

Plumbing the Shallows of the Human Mind

Anyone who examines the contents of his own mind without prejudice in his own favour will be obliged to admit that the vast majority of his thoughts are of the utmost banality: I'd like a cup of tea, it's nearly time for bed, why don't my visitors go home, etc. This, perhaps, explains why instant communication is such a bad thing. Not nation shall speak peace unto nation, as is inscribed in entrance to Broadcasting House, but person shall transmit trivia unto person.

There is, in fact, no plumbing the shallows of the human soul. One of the best methods of trying to do so, however, is to read the comments in the books that are placed by museums at the exit to special exhibitions. In extenuation of humanity it must be admitted that the art of graceful compliment is a difficult one, for once you have said that the exhibition was marvellous or exquisite or delightful, it is difficult to think of anything else.

Complaint is a more powerful stimulus to such originality as most people can rise to. Today, for example, I went to the Musée Guimet in Paris, the French national museum of Asian art, to see an exhibition of five centuries of Korean painting and decorative arts. I came out knowing much more than when I went in, which admittedly was very little; I was moved by what I had seen and was full of resolution to read up on the subject.

As usual, I made straight for the comment book as I left. My

eye fell on the first complaint:

Necessary to clean the glass cases to protect the works.

Too many finger-prints. Thank you.

Then there were the complaints about the lighting, although it was clearly stated at the beginning of the exhibition had to be low to avoid damaging the exhibits, and the disposition of the same:

*Ophthalmologists and osteopaths will thank the museum
for its co-operation.*

The lighting was low, and some of the paintings were several feet tall, so it was inevitable that some part of them would be near the floor and one would have to bend to peer closer.

In England, complaint often attaches in the comment book to the lavatories which are too far away, or not large enough; in France, complaint attaches to the restaurant:

*Your restaurant rather resembles that of a clinic or a
hospital.*

But for sheer banality, you can't beat 'I love Martina, Mama

and Papa,' enclosed in a heart-shape.

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