

AN ARTIST ON ART

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AN ARTIST ON ART
Collected Essays of
JEAN CHARLOT



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Charlot in His Studio, 1969

VOLUME I

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Foreword

Soon after Jean Charlot joined the University of Hawaii faculty in 1949, he demonstrated one of the important ways in which he had achieved his worldwide reputation: he painted a fresco in Bachman Hall. Since then he has painted other murals throughout the state, which enrich its imaginative life. We quickly learned, however, that murals were only a part of Jean Charlot's versatility. He did in Hawaii what he had done in other places where he had lived—he became part of the community; he painted, he lectured, he taught; he made friends everywhere—he had that precious quality of never meeting a stranger. He became absorbed in our distinctive local culture, so much so that he wrote plays on Hawaiian themes and in the Hawaiian language. Quiet and gentle though he is as a man, he looms impressively in the life of Hawaii.

These essays are based on ideas and activities and intellectual adjustments in various places, particularly Mexico, France, mainland United States, and Hawaii—seventy-nine essays of infinite variety, on art, literature, history, politics, philosophy, all done in a style as rich in image and perception as his painting. When he writes of

“The Painter Sees the World,” “The Geometry of Art and Life,” “Mayan Art,” “Mexican Heritage,” “Petroglyphs of Hawaii,” “Surrealism—or the Reason for Unreason,” or even “A Disney Disquisition” or “The Indian Beneath the Skin”—what riches are here! What he writes about, he illuminates! “Here is God’s plenty!”

Who else would introduce Rufino Tamayo in this unique way:

“. . . [he] came of age as a painter about 1926, when the first energy of the mural movement was already spent, when some ears, sated with the routine of pipe organs going full blast, sighed for chamber music. He, and others of similar mind, witnessed with amused awareness the sport of fellow painters pushing Sisyphean rocks uphill. Surrounded by red banners, closed fists, open mouths, clanging chains, and eviscerated money bags, it was a most natural thing for the dissidents to rediscover for themselves with delight *l’art pour l’art* with its exquisite soul searching, and the aristocratic monologue of a subconscious talking aloud to itself.”

When he buries Cubism, he does it with grace, information, intelligence. He humanizes his well-known associates in the Mexican renaissance; iconoclastic at times, yes; certainly he doesn’t pamper them; he reveals them.

We in Hawaii may relish especially his “Reflections of an Occidental Painter on Chinese Ink-Painting, after Looking at the Works of Tseng Yu-ho.” Consider:

“The European Old Master sports a beard; a beard figures also in the Oriental myth. For the many, it amounts

to a seal of authenticity that raises an ancient ink-wash to the rank of a masterpiece. This magic beard should adorn the chin of the lone philosopher—properly the size of a chick-pea—who gapes at a make-believe waterfall, or else gazes at a make-believe moon.”

It is fitting that at this point in Jean Charlot’s career a collection of his essays should be published, essays that show the variety and richness of his imaginative and intellectual experience. They take us on a voyage through his ideas, through his responses to people and art; ultimately they reveal a great deal of the man himself.

GREGG M. SINCLAIR
President Emeritus
University of Hawaii

PERSPECTIVES

For People of Good Will

There is no mystery about Art. It is one of the simplest things on earth. You know if a piece of furniture is made of good or bad wood, according to the grain, color and density. From the thickness of the beam, the perfection of the joints, you judge the worth of the workman, and if it is waxed with beeswax that smells good, you know that he finished his work with the gladness of perfection. Thus concerning the material. As for the looks, you relish the proportions if they are planned with orderly wisdom; you may prove or disprove its beauty by sitting on the chair or piling up your dishes in the cupboard, your linen in the chest.

A bad piece of furniture is the useless one. The table wobbles, the back of the chair catches the cloth of your coat, sometimes with a nail, other times by elaborate carvings. The screw of the microscope, the dial of a sextant, the face of man, have a beauty that comes from the perfect collaboration of each detail to the whole. Suppress one and you create a freak. The horror engendered by the blind eye lies solely in its uselessness. In the same way the good work of art is (a) made with an honorable material, (b) ordered to a useful end.

a: Material should be good from the start, for the working of it into an “art object” cannot modify its being. As the cabinet maker chooses with a purpose between cedar and pear wood, the painter or sculptor should be fastidious. He should know the origin and components, the weight, the density, the permanency of matters. He should also learn to respect their natural qualities. As a horticulturist prunes and grafts, the conscientious artist corroborates nature. To transmute a thing into another may seem the philosopher’s stone to morons, but it seldom happens without mayhem. The sculptor who gives to clay the appearance of stone, the painter who with colored pigments pretends to open illusive windows, what does their work consist of? By a legerdemain they make a natural being vanish, clay or canvas, and give us a monstrosity in return. They act like those wicked mendicants of yore who, for profit, encaged children into such small pens that their heads alone would grow to bizarre proportions, and pitying crowds would assemble and rain coins upon them.

b: Some ends are so ingrained in an object as to leave no doubt: water has cleansing power, a knife cuts, etc., but for others the end is more devious. To talk is to make a noise but words may be the carriers of thought, the latter may lead to action. Painting deals with plastic objects in the same way that the verb deals with words. Those objects are ideographs of thought. The painting which limits itself within the plastic universe is like the conversation of the mad man, which is a thoughtless noise.

As there were many steps on the ladder that Jacob

envisioned, there is, reflected in painting, a hierarchy of thought. Those imbedded in sensations are lowest. To satisfy their cravings, pictures of meat and fruits and of nude women are useful, although less than the originals. On the next rung sits sentimentality, this well-bred twin of sensuality. For her: musicians, children at play, cats in baskets, family photographs, etc. Still higher comes this class of pictures: historical compositions, portraits of heroes, the likenesses of saints, which make us wish to match their feats. Such are the frescoes of Raphael, the compositions of Poussin and David.

It is paradoxical that the fashion of the day respects only the likeness of vulgar objects, still-lives or landscapes, while the great historical styles are despised as storytelling. The public learns to gabble technical terms, is prodded by the critics into invading the artists' studios. Theaters do not open to customers at rehearsals, and the wings are kept free for stagehands. We painters would also appreciate privacy when at work. When ready, our show is free for all to see. We are pleased if the pain we have taken pleases you. If you are irked, close your eyes, it vanishes.

This article was originally published in Spanish in *Forma*, No. 1, 1926.

The Artist as Copyist

There is a maxim of Delacroix's that has helped lead astray many an artist, and that defines to a great extent the shortcomings of many of our "moderns": "The artist should use nature as a dictionary." This representation of natural vision as a phenomenon which, if not actually to be despised, is nevertheless to be considered as a means only, has imbued many a painter with a disrespect for the world as we see it and an exaggerated admiration for the shapes and fancies that dwell only in the artist's head. Yet if, before using nature as a springboard for inspiration, the painter would examine and analyze the nature of this accessory, he would perhaps, as other masters have before him, become so engrossed in his analysis and full of admiration for the results, that there would be no need to spring, that he could paint what he sees, and replace the sense of his own importance by a sense of awe before nature.

The world we paint is a different one from the world we live in, for it is already a photographic image inverted on the sensitized inner coating of our retina. The problem of translating a three-dimensional world into two dimen-

sions is a theoretical one. The world we see is already flattened on the concave surface of the inner eye.

It is a world which lacks many of the properties of the real world, for its objects, though recognizable, are deprived of the qualities we know them to have in our everyday life. A painted chair is not made to be sat upon, a fruit made of pigment to be eaten, or a picture of a woman to be made love to. Which explains the indifference of a lot of people realistically inclined for this world of the artist in which their senses find no meat. This lack of actual usefulness of the subject matter in pictures is a handicap to an extent, but the object, emptied of the meanings we know well, acquires new and unexpected ones.

The artist deals mainly with the physical, for as Poussin suggests, "There is no painting without solid." He will tend to classify the different objects in the world according to their shapes and relations of shapes, with utter disregard of established conventions: Thus when Velásquez went to Rome to paint the Pope, he first did a portrait of his negro colorgrinder, to prove to His Holiness how well he would paint him: features in painting are a problem independent of the majesty or lack of majesty of the sitter. Cézanne, engrossed in the representation of spherical surfaces, could hardly tell a skull from an apple. And the painter who relishes cubes may be equally impressed by a pair of dice or a pile of skyscrapers.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *The League*, Vol. XI (4), April 1940.

Abstract versus Concrete

In a world so topsy-turvy that labels are far from describing the goods they cover, where, for example, “peace mediation” means an act of war, we must not be surprised that in our own smaller world of art, similar double talk exists. Thus the artist who refuses to tell a lie, who wants pigment to be no more than pigment, lines to mean only lines, and pictures to proclaim that they are but gesso or canvas daubed with a coat of paint, this artist becomes “abstract,” with all the nebulous, spiritualistic and ectoplasmic innuendos that such a word suggests.

On the other hand the man who, far from calling a spade a spade, wants to pass his blob of paint for a cow, or a sunset, or the likeness of Aunt Mary, this man who tells you that flat is round, and near is far, is labeled a “realist.”

If the issues remained in practice as clear-cut as that, there would be no doubt that the abstract painter is the more reasonable of the two, for he deals in reality instead of mirage. But one cognizant of all the “isms” knows that they span the gap between concrete and abstract by imperceptible transitions, so that they may all be covered by the juggling of two percentages, those two ingredients

that are to be found in all works of art, Nature and X. Even within the purest non-objective art subject matter raises its ugly head, and even the most photographic performance differs from Nature's achievements.

The philistine who enters the portals of the museum where the Art of the Future is stored finds that instead of enjoying such pictures as "frozen music," he speculates on such idle facts as whether circles are not intended as balloons, moons, or cheeses, verticals as trees or gutter-pipes, diagonals as rain or Jacob's ladder, and whether free-hand scribbles are not in fact frozen microbes. If pictures could exist without an onlooker, the pristine purity of abstract art could be guaranteed; but alas, the human eye that catalyzes the painting is an impure channel, trained by daily habit to interpret colored areas in function of subject matter, to judge distance in terms of change of scale as well as dimming of hues, to sum up in the ever-changing arc of a mouth all human emotions from laughter to drama.

The optical projection of a painting is the *sine qua non* of its being a painting at all, and automatically means the introduction (valid or not) in all paintings of problems in subject matter. It is better for the painter to deal with this truth instead of denying it. Once acknowledged as a factor always present, subject matter can be mastered for plastic purpose, as one deals with the chemical and optical ingredients of the picture.

On the other hand, however perfect the illusion in a "realistic" picture, it remains quite distinct from reality. To the riddle, "What is it that has ears and cannot hear,

eyes and cannot see, legs and cannot walk?" an answer as true as the accepted one is "A painted donkey." It illustrates the fact that art breeds, willy-nilly, abstract monsters, abstract inasmuch as they are unfit for practical purposes. No man could be so singularly naive as to confuse a cow by Cuyp with one that could be milked; only the birds fancied that there was nourishment in the grapes of Zeuxis.

The gap between abstract and realistic painting exists only in our reading of them. Pictures the most ridden with subject matter, let us say the *Austerlitz* of Meissonier, are made of exactly the same plastic elements as pictures most devoid of it, for example, Malevich's *White on White*. Both are a complex of lines, areas, colors, values, textures, the only difference being qualitative, one of size, number, affinity and contrast. But one thing happens in this particular case that happens also to humans: the one that was intent on spinning a heroic yarn neglected his shape, and thus became a comical sight.

The old masters have proved that one can perfect both a dream and a shape, that there is no incompatibility between formal balance and heroic thoughts, that in fact a great idea is more fittingly clothed in plastic impeccability. The man who looks at their paintings hurdles the problem of subject matter at once because of the clarity of exposition and the lack of equivocation. He is then cleansed, and free to appreciate the picture for its plasticity only.

Modern art, when it tackles subject matter at all, favors its most invertebrate categories: a bowl of fruit, a napkin, a guitar, a nude, and does so with such deviations from

natural appearances that most of the time we look at the picture is passed in comparing our own optical experience of the model with its aesthetic “deformation.” One is thus made prisoner of the subject matter that should be but a prologue of esthetic enjoyment.

Rarely does modern art aspire to what the ancients proudly called “historical painting,” that is, the telling of great events and exalted fables. It may be that the trivial content and equivocal treatment of contemporary subject matter justifies as logical its total disappearance, and that abstract art is fated to be the art of the future. The other alternative is that subject matter must increase in interest, complexity and emotional content, that there will be a re-emergence in modern terms of the higher genres represented in the past by the St. Francis series of Giotto and the Loggias of Raphael.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *The League*, Vol. XII (3), April 1941.

The Geometry of Art and Life

When a Greek painter, heady with success, signed his pictures "He whose works are divine," a wag, by the change of a few letters, made it read, "He who shakes a hot stick," in derisive allusion to the cuisine of encaustic painting. As in antiquity, the modern artist remains split wide between the physical job of art making and the spiritual heights of esthetic contemplation. Probably the safest attitude for the practicing artist is to stick close to what in art overlaps artisanship, and to disclaim any magic power to usher other folk up the steep rungs of art enjoyment.

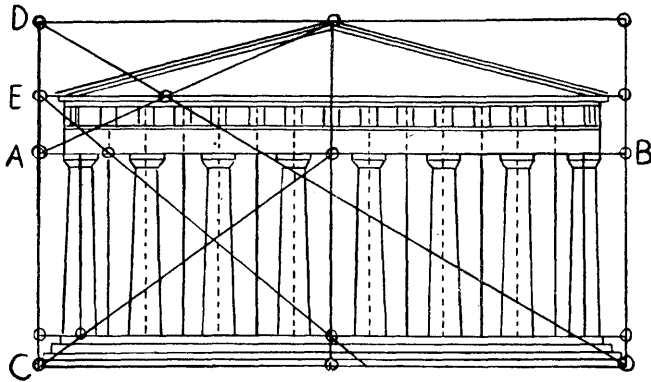
In the Paris of the 1920s, cubism was on the part of the painters an attempted return to common sense. If lines and color areas be the means of painting, then why pretend that the canvas is a meadow and a spot of brown pigment a cow? The increasing process of rationalization that brought a re-estimate of the painter's means was bound to sidepass the more unpredictable element, color, in favor of line and especially of those lines that can be obtained with ruler and compass, and that are thus drained

a priori of the personal idiosyncrasies that it was the cubist's aim to shake off.

Thus geometry appeared to the painter to be the possible common ground where the rationality of science could permeate art, its temperamental and repentant brother. The scientific training of most painters is shaky, but with the help of mechanical aids artists managed to introduce in their pictures enough straight lines and related angles to give them a geometric flavor.

Naturally, the cubist looked at nature to find a justification for his doings, but what he saw was disappointing. With the strict state of mind to be expected from a convert, nature seemed to him a very loose affair. The painter frowned at the old standards of beauty—the swan, the rose, the sunset—and looking everywhere for cubes, cones and cylinders, decided that what he had in mind was superior in its purity to what Mother Nature had to offer. Started as an exercise in common sense, the search ended in abstractions and the weaning away from everyday optics.

When Matila Ghyka's first version of *L'Esthetique des Proportions dans la Nature et dans les Arts* appeared, it justified the painter's dim instinct that saw in geometry a ground common to science and art. It did much (even if we only absorbed its text by a kind of mental osmosis) to reconcile us to the sights of Nature. I remember with what surprise I discovered that the sun flower—made by Van Gogh into a kind of expressionistic soul-mirror and rejected as impossibly romantic by the cubists—grows along a pattern of logarithmic spiral. To learn that the



Hambidge: The Parthenon, harmonic analysis. From Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life*

decreasing size ratio of the vertebrae of the neck of a swan can be interpreted mathematically made us humble, as it suggested that the foundation of beauty, even postcard beauty, went deep into this Pythagorean realm of numbers at whose threshold we stood, Ghyka's book in hand and a duncecap securely screwed over our bohemian wigs.

An important section of the book refers to the geometric *leitmotif* that links the different periods of art making. Under the skin of style—classical, gothic, renaissance, modern—a few choice proportions, a few mathematical beats constitute the common denominator.

The faithful who kneeled in a gothic cathedral, the metallic assertions of an Uccello painting, the French finesse of a Seurat, all owe something to the golden proportion. As this is not an obvious element of the work,

one is justified in speaking of esoteric knowledge. But one should be careful not to mistake the hidden for the obscure, and not to attribute to numbers supreme spiritual qualities. This may be right in the case of a Pythagoras who deals in metaphysics, but the painter is at work only when his hands are at work. To be fruitful his meditations must be short and to the point, and a certain mumbo-jumbo that has crept over art geometry, saddling it with quasi-mystical properties, will perforce leave the practicing artist unmoved. Golden proportion, harmonic door, Egyptian triangle, furnish him with a set of handy recipes no more mysterious than those to be found in a cookbook. A good cookbook put to action procures substantial delight, and the painter who uses the diagrams proposed by Ghyka will commune through these mechanical means with ways whose soundness is already proved by the flower, the crystal, the sea shell, etc.

That the method is not foolproof is shown by some of the illustrations. That it is an open channel to mood appears from the dissimilar results that Guardi, Seurat, Dürer and Villard de Honnecourt obtained from a similar preoccupation.

Rereading the book in its new form and at this date, I find that the same truths acquire new resonances. Meanwhile, an American mural renaissance has forced many painters to experience, as they fit a skin of color over the inner space of a building, the inescapable order inherent to the thrust of its verticals, the level of its horizontals, the abstract relationships between width, height and depth. If at all gifted with a sense of fitness, the mural painter will

work in accordance with the painting's permanent habitat, feel hemmed in by the resistancy of materials and the why of proportions. Ghyka's book, though it bypasses the peculiar problems of mural painting, will prove useful to muralists in search of the magic that may wed the illusive painted world to the reality of an architecture.

A review of Matila Ghyka, *The Geometry of Art and Life* (Sheed and Ward, 1946), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Magazine of Art*, January 1947. Reprinted by permission of The American Federation of Arts.

Art, Quick or Slow

“Le temps ne fait rien à l'affaire.”—MOLIÈRE

If it be true that the last thing a fish is aware of is water, in the same way, because it pervades us from out and in, are we ignorant of the more permanent characteristics of contemporary art. Whereas we see only diversity, even points of dissension between the works of modern masters, there will remain, a few decades from now, the perspective of a school as homogeneous in its output as the work of the eighteenth-century painters, if less amiable. It is even probable that art from the beginning of impressionism up to the death of the School of Paris will seem a logical curve, an unbroken development toward shorthand methods and the selfish use of a private code language, as opposed to the catholicity of the aims of art in most other periods.

Monet was a powerfully built fellow, and painting would probably not have been his pet trade had he not developed a brush stroke broad enough to insure sufficient exercise for arm and wrist. Landscapes became a natural subject matter for the people who enjoyed outings, and who were strong and healthy enough to carry their easels on their backs. The artist painted for his health; the public

was no more taken into his confidence, and painting switched from a universal language to the status of a freemasonry. That the next generation, being of a less sturdy health and of a more decadent turn of mind, enjoyed the somersaults of the spirit more than those of the body, did much to exaggerate this state of affairs. Casting aside its religious, moral, and social bonds, art flung itself into a dance of the seven "isms," of which the last stages are rather shameful, considered as a public performance.

One of the best definitions of modern art was given by Picasso, by negation—as Saint Thomas was wont to describe God—when he said that we were in need of a David. The crystal-like purity of David's descriptions, the logical subdivisions of his plan, are the oratorical tools of a man who addresses the public, of a worker who knows that the responsibility of the artist who creates a picture, in which the minds of generations will dwell, is at least equal to that of the architect in planning and building a house. Such a picture is usually built up through slow craftsmanship, permanency being an essential of the architectural mind.

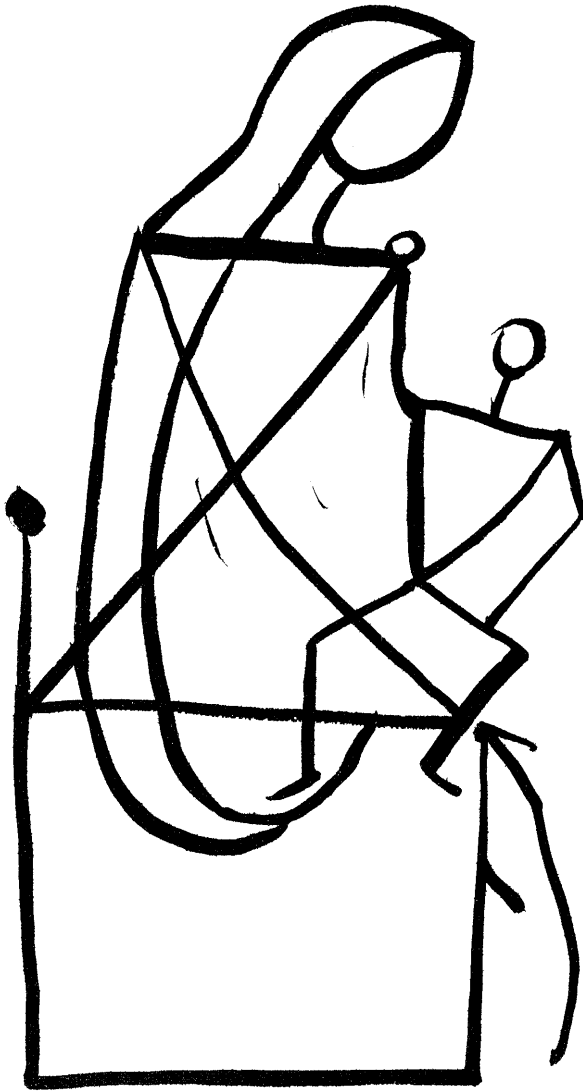
Patience in art, the time involved in the physical creation of a painting, is still for the layman a measure of its excellency. And quick work, the freehand and shorthand technique of the moderns, is the basis for most of the outspoken criticism of modern art. Yet, when the architectural urge is missing, sound craftsmanship cannot save, cannot even make a picture. And freehand technique is a befitting medium in which to voice the language of passion. That it has been misused of late for modish and

trivial ends must not make one forget that it is the natural language of a Van Gogh or an Orozco.

We know by the letters of Van Gogh that the great master of his type works with his mind at a pitch that would be exhausting to sustain. Such exaltation is made genuine and fruitful only through long years of emotional experience and technical study. To such a master, the moment of work is what to the saint is the moment of ecstasy, nourished and developed by the slower process of meditation and mortification. To attempt a slowing up of his painting technique would result for the artist in a distinct loss, a muddling and an obscuring of the unmarred mental image that he envisions as a start.

While quick art has always been linked, and rightly, less to illustrative than to emotive themes, the more careful techniques are commonly believed to be the natural language of academic art, meaning the uninspired objective renderings that the layman still considers as common sense. It is true that patience in art has been associated with secondary figures like Bouguereau and Gérôme; hence the usual linking of so-called objective art and sound craftsmanship. But it is of course obvious that great masters transcend such flimsy boundaries and that Dürer, Ingres or Pontormo used the coolest and most painstaking technique as a medium for the most inspired vision.

The fact that painters like Gérôme do represent the world as it is could have been sustained more easily fifty years ago than now. Scientific research has since exploded the atom into something more like movement than matter. It is proved now that an art that represents the



world as nineteenth-century common sense wished it—labeled, clearcut, and sturdy—is really an artificial, misleading translation, while truly creative art, with its suggestion of complex interrelations of dynamism and of elusiveness, does capture a deeper and a truer version of the world, even in its scientific and physical sense.

Photography, through its dehumanized eye, upholds for us this point. Even among the everyday millions of amateur snapshots, how few correspond to the ethic of the bourgeois eye! And when a great artist works with this, the most objective of mediums, his work does not recall the so-called objective work of mediocre artists, but can only match the work of the more subjective masters. Rare are the masters of photography as are those of painting; yet an Atget, a Weston, weld objective and subjective into one in their indubitable masterpieces.

All great artists have transcended the limitations of any one technique. Dürer, painstaking and dry-cut as much of his work is, did wash his extraordinary water color depicting the dream that he had of the end of the world, in an atmospherical rendering of rain and fog that anticipates Turner. Renoir, in some early landscapes, painted the trees leaf by leaf, an exercise in discipline which may have won for him an ultimate freedom. To each mood of man corresponds a given scale; and a broad mind, to express itself thoroughly, has to make use of the whole gamut. The complete work of art, as does the animal body, brings to a living unity materials as dissimilar on a spiritual plane as are the bones and the nerves, the veins and the

Charlot: After Villard de Honnecourt, thirteenth century



muscles. That the language of art for the last sixty years has been mainly a series of disconnected exclamations is not wholly an indictment: it did befit it to express climaxés of emotions and those twilights of the mind into which other ages have been careful not to venture. There is no doubt either that this period is fast coming to a close, killed by its neglect of the more architectural and static side of art.

Two historical apologues best sum up the two main approaches to art: master Sesshu in his old age decided to paint an aesthetic testament, a microcosm of the world of thoughts, philosophy, and technical experience, the fruit of seventy years of glorious labor. He took a feather, broke its quill, and dipping its barbs in ink made a splash on silk which up to now, duly authenticated by his own and many scholars' writing, remains a masterpiece of Japanese painting.

The Pope, in want of the best man to decorate his palace, sent learned emissaries to prominent artists to wring from each a major work proving his skill and knowledge. The winner of this contest was Giotto, who by tracing freehand a nakedly perfect circle, got the Pope's praise and the job.

To the student, emotion and geometry seem at first sight incompatible; yet they are but two facets of the one art. Underlying all emotional painting, even unknown to the painter, is a system of co-ordinates through which rhythms and spaces could be translated into figures as mathematical as are the intervals of music. And the work of the architectural painter—does it not use the

Tseng Yu-ho: Landscape. Brush and ink, 1950

extremes of the imagination, the geometrical figures that look like nothing much around us? And the assembling of these elements, how much stamped it is by sensitiveness!

Bitter feuds of schools are good only for pupils who through the narrow door of technique search for the fields of the mind, but in the world of the masters, which is this world of the mind, there remains only harmony. There Sesshu's supreme splash connects without effort and abides easily within the perfect circle of Giotto.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Magazine of Art*, November 1934. Reprinted by permission of The American Federation of Arts.

*From Altamira
to Disney*

Animation in art antedates the advent of the cinematograph. I do not mean here the still representation of figures in action, as happens in sports photography, but the mechanical illusion by which a painter produces an optical movement within his canvas, comparable to an extent to cinematographic action.

A painting is static by rule. It seems that a suggestion of animation would interfere with the enjoyment of the painted surface, those relations, affinities and contrasts between areas or colors. Some of the masters have wisely hesitated to bring movement into painting for fear that it would disturb their timeless architectures: Piero della Francesca, George de la Tour, may be called the masters of immobility. But we must also give thanks that a spirit of adventure carried other artists a little further than their actual means would strictly imply. A total purist should limit himself exclusively to the two dimensions of his canvas. That an immobile design should be endowed with apparent animation is no more artificial than this other subterfuge of modeling and chiaroscuro by which the painter suggests three dimensions on a flat surface. Yet

make-believe volume and space have become so essential to occidental painting as to be taken for granted, while the problem of animation has either been omitted or receives casual treatment.

Animation need not be the corollary of a subject matter, for it begins with the very birth of an art work, pervades even the barest geometrical scheme. A line, as Klee puts it, is a dot that has been taking a walk. An area or plane can be said in the same way to be a line that has been progressing crab-wise. And volumes are generated by the gyrations of planes. Those are not theoretical divagations, but the practical means that the eye uses in the act of sight. When we “follow a line” we play at being the dot that engenders it. When we experience a proportion it is by sliding the components into comparable positions. Even the bare canvas has such potentiality.

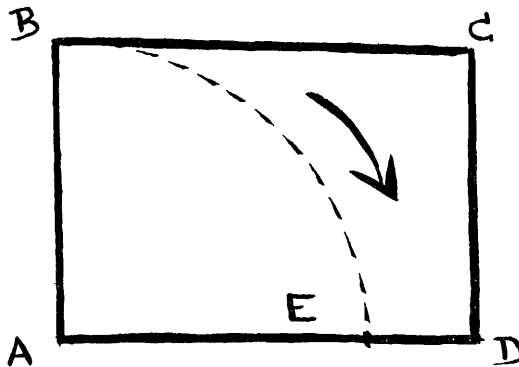


Diagram illustrating dynamics of blank canvas

When we compare the side AB to AD it is by swinging optically B around A as center until it reaches the position AE, ED being the residue or symbol of the aesthetic sensation. The arrow on the diagram is not a decorative addendum but the admission of this cinematic truth. A fan formation of lines can be read as static perspective lines, it may mean also that a single line is swinging with a pendulum movement. In that sense, the tipped tables, bottles and Mesdames Cézanne of Cézanne effect in our brain a constant swing between the vertical that they should be and the diagonal that they are, while if all was plumb perfect and true to gravity the picture would sink into a static state. As we saw, even straight figures sliding around fixed points are bound to leave a circular trail. The curved line becomes thus the trade mark of the painters who thrive on movement. Tintoretto, El Greco, Daumier, materialize those optical tracks into brush strokes. As a result their painting conjures a “tempo” as does music and the dance.

Similar figures drawn at different scales suggest that a single figure is receding in space as it diminishes in size. The rectangular map or mirror that Vermeer hangs on a bare wall is the rectangle of the picture itself which has taken a fling in depth.

When we switch from those abstract movements to motion as an aid to subject matter, we find that even inanimate objects have to submit to animation in painting for descriptive purpose, for motion is our prime way of investigating form. To grasp optically the shape of an object our natural course is to multiply our points of view.

We roll dice held in the hand until we have observed all six facets and checked up on their numerals. We manipulate the drinking glass we buy so as to observe the circle of its base, the circle of its rim, the profile of its cylindrical body. We shake or manipulate small things but in the case of heavier objects, a sculpture, an automobile, we ourselves walk around the immovable object, which comes to the same result in both cases, that of observing a solid from a number of instructive points of view.

This procedure is impossible to apply to the observation of painted volumes. The more perfect the imitation of a given volume in paint, the greater will be the desire of the onlooker to investigate further, the greater his disappointment as by shifting his position to the side all he comes to observe is the canvas flattening into a paper-thin profile. So that it is the painted object, if it is to be investigated at all, which has to move to and fro in front of the immobile spectator, exhibiting its front view, profile, ground plan, etc. It is for this reason that as far away as we can follow artistic tradition, a very few primary shapes fitted to this purpose have been preferred by painters who singled them out of the confused profusion of natural shapes. A painted sphere is as complete and satisfactory a description of sphericity as a sculptured sphere, for a sphere remains identical to itself from whichever point of view. Raphael, who in his own words sees "that Nature tends to the circle everywhere," smooths into this circular dream even the square canvas which he prefers as a tondo, "spheres" the heads of his madonnas with the same partisan fire with which Picasso cubes

his. Next to the sphere, the cube and the pyramid satisfy this law that a volume fit to paint should give a candid account of itself even from a single point of view. Each of those shapes is to itself front and profile view, top view and ground plan.

In the case of those chosen few, no need is felt of forcing into artificiality the natural appearances. The choice of shape at the start assures naturally the multiple point of view which is tantamount to movement.

When we come to informal shapes, their complete description with paint is attainable only through artifice. The minimum description of a drinking glass comprises two circles, its bottom and its rim, one rectangle, its pure profile. The bottle must show a circular ground plan, the smaller circle of its lip, an architectural draft of its profile. Though fearful of the opinions expressed by academicians, Cézanne solves this problem of the glass and bottle by queering the perspective of his objects. This master draftsman forces the rim of the glass into full vision by “bad drawing” if need be, deposits precisely at the bottom of the bottle an orange whose circle is the makeshift image of the bottle’s ground plan. A man less humbled by Nature than Cézanne, Picasso is bolder in his means: he amalgamates within one hieroglyph the unrelated points of view; that the result be puzzling is not to deny the thorough realism of the cubist intent.

As a link between this investigation of static volumes and mimicry proper, we have the border case of Degas. Wishing to paint one of his own sculptured models of dancers, Degas could not sum up into one single point of

view the plastic diversity of his statuette. Instead of evolving a composite image, as the cubists were wont to do later, he did, in one painting, reproduce his sculpture as three or four separate figures corresponding to strategic points of view. Such are the three dancing figures known as the *Danseuses Vertes*. They do not truly move, but should be read as one single figure which, on a revolving platform, describes a quarter arc of a circle before our eyes.

True animation concerns the gesticulations and displacements of living bodies. Simplest perhaps are those cases where, the body remaining in one place, movement affects only the limbs or features. The genesis of such illusion may have been those *pentimento* by which an artist, sketching quickly, superimposes three or four movements of his model. Such is this Mayan charcoal sketch where the face of the god is a composite of two sets of features, one benign, the other wrathful.



Mayan charcoal sketch. Analysis of components



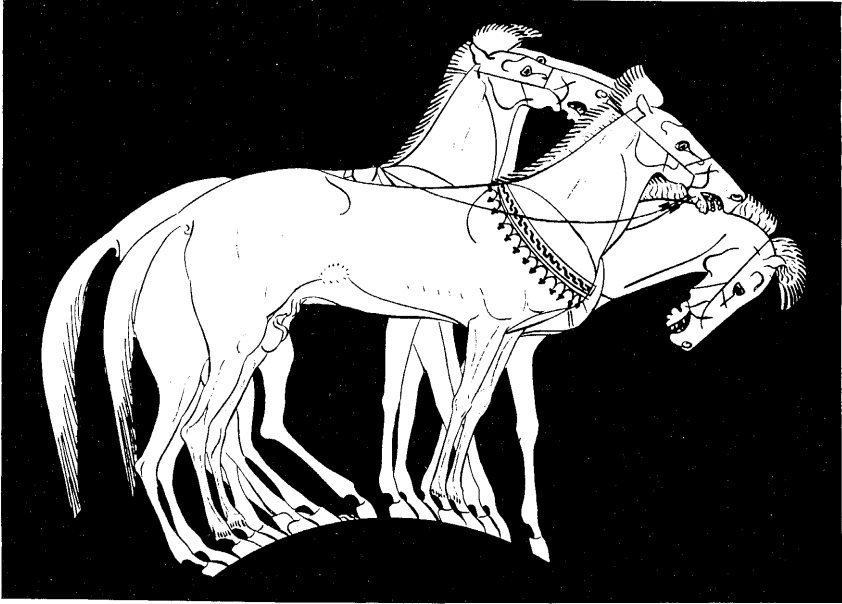
Franco-Flemish Trinity, fifteenth century

Another equivocal field where animation may happen as an accidental is that of scientific diagrams, such as the one in which Leonardo squares and circles a human body whose arms and legs in their two distinct positions suggest a working model for setting-up exercises.

Theology also does its bit. Theologians conceived the Hindu Shiva as having many arms to signify specialized powers. Ignoring those intricacies, the Hindu parishioners must have feared rather the dynamic effect of this wheel of arms precisely articulated at the shoulders, suggesting an ample and evil flapping as of two wings filmed in action. The composite Trinity of Flemish origin embodies a recondite dogma, but it is also one head whose circular movement majestically surveys a whole horizon.

In each of those three genres, *pentimento*, science, and religion, the optical illusion obtains even though it is not the essential intention. But in other diagrams, the artist's aim is to produce such illusion. The wild boar painted in the caves of Altamira is endowed with four pairs of legs, two in running and two in crouching posture, the two tempos of a gallop purposely filmed a few thousand years ago by the quick eye of a hunter. Greek horses drawn on vases are arranged so artfully that out of one body many more heads and legs emerge than an anatomist would vouch for. The legs are seen prancing briskly, the head shakes its mane and rattles the bit. The artist uses the privilege of his archaic status to dabble, more than an

Detail from a Greek vase



academician could, in cinematography. The futuristic dog of Balla, the walloping fist of Popeye multiply also legs and arms through movement. This optical realism for the camera duplicates those effects if the sitter refuses to be still and the shutter is slow.

Other means to produce animation are less realistic, more strictly confined to mental processes. In Picasso's *Enlèvement* two bodies are interarticulated in such a way that limbs are seen moving around knee and elbow, the forearm and leg being represented in two positions each. Picasso introduces here two people, and by double meaning produces movement.

When movement is accompanied by transportation, as in walking or running, the artist comes to use the cinematographic principle: a procession of beings, each illustrating statically an instant of motion, is equivalent to one single being in actual motion. We have thus a Chinese ink scroll of geese which are also, when read from right to left, a goose in flight, its wings passing by transition from their upright to their downward posture. We have the Mayan warrior caught in five successive "stills" of his war leap in the frescoes of Chichen-Itza.

The more complex scenario of the kind attempted in painting is Dürer's woodcut *King Sapor and the Forty Thousand Martyrs*. The action makes use of as many figures as there are Hollywood extras to animate the single actor. This composite Christian walks with diminishing strides until he reaches the edge of a cliff. His arms shoot upwards. With feet clinging to the rock as a hinge for a circular and clockwise movement, the body swings

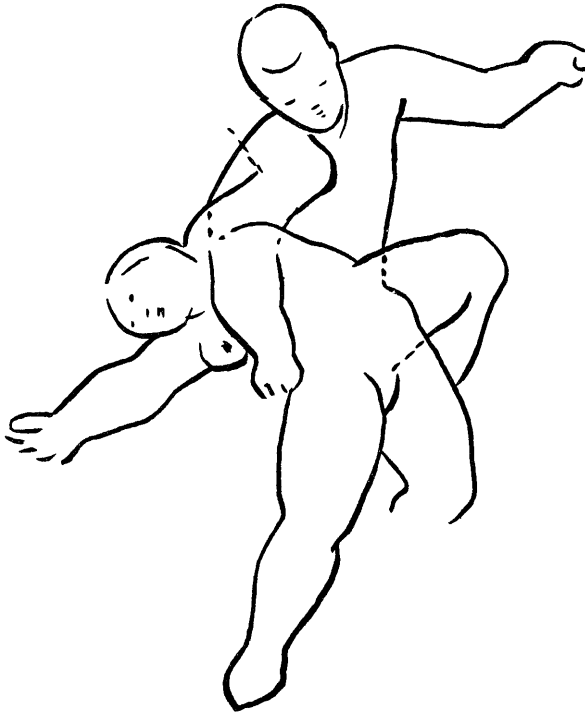


Diagram illustrating alternate readings in Picasso's Enlèvement

into space. The fall follows, until the martyr impacts the lances of the executioner waiting below, and collapses through four downward stages into death. It is edifying to compare Dürer's "short" with a movie of a man diving, the parallel sequences dovetailing to perfection.



Dürer: King Sapor and the Forty Thousand Martyrs.
Detail from woodcut

A similar though simpler strip of action became notorious in our own age: Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, for which this article traces a tradition. Unlike Dürer, Duchamp refuses to make-believe that many people are involved in this descending motion. His rigorous logic conveys not only the diagonal sliding of the single body in space, but even the shifting of the weight from hip to hip, and the balancing movement of shoulders and head.

When the plot becomes further involved, the optical dynamism obtained by abstract composition weakens; the artist needs to rely more on the onlookers' good will to read the tableaus in proper succession and timing. Such are the predellas relating episodes in the life of a Saint, the fourteen stations of the Way of the Cross, the page of "funnies" in our Sunday papers. We shift from the realm of painting to that of storytelling.

The cinema has made possible for us an extreme complexity of timing and movement impossible to reach by other means. Yet the urge of man for a dynamic art could not wait for the scientists' permission to perform. The cave man who "animated" the boar of Altamira would have hugged with reverence this other animalist, Disney.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (Sheed and Ward, 1939).

The Painter Sees the World

The theme of this study is the artist's description of the optical world in its most naked sensorial state, before this description becomes loaded with the emotional or mathematical computations bred in the artist's brain. The assumption that the painter who "merely" copies does an inferior job may arise from a failure to discriminate between the world as we know it and the world as we see it; for it is, in fact, when the artist copies most closely that he is furthest removed from the commonplace. When he copies through the eye alone he not only shuts out all the knowledge arrived at through the other senses and through scientific research or usage; he also denies the common ground between art and science—the preconceived postulates of mathematical or geometric composition. We could go further and say that the act of copying even precludes the many compromises between vision, the properties of pigments, the wrist and arm movements—all that in painting concerns craft and craftsmanship.

Putting nature on canvas is an activity similar to that of the botanist drying flowers between the leaves of his

herbarium; to change live things into dead ones, to flatten things that are round, may seem to an observer of dubious usefulness. Yet the botanist, classifying the weeds of the dishevelled garden of nature, superimposes order and thereby adds to nature. Perhaps there is a similar vocation that spurs a painter to paint; his addition to the world's knowledge is bound to be of an esoteric kind, for if it could be expressed in words, the slowness, cumbersomeness and limitations of paint would make it the least desirable of mediums for the communication of this knowledge.

Vermeer sits before his easel. That the model is Fame the trumpet attests. The artist has started to paint the leaves of a coronet of laurels. The rest of the canvas is untouched as yet. Insect-like his brush will cover this plain surface stroke by stroke as with a petit point stitch. He has no plan, if we discount the humble personal opinion which explains the choice of a model and a light. If there is logic, if there is beauty, even emotion, in the finished picture, these traits will come from the outside, seized upon by Vermeer's attentively cool eye. A Tiepolo may astonish us with a Fame flying enveloped in a rustling train of varicolored scarves, a picture whose reference to the actual optical world is as slight as the toe-marks of the diver against the springboard. The painter alone is responsible for whatever beauty there may be in the Italian picture. But the Dutchman astonishes us even more with his Fame solidly planted on both feet, the logic of his work emerging from the outside, just as it does when the jigsaw puzzle addict fits together tidbits and completes a picture

whose effect he had not had in mind at the outset. Yet the plastic spectacle gathering on the sensitized mirror that is the painter's eye testifies in terms of optics to the ordered scheme of the world.

The painter who uses his brain to check on natural vision is greater than the painter who accepts a commonplace version of the world. Poussin beautifies his pictures with much knowledge of other arts, antique canons of beauty, poetical fables, musical *tempi*; he reenforces this knowledge with the rules of geometry and a philosophic climate that bind firmly together the too fluid elements of vision. One must also admire the terrific impact of a Tintoretto or an El Greco, shattering the optical world and reforming it into another world after their own image. But perhaps greater than both types is the painter whose whole struggle lies in the effort to coordinate this inverted image on the inner eye and the man behind it, without reference to other sources of knowledge and without the interposition of personality. This start from rock bottom, this primary struggle featuring man and his senses naked, may be the only discipline out of which the permanent metaphysics of paint can emerge.

Whereas the outer world is in three dimensions, a conglomeration of bulks that can be impacted, circumvented, felt or built, the world which the painter knows is different; it is an optical world, smashed flat and upside down on the dark coating of his retina. Or rather, not truly flattened, it curves along the concavity of the inner eye, is received on this spheroidal screen which corresponds in the realm of optics to the factual shape of the

universe. Out of the interrelationship of these twin round worlds, the physical macrocosm and the optical microcosm, grow a series of identities, overlappings, displacements and transformations which may yield a clue to the validity of the painter's language.

If one magnifies a newspaper photograph the better to see a detail, this detail vanishes further and is replaced by the meaningless dot-and-blank of a printer's screen. Similarly the man who plumbs natural vision finds that a blur gathers, muddling the neatly labeled things. Neither the line nor the color of the world as seen can stand a curious approach. The optical world is dependent on physical bodies only insofar as they are revealed by light. Light is its most solid possession. The sleeper and the blind are conscious of things unseen but to the painter the unseen ones are as if they were not.

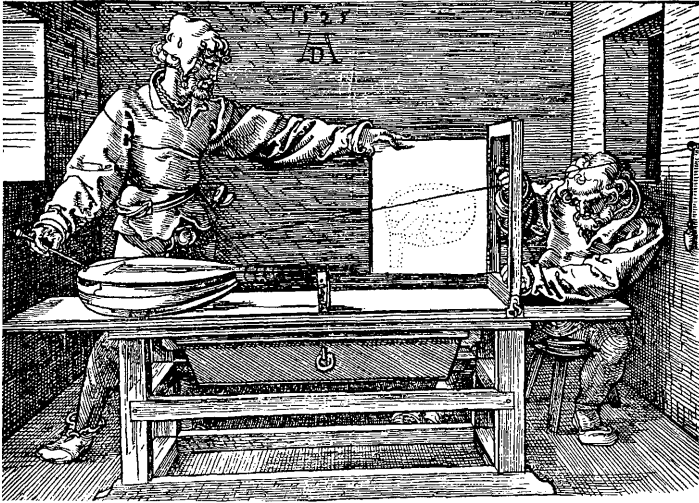
The eye gathers the meaning of the shape not from its silhouette but from inside. All modelings lead to this backbone of form, the frontier where light meets dark. Centrally located, this backbone of form draws to itself all the subsidiary, component forms, as the spine controls the web of the ribs. The outline proper, drained of power, expresses the illusiveness of matter rather than its boundaries; the form seen turns into the form unseen; the indistinct junction of solid and space affirms the sponginess of matter, as full of air as an expanded lung.

A house, a wall, a tree, are given definite colors by laymen as easily as if they were children's toy blocks; in the painter's world such local colors are modified by aerial perspective, slashed into contrasting hues by light

and dark, suffer metamorphoses that transcend the limitations of our vocabulary. The seen world (of which color is the articulation) has no use for those generic terms that suffice to the man who is color-conscious only as he protects steel from rust, daubs a barn door or inspects the bill for his wife's new dress.

No body can stand optically isolated, as it is isolated by reason or by anatomy. Each affirms its affinity to its surroundings until the whole is a unity, as is a straw matting or a shingle roof, each unit dovetailing into the next. The optical outline is not free, as in a mechanical rendering, but receives impacts from lines outside itself, is sucked in by tangential movements, is thus anchored securely to things far and near which it needs never physically touch. Local color also reacts to its surroundings as edge meets edge. The apple, which the fruiterer knows to be solidly round, yellow and red, in Cézanne's eye magnifies its yellowness against a purple cloth, reddens to deeper hue against the green of a bottle, is dragged out of both shape and tone by the magnet of a wallpaper design. The object is tied further to its surroundings by the shadows cast; they transcend the object that casts them, ooze over neighboring objects like tentacles. The scientist has to explode the things we know into particles heretofore unknown before he reaches their common denominator. But the visual world, retaining the image of things as we know them—a table, a bottle, an apple—commingles them into a oneness to which common-sense experience offers no clue.

Dürer: The Perspectivist. Woodcut, 1525



Optical objects, unlike factual ones, are not capable of measurement. With calipers and rod the anthropologists can subtract from man enough to equate him with a row of ciphers. But the shifting relationships in space of bulk and limbs make such a job impracticable for the painter. When Dürer attempts numerical formulae he enters the realm of anatomists; if his etched Adam and Eve, instead of cautiously imitating a bas-relief, behaved with the reckless gusto of the leaves of the trees about them or the blades of grass at their toes, their postulated measurements would collapse. The painter must reconcile himself to scientific monsters. A model extends his hand forward and it becomes as large as his torso, drags a foot back and it shrinks to the size of the big toe of his forward foot. There is more than a joke in Parmigianino's self-portrait, distorted in a concave mirror, for this bizarre and unscientific relation of limb to limb within a single body is of the essence of the optical world.

Such a world reacts in a most unEuclidian manner to objective spatial truth. When Raphael scorns perspectives as "those measures that seem to be and are not" he brings a fresh wonderment to the somewhat jaded view we take of scientific perspective; it is an incredible world where all parallels meet, where horizontals foreshorten into verticals; an architectural scene, drawn in perspective, opens and closes its right angles with the reckless dash of a señorita maneuvering a fan. This rendering from a single point of view is only half of the optical truth, for the fact from which the painter starts is not a single image in the camera obscura but twin images, one on each of his

retinas. Twins, but not identical, for if we shift our emphasis from one eye to the other, backgrounds slide sharply in relation to the object; the object, as we look at it through one eye and then the other, will expose, if it is close enough, more of one side and then of the other, as if it were pivoting gently. This primitive triangulation achieves computations in depth which the cubist tried to emulate—through both eyes used simultaneously we can see both sides of a sheet of paper, five facets of a die.

The distances involved in optics are relative, not measurable by yardstick but created anew in each picture. In a Cézanne landscape the pine tree in the foreground is related to the Mont St. Victoire in the background by a pocket of space that may be no wider than (in his *Mardi Gras*) the space between the harlequin's right and left foot.

The relative importance of things in the objective world is graded according to man, his hobbies and his needs. The optical approach upsets this egocentric order. Snapshots of a great man may focus candidly on the creases of his trousers rather than on the pose he strikes. Inasmuch as the painter-copyist, too, functions as a camera he creates a new order based on shape and colors rather than on ethical, social or religious values. Paintings which attempt to preserve the order based upon the laymen's usage can present only a useless world: painted chairs cannot be sat upon or sketched houses entered, etched beggars gather no alms, frescoed kings cannot rule.

When an astronomer computes the orbits of planets, man disappears from the landscape. When a scientist makes researches on the colloidal scale, man's body

dissolves into cells, becomes unrecognizable. With his vision of the known world upset, man loses his supremacy and even his identity. Without changing the scale of vision but by shifting his point of view from routine knowledge to pure optics the painter also faces a revolution.

Thus, born of this new vision, paintings which are great plastic organizations glorify the inorganic rather than the human body. Giotto lavishes care on buildings and rocks. To strengthen man's body into the equivalent of a plastic tool he must needs cover it with heavy all-hiding cloaks which bring it closer to his beloved mountain forms. Raphael's bonneted pope is dwarfed by the upholstered tassel of his throne. Velásquez juggles in one picture with three spherical shapes: an apple, a dwarf, a prince. The human body can hardly compete with purer geometric forms or his fleshtone with that of flowers and skies. With man dethroned, other bodies assume dictatorship, as do those candle flames to which El Greco dedicated a prose-poem.

However aloof the new-found hierarchy which governs his choice, the painter is no floating spirit but a severely anchored body. The world he discovers from his ambush is conditioned by the elasticity of the eye-lens and the varying length of the visual ray. With each given focus he finds himself at the core of a hollowed sphere with a range of visibility coinciding with its periphery. This spherical grasp of the outer world, which Cézanne refers to in a letter as "concentric vision," brings what we see of the universe out of a state of infinity and apparent disorder to a state limited, orderly, and as such within the range of

human purposes. The classical concept of the world apparent in Raphael or Poussin is not wholly a mental construction but an echo of the humanistic order reigning within the optical sphere. The painter, having through candid vision upset the established hierarchy of things, finds in this “concentric vision” a new dignity. His becomes a pre-Galilean universe, with man again at its hub.

This assumption of a rigid focus is adopted for clarity’s sake. But when we observe a scene our eye changes its focus according to the range of the objects successively sought. This gives a quasi-tactile reality to the selected details while the marginal areas become indistinct. Vermeer in his *New Testament* at the Metropolitan Museum focuses on his background and fills the foreground with an amazing rendition of a tapestry seen in blurred vision. Titian in his neutral backdrops solves the Gordian problem in a dictatorial way by wiping the unfocused planes out of optical existence. To make everything in a picture equally sharp or equally hazy, no matter how far apart from each other in space, is to establish a composite image—which in painting is the equivalent of time. Successive focuses in the act of seeing collapse into simultaneity in the painted result. In terms of physics, the world that ebbs and flows inside the painter’s eye justifies styles ranging from the sharpness of Mantegna to the fogs of Monet.

The gentle light, the amiable scenes favored by Vermeer, the humble objects Cézanne paints, are the wilful choice of men heroic enough to be copyists yet wise enough to channel natural vision into problems that are relatively

simple and capable of solution—Cézanne's apple, Vermeer's bare walls, approximate laboratory conditions. Thus the man who copies finds that a style has been imposed on his work through the extreme chastity deemed wise in the choice of subjects—a simplicity such that beside it the purest antique groups of Puvis de Chavannes seem ambitious exertions. Others may relish stranger moods in nature, fantasies in optics tinged with a content that is demonic, one is tempted to say Germanic. Such a scene confronted Leonardo, according to his own record—an old woman in black whose head, bonneted in white, seemed in the sunlight twice its natural size. Rembrandt seized upon the optical prestige of night devouring bodies; Grünewald recorded the miracle of their vanishing into intense light.

However candid the copyist's approach, his choice of a "motif" will tend to harmonize the physical fact that is his canvas with the optical facts of vision. Into Vermeer's optical world the canvas itself with its four square angles attracted square window panes, chessboard floor patterns, rectangular pictures that hang within the picture; this affinity translated into depth explains the cubed space of Vermeer's rooms, the cubical constructions of Cézanne and Giotto.

Concentric vision produces a taste for spherical forms. Again Vermeer illustrates the point in his astonishing picture at the Metropolitan Museum which bunches together those spheres—the mappamundi, the crystal of a celestial globe, the apple, the breast to which the hand points. For him the common denominator of vision is the

globule of light and color dropped from the brush tip— to his painting as vital as the round cells in its blood are to a living organism. In *The Milkmaid* it transforms a loaf of bread into a star-studded universe. It is spherical as the sun and as the eyeball, the two ends of the ray on which it is threaded, pearl-like.

