

## THE PLACE OF OIL PAINTING IN ART

“...whether it is a matter of music, painting, literature or manners, no single model can any longer lay claim to legitimacy, not one is any longer exclusive. We see everywhere a multiple experimentation, more or less daring, ephemeral or successful.”

Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers<sup>1</sup>

At the moment of its decline, we clearly see that painting in oils developed an original poetics, and one that was all of a piece, throughout a reascent and modern West. From its birth and during a development lasting half a millennium we see it—in Florence, Bruges, Venice, Rome, Toledo, Nuremberg, Amsterdam and Paris—attentive to the sources of signification: languages, rites, myths, theater, tools, techniques and sciences and the urban context that wove them all together. In each case, for one or the other of them, it brought a new relationship to the way of life and then left them to their social order of assimilation, keeping the initial contact for those who would be

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

<sup>1</sup> Prigogine and Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance*, “Bibliothèque des sciences humaines,” Paris, N.R.F., 1979, p. 295.

interested. It studded the West with centers of production that carried the practice and knowledge of art to their limits; engaged with the collective imagination, it punctuated history with decisive works, in which the desire to paint takes action and explains it. Marked by an impatience for change, oil painting revealed itself in a rapport with creativity akin to the other works of civilization. It is at the level of the bases of invention of the imaginary—which are in any expression the most profound structures—that the unfolding of oil painting is tightly bound. The establishment of modern national languages, the orderly rise, around a syntax and because of architecture, sculpture, music, song, tragedy, the systematic construction of scientific and technical expression, arose and grew quickly in importance in Western Europe during the same centuries as painting and with reciprocal correspondence. Dürer “who was the first to publish a treatise in which is collected all knowledge having to do with the expression of forms... wrote in his native tongue and in so doing was revealed as the creator of technical and scientific German.”<sup>2</sup>

Even more, communicating a poetics that held sway over imaginations and, as positive expressions gained in vigor, communicating this poetics more and more exclusively, more and more purely, oil painting continued to propose new landscapes, new horizons, attempting freer and bolder strokes to express and designate them.

Western painting never ceased to render the experience of space in terms of totality, as is seen in the slow advance of Albertian perspective, its prodigious success, then its explosion with Picasso and Kandinsky. Attentive to the rules but careless at the same time, without maiming sensitivity, without diminishing mental research, it records the dimensions of the human adventure day by day. Caught in the resulting tensions, it established itself in the lieux themselves of metamorphoses, and these were the concern of Giotto as well as Cézanne, Piero della Francesca as well as Delaunay.

In order to cover the subject of the place occupied by Western painting, we must disengage the moments of invention

<sup>2</sup> A. Flocon and R. Taton, *La Perspective*, in “Que Sais-je?,” P.U.F., 1963.

## *The Place of Oil Painting in Art*

of an *avant garde* expression at the limits of its expressive possibilities. Through acts of symbolic representation, we must each time delineate the geography of imaginary landscapes, indicate what horizons open in the pictorial universe of a work, what limits are attempted, what liberations sought.

We thus come to consider oil painting, magnificent and fragile—which is bidding us farewell—on its front line of invention, and as the center of one of the most astonishing, moving and profound productions of the European imagination.

### I. AT THE SOURCES OF SIGNIFICATION

The signs that make up pictorial expression are directed toward perception and, more precisely, toward the originating modes of its organization. The treatment of the subject matter keeps the expression inside sensory experience, at the very places where meaning is born. The pictorial act is only known through the material, and the material is only known through the pictorial act: in the imaginal area of painting, the exchanged signs designate the natural, native sources of meaning.

But the employment of signs that are thus oriented requires the artist to operate at the level of the structures of invention of the same expression, which means that the proposed communication is presented not in terms of recognition but in terms of interpretation; it means that, leading to an action of deciphering, as with a written text, but on a visual level, it mobilizes the optical sense; that, requiring the most alert vigilance, it also attacks it at the abrupt encounter with sensation, however excellent its repercussion may be.

Such are the exemplary qualities of oil painting: the object of technical performances, tied to the obligations of awakened consciences, it introduces expressions of space into the course of an incessant metamorphosis.

A ductile support, embellishing the action of painting, soliciting its promptitude, tied to the acuity of vision, to the impulses of the imagination, the clever accomplice of dream, it naturally led painters to the limit of the means they granted this technique. Thus they never stopped proposing new land-

scapes, new horizons, new ways of seeing and expressing them, new interpretations. This implicitly-experienced characteristic soon became the conscious and distinctive objective of research for the Western artist. The transition from miniatures to oil painting most certainly signals this decisive moment.

