CHAPTER IV

THE PRESERVATION OF ANTIQUITIES

In the Dresden *Nachrichten*, a newspaper of considerable standing, an article appeared in the second year of the late war, in which a well-known German writer advocated a ruthless attack upon the antiquities and art treasures of Italy.

"If Italian statesmen," he said, "have imagined that the art treasures in their country are a species of insurance against a too energetic conduct of the War on Germany's part, they will experience some very bitter disappointments." He tells the Italian people that the well-being of the least significant German soldier—that is to say, any oaf from the lowest grade of German life—is of more value than the most magnificent gem of ancient or modern art; and in conclusion he declares that "when the monuments and cathedrals, the statues and the pictures, the churches and the palaces, of Venice, Milan, Florence and Rome, feel the sharpness of the German sword, it will be—and God knows that it will be—a just judgment that overtakes them."

The views thus recorded are not to be regarded as the expression of an individual idiosyncrasy. The German treatment of the historical monuments of France and Belgium proved clearly enough that the Teutonic mind had discarded (let us hope temporarily) all reverence for ancient works of art as being a sentiment which was incompatible with the general policy of the nation; and we had abundant proof that the existence of what we reckon the greatest and most permanent treasures of civilisation was believed by our late enemies to be of infinitely less account than the smallest and most transient

operation of their aggressive warfare. Of course, there were certain artistic people in Germany who would have regretted the destruction of the great masterpieces and might have felt concerned on receiving the news of such a catastrophe; but there is hardly a man of Teutonic race who would not have found excuses for the soulless creatures who then directed the activities of the nation, and would not repeat the criminal heresy that national necessity abrogates international obligations.

It is the irony of fate that the Germanic enemies of Italy, under the stress of war embraced a doctrine which was first preached by an Italian—a very young and unbalanced personage named Marinetti—who in his initial Manifesto of Futurism, dated 1909, declared that his sect "wished to destroy the museums and libraries which cover Italy with as many cemeteries."

"Would you," he wrote, "waste the best of your strength by a useless admiration of the past? To admire an old picture is to pour our sensitiveness into a funeral urn instead of casting it forward in violent gushes of action. The admirable past may be balsam for invalids and for prisoners; but we will have none of it, we, the young, the strong, the living Futurists. Come, then, seize the pickaxes and hammers! Sap the foundations of the venerable cities. We stand upon the extreme promontory of the centuries: why should we look behind us?"

This whole manifesto, indeed, might well have been written by a Prussian officer of the school which one trusts the war has dislodged; and the ninth article of the Futurist doctrine, which says "We wish to glorify war, militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the anarchist, the beautiful inventions that kill, and the contempt for women," reveals a startling similarity to the creed of the German, as one saw it in those terrible years.

Our late enemies did not destroy valued historical monuments in the manner of savages who knew no better; they destroyed them because the reasoned doctrines upon which their Culture was founded declared

that one living German was of greater value than all the revered works of dead masters, one blow for Germany more precious than all the art treasures in the world. The only essential difference between the teachings of Futurism, at which we laughed, and of Pan-Germanism, against which we fought with such astounding intensity, is that the Futurist advocated the wholesale destruction of all relics of the past, whereas Pan-Germanism tolerated the retention of those monuments and works of art which, owing to their situation, did not interfere in the slightest degree with the paramount activities of the day. In other words, the Germans regarded the safeguarding of these works of art as a matter quite secondary to all practical considerations. They had no objection to the protection of their own monuments, which, they realised, had some sort of patriotic worth; but they did not consider that antiquities had an ethical value in themselves, and they did not regard the destruction of foreign works of art with any real regret at the time.

