THE SOURCE AND SUBSTANCE FOR A CONTEMPORARY ART OF AMERICAN ORIGIN

by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is in itself an accompaniment, or a verbal explanation of the experience analagous to and partially responsible for igniting the plastic experience which the paintings represent. It is a summary of occasions and conclusions which I experienced during the past two years in New York City. These two years among the museums, galleries and painters of New York represent the breakdown of the handicaps which I experienced, due to my previous isolation from a great portion of the tradition of painting. Without a knowledge of this tradition, no American can hope to paint seriously except as a primitive. This two year experience is inseparable from a study of my work to this point. These observations, comments and attitudes represent my confidence, the confirmation of my faith, and the transition from the status of student to painter. The object of this paper is to explain my conclusions, and to create a coherent background for the paintings which it accompanies. The term of "ex-patriot" has been used in this paper to classify those first American abstract painters who spent their formative years in Europe.

THE AWAKENING OF ART IN AMERICA

The most miraculous aspect of American painting previous to 1900 is that it produced any painters at all, much less painters of considerable merit such as Ryder, Whistler, Caleb Bingham, Eakins and Homer. The American scene has not been conducive to a fine plastic art. The influence of and the reaction to the frontier, and the seductive economic possibilities of this country prevented, in most cases, the time and place for art; and the callow gentility of the East was too superficial for it. Unfortunately certain aspects of our heritage still reverberate in places like Washington. Almost the entire course of painting in America before 1875 is a display of second rate provincial painting. The only exceptions to the rule were those who permanently joined the academic tradition in Europe. Curiously enough, a new group of expatriots helped to join present day American art to the world's tradition of great painting.[1] They were assisted by modern times--the barrier of two oceans had, until 1900, been a crippling factor in the growth of art in America. The success of Whistler and Sargeant, and the revolutionary excitement of a new art in Europe kindled a fire under the dissatisfied hearts of many young painters at the beginning of this century. Some of these ex-patriots were scholarship winners from

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1 One of the first to tell this story was S. M. Kootz in his Frontiers of American Painting, although portions of this book now appear obsolete.

the Pennsylvania Academy (Rattner) and the National Academy, who shocked their sponsors by joining forces (in the salon of Gertrude Stein) or by admiring from a distance the work of the new movements. Some of them stayed on for many years (Pascin, Weber, Morgan Russell), and almost all of these early ex-patriots submissively identified themselves with the prevailing schools of modern art. The show held by the Modern Museum in the spring of 1951, which contained examples of all the modern Americans, typifies the dependence of these early American moderns upon their European sources. The show was not a good one in that many examples of important American innovations were excluded, but the show served to reveal this important historical occurrence of the beginnings of an international art in America. It is not the intention to underestimate the importance of these derivators of the modern French and German schools-- men such as Feininger, MacDonald-Wright, Hartley, Russell, Stella, Gallatin, Weber, Rattner and others. These men broke the ice, they turned their backs on provincial American realism and the romantic sentimentalism heretofore regarded as the roots of an inherent tradition. They reminded us that western art did not stop growing after the 17th Century, and they pointed the way back to tradition for the younger painters. They deviated from the direction of John Stuart Currys and the Thomas Bentons and most of the mural art of the 30's which had found its source in previous American practices which could produce nothing but watered down

provincial art that already had too little blood in its veins.[2] The great failing with these ex-patriots was that as students they were too thorough and their dependence and admiration was too great. But they kindled the love for paint and stimulated the need for courage in America. The recent shows of Feininger and Rattner bear out their eloquence as craftsmen, and their shortcomings as innovators. We admire their message -- the call for the new -- but we are left with a sense that they had too little, personally, to say. Their short hand notes -- Futurism and Cubism and the influence of Klee in the case of Feininger, and the work of Picasso and Rouault and the German expressionists in the case of Rattner -- were excellent. In discussions with both of these very sincere men a note of insecurity was detected that is borne out in any retrospective of their work.

The ex-patriots dealt a severe blow to the myth of an American tradition.

The most significant single occasion, in the early days, was the Armoury Show of 1913. The results of this cultural crash, that announced the depression that had existed in American painting, are well known. However, the change and the victory of a serious art in America was not an overnight experience. The reaction to certain moderns was nearly as violent in the Chicago Worlds Fair of 1933 as it had been with the Armoury Show twenty years ago. The case of John

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2 An exception to this would be the influence of the Mexican muralists.

Sloan,[3] one of the original supporters of the 1913 occasion, whose recent memorial show at the Whitney Museum in New York was an event of pathos. Sloan felt desperately the need for a revitalisation of art in America, but he missed the essential points of the Show which he helped organise. Sloan was a firm believer in the American Tradition; he could not relinquish the appetitive, logical and prosy characteristics that he identified with American art of the past. He himself had been first an illustrator; America has always had an abundance of first rate illustrators. Sloan and his fellow members of the Ash-Can School thought, in the early days that, by capturing the more crude (McSorley's Bar), the more vital (The Boxing Matches of George Bellows) aspects of American life, they were travelling in high speed. They simply missed the point by trying to be more thoroughly reportorial and natively up-to-date than their predecessors. A similar instance of this hopeless thrust into what is already dead about the "advance" of the American Tradition can be seen in the work of the so-called abstract symbolists, those native painters who formerly decorated our post offices. They feel that by the introduction of a few modern European gimmicks (primarily a pseudo-analytical cubism with overtones of Blue Rider colour), they provided new links in the Stuart, Hudson River Valley, Thomas Benton-Mid Western, etc. tradition: the current paintings of Greene, Siegfried

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3 Art News - January 1952 - Page 24.

