Gleizes & Metzinger
Cubism

Cubism, the collaborative effort of the painters Albert Gleizes (1881-1953) and Jean Metzinger (1883-1956), has been read less than Apollinaire's *Cubist Painters,* due to the poet's reputation, the charm and wit of his essay, and its greater availability. Yet there can be no doubt that *Cubism* is a more certain embodiment of the ideas of one large group of Cubist painters, and a much more reasoned presentation of artistic theory.

Gleizes and Metzinger had met in 1910, when both had already adopted the new visual language whose initial impulse came from Picasso and Braque. By the spring of 1911, Gleizes and Metzinger banded together with Léger, Delaunay, and Le Fauconnier at the *Salon des Indépendants* to form a self-aware artistic movement. Although Picasso and Braque remained aloof, Cubism burgeoned over the next months, with public exhibitions, many articles, and incessant interchange of ideas in the studios of Puteaux and Courbevoie. Unlike the two initiators, whose still lifes, nudes, café and studio interiors showed no overt social concern, the Puteaux-Courbevoie group (by now including, among others, the brothers Jacques Villon, Marcel Duchamp, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon) chose themes which they considered more modern, especially the city and its industrial suburbs. In October 1912, they joined in the *Section d'Or* exhibition, one of the climactic events of prewar painting. Just a few weeks earlier, the essay *Cubism* had been published.

Gleizes and Metzinger had written the essay in the span of months preceding the *Section d'Or,* the most dynamic

period in the history of Cubism. In contrast to Picasso and Braque who, by keeping to themselves, tended to let others speak for them, the Puteaux group was anxious to explain itself. From their many interviews and articles of 1911 to 1913, we are entitled to conclude that *Cubism* embodies some of the ideas of the circle as well as those of its two artist-authors.

Published by Figuière in 1912, *Cubism* was given its first and only English translation in 1913 by the firm of T. Fisher Unwin. Their successors, Ernest Benn Limited, as far as their rights are involved, have kindly authorized me to reprint it. The 1913 translation is an excellent one, but at times a bit insensitive and lacking in nuance. I have revised it accordingly, especially in order to preserve the flavor of its coined words, and its assertive, energetic mood. I am immensely grateful to Daniel Robbins, Assistant Curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for his comments; his superb catalogue and exhibition of Gleizes' work (Autumn 1964) may one day be continued by an annotated, scholarly edition of *Cubism*.

Cubism

The word *Cubism* is only used here to spare the reader any doubts about the object of this study, and we hasten to state that the idea it implies, volume, could not by itself define a movement which aims at an integral realization of Painting.

However, we do not intend to provide definitions; we only wish to suggest that the joy of taking by surprise an art undefined within the limits of the painting, is worth the effort it demands, and to incite to this effort whoever is worthy of the task.

If we fail, what is the loss! To tell the truth, we are impelled by the pleasure man takes in speaking of the work to which he dedicates his daily life, and we firmly believe that we have said nothing that will fail to confirm real Painters in their personal dilection [*dilection*].

I

To evaluate the importance of Cubism, we must go back to Gustave Courbet.

This master—after David and Ingres had magnificently brought to an end a secular idealism—instead of wasting himself in servile repetitions like Delaroche and the Devérias, inaugurated a yearning for realism which is felt in all modern work. However, he remained a slave to the worst visual conventions. Unaware that in order to discover one true relationship it is necessary to sacrifice a thousand surface appearances, he accepted without the slightest intellectual control everything his retina communicated. He did not suspect that the visible world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought, and that the objects which strike us with the greatest force are not always those whose existence is richest in plastic truths.

Reality is deeper than academic recipes, and more complex also. Courbet was like one who contemplates the Ocean for the first time and who, diverted by the play of the waves, does not think of the depths; we can hardly blame him, because it is to him that we owe our present joys, so subtle and so powerful.

Edouard Manet marks a higher stage. All the same, his realism is still below Ingres' idealism, and his *Olympia* is heavy next to the *Odalisque*. We love him for having transgressed the decayed rules of composition and for having diminished the value of anecdote to the extent of painting "no matter what." In that we recognize a precursor, we for whom the beauty of a work resides expressly in the work, and not in what is only its pretext. Despite many things, we call Manet a realist less because he represented everyday events than because he endowed with a radiant reality many potential qualities enclosed in the most ordinary objects.