The point of view held, then and now, by the rest of the civilised world, is entirely different. While we recognise that national monuments or treasures of art are an asset to the country which produced them, we are accustomed to consider them more as assets of the whole human race, irrespective of nationality. We feel that a beautiful antiquity has an intrinsic value, and it is a matter of conscience with us to hand on to the future the treasures which we have received from the past. Cologne Cathedral or the castles of the Rhine would have been as little likely to be damaged intentionally by us as our own ancient buildings. The cathedral of Rheims, though it be stocked with memories of our early struggles with France, is as beloved by every intelligent Englishman as is Westminster Abbey; and the burning of Louvain evoked in England a feeling of distress no less sincere than that which would have been aroused by the destruction of Oxford or Cambridge. Ancient masterpieces are the possession of the whole world: they are

the records of the development of the whole human race, and we treasure them without regard to creed, nationality, or faction. The German threat to destroy the monuments of Italy or France could only be received with horror by us, and the sense of outrage would not have been different had we ourselves been at war with the Italian or French peoples. Each nation, we believe, is but the steward of its antiquities on behalf of the whole world, and warfare does not disrupt that stewardship.

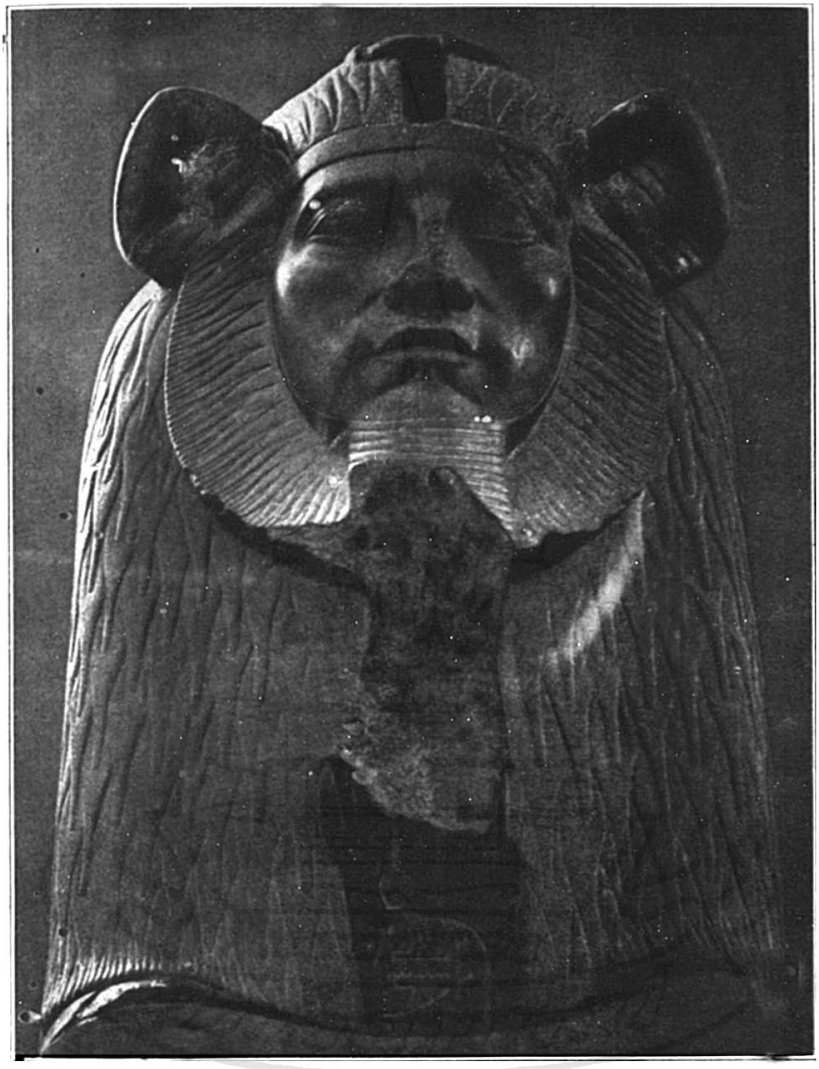
This attitude towards the relics of bygone days is not usually defined by us. It is a sense so rooted in our minds that we have felt no need to find for it a reasoned explanation. But, since our late enemies, in the excitement of warfare, widely and openly preached a doctrine of destruction which we had believed to be held only by a few madmen of the Futurist sect, it is necessary for us to inquire into the unconsidered arguments upon which our sentiments in this regard are based. What, then, is the value of an ancient work of art? Why do we feel that buildings or objects of this kind are entitled to respect no matter how fierce the international struggle which surges around them? Let us search for an answer to these questions in order that the attitude dictated to us by intuitive sentiment may be justified by some process of definite thought. Here in the following pages are briefly outlined the main arguments which have presented themselves to the mind of one whose business for several years it has been to safeguard the treasures of the past from thoughtless or intentional damage, and who, in the stress of that labour, has often searched for the foundations of the instinctive desire to preserve intact to future generations the ancient glories of an alien race.