Such are the qualities of oil painting, but we do not exclude tempera, its forerunner in the search for transparency: a transparency paradoxically subjected to the circumscriptions of drawing and the diffusion of light that made of oil painting, which served it faithfully, an instrument of composition having a variety of modulation, wideness of field and complexity of structure that were entirely original. This explains, in part, but to a determinant level, why oil painting, compared to Sung painting, to the linear elegance of Elephantine and to Roman frescos, developed inventions that were infinitely more constant and of centuries-long duration, in a dialogue consciously pursued from school to school, style to style and people to people.

The perception of space has as objective a transitory moment, a stimulus that is different each time, moments of irruption in us of a world that never ceases to surprise us. However, the hand that reveals the occurrence is the most clever and docile instrument we have, one that is most submissive to our will. Even more, at a time of refined craftsmanship the hand was the first tool of creative intelligence. Painting is done with the tips of the fingers in a marvellous promptitude to symbolize. Thus we may say that a culture that considers painting as a privileged expression shows an impatience to invent, maintain and stimulate it.

This is undoubtedly true for other artistic expressions also: mime, dance, sculpture and music, from which painting was not distinguished as long as it was identified with them to celebrate the birth of art, but once their destinies were separated, if painting shows differences, it is those mentioned above.

Established at the primary level of sensation, the pictorial sign does not solicit its viewer except to lead to an interpretation founded on corporal experience and memory. Thus painting is directed toward the intelligence of communicated perceptions not to convert them into concepts but to extend their effect to the most subtle organizations of consciousness so that it is con-

nected “to this pool of primitive sensibility” spoken of by Merleau-Ponty and which is the *raison d'être* of pictorial art.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing and painting are not just by chance previous to the foundation of writing itself. Elliptical image, mnemonic trace, all graphic expression furnishes an irreplaceable support to articulate expression: it is the formative energy, the basic and permanent demiurge. Motivating perception of space, drawing participates in the vigilance, alarms and interpretations committed to cries and appeals. What the word describes, the drawing can also describe, and often better, because it does so through foundations at the primary level of meaningful organization.

The circulation of meaningful signs that usage, memory and reflex abridged led to writing. *Grapshein*, means both to draw and to write in ancient Greek. Our thought is penetrated by sensory information, itself organized around vision. The mirror stage proves that the *semiurge* that modifies the gest does not escape. The word is in liaison with the visual discovery of the object. Thus drawing and painting are directed toward a semantics that is searching for its principle of organization. Later, in a favorable cultural context, let vision lend itself to objective experiment in the acts of an intelligent graphic production; let mimed, danced, sketched gesture signify, in visible space, the distinct projections of mental representation; then the functional economy of vision may be remarked. The exercise of drawing and painting has for its ultimate object, at the level of a too quickly repressed inchoate development, the exploration of inventive mechanisms of expression; a fervent perception, the miracle of intelligence, worshiping thought, “poetics,” at the limits of human semiological possibilities.

The human eye does not register any pictured representation; it is only the site of photographic impulses. The third dimension, depth and relief, the relative positions of objects within the range of vision are acquisitions we owe to tactile or muscular controls, to optical accommodation, to memory, to the intelligent synthesis of these different experiences. The irregularities of space are not registered as such, they are always deduced, if only

<sup>3</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.

by reflex. The sense of space thus comes from an education, an experience and a memory; it corresponds to an organized response. Perception and memory, emotion and sentiment, the entire gamut of human resources is required.

At a deeper level, our representation of space expresses our presence in the world. It is our interest, our experience, our knowledge of the universe that it renders according to a socialized order but always more or less involved according to the boldness of the individual toward life.

Our representation of space thus comes from a past of contacts, perceptions, explorations and hypotheses that is one with our life span. The signs with which we manifest it cover less a surface than they designate a course, the tensions of a developing consciousness. We thus always think of it as an expanse projected outside us. We assume that the rendering of surrounding space echoes from a past of contacts, perceptions, explorations and hypotheses, and that its representation is only a surface innervated with energy, pervaded with the tensions of a changing being, a field in the sense that physicists understand as an area of dispersion of energies. The sense of space can only be expressed in generative terms. This explains the fact that the act that tries to represent it—drawing or painting—is continually being modified, constructed and invented; that it is dramatic, since an active moment of destinies vibrates in it; that a will and an intelligence are manifested in it.

The employment of such signs for communication—which always aims at the construction of a shared interpretation—necessarily takes place at the level of the structures of invention of the expression involved. An exchange aiming at the interpretation and creation of a habitual state of questioning, an innovation that appropriates—if only to confirm itself—previously-conquered degrees of complexity, pictorial research finds itself engaged due to a causality that is within the permanent refining of its messages: in short, within the invention of an expression carried to the limits of its possibilities by the very nature of the exchanges of which it is the vehicle and by the incitement inherent in the way it is produced.

However, pictorial expression would not have earned this quality of language and art, that is, a continuous invention of

itself by itself, of the imaginary created by the imaginary, if it had not been the vehicle of a decisive social advent.

