THE OPPOSITE OF IRONY

How Integrity and Authenticity will Save Modern Art

by Homunculus

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INTRODUCTION

What is art? Why is it important? How important is it? What is the artist's responsibility to his audience? What is the audience's responsibility to the artist? How does the artist's experience of making art differ from the audience's experience of appreciating it? Is there a "right" way to make art? Why is it right?

There is an easy, cynical answer to the first question. Art is anything that anyone who considers himself to be an artist considers to be art. That raises the question of what is good art and what is bad art, because even bad art is still art, how to tell them apart and how to make sure what you're making is good art.

I submit that my way of making art is the right way of making art—I wouldn't be doing it this way if I didn't think so. You might think that is a foregone conclusion, that no one deliberately makes bad art, but alas, that seems not to be the case. There is now a sizable school of artists centered on the concept that making bad art is good art. It is my intention here to demonstrate that,

laughably self-evident as it might seem, bad art is not good art, good art is worth making and in fact the state of the arts has not descended to the point that deliberately making bad art is the only reasonable response.

Let me hasten to state that I'm not suggesting that all artistic activity outside the particular path I follow is invalid or of lesser quality. My contention is that, insofar as an artistic period may be said to have an overarching theme, my approach is at least pointed in the right direction, just as it is possible to look at the art of the Renaissance and say "Those guys were all about perspective," or at the Baroque and say "The Baroque genius lay in the portrait." There will always be exceptions to the rule, but in the main future art historians will look at my kind of art and say, "Yes, that's what it was all about."

So what is my kind of art? My kind of art is Representation and I will have a great deal more to say on the subject but before turning to that and other issues, I'd like to consider a little further the question of what is good art.

In his book "The Art Instinct," Denis Dutton lists twelve criteria for what he considers "art," but I would describe as "good art." They are:

1. It is pleasurable to look at.
2. It displays skill and virtuosity.
3. It evidences a style.
4. It conveys novelty and creativity.
5. It is amenable to criticism.
6. It is representational (See?!).
7. The appreciation of it requires "special focus."
8. It conveys a sense of expressive individuality.
9. It is "emotionally saturated."
10. It provides an intellectual challenge.
11. It comes with a set of traditions and institutions.
12. It provides an imaginative experience.

Most of these are self-explanatory. Item 7 refers to the need for art to be appreciated in a physical and mental environment that avoids the distractions of daily existence: physically, the gallery or museum, mentally, the special concentration of aesthetic meditation. No. 9 I found interesting. Dutton refers to the fact that

the emotional impact of a (good) piece of art is immediately apparent; it requires no build-up or development but is immediately apparent to the viewer from the first glance.

Of course, depending on your outlook many of these criteria might seem arbitrary, uncalled for, wrong. Someone who likes Andres Serrano might object to items 2, 6 or 11. The person who prefers Thomas Kinkade might take exception to items 4 or 10. I myself see no need for "style" (Item 3) as a prerequisite for good art;[1] likewise, the obsession with originality and self-expression in today's art culture has reached the level of self-parody.

[1] Style is generally viewed as an idiosyncrasy of the artist's approach to his work, a sort of second signature to help the viewer identify the painting. To that end many artists deliberately cultivate a style to establish their identity. Genuine style to my thinking reflects the artist's struggle with the intransigence of his materials: the more difficult the medium, the more pronounced the style. A sculpture executed in granite gives a more pronounced sense of style than one done in marble. We applaud the artist's mastery when his control of a difficult medium is such that all evidence of style disappears. Indeed, in the least recalcitrant media such mastery may be achieved that the style becomes completely "transparent;" cf. Ingres' portrait drawings.

Questions of individual taste aside, why does such a thing as bad art even exist? Everyone has criteria for differentiating between good and bad art. Whatever your taste, you must accept that what others like is art. If you don't like it, it's bad art. If you do, it's good. How do you tell the difference? Why should there be a difference at all? This and similar conundrums are addressed in Chapter 3.

But enough. Before investigating art in all its glory, let us investigate the connection between the divine science and the dismal one.

CHAPTER I
ART AND ECONOMICS

The world implicitly recognizes the value of artistic activity, sometime to an astonishing degree, yet in the main, and especially in American society, it is largely ignored and discounted. Today's art scene is almost feudal in its economic structure. A great mass of unsuccessful artists doggedly pursue their dreams despite the massive indifference of both cognoscenti and laypeople; a small "middle class" of reasonably successful artists make a modest living from the sale of their paintings; and a tiny class of art stars pull down enormous fees for their work. Many of these artists perhaps deserve the approbation they receive; but in the case of many of today's art celebrities, future generations no doubt will look back and remark with astonishment, "They paid how much for that?"

Art permeates our society to a surprising degree. Package design can make or break a product. Luxury items like cars or boats sell based largely on how good they look, not how well they perform. Visual graphic

values dominate print, TV, cinema, computer interfaces. In this banal, commercial sense, the impact or value of art cannot be underestimated.

Is art then an attractive gloss on the veneer of civilization? Is it merely decoration? I say no. Alternately, is art just another form of entertainment? In our materialistic society with its often pedestrian goals and ignoble motives, there are many who would like nothing better than to demote visual art to just another form of entertainment: something essentially worthless to which we arbitrarily assign value because it amuses us. But if art, if painting, were merely a form of entertainment it would have ceased to exist with the advent of photography and cinema, and rightly so. Despite its seeming demotion from being the primary means of conveying social messages, painting is still here. It still has something important to say.

Art does not stoop merely to entertain. Aesthetic values enable people to endure what otherwise might seem unendurable. In Japan people habitually endure conditions of overcrowding that would start riots in the

West. The Japanese can do this because the aesthetic underpinnings of their traditional society are explicitly incorporated into every aspect of their lives. The fruits of Japanese aesthetic are available to every member of their society; consequently, in a society virtually all of whose members live in conditions we would consider evidence of severe impoverishment, there is virtually no underclass or social unrest.

The sad flip side of aesthetic impoverishment is on display in the former Communist states of Eastern Europe. Fifty years of Socialist Realist aesthetic ensured the ugliest environment possible. In many of these countries living standards are superficially higher than in Japan, but the social contract is broken.

Entertainment is mass producible. The reproduction process can actually enhance the quality of the product. A reproduced piece of art, on the other hand, is only a pale shadow of the original.[1] People who buy reproductions of art as a substitute for art, mistaking visual content for aesthetic presence. The most ama-

[1] Prints notwithstanding. Fine art prints when executed properly are actually multiple originals.

teurish original piece has more genuine presence and value than a reproduction of a masterpiece.

Another hallmark of entertainment is its rapid depreciation in value. The album bought ten years ago for $10 is on sale for a dime at today's garage sale. Last year's blockbuster movie is this year's rental, next year's movie of the week. Most objects lose value as they age. The only exceptions are things that are already very, very old, and art.

Traditional economic theory states that there are only three genuine ways to create new value: grow it, mine it, or manufacture it from raw materials. Art has affinities with all three modes of value creation. Art-making typifies value creation.

First of all, art is patently a manufacturing process. Paintings, for instance, are manufactured or assembled from raw materials of lesser value: canvas, pigment, glue. These raw materials are subjected to a variety of processes that result in a new object of much greater value than its constituents. Art is an assembly line.

It can also be an astonishingly efficient assembly line. How much did Van Gogh pay for the stretcher bars, canvas and paint he used to create Starry Night? In the hands of a master, a Van Gogh or Picasso, a few dollars worth of materials can be transformed into an object worth millions of dollars, if not literally priceless. The ratio of value of materials to finished product is almost absurd. Painting is the most efficient form of manufacture ever invented.

Van Gogh only painted for a few years but Picasso created massive amounts of high quality work yearly throughout a lengthy career. At his height, his daily economic output must have rivaled a small diamond mine: one man, a few thousand dollars worth of materials each year, creating tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in new value.

But art is not merely a superior form of manufacture. It is also a mining operation. The artist, particularly the landscape painter, prospects for beauty in his environment. When he finds it he extracts it from its matrix, filters it through his sensibility and transfers it

to canvas.

The artist pans for beauty rather than gold nuggets, but the process is identical. Find it, dig it out, refine it, use it. The artist's mother lode is natural beauty. It is no coincidence that the portrait painter speaks of "capturing" the character of his subject, as does the still life painter. This process is more than metaphorical. The artist mines the environment for beauty and converts it to art.

Finally, we may compare art to a kind of farming. Note that artist as manufacture was a statement of fact, and artist as miner a matter of metaphysics, artist as farmer is symbolic; but true nonetheless. The artist's field is himself, his crop is his sensibility. Mastery grows, and continues to grow as time passes.

In no other intellectual endeavor is this relentless development of skill and achievement so apparent. Writers often display youthful brilliance and then fade away. Athletes and dancers reach their peak in their twenties, scientists perhaps in their thirties, actors with rare exceptions in their forties, musicians (but

not composers) shall we say in their fifties. Then comes almost inevitable decline. Only the visual artist continues to grow and grow in stature, barring infirmity, into his seventies, eighties, nineties. So long as he can hold a brush, he will continue to mature, to flower, as an artist. Experience is the compost in which the artist nurtures his talent.

Art is the ultimate economic activity. The artist's job is to locate beauty in his environment, extract it from its matrix, distill it through his sensibility and assemble it into a painting. Art embodies the value-making process.

Our society is not noted for its tendency to frivolously assign value. Until the very end of his life Van Gogh's paintings were studiously ignored by the art world. A hundred years later, the enormous value of his work is universally recognized. Insofar as this value is real it must have already adhered to the paintings at the time they were created. The failure of Van Gogh's contemporaries to recognize the value of his paintings does not mean they were any less valuable in 1880 than

in 1980. The value was always there.

I doubt Van Gogh's work is presently overvalued. Certain contemporary artworks currently command high prices which future art history may or may not bear out. In either case, the value is or is not already present in the art. Damien Hirst implicitly acknowledged this when he created a piece of art that could never be worth less than the extremely expensive materials used to make it.

At first glance, rarity and uniqueness would seem to be the major component in the value of art. Van Gogh is dead. There will never be any more paintings by Van Gogh, only fewer. The value of all the remaining Van Goghs must therefore inevitably increase because the number of Van Goghs must inevitably decline. However, this criterion lowers the artist's oeuvre to the level of a mere collectible, and it has its limits. I cannot imagine a price being set on the Mona Lisa, but I can without too much effort imagine one being set on the Venus of Willendorf, a piece perhaps one hundred times older and unique in its provenance. This is because the Ve-

nus of Willendorf, despite its extraordinary pedigree, is in the final analysis merely a piece of primitive craft; the Mona Lisa exists on a higher plane.

At a certain point a piece of art ceases to be merely an object and becomes an individual or entity unto itself. With any great piece of art a certain point is reached beyond which we can no longer assign a value to it and merely call it "priceless." In a moment of fiscal crisis the French government might be able to balance its budget by selling the Mona Lisa. It's unthinkable, though; because the Mona Lisa is, literally, priceless.

We have seen that art is a unique commodity. It is ubiquitous, it is exemplifies every method of value generation. Art is, simply, the most precious, the most valuable thing on earth. Why? What makes art so important? As we shall see, art lies at the well-spring of every important field of human endeavor. Art is the driving force behind society, for good or ill. As we shall see, society does not create art. Art creates society.

CHAPTER II
REPRESENTATION

As I mentioned in the Introduction, this book is an apology for a particular approach to painting: my own. I advocate this approach as a panacea for what ails modern art. Therefore, it behooves me to explain exactly what approach I am promoting, and why it is the proper approach.

This approach is called "Representation." In a certain sense, Representation can be described as the depiction of colored volumes in space. Representation is the absolute refusal to paint anything except what lies directly before the artist. Representation is painting exclusively from life. The representationalist paints what he sees, only what he sees, only while he's looking at it, only while it's right there in front of him. He does not work from photographs, or from memory, or imagination, or even from his own sketches. He works exclusively from life. I wish there were something more complicated to say on the subject, but really it keeps coming back to this basic, irrefutable, stubborn bottom

line of representation. *The representationalist works exclusively from life.*

Representation is one of the four main approaches available to the contemporary Western artist may work: Representation, Realism, Abstraction and Nonobjectivism. These four represent a spectrum of philosophical and technical approaches towards the processes of making and appreciating art.

Representation is not Realism, although obviously there are affinities. Realists often make use of representational techniques as a tool or a teaching aid, but the opposite is never true. Representationalists do not use realist techniques or substitutions; then they would be realists.