"Long memories make great peoples," said Montalembert, and it is largely for this reason that the preservation of antiquities is desirable. Antiquities, whether they be works of art or objects of archæological interest, are the illustrations in the book of history, by means of which we are able to visualise the activities of past ages. The

buildings and objects created by any period in a nation's existence have a value more or less equal to the written records of that age. On the one hand the documentary records sometimes tell us of matters upon which structural or artistic relics throw no light; and on the other hand monuments and objects often give information to us which no written word could convey. Antiquities and histories are inseparable. The one kind of record supplements the other; and it is as difficult to read history aright without the aid of these tangible illustrations as it would be to study Euclid without linear diagrams. Thus to destroy antiquities is to destroy history.

The Germans of course did not attempt to make a distinction between objects and documents in their threat to Italy, or in their destructive policy in France and Belgium. Public libraries were necessarily endangered by the menace to public museums, galleries, and buildings; and the attack therefore was openly made upon the national archives themselves, both in their documentary and their material form. The cranks of the Futurist movement desired to annihilate historical records because they considered them to be of no value to human progress: the Germans were willing to obliterate these records because they considered them to be of less value than the temporary operations of their armies. There is very little difference between the two points of view.

Any person of intelligence will quickly recognise that the mind which looks with complacency upon the destruction of a part of the world's archives will regard with equanimity the destruction of the entire record of man's past activities. Ancient buildings, objects and documents are not so numerous that the loss of a few specimens can pass unnoticed; but even if the number were unlimited the crime of the destruction of some of that number would not be diminished. A thief who steals a handy hundred pounds from a public fund is not less culpable because he leaves untouched the bulk of the capital sum, which happens to be out of his reach. This aspect of the



A human-faced lion, probably dating from the reign of Pharaoh Amenemes III. B.C. 1825. One of the great masterpieces of ancient Egyptian art. Now in Cairo

matter thus resolves itself into a question whether a knowledge of history is of any practical value to the man of the present day, or whether it is merely a hindrance to the progress of his original thought. The Futurist definitely accepts the latter view.

"Would you poison yourselves," says his Manifesto, "by a knowledge of history? Do you want to decay? Would you waste your strength by a useless admiration of the past, from which you can but emerge exhausted, reduced, downtrodden?"

The German seemed to take the same attitude towards history, with this one qualification—that he was prepared to tolerate, to a certain extent, the history of his own nation. In his blind agony he saw a certain use in the study of the development of Germanic thought, but recognised none in the lessons conveyed by the history of other nations. German antiquities had some sort of value to him because they were German, not because they were antiquities. Like the Futurist, he felt that he "stood upon the summit of the world"; he believed that he had the right to make new laws, to upset accustomed habits; he would not be bound by the old traditions of which the growth is recorded by history. Confident in the freedom and maniacal strength which he derived from his destruction of tradition, he bounded forward, to use the words of the Manifesto, "scratching the air with hooked fingers, and sniffing at the academy doors the odour of the rotting minds within; warming his hands at the fire made by the burning of the old books; while injustice, strong and healthy, burst forth radiantly in his eyes."

Like the Futurist, the militant German hated the restrictions placed upon him by calm, sedate history; he detested the admonitions of accumulated experience; and, regarding himself as superman, he wished to be rid of all records, documentary or material, which tended to pull his thoughts down from the untrodden paths of his high attainment to the unchanging plains of the world.

Just as in warfare he brushed aside every restraint which experience and custom had placed upon all military actions, and stopped his ears to the voice of history which counselled moderation, so in regard to the treatment of art treasures he adopted a policy of deliberate destructiveness based on the argument that the world's art, the world's history, the world's accumulations of experience, the world's very soul, was as nothing compared with Germany's needs of the moment.

"Come, good incendiaries with your charred fingers," he cried, in the words of the Futurist Manifesto, "set fire to the shelves of the libraries! Flood the museums, that the glorious canvases may drift hopelessly away! Destroy the venerable cities!" So might Germany, untrammelled by obsolete codes, reign supreme over a new earth.