By diffusing and receiving the products of oil painting; by encouraging the artists toward a continuing creation; by welcoming them; in short, by circulating their works, European towns confirmed the symbolic qualities of these works. Gaining in importance and durability, they introduced new and richer resonances into minds and emotions.

The variable support of artisanal products was from then on entirely devoted to the unfolding of the imaginary representation of the world to which modern Europe was giving birth. Its exchange was continuous from town to town, and its effect on imaginations was prodigious. It is not by chance that Bruges, Ghent, Liege, Tournai, Florence, Venice, Rome, Paris, Toledo and Novgorod are the centers of invention and acceleration of pictorial symbolism. They are so because their ways of painting established communities of differentiated life, in regard to exchanges at the most scattered levels of the collective imagination that by these means brought them together. What oil painting contributed was from then on the expression of a poetics of individual life that was inventing itself, magnifying itself and questioning itself to further invent itself in relation to an urban environment that was favorable to it but in which the horizons of a world open to the enrichment of merchants was being felt.

Thus painting was something other than a product of the most bizarre dreams of the individual painter; it engaged them, through their exchanges only, through their metamorphoses, in the expression of a collective adventure. It expressed the fundamental future needs of the town, unity, panorama; the maintenance, beyond division and specialization, of a universal relationship. Painting provided access to an intensity of inner life, exercise and presentation combined, that denied nothing. The past worked to invent the future, a slow and untiringly recommenced pursuit "of past, present and changing future."

It goes without saying, of course, that one could paint without rising to the level of art. There was a folk production that was of the people and artisanal, or ludic, that had nothing to do with *ars pingendi*. Where should the line be drawn? Precisely in this: that the artist went to the limits of an expression to



conquer it through a new organization of new horizons and previously unknown insights. Thus we see arise, in Siena in the 13th century and Florence in the 14th, an artistic quality in folk or regional milieus: it was enough that there be an expression using the laws of invention of the language concerned. Undoubtedly, the folk or regional expressions were gradually enlivened by artistic creations. On the other hand, a folk tradition degenerates as soon as there is no more invention of form but only a repetition of formulas—in the uncritical reference of collective heritage, the absence or refusal of confrontations. Whether in the Neolithic, in the local expressions of the Aegean islands, in those of Etruscan cities, the instant of the emergence of art coincides with the confrontation of a local tradition with exterior influences to the benefit of a deliberate, and from then on, more knowledgeable choice.

This is why folk art, in its normal production, is always closed within local and stereotyped effects. Its exit from this confinement is always due to an invention. When the invention is often repeated, the passage from folk art to true artistic expression soon occurs. The 12th-century frescos of Lucca, Pisa and Florence were at first provincial but later became an expression grasping the pictorial language of a decisive progress, one that casts it in the fragile but unique logic of continuous invention.

Now, it is exactly this determinism of the repetitive—the sign of folk art and regionalism—that was transgressed during the Renaissance, and deliberately transgressed. From then on, in all categories of symbolic representation—architecture, sculpture, painting, drawing, music and literature—there was a succession of creators conscious of participating through their research and their works in a single front of invention. In addition, an uninterrupted chain of artists would continue to define themselves as such, inasmuch as they consciously participated in this effort.

This is the significance of the reference to antiquity. It was a reference to a single front of invention and research, to a way of feeling, thinking, expressing and working according to a logic that was essentially one of perfecting. All symbolic expression in art is an exercise taken to its limits of consciousness. An experience that is organized starting with the possibilities that are working within it. Art is an expression that never stops testing



## *The Place of Oil Painting in Art*

its means of communication and participation, an expression exercised at the level of its structures of invention.

Beginning with the Renaissance, artistic production knew distinctive and successive styles, but only to pass through them: afterward they appear only as moments in a never-renounced research. Faith in antiquity was first the refusal of a provincial horizon, a strategy for going beyond it.

This is true not only for us who consider it in the past, but in the thought of its artists, its *intelligentsia* and its numerous witnesses, enlightened amateurs or *ingénus*. Because it was truly a new artistic consciousness that was born at that moment, and it was bound to a new experience, that of art as the exercise itself of the unlimited powers of invention.

## II. FROM THE PICTORIAL TO THE LINGUISTIC

The different inventions of languages and expression that occurred in the West were born and spread during the same centuries. They are uninterrupted inventions by means of which Europe overcame the challenges arising from its geographic, ethnic, social, economic and religious diversity; they are inventions closely tied to each other by structures that regulate their creation.