Rheinhardt,[4] and the paintings of Ben Shahn and Kunyioshi of the 40's. They have found a new gimmick to replace the old prose content of social realism which bores even themselves. It was a similar path of futility that John Sloan, with a crude aesthetic of American aphorisms, followed when he tried to outgrow the dated but historically important Ash-Can School. Rarely, has a serious painter endured a more pathetic course than that of Sloan from 1920 until his death in 1951. He became, in gradual steps, one of the most miserable painters of reputation in the American scene. He seemed to have lost his confidence while losing his skill. Much of his late work was derived from Lautrec, who had earlier influenced Sloan's illustrations, and the paintings show a complete lack of understanding of the source (Lautrec) and a complete disregard or unawareness of the sources that influenced Toulouse.

As the ex-patriots focused on the new European discoveries, while the American traditionalists looked to the American scene and the tradition of native illustration, it appears that fundamentally both lacked original creativity. Their sin was their inability to look beyond their immediate predecessors and contemporaries back to the sources of a wider tradition. The complexities of creative painting command a great knowledge and assimilation of the sources of the past. A lack of this knowledge, or an inability to see beyond the immediate, has been

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4 Life Magazine - March 24th, 1952.

one of the greatest handicaps for American painters.[5] An awareness of tradition, which appears to be incongruously rare in American traditionalists, is a prime characteristic of the current American Vanguard. These current Americans have obviously grown out of the European moderns without having been captured by them.

It would be false to give the impression that the American realist tradition is dead. True enough it is passe, it is lifeless. We cannot conceivably look at the work of Grant Wood, Leon Kroll, Speicher, Benton and others, and receive any kind of poetic substance; they appear meaningless when their story content has been told. The death rattle of the "American tradition" of the 30's was apparent enough in the social realists and W. P. A. muralists. They were technically as uninspiring as they were creatively dead. Yet there seems to be no end to the supply of hacks and illustrators pouring out of the American schools today. There are still strong forces of reaction, misjudgement and confusion; in some cases dying a slow death, in others there are foundations and schools with as much money as they have obsolete ideas. While in some places there is a danger of a kind of academic modernism, it is astounding to visit the exhibitions of students work at the Art Students League in New York City, where the students of Bouche, Olinsky and Brackman display their work; it is almost shocking to find students working in the bloodless manner of these

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5Saturday Review of Literature - A. W. Morgan - February 3rd, 1951, Page 29.

instructors. There are still many factors, while not reactionary, that inhibit the growth of serious painting in the U. S. -- the influence of the National Academy; the politics of Artists Equity, of the Woodstock Group, the Museum of Modern Art; the practical considerations of the large museums like the Metropolitan; not to mention the ridiculous dependence of the American Federation of Arts and similar organizations upon a few dictatorial philanthropists. In some cases these people favour contemporary art, but they insist upon using art as a kind of personal mode of expression to compensate their inner frustrations. There is no more ridiculous display of personal dictatorship and captured funds than exists at the Guggenheim Non-Objective Museum under Hilla Rebay. The evils of this particular institution have long been under attack from one of the few able critics in New York, Aline Loucheim.

Art criticism in America is rarely to be found at a high, penetrating level. We have, fortunately, a few able critics in Clement Greenberg, Thomas Hess, Meyer Schapiro, and the aforementioned Miss Loucheim. But most of the reviews, introductions, newspaper reports and books made available to the American public appear to have been written for a castrated audience. The general trend of art education and criticism seems most hindered by devotion to compromise. Many institutions seem to emulate the American Congress hacking the guts out of an important measure and, therefore, neutralizing it to satisfy the interests of the many sectional blocks. It is as though these

individuals and institutions fear controversy and lack a desire to stand by what they feel is honest and right, regardless of the cost. This practice results in one of the most frequent inequities commonly known at current exhibitions -- viz, the Jury System. Invariably, when a big show is planned, the Board of Directors takes great care to select, not what they feel would be the most competent judges available, but the foremost representatives of the most diverse fields. It is common then to find a jury composed of Leon Kroll, Hans Hoffman, and Karl Zerbe.

There are many painters, in any discussion of an awakening of serious contemporary American art, who cannot be easily classified. They appear independent of the new abstract movement and yet free of the faults of the ex-patriots and American traditionalists. A man like John Marin has contributed little inspiration for the Vanguard painters, and yet he rises above all of the early 20th Century Americans. Perhaps he is a glorious conclusion to a not so glorious "tradition" of American realism. There seem to be isolated realists such as Andrew Weythe, expressionists like Walt Kuhn, modified cubists like Karl Knaths, who are excellent painters that cannot be sacrificed for the sake of generalization. A more difficult case is that of Stuart Davis who just misses the classification of ex-patriot derivator while, at the same time, it would be inaccurate to place him inside the Vanguard Movement. While Davis is guilty of tremendous over simplification and lacks the complexity of great painters, his reputation as a

foremost American modern seems secure. When we examine the work of Gorky and his rightness as one of the first and most influential members of the Vanguard, we realize the impossibility of classifying Davis' work with this group.

