艺术史与艺术理论

History of Art and Theory of Art

上海师范大学美术学院　编

I

中国美术学院出版社

艺术史与艺术理论

History of Art and Theory of Art

上海师范大学美术学院　编

I

中国美术学院出版社

目 录

I

THE PREFERENCE FOR THE PRIMITIVE: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

E. H. Gombrich

暮春三月之末，江南花飞之时，得贡氏家属寄示 *The Preference for the Primitive* 一书，嘱余译为中文出版。此卷系贡氏晚年以九十高龄所撰之作，赐余函中曾屡屡述及。忽忽之间，先生谢世已两年矣。余久盼之书，一旦寓目，其喜其悲，不知何来。石火电光，如梦如幻，理虽易明，情却茫茫无依也！兹先以原文刊出，俾便爱读贡氏书者快睹之需。简端聊缀数言，谨代椒浆之奠。癸未秋日范景中记。

'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art was the title of a large, comprehensive exhibition mounted in 1984 in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, and commemorated in a catalogue of two heavy folio volumes, with contributions by many specialists, which will surely remain the standard work on the subject.

The organizer and principal author, William Rubin, showed himself aware of the fact that the term 'primitive art' was open to criticism on the part of those who saw in the designation a somewhat patronizing attitude, symptomatic of Eurocentric prejudice. He defended his choice, however, since

no valid alternative had been suggested. Readers of the preceding pages, moreover, will long have realized that the term 'primitive' had been used without condescension, at least since the end of the eighteenth century. Rubin asks the question: 'what happened, within the evolution of modern art, that suddenly in 1906-7 led artists to be receptive to tribal art? No doubt', he continues, 'there is more than one right answer, but the most important reason, I am convinced, had to do with a fundamental shift in the nature of most vanguard art from styles rooted in visual perception to others based on conceptualization'.[1]

Admitting that such contrasts must always be relative, the author rightly stresses the concentration of the Impressionists - and indeed, of Cézanne - on the minutiae of visual sensation. In the author's view, 'it was Gauguin...who took the first step towards a conceptual, and thus more "synthetic", more highly "stylized" art', blending the realism of the Impressionists with 'flat decorative effects and stylized forms' derived froms 'non - illusionistic arts as diverse as Egyptian, Medieval, Persian, Peruvian and Breton (folk) painting and decorative arts...and Cambodian, Javanese and Polynesian sculpture' (p.12). The author concedes that this shift from the perceptual to the conceptual had already been 'signalled by Manet and reflected in the "Japonisme" that took hold in the 1860s' (p.13).

Return to 'Cicero's Law'

Having travelled along a similar route, we can only endorse this verdict, but, strictly speaking, it offers a description of stylistic developments rather than an explanation of the primitivist revolution documented in such detail in the

exhibition catalogue.

There are many historians who eschew the notion of explanation in history and prefer the chronicling of events to speculating about causes, but it so happens that this book would never have been written if I wholly shared that opinion. In fact I proposed at least a partial explanation of the primitive revolution in a lecture I gave as long ago as November 1953, one which ultimately expanded into the present study. I am referring to the Ernest Jones Lecture on *Psychoanalysis and the History of Art*,[2] given to an audience largely composed of psychoanalysts. In that lecture I confronted a painting of the *Birth of Venus* by Bouguereau - a typical Salon painting-with the first monumental work of art that embodied reminiscences of tribal masks: Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* - a juxtaposition that implied that, without the first, the second might never have been painted. In other words, I saw in twentieth-century painting a reaction against the meretricious art of successful virtuosos. I do not want to pretend that this was all that was contained in the lecture, but I hope the contrast of the two illustrations will suffice to convince the reader in what respect the lecture anticipated the argument of this book.

I no longer know whether I remembered at that time that it was Aby Warburg who attached such importance to negative reactions in the development of styles,[3] perhaps since he had lived in the period which reacted so strongly against the art of the Salon. Later I found in Cicero confirmation of the hypothesis which I had presented to the psychoanalysts: namely that an excess of sweetness is felt to be cloying, and that we tend to mobilize our defences against what is too obviously seductive. In that passage, which I chose as the motto for this book, was an explanation for the preference for the

primitive which I found worth exploring.

In retrospect, the preceding chapters will be found to offer a variety of examples of this psychological reaction. Antiquity gives us many instances - from Plato's censorship of the musical modes, which were felt to be too sensuous and relaxing, to the accusation of the corruption of oratory by the seductive tricks of the Sophists, which were countered by deliberate harshness or studied simplicity.

Turning to the eighteenth century, we encountered the Platonist Shaftesbury inveighing against effeminacy and luscious colours to exalt the austerity of early styles and we found Richardson contrasting the 'manliness' of the style before Raphael with the effeminacy that followed him and rating the virtue of sublimity higher than faultless mastery.

