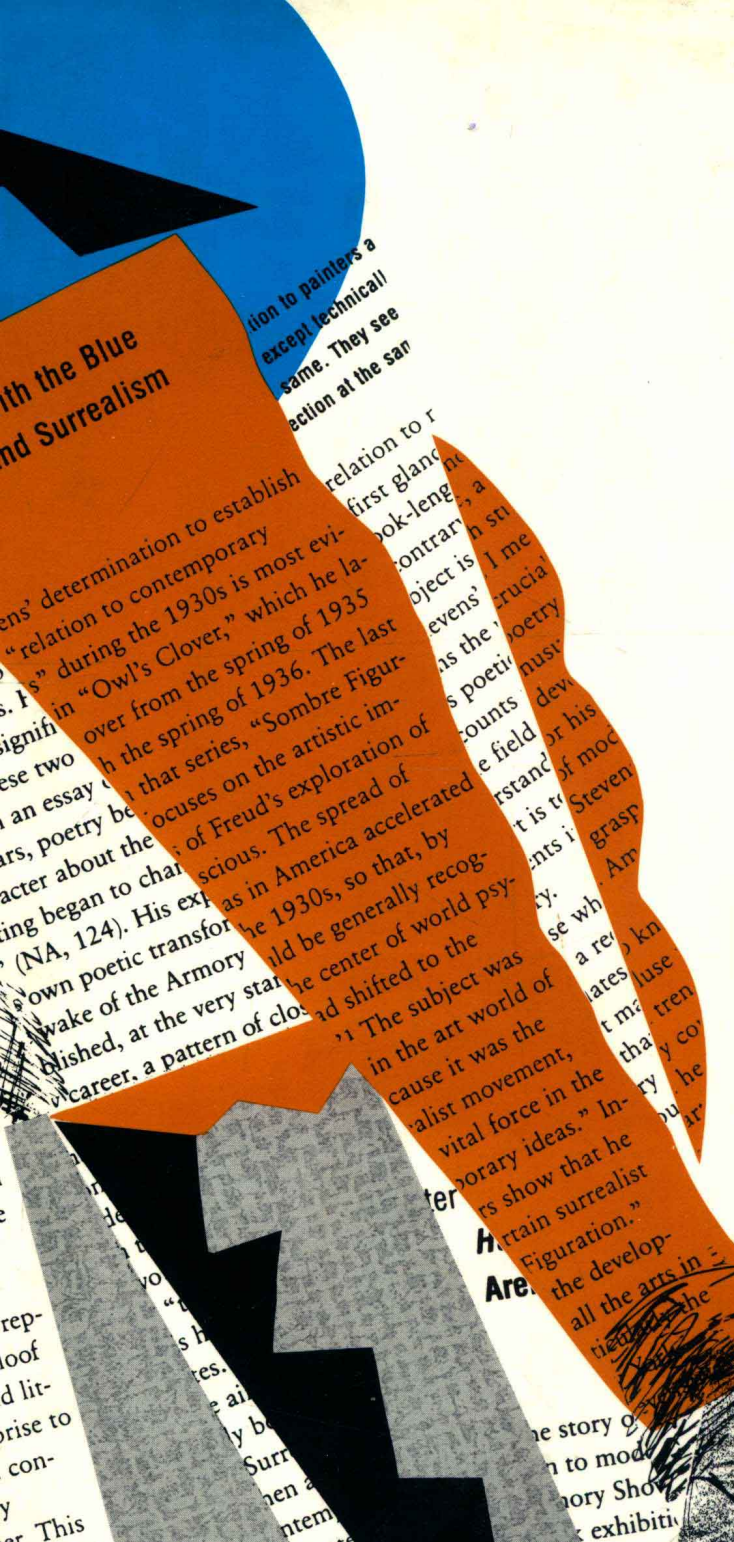
Wallace Stevens and Modern Art

From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism

Glen MacLeod



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Illustrations

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This book is dedicated to James L. Steffensen, Jr., whose genius for teaching, scholarship, and friendship has inspired me more than I can say.

