

The Artist As Copyist

By Jean Charlot

There is a saying by Delacroix 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 phenomena which, if not to be actually despised, is nevertheless to be considered as a means only, has imbued many a painter with a disrespect of the world as we see it and an exaggerated admiration for the shapes and fancies that dwell into the artist's head only. 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 admirative of 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 in front of 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. So that this problem of translating a three-dimensional world into two dimensions is a theoretical one, for the world we see is in reality 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 Velasquez went to Rome to paint the Pope, he did first a portrait of his negro colorgrinder to prove to His Holiness how well he would paint him. For features in painting are a problem independent from the majesty or lack of majesty of the sitter. Cezanne, 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.

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This classification of things by shapes instead of by use makes of the artist a queer fellow. He will have a tendency to pass over what the world considers beautiful or important, and to linger in the wrong places and look at the wrong things with love. In this optical world however, there is a kind of order parallel, though different from the social or moral order. The more geometric the forms, the more imperative they are. It is as if cube and cylinder and cone were bossing it over the less describable, more hesitant shapes. In such a way that the qualities of order, of strength, of reasonableness of which Giotto, for example, endowed his work, cannot be symbolised by the shapes of men but are communicated by inanimate things, cubical architectures and conical mountains; only a background to the story-telling, they set plastically the dominant mood.

Man is thus not the center of the optical world for his body cannot

compete in beauty with other more defined solids. Man, ever egotistical, has attempted to lessen the handicap by describing the human body in mathematical terms, as does Dürer by measurements. But the true optical world does not admit of measurements, for those are modified endlessly by foreshortenings, points-of-view, perspective changes of scale. In an early version of "Christ Chasing the Merchants from the Temple" of Greco, there is a child lying foreshortened on the black and white chessboard design of the temple floor. A gentleman scientifically minded has established, minus perspective, an exact diagram of this floor and found that the child's body would in reality attain a length of sixteen feet. The news would not have disturbed Greco greatly, for his approach is based on the difference between the layman's world and the optical world.

Though the things a painter paints are real enough to be recognizable, and can even be given more density, more majesty than their prototypes, one must not forget that they are only a reflection of things in our eye, and thus unsubstantial. Poussin, after stating that there is no painting without solids, goes on to say that there are no solids without light. So that unsubstantial light is the condition on which depends the very existence of optical bodies. If light defines forms, it also does strange things to objects as we know them. It breaks their local color into at least two distinct tones, light and dark, and to the real enough outline

of an object, adds this inner line which sums up all modelings, this illusive ridge where light and dark meet.

Without measurements, without local color, the optical world is indeed a different world from the one we know. The problem of painting the world as we see it deepens when one considers the fact that the eye can expand or contract to various focuses and that the sharp focusing at one distance makes the vision at other lengths indistinct. When Titian portrays a man against a neutral background, this background is not an artist's convention but rather a realistic representation of unfocused space. Vermeer dealing with the problem thoroughly, sprinkles the unfocused object with the same rounded dots of light that appear on badly focused snapshots; as in the large Metropolitan picture of religious symbols, where the painter's eye, focused onto his main subject in the background, leaves a third of the picture, the tapestry in the foreground, in blurred vision.

We may add to these the fact that

man sees with both eyes, and thus can project onto any point in space a primitive system of triangulation which produces feelings of depth; the painter can match this phenomena by superposing a double stereoscopic image, but with great loss of clarity. The hazy line of Renoir, the double-edged trembled line of Cezanne old, are compromises with this law.

Thus optical vision is not to be confused with commonplace vision. Painters who have attempted to reproduce it have had a lifetime work and it cannot be said that the result lacks originality. Whatever beautiful imaginations, shapes, and colors, a painter may think he has in his head, it would repay him also to investigate the constructions, shapes and colors, that the world has to offer. For the man who relies only on himself may go wrong in a big way. This optical world is a more universal language, corresponding within the artist's craft to the much talked of social consciousness which the artist must also maintain as a man.

League Instructors Show Works

The habitual gallery-goer will undoubtedly be impressed by the unusual activity of League instructors this season. Within the space of the last three months no less than six of the major shows of the season was the contribution made by the League faculty to the art scene. Five of these were New York showing: those of Messrs.

Brackman, Charlot, Fiene, Picken and Yaghjian. A sixth was Robert Laurent's exhibition in the Corcoran Gallery at Washington, D. C.

Critical opinion in the press gave unqualified recognition to the status of these League instructors as leading artists of our time.