A STUDY OF THE CONCEPTION OF THE FORM EMPLOYED IN THE COMPOSITION OF TWELVE PAINTINGS

By

James R. Coggin

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of
the Consolidated University of North Carolina
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

1956

Approved by

Gregory D. Ivy, Advisor

A STUDY OF THE CONCEPTION OF THE FORM EMPLOYED IN THE COMPOSITION OF TWELVE PAINTINGS

Table of Contents

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The painter's reality hinges around that which is perceived through the senses, the intellect acting as a flux in merging responses to that which is perceived and translating these into a synthesis, the essence of which is visual reason.

> A work of art is not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself. It does not design art; it creates it. Art is made up, not of the artist's intention, but of works of art. The most voluminous collection of commentaries and memoirs, written by artists whose understanding of the problems of form is fully equalled by their understanding of words, could never replace the meanest work of art.[1]

When the painter writes, he is out of his medium; he is superimposing an intellectual blanket over that in which the intellect is instrumental, but in which it performs a different function. When the painter does so, he is concerning himself with his artistic intent, and what he has written may or may not relate to the art product--his painting.

Art is for the artist a means of clarifying his human responses. A key to the means by which this is accomplished can be found in the meaning of the Indo-European ar, which is the root of the word art, and means to join or to fit together.[2] His material for joining or fitting together has to be that which is perceived through the senses. His logic does not prescribe to the laws of "the science of correct reasoning," and his writings cannot be subjected to the test of valid induction and deduction.

---

[1]Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art, (New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), p. 2.

[2]Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, (New York, The World Publishing Company, 1952), p. 83.

His way of reasoning is synthesis and his logic stems from the underlying principles of art.

The artist, in writing, attempts to assume an objective position in relation to his own work or to the work of others; whereas, by nature, he is a subjective creature. What he learns from various sources is fused into the art product. The strongest of these sources is himself, a human being who, like all other human beings, is a composite of a life of responses both to his conception of himself apart from his environment and in relation to the environment which is really inescapable. About this source of material for joining or fitting together, the artist cannot be objective; thus, there is no validity in writing about it. The ultimate importance of the work is quite dependent upon the artist as a consumate being, but its surface appearance and formal purpose is more dependent upon another source of material, the so-called "world of art", or realm of artistic and esthetic influence.

It is about this source of material for individual synthesis that the painter can afford to intellectualize. He perhaps can maintain some degree of objectivity when bringing into focus the influence of contemporary painting and esthetic thought on his own work. This may be used as a basis for self-criticism concerning the intent of his work. The result of this intellectual consideration is not a conclusion, but an hypothesis. This imposed direction is a groundwork, foundation, or supposition which becomes valid only if it is completely absorbed into the self; that is to say, that such an objectified purpose is of no value until it becomes subjective material for artistic synthesis.

This study will cite direct artistic and esthetic influences upon the work of the writer in order to perceive which are the more significant of these in relation to future work. This will form the basis of certain imposed disciplines in an effort toward the production of paintings more plastically and esthetically significant.

Chapter II

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

Though upon the mature painter, the artistic climate or the major directions or tendencies of the day may have little effect, it is precisely these that have the most profound effect upon the young painter. His adjustment to or rebellion against his environment and the effect of this upon his work is to be seen much later. He is acutely aware of the avant garde; and its influence is readily seen in his work, which provides for the critic his most cherished opportunity to cite lack of understanding of the particular idiom, whatever it might be. This lack of understanding exists in most cases, but who is more profoundly affected by and aware of life with a singular lack of understanding than the young child?

Regardless of artistic training and background, or the degree of talent present in the individual, the incentive to pursue such an existence is derived from an experience of an extremely poignant nature with art itself. This decisive experience repeats itself time and again during early periods of the young painter's development, and one of which coming at a particularly formative period proves to be the beginning of mature creative thought or a key to future artistic reason. This could be said to be the beginning of an individual's personal artistic heritage. To cite an example, the writer, upon visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in the summer of 1953, saw for the first time original works by major contemporary painters. The exhibit in one gallery was composed of Number 7, 1950, by Bradley Walker Tomlin;

Western Air, 1946-47, by Robert Motherwell; Painting, 1948, by William DeKooning; Number 10, 1950, by Mark Rothko; Number 1, 1948, by Jackson Pollock; and Number 11, A Presence, by Richard Pousette-Darte. It is impossible to relate the intensitity of the impact received from viewing these six paintings. Aside from the fact that a new concept of the surface appearance of painting was introduced, with the effect of newness being instrumental in the experience, the importance lay in the experiencing of a new power in painting.