Abbreviations

CP *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954).

L *Letters of Wallace Stevens,* ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

OP *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose,* ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

SP Holly Stevens, *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

Introduction

I pay just as much attention to painters as I *do* to writers because, except technically, their problems are the same. They seem to move in the same direction at the same time. —L, 593

Wallace Stevens' relation to modern art may seem, at first glance, a narrow focus for a book-length study of the poet. On the contrary, I mean to show that this subject is crucial to understanding Stevens' poetry; that it largely explains the unusual character of his poetic development; and that it accounts for his peculiar position in the field of modern poetry. To understand Stevens' relation to modern art is to grasp one of the central currents in American cultural history.

For those who know Stevens' reputation as a recluse who kept aloof from the latest trends in art and literature, it may come as a surprise to discover that he followed the contemporary art world intently throughout his mature career. This

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preoccupation is everywhere evident in his writing—in his letters telling of trips to galleries in New York and elsewhere; in his essays, which often draw analogies between poetry and painting; and in the notebooks where he jotted down favorite passages from current books and articles about the visual arts. Stevens' interest in the world of art was deep and continuous. It helped to determine the character of his poetry in many ways, from the choice of subjects for particular poems to the comprehensive organizing concepts of his poetic theory.

Stevens' poetic development closely parallels the development of modern art in America from the 1910s through the 1950s. This not only helps to explain his anomalous position in modern poetry, it also suggests why his poetry speaks more directly to visual artists than that of any other modern poet in English. Viewed in this context, Stevens is not the isolated and peculiar figure he often seems when compared only with his poetic contemporaries. Rather, he is perhaps the most central and representative American poet of his time.

To suggest that there is a direct relation between Stevens' poetry and the *contemporaneous* development of the visual arts in the United States challenges the prevailing view. Stevens' interest in "the relations between poetry and painting" has never been questioned. His 1951 essay of that title is only the most sustained treatment of a theme that occupied him throughout his career. But most critics have focused on Stevens' relation to impressionism, fauvism, and cubism—the major French movements that antedated his mature poetic utterances. The most thorough study of this subject is still that of Michel Benamou, who interprets Stevens' poetry in terms of a conflict between impressionist (romantic) and cubist (modern) aesthetics.[1] Without taking issue with this view, Robert Buttel and James Baird have contributed substantially to our understanding of Stevens' close relation to the visual arts.[2] Recently, Charles Altieri has analyzed Stevens' aesthetics in the context of what he calls "painterly abstraction" in twentieth-century art. But his broadly speculative approach finally has more

to do with philosophy than with art history, and he does not address the question of Stevens' relation to the contemporary art world.[3] There seems to be general agreement that—after *Harmonium,* at least—Stevens was simply out of touch with the avant-garde art movements of his time.

One factor contributing to this critical consensus is Stevens' own art collection. Composed mainly of small canvases by minor artists who had some reputation in Paris during his lifetime, the collection seems to represent a very conservative taste. The works are mostly landscapes, and have been described as "paintings that, in a quiet way, protested against Cubism, Fauvism, abstraction, harkening back to Impressionism or returning to Barbizon 'reality.'"[4] (A checklist of the collection is given in the appendix.) Stevens bought many of these works sight unseen, entrusting nearly all his purchases first to Anatole Vidal, a Parisian bookseller, and then, after Vidal's death during World War II, to his daughter, Paule Vidal.[5] Stevens showed no interest in collecting American art even when, by the end of the war, the vital center of Western art had shifted from Paris to New York.