There are many other factors in this disorganized bridge that have joined current American art to the tradition of European painting. All of them have contributed in some way, difficult to measure, that has brought about the first vital situation in American art. The sheer wealth of America, while fostering many backward ramifications, is partly responsible. Perhaps a country must feel sure of its appetitive success before it can fully entertain aesthetic pleasures, as is the case of Italy in the 15th Century, Flanders in the 16th Century, Spain in the 17th Century and France in the 18th Century. The after effects of Hitler's invasion of France in 1939, however, were the most important in the sudden splice of transatlantic art, and greatly responsible for the sudden appearance of the Vanguard. For into these years were crowded many important and unusual traditions. Many European dealers shifted their collections to America and some opened New York offices for the first time. The War brought about a stupendous migration of some of Europe's greatest living painters including, among others, Leger, Mondrian and Beckmann. Further, the war years provided an interim for re-examination of modern European painting. Several things were apparent when the smoke of the war had lifted: there were no new painters to be found in Europe; the "old" Masters,

Picasso, Matisse, Rouault and Dufy were still at work; their work was still vital, particularly in the case of Matisse. These moderns, who were approaching their 70's and 80's, were locally unchallenged. For that matter, few painters and practically no movements of great importance had appeared since 1920 on the European scene. The large number of retrospective group shows covering the history of the modern movement bear this out. Perhaps only in Italy where, except for the Futurists and Meta-Physicals (who spent much of their time in Paris), there had been no real battle ground and few victories, were there a few promising young artists. This derth of European talent, plus the fact that New York temporarily became the only active market for modern art during the war years, set the stage for a shift of the vital centre of art, and the opportunity for a new movement to appear. The American Vanguard, uninhibited by the dominating figures of modern European art, took up this challenge.

THE VANGUARD

The phenomenal development of the new movement since 1940 rattled the American scene like a blitzkreig. In some ways the appearance of this group was almost too sudden, for just as private collectors, schools and museums were beginning to adjust themselves to what they had formerly referred to derogatorily as "modernistic", this new movement appeared and rendered an "old-hat" effect on certain work hitherto classified as daring purchases a few short years before. Surrealism in particular, which had been considered by some as the ultimate in modern paintings,[6] looked vaguely old fashioned. Much of the expressionist work of Kokoschka, Rouault, Vlaminck and Kirchner appeared less vital and somewhat dated. For the first time since 1920, a new movement with a quality of its own, a movement which did not challenge what had gone before but expressed new directions, had to be reckoned with. Names which had gone practically unknown before became suddenly prominent after 1945. De Kooning, Pollock, Tomlin, Guston, Congdon, Brooks, Rothko and others demanded the attention of every serious painter and critic. Their appearance was so sudden that even today the work of these men is unknown to most of the teachers and art schools outside of New York, while their reputations are clearly felt. Perhaps much of the shock was due to the fact that most of these men were themselves grounded in tradition, and many of them established realists

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6 History of Modern Painting from Picasso to Surrealism - Skira - Page 175.

prior to the war. Guston, for example, won first prize in the Carnegie Exhibition as late as 1945 with a rather buxom, sentimental and realistic female figure. Herein lies one of the major keys to the appearance of this unusual group. Nearly all of them escaped the almost passive influence of the Modern Europeans suffered by the ex-patriot painters previously mentioned. The Vanguard painters went through an extensive period of re-examining the traditional roots of painting before 1900. There is a technical elegance and richness of paint in most of this work that bears out the fruit of their knowledge of the Old Masters. It is not strange that we think of the Vanguard as being composed of bright young men; however, the average age is about forty-five. Most of them have fifteen to twenty-five years of studio experience behind them. Nearly all of them disappeared from an established position on 57th Street quite suddenly and re-appeared after three or four years. Most of them, Like Bloom, Guston, Brooks and Pollock re-appeared in new galleries, if they were able to find them, and they had to wait for a new audience. Some, like De Kooning, Baziotes and Gorky, had waged their battle in obscurity for ten to fifteen years previous to 1946. Still others, like Motherwell and Ad Rheinhardt, had enjoyed reputations in related fields and had taken up the brush seriously only after 1940.

While many new painters have appeared whose merit seems indisputable such as Tobey, Vincente, Kline, Bloom, Tworkov, Coggeshall, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman, there are a number of painters whose power is undeniable but, either for lack of desire to show, or because

they have displayed some new facet of the Vanguard Movement as yet undigestible, they have not yet attained recognition. Their contribution to the movement will be revealed in good time. One of them, Judson Smith, was for years a highly paid academician who threw over his former style and success for the deeper meaning he had read into his vision. His case exemplifies the courage always associated with great movers. It is characteristic of most of the Vanguard painters. However, this transition is a double edged sword; for not all the Vanguard dealers and painters are urged so much by conviction as by keeping up with the Joneses. For example, there is the case of a recent one-man show by Louis Schanker at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery. Schanker, who has been a teacher at the Brooklyn Museum and at Bard College, is a first rate graphic technician. However, he has always lacked statement and originality. His show, I believe, was a clear case of getting on the band wagon; his trick effects and the uninspired black portholes leaves one with the feeling that even his "accidental" effects were pre-conceived. For many painters who had always considered themselves to be in the foreground, the birth of the Vanguard meant joining a new club. It is my belief that many painters of this type -- Vanguard academicians -- will enjoy the material fruits of this movement, while many of the more intense, vital and difficult painters remain temporarily unheralded. One such painter might be Sal Sirugo, whose black and white casein paintings are undeniably lacking in commercial value and, at the moment, extremely difficult to "read". While he received a secondary prize in the Emily Lowe Award Competition