After him there was a cleavage. The yearning for realism was split into superficial realism and profound realism. The former belongs to the Impressionists: Monet, Sisley, etc.; the latter to Cézanne.

The art of the Impressionists involves an absurdity: by diversity of color it tries to create life, yet its drawing is feeble and worthless. A dress shimmers, marvelous; forms disappear, atrophied. Here, even more than with Courbet, the retina predominates over the brain; they were aware of this and, to justify themselves, gave credit to the incompatibility of the intellectual faculties and artistic feeling.

However, no energy can thwart the general impulse from which it stems. We will stop short of considering Impressionism a false start. Imitation is the only error possible in art; it attacks the law of time, which is Law. Merely by the freedom with which they let

the technique appear, or showed the constituent elements of a hue, Monet and his disciples helped widen the horizon. They never tried to make Painting decorative, symbolic, moral, etc. If they were not great painters, they were painters, and that is enough for us to venerate them.

People have tried to make Cézanne into a sort of genius *manqué:* they say that he knew admirable things but that he stuttered instead of singing out. The truth is that he was in bad company. Cézanne is one of the greatest of those who orient history, and it is inappropriate to compare him to Van Gogh or Gauguin. He recalls Rembrandt. Like the author of the *Pilgrims of Emmaus,* disregarding idle chatter, he plumbed reality with a stubborn eye and, if he did not himself reach those regions where profound realism merges insensibly into luminous spirituality, at least he dedicated himself to whoever really wants to attain a simple, yet prodigious method.

He teaches us how to dominate universal dynamism. He reveals to us the modifications that supposedly inanimate objects impose on one another. From him we learn that to change a body's coloration is to corrupt its structure. He prophesies that the study of primordial volumes will open up unheard-of horizons. His work, an homogeneous block, stirs under our glance; it contracts, withdraws, melts, or illuminates itself, and proves beyond all doubt that painting is not—or is no longer—the art of imitating an object by means of lines and colors, but the art of giving to our instinct a plastic consciousness.

He who understands Cézanne, is close to Cubism. From now on we are justified in saying that between this school and the previous manifestations there is only a difference of intensity, and that in order to assure ourselves of the fact we need only attentively regard the process of this realism which, departing from Courbet's superficial realism, plunges with Cézanne into profound reality, growing luminous as it forces the unknowable to retreat.

Some maintain that such a tendency distorts the traditional curve. From where do they borrow their arguments, the future or the past? The future does not belong to them as far as we know, and one must be singularly naïve to seek to measure that which exists by that which exists no longer.

Under penalty of condemning all modern art, we must regard Cubism as legitimate, for it carries art forward and consequently is today the only possible conception of pictorial art. In other words, at present, Cubism is painting itself.

At this point we should like to destroy a widespread misapprehension to which we have already made allusion. Many consider that decorative preoccupations must govern the spirit of the new painters. Undoubtedly they are ignorant of the most obvious signs which make decorative work the antithesis of the picture. The decorative work of art exists only by virtue of its *destination;* it is animated only by the relations established between it and the given objects. Essentially dependent, necessarily incomplete, it must in the first place satisfy the mind so as not to distract it from the display which justifies and completes it. It is an organ.

A painting carries within itself its *raison d'être*. You may take it with impunity from a church to a drawing-room, from a museum to a study. Essentially independent, necessarily complete, it need not immediately satisfy the mind: on the contrary, it should lead it, little by little, toward the imaginative depths where burns the light of organization. It does not harmonize with this or that ensemble, it harmonizes with the totality of things, with the universe: it is an organism.

Not that we wish to belittle decoration in order to benefit painting; it is enough for us to prove that if wisdom is the science of putting everything in its place, then the majority of artists are far from possessing it. Enough decorative plastic art and pictorial decoration, enough confusion and ambiguity!

Let us not argue about the original goal of our art. Formerly the fresco incited the artist to present distinct objects which evoked a simple rhythm, and on which the light bloomed, serving a synchronic vision rendered necessary by the amplitude of the surfaces; today oil painting allows us to express supposedly inexpressible notions of depth, density, and duration, and encourages us to present, according to a complex rhythm, a veritable fusion of objects within a restricted space. As all preoccupation in art arises from the material employed, we ought to regard a preoccupation for decoration, if we find it in a painter, as an anachronistic artifice, useful only to conceal impotence.