The evidence of Stevens' art collecting has made it seem reasonable to assume that such a man had little concern for contemporary developments in the visual arts.The chief problem with this assumption is that Stevens' art collection is not a valid register of the full range of his artistic interests. The works of art a man chooses to *live* with are not necessarily those he most admires. Stevens liked the paintings of Georges Rouault, for example; his library included a number of books about or illustrated by the artist.[6] He could have afforded to buy one of Rouault's paintings, but in 1938 he declined to do so, explaining that Rouault's "tragic and overpowering things are a little more than I want, except on particularly bad days." In the same way, although he admired Joan Miró, he did not want to buy any of his paintings: "We have had rather a deluge of surrealist things recently and, while I think that the work of Miro in particular is miraculous, still I have no particular desire to own any of it."[7] Again, Stevens never acquired even a

small work by Paul Klee, although it was within his means to do so and Klee was his favorite painter.[8] James Johnson Sweeney, the director of the Guggenheim Museum when Stevens knew him, recalls that Stevens was often genuinely interested in contemporary art despite—or even, perhaps, because of—its foreignness to him: "When he talked to me [about painting], I thought he looked at contemporary painting much as he looked at French poetry, not as something native to him but which attracted him. I found it was always what was interesting to him as a stimulant."[9] To the extent that Stevens experienced contemporary art as alien he could welcome it as a stimulant. But this same strangeness and vitality, which attracted him and stimulated his imagination, also made such art inappropriate to the familiar, comfortable atmosphere he desired at home.

Stevens' remarks about modern art were sometimes quite dismissive.[10] Consider this passage from a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1936 about the landmark exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art: "When I was in New York last week I thought of going to the exhibition at the Modern Museum, but having to make a choice because of the shortness of time, I went to the Morgan Library instead (the exhibition room on the corner). Better fifty minutes of the Morgan Library than a cycle in the Surrealist Exhibition. The metaphysics of Aristotle embellished by a miniaturist who knew the meaning of the word embellishment knocks the metaphysics of Dali cold" (L, 315). This seems, on the face of it, a fairly straightforward declaration that Stevens had no sympathy with Surrealism, which was, during the 1920s and early 1930s, the most visible and influential avant-garde movement in Western art. In a general way, therefore, it seems to corroborate the standard view—supported by other passages in Stevens' letters and essays—that Stevens had little interest in the course of modern art after impressionism and cubism. But this statement, like much of what Stevens had to say about art, cannot be taken at face value. His apparent dismissal of Surrealism must be seen in the context of his conscious dialogue with Surreal-

ist art theory in 1936–1937, which culminated in his major poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (see chapter 3). Nor did his apparent scorn of Salvador Dalí in 1936 prevent Stevens from acquiring the lengthy catalogue of Dalí's one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941.[11] The attitude expressed in Stevens' letter has more to do with Dalí's already well-established reputation as a shameless popularizer than with Dalí's painting, and it reflects Stevens' boredom with the relentless promotion of Surrealism rather than a contempt for Surrealist art. He is not adopting the pose of an aesthetic reactionary who prefers medieval to modern art; rather, he is taking satisfaction in being so well informed and up-to-date that the latest New York craze is already old hat to him.

This example illustrates the importance of interpreting Stevens' references to art in context. This applies not only to his comments about contemporary artists and movements but also to his frequent allusions to figures from art history. Take, for instance, his mention of van Gogh in a letter to Robin Lane Latimer: "The fundamental source of joy in life is the instinct of joy.[12] If that is true, and a little difficult to realize in life, it is infinitely more true in poetry and painting, and much more easy to realize there. Van Gogh painted to indulge the instinct of joy" (L, 296). Stevens' reference to van Gogh is entirely unprompted; the rest of the letter contains no allusion to him. Reading this passage on its own, we may suppose that Stevens simply needed to illustrate what he meant by "the instinct of joy," that he thought of van Gogh because he was a fellow Dutchman and because the painter's colorful, boldly expressionistic manner made him in some ways a kindred spirit. But we miss the essence of Stevens' allusion if we think of it as having no particular historical context. In fact, this reference is specific and timely. In November 1935, when Stevens wrote the letter, the Museum of Modern Art had just opened a one-man exhibition of van Gogh. The artist's work did not then enjoy the nearly universal esteem it does today. In fact, the museum had been doubtful of the exhibition's prospects. The American press and