These particular paintings are examples of what Alfred H. Barr, Jr. refers to as Mid-Century Abstraction.[1] It would be well to consider the term abstraction. Lionello Venturi cites two meanings of the term:

1) a summary of something fully set forth in some other place;
2) something unreal, opposed to reality.

> If we try to understand the application to painting of these two definitions, we realize that every work of art is an abstraction from mere reality. The style of an artist is indeed an abstraction from reality. And because style transforms the whole reality according to the viewpoint of the artist, who belongs to reality, a work of art will be a summary of reality. Therefore the first definition of abstraction as a summary of reality applies to every work of art.
>
> The second definition of abstraction as something unreal, opposed to reality, does not apply to any human activity; not to intuition, which exists if it is the intuition of reality, not to reason, the scope of which is the understanding of reality. Only lack of intuition and reason, that is, confusion and blundering, belong to the unreal. But the meaning of "unreal" in the dictionary may be quite different; a pure geometric triangle is unreal because you do not meet it in reality, but it is a mental abstraction which may interpret a similar reality, as, for example, a mountain. This mental abstraction may assist in the process of a work of art so long as the artist finds a relation between it and his sensible reaction to reality; in other words, when the conceptional abstraction has been immersed in the sensation.

---

[1]Barr, What is Modern Painting?, (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1952).

> Of the two definitions of abstraction, the first, when applied to art, represents a journey from sensation to abstraction; the second a return from abstraction to sensation.[1]

This statement is perhaps indicative of the critical thought of the time in which it was written which was 1941. It could very well stand the test of Cezanne or Matisse, but should be expanded to apply to painting ten years later. A recent dictionary gives as one definition of abstraction:

> formation of an idea, as of the qualities or properties of a thing, by mental separation from particular instances or material objects.[2]

If the word painting were substituted for thing in the dictionary definition, the resulting meaning for abstraction could be used in relation to the paintings cited earlier at the Museum of Modern Art.

This mid-century abstraction pinnacled the second wave of American abstraction as it is referred to by Andrew C. Ritchie.[3] This had its beginnings in the 1930's, despite the swell of American Scene and Social Realist painting; a few artists like Davis, Dove, and Carles continued along abstract lines. Mr. Ritchie groups the abstract work of the period into five categories, and summarizes the characteristics and origins of each. The Pure Geometric group is characterized by pure rectangular or curvilinear forms bearing no recognizable relationships to natural forms, statically contained within the picture frame, with the space treated two-dimensionally; its origins can be

---

[1] Venturi, Art Criticism Now, (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), p. 25.

[2] Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, (New York, The World Publishing Company, 1952), p. 6.

[3] Ritchie, Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1951).

traced to Cubism, Constructivism, de Stijl, and the Bauhaus. Some of the artists working along these lines were Cavallon, Albers, and Pereira. The Architectural and Mechanical Geometric group used color and shape in much the same way, but the rectangular or curvilinear forms were derived from recognizable architectural or mechanical prototypes and had the same origins as the former group; Ralston Crawford and Spencer worked in this way.

O'Keefe and Feininger used recognizable natural or architectural forms and emphasized innate structure with a three-dimensional treatment of space and implications of atmosphere; this, the Naturalistic Geometric group had its origins in Cubism, Expressionism, and Constructivism. Another group, the Expressionist Geometric employed rectangular and curvilinear forms but arranged them in dynamic, organic relationships, reflecting inward and outward tensions and thrusts of the forms within the three-dimensional space; added to the aforementioned influences has been that of Dada and Surrealism as seen in the work of Knaths, Davis, and Browne. The last category, the Expressionist Biomorphic, was characterized by irregular-shaped forms and calligraphic interlacings bearing, if any, a relation to organic or anatomical forms; composed usually in dynamic, symbolic, or emotively suggestive relationships; often showing evidence of an automatist origin. Space was treated three-dimensionally reflecting the instability and vibrating life of the forms within; Gorky and Baziotes exemplify this tendency with the evident influence of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism.