The genius of the invention of languages was recognized from the *Trecento* by a twofold event of civilization that organically linked the pictorial and the linguistic: that is, the institution of a language by means of a literary work and the fact that this work was created through a spirit that was essentially visual. This conjunction—and there is no other that is more explicit—is found in Dante's work which, by itself, imposed Tuscan as the national language of an Italy up until then limited to regional idioms. Rarely has a literary work been so functionally bound to a linguistic realization in such an obvious way. The originality of *La Divina Commedia* lies first of all in the faultlessness of its language. A poem of the invisible, it is through the effect of a visual illusion that the poem catches the imagination. Not as vast, but with more acknowledged linguistic characteristics—enclosed in stylistic mannerisms—the *Vita Nuova* is composed on the suggestions of mental representation, amorous fascination,

awakened hallucination, a dream continued when the eyes are open. From the start, the work is given over to memory: “*In quella parte dell’libro de la memoria...*” Hopeless love changes pure and simple visual evocation into a work.

The second characteristic of *La Divina Commedia* is bound to the first as a necessary condition of it. Paul Valéry observed in his *Cahiers* that the language of *La Divina Commedia* is essentially the one spoken “*de soi à soi.*”<sup>4</sup> That is, the linguistic performance itself, the confrontation of the word and thought, of mental representations of the real, the use of language as a tool of consciousness, as a screen on which to project memory, the possible, the imaginary, for the expression of both desire and the movements of passion, in short, the exact moment of the invention of a language. *La Divina Commedia* is precisely this.

Thus, since the pre-Renaissance a semantic relationship of linguistic invention to pictorial invention is confirmed. Meanings are born of visual interpretation and are strengthened by the poet through visual reference. The power of the spoken word to designate reality replaces the rendering of the visual world. Expressing things seen, the spoken language may in its turn designate things that escape immediate perception. And in that way language, with regard to vision, is only one more step in the unseen comprehension of reality.

Dante, Rabelais, Luther, Shakespeare: at a time when national communities were passing from oral tradition to written expression, at the time when history from the 14th to the 16th century is marked by monumental works whose likes will never again be seen and that laid the foundations for linguistic consciousness of Western languages for the coming centuries, a genius of the visual was everywhere in operation.

This parallelism means that the Renaissance and the modern era are periods of the invention of expressions; the expansion of painting alongside the other symbolic expressions is part of the same anthropological adventure, that is, the putting into effect at that time of the inventive mechanism of expression of Western populations.

<sup>4</sup> P. Valéry, *Les Cahiers*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, N.R.F., 1974, II, p. 40.

These encounters of pictorial invention with modern national languages confirm the studies of semiology. How can a semiological approach be established for painting? Beginning with a verbal description. How do the theoreticians justify this? By the concrete liaison of the visible and the articulated. Semiology will begin with a text that will be first woven from the specifiable meanings of the painted work and so introduced into the fabric that it will be seen in its visual originality: perceptions, presences, metaphors, contiguities, imaginary echos, correspondences, of all kinds, all will be said in a metalanguage, an oral discourse with regard to a pictorial existence.<sup>5</sup> Thus the 20th century has had to propose the interpretation of the visible by a discourse so as to maintain the original complicity of the visible and the articulate. However, who would not have reservations about this method? A new effort must be made, gains must be made in semantic knowledge and organization, we must dare to admit that the new step to be taken is to observe the way verbal expression continues to receive its semiotic influx from the visible. There also, however, it will mean being at the limits of linguistics. At the level of impression on the retina the optic nerve does not receive an image; it receives sensorial information. A “system” based on opposition and difference and successive binary selections progressively composes according to more and more complex data, “intensity and contrast, color, movement, orientation, form—elements from which associative cerebral areas and effector areas will elaborate perception.”<sup>6</sup>

Are these not the two systematic and paradigmatic axes, the systemic and mnemonic, the code and the message, language and word? However, while the system of the double articulation of speech is objectivized in distinctive units and meaningful units—no doubt because it combines auditive perception with the motor acts of phonetic articulation, actions and signs of an artificial expression—vision does not objectivize its distinguishing material, tied as it is to incorporated organizations that govern the actions of manipulation and fabrication. Thus the distin-

<sup>5</sup> L. Marin, *Etudes sémiologiques. Ecritures, peintures*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> P. Fleury, “La Vision,” in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Paris, 1975, XVI, p. 897.

guishing articulations of the perceptive image do not emerge in the systematics of the perceptual act: perception is first of all an operation of the nervous system. Its field, its duration, its space and time belong to the body itself.

To the body itself that is the original sign and carries with it, as under-pinning, in the form of deep structures, its differentiating systematics, its inventive mechanisms of expression. Now, it is this intuitive mechanism, the structure itself of sensory perception, that a visual representation, drawing or painting, is implicitly called upon to designate. The visual representation is first deciphered as an orientation of the body, an attraction to light.

The pictorial is not only the occasion for a reunion of all the senses, it is the occasion for its first experience, its invention. Language does not have to recognize and describe pictorial expression but to recognize in painting the acts themselves of a linguistic genesis, to explore in painting the underlying strata of linguistics.