in 1951, he has not yet had a one-man show and he is rarely accepted in well known Group Exhibitions. Curiously enough, both Schanker and Sirugo are under the auspices of the Borgenicht Gallery which, I believe, started out to be a serious Vanguard Showcase. But few dealers have had the success or the perseverance of Betty Parsons. Borgenicht has added to her line several safe additions such as the Modigliani-like, S. Adler. She is playing it safe, and she has kept one of her most powerful assets, Sirugo, under wraps. The theory here, as at many other galleries, is to hold on to something that may be potentially good without having to be bold enough or speculative enough to devote a two-week investment to it.* The dealer system in America generally neither discourages nor encourages new movements. The only investment that the majority of galleries will consider is in that which is established and safe. The consignment system is practised in nearly all of the New York Galleries: it costs the dealer nothing to possess the exclusive on a particular painter. For that matter, many galleries are downright unscrupulous and commercial; anyone who knows the New York scene realizes that a one-man show (and this kind of New York Show pads many a biography in the provinces), in 50% of the New York galleries, can be had for the sake of the purchasing; it is like renting space at the Fulton Street Market (e. g. Creative Gallery). Many an eager "Scott Fitzgerald" comes into New York fro m the Ohio River Valley -- eager enough to show to pay rental, publicity and advertising expenses, under the guise of having been selected by a

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* Period generally allowed by New York galleries for one-man shows.

philanthropic gallery owner. Another avid practice is that of paying rent through the vehicle of competitive group exhibitions. The appeal is to the unknown who is ever anxious to show his work; the entrance fee runs about $3.00 a head; there is no limitation on the part of the gallery on the number of candidates submitting; there is, however, a definite space limitation, held sometimes to thirty or forty accepted paintings. It makes a very profitable venture (e. g. Contemporary Gallery). New York has not changed and there are just as many parasites attaching themselves to the Vanguard, which is now considered safe, as there were to previous new movements. There are also a number of reactionary galleries who are trying to protect their interest in earlier movements, their position is static (e. g. Paul Rosenberg). There are a few important Galleries (e. g. Kootz), who are making a gradual change but, for the most part, there are very few creditable galleries where the Vanguard painters can show their work. An exception to the consignment practice, and a very able dealer, Mrs. Holpert, owner of the Downtown Gallery, has been assisting young artists; unfortunately, most of them are followers of the ex-patricts, painters who might be called modern, but certainly not Vanguard. However, this is in keeping with her selection of sound independents such as O'Keefe, Sheeler and Davis, and safe quasi-realists such as Zorach, Kunyioshi and Ben Shahn. Undoubtedly the best example of the new gallery and the new audience is the case of Betty Parsons. She has patiently, conscientiously and honestly struggled for a new art in America and has built up a large following, with considerable hardship, over a

period of years beginning before World War II. It was natural that most of the Vanguard painters should gravitate in her direction. It must be said, however, that discrimination has not always been a characteristic of this Gallery but, hit-and-miss, she has by far the greatest collection of Vanguard painters under her wing; any history of the movement will have to pay considerable homage to this one source. She has been a major instrument in bringing at least partial or restricted recognition of New York as the current centre of vital art. Another excellent gallery is the Egan. A study of the work shown at these two galleries during recent years leaves a very definite impression of four or five common factors which identify the Vanguard painters. One of the foremost of these is the apparent re-examination of the art of the orient similar, but far more penetrating and understanding, to that which took place in the 1860's in France. The flat space with its mysterious suggestion of an infinite movement and the re-emergence of line as a definite force both in movement and as an ally of the two dimensional plane. No less important a characteristic was the rediscovery of the power and magic of black and white. The mysteries of chiaroscuro, of light and dark, through its most simple and dramatic expression of black and white has had a tremendous effect on most of the Vanguard painters. A leader of great influence in this last characteristic has been De Kooning. While few of these painters have been content with the rigid effect of black and white for any length of time, the lessons learned from this experience is evident in their later canvases. All of these qualities have had their effect and are active in my own

work. Perhaps for this reason they are the aspects of the Vanguard movement which are most evident. Other repercussions have occurred following the birth of the Vanguard; Village Modern has been exposed for what it is; there has been a clear cut reaction to free forms in painting. Essentially, for reasons previously mentioned in terms of sculptural space, the free forms floating on an opaque space or sky wash space now seems dull, uncomplex, and a misunderstanding of the total relativity of the parts of a painting. Free form painting appears now to have been the precursor of Greenwich Village enamel ash trays, glazed lamps, and the worst kind of contemporary interior design. It is necessary to mention here one last and very important characteristic of Vanguard painting which has been an invaluable contribution to the history of painting, namely the element of contingency, whether in the form of multi-layers of rotating washes or in the form of free flowing textures countered by discriminating pallet scrapings. The uninhibited and unrestricted flow of paint has been fearlessly used in a way that has been a concrete conception of an attitude used but not clearly understood by the Fauves (in terms of application of paint as well as colour). The controlled drippings, both wet and dry, have been carefully built up, selected, sometimes eliminated, and always used to get the greatest force out of painting, whether used in an extreme emotional manner (Pollock, De Kooning), or in a more refined, intellectual style (Rothko, Motherwell). Undoubtedly, this giving of oneself to paint, like the flow of lava from a volcanic mountain (and this metaphor seems to symbolise the Vanguard), has been the most controversial quality of