This is the artistic material which the mid-century painter had at his disposal. It is impossible to decipher from the paintings

themselves just what particular characteristics came from where; this is not essential. DeKooning, Motherwell, and Rothko at this time express in particular a new individuality. Mr. Ritchie places each of these men into one of his five categories, but they do not fit there as neatly as do some of the other painters.

DeKooning, even more than the other two, establishes a new look both in style and concept. Probably the most eminent American painter today because of the influence his work has had upon the present generation of younger painters here and abroad, he was instrumental in the development of the abstract expressionist school. This school has been the most influential force in painting for several years, and its followers include those who are still considered among the advanced guard. A Chicago painter, Leon Golub, states what he considers to be the major characteristics of abstract expressionism as the following:

> 1) the elimination of specific subject matters and a preference for spontaneous, impulsive qualities of expression.
> 2) the unfettered brush--decisive, improvisatory techniques--motion, motion organization, and an activated surface.[1]

Mr. Golub who is not entirely in sympathy with the school, has made a fair summary of its surface characteristics; however, the major unifying force within abstract expressionism is its freedom of expression. Its essence is not in style but in spirit.

As with any controversial movement there are those in the ranks of abstract expressionism who question its continuing vitality.

---

[1]Golub, "A Critique of Abstract Expressionism", College Art Journal, (New York, College Art Association of America, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1955), p. 142.

> Abstract expressionism is a matrix, and like other living organisms, dangerous. It can grow cancerously and destroy painting, swallow it up in a cult of obsessions, personalities, and ego-satisfactions. It can go soft and colonial. Or it can take the responsibilities that it, itself, invoked and work for a creative seminal leap.[1]

Though perhaps a bit melodramatic, this shows the painter's valid concern over the total effect of that in which he is immersed. The fate of abstract expressionism or the length of the life it is to lead is unimportant here; however, its self-invoked responsibilities are being fulfilled both in the realm of quality of the art product and the affording of implications for the future product. Its continuing strength and validity is supported by its continuing influence, and its future possibilities are enhanced by its refusal to submit to a strict definition.

---

[1]Ferren, "Symposium: The Human Figure", Art Digest, (New York, Art Digest, Inc., November 15, 1953), p. 12.

Chapter III

FORM AND ESTHETIC THOUGHT

Just what direct effect esthetic thought has upon the art product of a period is impossible to ascertain, but it is obvious that an artist can gain impetus in his work, particularly when he is going forth into something new, from philosophical concepts which are broad enough in scope for his artistic concept. A give-and-take between esthetics and art expression can produce a regenerative force vital to both fields. Today with much of the art training being acquired in colleges and universities, and the myriad numbers of publications available concerning every facet of the arts, the student is certainly subjected to a vast storehouse of ideas in the realm of esthetics. This is indeed a healthy thing, as the esthetician's concern with all the arts and for broad generalizations, drawn from more specifics than the painter has the opportunity to encounter directly and experience as fully, provides a cumulative panorama form which he is able to extract corollaries with his own artistic ideology.

This broadness of understanding, which is an essential in any system of esthetics, can often clarify and cite implications of concepts concerning the art product which have changed, expanded, or been displaced by new concepts in the work itself; it is here that the esthetician has the opportunity to provide the words, not verbal counterparts, but vehicles of rapport between the artistic impulse and intellectual consideration.

This transformation of meaning is the case with the word <u>form</u>. Expansions of meaning for this word superceded its present-day artistic implications; however, it is the contemporary esthetician who has provided

the fullest range of intellectual implications. Thus far in this paper the term form has been used in a sense derived from the following dictionary meaning:

> the shape or outline of anything; figure; structure, excluding color, texture, and density.[1]

In Mr. Ritchie's terminology, employed in the preceeding chapter, form or forms was used principally to refer to shapes within a composition. The term may also be used in reference to color, texture, etc., just as well. Another definition reads:

> arrangement; especially, orderly arrangement; way that something is put together; pattern; style; distinguished form content.[2]