Paradoxically, therefore, the axes of language and the word, of the systematics and actualization of syntax and paradigm, wait to receive a more determinant basis in extending themselves to the operation of vision. It is not to extend the categories of linguistics to an eventual semiology of painting that must be attempted but to show how the pictorial includes linguistics of this comprehension of reality that continues to be the aim of human research.

This is where the most important function of oil painting is seen, relative to the invention of expressions in which the peoples of Western Europe were deeply involved from the 14th to the 20th century. Apart from all the other directions that the invention of languages opened in the West, it never stopped representing the origin, keeping it alive and a creative ferment for the procedures of systematization that governed the institution of more and more regulated expressions. "*Eclosion sans déclin*,"<sup>7</sup> it never ceased to link the current modifications to more and more concerted, more and more codified elaborations: Grammar rules of Port-Royal, scientific and technical language.

<sup>7</sup> M. Heidegger, *Approche d'Hölderlin*, Paris, N.F.R., 1972.

## *The Place of Oil Painting in Art*

To the invention of modern European languages and literary works that marked the achievement of maturity, that established their quality as a magisterial tool, Renaissance and Baroque Europe added that of technical and scientific language. This language is dialectically bound to painting. It represents a grasping of the environment through exclusively logical means, so effective that the natural environment will find itself completely transformed by it. Painting in oils played no less a decisive role. It held and expressed propositions whose visual perception, following the individual register of the artist, has never ceased to announce the rational advance of Europe.

In fact, at the same time that modern sciences were born, painting appeared as a physics of the living environment. Leonardo da Vinci, in whom were combined the man of science and the artist, did not write from pure enthusiasm of the artist that *la pittura è cosa mentale*. He experienced painting as a central activity, essential to the speculations of the mind and to its questionings. For him it was a single physical experience and one that was full of instruction, including that of a philosophical order. A fact that is original itself in human history but not at all exorbitant if we consider that in Leonardo's hands painting was the instrument of the first and most subtle research, and the other arts or sciences were simply extensions.

However, the relationship of pictorial invention to scientific research was broken because of the growing demands of rational control. We are informed of this by the tension that arose from the beginning between the pictorial experiment on the one hand and the geometers and mathematicians on the other. It was especially Piero della Francesca who voluntarily and conscientiously decided in favor of a perspective construction in order to escape from the contradiction that resulted from the lateral distortions of the image as they are registered by effective visual perception; it was Leonardo who guarded against this by a clever stratagem of viewpoint and distance of the viewer from the painting.<sup>8</sup> In the 17th century these are the polemics that the perspective methods of Desargues unleash between painters and architects.

<sup>8</sup> E. Panofsky, *La perspective comme forme symbolique*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1975, p. 45.

This will be the confiscation of perspective for the ends of appropriation and mastery of nature by the illusionist architects of the 18th century, the geometrics of military construction, from Vauban to Monge, applications of all kinds, from map-making to ballistics, while the artists were taking their distance.<sup>9</sup> In reality, it is the latter, through this difficult attempt at the original to which the act of painting sent them back, who were prospecting for the underlying structures of formalized ways of representation: in short, were returning to the beginnings at the very time when architects were perfecting a system of superior works that painting was abandoning to them after they had been perfected.

Because of growing demands of rational control, the relationship of pictorial invention to scientific research was therefore broken. The original flow of energy, the living environment, metaphorically, the landscape, were left over. Oil painting continued to take this excess for the object of its research. Thus a different and complementary field is kept within the reach of European imagination. There is no doubt that scientists became, through the narrowness of their methods, more and more estranged from the *modus operandi* of painters, but the opposite was not true. Artists preserved the fundamental objectives of scientific research through optical and physical contact with the environment. This led to the isolation of artists in the scientific era, up until the semi-revenge of the 20th century, when we will finally realize that it is the best of resources of the human imagination that they did not cease and do not cease to preserve. The history of Western oil painting thus completes the knowledge of the sciences, namely the experience of the global environment that underlies all thought.

It is therefore not surprising that at the moment in which our artistic practices are getting away from painting in oils it increases its power for questioning. It can only be interpreted by a thorough understanding of the conditions that existed at the time of its advent, through the traces by the inscriptive act of the symbols; we ourselves are bared by it as we invent our representation of the world after the relays of writing and techniques,

<sup>9</sup> A. Flocon, *op. cit.*

at the foundation of any science. There will not be anything as ingenuous or knowing in the approach to the imaginary.

Painting in oils is inextricably bound to the total social phenomenon: not only does it appear as one of the most constant focal points of inventions and transmission of Western imagination; there is not a human science, from political economy to sociology, from linguistics to philosophical anthropology of which it does not mobilize, because of the wide field it covers, the most refined heuristic instruments.