I was watching a duck waddle out of the shade. A gray fowl on gray dust at the outset, it crossed into sunlight and became a dazzling white bird on pink ground while at a right angle from him his sharp shadow, just born, followed his moves, its blue feet close to the golden feet of its mate. Optically all was changed; the bird and the scene were transfigured and a dark bird was added to the play. But my duck, save for a warmer feeling at its webs, had not noticed the change nor the strange companion aping its step. This bird was no painter but, secure in its tactile experience, upheld a layman's faith in things as they are.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *The American Scholar*, Vol. X (1), December 1940.

The Critic, the Artist, and Problems of Representation

An artist who turns critic is handicapped by a great pride and a great humility. The medium of words, the process of intelligible analysis, are foreign to his trade and in the use of such tools his unfamiliarity makes him humble. His pride is a reflection of the fact that he has over the professional critic the advantage to which Mark Twain pointed—that same advantage that the bug has over the entomologist—he knows his subject from the inside.

Artist and critic are of opposite types and what befits one is poison to the other. The facile approach to all the sources enjoyed by the modern critic, his mind filled with illustrations of all styles of all times, is, as regards the painter, a dubious blessing. The artist of yesterday, limited as he was by the lack of automobiles and of photography, had as a result an innocent faith in the one local style of his birthplace or bishopric, and a lifetime to dig far down into its possibilities, to a depth made possible only by such a narrowed approach. His colleague of today, unless he be of the strongest, will ease himself by leaning on an academic knowledge of the art styles of the past. All he knows, from Altamira to Miro, will be ingeniously

put to work in pictures whose only defect will be a lack of creativeness.

True creation must start from nothing. For the artist who only approximates this godlike attribute, true creation must at least start from little. The real painter approaches his work as nakedly now as he did in the prehistoric cave. This emptying of himself, this vacuum cleaning which is the first step of creation, is the absolute opposite of the data gathering and file ordering of the critical type.

The hypnosis in which the creative artist must dwell will develop his emotional, intuitive functions, but will make him less fit to express himself through the more commonplace, more analytical channel of words. There is a general and valid acknowledgment that the better the painter the dumber he must be, and out of this dumbness the critic is born and makes hay. In our day the critic has become the indispensable middleman, sandwiched between the work of art and its public. His oratory in behalf of his dumb friend, the artist, more than often irritates the latter. Yet critics have their *raison d'être* in the reluctance of the artist to act as his own mouthpiece.

It is little wonder that the artist whose whole job is to put separate things together, to weld them solidly through composition and common emotional climate, will not see the point of attempting the reverse movement. To take a well-fused painting and tear it apart, design here, color there, spatial, tactile, qualities, each cut clean and labeled, all ready to be dumped in an alcohol jar, is the job of the critics of our day, as typified by a Barnes—a kind of post-

mortem trade. Much fun has been made of the emotional criticism of yore as opposed to such a so-called scientific attitude. Yet the case for the old-fashioned literateur-critic is still valid. He sensed the picture as alive and an autopsy would have seemed to him akin to murder. Pater attempted to parallel in words the mood of the picture, justly deemed all-important. Line, color, composition, were minimized as so much studio slang.

That the public loves to go behind the scenes does not impair the fact that its logical place is in the orchestra. So much shop talk has been aired in books discussing modern art that it has been forgotten that the picture is after all a spectacle to which for its full enjoyment one must bring a kind of ignorance or innocence. There is one problem, however, which is of interest to both artist and layman and stands as the meeting ground of their relationship—the problem of representation.

That pigments laid on canvas have anything to do with a representation of the world is not in fact apparent. Yet man, whose eye is trained at detecting the elements of natural spectacles, is quick to interpret into symbols otherwise meaningless patterns. Thus, as Leonardo points out, we see faces and monsters in the cracks of an old wall or in a moving mass of clouds. Contrary to the layman's opinion it is not the representation of nature that is difficult in art but, if such be the aim, a severance of the connection between painting and representation. The least clue of line or color, however faint, will set the associative power to work. An ink blot on paper will create a rough but effective illusion. The black may suggest a hole in the paper

affording a receding vista or become some object lying on the sheet of paper. Whatever the reading, an illusive space and volume are created. Such humanized interpretation of plastic facts multiplies with any stroke, scribbled line, change of value or of color in a picture. The human eye is trained to interpretation and the human mind follows its routine of attaching some objective reading to any system of line or color, be it in nature or in art.

It would be a cleaner job if one could paint with line and color only, barring their associative corollaries. In fact, abstract painting, using line and color per se, would be the only realistic approach to paint, denuded of what in painting smacks of magician's art and childish make-believe. But it appears evident from even this simplest example of the ink blot that, however desirable it would be to isolate line and color in some kind of sterilized vacuum, to study art "in the abstract" as we moderns put it quaintly, by some inescapable process of our imagination the outside world does get all mixed up with our diagrams. Picasso, try as he may, cannot shake off his guitar and his pipe. So, if we are to paint, we are to accept representation, the introduction willy-nilly of a subject matter woven into painting, as essential to pigment as is its physical density or chemical properties. Though such a conclusion lacks sophistication there is little harm done at that.

The incompatibility between storytelling and plastic equilibrium is an entirely fictitious creation, a scarecrow propped up by dealers and critics to shush a dissatisfied public. Throughout the history of art, representation and plastic qualities have grown and prospered as dependent

on each other as are Siamese twins. But for the last sixty years a strange disease has overcome painting, the twins have come to hate each other and each would cut himself loose from the other even though such a step means death. Compared with what went before them, impressionism and cubism—those supposed opposites—seem very close to each other, intimate allies in their war against subject matter. Only their means of warfare differ since an impressionist will melt, a cubist will hack, whatever they chose to come in contact with. It was perhaps a lurking instinct of shame that made them limit their slaughter to wholly noncommittal objects that would have been deemed ignoble by the historical, moral, dynastic schools of the past. Laboriously intent on clearing Monet and Picasso the critics of those last decades have built up a case for painting versus subject matter but it is dubiously convincing. It is a plea for the defense, and judicial oratory is sure to age badly.

That the painter is to deal with the objective world as one of the inescapable ingredients of his paint does not imply that he is to take representation as his aim. It seems more within human logic that he should bend it to his own end, use it with the same discrimination with which he handles contrasts of color or dynamics of line. But even if the painter unduly decided that representation alone was his end, he would not thereby become an exponent of academic art. Even the purely material version given by a camera rarely coincides with the academic version of the world. Freakish distortions, multiple exposures of

moving objects, hazy focusing of planes raise questions that painters true to nature would have to face. Furthermore, human vision with its double foyer and prehensile focusing multiplies the problem of camera vision *ad infinitum*. And if we consider the glaze that the human brain inscribes over the margin of human vision, it becomes apparent that academic art is no truer to nature than any of our modern "isms." It would have been easier fifty years ago to state that academic painters represent the world as it is. At that time "science" had a kind of cumulative and permanent meaning; since each optical fact is related to a physical one, the painting of a collection of facts seemed to have a certain value as scientific data. To infringe on this pure representation, to distort imaginatively, would have been a sin against science. Since those days, though, science has shattered this atom into something more like energy than matter. The world, as modern science conceives it, is again full of mystery. Its laws are relative, submitted to a kind of free will on the part of matter. These unforeseen qualities, this dynamism, must be built into any picture that is tuned on scientific reality. We do find this structure in the work of the great subjective masters more than in that of the so-called academic painters. This justification of what up to now passed as artistic temperament means that both objective and subjective do beat with the same pulse. Our own human mechanism is also an integral part of the world, and as the Chinese clearly expound, painting the laws of mountains and trees and riverfalls is but an introspective

excursion. Painting, even if we start our quest with the commonplace assertion that one must paint "real," becomes on examination a very spiritual affair.

No matter what objects appear in the picture, the painter conjures them up through his use of space and volume. Their representation on a flat surface outsmarts a magician's trick. That canvas and color should become human beings, trees, mountains or sheep seems more freakish than the pulling of rabbits out of hats. And it is true that a certain kind of naturalistic painting is no more than a magician's sleight of hand. Not the representation but the suggestion of space and volume is the painter's trade. The painter dealing with lines and colors is bound to create a kind of third dimension, as lines and colors will do even when left to themselves. But to remain a painter one must use such magic properties with a grain of salt, wink at the onlooker to make clear the fact that the painting is only an illusion, preserve within the painting certain areas where color and canvas refuse to play the game. Hence those purposeful limitations that some deem defects in the masters: the strong unnatural outlines of Botticelli and Ingres, the undisguised brushwork of Rembrandt or Cézanne.

A sculptor achieves volume by gauging its internal space; the painter achieves volume by closing up space around it. In the true painter's language, concave and convex can stand for space and volume, as it is akin to the semi-space or semi-volume that the inside or the outside of a spoon illustrates. The painter who favors volume will contract the object and make it compact,

avoid gaps between arms and torso, treat fingers as a single mass. Such shapes as those of Renoir would be translatable into good sculpture, were it not that the painter reasserts himself at the meeting point of shape and space, where the slight trembling of a line, a lack of focus will reassert the painted atmosphere that the rounding of the shape nearly denied.

Painters who select space as their major theme will prefer unsculpturesque elements whose thin members are like arrows pointing to width, height and depth. Hence the fondness of Chinese painters, space-hungry, for lean stems, bare branches—hence also the perspective lines and surveyors' stakes that are the lances of Uccello, the so-called "decorative" stripes of Matisse.

Because of such hidden reasons art has built up its peculiar bric-à-brac of subject matter, a medley of fat or lean objects to which each painter and each school for an essentially abstract purpose comes back. And it is a happy coincidence that in the days when the Church was patron of the arts, the painters, translating the sacred symbols into terms of their craft, could well warm up to the combination of horizontal and vertical which is the Cross, that pointing to cardinal directions of ladders, sticks and lances.

The hunting ground of the painter is strictly this physical world. The constructions of the mind which a philosopher, a scientist, may expose nakedly can be referred to in painting only by representing objects possessing on the physical plane a similar order or set of properties. Many objects have a metaphysical meaning disconnected from their plastic appearance. For example

though man, this microcosm, is the creator of balanced logic, his body, the only part of him with which painters may deal, with its shifting lines and suave modelings is no more able than other animal bodies to express such constructions of the mind. Yet those man-made constructions that come within the range of painting are eminent illustrations of mental processes. Hence the fondness of great periods for using the human body as only one of the ingredients of art, fortifying it with painted architectures that convey a static order. What those tiny houses and those cubistic mountains of a Giotto bring to his pictures is this brand of human logic that the human body fails to convey.

For the last half century sophisticates have jeered at paintings that tell stories. But as action follows reaction, subject matter was to make a vengeful comeback. There is of course nowadays a group of painters who, stung by social consciousness, present subjects chosen to advise, infuriate, or arouse enthusiasm in the "masses." Their achievement is weakened by the fact that such well-meaning painters did not fully realize that a new approach to the grammar of paint was the one condition essential to making the story legible. More profoundly typical of the new plebeian attitude, though forced into it very much in spite of themselves, is the position of the surrealists. It is true that the stories they tell are not at all nice, are barren of all social sense and have been industriously shorn of logic. But their pictures are definitely storytelling, with the special grammar, patient craftsmanship, photographic slavery to detail with which G r me glorified

his odalisques and G. J. Brown his bootblacks. A look at such pictures makes it obvious that the painter is no longer painting for pleasure but that painting is truly a business which presupposes the existence of a public and caters to its reactions. Paradoxically, though there is little mental finesse behind a Monet picture, its disregard of convention, its sheer brawny relish in brush stroke and cheesy pigment, make it the aristocratic gesture of the man who does as he pleases. Though there is much sophistication behind a Dali picture its academic treatment spells the vulgarian, the man who works to please others. This is an important turning point, a very much needed attitude after the orgy of selfishness characteristic of the elder moderns. Much against their own claim, it must be said that Dali et al. bring painting back to a point where it is no longer a masturbation but a trade. In his new role of tradesman the painter must evolve a technique adjusted to the correct or moving recitation of a fable. Description becomes to him what diction is to the actor, and less trust is placed in the sheer qualities of paint.

A general comeback to storytelling is unavoidable. The craft of painting is in its healthiest state when painting is used to an end, just as a healthy body is put to work. Painting for painting's sake is like the man who is afraid of failing health and totters through desperate medication and endless build-up exercises. Both for art and for man an anatomical interest in one's own carcass is born of a pathological fear of death. Modern art has become thus a language of interrogation and exclamation signs, fit to express emotional climaxes or introspective states but

lacking the articulations needed for objective description. To be vital the comeback to subject matter must be linked with the creation of a fit plastic language. Unhappily the surrealists sidestepped this problem, choosing as more expedient the wholesale plundering of 19th century academies. This weakens their effort, and as is true in the case of the Pre-Raphaelites and other "neo" movements, a stillborn aroma pervades their achievement.

Braver pioneers of the objective trend were perhaps the Mexicans who in the early twenties frescoed the walls of their public buildings with histories. These painters, living as craftsmen in close union with the master masons and workmen with whom they collaborated, did work of social import, forgot the ivory tower, and were recognized as useful by their fellow men. And more important, their plastic language, though fit for descriptive purpose, was not a surrender to the past.

This is the new trend. But though it represents a most intelligent desire on the part of a painter to take his place openly in the social structure it is not without its drawbacks. Set on a pedestal the artist was at least removed from the crowd, did not interfere with its traffic. Shorn of his prestige he makes a poor showing among his would-be fellows; and workers, both the brawny and the white collared, eye him with suspicion. The truth is that painters are in the bastard position of being neither bona fide workmen, as are carpenters, plumbers, etc., nor in tune with intellectuals. Their craft is certainly manual and their dominion over their material and their zest in handling it are typically characteristic of a craftsman. But whereas

one easily understands the use of a table, or of a chair, or of plumbing, and thus partakes in a social intercourse of exchange with their maker, one is more in doubt concerning the good of a picture. It is one of those baffling objects that like a piano are rather a nuisance unless you know to use them.

In truth a picture is an object only in appearance. That is, a picture in the dark, though physically unchanged, is no longer a picture. Only its optical projection into the human eye gives a picture its sense and its worth. The physical object is just a projecting machine; and the optical image, the real picture, exists and functions only in the semi-physical, semi-spiritual world of the human brain. With its body as physical as is a chair or a table, its function confined to the sensorial fringe of our mental reactions, and its aims those of spiritual introspection, painting bridges our whole universe. The painter who deals in such a dubious and impractical affair will never, try as he may, be accepted as a worker among other fellow workers.

The attempt on the part of the artist to adjust his relationship to the living is only part of the problem. If all that he asks for is food and shelter, the probability is that he can sneak through this life without awaking much antagonism, meanwhile making ready his post-mortem halo. More important to him, however, than this compromise with the living, the artist has to compete in his trade with the dead. They are his tutors, too, for more painters were made conscious of their gift while making the rounds of museums than while standing in front of

beautiful sunsets. But as soon as the artist starts to paint, the dead become his rivals, and from the level attained through the slow sifting of the centuries, from the vantage point of their Olympian position, they become formidably alive.

There is of course a hypnosis in museums, an awe born of the gold curlicues on frames, the dust-encrusted varnish, the labels with their ominous dates. The old masters in lace and long beards, for the layman, seem to be there and beckon. Even more impressive, if plainer, is the approach of the painter who, though he strips the work of all this ballyhoo and the men who did it of their unwanted halos, is still confronted with an excellence so great that matching its qualities means the work of a lifetime and surpassing them seems forbidden. The “bigger, better, faster” slogan of the mechanical engineer is here useless. The more the painter knows, the simpler his technical needs. All human expression may still come out of the few earth colors, yellow ochre, red ochre, terre verte, the black and the white that composed Apelles’ palette.

This chumming with the dead, which is both a spur and a restraint, is mysteriously spoken of as Tradition. It is a popular belief that the modern artist remains aloof from such, that he willingly would burn the museums the better to build from new premises. Yet paradoxically the fact that his work has an appearance distinct from that of the masters gives it the earmark of the true follower. For the masters are such because they did not copy. Their work eternizes a peculiar climate born of themselves and their own passing world. To follow them one must also face

one's self and one's world. To assume their surface quality is to misunderstand its deeper spring. Thus tradition is not, as some would have it, a pedantic historical knowledge but straightforward human relationship.

Tradition is also this continuity of the craft that leads the worker wisely to submit to the laws of his material. Instead of curving his own will to their logic the beginner fights against natural laws. He will polish a wood sculpture and make it look like china, but an adzed plank has more organic beauty. An egotist may paint a mural that surpasses architecture, but the very doors and windows of the building shame it out of plastic existence. When one knows more, one learns to collaborate with wood and pigment. A closer and more widespread bond than even that of historical tradition will thus bring into close relationship, through their use of similar materials, craftsmen who have never heard of each other. The Mayan sculptor in Yucatan, the medieval carver of European cathedrals never met. Yet they both learned to cut their stone the same way, to respect the trace of the chisel as an enrichment to texture, to strengthen their angles towards an ideal ninety degrees, to suggest round surfaces by "cubing" them into polyhedral facets.

If the good craftsman must be at peace with his material, he must also collaborate with his tools, including his hand and eye. Too often does the artist put them to freakish uses. Yet the way of least resistance seems to be the way to beauty. Leonardo's stroke is the left to right and downward one natural to the left-handed man. A Pompeiian fresco, a Monet, both bespeak the easy twist of the meta-

carpian bones that rule the brush. The perfect lines of an Altamira bison, of Michelangelo's Adam or of Rouault's Christ, all obey the commonplace laws that arm and hand muscles dictate.

The laws of the body, of the material used and of history cooperate to bring all art to some common denominator. They account for much of what we know as style—that is, to the layman, the quotient of artificiality in the grasp the artist has of Nature.

Style is in a way an unwanted interference with the artist's end, for what he aims at is to give us Nature. He is unconscious of style, for style is a thing of his bones, of his craft and of his birth. But the artist, seeing Nature as a spectacle outside himself, wishes consciously to capture and assimilate her as a desirable thing that his job will make available to others. Just like the scientist, he wishes to make a census of the world in a most objective way. But his gathering of facts through optics instead of logic results in an unorthodox version, a shuffling of facts as methodical but as unexpected in its implications as the neighboring of words in a dictionary. It may be the effort needed for this new reading, the jolt to established habit, which so irks the layman that he prefers to deny the validity of such research.

Yet, while Nature contains many elements that are easily translated into words, many pragmatic things whose "why" even a dry mind may fathom, it contains also a luxury of creation, an interplay of shapes and colors that up to now no scientist has touched. A butterfly wing seems as gratuitous in the natural realm as a painting in the

man-made world, and mimetism seems a poor explanation for both. Representational painting is a subtler and richer instrument than abstract art in that it gathers to our human use facts that like the bloom of a cheek, the white of a swan, the glow of the underbrush, are not as yet defined or labeled by a selfish need.

Critics, being by trade bookish, have created a fictitious artist in their own image. They jam him full of historical pedigrees, for dates are to be found in books and can be argued or authenticated. They make him also a battleground of styles, for with most of them comparison has taken the place of appreciation. They thus emphasize facts concerning historical tradition, but the laws of material and body, and this all-important holding of the mirror to Nature, are minimized or forgotten.

The artist is scarcely the introvert busy within a cult of technical "chinoiseries" that the critic makes him out to be. The few direct sayings from artists on art are so astonishingly simple they hardly bear quotation. Typical of the painter's point of view are Ingres' "Copy the model with great application" and Matisse's "One must feel that one is copying Nature."

Considering himself as a copyist the painter spares no pains or expense to catch Nature from some vantage point. Cézanne would wait patiently for days before he could ambush the sunny day, lightly clouded, which his critics translate into an esoteric geometry of color. He ordered for his studio special windows, whose carefully increased light endows still table and bottles with a Cézannian style. Rembrandt became the mechanic of

his own studio, juggling light and shade through a system of panes and shutters of his own device, in whose aid he had more confidence than in the mysteries of the soul's alchemy. It is little guesswork to see Correggio musing lovingly through the Correggiesque hours of twilight. Nature, more than man, has mothered all styles. Impervious to color theories, much color photography of our own day will insistently happen in the manner of Caravaggio.

The old-fashioned literary critic, rather a poet himself, saw more keenly than the scientific critic of today Nature's imperial quota in art. Observing through the picture the natural spectacle that had given it birth, he praised the painter for his women's beauty and the serenity of his sunsets. Raphael's work may be divided and studied successively for its unbroken line, its subdued use of space, its geometrically oriented volumes, its insistent local color. Those aspects may be bared under the scalpel of the critic, like the liver and lungs of beautiful women under that of the surgeon. Yet the good public are within their own right to enjoy their women undissected and state truly that Raphael is the painter of virginal beauty.

It is true that the painter, a Nature lover wishing to give you Nature undiluted, between the contemplation of a model and the exhibition of the finished picture has to go through many bizarre manipulations, many plastic speculations that will seem artificial to the lay mind. But the critic, instead of exposing these intermediate stages, should give the public a chance at the blessings of ignorance. One can enjoy the beauty of a child without

rehashing the sometimes unsavory secrets of the nursery. One can see a play without crowding in the wings to rub elbows with the stage-hands. This fashion of knowing all and telling all about this craft of art-making will probably become obsolete together with the fad of art for art's sake. If representational painting is to stage its comeback soon, critics and public would do well to go back to their seats and face the stage, so that the "representation" may begin.

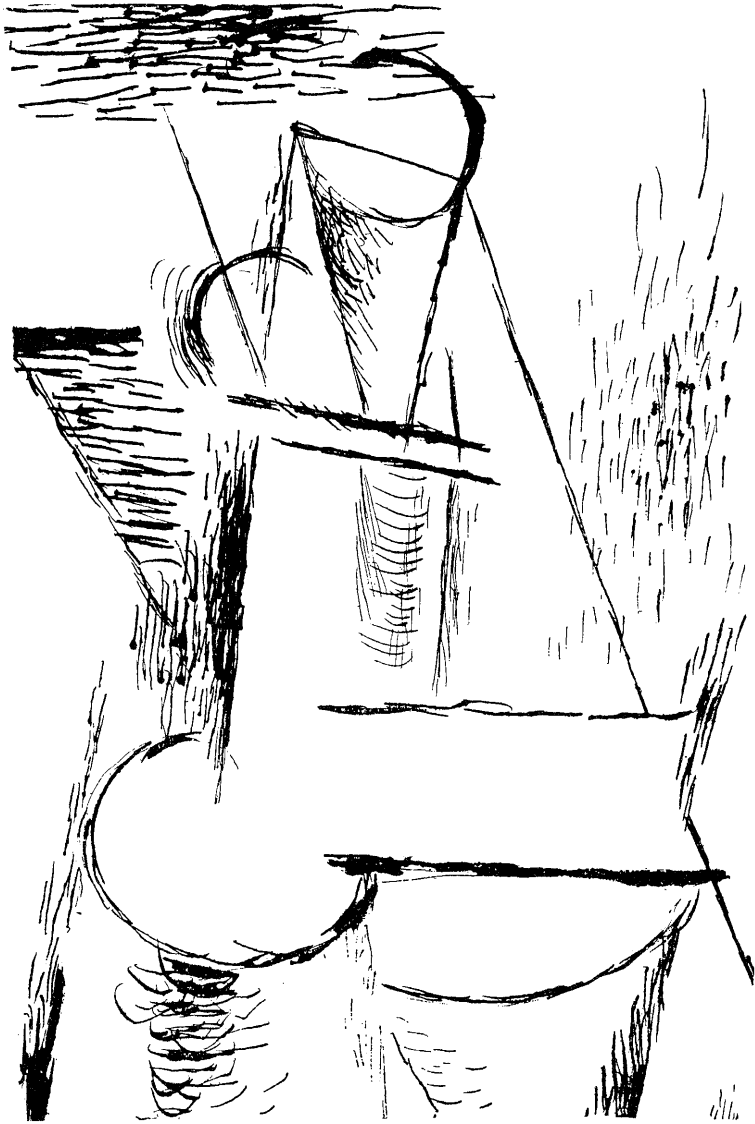
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Cubism: R.I.P.

Fashions as they recede in time pass through many qualifying trials before they settle into the perpetually pink light of the dear old past. The most trying moment comes when they are far enough from us to be out of style yet close enough to lack mystery, for we still remember that mother dressed so and that we ourselves used to be thus dolled up as babies. If art were wholly fashion, cubism would therefore be at its lowest ebb now, with cubist pictures piled into ash cans along with the hats of 1915. The impressionist picture is altogether a museum piece, but so are the bustles and “*suivez-moi, monsieur*” of its generation. Surrealism is so up-to-date as to be the guiding spirit behind shop-window displays. Cubism, hemmed in between them and stripped of all glamor, will indeed need undying qualities, the peer of those of the great schools of art, if at this stage it is to pass through the narrow door of the museum, where neither fashion nor history can vouch for it.

Cubism is still alive, still worshipped, but rather doting.

Picasso: Detail from an etching, 1912



The new-fangled approach to art, irrational, emotional, has permeated the classical structure. Cubism still struts along with the younger fashions, claims surrealist tendencies, but those are rather the worm in the fruit than the feather on the cap. To treat of cubism at its noblest we should limit ourselves to its brown period—1910–1920—when it genuinely pioneered, was serious, constrained even, had no time or taste for the fantastic. Cubism as a discipline of reason is the movement at its most genuine—an impersonal homogeneous art that could have reigned over a unified world with the autocracy of a Le Brun or a David. Cubism has at least succeeded in achieving a dictatorship in the realm of the applied arts. We live in a world streamlined as the cubist helped to create it. Duly grateful for its achievements we should inter cubism in History with loving care. This article is intended as its respectful eulogy.

A painting is of course a flat rectangular plane if we describe it as a physical object. But since line and color create illusive space it is nearer to optical truth, even if a departure from factual truth, to compare a painting with a box, lying on its side, its opening coincident with the picture proper. This box is also a minute stage which up to the time of the impressionists had been filled with an assortment of stage-flats whose carefully receding planes helped to carry the eye to a backdrop. The impressionists' dubious novelty radically changed this notion of a limited space trimmed into the layout of a stage. They knocked out the back of the box, and thus exposed whatever natural disorder—trees, skies, haystacks—happened to

be behind it. But by making space limitless the impressionist at the same time weakened its aesthetic value. The somewhat quaint arrangements of the past had brought recessions from flat to flat into mathematical relationship, had played upon spatial intervals as one plays upon musical intervals. But this could happen only when all the distances involved were measurable and comparable with each other. The infinite space of the impressionist became a joker in the game, for you cannot behold, divide or compare the infinite. Intended as an improvement on the finite, it greatly impaired instead the whole structure of art. Cubism's most important step was to nail back into place the discarded back of the box. That cubism filled the box with solids in a somewhat over-zealous way until it looked like a packed croquet box does not alter the great achievement. Sobered by the impressionist binge into space the cubist dropped horizons to play with blocks; but blocks are measurable, comparable, and as such are fit units for creating exacting beauty.

Impressionism, proud of its knowledge that painting's reason for being lies in the mental image it creates, is somewhat unkind to the painting as an object. It forces the spectator away from the painting, blurs his vision at close range until, by stepping backwards to focus properly, his more than arm-length range hinders him from finding a tactile correlation to what his eye sees. The impressionist wants his painting to become a mirage, a protoplasmic entity that the frame limits only uncertainly. The cubist, opposed to his father's ways, gathers unto himself the physical picture—the tight drum made of canvas stretched

on a wooden scaffolding; rather despising optical values he insists on tactile values—not illusive ones either but good sandpaper or corrugated board pasted on the picture. The fluffy contours that dissolve into air give place to honest lines stiffened after the ways of ruler and compass. Cubism, utterly weary of color, that treacherous element which makes a Monet out of a picture when you don't watch, safely limits itself to a tobacco-juice brown, snatched while still fresh from the palette of the academic painter. The four edges of the canvas, disdained by the impressionist, become dictatorial under the new order; the web of lines they imprison derives from them proportion, direction, the angularity of the inner design. In the same way the optical box or stage forces all the solids within its walls to ape its architecture: it becomes the paragon of all the cubes to be found in cubism.

There is a great nobility in this hunger for chains. This acknowledgment of limits is not only heroic but classic. And this discipline has received a fitting reward: the nut-brown aura which haloes the cubist picture turns it into a museum piece before its time; to this day it leaves the benighted amateur highly respectful if slightly bored. It is also appropriate to this classic vein that personality was taboo in those early days and that Braque and Picasso did not blush if they misnamed each other's pictures. Because the painting was considered mainly as an object the painter became a kind of tradesman rather than a superman.

Each cult must have its idols, and the impressionist had enshrined Turner. It is characteristic of the cubist that he should enthrone the house painter rather than any one

master. This workman could lay a tone flat, freed from the tremolo of Monet. He was a sound technician and used two thin coats of pigment rather than one fat one bound to crack. His subdued palette was careful of the retina. When he traced straight lines he used a ruler; when he traced fancy lines he pushed the paint through a stencil. Confiding in mechanical means, he escaped the narcissist attitude of the impressionist whose own wrist and eye were his gods.

The cubist also hailed the sign painter as great, for among the infinite combination of lines that we may use, letters are the most spiritual, their mental content having drained them forever of any sensual connotation. Each letter is a masterpiece of design, better attained by mathematical computation with compass and ruler than by improvisation. Letters were so suitable to the cubist ideal that the painter spattered A's, O's and E's over his picture with a zest similar to that of a Monet juggling with sunbeams. The master cubist, distrusting his hand (which verily was not as well trained as that of the sign painter), preferred scissors and paste-pot to the brush. Fragments of newspapers embellish his picture, for what freehand version could match the beautiful impersonality of the printer's product.

In this same vein of common sense Fernand Léger exalted the show windows of haberdashers and hatters as masterpieces of composition—not the expensive shops which employ artists and extraneous material to round up the effect but those in which the small shopkeeper presents ties, hats and shirts in rigid ranks of solids spaced with care.

But though the painter, dropping beret and beard and

endorsing overalls, prided himself on being a working man, though he built his picture with as much physical soundness as if it were a chair or a table, the picture refused to play this soothing game—to become, as the painter wished it to become, a common-sense object. In fact the cubist picture became a slightly more puzzling object than the impressionist one. The latter had educated people to a kind of vision which had become second nature. The eye and the brain had become exquisitely disconnected. One dared not swear to the roundness of a tree trunk, the cubicalness of a house, but things rippled amorphously into nothing, the world at large was camouflaged under the sheen of a Harlequin's coat of blue shadows and yellow lights. The cubist's job was to switch on again the current between brain and eye, between what one saw and what one knew; to bring mental help to the eye which had grown hypertrophied, had run amok as if possessing an animal life of its own.

We learn from the writings of Raphael that he painted not so much from the model as from a vision or pattern which existed in his mind only, and that this vision was of a circular kind. And the more beautiful the madonnas he created the more are they unlike the women we elbow. The bulk of their features and of their hair weakens, flattens itself onto the larger volume of the skull, until the head perceptibly glorifies itself into a sphere. In Ingres, who drank deep of Raphael, we have rubber-like arms, necks and joints in which the bones soften to give way to cylindrical beauty. The shoulder and bosom lines lose their substance to become the trails of great arcs of circles

whose motions would not be responsive to each ripple of fabric or muscle. In Seurat we have archaic bodies which swell or narrow equally round, irrelevant of how nature may wish it. They are related to the Nuremberg toys of turned wood, to the legs of chairs and to Ionic columns rather than to the science of the anatomist or to the optical blandness of the photographer. Those masters could conceive such sights only when the connection between eyes and brain had been so clarified and strengthened that the brain could give orders to nature—which the eye, a kibitzer, beholds overgrown with parasitic débris.

The cubist came back to the classical approach, the intellectual vision articulate as a well-balanced phrase, in contrast to the impressionist's vision which is more in the nature of an exclamation or an intaking of breath. When at the click of his eyelid Monet's wrist started to work, his brush did little but record what was before his eye. Lured by the accidental he could rarely elevate his art to the generic. Intellectual vision treats of genus and type, lowers itself to individual examples with effort. How often, in portraits of men painted by the classic Renoir, we feel that by tearing off the trick moustaches and beards, prying open the collars, we shall uncover his rotund feminine paragon, the Gabrielle who was not his cook at all, whatever history tells us, but rather a type whose origin existed in this artist's own mind—a type which his earthly models reflected more or less, but all imperfectly. As with Raphael or Renoir, Picasso's vision tends to general concepts. The square bottle which he paints is more than a particular bottle, for by whirling around its axis it establishes a void

into which all bottles—of whatever profile, lip or belly—may be fitted.

Cubism by putting brainwork back into vision infuriated people—and who knows if it was a blessing to tear them away from their sunsets and their rainbows of lyrical moods. After all we know that houses are cubes and that skulls are egg-shaped; and as an escape from facts what is more tempting than to stand on our heads and look at scrambled reflections in the water and make believe that this omelette is a dream world.

The eye, Monet's god, became with the cubists an invalid that had to be handled firmly if gently. Making their own Félibien's saying (1670) that the eye is easily deceived, they brought aids to the eye to correct its mirage. Something is hazy and shimmers in the sun. Come, pass your fingers over its surface, feel its hardness, its smoothness or roughness, such qualities as remain true even in the dark. You see a table with its sides running back to a horizon line, its farther side smaller than its frontal. Stop looking, correct this mistake by measuring each side and see that they are all equal; use a square and understand that all angles meet at 90 degrees even though your eye fancies them acute or obtuse. Italian perspective and its bastard son, the academic style, had immobilized the spectator into a single point of view, had even bade him close an eye so as not to be disturbed by twin images. Cubism took the spectator out of his cramped position at this peephole, recognized the fact that man has two eyes. Many of those idiosyncrasies at which Cézanne's critics scoff—tables that disappear behind a bottle to re-

appear at a different level or at cocky angles, cubic bodies that show their thickness on too many sides—are a simple acknowledgment of our binocular vision.

The cubist, however, liberates and instructs the spectator further. He bids him shuffle his feet too, walk around the object and gather a variety of data to be memorized and superimposed in a composite glyph which stands for the object. The cubist makes the heads that we see full front unhinge themselves at the nose to exhibit their profile. Not only does the spectator walk; he flies to observe the lip of the bottle as a full circle, he burrows and the bottom of the glass becomes a circle too. The power to free man from the straightjacket and the eye-blinkers of the academic vision, to transform the single point of view into the shifting one of an up-to-date movie camera, will excuse whatever coarseness may have marred the means.

The impressionist dabbled in astrology. The fragile dialogues between object and shadow which he loved to paint were at the mercy of celestial influences; Monet's haystacks were the fingers of an ever-changing dial. Monet revolved, a minute planet himself, around his model, followed by his daughter pushing a wheelbarrow piled with canvases, one for each mood and fancy of his master, the sun. One is reminded of the apologue of the realist painter who, tackling a still life, achieved perfect duplicates of the marble chimney, the vases on both sides of the clock and the bronze statuette on top of it but was defeated throughout a lifetime by the dial whose hands he could not match.

The cubist broke this enslavement. He was forced to

utilize light since it is the only means a painter has to reveal volume, but his light was not that of the sun. A diffused emanation, obedient to form, it bathed the object in inverse ratio to its distance from the picture plane. No fancy beam played on his stage; shadows were as absent from his peculiar climate as they are in things seen in dream. The effect produced was akin to that obtained by chemical photography or infra-red rays in the dark. Though the impressionist was naive in his sun-worship, his open window will forever afford the layman good air. The cubist picture lives in a limbo where the seasons of the year, the time of day are forgotten.

The cubist's itch to put his hand on the object, to pat its angles and test out its texture with his cheek, brought the model under the painter's very nose or even nearer. Picasso, asked how he proceeded to paint fish, answered "First, I eat it." The veil of atmosphere, whose mystery had intoxicated the nature-lover of yore, was rent. The painter had become anatomist, dissecting guitar and bottle—the wood or glass here, the profile there, the elevation, the plan, the slice. Space had been the impressionists' subject matter. It had reduced the bones of trees and mountains to a jelly, had digested solids into a fog, had ebbed in and out of the picture like a breath. The cubist came to shun space and lavished his care on volume. His was a world of solids unwilling to make place for skies and clouds. The breath of life, the throbbing which keeps impressionist painting alive, was unwelcome in the cubist limbo. Natural shapes were solidified into crystal forms—or rather, shunning the sheen of crystal, into those wooden

models of cubes, cones and cylinders, over which the musty aroma of the classroom still hovers.

The cubist concept of the world was so close to that of the sculptor that he borrowed some of the sculptor's means. A painter's space is the emptiness which gathers around a volume from the outside. A sculptor's sense of space is no more than a gauging of the volume, similar to the innate awareness each of us has of his own body, traveling within the spaces of the skull, determining the capacity of the chest by the volume of air inhaled. This voyaging through matter is obligatory with the sculptor who cannot create more distance than lies between one corner of his marble block and the other. Though the painter can include the world, up to the horizon, in his canvas, the cubist limits himself consciously to problems similar to those of the sculptor. But this concentration upon inner cubing, when applied to others than ourselves, comes close to the instinct of a ripper: it was not long till the cubist dismembered his models, exhibited piecemeal the fragments that constitute the whole, found the inventory of a body more exciting than its integrity.

The abandonment of visual means, however, had one superb advantage—that the artist got rid of the presence of the model. The sunlight and air which the man who painted landscapes inescapably absorbed were no doubt beneficial to his health but they had little connection with the painting trade. Whatever attention the painter gave his model was subtracted from the making of his picture. Painting as manual labor is a precise activity not unlike that of a druggist weighing and mixing the components of

a prescription and as such requires concentration and quiet. I doubt that even a watchmaker could put together a watch in the open with the sun playing rainbows on his metals or with cows mooing and flies buzzing. No wonder the impressionist had to replace painting, as tradition had known it, by a kind of shorthand, a hit-or-miss lack of technique that was the only possible approach under such improper conditions.

At last, with the advent of cubism, the painter, accepting the making of a painting as his job, became the stay-at-home an artisan should be. He put his knapsack and folding seat to rest and pottered in the workshop. This was no innovation but a return to normal. Cennino relates that when the Giottesque wanted to paint a mountain he brought a stone to his studio and copied it at the desired scale. The cubist, a man of less faith, doubting that the mountain would come to him, compromised with common sense and chose to paint indoor objects—the pipe, the bottle, Cézanne’s fruits and table. His was, of course, a partisan choice: such objects better served his contention that nature is made of cubes, cones and cylinders than would have, let us say, a swan or a rose.

This modesty of subject matter was also a judicious choice, for the cubist, who planned to hack his subject to pieces, preferred to pick on something small that had no comeback, just as a boy intent on fun would rather pluck the wings off a fly than tackle a bull-dog. Thus both impressionists and cubists, in agreement for once, left alone those noble subjects, historical and dramatic, in which classic painters delighted. Yet their subjects, casual as they

are, differ in more than the outdoor and indoor label. The impressionist tackles a tree at the moment when the sun glorifies it into a crystal chandelier. Water, to interest him, must teem with more reflections than there are bacteria in its physical make-up. The impressionist covers nature with gauze and glitter, haloes her with trick lighting before kneeling at her feet—and, like the man who drowns his food in ketchup, leaves us in doubt as to its real worth.

The cubist takes his nature straight. Even if he rips her as a child a doll he does it with the child's serious and realistic intent. Ignoring the enchantment of light and distance the cubist can hold a pipe, a bottle, in his hand and truly delight in their shape and texture. Because he is the first man of our modern world to recognize function as beauty, the pictures painted in the 'teens of this century are prophetic of the world to be. His approach was to become that of our architects and engineers. We live in a world streamlined by the influence of those very men of 1910 whose work we now pretend to be obsolete.

The cubist's choice of subject matter is also more humanistic than that of a Monet. Monet's eye, for physical rather than for philosophic reasons, had sided with the Chinese. His mountains, streams, trees, even if they do not mirror, as the oriental landscape does, a precise articulation of the metaphysical, bespeak the abandonment of man as the center of the world. The aerial bulk which is the unspoken subject of all impressionist pictures reminds one of the wheel of Lao-tzu which revolves around a hub of nothingness. The cubist hammered a self-centered axle into this hub: his very choice of objects was strictly

limited to those in human use. Smoking, drinking, playing music were the gentle activities with which his pictures dealt. When he packed all objects tightly inside the precise limits of the canvas, as a kernel within its shell, an order born of man reigned anew. The world became cozy again, so full of solids that no inkling of the surrounding icy spaces remained. The comeback to the mummy-brown sauce was not merely a technical quirk. It is significant that the painter cornered by a too-luxuriant creation had taken refuge in Caravaggio's cave where the retina of his sun-bathed eye could again expand to normal size. The return to the studio brought the painter back also to the friendly nakedness of four walls, a floor and a ceiling. There was utter affinity between man and his surroundings. The cubist lived and labored inside a cube.

In its early days cubism lived in the same state of mental intoxication that the early Renaissance had known. It was actuated by no scruples about musing up the actual plane of a picture, no Byzantine taboo that would make the painting flat as a carpet. We sense rather the excitement of digging through to the back of the picture with diagonal lines moving swift and straight and interweaving like arrows in the thick of a battle. The high mental climate of the period, suggested by the monotony of the color, was repeated in the labyrinth of planes, of solids that crystallized only to vanish into other solids, exhausting all alleys of investigation. A head, a hand was hammered triumphantly into those 64 facets which Uccello delighted to draw. His laws of perspective and Francesca's treatise on geometry are marked by the same cold fever that seized

the pioneer cubists, intent on translating passion into terms of ruler and compass.

At that early stage a great future was predicted for cubism. Its quasi-scientific and factual content, especially its connection with the mathematics of architecture, made it an ideal mural vehicle. Its objectivity in handling pigment could have opened the door to the use of a group of apprentices covering a wall under the supervision of a master, as had been customary in centuries past. Its textural qualities—imitation of wood and marble, use of printed letters—had already linked it with mural painting of the sturdier sort. It should have produced a school of men who, scorning personal squabble, would have renewed the monumental arts in Gothic fashion. In a way it failed.

Yet we must remember that critics had also scored impressionism for its lack of heroic achievements. They had called its landscapes and still-lives mere sketches, trial balloons for the art-to-come that would use the impressionist technique as a tool for the expression of noble anecdotes. Some painters—like Albert Besnard and Henri Martin—who believed in critics followed this recipe for true greatness, but their names are mostly forgotten. One is reminded of the score of small men of the 16th century who, adding the color of Titian to the drawing of Michelangelo, succeeded only in making themselves ridiculous.

Cubism may have failed the letter of the prophecies made at its cradle but these prophecies were fulfilled in spirit. Instead of the murals predicted for churches and palaces, cubist posters perform in subways, streets and

magazines. The printing press, which has multiplied the work of the cubist, has been more impersonal, more obedient to the spirit of the master-artist than any group of helpers could be. But cubism has also bred a group of mural painters, those Mexicans whose influence in turn is slowly modifying the place accorded art in the Americas, is changing it from a ladies' club topic into a potent social weapon. Cubism is linked so organically with mural painting that, though Rivera and Orozco occupy the same position with relation to cubism that Besnard and Martin had had to impressionism, the Mexican muralists will no doubt escape a similar fate.

The later phase of cubism has been so at variance with its early stages that the movement seems like the serpent that swallows itself. But like the serpent, notwithstanding its suicidal intent, it is nevertheless nourished by its own substance. Picasso's Greek period, for example, is nearer his brown one than appearances would suggest. The same unnatural light, subservient to volume, that characterized the still-lives of his early cubist days makes his human mannikins bulge. Their plaster-cast look, which made people nickname this his Canova period, obeys the same restraint which in his still-lives drained the color from the fruit and now refuses to rouge the lips of his human creations. The impassive features bespeak impersonal aims; the hugeness of limbs, the heaviness of fabrics teased by no wind, relates these bodies more closely to the cones and cylinders of his early pictures than to flesh. The "Greek" subject matter is chosen with the obvious classic

intent at which his brown patina of yore had aimed. He is still courting the museum.

Cubism was perhaps greatest when it was groping, trying its best, hoping. Arrived at the top it sits on its conquest, relaxes and is inclined to levity. Those formalized lines of its early stages that nestled amorously close to ruler and compass have given way to a kind of free-hand scribble; its limited palette has been succeeded by an orgy of Matisse-pinks and coal-tar dyes. The scribble is an activity natural on a scale where wrist and fingers perform it. When imitated on the gigantic scale of Picasso's later work the movements of wrist and fingers enlarged to such inhuman size suppose as the doodler not a man but rather an air-inflated giant, *à la* Giulio Romano, come to life. The novel addition of color weakens instead of strengthening the linear skeleton still very much in evidence, brings unwanted dramatic effects which neutralize the sober core. Cubism thereby turns against itself, commits hara-kiri in front of those dark romantic gods who hate its classical hide. The stage is set for surrealism.

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Surrealism—or the Reason for Unreason

*“ Le premier qui vit un chameau
S'enfuit à cet objet nouveau”*

—LAFONTAINE

With the lapse of time, events puzzling in their day have a way of falling into line so that the most madcap and “unpredictable” ones will eventually, like good soldiers, goose-step with their more sedate colleagues along the orderly paths of history. The accident or fancy of yesterday is labeled and neatly shelved as quickly as a new present is begotten. Those tempted to resent the advent of surrealism as a jog to their established routine, instead of concentrating on the strangeness of the new-born might well be thankful for the way in which, simply by being, it heaped and bound together the diverse personalities and tendencies of yesterday into a coherent whole. We can refer now to this thing of the past, the art style of the first third of the 20th century, with the same pedagogical clarity with which we speak of a school of 18th century painting. Such generalizations are bound to falsify but come within the historian’s right. It may become history that much of modern art up to 1930 partook

Dali: Detail from an etching illustrating Lautréamont



of those sturdy common sense qualities, that squatty code of ethics which took the name of cubism.

The main creed of cubism was a belief in the existence of the picture as such, its autonomous right to live independent of its subject matter in the same way, contemporary critics would point out, that a cow does not have to look like a tree to claim a right to existence. Paint was to be appreciated as pigment, the canvas was no longer the open window of impressionism but hemp or linen, woven and primed; the stretcher itself with its four square angles and the geometric relation of its sides commanded the interrelation of lines and colors that were to come into being, bound within its rectangle. Cubist painters liked to think of themselves as craftsmen whose job it was to construct out of this wood, canvas and pigments some objects called paintings, not illusive visions but possessed of a reality like that of a chair or a table; this painter-craftsman, as craftsmen will, took to soliloquizing about tools, permanency, recipes; mastering the craft of painting came to depend on technique, the respective merits of thick or thin layers, the memorizing of geometric formulas such as the "golden section." The cubists, sighing for an era wherein the guild member willed to his apprentice a set of fixed rules to work by, attempted by a cool analysis of the works of the past to recover those mathematical recipes and technical turns which he believed to be synonymous with greatness. What the painter had a right to assume as craftsman was elaborated upon, swallowed bait, hook and line by the critics who in turn educated their public into this religion of art from the

maker's point of view—one of fetichism in all that concerns the physical body of paint, textures that the finger can verify, proportions that a tape-measure will fathom.

The poor layman who through the centuries had appreciated pictures in terms of landscapes, seascapes, still-lives and portraits had those switched from under his nose by the cubist critic and was instead given, as object for his love, anonymous rectangles dressed in a harlequin's coat of lines and colors. At first irked by this meager fare, the public later became elated by the assumed knowledge that they were no longer mere laymen but shared the artist's most esoteric point of view. A reference to subject matter came to be shunned as a plebian faux-pas. *A Burial of Christ* by Titian, apples by Cézanne, were judged identical because they contained similar arrangements of circles and angles. It is true that a residue of subject matter still lingered, a battered guitar or a melted bottle, but imprisoned solidly behind the cross-bars of the "abstract" design; even emotional response to line and the dramatic suggestions of color were stifled; man was allowed to react to paint in a muscular way only, as a bull does to red.

This very excess made the job of the younger men easier, gave a good platform to the reaction. Young enthusiasts found it easy to laugh at the older cubist whose eye remained glued to lines, angles and colors with the narcissist attention of the fakir for his navel. Their elders were wrong after all when they decreed that a picture was an object and a painter a craftsman. For of what use would be the physical body of paint if not as a spring-board for this

most noble and by now almost forgotten ingredient of art called inspiration, this metaphysical spring without which the art object could not tick. To this wealth of correlations, emotions, moods that their elders had denied, the surrealists would give free rein. An inspiration or daemon, the wind of whose passage had materialized a century before in the embattled wig of the bohème, would take hold of them anew. The great *leit-motiv* of the romantics, life, death and love, were to be unleashed, but brought up to date within the scientific tenets of Freudian terminology: those eternal themes were now “complexes” with Greek aliases full of Germanic implications. Unlike the sibyl of old through whom the gods spoke, and unlike the artist of yesteryear whom passion swayed, the surrealist was to be dominated by his subconscious. His picture was to be a stage on which this nether world would perform.

In practice this meant that after a lapse of some 60 years during which the art-for-art slogan reigned, painting was to come back to its old purpose of telling stories. The public was by now fed up with sharing the personal failures and victories of the painter struggling within the intricacies of his craft, and sighed with relief when addressed by the painter of anecdotes who faced his public squarely, catered to the layman in his own language.

The return to subject matter is both vital and healthy. That pigment and canvas should be transformed into sunlight, moonlight, relatives or grazing cows is magical to the utmost. That such an amazing fact had been taken for granted by generations of innocent-minded onlookers

had dulled this truth to the point where critics of the cubist generation tabooed enjoyment of subject matter as a show of childish ignorance. It became the surrealist's easy lot to exalt representation as being art's most magical function. That painters and critics found themselves, in so doing, singing from the same pew as all the academicians of the past did not dim their enthusiasm, for such oldsters as Meissonier and Gérôme, careful and horrid painters that they are, had been forgotten for so long and their works hidden with such shame that their rediscovery held a thrill of newness like the discovery of a Grünewald or a Greco.

Most of us have seen, in our youth or at public auctions, some of those obsolete pictures smoothly finished and entirely credible, of brightly uniformed soldiers galloping heroically to their death at a lusty shout of "Vive Napoléon!" or of pink and red cardinals at a table, or (as in the case of our own G. J. Brown) of well-washed bootblacks emoting prettily. Dissimilar as their subject may be from the pictures of a Dali, a close bond links them together. Both Meissonier and Dali paint to bring forth their subject matter and both, through a desire to make their anecdote convincing, came to adopt this same patient style, known as photographic, which attempts to be no style at all and is eminently suited to story-telling. It is strange to realize that for generations laymen approved of it as the only reasonable way to paint. It was considered a show of common sense that Meissonier in his great thirst for objective rendering would pour, one spring, sugar by the ton on the fields of Poissy to transform them

into the Russian steppes needed for his picture of the retreat from Moscow. His great renown enabled him to borrow from the Musée des Invalides the original redingote of the Emperor. On the roof of his studio he would wear it himself, climb astride a saddle propped on a carpenter's horse and, facing a mirror, carefully duplicate, palette in hand and in a real storm this time, the snowflakes melting on the august relic. Dali copying a lamb chop perched on his wife's shoulder illustrates, on a pettier scale, the same love of objectivity by which man, trying to impose commonplace rendering on art, can attempt it only through uncommon antics.

The surrealist's comeback to an academic technique shows that he understands his job as a story-teller. Before him Boecklin, having selected disturbing imageries for his theme, chose also to work them out in cold blood. The more improbable the subject matter the more impressive will be its photographic rendering, a trick already well worn out by ghost-story writers. But this problem of anecdote painting, which now faces the surrealist as it used to face the academician, involves more problems than the choice of the correct story and the correct model. A small-scale and patient rendering, quaint boxed frames with glass and plush, are successful inasmuch as they make the surrealist picture secede from the corporeal appearance of the large-scale, broadly-brushed painting that preceded it, but it sidesteps the main issue. Painting is primarily a visual art. Lines, angles, and colors are the tools with which the painter plies his trade; their qualities, affinities and

oppositions are the grammar of his language. It was not laziness or lack of imagination that made Vermeer confine himself for a lifetime of study to a table, a curtain, a window and a bare wall. Rembrandt had his fill with what he saw in his shaving glass. Cézanne's life was not long enough to round an apple or erect the cylinder of a bottle. What comprehensive geniuses then would be Meissonier and Dali who far transcend the subject matter of these masters and pour onto their canvas armies of galloping hussars or cram 38 bicycle riders into a three-inch square!

It is the superficial approach of such painters to objective nature which allows them to commit such involved feats. Their confusion of the natural spectacle with the endless chromos and snapshots that have molded their vision is a protective armor permitting them to deal with visual art and yet never to question their ready-made reflexes, never to deepen their knowledge of optics. Their idiom gives us the glyph or pictured idea of an object but not its weight, its texture, its relation to the world, its spiritual implications. They may write in paint the detailed memorandum of a plot, but the drama itself will stir us only through the language of true painting. A revelation of the problem that plagues the born painter would result in the case of those voluble storytellers in immediate impotency. It is indeed consistent with our human limitations in other fields of research that to give the essence of things the true painter has to busy himself with few and very simple objects. Yet his is less of a failure than that of the academic

painter who, though able to complete in paint an ambitious diorama, misses the inner life of his subject, gives us less than the man who recreates an apple.