The realist's primary goal is to create "realistic" images of one sort or another. For this reason we find all sorts of realist painting: Social Realism, Magical Realism, Photorealism; but there is only one kind of Representation. As soon as you take the painting back to your studio and putter around with it to make it more salable, you are no longer a representationalist. You are

a realist.

Another essential difference between the two: to a realist, if the viewer is unable to identify the subject matter, the painting is a failure. If you can't tell what it is, it's no good. In contrast, the viewer's apprehension of the subject of a representational painting, while it might be mildly gratifying to the artist, is secondary and inconsequential. It is the artist's direct experience of reality and its direct transference to canvas that matters. Representation is not about making pictures. It's about making a picture.

For realists, the way visual information is gathered is not as important as the final product, while to the representationalist the process of gathering and conveying direct visual information is the final product. Realists can work from photos, or memory, or sketches, or imagination. Anything goes, as long as the finished product "looks real." Representationalists work exclusively from life.

By necessity Representation is quick, sketchy, immediate. It is particularly suitable for landscape painting.

(I primarily paint landscapes myself. If you assume I'm taking about the landscape when I talk about art in general, you will not go too far wrong when reading this book. I probably should have said that earlier.)

There are many schools of Realism. There is only one school of Representation. There is plenty of bad realist art but there is no, there cannot be, such thing as bad representational art. As long as the artist sincerely does his best to convey his perceptions as directly, succinctly and expressively as he can, there can be bad painting, but not bad art. [1]

Representation is difficult because it permits no shortcuts, no easy way to success. A representational artist should start to feel suspicious if his work starts to flow too easily. Realism allows the use of conventions (more on conventions later), technical or visual shortcuts legitimately developed by the artist from his

[1] Good art which is also bad painting is not really a contradiction. Georgia O'Keeffe comes to mind as a great artist who was a bad painter, as she herself freely admitted. The greatness of O'Keeffe's vision shines through the mediocrity of her technique like a search light through a dirty window.

own experience or training. The perfection of the conventional approach can be seen in Far Eastern painting.[2] The Realist's use of conventions is sanctioned, and is often identified with his style.[3] In this sense the representational artist cannot have a style, except insofar as mastery eludes him, since the representational approach by definition excludes such tools. Each painting must be wrested anew from nature.

The realist painter may choose to concentrate on detail but this is a limited option for the representationalist. It's simply not possible or even desirable to capture every detail in a scene painted *plein air alla prima*, at least here in New England. I haven't had the opportunity to paint in, say, the Southwest, where the light is more reliable and it's possible to return to a location on successive days and have approximately the same visual experience each day. Even so, I would imagine a limit to how many times you could return to the same *plein air* painting. Representational still life is of course another

[2] An example of convention gone horribly, horribly wrong are those "magic" oil painting shows on TV where the artist paints with a house-painter's brush or a wad of dryer lint

[3] See earlier discussion of style in Introduction.

issue, as is the portrait.

For the landscape painter, the obvious solution is to select only the important details. From there he moves on to capturing the essential details, and then only the essential details. This leaves the representationalist quivering on the edge of Abstraction, a mere conceptual step away from a whole other way of painting. But that is where he belongs, balanced precariously between realist and abstract concerns. Insofar as a representational image maintains its identity, it is because the artist is trying to convey only his direct apprehension of reality, has succeeded in doing so.

I have mentioned Abstraction, and so I will pause briefly in my discussion of Representation to address other approaches to art making.

As noted earlier, there are four main divisions of modern Western art: Realism, Representation, Abstraction and Nonobjectivism. These four schools of thought gradually blend into one another, creating a spectrum or gradient of painterly and aesthetic concerns. Each has aspects to recommend it. As we shall

see, each has achieved distinction as the more or less predominant art form of a particular period of Western art. To summarize their philosophical differences:

Realist, as we've discussed, strive to create a realistic image, however defined.

Representationalists are driven to convey visual experience directly from experience to canvas, with nothing more intervening than the artist's sensibility.

Abstraction, like Representation, springs from an external visual stimulus, but the abstractionist takes the representationalist's indifference to illusion a step further. The Abstract artist's primary concern is to seek out the underlying dynamism of visual forms while deliberately ignoring the conceptual context of his imagery. Abstraction and Representation constitute a close gradient of aesthetic response, with one implicitly acknowledging and the other explicitly suppressing the identity of the subject matter.

Nonobjectivism, like Realism, is primarily concerned with Idea. Nonobjective art is completely divorced

from surrounding visual reality, springing exclusively from the artist's inner vision. Imagery is unconditionally personal, and the audience's appreciation of the underlying symbolism, if it exists, is of little or no concern to the artist. Nonobjectivism ranges from the painterly imagery of Color Field and Minimalism to the more rarefied efforts of Conceptual and "Post-Modern" art.

To summarize:

The Realist painter is primarily concerned with the creation of recognizable imagery. Primary observation is only a tool to achieve this aim, and can to a certain degree be dispensed with.

The Representationalist is concerned with observation. Accurate observation may result in recognizable imagery, but this is more in the line of a happy accident than an essential condition.

Abstraction starts out with an external visual impetus, but makes no effort to achieve a recognizable image; it may deliberately avoid it. Abstraction emphasizes and exaggerates the underlying formal elements in

the visual field.

Nonobjectivism eschews recognizable imagery altogether in favor of a personal iconography of form and color divorced from visual reality. The expression of inner emotion is paramount.

Put another way: the Nonobjectivist paints what he feels. The Abstractionist paints what he feels about what he sees. The Representationalist paints what he sees. The Realist paints what things look like.

* * *

One more quality differentiates Representation from other art approaches: sincerity. That is not to say that other art approaches are inherently insincere; quite the contrary. Nevertheless, it is possible, it is all too easy, to be insincere within the context of Abstraction or Realism. Whole schools are founded on the concept of art-as-joke, artist-as-wiseguy. Hanging a urinal on the wall or putting a dead horse in formaldehyde is not within the purview of Representation. We shall see in the next chapter why this is bad.

Representation

Representation is incapable of irony.

Landscape is the dominant idiom of representational art because the demands of the subject and the medium most closely correspond with the representational approach. A purely representational approach to portrait painting is more problematical. However, such an approach did appear in the West (and only in the West, so far as I know) some four centuries ago, and remains with us to this day; however, the emotional intimacy and intense empathy required to paint a portrait are essentially at odds with the dispassionate appreciation of true Representation. A portrait reduced to its essential details, to colored volumes in space, is no portrait at all, although it may still be very fine art. In portrait painting there are no "unimportant" details. The portrait is non-transcendental.

Representation likewise might seem to lend itself to still life but for the unavoidable necessity of "setting up" the subject. This artifice detracts from the "found" or accidental nature of pure representational imagery.[4]

[4] I suppose a "found" still life is a possibility, but its rarity in the canon suggests an essential departure from the aesthetic of still life.

One might imagine representational approaches to other realist genres, but the mental and aesthetic gymnastics necessary to achieve true representation within the context of, say, history painting, is ridiculous. For there to be truly representational history painting, the artist would have to be present at the actual event. This has sometimes been the case, as in Goya's "Horrors of War," and the results are terrible to see. Of course, from the point of view of a realist history painter (and some few still exist), all this is splitting hairs and completely unnecessary.

As we shall see, both representation and landscape painting achieved a certain maturity at the same time, in the late nineteenth century. Their fates remain inextricably entwined. So long as there is landscape, there will be Representation. It is its essential means of expression.

CHAPTER III
THE LESSON OF ART HISTORY

Like every other human undertaking, we can not begin to understand art until we understand its history. But first, some definitions.

The concept of "Western" art should be self-explanatory but I will use the term "Modern" in its historical sense as descriptive of all art since the beginning of the Renaissance. The application of that term to current major art movements, along with the meaningless term "Post-Modern," is presumptuous and misleading and I will suggest an alternate term to describe the current art movement.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century art historians took a view we may call "Spenglerian." Spengler thought that civilizations rose and fell in a manner analogous to organic growth, with birth, maturity, old age and inevitable death. Art historians saw similar tendencies in the development of Western art movements.

This theory, both in art historical circles and in the wider historical field, is currently in disrepute. Indeed, while the earlier eras of modern Western art conform admirably to this model, from approximately the nineteenth century on it seems to fail. That the failure of Western art to conform to organic modes coincided with the recognition of those selfsame organic patterns in history is in itself revealing.

As an added disproof, the art of most non-Western cultures and civilizations, many quite sophisticated, don't seem to conform to this model at all. There are no dramatic revolutions in Japanese and Chinese art (unless we count their recent surrender to Western modalities) as there have been any number of times in the West. To the unsophisticated eye quite different Eastern art movements seem nearly identical in technique and subject matter.

Nevertheless, I believe the theory has a certain validity and that many aspects not only of Western art, but of Eastern and other non-Western art movements as well, can be accommodated within a Spenglerian mod-

el, suitably modified.

Spengler concluded that civilizations conformed to an organic model of birth, maturity and death. This exemplar was first applied to Western art history in the nineteenth century and seemed to fit the observable facts admirably. Modern Western art begins with the early Renaissance, achieves perfection in the High Renaissance, and then decays into Mannerism. From the ashheap of *la maniera* springs Baroque art, which after a vigorous heyday likewise declines into the Rococo. From the vantage point of the nineteenth century it was impossible to foresee the fate of Romanticism, but many of the artists of the last quarter of that century certainly accepted the organic theory and proudly called themselves Decadents.

From our privileged viewpoint a discernible flaw to this theory becomes evident during the Romantic period. The main fly in the Spenglerian ointment is that, if this theory is correct, the art of the late nineteenth century should be just simply terrible. Instead, some of the greatest paintings of the last three hundred years

were executed by the likes of Monet, Van Gogh, Degas. What's so decadent about that?

Here is the explanation for the apparent failure but actual success of the Spenglerian approach to art history.

First, there is an important difference between applying the Spenglerian paradigm to art history as opposed to political or social history. Other kinds of history ultimately concern themselves with the movements and actions of enormous populations. Art history focuses on the activities of an extremely small group of people. Had these people failed to exist, the world might be culturally the poorer, but not necessarily materially so. In political history, whether or not a new nation succeeds in the long run or promptly fails, the people who make up the nation will still exist in some form. But if an art movement failed to materialize, who would ever know? If Surrealism had failed to generate Dada, would we notice the difference?

So the basic difference then between art history and political history is that political history is inevitable

in the sense that *something must happen*. Art history is contingent. Even in the West long periods of eventful political history have gone by with little or no change to the attendant art forms.

Political history will go on, nations will be born and die, change will occur. For change to come about in art history, there must be something else; there has to be an Idea.

Every modern Western art movement has had an Idea, a defining, central concept, implicit at its birth, realized at its height, and played out as the movement declines into decadence.

In most cultures, indeed for most of Western history, this development and retreat occur at rates so slow as only to be apparent over hundreds of years. Classical Japanese and Chinese art certainly never went through periods with dozens of competing art movements. But twice in Western history, first during the Classical age and more intensely in our Modern era, the rate of artistic evolution has sped up to an unbelievable degree. The Western art of just the past 500 years has been far

more eventful than 5000 years of Chinese art. Western art history has far outpaced Western social development. The only similar historical development, tellingly, is the geometric increase in Western scientific and technical knowledge.

This acceleration can be attributed to the defining feature of Western art, the essential difference between it and all other cultural traditions. For all other cultures, art develops through the perfection of convention. In the West, since the Renaissance, art has proceeded through a process of stripping away convention.

By convention I mean those quasi-symbolic images generally accepted at the cultural level as signifying a particular concept. A trivial but ubiquitous example is the "smiley face." A circle, two dots and an arc obviously bear only a fleeting resemblance to a real face; nevertheless it is universally recognized, at least in the West (I would be interested to see how easily it is interpreted in a primitive or traditional culture; I suspect not with too much difficulty).

In sophisticated hands, convention can provide the

basis for magnificent art. Eastern art is highly conventionalized. Like all convention, it has its original impetus in observation, and from time to time returns to the source, but for the most part Eastern art is consciously based on the refinement of previous achievements, the fine-tuning of conventional short hands. I don't suggest there is something wrong with this. Quite the contrary; for most cultures, for most of human history, this is how art is made. But Western art has taken a different course.