Winckelmann's slogan of 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' was directed against the playfulness of the Rococo, and led him to commend the lofty style of early Greek art. Goethe expressed contempt for the beauty-mongering of the French, and even Reynolds was to lay it down that 'the sublime in Painting, as in Poetry, so overpowers, and takes such a possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism. The little elegancies of art in the presence of the great ideas thus greatly expressed, lose all their value, and are, for the instant at least, felt to be unworthy of our notice. The correct judgement, the purity of taste, which characterizes Raffaelle, the exquisite grace of Correggio and Parmegianino, all disappear before them.'[4]

We are close in time to the sect *of les Primitifs* in David's studio, with their battlecry of contempt for Van Loo, Pompadour and Rococo. A similar

reaction led Cornelius to say that the 'worst poison' was in Raphael, and Rio to prefer the works of Fra Angelico to the art of the High Renaissance.

In the movement I described as 'The Emancipation of Formal Values', the antagonistic character came, if possible, even more into the open. The polemic about ornament and decoration - which I described more fully in my book *The Sense of Order* - arose from alleged lapses in taste exemplified by industrial products and called for a reform of decorative design in which the values of tribal and exotic works were emphasized. To quote what I wrote there in summing up: 'The doctrine that it was vulgar for decoration to look like pictures was easily grasped and easily applied; there was but one stop from here to the conviction that paintings which did not conform to the laws of decoration were also vulgar. Illusionism in art had had its day.'[5]

The Bifurcation of Nineteenth-century Art

The term 'vulgar' which Ruskin had used in this context throws plenty of light on the social aspect of this movement of taste. It reminds us of the radical transformation which society had undergone in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. While at the beginning of the eighteenth century it was the concern of the critic to propagate a refined taste among the members of the upper classes entering on the 'Grand Tour', now the middle class - the bourgeoisie - took it for granted that their taste and predilections should be respected by the market. The division that resulted between the connoisseurs and the general public dominates the history of the art of the nineteenth century, but it still deserves to be analysed and explained.

I know no clearer description of this bifurcation in taste than the passage

Zola wrote about Manet's *Olympia* in *Mon Salon*, in 1866:

> For the public, and I do not use the word in the derogatory sense-for the public a work of art, a picture, is an agreeable thing which moves the heart to delight or to horror; it is a massacre where the gasping victims whimper and drag themselves beneath the guns which threaten them; or else it is a delightful young girl all in snowy white who dreams in the moonlight, leaning on a broken column. I mean to say that most people see in a canvas only a subject...and they demand nothing further of the artist than a tear or a smile.
>
> To me, and I hope to many, a work of art is, on the contrary, a personality, an individual.
>
> I don't ask that the artist give me tender visions or horrible nightmares, I ask him to give himself, heart and body...In a word, I have the most profound disdain for the little tricks, for the scheming flatteries, for that which can be learned at school...
>
> It is no longer a question here, therefore, of pleasing or of not pleasing, it is a question of being oneself, of baring one's breast...
>
> I am not for any one school...The word 'art' displeases me. It contains, I do not know what, in the way of ideas of necessary compromises, of absolute ideals...that which I seek above all in a painting is a man, and not a picture...
>
> For it is another good joke to believe that there is, where artistic beauty is concerned, an absolute and eternal truth. ...Like everything else, art is a human product, a human secretion; it is our body which sweats out the

> beauty of our works. Our body changes according to the climate and customs, and therefore, its secretions change also.
>
> That is to say that the work of tomorrow cannot be that of today; you can neither formulate a rule nor give it a precept...you must abandon yourself bravely to your nature and not seek to deny it.[6]

I have always considered this declaration of faith one of the formative documents of what we call 'modern art', but in a sense, it is even more: it helps us to see the difference between modernist attitudes and the attitudes against which they rebelled. For there is no doubt that Zola was correct in the view he attributed to the general public. What was valued by them was the subject-matter of a painting and the emotional response to it which the artist achieved. Practising artists resented this bias since they naturally desired to impress the beholder not by their choice of subject, but by their mastery of the medium of painting. No wonder they took pleasure in baiting the complacent middle class, and enjoyed the sport of *épater le bourgeois.* In their minds, to aim at success with the jury of the Salon was tantamount to selling their soul, for such success could only be achieved by pandering to the tasteless bourgeoisie.

Later usage has coined for this kind of Salon painting the derogatory term 'anecdotal', but it may be more fair and more correct to call it 'dramatic', or possibly 'operatic', since in the librettos of the grand nineteenth-century operas-such as Verdi's and Wagner's - this attitude remained alive. The librettist of an opera must think of a plot that gives the composer the maximum of opportunities to express the passions - not his own passions, of

course, but those of the *dramatis personae.*

Henceforth the world of art was divided between the traditionalists, whose work pleased the public, and the avant-garde, who looked for success among the élite. To analyse this momentous development would take us far beyond the limits of our chosen subject, but without an understanding of its roots its reverberation in the twentieth century cannot be understood.