public had simply ignored the van Gogh paintings at the Armory Show in 1913, and an exhibition at the Montross Gallery in 1920 had not attracted a single buyer.[13] The museum's Advisory Committee had opposed the show on the grounds that van Gogh's paintings were too similar to make an interesting one-man show and that he had had little influence on contemporary painting. In the event, however, the show was overwhelmingly successful with both the critics and the public, who crowded into the museum in record numbers. Although we have no record of it, it seems likely that Wallace Stevens was among the visitors.[14]

The nationwide publicity surrounding this exhibition first established van Gogh's enormous popularity in the United States. The legend of van Gogh as a neglected genius creating images of transcendent beauty amid a sordid and tormented existence captured the imagination of a nation in the midst of the Depression. As Russell Lynes puts it: "It was as though in the depths of the Depression . . . a bright and cheerful light had been let in. No matter that it came from a dark soul and an often deranged mind. Wasn't everybody's soul feeling somewhat dark and his mind somewhat off its track then?"[15] Stevens' characterization of van Gogh as the embodiment of "the instinct of joy" springs directly from this context. His seemingly hermetic allusion to the nineteenth-century Dutch artist actually reflects Stevens' lively engagement with events in the contemporary art world.

The pattern of such references in Stevens' letters and poems maps a continuing dialogue with the contemporary art world that can also serve as a mirror of Stevens' development as a poet. His only other reference to van Gogh in the *Letters*, for instance, demonstrates how his view of artistic creation changed during the 1930s. In 1943 he described for Henry Church his reactions to a van Gogh exhibition at Wildenstein's: "The word for all this is *maniement*: I don't mean a mania of manner, but I mean a total subjection of reality to the artist. It may be only too true that Van Gogh had fortuitous assistance in the mastery of reality. But he mastered it, no matter how. And that is so often what one wants to

do in poetry: to seize the whole mass of everything and to squeeze it, and make it one's own" (L, 459).[16] In this passage van Gogh serves once again as a kind of alter ego for Stevens, but now instead of the "instinct of joy" he represents a "mastery of reality." This implies a more active, forceful view of art that reflects Stevens' changing response to the "pressure of reality" between the Depression and the Second World War. During this transitional period in his career, he shifted to a more aggressive conception of poetry as "the act of the mind."

Often when Stevens refers to the visual arts in his poetry or letters, he is testing his own artistic identity against the "reality" of the contemporary art world. Thus even historical art exhibitions could take on contemporary significance in terms of Stevens' poetic development. A small but well-conceived show like "The Painters of Still Life" at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1938 could have great impact despite its modest scale, as its influence on Stevens' *Parts of a World* demonstrates. (See chapter 4.) Although Stevens, unlike his friend William Carlos Williams, did not visit artists' studios, his poetic growth is, in its own way, just as closely linked to the contemporary art world.

The comparison with Williams is useful in clarifying Stevens' relation to the visual arts. Bonnie Costello has stated what seems to me the crucial distinction: "All the studies of Williams agree that he takes the analogy with painting literally and strives for an equivalency of effect in words. Stevens' relation to painting is a far more figurative and conceptual one."[17] For Stevens, the important relations between poetry and painting were in the realm of theory, not technique. This helps to explain why few books have been written about Stevens and painting, but many about Williams and painting.[18] The Western tradition of *ut pictura poesis* has conditioned us to expect that analogies between poetry and painting will involve direct comparisons between particular paintings and poems, usually in terms of their common iconography or technique. In this sense, it is illuminating to compare Williams' poem "The Rose" with Juan Gris' cubist collage *Roses* (1914) or his painting *The*

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