The art of the late Middle Ages was extremely conventionalized. From the depiction of the human form (Clark's "Gothic convention") to methods of depicting perspective, landscape and drapery, imagery was drawn from copy books as hierarchically defined as the Mustard Seed Garden Manual. Within the self-limiting confines of accepted convention this art achieved a certain greatness, but it is no coincidence that the crowning achievements of the Gothic period were to be found in architecture, rooted as it is in the concrete, rather than in painting.

The Renaissance took the first step towards the stripping convention away from art. Ironically, this step occurred not through the rejection of existing convention but through its replacement with a new, but much more accurate, convention.

The artists of the Renaissance were Realists. Direct observation of nature was pursued as never before, but essentially as an educational and aesthetic tool, not as an end in itself. The Renaissance artist studied anatomy assiduously, participated in dissections, learned to paint drapery by copying plaster-impregnated cloth. His perspective was based on mathematical analysis. Once these lessons were fully absorbed, the painter was expected to, and indeed did, work exclusively from his superbly trained imagination. He was the purveyor of a radical and scientifically-founded new convention.

The Renaissance artist could draw the figure in any pose, drape it with clothes, place it in a convincing landscape or architecture, all without any direct reference to nature. If it were not a point of honor that he work in this manner, is was perhaps automatically

assumed. The Renaissance artist therefore still worked from convention, but from a higher order convention, rooted in a scientific rather than casual analysis of visual phenomena. The imagery of a Renaissance painting is strikingly more realistic than its predecessors, but this difference is almost coincidental. The mindset had yet to change.

Thus the Renaissance invented Western Conventional Realism, an approach that has never entirely disappeared even during the most anti-rationalist periods to follow, cropping up right through the present.

In Mannerism we encounter the first decadent phase of a modern Western art movement, and so we shall use it as an exemplar for later, similar periods. All decadent periods, in all cultures, display the following characteristics:

- Excessive elegance; attenuation of form
- Excessive decorativeness; the primacy of pattern over composition
- Misplaced erudition; quotation from previous artists rather than self-reliance

- Lack of seriousness; self-indulgence
- Sentimentality

The primary visual hallmark of decadent art is excess: excess emotion, excess decoration, excess reliance on the conceptual. While valid art movements try to express the most information with the fewest means, this approach is reversed during times of decadence.

Another interesting aspect of such periods, related to "misplaced erudition" is the increasing influence of criticism on art; rather than recording and analyzing artistic development, the critic begins to direct it, or even to make it himself.

But the most important attribute of a decadent art movement, implicit in all the criteria listed above, is despair, self-loathing. The decadent artist feels inadequate when he compares himself to the artistic giants of the preceding generation. In this lies the true source of self-conscious decadence.

To the Mannerists it seemed the great artists of the Renaissance had achieved all that could be achieved

within the context of the Renaissance paradigm. From the Mannerist perspective this meant their predecessors had achieved everything that could be achieved. Nothing further could be added; it was the "end of art history." Faced with the futility of creating new art in the shadow of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, Mannerist artists turned inward, into conceptual games and languid indifference. The more earnest among them turned to literary imitation, sometimes producing huge canvases peopled with hundreds of quoted figures from the Renaissance heyday, particularly from Michelangelo (i.e., the pastiches of Taddeo Zuccaro or Giorgio Vasari).



Quoting from Michelangelo
Vasari, Founding of Florence c. 1565

We will encounter these attitudes of false gaiety or slavish imitation of the masters again in later decadent periods, during the Rococo, during both the plethora of self-consciously decadent movements that arose

during the late Romantic period, and during our own "Post-Modern" period.[1] Because decadent styles generally appear even as the giants of the previous generation are still creating their final masterworks, their early stages often exhibit a seeming vigor and novelty suggesting a further development of the parent movement; but it is the vigor of the grave worm. Pontormo and Bronzino were undoubtedly great artists. Their tragedy is that they did not have the chance to express their genius within the context of a vigorous, valid art movement.

Significantly, it is during the early period of the decadence that the underlying motifs of the valid art movement that will ultimately replace it often make their first appearance; not as a central theme of the decadence but marginally, even as an afterthought. Thus in the overwrought emotionalism and twisted forms of

[1] I saw something of this attitude directly during my undergraduate studies back in the 70's. One of the grad students was producing long, thin, irregularly shaped abstract canvases. When I asked him what they signified he told me they were the central strips from Barnett Newman paintings. Similarly, Robert Motherwell's comments about the impossibility of creating something new within the context of Abstract Expressionism.

Mannerism we see the first hints of the Baroque mastery of empathy and the organic dynamism of Baroque architecture.

Baroque artists were the first to consciously peel away a layer of convention from Western art. In that sense, they invented Modern Art. Baroque artists rejected the conventionalized, idealized human figure of the Renaissance in favor of a scrupulous representation from the model.

It began to dawn on the artists of the period that a figure drawn from life might somehow be superior to one drawn from the imagination. Only by painting from life could they truly reveal the subtleties of human character. This doctrine, first proposed by Annibale Caracci, received its fullest expression in the south from Caravaggio, in the north from Rembrandt.

The other hallmark of Baroque art is its preoccupation with the dramatic potential of indoor light. The supernal genius and preternatural memory of a Leonardo might invent *sfumato* but for the consistent depiction of interior light it is necessary to paint from life.

While some artists, notably in the Netherlands, took some tentative steps in the direction of representational landscape, the true conquest of outdoor light awaited a later generation.

The genius, the defining Idea of the Baroque is expressed through the portrait and the genre scene. The increasing recognition of the importance of representation was also reflected in a new market for preparatory sketches, not just finished paintings.

It is not necessary here to discuss in detail the failings of Rococo art. Suffice to say that the deficiencies outlined for Mannerism were present in Rococo art as well. But here we must pause in our discussion because it is here, at the juncture of Rococo and Neoclassicism that the Spenglerian model breaks down. Some other explanation for the manner in which Western art has developed must be advanced.

I have suggested that each era in Modern art has had an underlying genius, a defining concept or Idea that informs all the art of that period. I will now further suggest that this genius must fall into one of two ap-

proaches: the genius of an age is either Ideal or Humane.

Ideal movements are concerned with overarching artistic statements. They are rational and Apollonian, and proceed from the general to the specific. Humane movements deal with the particularities of human experience. They are emotional and Dionysian, and proceed from the specific to the general.

I hasten to add that neither concept is inherently superior to the other, although we may posit that the Western genius in general is Humane. The Renaissance at its height was an Ideal movement. The Baroque genius was Humane. Neoclassicism was Ideal. Romanticism was Humane. Our own so-called Modern movement is Ideal. The next movement, the one that has already started, will be Humane.

To a degree the Renaissance and the Baroque each achieved the ultimate expressions of their respective value systems. All Western art since the Baroque in a certain sense has been anticlimactic. Neoclassicism may have been an inevitable Ideal interlude between

the emotional Baroque and Romantic movements, but as art movements go it was rather unimpressive, lasting perhaps fifty years and producing only two truly notable artists, David and Ingres.

Essentially a revival of the Western Conventional Realist currents which managed to survive and even achieve a certain distinction during the Baroque period (for instance, in the art of Nicolas Poussin), Neoclassicism represents a necessary breathing space between the excesses of the Rococo and the irrational outbursts of early Romanticism.

We cannot ascribe a conceptual breakthrough to Neoclassicism as we can to the preceding movements or the ones that followed. It sprang full blown from a pre-existing classical tradition and flickered out under the emotional onslaught of Romanticism. On the other hand, Neoclassicism was the first "political" art movement, the first to actively influence, even direct, the events of the surrounding society. During the Counter Reformation the Church had attempted to use art as a propaganda tool, with some success, but

it was the era of the Neoclassic period that artists saw fit to express their own opinions. This growing, recognized influence of art on society is a hallmark of recent art history.

Romanticism was a much more robust movement than Neoclassicism, one that introduced truly revolutionary new concepts, and one that thoroughly muddles even further the neat Spenglerian pattern of Western art.

In a certain sense Romanticism gave evidence of decadence from its very inception. It embraced extravagance and excess in color, form and composition. It made literary issues central to its identity. It invented the concept of the self-indulgent artist.

But Romanticism did have a central motif, stripping away yet another layer of convention from Western art. Romanticism's Idea was the deconventionalization of landscape and outdoor light. This is the birth of Representation.

If the development of a Representational landscape

sensibility as central motif is ignored, late Romanticism seems to devolve into a confusing welter of competing, decadent schools: Symbolism, Art Noveau, Brown Gravy Academicism, Pre-Raphaelitism, and so on. But when we view landscape as the defining feature of Romanticism, the entire nineteenth century becomes a magnificent sweep of conceptual development, from Turner and Constable through the Barbizon School and related continental and American landscape movements, to the ultimate achievement of the Impressionists.

The decadent schools mentioned above, interesting though many of them are, are mere footnotes to the true course of Romantic art. However, these competing movements do raise an interesting issue in that they appear before the appearance of the Impressionists. Again this would appear to go against the Spenglerian approach to art history. Viewed properly, it highlights an aspect of Western art that might be only faintly apparent in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, but which comes into its own during Romanticism and especially in "Modern" art: a brief fallow peri-

od or premature senescence, followed by the art form's reinvention on a higher plane; then rapid decline into true decadence.

In other words, there were two Romantic movements: early Romanticism from approximately 1810 to 1850 which hinted at but failed to achieve the ultimate expression of landscape sensibility; and what we may call the High Romantic from approximately 1870 to 1890. The decadent movements that made their appearance during the 1850's continued to slowly develop (or rather, decline) throughout this period, and came back into their own in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The Romantic decadence took many forms as the various movements pursued their disparate courses. Late nineteenth century Academic art is perhaps the most poignant and stark example of decadent art outside of Asia. Not even the endgame of a current art movement, Academic art represented the tattered remnants of an artistic tradition already more than 300 years old. Hanging on as an undercurrent during

the Baroque, briefly recrudescent during the Neoclassic period, the Academics seized control of the official art schools at the beginning of the nineteenth century and proceeded to use their undeniable mastery of the technical means of oil painting to maintain their status as the "official" Western art form.

The banality and sentimentality of late nineteenth century Academic art boggles the imagination.[2] The almost universal oblivion accorded by art history to these artists, celebrated in their time, is entirely deserved.

The classical Ideal is obviously an enticing mode because it survives into the present day, in ever more

[2] I recall attending as a teenager a huge exhibit of Academic art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The work was technically excellent, intellectually and emotionally impoverished. The only piece that sticks in my mind was one showing two proper British soldiers reclining on a sand dune, one of them holding up a canteen in a toast. The title was "To the Queen!" I thought at the time that for once I would agree with Hilton Kramer's review in the Times. But his response to the show was quite laudatory and called for open-mindedness and a general "live and let live" attitude between Abstract and Realist artists. It was then I first realized that Western art had become decadent.

distorted, even monstrous forms: Socialist Realism, official Nazi art, and present-day cheap, mass-produced "art" for the lowbrow market are all sad reflections of a once-noble aesthetic.

The various self-consciously decadent movements of the mid- to late-nineteenth century—Symbolism, Pre-Raphaelitism, Art Nouveau, and so on—conform rather more strictly to the criteria outlined earlier. Hyper-elegant, decorative rather than substantive, self-indulgent and frivolous, they were well aware of their decadence and gloried in it.

As noted earlier, in many respects Romanticism was decadent from its very outset. It lacked from the very beginning the innocence and unself-consciousness, the sense of infinite possibilities, which attended the births of earlier movements. This self-consciousness has constituted a burden for all Western art since the eighteenth century origination of Aesthetics as a formal area of inquiry.

The Decadents did not cower in awe before Delacroix or Gericault. Their sense of inadequacy arose in

the face of the combined achievements of all previous Western art history, the combined Renaissance and Baroque. It was for this reason that movements like the Pre-Raphaelites sought to return to pre-Renaissance norms, to Gothic and Byzantine conventions, or searched even further afield in the art of the East or in primitive cultures.

The convention undermined by the Abstract[3] movement is that of depicting recognizable objects at all. Abstraction reached its apogee during the period of Color Field, Minimalist, and Abstract Expressionist painting, respectively the ultimate expressions of color, composition, and brushwork, with all distracting imagery stripped away.

