

16 The Eye Is a Part of the Mind (1953)

We begin with the interrogation of witnesses. Two men are called to defend the reversal of esthetic values in their time. The first is Giorgio Vasari, the tireless biographer to whose *Lives of the Painters* we owe half the facts and most of the figments current on the artists of the Renaissance. The other, Vasari's junior by four centuries, is André Malraux, whose *Psychology of Art*¹ forms a brilliant brief for the moot values of a neo-mystic, modern taste in art.

Speaking of Masaccio, the great initiator of the naturalist trend in Western art, Vasari states: "The things made before his time may be termed paintings merely, and by comparison his [Masaccio's] creations are real."

And Malraux, hailing Manet as the initiator of the modern trend in art, asks: "What then was painting becoming, now it no longer imitated or transfigured?" And his answer: "Simply—painting."

A startling coincidence—the "painting merely" of Vasari and the "simply painting" of Malraux. Strange also that the selfsame epithet should come as scorn from one man and as praise from the other, and yet for both bear the same connotation.

For what exactly did Vasari have in mind? That Masaccio's work, and that which flowed from his influence to make the mainstream of the Renaissance, was a true representation of the external world; whereas earlier icons, mosaics, and frescoes were pictorial patterns

First published in *Partisan Review*, 20, 2 (March-April 1953); revised and reprinted in Susanne K. Langer, ed., *Reflections On Art*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1958, and Oxford University Press, New York, 1961.

whose forms were not determined by reality. Being undetermined by nature, he called them "paintings merely"—just as he might have called scholastic metaphysics "thinking merely," since it too formed a speculative system adrift from experience. Vasari's point was that medieval pictures implied no verifiable referent outside themselves. Renaissance painting, on the contrary, was valid because in it every element corresponded with its prototype in nature.

And Malraux? What does *he* mean when he pits the "simply painting" of Manet against the styles of other ages? Why, precisely the same thing. Representational art for him is weighted with extraneous content and transcribed appeal, with reference to things and situations that exist outside the picture frame in general experience. Manet pries art loose from the world. "Modern art," says Malraux, "has liberated painting which is now triumphantly a law unto itself." No longer must a painting borrow its validity from natural analogues. Its meaning—if self-significance can be called meaning—lies wholly within itself. Wherever art is seen with modern eyes—seen, that is to say, as "a certain compelling balance in colors and lines"—there, says Malraux, "a magic casement opens on another world . . . a world incompatible with the world of reality." It was for this incompatibility that Vasari spurned medieval art; it is on this very account that Malraux exalts contemporary painting.

Thus juxtaposed our authors confess that what is here involved is not a difference in esthetic judgment, nor even in the definition of art. We are dealing rather with two distinct valuations set upon reality, and the overt gap between the Renaissance and the modern esthetician is evidence of a rift far more deeply grounded.

We will ask later whether either Malraux or Vasari was justified in seeing "merely painting" anywhere. For the moment we may say that Malraux speaks the mind of his generation when he declares that the representation of external nature has nothing to do with art. "Creating a work of art is so tremendous a business," says Clive Bell, "that it leaves no leisure for catching likenesses." As long ago as 1911, Laurence Binyon wrote with satisfaction: "The theory that art is, above all things, imitative and representative, no longer holds the field with thinking minds." Albert C. Barnes reminds us that only painters "unable to master the means of plastic expression, seek to awaken emotion by portraying objects or situations which have an appeal in themselves. . . . This attraction, though it is all-important in determining popular preference, is plastically and aes-

thetically irrelevant." And, as Sheldon Cheney insists: "It can hardly be too often repeated that the modernist repudiates the Aristotelian principle 'Art is Imitation.'"

But this position presents a serious quandary, for the first glance at art through the ages shows unmistakably that most of it is dedicated precisely to the imitation of nature, to likeness-catching, to the portrayal of objects and situations—in short, to representation. Now there are three possible formulas by which this contradiction between evidence and creed may be resolved. The first asserts that representation has always been an adventitious element in art—a concession to state, populace, or church. Modern art, then, differs from historic art not in essence but in degree of purity. This is the view put forth by Roger Fry and by most later formalists. The second choice is to concede that representation did function essentially in the arts of the past, and that modern art, by suppressing the outgoing reference, constitutes something radically different and new. This is the implication of such continental critics as Ortega y Gasset and Malraux, who endorse the meaning elements in the historic styles, yet claim for modern art exemption from associated values. It is also (esthetics makes strange bedfellows!) the view of the bourgeois who repudiates all modern art as an unfunny and too long protracted hoax.