In his own words the surrealist is pledged to the conquest of the irrational. This claim, by opposing the cult of the well-ordered and of the functional which marks the achievements of the 20s, is a slap to the faith of the preceding generation; and though this may not be the reason for his stand the young surrealist would be inhuman who did not enjoy the deed. His own excess in genuflecting to unreason is partly explained by the bigotry of his opponent. The idolatrous attitude towards the machine sacrificed much that was licit when it heralded the dictatorship of the streamline, this heartless rejection of all gadgets that have no discernible purpose. The modern engineer had claimed nature as his own, pointing to the mathematical precision of the curve; the clinical whiteness of an egg. It is easy to contradict his claim, for even if a progressive bird could hatch her brood in a china bowl, the array of twiglets, straw, leaf, rags and mud with which she upholsters the nest would give her young a more proprietary satisfaction, a more mimetic contact with their own motley bodies. The smooth and streamlined egg of the engineer is after all only a device to bring forth a chick as stuffy with feathers as a quilt of the antimacassar days. Mother Nature may be at times partner to the purist mood of a modern house by Le Corbusier, but will lapse at others into the Victorian. Our body, which like the egg and the house happens also to be a "machine à habiter," seldom uses the

ruled line, the right angle, and the flat planes associated with the term “functional.” The earth itself carefully clothes its mineral skeleton with blades of grass, the flutter of foliage and the mist of dew. In this sense the Albert Memorial is nearer to natural processes than a skyscraper. A surrealist picture that despises the cubist rules of surface and color composition acquires also, as a jungle will, a complicated and amorphous character, the kind of new baroque which, like the baroque of old, reclaims line and color from the too rational government of the ruler, the compass and of Chevreul’s rotating disc. Even the unusual subject matter indulged in by surrealists is not irrationally chosen, for they gather to their bosom the useless things despised by their predecessors, thrown by their cruel logic on the ash heap: a pitiful assortment of fragments—of broken watches, dead organs, crumbled pianos; of what has outlived its function; of what repels and of what stinks.

That painting is a possible vehicle for the subconscious has long been acknowledged by the Chinese who cherish historical samples of brush writing for psychological reasons unrelated to calligraphy or literary content. For the same spiritual purpose we treasure the representation of common objects in paint if they show the hand of a master. One can make use of an indifferent subject-matter to release instinctive drama and lyricism through the passionate automatism of the brush stroke; but there is incompatibility between a mechanical rendering and the free play of the subconscious. It is strange that the surrealist who stores up as treasures bits of automatic writing, words

uttered in a trance, remembered fragments of dream, does not believe in the subjective virtues of direct painting. His round-about way of using paint by taming his muscular action within the intricacies of technique kills the subconscious impulses before they reach the hand.

Painters do not have the reputation of being intellectuals, nor is it their business to be such. Rarely original thinkers, they are however sufficiently sensitized to mirror the current thought of the day. But they need, if they are to be painters at all, to preserve a positive belief in their craft and in the world. Monet, imbued with the materialistic science of his time, shunned mythology in his landscapes but by humbling man's moods before the moods of nature he drank from the very source from which pantheism is born. Picasso, counselled by the Bergsonian quest of his own day, ripped guitars and Greek statues to unrecognition, but his zest with paint nevertheless brings forth a chaotic matter which contains, as do our very body's viscera, the disorder but also the juices of life. It may be that the Freudian analogies on which Dali props his work contain too much magic to admit of a magic handling; in this case he is less well served by his time's current thought than were his predecessors, a congenital defect which may wreck the new movement at birth.

An act of simple faith remains essential to painting, be it the animal faith that the impressionist had in life or the concrete faith of the cubist in textures and lines. The Viennese haze that settles between the surrealist's eye and the world, by bringing its diversity to a shameful common denominator, disintegrates actual objects and people to

such a degree that painting them becomes an artificial exercise.

The saying of Poussin, "There is no painting without solid," refers both to objects and to our faith in them. The surrealist's postulate that he approaches the world with a blank mind, without the pre-ordered scaffolding that alone can hold it together, may mean an admirably impartial attitude for a scientist, but it may also mean death to that will to do, without which no artist could ply his trade.

Even if the artist worships himself as a prophet or hero his approach to his material must remain that of an artisan. Most intellectual of them all, da Vinci, who did not relish this puttering with pots and pans, gave himself courage by writing that painting was a better craft than sculpture because one could indulge in it without removing one's lace cuffs or rolling up one's sleeves. Still, painting may prove too much of a manual trade to be indulged in by the surrealist if he truly wants to deal in the irrational. As soon as unreason is pitted against material laws there is breakage and hell to pay; a truly irrational architect would see his building collapse as soon as it emerged above ground level. The knowledge of materials, pressure, resistance, elasticity, the dove-tailing of blocks or welding of metal cores are essential to the act of building. A man like Gaudi may achieve a make-believe surrealist house whose baroque curves remind one of lava flowing or muscles heaving, but the same reasonable knowledge must go into its planning, if it is to be a house at all, as into a Le Corbusier "machine for living." Sculpture and painting, inasmuch

as they have a body, are, like the house, subject to natural laws and could not exist, whatever their apparent content, if they were not strictly within nature's reasonableness.

In the same way that a house, a sculpture, a painting submit to the laws of nature, the artist's body, itself one of his tools, functions on the reasonable plan of other animal bodies, even if the painter's tenets are the glorification of the irrational. "Who shall add one inch to his stature?" A lamb chop on the shoulder or the brassiere on a male chest¹ cannot deny the inner anatomical architecture which through the arm, wrist and fingers may communicate itself to the picture, pollute with its good health the psychopathic intentions of the author. A hand working freely, as in the case of Monet, gives to painting a healthy animal tang which would be rather at odds with the tenets of surrealism. Hence the search for safer means which will preserve a purer brand of unreason and in which the hand is no longer concerned: photo-montage, print-collages, rubbings, through which the thought or vision may somehow express itself without being straightened and strained through the sieve of organic experience.

Thus Max Ernst enthrones himself amongst a hodge-podge of 19th-century wood engravings, daguerreotypes, and hardware with the same royal nonchalance as the hermit crab lodges in the shell of a deceased mollusk; and with paste-pot and scissors injects unexpected meaning into those old things. The fear of autography grips even those surrealists who, somewhat suspicious of the ready-

¹Worn by Dali at a surrealist ball.

made, still produce their pictures by hand. The extremely cautious brush stroke of a Dali is truly as inert as the cut-outs of an Ernst. The fragments from old masters, from snapshots, from anatomical plates that constitute his stock in trade recur time and again in his pictures, identical but in shuffled order, reminiscent of the franker methods of a montage. One step further towards impersonal handling and we have the modified objects—furred cups and similar freaks.

Yet even if you kill the hand unreason is not saved, for the skeptical could argue that our brain itself is as much a part of nature's scheme as our hand and that, prisoner as it is of the universal logic of creation, its efforts to escape are probably inadequate. A surrealist scene can be fabricated simply by inverting the relative proportions of normal objects and situations. Our grandfathers' favorite was the painting of a cardinal eating lobster at a lavishly garnished table. If we shrink the cardinal to a size where he would fit at ease on the plate and enlarge the lobster until it fills the prelate's armchair we have a typical paranoiac picture which satisfies the most exacting standards of the good taste of tomorrow. Just as a photographic negative, though it paints nature's white black, can boast of little fantasy, and just as the devil may be said to ape God, the too logical unreason which happens to be reason reversed has little claim to be an irrational process.

It would seem that the perfectly unreasonable picture could be the work of a madman only, but few such genuine creations fit easily into the surrealist bracket. Madmen go wrong at one point in their reasoning but as soon as they

have branched away from the main road they follow their erroneous path with tenacious logic. The surrealist unlogic occurs rather in those relaxed moods of dream and day-dream which are typical Freudian hunting grounds. The two operations conducive to such moods are, first, a conscious state in which a store of images accumulates in us, to be released in apparent disorder in the second, subconscious stage. Consider the two operations necessary to the functioning of a mechanical toy: the grim expression and muscular effort that attend the winding of the spring, reminiscent of our articulate activities, contrasted with the disorderly, noisy, comical animation that attends the uncoiling of the spring, and that is similar to our dream mood. Subconscious vision proceeds, like movie fade-outs and fade-ins, by swift, unrelated changes of scenery. Its objects have a lack of tactile reality. No medium is elastic enough to describe this dream world. Cinema can approach only its tempo; words are too rigid to fit shifting meanings. Painting, with its static monumentality, is perhaps with sculpture the least fitted of mediums to describe it accurately.

The man who embarks on a voyage into the Freudian realm with the too innocent faith that the new land, however fanciful its vistas, is the wholly natural phenomenon of a release from inhibitions is bound soon to be disturbed by an imperceptible passage into the psychic. There the soothing voice of the psychoanalyst gives way to the scratchings of automatic pencils in the dark, the fist of the expounding professor is replaced by the raps of turning tables, the text-book is superseded by visions and voices.

Reason may be clumsy but it acts as a useful ballast for anchoring within the natural our humanity prone to flight. Having first divested himself of his armor of logic the super-realist comes nakedly face to face with the supernatural. To push forward with blank mind into the jungles of the irrational is to annul those centuries of bitter experience through which men at a dear cost sifted and labeled psychic phenomena, came to distinguish between what makes witches fly, werewolves howl, John unroll his Apocalypse, and Joan deliver France. Tradition, even if it be called old wives' gossip, would have been useful in charting the new country. Fra Angelico knelt in joy when the angels held his brush but a surrealist will rejoice as much if some Ouija board entity dictates his picture. Unconcerned with the obvious implications of his own oath that he acts as medium, he views with satisfaction and profit the fruits of his labor, those representations of putrid matter, rancid bones, which to the uninitiated resemble a streamlining of the horns, tail and hooves of the devils of a less credulous age.

Schools of painting have always had their main reality on paper. Painters have been bunched together according to their date of birth rather than an understanding of their *oeuvre*. Thus the sculpturesque Renoir nestles with the impressionists, the Whistlerian Braque is labeled cubist. Surrealism is also the wish-fulfilment mirage of critics. If we look at personalities its entity weakens. Its most doubtful exponents are those older painters who were already committed to a personal style when surrealism was born. To eulogize their work ten years ago for lyrical

or emotional reasons would have seemed misplaced and even libelous. They had led the cubist movement but cubism was fast becoming old-fashioned. The simplest way to keep them up to date was to change the label on their goods. Chirico's early work was hailed within the cubist movement for its building up of architectures with compass and ruler, its rigid perspective, its mathematical symbols, its house-painter's way of laying the paint flat. It is now lauded for its mysterious moods, sexual innuendos, disquieting titles. Picasso's work was more difficult to reinterpret because of its obvious plastic soundness, simplist subject matter and good-humored craft. Some person, however, did a good job of it who, by changing the title of a cubist "Bather" to "Metamorphosis," packed it chock full of menacing implications.

Between this blatant misuse of cubism to make it appear what it is not and bona fide surrealism there is a twilight fringe of painters, lacking the constructive solidity of the one as well as the literary frills of the other. The gay Miro, Masson the sad, can be made to fit in either camp. The melancholy offerings of Tchelicheff and of Berman are too close to a Whistler Nocturne in mood and means to fit easily into the surrealist bracket. The more genuine surrealist picture should exhibit a cluster of haphazard objects realistically achieved. Though Pierre Roy is the pioneer of this comeback to a *trompe-l'oeil* his work is so bathed in French lucidity as to starve the amateur of unhealthy complexes. Dali alone, by telling strictly horror stories or worse, fulfils all the expectations of the surrealist fan.

Men who wish for sausages get them hanging from the nose. When Picasso some 15 years ago sighed that "Art is in need of a David" he was voicing a desire for the re-appearance of subject matter, for a more objective rendering, for more craftsmanship in paint, conscious as he was of the defects of his own ego-swelled, sketch-mad era. No David but a Dali appeared in answer to this wish. Yet even though the new school features the sausage-shaped appendage reminiscent of the apologue instead of the Roman heroes dear to David, it brought back under this vile disguise some of the reforms that Picasso was asking for. The return to subject matter and objective rendering is pregnant with consequences, re-educates the public into this only proper way for it to look at a picture. Compared to such a boon the kind of representation offered, offensive as it may be to some, is inconsequential. The artist ceases to be the egotist shut up in his tower. He must now come down from his pedestal into the street and gather a public to tell his story to. Surrealists reaffirm also the truth that art, whatever the manual labor involved, is pre-eminently a spiritual affair. They rescue from the too-physical armory of the cubist achievement this minute seed, this soul without which no picture of any school could live. That the artist needs a daemon is of course no surrealist discovery, but the surrealists were brave enough to single out this fact from the discarded bric-à-brac of truths shelved by the cubists. The artist who yields to inspiration can no longer pretend that he is concerned only with himself and his own art problems. He becomes a channel for some agency more universal than himself. But though

in the art-for-art achievement the artist could only hurt or ridicule himself, in art with universal implications his public too may be damaged. If his objectivity concerns only the social beliefs of a group the artist's only duty is to be accurate. But if he delves deeper into inspiration, or as we say now, follows the dictates of his subconscious, his manner approaches that of the prophet or the sibyl. For his own hygiene and that of his public he would do well in such case to be choosy as to what gets hold of him.

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Public Speaking in Paint

In a world clogged with easel paintings a nostalgic memory still lingers of past art periods when painting was a communal need and murals were the norm. On the strength of this feeling mural revivals have been spasmodically staged. Around 1850 the Prince Consort imported to London some Italian muralists to decorate his palace; young English painters were impressed, art magazines prophesied that true fresco would soon be staging a comeback. Later on France tasted in the murals of Puvis de Chavannes as much of the qualities of fresco as can be translated into the oil medium. We experience today another “renaissance” of sturdy make, blown over the border from Mexico.

A mural painting is far from being an enlarged easel painting. Critics agree that there is a mural style, that it involves a composition, a drawing, a modeling and a color that may be called specifically mural. I should like to review those characteristics and to show how they are based, not so much on personal idiosyncrasies as in the case of contemporary easel painting, as on objective physical laws concerning chiefly architecture and optics.

If I use throughout as interchangeable the terms “mural painting” and “fresco” it is not that I am unaware of their different meanings; but, desirous of comparing mural and easel modes, I naturally choose to speak of murals par excellence—that is, murals in true fresco. For the same reason I take it for granted that I treat of murals of great size, because small ones do not branch sufficiently away from easel status.

When Leonardo, in a diatribe perhaps directed against Michelangelo, exalted the painter’s craft for being daintier than that of the sculptor, he overlooked fresco painting. But Michelangelo, lying on his back on the mammoth scaffold of the Sistine, with lime, sand and paint dripping from his beard, must have been quite as dirty then as in his most dust-raising moments with mallet and chisel. His own distinction, that in painting fresco alone is a man’s job, may be taken as his retort to Leonardo. Truly the man that sits on a scaffold many feet high, and matches the strength of his brush against a mortar of lime and sand chemically tied to the very structure of a building, thinks differently from a man seated at an easel timing the swing of his brush to the elastic bounce of a canvas.

The easel painter may, following his impressionist leanings in search of a motif, plant his easel in a landscape alive with birds or cows; if he fancies classicism his work may send roots into the non-geometric curves and non-arithmetical proportions abstracted from the human body; or, if a romantic, his work may emerge from the dark recesses of his brooding. But the postulate from which the mural painter starts is not of his own choice; he is

bidden to work inside the mineral landscape sung by Baudelaire, where organic forms and the *beau désordre* of nature or of passion have given way to a rational order, grooved to architecture. Architecture, as its habitat, conditions mural painting.

A building is planned not only as an organism valid in itself, similar to the animal body which does not imply a witness, but also to the scale of its human parasites. The relationship between architectural elements is governed both by “abstract” esthetics and pragmatic requirements. Buildings are made not only of stone and brick, mortar and steel, but of air; their walls, like the wall of the ribs, define recesses reserved for vital functions; their porosity is both the internal porosity of a lung full of air and an outer porosity, a breathing relationship which windows and doors achieve between the building, the landscape, and the world.

Regardless of superficial “embellishments,” the severity with which buildings are planned is comparable in the realm of painting only to the most radical of abstractions, especially those of Piet Mondrian. The people who expostulate heatedly at the rigid verticals and horizontals that Mondrian lovingly rules on his canvases would blow sky-high if a similar rigidity and exclusive use of 90-degree angles failed to be stressed in the plan of a building. The rectangular shapes of the two-dimensional painting in architecture become parallelepipeds, those rigidly cubistic creations within which even conservative people make it a point to be born and to die.

Sensitive to the architectural blueprint that has become



his world the born mural painter, following a kind of mimetic logic, bids to complete in illusion what the architect has begun in truth; taking naturally to ruler, square and compass, he will add painted perspectives to the built construction, open or stop the vistas and culs-de-sac that doors, windows and walls initiate. If architecture is frozen music, the structure at least of his fresco will be articulated in musical terms—that is, as mathematical abstraction; the issue of subject matter, make-believe, propriety will be superseded by concern for numerical laws, chords of numbers transformed into clusters of proportions, colors, values.

The depiction of actual architectural elements accounts for a major area in great mural paintings. The background of Leonardo's *Last Supper* is his excuse for painting the picture on the wall. Giotto, Fra Angelico, Signorelli, are all adepts at the wiles of the house painter; with paint they match wood grain and marble veins, the bulge of pilasters, the recession of cornices. It is not only those make-believe architectural elements that cement the union of painting and architecture, but all lines and volumes that partake of geometry acquire in a mural functions proper to architectural members. Ruled on a wall, a vertical line not only obeys optical demands, but upholds as does a column; a horizontal is a level certified by the junction of air bubble and sight-line, rather than the far-flung horizon it suggests in a landscape; the arc of a circle obeys the pull and stress to which arches and buttresses submit, rather than obeying the freehand swing it implies on canvas.

Rivera: Church interior, Ravenna. From Italian sketchbook, 1921

Painters who use geometric forms undiluted work thus in a certain mural climate. Picasso, Léger, would acquire renewed validity if transposed into murals. The painted constructions of Poussin beg to be reinforced by a permanent architectural setting. Mural geometry can be as obvious as it is in Byzantine mosaics or in Gleize; it might also be revealed secretly, as bones are suggested by flesh. Invisible axes pierce the cylindrical bodies that Seurat paints, and inner plumb lines hang from the tip of the conical personages of Piero. In Giotto's *Lamentation* the disciples suffer an architectural metamorphose; they become columns when they stand, buttresses and arches when they stoop. In his *St. Francis and the Birds* the trees are spheres dense and full at the top, sturdy enough to receive the weight of the ceiling. Thus all subject matter, inorganic and organic, conspires in a kind of architectural charade. Even the gesticulations of El Greco follow the secret and severe rhythms he learned in his youthful apprenticeship with Cretan muralists. Even the lushness of Rubens swells or narrows according to a circular or spherical logic, as if the thrust and pull to which the construction submits were featured in place of the construction itself.

Buildings are made of spaces and volumes. Painting likewise deals with volumes and spaces. The spaces that the muralist paints acquire also architectural definition. There is fitness when the space enclosed between the walls of a given room opens into a painted space similarly limited and ordered. Perhaps it is the "open window" illusion, the unlimited space inherent to impressionism,

that makes it unfit as a mural language. Ordered space develops by sliding in depth the front plane that constitutes the painted area. This plane may rotate backwards around one of its vertical sides, creating a triangular recess like that existing between a door frame and a door half-swung, as in the *Embrace at the Golden Gate* of Giotto or the *Bishop Cabañas* of Orozco. More often the plane of the picture recedes to a position parallel to its starting position, becoming the back drop of its own shallow stage; a cube of space is created, as if an open box were lying on its side, its opening flush with the picture itself. It is such defined space that gives a monumental feel to Seurat, whose *Grande Jatte* is after all a mural in search of a wall.

A painting can be said to consist of soul and body. In easel painting the body is the canvas stretched on a wood frame and coated with pigment; in fresco it is a mixture of lime, sand and pigment, tightly packed against inner strata of lime and sand backed by the cement, brick or stone constituting the thickness of the wall. At the finger tips of the blind, or bumped against in the dark, the body of a picture is made manifest yet does not function as painting. It releases its meaning only when reflected in the eyes and brain of a spectator. The circumstances that condition this soul, this unsubstantial image through which physical picture and human eye make contact, differ as much in easel painting and fresco as do the physical qualities of canvas and wall.

Easel pictures are conceived as though surrounded by a total vacuum. If you cease focusing on the illusive space within the frame and become conscious of the wall or the

draped on which the picture hangs, the illusion vanishes. The old-fashioned way of exhibiting pictures on an easel served excellently this need for an unfocused background. Cowed by tradition, the onlooker standing at the proper distance centers his line of vision on the center of the picture, at right angles to its plane. One sees in museums how visitors, obeying a posthumous call, approach close to a Van Eyck or walk further from a Rembrandt, until they stand on the one spot from which the artist guarantees the illusion. The more scientific a perspective, the more the one point of view is important for its effect. Dutch "perspective boxes" from the time of Vermeer display a scientifically correct peephole that ensures depth illusion; lateral view paintings have also a side attachment through which one may "read" a subject matter that remains undecipherable in frontal approach.

Mural painting cannot afford the optical protection of a frame; it has to vie in the allotted space with windows, doors, ventilators and pipes; nor is normal vision and a single point of view its lot. It caters to a public busy with practical pursuits rather than esthetic ones and catches its eye more often sideways. It cannot count on the pinning of the hypnotized amateur to the horizontal and vertical cross bars of the median lines that is taken for granted in viewing small paintings. The average distance from which a wall will be apprehended depends on the width and length of the room, the place and number of the entrances, the graded levels of floor, staircases and balconies—a complex planned by the architect and over which the painter holds no sway. Mural paintings have to look well

both in centered and lateral vision, from a worm's eye view as well as in a plunging perspective. Such a postulate, distinct from the "peephole" assumption of easel painting, makes it impossible to attain any realistic intensity. A certain amount of artificiality, a style, imposes itself on the mural painter as a corollary to optical postulates. The Egyptian and Chinese mural styles, by ignoring the difficulties of perspective that plagued the Italians, offer a clean-cut solution to the problem of mural optics. But our occidental traditions, intent on defining solids in space, cannot avoid questions of depth. Our mural painter must perforce find a compromise between a standardized perspective based on a single point of view and a mural arrangement that implies multiple points of view.

The armature of so-called "Italian" perspective is such that the horizon line determines the vanishing points and their related fan formations of perspective lines. This key line coincides roughly in easel painting with the horizon line that each spectator generates at his own eye-height; painted and real perspectives merge into one, the illusion of depth is enhanced. Most murals start higher than this eye line. If a realistic relationship is to be kept between the painted and the human perspective, the horizon line will sink even lower than the lower edge of the picture, outside the painted area. Mantegna follows this rule in his *Triumphs* with results scientifically engrossing, but esthetically freakish. In his *Marriage at Cana Veronese* establishes three horizon lines that may well correspond to the true viewpoint from floor, staircase and balcony levels. But as a rule the mural painter, unable to match the

painted horizon line with the stature of a spectator, brings both into an arbitrary relationship that results in a weakening of depth illusion—a happening beneficial to the mural because it preserves the physical identity of the wall surface as a guarantee of its architectural function.

The concept of multiple points of view includes centered vision, that is, the conventional way of looking at a picture, and lateral vision. In a movie house the “style” of the screen picture is very realistic and the subject matter is not chosen for any formal plastic value; so that a man sitting on the side sees the picture on the screen deformed into incredibility. In the theater, however, where the actors have actual bulk, both front and side views are equally convincing. The quandary of the muralist is how to approximate the optical results of the theater with physical means resembling those of the screen. To attempt a solution, let us take three sketches of a model, made simultaneously from center and lateral views, and superimpose them into a composite. The more complex and realistic the subject, the more involved and meaningless the composite. Geometric solids with a square or triangular plan would, however, coincide better than realistic subjects, but not perfectly, and would resemble cubistic variations on dice-shapes; spheres, cylinders, and cones, offering identical perspectives from the three chosen points of view, yield composites as clear as the objects themselves. To insure the readability of his painting from both center and sides (a necessity not of his own choice), the muralist must reform such shapes as nature offers into compromise volumes closer than are his models

to the geometric bodies with circular base that solve his problem best.

As the diagonal angle of the view of a wall increases it brings to the drawing itself perspective deformations; side vision shortens horizontals and by contrast emphasizes verticals; to correct this state of affairs the muralist broadens the horizontals. Giotto is so conscious of this that the bodies he paints are padded, Eskimo fashion, with improbable layers of clothes, their bulk further augmented by thick over-all cloaks, their posture stooped until some personages occupy an area as wide as their height. Such stout shapes retain their apparent mass at much wider angles of vision than would realistic forms. This rule applies in practice to frieze-like murals situated in long and narrow halls, such as the arched walks that line inner patios. The opposite condition obtains when narrow and high panels are protected from side vision by recesses, but are to be seen in close-up from a worm's eye view. The slant tends to shorten the verticals, which results in an apparent broadening of the shape. To correct this illusion the painter must elongate his verticals and narrow his horizontals. The elongations of El Greco may be rooted not in a mystical urge primarily but in solving the optical problems peculiar to the narrow and high chapels of Toledo.

While easel painting is pretty much standardized to a rectangular and a vertical area, the grounds for mural painting show an infinite variety of shapes and slopes. The shape matches any portion of inner architecture, may even drop all reference to level and to plumb line as it

follows the spiral of a staircase. The slope spans all degrees from the vertical walls to the horizontal ceilings. True murals are not confined to the two dimensions of a wall, but spread on architectural units in three dimensions. Their shape may be cubical, on four walls and a ceiling, or partly spherical, on arches or cupolas. The spectator, instead of standing outside of the painting looking in, is surrounded by it like a goldfish by its bowl; each turn of the head, each shift of point of view, brings ever-changing modifications to the optical picture, dynamic in the sense that its relative proportions are in a state of liquid mutation. The word coined by Archipenko, "sculpto-painting," fits murals; but instead of covering the convex surface of solid sculpture, murals are laid on the concave surfaces of a solid that is but the mold into which a space-sculpture is cast. In the space from wall to wall, from dome to arches, an exchange of optical relationships takes place. The Prophets of the Sistine, facing each other over the width of the nave, engage in conversation, start a plastic argument that the facing partner concludes, pair complementary rhythms. In the now dismembered room that Uccello criss-crossed with the martial clash of lances, red on black, such a spatial plastic intercourse filled the air with as complicated a *va-et-vient* of optical lines as the bounces of a *jai alai* ball in a closed court. The dismembered fragments exhibited in museums, the photographs and book illustrations that flatten the mural bulk, miss perforce this vital point and no more reproduce the actual work than a bear-skin portrays the live animal.

Given the size of walls and the distance from which they

are to be viewed, much mural subject matter must be on a heroic scale. The aim of the chosen scale is roughly to suggest normal size from average points of view; to attain this aim the painter must take into consideration the height at which the painted area begins, the set of distances from which it will be seen, and the requirements for visibility under the light conditions that the building affords. Thus, though apparent scale can be accepted as constant, actual scale varies greatly, from the few inches in height of figures in Mayan frescoes planned to be seen nose to nose by a squatting onlooker, to the giants that can barely "carry" from the heights of the Sistine ceiling.

The actual scale is the one that the painter experiences in the course of painting, and its size reacts on the mural style. Physically speaking, the painter who works on a miniature scale will use mainly his fingers; as the scale increases the means shift to the wrist, then to the elbow and in ceiling work even to the shoulder. The tracing patterns natural to each muscular set differ. Broadly speaking, the painter who paints from the shoulder tends to a large and monotonous sweep, less versatile than the trick motions at his finger tips.

The mural problems reviewed so far are not primarily esthetic problems, but concern the physical conditions that govern the making and the seeing of murals. Yet the solution of these physical problems impinges upon esthetics: architectural habitat and multiple points of view call upon the painter to geometrize, impose on his work a style. We come now to problems in drawing, in modeling and color, that are primarily esthetic but likewise so hemmed

in by physical actualities, both optical and technical, that their discussion still depends more on objective understanding than subjective considerations. The size of painted walls is such that subject matter, even enlarged to mural scale, will be more elaborate than in easel painting and the *dramatis personae* more numerous. There are points of view from which the wall can be seen as a whole, optically reduced by distance to what could be called easel size. In spite of the complex subject matter the muralist must preserve in this total view a certain simplicity, for complexity can be absorbed by the human eye to saturation, but past that point becomes confusion. Simplicity is somewhat automatically preserved by the fact that the smaller elements become invisible at the distance from which the wall may be comprehended as a unit. The handling of the brush that plays a vital role in easel painting lacks carrying range in murals. The witty stroke of Manet, the bold brush of Hals, would be dead matter in mural craft. To the muralist the house painter is the better teacher, for he can cover large areas with wise technical impersonality. Having no access to the emotional expression latent in the finger tips of the autographic automatic brush writer, the muralist must find the outlet for his personality mostly in intellectual planning. The vivaciousness that the brush of great easel painters communicates even to bodies in full repose must submit to inorganic architecture. The bloom of a cheek, the warmth of lips, the highlight on an eyeball, lack mural substantiality; at mural range the ovoid of a skull, the cylinder of a neck, express the character of a head long after the features can no longer

be seen. With Francesca's women beauty follows mural form and function.

I referred before to a mural composition as a charade where organic bodies and inorganic objects vie in performing architectural roles. This tendency to geometrize becomes much strengthened in practice by the stages that govern the technical handling of true fresco. The painter who dons overalls, climbs a ladder, sits on a plank and paints,肘ed by masons busy with hod and trowel, seems to acquire some of their common-sense manual approach to the craft. To compose, the muralist must read a spirit level, use a plumb line, swing a compass, string a ruled line, slacken a catenary line; to draw, he must stylize a first sketch to mural status, enlarge it on brown paper, retrace it on tracing paper, punch it with pin or roulette, pass it and brush it on the scratch coat, pounce it on the final coat of sand and lime preparatory to painting. By the time the drawing is transferred to the wall it has exchanged the qualities of spontaneity and impromptu for a dose of impersonal monumentality.

Mural drawing is best paired with a mural palette. Its tradition lives in the book of Cennini and the recipes of contemporary Slav fresco painters. Its sober range owes much to the happy habit that lime has of disintegrating the more blatant pigments, of bringing out the subtleties of earth colors. The resulting nobility suits well the monumental style, unifies in mood and hue the multiple threads of large size composition. Ingres, queried on Dutch genre painting, answered that in spite of its low subject matter its palette was best suited to the noble tone of

historical painting. We can add also that this palette is eminently mural. The Dutch painters do squeeze out of earth colors all the nuances that are latent in them. The contrast of a brown against a red ochre in Brouwer's *Smokers* is as decisive as the red-green chord that is Delacroix's culminating cymbal-clash; against the warm ochres a pinch of green earth evokes vistas of trees; on the brown glaze of a jug a grey highlight suffices to pool the sky. Ingres himself has used these hues when at his noblest but, a stranger to fresco painting, he could not gather the fullness of his own remark, for earth colors are par excellence a fresco palette.

As is the case with drawing, the technical handling of color has become standardized to maximum efficiency by mural tradition, from the grinding of pigment to a listing of complementaries that contradicts Chevreul's color wheel. The use of verdaccio to underpaint flesh, the summing up of modelings into flat stenciled areas, the exalting of the local color by a contrasting net of colored lines, the open cross-hatchings that result automatically in concave or convex illusions—all these recipes are as human, as wise and as healthily limiting as is, to the hordes of potential sounds, the restricted and filtered range of a piano. If such logical handling acquires today an archaistic overtone that is only because ancient tradition is itself a summary of long-pondered function.

Mural drawing and mural color imply mural modeling, and modeling is ruled by light conditions. The steps through which the drawing passes before reaching the wall result in an emphasis on unbroken outline, the traditional

application of pigment in unbroken local color. Such elements could not be featured in a sharp diagonal light à la Caravaggio or à la Rembrandt that replaces the outline with this inner line where dark meets light, that breaks the local color in two portions, contrasted as black to white; nor in the impressionist glare that dissolves outlines behind gauzes of atmospheric haze, splits local color into strips of contrasting hues in its desire to model with color. The mural specification for a clear outline and sustained local color seems to be a frontal, flat, diffused light—a light which best holds the object within the bounds of its own outline, plays low the modeling, increases the hegemony of local color, tends to feature things as we know them rather than things as seen. A cloak painted mural style will be truer to the dye in which its model was soaked than to the law of complementaries as observed in nature by Delacroix and Chevreul. For the mural painter dealing with a remote point of view, such a light guarantees maximum breadth, maximum carrying power. Ingres sums it all up in his aphorism, “Reflected lights in the shadows are beneath the dignity of historical painting.”

Both easel painter and muralist work perforce at no more than arm’s length; but while the easel painter puts to work both brush and eye, the mural painter can be said to paint blind. If he worked easel fashion on the wall, painting daily contrasts in color, value and direction to please his eye, these many small effects would neutralize each other when seen at the long mural range. Especially in fresco where each day’s area is thoroughly finished before the neighboring area is begun, the muralist at work is

bereft of the physical check-up that a glance at the whole would furnish, must rely on a mental image of planned results. The daily job will look monotonous until, the jigsaw puzzle completed, the parts gather meaning from the whole. Thus a mural fragment similar in subject and area to a given easel picture will show less contrast both in value and color, less variety in line and direction. This fragmentary state is often misinterpreted by critics familiar with easel painting as a weakness of the artist. People who, confronted with the detail of a Rivera fresco, point to monotony in drawing, dullness in color and flatness in values, do not point to defects, as they think, but to this effacement in each individual score that insures a correct orchestration.

Governed as he is by architecture, the mural painter cannot capture nature as casually or as convincingly as can the easel painter; yet he cannot forego nature as justifiably as the abstractionist. A public building is not a studio where the work of art may be submitted only to the scrutiny of experts; its public is made of laymen who expect its painting to tell a story. Thus the mural artist is immobilized between two contradictory magnetic poles: the mysterious mathematical basis of architecture, and the interesting and clear storytelling that his public has a right to expect. The ancient dignity inherent in the calling of the painter of "historyes" is visited anew on the fresco painter. The hierarchical pre-eminence of historical painting that the 17th century took for granted is accepted again. Walls do not encourage the factual listing of casual objects proper to still life, nor the petty

anecdotes of genre painters; their sheer size and their public function fit them better to the doings of heroic characters, to the weaving of themes weighted with human significance.

Propaganda and fresco mix well. In a former day the mother of Villon relished in the murals of her parish church the display of the blessed in heaven that stirred her to virtue, the vision of lost souls boiled in vast caldrons that kept her away from sin. The *Battles* that LeBrun painted for Louis XIV, the mural canvases that David covered for Napoléon, hallowed as they are, were in their time raw political propaganda. A friend relates an overheard conversation showing that this affinity is still understood, though perhaps stated in muddled form.

“X is to paint a fresco for the government.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“But why not?”

“Because a fresco is a communist painting.”

Public speaking in paint, painting from the pulpit or the soapbox, requires technical achievements distinct from those of “chamber” painting. For even if we admit that mural painting must have a religious or a social content, whatever the axe that the painter grinds it is his job to grind it fine. Thus we come back to plastic problems concerning line, mass, value and color, problems that public and patrons alike impatiently dismiss as studio shop talk. But in final analysis it is on these that the clear enunciation of the theme, and hence its propagandistic power, hinges.

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AMERICAN ART



All-American

The pioneer Tribal Arts show of 1931 marked a turning-point in the appreciation of United States Indian arts. An effort was made to assess their esthetic value rather than to tolerate them as scientific specimens or as tourist curios. The new show current at the Museum of Modern Art finds Americans stranded on their own continent in recoil from a beset world; the patriotic angle may well weigh the scales in favor of these hundred-per-centers of American art, beside whom even Thomas Craven's roster of Americans acquires an immigrant flavor. However genuine our pride in the aesthetic achievements of the Indian, it should be tinged with introspective compunction: some of the objects now on exhibit were "collected" by our War Department, presumably as spoils, while the cover of the extensive catalogue is a shield design that pictures a bear charging fearlessly into the thick of a salvo of United States bullets.

Lest we be accused of sighing for bygone days, let us add that the coming of the white man had also its

Mimbres pottery design. Pueblo III, Anazasi, New Mexico

beneficent influence. The sculptors of the Northwest boomed into a renaissance with the importation of metal tools; to the paleface the plains hunter owes his horse, the forest Indian his beadwork, the Navajo his silversmithing.

That a museum dedicated to modern art stages this show is no haphazard event, for Indian crafts are one of the sources of our own modern style. Amédée Ozenfant, whom I met at the opening, suggested mischievously that Indians were imitating Picasso; but it is a fact that Chilkat blankets were admired by early cubists as the living tradition onto which their own plastic inventions were grafted, while the distorted spirit masks of the Eskimos, conceived in visions induced by fasting or by drugs, receive today the praise of orthodox surrealists. The élite of each succeeding generation may flirt with what in the vast and complex body of aboriginal art approximates most its fancy of the day, yet, at its best, it far transcends such modish standards.

As is the case with our own art history, where the golden age lies in the past, Indian Michelangelos have long been dead. Unlike its modern counterpart struggling in a morass of folklore, prehistoric Indian sculpture exhibits a beauty of form strikingly set forth against an unfocused background of ritual pageants that no explorer scooped. Its might is at its best in the group of eastern pipes for the most part made from hardened clay, a material that suggests in spite of direct carving the caress of the modeling thumb. Some artists, relying on texture and geometric shape alone, root the cylinder of the bowl into the leaf

shape of the stem at an angle evolved through centuries of use; such specimens match in their functional purity that other great civilized achievement—an English briar pipe. For those less puristically inclined, pipes adorned with animal shapes combine uniquely the observed vivaciousness of animal life, the Egyptian dignity of monolithic masses, with details of minute refinement; for example, the interplay of crossed wing tips and tail feathers on the back of a crested duck, or the wet ripple of muscles on the otter catching its prey.

For the critic who can measure an artist's size only as he matches his skill, Greek-like, against the proportions of the human body, a pipe from Adena Mound erects a chanting warrior whose eight inches of height have been enlarged by the impresario of the show into a photo-mural of heroic size without losing a mite of its compact humanness. A Mexican influence has been advanced for this piece, but it shows none of the loss of power that provincial art would be bound to show, so far from its center of civilization.

All Indian fine arts came into being as side-products of some utilitarian instinct, if one postulates the practical validity of religious instinct. Owing to this lack of cleavage between fine and applied arts, one is dragged imperceptibly in this exhibition from the consideration of the sublime to a limbo of moose-hair embroidery, porcupine-quill mosaics, ribbon appliqué, that prove the squaw a potential subscriber to the *Ladies' Home Companion*.

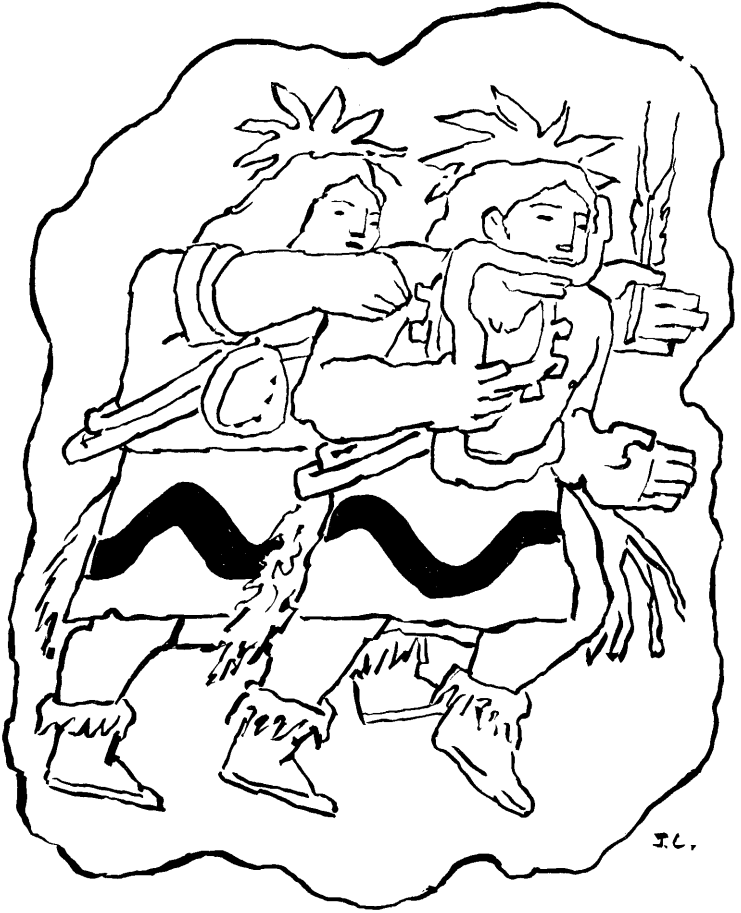
Indian artists have an amphibian gift of moving at ease



among abstract as well as realistic pursuits. In its rare bona fide examples, realism is used for purpose of farce, fable, or history, but most often is a not undignified pandering to the taste of the paleface. Objects classed by our standards as great examples of Indian art—the bear woman suckling her child, the mask of a maiden, the dancing medicine-man—were pot-boilers in the eyes of their makers. The deepest thrust of the Indian mind, the language it chooses to exalt its clan pride, wield magic power, or address the gods, is the language of abstract art: thus the Zuni amuse their children with dolls that are acceptable sculptures by our standards, while the fearful image of their war-god is hewn in such austere primitive style that we despise it as childish; the Eskimo humors his baby with teething-toys that we treasure as ivory statuettes, while his religious masks, carved to perpetuate lofty visions, remain for us shapeless.

One must discard such labels as realistic and abstract if one is to share further the Indian point of view. To illustrate without departing from the organic world: the “abstract” art of the Northwest is more deeply realistic than is the formula for reality in our art. The Haida painter splits the creature he paints and exhibits its innards—heart, liver, stomach. For not only has he seen the bear and the whale, but he has hunted both, has killed, quartered and cooked them, and his painting sums up the knowledge acquired through all senses and his brain; while the white man is

Incised shell, Oklahoma. Collection of the University of Oklahoma



J.C.

satisfied that he represents a creature when all he describes is its outer bag of skin. One is reminded of the visitor who asked Picasso, apropos of a "still-life with fish," how the fish kept while the work was in progress and of the artist's admission, "I ate it first."

Unfamiliar as we are with the Indian mode of life, our natural reaction to this show is to stress its picturesque and romantic connotations; but the Indian artist manages to assert his greatness within an accepted frame of tribal norms. The pipe-carver, basket-weaver, or sand-painter does not seem to suffer from the infirmity of our own artists who strengthen their personality insofar as they weaken the thread between their work and tradition. The spiritual content that loads the Indian work, a manual perfection deepened by technical impediments, the balance obtained between objective conventions and the personal quota of individual genius, mark the attitude of the Indian artist as one of classical integrity. It is on such a plane that this show may bear valid fruits, rather than in a shop-window revival of feather-work and leather tooling.

Though the choice of individual specimens is impeccable, one would wish to admire with more confidence the murals from Awatovi; the original fragment exhibited, as sensitive as a Paul Klee, does not jibe with the cocksureness of the restoration.

The show is staged with ingratiating versatility, even if inverted lighting increases the Hallowe'en note of the

Charlot: Hopi Snake Dance. Brush and ink, 1951

collection of masks, rather than furthers an understanding of their beautiful carving. While most will justly delight in the surprises strewn in their path, the serious student may grumble a bit as he is made to grope his way through dim-lit detours. But serious students have already visited the Museum of Natural History and the Heye Museum of the American Indian, where many of the treasures exhibited here managed, up to now, to escape popular adulation.

A review of a show held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, this article first appeared in slightly different form in *The Nation*, February 8, 1941.

*American Art Today (1959):
A Survey*

To achieve depth in this survey, being myself a painter, naturally enough I shall put the emphasis on painting. Architecture and sculpture are equally strong expressions of our national art and each rates a study of its own. However, parallels are easily drawn between the arts that illumine all three through the study of the one. Reflections on the place of the artist in our society, an important part of the cultural graph, remain valid for all art-makers.

More obviously than in other countries, a cleavage exists in our United States between the few and the many in their relationship to the arts. Men well-versed in the lore of modern art—dealers, critics, museum men, collectors—are but a minority. They constitute by far the most articulate group in matters of art. Their opinions, well published by mass media here as well as abroad, make news and make law. I feel it would be misleading to confine this survey to the opinions of these few, articulate though they may be. As a complement, I also wish to consider art's impact, or lack of impact, on the common man whom, as Lincoln musingly said, God must love most as He created so many men like that. There may be a lesson in lending an ear to

the rarely heard hesitant voice of the many. As an antidote to the pronouncements from the inner sanctum, it may be fitting to gather the opinion, if any, of those we could refer to without prejudice as the esthetically unwashed.

Here in America the strain—a tug-of-war in fact—between expert and non-expert in the matter of art is more obvious and also more distressing than in Europe or in Mexico. Perhaps deep-rooted homogeneous traditions feed there a consciousness of art, magnified at times into a national asset. In the States the expert both bemoans the fact of, and takes pride in, his cultural isolation. Whatever he says is never meant to represent the people at large, nor even intended to sway a majority to his taste. Some experts, carried away by the unusualness of their calling, stress what for the uninitiated passes for mysteries. In turn, the average man, baffled and far from convinced by what he hears, takes refuge from the unknown quantity that art has become up into an ivory tower of his own, one built exclusively for lowbrows. The common man's mumbled defense, "I don't know anything about art but . . .," sounds less humble and more mulish in the ratio that art styles plunge into a stratosphere of abstraction. Despairing of ever understanding what goes on in museums and art galleries, the man in the street reacts violently. The Old Master paintings he acknowledges may be *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and *The Spirit of 1776*. Norman Rockwell's covers fulfil all his aesthetic ambitions.

Perhaps at this time when an impasse seems reached, a round table should be proposed, to be held between the aesthetes and the unwashed, and a *rapprochement* attempted.

Astonishingly, a good plea could be made at such a meeting in defense of the inarticulates. If an armistice, or even a peace, resulted, art again could be felt to be a national patrimony. It was so in the last century where artists, both major and minor ones, acted as spokesmen for the people at large. It was the century of *The Last Bison Hunt*, and of *The Indian Maiden's Dream*. It was also the century of true masters not a whit less popular, such as Winslow Homer. We can stretch this state of affairs to the opening of our century and the members of the ashcan school, whose models and workshops were the city streets.

The Armory Show, staged in New York in 1913, is the acknowledged turning point. Experts hail it as an event that ushered in modern art for our continent. If one dared articulate the thoughts of the inarticulates, the Armory Show seen from their angle is more in the nature of a national disaster. Its diffusion of School of Paris manners onto the American scene sped the dilution of an art up to then genuinely different. The brilliancy of the show lured American painters to mimic a foreign accent. They became, if one may say so without intending a paradox, expatriates living in their own country.

One cement that may bring fast again those in the know and those out of it is what art is still created far from the great centers. Small communities manage a relation to their local artists based on an innocent awe of art. Local artists work wonders of their own to reflect their narrow milieu. Every small local show I have seen or juried has held surprises and at times beauties, come to through innocence and a lack of recipes. The fierce artificial light

that beats on the brow of Grandma Moses is justified only if it is taken rather as a reminder of other amateurs, equally skillful, equally devoted to local land and local lore. All over the States, they weave a sort of patchwork quilt of art works that speak for the people, even though not all may stand up against the brutal and mysterious standard called "museum caliber."

The most intense experience I have had of our provincial resources was on a trip through New Mexico with a friend well-versed in local lore. Our tour took us through backroads from village to village among people mostly Spanish-speaking. These families had been for generations at their job of painting *santos* and of sculpturing *bultos*. The open workshops gave on the street. Works of three generations were displayed on trestled boards. Works still in the making formed a living background to the static display. What impressed me most on this trip was the all-over picture of a community where the artist still has his place, stands as an equal to the smith and to the baker. His art is rooted without violence or mishap into the communal pattern.

Similar surprises are possible as we scan the art of the cities. One visual art that the common man loves and that highbrows do not disregard is the art of the funnies. Here surrealism is taken for granted. It is the one form of art that is a daily fare of all, or at least a must for most. Though genius is as rare in funnies as in other forms of art, it exists. Funnies even have their genuine Old Masters: Herriman and his Krazy Kat are enshrined for keeps in the temple of fame, whereas it appears probable that many a

fine-art artist of today is fated to be stopped at the threshold.

The common man is not always, or forever, in the wrong. One of the accepted forms of modern art, at least accepted by the knowing few, is magic realism. About it, around it, shows are organized, books written and the masters of the style acknowledged. By conjuring relationships rarely or never achieved in nature—a Venus of Milo wearing galoshes, perhaps—the magic realist suggests a world out of this world. The means he uses to render such heterogeneous objects, however, are not distinct from those used by a different brand of painters, men far from the vanguard, mostly distasteful their names to the orthodox art gourmet. Petty realism—an appellation that fits this one tame “ism” of which the major exponent is Norman Rockwell—is shunned by sound dealers, unsung by wise critics, and certainly unsought by museums. Like it or not, it is in fact a major form of the American art of today. Its disrepute among experts is hard to justify on stylistic grounds. Its visual solutions, its patient renderings, are identical with those of magic realism. The objects and people represented, however, are scrupulously true to the average man’s everyday experience. People in coming centuries may be touched and intrigued by what were the everyday scenes of our time much more than by what neither was nor could be. The faithfulness of petty realism to objective reality may prove truly magic once our generations are gone. Lowbrows may be justified in the long run!

Let us leave these errant thoughts and dangerous byways, and face now the more orthodox fields of art.

Art magazines, art critics, museums and collectors, have culled from out of the diversity a few trends, a few painters. Orthodox art is that shown in art galleries of repute, collected by an elite and, for example, sent to other countries, to Paris or Venice, to represent our country. Having lived myself for decades in far-off places, my visits to New York and its galleries have been sporadic. It would be easy to try and reconstruct what it is I missed of the evolution of our modern art with the help of books and slides, but I feel that I owe you, rather than a digest, a first-hand report. I will speak only from my own experience. Spaced every seven years or so, these visits afforded me one advantage, comparative cross-sections, as it were, into the continuity of art evolution. The locus of our story shall be a New York gallery that specializes in the latest trends. The visitors in the showroom, connoisseurs all, remain pretty much the same. The style of the pictures on the walls was different at each of my widely-spaced visits.

Some twenty years ago, the main lever of modern art was distortion. Inspired by African and South Pacific carvings, painters managed in their works to pack an impact based on wilful departures from natural proportions and from what one could call organic pulchritude. To make the spectator conscious of the boldness involved, the painter could deal only with a very limited subject matter. To distort the proportions of a hippopotamus or of a rose would be meaningful only for a zoologist or for a botanist. The one subject matter of which all humans have cognizance, that they know visually, and better

still from inside out, is the human body. Violence made to the human anatomy, even though it be only make-believe, elicits in all humans a response. The painters of that generation had one thing in common with classical art: for very different reasons from the Greeks, they too were limited mostly to representations of the nude. It was a time when onlookers felt barbaric, tried mirrored ways to act what they saw on the canvases, patterned their gestures to the squareness of Negro woodcarvings.

On my next visit, years later, the scenery had changed: abstract expressionism was the thing. Art was to do things to people not anymore by conjuring unusual forms, albeit illusive ones. Art contacted people directly through pigment without involving into the picture our experience of the objective world, not even to mark its violence. Allusions to humans, if any, were mere innuendos, exploded away from nature so drastically as to annul the pang of distortion that needs a modicum of realism to subsist. The pictures were heavy with pigment, freely slashed on or piled up in artfully discordant chords. Abstract expressionism spread into the spectators subterraneously, deep into what we could call their spiritual innards, dark formless regions of the unconscious and of the unrealized. All pictures then amounted to self-portraits, indeed not a mere catalogue of the shapes and colors of noses, craniums and eyes, but more subtly of the shapes and colors of souls. These and their moods were as live and varied, and of as many motley tastes as were those other souls collected by the diabolical gourmet, Bonbon, in Poe's frightening tale.

Gallery goers, then, mimed what they saw in other ways than before. Keyed to the new style, they attempted a sort of shut-eye appreciation. The painting still had to be funnelled in through the eyes, but was better appreciated by ceasing to look outwards, and by dipping deep into self. If any gesture accompanied the rite, it was aimed between one's heart and one's stomach, to the spleen, presumably the organ of this kind of introspection.