[3] Naming our current art movement "Modern Art" is the most presumptuous act of a generally presumptuous aesthetic. It has already obliged the development of such meaningless terms as "Post-Modernism" and obviously will not and cannot stand the test of time, since all movements are modern at the time of their creation. It behooves the "Modernists" to develop an adequate description of their art movement lest that duty be left up to a later, less sympathetic generation (the term "Baroque" was originally pejorative). Abstraction seems to me to generally describe the majority of mainstream twentieth century art, and as I have already properly applied the term "Modern" to describe all post-Gothic Western art, it is the term I will use throughout the remainder of this book.

The argument can be made that Conceptual Art carried this purification a step further, stripping away everything from art until only the Idea is left. My gut reaction is that Conceptual Art should be listed in the decadent column; but perhaps I'm wrong.

Abstraction even more strongly than Romanticism, is divided into two distinct periods. Abstraction was essentially dead by 1930, as evidenced by the resurgence of neo-Realist movements like American Regionalism or the Ash Can School, and proto-decadent ones like Surrealism and Dada. Abstraction reached its early apex in the Constructivist aesthetic of Malevich and Rodchenko. After this early triumph, both German and Russian art slid into revisionist reaction. Then came World War II, and the slate was wiped clean.

In the post-war period Abstraction arose again into prominence, but with a major difference. While the pure abstractions of the teens and twenties were easel paintings, the new Abstraction was executed on a monumental scale.

Indeed, many of these new works could easily be

mistaken for a Suprematist composition, were it not for the scale. Ultimately Abstraction cries out for this heroic approach. Monumental Abstraction is appropriate, it properly fulfills the implicit goals of the movement, without it Abstraction would have been incomplete—just as Romanticism would have been incomplete had it ended with Barbizon.



Malevich, White on White
1912



Rothko, Turquoise
1969

Abstraction has been a necessary step in the development of Western art. Its discoveries can now be integrated into a new synthetic approach to painting.

We may now place both Neoclassicism and early

twentieth century art in their proper context. Neoclassicism is not a separate art movement. It has the appearance of separateness because its Ideal earnestness contrasts strongly with the frivolity of the Rococo and the emotionalism of early Romanticism. In actuality Neoclassicism is part of the Rococo, the last gasp of Baroque art dragged into the nineteenth century.

By the mid-eighteenth century art had reached such a state of decay that it was obvious that something had to change. Lacking an insight into the Romantic movement about to flower and caught up in the political turmoil leading up to the French and American revolutions, Neoclassic artists tried to return to an earlier, cleaner model. But there was nothing truly innovative in the movement. It is no accident that Neoclassicism first appeared in response to the writings of the art historian and critic, Johann Winckelman. There is something intrinsically wrong with an art movement originated by a critic.

Similarly, we must wrest early twentieth century art from the provenance of Abstraction and properly

class it as the last decadent remnants of the Romantic movement. Like Abstraction, Romanticism lapsed into an early senescence with its potential not fully realized, then reemerged into full, brief glory as Impressionism. Like Abstraction, the extended decadence that followed lasted far longer than the brilliant period of achievement that preceded it. The early period of the late Romantic decadence, consisting of Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, and related movements like the Vienna Secession were obviously descended from Impressionism. However, like Neoclassicism, the ultimate expressions of decadent Romanticism is an approach seemingly unrelated to it—Analytical Cubism (Synthetic Cubism properly belongs with the Abstract era), Futurism, Fauvism, and other early twentieth century "isms"—while seemingly unrelated to what we recognize as Romantic art—similarly retain a number of typically Romantic characteristics.

The excessive emotionalism of Romanticism is mirrored in the anguish of Expressionism. The pretensions to scientific method, found in the mid-century "Realist" movement of Courbet, is echoed in Post-Im-

pressionism and Futurism. The concern with perceptual dispassion associated with Impressionism receives its ultimate distorted expression in Analytical Cubism. These movements properly speaking are still founded in the nineteenth century. "Modern Art" begins with the Blue Rider.

* * *

To summarize, then. Western art has heretofore reflected a process of conceptual deconventionalization. The movements and their contributions can be summarized as follows:

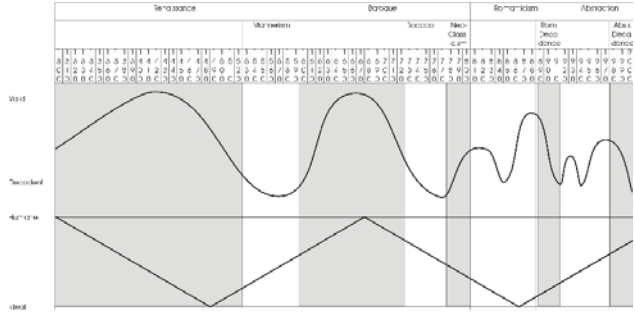
Period	Convention Undermined	Typified by
Pre-Renaissance	—	Regional styles based on regional conventions
Renaissance	Perspective, Anatomy	International style; first realist paintings

Period	Convention Undermined	Typified by
Baroque	Portrait, Indoor Light	Representational figuration, chiaroscuro
Romanticism	Landscape, Outdoor Light	Turner, Constable, Impressionists
Abstraction	Verisimilitude	Color field, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism

To understand why art history has become so confusing in the past two hundred years, we must return to our earlier discussion of Ideal and Humane art movements. The Renaissance began as a Humane movement, as hinted by its obsession with the human figure. A generation later it was fully in the Ideal camp. This Ideal mindset was still apparent in early Baroque art, but Baroque art was strongly Humane by the mid-seventeenth century and by the Neoclassic period had returned to the Ideal. Romanticism began as a Humane movement but was Ideal by the time of the

Impressionists. Although Abstraction has largely been Ideal in its concerns, its slide into decadence has been accompanied by an increased interest in traditionally Humane concerns.

The following graph illustrates these two sometimes contradictory trends in Western art. No value judgment is intended by the relative positions of the Ideal and Humane labels although I have taken the liberty of assigning a degree of value or validity, good or bad, to each movement:



While the alternation of Ideal and Humane motifs seems quite regular, we also observe that each art movement has been significantly shorter than its pre-

decessor. I believe future art historians will conclude that Abstraction in both its valid and decadent modes, at this writing is already over.

The next movement, the one just beginning, will be pivotal. The deconstructionist tendencies of Abstraction have already stripped away the last layers of convention from Western painting. Art will either have to give up its search for novelty or give way to an entirely new approach. If it keeps true to the form of the trends described above, it will only last about fifty years. This is absurdly short, even for a Western art movement.

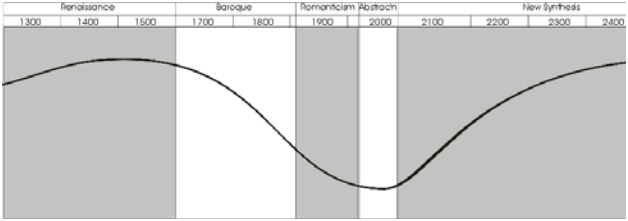
I for one do not believe that painting is dead. It has already survived the arrival of such new art forms as photography and motion pictures. It will survive computer graphics and virtual reality as well. Painting has been sick, but it is not like other kinds of art. It has an inherent value, and implicit message, that goes beyond any paltry aesthetic concerns.

We are poised not at the end of art but at the beginning of a new era, not post-Modern but perhaps post-Western, a genuine International Style. The art

movements of the future will more closely resemble Eastern modalities with their slow rises and gentle declines.

The artist of the future will not seek new modes, but new subjects; and the world affords an endless source of subject matter. The first person to paint a landscape on the Moon or Mars will have opened a door into the beginnings of a new art form.

Five hundred years from now, I believe the chart art historians will draw will surely look like this:



CHAPTER IV
ART OR AESTHETICS

An artist may be an aesthete, but most aesthetes are not artists. The concerns of artists and aesthetes are identical in certain respects, parallel in others, in still others diametrically opposed. Aesthetics is primarily the study of art and of the emotional response to art. This is naturally of some concern to the artist, but it is not his only concern, perhaps not even his primary one.

If Abstraction has made any useful contributions to artistic discourse, foremost among these must be the idea of the primacy of artistic vision. The artist works for an audience of one. He need only satisfy himself.

The artist's business is expression. Artists and critics talk a lot about self-expression and self-expression is treated as though it were an end in itself. But self-expression is only a byproduct of the art process, impossible to suppress even if that were desirable. As a Representationalist I am much more concerned with other-expression, the act of looking out, not of

looking within. And it is precisely here in the realm of other-expression that the artist's agenda departs most radically from that of the aesthete.

The aesthetic process essentially consists of four steps: (1) the contemplation of a work of art with consequent aesthetic response; (2) awareness that one is having an aesthetic experience and an inward examination to gauge the effect of the art upon the viewer; (3) an analysis of the piece of art to determine which elements in it caused these responses; and (4) the incorporation of the results into a consistent theory of aesthetics.

For example, looking at a Georgia O'Keeffe painting might make me feel serene and happy; I consciously note that looking at the painting makes me feel serene and happy. I examine the painting more closely to determine what makes me so happy. I might conclude (wrongly) that a painting which contains smooth modeling and harmonious colors tends to create a sensation of serenity and happiness in the viewer.

Note that while each of the steps above is dependent

upon achieving the previous level of awareness, each constitutes in itself a complete and valid aesthetic experience. Each level represents an enhanced experience relative to its predecessor. I feel pleasure looking at a painting. Becoming aware of the fact that I feel pleasure adds to my pleasure. Determining which elements of the painting give me pleasure increases my happiness even more.

The aesthetic process progresses from the visceral awareness of beauty through increasing levels of awareness and apprehension.

The danger to the aesthete is that he may be tempted to skip the earlier, more primitive stages of the process and proceed directly to the final, theoretical level. Much bad art, more bad criticism has been created by people who have lost touch with the primary sources of aesthetic experience. [1]

[1] This aesthetic process allows us to look at bad art as well good. The pleasures of deconstructing a truly bad painting can approach those of appreciating a good one; otherwise we would merely turning away in disgust. It also explains our reluctance to accept radical art, because it is disturbing to like a painting that, by our aesthetic standards, should be offensive.

The aesthetic process is rational analysis of an irrational response. Why should colors feel warm or cool? Why should one brushstroke feel right, another wrong? There is no particular reason that smooth modeling and harmonious colors should cause pleasure, yet they might seem to do so. We may grossly oversimplify the work of the art critic or historian as compiling lists of specific pictorial elements and their resulting emotional and aesthetic effects.

The artistic process is in many respects an exact inversion of the aesthetic, as well as a vastly more complicated one.

The aesthetic process begins with a finished product, the painting. The artistic process begins with a blank canvas.

The aesthete deals with intangibles. The artist deals with pigment, oil, turpentine, glue.

The aesthete looks inward to determine his emotional response to a painting. The artist looks outward for a suitable subject.

Self-awareness is an essential component of the aesthetic experience. To the artist self-awareness may be irrelevant or an actual impediment to the art making process.

In the final analysis, aesthetic experience is second hand and unproductive. The artist communes directly with nature and in a certain sense improves upon it.

To understand the artistic process, we must understand how the artist perceives his surroundings. Some discussion of the physics and physiology of vision are necessary before attempting an investigation of the psychological aspects of perception. I apologize in advance to those to whom the following outline is familiar territory.

* * *

Artists must deal with two kinds of color—the color created by light and the color created by pigment. I have seen any number of terms used to describe these concepts. For purposes of this discussion I will refer to color created by light as "optical" color and color creat-

ed with pigment as "mechanical" color. These two color systems are also called "additive" and "subtractive" color for reasons that will become apparent.

The artist's goal is to recreate optical effects mechanically.

Optical color constitutes the visual part of the electromagnetic spectrum, occupying wavelengths from 370 angstroms (an angstrom is approximately one billionth of an inch) to 750 angstroms. Longer wavelengths bring us into the infrared (detectable as heat), still longer to microwaves and then radio waves. Wavelengths shorter than those in the visible range start with ultraviolet, and proceed to x-rays and, at the shortest wavelengths, gamma radiation.

We perceive only an extremely small band of the electromagnetic spectrum, and as our senses approach the extremes of the visible range, sensitivity to color fades.

As an example of the importance of this to the artist, consider the color of the sky. It appears to be blue,

but is it? In fact, the light that impinges on our retinas when we look at the sky is only about 40% blue. The remaining 60% of the light rays are actually within the violet range. The sky is violet; we should see it as violet. However, violet lies at the extreme range of human visual sensitivity. Our eyes are much more sensitive to blue. As a result, the blue wavelengths drown out the violet ones, and the sky appears blue. If our visual range extended into ultraviolet as it does for some animals, we would call the sky violet.