The third alternative is to suggest that modern art has not, after all, abandoned the imitation of nature, and that, in its most powerful expressions, representation is still an essential condition, not an expendable freight. It is this third view which this essay will seek to establish. It will try to show that representation is a central esthetic function in all art; and that the formalist esthetic, designed to champion the new abstract trend, was largely based on a misunderstanding and an underestimation of the art it set out to defend.

II

We have said that most historic art is vitally concerned with representation. And lest the word be thought to offer too much latitude, we will commit ourselves further to say that about half the great art generated by mankind is dedicated to the accurate transcription of the sensible world.² This is as true of the best paleolithic art as of Egyptian at its finest moments. It applies to the entire Hellenic effort down to third-century Rome.³ It applies equally to the great

Western wave that lies between Giotto and the Postimpressionists. Nor is it any the less true of Chinese painting—so self-conscious that it operated for a thousand years within six explicit canons; of which the third called for “conformity with nature,” or “the drawing of forms which answer to natural forms.” All of these schools—and there are as many more—strove for the mastery of nature by convincing imitation.

Perhaps it will be said that artists closer to us in time would not have subscribed to this quest. Here is a sampling of their depositions: Manet declared (Malraux notwithstanding) that he painted what he saw. Van Gogh’s avowed aim was to be “simply honest before nature.” Cézanne exclaims: “Look at that cloud! I would like to be able to paint that!” And he says: “We must give the picture of what we see, forgetting everything that has appeared in the past.” Even for Matisse “the problem is to maintain the intensity of the canvas whilst getting near to verisimilitude.”

Such quotations, given a collector’s leisure, could be amply multiplied. They are adequately summarized in Constable’s dictum which defines the goal of painting as “the pure apprehension of natural fact.”

Yet artists and critics, for half a century and more, have been denouncing the representation of nature as a fatal side-stepping of artistic purpose. And whoever has the least pretension to esthetic culture speaks with condescension of “that power which is nothing but technical capacity in the imitation of nature.”⁴ This famous slur, reverberating in the prejudice of almost every modern connoisseur, has become standard critical jargon. The picturing of overt nature is written off as mere factual reportage, worthy only of the amateur photographer, a mechanical skill, patently uncreative and therefore alien to the essence of art.

The objection to this view is not far to seek. To begin with, “technical capacity in imitation” implies what no one seriously believes: that nature confronts man with a fixed, invariant look. For what else does it mean to speak of “mere skill in copying the model” (the words are Malraux’s), but that the model’s appearance is an objective fact susceptible of mechanical reproduction? We know better than that. Appearances reach us through the eye, and the eye—whether we speak with the psychologist or the embryologist—is part of the brain and therefore inextricably involved in mysterious cerebral operations. Thus nature presents every generation (and every

person who will use his eyes for more than nodding recognitions) with a unique and unrepeatable facet of appearance. And the Ineluctable Modality of the Visible—young Dedalus's hypnotic phrase—is a myth that evaporates between any two works of representation. The encroaching archaism of old photographs is only the latest instance of an endless succession in which every new mode of nature-representation eventually resigns its claim to co-identity with natural appearance. And if appearances are thus unstable in the human eye, their representation in art is not a matter of mechanical reproduction but of progressive revelation.

We can therefore assert with confidence that "technical capacity in the imitation of nature" simply does not exist. What does exist is the skill of reproducing handy graphic symbols for natural appearances, of rendering familiar facts by set professional conventions. We have cited a canon from the beginning phase of Chinese painting; here is another from nearer its dead end:

There are ten ways, say the Chinese academicians, of depicting a mountain: by drawing wrinkles like the slashes of a large axe, or wrinkles like the hair on a cow's hide; by brush-strokes wrinkled like a heap of firewood, or like the veins of lotus leaves. The rest are to be wrinkled like the folds of a belt, or the twists of a rope; or like raindrops, or like convoluted clouds, etc.