this painting. It has been condemned from such holy corners as the "T. V." Bishop, Fulton Sheen, Time Magazine, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The revolt from the Metropolitan Show of 1950 was the volcanic eruption that stamped the Vanguard as something to be reckoned with. It was the foremost example of reaction to the compromise Jury System which has been previously mentioned. This was not temperamental display, and the Metropolitan Show was considerably weaker for it; this revolt provided a jolt to the prevailing evils of the "system" that was sorely needed. By comparison, how anarchistic was the expose of the open letter circulated by the mummified National Society of Sculptors, who refected the controversial Metropolitan U. S. Sculpture Show of 1951 and 1952. One third of the work in the Show was created by members of that Society and the Show, far from being "advanced", exposed the grey state of American Sculpture.

There are a number of painters of great merit who, like their colleagues of the period previously considered here, cannot be rightly placed within the Vanguard movement. Hoffman, Albers and Gottlieb are undoubtedly among the most advanced painters in America today, but they have followed a more or less independent direction. They have sprung from the roots of modern painting without being identified with the Vanguard; they stand out as independent land marks along the way of modern art. Gottlieb, while influenced by Rothko, has refined and perfected many of the unprobed directions borne out of primitive sources (partly touched by such as Picasso, Modigliani, etc., without being carried to a conclusion). Albers has again refined an isolated area

touched by some forerunners such as Mondrian and Malevitch. Hoffman above all has marked importance; his reputation pre-dated the Vanguard; his influence as a teacher has had no small effect upon creating the atmosphere for a Vanguard Movement. In his own right as a painter, his recent oils have come close to making "something for the museums" out of Expressionism. By way of contrast, Max Beckmann, another "exile", will be remembered as one of the top German expressionists, but he failed to drive his art forward, and his efforts as a teacher rarely went beyond the fundamentals of Beckmann.

While the Vanguard Movement has had no small influence upon student work, it is obvious that it is no zenith in American painting. While this movement shows definite signs of beginning to jell and even of becoming static, new painters will break through and new horizons will be sought. Clearly, there are the beginnings of dogma in the writings of Barnett Newmann and Mark Rothko. Undoubtedly a generation of young painters will stagnate about the credos of the new leaders. Many of the Vanguard painters have begun what might be called a conservative, but not retrogressive, refinement of their own work. This is clear enough in the case of Pollock who first pushed his own work to the extreme end of its limits and is now qualifying and introducing conservative but judicious elements into his painting.

The Vanguard has incorporated a structure or total view which has brought unified understanding to the multi-faceted (often resulting in misconstrued confusion) character of modern European Art from 1900 to 1925. This period, which has been regarded as the most

diverse and controversial in Art History, has begun to assume its proper perspective to the art which preceded it. The advanced movement of today, far from obscuring the place of tradition, has restated its inspirational importance as indispensable to the painter. The Vanguard has released the psychological block and re-opened the gates to the infinite realm of painting at a time when new creative practices seemed impossible. The Vanguard has re-established the rightness of the honest painter's performance, however strange or antipathetic to prevailing standards. And, most of all, it has assured the birth of future masters by overcoming the great academic failing of the 19th century, by shifting the emphasis from style to statement; it says that he has the right to be heard who has something to say, regardless of the crudeness, heterogeneity or mysteriousness of style. Perhaps this is a cultural trait of democracy; certainly it is anti-academic. No painter of this movement is expected to have the style of his nation, of his region, or of his cult; he is not even required to possess any consistent style. I realize this is a revolutionary repercussion -- it makes painters difficult to identify for the glib historians, but it keeps them from becoming static. It will make the dealer unhappy who has built up a clientele that has learned to anticipate repetition.

It would be most unreal to pretend that the new movement is without weakness -- some glaring; but I have tried to illuminate upon the experiences and impressions that I have had both as a viewer and painter in proximity to this movement, which is inseperable from my current work. One of the most dubious aspects of the new movement

is the insistence upon huge canvases, when the statements could be adequately expressed on a small plane. While the desire for the large surface has come about partly to free the painter, to give him a sense of wide open spaces and of unbridled movement, a certain lack of discipline is apparent on many canvases. It is a characteristic of most Vanguard shows, including some of the very best members of this Group, that the show is composed of a number of unusually competent works and an equal number of incomplete and even bad paintings. There is often lack of discrimination and discipline; many areas of the large canvases seem unconquered and unattended to for lack of direction. The Vanguard painters are often impatient and too hurried. It is a weakness that is often overlooked or side stepped by the painter who can fall back on the monumental proportions or the sheer imposing bigness of the surface. The movement is in its early stages; it has not yet produced a Cezanne. Drawing and water colour have been unrealistically neglected. It is the magnified proportions of the advanced painter's statement that often reveals the lack of tenderness from detail. To this point too many Vanguard paintings are pared down to the bare paraphrase; there is a lack of complexity but this results from the resurgence of statement. The peak of the Vanguard movement will be reached when an inherent style has been discovered.