At the other end of the spectrum some animals are capable of perceiving infrared radiation (we can too, as heat.) And of course in terms of simple visual acuity, we are vastly outmatched by most birds.

Of the 380 angstrom range of light we are able to perceive, the following color sensations correspond with the listed range:

Angstroms	Band Width	Color
370-414	44	Violet
414-481	67	Blue
481-565	84	Green
565-575	10	Yellow
575-637	62	Orange
637-750	113	Red



The preceding charts suggest a number of conclusions. First, it can immediately be seen that yellow occupies the smallest range of the spectrum; we therefore recognize only a small range of colors as yellow. Red occupies the largest range and we accordingly identify a large band of colors as red.

This range of colors, from violet to red, is what we

see when a beam of white light is broken up by a prism. "White" light is in fact composed of all the spectral colors. As we add together two or more optical colors, the resulting color mix is lighter than the constituent colors. This is why optical colors are called "additive colors."

When mechanical colors are mixed the resulting hue is darker than either of the constituent colors. Mixing all three mechanical primaries results in black; hence the term "subtractive color."

Mechanical color is in every respect the exact opposite of optical color. Since we are used to mixing colors mechanically, the concepts of optical color can be counterintuitive and confusing, i.e.:

	Mechanical	Optical
Primary Colors:	Red (R)	Green (G)
	Yellow (Y)	Violet (V)
	Blue (B)[2]	Orange (O)

[2] Technically the primary mechanical colors are yellow, cyan-blue, and magenta-red.

	Mechanical	Optical
Secondary Colors:	Green	Red
	Violet	Yellow
	Orange	Blue
	R + Y = O	O + V = R
	B + R = V	G + V = B
	Y + B = G	O + G = Y
All colors mixed together:	Black	White

The real lesson for the artist is that there is no such thing as a primary or secondary color—all colors are primaries within the context of either optical or mechanical color theory and the colors constitute a continuum in the electromagnetic spectrum. In the discussion that follows we can therefore consider any particular color as either a primary or as the mixture of two other colors.

Optical color mixing proceeds through a process of absorbance and reflectance. A surface of a particular

color will absorb all colors except for the one we perceive, which is reflected back to our eyes to create the appropriate color sensation. Thus, a green surface absorbs violet and orange light waves and reflects green, an orange surface absorbs violet and green light waves and reflects orange, a violet surface absorbs green and orange light waves and reflects violet, and so on. A black surface absorbs all light, a white surface reflects all light and a gray surface absorbs some of all of the light waves and reflects back the unabsorbed spectrum

Since even mechanically mixed colors are perceived optically, optical color theory cannot be ignored by the artist. In order to mix a desired color, he must analyze the optical character of the color he wishes to create before using his knowledge of the properties of available pigments to reproduce the color mechanically.

* * *

As important to the understanding art as the physics of color are the physiological and psychological aspects of vision.

Light passes through the transparent cornea of the eye and is focused by the lens upon the retina. Light-sensitive receptor cells transmit the light to a layer of pigmented cells directly behind them. These cells take two forms, rods and cones, which convert the light into electrical impulses to be transmitted to the brain for interpretation. Cone cells are connected individually to nerve fibers, while rods are connected in groups. Cone cells are therefore capable of making much finer distinctions of detail and color than rod cells, but do not operate well in low light conditions. The reason night vision is "grainier" than daytime vision, is that it is completely mediated by the rod cells.

Directly behind the lens is a small yellow-pigmented spot, the *macula*, at the center of which is the *fovea*. The fovea consists exclusively of tightly packed cone cells; as a result it is the most visually acute part of the retina. The density of cone cells and of receptor cells in general declines as a factor of distance from the fovea, until at the periphery of the sensitive area there are only sparse rod cells. Birds have much larger foveae than humans; hence they have greater visual acuity.

In order to achieve a coherent awareness of its visual surroundings the eye moves constantly to focus various parts of the visual field on the fovea. These movements are called *saccades*. If you hold your eyes and head rigidly still you will become aware of the rather limited range of human vision (about 20° of non-peripheral vision). This limitation is an inevitable byproduct of the frontal location of the eyes, essential for stereoscopic vision. This phenomenon is responsible for the odd effect of peripheral distortion sometimes encountered when viewing a photograph. A 35 mm lens has a visual range about double that of the human eye. Towards the edges of the photograph images become "distorted" as they exceed the normal range of human vision. Paradoxically, the camera's superior field of vision makes it a less effective conveyor of visual reality as perceived by the human eye. [3]

[3] In this respect a painting has another advantage over a photograph. The camera can only focus rigidly on a particular distance. Behind and in front of that point objects appear out of focus. On the other hand the eye constantly changes its focus as it moves over the visual field. The overall psychological effect is that all objects in the visual field are in focus. The painter can convey this visual reality—the camera cannot.

Before moving on to the psychological aspects of perception we should make note of a recent discovery which has some bearing on our discussion and which lies midway between the physiological and the psychological. Briefly, scientists have determined that the human brain is capable of total visual recall for about one and a half seconds. In other words, if you close your eyes after looking at something for the brief time stated you will remember every detail of what you have just seen. This persistence of vision is an essential capability for the artist, who constantly looks back and forth from his subject to the canvas.

My personal experience has been that for an instant before the memory fades away the center of the image is briefly enlarged before my closed eyes. I suspect this is the visual memory associated with the fovea. This is an experiment that can be easily duplicated by anyone.

* * *

Obviously various technical considerations occupy the artist's mind as he paints, but these are not the subject of this chapter. I will instead concentrate

on certain non-normative perceptual or psychological states which arise during the artistic process and differ substantially from normal or even aesthetic perceptual modes. These self-induced "altered states of consciousness" fundamentally differ from the normal way of seeing in several ways. However, because they are essentially nonverbal and in many cases counter-intuitive, it is hard to describe them. I believe a glimpse can be obtained through retrospective subjective awareness.

There are several modes of consciousness which, while rare in normal mental states, are essential to the artistic process.

The first of these states I call *simultaneity*. A painting consists of a number of structural elements or compositions. In addition to the formal pictorial composition, every painting has a conceptual composition (which falls outside the terms of this discussion); a color composition (including the chromatic structure, tonal structure, intensity structure, contrast structure, and temperature structure); a spatial or volumetric composition; a light composition; and a brushwork compo-

sition (including the thick/thin structure, directional structure, and attack structure). It is simply impossible not to address all of these elements simultaneously; the alternative is stilted academicism or total paralysis.

The brushstroke is the irreducible minimum of the artistic process. With each brushstroke the artist must make simultaneous decisions about drawing, color, value, light, texture, directionality, and so on. Each brushstroke must accurately express the artist's intentions and combine with thousands of other brushstrokes to form a consistent whole. Furthermore, each brushstroke must operate simultaneously as a formal element and a pictorial element.

A single dab of paint may be a tree, a rock, or a person, as well as a color, texture, and compositional element. All this occurs without even considering the emotional content of a painting, or the fact that the artist is simultaneously looking at his subject (and looking hard), as he makes these decisions. To even attempt to address all these issues in a sequential manner would be so daunting as to effectively halt the artistic

process before it even began. It all has to happen at once.

This simultaneous approach gives rise to the sensation of timelessness while painting with which all artists are familiar. Hours may pass before he returns to a normal state. Self-awareness obliterates this state of mind. I believe this feeling of timelessness is somehow conveyed through the finished work of art, and provides one of the pleasures of looking at it. This ecstatic state, sometimes known as "peak experience," can be achieved through disciplined religious meditation, or sometimes as a byproduct of intense physical exercise; the chessplayer at his board or the mathematician in the throes of creative insight may sometimes reach it. But only the artist reliably and repeatedly undergoes a truly simultaneous experience.

The second mental state that occurs during the artmaking process is one I call *dysgnosia*.[4] There is a neurological condition called anomia. The anomic sees

[4] I had originally called this state "dysnomia" but learned to my dismay that this is an existing clinical term. Dysgnosia conveys the concept as well.

perfectly well but due usually to organic brain damage is unable to recognize or interpret what he sees. The classic example cited by Oliver Sacks in "The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat" is a patient who, in addition to his actions implied by the title, when shown an ordinary glove, guesses that it is a change purse with pockets for five different size coins. He can see the object clearly, even describe it accurately (if eccentrically), but is utterly incapable of identifying it.

The artist's mental state is not so extreme but achieves, deliberately, a similar pathology. Dysgnosia is the state of being able to recognize objects *but refusing to do so*. The identity of the artist's subject matter is irrelevant to him. What matters are forms, shapes, colors. He puts the identity of his subject out of his mind in order, ironically, to achieve a greater likeness.

According to gestalt theories of perception, we learn through experience to connect visual patterns with objective identities. As infants our visual perceptions are haphazard and confused. Through experience we begin to build up a library of visual memories, of forms, col-

ors, textures and juxtapositions. When we encounter a new visual experience, we test it against this library of remembered forms until we find one that matches it; we then "recognize" the object. If we cannot match the new perception with a pre-existing one, we either fail to recognize the form, falsely associate it with a similar form, or learn a new form and add it to the library.

Everyone has had this experience of seeing something utterly strange and then having it "click" into place as his mind made the proper connections. For example, I recall being at a lake with my two young children. Walking down the beach, I was keeping an eye on the kids (who had an unnerving tendency to run into the water until it was just below their noses). I was also vaguely keeping track of a flock of geese swimming away from shore and from the corner of my eye I was aware of a line of people laying in the sun and absently noting the various shades of tan and brown.

Suddenly I became aware of a sun bather whose skin was distinctly purple. The effect was quite startling and my first thought was that she must have a rare skin

disease. Only after I focused my attention on the bather did I notice the beach umbrella which was casting a shadow on her, causing the purple effect. At once her skin coloration became "normal" as the color effect was reduced to an understandable phenomenon.

What I have described is amply accounted for by gestalt theory. With most of my attention focused on other things, my peripheral gestalt awareness made the simplest possible interpretation of an unexpected phenomenon; the woman was purple. As soon as I switched my full awareness to this unexpected image I was able to immediately make the correct gestalt interpretations. Were I to suffer from some degree of anomia, I might persist in believing the women's color actually to be purple.

Now then, speaking as an artist, in order to paint the sun bather, it behooves me to assume she is purple. Gestalt awareness may be essential for carrying on the day-to-day business of existence, but from an artistic viewpoint it represents an impediment to the representational method. The intellectual knowledge that

people are not purple may be useful in a social context, but to the artist it is both irrelevant and distracting. In order to convey an accurate visual impression I must accept that the figure is purple, in fact ignore that the figure is a figure at all. It is merely a purple form of a certain size and configuration which I may find, later on when looking at the completed painting, to be reminiscent of a sun bather lying under a beach umbrella.

The artist tries to see the world as a meaningless jumble of colors and forms. He then paints this jumble as accurately as possible. It is the artist's business to see things clearly, without preconceptions, as if for the first time. Apprehension supersedes identity.

Ideally the artist sees the world through the eyes of an infant. It is his role to deny the gestalt. The dysgnosic state is pre-gestalt.

Another mental state that occurs during the art-making process I will call *synaesthkinesia*. Synaesthesia is a clinical condition in which perceptions are experienced through the "wrong" sense: tactile impressions may be perceived as taste, visual impressions as sounds, sounds

as smells, and so on. This condition is well-documented, although whether its causes are physiological or psychological remains uncertain.

There is a strong synaesthetic element in all artistic effort, implicitly recognized when people say things like "that painting really speaks to me" or "the color sings." That painting and music share a whole range of vocabulary—color, texture, tone, rhythm, passages both musical and painterly—is not a coincidence. It reflects an unrecognized prevalence of this condition in both art forms.

In a successful landscape painting the gamut of visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and even subtler senses and impressions—the temperature and humidity, a mosquito bite or the sunburn on the back of your neck, a bird's song in the distance, the smell of the grass beneath your feet—I believe can be and are somehow transferred into the painting. If in such a painting the synaesthetic component is successfully conveyed to the viewer, a pleasantly befuddled sensory-emotional response is elicited. This is another of the only vaguely

recognized attractions of painting.

However, the artist takes the idea behind synaesthesia a step further. Sensory impressions are not converted into alternate sensations. They are converted into movement. The artist's response to visual information is not purely emotional or intellectual; it is kinaesthetic, conveyed through the medium of the brushstroke. Other sensory and emotional impressions, synaesthetic and otherwise, also find their way into the painting.