With rigorous training the Ming painters could, and did, acquire a dazzling proficiency in drawing the right wrinkles so as to evoke some long-assimilated and familiar facts about natural panoramas. They had mastered the skill of applying certain academic tricks for the drawing of mountains—but this is most emphatically not the same as skill in drawing actual mountains. The mechanical, the uncreative element lies not therefore in imitating nature, but in academicism, which is the passionless employment of preformed devices. Representation in art is the fashioning of graphic symbols to act as analogues for certain areas of visual experience. There is every difference between this fashioning of symbols, this transmutation and reduction of experience to symbolic pattern, and the use of symbols ready-made. In works that seem to duplicate a visible aspect of nature we must therefore distinguish between the recitation of a known fact and the discovery thereof, between the dexterous use of tools and their invention.

This distinction must be upheld for all representational art. Seen in this light it becomes quite absurd to charge Victorian academi-

cians with too fastidious an eye for natural forms. Their fault was not, as Roger Fry maintained, "the fervid pursuit of naturalistic appearances," but that they continued to see and represent the facts of nature in spent conventional terms. The so-called naturalism of certain nineteenth-century academicians was worthless because it was impelled by precept and by meritorious example, instead of by pure visual apprehension. These men never imitated nature; they copied earlier imitations and applied those formal principles which, they believed, had made their models so effective. That they sometimes painted from life is, of course, beside the point; for they still saw life in the aspect which their vision was conditioned to expect.⁵ Thus the malady of Victorian art (and of some lingering official art today, notably in Soviet Russia) is not naturalism, nor literal representation, but the presumption to create living art out of impulses long dead and mummified; which ailment is not confined to realistic art. For academicism will blight non-objective figurations and abstractions as readily as illustrative, anecdotal pictures.

This is not to say that a convention invariably chokes artistic creativity. It does so only when too fully coned and understood, when the uphill drive of aspiration is relaxed and the professors of the brush can settle down to mass production. An artist searches for true vision, but having found it, leaves in his successors' hands the blueprint of a new academy. Almost anyone with a modicum of talent and sufficient application can appropriate another man's mode of representation. (Were this not so, the forger's craft would not exist.) But he cannot discover it. He can learn after one lesson in perspective how to give an illusion of depth to a design (an illusion, by the way, based largely on our habit of routine consent). But this lesson will not arm him with the passion of an early Florentine who first ventures through the picture plane and, like daydreaming Alice, finds a wonderland beyond. The same rules of perspective mean one thing at the Beaux Arts; in Mantegna's studio, in Uccello's workshop, they meant quite another. Space, that had congealed into a solid crust during the Middle Ages, was here pierced and vaporized. Bodies were inserted and, against resisting pressure, as on reluctant hinges, pivoted into depth. There is in Uccello's work a tensivity which springs directly from his craving to know how bodies will behave in the *terra incognita* known as the third dimension. And the reports of his discoveries, such as the bold foreshortenings in *The Battle of San Romano*, are proclaimed in tense and urgent gestures.

And what is true of perspective applies equally to anatomy. The gulf that separates a Pollaiuolo nude from one by Bouguereau is not all a matter of significant design. The one was born of nature's union with an avid sensibility; the other makes a parade of a habitual skill. One says, pointing to the array of anatomic facts—"Here lies the mystery"; the other says—"Here lies no mystery, I know it all."

The modern critic who belittles all representational concerns, because he sees them only as solved problems, underrates their power to inflame the artist's mind and to intensify his vision and his touch. He will fail in appreciation if he cannot relive the artist's will to formulate his found reality. Nor need he know how much of anatomic ignorance prevailed in Pollaiuolo's time to judge the measure of the artist's revelation. For Pollaiuolo's effort to articulate each muscular inflection is permanently sealed in the form. Like all works connected with discoveries of representation, his pictures lack the sweet ease of accomplishment. His images are ever aborning, swelling into space and taking life, like frozen fingers tingling as they warm. It is not facts they purvey; it is the thrill and wonder of cognition.

