

TWO ORIGINAL OIL PAINTINGS: ONE OBJECTIVE AND THE  
SECOND A DECORATIVE DERIVATION OF THE FIRST

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

My objective in painting these two pictures for my thesis is to demonstrate the development of an original painting in the decorative manner from an objective realization of the same motif.

In the first painting, visual objectivity was the approach to the chosen motif, an interior arrangement with a figure. Color, form, chiaroscuro and textures are painted as they appear to the physical "outer eye", creating an illusion of the third dimension on the picture plane.

A departure from the objective realization was made in the second painting, developing a decorative pattern, purposefully abstracting, simplifying and distorting elements for the sake of a two dimensional formal order. Here were employed the methods and spirit of the decorative artists from the decorations of Palaeolithic man to the paintings of Gauguin and Matisse in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## INTRODUCTION: MY ART BACKGROUND

My parents used to say that I learned how to hold a crayon in my hand almost before I learned to walk or talk. As early as they can remember my hours were spent drawing or painting by myself. Like any other young child, I had the consuming desire to cover any available blank surface with my own "embellishments."

My devotion to art activities continued through elementary and high school. Draftsmanship was my primary concern and in high school my main objective was to draw as realistically as possible. It was then that my work seemed to receive the most praise and attention. The Old Masters of the Renaissance, Raphael, da Vinci, and above all, Michelangelo, were my ideals. My work showed a tendency toward the Baroque and Romantic in that exotic and dramatic subject matter was often chosen. As might be expected, my pictures at this time were linear, colorless and illustrational in character.

It was in the art classes at the University of Wisconsin in 1946 that I first became aware of the formal values in modern art. My painting was still objective and it was almost impossible for me to distort or abstract natural forms, although there was an effort towards organizing the compositions. Subject matter and literary significance were still important and my chosen subjects were usually portraits and figure work.

Following my graduation from the University in 1950 with a Bachelor's Degree in art education, I spent two years as art supervisor in

the public schools of Wisconsin. There was little time for my own painting, but there were valuable opportunities for observing child art work at the different levels. Observations were made of the simple, direct approach and basically decorative urge in small children. They often will break up spaces with patterns and textures, intuitively sensing the decorative values.

The summer of 1951 was spent studying and painting with the Mexican Art Workshop in Taxco, Mexico. Here the Pre-Colombian and contemporary art of the country had a great influence on me. The formal, decorative quality of Mayan art work was especially interesting to me, as was the contemporary work of Carlos Merida and Rufino Tamayo.

My graduate work in art began at the University of Arizona September, 1952. My painting was still very much under the influence of art experiences in Mexico. The first paintings were usually of Mexican subject matter, rather realistic, with a narrative quality. My interest in Pre-Colombian art led to my research project on this subject. The distortions and conventionalizations of form by the Mayans and Aztecs served as a great influence to my own style of painting. Whistler, Gauguin and Matisse began to be important artists in my studies and I began to appreciate the decorative values in their art. It was soon evident that my own work was gradually taking on decorative characteristics, and that my old ideals of devotion to subject matter and realistic vision were being revised to newer attitudes. In other words, I became aware of the importance of the painting itself, the media employed and the artist's feeling for order and completeness, as opposed to the dominance of subject matter.

Thus, my artistic development at present has led me to base my thesis upon the decorative expression in painting. Since my early tendency was to view my subject matter factually and realistically, an objective realization of the subject was to be followed first. This painting served as my point of departure for a decorative interpretation of the same motif.

## II. THE OBJECTIVE PAINTING

Objective painting has been the "normal art" of the Western World since it was brought to a climax in the scientific vision of the Renaissance. The new scientific spirit acted as an impulse on art toward recording a study of correct anatomy, draftsmanship, light, shade and perspective. Often attention to minute detail destroyed formal order, and perspective created such an illusion of depth that the two dimensional picture plane was violated.

Giotto began to model his forms with some regard to natural light and shade. Masaccio was the first artist of the Renaissance to define his subjects by natural light and shadow. Previously, contour had been represented chiefly by line rather than by value or color differentiation.