When considered dispassionately, it seems impossible that a series of hand gestures can reconstitute a visual image, but this obviously occurs. The term "eye-hand coordination" hardly does this process justice; it is more a case of "eye-heart-hand" coordination. For this reason I have dubbed the process synaesthkinesia.

In figure drawing, the artist tenses his body in unconscious imitation of the model's pose. The immobility of the still life is transformed into the tranquil brushstroke of Morandi. Even in the most non-representational art the process of converting emotional content into color and form is essentially synaesthki-

netic. Weight, volume, texture, presence are expressed through the intensity and directionality of the painterly gesture.

This state can be experienced by the layman, as an exercise, by clearing one's mind and doodling in time to music. Again, while synaesthkinesia may occur in other pursuits, it is most closely associated with artistic endeavors.

Another aspect of the creative process which has been not received the attention it deserves is often called cognitive dissonance; I prefer to identify it more simply as *perversity*. By this I mean that a large part of the artist's job is to seek out (or have thrust upon him) and emphasize (or try to disassociate himself from) contradictory elements in his painting.

The reconciliation of opposites is essential to art. We might almost submit as a rule that if something seems contradictory, it must be true. By accumulating and accommodating incompatible pictorial and intellectual elements a painting attains the status of art.

Take for example a painting of a mountain. As a sensory record (like a photograph) the illusion of a mountain may be absolutely convincing. It is a mountain; yet it is also a membrane of colored grease daubed onto stretched fabric. Trees, valleys, and rills are also dabs and blobs of pigment.

We can switch our awareness at will back and forth between the mountain and the film of varying brushstrokes. The image can be experienced either way exclusively or both ways simultaneously. This differentiates it from a photograph whose exact rendition of reflected light data gives it a "transparent" style as defined earlier.

In our painting the lighting might suggest it is sunrise; this sensation of light and time is conveyed through subtractive color mixing, the exact opposite of the physics involved in creating the original light. The painting may convey a sense of the mountain's size; yet the painting itself is small, much smaller perhaps than the opening of a window through which you might normally see a mountain. The painting conveys a sense

of volumes and space, and yet it exists in only two dimensions. And so on. The experience of looking at a painting of a mountain is exactly like looking at the mountain, and yet as different from looking at a mountain as it can be.

From a formal point of view a whole different set of contradictions emerge. The painting, as we said, is flat. And yet it is not flat, for the physical object called a painting as a whole has three dimensions and more importantly the painted surface itself subtly rises and falls in three dimensions. The overall color effect may be harmonious; yet this harmony might be achieved through the judicious application of contrasting colors. A horizontal passage of brushwork may convey a sense of verticality; a patch of color might appear warm when compared to the color on one side, cool in comparison to the other.

A painting constantly shifts from one gestalt to another, color field to image to brushwork texture to light pattern to abstract composition. The viewer's perception constantly switches back and forth between aware-

ness of a painting and of a mountain. He cheerfully accepts the contradiction (again, an unacknowledged pleasures of viewing a painting). The artist's business may be synthesis, but his science is the perverse.

The final psychological aspect of art making is *inspiration*. Inspiration by definition arises from outside the artist. It expresses itself through the artist and exists beyond his control. The artist can act as a channel for inspiration, but he cannot generate it himself. He can only hone his skills and sensibility to make himself a worthy vessel for inspiration, and hope it will choose him.

And with the subject of inspiration we have passed beyond the physical to the metaphysical. It can't be proven, but every artist has experienced it. I will say no more on the subject.

CHAPTER V
RESPONSIBILITY

For a long time a phrase has been going through my head: "the artist's responsibility." Does the artist even have a responsibility? To his agent or gallery? It goes without saying.[1] To himself? Some people still think so.

To his audience?

Many artists will tell you they have no responsibility to their audience. On the contrary they say, the audience has a responsibility to them. This of course is entirely correct. The audience does indeed have a deep and vital responsibility to the artist: to support him financially and critically, to make the effort to understand his work, to be involved in aesthetic discussion. But this does not relieve the artist of his corresponding responsibility.

The artist's responsibility to his audience is not simply a matter of making his art accessible. Art doesn't

[1] Um, this is sarcasm.

have to be conventionally accessible, for in art there is no lowest common denominator. [2] Nor is the artist obliged to "uplift" or "improve" his audience, although these are neither undesirable nor uncommon outcomes. Nor, despite recent trends, is it the artist's responsibility to keep his audience amused. No, the source of artistic responsibility lies far deeper than such trivialities. It is far greater than many artists might think, or be willing to admit.

Consider our current technological society, the most materially advanced in history. Our present prosperity arose as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Without the Industrial Revolution, I would be writing this with a quill pen and you would be reading it by candlelight.

The Industrial Revolution consisted of two elements: a revolution in manufacture and one in communications. At the heart of these revolutions lay two achievements: the practical steam engine and telegraphy. From these two innovations arise everything that

[2] The artist does have a responsibility not to deliberately obfuscate his message. Offending bourgeois sensibilities may be an amusing diversion but it is not a proper activity for serious art.

makes our civilization unique, from the typewriter to the computer, from cars to CAT scans.

Now it is an interesting coincidence that the inventors of these two essential inventions both just happened to be practicing artists. Robert Fulton while not the inventor of the first practical steam engine, dazzled the world with his improved model and paved the way for widescale acceptance of industrial society.

Robert Fulton was, by profession and training, a painter.

Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, was also a professional painter (he was a founder and first president of the National Academy of Design in New York). Morse's technological contribution was more unique than Fulton's, a quantum and mostly unheralded improvement in communication.

So the Industrial Revolution can with some justice be attributed to two painters. Coincidence? Maybe, but these are not the only ones.

The visual arts are strikingly influential in other social arenas. There are many cases of art students switching to music, as in the case of John Lennon and David Bowie. I cannot think of a single case of the opposite being true. While many actors and musicians take up painting as a hobby at some point, none could exactly be said to be influential, or even art historically important. Ibsen, the great playwright in many ways the inventor of modern social sensibilities, was torn between choosing a career as a dramatist and as a painter. Churchill and Hitler both were frustrated artists. [3]

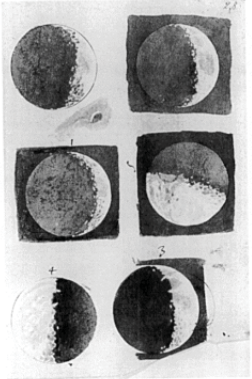
An important example of artists acting as midwife at the birth of a new technology is modern medicine. At the turn of the sixteenth century medicine was hidebound, tradition-ridden. Doctors were content to dissect dogs and diagnosed from cloth dolls. It was the artists of the Renaissance, not the doctors, who developed an interest in human anatomy. Without them physical medicine today might be no more advanced than is, say, modern psychology.[4]

[3] Churchill was better.

[4] More sarcasm.

Of course no discussion of artistic influence on technology could be complete without mentioning Leonardo, within whose fertile brain lay the origin of the modern sciences of optics, hydraulics, even fractals, as well as such engineering disciplines as avionics and war science. Leonardo even assisted the mathematician Luca Pacioli in his seminal work "Divina Proportione" (1509). It has taken five hundred years for some of the concepts introduced by Leonardo to achieve reality.

The "coincidences" continue. Galileo was an accomplished watercolorist, a member of the Paduan Academy. In addition to his astronomical work, he was also instrumental in the founding of the science of hydrostatics.



7.12. Galileo, wash drawings of the moon (1609). Ms. Gal. 48, fol. 28r. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence.

Watercolors of the Moon by Galileo

Go further back in time. Both mathematics and literature, ancient disciplines indeed, originally arose out of

aesthetic concerns. Geometry as decorative art form predates geometry as mathematical science by thousands if not tens of thousands of years. The alphabet arose from pictograms.

Art certainly predates agriculture. The change from hunting/gathering to agriculture was predicated on certain conditions like more reliable growing seasons, but it also reflects a psychic change, a new belief that the world, previously seen as malign and unpredictable, could be controlled and successfully manipulated. Cave painting was an early form of magic, to provide control over the environment. The purpose of cave painting was to ensure a good hunt, good foraging, fertility. Cave painting therefore lies at the threshold of this psychic change—the belief that it is be possible to exert some measure of control over the environment. In this sense, painters invented agriculture.

Shelley had it wrong. Poets are not the unacknowledged legislators of the world; painters are. And I don't mean this in some vague, poetic sense either, but in the most concrete, realistic terms possible.

Scratch an innovation, find a painter.

Artists are the conduit through which new ideas arrive from the region of archetypes into the region of discourse. Society does not create art. Art creates society. Without artists new concepts can arrive and you social development ceases.

Look at what happens when cultures attempt to regulate or control their art. This trend reached its nadir in the last century, but in its modern form it has its roots in the nineteenth century and of course the idea was first proposed by Plato.

The record seems pretty clear. Modern societies, notably the old Soviet Union, have proven they can successfully control their artists. Indeed, they instinctively understand the importance of controlling their artists. These nations typically are characterized by sluggish scientific, social and economic development. The modern experience in Eastern Europe, Korea, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean generally bears out this assertion.[5] The populations of these countries are by and

[5] China is a rather large exception but then, China is China

large docile and obedient, which is of course the whole point of regulating art and again corroborates its importance.

Cultures which suppress the visual arts completely cease to develop at all. Again, there are several examples to support this observation.

The Amish explicitly outlawed visual art in the eighteenth century and their culture has been frozen in the eighteenth century time to this day. They wear the same clothes, speak the same language, and pursue the exact same social, religious and economic activities as their ancestors.

Ultra-orthodox Jews are another example of a culture that has rigorously suppressed artistic activity. In this instance the suppression occurred in the seventeenth century and as a result today's Hasidic Jew walking down a street in New York could have been plucked from the streets of medieval Warsaw.

In the main, however, the outright ban on visual art is rare. Traditional Islamic culture also eschews visu-

al art, and their cultures are predictably mired in the past, to our present dismay. But an examination of the record shows the great Muslim civilizations which laid the foundations for modern mathematics and astronomy honored the Koranic proscription against art more in the breach than in practice. Societies that ban art outright are rare.

Art creates society. A vital art will create a vibrant, healthy society. A decadent art will produce a sickly, decadent society.

You may disagree and say that art does not create society; society creates art. If this is your contention, you must also subscribe to one of the following three possibilities: that vital societies produce vital art and decadent societies decadent art; or, that the relative vitality or decadence of art bears no relation to the level of vitality in the society; or that there is no such thing as decadence, artistic or social, or relative levels of artistic validity.

The concept of artistic decadence has already been discussed and I see no reason to further argue its ex-

istence or social effects. For this reason I dismiss the third possibility out of hand. The question is therefore one of priority. Does the artistic decadence precede or follow the social decadence? Can we apply the same criteria we used to identify artistic decadence to the social phenomenon?

The difficulty in establishing this criterion is increased by the undeniably "upward" tendency of Western culture. Many people, myself included, feel our present society is socially and artistically decadent in the extreme. At the same time no one can deny that science and technology have reached heights unparalleled in human history. How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

The answer lies in the nature of the artistic contribution. I will state as a general rule that the speed with which artistic contributions are absorbed by the general society is inversely proportional to the vigor of the art movement that generated it. In other words, the concepts embodied in a strong, valid art movement will take longer to enter the general consciousness than

those in a decadent one.

During decadent periods the latest artistic craze may be embraced by the surrounding society almost instantly. During more valid periods years or decades may pass before artistic ideals find acceptance.

A good example of this is David Hockney's early work, done in the late 50's and early 60's, which achieved cultural penetration during the punk 70's; the correlation of visual style is obvious. In this case it took about 20 years for a (decadent) artist-mediated idea to permeate general society. Ironically, Hockney himself had moved on to other, more wholesome concerns. [6]

Compare this with Leonardo's contribution, which arose during the most exuberantly vital period of creativity in Western history. It has taken literally hundreds of years for his conceptual insights, like helicopters and parachutes, to percolate into the mainstream. *The more important the artist's conceptual contribution, the longer it will take to fully infiltrate society.*

[6] Insofar as homoerotic themes can be considered wholesome when combined with an impeccable formalistic approach.

Visual art's power to influence society is at its most palpable in its sister art form, Music. Music can directly influence human behavior, for good or ill, in a manner of which a visual artist can only dream. Let me even propose a rather odious criterion for the comparison of the value of different musical styles. How much mayhem did it inspire?