But is this sort of cognition relevant to esthetic value? To be sure, it is. We are told that the artist's design seeks to impose enduring unity and order on the undifferentiated content of experience. To bring his organizing powers into fullest play, the painter must haul his perceptions out of confusion and annex them to his plan. A young Michelangelo, busying himself in anatomic studies, knows that the apparent turbulence of a man's muscles must become in his design as inevitably ordered as was the long, unswerving contour of Masaccio. A score of muscles newly differentiated, a new vocabulary of expressive gesture, a newly seen relation between motion and shape, these become part of that living diversity to which unification is the victorious response. They are the stuff of the esthetic program. And in bringing novel visual experiences to his art, Michelangelo, so far from abandoning Masaccio's ground, is doing precisely what his forerunner had done. For he is still engaged in the "pure apprehension of natural fact." The mannerist, on the other hand, he who displays Michelangelo's musculature over again, is not at all repeating Michelangelo, since what he arranges on the canvas lives already in the domesticated state. It had been won for art already.

In realistic art, then, it is the ever-novel influx of visual experience which incites the artist's synthesizing will, summons his energies, and so contributes to the generation of esthetic form. And this per-

haps explains why periods of expanding iconography, of deepening observation and growing imitative skill so often coincide with supreme esthetic achievement. When the limits of the depictable in nature suddenly recede before the searching gaze, when earlier works come to seem inadequately representative of truth, then the artist's power multiplies. Hence the beauty of those Fifth Dynasty reliefs in Egypt, when, almost suddenly, all life comes to be taken for the artist's province; or the unsurpassed grandeur of Middle Kingdom heads, when the uniqueness of the human face is first perceived. Hence the upsurge of esthetic force in sixth- and fifth-century Greece, when new insights into human nature find embodiment; or in Quattrocento art when the untamed reality of space has to be disciplined and reduced to the coordinate system of the plane canvas or wall.

The Impressionists formed another group of passionate investigators into natural fact. Was it accident that these same men evolved powerful new formal conceptions? Malraux chooses to see no connection between the significance of their forms and their representational pursuits. "That the banks of the Seine might look more 'lifelike' in Sisley's than in Théodore Rousseau's work was beside the mark," he says. Beside the mark, possibly, for the modern doctrinaire, but obviously not so for Sisley.

And Cézanne? Nowadays every schoolboy knows that Cézanne was interested in picture construction. We incline to forget that he was just as concerned with the construction of Mont Sainte-Victoire and the vibration of sunlight; that he studied the subterranean geologic energies which had rolled up the landscape of Provence, and pondered those pervasive unities of nature in which forms are compacted despite their apparent edges. Today's fashionable cant ignores Cézanne's obsession with reality, "the spectacle that the Pater Omnipotens spreads before our eyes." When he warns his friend, Emile Bernard, to "beware of the literary spirit which so often causes painting to deviate from its true path—the concrete study of nature—to lose itself all too long in intangible speculations," he seems to be speaking not so much of the critics he knew, as of those more recent who profess to know him. The truth is that Cézanne's work embodies profound insights into nature. And the logic of his form is unthinkable without his ardent apprehension of natural fact.

By what hazard do these moments of whole-hearted nature-imitation synchronize so often with unforgettable art? In the for-

malistic system of ideas the recurrent coincidence of significant form with deepened observation remains unexplained. To avoid perversity we do better to grant that nature-imitation in art is neither mechanical skill nor irrelevant distraction. The most that can be said in its disfavor is that we of this century happen to have turned our interest elsewhere.

III

Where your treasure is, there (dropping the h) will your art be also. Every picture is to some degree a value judgment, since you cannot represent a thing without proclaiming it to be worthwhile.

Now the arts discussed in the foregoing section pertained to those schools whose purpose was, at least in part, to depict the open sights of nature. One and all they endorsed Constable's plea for the pure apprehension of natural fact.

But natural fact can be purely apprehended only where the human mind has first endowed it with the status of reality. Only then is the act of seeing backed by a passion, being focused on ultimate truth. From Masaccio to Cézanne men prized overt nature as the locus of reality, and to it they directed their capacities of apprehension. But if we invoke a civilization for whom nature was a pale and immaterial reflection of ideal types, we shall expect to find it careless of the outer shapes of things. Its art will strive to incarnate those forms which are the permanent exemplars behind the drift of sensuous appearances. This indeed is the course taken by Christian art after the fall of pagan Rome.

We can now modify Constable's dictum and propose that art seeks the pure apprehension of natural fact wherever natural fact, as registered by the senses, is regarded as meaningful reality. Where it is not so interpreted we shall find some form of anti-humanist distortion, of hieratic stylization or abstraction. But—and this is crucial—such abstraction will continue to apprehend and to express reality. Though it rejects the intimations of mere sense perception, it does not thereby cease to be representational. Only the matter that now calls for representation is drawn from a new order of reality.