PERSONAL DIRECTION AND THE SEARCH FOR SUBSTANCE

"I admire very much the energy and vitality of American painters. I especially like their enthusiasm and freshness. This I find inspiring. They would do well to free themselves from Europe's influence". (Advice to young painters:- "Work hard - then say nuts.") *

Thus far I have taken a diverse route to express my attitude towards painting today. Perhaps my previous comments upon external and objective things will prove the more judicious in light of what is to follow. Theory is hazardous enough, but personal credos are always suspect. I confess that my articulate feelings and statements upon my own art are likely to be contradicted by me at a future date. All this may be obsolete tomorrow; for inherent in my belief is a tinge of nihilism, perhaps more rightly called the personal whims of "chills and fever". The life giving force within the painter must deny, must react unfavorably, must fight the established chain of practice, aesthetics and plastic doctrine.

Let me begin by attempting to define what I mean by abstract painting; for this is how I define my work, and this is how I label nearly all of the contemporary work that I consider important. To begin with there is the matter of content; the conscious discovery of modern painting is the realization of a plastic content composed of the inherent elements of painting that is independent of and, at times, even dispenses with pictorial content. Imitation can never be a true work of art for the relationship of the painter to his painted canvas is different and abstract compared to his relationship with the

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* Joan Miro in an interview by Francis Lee in the Magazine Possibilities I - Winter 1947/48 - Wittenborn.

objects in the world; the relationship of the component parts of a canvas is creative, unreal and abstract when compared with the objects in nature. MoholyNagy has said, in counter suggestion to those who maintain that an artist has to be stimulated by a direct and natural visual experience, and I quote: "It is only the relationship between visual elements and not the subject matter which produces visual structure with an intrinsic meaning." [6] The painter qualifies his observations from nature by reducing them to the two dimensional plane; the painter instinctively moves away from a concrete objective reality. Andre Malreaux has called this reduction "the beginning of art"[8]. The painter speaks from within; for him it is a necessity, it is the meaning of life. He speaks with the flow of his paint; the turn of his brush can express the texture of wind, the feeling of free movement on the wing. His final object, the painting, is an abstract vehicle, a condenser which moves the viewer in empathy for the internal motions of the artist. This created space, the canvas, when it has original verve is a new message in plastic space that gives new meaning to the tender feelings of human consciousness.

I must now begin to introduce come contradictions. In art, definitions must contain no less ambiguity than paintings themselves. As I have implied, what the painter senses and feels is abstract, and the manner in which he expresses it is abstract. But his final statement,

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7 Vision In Motion - P. Thoebald - Chicago, 1947 - Page 142.

8 The Psychology of Art. The Creative Act - The Bollingen Series XXIV - Pantheon Books, New York, 1949 - Page 114.

the creative thing, the canvas, is a concrete object which contains the particular attitude of an individual artist. The painting itself, objectively speaking, is immobile as a piece of sculpture is immobile. It is a solidifed and concrete visualization that the artist has moulded from the special moment which, for him, was abstract; as El Greco's inspirational reaction, his mysterious feelings about Toledo were abstract; but the final canvas, or El Greco's "Toledo", hanging in the Metropolitan Museum, is a solid aesthetic object. It is my belief that this general description of the abstract quality in painting, which we sense in the nervous brush strokes of Soutine, or in the enigmatic chiaroscuro of Rembrandt, has always existed in painting. At times in the history of art, the more obvious abstract objectives of our contemporaries have been employed as positively as it was diabolically camouflaged by many of the High Renaissance painters. But there is this distinction to keep in mind in any discussion of abstraction and content; few paintings of merit have ever pretended to compensate or simply reproduce the real thing. The objective of contemporary painters has been something more than the abstraction of nature or the abstraction of an idea as in a mathematical formula. The modern painter has doggedly tried to create a plastic content comparable to the internal content of music, which relieves the painter of the obligation and serious jeopardy involved in story telling or placing the mirror up to nature. In my paintings I have struggled with my forms, without regard to nature, to evolve an inner organization that represents the statement or content. In my own

case, and I believe in the majority of cases with painters, line is the major element of this abstract internal structure. As with melody in music I have found that line is my initial movement; it is the release of a vision of feeling on the canvas in the form of plastic statement. It is, however, the most abstract, the most mathematical basis of organization for painting. What follows in the way of light and colour appears to be the tissue, the devious arrangement and the flowering body of the initial abstract attitude which has its release in the linear.

> All controversy about realism or idealism in art is idle; it deals with a product outwardly similar but inwardly non-artistic. Art, if it deserves the name, cannot be either realistic or idealistic; it can only be always and everywhere one and the same thing, whatever name may be given to it.[9]

It is difficult to speak for anyone else, however it is known that certain painters begin with the reduction of certain elements observed in nature; others have been known to work from Old Masters (Gorky); while a great many maintain that no objective source has influenced them but that their work has risen from the depths of their subconscious feeling. Still, it is apparent that practically all of the moderns have been guided by a concrete visual pattern which forms their work in a very definite direction. This visual pattern is subject to evolutionary changes, but it is a consistent and formal "way of seeing" that results in creative and visual experience.