Understood in this way and put into a total historical perspective, painting in oils takes on an anthropological dimension at the very moment of its decline. As defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss: far off and yet nearby, and at the point of disappearing, concerning us more imperatively than ever.

### III. THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE IN FORMATION<sup>10</sup>

Instinctively, we do not believe in the geometrical plane, and we do not need to believe in it, since it does not exist in nature and is an intellectual fiction. We experience the outside of a material, the solid surface of a wall. Such is the primitive, inevitable and universal experience.

The expressive qualities of the plane surface thus depend on the qualities of the support. The painter of the prehistoric cave of Bayol in the department of Gard (France) used the relief of the cave's wall to represent a *cereus*. From that time on, expression was bound to the texture of the material used, a rock wall, a metal or a fiber. Immediate or intuitive, the drawing essentially suggests the synthesis and allusion of spatial situations, in which our existence understands and orients itself. Prehistoric, pre-Columbian, Polynesian and African rock paintings, romanesque tapestries and painting, folkloric daubings, all participate in a primitive expression, because they are the vehicles of an organically-experienced sensation of the wall. When these arts take on two dimensions, it is not in the strict sense of the

<sup>10</sup> S. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, "Jamais un coup de dés n'abolira le hasard," Bibl. de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard.



term, but to enhance the solidity of the supports, the density, roughness or opacity of the stone, the fibrous texture of vegetable matter and a tactile exploration, the familiarity of a sure and insensible material, the magic closeness of the world.

Expression through material remained dominant in Byzantine mosaics. The iridescence of the gems, the rippling of light-spattered stones, the suggestion of inviolate mineral make up an alchemy of chaos. Fixed in the wall, extraordinary energies are at work. Divided and worked, its richness bared, its qualities assembled, the stone exerts a sensory fascination manifesting its telluric origin. This appearance of the original at the heart of the material minimizes its oppressiveness and announces a second apparition, whose schematic and gigantesque figures are vehicles of illusion. Through a premeditated geometrics imposed on the mosaics as a sacrament, the Greeks of the *bas Empire* reduced their starbursts to geometric designs repeated so as to seem unified. From this came the figures subjected to a persistent linear rhythm, a stiffness and a refusal, dimly dictated by an obsession with the barbarian menace.

The abstract severity of a flat surface is avoided by the intuitive suggestions of space, and these cannot be enumerated: there are as many of them as there are artists. We will select some of them from Western painting: a progressive lightening of color; the segmentation of the plane; the relationships of distance in the figures; contrasts; attracting forces; the dynamism of the line; and the tactile values of the modeling. All these ingenuously suggest depth. The presence of the support is not abolished; on the contrary, it is the support that assures the unity of the painting. The heavy Gothic triptych, the compartmented painting of the Sienese artists are models for juxtaposition. The copying of human gestures and situations creates distance along with the material values. This distance will grow as copying becomes more incisive.

Approached through the scenography of the urban medieval theater, as Francastel observed,<sup>11</sup> and systemized by the artists of the Florentine Renaissance, the construction of a three-dimensional space accepted the intuitive conquest of space of the

<sup>11</sup> Francastel, *Peinture et société*, Coll. "Idées/arts," Paris, N.R.F., 1965.

Primitives. It accepted them and combined them. It did not exclude the organic alliance that these conquests express, but it also aimed at the rectitude of an autonomous organization, rising to the abstraction of an intelligent construction. Especially noticeable is the refusal of the limited experience of the strictly two-dimensional. When Albertian perspective became imperative in Tuscany, the two-dimensional abstractions of mosaic were not unknown. On the contrary, it was in their familiarity with these that Tuscan artists worked. Why did they break away from them? The three-dimensional painting that was established admitted its complicity with immediate experience, remained in agreement with tactile, kinesthetic, dynamic, operative, respiratory, in a word organic experiences. In short, the sensory experience was accepted in its totality. However, it rested upon the solidity of the volumes constructed by the architect and on absolutely sure calculations. Brunelleschi promoted perspective "in taking the constructive method as a base" and at the very moment when "he became established as an architect"<sup>12</sup> in Florence. It was thus within the spaces of the city that he deliberately worked, spaces constructed in reflection and reason, and it was through this that he arrived at the representation of his art. That was also a concrete experience.

The plenitude of Masaccio, like that of Piero della Francesca, both dynamically open to the tactile and rhythmic energies of a universe explored and controlled physically, is as interesting as the perspective laws established by those same artists. Three-dimensional painting combines an intuitive expression of space and a voluntary and abstract construction. These two experiences find an equilibrium only in the most choice encounters; their conjunction installed Western painting between intuition and analysis. It was a very fruitful situation, an ideally dialectic condition and one that would not fail to elicit continuing inventions. Between the intuitive experience of space and its intellectualized realization, choice, directions and combinations were going to multiply from then on.