Let us list briefly some of the formal features governing Early Christian and Byzantine art. Comparing it to the preceding style of disenchanting Hellenism, we are struck by a rigid frontality in the

disposition of figures, by a minimum of variation in gesture, and the replacement of individual likeness by canonic type. We note that movement is arrested, that the natural bulk of things is flattened and all forms are gathered in a single plane; distance is eliminated in favor of ideal space, purple or gold; color becomes pure, unmodulated, and the shadow—that negating spirit who haunts only the art of the West—vanishes in the diffusion of an unremitting light.

These devices sound, as indeed they look, other-worldly. Yet we can say without paradox that their employment proves how deeply involved was the art of Byzantium, and of the Western Dark and Middle Ages, in the effort at truthful representation. This is readily verified by reference to Neo-Platonist esthetics.

The most valuable source here is Plotinus, whose thought, by way of Dionysius and Augustine, shaped the spirituality of the first Christian millennium. What, asks Plotinus, speaking of the plastic arts, are true distance and true size? And his answer is a philosophic premonition of the Byzantine manner.⁶ If we see two men, the one close by, the other far away, the latter will appear ridiculously dwarfed, and the interval between the two will seem absurdly shrunken. A given distance, therefore, is so many measures of falsification. Since deep space is the occasion of delusion, true distance can exist only within the nearest facing plane; true size is the dimension of each form within that plane.

The argument is extended to true color. If the red of a red object fades in distance, this effaced, degraded color is not "true." The truth must be an even red in the proximate plane. Furthermore, shadows are to be shunned for doing violence to truthful color, for there can be neither truth nor reality where there is not illumination. Thus to Plotinus the proper rendering of a red sphere would be a disk of pure, ungraduated hue. It is the chiaroscurist—a pander to the sense of sight—who mistakes the nature of reality and therefore sins against the light. "We dare not keep ourselves set toward the images of sense," Plotinus says.⁷

Do Byzantine images seem incorporeal? How else should they represent the truly real? "The body is brute," says Plotinus; "the true man is the other, going pure of body." And he proceeds to reprove those who on the evidence of thrust and resistance identify body with real being.

Do Early Christian figures seem monotonously like, immobile and unchanging? We are forewarned by Plotinus that "bodies live in

the species, and the individual in the whole class; from them they derive their life and maintenance, for life here is a thing of change, but in that prior realm it is unmoving."

Finally, do the eyes in medieval faces seem excessively prominent? The eye sees the sun, says Plotinus, because it is itself sun-like. Window of the soul, it bespeaks the presence in the body of that radiant emanation which sustains matter in being. Should not the artist therefore mark the eye's true nature rather than its physical size? Values having more reality than facts, it is they that determine the ethos and technique of medieval art.

Clearly, then, the formal conventions of this Christian art came into being in the interest of representational truth; not, to be sure, of direct visual facts, since such facts were metaphysically discredited, but of an ideal, extra-sensory reality.

Obedient to its mystic vision, Christian art proceeded to erect a system of representation by abstraction. Here a certain limited affinity with our own contemporary art suggests itself. There is indeed striking resemblance between the repudiation of naturalism in our time and in Plotinus' day. Plotinus wrote that "the arts give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the ideas from which nature herself derives." Compare this with Paul Klee's "The modern artist places more value on the powers that do the forming, than on the final forms (of nature) themselves." And even Roger Fry, who had no stomach for mystical speculation, says of Cézanne—who was all modern art to him—that he rendered "not appearances, but the causes of appearance in structure."

As the greatest apostle of the modern esthetic faith, the case of Roger Fry is a rewarding study. And it is noteworthy that he was unaware of his own implications. He fervently believed that the prime business of art, in fact its sole legitimate concern, was "abstract unity of design." "Painting," he exclaimed, "has thrown representation to the winds; literature should do the same and follow suit!" Yet, gazing at an academic portrait, he passed this elegant quip (quoted in Virginia Woolf's *Roger Fry*): "I cannot," he said, "see the man for the likeness."