Does the difficulty which even a sensible and cultivated public experiences in understanding art result from present conditions? It must be admitted, but it should lead to enjoyment. A man will enjoy today what exasperated him yesterday. The transformation is extremely slow, and the slowness is easily explained: how could comprehension evolve as rapidly as the creative faculties? It follows in their wake.

II

Dissociating, for convenience, things that we know to be indissolubly united, let us study, by means of form and color, the integration of the plastic consciousness.

To discern a form implies, besides the visual function and the faculty of moving oneself, a certain development of the mind; to the eyes of most people the external world is amorphous.

To discern a form is to verify it by a pre-existing idea, an act that no one, save the man we call an artist, can accomplish without external assistance.

Before a natural spectacle, the child, in order to coordinate his sensations and to subject them to mental control, compares them with his picture-book; culture intervening, the adult refers himself to works of art.

The artist, having discerned a form which presents a certain intensity of analogy with his pre-existing idea, prefers it to other forms, and consequently—for we like to force our preferences on others—he endeavors to enclose the quality of this form (the unmeasurable sum of the affinities perceived between the visible manifestation and the tendency of his mind) in a symbol likely to affect others. When he succeeds he forces the crowd, confronted by his integrated plastic consciousness, to adopt the same relationship he established with nature. But while the painter, eager to create, rejects the natural image as soon as he has made use of it, the crowd long remains the slave of the painted image, and persists in seeing the world only through the adopted sign. That is why any new form seems monstrous, and why the most slavish imitations are admired.

Let the artist deepen his mission more than he broadens it. Let the forms which he discerns and the symbols in which he incorporates their qualities be sufficiently remote from the imagination of the crowd to prevent the truth which they convey from assuming a general character. Trouble results when the work is a kind of unit of measurement indefinitely applicable to several categories, both natural and artistic. We concede nothing to the past: why, then, should we favor the future by facilitating the task of the vulgarizer? Too much lucidity miscarries: let us beware of masterpieces. Propriety demands a certain degree of dimness, and propriety is one of the attributes of art.

Above all, let no one be decoyed by the appearance of objectivity with which many imprudent artists endow their pictures. There are

no direct means of evaluating the processes thanks to which the relations between the world and the thought of a man are rendered perceptible to us. The fact commonly invoked, that we find in a painting the familiar characteristics of the sight which motivated it, proves nothing at all. Let us imagine a landscape. The width of the river, the thickness of the foliage, the height of the banks, the dimensions of each object and the relations of these dimensions—these are secure guarantees. Well, if we find these intact upon the canvas, we shall have learned nothing as to the talent or the genius of the painter. The worth of river, foliage, and banks, despite a conscientious faithfulness to scale, is no longer measured by width, thickness, and height, nor the relations between these dimensions. Torn from natural space, they have entered a different kind of space, which does not assimilate the proportion observed. This remains an external matter. It has just as much importance as a catalogue number, or a title at the bottom of a picture-frame. To contest this is to deny the space of painters; it is to deny painting.

The painter has the power of rendering enormous that which we regard as minuscule, and as infinitesimal that which we know to be considerable: he changes quantity into quality.

Only when decades and centuries have come to our aid, when thousands of minds have corroborated one another, only when innumerable plagiarists have enfeebled the noble enigma that a picture is by commenting upon it, then, perhaps, we shall be able to speak, without ridicule, of objective criticism.

To whom shall we impute the misapprehension? To the painters who disregard their rights. When from any spectacle they have separated the features which summarize it, they believe themselves constrained to observe an accuracy which is truly superfluous. Let us remind them that we visit an exhibition to contemplate painting and to enjoy it, not to enlarge our knowledge of geography, anatomy, etc.

Let the picture imitate nothing and let it present nakedly its *raison d'être!* Then we should indeed be ungrateful were we to deplore the absence of all those things—flowers, or landscape, or faces—whose mere reflection it might have been. Nevertheless, let us admit that the reminiscence of natural forms cannot be absolutely banished; as yet, at all events. An art cannot be raised all at once to the level of a pure effusion.

This is understood by the Cubist painters, who tirelessly study pictorial form and the space which it engenders.

This space we have negligently confused with pure visual space or with Euclidean space.