On my next visit, some seven years later, the New York gallery featured abstract impressionism. For the uninitiated, the paintings were not too unlike the ones I had seen before. Pigments were again brushed freely, slashed and piled up, minus form. The visual summing up, however, afforded a sense of space, of air and of sunny complacency. To use a word that would have been anathema but little before, decorativeness shyly peeked out in spite of the boldness displayed. A dilution of natural landscape was found rampant just under the abstract skin. Catalogue titles referred to a locus on earth, and even a time of day. Monet's waterlilies were verily the canon or pattern for the new art.

Spectators, knowing that landscape was involved, had modified their ritual gestures. The old impressionist approach was revived; heads wagged and eyes half slit as if stunned by strong sunlight. In the best of these works one could drink anew of the ancient elixir: Monet's pleasure before Nature's beauty, that at times did transcend pleasure and reach true dilection, the pleasure beyond pleasure that Poussin, the classicist of the seventeenth century, stated to be the aim and the end of true art.

Nowadays, the scenery on the gallery wall and the doings of gallery-goers are once more renewed. The boundless, patternless, featureless picture is usually achieved by means less docile than a brush moving at the beck of fingers and wrist. Thrown on or trickled, the pigment spreads blob over blob until they merge and total formlessness sets in. Often a single texture, a single color, sum up the new style in a single note, shrill or bass, but sustained to what one could venture to call a peak of epic monotony. In tune with the new style, the gallery-goers look blank.

It is not the first time that *nothing*, or to use the pregnant Spanish form, the *nada*, has seemed to fulfill all fullness for a generation. Mystics, long before artists, dwelt with the *nada*. Spanish seventeenth-century saints wrote movingly of their odyssey within the black night of the soul. Artists, being craftsmen, have more rarely felt so swayed as to forget the material object that is the picture, the grained texture of the canvas, or the four comforting straight angles of its rectangle. The Spanish mystics were denuded and waiting for their hard-to-gain emptiness to be filled. The “night” that is the new style may be rather the expression of a plenitude than of an emptiness. Only in our generation has the painter become acquainted with the art forms of all races and all times. Together with art shows, picture-books have filled his head to saturation with the untold wealth of a “museum without walls.” The newly coined term is meant to denote a progress, but walls after all are a *sine qua non* for windows and these alone may afford focused vistas. Before the present-day

artists are displayed the art treasures of all the world, as Satan did spread all kingdoms before Christ. It is a sore temptation for the painter to believe that all these kingdoms are his. Hence his unwillingness to choose among them. In physics, the blend of all rainbow colors results in white light. As pigments go, the blend of all colors is a black. In both cases, too much color results in colorlessness. Likewise, the painter's *nada*, his black night, may signify a surfeit, the quality of eclecticism without choice that is a unique trait of our day.

These cross-sections, cut within the last twenty years through the continuity of art evolution, are sufficient to suggest the richness and the complexity of the contemporary scene. May one hazard a guess at the future? Each painter believes, or at least hopes, that the evolution of styles will stand still now that a new style, his own, has been born. Of the practitioners of painting, the great majority are abstract artists. This in itself is a straw in the wind. Before it is ready to be discarded, before a violent reaction sets in engineered by a dissenting genius, a style has to be accepted, has in fact to become standard. With abstraction, this stage of saturation has come to pass.

To locate the manner in which the future revolution may happen, we should look for some element now bypassed and despised, some forgotten stuff that can be raised anew as a banner and as a battlecall. My own guess, that in no way pretends to be a prophecy, is that there will be a revival of didactic art, sequences tied together by a complex subject matter, unabashedly historical. There will be re-estimates of dead masters in the light of the new

terms. Rivera, so promptly dismissed today as a mere story teller, will come into his own as a stylist. Grant Wood also will be studied in the new light, and his *Washington Cutting the Cherry Tree* hailed as a forerunner. For those who look towards Paris for a needed reassurance that this will never come to pass, there as here, there are symptoms of change: Bernard Buffet, in his latest show, sorely tried his admirers by exhibiting a set of episodes from the story of Joan of Arc, complete with banners and chargers, castle-moats and knights in armor.

Let us turn from art to the art-maker, the artist. He is a notorious vagrant in any society. Plato considered him expendable and politely dismissed him from his Republic. Different is the American system of check and balance, though its purpose remains practically the same.

The difference is based on the dominantly mercantile quality of our culture. In Mexico and in Japan, art is something one does. Here the emphasis is on art as something one buys. As yet, we lack in the United States a virtue that could be more simply described as a sense of continuity. When I was a small Frenchman, each summer in Poissy I would go to Mass in the very church that Queen Blanche, mother of St. Louis, built there in the thirteenth century. The building and its art I took for granted. As I prayed, I soaked in unconsciously a vast segment of history and of art history. In our portion of the Americas we lack such an art, alive and grown mossy with use in its natural habitat. The art we never had by birthright we bought. Our museums are like herbariums compared with parks and jungles: plants once of sturdy

growth, dried out and flattened between the sheets of a folio.

When it comes to contemporary art, this habit of thinking of art as something one buys could be of advantage for the artist, what with a bullish art market and soaring prizes that even rate the headlines. Why is it then that the following simple syllogism amuses one as if it was a laughable paradox: Art is valuable. Artists make art. Therefore artists are wealthy.

Peculiar to the American scene is the pre-eminence of the middleman. By nature the middleman neither produces nor retails goods. In a card game he would be called a kibitzer. His self-appointed tasks are many. He surveys existing markets and analyzes potential ones. He proves, through the channels of mass media, why a certain brand of car should be in every garage and frozen food in every pot. The middleman increases sales by streamlining and packaging. He woos housewives with saving stamps and buries trinkets in breakfast foods. The price that the artist has to pay to be in tune with our society is to accept the manifold ministrations of the middleman for his art, treated as any other kind of goods. In the United States, between the art-maker and the art-lover, the middleman interposes hermetically his bulk.

To launch successfully any merchandise, it should be endowed with two dissimilar virtues: exclusivity and popularity. Most of the mercantile rites that are so impressively our own automatically get into gear around art. The "packaging" of art becomes an art in itself. A natural way of selling it is prestige, the very same lever

that sells French perfumes and fashions. Thus, to collect art has become a guarantee of cultured literacy. Museum openings may be social events as breathtaking as the unveiling of the latest couturier collection.

Much more difficult is the other facet of the middleman's task, that of creating a demand by proving to the people that they cannot do without art. The assumption is, of course, that art and people do not mix, and that hard work shall be needed to remedy this sad state of affairs. In truth, if things are to be justified by their use only, the genuine uses of art are both too vague and too transcendent to carry conviction. Art shall be forced to fit the procrustean bed and the democratic mold. Art is said to be good for you. Its therapeutic effects are extolled. It increases your conversational acumen. Publications that are mostly picture books spread and popularize art along these artificial lines. Critics evaluate, compare, analyze trends. They present art as a sport, the artists as jockeys wearing contrasting silks. Bets are taken and the winner takes all. Works written in this mode about modern art are readable and even exciting. They make more sense to most than the subject they treat. So thick is the fungus grown over the body of art that it obscures both its essence and its primacy. When a practicing artist applied not long ago for a place at an institute of advanced studies, he was gently shoved aside: the statutes had no provision made for artists, only for art historians.

On the totem pole of art the artist is low man. Riding him, topping him, one sees critics, museum men, dealers and collectors. That the equilibrium of the human

pyramid is literally based on the artist does not mean much to most. One museum director, queried about his peculiar policies of inclusions and exclusions, published a curt rejoinder that came close to being indiscreet and, as such, illuminating, "We call the plays as we see them." A little boy's dream had come true. Was it baseball, football, or art, he was the umpire, sporting cap and whistle. Impervious as a sphinx he watched the field. The players sweated and grunted; they made or lost points; they were cheered or booed. All the time he knew that a single blow of his whistle could freeze all of them into awed immobility.

Does the cumbrous and peculiar set-up influence the art-maker and his working ways? Artists are notoriously defenceless against the inroads of society. Russia puts its painters to functional tasks by forcing them into an excruciating mold of realism. We feel free to criticize this state of affairs, but fail to realize how the pressure that capitalism exerts is scarcely less severe. Many an American art-maker, for no more complex a reason than a family to clothe and feed, turns to highpressured commercial art. For a lifetime his creative gifts, often not inconsiderable, are kept on a leash and taught to turn tricks in praise of soaps, whiskeys and toilet paper. True, some artists grow rich at this trade. The best even acquire stomach ulcers and are ranked with executives. I have little patience with those who state that this is a genuine form of American art. I have been too close to successful commercial artists. I have watched the death struggle of their creativity against the combined assaults of vice-presidents, publicity experts and sales psychologists. It reminded me uncomfortably of

other art-makers: Pasternak, half-defying, half-subdued; Eisenstein, the movie director, or the composer, Shostakovich, debased and denuded of their genius the better to match an inflexible order.

There is a more subtle and less drastic form of surrender. Men who know what it is that makes our civilization tick work hard to transform the useless art-object into useful merchandise. The art market opens to the artist a temptation all the more enticing because there is this time no question of putting his art to crass uses. On the contrary, the dealer will insist on art for art's sake exclusively, and the painter's status remains unsullied. As is true of a boxer's manager, the job of the dealer includes the seeking and the fomenting of fame for his artist. One rule is that pictures, once they have become advertised brand products, must not depart from expected standards. The output of each artist should be recognized at a glance, be typically "as advertised." What was once a genuine expression of a rare moment in the painter's life, when enthusiasm, passion, vision, fused into a personal style, becomes cast into a mask. The man may grow. He may change his mood and his creed. Yet he shall live and die wearing over his true features the cast semblance of what once had been himself long ago.

What of painters who have not yielded to semi-commercial jobs, and have failed to join the stable of an art dealer? There is an insistent small voice—one could call it historical awareness—that suggests that tomorrow's recognized Old Master may well prove to be one of these men, unsuccessful on the face of it, and unpublicized.

Would the situation be worse, would our culture show no interest whatsoever in art, these men would go on painting. To use Cézanne's striking simile, they make art as a snail makes its ooze. When at work, the true painter does not mean to prove a point or to launch a style, or to accumulate treasure for his heirs. He works because work is a must, the one way he knows to rid himself of what power churns his innards, demanding to be born.

This kind of artist dimly realizes that the game of living, as played by his contemporaries, is not one of his own choosing. He would like to be appraised for what he is, a craftsman as skilled as any mechanic, creating objects as important to man as any car, or TV set, or rocket. Instead, he finds himself pushed aside. True artists would fail in their trust if they pretended that art has any other essential reason to be than that elusive, silent, passive, timeless element that Poussin signified by the word "dilection." The core of such an art, reaching the spectator through the senses, strikes the peaks of spirituality. At such a level, the physical art object encloses a virtue close to the nature of a sacramental. No wonder then that the true artist at work—his only care that of proving to himself the validity of an inner image—remains by definition ineffably alone.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *The Critic*, August–September, 1959.

American Prints:
1913-1947

This summary aims at being a review of the changes which have occurred in the American graphic arts within the last twenty-five years. Its starting year is 1913, when the aesthetic thunderbolt of the Armory Show, having shattered the one accepted faith, replaced it by other creeds, sapling-like, bud-hard, dynamic, which now (a time-span sufficient to launch a generation having elapsed) have become routine in their turn.

If this panorama in retrospect succeeds in being representative of the trends that the period involves, it should suggest the light-hearted unlacing of a corset of academic traditions and the resulting gambol in the pastures of modern art; on the edge of the era now opening it should disclose, as the arteries of the once-young moderns harden, a revulsion of the truly young men from the subjective doings of their elders, a gradual swell of yearning for a recaptured collective idiom, like the nostalgia of the prodigal for his father's house.

For a better understanding and enjoyment of prints, one must take exception to a certain concept of fine prints that parallels in the graphic field the apocryphal golden

legend concerning the sacredness of the “Old Masters.” Far from being that of building Chinese walls to protect fine prints from the people at large, the task of the expert should be to bring both together. Before writing about such a topic, one should pledge oneself anew to a truth which so much specialized literature about prints has obscured: It is self-evident that the essence of the graphic arts is this property of spawning, of multiplying, and thus of pulling down the barriers of rarity and expensiveness that stand between the everyday man and art originals. Such a postulate infuriates in its simplicity a certain type of print-lover who shares with the hoarder of postage stamps a belief in the mysterious qualities inherent in rarity. Fineness, an imponderable that remains essential for art enjoyment, is in no way impaired by multiplication; only the price the art object will fetch, only its desirability for collectors. Meanwhile its enjoyment spreads until it at last reaches *hoi polloi*, a fate observed with mental reservations by those who hold art to be a proper pursuit only for an elite, and with joy by those others who deem art to be as useful and beneficial as bread, not to be taxed, or denied to the many.

Before the advent of photography and photo-engraving in relatively modern times, all prints were technically fine prints, in the sense that a hand-made design had been cut or engraved or drawn on wood or metal or stone. The topical vignette published with stop-press speed in a nineteenth-century magazine barely a week after the event—the siege of a town, the queen’s displacements, the arrival of foreign ambassadors—was hand-drawn and

hand-cut, indistinguishable, so far as the impeccability of its autography is concerned, from the woodcuts of Holbein and Dürer.

The distinction could not then be made that is now drawn between newspaper and magazine illustrations on the one hand and fine prints on the other, as it is based wholly on the introduction of photography somewhere in the process of reproduction. The collector of fine prints had no other valid touchstone than quality to separate the fine-art sheep from the commercial-art goats. And it would hardly have proved safe to attempt a judgment by a simple rule of thumb, by treasuring “idle” art, done with strict subjectiveness in the confines of a studio, and rejecting that other kind of graphic art commissioned to quench the curiosity of magazine subscribers as to how many horses dragged the queen’s carriage, or how Malakoff fell. For among the hack draftsmen sent to far-flung battlefields, or grinding out cartoons week after week—and grinding their own lithographic stones also—there happened to be some of the topflight artists of their epoch—Daumier and Constantin Guys in Europe, Winslow Homer and Constantino Escalante in America. After the passage of time, with the pressure of publication wiped away and deadlines long since erased, with the topics that were once the toast of the day forgotten, the residue of art in these topical prints vies for beauty with the subjective Biblical musings of Rembrandt, or with the no less subjective pastime exercises of the aged and half blind Goya in Bordeaux, when, propping a litho stone on an easel, he smudged on it, with the aid of a magnifying

glass, bulls as live as those other Spanish bulls also smudged on stone in the caves of Altamira.

The one graphic field where photography was bound to supplant the hand-made product was that of reproductions meant to multiply the semblance of famous or salable works. Unswayed by emotion, the camera performs a job of undoubted authenticity; and yet, when genuine artists deserted the field of reproductive prints, we lost a chance at seeing the work of one master filtered through another trained eye. When the Kings of Spain commissioned Goya to engrave the masterpieces of Velásquez, they acted like museum curators bent on procuring postcards of exhibits as souvenirs for visitors. The result, a composite exposure of two equally great personalities, states by contrast the limitations of today's camera, dreamed of by some as unlimited.

It is of importance that, within the period allotted to this show, an authentic American master of reproductive wood-engraving was still active, Timothy Cole, who gallantly fought and lost his rearguard skirmish against the machine.

It remains true today, as it was true yesterday, that we should exercise ample-mindedness when mapping borderlines between fine and other prints, so as not to miss the Guys and Daumiers and Homers of our day. The graphic arts are today so widespread and so widely enjoyed in the United States that they have become the indispensable daily fare for the man in the street, the subway commuter, the business man relaxing in his office, even the child in the nursery. I refer, of course, to the American cartoons

that stud dailies and weeklies, some in the Nash tradition of a single, telling, political drawing, some that display the inner workings of fantasm worlds, “funnies,” the impertinent contemporary version of the strips of holy vignettes—illustrating successive slices of time—that Italy called “*predelle*.”

Today’s cartooning has all the earmarks of a living art, being so widely consumed that it is not thought of as art anymore. Its prints, left to the small mercies of children’s hands, stained, torn, and thrown away as rubbish, are fated to turn into collector’s items, like the medieval woodblocks and blockbooks that were also once much in demand and thoroughly consumed, both spiritually and physically. Only a ruling on the fact that Herriman’s pen-and-ink originals were multiplied by a photo-engraving process could keep his *oeuvre* out of this show; for included in the definition of what constitutes a fine print is that it should be hand-cut and hand-printed. So let us raise an eyebrow at cartoons, our country’s most live expression of the art of black-and-white; let us attempt to interpose the flaming sword of Fine Art between Krazy Kat and immortality.

Photography withered a whole generation of reproductive engravers and snapped the *raison d’être* of graphic media that brought a dignity and autographic purity even to the meanest magazine of the pre-camera era. But also, by an automatic shift of gravity that could be translated into an esthetic law of compensation, photography itself became in turn an imposing new branch of the graphic arts. In its combination of factual veracity,

strict chemistry and austere palette, photography is well suited to the idiosyncrasies of the American approach. Its few masters could hardly be omitted from this show. However, a cautious criterion allotted their works only antechamber space, so to speak, for they lack the doubtful blessing of being hand-drawn.

Having shoved into exterior darkness, because they either are not drawn or else not cut by hand, important and peculiarly modern manifestations of the graphic arts understood in their wider sense, this show features prints hand-drawn, hand-cut or hand-engraved, a considerable residue of today's American graphic arts. Even when so rigorously delimited, the field is thick with split-hair rulings that may puzzle the intruding layman. The good technical health of a plate—that is, its potentiality for reproducing a design *ad infinitum*—is frowned upon by many a connoisseur. King of the portfolios remains the drypoint, its prized velvet burr good only for a very few proofs. Etching comes next, that yields its good proofs only in short pulls. It has become proverbially synonymous with other coveted things, lollypops, mink coats, and such, that may lure unwary innocence into danger. The word even grates on the hardened ears of Hollywood censors. Otherwise how could one explain the following line—doubtless chastely edited—spoken by a film roué to a blond stenographer: “Do come and see my Rembrandt lithographs!”

Theoretically, all prints of museum standard should be hand-printed. It is a catchy term, redolent of Ruskin's try at an artificial pumping of health into sick handicrafts.

Of course, the printing of proofs from an original block does not require a complex paraphernalia. Perhaps closest to true hand-printing are the Chinese rubbings from stone bas-reliefs, and in the Occident, the casual proofs made without benefit of a press, when the paper is laid over the block and pressed into its grooves with fingerball or thumbnail. Thus would Millet and Gauguin check the state of a work, often a single detail, before cutting any further. These undoubtedly hand-made proofs are usually quite deficient as concerns inking and pressure, could not stand on quality alone. Despite this they are precious, inasmuch as they are relics of the artist, like his shirt or pipe.

Most prints are made with the intromission between the artist and the artist's proof of a printer and a press. As far as relief prints are concerned, it is futile to distinguish between Gutenberg's archaic press, hand-manned, but worked at top speed in a most businesslike fashion, the more complex plate-press that pulled circa 1850 the engravings of *The London Illustrated News*, and the small artists' presses of today. Only naive souls sighing for the fiction of the good old times could detect a difference. All that is needed to insure a decent proof is correct inking and pressure.

In lithography, delicate hand and brain work is indispensable at the stage of etching the stone, and this is where great printers are made. All that should be expected of an ink-roller is uniform inking, equally possible when the stone is hand-rolled or inked by a roller mechanically moved, or when the hand-drawn zincograph is stretched over the drum of an offset press. Offset printing exposes

the fallacies of attempted definitions of fine printing. At first it seems removed one step further from what is called hand-printing—composition roller inking the plate that inks a rubber pad that inks the paper—and yet it achieves an important forward step in autography, in that the print is identical with the model instead of its mirrored image.

Intaglio printing is perforce hand-done. Perhaps unjustly, Joseph Pennel represents in this show a kind of tail-end of the Whistler tradition—or was it only mannerism?—which attempted personal artistry at every stage of print-making and especially at that of inking and pressure. Fame hallows the Whistler proofs that he also signed as printer. The film of ink that the master's unequal wipe left on metal, and thence on paper, is revered by the collector; and in truth some of his waterscapes would vanish in the sunlight of a clean pull. Signed, numbered limited editions, marginal remarks, states, go with this type of approach. In the stylistic battle still raging between conservatives and moderns, I would check as a point in favor of modern prints the fact that such fine and refined traits, most of them collectors' bait, are more often found as a kind of fungus that thrives on conservative plates, of which modern works are relatively free.

Even the simplest press may interpose a rusty turn of its screw or the wobbliness of its plates between an inexperienced printer (who may very well be the artist himself) and the beauty of a final proof. Even the most intricate of offset presses may be made to conform to the lightest indication of a skilled printer and yield the

proof supreme. As in other fields of endeavor, it is not the accessories used that guarantee fineness, but in the last analysis, a craftsman's hand and the brain that motors the hand. In that sense, and in that sense only, all fine prints are hand-made. One should mention among the few fine printers of our day, George C. Miller of New York City, Lawrence Barrett who works in Colorado Springs, and Lynton R. Kistler of Los Angeles. Their skilled enthusiasm has assisted at the birth of many a graphic artist.

The United States witnesses a heartening revival of the use of hand-drawn prints pulled in unlimited editions, which is where the definition of what the graphic arts should be acquires its full meaning. They are illustrations for trade books, more often children's books. In mid-nineteenth century, when tired printers' devils snapped the jaws and pulled the levers of the press that inked the five thousand copies of the weekly *Charivari*, their thoughts through the long twelve-hour day were not on esthetic pursuits. Yet it is their hack labor that made Daumier's *oeuvre* possible. Had it been submitted to the restraint of limited editions for collectors only, had it been cut off from contact with his fall guy and constant admirer, the French bourgeois at large, Daumier's opus would have withered. Today, offset presses that run without fatigue as many as 200,000 copies of one hand-drawn zinc doubtless launch some of the more vital prints of our era.

In their democratic way of reaching the people, the graphic arts play more than an esthetic role on the American scene. They blend well with a tradition that rebels at the exquisite and the rare. With the gradual shrinking of the

terra incognita which blanked the map of the United States, the interest in pioneering and the open spaces that the works of Homer and Jackson typify thinly petered out into the duck prints of Benson. The new wilds were in the city, and the American tradition snared another generation of draftsmen trained in the tough school of newspaper graphic reporting, who had the street for a studio, and for a drawing board an ash-can lid. At its deepest, their work matches the mood, humanity-packed, of Stieglitz' great contemporaneous photograph, "The Immigrants." At its rowdiest, it is as high-pitched as the rowdiness of beef-eater Hogarth, another great graphic reporter. John Sloan succeeded in capturing in a web of etched lines a whole metropolis and its motley inhabitants, a New York that is not today's New York and is now sunk as far as any Atlantis; already Sloan's etchings have outlived his city. As in the days of Constantin Guys, Boardman Robinson jobbed as a war correspondent whose graphic reportings from the field will outlast many a studio job.

This art of the "ash-can school," so close to the people, illustrates Lincoln's saying, "God must have loved the common man; he made so many of them." It could have spilled easily into the social-consciousness that marks the art of the thirties without need of, or reference to, the very different brand of art that was being done in Paris at the time. It probably would have done so were it not for the Armory Show. While a majority of puritan laymen were shocked by Marcel Duchamps into believing in a European cultural decadence, while a minority of liberal laymen

cheered modern art hobbling on its zig-zag way as anarchistic, American artists understood the lesson of Europe in its purest and highest sense. They felt it as a heroic and painful reappraisal of means, a conscious restating of problems of style, a shying away from the herd thinking and the cliché solutions that had served so well so many that came before. Each artist started heroically to build his own personal universe from scratch, its art form perforce archaic.

Max Weber comes to mind as the American paragon of good moderns, and also the remark of his friend Henri Rousseau in a letter to Picasso, "We are the two masters of the day; I in the naturalistic manner, and you in the Egyptian one." The purest expression of that moment are Weber's early woodcuts, which paradoxically capture a symbolist's sensitiveness in planks roughly adzed with African bluntness.

A rising flux of art books and reproductions was to give the next generation of American artists a moment of drunken elation as they surveyed world cultures and art forms from the vantage point of photogravure. Great was the temptation to feel heir to all those kingdoms. The panoramic view measurably strengthened the range of stylistic choice open to eclectics, but perhaps not their innate strength.

There is a certain horse-sense that spices American taste, and purely intellectual roots are a somewhat brittle channel for healthy sap. Soon, a group of critics and artists confessed, with a *mea culpa*, that, even though modern art might be dressed in gossamer-fine raiment, as far as their



eyes could see, it went naked. A general sigh of relief went up at this admission, and the American Scene put in its appearance. For me, Grant Wood personifies the return to Arcadia, the candid search for earth, blood and roots. A chance meeting in Cedar Rapids, a visit to his workshop, where murals on rustic themes were team-painted, impressed me with the fact that in Iowa at that time, murals and land and people were as closely interwoven as were the land and people and murals of Mexico. Even in Grant's lithographs his mural affinities may be felt, his patience, and a flair for architectural balance.

At the same time that Corn became the *leitmotiv* in the country, city art focused on the Worker. Socially conscious artists now called themselves plastic workers, and attempts at artists' unions patterned after workers' unions were made. Here, perhaps, an inspiration nurtured by the depression at home borrowed its ideography in part from the Mexico of the 1920s, where engravers had shared in the renaissance with a loud crop of illustrated posters and broadsides cheaply printed and retailing for a few pennies. But in the States, the logical role of the graphic arts as a ready medium of art for the people never quite dovetailed with the making of an art about the people. Prints that canonize the worker were pulled somewhat paradoxically on china paper, in limited editions, and priced accordingly. Nevertheless, the new faith, or the remodeled faith, infused many a fine print

Weber: Figure. Woodcut, 1918. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

with a breath and a breadth that a preoccupation with style alone had never produced.

Within the range of time that this show encompasses, many new techniques have been tried in the graphic field, made possible by increasingly complex technological resources. Some are variations on classical themes—the use of sandpaper and gasoline in the making of a lithograph, the sandblasting of a woodcut—and others are materially new departures—serigraphs, celloprints, etc. If progress resided in variety we should indeed rejoice. The graphic artist should not, however, rely unduly on technical inventions to solve his problems, any more than the painter on his brand-new synthetic pigments. No short-cut can make art appreciably easier of attainment. Despite the many manual steps involved, printmaking, inasmuch as it is art at all, “*e cosa mentale.*”

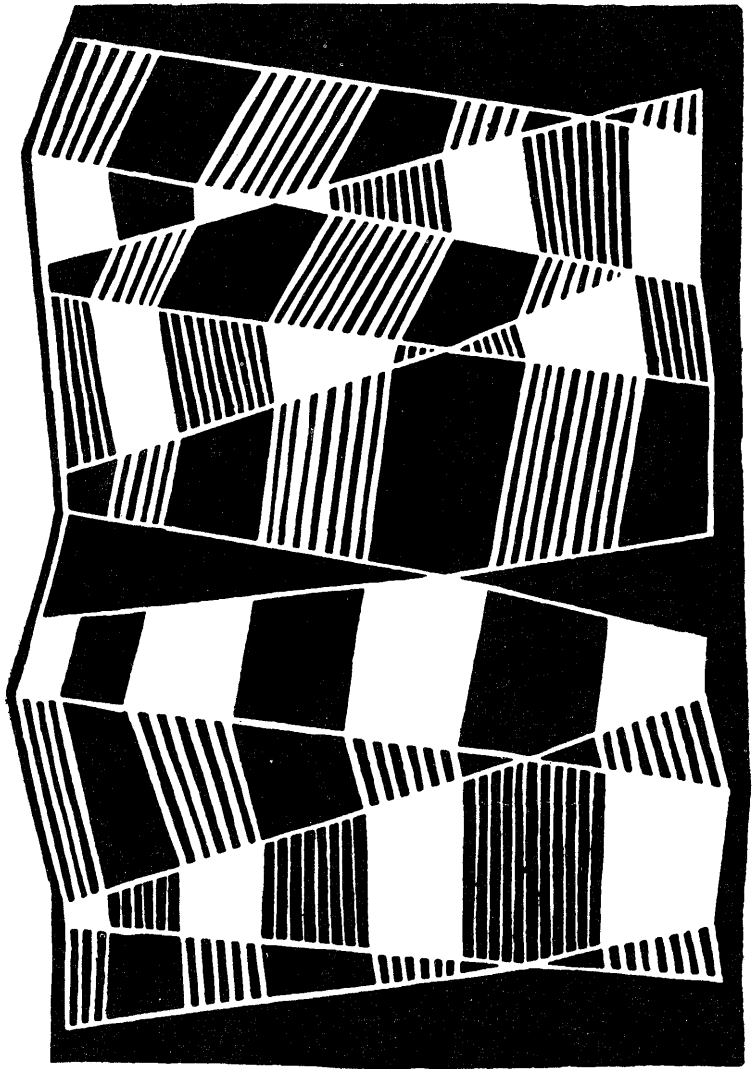
This article first appeared in slightly different form as the Foreword to the catalog of the retrospective show arranged by the American Institute of Graphic Arts at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1947.

Old Masters for Tomorrow

It is told that *Alice in Wonderland* having found favor with Queen Victoria, Her Majesty graciously allowed Lewis Carroll to dedicate his next work to her. This happened to be *The Fifth Book of Euclid Treated Algebraically, So Far As It Relates to Commensurable Magnitudes*. Some similar mischievousness rules the sequence of publication of the two books that Sydney Janis dedicates to contemporary painting.

In the first, *They Taught Themselves*, he presented with a keen outlook and refreshing respect for the artists concerned, the wonderland sight of men who succeeded in lifting themselves by their bootstraps and were caught in this levitating act. Many of the pictures analyzed were of the storytelling type, monkeys upsetting fruit trays, cops in pursuit and such. Accused of favoring Sunday painters over professionals, Janis was suspected by purists of being somewhat of a practical joker.

His second book is so at variance with the first that it could mean an aesthetic *mea culpa* for those who do not know that Janis has long been a pioneer champion of non-representational art, who acquired difficult and



mature Picassos when most other collectors were flirting with this artist's "Blue" juvenilia.

The riotous and the quaint are absent from *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*. Austerity marks its text from the first sentence, "Science is the open sesame of twentieth-century art . . ." to the parting tableau, "Man, manipulating the lever of contemporary culture upon the fulcrum of science, attains the vital balance for twentieth-century art." Would scientists care to uphold this thesis or choose to deny it, as did Sigmund Freud when he refused a proffered stake in the expensive subconscious of Dali? It matters little, for the attitude exists as an aim, a spring, a passion—and in aesthetic matters, will often equals fact.

Today, when children bring home as a matter of course the abstract finger paintings that they smear in nursery schools, when surrealism proves a hit in advertising, and stroboscopic photography featured in magazines familiarizes us with the plastic patterns of time-movement, it would be disingenuous to pretend shock or even surprise at the contents of this book. An extraordinarily well-informed and lucid text recites the factual record without crowding it with irrelevancies. Janis taps worthwhile provincial sources scarcely touched by New York galleries, gives their chance to the very young, while denying space to deans among practitioners, George L. K. Morris and Albert Gallatin among them.

To match in art today's globe-circling activities, stylistic relationships between continents are emphasized

Albers: Edged II. Woodcut, 1934

at the expense of national flavor. After reading the opening chapter, "Sources in 20th Century European Painting," that suggests an America dependent upon Europe for its art forms, one looks in vain for a complementary chapter on American sources. Europe freely acknowledges the role of America in the formation of abstract and surrealist art. Gleize and Metzinger mention and illustrate in 1912 American Indian totem patterns as forerunners of cubism. Pioneer American skyscrapers, pioneer American machines, inform both the dynamics of futurism and Bauhaus functionalism, while Mack Sennett cinema comedies with their fantastic plots parallel Dada. If, as Janis says, it be true that "to participate in today's culture it is only necessary that a country be infused with a modernization of its physical equipment," one understands why an American plumbing fixture dated A.D. 1917 was exhibited by Marcel Duchamp as an *objet d'art*.

Janis asserts rightly that non-objective painting is the legitimate exponent of its era, which is undeniably a noble enough place for any type of art. But the price to be paid for such genuineness is the merging of individual works into period homogeneity. Where the artists are long dead, like those of Egypt and Byzantium, we expect single achievements to agglutinate into one communal mass. In this book we surprise a similar metamorphosis in the making. As one goes through the plates of the abstract section, paint acquires a hieratic quality in the ratio that it shuns the incidents of natural vision. Picture after picture falls into the groove as discs to an automatically fed phonograph. Abstract works, intended as exasperated

affirmations of uniqueness, melt their already faceless features into a still deeper sediment of dehumanization— anonymity.

To the layman, surrealism diverges sharply from abstractionism, and should present a bric-a-brac of unrelated objects, watches, rags, organs, ants, patiently rendered in make-believe style. It has thus become synonymous with the reappearance of subject matter, a change of mood, deep as a chasm, that splits modern art circa 1930 and gives to the second third of the century a complexion far different from that of the first. The Picasso of 1915 shied from representation. To quote loosely a contemporary text of Cocteau, having built a scaffold of planes and lines around a lady or a bottle, the artist made bottle or lady vanish from the finished picture. Fourteen years later, Dali crowds unabashed thirty-eight bicycle riders in three square inches of *Illumined Pleasures* as an answer to the challenge of his paragon, Meissonier, who could fit in one picture a whole Napoleonic army down to the last brass button, gaiter and moustache. The surrealism that Janis sponsors in this book is more abstract in hue than is its popular version, inasmuch as it inclines to the orthodox line of the surrealist party that favors automatism over patient rendering, and anathematizes Daliism for vernacular.

This first corpus of American non-objective art, impressive both in quantity and quality, needs no strengthening at the expense of realism. One regrets what Janis says of abstract painters turned realists: “. . . artists who could not survive without support, approval and companion-

ship turned their backs on the difficult path of abstractionism. . . .” Not all conversion to representation need be venal and cowardly. Heroic was the attitude of the cubist Rivera, leaving behind him in 1921 the economic security guaranteed by a Paris dealer for what seemed then aesthetic exile and meager rewards—Mexican walls and a laborer’s weekly pay. Hélicon, justly recognized as a successful master of abstract art, links his recent turn towards nature to what he experienced as a soldier in this war. And Dali was yielding to another spur than weakness when he changed from early abstractions to what he calls “hand-done color photography.”

I agree with Janis that non-objective art deserves the name of “twentieth-century art,” but feel that it would be safer to term it “early twentieth-century art.” Aesthetic quakes write complex graphs in a hundred years, as in the last century that opens with the pomp of David’s *Coronation of Napoléon* and outlasts Van Gogh. Starting with Fauvism where Van Gogh left off, our own century has ample time left to breed in its turn a David.

A review of Sydney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Kenyon Review*, Spring 1945.

Edward Weston

By definition photography is a most objective medium. By vocation, Edward Weston makes it more so. To survey chronologically his “oeuvre” is to witness a purposeful shelling away of subjective addenda, of trimmings that, to the average observer, transform a photograph into a work of art.

In his earliest work, lyrical qualities strive to express themselves against the logic of the camera. He idealizes objects through “flou” effects or spider webs of shadows, much as a French chef will induce a fish to look like a chicken and taste nearly as it looks. Those trickeries soon discarded, Weston tried to retain a well-earned right to unusual photographic angles, subtle space composition and sophisticated layouts. It seems that, without such pride feeders, an artist’s personality would cease to be. But his destiny was to strip himself still further. In his present work, the last vestiges of self-obsession have disappeared. In the concrete, implacable way which is its own privilege, the camera records whatever it is, rock, plant or tree trunk, that Weston innocently squares plumb in the middle of the lens.

The increased effacement of the man behind the machine has resulted in deepening and heightening the aesthetic message. With a humbleness born of conviction, the artist distracts our attention from himself as a spectacle, shifts it to nature as a spectacle. The search for a super-objectivity produces an art which accomplishes the inner aim of all great art, to make us commune with the artist's clairvoyance in the minute of creation.

This application of the apologue of the man who found himself by losing himself clashes with this epoch of artistic theorizing. People now profess that objective vision and subjective understanding are incompatible, that the former is trash compared with the latter. Yet man speaks but of himself: however objective his aim, he does not describe objects, but only his own sensuous contact with them. The more tenaciously a painter clings to normal vision, the more clearly will he state, as does Vermeer, that the human optic is a more perfect means of emotion than of cognizance. The camera too gives us not the object, but a sign for it written in terms of light and dark, often at odds with the experience gathered through touch, smell, mental knowledge or even an average eye. As concerns the supposed hierarchy between an inner and an outer world, let us remember that the only possible commerce of the optical arts is within the realm of the visible, deals with the description of physical bodies. This does not mean that art must be de-spiritualized. The very fact of the visibility of the outer world is

Charlot: Portrait of Edward Weston, Mexico, 1924



proof that it has laws, rhythms and phrases to which, both being attuned to the same diapason, the laws, rhythms and phrases of our spiritual world answer. To describe physical biological phenomena, erosion, growth, etc., is to refer to similar happenings in our mental world. There is a mystery in the objective realm as loaded with meaning as are the voyages that one makes into oneself. Weston has understood those things as few others have. More exactly, as artists—at least in the heat of creation—do not think, Weston has lived these things. The more objective he strives to be, the more inner chords he strikes, and in so doing, points to a means of liberation for his fellow artists, away from the current and exasperating creed.

There is nothing in his photographs to enthuse the kind of aesthete who expects from art the same soothing or tickling that one demands from an ivory scratcher. Poussin justly stated “the aim of art is dilection,” but many mistake pleasure for dilection. Superseding the physical, and even the emotional, true dilection is of the realm of the spirit.

The physical exertion inherent to the technique of painting, the multiple twists of arm, wrist and fingers, as well as the time that goes into the creation of a picture, are too often deemed the standards of its excellency. Yet they often result in a muddling of the mental image that the painter forms at the start, and then patiently mutilates. The Chinese understood better this fact that physical exertion is incompatible with the highest forms of medita-

Charlot: Weston in His Studio, Carmel, California, 1933



tion; their greatest masterpieces, devoid of color, jugglery or patience, were created in five minutes with a broken reed, a feather, or a finger smeared in ink.

Weston's art is a culmination of the Oriental concept. Hand and wrist work give way to the mastery of the machine, eliminating such uncertainties as are corollaries of muscle and time. Under the stupendous concentration of the artist's mind, $1/35$ of a second suffices to create an image with which to perpetuate his spiritual passion.

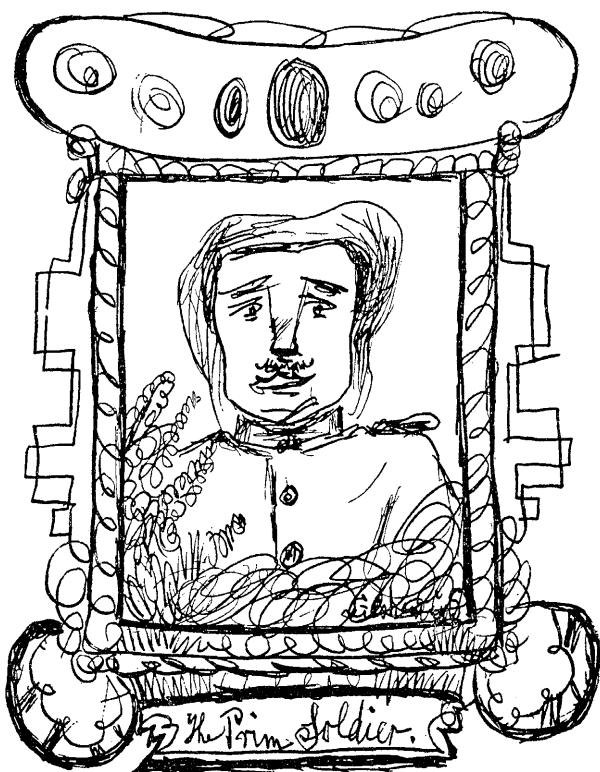
Weston's world of ordered bodies is as fitted a tool towards contemplation as the hierarchy of blacks in the greatest ink paintings—with this added security, that Nature being actually such as revealed in his well-focused photographs, we come closer to the mechanical proof of its being, in essence, divine.

This article appeared in slightly different form first in a monograph in 1932 and then as a foreword to a show in 1933.

Louis M. Eilshemius

The paintings of Eilshemius are laughable, that is, they have been laughed at so heartily that it takes courage to realize and confess with the unavoidable blush that he is the greatest American painter of his generation. Yet there was good ground for laughing. Eilshemius was no man of mystery. Known to all dealers, to all painters and critics for decades, and not one to think much of him or his work. So his paintings accumulated right where he lived, on East 57th Street, the hub of the art market. Not in the hands of dealers, of course, but in his own house, stacked behind sofas and wash-stands, in his cellar, in his attic, under a coat of dust. Year after year the pile would grow, strata upon strata, with almost undisturbed geological precision.

For all of this long time Eilshemius was the only one to believe in his work. He would publish in print this faith, force his copy on reluctant art editors. For the public, misunderstood geniuses lose interest if, first and above all, they do not misunderstand themselves. That a Van Gogh died in full consciousness of his genius is indeed a thought to make one uneasy. But at least Van



Gogh was discreet about it, his brother being the only one to share his secret. Eilshemius wanted to take the whole world as witness and thus, paradoxically, brought himself to a state of the most public isolation.

The pictures themselves are, even now that all agree on their goodness, rather difficult to forgive. We pride ourselves on sophistication and nature seems to us very poor art indeed. But not only do the paintings of Eilshemius look like nature, but like nature at its worst, when its sunsets and moonlights, lakes and ladies and gondolas remind one of artistic picture postcards or of the gilded and embossed design on a Cuban cigar box.

These are the odds. Grave as they may be on social grounds, it is evident that, aesthetically, they are not even blemishes. There have been good artists who knew they were good and said so, and taste is rather in inverse ratio to greatness. Whistler had good taste. But the very great have great innocence and fall more easily into social errors. Witness the *Turkish Bath* of Monsieur Ingres or the daubs of that other vulgarian, Courbet. Because the good artist realizes shamelessly whatever his inner impulse bids him do. Of the critics, the public, he does not think. His struggles, his victories, are strictly fought and won in isolation. In not one of Eilshemius' pictures is there a hint or knowledge that he will not be the only one to look at them, none of that slight stiffening of the backbone of the man who knows he is being watched.

The freshness and clarity of his early landscapes are

Eilshemius: The Prim Soldier. Pen vignette, 1938

little short of a miracle when one thinks of the bitumen-loaded brush of his contemporaries. Among the best are souvenirs of his trip to the South Seas. The king and his family, and many native beauties, were painted with all the intimate seriousness with which one would paint his friends and parents. Later on Eilshemius indulges in more fantastic subjects. Be they nymphs monkeying in moon-lit forests or ghostly riders under majestic clouds, they all obey the same sweeping joyful rhythms of his spiritual maturity.

The technical resolutions, always inventively genuine, are of the greatest simplicity. The atmospheres, laid thin, vanish into layers of space with the airy nobility of a Lorrain, upon which foliage is spattered with the craft and zest of a house painter or a Dosso Dossi. The textures are contrived with new physical means; I remember some donkeys with all their hair engraved in pencil on the thick impasto. Figures well into the distance acquire, when you get closer to them, a wealth of details that do not somehow intrude on the whole. They are, as their author puts it in a fit of pride, as truthful and complete as a photograph. It is true that a picture by Eilshemius seems to be not any more paint on canvas, but admits you from the start into its three-dimensional reality.

This belief in an outer world, in the existence of the object, is the proof of a good mental health even if it belies the actual trend of art-philosophy. Painting being optic and optic dealing with bodies—bodies in function of light, as Poussin has it—the more objects, the more details in those objects, the more painting you will have in your

picture. Not that Eilshemius finds any problem at all in the representation of objects; they all come to the tip of his brush; the trees, the water, the nymphs, the mountains, as swiftly as the rabbit from the magician's hat. Yet in spite of the story telling, the illustrative quality which he relishes, his pictures are endowed with a spiritual animation that far outweighs their realism. His models, often trivial, are made by the alchemy of genius to give utterances deep if disconnected with their everydayness. I recall a picture now in the Phillips Memorial Gallery called *The Rejected Suitor*. A gentleman in a brown derby, some Victorian ladies amidst furniture to match. The artist had swallowed it whole, bustles, gilt and plush, without a hint at discrimination or fun-poking. Yet it was impossible to escape the sense of mystery, subdued and subtle, that permeated it, reminding one of Vermeer and Rembrandt.

Historically, Eilshemius, like Douanier Rousseau, is a freak. Which means that it is hard for art critics to make him fall in line. Possessed of the cocksure craftsmanship of a Magnasco or a Dufy he ought to be, on technical grounds, classified beside such examples of subtle decadence. But the art of those virtuosi, humorous or exquisite as it may be, is somewhat shallow in spiritual content. On the contrary, the work of Eilshemius, though dressed up in similar garb, is all permeated by a spirit of childish innocence, of wonderment before the beauties of the world, a spirit to be described by the word "primitive."

If the history of art does not yield readily to include Eilshemius, much less will the history of today. Un-

mistakably, the gargantuan good health with which he succeeds in recreating a whole world with ease, does brand our painter as unfashionable. The giants of modern art, battling forever with a guitar, the ripping feats of a Picasso in humbling the human machine, bring us more readily to our knees. But an artist paints more often for future generations than his own, and Eilshemius can afford to wait. His pictures exhumed, soaped, scrubbed and framed, are at last in the hands of an intelligent dealer. They are well revered by the youngest of art students who puzzle already at the fundamental distrust and discomfort that nature gave to their elders, and feel somewhat distracted in the presence of abstractions. They look back for guidance to those masters of yesterday whose realism and craftsmanship they relish. Their cruel and pious hands take down from its pedestal the bust of Picasso and dust tenderly the somewhat bruised busts of Gérôme and Bouguereau to hoist them in its place. In the days to come, much emphasis will be laid upon objective rendering and technical excellence. By then, the art of Eilshemius, blending such qualities with those of the spirit, may be a useful reminder that after all, and however real paint may look, "*la pittura e cosa mentale.*"

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It is sometimes perplexing to come face to face with the opinions that contemporaries of past periods had of their artists, and to check up on the final allotment of fame as ratified by posterity. Gigantic figures, pricked, dwindle like balloons, while from some obscure corner related to fine arts, a fashion-plate designer like Moreau-le-jeune, a newspaper reporter like Guys, emerge as the indisputable mouthpieces of their epoch. Thus, on the ground of experience, we may prophesy the deflation of our own giants of modern art, and start hunting through improbable corners of garrets and cellars for more authentic geniuses dyed deep enough to suit the taste of our grandsons.

Why is it that contemporaries of the artists usually guess wrong as to their respective merits. We associate the idea of greatness with the term "old masters" and those are for us elders with long beards who live and work in an ivory tower suggested by the museum atmosphere in which their pictures are now buried. We forget that those old masters were young, and that they achieved international fame only by clinging tenaciously to their own earthly boundaries and mental idiosyncrasies. Thus Brueghel,



after a trip to Italy at a time when the Sistine chapel was news, came back home steeped deeper than ever in the atmosphere of his own Dutch peasantry and his distaste for the Spanish invaders. Siding with one's own moment, country, party or hamlet, diving into the social turmoil, using pencil and brushes to club your opponents is paradoxically one of the surest ways to remain in posterity's consciousness as a master whose work transcended all limitations of time and space.

We can safely look at Ben Shahn as a most valuable witness of our epoch. Both his language and subject matter are unmistakably contemporary. He is indeed a painter of historical tableaux as much as Emmanuel Leutze or the Baron Gros, and if his pictures are so dissimilar from theirs, it is further proof of how genuinely Shahn is of his time. The sources of Shahn's art, that is, the technical sources, its grammar, are to be found in this school of Paris whose aims differed so entirely from his own. Flippant Dufy and Catholic Rouault contributed indirectly to his vocabulary those broad washes of gouache which in an apparently accidental way create the volumes, but not this tense, grimy city atmosphere which remains peculiarly his. On this loosely brushed background a line as keen as the sharpest silverpoint superposes its own version of the subject, sometimes in agreement with the mass modeling, but more often unbinding itself from it and creating a version of its own. It is a palimpsest, two texts perceived simultaneously, whose concordancies and discrepancies create a

Shahn: Pen and ink drawing, 1938. Charlot collection

third image, forcefully dynamic, which is the picture.

Much of Shahn's style is explainable by his aims. Being a storyteller, his source material consists mainly of newspaper reports, his models being the photographs of rotogravure sections and tabloid sheets. Degas also used photographs, but purified, stylized, lifted to the plane of his art. Shahn, on the contrary, delights in what is peculiarly accidental, cynical, and ungentlemanly in camera work. The gymnastics of inhibition, by which we immediately substitute for any given spectacle a more anthropomorphic version in which hands and heads will be given the leading role, do not fool the camera, nor Shahn. For them a man, however intellectually eminent, will exist mainly through the bunch of folds and creases that are his clothes, his buttons, his shoe-laces, his grotesque shadow on a brick wall, the baroque mouldings on the arm of his chair, while his mouth and eyes may be summed up in three inconspicuous slits. Such an ousting of our lawful vision is a slap to the highly orderly and satisfying implications that this vision symbolizes. Yet the more one grows accustomed to this new version of the world, the more one is able to perceive in it a new order. The overgrown canine teeth of Governor Rolph, the bittersweet dimple at the corner of Mooney's mouth are enough to reassure one that this apparently mechanical vision is as heavily loaded with moral values as the more conservative and antiquated version.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Hound and Horn*, July-September, 1933.

Franklin C. Watkins

Tried and true men acting on juries are seldom expected to render judgements as drastically upsetting for established values as those of which we will be the abashed witnesses on the day of the Last Judgement. Yet such an incident happened when a Carnegie jury in 1931 gave to Franklin C. Watkins, unknown American, the first prize at the Pittsburgh International. It was of course blamed on cocktails, but there is reason to believe that this judgement will hold good for some centuries to come.

The net result was that on two or three further occasions in which he publicly exhibited, Watkins was a ready target for the bitter denunciation of well-meaning critics. They especially attempted the sabotage of his grandiose mural, *Man Crushed by the Machine*, a humanistic work that linked him through Delacroix to the great Venetians, reminding one forcibly of Tintoretto.

This is the trouble with Watkins; he is a necromantic painter, whose familiarity with the Dead makes the good neighbors suspicious. Engrossed in his own pursuits, he does not try and emulate the white horses of the art galleries, forgets to take part in the hurried confabs and

huddles from which new-fangled movements emerge. Watkins, nearing forty, has not yet had a one-man show. He works with the utmost hesitancy, destroys or hides most of his work, apologizing profusely for the bare dozen pictures that he dares to show at all.

This humility is of course born of pride; but it is true also that all his painting may be said to be unfinished inasmuch as the life that permeates them makes them ever shifting; they will never become static, resign themselves to being a decorative scroll, or a self-contained volume.

Whatever the actual subject matter, the permanent presence in his pictures, the dramatic actor, is the atmosphere. It is the common denominator that links all things together. Its bulk measures space, it defines the shape by contact, and the movement by its own resistancy. In this painted world things never exist in themselves, as museum pieces in a show-case, but mixed and intermingled and related. The bodies Watkins depicts acquire a kind of elastic consistency, they are in the ectoplasm stage where shape is dependent on movement. His is a very complete world indeed where the credibility of movement strengthens in turn the idea of space and implies the existence of time.

This peculiar philosophy too relative for sculpture, too didactic for music, is eminently suited to the medium of paint. Watkins shuns the sculpturesque definition of volume through black and white, suggests it through imperceptible transitions of value from color to color.

Watkins: Pen and ink drawing, 1939. Charlot collection



The eye, while it absorbs the volume, never loses contact with the color sensation.

However articulate his grammar, Watkins does not delight in it, but uses it soberly as a tool. The message he wishes to carry to the onlooker is not that of a good painter, but primarily that of a man of passion. The mood is as pre-eminent in his paintings as it is in lyric poetry. And it is this mood which grasps and disintegrates the subject to serve its own human aim as completely, but more beautifully, than the impressionistic light immolated the subject to scientific superstition. In his *Blues* the negro is re-created from within, endowed with a syn-copated body, the whole dark scheme being miraculously suggested by cream and buff and white. In another paradox, *A Lady Holding Flowers*, a demonic mood transforms a Victorian bodice and bouquet into the repellent spikes of some tropical fish. Or he tackles the problem of man in relation to the universe in his *Boy*, so studious, dwarfed by a hypertrophied background as is a Chinese sage by a towering abyss.

Few terms of the aesthetic jargon in vogue could fit at all a description of Watkins' paintings, so removed are his aims and means from the orthodox modern path. The good artist of today builds up with paint an organism with members as carefully interjoined as are the cogs of a machine. His naïve assumption being that such a body will somehow suscite its own soul. But the miracle more often fails to happen and the picture remains a most complete corpse. Watkins uses an opposite method, somehow more sound in its inception. He builds up a spiritual core

which when strong enough accretes its own body. This metaphysical quality of his work has repelled most of the critics who have spoken of him. They point to the fact that he is not an architectural painter, and thus unfit for murals. Watkins is certainly not a fresco painter, yet he proved himself a mural painter of the first order both in the panel shown with such negative success at the Museum of Modern Art, and in the huge godly Hand that he still keeps in his studio. His mature philosophy, even though embodied into quasi-impalpable modulations of color, could give any wall an architectural strength unequalled by all the make-believe robots of his more “constructive” colleagues.