The uses of history are most readily shown in the irresistible opposition which it presents to this attitude; and herein lies the practical value of all records of the past in whatever form they are placed before us. The simple consciousness that we who live in the present day are figures silhouetted against the luminous curtain of former ages produces in our minds a definite sense of proportion and decorum which is our surest defence against anarchy and uncontrol. Man's knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong, whether divinely inspired or not, is the result of his accumulated experience. It is an inherited instinct, derived like the instinct of self-defence, from the teachings of the past; and on that intuitive sense is based all law, all order, and all righteousness. To destroy antiquities, and consequently to obliterate a piece of history, is to help in the undermining of the very basis of orderly society and the weakening of the foundations upon which the peace of the world is to be built. The mind which can regard with equanimity the deliberate destruction of a glorious relic of bygone activities can have little love for the human race, and can hold in no esteem the traditional codes from which the goodness and the balance of mankind are mainly derived.

It is ridiculous to suppose that common sense and natural morality will direct our lives upon the true course. If we have no traditions, if the past experiences of our race be obliterated, we may stray from the road as the Germans strayed, and be utterly lost in the howling wilderness of materialism, where the qualities long-loved and endeared to us by time are forgotten, and the soul of mankind is shed.

Though we do not always realise the fact, it is the consciousness of history which gives us individually that natural discipline discarded by the Germans in place of an artificial obedience. It is the inherent sense of history that is the source of the strength and the sweetness of liberalism and democracy, for it gives to every individual a feeling of responsibility which causes him to act with a kind of reasonable sobriety on all occasions. I do not mean to say that a man is more decorous because he has learnt that William the Conqueror landed in England in 1066; I am not referring to a knowledge of the details of historical events, but rather to a consciousness of history in its widest aspect, a consciousness not necessarily derived at all from the study of books And it is the presence around us of ancient buildings and other relics of the past which prevents this consciousness from becoming dimmed in the hurly-burly of to-day's activities.

Let us ask ourselves this question: Are acquired knowledge and established custom, or is a vacuum the better base for human advancement? If organising energy, creative faculty, and orderliness be so strong in us that we need no foundation for our efforts; if, in the divine manner, we are prepared to create something out of nothing; then, I suppose, we may reply that vacuum, with its freedom from impurities and useless habits, has its advantages. But if we have no pretension to divinity or to super-manhood, then it is clear that we cannot hope to improve the lot of humanity unless we set out upon our task of progress girt with the accumulated experience of former generations, that is to say, girt with history.

Moreover, history hands down to us that most precious of human assets—our conscience. It is history that arms us individually with the sword and buckler of instinctive orderliness; and every antiquity or ancient work of art serves as a reminder to us of our responsibilities to God and man. 'History is the silver thread which passes from a man back to his Creator; and woe be to him who breaks that thread.

In the above remarks antiquities have been regarded simply as the relics of an earlier epoch; but let us now ask ourselves what is the value of antiquities regarded as works of art. In this aspect we must note that the value does not merely lie in the age of the object; for no distinction can be made artistically between an ancient and a modern piece of work. The splendours of art transcend time, their manifestations appearing sporadically in all periods; and therefore, when we ask what is the value from this point of view of an ancient work of art we are in reality questioning what is the value of such a work, of any period, ancient or modern. It is obvious that we cannot simply reply that these works are to be safeguarded because they are beautiful, or because they are finely inspired. That would lead only to the question as to what *is* beauty or what *is* inspiration; and the answer would vary according to the taste of the individual. A more practical, a more concrete reason must be given for the need of preserving these things.

Works of art, no matter what may be the material or the medium employed, are primarily expressions of a point of view which cannot be communicated by the written or the spoken word. A painting, a piece of sculpture, an edifice, or any other work of art, is essentially a statement. The creative impulse felt by the artist, the inspiration which impels him to set to work, is actually his desire to communicate some aspect of his thought to his fellow-men. He has something to say, a message to deliver, an angle of vision to represent, a sensation or an emotion to express, which can be conveyed by no other

means. Words are not the only method of intellectual communication between individuals; and upon certain planes of thought they entirely fail to effect a sympathetic juncture. The artist must make use of other methods of intercourse. Rhythm, symmetry, the composition of lines, the grouping of colours and forms, go to make up his language; and in this manner he unburdens his heart to his fellow-men. Thus the greatest value of a work of art lies in its action as a medium of high intercourse by means of vision and aspect in place of language.