Rap seems to have inspired quite a bit of violence., much of it self-inflicted Country-Western has also included the occasional incitement to murder. The Beatles were the inspiration for at least a dozen violent deaths. But the all-time championship for inspiring carnage must go to the composer Richard Wagner.

We may with cause lay more than 55 million deaths at Wagner's feet. The link between "German opium" and the Holocaust is as direct as that between crack cocaine and a shot-up 7-11. Wagner provided both the heroic inspiration and the explicit rationale for German atrocities during the Second World War.

I happen to love Wagner's music, but I cannot deny his direct responsibility for the greatest atrocities of

any century. As a humanist, I am appalled. As a Jew, I'm aghast. As an artist, however, I'm impressed.

So to get back to our original question: what is the artist's responsibility to his audience? Pretty serious, I hope you will agree, and similar in many respects to that between a parent and a child. The parent has a responsibility not to flaunt his vices in front of his offspring. It sets a bad example that too often is eagerly imitated. We artists must careful not to set a bad example for society. We must approach our art soberly and respectfully, aware of our awesome responsibility to the surrounding society and our powerful influence, intentional or otherwise, over it. Self-indulgent license may always play a role in the artist's life style, but it has no place in our actual art.

CHAPTER VI
KALLOTICS

This chapter will be rather brief as I intend merely to suggest a course of investigation to others rather than to explore it in any detail myself.

Our culture uses the term "beautiful" almost promiscuously to describe a wide range of phenomena—a day of fine weather, a well-executed sports play, most of all, an attractive member of the opposite sex. While these are items undoubtedly of interest to the artist as an individual, they necessarily fall outside the range of his professional concerns. The influence of sexual desire over the artistic impulse cannot be denied, but neither should it be exaggerated, and for purposes of this discussion we will restrict our use of the term, however reluctantly, to those formal and natural qualities generally recognized as of aesthetic rather than sexual interest.

In Chapter III we saw that the term "aesthetics" alone is too limited to do justice to the full gamut of art making concerns. The artist can not limit himself to the appreciation of art but must address three distinct if

related areas of study, each of which deserve its own name and in itself is a worthy field of study:

- How beauty is experienced—Aesthetics
- How beauty is created—Technics
- The nature of beauty—Kallotics

These three areas of inquiry, aesthetics, technics and kallotics, can be further subdivided into "natural" and "synthetic" components as a result of their different areas of emphasis:

Aesthetics	The study of how beauty is experienced
Synthetic Aesthetic	The study of how man-made beauty is experienced
Natural Aesthetic	The study of how natural beauty is experienced
Kallotics	The study of the nature of beauty

- Synthetic Kallotic — The study of the qualities of beauty as found in man-made objects
- Natural Kallotic — The study of the qualities of beauty as found in Nature
- Technics — The study of how beauty is created
- Synthetic Technic — The study of how art is made
- Natural Technic — Subatomic physics

Aesthetic of both the synthetic and natural sorts needs no further discussion here beyond noting the vast difference between how natural and synthetic beauty are experienced and appreciated. Similarly, considerable attention within the context of academic analysis has been given to synthetic technic. Natural technic is currently the conscious subject of religious study, the unacknowledged subject of science.

The idea of a science or philosophy of kallotics

seems to me an important concept. By subsuming kallotic issues under the rubric of aesthetics, Western philosophy has for the past three hundred years placed the cart firmly before the horse. Some might find the term problematic; it suggests that dynamic forces are at play in the generation of beauty, it implies a metaphysical realm that we can only dimly perceive. It implies a region of archetypes.

The beauty in a sunset and the beauty in a painting of that sunset arise from radically different sources. The beauty of the sunset arises from the majesty and imminence of unfettered nature. The beauty of the painting is based on how well the artist has captured his sensory and emotional response to that beauty, the expressiveness of his brushwork, his understanding of color and compositional relationships, the depth of his inspiration.

Likewise with aesthetic; how we appreciate the sunset and how we appreciate a painting of a sunset differ radically. The direct apprehension of natural beauty is a visceral experience. We experience it with our eyes,

our ears, our senses of touch and temperature. The sublimity of natural beauty lies in our direct apprehension of proximity to something unimaginably grander than ourselves.

Our feelings when viewing a piece of art can also approach the sublime, but as a rule the process is a quieter and more contemplative. One obvious reason is the smallness of the painting, but the main difference is that the beauty of the painting has been mediated through an artist's sensibility.

At least two personalities are involved when a painting is viewed, the viewer's and the painter's. A truly great painting can exceeds the bounds of the inanimate. It becomes an individual, a personality in itself.

All these categories, natural and synthetic aesthetic, kallotic and technic, overlap and blur to some degree. The previous chapters addressed issues of both natural aesthetic and synthetic technic. Most previous aesthetic philosophies limit themselves to issues of synthetic aesthetic and synthetic kallotic. The artist cannot limit himself exclusively to the struggle to make his paint-

ings more beautiful. He must strive to discover beauty outside himself, and once he has, to capture it permanently in his art. This struggle, essentially economic in its methods, is the subject of the next chapter.

We have a thirst for beauty that cannot be quenched. It moves us to attempt to create beauty on our own, beauty that partakes of natural beauty but has a special quality that is not to be found in nature. This synthetic beauty is therefore a rare and valuable thing.

Every piece of art is in a certain sense a unique individual. Looking at a painting is in many ways like looking at a person. A conversation is possible. With natural beauty there can be only communion.

CHAPTER VII
GOD IS A PAINTER

Beauty does not exist in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is real; it is an objective, not a subjective phenomenon. Beauty is *out there*.

That beauty exists objectively can be demonstrated in that it is both quantifiable and qualifiable. It is quantifiable because we can differentiate between beauty and ugliness, as well as between different degrees of beauty. It is qualifiable because it is a quality of matter, like temperature or density.

We are able to detect temperature, pressure and mass directly because we have developed senses that enable us to recognize them. As a general rule we may assume that we do not develop a sensory capability unless it is to our evolutionary advantage to do so. For instance, we are not able to perceive microwaves, because microwaves do not impinge directly on our environment in such a manner as to warrant the development of an appropriate sense. If they did, we would have developed the capability, as we have developed the ability to

perceive light and sound.

We can perceive beauty quite easily. Our primary means of sensing beauty is visual, although we also are able to perceive it aurally.[1] The apparent mediation of beauty perception through organs ostensibly intended for other purposes does not in itself negate that use. After all, we use our ears both for hearing and for balance. The tongue senses both taste and the so-called "chemical" sense. The skin senses both heat and pressure.

Only recently have instruments been developed which can measure qualities like temperature and density more precisely than our unaided senses. Why should we not someday be able to do the same with beauty? Temperature is the measurement of the relative rate at which molecules vibrate, density of how closely packed they are. What vibrates to create the

[1] Other senses like smell and touch are amenable to sensations which we describe as "beautiful" but I submit these senses are so primitive in their origin that the use of the word "beautiful" in this context is suspect; we do not after all talk about food tasting "beautiful," although the way it is decorated might be.

sensation of beauty?

So the fact that we can detect beauty at all is in itself the first argument for its objective existence. The human organism is a superb receptor and analyst of aesthetic information. Even the dullest philistine appreciates the beauty of a sunset. Thus, primary evidence that beauty is "out there" is that to us *it seems to be out there*. From an evolutionary standpoint it seems pointless to develop an exquisite ability to sense something that isn't there.

A reasonable indication of the validity of this argument might then be the ability of a non-human sensibility to detect beauty. On a hot day humans sweat, dogs pant. The dog perceives the excessive temperature and reacts to it, as do we; we may therefore conclude that temperature, although experienced subjectively by both dog and man, is an objective phenomenon that would still exist even if the thermometer had never been invented, even if there were no dog or man available to experience it.

Unfortunately we have not had the opportunity to

discuss aesthetic issues with ET. We must look closer to home for evidence of aesthetic awareness outside our own species.

In fact there is ample evidence of other species on Earth possessing aesthetic capabilities. Some may approach or even surpass our own. For instance, when taught sign language gorillas and chimpanzees, our closest relatives, seem to have no problem grasping the meaning of the word "beautiful," nor of assigning the term appropriately.

Other higher mammals have also shown evidence of aesthetic appreciation. The musical aesthetic of whales and dolphins is well known, and the fact that humans also find their music beautiful suggests that the music in fact is beautiful in some objective sense.



Example of elephant painting

Elephants are highly intelligent creatures and have shown indications of an inner aesthetic life. In captivity, if provided with drawing or painting materials, they eagerly and easily indulge in artistic expression. Recently similar art activity, consisting of drawing with a stick in the dust, has been observed in wild elephant populations

But it is among the birds that the evidence of aesthetic sensibility and creativity is most striking. Birds have the most highly developed vision in the animal kingdom and if such a thing as visual beauty is a literal fact we might expect them to be particularly sensitive to it. Indeed there is ample evidence of a visual aesthetic among the birds.

Visual display as a means of sexual attraction is developed to an enormous degree among the birds and experiments have shown them to possess a high degree of visual discrimination. One particular bird evinces a unique level of aesthetic awareness, and provides a clue as to the origin of aesthetic awareness in our own species. Even more striking, this aesthetic awareness

seems unconnected with higher cognitive abilities. The ability to perceive beauty can exist without higher intelligence!

The bowerbird of New Guinea and Australia is a family of small, for the most part rather drab and unremarkable appearing species noted for their courtship practices, which involve elaborate displays of inanimate objects. In breeding season the males gather together to compete for mates, each clearing a "court" on the forest floor to which he attempts to attract females. On this space many species place shells, flowers, brightly colored berries, and even human-made objects such as bits of glass.

In addition, males build various kinds of structures. Some construct "maypoles" of sticks, often decorated with lichens and flowers, around a tree trunk. One species of bowerbird builds a tepee-like structure as much as five feet across, with a low entranceway in front of which is a "garden" of bright objects and flowers that are regularly replaced as soon as they fade.

The male satin bowerbird builds a stick mat, down

the middle of which he places two walls of vertical sticks that may reach 16 inches in height. He mixes a blue or green fruit juice with saliva and "paints" this on the bower with a wad of bark, one of the few known instances of birds using a tool. This species of bowerbird have evidenced a marked preference for the color blue and will preferentially select blue objects to decorate its bowers.

The drab bowerbird is closely related to the exquisite bird-of-paradise and a few of the 19 bowerbird species do display more lustrous plumage. It is reasonable to posit a common ancestor with a slight tendency in both directions (since it is unlikely that an elaborately plumed ancestor lost its ornamentation as it evolved into the bowerbird—one would be hard pressed to think of an example of sexual display evolving in the direction of less sophistication). At some point the species parted, the ancestors of the birds-of-paradise developing increasingly beautiful plumage, the ancestor of the bowerbirds increasing their technical ability to create beauty.

In any case, both genera share an obvious aesthetic awareness that we humans can likewise appreciate. In the bowerbird and the bird-of-paradise we have unequivocal proof of the highest degree of aesthetic awareness in a species other than our own. Indeed, given the general superiority of avian eyesight, these birds may actually be more aesthetically aware than we are—assuming once again there is an objective phenomenon to be perceived. In all, the bowerbird represents one of the most remarkable evolutionary developments in the animal kingdom.

Another important lesson to be learned from the bowerbird lies in its habitat. Both the bowerbird and the bird-of-paradise are island forms. Exaggerated sexual selection of this sort is found almost exclusively in island environments. The most bizarre designs in nature are to be found on islands, from the bird-of-paradise (sexual selection) to the dodo and kiwi (atrophy of nonessential characteristics) to the finches of the Galapagos Islands (radiation into unoccupied evolutionary niches). The isolation and lack of predators of the island environment gives species the leisure to develop

into unusual forms.

There is no form on earth more unusual than the human body. As a biological design, it is, by mammalian standards, utterly bizarre. We are the only truly bipedal mammal on the planet. Our lack of body hair is unheard-of among medium-sized terrestrial mammals (hairlessness is a survival characteristic in large land mammals that must shed heat, for aquatic mammals, and for some subterranean species). The prolonged helplessness of human infancy is absolutely unique. All of these characteristics would seem to preclude development in a competitive evolutionary environment. Is it possible humanity arose on an island?

Bipedalism has been hypothesized to be a response to a thickly forested environment. In such a case an upright posture might be advantageous for moving among densely packed trees. Since walking is a less intensive activity than swinging through the trees, a bipedal stance may have also provided an advantage in the limited environment of the island. The authors of this theory supposed mobile, bipedal males carrying

food and offerings to his nest-confined mate.

