

The Art of Painting Since 1880: A Personal View

Harvey Gordon

TRADITIONALLY, BEGINNING WITH reference to works executed twenty thousand years ago or more, art, in its purest form, has been understood as painting and sculpture that represent observable, significant human experience. When utilized for decorative, symbolic, or expressive ends, painting and sculpture may have satisfied a specific need and a specific audience, but they have not been commonly understood as art. Art has been considered, and for many and possibly most of us remains, representation.

The twentieth century has brought impressive material and technological progress. Its art, unfortunately, has not progressed in the same impressive manner. An essentially negative, anti-traditional strain in our own culture, often referred to as Modernism, has introduced and promoted the concept of "Abstract Art." That concept is at the core of Modernism's deliberate, determined, and apparently somewhat effective attempt to negate, or break down, the traditional definition of art. Preventing this negative initiative, this artistic breakdown, from continuing has become the most challenging and profound commitment of responsible cultural leadership.

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At its finest, art functions as the physical embodiment of humanity's highest ideals and as a crucible for the ongoing regeneration of humanity's deepest values. The immense power and influence of those two functions places fine art at the pinnacle of civilization. As a result, the breakdown of art leads to the breakdown of the broader culture which then leads to the breakdown of society at large. Therefore, the integrity and the vitality of any society depend, more than many of us may realize, on how constructively it defines and how successfully it appreciates its most important art.

Although new materials, methods, and subjects and an evolving sense of beauty guarantee natural changes in the outward appearance of art, those changes, while interesting, are only superficial. With the passage of time, both the surface and subject matter of art may look somewhat different, but its essence remains the same. The highest ideals of humanity continue to inspire us; the deepest values of humanity continue to fortify us; and the representational nature of art remains a fundamental human truth.

This understanding leads to the conclusion that "Abstract Art" is the most insidious, potentially destructive lie of twentieth century culture. "Abstract Art" is a lie because art derives from and reflects human experience. While any

work of art is necessarily an abstraction of whatever it represents, without the representation of human experience, there is no art. "Abstract Art" is an insidious lie because, although individuals of ordinary common sense instinctively oppose the idea, very few seem engaged, informed, and courageous enough to refute it effectively to a society that sometimes seems adrift in confusion, indifference, and self-indulgence. "Abstract Art" is a potentially destructive lie because, if allowed to persist, it will continue to covet and claim the place of genuine art and, by polluting our culture at its highest and most powerful point, it will continue to degrade and may even destroy our entire system of cultural values.

As art is drained of recognizable content, it increasingly descends to form, self-expression, and/or decoration. Eventually, emptied of representation and detached from the reality of human experience, from its only real source of meaning, it ceases to be art and becomes, however appealing, mere design. Without art, humanity is left similarly empty and sharply, perhaps even terminally, diminished. If human experience, with the force of spirit that impels it, is allowed to vanish from art, then art itself will have vanished as well; and ours may become the age that is finally responsible for having uttered the whimper that spiritually, if not physically, helps end the world.

On the other hand, if our common objective is to proceed positively and constructively into the future, then our best course of action is to begin by establishing a solid connection with what is most authentic and important in our cultural history and to continue by adding a vibrant contemporary sensibility and relevant contemporary technology to the great tradition of past artistic accomplishment. At present, that connection is partly obstructed by a misguided Modernist ideology that embraces and pro-

notes the notion that art has somehow managed to rise above or move beyond humanity's natural and fundamental tendency to affirm our existence by representing our experience.

Modernism has co-opted Cézanne and, to a lesser extent, Whistler, among others, in order to set the stage and devise a rationale for the dismissal of subject matter from "Abstract Art," but neither of those admirable artists ever, to my knowledge, made a painting without recognizable content or advised, suggested, or even implied that any subsequent artist should or might. Cézanne's analytic mode of observation, his choppy, faceted brushwork, his delicate veils of color, and his inclination to leave some paintings unfinished may combine in ways that lend some of his subjects an aura of de-materialization; but his most generous and substantial paintings are those whose subjects de-materialize the least.

Whistler is invoked because a few of his renditions of fireworks and night scenes approach, without exceeding, the boundary of representation and because he saw fit to bestow musical rather than descriptive titles on many of his paintings. Whistler's titles were probably meant to educate and, because he was Whistler, to provoke his public. Their educational value lies in their drawing attention to the fact that each painting is a carefully formulated aesthetic composition as well as, but not instead of, a representation.