When we look at the works of a master in this art of spiritual expression we are stirred and stimulated by the sensations which he himself has experienced, we read off the message which he has put before us, we see things from his point of view; and a bond of emotional and intellectual sympathy is created between us which could have been established by no other means. In most cases the message thus conveyed is of an ideal nature, telling of emotions which are exalted altogether above the common incidents of the day, and placing us in touch with those beauties of life which are usually regarded as being in some manner God-given. The galleries of pictures and statuary which the Germans ransacked, the groups of splendid monuments and edifices which they blew to pieces, are the libraries of men's souls, where, through our eyes, we may receive the spiritual communications of the masters, and may be linked one to another by sympathy and understanding. In this manner works of art constitute the most powerful bond between the nations; for they connect man to man without regard to nationality. Where a babel of languages leads to confusion and misunderstanding, Art speaks with a voice that men of all races can comprehend; it speaks through the senses, and the language of the senses is common to all mankind.

The writer in the Dresden *Nachrichten* told his readers that the destruction of Italian works of art would be Italy's just punishment; and evidently he had no belief that the loss would also be felt by his own nation. In his

warlike frenzy he had no wish to come into touch with the point of view of other people; and, moreover, his war-dedicated mind regarded with mistrust all consideration of what may be called a spiritual subject. His stern philosophy dulled his brains and blunted his wits; and he refused to admit either the possibility or the desirability of receiving any stimulation from the work of foreign hands. A picture for him was simply paint and canvas, and Italian paint and canvas were enemy goods. Similarly in regard to the French cathedrals which he shot nearly to pieces he admitted the sanctity of neither the art nor the religion of France. Or if there were a glimmering in his mind that such works were the medium for the expression of a point of view, and as such were the cherished vehicles of international sympathy, he shunned with so much the more decision the contamination of non-Germanic ideals. The essence of his system was anti-democratic: it was entirely opposed to internationalisation or to any tolerant and benevolent understanding between the peoples of the world; and anything that led to such a condition was scorned by him as being incompatible with those tyrannical doctrines of the mailed fist, to which in his frenzy he clung.

It is not necessary here to discuss the many arguments of an idealistic kind which can be advanced in favour of the preservation of antiquities. I have stated simply two practical lines of thought—namely, that antiquities regarded as relics of a past age have the same value as documentary records, and illustrate the story of the development of the soul of mankind; and that, regarded as works of art, they serve as an international bond, putting us in touch with the aspirations and the high endeavour of all races and of all periods. In either case, antiquities are seen to be of untold value to the world. On the one hand, they put the people of to-day *au fait* with the movement of the intellect of other ages; they keep us in touch with past experience, and give us the benefit of earlier effort. On the other hand, they enlarge

the breadth of our outlook and put the thought of the different races of the world before us in its spiritual aspect more clearly than written records could put it. In either case they perform a function which is essential to that unity of mankind and that international tolerance upon which the future peace of the earth must be based. We fought for the maintenance of what may be termed the soul of the world; and to destroy antiquities is to destroy the record and the manifestation of that soul. We fought, or so we believed, for the cessation of international misunderstanding, and to destroy works of art is to destroy a vital bond of sympathy between the nations. We fought for the happiness and well-being of our children's children; and we must hand on to them intact the good things that we receive from the past and the present: not only the things that we, in our own phase of thought, consider good, but all those which the past has cherished and the future may find of value. To obliterate now anything which may be the inspiration of our descendants is against the principles for which we should strive. The Germans of the old *régime* deliberately destroyed the records of early ideals as worthless to their materialistic civilisation. We fought, and toiled, and poured out our blood and our treasure, that idealism, sympathy, tolerance, understanding, and good will might be established on this earth for ever. The dream has not been realized after all, but a right appreciation of the value of the records of the past will assuredly help towards its attainment.