



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

JACQUES LOUIS DAVID: DEATH OF SOCRATES (DETAIL)

ART, QUICK OR SLOW

By JEAN CHARLOT

"Le temps ne fait rien à l'affaire."—Molière.

IF it be true that the last thing a fish is aware of is water, in the same way, because it pervades us from out and in, are we ignorant of the more permanent characteristics of contemporary art. Whereas we see only diversity, even points of dissension between the works of modern masters, there will remain, a few decades from now, the perspective of a ponderable, if less amiable, school as homogeneous in its output as the works of the eighteenth century painters of "Fêtes Galantes" now appear to us. It is even probable that art from the beginning of impressionism up to the death of the School of Paris will seem a logical curve, an unbroken development toward shorthand methods and the selfish use of a private code language, as opposed to the catholicity of the aims of art in most other periods.

Monet was a powerfully built fellow, and painting would probably not have been his pet trade had he not developed a brush stroke broad enough to insure sufficient exercise for

arm and wrist. Landscapes became a natural subject-matter for the people who enjoyed outings, and who were strong and healthy enough to carry their easels on their backs. The artist painted for his health; the public was no more taken into his confidence, and painting switched from a universal language to the status of a freemasonry. That the next generation, being of a less sturdy health and of a more decadent turn of mind, enjoyed more the somersaults of the spirit than those of the body, did much to exaggerate this state of affairs. Casting aside its religious, moral, and social bonds, art flung itself into a dance of the seven "isms," of which the last stages are rather shameful, considered as a public performance.

One of the best definitions of modern art was given by Picasso, by negation—as Saint Thomas was wont to describe God—when he said that we were in need of a David. The crystal-like purity of David's descriptions, the

logical subdivisions of his plan, are the oratorical tools of a man who addresses the public, of a worker who knows that the responsibility of the artist who creates a picture, in which the minds of generations will dwell, is at least equal to that of the architect in planning and building a house. Such a picture is usually built up through slow craftsmanship, permanency being an essential of the architectural mind.

Patience in art, the time involved in the physical creation of a painting, is still for the layman a measure of its excellency. And quick work, the freehand and shorthand technique of the moderns, is the basis for most of the

outspoken criticism of modern art. Yet, when the architectural urge is missing, sound craftsmanship cannot save, cannot even make a picture. And freehand technique is a befitting medium in which to voice the language of passion. That it has been misused of late for modish and trivial ends must not make one forget that it is the natural language of a Van Gogh or an Orozco.

We know by the letters of Van Gogh that the great master of his type works with his mind at a pitch that it would be exhausting to sustain. Such exaltation is made genuine and fruitful only through long years of emotional experience and technical study. To such



WILLIAM A.
BOUGUEREAU:
MUSIC OF THE SEA

*Courtesy
John Levy Galleries, Inc.*



Courtesy E. M. Benson

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO: MODERN MIGRATION OF THE SPIRIT
Fourteenth Panel, Dartmouth Frescoes

a master, the moment of work is what to the saint is the moment of ecstasy, nourished and developed by the slower process of meditation and mortification. To attempt a slowing up of his painting technique would result for the artist in a distinct loss, a muddling and an obscuring of the unmarred mental image that he envisions as a start. The Chinese and Japanese understood better than we do the fact that physical exertion is incompatible with the highest forms of meditation, and their greatest mas-

terpieces, devoid of color, of jugglery, and of patience, were created in five minutes with a broken reed, or a feather, or the fingers smeared in ink.

While quick art has always been linked, and rightly, less to illustrative than to emotive themes, the more careful techniques are commonly believed to be the natural language of academic art, meaning the uninspired objective renderings that the layman still considers as common sense. It is true that patience

in art has been associated with secondary figures like Bouguereau and Gérôme; hence the usual linking of so-called objective art and sound craftsmanship. But it is of course obvious that great masters transcend such flimsy boundaries and that Van der Weyden, Dürer, or Pontormo used the coolest and most painstaking technique as a medium for the most inspired vision.

The fact that painters like Gérôme do represent the world as it is could have been sustained more easily fifty years ago than now. Scientific research, having trapped matter into the atom, has since exploded the atom into something more like movement than matter. It is proved now that an art that represents the world as nineteenth-century common sense wished it—labeled, clearcut, and sturdy—is really an artificial, misleading translation, while truly creative art, with its suggestion of complex inter-relations of dynamism and of elusiveness, does capture a deeper and a truer version of the world, even in its scientific and physical sense.

Photography, through its dehumanized eye, upholds for us this point. Even among the everyday millions of amateur snapshots, how few correspond to the ethic of the bourgeois eye! And when a great artist works with this, the most objective of mediums, his work does not recall the so-called objective work of mediocre artists, but can only match the work of the more subjective masters. Rare are the masters of photography as are those of painting; yet an Atget, a Weston, have welded objective and subjective into one, in their indubitable masterpieces.

All great artists have transcended the limitations of any one technique. Dürer, painstaking and dry-cut as much of his work is, did wash his extraordinary water color, depicting the dream that he had of the end of the world, in an atmospherical rendering of rain and fog that anticipates Turner. Renoir, in some early landscapes, painted the trees leaf by leaf, an exercise in discipline which may have won for him an ultimate freedom. To each mood of a man corresponds a given scale; and a broad mind, to express itself thoroughly, has to make use of the whole gamut. The complete work of art, as does the animal

body, brings to a living unity materials as dissimilar on a spiritual plane as are the bones and the nerves, the veins and the muscles. That the language of art for the last sixty years has been mainly a series of disconnected exclamations is not wholly an indictment: it did befit it to express climaxes of emotions and those twilights of the mind into which other ages have been careful not to venture. There is no doubt either that this period is fast coming to a close, killed by its neglect of the more architectural and static side of art.

Two historical apologues best sum up the two main approaches to art: old master Sesshou in his old age decided to paint an aesthetic testament, a microcosm of the world of thoughts, philosophy, and technical experience, the fruit of seventy years of glorious labor. He took a feather, broke its quill, and dipping its barbs in ink made a splash on silk which up to now, duly authenticated by his own and many scholars' writing, remains the masterpiece of Japanese painting.

The Pope, in want of the best man to decorate his palace, sent learned emissaries to prominent artists to wring from each a major work proving his skill and knowledge. The winner of this contest was Giotto, who by tracing freehand a nakedly perfect circle, did get the Pope's praise and the job.

To the student, emotion and geometry seem at first sight incompatible; yet they are but two facets of the one art. Underlying all emotional painting, even unknown to the painter, is a system of coordinates through which rhythms and spaces could be translated into figures as mathematical as are the intervals of music. And the work of the architectural painter—does it not use the extremes of the imagination, the geometrical figures that look like nothing much around us? And the assembling of these elements, how much stamped it is by sensitiveness!

Bitter feuds of schools are good only for pupils who through the narrow door of technique search for the fields of the mind, but in the world of the masters, which is this world of the mind, there remains only harmony. There Sesshou's supreme splash connects without effort and abides easily within the perfect circle of Giotto.



SESSHOU: LANDSCAPE (DETAIL)



EDWARD WESTON: CYPRESSES, POINT LOBOS