Although Whistler's stature, which derives mainly from his beautiful small works on panel, is historically underappreciated, he and Cézanne are two of a quartet of important artists who were active around the end of the nineteenth century and with whom the solid, unobstructed connection that will enable us to move successfully forward needs to be made. The others are Seurat, with his methodical, systematic approach to the application and visual mixing of

color, and van Gogh, with his open, emphatic, rhythmic brushwork and intensified hues.

It may be argued that Whistler, a painter of acute sensitivity with an exquisitely graceful touch, only added refinement to the art of painting, whereas the other three intrinsically changed and advanced it. That argument carries some weight; but, where the matter under consideration is not just art but fine art, any notable increase in refinement becomes, by definition, both a constructive change and a desired advance. As one of the four major Post-Impressionists, Whistler more properly deserves the position that recent art history has accorded to Gauguin, an artist with a dramatic biography whose often attractive, lushly colored work inclines too far toward decoration.

While the mature efforts of Cézanne, Seurat, van Gogh, and Whistler, coinciding with the increasing availability of the camera, made it apparent that painting was no longer constrained to perform the function of photography, all were thoroughly and unequivocally committed to representation. Each demonstrated repeatedly and exclusively that the inspiration, the infusion of spirit, for art was to be found in the realm of observable experience; and none displayed even the slightest inclination to retreat from representing that familiar, abundant, and commonly accessible world. These four artists, each a traditionalist, each a progressive, each laboring to keep painting alive for himself and his time, were instrumental in clarifying the syntax, the language of painting for the twentieth century.

This meant insisting that the finished painting reveal, over its full surface and to the greatest possible extent, the method and materials of its construction: the application of a tinted liquid of varying viscosity to a flat support with a brush or other tool and, at least in the cases of Seurat and Cézanne, the cre-

ation of some tints by the visible combination of others. It also incorporated a greater concentration on the most satisfying and dynamic use of painting's other formal elements: shape, value, and color; but the collective act of deliberately and unambiguously asserting both the process of painting and its consequent visual texture was the quartet's single most sophisticated, innovative, and important accomplishment. It resulted in works of art that exhibited a higher degree of structural integrity and a more compelling tension between form and content than any that had preceded them.

Since subject matter and its means of execution were given fairly equal emphasis, their visual competition for attention enabled the finished work of art to pulse and vibrate with energy when viewed from a point about an arm's length away, the most appropriate distance for making and fully appreciating fine art. Because the marks of the brush and the mixing of colors remained in evidence, painterly process visibly interlocked with and metamorphosed into a painting's subject matter. It became possible to see and to see through the painting simultaneously, to relate to its pictorial content and to become involved in its physical evolution at the same time. Painting, while faithfully continuing to serve art's basic purpose of representation, took on a vivid life of its own, gaining a textural vitality and a material presence that elevated it above and propelled it beyond the mimetic and documentary functions of photography.

Raising painting above and beyond the level of photography is not nearly the same thing as entirely abandoning representational content; but it is on that precise and not very complicated point that Modernist theory seems to have foundered, to have lost its artistic direction. From that juncture, Modernism intelligently proceeded to assimilate the syntax of painting but unwisely eschewed its

deeper artistic purpose. Having learned the language diligently and fluently, it disdained to use it in a truly meaningful way. Modernism concluded that the whole did not and did not need to add up to more than the sum of its parts, its aesthetic components, its elements of design. For the art of painting, that conclusion is utterly inadequate and demonstrably false.

To paraphrase another recent writer on the subject: in any artistically successful painting, by Cézanne, Titian, Velasquez, or Vermeer, it is critical to be able to discover ten, twenty, or a hundred intriguing and engrossing non-representational configurations; but in a hundred thousand non-representational paintings, it is not possible to discover a single Cézanne, a single Titian, a single Velasquez, or a single Vermeer. This is because the fundamental significance of art does not reduce to design; and even the most aesthetically pleasing design attains the power to transcend its own inherent limits only if and only when it is deployed in the representation of human experience, which constitutes the absolute, irreplaceable essence of art.

How and why this crucial and apparently self-evident truth, this ideal of integrating meaning and beauty that has lifted humanity toward its highest achievements, was discarded and repudiated by Modernism is an open question; but a partial answer may be discovered by considering both the early development of the painters Mondrian and Duchamp and the way in which the official culture has responded to and evaluated their ensuing accomplishments. A few years after the beginning of the twentieth century, both men were young and aspiring artists who found themselves either unwilling or unable to continue in the traditional manner: unwilling or unable, in other words, to produce what had been traditionally understood as art.