This is inclusive of all the elements of a composition and implies that form, in another sense, arises out of discretion and manipulation. There is still a larger meaning of form. One cannot find in abstract painting of today the traditional concept of content, yet the latter definition excludes the possibility of a synthesis of form and content; we must look to another definition:

> the particular way of being that gives something its nature or character; combination of qualities making it what it is; intrinsic character.[3]

This suggests a way of thinking that is definitely a part of the esthetic thought of today, that form itself can achieve such significance that the so-called content becomes inseparable; a synthesis of values is obtained. Henri Focillon with his essay, The Life of Forms in Art, has made an

---

[1]Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, (New York, The World Publishing Company, 1952), p. 568.
[2]Ibid.
[3]Ibid.

important contribution to the thinking along this line. In one instance he writes:

> Organic life designs spirals, orbs, meanders, and stars, and if I wish to study this life, I must have recourse to form and number. But the instant these shapes invade the space and the materials specific to art, they acquire an entirely new value and give rise to entirely new systems.
>
> Now that these new values and new systems should retain their alien quality is a fact to which we submit with a very poor grace. We are always tempted to read into form a meaning other than its own, to confuse the notion of form with that of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only itself. And whenever a sign acquires any prominent formal value, the latter has so powerful a reaction upon the value of the sign as such that it is either drained of meaning or is turned from its regular course and directed toward a totally new life. For form is surrounded by a certain aura; although it is our most strict definition of space, it also suggests to us the existence of other forms. It prolongs and diffuses itself throughout our dreams and fancies; we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm--a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.[1]

This is an example of the intense and penetrating thought which has dissolved old meanings and congealed into a new concept of artistic form. Jacques Maritain, though a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Church, establishes a cosmos which is broad enough for most of the new concepts. But with his insistent linking of art and beauty with the meta-physical and transcendental order, he fails to achieve the universality of artistic thought which other estheticians, such as Malraux, have achieved.

In the experience of the writer, Susanne Langer in her book, Philosophy in a New Key,[2] and its sequel, Feeling and Form,[3] affords the most

---

[1] Focillon, op. cit., p. 3.

[2] Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1942).

[3] Langer, Feeling and Form, (New York, Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1953).

important study in artistic significance of our day. Her study does not follow the idealistic tradition nor is it in the spirit of post-Kantian metaphysics; it is in logical interests and concerns itself with the essentially transformational nature of human understanding. It attempts to make ideas clear, not to offer criteria for judging works of art or set up canons of taste. Mrs. Langer states as her purpose in the introduction to Feeling and Form:

> What Feeling and Form does undertake to do, is to specify the meanings of the words: expression, creation, symbol, import, intuition, vitality, and organic form, in such a way that we may understand, in terms of them, the nature of art and its relation to feeling, the relative autonomy of the several arts and their fundamental unity in "Art" itself, the functions of subject matter and medium, the epistemological problems of artistic "communication" and "truth". A great many other problems--for instance, whether performance is "creation", or "mere craftsmanship", whether drama is "literature" or not, why the dance often reaches the zenith of its development in the primitive stage of a culture when other arts are just dawning on its ethnic horizon, to mention but a few--development from the central ones and, like them, take answerable form. The main purpose of the book, therefore, may be described as the construction of an intellectual framework for philosophical studies, heneral or detailed, relating to art.[1]

Such a work, particularly when it is as successful as this one, provides for the artist a realm of intellectual and human consciousness that is certainly in key with his own time, and more directly, in key with the artist himself as a creative being.

---

[1]Langer, op. cit., p. viii.

Chapter IV

THE PAINTING PROBLEM

The writer's paintings have previously been involved with the manipulation of the plastic means in an effort toward achieving a significance in the resulting form apart from subject matter as such. The paintings failed, in that superficial compositional dynamics were inadvertently employed to defend the lack of significance of the form achieved. These dynamics constituted the use of a theatrical or atmospheric effect through the use of three-dimensional shapes and movement with uncontrolled depth; an initial impact achieved by strong contrasts in value; tensions created by the use of directional lines, with the drawing obviously separated from the planes in space; and an obvious use of the materials themselves.