Euclid, in one of his postulates, speaks of the indeformability of figures in movement, so we need not insist upon this point.

If we wished to tie the painter's space to a particular geometry, we should have to refer it to the non-Euclidean scientists; we should have to study, at some length, certain of Riemann's theorems.

As for visual space, we know that it results from the harmony of the sensations of convergence and accommodation of the eye.

For the picture, a flat surface, the accommodation is negative. Therefore the convergence which perspective teaches us to simulate cannot evoke the idea of depth. Moreover, we know that the most serious infractions of the rules of perspective will by no means compromise the spatiality of a painting. Do not the Chinese painters evoke space, despite their strong partiality for *divergence?*

To establish pictorial space, we must have recourse to tactile and motor sensations, indeed to all our faculties. It is our whole personality which, contracting or expanding, transforms the plane of the picture. As it reacts, this plane reflects the personality back upon the understanding of the spectator, and thus pictorial space is defined: a sensitive passage between two subjective spaces.

The forms which are situated within this space spring from a dynamism which we profess to dominate. In order that our intelligence may possess it, let us first exercise our sensitivity. There are only *nuances*. Form appears endowed with properties identical to those of color. It is tempered or augmented by contact with another form, it is destroyed or it flowers, it is multiplied or it disappears. An ellipse may change its circumference because it is inscribed in a polygon. A form more emphatic than those which surround it may govern the whole picture, may imprint its own effigy upon everything. Those picture-makers who minutely imitate one or two leaves in order that all the leaves of a tree may seem to be painted, show in a clumsy fashion that they suspect this truth. An illusion, perhaps, but we must take it into account. The eye quickly interests the mind in its errors. These analogies and contrasts are capable of all good and all evil; the masters felt this when they strove to compose with pyramids, crosses, circles, semicircles, etc.

To compose, to construct, to design, reduces itself to this: to determine by our own activity the dynamism of form.

Some, and they are not the least intelligent, see the aim of our technique in the exclusive study of volumes. If they were to add

that because surfaces are the limits of volumes, and lines those of surfaces, it suffices to imitate a contour in order to represent a volume, we might agree with them; but they are thinking only of the *sensation of relief,* which we consider insufficient. We are neither geometers nor sculptors; for us, lines, surfaces, and volumes are only nuances of the notion of fullness. To imitate only volumes would be to deny these nuances for the benefit of a monotonous intensity. We might as well renounce at once our vow of variety.

Between sculpturally bold reliefs, let us throw slender shafts which do not define, but which suggest. Certain forms must remain implicit, so that the mind of the spectator is the chosen place of their concrete birth.

Let us also contrive to cut by large restful surfaces any area where activity is exaggerated by excessive contiguities.

In short, the science of design consists in instituting relations between straight lines and curves. A picture which contained only straight lines or curves would not express existence.

It would be the same with a painting in which curves and straight lines exactly compensated one another, for exact equivalence is equal to zero.

The diversity of the relations of line to line must be indefinite; on this condition it incorporates quality, the unmeasurable sum of the affinities perceived between that which we discern and that which already existed within us; on this condition a work of art moves us.

What the curve is to the straight line, the cold tone is to the warm in the domain of color.

III

After the Impressionists had burned up the last Romantic bitumens, some believed in a renaissance, or at least the advent of a new art: the art of color. Some were delirious. They would have given the Louvre and all the museums of the world for a scrap of cardboard spotted with hazy pink and apple-green. We are not jesting. To these excesses we owe the experience of a bold and necessary experiment.

Seurat and Signac thought of schematizing the palette and, boldly breaking with an age-long habit of the eye, established optical mixture.

Noble works of art, by Seurat as well as by Signac, Cross, and

certain others, testify to the fertility of the Neo-Impressionist method; but it appears contestable as soon as we cease to regard it on the plane of superficial realism.

Endeavoring to assimilate the colors of the palette with those of the prism, it is based on the exclusive use of pure elements. Now the colors of the prism are homogeneous, while those of the palette, being heterogeneous, can furnish pure elements only insofar as we accept the idea of a *relative purity*.