Here, no less than in the discussion of the early eighteenth century, we can rely once more on M. H. Abrams. Long before he wrote his essay on 'Art-as-such', from which I profited in chapter two, Abrams had gained a deserved reputation from his book *The Mirror and the Lamp,*[7] in which he analysed the profound changes which the notion of art had undergone during the birth of the Romantic movement. What that book documented so convincingly was precisely the shift in the notion of 'expression'. While in the ancient world, no less than in the eighteenth century, artists regarded it as their task to *depict* the passions objectively and accurately, the Romantic artist was out to *express* and communicate his own emotions with absolute sincerity.

It was in the medium of poetry that this shift wrought the most radical change. The love sonnets of the Elizabethan age are mostly descriptions, rather than expressions, of love. To the nineteenth century a love poem that was 'insincere' would have been dismissed as hypocrisy. It is clear that the visual arts proved less responsive to the novel demand. Yet, if the reader returns to the passage cited from Zola's *Mon Salon*, he will find that what the author extols is precisely that quality of sincerity that the Romantics associated with poetry: '...I ask him to give himself, heart and body ... it is a question ... of baring one's breast ... that which I seek above all in a painting

is a man, and not a picture ... you must abandon yourself bravely to your nature and not seek to deny it.'

Not that Zola was the first to make such demands of the artist, but he was perhaps the first to make them so explicitly and exclusively. Once we have focused on his attitued in terms of Abrams's book, we will vot find it too hard to find his predecessors in the nineteenth century. But this cannot be our concern. What must matter to us is the bifurcation of artistic practice into two virtually irreconcilable camps.

While the traditionalists firmly believed that there were objective standards by which a painting could and should be judged, the progressives of Zola's conviction conceived of painting, like poetry, as the expression of subjective reactions. The objective standards, based on the accurate rendering of natural appearances, led the traditionalists to dismiss any artist's departure from visual truth as a symptom of incompetence, of bungling: if a contemporary artist was found to infringe the rules and conventions of representation the only possible reaction was laughter.

The Licence of Humour

This is indeed what Zola tells us in the next of his articles on Manet, where he describes what he takes to be the majority opinion of the artist: 'After he has drunk several kegs of beer the dauber decides to paint some caricatures and exhibit them that the public may make sport of him and remember his name ... he holds his sides in front of his own picture ...'[8] Everyone was familiar with such distortions from the pages of the humorous weeklies, since caricature enjoyed the fool's licence of playing fast and loose with natural

appearances for the sake of provoking laughter.

Where exotic or primitive images were concerned it was obviously less easy to decide whether the perceived distortion resulted from a humorous intention or from sheer incompetence. It is fitting therefore that J. P. Malcolm's *Historical Sketch of the Art of Caricaturing*, of 1813 - the first book on the subject ever written - devotes the first two introductory chapters to what the author describes as 'subjects unintentionally distorted' (p.13). He writes that:

> A savage cannot transfer just conception to wood or stone; on the contrary, he seems to lose all recollection that he had ever viewed the human species, and creates monsters from his own disordered imagination - a fact very difficult to account for, as imitation is an impulse of Nature almost in every other pursuit.
>
> The British Museum contains ample illustrations of the total departure of savage sculptors or carvers from the outlines of man and beast, when attempting to represent bipeds and quadrupeds; and of others, who, though not uncivilized, were incapable of giving forms true resemblances, probably through want of encouragement and the observations of criticism ... It is remarkable, that some of the rude sculptures profusely scattered over our most antient Saxon buildings resemble the capricious fancies of these untutored artists; which tends to prove that the first native conceptions of genius at all times and in all places are a confused chaos, which may be compared to the frightful dreams that sometimes torture our minds when the body is at rest: in both cases phantoms float

> before the perception, ghastly and terrible to the imagination ... the unfortunate savage, or half-civilized sculptor or carver, appears to act under some powerful impulse, and perpetuates his waking dreams.[9]

Looming large among Malcolm's illustrations are the famous feather heads brought nome from Cook's first voyage, and also some pages of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