It is this field of exploration that the process of oil painting would come to help and broaden. The invention of the Van

<sup>12</sup> H. Damisch, "L'origine de la perspective," in *Macula*, 5/6, Paris, 1979.

Eycks, oil painting was at first the preferred medium of the early Flemish painters: it proceeded directly from their polyphonic understanding of space, their instinctive perception of the color and light of their environment. However, the transparent quality of oil favored design as well as color. Tuscan artists, whose sense of space was construed according to structural relationships of geometric perspective, borrowed the procedure of oil painting and confirmed a decisive exchange between an instinctive view and the means of an intellectual construction, between the *geste* tied to the optic and the concerted effects of a mental representation of reality. Opposing poles, intuitive and intellectual, Flemish and Tuscan, beginning with which, from the earliest to the latest expressions, from the 15th century to the 20th, the invention of space in Western oil painting will be born.

Venetian painting was the first to propose a synthesis between the colored perspective that it received from the Northern painters, Flemish and German, and the perspective laws received from Florence. A rich and full synthesis that takes Caravaggio's work to the limit of persisting problems, as much concerned with light as with logical construction, a work that Spanish painting further developed with its somber harmonies, contrasted and studied at the same time.

It was a synthesis that French painting would achieve as the continuation of an already established tradition but one that was under the joint influence of the Flemish and Italian schools. The academicism of Versailles is ultramontane, but those painters that we recognize as the greatest of the French 16th, 17th and 18th centuries learned their art from unknown Flemish artisans. Such was the case with the Lenains, Watteau and Chardin; and Dumesnil de la Tour himself combined the plastic contribution of the South with the luminism of the North, to the profit of a masterly poetics, and that is not the least fascinating nor least enigmatic aspect of his art.

The painting of the northern Low Countries developed in powerfully individualized styles the pictorial expression of Flanders. An ingenious and incomparable luminism in which the Italian science of composition is underlying. Dutch painting proposed a completely original synthesis equal in invention and

## *The Place of Oil Painting in Art*

science to those of Venice and Spain, but it is always between the same two poles that the variegations are disposed.

English painting, influenced by Rubens and the Flemish landscapists, conducted by them through the luminist experiences of Lorrain and Watteau, proposed a new interpretation of space, intuitive and colored, proper to the Northern painters. It is through the mediation of Constable and Turner that the search for atmospheric interpretation by Delacroix and later the French Impressionists is born. Also to be remembered is the role played by Jongkink of Holland. An impressionism that is also the liberation of the way to paint and the way to see, in which the luminist instinct of the painter is almost the only player in the game and wins it.

Van Gogh introduced to the Paris school an open and immediate instinct for color that is also from the North. We find its reverberation in successive waves in Fauvism, Expressionism and, by way of this last, Kandinsky, Surrealism and the lyrical Abstract.

The intellectual South, calculating, wilfully expert in its concerted compositions of space, did not however cease to radiate its genius: Ingres, Lautrec, Picasso. It found its full strength in Cubism, Futurism, through which the Cold Abstract will find its way: Delaunay, Mondrian, Vasarely, Op Art, Conceptual Art.

The revolution of the Ready-made, Pop Art, Brutalism, Hyper-realism, are in their turn vehicles of an expression that defies mental categorization. The pulsions of desire come to the surface almost without mediation, like the elementary mechanisms of the reflex arc as opposed to the grid of Op Art, the concerted montages of the Multiple. Thus is affirmed, up until recently, the permanence of the basic question. This duality of instinct and intelligence, of color and perspective, of the luminous and the sculptural, has known infinite but not undefined variations, their modulations establishing a precisely articulated expression, a unique expression that European, and later Euro-American, visual sensitivity has progressively invented to express its experience of space.

The Western painters are divided into two families, according to whether they give preference to intuitive expression of space

or to an abstract experience of space, Apollonians hoping to interpret space in still more strictly deduced forms, Dionysians intoxicated by splashes of vibrating color, a comprehensive space inexhaustibly open, while the more universal geniuses will hold, as Pascal said, to both extremities at the same time.

The conscious search for a purer, more laconic, more definitive, style, for a more willful vision, produces Apollonian abstraction. From the first years of Albertian perspective these are the studies of Uccello, followed throughout the centuries by the compositions of Raphael, Dumesnil de la Tour, Vermeer, Ingres, Degas, the Cubists and pure two-dimensional painting. It is not by chance that two-dimensional painting is genetically bound to the three-dimensional experience of space: it is a support, and not a rupture, if not in the minds of a public fond of its visual habits. The organizing qualities of the three-dimensional had to be exhausted in order to isolate its dictatorship, to conceive the rigidity of the strictly two-dimensional.