Mondrian, proceeding as a dedicated

painter, withdrew into an austere, esoteric mode of symbolism and design. Duchamp, possessed of a more playful and mischievous intellect, apparently determined that, since he was not fated to mature and advance as an artist, he would devote his best efforts, instead, to ridiculing and attempting to invalidate traditionally held ideas about art. Insofar as the accepted definition of art was allowed to stand, Mondrian and Duchamp could be viewed only as artistic failures, would-be artists who, in the early 1900s, in a world about to embark on a long period of terrible self-annihilation, lacked the power to combine significant representational content and pleasing aesthetic form in their work, to forge the integration of meaning and beauty that characterizes fine art.

As humanity managed to survive, comprehend, and sense itself in some large measure responsible for the horrors of two World Wars and the hideous purges and mass exterminations that accompanied the second, the inclination of a demoralized, shattered culture to identify more closely with failure than success was understandable and unsurprising. The intriguing and possibly emblematic failures of Mondrian and Duchamp, foreshadowing society's own, came to seem more culturally relevant than the limited and minor successes of painters like Vuillard, Corinth, Morandi, Soutine, and Porter. The situation continues to be further exacerbated by a level of contemporary cultural hubris too great to allow for the admission that the individuals whose work seemed, in some way, the most important and alluring had failed as artists. Their failures, of course, were exactly what made their work seem so important and alluring to a culture burdened, as a result of its own recent history, with guilt about its past, apprehension about its future, and doubt about itself.

Because art was correctly understood

to exist at the pinnacle of culture, the prevailing definition of art had to be broken down, just as Duchamp desired, and then re-configured to accommodate what seemed most culturally relevant, even if what seemed most culturally relevant was only the acting-out of insecurity, inadequacy, and impotence rather than the creation of genuine art. This ideological breakdown, encouraged and then force-fed by Modernism, was allowed to infiltrate, overtake, and eventually dominate many of our most prominent cultural institutions. In a profoundly damaging distortion of values, the artistic failures of Mondrian, Duchamp, Pollock, and countless others too weak and too poorly fortified to bear the burden of a difficult, problematic reality were officially anointed as paradigms of artistic success.

Once the idea that art might be something quite different from traditionally supposed gained official approbation, Modernism was set in motion. If art could be something different from the traditional, it also could be, and probably should be, something different from the last difference as well. Art, it seemed, could be almost anything that anybody with a modicum of apparent authority said it was, which yielded a windfall for the symbiotic businesses of selling and explaining art. Once different, which is easier to identify, was accepted as more important or relevant than better and finer, which require knowledge and sophistication, then different became easier to sell; and different invariably required an accompanying and superficially plausible explanation.

As mass communication and the news media expanded, their role in the process expanded accordingly. Each new species of Modern Art, however unfamiliar and unanticipated, and the more unfamiliar and unanticipated the better, became a newer and more newsworthy man-bites-dog story. Every notable dif-

ference, every trend, every passing fashion, generated activity and attention for makers, dealers, critics, and academics, each with a useful and admirable social function to perform, but all, insofar as they were invested in and supported by Modernist ideology, resting on the same false, weak, and unworthy foundation.

The relationship of Modernism to the development of aspiring artists may be epitomized by the use of a slogan that was repeated in art schools during the 1960s, "Anybody can learn to draw like Rembrandt." It was offered to justify an increasing disdain for the teaching and learning of representational drawing skills. If anybody could learn to draw as well as Rembrandt, then nobody, it seemed, needed to; especially if, since the constant re-invention of art had become more important than representation, competent drawing was no longer an essential part of an aspiring artist's long-term goals.

Considered with the utmost respect for human potential, the slogan may be true. Experience, however, indicates that, while most people are capable of learning to draw, some well, very few have the facility and determination to draw like Rembrandt, one of art's most fluent draughtsmen. Even accepted as truth, the slogan might just as well have provided every aspiring artist with a goal toward which to strive rather than an excuse for not striving, for taking a lax, undisciplined, or dismissive approach to drawing. Some young artists did adopt an open, contemporary approach to methods and materials while, at the same time, remaining focused on art's traditional ideal, the successful integration of meaning and beauty; but their work, because it failed to conform to Modernist ideology, was often ignored, derided as obsolete, demeaned as precious, or patronized as illustration and craft.

The perspective of the general public on these developments is also worth con-

sidering. Many individuals simply do not possess much interest in or concern for fine art, which requires specialized knowledge, focused attention, and even intense concentration in order to be fully appreciated. Serious art does not reward passive engagement in the easier, more directly accessible manner of decoration, illustration, photography, and entertainment, which, as a consequence, enjoy greater popularity in spite of the fact that they yield lower, less substantial returns. Those willing to settle for lower and lesser satisfactions often seem content to remain largely indifferent to fine art.