Leonardo da Vinci refers in his writings to the eye as the window of the soul, the chief means by which we may appreciate the works of God, and that these visible things form the basis of painting. Michelangelo also reveals his reliance upon nature, but stressed the importance of selection, and the truthful representation of the dominant, the graceful, the harmonious and the beautiful in nature. Durer, contemporary of Michelangelo, wrote in Germany that art stands firmly fixed in nature and only through nature can art become great.

The Flemish stressed realism to the point of naturalism, so that every minute detail and texture was represented. Realism is big enough to include the naturalistic painting of Ingres and David, as well as the

work of Corot, Courbet and the Impressionists. They were all devoted to nature and never ventured to distort it for plastic means.

My first painting, in the objective manner, follows the ideas set forth by the realists from the early Renaissance to the nineteenth century, as described. In preparation, a group of sketches were made of the chosen subject, including detailed sketches of head and hands. Some sketches were done in color and others in charcoal or pencil. All were drawn in scale to the exact size of the masonite panel to be used for the final painting.

The panel used was untempered masonite, 24 inches by 36 inches, prepared as a painting surface by three coats of underpainting white and sanding the surface after each coat was dry.

A "cartoon" of the chosen composition was made and transferred to the surface of the panel by tracing. After the charcoal image had been fixed with fixative, the monochromatic underpainting was applied with the use of umber and underpainting white pigment with turpentine. Lights and darks, proportions and correct drawing were established in this underpainting, keeping in mind that an illusion of the third dimension was to be created upon the two dimensional surface.

When the preliminary painting had dried thoroughly, glazing and scumbling was employed to enrich the basic image of my underpainting. There is a predominance of warm colors, orange-reds, browns, golds, and greens and blue-greens for contrast. A warm ochre-brown glaze was applied over these cool colors to bring them into harmony with the generally warm tone of the picture. Particular attention was paid to the light sources, cast shadows and a few reflected lights, thereby

achieving the desired solidity of form. Textures were of importance to me and the particular textures of tufted rug, leaves of the plant and the richly patterned jacket were carefully represented. A high angle of vision was used to better create a feeling of depth by perspective and overlapping forms.

In the general arrangement of this picture, objects were placed for their compositional value but there were no distortions or deviations from visual reality. By the utilization of realistic objects, a poised and organized composition was planned, since there does not seem to be any reason for painting a picture, unless it be well organized and complete in itself. A painting containing a number of objects casually placed would be of little value, since all art, whether realistic or abstract, should involve the arrangement of elements in nature.

### III. THE DECORATIVE PAINTING

In the late nineteenth century artists began discarding reality as a basis for painting and laid the ground work for our present schools of modern art. It was discovered that, "Representation inevitably proves to be inadequate. It tends to place the center of interest and the standard of judgement outside the work of art; and in so doing, it disparages the integrity of art by seeking to estimate aesthetic qualities in terms of non-aesthetic qualities."<sup>1</sup>

There are three ways of expression in the modern sense, the subjective or emotional, the abstract or plastic, and the decorative. "The decorative school of moderns might be defined as that which deliberately shallows the picture space, deals generously in linear rhythms and color harmonies, and generally is content with surface melodies rather than deep contrapuntal orchestration."<sup>2</sup>

The decorative intent in man goes back to the art of the primitives. They had an intuitive feeling for design and order. They often appeared to have decorated objects in order to enrich the surface of the object. Often their use of decoration involved symbolical meaning as well as a sense of beauty.

The art of the Far and Middle East has always been rich in

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1 Nolte, Fred, "Art and Reality," Lancaster, Pa., 1942, pp. 10.

2 Cheney, Sheldon, "World History of Art," N.Y., 1947, pp. 874.

decorative formalism. As early as 3000 B.C. the Persians were known for their decorative talents and passion for beauty. They loved clarity, precision, poetic imagination, a feeling for rhythm suggested by line and richness of color and textures. Their work was generally flat and conventionalized rather than realistic. They used brilliant "jewel-like" colors and often employed a warm color, such as red, for backgrounds, which served to further flatten the picture. The Persians used the motifs found in nature but never intended truthful representation.

