

AN EFFORT TO USE NATURAL FORMS IN CREATIVE PAINTING

by

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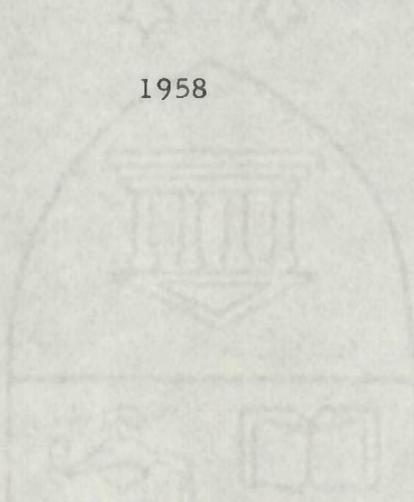
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AN EFFORT TO USE NATURAL FORMS IN CREATIVE PAINTING

"The greatness of true art... was to rediscover, to recapture, to make known to us that reality so distant from our everyday existence, and from which we stray ever farther according to the increasing solidity and impermeability of the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it, that reality which we run a serious risk of never knowing before we die, and which is nothing more or less than our life, our real life, life finally discovered and illuminated, that life which, in a sense, is present at every moment in all men as well as in the artist,"

says Proust, and he speaks in this connection of

"a revelation, which would be impossible by direct or conscious means." ¹

"Poetry points to the secrets of Nature and seeks to reveal them by means of pictures." ²

"Poetry is the expression of the mysterious meaning of the various aspects of our existence." ³

We discern in these observations the striving of the artist towards the perception, the revelation (unveiling) of a reality

1. Marcel Proust, Le Temps retrouvé, quoted in The Mind of Proust, (Cambridge University Press, 1949) p. 521.

2. Johann W. Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen, quoted in Karl Vietor, Goethe, the Thinker, (Harvard University Press, 1950) p. 521.

3. Stéphane Mallarmé, letter to Leo d'Orfer, June 27, 1884, quoted in Mallarmé: Selected Prose, Poems, Essays and Letters, edited by Bradford Cook (Baltimore, The John Hopkins Press, 1956) p. 99.

behind the surface of our impressions. When the Chinese art critic, Hsieh Ho, states that to give expression to "the cosmic spirit in its rhythmic movement,"⁴ is the primary task of the painter, he too shows the concern of the artist with an inner reality. Contrary to the Western artist -- who finds himself basically in an antagonistic position towards nature, either dominating or being subject to nature, approaching it rather actively -- the Eastern artist, feeling himself as a part of the cosmos, wants to achieve communion with the spirit of the cosmos.

The Gilgamesh-epos, the head of the Apollo from the temple of Zeus in Olympia, Tristan and Isolde, Rembrandt's landscape with the three trees, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Don Giovanni, the Mont-St.-Victoire of the old Cézanne, these are visions, pictures in which man sees himself, recognizes his place in the universe. Creating these pictures, the artist joins the prophets, the mystics, the philosophers in their effort to perceive the ultimate realities, to create the myth, to make this world habitable. Seeing in these pictures ourselves and our place in the universe -- our real selves, not our apparent selves -- we see where we must go in order to become ourselves. Vision and picture

4. Daisetz Suzuki, "Sengai: Zen and Art", in Art News Annual XXVII (New York, The Art Foundation Press, Inc. 1957) p. 116.

do not develop successively in time, but in dependence on each other. Only in the measure as it takes form, the vision becomes clear. Different visions need different forms, producing different styles.

When a civilization has reached a stage where man's urge to find his place in the universe is satisfied by the composite of the visions, no new forms, no new styles will develop. As long as the particular myth retains its power, the artist will work with the developed forms and be able to fill them with life. The question of originality does not arise (as in the case of Egyptian culture).

In Western civilization, where visions of the universe have developed and changed continually, the artist constantly needed new forms to make the new visions visible.

The artist who tries to use forms of a passed time (forms which correspond to visions which, for the artist, are not alive any more) will not be able to fill them with life, and he will not be able to contribute to the effort of his own time to develop its myth. In a civilization which loses its belief in its myth, the artist loses content for his artistic forms. When a comfortable life becomes our foremost desire, then the position of the artist, who, to speak with Hegel, should "bring to consciousness the highest interests of mind" ⁵ becomes obsolete.