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Henrietta Shore

Henrietta Shore is a painter upon whom a curse of indifference rests heavily. Amidst the void created, her work has grown manful and sturdy as it would not have in more hospitable surroundings. This bitter protective shield is the fact that she is classified as a decorative artist. That more than many she has worked, loved and suffered, that she buttresses each stroke with a full impact of brain and heart, does not weigh in the balance against the fact that she is a woman, that she paints flowers, and that her technique is crystal clean.

A decorative artist is one who uses nature as if it were an inferior putty out of which to make daintier things. But artists of Shore's type feel small and helpless when confronted with the Creation. Nature in its manifold manifestations appears to them so admirable that they cling tenaciously to any part of it, be it a blade of grass, in order to partake of its hierarchical wisdom. To such artists, it seems a negative feat to transform a mountain into a triangle or a living flower into an arabesque. Today, their

Shore: Canadian Weed. Lithograph, 1925

passion is matched by that of the micro-photographic lens which uncovers Greek capitals in a bamboo knot, or Gothic vaults in a thistle head.

The cogs of a watch in movement may be appreciated in abstract, as a delightful concordancy of circular lines. More imposing is the sight of the living intercourse of axles and wheels, and even more to the point if one does not lose sight of the fact that a watch marks time. All objects in nature can thus be projected in two dimensions, leaving a deposit of lines and colors, or viewed in space as mechanical arrangements, but only great artists, true to their belief that the world is oriented, present natural facts as corollaries to their spiritual use. They thus relate otherwise unrelated objects, spur and help the onlooker at the process of unifying his own world.

A popular belief concerning "geniuses" is that they slash the canvas with disheveled strokes, are partial to dazzling lights and deep shadows. Men like Grünewald, Van der Weyden, Pontormo belie the saying, by expressing passion with careful line, clear color and the smoothest of techniques. Modern art has been spare of men of this type. Henrietta Shore, who years ago forsook ability for better things, chose to become the impeccable craftsman of her own passion. Hers being not an invertebrate emotion to be fulfilled in a sketch, but the belief that nature, ordered and meaningful to the utmost detail, deserves to be transmuted into paint with equal care.

Her evolution of means achieves autonomy through a desire for self-effacement. Her technique is exacting; she will work for days on a linear draft until it acquires the

supple inexorability of the copper ribbon that partitions cloisonné enamels. Modeling and local tone imbed themselves in these boundaries as logically and organically as muscles and tendons to bones. Supremely aware that colors *per se* are of variable densities and endowed with personal spatial co-efficients, she mixes and applies them with the vital care of a druggist compounding a prescription. A small area becomes dominant when tuned to red or yellow; rainbow-like blends make the plane recede or advance, cave or bulge. The finished picture, though coinciding with the first draft, is plastically and emotionally a new work. It possesses a smooth finish and a stencil-like accuracy. The absence of visible brush stroke, the rigid emphasis on local colors, a diffusion of light through which modeling acquires a quasi-static content, those rare elements are in close kinship to older and perhaps saner art periods than ours, when the artist, having things to say that he believed of public interest, was proud to do so with grammatical clarity.

The resulting finality of her designs rebukes and misleads her contemporaries. Most modern pictures are suggestions on canvas, to be glozed over at will by the onlooker. Critics delight at this *jeu d'esprit* but, unpolitically enough, Shore gives in each picture premises and conclusions, with such forceful style and detailed particulars that the baffled critic cannot find his cue.

Though the spiritual climate which sums up a great artist's achievement is gathered through the autographic confession of line and color, his choice of subject matter helps clarify his stand. The world of Shore is made peculiar

by an absence of anthropomorphic delusion. In this world of rocks, birds and flowers, man and man's moods play little part. Her trees need not ape human gestures to be significant, nor her flowers a corsage. Rather does she subject the few humans she portrays to laws of vegetable growth and mineral erosion.

Keenly aware of the chasm between appearance and essence, she connects with her subject by the roots. When she has mastered a natural law by meditation, she proceeds with the logic with which stem, leaves and flowers unfurl from a seed. To attain such true realism, Shore looks long at her model but conscientiously turns her back on it at the time of painting.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (Sheed and Ward, 1939).

Nature and the Art of Josef Albers

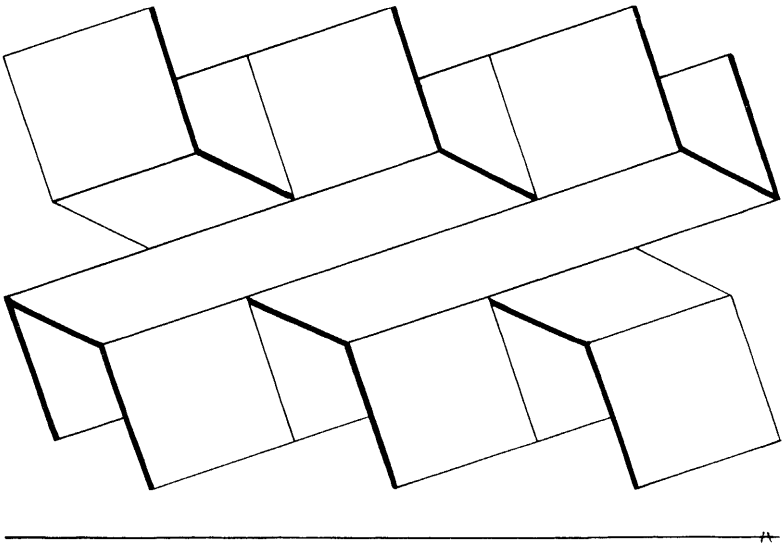
Two years ago, while Josef Albers was in Hawaii, he would sit on a canvas chair, facing unmatched vistas of palm trees and blue sea. On his knees would be a notebook, of squared paper of the type that architects favor. From time to time, emerging from his obvious enjoyment of the scene, Albers would carefully put together some “abstract” diagrams, using pencil and ruler. These sketches distilled up for me, paradoxically, a visual essence more like nature than any one of the many postcards of the famed view. In the same way, I cannot pass an adobe house set against the desert horizon without remembering Albers’ New Mexico series, or look at the cubic compactness of a pre-Hispanic ruin without assessing against it Albers’ Mexican *Mitla*.

To analyze Albers’ art, or to purposely use a term with obsolete connotations, to describe its subject matter, there is no need to postulate a right to abstract art, or take an upwards plunge into a fourth dimension. As it is usually understood, the term “realism” is a singularly limited and limiting term. Out of the immensity and variety of physical nature, it singles out as proper fare for art only

the most meager fringe. Looking at Albers' work, one such adherent of routine realism softly complained, "There are no faces." For this spectator as for many another, the hub of reality remains this consoling cluster: human features that sum up our daily contacts with a neighborhood we know "by heart" and its familiar neighbors.

Between this comforting world of our own daily experience and an equally real Universe, there lies a chasm that would make the good spectator queasy, another kind of realism that would rudely jolt him out of his horizontal everydayness, unless he succeeded in building around himself an opaque accretion, a cell within which he may live and breathe in relative comfort; wherein he is at least spared the sight of the immensities that a Pascal saw and dreaded. It is not the artist's task to cater to the good spectator's practical plea for faces, especially for such well-tried ones that it would be ingratiating to limit to this tender knowledge our image of the Universe. Great art is made neither to please nor to displease. If truly great, it should at least make uneasy those whose lives are lived in self-chosen prisons similar to the large soap bubbles and giant clam shells in which Hieronymus Bosch locates his pin-headed and gymnastic lovers.

To let go of routine appearances, a change of scale suffices. One feels the vertigo of leaving the known world behind in the pearly touch of Vermeer, who, patterning his art after what he had seen through the home-made microscope of his close friend, Anthony van Leeuwenhoek, had lost faith in the oneness of form: he had seen it dissolve under his eye, in a sample drop of water or of



Albers: Detail from a lithograph

sperm, into legions of clashing forms. The spherical units with which Vermeer builds the loaf of bread in *The Milkmaid* mean much more than a textural device. They are an anguished try at integrating with optics the novel science of microscopy, before whose advance the world that previous painters had believed in collapsed.

A telescope will offer visual truths not unlike those seen in a microscope. It shows an equally featureless world, globe after globe patterned after a canon of balance more readily expressed in mathematical terms than in aesthetic ones. It is beauty also, but poles away from the anatomical, spread over a scaffolding of numbers instead of bones.

The man who looks through a microscope or through a telescope, or with good will at the pictures of Albers, comes to feel how small is the distance between, let us say, the Venus of Milo and any one of the dancing peasants of Breughel. The Greek sculptor and the Flemish painter were both content to paraphrase daily experiences. Both remain comforting in their everydayness, and ask little more for their art than to be checked against the daily exercise of our senses, tact and sight. Perhaps the Venus is at one end of this approach to the visible world, close to infra-red as it were; while Breughel's peasants hover on the borderline of the ultra-violet. Yet the span that both works stake is limited, and needs no Columbus to survey it.

Albers firmly believes that art and nature are at peace, that his own art springs from nature. Of course the two can be linked metaphysically, for example, by quoting Aristotle, "Art follows Nature in its operation." But

artists, dealing with concrete forms, colors and lines, are scarcely nourished by philosophy. Albers' art stirs the spectator much more radically than a merely generalized assertion; yet it escapes the range of the more usual definitions.

One theory has it that the challenge of art is, for the spectator, to partake of the born and trained awareness of the hyper-sensuous artist, with tactile and visual richness underlined. A ham by Jan Steen, a Renoir buttock, a plate of oysters by Hals, all ring the bell that starts the dog salivating, procure a visceral well-being that needs hardly refer to the head to function. True, but art is of many kinds, and man's roads to enjoyment are diverse and placed on divergent levels. Albers' art proposes an opposite effect, a discipline that does not lack, however, its own kind of pleasure: to retire into oneself, to stop fluttering and retract the wing under the wing plate as does a beetle at landing; to stop the excited palpating of antennae, retreat into wilful hibernation and conform again to the austere form of the pre-natal grub. Close to contemplation, the French word *délectation*, that Poussin wisely chose to express the purpose of art, has very little to do with sensuous surfeits. Poussin's art, Albers' art, instead of flattering and expanding the spectator's self, choose to prune and to cauterize it. This sort of artist is so intent on grasping the very core of things that he lets go of all the surface phenomena around it. To better express this inner order, he will give up faceted appearances and cloying nuances.

In art history, there are eras where sensuousness recedes, when the artist, turning his back on the obvious, both hides and exposes his meditative secret. Then prettiness, beauty even, are deemed expendable. Paolo Uccello's diamond shaped *mazzocchios*, his faceless armored robots, are less immediately ingratiating than, say, a Virgin and her Bambino by Raphael; and yet a passion of sorts went into the making of these perspective diagrams, a passion at least as demanding as that of Raphael for his Fornarina.

Everyday sights remain the expected content of this art that those who like it term realistic, and those who disdain it dub photographic. As scale changes, and without leaving the realm of the visible, we come closer to what moves planets and atoms, invisible laws. Laws dominate our life as did the Three Fates of old, minus the human features that Greek mythology, somewhat optimistically, attributed to the Three Sisters. Two main laws—horizontal and vertical—are paired and strung implacably straight: the first law is the plumbline of gravity that each of us carries inside himself as if it were a physical conscience, so to speak, ready to reproach man his least attempt at obliquity. The law embodied in water levels checks from a whole ocean to the content of a cocktail glass. Between the prongs of this compass, set at right angles to each other, man lives cautiously, as if they were the jaws of the dragon that was an essential prop of mediaeval mystery plays. A third law, equally faceless, is one of rhythm, meaning for us mostly the clocked beat of the heart and meticulous intake of breath, computable in intervals and

numbers, as crucial as they are untranslatable in terms of story-telling.

Ruled verticals and horizontals, numbers set to an organic beat, these are living truths that realistic art may, at its best, do no more than suggest. For the painter, to pitch into diagrams of straight lines and measured numbers is not an escape, but a licit approach to the deeper truths. Such geometric art is not without tradition despite Albers' sharp distrust of a past with which misguided "professors" attempt to smother our present. From the makers of the pyramids to Mondrian, some masters have felt the vertigo of shedding appearances for substance.

Unlike Mondrian, whose verticals and horizontals function as spears meant to pierce through and through the borderline between the picture world and the outer world, Albers designs *sous cloche*, with no loose ends, no stray matter to escape the limits of the frame, unless it be through the expanding vitality of pure color. Active lines are deflected even before they reach the edge of the picture as is a billiard ball by the elastic band.

While Mondrian states the law—plumb and water level—Albers, without denying to law its absolute worth, in milder and personal fashion proposes situations that become geometrical and legal labyrinths. Man, imperfect and limited, contacts outer dictates of perfection in genuine puzzlement. Accidents somewhat clog the cogs in whose perfect motion Mondrian took straightforward delight. Albers' favorite term is a legalistic one: and/or. It reappears in the titles he chooses for his pictures in

endless variations. It is literally a *double-entendre*, though here not a double solution. Albers favors these deceptive figures that the mind apprehends in one way, only to discover at a second reading new terms incompatible with the first ones, and equally valid.

And/or: square overlaps square in playing-card fashion, until the picture proposes avenues that recede, portals opening on vistas. And/or: shapes will pile up in the semblance of houses, cubic with flat *azoteas*, but form melts into form, or bilocates with amoeba-like motion. And/or: pyramidal shapes will be at first convex, as monuments surveyed from a plane in flight, only to reverse themselves, become concave shells, their sides receding to the caved-in tip, as if it were a mummy's outlook from the burial chamber to the pit's outward slopes.

The coolness of Albers' craftsmanship, his obvious love of the law, make one feel that in the midst of such geometric fantasmagories and pulsating images, the artist longs for rest, for a superior state in which incidentals, without being annulled, may be allowed to register correctly within the frame of a stable absolute. Though Albers' art longs for this state of repose as does a saint for unitive vision, the artist's exacting conscience refuses to hurry the process. It is only in a very few cases that diagonals are laid to rest on a water level, or are raised true to plumb. Close to such a peace achieved the hard way is the harmonious gray picture called *Franciscan*, but even there, planes hinged in screen fashion breathe a potentiality of motion, and refuse the nirvana.

Thus, in Albers' art, geometry acquires dramatic undertones, man pleading his right to imperfections even as he handles the cold perfection of numbers and geometric relations. One could say that, in measuring mind against law, Albers humanizes geometry. He says, "But for me a circle, a triangle, has a face," and means it. For it is geometry only as it percolates inside man's nature and not geometry in a void that Albers treats of. There is humor of a sort, there is earnestness, in his figures; not so perfect that a mathematician or a geometrician could call them bona-fide science, and yet planted at heights out of the grasp of many a one who feels at ease with Venuses and with Jan Steen's succulent hams.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *College Art Journal*, Spring 1956.

A Disney Disquisition

The problem of animated drawing does not date from the advent of the movies. Cinematic animation, however artificial its relationship to the static medium of painting, has tempted artists from the very beginning of human time. The boar of Altamira, galloping on four pairs of legs, is echoed across the millennia by Balla's futuristic dog whose legs in action resemble two full-pleated skirts. Giotto suggests actual gesticulation through key postures. It takes two people out of his crowd to act despair—one with arms raised and extended, the other with arms and hands gathered forcefully to the head. Picasso, battling against the resistance of his medium to the expression of mechanical movement, brings forth obscure palimpsests of superimposed images. In a subtle way, when the rigid line of the classic gives way to the loose contours of the romantic, the released line frees the painted personage from his carcan of geometry, allows his muscles to ripple and his breast to heave. The baroque masters go furthest into movement—use turmoil as a rule of composition.

It is no superficial urge that makes a painter crave

animation, but an essential one, as deeply rooted in our nature as the sense of width, height and depth. As Dr. Carrel bluntly puts it, man lives physically in a world of four dimensions—the three that can be measured with an inch tape and the fourth with a watch. Time, in effect, is a condition of our being. The curved graph that our body traces while growing from ovus to manhood and receding into dust is vitally ours, impossible to conceive outside that element. So too are its pettier daily gestures. A measurement of height and weight describes us only in terms of a given date. Any family album of snapshots shows a single entity—the tottering baby, the college boy, the bridegroom, the happy father—in the guise of diverse and unrelated bodies. These are selected slices cut into a trajectory through time, into a fourth dimension so physical that, like the other three, it is not outside the camera's reach. The world a man paints is optical, a strictly physical world of objects and bodies. The painter cannot, like those artists who deal in words, treat of time in its imponderable essence. He cannot, like the family album, suggest it over long periods. He can catch time only at its point of impact with the other three dimensions, when it clothes itself in movement.

Because approximate means of animation have been routine among painters for centuries it is difficult to believe that, when a more convincing means has been evolved, its use will bring us (as some suggest) from fine arts to a nondescript bastard medium into which art critics will not dip. Of course animated drawing differs from painting and sculpture, but will remain art inasmuch as its new

freedom brings with itself its own limitations. The main difference between immobile painting and cinematic drawing lies in the fact that the element of time which is artificial to the former becomes one of the essentials of the latter. In this sense animated drawing partakes of the qualities of music, poetry and the dance. It must be appreciated not only in terms of simultaneous proportion, as a painting, but also in successive tempos that have a beginning and an end.

The animator had mostly to discard the classical shapes cherished by painters—the sphere, the cube, the cylinder—for the very reason which makes their painted excellence: Raphael's beloved sphere, Seurat's canon of beauty, the cylinder, remain unchanged in shape from wherever they are seen. Raphael's Madonna, Seurat's *Promeneuse*, could look only dull if whirled on a screen for, beautiful in repose, they are no more adapted to movement than an Ionic column. Sculpture and cinema call for surprising changes of form as an accompaniment to the shifting of points of view. Let us say that a piece of pie is a classical shape for the purposes of animation inasmuch as its top view is triangular, its side view rectangular and its periphery circular. In Disney's *Ugly Duckling* we see a decoy duck floating over the waves. As the duck bobs up and down our point of view changes vertically from ground plan to airplane view while the shifting currents that carry it into a circular movement familiarize us with both its sides. We get out of this thorough observation of its illusive and complex volume the same aesthetic enjoy-

ment we should derive from handling and patting an African carving.

In painting we get a sense of proportion when one volume is compared with others. This is also true of animation, but here a volume can also compare itself with itself in time. Disney handles this comparison most successfully when he uses abstract volumes—for example the swarm of bees who shift their strategic attack on Mickey from pyramid to sphere and back to pyramid. But the same observation holds true of all the actors. A thinnish personage rotating, both arms extended downwards at a forty-five degree slope, transforms himself into a cone perched upon the stem of his legs, a human Christmas tree. When the arms are extended at an angle nearer to the horizontal, the rotating body becomes a parasol. If the arms are raised upwards at a forty-five degree angle, the rotating shape is that of a chalice or funnel.

This sort of transfiguration may sound like a parlor game but has deep plastic significance. Whereas sculptor and painter perforce treat of constant shapes, the animator (without needing to use an abstract language) can at will bring into being and discard the series of shapes which the body in movement creates as naturally as the mouth spouts forth words. This plastic language depends on the degree of the relationship between the evoked shapes and the mother shape. A cylindrical man may use cubic gestures; a thin man may revolve himself into spheres. The modification may be less obvious—it may be a slight shuffling of the component measurements, the swelling

of the chest, the rolling of a muscle (or, in a close-up, the movement of an eyelid over the sphere of the eyeball). Contrasts and affinities make up a language of movement as suggestive as the language of line or color.

Animation portrays the rolling of waters, the mutiny of fire, the growth of spring, whereas the painter is bound by a set of childish symbols—the wave, the flame, the flower. To use the Chinese terminology (which recognizes constant form as distinct from constant principle), painting can tackle the form but only suggest the principle, whereas the principle is well within the range of animation. When Cézanne tips Madame Cézanne and her chair, we can check their unnatural angle only against the rigid verticality of other painted lines. When Titian in his *Bacchanal* places a wine-glass in the hand of a Maenad he opposes the tipsy diagonal of the stem to the horizontality of the liquid level. The animator does not have to oppose line to line but, more richly, lines to law. In a drunken scene the animated drunk battles against the vertical pull of gravity, makes it the very real if invisible prop against which he essays dangerously diagonal attitudes. The wine-glass he carries can multiply its angles graphically in a pendulum movement set against the immovable reproach of a horizontal liquid.

It has been said that cinematic movement will weaken painting by bringing an added naturalness into the medium. Were there no bounds to means we should, it is true, have nature instead of art. But movement brings in the element of time and time is a discipline in itself. The elusive time which a painter may conjure up slows down

or hastens its pace at will, for it is a subjective time. But the time which the animator has to deal with is time measured by a clock. It reigns implacably within the work of art as it does in our life; the artist cannot manipulate it but can only toe to its beat. The addition of movement gives freedom of a sort to a drawing but it also constructs new boundaries. Since the “short,” to be of commercial value, must be compressed into a seven-minute duration, the artist is forced into the concision and precise dosage of moods that one finds in a Japanese *hai-kai*. Artificiality is restored.

The space within which the painter sets his volumes does not call for much elasticity as a counterbalance to their static pressure, for his means include those delicate gradations and veils of air with which a Rembrandt, a Monet, suggest infinite recessions. The animator can also lick and polish his backgrounds with tonal washes until they are as spatial as a painting. But when the drawn puppet steps onto this highly refined stage his blaze of color, his mesh of black outlines, give the lie to the refined setting out of which he has hatched. In order to live and breathe the puppet must create a more functional space around itself, and gesticulation is the only spatial means within its range. With its legs and arms the cartoon creature pushes away from itself the flatness of the screen that would engulf it, proves space to itself and to us by whirling and running. Like the water-insect enclosed within its own air bubble, the puppet lives within its subjective private space.

Here is reconciled the clash between the cubists, who

would limit a picture to its rectangular outline, and the impressionists, who view the rectangle as a window opening onto unlimited vistas. For the moving screen (responsive to the settings demanded by promenades and pursuits) may at times unroll dioramas vaster than those of a Monet; whereas at other times the scene may be so rectangularly circumscribed by the boundaries of the screen that the personages who rush against the walls, ceiling and floor of that cubist heaven bounce back with broken ribs and bleeding noses. The moving picture has here developed a new plastic theory, that of contrast, and the two great schools of thought that painting bred are equally good ingredients for the cinematic sauce.

Peculiar laws govern the landscape in which animation takes place. Although in real life topography governs our movements, in the realm of animation the trees, houses, furniture, are all born of, or submit to, our own movement. There may be any number of trees in a landscape but they efface themselves from the path of a running creature. Or if a bump there must be they pile up on the track. Objects have no other weight or texture than that proved by their contact with movement. Of two similar walls one will be passed through as in dream whereas another will provide a harsh fall. People obey the laws of gravity when need be or they float in air or multiply themselves till they are in three or four places at once. This high-handed use of natural laws to suit special purposes effects a release in us more joyful than any gag. We who have suffered since birth from an incessant pull at our coat tails by centripetal forces, who tiptoe through life avoiding

evilly-set obstacles, rejoice when flung into the world of animation where our moves impose their own elbow-room over all creation.

Poussin built up small maquettes of places with mannequins propped up at given points and thus established his horizontal composition on ground level before he collapsed the whole scene on the window-pane of the vertical canvas. But not even the severe calculations of a master can overcome the congenital weakness of painted depth—at best only a poetic approximate to physical width and height. Depth dwells in animation as sturdily as height and width, its trail spun under our very noses by the personage in action. Painters who know that depth is a lie use it with discretion, plan spatial compositions that are relatively simple when compared with the refinements of the surface schemes they develop. Animation, by removing such scruples, makes complexity legitimate when composing in depth.

Just as a painter composes with physical volumes, an animator composes mainly with diagrams based on motion. The continuity of movement as stored by the retina is a pictographic language, related to the moving source as slightly as, for example, figures cut on ice are to the skater. More exactly, composition by movement, since it is in three dimensions, could be compared with the luminous trail left by a swiftly moving cigarette tip in the dark. Its scheme, moreover, can be more severe than that which the natural form admits of. Who has not thrilled at the spiral into space evoked by the gyrating musicians caught by the cyclone in *Mickey's Band Concert*?

No one would be more delighted by it than Hogarth; for here at last, in its three-dimensional reality, has been realized that Line of Beauty, the S shape which, with the imperfect techniques of the painter, Hogarth strove to wind into space by coiling it around a superfluous cone. That spiral which the painter can only hint at and the sculptor can only freeze, animation brings to life.

In discussing the new medium one dreams of endless achievements. It has been suggested that in the hand of a Michelangelo animation could evolve Sistine Chapels; that if this came to pass all the work painted in the pre-Disney era would become as obsolete as stereoscopic views in our decade of "talkies." But the actual use to which animation has been put is perhaps not so much the first mouthings of a wonder child as a classic flowering of the medium. The gesture of the Sistine Christ is beautiful because of its arrested motion; its timing and completion would bring it down to the range of accidentals. On the contrary Donald Duck could gain nothing by being frozen into architecture, for his soul shines brighter amid fits of motion. Animation needs to treat a gesture as continuously in the making; its actors must strive and quibble on a plane low enough to make events or inanimate things conspire against their endeavors, corner them into muscular reactions. When the Mouse has triumphed over its enemies and enters into Beatitude the "short" is over, the fade-out nears. For Mickey steps thus out of the range of the animator, enters the static realm proper to other arts. Michelangelo could not have conceived his heroes at a stage previous to apotheosis and might therefore have been

a poor man to handle the fluid medium of animation. But it is also true that baroque minds—a Greco, a Magnasco, a Daumier—who worked in a static medium but were haunted by dynamics, would have welcomed cinematography.

In the movies a comic angle and functional beauty are one. The shape that genuinely animates, that brings swift changes from profile to front view and is elastic enough for gesticulation, may have to be funny. The motive, and the shape which implies movement, pull the screen personage from the severity of the permanent into the continuous surprise party of the impermanent. Disney's creations are no vagaries. They are shapes modeled strictly along the lines of their function, and their function burgeons into beauty. When Doc turns around and the sphere of his skull melts blushing into the twin sphere of his nose, one gets an impact of functional beauty. For Doc is as fully consistent with the cinema as Raphael's Virgin is consistent with paint. Beautiful art must be conditioned by the medium, as our own body is by function. To have flowered into appetizing womanhood, Galatea must have started out as a very poor piece of sculpture. When human shapes—Snow White or the Prince Charming—are seen side by side with Disney shapes on the screen, it is the human that suffers.

Where plastic language is concerned this newest of arts is a major achievement. The painted fan, the radiator cap, may be a reflection of the major art trends of the day, but animated drawing is a microcosm of style complete within itself. Though its evolution follows the graph

drawn by the history of art, it does so at its own regal good will, in a tempo that within a very few years has telescoped the primitive, classic, baroque and decadent styles which painting took centuries to investigate.

The earliest animation, though the story was jammed with gags, confined itself with a Giottesque severity and decision to black and white. Backgrounds evolved more rapidly than personages from this "primitive" stage because their handling made smaller technical demands upon their creators. They ran through a whole gamut of styles, only to nestle finally, and triumphantly, in a ladylike photographic rendering. Personages, which labored under the handicap of more involved technicalities, made slower progress. They have now reached a stage where local color has been added to the black outline, where they resemble Gothic windows whose opaque leading partitions light into color. The animated beings of today and their creators seem somewhat absent-minded apropos this archaic glory which is theirs. Alas! some new technical kink may yet rid them of their rigid outline and permit them to melt into their background, long seated on the lap of the Academy. We have already seen the seven dwarfs, emerging from their cave into the sunset, shed their flat Gothic livery for the contrasting light and shade of the High Renaissance!

Cubism had dreamt of an impersonal art that would replace the free-hand line and the open brush stroke with patterns appropriate to ruler and compass; that would substitute flat areas of tone, as bare of individuality as a newly-painted wall, for subtle shadings. Since works of

this sort could be multiplied by mechanical means the world might at last rid itself of the idolatry of the “original,” might resuscitate ancient collective traditions, Gothic and Egyptian. Léger, Gleize and Gris came close to realization, but neither dealers nor collectors wished to endorse an art that was not for the few. Though the cubists had evolved a means, their art-for-all dream, their cathedral, was side-tracked on its way.

Without benefit of critical appraisal, and whipped into form by the pressure of balance sheets and the profit motive, the animated cartoon is nevertheless the unexpected flowering of the cubist seed. In this cartoon the impersonality of a work of art has been captured, the cult of the “original” has been smashed. The drawings are manipulated by so many hands from the birth of the plot to the inking of the line that they are propelled into being more by the communal machinery that grinds them out than by any single human being. A first draft for a film reveals the creative heat through its *pentimento*, erasures, clinical additions in blue or red pencil; it goes further into the alchemy of transmuting form into motion than did many of the Masters. But this holography, which makes the sketch worthy of a museum, is still not sufficiently purified for the severe standards of the cartoon. Personality is squeezed out through multiple tracings until the diagram, its human flavor lost, becomes an exact cog within the clockwork. The key drawings are cross-sections of each gesture at its mechanical and emotional climaxes. Numerous hands patiently perform the intermediates until the flow of images, so many to a beat,

parallels the tempo of the sound track. Time, the fourth dimension, is the conductor which orchestrates the great volume of drawings and files them into a coherent whole. Far from a free-for-all, this motion-art composes not only in the media of surface and depth, but uniquely and rigidly in that of time.

Truly an art-for-all, these great murals that move are pets of the people. Uccello's gigantic horseman has become green mold on its smoked wall; ancient frescoes are entombed in deserted museums. It is altogether fitting that new murals should emerge in those places where the living congregate. The new subject matter illustrates the sharp cleft between our rationalism and our imaginative urge. We work, love, eat and sleep within a riddle of financial pursuit; our brains overbrim with common sense. We bow to this newly created pantheon of animal godlings, Mickey Mouse et al., for they are different from us, godlike, irrational.

Disney Studios: Dopey. Drawn specially to illustrate this
article

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W.D.R.
1937

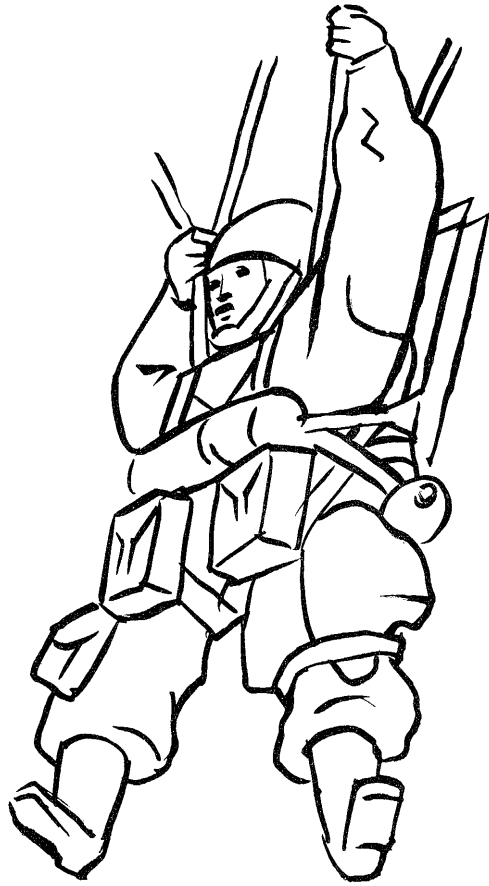
Murals for Tomorrow

To raise a flag in battle is heroic. "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" is a superb news photograph, a possible poster, an impossible mural and, begging pardon of Congress, an atrocious sculpture. In any branch of art, subject matter alone, however moving in real life, is a very weak lever with which to raise the work to grandeur. Each of the media has laws of its own, material and psychological, by which solutions are ratified or proven invalid.

The Mexican Coatlicue still stands, surviving the wreck of its temple, the death of its cult, the sinking of its culture. Time has skinned the monolith of gesso and paint, weather has eroded it like the flank of a mountain, but the derelict, inasmuch as it follows the logic of the matrix boulder and the proportions of an architecture now returned to dust, retains the same power to move us that it had in its polychrome prime.

Let us hope that the war memorials that will soon mushroom across the land may prove of such sturdy

Charlot: American Paratrooper Landing in Sicily. Detail
from a fresco in Journalism Building, University of Georgia,
Athens, Georgia, 1944



vitality. A future United States may be incapable of feeling in retrospect the dynamics of today, the collective resolve that drives us towards one goal. A generation will be born for whom this war would be mainly a few pages of statistical logistics in a text book—if it were not for art. Only art may attempt the feat that the Indian sculptor once performed: to harden topical emotion into permanence.

Man, the little engineer, plays with blocks, sorts and piles them with the fierce concentration and vital intent of a child, and of course he also colors them. They are blocks to live in, to crawl into, as the hermit crab protects its soft body behind the armor of a borrowed shell. Each species of creature has its housing taste, its geometric affinity. The snail takes its ease in a spiral, the bee favors hexagonal shafts, man is partial to cubes. Though his body be far more complex in shape than are Euclid's solids, man feels it a good thing to be born, to live, and to die within a neatly packaged cube of space, its verticals and horizontals standing for the intellectual logical orderings that are his own.

It is the fate of mural painting to be a corollary to buildings, these rigid geometric complexes. Murals are the skin-thin, vari-colored garment made to reveal architectural *dessous*, as clothes bulge at the chest and pleat at the hip. A mural should answer the spatial cubes of rooms with a corresponding quartering of illusive painted space. If it is to be a mural, not just a painting on a wall, it needs to accept this subservient position to architecture, suck its strength from the main body as a remora from the shark. No passionate improvisation, no luscious brushstroke, can

take the place of plain mural fitness, or explain the impact even today of Uccello's style.

A mural that "plays ball" with an architecture accepts in its makeup ingredients that could be called abstract—Vitruvius' canon of proportions finds in it an equivalent; its horizontals match floor levels, its verticals share the burden with columns, its diagonals ascend or descend with the stairs. The mural echoes the mesh of mathematical relationships that underlie even a mediocre architecture.

But the painting on the wall needs also to be the funnel through which much besides art is relayed to the onlooker. For its intended public, any man liable to enter a church, a ministry, a postoffice, art can be only the side dish—to be savored imperceptibly as it were, while a major theme, patriotic, social or religious, is digested. The muralist must cater to this very real need of laymen for a familiar aperture to bring into focus the revelation of esthetics. Styles that do not allow of story telling lack certain mural requirements. The muralist must indeed be humbly prepared to deal with *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *Lincoln Freeing the Slaves*. The backbone of mathematics should remain embedded in the flesh of an obvious subject matter, computations relay emotions. Artists too proud to do this need not adopt a genre so publicly displayed.

Critics would be wise to keep this popular element in mind. Venturi, in the follow-up to his *History of Criticism*, damns Mexican painters for academicians because of their obvious interest in social themes. Modern art, says he, probes problems of form by painting apples, has done so far the last eighty years and should continue to do so. Cézanne

knew better. Distinguishing genres, he painted fruit pieces, but remained haunted through life by mural themes, an epic vocabulary of nude bodies.

All through history, form and content cohabit in peace. Duccio and Giotto, Raphael and Michelangelo, Tiepolo and Goya, Delacroix and Daumier, all tell stories. The contemporary muralist need not excuse himself for being a storyteller.

Murals are the personal *apport* of the Americas to modern art. Marcel Lenoir, Gino Severini and others contributed frescoes to Europe in the early 1920s, but scarcely on the scale and at the pitch that marks their surge in Mexico, where murals smoked the artist out of his ivory tower and educated him to team work. In fresco painting, painter and mason elbow each other on the same scaffold. As the mason mixes mortar, trowels it in daily areas, the painter is reminded of the fact that his art is also manual work, that he should be at least as efficient as the mason. The successive manipulations inherent to the fresco technique—tracing, squaring, pouncing, dividing in daily jobs—check would-be flights of genius into good craft, which is safer.

Fresco is an ideal communal means. The word conjures up guilds and medieval workshops, sand and lime, pestles and mortars, scaffolds rather than easels, overalls instead of smocks. Its executant learns not only a technique, but moreover an aesthetic. The shift of values and colors that takes place as the mortar dries into permanency precludes a visual checkup of the work in course. This forces one to replace the sensuous means, overworked by Impression-

ism, by the classic discipline of mental planning. Felibien, praising Poussin circa 1670, wrote that his pictures were not pleasing to the eye; but that this is an animal tool on which the thoughtful artist need not rely, an organ unfit to pass judgment upon masterpieces.

To insure in practice the worth of the finished mural, a system of traps and sundry obstacles has been devised in this country by well-meaning people, to slow, brake, dam the course of the artist's inspiration, in an attempt to cure him of a suspected case of bohemianism. The poor man is bidden to flex his muscles, jump through hoops so often before the start of the work, that he reaches the wall with little breath left, and less will. Suggestions, objections, and pressures submit him to an ordeal by despair. Competitions inflict what Villier de l'Isle-Adam called the ordeal by hope. The artist does sketches, perforce faked to make sense to outsiders. In order to reach the wall, he runs the gauntlet of color schemes, reduced models, full-scale details wrung out of context. Finally he starts painting—while the man with a bucket of whitewash waits behind him, poised to spring forth into action.

Why not give the muralist the same confidence shown a plumber? Why use such archaic devices as that of the executioner with axe raised which insures the correct diagnosis of doctors called to the sickbed of some barbaric chieftain?

That I plead for fewer fetters from the outside does not mean that I believe art is at its best when most free. It is the artist who should stake his own limits.

Long identified with sanctimonious tableaux of ladies

draped in cheesecloth, plucking, bestowing, blowing such operatic paraphernalia as lyres, crowns of laurel and gold trumpets, mural painting in the United States experienced in the last decade a life-giving jolt. Patterned in part after the example of government-sponsored murals in Mexico and partly to round up this deal of a brave new world, murals have rejoined the trends in easel painting with seven-league leaps.

Its new patrons, government agencies or labor organizations, will have none of the clammy stuffiness that catered to conservatives. One does not question the soundness of the change, but perhaps that of its extent. The liberation of mural painting is a revolution on the aesthetic plane, apt to be messy as revolutions will be. The Victorian standards have been lynched with gusto. Surface finish, static dignity, nobility of theme, classicism (even though it be only neo-classicism) are strung from lampposts. The new standards, much alive and with the kick of a giraffe, are the same that reign over average modern art: individuality at the core, distortion as the means, much pain taken to make the thing appear effortless. Slices of life, local incidentals, are favored over outmoded allegories.

Is such a style adequate for the murals that will vie with sculptures to commemorate this war? We may trust that a global war, fought in standard uniforms with standard weapons the world over, for aims that transcend the boundaries of a state, a nation, even a continent, will breed its own ample style, perhaps closer to the older point of view, now so thoroughly despised.

A return to a kind of classicism, even to the depiction of

ladies draped in cheesecloth, need not prove a tragedy. Many allegorical tableaux painted in this century are aesthetically worthless, but theirs is nevertheless a proud lineage. The beauteous muses, draperies, wreaths, lyres, that make us smile today were once hallowed by the genius of Raphael and Poussin. The modern formula of avoiding formulas is rich in passion but short of breath. And a brave return to tested recipes may breed works that match Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* and Lebrun's *Battles* in long sustained inspiration and inventive dignity.

The best guarantee that war memorials shall be worthy of their dedication does not lie in the small irritants of routine supervision, but in allowing free play to the heart, brain, and conscience of the artist. The intricacies of the craft, the exigencies of the genre, the seriousness of the purpose, are censors he scarcely could escape.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Art News*, July 1945.



Mudgett
1950

Art in Hawaii

Hawaiian art is backed by a tradition that goes back far into the past, at least a millennium. Before the coming of Cook, Hawaiian art was far from inarticulate. It is one of the great expressions of the arts of the Pacific. The arts of the pre-discovery era were not, however, thought of by those craftsmen who made them as a form of art for art. Esthetic problems remained subservient to function. The petroglyphs carved in stone, the pictographs painted on rocks, were messages of a sort, proud footnotes to journeys by land and sea. There was added to the utilitarian purpose another one that can be called a spiritual urge. Indeed art at all times has had as its purpose to imbue with timelessness objects and events that happen, are born and die, in time. Petroglyphs and pictographs are a poignant reminder of this longing of the ancient Hawaiian for some sort of a spiritual survival. Besides, these shapes of men and dogs, of fans and paddles and birds, seen from the vantage point of our twentieth century, deliver a message of beauty exciting as an

Tennent: Hawaiian Head. Pen and ink drawing, 1950.
Charlot collection

adventure in aesthetic, untainted by the cliches of the European, Greco-Roman tradition.

Hawaiian sculptures on a monunental scale are both majestic and rare. Carved to be planted as wooden monoliths attesting to the sacredness of a *heiau* enclosure, these beautiful works were nevertheless considered expendable. Made as a sort of transient perch for the god to rest upon, these sculptures were given homage and fed sacrifices, until the priests felt that the *mana* had waned, that the spiritual inhabitant of the image had tired of this home. Then, without regard for its beauty, the idol was discarded, left to rot, replaced by a new one. Which explains the astonishment of Cook's sailors in quest for logs to burn, when pagan priests gave them a heavy load of well-seasoned "gods" for their unpius purpose. Which explains also the scarcity of such sculptures as have survived.

More fragile arts of feathers and tapa cloth complement pictographs and sculptures, with feather cloaks being the most splendid of these items. Most fragile of all the arts, and most essential in ancient times, was the training of the human body for aesthetic purpose in schools of priests and priestesses trained to express through dancing and chanting not only the relaxation and pleasure that our own dancing expresses, but the whole gamut of human passions and drama. Still alive today as a weak survival of ancient communal expression, the hula carries to newcomers of good will some inkling of the ancient wisdom and the ancient beauty.

Pre-discovery arts will always be the soil from which

later forms of art in Hawaii will grow. They stand in regard to present-day art as do, in Europe, the arts of Greece and Rome. Hawaii should thus be proud of what can justly be labeled its classical tradition.

With the coming of the white man, native culture became intricately mixed with European culture, never again to recover its original purity. A second period opened when explorers and travelers imported artists trained in Europe to report the sights of these strange islands. It was a time when photography was unknown, and military and scientific expeditions included an artist, not for the sake of art but to report and function as a sort of human camera. Good luck it was for us, as these earliest records of the sights of Hawaii, even though they were practical and factual in intent, often surpass in their hand-made and mind-conditioned tableaus what the machine could do.

In the eighteenth century, Cook imported the Swiss artist, Webber. In the early nineteenth century, von Kotzebue brought Ludwig Choris. Both Webber and Choris, being true artists, gave more to their job than was expected of them. Beyond the description of curio, the shapes of anthropological accessories, and the reports on the topography of coastlines, they added what the camera can only rarely give, the emotion at first contact with a new form of art. Webber and Choris, however, were somewhat betrayed by the modes of reproduction of their times. The engravings and lithographs of the published books, formalized as they are, lack the quality of the originals. Both the Bishop Museum and the

Honolulu Academy of Art own drawings and watercolors by Webber and by Choris, unique reports on early Hawaii.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, so intent were the missionaries on teaching, so intent were most Hawaiians on being taught the foreign ways, that such an imponderable as art doubtless suffered. Illustrations in picture books, engravings after Italian old masters, the works of ever more numerous itinerant artists, swamped native abilities in a sort of underground limbo. With the hindsight that our own appreciation of primitive arts allows, we are tempted to call this a period of decadence for Hawaiian art. At the time, however, it was construed as a period of speedy progress. Indeed, only a rabid ethnologist or a romantic artist could regret the replacing of the thatched hut by the wooden cottage or the stone building. As art goes, allowing the native to gaze at a suave English mezzotint more than repaid, or so it seemed, the loss of local art forms. Nowadays, with aesthetic fashion reversed, we downgrade the niceties of imported pictures and the able output of itinerant artists; we look instead for remnants of native culture under the veneer of imported mannerisms. This we find in the engravings done by Hawaiian students at Lahainaluna, under the care of teachers who may have despaired at the lack of polish of native students' work. This very uncouthness, much to the taste of today, is what pleases us most in the landscapes and even in the maps turned out at the school under primitive conditions in the 1830s and 1840s.

I spoke of itinerant artists. These professionals were

attracted to Hawaii as an incipient art market. They were roughly of two sorts: portrait and landscape painters. Portrait painters were well received indeed, and commissions were sufficient to repay the expense of travel. Rather than artists, they were artisans quite able at their craft. To them we owe likenesses of Hawaiian royalty, of missionaries and of chiefs. Indeed, we should be grateful that these men were not as skilled as the contemporary portrait painters deluxe who plied their art at the courts of Europe, and whose true trade was flattery. Provincial the best of our royal portraits may be, but none betrays the bulk, the features, and golden color of the unmistakably Hawaiian bodies of the august models.

The other type of artist was the landscape artist. Become numerous, travelers imperceptibly transformed themselves into tourists, even if not as obvious a type as the tourist of today. There was a market though for souvenirs to take home, especially of views and sights unknown in America or in Europe. Painters specialized in such views. Volcanoes in eruption were sought for by those who had been to Hawaii. Palm trees and blue seas, then as now, were enjoyed both as sights and as paintings. Only one sort of pictorial curio had not yet been invented, this being reserved for the tourist of today—paintings on black velvet! Again here Hawaii was fortunate. Emmert's lithographed views of Honolulu, Taverniers' oils, are features of the mid-century.

To Hawaiian local forms and European art forms a third esthetic source was added, out of the melting pot of Asiatic immigration. These new arrivals were businessmen

bent on gain. However, their balance sheets were brushed with vertical columns of ideographs. Japanese and Chinese have ways with a brush, as if their wrists were conditioned to art regardless of intent. Even the cheapest Asiatic exports, paper carps to fly on Boys' Day, kites, dolls, bear the imprint of a very great culture and could not leave less of a mark on Hawaiian art than did Japanese woodcuts on the work of the French impressionists. Hawaiian artists of today, even if not of Asiatic stock, have learned modes with the brush from even the humblest of storekeepers come from Asia.

As to the present, the picture is so rich and so complex that to attempt even a roll-call of the best would be meaningless. Mention should be made of two "old masters" of today: Huc Luquiens whose etching *Burial of Queen Liliuokalani* combines an invaluable reporting of history with great artistry; and Madge Tennent who has isolated out of what could be called pre-Pearl Harbor Hawaii native elements nearly in their pure form. Her artist's insight has singled out human bodies, generous to a fault, that represent and that act, so to speak, a survival of all that is most ancient in local modes. Her paintings embody in mass and in color the *imi loa*, or ancient wisdom, of Hawaii.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *The Honolulu Advertiser*, Statehood Edition, 1959.

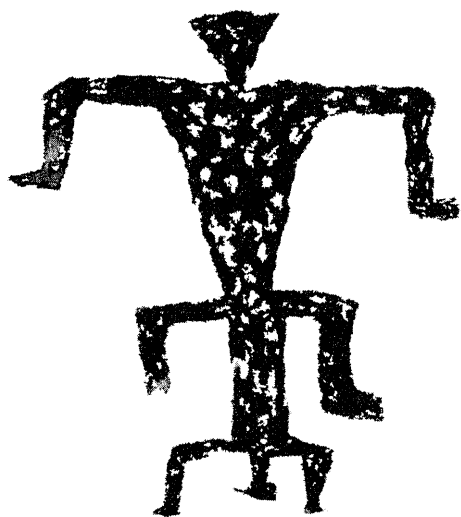
Petroglyphs of Hawaii

The native arts of the Pacific islands are not as different from our own brand of art as some people would believe. Proof of it is perhaps the story of Gauguin, who was Paris-bred. Eventually it was in Tahiti that he found his aesthetic home.

To call these Pacific cultures primitive is to think rather smugly. There is little proof that the natives who carved wood or sculptured stone in Tahiti or Hawaii were of an essentially different breed from today's artists. Our own modern art affords us an advantageous lookout upon their work, helps us understand its hidden complexity. Man, in the last analysis, can only express himself, and human nature has never been simple.

Thanks to the shift in taste, Hawaiian petroglyphs have entered the range of our appreciation. In the nineteenth century, the Venus of Milo was considered, and rightly so, a supreme masterpiece. In our day, however, we appreciate equally the Hawaiian Venus. Here we meet distortions and stylizations pertinent to the taste of today.

Hawaiian rock drawings were still made yesterday. The earliest ones date from a thousand years ago, when humans



first landed on these islands. Once established, the Hawaiian did not orient himself, as we do, by North and South, East and West. Two directions were sufficient in his closed-in world. One, *mauka*, meant “toward the mountains”; the other, *makai*, “toward the sea.” Also two were the elements that ruled this Hawaiian world, fire and water. The water was all around, the sea itself. Fire poured out of the volcanoes and in lava form flowed to meet the sea. It is on these cooled-off lava rocks that most of the petroglyphs are carved.

The Hawaiian artist was not egotrous; pride was not an ingredient of his inspiration. Rather he wanted to express that very special relation to nature that man experiences in a landscape so overpowering in its tropical lushness that it is hard for him—even if he is an artist—to consider himself as the hub of the world.

The scratches that the Hawaiian made on rocks were meant to relate himself to nature rather than to assert himself. He did not mean to build skyscrapers of a sort, proud works of art to scrape the skies with. He preferred to make a mark that he alone would know was there and that could not in any way queer the landscape.

This explains how the Hawaiian chose to carve his petroglyphs at places that are hard to find. Sometimes, as he arrived in his outrigger, he would enter a cave near the landing place and record there his happy arrival. At other times, it is in the forest, on free-standing boulders, that he chose to trace his designs. At other times yet, in a

Petroglyph. Birth scene. Rubbing by Jean Charlot

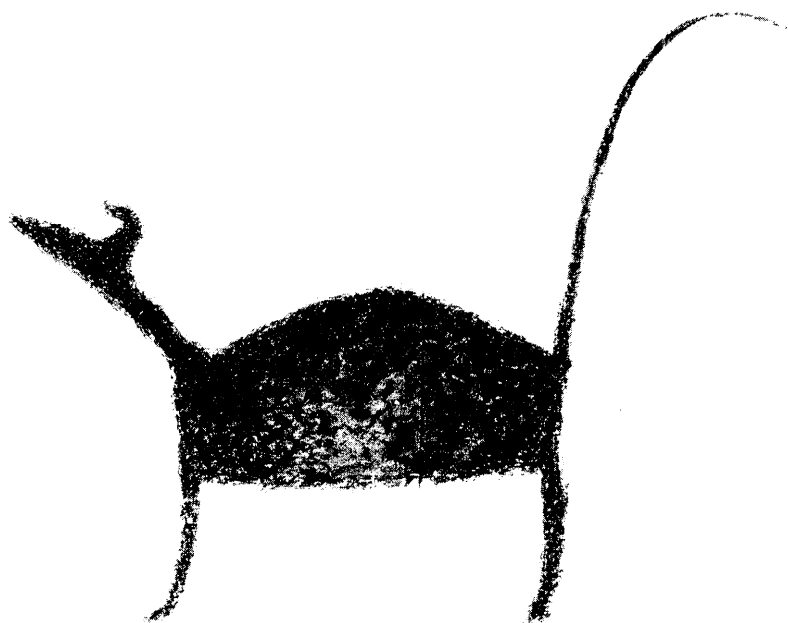
mood of humility, he singled out rocks that can be seen at low tide but that the sea everyday obliterates at high tide.

The Hawaiian was not under the spell of optical appearances. It is rare to find in ancient works scenes rendered visually, as is the wont of the Western artist. Descriptive works are the exception: at times, a Hawaiian would consider the natural erosion of a rock, by deepening certain furrows already there he would suggest a flight of gulls. At other times, he recorded the landing of a double-canoe by a representation in shorthand of the canoe's sail.

Part of a famous complex of petroglyphs are the flocks of dogs found on a rock-strewn slope in Nuuanu Valley. Rather than live dogs, these are spirit dogs. The Hawaiian artist, like his colleague the modern artist, was more preoccupied with his own inner world than with the outer objective world. As is the artist of today, he was a man of moods; it is that mood that he recorded in plastic symbols. When we look at these rock-carved dogs, we contact the artist and his personality, and foremost his primitive sense of spirituality. On a night of full moon, he saw these ghost dogs circling the sacred islet nearby. As the old Hawaiians still tell it, first came the black dogs, then the red dogs, and then the brindled dogs.

It seems paradoxical that the Hawaiian, who has a reputation for sensuousness, remained mostly spiritual in his art. We may search his works for what role humans play in it, for some canon based on the human form, that is the pattern of our own classical art. Here, the Hawaiian pre-

Petroglyph. Spirit dog. Rubbing by Jean Charlot



ferred again the spirit. The grand friezes of warriors engraved on the stone floor of ancient paths are not meant as flesh but as the conjured spirits of dead heroes. It is said that these still roam along the antique warpaths, and still may be met. As a friend of mine tells it, he came close enough to them to smell the fragrance of the leaves from the *maile* leis that these ghosts wore. Needless to say, he hastily avoided their path.