It is evident now that the lack of lasting value resulted largely from failure to achieve a cohesive quality among the simple compositional elements, while trying to gain movement and tension. It is from this realization that the following disciplines are drawn:

1) the achievement of a more profound and basic quality, relating both to the elements and the materials;

2) improvement in use of color in relation to shape and to the surface of the canvas; and

3) the use of non-realistic color to achieve greater hue, value, and chroma significance in conjunction with the abstract composition.

Chapter V

THE RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM

In the executing of the twelve paintings, with the disciplined intent in mind, the author made no attempt at variety from one painting to another; the problem was the same for each canvas. The differences to be found in tonality, organization of shape and movement, and the total effect from one painting to another came about naturally and unconsciously.

Painting Number 1 merged into its present form after about two weeks of work. No effort was made to control the color tonality, which came about as a result of painting the same areas over and over, leaving parts showing as they began to contribute to the composition. The final composition achieved a freedom of movement which has not been achieved in earlier work, owing to the unconscious dependence upon horizontals and verticals to constitute the organization of the previous efforts.

Painting Number 2 achieved a still freer movement without the sacrifice of compositional cohesiveness. There was also a marked increase in chroma; and an overall strengthening of intensity characterized the progression from the latter painting to this one.

The fact that the first two paintings were rather large in dimension posed a definite problem concerning Painting Number 3. This panel, small in size, developed much more slowly. To gain any sort of significance within the confines of the smaller area was quite a task. The same is true of Painting Number 5, Painting Number 6, Painting Number 8,

and Painting Number 9. A lessening of intensity was finally necessary to bring about an organization in all of these; the intent had not been in accord with the limitations of the size.

Painting Number 4, the largest canvas of the twelve, embodies to the greatest degree the thing sought for in the overall problem. It was begun freely with, as was the case with the whole group, no conception of the final appearance of the finished work, either in composition or color tonality. The painting went through countless stages, each of which was really a different painting from the whole, each was in turn again subordinated; and it was principally through this process that a cohesive quality finally developed, this in essence being the goal of the problem. This painting possesses, owing partly to its size, more intensity of feeling than any of the others; there is also much more evidence of tension which gives it a great deal of vitality. Still, the cohesive quality is not lost in any area of the picture fabric.

In all of the paintings an essentially two-dimensional quality is maintained. The attempt has been made to keep any element from being just itself. Color must never for a moment remain just color, but an integral part of shape, for example; but at the same time this is happening it must also not lose its identity as color and become merely a device to define the shape. It is in this way that the painting achieves not only a oneness with itself, but a dynamic oneness--what might be called a vitality of wholeness.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

If the portion of this study consigned to the painting problem seems to exclude a relationship of the problem to the influences which were cited; this is not, in fact, true. The consideration of what went into the formation of the original intent provided the materials for the building of a "mental gallery", so to speak; and provided, as a basis for self-criticism, a view of the resulting work for what it was worth. And this view, in turn, created the necessity of the re-forging of old tools for a new purpose.

If an enthusiasm of response on the part of the painter himself to a finished work, comparing favorable to the enthusiasm of intent experienced when a work is begun, is any sort of test concerning the fruition of that intent; then the writer accomplished, for now, what he had intended in his painting. Thus, the hypothesis assumed, in the form of the imposed disciplines, was valid in regard to the realization of purpose. So finally and most important, that which has been gained from this study of the conception of form is now a part of the painter's subjective equipment for future artistic synthesis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dictionary

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. New York, The World Publishing Company, 1952.

Books

Barr, Alfred H., Jr., What is Modern Painting? New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1952.

Focillon, Henri, The Life of Forms in Art. New York, Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948.

Langer, Susanne K., Philosophy in a New Key. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1942.

Langer, Susanne K., Feeling and Form. New York, Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1953.

Maritain, Jacques, Art and Poetry. New York, Philosophical Library, Inc., 1943.

Maritain, Jacques, Art and Scholasticism. New York, Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1930.

Ritchie, Andrew Carnduff, Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1951.

Venturi, Lionello, Art Criticism Now. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941.

Periodicals

Ferren, John, "Symposium: The Human Figure", Art Digest, November 15, 1953.

Golub, Leon, "A Critique of Abstract Expressionism", College Art Journal, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1955.