The adventure of two-dimensional painting, exclusive of the polydimensional suggestions of its support or material, is from then on a limited experience: it leads the analysis of the pictorial sign to its culminating point. The sign, that is, of the pictorial act that construes a way of seeing, beginning with mental conception.

This research was exemplarily followed in Cubism. Picasso, at the moment of his invention, reduced pictorial expression to the two dimensions that abstractly define the plane in a rigidity that does not take the sensory into account. It was deliberately done, it was a matter of revealing the canvas in the form of a space offered to a formal code. He instituted a plane to reveal the elementary energies of the line.

To reveal a powerful geometry whose elements are animated by an expression reinforced by a fundamental visual structure; the analysis of the brush stroke in Picasso renders a construction of a complete, willful and vehement autonomy. These are studies having as subject the constitutive structures of form and the fundamental genealogy of the imaginary. Inevitable associations are produced in and by the ellipses. We do not know which we admire the most, the science of foreshortening or the pulsion springing from an underlying vitality, both being un-

predictable and irresistibly captivating. In addition, a grandiose and sure stenography, a continuous line, rapid, decisive, overwhelming, to fix a profile, to leave to the imagination an action that invents its audacity by daring.

Strictly two-dimensional painting, like three-dimensional, is made up of abstract expressions, they continue through the effect of a tension that becomes stronger through the solicitations of a latent polydimensional space in the various densities of the support and, more subtly, in the act of painting itself. Abstract art could not maintain itself, as is shown by Picasso's compositions, almost coexistent with the radical geometries of the early Cubist canvases, in which he uses several raw materials: cardboard, wood, *découpage*, rags and others. This is seen again in the avatars of Russian constructivism and, in an extension of cold abstract, those of Op Art. The kinetics of Vasarely, through intersecting grids and superimposed profiles, creates tensions that operate in depth and by means of which is installed not a third dimension but an ambiguous gradation in which abstract precision is relaxed and becomes a performance with rules for the painter and the viewer.

As for the possibilities of an intuitive expression of space contained in three-dimensional painting, they have been manifested since the beginning in the tactile values of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Uccello. They have always been on view in the colored and sentimental perspective of the Northern painters and were reaffirmed in the geometrical perspective of many focal points of the Venetians. The fragmentation of the plane of El Greco, the subtle *tachisme* of Velasquez, the colored densities of Rembrandt, the iridescences of Rubens, the shaded affluxes of Goya, the pre-Impressionism of Delacroix, the afflux of pure color of Gauguin and Van Gogh were so many approaches, then irruptions, into the translation of a globally-sensed space.

The painters of geste continued those experiences. By practising this type of art, by embracing the disjections of his spatial explosion, Jackson Pollock not only made himself the seismograph of the pulsions of the instinct, he rendered the resistences, facilities, densities and ductibilities, ruptures and continuities, that give the impression of relief, accept the polydimensional suggestions of the support and material. Thus from the Neolithic

to the 20th century flows a Dionysian current in the grip of perpetual metamorphoses. It takes root in raw sensory experience, the instigator of all revolutions, all possibilities, all new beginnings.

The expressions of painting thus rise level by level from the affirmation of the plane attempted in the form of a wall or whatever concrete support it might be, to its negation in a series of very subtle degrees of a willful, intellectual and abstract nature at the extremes; sensitive, instinctive and suggestive in nature in the intermediate cases.

The variegations in the expression of oil painting are conquered on the vast field of visual and symbolic experience. Half a millennium whose history we can follow. Not a history recounted by a succession of dates, but one advancing from invention to invention in order to express the constituent elements of an expression that is in itself a phenomenon of resonance—interwoven diachrony and synchrony—open to social exchanges and fertilizing them.

Western painting distributes its powers on two axes: research in drawing and research in color—that is, the two poles of the pictorial act: the optical sensation of color, neural synesthetics that are established at the level of sensory information—even before, it seems, cerebral associations and syntheses. Drawing, linked to the sensory-motor activities of the action, and through this to the cortical associative areas and cerebral syntheses, finally, to the joined and completely decisive formations of the act and the expression.<sup>13</sup>

Thus appears the significance of oil painting as it comes out of an opposition and differentiation from all the other expressions inscribed on a plane. Capable of admitting the complexities of each into its own complexity; capable of representing the constituent elements to the most evolved procedures of organization; capable of linking the beginning of thought to the most complicated scientific and technical terms. A medium receiving into its ductile texture the finest differentiations of this representation, it became the support of tendencies open to the

<sup>13</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la parole*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1965.



*The Place of Oil Painting in Art*

infinite: it became the mirror of the human spirit taking to their limits the exchanges of visual perception and of a gesture re-proposing, as it unfolded and became perfected, significant directions. Finally, it became the expression whose history permits us to understand not only a genealogy of the imagination, reciprocal to the total social phenomenon, but also structures of invention involved in the performances of the nervous system and approachable by the painter, in each finished work.

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