Local beliefs and milieu shed a slanting light on what the artist intended, but a more straightforward witness is the testimonial of our own eyes. Esthetics deal with permanent values. Consider how the sculptor treated each one of his personages as a separate entity and used, as the modern artist does and as the ancient masters did, elongations and distortions to express his esthetic aim.

Some of the frescoes I painted in Hawaii use petroglyph themes. I have loved the ancient carver's art enough to try to borrow the outer form of his dogs and his ghosts as a key to his mood. Is it fair, is it unfair, to use these ancient forms today? Why not? Europe has its classical art, its Venus of Milo, its Greco-Roman remains. Wilfully or not, the European artist still depends on the formulas of his past. There are other continents and other traditions. The Hawaiian rock drawings are a true part of the classical past of Hawaii. Nature and man have not changed much within this millennium, and the art of old Hawaii remains the most perfect expression of Hawaiian culture.

This article was used in slightly different form as the narration for the film of the same title, produced by George Tahara.

An Eighteenth-Century Hawaiian Petroglyph

There is in Nuuanu Valley a site famed for petroglyphs. Their subject and style mark them as prehistoric, in Hawaiian archeology a rough equivalent of pre-discovery. Now enclosed behind bars meant to keep non-specialists out, this was once a lovely spot where, as a family, we combined the pleasure of a picnic with casual research into Hawaii's past.

It was while making rubbings from the rock to transfer to muslin some of these ancient designs that I stumbled upon a pictograph drastically different from the rest. Long ago, perhaps in geological times, a large boulder had split clean into halves. They fell apart, opening between them a corridor some two feet wide. Despite the cramped space and difficult access, its walls tempted petroglyph makers, who chipped thereon humans and dogs. One day at noon, a ray of sunlight filtering between the boulders overhead brought into focus a few engraved lines. These proved to be part of a complex image: post-discovery in its subject matter, it represents a ship anchored off a shore with a palm tree. A man in outlandish uniform fires

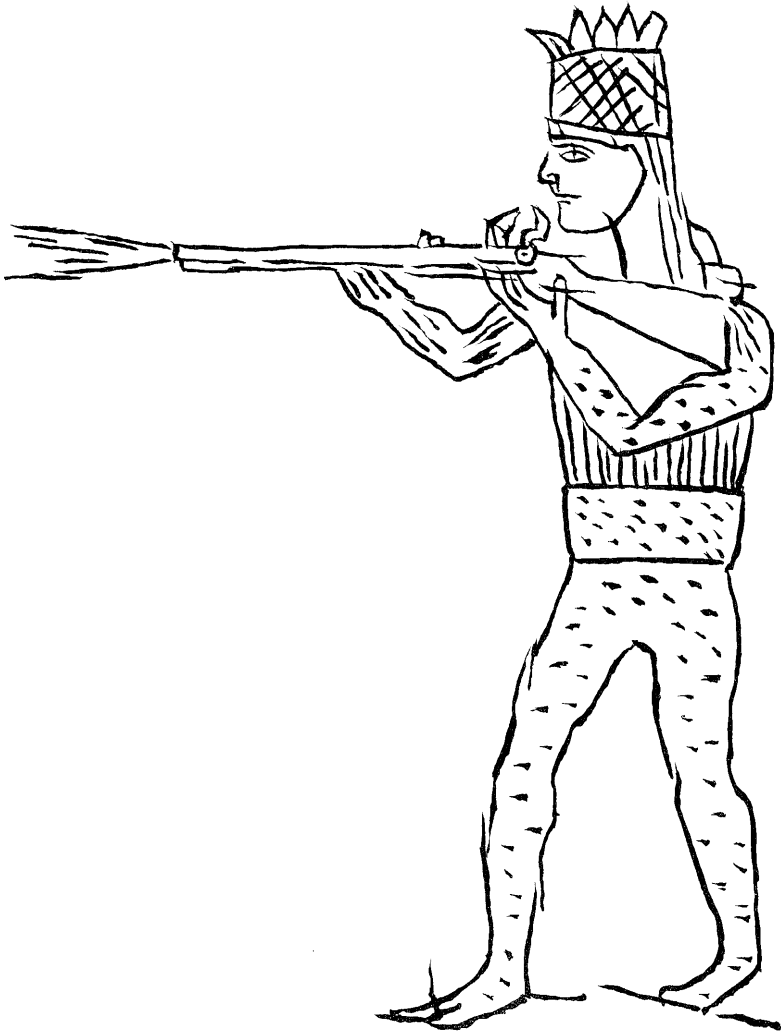
a gun landwards, over an uncertain scrawl that reads *Discovery*.

The unobtrusive position, the substantial weathering of the incised lines, the time and care that went into their making, preclude the idea of a hoax. Can a date be assigned to this puzzling work, the ship identified, an interpretation of the scene attempted?

Two *Discovery* ships are famous in the history of Hawaii, Captain Cook's and Vancouver's. Both anchored off Oahu, where they could have been observed and drawn. Cook's stopped only briefly in March, 1779, to look for water; Vancouver's anchored at length in March, 1793.

Cook's ship was a collier, a type normally used for coastwise coal traffic. Sturdy rather than elegant, capacious rather than speedy, it was chosen to resist the pressure of ice floes on the trip to the arctic Northwest. Cook's *Discovery* is one of the ships engraved by Webber, at anchor in the bay of Kealakekua. She is a three-master with bulging hull. The bowsprit enters the ship well abaft the stem, which adds to the sturdiness of the stocky silhouette. In the 1770's, functional fitness was slowly displacing the ornamental features of old galleons: carved mouldings and figures, lanterns and balustrades. Cook's *Discovery* illustrates the trend, with its simplified stern gallery. Rising above the level of the upper deck, the scalloped pediment suggests a sea-going piece of Baroque architecture; but it is a mere reminder of ancient redundancies. The same ship is the subject of a romantic litho-

Man with gun. Detail from petroglyph, Nuuanu Valley,
Oahu



graph dated 1828: a beached carcass, disfigured by a shabby superstructure, become a navy prison.

The streamlining of cumbrous features gathered speed at the end of the eighteenth century. There existed substantial differences between Cook's ship in the 1770's and the standard silhouette of the 1790's. Vancouver's *Discovery* was not, as is the popular belief, Cook's ship reused. In Vancouver's own words she was "a sloop of war . . . copper-fastened, sheathed with planks, and coppered over. . . . (She) mounted ten four-pounders and ten swivels." Vancouver himself gives her pedigree, "In the yard of Mssrs. Randall and Brent, on the banks of the Thames, a vessel of 340 tons burthens was nearly finished; and as she would demand but few alterations to make her in every respect fit for the purpose, she was purchased; and, on being launched, was named "The Discovery."

The shipbuilder's hull lines still exist. There also is an engraving, published in Vancouver's official report, of the *Discovery* foundering on the shoals of Queen Charlotte's Sound. Unlike Cook's ship, Vancouver's was built for speed. Its lines prefigure those of the clippers of the coming nineteenth century. Extending directly from the stem, the bowsprit juts out boldly. The quarter galleries are but a shrivelled token of the past. Shorn of most paraphernalia, they are built lower than the poop deck, whose balustrade runs over them unimpeded.

A comparison of the petroglyph with the two ships points to more than casual conformity with Vancouver's. Even the figurehead seen in the engraving of the foundered

ship is marked in the rock drawing by a few evocative curves.

What episode that included the firing of guns links Vancouver's *Discovery* with Oahu? It is rather a chain of events. In March, 1792, Vancouver anchored off the island for two uneventful days. After his departure, his storage boat, the *Daedalus*, touched at Waimea. Her landing party was attacked while reconnoitering for water, and a sailor, a lieutenant, and the astronomer were killed. The following March, 1793, Vancouver returned, this time in the guise of an avenging god. Oahu's ruler, Kahekili, volunteered human victims to appease the angry sea captain. It was after all the accepted pagan etiquette, for which end racial untouchables, political dissenters, and taboo breakers were expendable when need arose. But Vancouver righteously demanded legal proof of their guilt and *éclat* to enhance the pomp of an English court martial. Sighing, Kahekili provided it all. Confessions were recorded thanks to the political acumen of an interpreter. People at large assembled on shore to view the spectacle. The "chosen ones" were literally hog-tied and thrust into canoes, where lesser chiefs, with borrowed firearms, blew their brains out.

Though this episode links Oahu, Vancouver's *Discovery*, and some bloody and notable doings, the details of the pictograph only loosely fit the recital. The men were sacrificed at sea; their executioners used pistols. They could hardly have been decked in the bizarre uniform that combines English features with a dubious native one:

the cylindrical helmet, seemingly of basketry work, topped with plumes.

To guess at what the petroglyph meant to contemporaries, one needs a refresher course in Hawaiian history. For the chiefs, the apparition of Cook's ships was a terrifying revelation. Warfare between islands was perforce a seagoing affair, involving the vital logistics of transport and supply. Even giant war canoes were little more than scooped-out logs. In addition to oarsmen, they loaded only what could be lashed on the narrow bridge, between the twin hulls. A *haole* ship, a floating island manned with guns, swift, capacious enough to hide an army, meant to the warring Hawaiians much of what the H-bomb means today—victory.

Through much of the period of exploration, the Hawaiian chiefs were engrossed in inter-island warfare. It was even more vital to them than discovery was to the English. The universe Hawaiians had known as their own for close to a thousand years was afire, forcefully racked into unity by the intolerable genius of Kamehameha. As the explorers anchored their coveted ships by this or that island, warfare was held in abeyance, and offerings piled upon the ships' owners. Return gifts were at first meager: an ax, a hammer, a handful of nails. Native awe soon wore off, and ships at anchor were intelligently scanned from the native canoes that old prints show us crowding picturesquely close. They were examined even more closely when beached for repairs or caulking. Chiefs now boldly asked for the

loan of a seasoned carpenter, a trained smith; then for lessons in shipbuilding. Craftiest of all *alii*, Kamehameha clamped a near exclusive on ship deals. For him, peace-loving Vancouver imprudently laid the keel of the first Island-built ship, the thirty-six-foot-long *Britannia*. A greed born of despair impelled rival chiefs to bloody deeds to own ships in their turn.

When new, the drawings of the *Discovery* meant to natives the equivalent of our present-day blueprints of atomic gadgets—which may account for the hiding place where the record was tucked.

This unusual petroglyph thus bears witness to a world in impetuous transition. Its subject matter is English and eighteenth century; its technique is prehistoric, of the stone age to which the Islands' culture belonged. Its author could have been either an Englishman or a native-born Hawaiian. That single English word scrawled in can hardly rule out a native. Certainly, when he chose to add his own to this hallowed saturation of petroglyphs, our man catered to Island tradition.

At first glance, the style of the work is un-Hawaiian. Native esthetic achievements, generalized and abstract, shun the anecdotal. Yet, Hawaiians could at will dabble in realism. In 1817, de Chamisso observed, "We were very much surprised to see, at Titalua, some children drawing ships with a switch in the sand on the beach. Two and three masted vessels were drawn with the greatest accuracy, and provided with the most minute parts of tackling." If children could do this as a game, in more heroic times a

spy, with quick eye and retentive memory, may well have jotted down the visual essentials of such a desirable prize as Vancouver's *Discovery*.

To compare the plate of the foundering ship with its pictograph brings out a striking difference of approach. Though not a work of supreme artistry, the book illustration is nevertheless from the hand of a trained artist: hull, sea, and sky—mass and space—build up a unified composition. Whoever did the pictograph would not have known, or cared to know, the meaning of art for art. This brings to mind other ship models, whittled or limned, made by men who knew ships from the inside, having for a lifetime scrubbed decks, spliced rope, furled sails, climbed ladders, and stood lookout watch in crows' nests. In our *Discovery* each mast, each sail, each rope is expressed singly, with care as to where it is attached, what it does, and where it leads.

Simple as it is, the drawing of the ship appears sophisticated when compared with that of the man firing the gun. That would be but a childish scrawl if the action of fingers on gun barrel and trigger was not felt so keenly and if the one mechanical detail, the flintlock hammer, was not rendered with such sharp accuracy.

To sum up what esthetic imponderables teach us, the man who did this pictograph was no artist. He knew ships, or at least this ship, intimately and felt in his own arm and fingers what it feels like to fire a gun. He was a mechanic of sorts, and judging from the detail of the gun hammer, he may have been a smith.

With this analysis of style, the scales tip to an Englishman—one familiar by birthright with ships and guns but equally aware of native ways. We should look for his like among the specialists—gunsmiths, shipwrights, sailmakers—who were a crucial complement of the military machine of contending chiefs. Adventurers of this type, like Davis and Young, entered history with the victory of Kamehameha the Great. Others as loyal, and perhaps as able, went down with the *alii* of their choice.

Chief Kaeo was one of the losers in the battle royal sparked by Kamehameha. Claimant to Oahu, he died in battle soon after Vancouver's departure, killed by a rival claimant, Kalanikupule. Kaeo's men may have hid after that in the rocky wilds of Nuuanu, as Kalanikupule's were to do after his own disastrous rout at the Pali. A plausible choice for the petroglyph-maker would be Kaeo's Scottish smith, Murray the armorer, known to Hawaiians as Male Amole.

Commodore F. G. Reinicke, U.S. Navy (Ret.), who was kind enough to coach me on the use of nautical terms, wholeheartedly endorses the theory of an English hand. In his opinion, no one but a sailor could rig this sketch with such professional competence. As he puts it, "Give this drawing to copy to anyone today, and the chance is that he will go wrong somewhere, as each line, however slight, answers a set function and defined purpose."

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Paradise of the Pacific*, Christmas 1957.

Angels over the Altar

This slim volume is an exquisite sample of book-making that clothes an exhaustive piece of scholarly research. “Christian Folk Art in the South Seas” is not, however, as first implications suggest, a study of the art of native converts, redolent with paganism, the present heir to antique cultures such as lured Gauguin to Tahiti. To the architect or the decorator it offers no hint on how to clothe Christian churches in the borrowed splendor of “savage” crafts. Surprisingly so, the folk art illustrated here is not the work of Tahitian or Hawaiian natives, but that of French or Belgian folks who were sent to these far-flung places as missionaries.

It is a story parallel to that of the Spanish Franciscans and Dominicans who were the first to reach Mexico in the sixteenth century. Unable to quickly master the involuted native tongues and yet impatient to preach, these men painted pictures and displayed them on mission walls. Old engravings show them pointing a rod at each subject in turn to instruct their squatting Indian neophytes into the mysteries of the Pater Noster or the articles of the Creed.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a similar

impulse, didactical rather than esthetic, transformed into unwilling artists other zealous missionaries, equally impatient and equally ingenious. In the Pacific islands that it was their lot to evangelize, nature had trained native eyes to lush displays, had rendered men sensitive to the sensuousness of forms and colors. The clerics found it difficult to communicate to their Polynesian parishioners concepts quasi abstract, such as those of good and evil, or to depict in words scenes unseen, such as those of Heaven and of Hell. Why not replace words with paint, or with sculptures, for all to see.

Novel as the subject matter is, the author acknowledges a predecessor in the field, Robert Louis Stevenson. In the 1880s, Stevenson, on a tour of the Marquesas, stumbled on one of Brother Blanc's chapels, on the island of Nukuhiva. He wrote of it lovingly: "It is impossible to tell in words of the angels (although they are more like winged archbishops) that stand guard upon the door, of the cherubs in the corners, of the scapegoat gargoyles, or the quaint and spirited relief, where Michael (the artist's patron) makes short work of a protesting Lucifer."

Another one of Brother Blanc's rustic cathedrals, built on the island of Atunoa, and crammed with his quaint brand of polychrome sculpture, stood a neighbor to Gauguin's last dwelling. The master casually rendered it as a spot of white topped with a cross and half hid in tropical foliage in one of his last landscapes, where naked riders romp freely in the pagan foreground. The juxtaposition of these two expatriates, Blanc and Gauguin, has curious overtones. Blanc was a true primitive, just as were the

Breton artisans whose stone calvaries had been first to fire sophisticated Gauguin with a longing for things primitive.

The book also describes the painted churches of Hawaii, of which the best known is that of Honaunau, the work of a Belgian priest, Father John. A tiny wooden chapel within sight of the ocean, it startles the onlooker who crosses its latticed threshold to suddenly find himself in a Gothic cathedral, seemingly immense and lighted by rays filtered through the stained glass of high rose windows. Father John succeeded here in painting a piece of make-believe as artful in its perspective effect as it is artless in its handling of pigments.

A few years ago, when I visited this little church, known in the Islands as the Painted Church, I took it for granted that Father John, being Belgian, had sickened of the insistent beauty of the tropics that hemmed him and his church between palms and papaya trees, and that his painted cathedral was an exercise in escape. In this book, Frankenstein proves that the Cathedral of Burgos, via postcard, is his model, spoiling somewhat my simple theory. Father John had spent some of his seminary years in Spain, so we may now postulate that this strangely moving mural helped the missionary to recapture his youth.

Scenes depicting a good death, and Eve, and Hell, and the stigmatization of Saint Francis, line the side walls. Looking for what models inspired Father John, Frankenstein comes up with a list of names that never were listed in a history of art. It seems that Father John chose his

models not for their eminence but for their availability. For his inspiration, he probably consulted what pious cards he had kept within the pages of his missal since seminary days.

The third artist, Father Evarist, is still active today and answered all the queries of the author as best he could. All the more mysterious remains the fact that his church at Kalapana is a thing of beauty. His richest iconographic source proved to be *Le Catéchisme en Images*, illustrated with the type of antiquated woodcuts that the enlightened connoisseur can only see as a sort of raw material for a Max Ernst to cut and paste into surrealist collages.

This book, treating of a kind of church art incompatible with what we usually understand to be good liturgical art, does so with a serious kindness and a gentle comprehension that raises for the liturgical art expert grave questions. Decades ago, when the liturgical art movement launched its sturdy battle for reform, one of its most potent weapons proved to be the assumption that good taste is an indispensable ingredient of good art. The battle is practically won. Bad taste has been relegated by the connoisseur into a limbo of its own, even perhaps to its own hell. To look at the naïve works lovingly reproduced in this book suggests a difficult reappraisal. Perhaps the good and the bad in art are not as clearcut as are good and bad on moral grounds. Perhaps a kind of pharisaical pride has queered our esthetic manifestos. Brother Blanc and Father John thought of art in terms of function. If taste entered in the making of their art, it was more of the kind one associates with cooking recipes than with art: the proof of the

pudding, the proof of their art, was in the reaction of the wide-eyed parishioners to these visual sermons. As he docilely molded his esthetic concept to fit local instincts, the cleric turned artist veered away from accepted forms of art and at times even from acceptable ones.

When we say that church art should be visual prayer, should not the comparison be followed through. There is a kind of liturgical art that patterns itself after the official prayer that speaks for a whole congregation. This collective prayer borrows its formulas from the biblical past and from the doctors of the Church. The corresponding art leans also heavily on the past, patterns its style after the Byzantine if orthodox modern or, in dubious cases, after the Gothic. A sort of awesomeness emanates from the official prayer and the official art, that underlines the fact that the church is indeed the House of God.

Other forms of prayer are certainly valid. Such is the very private prayer of the publican, half hid behind a pillar, both fists passionately pressed against his eyeballs, intent on improvising words to fit his own personal case. His very earnestness makes his prayer ungrammatical, and unimpressive indeed when compared with the resonant periods of the kings and prophets of ancient days. Has this kind of prayer its counterpart in our concept of a liturgical style or, in our eagerness to equate goodness with good taste, have we swept out of the church and into outer darkness, whenever given the chance, all art that falls below rather stiff professional standards. This little book raises indeed a grave question, of concern to those brave

men who have, by now, practically won their battle for “good” art in the church.

Tying up what thoughts the reading of this book aroused, I look at a photograph, one of the unretouched kind, of Saint Theresa of Lisieux. There she stands hugging with one hand a plaster statue of the Child Jesus, of a type that even Barclay Street must have discontinued, with, in her other hand the palette and the brushes of a painter. Theresa here consciously posed as the artist. What humble pride she may have felt in her artistic achievements cannot be shared by any conscientious art critics. Yet, the scrolls, and hearts, and lambs that she lovingly limned must have been most pleasing to God. Now that the liturgical battle has turned into a victory, it is perhaps time to ask of ourselves this question: have we kept in the church a place for innocence in art as God has kept a place for His innocents in Heaven?

A review of Alfred Frankenstein and Norman Carlson, *Angels over the Altar: Christian Folk Art in Hawaii and the South Seas* (University of Hawaii Press, 1961), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, November 1961.

LITURGICAL ART

Catholic Art in America: Debits and Credits

The sights that assail the eye of the American faithful every church-going day rarely illustrate a sane concept of the liturgical arts. As backdrop to divine service, cast cement *reredos* will raise monstrous mock steeples; gables pointed like dunce caps crawl with decor as a birthday cake oozes sugar tracery. Altars will be snowed under scalloped doilies and cross-stitched lambs, valentine offerings of artless nuns. A crop of zinc lilies will fill china vases shaped like oversize lily blooms. We pray before plastercast saints as soft-textured as margarine and colored as sickeningly as that mammoth ice-cream sundae once known as a “moron’s delight.” These saints sport their sanctity as a kind of social accomplishment, lips and cheeks rouged, beckoning with rosy manicured fingers that no labor ever toughened, no mortification ever shrank.

Taken at its face value, this daily visual experience would mean that church art must be, for unstated reasons, a doubly debased imitation of past forms of art, shaped indeed in abhorrence of its intended function. Average church art is debased because no contemporary could hope to breathe life in art forms whose once cogent reason

to be is long dead and gone; it is doubly debased because these archaeological fakes are not even given to us at first hand, turned out as they are by the thousands as heartlessly and irreverently as if they were video sets or toasters.

Differing from this widespread practice is the correct concept of what the sacred arts should be. Leaving for the moment feeling and theology aside, let us tackle function. In the 1920s, the French architect Le Corbusier crisply stated that a house is a *machine to live in*; thus implying that all of it, from floor plan to crockery, must be shaped, textured, and interrelated to meet living requirements as exactly as the cogs of a watch conform to their purpose of marking time. Though a church is a more mysterious unit than is a house, it may also be described along functional lines: from God's point of view, a church is a *machine to live in*, and a *machine to pray in* from man's point of view. Function is more than implicit in the many practical rulings of the Congregation of Rites. Its laws are more factual than aesthetic. They specify practical requirements for a whole gamut of objects, from the plan of a nave to the matter, texture, and shape of a single patena. To start thus at the functional level of the liturgical problem is one sure way to shove away the skin-deep scruples artificially and perennially raised about matters of style.

The business of the Living Church is with the living. To answer its function, a church building should achieve

Charlot: Apparition by the Lake of Tiberias. Brush and ink



between today's American parishioner and its architecture, its statues and pictures, a moving affinity not unlike the one that, in Europe, has existed for centuries between the faithful and his material church, be it a cathedral or a crossroad chapel. The point is not at all that Americans should compete with Chartres on its own terms, but rather that our churches should fit the requirements of New World Catholics as successfully as Chartres answered the needs of its own people in a very different time and place.

In the Old World, the battle against ecclesiastical Gothic can be fought only on the ground of fitness in time; its battle cry is: to each period its style! But Europe is the birthplace of cathedrals. Still in place and in use they blend today, as they did yesterday, in a willing landscape.

In America, Gothic architecture constitutes a brag flaunted in the face of reason, as insane as importing a haunted Scotch castle. On this continent we have good European medieval works, such as those displayed in the Museum of the Cloisters in New York, or the Hearst chapel, packed stone by stone and brought here from Spain. Once they have crossed the Atlantic, they become mere beautiful curio, as extinct as stuffed dodos in a museum of natural history. Copies of course are worse. Even if we could afford more American cathedrals far outdistancing their European models in size, and many more replicas of Bruges belfreys equipped with push-button carillons, the problem of fitness would not be solved a mite by such excessively costly aesthetic sins.

Will modern art offer then a better solution? Yes, if by modern art we mean an art created by contemporaries,

like us soothed or buffeted by the times we live in; works whose style will reflect our common experience. Today's artists wear neither knights' armor nor musketeers' cape, and the genuine ones see no reason for creating an art in fancy dress.

The excellence of this simple formula—that we have no choice but to be of our time—should also spread to geography and a conformity with the place we live in. Within the relative cohesion of our Western culture, there exist local nuances that the religious artist has no more right to bypass than he has the right to deny the larger problems raised by what kind of church-art will best fit Asia or Africa. An indiscriminate importation of up-to-date art formulas is but a doubtful panacea for what ails our American liturgical arts. As stated, building fourteenth-century churches in the twentieth century fails in logic. Nor can one sincerely long for the day when a so-called international style will lay a rash of identical slab-like architectures on our ever-varied American landscape.

When speaking of modern art, usually French art is meant, or rather that of the School of Paris, riding for eighty years on a peak of fashion. The French liturgical movement at its most daring became identified with a Dominican, Father Couturier, whose stable of artist-friends was a roster of the better-known names of this School of Paris, Rouault, Léger, Lurçat, Braque, Matisse. Father Couturier stated that he trusted genius above piety. To practice this saying, he required no confession certificates or even baptismal papers from those of his friends

he put to work. His trust was rewarded with such beautiful achievements as is the Matisse chapel in Venice. Its poise reflects the plastic purity that great age, at times, brings to a tempestuous master. This mature work by a major artist lacks nevertheless in functional competency. Either Matisse failed to remember, or could not be bothered with, the why of his decoration. For example, when praying the Stations of the Cross, a few steps should be taken between stations in imitation of Our Lord's last journey. Hence, the fourteen pictures spaced around the nave in orderly display. To pray the Matisse stations, distracted faithfuls would have to meander in front of the single wall where they are crowded in disordered tiers, with the hazard of colliding against each other in mid-devotion. Granted that form should not be at odds with function, Americans cannot enthusiastically make their own the thesis of Father Couturier—so much more credible when stated in French and in France—that when we deal with genius the rest will take care of itself.

The main influence on church art remains that of the Englishman, Eric Gill. Attractive and not too difficult to copy is the calligraphic purity of his line. Unlike the fickle French, in his sculptures and in his writings he stressed an awareness of function, and a respect for whatever material he worked in. In those churches decorated after his spirit, one may appreciate the smooth relationship achieved between the actors of the divine service and their sacred "props." The effect on the open-minded spectator is not always flawless. The wilful shearing of all superfluousness smacks at times of classroom

or sickroom. The altar slab, once denuded of its artificial flowers and pious doilies, can look all too plainly like a morgue slab. “Gillite” art forms keep chastely in check any loud outpouring of religious emotion. Such an understatement, praiseworthy by the standards of English etiquette, is hardly cut to fit a more extroverted America. Gone also, together with the hair-raising, dust-storing accessories that reformers reject on esthetic grounds, are the testimonials of love that these ugly things implied. Liturgical purists bear the brunt of proving that an exquisite taste is more pleasing to God than many a candid human value.

Despite these reservations, based on personal traits and not on quality, both France and England have solved for themselves basic problems of liturgical art, and have done it so forcefully that American clerics cannot bypass these problems anymore. Gill illustrates the respect for craft and the attention to function. Father Couturier spectacularly restates an old and nearly forgotten truism: great art is none too good for God.

America will solve its problems better if it uses these foreign examples as a spur rather than as a model. That ours is a country lacking in traditions is a cliché that comes handy to excuse wholesale aesthetic borrowings. It is true that American esthetic religious tradition is far from coherent, and its quality inconspicuous, when compared with that of the formidable corpus of church art in Europe. Yet, we must come to love this humble artistic residue as our own, as the only one we can safely build upon.

Prehistoric Indian cultures are to America what the

Gothic style is to Europe. The climate, open ranges, and scenery that inspired the Indian artist are still here, especially in the West. The scene controls in turn, however subconsciously, the sensitive artist of today. We part altogether from Europe at this deeper strata. Compared with Indian art, both Romanesque and Gothic appear descriptive, illustrative even. In fact, it is only with the advent of the more drastic among "isms" that the modern European artist caught up with the American past.

Next in time, and now equally our own, the Catholic Hispanic tradition is still alive and productive, signally in New Mexico. Those who dismiss Colonial Hispanic art as merely an import from Spain fail to realise how tenaciously it transformed itself, and how well it governed its American growth to fit changed conditions. This art aimed its message at men who were both too rustic and too free to have any willing truck with pictures conforming to the mannerisms of a far-flung court and courtiers. While the earliest of these devotional panels still depend on the sophisticate formulas of Castille, *santos* evolved steadily towards an abstracted calligraphy in which some art critics profess to see the influence of Amerindian aesthetics. Whatever the reason, nineteenth-century New Mexico folk painting vividly answers our standards of good art. Humble as the *santos* may be, they hold for us a lesson of imperative actuality, as an art that drastically transformed itself to fit another continent.

Less defined but equally touching is another kind of American architecture and church decoration, even though this time the makers were totally unconcerned with prob-

lems of fitness to place or to time. In mid-nineteenth century, the parish priest or the missionary come from the old country—often Belgium or Germany—felt “blue” for the traditional beauty he had left behind, for which the Middle West had no equivalent. The exiled cleric attempted with minor means to recreate this longed-for visual atmosphere. The mock-medieval chapels one comes across at times in the countryside were truly built as a labor of love, however ignorant their makers may have been of architecture and the refinements of taste. I think of a church visited perchance in Iowa, crammed with brown and gold woodwork and polychrome statues antedating Barclay Street. Gaudier even than the average plastercast, these effigies were also more edifying as they lacked the fearsome “smell of money” that clings to today’s manufactured product: Paradoxically, Middle West Gothic manages to be creative. Between this folk expression and the American super-cathedrals that cost millions a chasm exists as deep as that recorded between Lazarus and Dives.

The *santos* of New Mexico and Middle West American Gothic are most unlike. Yet, both were created by men who approached their task with hearts that were pure, unswayed by lucre. These men, who were hardly more than amateur artists, have left us a lesson to ponder: however sophisticate or elaborate the style of the coming reform of American church art for which so many long, only men equally pure of heart will prove strong enough to reverse the tide of bad taste. Great art, good art even, has cleansing properties close to the sacramental. As happens with blessed water and holy chrism, to contact art consti-

tutes a purifying rite. It is this inner virtue that binds together the diverse strands of valid Christian art styles the world over, from the catacombs to Chartres, from Assisi to Assy.

The history of Western art was long synonymous with the arts of the Church. The Church was the most active patron of artists, and all flocked naturally to her. Times were when a Pope, picking an adolescent out of a crowd of applicants, found his flair rewarded with a Sistine Chapel or Raphael's Stanzas. Today the link between artist and Church that in the past worked splendors seems severed. The Church today is an uncertain patron, fallen from its great estate as appreciator of untried styles; the Church is also an irascible patron, quick to suspect the new, its memory blanked of the art revolutions that it once consistently helped. The artist is still at work, painting Ways of the Cross and Flights into Egypt, only to put them eventually in storage; carving statues worthy of God's house, only to leave them behind to avoid freight charges on moving day. The cleric now shops for church art not where he would naturally find it, in the artist's studio, but more conveniently from the rectory, out of a mail-order catalogue. What aesthetic junk he buys as a result shall visually foul his church, debase the piety of his parishioners into pietistic routines, and be seized upon by the gleeful unbeliever as another proof that the Church is indeed in its decadence.

There are of course exceptions. At times, the artist, waiting at the church gates in ashes and sackcloth, is bid to enter, and the plastic cacophony one has come to expect as

accompaniment to divine service is wondrously replaced by visual music. Every time this happens impatient well-wishers acclaim a renaissance! After thirty years of meditating on the shortcomings of the liturgical arts, and of laboring to narrow the gap between sane theory and insane practice, I feel most cautious in claiming such a clearcut victory, or, as well, in conceding defeat. Defeat there is, of a sort, in being an absolute minority when one's aims are altogether catholic. There is a defeat of sort in producing objects—paintings or statues—that may never reach their rightful place inside a religious architecture, never edify, as is their birthright, praying crowds. The victory as I see it is of a more metaphysical nature: the vocation of the creative liturgical artist has become so fiercely impractical today that it must be more than ever a tried way, if trying, of serving God.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, November 1958.

Art, Sacred and Otherwise

This book will be welcomed by the artist who works, or ever hopes to work, in the liturgical field. It states Church laws concisely and authoritatively. Its *dos* and *don'ts*, rather than being personal to the author, sum up historical tradition and sound practice. It also takes into account the problems of today. The illustrations, picked, as I understand, on this side of the Atlantic, add a welcome boldness. Using this book as a guide, an artist can come to a better understanding of what is expected of him.

The author, the Reverend J. B. O'Connell, says: "The church plan must not neglect the claims of the aesthetic. These, however, are the province of the architect, the artist, and the craftsman, not the primary concern of the liturgist." There is, then, a substantial no-man's land between what is permissible and what is forbidden in matters of sacred art. To comment on the book from the point of view of the practicing artist, and only inasmuch as it is concerned with the problems of art-making, is the very limited purpose of this review.

First, let us look at the pitfalls that threaten the unwary craftsman who intends to work for the Church. On the

right there lurk, as Cardinal Celso Costantini so forcefully puts it, “. . . cheap reproductions of painted plaster statues and all the industrial rubbish that has invaded so many churches.” On the left there are other dangers, labeled by Father O’Connell modernistic art—an art “over subjective, often bizarre and extravagant, sometimes coarse and even barbaric, the product of undisciplined sentimentalism and mere ephemeral whim.” Such art, if as black as painted, should indeed also be avoided.

This feat of stepping tip-toe on a razor’s edge without falling into either chasm makes a most disquieting picture both for the cleric who would become an art patron and for the artist who longs to put his craft at the service of the Church. In theoretical fairness, Father O’Connell fulminates impartially against the right and against the left, suggesting imminent danger from both directions.

Let us now check theory against practice. Let us close the book and make a round of churches to investigate their worth, or their shortcomings, in the matter of sacred art. The picture changes drastically. The careful balance that the book suggests, the ideal of church art as an example of the *juste milieu*, will receive a rude jolt in practice, as we go from church to church on our aesthetic pilgrimage. Indeed, very few of the churches we may visit will show anything as blatant as originality. And where are works to be found in a modern idiom bold enough to be suspected of fellow-traveling with the modernistic? This nightmare of churches rendered unworthy by tortured *isms* and sadistic distortions proves to be mostly a dream.

Certainly in our day it is not a foe strong enough to upset, or even to rock, sound Christian tradition.

Formidable, however—all-pervading, arrayed in armor, and so strong in numbers and entrenched positions as to suggest that the battle has already been fought and won—are the samples of industrial rubbish that debase sacred art. There they stand victorious, a guard of dishonor around the altar, a plaster foot on top of their supine foe, impervious to the fulminations of the Congregation of Rites, to the admonitions of Popes, to the opinion of Roman cardinals, and—why not mention it, given that this is after all an aesthetic matter—to the despair of Christian artists. What more accurate description of the average church of today can be found than that in this instruction of the Holy Office: “Let ordinaries forbid second-rate and for the most part stereotyped statues and pictures to be multiplied and improperly and absurdly exposed for the veneration of the faithful on the altars themselves and on the adjoining walls of chapels.”

Thus, in practice, it is not the revolution of the *isms* that menaces the position and dignity of sacred art, but—intensely more acute—this comical counterrevolution of bad art, born of lucre, that already clutters and clogs the churches with impertinence. Such art is incapable of fulfilling any liturgical function; how can it inspire a devotion that did not go into its making? Such art teaches a false doctrine that presents sanctity as a genteel social accomplishment, an activity so mild that it has never displaced even a hair in the coiffure of the fairy plaster princess, or calloused the hand of the monk who cannot read his

missal because a cupid masquerading as the Holy Child is sitting on it. Such a poor brand of art cannot be neutral: incapable of greatness, it will seep its poison, needle its meanness, into those who make use of it, regardless of pious intent.

One could wish that somewhere in the book Father O'Connell, descending from aesthetic theory to the mention of clerical practice, had acknowledged at least this cardinal fact that the abomination of the desolation is already entrenched in the Temple. If modernistic art ever gained a toe hold, it could be slapped down and bounced out by local ordinaries without causing more than a ripple of protest. What would happen if—in order zealously to preserve the artistic middle-ground that the author, quoting ecclesiastical authorities, presents as the ideal for sacred art—ordinaries would forcefully eject from the churches in their care all third-rate statues and pictures?

What should sacred art look like, then; what should it be? Canon Law states: "Ordinaries . . . are to take care that . . . the forms received from Christian tradition are preserved." Father O'Connell lucidly explains how "forms" can hardly refer to any one style. Rather than physical shapes, they should be understood as *formae*, rules of conduct that go to make the permanent core around which evolves the dynamic pageant of ever-changing styles.

When it comes to a less metaphysical definition of what it is that the artist-craftsman should fashion—perhaps because of the impossibility of encompassing all styles and the modes of all lands in a few words—the instructions

given are vague, and to the literal-minded may prove a letdown. We learn that the artist should do his work “. . . with due regard to the claims of the beautiful.” He should clothe religious ideas with “lovely forms.” Father O’Connell borrows from Cardinal Costantini what may be the most “horizontal” definition ever voiced of art, “Art is not an enigma to be solved. . . . It ought to know how to make itself understood quickly and give pleasure.”

Beauty, loveliness, pleasure, are dangerous terms to apply to sacred art. To the few familiar with the work of the great masters (Cardinal Costantini and Father O’Connell may well be among them) these terms may suggest, however weakly, the meditative exaltation that is felt in the presence of aesthetic grandeur. As for the many who are familiar only with the mediocre, there is the risk these very terms will be construed as an indictment of all greatness, and used as a sly justification of the worst in church art. Plaster saints are indeed no enigma to be solved. They make themselves understood instantaneously. Those who know nothing about art but who know what they like may well find pleasure in them.

There is an implied inner strain between the two functions of liturgical art; that of praising God, and that of catering to the congregation. This art should be sublime on the one hand, and lucid on the other. Its quality will change as the emphasis oscillates between the use of art for the altar or for the people. Though he mentions both functions, Father O’Connell, with a touch of the pragmatic, beams church art mostly towards the people.

This process of leveling art down to popular function has its artistic drawbacks. It implicitly puts a premium on the more pedestrian forms of art, while less simplistic styles will, at the least, arouse suspicion. Thus primed to eject a number of artists from his ideal church, Father O'Connell already feels their resentment: "Some of what I write will probably be unacceptable to certain modern artists." As to what it is that such fellows do, confined as they now are to the outer darkness, serviceable Cardinal Costantini is called upon to fill in details: their art "loses itself in the wild forest of cubist and abstract art." Father O'Connell adds a footnote, necessary to bring the quote up-to-date: "Cubist art, it seems, has faded out of fashion." It has faded, mind you, without ever having been given a chance to spoil a single church wall!

There are, however, other ways of looking at church art than to conceive of it as little more than an illustration, a spur to devotion, a bit of machinery useful to lull the church-goer into quiet through mass and Sunday sermon. Otherwise, why was this problem of scandal, that looms so prominent today, minimized or by-passed as unimportant by past generations of clerics who were also art patrons? Father O'Connell tells a story neatly to the point: "Until the twelfth or thirteenth century, the Christ represented on the cross was the triumphant Redeemer of the world, reigning from the cross, alive, with open eyes, clothed in the colobium and often wearing a jewelled crown. . . . From the thirteenth century, He is mostly depicted as dead, with eyes closed, head dropped, an anguished face, bleeding wounds, crowned with thorns, and naked. . . .

This at first shocked the faithful and even aroused indignation.”

There have been other famous scandals connected with the history of church art, in fact with some of its greatest accomplishments. Aretino did berate Michelangelo for painting in the Pope’s own chapel frescoes “fit at best for a brothel or a steam-bath house.” This critic, a great art connoisseur, was giving vent to personal spite; but the strength of the statement came from the fact that, so saying, he gave voice to the bewilderment of so many good people caught in the wildly rising current of the high Renaissance. From Byzantine to Romanesque to Gothic; from the elaborations of Bernini to the chaste simplicity of the Matisse chapel at Vence; each coming change hurt men set in their ways, men whose devotions were sentimentally bound to the statues, the windows, or frescoes they looked at when they first learned how to kneel and pray.

In ancient times, churchmen disregarded so completely the *qu’en dira-t-on* in favor of greatness that this brave attitude, spread in space and time, can truly be said to be one of the *formae*, one of the constants that can now safely be used as a guide. Through the centuries, the relation between churchmen and artists has been one of incredible boldness. Abbots and popes were so quick at adopting the new trends that, with the out-focusing that comes with time, it seems as if the commissions they gave initiated, rather than furthered, the new forms. For over fifteen centuries, the history of all Western art is as one with the history of church art. Why is Father O’Connell reluctant

to concede to the Church its glorious and unmatched role as an art patron: “The Church in her art assimilates—slowly it is true, never in a hurry—what is good from the spirit of the times. . . .” And again; “The Church, while no enemy to real progress, is by its nature prudent and wisely conservative.”

The secret of this ancient boldness may be found in a kind of emphasis on the role of sacred art other than that we place today. Art was seen primarily as praise given to God, rather than as a matter of catering to the faithful. Religion itself is more than a way of social gathering, of forming useful citizens, docile employees, or trusted neighbors. First of all, it is the relation, the naked relation, of man to God. In the same way, the facet of sacred art that turns it towards the altar is in itself a virtue, an act of faith, a visible prayer, regardless of the presence, or absence, of a congregation. Thus conceived, the role of church art stresses sacredness more than if it is thought of as mostly a means of reaching the people.

This new angle suggests as a new postulate, that the best art is none too good for God. This requirement of quality is one very distinct from that of readability. We believe in dogmatic mysteries that exist beyond our capacity of stating and of understanding. Is it not natural that the great artist, endowed beyond the usual measure, thinking and practicing his art through a lifetime, may, on another plane than the dogmatic, propose what to less endowed men and less trained eyes will appear to be aesthetic mysteries? Certainly God, present on the altar, can never be puzzled by aesthetic depth, but may still appreciate

what praise is implicit in the unusual form: what this art contains of purity, of selflessness, of dedication on the part of the artist, of zeal to refine, compose, articulate, a genuine form of manual and visual prayer.

Even though we have at last emerged from the modern “dark ages,” when only the Gothic was considered a fit style for a church, a flavor of eclecticism still clings to church art, a flavor of which the lay art of our time is quite free.

If we think of art as decoration, as a pleasing inducement for the faithful, then we may pick, as one does furniture, from this and that century including our own, elements that will, once put together, procure an ensemble to our taste. If art means for us instead a voice lifted in the presence of God, that will forever in the sanctuary represent us as does the lighted lamp, then the back door for modern art is not enough. Why frisk living art at the door for blackjacks or brass knuckles, if one has no other art to choose from? To praise God, sacred art must be a live art, born in anguish, embodying enough that is genuine of our times and selves to deserve existence through coming centuries. The illusion of a choice among styles grows with the ever-multiplying art folios and color facsimiles that make it deceptively easy to travel back and forth through past eras with all the blasé nonchalance of an Alley Oop. There comes an urge to fill our knapsacks with splendid loot, gems pried out of context from art history. We stand atop the mountain and survey these many

kingdoms, and great is the temptation to believe that they are ours for the picking.

If what we quest after is genuine art, it would be saner to forget so much beautiful and idle knowledge. A total lack of historical perspective would serve us better. Villard de Honnecourt, in the thirteenth century, made a grotesque copy, in his sketchbook, of a Roman sarcophagus, and captioned it "The sepulchre of an Arab." Such lack of eclecticism, of tolerance for ancient forms of art, seem to us a professional sin, or at least an intolerable handicap: yet de Honnecourt was a famous builder of cathedrals.

What is more expressive of the exclusive love of modern art that devoured ancient craftsmen, architects, and clerical patrons, than the asymmetrical, lopsided constructions they left us; they may start underground with a Romanesque crypt, on which is raised a Gothic nave flanked by towers whose tops may emerge into the full Renaissance. Each progress, even each change, was so eagerly seized upon that previous overall plans were discarded to make place for each successive stage of "modern art."

Between us and similarly vital accomplishments there intrudes a continuous reassurance and reinvestment of prejudices that we experience each time we contact a past perhaps more comforting to look at than is our present. We sigh for a golden age that will never return: "The time for Raphaels and miracles is past." We hold up as paragons for the living artist objectives and monuments that would better remain for us dehydrated bygones. Strange bed-

fellows share the subconscious of today's art patron; the Byzantines, Angelico, Raphael, Bernini, and so on to Gill and Bosseron Chambers. These dormants and their remembered works constitute the unfair *touchstone* for what the living artist brings, hat in hand, be it blueprint, maquette, or mural cartoon.

The practicing artist also sees and admires ancient art, and mulls over art facsimiles. At working time, at the moment in which this man—amiable or boorish, proud or humble on everyday contact—acts as an art-maker, historical knowledge falls away from him as obsolete. He faces his material, tools in hand, with the same blankness and blandness with which the most provincial craftsman of the so-called dark ages tackled his task. Otherwise, this assumed science, this memorized visual encyclopedia, only gets in the way of what he is about to do—to search for and strike chords that will be valid only inasmuch as they are tuned to his own self and times.

Pope Jules, the one who commissioned the Sistine Chapel decorations, quipped once to a cardinal that he had been given power to create cardinals at will, but was powerless to bring forth a Michelangelo. This proud pope's humble assertion could be amplified: no true artist, and he need not be on a level with Michelangelo, can be made by having a man toe the line of ecclesiastical law, or by force-feeding him on liturgical knowledge; no man can become an artist because of personal piety, willing obedience to learned suggestions, or awe at the sacredness

of church art. In that sense Father Couturier's opinion holds good; he put more trust in genius than in faith.

Once found, the live artist should somehow be put to work in the house of God. What he does there should, in the words of Pope Pius XII in *Mediator Dei*, “. . . take into account more the needs of the Christian community than the personal taste and judgment of the artist.” One senses here a concern peculiar to the conditions of our time. The inference is that today there exists at least a latent conflict between the requirements of the Church and the path of artistic fulfillment. This idea would surprise past generations of artists, battalions of craftsmen for whom the Church was the ideal and all-understanding patron; men who would have been at a total loss if asked to disentangle the one from the other their twin goals, liturgical and aesthetic. Conditions have changed. Artists, at least live artists, are now open to suspicion as egocentric, egolatric, smitten with related handicaps. In turn, the artist may be a faithful parishioner, but the art he sees in his parish church will prove mostly an eyesore, and he will learn to pray with his eyes closed. Perhaps he will pray for a renewal of understanding between cleric and artist, a return to what existed once before.

When such a prayer is answered, this getting together again of clerics and artists need not stir undue trepidation. Artists will prove, on acquaintance, a surprisingly tranquil bunch of fellows. Their problems are mainly those of craftsmen. They know better than the critic or patron that art, whatever its ends and its form, is for them, if it is to

be at all, arduous manual labor. They may also remain tactfully silent when told of the chasm between modern and modernistic art, and will meekly promise to be on their best behavior. Actually, the new-found usefulness, the monumental scale of the work at hand and its sobering tie-up with architecture, uppermost the sacredness of their mission, will prove more instructive and more imperative than many a paper pronouncement. Bid to do his best, the artist will do so, in all freedom and all humility.

If I may mention my most recent experience in the liturgical mural field, it did prove a gratifying one. There are soothing affinities between clerics and artists. The cleric, however much time he may spend in straightening the finances of the parish, is forbidden personal wealth by Canon Law. The artist may not afford lucre anyhow, dealing as he does in a commodity that is not even seasonal. The cleric realizes the primacy of the spiritual order. He knows how physical matter—oil, water, beeswax or fire—may through rites become a carrier and distributor of grace. The artist also is a maker of objects that remain senseless and useless as such, acquiring meaning and function solely on the mysterious plane of the spirit, on the borderline of the spiritual. Affinities will work both ways: once understood Our Lord's saying that the lily of the field is clothed in more splendor than Solomon in all his glory, the seed of aesthetic wonder will be sown, and the cleric should see eye to eye with the artist.

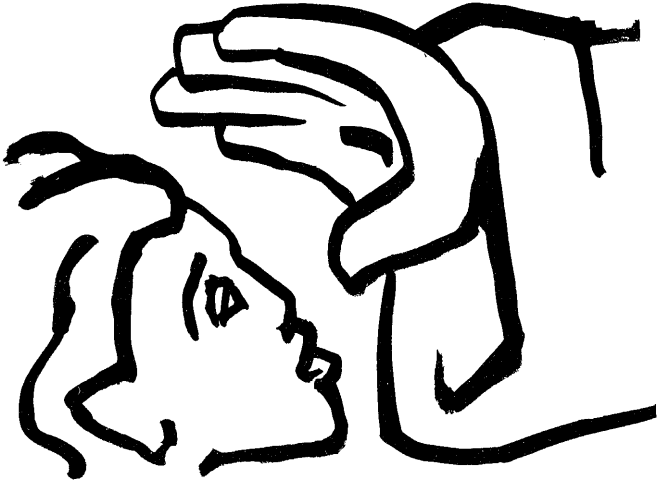
A review of the Rev. J. B. O'Connell, *Church Building and Furnishing* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, May 1956.

Thirty Years at It

One of the threads that bind the epochs of my life, otherwise contrasting or disparate, is a love of the liturgical arts. Kept as a rule in enforced idleness, this love proved creative, if hardly lucrative, when chance and commissioned works that were few and far between allowed.

It is only justice that I should underline the boon of having lived my youth in France, the birthplace of cathedrals not only in cliché, but in truth. Perhaps Notre-Dame de Poissy, our summer parish, associated with Saint Louis and his mother, Queen Blanche, taught me the dignity of church art more even than had books, however early and assiduously I courted them. Its stones had long ago lost their veneer of polychromy, and, weather-eroded on the outside, inside were equally weathered by the feet, knees, and candle-flames of generations of parishioners. There it stood, a lesson in the respect of the material used, in the dignity of concept, and—so loyal was each detail to the aims and modalities of the century that had created it—in contemporaneity.

As instructive as cathedrals were the small country chapels and outdoor shrines, especially those of Brittany.



At Breton pilgrimages, such as that of Notre-Dame de la Clarté—as the pious folks in blue blouses, the girls in white coiffes, streamed candle in hand by a road calvary—this active relationship between a functional art and the live folk who enjoyed it raised a question that even the Louvre had failed to raise.

Circa 1916, a group of Parisian adolescents used to gather in a crypt, under the name of “Gilde Notre-Dame.” Besides our Catholicism, we had in common a vocation to graft the fine arts onto the sturdy stem of the applied arts; also ours was a desire to take contemporary art out of the category of studio experiment and to restore it to its full dignity as the servant of theology and, incidentally, of architecture.

Our World War, the first, was raging outside, and managed somehow, even minus an atom bomb, to be thoroughly awesome. It would eventually suck into its maelstrom all young men and we knew our turn to be at hand. This martial accompaniment to a brand of piety as green as it was intense communicated to our plastic expression a kind of desperate urgency. We met regularly for mass and communion, and to give or hear lectures, egged on by a very practical nun charged by her order with our organization, and soothed and restrained if need be by a Jesuit priest whom we converted to aestheticism: to our pride, adopting gloves with flaring cuffs and a cape that he negligently threw over one shoulder, Father soon acquired a musketeer cast.

Charlot: Noli Me Tangere. Brush and ink

Given our specialized vocation that ran against the trend of the day, the older artists whom we could approach reverently were few. Maurice Denis had played a rôle in the symbolist movement as a painter, and an even more substantial one as a critic. He had done, or was then finishing, large mural decorations, some lay, like the dome of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, others religious. He was kind enough to come and talk to us of his concept of liturgical art, of his anger at the lying make-believe to be commonly found in churches: fake marbles, assumed gold leaf, and, worst of all, photographic renderings. At the annual Salons he exhibited, or so it seems to me now, mostly Annunciations, in a palette of mauves and pinks that well fitted the mood of the puppet-like figures, hands thrown outward in childish ecstasy, with mouths that prayer opened in O's suggestive of an invisible lollypop. How vividly could a Frenchman remember, looking at a Denis, the Corpus Christi processions of his childhood when, dolled up with motherly care in white satin and lace, he felt proud to carry a basket full of rose petals to be strewn on the passage of the Host.

Once, when an artillerist on leave, I went to visit Denis in Saint Germain, where he managed both to paint and to raise a large family. He had just been made an Officer of the Legion of Honor and wore its ribbon at his lapel, with yet another coat with yet another ribbon casually thrown over his shoulders. In his studio, the Annunciation in course proved less exciting than preceding ones seen at exhibitions, perhaps because the taste of war just ex-

perienced marred for me the affinities between pale pinks and blues that the Master managed so well. On that occasion, the last that I was to see Denis, I felt a little disappointed in the man and the work, unjustly so, as adolescents will measure against their own fierce untried standards those of older men, somewhat rounded at the edges by usage.