This went far deeper than Fry intended. He had meant to say that he could not see the essential man beneath the clutter of external traits. But he unwittingly confessed that he did want to see this inner man. While affirming that the valuable image did not manifest itself in mere visibility, he also admitted that the truth which lay

concealed behind the model's mask could and should be represented by some graphic symbol. It will be seen at once that Fry was speaking from a philosophic premise for which his formalistic theorizing left no room. He mistook for an esthetic doctrine what was actually a shift in philosophic orientation. And he was not calling for the end of representation in art, but for the representation of a different content, to be tapped from a new order of reality.

Fry's sensitive recoil from Victorian academicism—or naturalism, to give it his preferred misnomer—was therefore based on two objections, neither of which he acknowledged. First, that it substituted standard commonplaces for pure vision, and second, that it continued to portray an aspect of nature which in the philosophic conscience of his age had lost reality and meaning. For the inversions of modern psychology and the iconoclasm of contemporary physics have once again, as in the Middle Ages, subverted our faith in the reality of palpable appearances. And it is right and proper for the modern artist who is worthy of his time that he should turn his back on the apparent, since he holds with Plotinus that "all perceptible things are but signs and symbols of the imperceptible." Thus the relevance of naturalistic representation to art depends on no esthetic doctrines, but on prior metaphysical commitments. And the argument for and against representation, which has agitated critics for so long, has rarely been fought at its proper level.

IV

Has modern art, then, like Byzantium, broken with the sensible world? Is it true that art, having paid its debt to nature, is now finally at liberty? Let us consider first those modern works which still maintain natural forms at some degree of recognizability. To the formalist their distortions seem sufficiently justified as serving the higher needs of design. Yet in these works the illustrative element is there, and—no matter how abstracted—takes its point from its residual resemblance to familiar sights. "The deformation of natural forms" of which Klee speaks in his journals presupposes in us the expectation of natural forms undeformed. Meyer Schapiro, speaking of Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, points out that "Picasso and other moderns have discovered for art the internality of the body," that is, the inner image of the body as conjured up by fear and desire, pleasure and pain. But this inner image is communicable

only as related contrast to the outer. Everyone knows how clumsy one's human feet feel when pursuing a bird. The mammoth foot in Miro's *Man Throwing a Stone at a Bird* is thus an eloquent hyperbole, a piece of graphic gigantism. It makes its point not as largeness—a pure, abstract value—but as enlargement, which implies an external referent. The distance which the form has traveled in the way of distortion is apprehended by the beholder and becomes a vital element of the narrative structure. Familiar nature is not, after all, ignored. It survives as the distanced, but implicit, norm.

Exaggeration for expressive ends is found, of course, throughout the history of art. It is the common device of all caricatures. No matter how remotely they may venture into fantasy, it is the stretch and span between norm and distortion that constitutes their wit. The same is true of expressionism and of much so-called abstract art. A term of reference still lies outside the picture frame in human recollection and experience, as it does for the most clinically realistic pictures.

To an eye still immersed in the visual habits of the nineteenth century, the abstract way often seems willful and arbitrary. To a mind indoctrinated with formalist theory, it often looks like—"simply painting," a manipulation of the medium itself. Both judgments, I believe, are failures of appreciation, since abstraction *from* nature is still a telling mode of representation, whose hyphen with common reality is stretched but never snapped, except in the most thinly decorative works.

There is another feature in contemporary abstract art which ties it to the world of sense and separates it from all anti-naturalistic styles of the past—its boundless freedom of selection from natural sights. The conceptualism of ancient Egypt or Byzantium had constrained itself to show every form from a preferred angle, convinced that one aspect alone could reveal its essential nature. Thus the Egyptian foot appears persistently in profile, as though the human foot in essence were a profile form, all other postures being accidentals. Domiciled in eternity, the Egyptian or Byzantine foot is not susceptible of change.

Modern abstraction brooks no such restraints. Six centuries of arduous research into the changing nature of appearance are not so easily dismissed. Accordingly, in modern art, a difficult, foreshortened front view of a foot is met head-on, and finds its abstract formulation as readily as the diagrammatic profile. The modern painter,

if caught in the orbit of Picasso or Paul Klee, discovers a formative principle not in the foot as such, but in the foot in every possible predicament. He sees not one transcendent, universal formula for man, but a distinct abbreviation for man in every pose, mood, situation. Klee himself finds a symbolic cipher not for Woman, the Eternal Feminine, but for a middle-aged lady coming home loaded with packages.