Other Eastern cultures derived their art forms from the Persians. Moslem art, for example, reflects the same frankly formal decorative motif as the Persians. A Moslem painting seems to vibrate with a rhythmic movement, yet it never loses its poise. The rich interplay between color, texture and line is completely confined and sustained.

Asiatic art has contributed much in the field of decorative expression. The example of the East has always been in opposition to the materialistic intellect of the West, since it paints with the spiritual "inner eye" rather than the physical "outer eye." The Orientals stressed the essential structure and spirit of the subject rather than outward, incidental effects. They relied upon abstract means and universal rhythms which resulted in a plastic organization of form. The picture has a life or vitality of its own which does not represent the outer characteristics of the object depicted. The linear quality was important to all Chinese art and this feeling for line is found in their sculpture as well.

The art of Byzantium has been described as a "marriage of Eastern

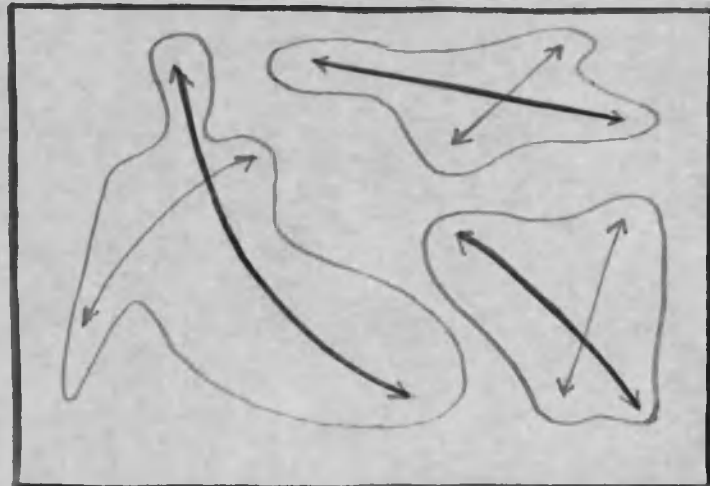
and Western ideals in art." This early Christian art indicated its Oriental derivation; especially Persian, by its flattened composition, posteresque simplicity of form and use of full color and patterned areas. It possessed the intertwining linear motives of the Eastern manner and was especially evident in their mosaic and cloisenné enamel work.

James McNeil Whistler is considered the first artist of the West to exploit the formalized and decorative art of the East. He chose titles as "Arrangement" and "Symphony" for his paintings, which indicated his decorative intent. He utilized the high angle of vision, the use of flattened planes, marking of the front plane of the picture, the studied color and tone harmonies and pattern arrangement of the Oriental painters.

With Paul Gauguin, we have the decorative wing of the modern school of art more firmly established. It was his belief that it was not necessary for the artist's subject to be beautiful, but the artist's work should be. His canvases are rich in formal design of the two dimensional order. His art was the result of many influences. His association with the Impressionists, through Pissarro suggested much of the purity of color and freeing of the object from its local color of Gauguin's later work. Cézanne influenced him through his search for his "realization" and his investigations on functional color. The strong arbitrary design of Daumier and the strong feeling for design in French primitive peasant ceramics influenced him by their insistence upon formal qualities. He was influenced by the colorful and decorative Japanese prints, as well as Medieval mosaics and enamels.

Gauguin formulated his theory of "synthesism," which stated that there should be simplification and subordination of all the elements to one dominant rhythm. This theory served to influence the later painters in the decorative manner.

Gauguin demonstrated a definite affinity to the primitive and direct approach to art. He believed that man's true nature had been lost through the process of civilization and that the so called savage people have retained the quality of childhood and are, therefore, able to display this in their art. Gauguin's mature works have a definite formal decorative quality, such as found in Oriental art. He distorted and simplified form for the sake of design and utilized color for its decorative values. He often used functional color in reverse in order to achieve flatness. This flat character helps the viewer to concentrate upon the essentials of design, linear rhythms and color harmonies. He was interested in a two dimensional movement across the picture plane, not back and forth in three dimensional space;



In the early 1900's "Les Fauves" began to go back to the sources which had inspired Whistler and Gauguin. The Oriental plastic aims soon dominated the work of such men as Matisse and Dufy. Gauguin's theory of synthesis served as a point of departure for the modern decorativists. They went back to the art of the primitives, Byzantines and Persians for inspiration.