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9 Conrad Fiedler - On Judging Works of Visual Art - University of California Press, 1949 - Ed. by Henry Schaefer-Simmern - Page 59.

It is my belief that every painter, regardless of his approach to the canvas as aforementioned, is guided by all his conscious perceptions of the visual world. Through these he adopts a visual attitude which, true enough, is tempered by the inner workings of his mind and emotions. But these visual experiences, while none of them may directly result in a painting per se, are the makings of his creative expression. It is through his senses that the artist begins to select and eliminate the elements that reveal his formal images. It is the awareness of this peculiar and hyper-sensitiveness of visual experience that gives the painter his particular kind of knowledge; it is through this awareness that he finds the medium into which he can pour his creative discoveries. No matter how abstractly or realistically these patterns may develop, they speak of the relationship of a sensitive human consciousness to the external world. In my own case, as I stand in a blank square room illuminated only by a consistent electric light with a pencil, charcoal or brush in my hand and stare at the blank surface before me, I have queried my own attitude. I am excited and eager to begin the division and development of that space. I am conscious of a nervous eagerness to start. I am sure that I have something to say and yet there is no model, no positive immediate picture in my mind. Yet every canvas has evolved and has been related to the paintings that have preceded it, and every painting is based on definite foregone visual experiences -- some of them immediate -- some of them re-occurring visual activities that are repetitiously familiar to my earliest visual remembrances. I can recall some of

the most active impressions: the water colors of Cezanne; the moving textural strokes of Munch; the rock formations of every place I have visited since boyhood; the experience of Chinatown; the fantastic ballet of Chinese written characters; the excitement and drama in the accidental textures upon city walls - the sides of semi-demolished buildings on the Lower East side - the open hand-ball courts, crusted with age and spattered with paint and chalk; the wet sombre textures on the tubular walls of the New York and London subways. Out of these things has grown a total and consistent visual discipline that absorbs all of the individual perceptions. Each has added to the complex visual attitude which I now possess. This total attitude is obviously conditioned by those instincts and ideas which impregnate and result in a formal aesthetic presentation. This attitude is consistent but never static; for not only do I experience new activities in the external world - new to me - but I am constantly faced with the observations and conscious discoveries of all of my previous canvases. This stimulates a second level of selection and elimination which is more native and more important to the creative artist than to the average human observer and that is in seeing the activity of the elements in one's own work, for here it is that we discover the plastic patterns that fail to work, or disrupt the organization of our total plastic statement. On this basis we correct, change and alter our formal expression and adjust it to the new and imperative sensations that seem to suggest a final solution to the painter's problems.

The greatest difficulty that I have encountered is the constant

vigilance necessary to maintain the inter-relation of all parts of the painting. For nowhere on the plane can there exist an acrobat or an individual and unconnected part, no matter how brilliant, that is not a part of the whole. It is a tremendous temptation to employ some new effect in the midst of developing a canvas, or to allow some accidental effect to remain that is foreign to the unity of the work. It is part of the painter's discipline to scrape out and paint over, to labor upon his painting until it speaks with one voice. However, it is my belief that on certain canvases, experimental problems or phases of the total vision of the artist can be worked out on a painting that is on the whole incomplete. In many instances, where the painter is honestly aware of this and sees the solution of integration for the new discovery in a new work, it is best for him to drive into a new painting. For the painter must be able to discern between the spiritual necessity of his life as a painter and the temptation of a pastry maker to turn out a consistently pretty object. It is possible to work any number of paintings concurrently. It is evident that many painters would like, and sometimes do return to touch up an old work. There seems to be no final time factor in a mature work of art; a painter could eternally alter the arrangements of his painting. Strictly speaking there is no climax for the painter. However, the painter tends to move from one painting to another. It is my feeling that the sum total of all the paintings represent the artist's vision; they proceed in a logical and related order like the alphabet. Nonetheless each painting represents, to the observer, a complete object like a musical

note or a short poem.

It is difficult to relinquish or part with any of my paintings until such time as an old work appears to be obsolete or unrelated to my current work; and then it becomes a suitable object for destruction rather than for sale; I am sure every painter feels this sense of offspring. Nor can he calculate or produce work on a time schedule. It is a monstrous habit that painters sometimes acquire to create a painting to fit a particular show or to work up a painting in time for a show. The very idea of preparing a work with a pre-conceived motive appears to me to be an appetitive torpedo, from which a painting cannot possibly hope to survive as a serious work. Painting can never be a way of earning a living. Today, when practically all painting is easel painting and dimensions must be suitable to dealers and middle class housing projects, there is a great threat to the painter and the life giving force which makes him work. How much the painter of today must yearn for permanent mural occasions for his work, where he can work without a care for time or subsistence towards a fulfillment of his nature in monumental terms, where the final creation becomes a public rather than a private experience. Nor can painting be used in the more obvious and logical form of propaganda, if it is to survive as a fine art. The example of Germany under the Third Reich and the Social Realism of Soviet Russia would make this statement evident enough. It is my feeling that the painter is driven to express himself involuntarily - that he can have no rational motive. This does not mean that the final work is impassable or an object of exclusive and

private meaning. For the serious painter grows, as do objects of nature, with full meaning, beauty and inter-connection without having the slightest desire to please or inform while in the act of development. Perhaps it is this intensity and self-service that generally makes the painter inarticulate and often inaccurate when describing his own work. Essentially this is the job of critics and historians.