It is quite true that Klee probes into the form-giving principle behind the thing, and strips it, like the mystic, of its superfluity; his representations rest upon his vision of a world whose surface forms conceal an occulted reality. In his own words, he seeks "a distant point at the source of creation, a kind of formula for man, earth, fire, water, air, and all the circling forces." Klee here seems to repeat a commonplace of mysticism. And yet his work, one of the potent influences behind modern abstraction, is of devastating originality, utterly destructive of the mystic premise that there is one immutable reality available to detached contemplation. For Klee finds his occult reality incarnate in each fleeting, perjured gesture of this world. In his intuition the nature of man is not to be found in any timeless essence, soaring like Byzantine man above vicissitudes. Man, to Paul Klee, is what he does and where he is—a *Juggler in April*, an *Omphalocentric Lecturer*, an *Old Man Figuring*, a *Mocker Mocked*. Vainly you scan these works for any single pictographic type; in every sketch the symbol is freshly apprehended and invented anew. If this is mysticism it is certainly not of the medieval, contemplative kind. It is a restless, existential mysticism, peculiarly our own.

Or watch Picasso's *Three Musicians* in the Philadelphia version. Despite an apparently remote cubist formalism we can say with confidence that the three men in the picture are equipped with six hands. But saying this we have already said too much. Having availed ourselves of the non-visual concept of *the human hand*, we have implied that Picasso here deals with a six-fold repetition of a single item. But he does nothing of the kind. He knows, or knew in 1921, that a man's hand may manifest itself as rake or mallet, pincer, vise, or broom; as cantilever or as decorative fringe; that it is a nubile and unstable element, contracting easy marriages with other forms to build up into compound entities. In actual vision the hand is an infinity of variegated forms. Its common factor is not any ontological handshape, but a protean energy with only a positional and functional relation to the arm, and to the object handled. Thus,

in the *Three Musicians*, a fist hugging a fiddle's neck is one sort of efficient force expressed by one decorative shape; four digits flat upon a keyboard are of another sort entirely. Picasso here dispels the *a priori* vision which must ever find conceptual permanence despite visible change. His manual formulae stand not for Being, but for function, operation. Adaptability and change are the sole measure of reality. And it is on behalf of such reality, as well as of design, that his sleights of hand are wrought. To describe the *Three Musicians* as a finely patterned abstraction of invented anatomies is an injustice to the matter of Picasso's revelation.

It follows that the modern abstractionist does not necessarily write off the "accidents" of visual appearance. He welcomes their occurrence, but pictures them as the negotiable shapes assumed by transient energy. And in this adaptability to every optic impulse modern art is more closely linked to its naturalistic ancestry than to the unworldly stylizations of the past. Its affinity with medieval art remains, after all, purely negative. Modern and medieval art agree that reality is not so much revealed as masked by surfaces. But as, at a carnival, the choice of a mask may betray the reveler's characteristic nature, so surfaces bespeak something as to the truth below. And the truths inferred by modern and by medieval artists lie at opposite poles of interpretation.

v

It remains to speak of so-called non-objective art. Here surely all connection with the outer world is cut. The forms that here emerge mean nothing, we are told, but private states of feeling; and, for the rest, they are pure form, a music for the optic nerve. The following passage from Ortega y Gasset ("On Point of View in the Arts," *Partisan Review*, August 1949) may serve as an example of the common view: "Painting," Ortega writes, "completely reversed its function and, instead of putting us within what is outside, endeavored to pour out upon the canvas what is within: ideal invented objects. . . . The [artist's] eyes, instead of absorbing things, are converted into projectors of private flora and fauna. Before, the real world drained off into them; now they are reservoirs of irreality."

This seems to me an open question still. For we are forced to ask: by what faculty of mind or eye does the artist discover and distill the forms of his private irreality? Whence come the plastic symbols

of his unconditioned subjectivity? Surely no amount of introspection will yield shapes to put on canvas. And if this is so, from what external quarter proceed those visual stimuli which the artist can identify as apt and corresponding to his inner state?

Obviously, any attempt to answer such questions is pure speculation. Yet it seems worth considering the testimony of those artists and critics who have pointed to the impact of science on contemporary art.