Matisse's canvases are concise and economical. He starts with visual reality and then works by a certain process of elimination to a pure simplification of decorative essentials. His contention is never to imitate form, but to create form.

"Fauvism means a mood rather than a mode -- a common denominator, the supremacy of color over story; the directness of perceptual, sensorial values against the illusionistic rendering of nature; the emphasis on visual fundamentals to express a particular concept."<sup>3</sup>

The influences felt by Matisse were the extravagant use of color by Turner, the decorative quality of Mohammedan and Japanese art and the direct simplicity of primitive art. He also gained much from the Post-Impressionists, Gauguin, Cézanne and Van Gogh.

Color is of prime importance to pictorial structure. Matisse says that each tone, upon application to the canvas, permits itself to be modified by adjacent tones. Colors exist only in relation to others and therefore must resolve themselves into harmony. He weaves color, line, texture and pattern from objective realities, but has no interest

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<sup>3</sup> Duthuit, Georges, "The Fauvist Painters," N.Y., 1950, pp. 103.

in the visual representation of these objects.

It was my plan to transcribe the objective realism of my first painting into a two dimensional decorative painting in my second picture, utilizing the various decorative means employed by the decorativists previously described. These methods may be listed as:

- (1) Emphasis on two dimensions rather than three dimensions.
- (2) Distortion and simplification of forms for formal unity.
- (3) Little or absence of modelling and natural chiaroscuro.
- (4) Disregard for Western perspective.
- (5) Use of strong, pure colors.
- (6) Importance of patterned and textured areas.
- (7) Media employed clearly stated.
- (8) Above all, a basic feeling for harmony and design unity within the picture.

Before presenting a complete description of how these methods were employed in my decorative painting, it is necessary to set forth the creative spirit necessary for the work. In research into the various decorative arts as preliminary work to my painting, it was necessary that actual "imitation" of the styles of these artists was not employed. It was my desire to incorporate their aesthetics and retain my own individuality of approach to the problem. The traditions in art can be of inspiration to true creative work if one views these traditions in a "constructive spirit" and not "ape" the actual mannerisms and styles of past artists.

First, a series of sketches were made, exploring the decorative possibilities inherent in the objective motif. The entire composition

was purposefully distorted and greatly simplified. Color areas were purified and modified as needed. When a specific sketch had been decided on, an actual sized "cartoon" was drawn in line and transferred to the second masonite panel. (The panel had been prepared in the same manner as the first one.) When the charcoal image had been fixed by a fixative, the masses of colors were broadly blocked in.

All forms were kept flat without any suggestion of modelling. Perspective, in the natural sense, was disregarded and diagonal lines, such as the back of the sofa and the floor edge, were made horizontal to keep any backward movement into the picture plane at a minimum.



This transformation of dynamic planes into static planes gave the whole composition more stability and feeling for flatness, which is essential to decorative painting. This stability was due to the planes being made parallel to the edge of the panel and therefore parallel to the picture plane itself. (Static planes do not lead the eye back in three dimensional space.)

Distortion of the forms is evident. I elongated them to conform with the basic oval shape which is repeated with variation throughout the picture. This oval shape is most evident in the shape of the head,

the eyes, mouth, blue vase and the shapes of the leaves on the plant. The basic composition is curvilinear, with certain angular forms for contrast.

Colors were constantly being modified as they were applied to the composition so that they would harmonize and work with the other colors. For example, the rug area was repainted many times until the color desired was achieved. This area was to contrast slightly with the yellow of the jacket and not carry the eye back in space by the insinuation of the natural floor plane. In other words, the floor plane was to be close to a static plane (parallel to picture plane) rather than a dynamic one, as in the first painting. By texturing the upper edge of the floor, this area seemed to "tilt up" and not exactly be horizontal as in the first painting.

Obviously, the color scheme of the first painting has been changed in the second one. The color arrangement is based on the primary colors, red, blue and yellow. These colors were repeated with variation throughout the picture. Thus, the brilliant blue of the vase is echoed in the lighter blue of the sofa patterning in the jacket and in the arbitrary blue shadow of the woman's face and arms.

