a synthesis of knowledge and ideas. For these and many other reasons we invited him to preside at Mr. Archer's sensitive, thought-provoking and charming address. Will you join me in thanking our Chairman for presiding?

The vote of thanks to the Chairman was carried with acclamation, and the meeting then ended.