Suppose this were possible. A thousand little touches of pure color break down white light, and the resultant synthesis should take place in the eye of the spectator. They are so disposed that they are not reciprocally annihilated by the optical fusion of the complementaries; for, outside the prism, whether we form an optical mixture or a mixture on the palette, the result of the sum of complementaries is a troubled grey, not a luminous white. This contradiction stops us. On the one hand, we use a special procedure to reconstitute light; on the other hand, it is implicitly admitted that this reconstitution is impossible.

The Neo-Impressionists will not claim that it is not light they have divided, but color; they know too well that color in art is a quality of light, and that one cannot divide a quality. It is still light that they divide. For their theory to be perfect, they ought to be able to produce the sensation of white with the seven fundamentals. Then, when they juxtapose a red and a blue, the violet obtained should be equivalent to the red plus the blue. It is nothing of the sort. Whether the mixture is effected on the palette or on the retina, the result always is less luminous and less intense than the components. However, let us not hasten to condemn the optical mixture; it causes a certain stimulation of the visual sense, and we cannot deny that herein lies a possible advantage. But in this latter case it is sufficient to juxtapose elements of the same hue, yet of unequal intensity, to give that color a highly seductive animation; it is sufficient to *graduate* them. On this point the Neo-Impressionists can readily convince us.

The most disturbing point of their theory is an obvious tendency to eliminate those elements called *neutral* which, on canvas or elsewhere, form the indefinite, and whose presence is betrayed by Fraunhofer rays even in the spectrum itself. Have we the right thus to suppress the innumerable combinations which separate a cadmium yellow from a cobalt violet? Is it permissible thus to reduce the limits imposed by the color-makers? Neither Seurat, Signac, nor

Cross, fundamentally painters, went so far as this; but others, desirous of absolute equivalence, the negation of living beauty, renounced all mixtures, misunderstood the gradation of colors, and confided the task of lighting their paintings to the pre-selected chromatics [*précellences chromatiques*] exactly determined by industry.

The law of contrast, old as the human eye and on which Seurat judiciously insisted, was promulgated with much clamor. Among those who flattered themselves most on being sensitive to it, none was sufficiently so to perceive that to apply the law of complementaries without tact is to deny it, since it is only of value by the fact of automatic application, and only demands a delicate handling of values.

It was then that the Cubists taught a new way of imagining light.

According to them, to illuminate is to reveal; to color is to specify the mode of revelation. They call luminous that which strikes the mind, and dark that which the mind has to penetrate.

We do not automatically associate the sensation of white with the idea of light, any more than black with the idea of darkness. We admit that a black jewel, even if of a matte black, may be more luminous than the white or pink satin of its case. Loving light, we refuse to measure it, and we avoid the geometric ideas of focus and ray, which imply the repetition—contrary to the principle of variety which guides us—of light planes and dark intervals in a given direction. Loving color, we refuse to limit it, and sober or dazzling, fresh or muddy, we accept all the possibilities contained between the two extreme points of the spectrum, between the cold and the warm tone.

Here are a thousand tints which escape from the prism, and hasten to range themselves in the lucid region forbidden to those who are blinded by the immediate.

IV

If we consider only the bare fact of painting, we attain a common ground of understanding.

Who will deny that this fact consists in dividing the surface of the canvas and investing each part with a quality which must not be excluded by the nature of the whole?

Taste immediately dictates a rule: we must paint so that no two portions of the same extent ever meet in the picture. Common

sense approves and explains: let one portion repeat another, and the whole becomes measurable. The art which ceases to be a fixation of our personality (unmeasurable, in which nothing is ever repeated), fails to do what we expect of it.

The inequality of parts being granted as a prime condition, there are two methods of regarding the division of the canvas. According to the first, all the parts are connected by a rhythmic artifice which is determined by one of them. This one—its position on the canvas matters little—gives the painting a center from which or toward which the gradations of color tend, according as the maximum or minimum of intensity resides there.

According to the second, in order that the spectator ready to establish unity himself may apprehend all the elements in the order assigned to them by creative intuition, the properties of each portion must be left independent, and the plastic continuity must be broken into a thousand surprises of light and shade.

Hence we have two methods apparently inimical.

However little we know of the history of art, we can readily find names which illustrate each. The interesting point is to reconcile them.

The Cubist painters endeavor to do so, and whether they partially interrupt the ties demanded by the first method or confine one of those forces which the second insists should be freely allowed to flash out, they achieve that superior disequilibrium without which we cannot conceive lyricism.