There is perhaps more permanent meaning in the substance of an art object as found by the world than in the private meaning or necessity that drives the individual painter to create it. It is the objective meaning and the critical judgement of the following generations that observe a painting that gives it universal significance. The experience of creating it was no less meaningful for the artist, but the two meanings are separate, and the consequence of the latter dies with the artist.

I have tried in my work to suggest movement through texture rather than line - controlled by certain quantities of stand-oil in mixtures, and through brush work. I have tended to use color as light rather than in establishing the volume of form. There is a contradiction in Cezanne, namely that where color is a brick-building element on his oils, it is used in a totally different manner in his water-colors; color is used to support the movement, tension and inter-play of light. This quality in his water colors has influenced my own attitude towards the employment of color. I prefer the spontaneity in drawing and a free, uninhibited development of the initial composition. I like to think of the painting first in terms of black and

white; to assist it, to push it towards the formation of an organic structure; to begin a painting in an unpremeditated and hopeful way. For it sometimes seems that the painting grows of itself; that the flat space has always been divided and arranged but is hidden by a blanket of mystery. It is as though it were waiting with all the fertility of spring to reveal itself. And as the composition develops with an inherent sense of rightness, you assist it, as a farmer the field, knowing that each new change, each addition to the structure was the one previously intended to be. It is this mystical sense of unveiling, of knowing that the hand becomes more sensitive and that each new painting will be an unveiling of greater significance; it is the knowledge that every new stroke on the canvas is pre-determined and intrinsically needed by what has gone before, that makes me question and seriously doubt the value of defining a personal method with the dogmas of style. The practical aspects of painting that I have mentioned are details of dubious value. In no two paintings do we reveal the content of our vision in the same way. For an individual painter to attempt, like an anatomy student, to dissect the manual employment used in plastic revelation, is fruitless. It is like a clumsy archaeologist breaking the seal of a sacred tomb in such a way that the elements precede him into the inner sanctum and disintegrate the secret contents.

It is necessary to stop short of a prosaic explanation when evaluating the experience and effort that is a poetic mixture. If the

explanation of one's work were not so intangible, so sacred, and so incapable of paraphrase, it would not be the art of painting. The painter seeks to be at one with his materials; to reveal the meaning of both the imagination of man and its relation to matter.

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SHOWS

Modern Museum

1-man Shows: Modigliani, Ensor, Munch, Matisse, Soutine, Beckman Memorial.

Group Shows: Contemporary American Anstract.
Contemporary New York Private Collections, including Clifford Odets Klee Collection.
15 new Americans.

Downtown Gallery:

1-man Shows: John Marin, Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn.
Group Shows: Contemporary American - new painters.

Wildenstein Gallery:

1-man Shows: Goya, Daumier.

Metropolitan Museum:

1-man Shows: Lautrec, Cezanne.
Group Shows: Contemporary American Oil Paintings, 1950.

B. Schaefer Gallery:

1-man Shows: Balcomb Greene.

Whitney Museum:

1-man Shows: John Sloan, Archile Gorky
Group Shows: Contemporary American - 1950 and 1951.

Grand Central Moderns:

1-man Shows: Byron Brown.

Peridot Gallery:

1-man Shows: Phil Guston, James Brooks.

Janis Gallery:

1-man Shows: Piet Mondrian, Rousseau le Douanier, Ferdinand Leger, Joseph Albers, Drawings of Saul Steinberg

Group Shows: Three shows concerning early sources of contemporary painting - 1913/25 European.
Contemporary American Anstract.

New Gallery:

1-man Shows: Robert Conover, Joan Shaw.

Rose Fried Gallery:

1-man Shows: Fritz Glorner.
Group Shows: Early American Moderns.

Betty Parsons Gallery:

1-man Shows: Mark Rothko, Ad Rheinhardt, Coggeshall, Pousset-dart, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newmann, Pollock, Stamos, Ahmed, William Congdon.

Kootz Gallery:

1-man Shows: Baziotes, A. Gottlieb, Motherwell, Hans Hoffman
Group Shows: Fauves Paintings.

Rosenberg Gallery:

1-man Shows: Max Weber, Abraham Rattner, Picasso, Karl Knaths, Marsden Hartley.

Carre Gallery:

1-man Raoul Dufy, Jacques Villon, World War II Paintings of Picasso.

Pierre Matisse Gallery:

1-man Shows: Miro - 1947/1950

Non-Objective Museum:

Group Shows: Contemporary Non-objective painters, 1950 & 1951.

Durlacher Gallery:

1-man Shows: Ben Nicholson

Borgenicht Gallery:

1-man Shows: Schanker, Gabor Peterdi, Sam Adler.

Curt Valentin Gallery:

1-man Shows: Drawings and Sculpture of Alexander Calder.
Feininger.

Knoedler Gallery:

1-man Shows: R. de la Fresnaye

Passedoit Gallery:

1-man Shows: E. Romano

Willard Gallery:

1-man Shows: Toboy, M. Graves.

Student Exhibitions: Art Students League and Brooklyn Museum