Another of our models was Georges Desvallières, then famous for a *Sacred Heart in a Bomb-burst* painted in memory of his son, killed in the war. I still feel the impact of the work as I felt it then: liquid reds and deep ultramarines bleeding through a scribbled mesh of black lines suggested that the roots of Desvallières' art fed on the same earth where Chartres stood. His style, bold as any I had yet seen, hinted at a way out of the cloying innuendoes of symbolism.

My preferred master was Marcel Lenoir, partly because his name reminded me of Bloy's Marchenoir, one of my heroes, partly because Lenoir was one of the few men of his generation to practice and to understand true fresco. He had a loving understanding of perspective that, at his best, compared with the straightforward complexity of Uccello. Repeatedly, and very much against the grain of his generation, Lenoir tackled liturgical subject matter, disused forms such as the polyptich, disused ideals, such as a nobility in the treatment of the human form so insistent that some called it stereotyped. At one Salon, Lenoir, despairing of ever receiving a bona-fide mural commission, carted in, rigged on wheels, a brick wall that he had built single-handed, then plastered and frescoed. I learned from

him to love above other media the tactile feel, matte surface, and limited palette of true fresco.

My own work as a guildsman was mostly in sculpture, carved directly in wood and painted. I proudly brought samples of my carvings to Dom Besse, rotund Benedictine active in the liturgical revival. Looking at the roughly hewn panels, he guessed shrewdly that I was of Breton stock, which pleased me all the more as there was not a grain of truth in it.

After the war I remained two years in Germany with the troops of occupation. So thoroughly scattered by then were the members of our guild that I do not know how it all ended. I would visit when on leave the workshop where Marguerite Huré did stained glass, and did it beautifully. In Germany, as we slowly rode horseback along the Rhine, bivouacking all the way from Mannheim to Cologne, I started work on my first Way of the Cross. The stations were large woodcuts on pearwood, cut in part with hammer and chisel, and closer in technique to carving than to engraving.

Demobilized, my first mural commission proved a failure. It was to be a frieze running on both sides of the nave of a newly built suburban church. Between the start of the preparatory work and the completion of the gouaches to scale, the priest in charge changed his mind. He said so in a curt note, declining even to look at the sketches.

Germany shook my faith in order, in this order *à la* Poussin that, in France, is considered essential to art. The mediaeval Cologne Masters raised the query in terms of

good taste that, up to then, I pictured as the orderly perspectives of Versailles. Their Teutonic double-chinned Madonnas that dwelt in rose arbors where roses and angels, equally fat and dimpled, grew like cabbages or gambolled like puppies, were in the worst of taste—and also they were beautiful. In Colmar, the Grünewalds constituted an apotheosis of the demonic that, in France, I had plainly dismissed as devilish. It was great art based on unrest, from the rabidly gnarled outlines to the willful assonances of color-chords. I began to experience the kind of intellectual quartering that became my lot as a displaced person, partaking of one culture after another. It was little comfort to think of El Greco, split between Byzantium, Titian, and Torquemada. I understood then how wise a policy it is for the Frenchman to stay at home and to ignore geography.

Mexico increased this feeling of doubt. In 1920, it was emerging uncertainly from violent revolution into some kind of topsy-turvy order, with the underdog cast as the upper-dog. Even attempts at reconstruction were marked with violence. The politicians just risen to power, especially the Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, took delight in turning over to a handful of untried muralists—thought by some to be cruel pranksters—the walls of ancient palaces or churches, with their noble domes, graceful arcades, and airy patios. It is there that, working elbow to elbow with men whose ideals and actions were far from pious, I realized one of my early longings, that of uniting painting with architecture.

In the buildings that we started to decorate, ancient murals stood as a lesson as well as a challenge. On the walls of the Preparatoria School, where Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and others, including myself, painted our first murals, could be admired the decorations signed in 1760 by our great predecessor, Antonio Vallejo. Arched to fit the vaulted ceiling of what had been the sacristy of the school chapel, scalloped to make way for doors and sculptured lintels, optically conceived to answer their unusually high position, these oil paintings on canvas were indeed true murals. The zest with which the rococo master spattered his earth and his heavens with smiling saints, and ushered in with mincing ballet steps the seven Archangels in silvery armors and plumed helmets, was a climax of mural craft. Moreover the content of his work remained a true witness to these past centuries when Mexico constituted a near theocracy.

So deep were the roots of modern Mexican art in its colonial past that my new friends, despite avowed Marxist aims, could hardly conceive at first of an art that was not religious. Patronized by a government still licking its chops from a meal of bourgeois, freely conceived by men certainly more aware of the world order proposed by Marx than of that sponsored by Saint Thomas, and painted in the midst of what amounted to an official persecution of the Church, astonishing examples of Catholic art came into being: Rivera's first venture was *Creation*, showing the Trinity flanked by personified theological and cardinal virtues. Alva de la Canal frescoed *The Planting of the Cross in the New World*, faced by Revueltas's *Apotheosis of the*

Virgin of Guadalupe. Orozco, the good anarchist, embarked on a set of frescoes to the glory of Saint Francis. Siqueiros, in allusion to Christopher Columbus, limned a Saint Christopher.

Of these men, Orozco was the one to realize the unusualness of the position. His published apology, in its simplicity, goes deeper than questions of tradition, deeper even than the right of the artist to be *hors de lui-même*—out of self—in the grip of inspiration. “All art is religious. Even if a painter chooses to paint an anti-religious theme, if the result is art at all it will be religious at the core.” This felt conviction guided Orozco further away from the early journalistic anti-clerical cartoons of the 1910s, toward subject matter more naturally in harmony with the core of his art. In his last period he painted martyrdoms—several versions of the stoning of Saint Stephen—Golgothas, and the apocalyptic decoration of the Church of Jesus, unfinished at his death.

Never acknowledged in words, unless it be *in articulo mortis*, this unintended conversion proves, by its splendid fruits, how close great art comes to functioning as a sacramental. This thought should shake us off the kind of pharisaical conceit that is the usual vice of obviously good men, such as I was and I had known in the days and ways of our French guild. As Gill, in his autobiography, remarked of his companions in the arts and craft circles, “They are really like that; they’re terribly strait-laced and prim. . . . You can *see* the boys don’t drink; you can *see* they’re not on speaking terms with the devil.” In Mexico, it was Christ’s choice to blow the breath of great religious

expression in the nostrils of men who, indeed, were not professional do-gooders.

In Mexico, my own contribution to liturgical arts remained modest. French Marist fathers, who knew me as a member of the Catholic Youth, asked me to decorate the chapel of the school they had built. Nuns were in charge of the lower grades and of the care of the altar, and they stood firm in their determination that the mural be to their taste. Perhaps an atom of the epic spirit of our first frescoes sneaked unbidden into this new mural, as it failed to meet their timorous requirements. The theme was simple: around the niche that already housed the plaster statue of our Lady of Lourdes, I painted the grotto and its meagre vegetation. This could hardly be motive for reproach, but as the two angels in prayer on both sides of our Lady took shape, suggestions fell, thick as hail and wrong as sin: "You should know that angels are aristocratic; these look plebeian." "Paint just cherubs with pink cheeks in a blue sky with white clouds floating around." One good nun suggested as models cutouts meant to hang on Christmas trees; another amorously sketched in colored pencils a "correct" cherub's head for my edification. I suppose all the sisters went to confession on the same day and were all of an obedient cast, for, as suddenly as it had started, the hail of open counsels and articulate reproofs stopped. It was replaced by a kind of war of nerves, sisters trooping in and out of the chapel as the angels took color and shape, seized with stage giggles timed and sized to reach me at work up on my scaffold.

Once the work finished and the scaffold removed, there

was a genuine change of heart. At evening prayers strange lights were seen to hover over my once maligned angels. I became quickly reconciled to the thought of having painted a miraculous picture, and flattered to have God side with me in this quarrel concerned with the liturgical arts; but, in the end, it turned out that the wall was not quite flat and the pigments not quite mat. Candlelight did the rest.

I can speak of that mural as I please. Today, the chapel has been transformed into a two-story building, with a refectory downstairs and a social hall above it. Nothing remains of my Mexican masterpiece.

In France, Brittany had its quiet and forceful say, heard over the noise of more advertised doings in Paris. In Mexico, though the muralists scandalized the citizens of Mexico City, the countryside ignored them, wherein folk were, as usual, busy producing folk art. Much of it was liturgical art.

Up to then, taking after the theories of Maurice Denis, I postulated the abomination of photographic realism in religious statues, yet these abhorred productions were but colored plaster. In Mexico, the folks who carve statues for country chapels carry realism much further: made of light wood or of corncob paste, Mexican *bultos* are gessoed, lacquered, and polychromed, with eyelashes and wigs of human hair, teeth and ribs of actual bone. Some, puppet-like, display movable limbs; jaws open and eyes roll in their sockets at the tug of a string. They are dressed in linen, damask, or velvet, beribboned, with their feet shod

in silver sandals. If the parish can afford it, our Lady will own a whole wardrobe to match the seasons and the liturgy. Besides such practices, Barclay Street merchandise sheds its naturalism and acquires style. Why is it, then, that the atmosphere of Mexican country churches and pilgrimage shrines is lyrical, mystical, and conducive to prayer in a way that many a modern church, obeying all the rules of good art and good taste, fails to convey?

Come to New York, for a while I felt uprooted and, not knowing what to make of the city all around, under, and over me, worked with the memory of things I had known rather than with the present, noisily rushing and honking outside my one-and-a-half-room apartment on Fifty-Seventh Street. Paul Claudel, the poet, then French Ambassador to the United States, would at times come and console me: he had a plan for a cathedral to be built near Chicago, the biggest ever. It was to be a wall-less, sunken amphitheater roofed with a dome to dwarf all existing domes, entirely frescoed on the inside. The plan went as far as a discussion with the architect, Antonin Raymond, of the technical problems involved. I felt less qualms than he did on my behalf, and, as a precedent in gigantism, reminded him that Michelangelo had taken only four years to paint the Sistine ceiling. His reply was factual: the surface of the proposed dome was a hundred times greater than that of the Sistine ceiling. I argued weakly that my style admitted of more speed than that of Michelangelo, being unencumbered by the rendering of muscles, but that evening, nevertheless, I prayed for the first time for a long, long life.

In my room on Fifty-Seventh Street, I painted in oils a whole Way of the Cross, twenty years after the first. It was done in a vacuum, so to speak, that is detached from actual architectural considerations. For its exhibition, Father Couturier, then relatively unknown outside the circle of his Parisian friends, wrote the foreword to the catalogue. In it, he underlined the fact that there is not one kind of religious art but a hundred kinds; he also had nice things to say about me, but all through his stay on this continent one felt his impatience at finding himself away from France . . . and Braque, and Matisse.

In Peapack, New Jersey, I decorated the Church of Saint Bridget. Mrs. Suydham Cutting had it built, and commissioned Elsa Schmid to do the altar frontal and the Way of the Cross in the direct manner and with the respect of her mosaic material that marks all of her work. It was Elsa who suggested me for the decoration of the apsidal walls.

I was ill-informed of things Irish, even though I once watched a Saint Patrick's parade prance as it went by the New York cathedral, and more than once wondered, as "the little green island" popped up in sermons, both in turn and out of turn. It was a pleasant surprise to meet Saint Bridget, a sturdy peasant saint who brewed the best beer and produced the best cheese, and performed miracles by throwing her bathwater from its wooden bucket on the queue of cripples waiting every day for this holy ministration. In the one poem we have from her hand, she invites the Trinity to come and visit her as the Three Persons did Abraham, and, as an inducement, promises to

serve Them with a mountain of cheese and a lake of beer. This was a holy saint indeed, and I sketched with enthusiasm. Alas, the walls were not as vast as the ideas: beer-making was eventually eliminated, but cheese-making got its due. Angels function as milk maids, separate the curd from the whey, while the large wheels of cheese are shelved to ripen. In another panel, Saint Brandon returns from one of his seafaring expeditions with strange birds and fishes for Bridget, and her maidens stop shearing sheep and carding wool long enough to welcome the holy explorer.

Helen Cutting breeds Tibetan dogs and, to my delight, asked but for one thing, that her pet dog, Cha-Chu, a gift of the Dalai Lama, figure in the picture. It was just a ball of long hair but provided, however tenuously, this relationship between people and art that, after my experiences in Brittany and in Mexico, I understood to be essential.

Once, writing about Eric Gill, I stated somewhat flippantly:

Are reforms as good as they are novel? Of the impressionists Renoir used to say, "They boast that they paint shadows blue while others paint them black." Of the portion of the liturgical arts movement that Gill leavened it may be similarly said, "They rejoice at having replaced in their churches the neo-Gothic by the pseudo-Byzantine."

As a modern artist working, when occasion arises, for the Church, and also simply as a parishioner, I wish that I could feel more a part of such a movement, that has cleansed our churches of so much abomination; but

are neatness and cleanliness in the liturgical arts closest to godliness? Does clinical functionalism solve the problem of establishing a loving relationship between the American parishioner and the statues and pictures he sees in his parish church? Such a relationship exists for a fact in the country churches of France and Mexico.

Obviously, church art in the United States could not wisely follow the forms of church art proper to Europe or to Latin America. Notre-Dame de Poissy or El Señor de Chalma needed centuries to accumulate ex-votos, tombs, mementos, local devotions, carelessly piled up as furniture in the old family attic. How can a Gothic cathedral fail to soar upwards when it does so from the springboard of a Romanesque crypt built centuries before, with blocks looted in turn from a pagan temple? The church of Chalma acquires its verticality from the fact, far from forgotten by its Aztec pilgrims, that its crypt, scooped long ago out of the live rock, was once a vault sacred to the awesome Tezozomoc, god of the caverns. American Gothic is an abomination only because it lacks such roots. In New York, Saint Patrick's remains an architectural model out of a course of comparative architecture, unnaturally served on its platform like the severed head of the Baptist *in disco*.

In the same way, alas, some modern churches also lack roots, or are rooted, rather than in the community they are built to serve, in the printer's ink of architectural magazines.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, February 1953.

To the Editor of Liturgical Arts

DEAR FRIEND:

You write me that many readers disliked my frontispiece, and to please tell them why I did it “ugly.” It is an embarrassing question that should not be asked, or would you ask a father why he made his children ugly? Whatever they are to the outside world, children multiply in flesh and mind the idiosyncrasies of their begetter and thus seem beautiful to him. I coo and bill over my maligned frontispiece with as much conviction as a father toad cooing and billing over his toadies. Indeed the whole outer world and the outer world’s children seem somewhat deformed to me.

What you ask of me is to fly out of my skin, as Georgia witches are wont to do, and from this outer vantage point give your readers an unbiased analysis of what makes me and mine tick.

Some of your friends, as quoted by you, find that in my opus Mary is not “as beautiful as they dream her to be.” “Beautiful” is a term so debased today as to require further elucidation. Much pietistic literature, many pious

Charlot: Nativity. Linocut



images give of our Lady a version not unrelated to the professional beauty of gown-models and bathing beauties. I despise such achievements wholeheartedly, and indulge a creeping belief that unknown to them the musings of devout people in front of such images are not wholly devoid of what gives savor to the musings of more rowdy gents in front of pin-up girls and petty *femmes*.

The beauty of our Lady was and is wholly devoid of what America bluntly terms "sex-appeal" and thus is not for us sinners to apprehend. When our Lady appeared at Pontmain to small children and babes-in-arms exclusively, it was certainly no ill-will of hers that denied her sight to the good curate and his well-meaning parishioners, but rather the touch of sin that soiled their make-up. Mary's appearance that soothed and edified babes would have seemed to grownups that were not saints "fearful as an army arrayed for battle."

If an artist received the miraculous gift of reproducing our Lady as she is, it would be accompanied no doubt by a corresponding gift of prudence to stop him from ever flaunting his foolhardy accomplishment. In my *Nativity* the sketchiness of Mary's features is the only decent kind of homage that I know how to pay.

What line and color may portray without trespassing on forbidden ground are the trails along which the painter's devotion carries him, the mental and spiritual climate of his prayer with the brush. The more individual this delineation of one man's devotion, the stranger to the many perhaps, but also the more edifying for a group of people with like affinity.

In my case, my work is much concerned with Indian Mexico. At birth and throughout life and in death, Aztecs hug the earth with an intensity of comprehension unmatched by that of people who sit on chairs and not on the ground, sleep in beds and not on mats. This peculiar chumming with earth crept into this Nativity scene: all three members of the holy family stoop close to the ground to form a low-lying shape that people familiar with Indian mounds and Aztec pyramids may readily recognize. What could be a mere compositional device has also moral meaning. These attitudes rejoin beyond centuries and continents the Italian “Madonnas of Humility” that squat on the bare earth, for example Masaccio’s in the National Gallery at Washington. Perhaps because a Madonna of Humility par excellence, this Italian Mary looks and acts like a Mexican Indian mother as she gravely fondles the Divine Papoose.

Besides racial considerations, style comes into play; that is the ingredient that differentiates art from nature. In his wonderful picture *A Joust Between Carnival and Lent* Breughel touches other matters besides church and kitchen, presents unwittingly a summary of the history of style. The lanky tribe that pelts its foes with boiled leeks and salted herrings could stand for the masters that elongate the verticals—Byzantines, Greco, Gill. The fat folk that repulse the attack with cannon balls made of capons and fatted geese are the cartoon equivalent of the masters of spherical bulk—Giotto, Raphael, Rubens. The only type lacking is one of which Breughel had no concept, the photographic artist that despises all styles. Nowadays

Barclay Street art steers joylessly its naturalistic course away from both thinness and fatness. It reminds one of the case of a mental patient who divided womanhood in two types: the broad ones, too animal to be wooed, the lean ones, too ethereal to be desired. Psychoanalysts rescued him from suicide.

My frontispiece is in kinship with the low and wide figures that Breughel's revellers stand for. The few people who are nowadays both conscious of style and concerned with liturgical arts favor rather the "lenten" tradition, the Eric Gill type of saints, underfed and oblivious of the pull of gravity. Because this bony art hovers much higher than do realistic plaster saints, its exponents are prone to claim that all saints in Heaven *do* watch their weight, and fulminate interdicts against other types of art. If true, us fat ones would be left in outer darkness—not only Charlot, but Giotto whose forms are as pregnant with grace as they seem pregnant with child, and Raphael who rounds breasts bursting with peasant milk, and Rubens whose painted mess of bosoms and hocks is a fearless tableau of the gifts of God.

May these lines allay some of the suspicion with which your thin friends view my work.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, November 1943.

Catholic Art, Its Quandaries

The world man has been put into to enjoy as his own has been inventoried in many unrelated ways—astronomy, microscopy, dictionaries, etc. Each results in listings so unrelated to those obtained in another way that only God can fill the gaps between them, and thus observe His Creation as a unit. No one considers one science invalid because its findings are independent of some other science. In fact each branch of knowledge is expected to deal in its own way with the universe, unduplicated by another.

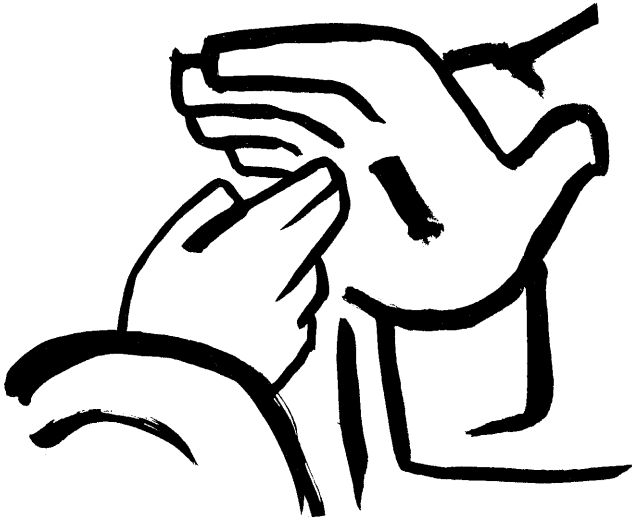
A thesaurus that lists words by meaning will have an entirely different arrangement from a dictionary that lists them by spelling, though both follow a thoroughly logical plan. The artist, whose field is the visible only, that is to say what Poussin calls “solids,” will sort the things of the universe by shapes, colors, light and dark, suggested textures. This results in a new encyclopedia different again from both dictionary and thesaurus. Within his craft, the artist is not able to distinguish between good and evil, one should say between beautiful and horrible to use a layman’s terminology. But though it lacks the benefit of other traditions, the physical has a logic all its own, and one not devoid of horizons.

We must consider that the Creative Act took into consideration the shapes of things and that, in the same way that man (body included) was made in the image of God, all creatures reflect in their shapes some particular virtue of His substantial thought. Thus it may not be accident, as Delacroix remarks in his journals, that the cracks to be observed in dried mud have a shape and logic similar to the formation of tree trunks and branches. It must mean something, for example, this insistence on the sphere—spherical cells, spherical eye, spherical planets. Or this relation of a pine branch lovingly mimicking the outline of Mount Sainte Victoire, miles away, as observed by Cézanne. Innocent of other terminologies, the artist does pick from all fields and gather together within his own plastic scheme things up to then unrelated.

One should not try to impose outside standards to the artist's own world; true in everyday experience, they become falsified in his case: giving to sculptured or painted bodies the biological and moral attributes of real bodies has resulted in much iconoclasm and witch-burning. One should rather proceed by respecting the laws peculiar to this plastic world which, possessed of a hierarchy all its own, presents an orderly image of the universe as justifiable as, though different from, other interpretations.

The dictatorship of man and of man's thoughts in literature is hardly to be matched within the plastic arts, for while literature can delve into psychology and metaphysics, painting and sculpture are bound to "think" in terms of solids.

Charlot: Incredulity of Saint Thomas. Brush and ink



Thus in painting it is not the story itself that communicates its drama. In this specialized sense, one may say that the clothes are more than the body, the accessories more essential than the hero. In the martyrdom of Saint Andrew or Saint Peter, in the Crucifixion of our Lord, the human shape remains subservient to the carpentered cross. A Deposition needs the pyramidal ladders to acquire plastic existence. The Resurrection, the Assumption, to acquire flight need as a starter the square, stolid shape of the tomb. Giotto paints a world at peace under the guidance of God, but it is not through soulful expressions on people's faces that he achieves this mood. He prefers to use the great architectural backgrounds to the monastic scenes, the solidity of conical mountains poised as a proposition of the *Summa*. Mainly through those inanimate things does he communicate the equivalent of men's thoughts. Man's body as Giotto portrays it is disguised into the semblance of trees and mounds under the heavy folds of cloaks whose texture is nearer to bark and soil than to any known cloth.

It is not always possible to keep equally intact both illustrative and plastic proprieties; their relative importance shifts with time and fashion. When El Greco tucks his personages into bodies which medical science would pronounce in the last stages of exhaustion, when his brush distorts the face of our Lady as if it was made of ectoplasm, he sins against story telling, and this made his work a scandal for at least three centuries. Yet if one pays attention to his line and color, one gets the full impact of his mysticism.

Most of the devotional images used today in churches depict pious attitudes, eyes rolled in ecstasies, but the choice of shapes and colors often tells an entirely unrelated story, one of bad art and of mercenary aims, sinful, at least within the craft.

Why should the churchmen of today sponsor such a dubious art? Few of the miraculous devotional images have stuck close to realism. The black log Virgins of old world sanctuaries, those of Spain and Mexico hidden under stiff pyramids of brocade, the axe-hewn, blood-drenched Santos of New Mexico are but the thinnest of veils between *orans* and Recipients of the prayers.

When Rubens painted our Lady fat and El Greco painted her thin, the Inquisition did not pounce on them (for that reason at least), for it was then well understood that this was not our Lady but a symbol of her; a German will paint her Germanic, an Italian as Italian: the Chinese paints her Chinese with specific approval of the Holy See. There are besides this racial geography individual stylistic climates for which allowances must also be made. If we may pry into our Lady's own opinion on the matter, it may be pointed out that she herself, in her apparitions, modifies her appearance according to the recipient.

The world we paint is not the world we know, but only its mirrored reflection within our eye. It is perhaps a not negligible point for those who are sticklers for nature's ways that this image in fact is upside down. The illusiveness of such a vision dovetails strikingly with Saint Paul's allusion to "things seen in a mirror and as symbols." Only a crass materialist would check on the correctness of the

mirrored image and overlook this other assertion, that it must also stand as symbol. Were art as real as the model itself, it would mean a thickening of the walls around us, the closing tight of this material prison; it would sink art into matter. Rather than reflecting barrenly the object of its reflection, the work of art must open a passage for mortal things to the spiritual world.

It is the very difference between the painted object and the natural object that best expresses its spiritual import; here are things detached from their everyday uses: plants without growth, people without action, light without twilight. Time ceases to exist. From our transient world we move into the perennial. It is as if Judgment had already been passed and all values were arrested into timelessness. This permanency is in itself a spiritual asset, as if all the busy Marthas of this world, all those creatures, animate and inanimate, whose reason to be is to serve, each in its capacity, were suddenly freed from this servitude and transformed into so many immobile, contemplative, God-loving Marys. It is then a Catholic's duty to respect the artificiality of art and to orient his pictures toward a greater goal than successful make-believe.

Such a well-rooted scruple should not be magnified so far as to practically annul the creative instinct. Some Catholics cling timorously to well-tried styles, Byzantine or Gothic, or to their modern revivals. Their abhorrence of photographic art becomes an artistic phobia of things pertaining to the third dimension. Their creed may be summed up thus: How is it licit to take a material true to its own identity and to transform it into the pretence of

other illusive materials and objects? Is not this postulate so against nature that no positive addition in the final result may outweigh the initial subtraction? Is not the magical assumption on the canvas or wall of a sense of depth a lie, and as such evil?

Laudable as those tenets are, there is bound to be discordance in the results. If a love of truth forces us to keep our picture within two dimensions, how much of Saint Peter (if such be the subject) will remain after we have steam-rolled him flat upon our canvas? Is not the disservice shown the Saint as bad a feature as the disrespect one would have shown the material, by painting enough space into it to make place for a more rounded Peter? Why not let the artist create as much depth as he may? Be he Raphael or Bosseron-Chambers, his painted means are so limited that none will take the result for a reality. If it be a lie, it remains a very white one.

When God gave the world to man for his own use, the gift was intended also for the artist. The work of art must not be cut too harshly from the outer logic and beauty. A picture that reflects liberally God's creation is bound to reflect also some of His good. Asceticism is nonsense within the craft of sculpting and painting, for both deal with bodies, and their maker cannot shut up his senses without weakening the usefulness of the result. It may be, it is even probable, that the higher reaches of spiritual life have no need for the plastic arts; but at our imperfect level sensuousness remains for the plastic artist the one proper approach; an animal gusto, not metaphysics, is what makes the craft tick.

The world is not only a dry nomenclature of things, fit for the statistician; when all and each is weighed, counted, and labeled, what better than paint can express the admirable residue? One cannot imagine the convincing portrayal of a butterfly's wing in words. In that sense, though the thought be paradoxical, Rubens is an eminently religious painter. He endows the objects he paints with those supererogative attributes which God intended for each—sheen of silks, lusciousness of fruits, sensuousness of bodies. There is in his lack of inhibition a truly Catholic attitude, attuned to his profession.

However engrossing may be theoretical considerations, Catholic art is so tied up with practical problems that the artist cannot afford to rent an ivory tower or suffer a pathological inflation of ego. The art-for-art artist proceeds on his own, brushes his pictures as he wants, let the chips fall where they may. But the Catholic artist is at one end of a kind of tug of war, the Catholic worshipper at the other—or, to be realistic, the ecclesiastic that handles the parish money. If these were the only participants in the sport, the artist would have no choice but to bow abjectly to the aesthetic ideas of the non-artist; but it happens that this is a three-cornered proposition, with God as the referee. Before serving the Catholic flock or its pastor, the artist must give obeisance to God: he must not break the rules of sound aesthetics under penalty of ceasing to be a good man.

This article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, October 1940.

Eric Gill

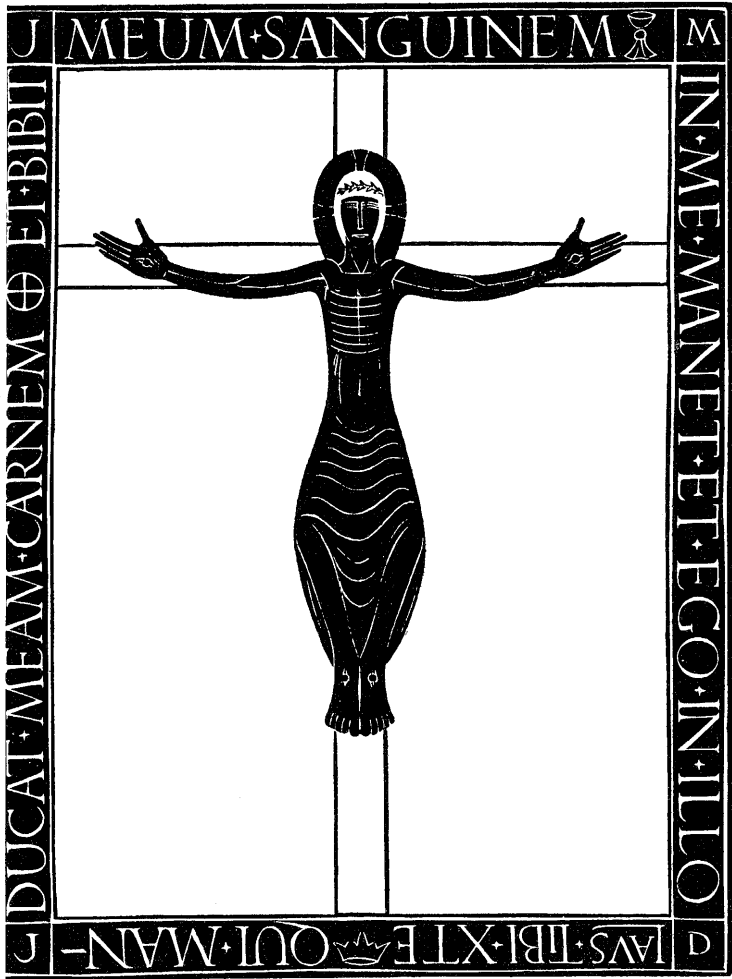
A leader among the pitifully small group of Catholic artists, Gill has aroused as much opposition as he has found loyalties. His detractors are usually people of gross taste who pray as well in front of a photographic daub as they would before a masterpiece, clerics who gladly cram their churches with the gaudiest plaster saints that mass production markets; while on the other hand those who unconditionally worship Gill and his work are the faithful of enlightened taste, instrumental in building and decorating churches in the modern style that slowly pushes aside the monstrosities of a phony gothic. Thus to give Gill's work only restricted praise is a somewhat perilous affair, a partial strengthening of dubious allies against their aesthetic betters.

Under the aegis of Saint Paul was this book of confessions written; having completed it, its author, with finely clocked timing, laid himself to sleep robed in the Dominican habit of a tertiary. Clearly soaked in an atmosphere of grace, the telling of his life brings to literature the precise horse sense of a craftsman accustomed to carve hard materials, wood and stone, whose grain and density make

short work of attempted nonsense. The plastic thought of Gill the carver, that ponders the angle of the chisel and weighs the stroke of the mallet, informs with both caution and confidence the articulate thoughts of Gill the writer. His style, clothed in worker-like simplicity, can also pack the wallop of a worker's fist. His thinking apparatus is so earthy that it seems conditioned by touch and smell rather than logic, so salty that the pen moves impelled by the loins as well as the brain. Gill the stonemason digs into things of thought as a mole into the black soil, carving patient tunnels that open at the end on true blue vistas.

Coming from the mind of a man accustomed to think and feel in images, this book can be summed up in a picture more easily than in an abstract train of thought. Reading it conjures a pennysheet with gaudy coloring, a Currier and Ives in robust style: wearing the leather apron proper to stonemasons and the folded paper cap that printers sport, a bearded patriarch holds the chisel of the sculptor and the burins of the wood-engraver; surrounded by cases of sans-serif, he stands silhouetted against the bulk of a screw-press that assistants slowly feed with hand-made sheets; one sees through the door the women baking bread, tending cattle, giving the breast to their brood under the arches of a crumbling monastery. It is a composite image that superimposes reminiscences of the patron saints of many trades—Saint Luke the icon maker, Saint Eloy the smith, Crispin and Crispinian in leather aprons working at their bench, Saint Isidore who watches

Gill: Crucifix. Wood engraving. Courtesy of the New York
Public Library



over the farm chores, and a kind of Tobias who cares for the dead by lettering their virtues on tombstones.

From the man that the book evokes, artisan rather than artist, shorn of theories, hot-blooded and hirsute, an unknowing reader would expect works as good, as imperfect, as humorous and as sanguine as himself. Indeed it is hard to reconcile Gill the man, as seen through the eyes of Gill the writer, with the mannered and somewhat bloodless productions of Gill the artist; the author somewhat clarifies the paradox by detailing the influences that concurred in shaping his style.

At the start of his career he specialized exclusively in carved lettering on monuments and tombstones. A carved letter is most peculiar among sculptured beings because, in spite of beveled uprights and incised serifs, it has no real volume or existence in space; its members are rigidly flush with the frontal plane of the slab. Thus Gill became familiar with this paradox: a sculpture in calligraphic terms that depend neither on volume nor on space. Nature offers no subject matter as unsubstantial as man-created letters. Even a blade of grass pressed between blotters suffers violence as it is thus ushered into two dimensions; though paper thin, the helicoidal torsion of its live body already postulates space and volume.

Gill well realized the limitations of his calling. He dared carve garlands of leaves and flowers in the margins of his text; but when his design included embellishments in the round, such as cheeky cherub's heads, the young letterer would wisely give the job to a sculptor, as it seemed to

him then outside the range of his craft. He soon hardened his heart to such adolescent scruples, came eventually to carve not only heads but bodies, whole clusters of person-ages in action. In spite of the applause this more ambitious work received, one may question at least its influence on many a younger artist. The flatness that letters possess by nature, that leaves and flowers may acquire (still retaining a measure of their former entity), does mortal violence to man; in his bas-reliefs the volume gives way to the slice, the human body with its elbows and knees painfully profiled appears crushed into the surface of the stone slab.

To be sure, Gill, the skilled letterer, often weaves his silhouettes into calligraphic purity, spins a line as precisely streamlined as the profiles cut by a tooling machine; one may, however, question the propriety of transmuting man, and especially the Man-God, into a pattern. Gill worked, perhaps unknowingly, closer to the modern movement of the Parisian abstractionists than he would have cared to admit, but while Braque and Picasso humbly used their magic on a guitar, a pipe or a package of tobacco, Gill collected and pressed into his strange herbarium the most sacred objects that his faith grasped.

Gill submits candid, lucid explanations for his other activities: how he came to carve a nude woman as a kind of sexual outlet, how he adopted an “unnatural” style because it was the only one he knew. Such humbleness relying more on artisan’s sweat than on higher logic contrasts with the assurance of some of his followers, who

stoop from metaphysical truths to the physical problems of art, who show a tendency to solve aesthetic dilemmas by wielding the *Summa* as if it was a tomahawk.

All his life Gill remained suspicious of theorists, and yet he attracted them in swarms. There is a wistful portrait of his friends penned apropos of his doing his first sculpture in the round; we give it here in full as it is also a brisk sample of his style:

My friends in the arts and crafts circles rather looked askance at me. I seemed to be deserting their homely fireside and going into brothels and dance-halls. They really are like that; they're terribly strait-laced and prim . . . there was something very emasculate and lacking in guts as well as other appurtenances about most of the products of the arts and crafts movement. You can *see* the boys don't drink; you can *see* they're not on speaking terms with the devil.

Gill put into his work all he knew, all he loved, with most intense concentration. One would like to say that the results of such life-long devotion were truly important. But are reforms as essentially good as they are novel?

A review of Eric Gill, *Autobiography* (Devin-Adair, 1941), this article was first published in slightly different form in *The Commonwealth*, September 12, 1941.

Maritain and the Artist

Rarely does an art-maker feel inclined to open a book about art, even in novelized form. Even more rarely would he attempt to read a book about art written by a philosopher. Art seen from the outside and art felt from the inside are such different things. To loosely quote once again the quotable Mark Twain: “The bug knows more about the business of bugs than does the entomologist.”

This is not another book about art, however, but one that deals with artists. When a master of Maritain’s stature chooses to speak about art-makers, the art-maker may profitably run the gauntlet of Maritain’s philosophy to try and find out what he has to tell him. I say “run the gauntlet” because the professional tool of the philosopher, his probing scalpel, is a language wherein words are chosen for their meaning only, a language that shuns equally the poet’s music and the painter’s imagery.

While it is an uphill exercise for an artist far from meta-physically inclined to follow a reasoning of such impeccable and undeviating clarity, it may also prove artificial for Maritain to act native to the world of the artist, solidly based on irrationalities. With poets, the author at least

shares the use of words. It is harder for him to focus on the painter, and as to the sculptor he prefers to leave him alone. Compared with the thin air of philosophical heights, the air that the practising artist breathes is in truth a thicker and a denser air, clogged with the stench of that sensuousness that is the trademark of all art-makers.

Vocational differences notwithstanding, it is well for the while to loosen our grip on brush or chisel, and for a moment to digress from our stolid communion with stone, or wood, or canvas. In spite of its forbidding title, this book shall come to us as a tonic surprise. It does not attempt to duplicate in words those familiar sights, the rod of the moralist and the wagging finger of the bourgeois. At the end of our reading, we shall realize gratefully that, for Maritain, artists are not after all the most expendable kind of humans.

Clear thinking need not hide a loving heart. Even though his business is to probe, Maritain does it so deftly that no bruising and little hurt follow his organic explorations. Especially never does the reader who is also an artist feel that he is assisting at his own post-mortem. Fairly enough, often enough, quotes straight from the mouth of artists are scattered through the text as a sort of counterpoint to the author's assertions. The touchy specimen, even while he is being probed, is given a healthy chance to squirm, and even to bellow a repartee, as did Rouault to the well-meaning questioner who wished his art more pleasing: "Get out and leave me alone, you fool!"

There is no easy diagnosis and no cure-all remedy. The author describes live tissue and breathing matter, not the

easily differentiated reds and blues of an anatomical dummy. Under Maritain's lucid and respectful scrutiny the artist as an entity remains mostly inviolate. One gathers that other types, the politician or the businessman, could be more easily pulled apart and gathered together again. A theologian once told me—I hope he was a bad theologian or at least an inarticulate one—that angels, once they are set, are forever immovable and unchangeable, because they are not made of parts. In this book, artists appear as even more mulishly inclined than any such cast-iron angels. “To support his family, an artist may have to become a farmer, or a customs officer, or even to give up art. He can never accept to be a bad artist, and spoil his work.”

Has Maritain befriended only this type of heroic artist, or else does he choose to call artists only men of such heroic cast? Facts are otherwise. Many a man born an artist is eroded by the world, but not to the point of ceasing to be an artist. It can be through the temptation of success, or a desire for social intercourse, or a promise of material reward. What he works at must still be classified as art, even though it is an art polluted, shrunken to his own unheroic size. An example was Sargent, so gifted, so clairvoyant, that he could both paint socially flattering portraits and despise himself for doing it. In our time, pressure is exerted mostly through the art dealer, who holds a key to the art market. Grown old, a master shall repeat forms now empty, once the truthful expression of his youthful ecstasy. In the aesthetic world, these mangled artists correspond to sinners in the moral world. Perhaps

there is too much of a puritanical haste in this otherwise gentle book to cast these men outside its scope and into outer darkness. Most artists, alas, fall short of a heroic practice of aesthetic virtues as most of us, artists or not, fall short of sanctity.

Maritain's exacting definition of the artist is not plucked down from fancies, however. Rather it blends into a type those artists he has known personally. Among them he must feel closer to borderline cases, men who painted or drew, and did it well, but who remained first of all literateurs, Léon Bloy and Max Jacob. The professionals he knew, among them Rouault, were members of the School of Paris. Most of them true masters, but also a very specialized lot of men, one that would have puzzled many a master artist of past eras. The typical Parisian painter of the twentieth century is as clearcut a type as a stage Pantaloon, or—more closely—the Gilles of the eighteenth-century pantomimes. His roots are romantic. He sits in solitude in front of his easel, brush in hand. That hand shall move only at the call of inspiration. Then the vision shall be spilled on canvas hurriedly before it has time to cool off. His stock-in-trade is innovation and experimentation. He is an eccentric late comer to the world of art.

One could wish for a broader, a more embracing definition of what is an artist, and that is why, at the beginning of this review, I used the term "art-maker" in preference to "artist." For centuries art of a high order came into being without benefit of artists, at least of the genre now accepted as typical. Teamwork was the natural way of working for the builders and hewers of

cathedrals. And so it was doubtless for the marble-masons who carved the frieze of the Parthenon. These men, who thought of themselves as craftsmen, would marvel to realize that they are brothers under the skin to the amoral and asocial fellow we visualize as the artist. Art itself, at least in the sense we use the word, is a late comer to our thoughts. The title of Cennino Cennini's book *Il Libro dell'Arte* is better translated into English as *The Craftsman's Handbook*. Art produced unwittingly, as it were, is even more of a mystery than art produced under the blatant label of art. Perhaps some day Maritain will apply his powers to elucidate for us that important riddle: What made the artist tick when he did not even know that he was an artist, when humility and the making of art went hand in hand.

Of heroic cast as he may seem when seen from inside, especially with Maritain's appreciative eye, the artist shrinks in size when seen from the outside, as non-artists see him. It does matter but little if the artist shakes his fist at society or dutifully attempts to be a good citizen. Rarely does he manage an entirely successful protective coloration. As Maritain considers the relationship of the artist with the society he lives in, his lovingness becomes tinged with pity. The artist is least among citizens, mostly expendable. He can be suppressed outright or thrown outside the city walls. Nowadays solutions of a less black and white hue are accepted. Speaking of dictatorships, Maritain remarks: "The State does not expel Homer, as Plato naïvely wanted. It tries to domesticate him." Perhaps here the opprobrium should not land on Hitler

and on Stalin only. Democracies are not immune. Many an American artist, either gently through success, or harshly through need, has been put to domesticated paces, mostly in the field of commercial art. He learns to subordinate his gifts to the requirements of soft-sell and hard-sell, and labors a lifetime at the apotheosis of soaps and deodorants.

Maritain has little patience with an art whose contents bypass art. "Art for the social group becomes thus, inevitably, propaganda art." The scorn should be qualified. In other moments of art history, propaganda was thought of as a sound enough ingredient of art, and certainly the one obvious reason for producing art. Today's more exquisite approach implies a certain decadent attitude, compared with the more robust one of other centuries. Articulate eloquence, the communication with line and color of a thesis, can also be expressive of the inner artist, as expressive as these accepted ingredients of the art of today, inarticulate musings or expletives of passion. So ingrained was a social sense, warped or not, among my friends the Mexican muralists, that propaganda art flowed out of them naturally, without the motor of an outside compulsion, as naturally as did the moments and seasons from the brush of Monet. This is true of other kinds of propaganda art. It is doubtful that Fra Angelico would have been a better artist had he been forbidden the field of liturgical art.

Maritain's concern, perhaps his main reason for writing this book, turns to the relation of morality and art. One kind of morality happens squarely in the path of the artist at work, the morality of the craftsman intent on construct-

ing a truthful piece of goods. Maritain evokes here a curious situation. When the work of the artist, done along the lines of his morality, offends the moral sense of a non-artist, the scandal can be corrected only at the price of another scandal. A hasty patching up of the work of art would warp its quality, and make it immoral by the craftsman's standards.

This brings us to problems of censorship. Maritain sees little natural affinity between the prudent man, who stops and ponders before acting, and the artist who, if he stopped and pondered, could not act. If chosen wisely, a censor, by definition, should be a prudent man. Artist and censor shall remain at odds. As the artist defends himself, the censor refuses to believe him and his wagging finger does not cease to wag. As the censor in turn explains his point of view, the artist, by now convinced of the man's obtuseness, hardly takes time off his work to listen to what the censor has to say. Censors and artists have been at this tug-of-war ever since. In the sixteenth century, Veronese was brought before the tribunal of the Inquisition, charged with indecency with undertones of heresy. Mingling with more orthodox guests at Our Lord's Supper, Veronese had painted hunchbacks, drunkards, and German halberdiers. He was solemnly cautioned to mend his ways. The shy defense of the artist is not as casual as its wording implies. It contains in fact the gist of Maritain's argument: "Painters always have had license for certain things, as is understood of poets and of fools."

However awesome its accessories, the Holy Tribunal that bid Veronese mend his ways was one made of humans. Today, as holds true in so many other fields, machine

tabulations seem to have replaced men. These faceless judges do not give the artist even the small leeway to answer that Veronese felt he had. The A's, and B's, and C's, with which the morality of art is tabulated are doubtless grounded on prudent motives. How slightly do they dovetail, as a rule, with aesthetic ratings!

Is there, then, a sort of impending damnation in the artist's vocation, as there is a sort of impending salvation in a monastic vocation? Maritain's hopeful answer is that there are many kinds of perfections. Granted that the prudent man and the theologian are not on easy speaking terms with the artist, another perfectionist, the mystic, happens to be. Maritain defines thus the mystical experience: "Perfection consists in loving, in going through all that is unpredictable, dangerous, dark, demanding, and insensate in love." The parallel with the aesthetic experience is obvious.

Some of us remain terrified by the difficulties of our calling, and genuinely conscious of the moral danger inherent in the sensual approach to the world that is our working tool. The temptation to court salvation by denying our specialized vocation should remain only a temptation. We may find strength and hope in Maritain's quotation after Francis Thompson: "Among all the temptations wherewith he (the devil) tempted Saint Anthony, though we have often seen it stated that he howled, we have never seen it stated that he sang."

A review of Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Liturgical Arts*, August 1960.

El Greco as Mystic

This book presents on an equal billing “Three Mystics,” Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and El Greco. Thus, it equates boldly the two Saints whose holiness is certified by the Church with a painter who never has been thought of as saint, but who must, on some plane not obviously connected with the routine of his known life, have kept an inner eye fixed at least on the velvet-black background that framed the two others’ radiant visions; on the “dark night” both feared and cherished by the Spanish mystics. Otherwise, how could his paintings furnish so apt a commentary to their meditations?

This suggests an investigation of Greco’s stature within the Church. As a first-hand witness, there is Pacheco, father-in-law of Velásquez, an expert on the rules of liturgical art, and a mind modern enough to achieve scoops in the journalistic sense. Out of his interview with the aging Greek master, Pacheco emerged willing enough to publish the sayings that concerned aesthetics, but the rest, which we may surmise to have tended to the theological, he admitted that he did not dare repeat. Was it the shadow of the Inquisitors that stopped him from making

copy out of El Greco's confidences? In the painter's portrait of the Grand Inquisitor—now in the Metropolitan Museum—the name of Theotocopuli is found scrawled on a sheet of paper thrown on the tile floor, open, but still creased along four-fold lines. It could be a letter, a denunciation perhaps, opened, read and discarded by the somewhat awesome Cardinal.

Some infer that the fancy of the artist was not accidental in putting thus publicly his name under the foot of the sitter, very much in obeisance, but also very much under his protection; El Greco, who in his youth had been so familiar with Eastern rites, may have been closely watched when in Spain to insure Roman orthodoxy.

Two more details, the one all night and the other all light. In a letter written from Rome and concerning the Italian sojourn of El Greco, Giulio Clovio, no mean artist himself, stated how, on a visit to the painter, he found him sitting awake in absolute darkness, all draperies drawn over the high windows, so as not to let in even one filtered ray of the fine morning sun. The authenticity of the letter is now contested, but whatever experts may say, the anecdote is too finely woven with the trends of the work and of the man not to remain filed in his dossier, even if only as an apologue that shows his anticipation of the mystical night with which he was to come into contact in Spain.

The other clue, one that deals with light, is of undoubted authenticity: El Greco, with the tip of his brush, jotted down on one of his pictures, concerning the

heavenly court that surrounds an apparition of the Virgin: “Angels are like candle flame; they seem of great size at a distance, but are actually small when seen in close-up.” These words capture the dynamics of a true vision, swooping forwards from afar. Was El Greco accustomed to come nose to nose with angels, or was he only reporting at second-hand? There is a matter-of-factness in the wording that inclines one to the first surmise; no other eye saw these angels but that of a master of optics; an eye still busy with clinical analysis at the time that heart and head may have conversed with heaven.

A fact that few critics care to remember is that the man big enough to still be “in the news” after a few centuries or even a few decades from his death, probably surpassed in height and depth the critic who attempts belatedly his psychological autopsy. As a result, each generation takes hold of a genius by a single hair, and proclaims that it holds the whole man. Among modern masters, more and more does Cézanne prove his scope as beyond that niche in art history prepared for him by his early apologists, that of a precursor of cubism. Likewise, El Greco contains—but far exceeds—what the modern critic acclaims him for, a prophetic encouragement of the pioneers of expressionism. His famed distortions may give consolation to moderns who likewise distort; but the juxtaposition of text and pictures in this book suggests how, to his contemporaries, these were more than subjective statements. To Spanish souls steeped in the vertical theology of his times, these distortions appeared as dogmatic exercises, pious varia-

tions on the theme of resurrection; of what will happen to our bodies when violently thrown overboard from the what-we-know, into a world shorn of space and time.

Then as now, not all clerics were art-minded. To decorate churches, there existed in Spain a safe brand of art, closest equivalent for that period of today's Barclay Street. These easel pictures were the watered legacy of the divine Morales, panels with soft shadings reminiscent of Leonardo, of a craft that hid the brush-stroke as if it was shameful, and attained enamel-smooth polish. Though it had not reached by far the degradation apparent in our day, liturgical art was fast entering a routine path and the blood painted on flagellation pictures took amiable hues of rubies.

We may sympathize indeed with the first curate to blunder and commission a picture from El Greco in Spain. On receiving the masterpiece the good man was so puzzled that he withheld payment. Many a priest today would leave it at that, adding probably that he felt sorry to have caused the painter trouble but that the picture was unfit for the cult. The Spanish priest, however, knew that he was no expert, and had the humility to gather a commission of local artists to pass on the matter. These in turn had the humility to state that no picture of this merit had as yet been painted in Spain; which soothed the ecclesiastic.

Perhaps El Greco was a mystic. If so, this gift never hindered its recipient from a gift of practicality, as proved also to be the case with St. Teresa. El Greco devised a way

El Greco's signature, circa 1600

δορυκρινος
θεοδωρος
ε'ποιησ'

of avoiding the sales tax on commissions. We find a similar commonsense in his compositions: a crystal-sharp, crystal-clear, geometrical web is drafted with machine-made lines, straight lines or segments of circles. It is over this wholly rational core that the famed flame-like torsions of the brush-strokes spiral like vines cling to a building, both hiding and suggesting it. After all, in the inventory of El Greco's library, the only books concerned with art were treatises on architecture.

Soon after El Greco became established in Spain his shop prospered. The painting of a commission became in fact, as in the case of another successful painter, Rubens, a kind of studio or family affair. An uncle, a son, and boarding students, all were busy brushing in the underpainting, or painting *in toto* El Greco's. At least we know of one case in which the master saw one of his commissions only after its completion, and then only because of a squabble concerning its price.

When we state that El Greco was a craftsman who sold his pictures as the cobbler sells his shoes, all we say is that his outlook on art was in keeping with the times. The more exquisite theory that his subconscious ruled his brush, and at that rather with frenzy than reason, is more flattering to contemporary taste but lacks in historical perspective.

It is the same with this fetish that we make today of personality, a preoccupation that would have proved as incomprehensible to El Greco and his contemporaries as the theory of a ruling subconscious. It was then wisely taken for granted that a man is so much part of his times, with roots so secure in the past, that, at most, he achieves

deviations rather than creations. El Greco's elongated proportions, original as they may seem, were adapted from Cretan formulas that were in turn but a provincial branch of the Byzantine. These conventions ruled fresco painting in the island where El Greco was born. To the end, with the same tenacity with which he signed his name in Greek characters and boasted of being Cretan, El Greco cherished the traditional types of orthodox Eastern devotion; the gaunt, bearded, cadaverous elders that he had seen, and perhaps even helped to paint on Cretan walls, when he was but a lad in his teens. In Spain, these figures shed their Eastern names, Athanasius or Cyriacus, to masquerade as St. Jerome of Latin fame, and even as the pagan Laocoön.

As to El Greco's females, swaddled in draperies of undiluted local color, with fleshtones of a green no more than mottled with faint terra-rosa, their life seemingly concentrated in the agitation of their fan-spread, needle-thin fingers, they help to prolong into the over-ripe times of the Baroque the archaisms of the slavish icons that represented the three Marys at the Tomb.

This familiarity with Eastern rites and modes makes us believe that El Greco was never much at his ease as a parishioner in Toledo or in Seville; that his swashbuckling manners, noted by contemporaries, hid the unease of the displaced person.