Like color, textures and patterns were employed for their weight and flattening effect, as needed. The texture of the thick paint areas serves as contrast to smoother, thinly applied paint areas. Patterns were repeated with variation, such as the plant leaves repeated in the plant motif of the jacket design. Certain areas were scraped into for pattern, such as the hair and the red curtain. It was desired that the red curtain advance and exist on or very near the same plane as the

figure. The first delicate pattern employed on the curtain for this purpose was not in scale with the entire picture; so a larger pattern was superimposed with white pigment. As mentioned, blue was used in the shadow pattern of the face and arms of the figure for design purposes. It does not follow natural lighting and shadow. The use of this cool color tends to flatten out the areas of face and arms, in order to make them appear "paper thin."

Line was used a great deal to emphasize rhythmic contours. This device is easily overdone to the point of complete boredom; so efforts were made to vary the line in width, character and color. Sometimes line was scraped into the wet pigment, as in the hair area. The line was needed in some places to separate certain colors where ambiguity might exist, as in the hair next to the red of the curtain and in the sleeve of the jacket next to the jacket front.

The painting of this decorative picture was a process of adjusting, modifying and simplifying colors and shapes until a completely flat organization was achieved. At times it amounted to a "trial and error" method in that colors and shapes were constantly being changed until they conformed to the basic arrangement and did not detract from the unity of the whole.

## IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

My thesis paintings and research have set forth two contrasting approaches to art, the materialistic illusion of the third dimension in the objective painting, and the imposition of two dimensional order on the elements in the decorative painting. In the former, it is the subject matter which dominates the painter and his work, while in the latter, the painter is free to impose order upon the subject matter and make his painting an entity in itself.

Not as much emphasis is placed on the objective painting, since my main purpose in undertaking this thesis work was to develop an original decorative painting from an objective realization. My objective picture serves as a basis for my decorative interpretation of the same motif. This was the most logical procedure for me to follow, since it has always been easier for me to view my subject matter materialistically first, and then to simplify and abstract the motif for organization and unification.

Various influences are reflected in my last painting. The elongations and extreme simplification of the figure might be due to my contact with certain primitive art forms, such as African carvings and Mayan and Aztec sculptures. (The Fauvists were also influenced by primitive art.) The precise linear character of my work suggests the Persian influence and the static, almost stiff feeling in the human figure is not unlike that of Byzantine enamel work. My color and line are derived in part from Gauguin and Matisse. Much was learned about patterning and

textures from the study of Matisse and the other Fauvists. My use of color is strictly decorative and reflects some of the freedom and boldness in color utilized by these Fauvists.

In spite of my painting reflecting these many influences, my work has retained an original quality due to my own particular style. I have learned much from my study and tracing of the decorative urge in man from primitive to modern times, and many of their ideas may be incorporated into my own work.

The painting of the decorative picture, in my opinion, was more of an intuitive process than an intellectual one. I found myself "feeling out" areas of the picture and modifying them to conform with the whole. As evidenced by my preliminary sketches, there was a definite idea in mind when I started the painting, but as the picture progressed, many changes in color, form and arrangement were necessary.

The painting of these two contrasting pictures may serve to illustrate my own artistic development in bridging the gap between visual reality and organizing the elements of reality. I can now appreciate distortion and abstraction for the purpose of design and order. Nature is but the starting point for the artist, and it is his right to utilize these elements in nature and make of them a new and complete entity in his painting.

Decorativism is one way of organizing the elements of nature, but this two dimensional approach has its limitations. Decorative painting is often described musically, as a "pleasing melody" rather than a complete "orchestration" as found in the three dimensional order of Cézanne and Picasso. The formal order of decorative painting exists on

the two dimensional surface of the painting and does not strive for deep penetration of space.

I do not believe this decorative phase of my work is the ultimate, but it has helped me to paint in a more abstract and vital manner, and may point the way to more complete abstraction in my work in the future.

I believe that I have learned to better simplify and to eliminate the non-essentials so that unnecessary detail does not clutter and detract from the fundamental unity of the painting. I hope to utilize the discoveries in my thesis work to gain more plastic order in my painting in the future.

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