Both methods are based on the kinship of color and form.

Although of a hundred thousand living painters only four or five appear to perceive it, a law here asserts itself which is to be neither discussed nor interpreted, but rigorously followed:

Every inflection of form is accompanied by a modification of color, and every modification of color gives birth to a form.

There are tints which refuse to wed certain lines; there are surfaces which cannot support certain colors, repelling them to a distance or sinking under them as under too heavy a weight.

To simple forms the fundamental hues of the spectrum are allied, and fragmentary forms should assume sparkling colors.

Nothing surprises us so greatly as to hear every day someone praise the color of a picture and find fault with the drawing. The Impressionists provide no excuse for such absurdity. Although in their case we may have deplored the poverty of form and at the same time praised the beauties of their coloring, it was because we focused upon their role as precursors.

In any other case we flatly refuse to perpetrate a division contrary to the vital forces of the painter's art.

The impossibility of imagining form and color separately confers upon those that feel it the privilege of envisaging conventional reality in a useful manner.

There is nothing real outside ourselves, there is nothing real except the coincidence of a sensation and an individual mental direction. Far from us any thought of doubting the existence of the objects which strike our senses; but, being reasonable, we can only have certitude with regard to the images which they make blossom in our mind.

It therefore amazes us that well-meaning critics explain the remarkable difference between the forms attributed to nature and those of modern painting, by a desire to represent things not as they appear, but as they are. And how are they? According to them, the object possesses an absolute form, an essential form, and, in order to uncover it, we should suppress chiaroscuro and traditional perspective. What naïveté! An object has not one absolute form, it has several; it has as many as there are planes in the domain of meaning. The one which these writers point to is miraculously adapted to geometric form. Geometry is a science, painting is an art. The geometer measures, the painter savors. The absolute of the one is necessarily the relative of the other; if logic is alarmed at this, so much the worse! Will it ever prevent a wine from being different in the retort of the chemist and in the glass of the drinker?

We are frankly amused to think that many a novice may perhaps pay for his too literal comprehension of Cubist theory, and his faith in absolute truth, by arduously juxtaposing the six faces of a cube or the two ears of a model seen in profile.

Does it ensue from this that we should follow the example of the Impressionists and rely upon the senses alone? By no means. We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality, and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously fitted out by mathematicians and philosophers.

Moreover, as we have said, the only difference between the Impressionists and ourselves is a difference of intensity, and we do not wish it to be otherwise.

As many images of the object as eyes to contemplate it, as many images of essence as minds to understand it.

But we cannot enjoy ourselves in isolation; we wish to dazzle others with that which we daily snatch from the sensate world, and in return we wish others to show us their trophies. From a reci-

procity of concessions there will arise those mixed images, which we hasten to confront with artistic creations in order to calculate what they contain of the objective, that is, of the purely conventional.

If the artist has conceded nothing to common standards, his work will inevitably be unintelligible to those who cannot, with a single beat of their wings, lift themselves to unknown planes. If, on the contrary, by feebleness or lack of intellectual control, the painter remains enslaved to the forms in common use, his work will delight the crowd—his work? the crowd's work—and will sadden the individual.

Among so-called academic painters some may be gifted; but how could we know it? Their painting is so truthful that it founders in truth, in that negative truth, the mother of morals and everything insipid which, true for the many, is false for the individual.

Does this mean that a work of art must necessarily be unintelligible to the majority? No, it is only a consequence, merely temporary, and by no means a necessity.

We should be the first to blame those who, to hide their weaknesses, should attempt to fabricate puzzles. Systematic obscurity is betrayed by its persistence. Instead of a veil which the intellect gradually pushes aside as it adventures toward progressive richnesses, it is merely a curtain hiding a void.

Moreover, let us note that because all plastic qualities guarantee a built-in emotion, and because every emotion certifies a concrete existence, it is enough for a picture to be well painted to assure us of its author's veracity, and that our intellective [*intellectif*] effort will be rewarded.

That people unfamiliar with painting should not spontaneously share our assurance is hardly surprising; that they become irritated is certainly senseless. Must the painter, to please them, take his painting by the wrong end and restore to things the commonplace appearance which it is his mission to strip away?