He was buried in the parish of Santo Domingo, the same that had commissioned his first Spanish picture. Just before he died he willed to the parish money to buy tapers, long and thin with haloed heads, like the figures of Greek patriarchs that had formed his style. As he made this, his

last wish, known, did he also remember how once he had noticed the fact that, to his trained eye, now tired and straining already towards the sight of the Resurrection, tapers and angels behaved alike?

Our present dilemmas with painting are all concerned with shop matters: abstract or concrete; surrealism or realism; new romanticism or primitivism, we speak of all as if it was our freedom to choose. This is so because we have half forgotten how the terms of art criticism are more than juggling balls; each drags in gigantic chunks of human knowledge and of human emotion of which historical style is but the visible fringe. Too often does the critic, if he feels at all that there is in these terms more than sound, refer through them only to means, the choice of palette, the line straight or distorted, the spatial rendering deepened or squashed. Those are organic to the painting and worthy of study, but the means, like the picture itself, have materialized only because of the centrifugal pressure of a definite type of spirituality that churned them into personalized being.

To speak of a conflict between forms of art becomes meaningless once the link between material and spiritual is severed. A style is as great as its power to translate—with only a minimum of physical veils—the impulse that forced it into visibility. The same style, industriously copied from the outside, frozen into mannerisms, is dead though the means remain the same. The claim of today's champions of progress that modern art has at last triumphed means little more than the fact that a majority of art practitioners rely for effect on abstraction or distortion.

In El Greco's case, we see how, once his means were divorced from their live springs, his art died within the next generation, at the hands of his well-practiced followers.

The Catholic approach of the publishers, focusing more on theology than on art, already has reopened old beautiful vistas nearly forgotten. How thankful we should be for a reproduction of the crucifix in zenithal flight sketched from nature by John of the Cross. Here perhaps, in a complete denial of self, intent only on recording the vision, do we find at last true originality. As René Huyghe points out in his clear and cautious analysis, the stylistic ingredients are as miraculous as the occasion, being prophetic rather than retrospective. One may only question Huyghe's opinion that this drawing "belongs less to art than to mysticism." Would it not be truer to state that, in art as in other pursuits, there is no substitute for sanctity?

A review of Bruno de J. M., *Three Mystics* (Sheed and Ward, 1949), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Sheed and Ward's Own Trumpet*, No. 22, February 1950.

VARIA



Seal of Tseng Yu-ho

*Reflections of an Occidental Painter
on Chinese Ink-Painting, after Looking at
the Works of Tseng Yu-ho*

1950

Occidental art history has its myth, that of the Old Masters. It pictures them as bearded elders; the hand that holds the brush emerges from a cuff of old lace strewn over a sleeve of wine-colored velvet; the brush is dipped in mellow gold to better match the glow of an expensive gilded frame. Often we see a king or emperor in attendance, eager to retrieve the tools the Master, weakened with age, may have let fall.

Only in appearance is this folk tale innocuous, as it furnishes the touchstone against which the living artist and his work are subconsciously assayed, and unjustly found wanting. Few indeed are the art-lovers who like their dish caught fresh, before the gamey stench of history, or of fable, has had time to set in. Centuries hence, when dirt, varnish, fakers, and restorers, will have obscured his achievement, the once-alive artist may be raised in his turn to the status of myth.

Oriental art, too, fosters similar midwives' tales. There also, an assumed golden age is safely tucked way back into the past, with this added advantage over the Occident, that fabulously few authenticated works remain as the

basis for a formulation of aesthetic criteria; in this field, art-lovers may proceed to ecstasy practically unhampered by facts.

The European Old Master sports a beard; a beard figures also in the Oriental myth. For the many, it amounts to a seal of authenticity that raises an ancient ink-wash to the rank of a masterpiece. This magic beard should adorn the chin of the lone philosopher—properly the size of a chick-pea—who gapes at a make-believe waterfall, or else gazes at a make-believe moon.

As to the yellow varnish that both hides and makes an Occidental Old Master, it has a Chinese substitute in accumulated grime, disintegrating silk, and faded ink. An English amateur of the eighteenth century summed up an attitude that applies equally well to the appreciation of the art of the East and of the West when he stated smugly that a masterpiece should be well-browned all over, just like a lovely old violin.

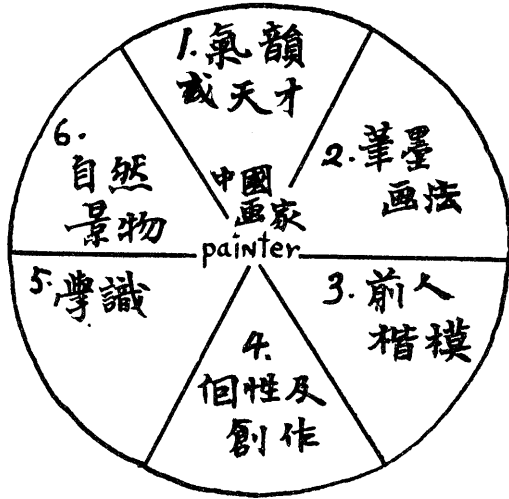
Practicing artists will forever remain unsatisfied with this attitude, however *distinguée*. For them, rather than manna from Heaven, the work of art is a man-made object. The approach of the painter to another's paintings can be as matter-of-fact as that of a carpenter surveying the joints of a colleague's table. For the art-maker, what mystery has been superimposed upon the original work by the smoking process of Time and the patter of commentators hath little charm. An unobstructed view of a single brush-stroke could tell him more.

We should be grateful to Tseng Yu-ho for helping us raise this and assorted queries, simply because of the fact

that she is alive, young, as yet unhallowed by the myth of Old Masters, and that she paints on clean white paper with clean black ink. To look at her ink-paintings clarifies the true meaning of tradition, as against the phony myth of an unmatchable past. Indeed, these twentieth-century pictures are firmly rooted in tradition, from the choice of subject matter—mountain peaks, gnarled pines, river falls—to the slightest brush-stroke that charts the curve of one single blade of grass.

Chinese ink-painting is an exacting medium. It admits of nothing hidden, nothing stated twice, and no possible stutterings. It is a heroic medium that deserves the same praise that Michelangelo reserved for *buon fresco*. The spirit of both media contrasts with that of oil painting, wherein ruse may masquerade as inspiration, where scumbles, glazes and retouching varnish conspire to doctor a weak initial concept, or to heal a deficient start. Matured by unhurried thoughts and repeated communions with nature, the execution of an ink-picture must be nevertheless lightning-quick. The plastic rhythm grows on paper at the same time that the brush flashes its curves and zigzags, musically, but swifter even than music. No craftiness, no conscious thought even, has time to deflect the motion of wrist and fingers. Here, unlike what may happen in less exacting techniques, the artist can fake neither knowledge nor greatness.

One whole portion of man is cast aside in free-stroke brush painting, this part midway between body and soul that we call rational. All too rarely does the Occidental artist understand this need to shush reason at the time of



1. Inspiration (spark of genius).
2. The technique (includes composition & brush work).
3. The study of the old masters.
4. Personality and creation.
5. Knowledge (culture).
6. Nature.

painting. He is loath to let go of this, his safest faculty. In his work, reason battles at each step with inspiration. The artist's rational self plots to hide from the spectator its master's weaknesses and shortcomings. If the Occidental painter is at all "at home" in his picture, it is only as the perfect host, hand stretched, shirt-front starched, hair groomed. To know eventually the whole man, we must look at his sketchbooks, or better still, his telephone booth doodlings.

Not so with the Oriental ink-painter. A mystical disposition, or the winebibbing praised in biographies as a trusted aid to inspiration, or both, lock reason out in darkness, at least for the time necessary to picture making. Otherwise, reason would engage in a pointless dialogue with inspiration, distract her certainly, convince her perhaps of helplessness as, of the two, only reason cares to follow an argument to its winning conclusion. Once reason is rendered harmless, the Chinese master has no choice but to display on paper or silk his spiritual self as relentlessly as a farmer nails an owl to a barn door. The act of painting becomes a total spiritual disrobing, both shameful and glorious, in the manner of a public self-confession. From depths that words may never probe the brush brings up subconscious moods, innermost states, for which pine, bamboo, plum tree and orchid act as species of tuning forks to prove or disprove harmony between the painter and the universe. It is this paradoxical selflessness in the assertion of self that explains how the

Tseng Yu-ho: Prerequisites for painting. A diagram

lives of the hermit-painters are replete with Franciscan anecdotes. What true artist, alone with his vision before the blank area of the picture-to-be, has not already renounced the world.

However spiritual art may be in its final draft, it is not at the metaphysical plane that it starts. Its beginnings are located close to sensuous perceptions. Perhaps too much has been made of the similarities between ink-painting and brush-writing by literary critics who, in so doing, felt that they honored painting all the more. There are conceptual incompatibilities between ideographs and pictorial subject matter. It is the business of the sign that stands for "tree" to propose to its reader an image so devoid of personality that it will fit all possible kinds of trees. It is true that the tree that the painter brushes on paper is not nature's own either. He fills it with autobiographical innuendos; it suffers a radical metamorphosis the better to fit into the strange world—two-dimensional in fact and monochrome—of ink-painting. Yet the model remains personalized, endowed with physical substance; with its own height, girth, and density; and growing a web of branches as unique as finger-tip whorls, only valid for this one tree.

Other senses than sight are also put to work. It is tactile experience that moves the brush when it renders the asperities of rocks or the furrows of tree trunks as convincingly as would actual ink-rubbings lifted from the surface of the object. The mottled, streaked, or splashed areas that pass for foliage lean on texture more than on form; beyond texture, they capture the smell of dew-

damp shoots or of the dry leaves in autumn. So close to the senses remains the realization as to suggest an inception incubated at leisure within the senses before it grew vertebrate enough to acquire a visible body.

With the brush lashed to his paralyzed fist, Renoir stands as a symbol of the complete unity of an artist with his medium. They should not be separable any more than are horse and man in a centaur. It is not with the inert brush that man paints, but with wrist, elbow, and shoulder. In the Occident, the intellectual planning of a picture often comes into conflict with the muscular function of picturemaking. The kind of painter who uses a mahlstick is patient enough to tame muscles and nerves to the point of organic inertia. The stroke of the academic brush is proudly laid dead. Effaced—as if they were obscene—are the clues to the live initial impact of the brush as it strikes the canvas, and as well of its final flight away from the painted plane and back into air. The gymnastics that discipline the hand of the academician are doubtless admirable because they are so difficult; but this kind of training forfeits a whole world of beautiful lines never meant to obey the requirements of cold intellect. Taking after the combined articulations of knuckles, wrist, and elbow, freehand lines record circular motions laid within circular motions. They look free when compared with lines made with ruler or compass only because the tool that makes them is immeasurably more complex, but they too are laid along terms of logic and function.

In the ink-stroke of Chinese painting, two extremes are

thus fused: the complex animal machinery of the skeleton, with the tensions and extensions of its attached muscles, is on display as nakedly as is the spiritual note. A mystic with a sluggish body, or a body only loosely teamed with its soul, is a deficient tool for painting. It is this rare near-miracle of the spiritual putting bone and sinew directly in motion that alone accounts for great ink-painting.

As to subject matter, the squadron of old pictures that represent a sage gazing at the moon postulates at least a link between picturemaking and natural sights; to be exact, between this mirrored image of nature that hangs reduced and reversed at the inner lining of our eyeball, and the man-made image of paper and pigment. The theme of nature in Chinese painting is often stripped of its seriousness when it is presented by the kind of speaker who is at his best when lecturing to garden clubs. Perhaps certain blossoms displayed in full-color paintings hold interest for the flower-lover; and entomologists may approve of the bugs that suck or chew the plants, fireflies or praying mantises; but the subject matter is not all-important, even though stressed and bolstered by the addition of literary colophons. Like the best Occidental paintings, the best ink-paintings are themselves, rather than slices of nature. In ink-painting, beauty does not depend on that of the subject matter. In fact, an ascetic disposition imbues nature in many a masterpiece with spectral undertones. The residue of nature that filters through in these paintings is as often a shorthand of decay as it is of spring. Ink-trees remain beyond the ministrations of well-meaning tree surgeons; ink-flowers hardly ever do rate florists' ribbons.

Pine, grass, men and rocks, all are ruthlessly equated to the common denominator of ink. To appreciate these painted sights, it is well to remember how the reality of stains and splashes rates as high as whatever it is that they purport to represent.

Before meeting Tseng Yu-ho, what I knew of the relationship between Chinese painters and Nature was twofold and meager: (a) they loved it dearly; (b) they turned their back on it at the time of painting. Being myself a practicing artist, I readily believed both statements, but suspected that they were presented all too simply. Thanks to the readiness of Tseng Yu-ho in opening for me her notebooks and portfolios, I now realize more clearly the similarities that attend the craft of picturemaking the world over.

Her first steps toward a picture are shown in a series of lead-pencil drawings that are, she assures me, done directly from the model. Made in a medium with which the West is familiar, as yet only faintly marked by the timbre of formal style, these drawings are of value for an Occidental to help isolate what is art from the *chinoiserie* that, regardless of quality or intent, spells its own picturesque magic. Motifs are mostly tree trunks, some thin, erect and budding; some wounded, struck by lightning, or armless from great age. There is a minimum of modelings, but form in the round is mostly achieved by the thick or thin of the pencil stroke, manipulated so as to approximate the brush. There are no backgrounds, no diminishing companion trees to carry the eye towards middle-distance, no horizon line. The fog that sets its opaque film right

behind the model may be construed as an acceptancy of the fact of unfocused vision, unlike our manner of shifting our sight range back and forth, and of sharpening all outlines.

As could be expected, there is youth and charm in these attentive notations, coupled with a lack of preoccupation with all-over effect, and a submissiveness to the model that reminded me of sketches made by the young Corot, at the same age and in the same vein.

Other pencil notations order together the separate elements in tentative compositions. Already here, formats differ sharply from Occidental ones. The sketchbook itself, made in Peking, has long thin pages that encourage the concept of a scroll. Occidental formats may deviate only moderately from the square because we are accustomed to view the parts of a picture simultaneously and from a centralized point. In the case of the Chinese, the implied mechanism of successive viewings makes away with a center and breeds panoramic formats. An Oriental composition uses, as we do, space and solids, but juggles them after the principle of change that presupposes, as does movement, a reading of the picture along a stretch of time instead of in a single moment.

One of the slightest sketches is a striking project laid down along a thin strip of paper, three inches wide and four feet long. In accord with the cinematic principle, it sums up the sights of a two-day boating party along the banks of a river. The artist makes use of a system of dots and dashes so slight that it barely disturbs the whiteness of the paper; this pencilled shorthand of the projected

shorthand of the brush already carries the meaning of the complex subject matter and its load of subjective values.

A third type of sketch uses the brush only, is based on areas rather than on lines. There is no attempt at formal balance, or rather the sketch is composed in vignette fashion, inscribed loosely in an irregular oval shape. Such a sketch is that of the fishing barge seen through the hanging foliage of a river bank, a kind of ink-play. The wet-looking surface of the paper is modulated, rather than divided, by the sliding of values that ooze into each other as a testimonial to the speed that moved the brush. More than the previous ones, these works technically escape Occidental parallels, as they spring from grounds as yet unstudied in our own brand of art criticism. Fattened at will by the twist of the wrist, line expands to area or thins again into line. Grays fade imperceptibly into blacks, outlines are blotted out by washes. The one quality that a painter recognizes at once is *la fuerza del mango*, the strength and assurance that attended the manipulation of the brush.

Next come album leaves in which pencil and brush notations fuse into all-round compositions. Elaborations along traditional lines add to the well-observed tree trunk its ragged ink-foliage, and to the bare rock its spattering of moss. Perhaps because these album leaves are wider than they are high, the themes are based on the horizontal, and are pastoral in mood. In these tranquil notations of the countryside, charm of tint and the inviting slope of low hills suggest a morning stroll through mist, whose slow rising reveals translucent suggestions of solids, gathered

from out of the ever-present reality of space.

In the large-scale vertical scrolls, we rise from pastoral charm to epic grandeur. Over the earth-bound scene, beyond the trailing clouds that are reserves of paper whiteness, peaks loom that stretch the relationship of objects to verticality. A torsion imbued with elements akin to those of our baroque style wrings the shapes of nature like wet cloth. Grass tufts acquire a quasi-organic animation as each blade folds under in mimicry of spider legs, or rises like scarab's feelers. Tree trunks now pattern their restlessness after animal trunks. The slopes of mountains are vertical walls pocked with erosion, suggesting imminent cave-ins. Even the architecture of pagodas and pavilions leans askew.

In spite of the different medium and exotic paraphernalia, these torsions and elongations strike a memory. I have seen and felt them before, when looking at El Greco's *Toledo*.

In their successful balance between a willing obeisance paid to the past and the release of individuality inherent to the free-stroke ink style, these impressive works raise for the Occidental critic a query. They hint at the possible confusion that exists among the partisans of our contemporary art between originality and greatness. An American painter raised this objection to the work of Tseng Yu-ho: "How can an artist who lives in our own age sacrifice her birthright of freedom and of individuality, and prefer instead subservience to a tradition now proved obsolete, unrelated to our present *mores* and conditions?"

Many confusions mingle here. Occidental artists, and among them the objector himself, follow the lines of their own tradition no less obediently than do the Orientals. Our publicized aesthetic freedom is far from being a shattering reassessment of norms; at most, it is a twist given to the basic approach. Now, as it always has, a "modern" picture will conform to the style of its century, its country, even its home town.

Why should the Oriental artist feel that the past constitutes a shackle, when the objector works with a feeling of perfect freedom? Properly understood, the relationship of the individual to tradition is like that of a babe to his mother, one that can hardly be described as confining. True, there are nuances that differentiate Orient from Occident in this regard. Occidental styles obey the clock; chronology and history remain of their essence; they live short lives that can be counted in decades. A more elastic understanding of time, peculiar to the Chinese, allows an artist to slow or to reverse its course, and to become at will the contemporary of a master whose work he cherishes. Chinese styles run rather against the grain of time, like parallel streaks that course along and bridge over the centuries without dated birth or certified death. Chinese styles are more in the nature of spiritual affinities than after the generations of the flesh.

To state this basic difference in the nature of style between East and West is to answer those who belittle Oriental tradition as *passée*. It is true that the Occidental painter who attempts to work in a style of the past courts

failure. An addiction to troubadour Gothic hindered the Pre-Raphaelites. In Occidental art, the original style of a master perforce dies with him, radically so if he held the mirror to his age: Goya's goyesques and Lautrec's *cancan* can only be revived today as fiesta costumes. Even the spirit of artists who stood aloof from their period—Michelangelo or Cézanne—fails to live in the works of imitators intent on mastering the letter only of their achievement.

Doubtless, period pieces exist in Chinese genre and the minor arts, but period hardly ever intrudes in the nobler style of ink-painting. As restricted as is the cast of archaic drama, its repertory of forms was purified of its everyday context—already long ago—by meditative minds impatient of ephemera. The range of subject matter extant in ink-painting is as limited and as timeless as are the severe geometries that underlie a Cézanne still-life. Nevertheless, plum tree, pine and bamboo are no exact counterparts of the cone, the sphere, and the cylinder praised by the master of Aix, which are inorganic and scarcely mutable. Even though lifted out of all calendar years to spiritual significance, the heroic ink-flora of the Chinese painters still affords a continuum of metamorphosis in the pulse-beat of its seasonal cycle.

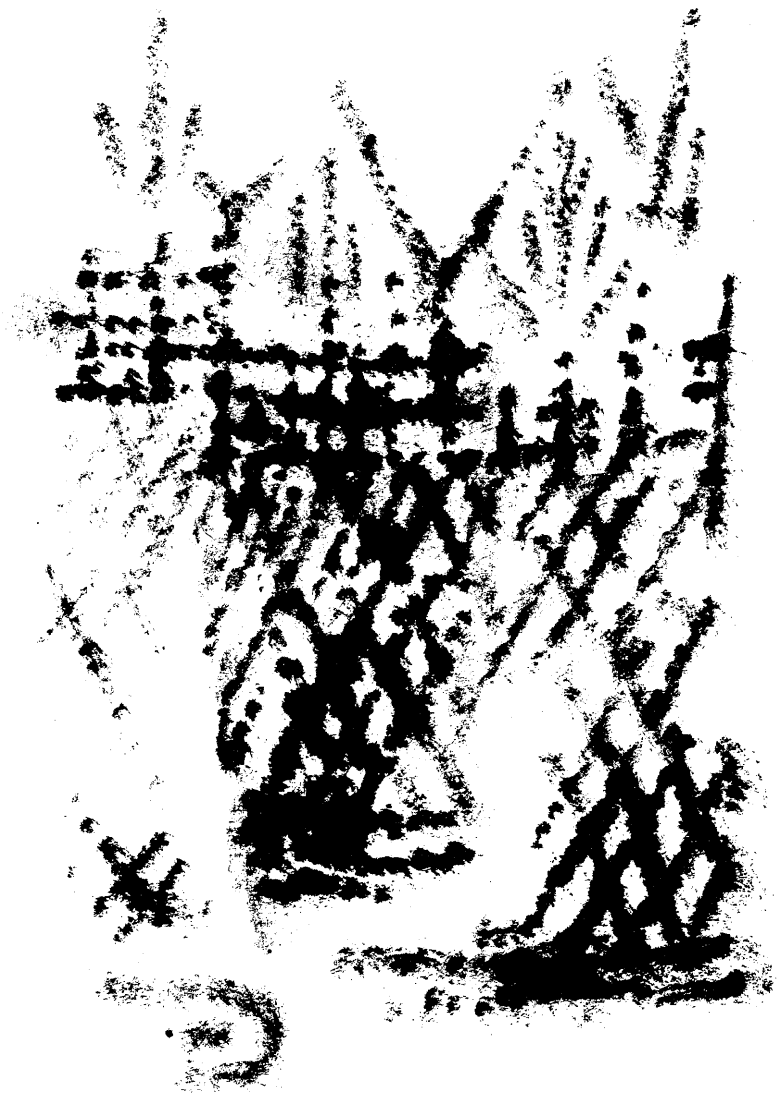
It is conceivable that, in a frightening future, a man-made landscape constructed all of plastic, steel and cement, will cover the globe and render obsolete at last the basic choice of motifs that govern Chinese ink-painting. By then, however, man as we know him would have ceased also to exist.

Tseng Yu-ho's first show in Hawaii was in 1950, at Gump's in Waikiki. Much of this early work had been painted in China, before her flight from Peking under the mounting pressure of political storms.

This first show did not go decisively against the grain of what a Westerner expects in matters of *chinoiseries*—I choose on purpose the French term that implies a Westerner's reaction to things Chinese rather than Chinese art seen through Chinese eyes. The repertory was the traditional one. Vertical cliffs contrasted with horizontal river scenes. Gnarled tree trunks opposed crochety age to the youthful grace that stemmed from orchid leaves. Tseng Yu-ho's evolution since then has taken her through difficult paths towards what could be labeled abstractions. To understand the paintings that she paints today, it is worth retracing the road that led her there.

Her story is that of other displaced masters. The obvious parallel is that of El Greco. Born in Crete, he took new roots in Spain, where he acquired his surname. But to the end he signed his pictures proudly in Greek, his mother tongue, and with his true name, Domenico Theotokopoulos, Cretan.

As El Greco with Greece, Tseng Yu-ho's memory gives to her China even more substance than when China was all round her. Her past is very vividly a part of her present. Outside her house, in Nuuanu valley, there are great pine trees and a waterfall, its foamy whiteness divided as it courses over black boulders. To the natural



setting a single rock was added, and a single plant with multicolored leaves. Plant and rock, pines and waterfall are a microcosm of her farflung beloved land.

Twenty years ago Oahu valleys were not unlike China's own. Houses were few. They mused up the natural beauty hardly more than had, in China, the lone pavilion erected by the sage as a shelter from which to view, undisturbed, the mountains. Hawaii changed swiftly. A few years after the artist's arrival, houses filled the once empty landscape. An ocean of cement rose along its hills. Today real estate maculates even the highest skyline. In a folding screen owned by the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Tseng Yu-ho half humorously, half sadly, acknowledged the change. Her subject is a valley. Whereas Chinese masters would cast in its concavity an imponderable cushion of clouds, Tseng Yu-ho casts in this valley a solid sea of houses. Its title, *Settlement*. Nature, the nature of the sage, of the artist and of the poet, is going, going, gone. The profit motive won its battle against nature. As we barbarians say, money talks. And money, pitted against the meditative silence of the artist, wins the argument every time.

Faced with the destruction of natural beauty, Tseng Yu-ho became less explicit in her search for subject matter. Her new style comes close to what Westerners call abstraction. This term applies only loosely to her art. The Chinese artist never was over-burdened by problems of realism. True realism plagues only the Western artist.

Tseng Yu-ho: Landscape. Brush and ink, 1969

In Chinese painting, subject matter never was a must, perhaps because calligraphy, the sister art, is so obviously abstract. Chinese painting is also writing. The beauty of the brush work allows the eye a choice. Now you see the thousand-year-old pine tree, overhanging a void. Close your eyes. Open them. The pine tree has disappeared. The picture has become abstract beauty: the strokes of the ink-loaded brush slash the paper in contrasting directions. Values glide smoothly from velvety blacks—as deep as any by Rembrandt—to airy grays so lightly washed that they barely tint the paper.

Nature and abstraction cohabitate in the work of every Chinese master. Unlike the Western artist who must break violently with natural sights to enter the world of abstractions, the Chinese artist glides effortlessly from the one into the other. As proof of this, one may find in Tseng Yu-ho's realistic style premonitions of her abstract style. An early panoramic view of fishermen's boats and a curving river is latent in the newly painted *Waterland*, where a dark vertical courses between abstracted fields. This simplified river still retains a dotting of ghost boats. In the painting *Woodland*, the contorted gnarled trees the artist loved to paint become naked Y shapes. The serried folds of hills are now schematic parallel lines alternating gray and gold.

The more one delves into Tseng Yu-ho's abstract style, the more do the resemblance between her art and our modern art fade out. Instead a sense of deep antiquity replaces surface modernism. Straight lines, circles and dots, irregular rectangles, are nearly her only means. The

colors are few and subdued. The trees in *Woodland* are as simply stated as Hawaiian petroglyphs. Having absorbed both cultures, of the East and the West, the artist achieves a peak of sophistication by rejoicing in undiluted simplicity.

Tseng Yu-ho's latest work is done in the *dsui* technique, on sheets of metal, aluminium or gold. Art lovers fond of French terms describe *dsui* as *assemblage*. I prefer to translate it by the more homely term of "patchwork." The metal leaf shows seams that divide the surface in irregular squares. Notwithstanding its high aesthetic and spiritual content, *dsui* painting has some visual affinity with certain New England quilts. This humble image is contradicted by the splendor of the material used. *Dsui* reminds me of the liturgical robes worn by Buddhist abbots in some mendicant orders. The vestment simulates a beggar's tattered rags. It is torn and patched as an obvious symbol of poverty. But in honor of God the garment is made of splendid material, of varicolored silk threaded with silver and gold.

Spirituality emerges in Tseng Yu-ho's latest pictures. Having reached peace the hard way, her art deserves to be clothed in the tattered splendor of her very own *dsui* technique.

The first part of this article first appeared in slightly different form in Jean Charlot, *Art-Making from Mexico to China* (Sheed and Ward, 1950). The second part brings up-to-date an article which first appeared in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 13, 1966.

A Westerner on Japanese Art

Perhaps the most striking quality of the show of Japanese art now on view at the Academy of Arts is its diversity. One was well prepared to meet treasures on the highest possible level of national aesthetic achievement. But it comes as a surprise that this uniformly high performance expresses such a diversity that, to find a parallel to its range in our own Western art, we should pair paradoxically the visionary watercolors of William Blake with the lithographed cartoons of Gavarni.

Far from being for the Westerner only a curious display of exotic art, this show underlies ties with our own modern art, for the latter would scarcely be what it is if, somewhere close to mid-nineteenth century, French genius had failed to contact Japanese forms of art. It matters little that this contact happened historically through the backdoor as it were: Manet, Degas, Lautrec, Gauguin, met Japanese art only in the folk version of the penny sheet, the colored woodcut. Yet this art that, for a nineteenth-century Parisian, might just as well have matured on another planet, was enough to jolt the masters

Sengai (1750–1837): Calligraphy

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子

out of set Renaissance norms, and to start them on a quest of such scope that, close to a century later, it has not yet settled its pace to a routine.

Compare the Western portrait, planted into the center of the canvas with barbaric bluntness—bulging out for all to see—with the Japanese mode: not a bulge but a recession seems to be its approach; not the gross achievement of display, but the elusive game of understatement. Pillars, screens, cloud forms continuously interpose their opaqueness between the onlooker and what, in the picture, goes on unconcernedly, as if the people in there did not know they were being watched. Here, a throne room, the deep prostration of a supplicant a clue to the august presence; but only the imperial foot in its brocaded slipper is defined, and the lower edge of a golden pantaloon. The roof edge cuts out of visibility the rest of the exalted countenance, hidden further by the free forms of a low trailing fog. Or look at the portrait of a famous beauty, resting inside a river pavilion, a subject matter comparable to that of our so-called cheesecake snapshots that, in a straightforward way, often complete the lavish visual display with charts of measurements. Perhaps more alluring is the Japanese manner, where the inquiring eye is made to hurdle over successive barriers, to slide along the diagonal perspectives of timbers, over walls, floors and balconies, to glimpse through half-slid partitions the opening of a darkened room. In it is seen the edge of a mat and, just at the upper boundary of the composition where storytelling melts into visual nothingness, the folds of a kimono sleeve, a sparse strand of black hair, all we shall ever know concerning this famous beauty.

Another facet of Japanese art would have jarred the faith of the Western masters who believed wholly in its exquisiteness. It is genre of a sort that the French call *canaille*. In this show, it starts chronologically with a masterpiece, *Animals in Frolic*, that could shame even our Disney as unimaginative. It culminates in long scrolls positively jammed with sketches of milling lowbrows. For a Western eye, tuned still, if somewhat ashamedly, to Greco-Roman ideals, it is hard not to appraise at first these actors as somewhat sub-human, not to perceive, emerging as a kind of double-take from behind the human bodies, the frog, the rabbit, the louse even, as a probable ancestor, nay, as a begetter. But soon one forgets, as one should, Venus and Apollo to watch with tender concern these little men asserting their humanness in a frenzy of exploding gestures that shake the underfed bodies up to the very tips of their fingers spread fanwise, bent backwards in a climax of expostulations. Each is conscious to be an individual active in the drama, or comedy, that unfolds its plot as the scroll is unrolled, or unfolded the screen.

To understand these masterpieces of expression, it may help the Westerner to look back to his own Gothic age, contemporary with the Japanese scrolls. The Eastern crowds of gesticulating lowlies call to mind the bug-like personages of illuminated books of hours, busy ants thronging at the foot of the cross, villains jostling each other to better stone the martyr, or else the blessed packed tight in the bosom of Abraham. Twelfth and thirteenth centuries stamp both Japanese and European art with the sense of human limitations without ever sinking into despondency. The Christian sense of sin and the Japanese

sense of humor never mistake the little men that jam this crowded art form with Hercules, or with these other supermen that, in our day and country, display their might in whiskey ads and comic books.

Again a change of scene when, away from the human crowd, we enter timelessness, a silence meant to be more pregnant than words, in the art that Zen discipline bred. These Zen saints are not of the goody-godly kind, that smiling, well-washed kind that would have one believe that attaining sainthood is but a lark. They pattern themselves after the modes of Hindu apostles, seen as rawboned, muscled and hairy, engaged in a tug-of-war with virtue as strenuous as warring or wrestling. Again, we may capture between East and West a link of thought that however tenuous may help us to understand: to the Zen monk who, eyes squinting, attempts to thread a needle, forced to leave cosmic panoramas to perform this minute action, we find a parallel in the old scholastic query: how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Here, the holy man retains his good humor, amused as much by the queer paths that his search for essentials has thrust him into as, in the more worldly scroll displayed in the next room, is amused the stable boy gathering pails of manure from under the heroically proportioned stallions.

The leaving behind of everyday appearances, including time as we know it, increases as we face the images of gods and guardians, as credible in their otherworldliness as, in our own Western art, are only too believable the familiar daemons of Blake. Impressive are the religious images, with their grandiose scale, that make of a mountain but a

footstool for the god. Yet, equally grandiose are the simple fan leaves adorned with lay motifs. Fan shapes are not free forms, not truly rid of plumb and level. But rather than frozen in the limits of a rectangle, level and plumb multiply along a circular trail that follows the complex setup of the planet itself. As the small fanshape can suggest a whole world, so the theme that decorates that shape may sum up all nature, in the miraculous shorthand that summons a scalloped autumn leaf, the tender crozier of a not as yet unfurled fern, a patch of moss, or a single blade of grass.

In another genre, the highly stylistic one of mountain landscape, the Japanese artist attempted the nearly impossible, the evocation of crags and peaks that he had never seen unless it be in their quintessence, filtered through the brushstrokes of mainland masters. But he did meet in his own islands, that are scaled to man's scale and gardenwise, the moss, the mushroom, the blade of grass. He could hold them in his hand, dew-drenched and damp smelling, size them in his heart as greater for himself than the mountains and maelstroms of another country.

Japanese art, as we are able to see it in this superb show, spans from the visions of Buddhism and Zen through picturesque genre, and reaches down to the tender definition of a single blade of grass. Did any other art cover a wider span?

A review of a show held at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1955, this article first appeared in slightly different form in *East and West*, Vol. VI (2), July 1955.



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Illustrating Children's Books

A painter accustomed to run the gauntlet of grown-up criticism should not expect an easing of the ordeal as he switches to children as his onlookers but only to a change of critical weapons. Up to then, the artist has been conscious of his power and of his knowledge of where it is that art and science, and art and nature, overlap. He better be resigned from now on to the fact that anatomy, and perspective, and all related sciences, will be as water over a duck's back as far as the younger set is concerned. He should renounce his hard-won knowledge, such as the finer points of muscle attachments and the scale of receding objects. As children see the world, at least that world held within the covers of a picture book, a hand may just as well have three or six fingers, rather than the orthodox five, and a left arm end in a right hand. As to perspective, the child, as did the painters of the Italian trecento, believes in level and in plumb only. To translate houses, doors, windows, into a web of diagonals, however successful the resulting perspective illusion, appears to the child's

Charlot: Woodcut for "Poema del Niño" by Atanasio Perez Vargas. Published by Arsacio Vanegas Arroyo, Mexico, 1947

eye an unnatural pretence rather than a make-believe device.

As a mural painter, my other and large-scaled vocation, I have learned an attitude towards the arts perhaps less intent on self than that needed to paint easel pictures successfully. A fresco painter learns to collaborate with an architecture. Switching from frescoes, more often than not heroic in scale, to the minute requirements of illustration or—to get the medieval feel of this ancient craft—of illumination, I have been conscious of a change of scale rather than of a change in the point of view. Like the muralist, the illustrator is not exactly free, even disregarding the requirements of the author, the publisher, and the mysterious inroads into psychology by sales experts. If those men did not exist, if the artist, as a craftsman, had to deal but with the bona fide logic of his job, he could hardly indulge in an unhampered display of self. Small as it is, the book is an architecture, with each of its pages a rectangular affirmation of plumb and level, as insistent as the plumb and level of walls and columns that are the natural setting for frescoes. As with fresco, where the mortar itself should remain the most eloquent assertion, as much in a painted as in an unpainted wall, raw material confronts the illustrator, paper here instead of mortar. In its thinness, its flatness, and its whiteness, paper should impose its essence on the illustrator as assertively as does mortar in the case of the fresco painter, or at that, marble or stone in that of the sculptor. Paper does not wish to be superimposed with heavy constructions, a false front of

make-believe rendering, fully modeled, fully chromatic, or what Victorians proudly referred to as “oleographs,” prints that could be mistaken for oil paintings. A finished carving should still be a block of stone to be great, as Michelangelo asserted. In the same way, the whiteness of the paper should remain the outstanding quality of each page of a picture book, after, as well as before, the illustrator has had his say.

Thus, the rules of the craft fetter the craftsman from the start. Paramount for the artist, such aesthetic and ethical problems are of little concern to publishers, living as they do in a hard world of business and sales statistics. We should here bypass publishers’ requirements. Looming large as they do in the execution of the actual job, they remain mostly outside the problems of the craft. How could one however bypass the requirements of readers. A book is after all a book only because of its readers.

In theory, artist and children are the only beings that picture books concern. Small children will read the book. If they are smaller ones, they will be read the book. If they are smaller still, they will try and eat the book. In practice, however, before child and book may get in contact, parents have to buy the book. To buy it they have to like it enough. Try as they may, parents prejudge what is good for the child, guided mostly by their own taste and leanings. Many children’s books, patiently and industriously rendered, will appeal to parents because they feel they are getting worth for their money. In our United States, there is a tendency to confuse what is beautiful with what

is hard to do. Witness another art, the ballet, where high leaps inevitably evoke loud applause, even if the ballet itself would be better without them.

Shorn as they are by nature of their parents' pretense, children do meet by instinct the artist's exacting requirements as regards picture books. What is in the artist a willful denial of idle display may be in the child no more than an innocent and ignorant simplicity. Artist and child both agree that line-drawings read more easily than fuzzy renderings, and that a sense of depth and light should come into play only inasmuch as it furthers the meaning of the story and clarifies it. Meaning in a picture book should never be buried under such scalloped artistry that the cake cannot be tasted, but only its icing.

The story then is the thing, and both artist and reader, regardless of their respective ages, should soak in its incidents unabashed. The plot is more often than not of a simple nature. A baby snowshoe rabbit meets snow on the first winter of his life. Animals and children open their eyes to the morning sun. Animals and children close their eyes at dusk. If the illustrator, proud of the few extra decades he has lived, and of the concomitant wisdom acquired, would create his drawings tongue in cheek, the child would feel ill at east as he peruses the book, even if his parents did not. In terms of its ultimate function, the book would prove a failure.

I can point best to the needed degree of absorption in the story by an anecdote. I was working on an exciting plot aimed at four-year-olds, a train story in which a streamlined train and an old-fashioned train race East to

West across the continent. The streamlined train I had at the tip of my pencil point: what with the reduced scale and childish simplification, it looked exactly like an over-long and naked caterpillar. However, his companion, the old-fashioned train, had me stumped. I went to the New York Public Library, to its picture room, my visual treasure trove both for fresco themes and picture books. Seated at one of the large communal tables, I started rummaging through train lore. I soon noticed that my near neighbors, as well as those seated across from me, did not take kindly to my presence. Glances were exchanged, words whispered. Uneasy, I checked my apparel. That seemed correct enough, for an artist at least. Doggedly I plodded further into train data. Then from the back the blow fell, or rather a tap on the shoulder as sweet as it was authoritative. Looming over me was the lady librarian, one index finger to her lips, the other pointing straight at a sign asking for silence. No words were exchanged. She read, or thought she read, in my startled countenance remorse and repentance, and vanished silently. Puzzled, I proceeded with my work but I too, now aware, heard a murmur or refrain that shattered perceptibly the quiet of the study room. It was me, it was I, encouraging myself at my task by over and over again repeating in a would-be infantile voice the key verse of my book, "Chug-chug-chug and puff-puff-puff."

Perhaps due to this obvious absorption in and identification with the task, the resulting book remains a favorite both of myself and of its small readers.



Pinning Butterflies: Matisse versus Barnes

It is refreshing to find a book on Matisse that expresses an honest opinion, not a blurb rehashed from the enthusiastic prophecies of those who discovered Matisse when he was a young man.

One can readily agree with Dr. Barnes' estimate that the artist is "great enough to sustain comparison with all but the greatest masters," but how he arrived at such a conclusion is something his book does not make clear. Perhaps he and his methods have grasped in Matisse's "oeuvre" all that science can grasp—which is amazingly little. The descriptions of pictures which fill four-fifths of the book are as painstakingly accurate as the anatomical charts, followed by measurements in inches, intended to describe beauty-contest winners and prize-fighters, but the essence of beauty, or of strength, must lie in more hidden springs, since it remains undetected by such mathematical sleuthing.

Science can readily measure the size and grain of a canvas or the direction and breadth of a brush stroke, but a painting

Matisse: Remarque in the margin of an etching illustrating a poem by Stephane Mallarmé. Actual size

in a dark room retains its distinct physical existence—yet cannot be said to function as a painting. Its true existence is optical, it lives only as an image created in the brain of the onlooker. This optical and, so to speak, spiritual entity is already less open to scientific investigation, since much depends on the personality of the witness. A dog will connect only with the pigment as it lies on the canvas. An untrained human eye may go so far as to perceive the subject matter and the degree of faithfulness to the model. A pedant will go hunting for stylistic influences, while for the trained eye and sensitive brain the same work of art may open vistas of simple delight.

There is much in this book about pigment and much concerning the history of art but, whether from shyness of indulging in what he calls “gusts of irrelevant emotions” or from plain toughness of the eye, the author says little that could make us commune with the peace and plenty that Matisse’s masterpieces suggest. In spite of its imposing array of archaeological references and its home-made terminology, it becomes evident that the scientific method of Dr. Barnes cannot perceive further than Dr. Barnes’ eye.

We can well believe the author when he reminds us that Matisse is a man of the nineteenth century, that he shares the creed of the men of the ’nineties, is influenced by Japanese prints, then in their prime, trails somewhat behind the symbolist group of Pont-Aven, and, of course, bridges the century over Cézanne. But when we are told that Matisse is possessed of an “avid intellectual curiosity which makes him explore ALL the traditions of art of ALL

periods," it is time to prick up our ears. Dr. Barnes refers specifically to Byzantine mosaics, Persian tiles and miniatures, Egyptian fabrics, Chinese frescoes, early Greek drawings, Negro sculpture, Egypto-Roman portraits, and to the work of fourteen painters which Matisse artfully plundered. Such a pragmatic knowledge of history and geography in a Frenchman—and, at that, a painter—is hardly credible, especially after rereading what Matisse himself wrote, that the artist "must sincerely believe that he has only painted what he has seen."

It may be that Dr. Barnes belittles the imposing influence of Nature in a painter's formation. Neither Byzantines nor Coptics nor Negroes were wilful stylists. Nature struck them in such of her aspects as are most akin to their gifts. This same objective world is the treasure chest from which Matisse extracts his own forms. This and the limitations of technique are enough to account for many resemblances.

Perhaps the most dangerous affirmation concerning the artist in question is the oft-repeated one that his interests are primarily decorative. To emphasize this decorative quality, the book suggests that he weakens or even suppresses the spatial values of his model so that "flatness is the rule in the great majority of Matisse's designs." The pictures thus duly flattened, Dr. Barnes proceeds to divide them into types according to their resemblances to flags, posters, cretonnes, tapestries, geographical maps, the fabric of gowns or of upholstery. It is true that Matisse uses but sparingly of those more obvious means of creating volume and space, chiaroscuro and the atmospheric

degradation of tone, yet space is the all-dominant factor of his paintings which definitely distinguishes them from the objects listed above. In his own visual vocabulary, the slightest modification of a color, even a change in the direction of a brush stroke, will round a fruit or a shoulder convincingly. The bands and stripes that are his most obvious theme, if they were taken at their face value, would make his pictures little more than the flag or the poster to which Dr. Barnes alludes, but he uses them only as a means to create space and light. In his hands they become surveyor's stakes which emphasize the three dimensions of his painted space and coordinate the objects in the box-like formation that most of his pictures present.

So literally physical is Dr. Barnes' approach to painting that it seems at times as if food were his theme. He revels in the "juicy" impasto of Soutine and shrinks before the "dry, dull, arid, unappealing" surface quality of Matisse's paint, although such a surface fits eminently the kind of metaphysical balance that characterizes the best of his work.

In his drawings, as in his sculpture, Matisse bares the deep human emotion that in the Nice oils he so politely dilutes. But their lack of analyzable props and, moreover, their psychological flavor make them difficult for Dr. Barnes to label, and it is with relief that he comes back to the bands and stripes and rosettes that for him seem the essential Matisse.

To think "Matisse" in the abstract, as we may think "Ingres" or "Delacroix," brings to most minds a mental, rather than a physical, image. Nor does it conjure quite as

clear a mood as those two names do; rather does it suggest a dual personality. In the heroic pictures of the Fauve period, in which he perhaps reached his loftiest climax, the sobriety and monumentality strike a monastic note not far removed from Giotto.

Then occurred a breach, a relaxation of the inner tension, which transformed Matisse-the-Fauve into the supple and well-bred Matisse of the Nice period. In those pictures the bourgeois and "intime" feeling masquerades lightly under the trappings of Oriental bric-a-brac so dear to the heart of the Frenchman who likes to travel at home, an Orient of the same brand as Molière's "turqueries." Those two notes, the heroic and the "intime," sum up Matisse. Of the first one, the book does not speak, while the second, apart from its historical connotations, is alluded to in a footnote, very curtly, probably because the author felt he was here skirting the taboo subject of spirituality.

It may be that the book, much against its author's aim, builds up a case *for* the literary critics. Knowing the limitations of each medium, they do not attempt the wearisome task of duplicating in words the art object. "Scientific" criticism, on the other hand, in its concern with pigment and canvas, misses the spiritual quantity of which pigment and canvas are merely the hieroglyphics.

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Renaissance in Haiti

As our speed of communication increases, it is said that the world grows smaller, that, as the many local differences are minimized, trends tend to become global. These facts may be glad news for the publishers of mail-order catalogues, but what holds true of success in plumbing and in kitchen accessories is not so certain to prove a boon on other planes. A philosopher once said that he could see no ground for objecting to a law that would dictate the shape and color and texture of hats—provided that the head underneath remained free to be itself.

Art is perhaps made of a stuff closer to heads than to hats. Should modern architecture mushroom its cubes over the whole planet? Should modern painting, permeating like an oil stain, spread unchecked from Paris to the farthest outposts? Whereas there is undoubted beauty in physical uniformity on a grand scale—in collective gymnastic exhibitions, in drills of regiments and Rockettes—one may doubt the virtue of similar collective demonstrations in the realm of art-making.

For example, we would do well to check the triumphant

and routine assertion that modern art has at last won its battles, a statement based on statistics, on the wholly arithmetical consideration that an increasing number of men in smocks practice distortion or abstraction. Alas, we know only too well what happened to impressionism when its rainbow spread from the palettes of a handful of pioneers to those of an army of painting practitioners, proud to translate in their turn natural sights into a mosaic of cadmium sunspots and cobalt shadows. These late-comers were furthermore inclined to be curt with colleagues who still clung to a different creed.

Today, it is forms of art derived from those of the School of Paris that the sweet pressure of taste and fashion plants like so many billboards over the art panorama. Paradoxically enough, given that its banner is personality, modern painting is in danger of becoming a mechanized drill performed by painters in global unison.

In ancient Italy, dissimilar and even incompatible concepts of art cohabited all at one period, changing from bishopric to bishopric, with standards shifting from townlet to hamlet. Yet, a few centuries later, critics are agreed that the art produced under these conditions was good. A similar breaking-up of contemporary painting into local schools would be a healthy move, one that would state anew the differences inherent in what constitutes correct behavior on the physical plane and on the spiritual. However, this breaking-up of the international school into smaller ones presupposes also the discarding of the imperial assumption that guides many a happy art critic, that a few rules of eye and thumb, easy to

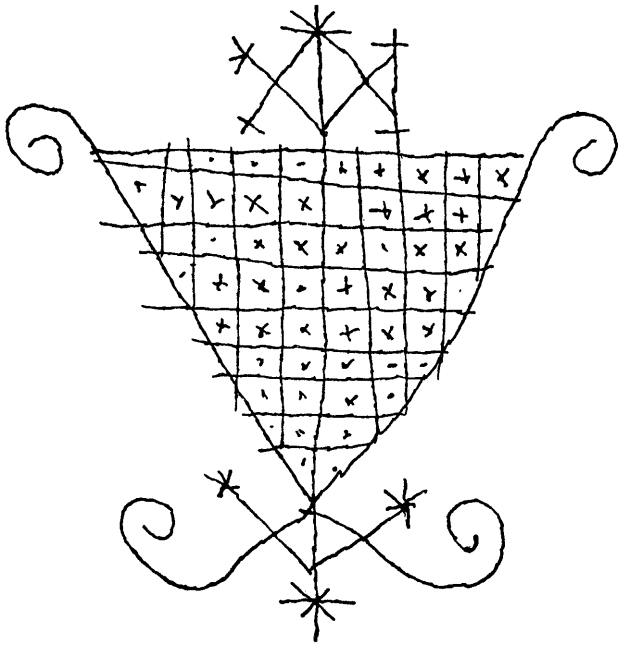
memorize, are a sufficient touchstone to separate forever the academic goats from the pictorial sheep.

The attempt made by Grant Wood in Iowa to relate painting to local activities and the local landscape proposed in the United States a vital policy that came close to taking healthy root. Eventually, the movement fell under the thrusts of an adverse criticism that failed to find in Grant the qualities typical of French and of German expressionists. Though efficiently destructive in practice, this was of course a quite irrelevant inquiry.

Another local school grown on this continent, the Mexican, formed in the twenties and stressing the mural accent, did take root and flourish, and is today a recognized national asset of Mexico. Yet, how close it came to failure in these early days because of similarly disoriented criticisms! When Orozco had just completed his frieze on revolutionary themes on the top floor of the Escuela Preparatoria, I took a foreign visitor of great culture to view the magnificent set of still fresh frescoes. As we walked along the corridors smelling of damp plaster, my companion was quite silent. The tour over, he mused reprovingly, "I wonder what they would have to say about *that* in Paris!"

The local movement started in Haiti constitutes still another attempt to slow the mechanization of the spiritual. It is all the more impressive in that, to the dream of one art in one world, as beautifully deceiving as the countless repeated images of a single object placed between facing

Anonymous: Vevers. A voodoo magic diagram



mirrors, it bravely opposes a much smaller image, the works of a handful of culturally isolated men whose geographical portion is confined to only half a not very large island. Here, as in previous attempts to decentralize art, critical acumen will fail to focus properly unless it sheds the current postulate that only one kind of art may thrive in the world at one time.

This unassuming and charming book is convincing because it is written in a plain human vein and does not even attempt to separate art from its makers. Would that we had documents as human as this one on the beginnings of other art movements—for example, the following passage, describing a time when only the artists themselves were aware of what was afoot, before outsiders had stumbled onto their doings, “A book-keeper in Cap-Haitien was spending his nights painting scenes from Haitian history for a Masonic temple. An overworked taxi driver was precisely modeling some Chinese roses on a cracked tooth-mug. An apprentice airplane mechanic wondered how he could improve . . . if he had paint and brushes. A half-starved ‘voodoo priest’ . . . was agreeing to paint flowers and birds on a barroom door for a couple of bottles of ceremonial wine. A cobbler was sketching chickens and palm trees on discarded Esso calendars.”

Especially valuable in form and content are the minute biographies of individual artists. Rodman manages to describe their lives and their motivations without building up the picturesque for its own sake, neither glossing over nor underlining standards of thought and of daily living so different from those of American artists. Because of this

happy blend of keen observation and restraint, the artists suffer neither a premature apotheosis nor a loss of human dignity.

This is only my own subjective reaction, but, in straining to avoid prejudices, Peters and Rodman, the two American apostles of this movement, may have “gone over” somewhat too wholeheartedly to the other standard, underestimating, in so doing, the quota of Haitian culture not based on jungle and voodoo. The world over, artists have been born on all rungs of the social ladder, as the two worlds, society and art, are scarcely interdependent. In Haiti, throwing overboard artists that fail to meet the exacting standards of popularism set by Peters and Rodman might result in a kind of snobism in reverse. When I was teaching fresco painting at the Art Students League in the thirties, one of my students, who became class monitor, was a Haitian blue-blood, painter and writer, Petion-Savain. I do not know what he did later, after his return home, but I remain grateful to him for having introduced me, in impeccable French, to the art of *vevers* and *voodoo*, in his illustrated book on rustic Haiti, *La Case de Dambala*. I failed to find his name in this book.

Very naturally, Selden Rodman attempts to “sell” the nascent movement to an obdurate world by stressing its similarities with what global *bon ton* sees fit to eulogize. It is a policy simpler and probably more effective in its results than to attempt a true portrait. Anyhow, does it matter that this little group of painters should enter the hall of fame through the narrow door of fashion, if only it shortens their trials and lengthens the leisure they need

for art-making? As luck would have it, Haitian painting is validly related to two sure standbys of fashion, the hieratism of African art and the brand of primitivism hallowed by Henri Rousseau. Given this premise, it comes as no surprise to learn that Paris already applauds and that André Breton nods recognition.

If I may judge in this case by what I know of Indian Mexico, Haitian life, in all its humility, may be lived on a more permanent basis of mood and of taste than life in Paris. The final test for the budding movement will be the viability of the relationship between Haitian art and the Haitian people, a kind of proof that is more slowly forthcoming, but much more relevant, than the passing accolade bestowed by surrealists.

A review of Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti* (Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), this article first appeared in slightly different form in *Magazine of Art*, March 1950. Reprinted by permission of The American Federation of Arts.