In the middle of the 20th century the painter finds himself

5. G. F. W. Hegel, quoted in Herbert Read, Art and the Evolution of Man, (London, Freedom Press, 1951) p. 47.

confronted with different directions in actual painting as well as in the theories about painting. Some of these directions seem irreconcilably opposed to each other. He finds ideas which sound promising, but he wants to be convinced by the results. He sees pictures of Mondrian, who works according to a premeditated theory, and pictures of Matisse who says: "I work without theory... I am driven by an idea which I know only in the measure as it is developed by the progress of the picture." ⁶

He recalls Cézanne's words: "There is a logic of the colors, and it is with this alone, and not with the logic of the brain, that the painter should conform." ⁷

One of the main trends in the painting of our century is the attempt to paint without reference to the world of visual experience. This is non-objective painting, as we prefer to call it instead of abstract painting in order to distinguish it from those other kind of paintings, which refer to the forms of our visual experience, however reduced, changed or distorted they may appear in the picture. As far as the word "abstract" can be meaningful in painting, ("abstract" meaning the extraction of the essential traits from the whole of impression from which we start) there

6. Quoted in Gaston Diehl, Matisse (Paris, P. Tisné 1951) p. 157.

7. Quoted in Andre Malraux, The Voices of Silence, (New York, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953) p. 345.

exists only abstract art, and between a head by Raphael and the "Three Musicians" by Picasso, there is no difference in principle.

A very simple observation may induce us to assume that relationships of shapes, values, colors, developed independently from the objects of our visual experience, constitute a picture.

When Cézanne paints onions and a bottle of wine on a kitchen table, he creates a work of art. This doesn't happen when the painter Annigoni paints Queen Elizabeth. If the humble or noble object doesn't make the difference, are the formal qualities decisive? Why then not completely dispose of the objects, which direct the viewers attention in the wrong direction (making him believe that the beauty of the portrayed girl, the mood of the sunset, the moral lesson of the represented scene, or the perfection of the rendering of a visual impression make a work of art) and which set limits to the painter's use of shapes, values and colors. Should not the freedom to organize a painting exclusively according to formal necessities make possible a more perfect work of art?

In the artist's consciousness, the position of art has developed from that of integration into the common effort to form the vision of the time, (or even that of subordination to endeavours alien to art,) towards a greater and greater independence. This process has gained momentum with the rise of modern art. In a civilization which was gradually losing its belief in its highest values, the artist was

tempted to set his values as an artist, the aesthetic values, as absolute, and has tended to eliminate from his creation all elements which didn't seem to be purely artistic. What had literature, psychology, anatomy, perspective to do with the "organization of the pictorial space!" A new ideal in artistic creation had developed: purity.

In his decision to eliminate the object, the artist felt himself confirmed by parallels which he drew to the laws which govern musical creation. Music, he observed -- we cannot here go into the question as to whether this observation is well founded -- does not need to refer to the sound of the wind in the trees and the splashing of the waves against the beach.

And now he goes again to the ateliers of his friends and to expositions, and his enthusiasm gives way to thoughtfulness. He sees paintings which are pleasing, with tasteful colors, surfaces with a certain charm. And there seems to be expression of emotion, too. The visitor at an exhibition of non-objective painting (for example, the Salon des Nouvelles Realities, Paris, 1956, an exhibition selected after severe jurying) may happen to leave with a strange uneasiness, somewhat like having waited on the corner of a street, on a gray day, for a quarter of an hour and another quarter of an hour, and another one, while the awaited person did not come: a feeling of emptiness. Does this feeling have its origin in the paintings, which conveyed the state of mind of their authors, or was it the result of