From the fact that the object is truly transubstantiated, so that the most practiced eye has some difficulty in discovering it, a great charm results. The picture which only surrenders itself slowly seems always to wait until we interrogate it, as though it reserved an infinity of replies to an infinity of questions. On this point let Leonardo da Vinci defend Cubism:

"We know well," says Leonardo, "that our sight, by rapid observations, discovers from one vantage point an infinity of forms; nevertheless it only understands one thing at a time. Suppose that you,

reader, were to see the whole of this page at a glance, and concluded instantly that it is full of various letters; you would not at the same moment know what letters they are, nor what they would mean. You would have to go from one word to another and from line to line if you would wish to know these letters, just as you would have to climb step by step to reach the top of a building, or else never reach the top."

Not to discern at first contact the individuality of the objects which motivate a painting has its great charm, true, but it is also dangerous. We reject not only synchronistic and primary images, but also fanciful occultism, an easy way out; if we condemn the exclusive use of common signs it is not at all because we think of replacing them by cabalistic ones. We will even willingly confess that it is impossible to write without using clichés, and to paint while disregarding familiar signs completely. It is up to each one to decide whether he should disseminate them throughout his work, mix them intimately with personal signs, or boldly plaster them, magical dissonances, tatters of the great collective lie, on a single point of the plane of higher reality which he sets aside for his art. A true painter takes into account all the elements which experience reveals to him, even if they are neutral or vulgar. A simple question of tact.

But objective or conventional reality, this world intermediate between another's consciousness and our own, never ceases to fluctuate according to the will of race, religion, scientific theory, etc., although humanity has labored from time immemorial to hold it fast. Into the occasional gaps in the cycle, we can insert our personal discoveries and contribute surprising exceptions to the norm.

We do not doubt that those who measure with the handle of their paintbrush soon discover that roundness does more to represent a round object than do dimensions, which are always relative. We are certain that even the least wise will quickly recognize that the claim of configurating [*de configurer*] the weight of bodies and the time spent in enumerating their different points of view, is as legitimate as that of imitating daylight by the clash of orange and blue. Then the fact of moving around an object to seize from it several successive appearances, which, fused into a single image, reconstitute it in time, will no longer make reasoning people indignant.

And those who mistake the bustle of the street for plastic dynamism will eventually appreciate the differences. People will finally

realize that there never was a Cubist technique, but simply a pictorial technique which a few painters exhibited with courage and diversity. In actual fact, they are reproached with displaying it to excess, and are urged to conceal their craft. How absurd! As though one were to tell a man to run, but not to stir his legs!

Moreover, all painters exhibit their craft, even those whose industrious delicacies upset the barbarians across the ocean. But one thing is true of the painter's methods, as well as of the writer's: by passing from hand to hand they grow colorless, insipid, and abstract.

The Cubist methods are far from being this, although they do not still shine with the hard brilliancy of new coin, and although an attentive study of Michelangelo permits us to say that they have their patent of nobility.

V

To carry out a work of art it is not enough to know the relations of color and form and to apply the laws that govern them; the artist must also contrive to free himself from the servitude inherent in such a task. Any painter of healthy sensitivity and sufficient intelligence can provide us with well-painted pictures; but only he can awaken beauty who is designated by Taste. We call thus the faculty thanks to which we become conscious of Quality, and we reject the notions of good taste and bad taste which correspond with nothing positive: a faculty is neither good nor bad, it is simply more or less developed.

We attribute a rudimentary taste to the savage who is delighted by glass beads, but we might with infinitely greater justice consider as a savage the so-called civilized man who, for example, can appreciate nothing but Italian painting or Louis XV furniture. Taste is valued according to the number of qualities it allows us to perceive; yet when this number exceeds a certain figure it diminishes in intensity and evaporates into eclecticism. Taste is innate; but like sensitivity, which enhances it, it is tributary to the will. Many deny this. What is more obvious, however, than the influence of the will on our senses? It is so apparent that as soon as we should wish it, we could isolate the high-pitched note of an oboe among the metallic thunders of an orchestra. Similarly we can succeed in savoring a certain quality whose existence is affirmed by reason alone.

Is the influence of the will upon taste intrinsically good or is it

evil? The will can only develop taste along a plane parallel to that of the consciousness.

If a painter of mediocre intellect strives to savor qualities which for him are only the abstract products of a line of reasoning, and if he thus tries to augment his little talent, which he owes only to his sensitivity, then there is no doubt that his painting will become execrable, false, and stilted. If a man of superior mind sets himself the same goal, he will draw miraculous advantages from it.