The way in which the grotesque shapes of tribal art were seen did not change materially in the course of the nineteenth century - witness Flaxman's remarks quoted earlier.[10] In his novel, *L'Oeuvre*, Zola was to describe the salvos of laughter that emanated from the Salon des Refusés, since its visitors regarded the exhibits as the works of self-deluded bunglers and as unintentional caricatures. But skilled tactician as he was, Zola proceeded to counter-attack: who were the distorters? Surely not honest artists such as Manet, but rather the successful masters of the Salon, who prettified and dolled up their models: '...we have neither M. Gérôme's plaster Cleopatra, nor M. Dubufe's pretty pink and white demoiselles...If M. Manet had at least borrowed M. Cabanel's rice powder puff and applied a little make-up to Olympia's cheeks and breasts, the young lady would have been presentable...All around them [Manet's canvases] are spread the confections of the artistic sweetmeat makers in fashion, sugar-candy trees and pie-crust houses, gingerbread men and women fashioned of vanilla frosting...[the public] eagerly lap up all the nauseating sweets they are served.[11]

'This', as they used to say in the cinema, 'is where we came in,' for where have we first encountered this response? - surely it is the one I chose as

the motto for this investigation: Cicero's discovery that too much sweetness can cause disgust.

I have called the attitudes of the opposing camps irreconcilable. They were so because they relied on contrasting *mental sets.* Psychologists use this technical term to describe the expectations which modify our perceptions. If we look at a string of figures, the configuration 'O' will be read as zero. If we look at letters it will stand for the vowel 'O'. We have to adopt different mental sets to deal with a calculation or a printed text. The same applies to our commerce with images. Looking at a photographic portrait we build up in our mind an idea of what a person looks like. Presented with a caricature such as Daumier's *The Past, the Present, the Future* we know that it is a distortion for the purpose of fun or mockery. In *Art and Illusion* I quoted the reply by Matisse to a lady who criticized his portrait of a woman because her arm was too long: 'Madame, you are mistaken. This is not a woman, this is a picture.'[12]

Mental Sets

The bourgeois evidently arrived at the Salon with two mental sets he was ready to apply: if a painting refused to look like reality it could only be interpreted as a parody or caricature. For Zola, as we have seen, there was a third possibliity: he waw in the exhibition nothing but falsified or prettified reality contrived by slick manufacturers to suit the taste of the multitudes-in other words what came to be known as 'kitsch'.

Posterity was inclined for many generations to accept this third mental set, and to turn away in disgust from exhibitions in the Salon guilty of

showing nothing but pseudo-art - art characterized by Zola as 'the theatrical tours de force of this Monsieur and all the perfumed reveries of that Monsieur'.[13] The attitude of official art history was little short of a *damnatio memoriae*, a verdict that has only slowly and hesitantly been revised in the last few decades.[14]

And yet, to repeat, it seems to me that the development of modern art can only be explained against the foil of that other camp, as a headlong flight from 'kitsch'. The subjective conception of art could only assert its character by acts of defiance, of deliberate departure from what became known as 'photographic accuracy'.

Defiance

There is a remarkable letter by van Gogh written during the Summer of 1885, in which he refers to criticism a certain Serret had made of his *Potato Eaters*: 'Tell Serret that *I should be desperate if my figures were correct*, tell him that I do not want them to be academically correct, tell him I mean: if one photographs a digger *he certainly would not be digging then*... Tell him that my great longing is to learn to make these very incorrectnesses, remodellings, changs in reality, so that they may become, yes, lies if you like-but truer than the literal truth.'[15]

His description of his own procedure in painting a portrait is more familiar: 'I exaggerate the fair colour of the hair, I take orange, chrome, lemon colour, and behind the head I do not paint the trivial wall of the room but the Infinite. I make a simple background out of the most intense and richest blue the palette will yield. The blond luminous head stands out against this strong

blue background mysteriously like a star in the azure. Alas my dear friend, the public will see nothing but caricature in this exaggeration, but what does this matter to us?'[16]

What marks the revolution ushered in by Gauguin and his friends is precisely that they refused to recognize this category. Thus Maurice Denis was to claim that what he had learnt from Gauguin was 'that all works of art are a transposition, a caricature'.[17] No doubt Rubin was right when he artributed one of the main impulses of twentieth-century primitivism to Gauguin, but his formal means were perhaps only the symptoms of his attitude to art. What he preached was the extreme of defiant subjectivism:

> We had to think in terms of a total liberation...of smashing windows even if it meant cutting our fingers, leaving the next generation free and unfettered to find its own solution. Not a definitive solution, mind you, for we are talking about an infinite art, rich in all manner of techniques, fit to express everything that is in nature and in man...
>
> To do this we had to hurl ourselves body and soul into the fray, taking on all the schools without distinction. Rather than run them down we would confront them: not just officialdom but Impressionists, Neo-Impressionists, and the public, old and new. Let our wives and children disown us. Never mind the insults, Never mind poverty. That was so far as a man's conduct was concerned.
>
> As for his work, a method of contradiction if you like...To relearn, and once learnt, to learn again. To conquer all inhibitions even in the face of ridicule.
>
> Before his easel the painter is slave neither to the past, to the present, to