The impact operates on several levels and takes various forms. There is, first, the original stream of suggestion issuing from the laboratories. Wittingly, or through unconscious exposure, the non-objective artist may draw permissions for his imagery from the visual data of the scientist—from magnifications of infinitesimal textures, from telescopic vistas, submarine scenery, X-ray photography. Not that he renders a particular bacterial culture or cloud chamber event. The shapes of his choice are recruited in good faith for their suggestiveness as shapes, and for their obscure correspondence to his inner state. But it is significant how often the morphology he finds analogous to his own sentient being is that which has revealed itself to scientific vision. It is apparently in these gestating images, shapes antecedent to the visible, that many abstract painters recognize a more intimate manifestation of natural truth. On these uncharted realms of form they must impose esthetic purpose; from them they wrest new decorative principles—such as the “biomorphic” motif. Nature they imitate no less than did Masaccio. But where the Renaissance had turned to nature’s display windows, and to the finished forms of man and beast, the men of our time descend into nature’s laboratories.

But the affinity with science probably goes further still. It has been suggested that the very conceptions of twentieth-century science are finding expression in modern abstract art. The scientist’s sense of pervasive physical activity in space, his intuition of immaterial functions, his awareness of the constant mutability of forms, of their indefinable location, their mutual interpenetration, their renewal and decay—all these have found a visual echo in contemporary art; not because painters illustrate scientific concepts, but because an awareness of nature in its latest undisguise seems to be held in common by science and art.

The question is, of course, whether nature as the modern scientist conceives it can be represented at all, except in spectral mathemati-

cal equations. Philosophers of science concur in saying it cannot. Even such divergent thinkers as A. N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell join hands when they declare that the abstractions of contemporary science have irrevocably passed beyond man's visual imagination. "Our understanding of nature has now reached a stage," says J. W. N. Sullivan, "when we cannot picture what we are talking about."

But this utterance of the philosophers contains an unwarranted assumption, to wit, that whereas man's capacity for intellectual abstraction is ever widening, his visual imagination is fixed and circumscribed. Here the philosophers are reckoning without the host, since our visualizing powers are determined for us not by them but by the men who paint. And this our visual imagination, thanks to those in whom it is creative, is also in perpetual growth, as unpredictable as the extension of thought.

Thus the art of the last half-century may well be schooling our eyes to live at ease with the new concepts forced upon our credulity by scientific reasoning. What we may be witnessing is the gradual condensation of abstract ideas into images that fall within the range of sensory imagination.⁸ Modern painting inures us to the aspect of a world housing not discrete forms but trajectories and vectors, lines of tension and strain. Form in the sense of solid substance melts away and resolves itself into dynamic process. Instead of bodies powered by muscle, or by gravity, we get energy propagating itself in the void. If, to the scientist, solidity and simple location are illusions born of the grossness of our senses, they are so also to the modern painter. His canvases are fields of force; his shapes the transient aggregates of energies that seem impatient to be on their way. In the imagery of modern art waves of matter have usurped the place of tangible, visible things.

The representation of the trajectory in art has its own history, like the representation of the visage of Christ. Emerging in certain Rembrandt drawings as a scribbled flourish in the wake of a volatile angel, it comes in the late work of Turner to invade painting itself. And in Brancusi's *Bird in Space* the path of motion at last claims the full sculptured dignity of mass. It is senseless to call such a work non-representational, for there is no ignoring here of nature. The trail of a projectile is, after all, as real as the object flung. And though it wants tangibility, it is as surely part of the natural world.

So much then for the dissolution of the solid in contemporary art;

the substantial object has been activated into a continuing event. As for space, it is no longer a passive receptacle, wherein solid forms may disport themselves, as once they did in Renaissance or nineteenth-century art. In modern paintings—barring those which are nostalgic throwbacks to the past—space is an organic growth interacting with matter. There is a painting by Matta Echaurren, entitled *Grave Situation*, in which long tensile forms stretch through a space generated by their motion—a space which at the same time inflects the curvature of their path.

It takes some effort to concede the heroic creativity of such envisions. Granted that they do not depict what we normally see. But to call them “simply painting,” as though they had no referent outside themselves, is to miss both their meaning and their continuity with the art of the past. If my suggestion is valid, then even non-objective art continues to pursue art’s social role of fixating thought in esthetic form, pinning down the most ethereal conceptions of the age in vital designs, and rendering them accessible to the apparatus of sense.