the steadily growing, unconscious disappointment produced by these 150 pictures which, again and again, say nothing? We do not doubt that good pictures were always rare, but certainly in an exhibition of the Impressionists in the year 1874, or of the Fauves in 1906, there was a considerable number of pictures of quality. As we believe that some of the authors of these pictures are talented painters, we are led to question their approach to painting. We must not be misled by the observation that we can distinguish differences of quality among these paintings. We can distinguish differences of quality between wallpapers too. We are here guided by taste, which corresponds to the aesthetic level. But this is not art; it is only the beginning of art. When we apply colors to a flat surface and feel that their red does not harmonize with that yellow, that these shapes must be arranged differently and that that area should be darker, and when, perhaps, we enjoy it immensely to work out these problems, we should not yet feel entitled to believe that we are working in the realm of art. Probably we are only in the anteroom. Jacques Fath has similar problems, and probably he too enjoys finding solutions for them. But he knows that his gorgeous new spring dress is on another level of creativity than Corot's when he tried to find a form for the shape which he saw before him, painting a girl with her simple peasant's clothes. To arrange colors nicely, to produce shapes which are pleasing but do not commit the viewer to

anything, is one thing, a valuable thing which enriches our lives; but it is another thing to see the reality behind appearances.

In recent years, the non-objective movement has taken a new direction, which goes mostly under the name, "abstract expressionism, "although some times it is called "motion painting," which might be more significant.

"The poet deserves not the name while he speaks out his few subjective feelings; but as soon as he can appropriate to himself and express the world, he is a poet. Then he is inexhaustible, and can always be new, while a subjective nature has soon talked out his little internal material, and is at last ruined by mannerism." ⁸

This remark by Goethe was occasioned by a conversation about Romantic poets. These Romantic poets had, of course, still a quite objective attitude, compared to the modern tendencies in question.

"The cult of art as pure emotional abreaction ⁹ or expression is a debased form of the Romantic belief in inspiration." ¹⁰

After having made the preceding observations, which were started by an annoying exhibition, and after having taken different opinions into consideration, our artist might ask himself:

8. Johann W. Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann, January 29, 1826, edited by Ernst Buetler (Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1948) vol. XXIV.

9. ("abreaction": Getting rid of inner tensions by means of vehement but uncontrolled physical movements.)

10. Ernst Gombrich, "The Tyranny of Abstract Art" in Atlantic Monthly (Boston, Mass., The Rumford Press, April, 1958) p. 48.

What was right in these theories? Had he simplified too much, when, from the observation that the everyday meaning of a represented object did not matter in regard to the artistic value of his picture, he had drawn the conclusion that the object as such, the part of our visually experienced surroundings, was not a necessary element of the work of art?

Had he been right with his parallel to music; were the laws of musical creation applicable to the plastic arts, or did these rather follow laws parallel to the ones which govern the work of the poet? In literature too, the attempt had been made to eliminate from the sentences any meaning which could be grasped logically; even to dispense with meaningful words. The results were not encouraging.

"To construct a poem which contains nothing other than poetry is impossible" said Valéry¹¹, who had gone far in this direction. "If you aim only at poetry in poetry there is no poetry either" was T. S. Eliot's¹² experience.

"Imagine Poussin, completely repainted after nature, that is the classic painter as I understand him. What I cannot admit is the classic which restricts us. I need the communion with a master, to restore me to myself. Each time when I leave Poussin,

11. Paul Valéry, quoted in Sedlmayr, Die Revolution der Modernen Kunst (Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1955) p. 55.

12. Ibid., p. 55.

I know myself better." 13

The painter sees, perceives the world around him through the forms which generations of painters have developed. And looking at this world -- whose inner reality has been revealed to him thus -- he may develop his own visions, which will mean the creation of new forms.

13. Paul Cézanne, quoted in Bernard Dorival, Cézanne (New York, Continental Book Center, Inc., 1948) p. 110.



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CURRICULUM VITAE

I was born March 1, 1926 in Kitzbühel, Austria. I went to Ober Schule in Innsbruck, where I passed the final examinations in 1944. I studied three semesters history of art, and seven semesters of law at the universities in Innsbruck and Vienna. At the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, I studied nine semesters, finishing with the Diploma for painting in June, 1957. From September, 1955, to June, 1956, I studied in Paris with a scholarship from the French government. From September 1957 to May, 1958, I studied in Tucson, Arizona, with a tuition scholarship from the University of Arizona.

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