The will exerted on taste with a view to a qualitative possession of the world derives its merit from the subjugation of every conquest to the nature of the chosen material.

Without using any allegorical or symbolic literary artifice, but with only inflections of lines and colors, a painter can show in the same picture both a Chinese and a French city, together with the mountains, oceans, flora and fauna, peoples with their histories and their desires, everything which in exterior reality separates them. Distance or time, concrete thing or pure conception, nothing refuses to be said in the painter's tongue, any more than in that of the poet, the musician, or the scientist.

The more the notions that the painter subordinates to his art appear remote from it, the more its beauty is affirmed. Its difficulties grow proportionately. A mediocre artist shows some wisdom by contenting himself with acting upon notions long ago appropriated to painting. Is not a simple Impressionist notation preferable to these compositions brimful of literature, metaphysics, and geometry, all insufficiently *pictorialized* [*picturalisées*]? We want plastic integration: either it is perfect or it is not; we want style, and not a parody of style.

The action of the will on taste aids selection. By the way a neophyte supports the discipline we can verify his vocation.

Among the Cubist painters there are some who painfully pretend to be self-willed and profound; there are others who move freely in the highest planes. Among the latter—it is not our place to name them—restraint is only the clothing of fervor, as with the great Mystics.

Since it has been said that great painting died with the Primitives —why not great literature with Homer?—some, in order to resuscitate it, impudently plagiarize the old Italian, German, and French masters and, undoubtedly in order to modernize it, have chosen to bolster their industry by means which the ill-informed are tempted to attribute to Cubism. Because the language of these tricksters, a kind of Esperanto or Volapük, is understood by everyone, it was

soon claimed that they speak, or at least that they are about to speak, that language of great art accessible to all. Let us have done with an irksome misunderstanding.

That the ultimate end of painting is to reach the masses, we have agreed; it is, however, not in the language of the masses that painting should address the masses, but in its own, in order to move, to dominate, to direct, and not in order to be understood. It is the same with religions and philosophies. The artist who abstains from any concessions, who does not explain himself and who tells nothing, builds up an internal strength whose radiance shines all around.

It is in consummating ourselves within ourselves that we shall purify humanity, it is by increasing our own riches that we shall enrich others, it is by setting fire to the heart of the star for our intimate joy that we shall exalt the universe.

To sum up, Cubism, which has been accused of being a system, condemns all systems.

The technical simplifications which have provoked such accusations denote a legitimate anxiety to eliminate everything that does not exactly correspond to the conditions of the plastic material, a noble vow of purity. Let us grant that it is a method, but let us not permit the confusion of method with system.

For the partial liberties conquered by Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, and the Impressionists, Cubism substitutes an indefinite liberty.

Henceforth objective knowledge at last regarded as chimerical, and all that the crowd understands by natural form proven to be convention, the painter will know no other laws than those of Taste.

From then on, by the study of all the manifestations of physical and mental life, he will learn to apply them. But if all the same he ventures into metaphysics, cosmogony, or mathematics, let him be content with obtaining their savor, and abstain from demanding of them certitudes which they do not possess. In their depths one finds nothing but love and desire.

A realist, he will fashion the real in the image of his mind, for there is only one truth, ours, when we impose it on everyone. And it is the faith in Beauty which provides the necessary strength.

Modern Artists On Art

Ten Unabridged Essays

Edited by

Robert L. Herbert

Prentice-Hall, Inc. A SPECTRUM BOOK *Englewood Cliffs, N.J.*

Current printing (last digit):
19 18 17 16 15 14

 Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 64-7568. Printed in the United States of America—C. P58685, C58686.

Contents

Gleizes & Metzinger
Cubism (1912) 1

Kandinsky
Reminiscences (1913) 19

Boccioni
Futurist Sculpture (1913) 45

Le Corbusier & Ozenfant
Purism (1920) 58

Klee
On Modern Art (1924) 74

Malevich
Suprematism (1927) 92

Gabo
The Constructive Idea in Art (1937) 103

Mondrian
Plastic Art & Pure Plastic Art (1937) 114

Beckmann
On My Painting (1938) 131

Moore
On Sculpture & Primitive Art (1934, 1937, 1941) 138