On the other hand humans have many obvious aquatic adaptations. Hairlessness, the submergence response,[2] vestigial webbing of the fingers and toes, even buoyant breasts in women have been offered as evidence of humanity's partial adaptation to the water.

A tropical island could uniquely offer both these environments in close proximity to each another. The region in Africa where humanity originated was repeatedly flooded in Miocene times and prehistoric Danekil Island (now the Danekil Alps) in South Africa has been proposed as a potential site for human evolution.

Furthermore, no matter how quickly evolution works during one of Prof. Gould's punctuations, more than a few generations must have passed for such a massive adaptation as human bipedalism to occur. At least centuries if not thousands of years may have gone by with our ancestors in an awkward intermediate stages between apelike and fully upright posture. Only in a predator-free and generally benevolent environment—

[2] Decrease in heartrate when the face is dipped in water

such as on an island—could a species have survived such a counteradaptive period.

The benevolent island environment also encourages sexual selection. Could the protohumans have engaged in display activities similar to the bowerbird? Bipedalism frees up the hands to carry things. Offerings to a prospective mate?

In short, we may have identified the origin of the aesthetic response in humans. The unique environment of a tropical island offered protohumanity the luxury of engaging in bizarre physical adaptations and developing aesthetic criteria for sexual selection utilizing those adaptations. The transference of aesthetic awareness from merely sexual targets to the world in general is a further argument for the objectivity of beauty.

My final argument for the objective existence of beauty remains unproven. I submit that it may be verifiable through scientific means. I have already suggested that a quality or substance is extracted from the environment when the artist paints a canvas. This is not a metaphor: I believe a literal extraction occurs.

Natural beauty such as can be found in a sunset or a landscape exists in quantities far beyond the abilities of an individual artist to seriously deplete, and it is a "renewable" resource. But what happens if the subject of a painting is ugly to begin with?

If beauty has objective reality, and especially if beauty is an essential element of matter, then if what little beauty that remains in an ugly object is removed, *that object must cease to exist*. An ugly subject that has been thoroughly subjected to aesthetic "mining" should disintegrate.

I personally have on several occasions experienced precisely this phenomenon. The first time I had done a painting of a particularly ugly diner near my studio; that night it burnt to the ground. This was by far the most dramatic instance, but five or six times now I have painted ugly subjects which within a few weeks or months have been torn down, burnt down, or hidden from sight by new construction.[3]

[3] My conviction as to the reality of this phenomenon is so strong that on a painting trip in the White Mountains a few years ago I forbore from painting "The Old Man of the Mountain," which was precariously main-

I have asked many landscape artists if they have had similar experiences. Most could cite comparable anecdotes, although they did not necessarily draw the same conclusions. It might be argued that these are only coincidences, that I chose subjects that were on the point of ruin anyway. I do not believe this to be the case and propose an experiment to resolve the question once and for all.

The experiment is this: Go the five and dime and buy two identical examples of the ugliest candle you can find. Place the candles in controlled conditions so that under normal circumstances they will melt at approximately the same rate. Light both candles and have a group of skillful artists observe and paint one of them while ignoring the other.

I submit that the observed candle will melt significantly faster than the other, because its paltry beauty will be rapidly extracted by the observing artists. I have not performed this experiment myself yet, but I would be willing to stand by its results as proving or disprov-

tained by a system of bolts and guywires, for fear that it, too, would disintegrate. The point is of course moot now.

ing the objectivity of beauty.

If beauty exists objectively, what is its nature? For better or worse, the answer can only be couched in mystical, even religious terms.

Beauty arises, can only arise, from God. As Gabriela Mistral put it, "Beauty… is a shadow of God on the Universe." The universe is a work of art, God is the artist. And like every other artist, God yearns for an appreciative audience.

Age-old philosophical questions, not to mention new ones raised by modern physics, fall into place if we accept God as having an artist's attitude towards His creation.

The problems of good and evil, of undeserved suffering and unpunished iniquity, are immediately resolved. Every artist knows that contrast, much more than harmony, is necessary to make a good painting. If aesthetics is ignored, the existence of evil in a world created by a beneficent God can only be explained through such inadequate and inherently cruel concepts as "original

sin" or the struggle of opposing metaphysical forces. Many perceive this contradiction and reject the concept of Godhead *a priori*.

But the universe is neither good nor evil. It is merely beautiful. If the universe is a tragic piece of art,[4] bad things must happen to good people. The canons of beauty demand it. We can no more blame God for suffering or death than we can blame the artist for using black in his painting or for scraping out an unsatisfactory passage.

It is our privilege to be brushstrokes in God's great composition. Our position or prominence on His canvas is not of our choosing.

Modern physicists have reached an impasse in their exploration of the events that occurred at the beginning of the universe. I don't pretend to understand the issues under consideration, but they seem to revolve

[4] Or tragicomic. God's sense of humor is evident in everything from the coincidence that the sun and the moon when viewed from earth are exactly the same size(ha ha, good one God, that set astronomy back 2000 years) to the "recreation area in the middle of a toxic waste dump" aspects of anatomy.

around the requirement for an observer to be present in order for an event to occur. Scientists are so intent on precluding God from their equations, they fail to see that He is the answer to their dilemma. God creates and He observes.

But there is something God cannot do, and that is where artists come in.

Good art depends to a certain degree on serendipity and accident. Art is a process. A good piece of art is as surprising to the artist as it is to the audience. In order for God to make art, he must relinquish a degree of control over the final product. A truly omnipotent or omniscient God could not create beauty. He could only create perfection.

If God is omnipotent, He has the power to limit Himself. I submit that an aesthetic God has chosen to forego omniscience and omnipotence in order to further His Art. It may be that in a previous creation God acted omnipotently. It is apparent that in this one He did not.

Another problem facing science is the issue of mathematical improbability. Scientists have learned, perhaps to their dismay, that the mere fact of the universe's existence is in itself mathematically improbable. That the universe can support chemical and physical processes as it does is even more improbable; that life might occur, more improbable still. The earth spent half its existence inhabited solely by bacteria. The appearance of first eukaryotic and then multi-cellular life was extremely contingent. I bet for every earth-like planet in the universe with multi-cellular life there are 10,000 covered by nothing more complicated than algae.

Intelligent life is even more improbable. That you or I as individuals exist at all is the most improbable contingency of all.

I suspect that intelligence was not what God was looking or expecting to evolve when He created the universe. Aesthetic awareness, as we have seen, pre-exists intelligence and is more important to an Artist-God than mere intelligence would be.

How aesthetically aware were the dinosaurs? If the

bowerbird can appreciate beauty with its bird brain, how much more aware were the titanic birds of a hundred million years ago? For all we know they spent their time in an aesthetic ecstasy.

God experimented for 160 million years with the dinosaurs, and in the end they came up wanting. It turns out aesthetic appreciation in itself is not enough; there must be more. And that "more" can only occur in an animal not only capable of appreciating beauty but of itself creating new beauty, a new kind of beauty. Such an animal would require a previously unheralded level of intelligence and self-awareness, qualities the dinosaurs could never achieve.

God looked at His creation and He saw that it was flawed. So like the Artist He is, He perhaps reluctantly but firmly took out his palette knife, in the shape of a giant meteor, and scraped the canvas clean.

Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery, the most resonant form of worship. And here's the thing:, why God takes care of us and so far has avoided the dinosaur treatment: *every now and then an artist comes*

up with something God wasn't expecting. We can surprise God. This is something artists can do that God cannot. And here is why art is important, art is valuable, society is rewarded for good art with valuable insights provided through the avenue of artistic endeavor. This, Society, is why you should coddle and care for your artists. This, artists, is why society does indeed owe you a living.

We see now God's plan for the artist. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but the artist does not merely imitate nature. He transcends it, he transforms it into something new, a new form of beauty beyond the capability of God to produce or to anticipate. That is a valuable skill.

It is as though the painter's brushstrokes picked up brushes and began to paint themselves. This serendipitous outcome must have exceeded God's expectations in a manner that can only be appreciated by another artist.

Probably it was never God's explicit intention to create *Homo sapiens*. I suspect it was His intention, howev-

er, to set up the conditions under which an aesthetically aware and creative creature would arise to appreciate His work.

* * *

God is the supreme Artist. Beauty is the visible evidence of His style. The painter imitates God, in technique and in subject matter. The painter, through the act of painting, also improves upon God's creation in a manner that God, as a result of His very nature, cannot do. God therefore values the activities of the painter above all others and rewards him in a manner that, redounding to the general welfare of the surrounding society, tends to improve the lot and increase the number of painters.

Society therefore fails to support and reward its artists at its own peril. There is nothing more infuriating to a painter than to be ignored.

God is a Painter.

CHAPTER VIII
THE OPPOSITE OF IRONY

We have established that art is not merely entertainment or decoration; that it is both a unique and priceless commodity, that it underlies all that is significant and valuable in society and that it reflects, in a meaningful way, how the universe is constructed. We have further seen that art movements develop and decay in a manner which, if not predictable at the time, at least makes sense in retrospect, that vital, positive movements contribute, again perhaps in retrospect, positive energy to the surrounding culture and that decadent movements cause and accelerate decay in the surrounding culture. What does this mean to us as artists? Why should we be concerned? What should we do about it?

The hallmark of today's art is irony. Art is a joke, artists are a joke, life is a joke, it's all very amusing and rather boring. This attitude has suffused art for the past thirty years at least, and it's staring to make headway in the surrounding culture.

This is not a good thing, for art or for society. Bad things happen to decadent societies. They have a way of being overrun by barbarian cultures, or of succumbing to internal stresses that lead to dark ages—or both. I do not want to live in a decadent society. You do not want to live in a decadent society. You do not want your children growing up in a decadent society; take my word for it, you don't.

The awareness of encroaching cultural decay drives the revival of religious fanaticism of both Christian and Muslim varieties. The Christian fanatics quite rightly object to the decay in morals and social responsibility which accompanies social decline; they fail to see how they themselves are already tainted by the overall social decay. The Muslims equally rightly object to having Western decadence forced upon them. They also see an opportunity in the West's decline to force their religio-cultural views upon the world. This would be a very great disaster, in my opinion.

The hallmark of today's art is irony. We must reject irony. Irony is the death of art. Irony is the dis-

temper of decadent art, from Mannerism to Rococo to Spot Painting. Ironic world-weariness undermines the proper role and execution of art. And irony is so easy, so tempting. It takes very little effort and perhaps too much thought, as though thinking about art, an essentially critical pastime, was the same as, or as good as, actually making art. Indeed, at the highest levels of modern art the artist barely dirties his hands at all. He scribbles down an idea, or dictates it to his assistant, and in some studio or factory somewhere a nameless peon realizes the artist's vision. This is not art. It's an aesthetic Ponzi scheme, the emperor's new clothes with the emperor himself willingly in on the joke.

Art has ceased to be a commentary on existence; it has become a commentary on itself, which is barely acceptable, and in the past few years, a commentary on the commentary on itself.

Should we be concerned? Yes, of course. Art creates society. Bad art creates worse society, awful art creates godawful society. Bad visual art trickles down into bad music and music, as we have seen, affects society much

more viscerally and immediately than visual art. Depraved art creates a depraved society. The violence and crudity of our popular culture is due to the failure of art to uplift and inspire both its practitioners and its recipients. .And it's only going to get worse, unless we do something about it.

So what can we as artists do about it? Strangely enough, the answer is "a lot." Remember, it doesn't matter if society ignores or rejects your art. *Your art will affect society anyway*. If artists choose to be sincere, respectful of their audience, committed to authenticity of means and nobility of expression, that sincerity will infiltrate the structure of society, whether or not society wants it to, whether or not society is aware it is happening, whether or not the artist is aware of what he's doing.. And if the artist continues to embrace irony, things will continue to get much. muchworse.

the work of teachers, and actively seek to destroy the fabric of society in the name of greed?

Things are coming to a head. Western Art has followed a unique and powerful course, and it built of a

lot of positive energy to infuse into society, but we are reaching the end of that energy. We are in a kind of aesthetic energy crisis, where strategic reserves of beauty and taste are running dangerously low.

The aesthetic infrastructure is in bad shape. Something needs to be done about it. If not you, fellow artist, then who? If not now, then when? All you have to do is reject irony and self-indulgence, embrace sincerity and authenticity. You can do it, fellow artist. Be true to yourself, be true to your art, and you can save the world.

THE END