That segment of the public with an interest in more important, enduring, and valuable art also tends to have a fairly respectful understanding that its full appreciation requires a degree of sophistication and sensitivity, a level of acculturation, that needs to be nurtured by education and developed through applied experience. In the absence of adequate instruction and experience in art appreciation, individuals who are genuinely interested in fine art may find themselves empathetic but insecure; and the insecurity may be exacerbated by a sense that things are changing rapidly in the world and that one has an obligation to try and keep up with the changes. This combination of qualities is particularly vulnerable to the manipulation of Modern Art Professionals.

A full appreciation of fine art does depend on a high degree of technical sophistication and a keen sensitivity to the compositional elements of a given medium. Therefore, the rewards of the finest art are determined as much by the receptivity of the audience as by the achievement of the artist. An open-minded empathy is the optimum starting point for full appreciation, but that empathy needs to be supported by a secure philosophical foundation and a sound technical framework. The Modern Art Professionals offer only the technical

framework. Their philosophical position is one of denial at worst and equivocation at best. Human experience is either banished from Modern Art or accepted only as one possible option, as though a clear and vivid consciousness of and a strong emotional relationship to the world around us constituted only one possible option for a meaningful life.

When the Modern Art Professionals are well-credentialed, when their technical information is instructive, stimulating, and comprehensive, and when the institutions that employ them have given their sanction to "Abstract Art," the empathetic, insecure learner may become a seemingly willing convert. A deep, intuitive sense that representation must play a fundamental role in art may linger, but insecure learners are not often willing to contradict eminent, apparently well-qualified experts; and, if the matter in question has already been acknowledged as an acceptable option, what would be the point of mounting a challenge to established authority? In this case, the point would be to assert, with full regard for constructive technological progress, that not everything changes, not everything needs to change, and not every change that does occur is necessarily for the best.

The preceding sections, beginning with an attempt to place the careers of Mondrian and Duchamp in accurate perspective and suggesting a rationale for the inception and ostensible acceptance of Modernism, are merely speculation on what may remain a matter of dispute or even a mystery; but there is nothing mysterious about why the breakdown that constitutes the essence of Modernism needs to be promptly and emphatically overcome. Modernist ideology pointed, from its beginning, toward the frivolous and futile dead-end it now occupies. Its shallow frivolity may be an indulgence that our society, in its unprecedented affluence, is able to afford;

but Modernism's deeper futility, its lack of meaningful and nourishing substance, its inexorable, relentless regression toward the suffocation of the human spirit can no longer be ignored, can no longer be tolerated, can no longer be accepted, can no longer be endured.

"Abstract Art" now exists as nothing more than a fruitless, failed experiment, driven by the corrupt ideology and vested interest of a narrow cultural elite and supported by broad cultural apathy, ignorance, and gullibility. "Abstract Art" has grown and temporarily thrives, like a malignant tumor pursuing its own and its host's imminent demise, by invading, contaminating, and then draining the life-force out of its environment. By negating the fundamental role of human experience in genuine art, "Abstract Art" denies the value of human life; and by denying the value of human life, it threatens the future of all humanity. "Ab-

stract Art" is a menacing, nihilistic lie that must be ended: once, for all, and the sooner, the better.

When that lie is ended, the understanding that art is the representation of human experience will prevail; and, from this core of simple but essential wisdom, the waning, weakening spirit of our society will be replenished and re-vitalized. History will be re-routed out of the dead-end of Modernism, and a healthy culture will flourish from roots in fertile, uninfected philosophical ground. Painting, having surmounted the century's atrocities and absorbed its intensity, having achieved a progressive synthesis of Post-Impressionism, and having regained a sense of positive, meaningful direction, will lead the arts, and the arts will lead humanity, into a culturally enlightened era of increased integrity, enhanced refinement, and true, enduring significance.

Summer End

*A tarnished white butterfly
zig-zagging across the singed grass
of Summer End.*

*Looking for something it remembered
a dewy blossom
a flash of color
a fragrance*

something of summer still.

*With no other winged thing
for confidence or collaboration
it balances its timorous innocence
against the dark Immense
the metamorphosis of Autumn.*

Already it is gone...

*A tiny wistful Odysseus
breasting its seas sirens
clasping rocks monsters...*

*What harbour what homeland what Ithaca
now?*

Louise Dauner