



DEPOSITION FROM THE CROSS
Jean Charlot

Painter's Insight, Public's Sight

The Critic, the Artist, and Problems of Representation

JEAN CHARLOT

AN ARTIST who turns critic is handicapped by a great pride and a great humility. The medium of words, the process of intelligible analysis, are foreign to his trade and in the use of such tools his unfamiliarity makes him humble. His pride is a reflection of the fact that he has over the professional critic the advantage to which Mark Twain pointed—that same advantage that the bug has over the entomologist—he knows his subject from the inside.

Artist and critic are of opposite types and what befits one is poison to the other. The facile approach to all the sources enjoyed by the modern critic, his mind filled with illustrations of all styles of all times, is, as regards the painter, a dubious blessing. The artist of yesterday, limited as he was by the lack of automobiles and of photography, had as a result an innocent faith in the one local style of his birthplace or bishopric, and a lifetime to dig far down into its possibilities, to a depth made possible only by such a narrowed approach. His colleague of today, unless he be of the strongest, will ease himself by leaning on an academic knowledge of the art styles of the past. All he knows, from Altamira to Miro, will be ingeniously put to work into pictures whose only defect will be a lack of creativeness.

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True creation must start from nothing. For the artist who only approximates this godlike attribute, true creation must at least start from little. The real painter approaches his work as nakedly now as he did in the prehistoric cave. This emptying of himself, this vacuum cleaning which is the first step of creation, is the absolute opposite of the data gathering and file ordering of the critical type.

The hypnosis in which the creative artist must dwell will develop his emotional, intuitive functions, but will make him less fit to express himself through the more commonplace, more analytical channel of words. There is a general and valid acknowledgment that the better the painter the more inarticulate he must be, and out of this inarticulateness the critic is born and makes hay. In our day the critic has become the indispensable middleman, sandwiched between the work of art and its public. His oratory in behalf of his dumb friend, the artist, more than often irritates the latter. Yet critics have their *raison d'être* in the reluctance of the artist to act as his own mouth-piece.

It is little wonder that the artist whose whole job is to put separate things together, to weld them solidly through composition and common emotional climate, will not see the point of attempting the reverse movement. To take a well-fused painting and tear it apart, design here, color there, spatial, tactile, etc. qualities, each cut clean and labelled, all ready to be dumped in an alcohol jar, is the job of the critics of our day, as typified by a Barnes—a kind of post-mortem trade. Much fun has been made of the emotional criticism of yore as opposed to such a so-called scientific attitude. Yet the case for the old-fashioned literary critic is still valid. He sensed the picture as alive and an autopsy would have seemed to him akin to murder. Pater attempted to parallel in words the mood of the picture, justly deemed all-important. Line, color, composition, were minimized as so much studio slang.

That the public loves to go behind the scenes does not impair the fact that its logical place is in the orchestra. So much

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shop talk has been aired in books discussing modern art that it has been forgotten that the picture is after all a spectacle to which for its full enjoyment one must bring a kind of ignorance or innocence. There is one problem, however, which is of interest to both artist and layman and stands as the meeting ground of their relationship—the problem of representation.

That pigments laid on canvas have anything to do with a representation of the world is not in fact apparent. Yet man, whose eye is trained at detecting the elements of natural spectacles, is quick to interpret into symbols otherwise meaningless patterns. Thus, as Leonardo points out, we see faces and monsters in the cracks of an old wall or a moving mass of clouds. Contrary to the layman's opinion it is not the representation of nature that is difficult in art but, if such be the aim, a severance of the connection between painting and representation. The least clue of line or color, however faint, will set the associative power to work. An ink blot on paper will create a rough but effective illusion. The black may suggest a hole in the paper affording a receding vista or become some object lying on the sheet of paper. Whatever the reading, an illusive space and volume are created. Such humanized interpretation of plastic facts multiplies with any stroke, scribbled line, change of value or of color in a picture. The human eye is trained to interpretation and the human mind follows its routine of attaching some objective reading to any system of line or color, be it in nature or in art.

It would be a cleaner job if one could paint with line and color only, barring their associative corollaries. In fact, abstract painting, using line and color per se, would be the only realistic approach to paint, denuded of what in painting smacks of magician's art and childish make-believe. But it appears evident from even this simplest example of the ink blot that, however desirable it would be to isolate line and color in some kind of sterilized vacuum, to study art "in the abstract" as we moderns put it quaintly, by some inescapable process of our

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imagination the outside world does get all mixed up with our diagrams. Picasso, try as he may, cannot shake off his guitar and his pipe. So, if we are to paint, we are to accept representation, the introduction willy-nilly of a subject matter woven into painting, as essential to pigment as is its physical density or chemical properties. Though such a conclusion smacks of unsophistication there is little harm done at that.

The incompatibility between story-telling and plastic equilibrium is an entirely fictitious creation, a scarecrow propped up by dealers and critics to shush a dissatisfied public. Throughout the history of art, representation and plastic qualities have grown and prospered as dependent on each other as are Siamese twins. But for the last sixty years a strange disease has overcome painting, the twins have come to hate each other and each would cut himself loose from the other even though such a step means death. Compared with what went before them, impressionism and cubism, those supposed opposites, seem very close to each other, intimate allies in their war against subject matter. Only their means of warfare differ since an impressionist will melt, a cubist will hack, whatever they chose to come in contact with. It was perhaps a lurking instinct of shame that made them limit their slaughter to wholly noncommittal objects that would have been deemed ignoble by the historical, moral, dynastic schools of the past. Laboriously intent on clearing Monet and Picasso the critics of those last decades have built up a case for painting versus subject matter but it is dubiously convincing. It is a plea for the defense, and judicial oratory is sure to age badly.

That the painter is to deal with the objective world as one of the inescapable ingredients of his paint does not imply that he is to take representation as his aim. It seems more within human logic that he should bend it to his own end, use it with the same discrimination with which he handles contrasts of color or dynamics of line. But even if the painter unduly decided that representation alone was his end, he would not

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thereby become an exponent of academic art. Even the purely material version given by a camera rarely coincides with the academic version of the world. Freakish distortions, multiple exposures of moving objects, hazy focusing of planes raise questions that painters true to nature would have to face. Furthermore, human vision with its double foyer and prehensile focusing multiplies the problem of camera vision *ad infinitum*. And if we consider the gloze that the human brain inscribes over the margin of human vision it becomes apparent that academic art is no truer to nature than any of our modern "isms." It would have been easier fifty years ago to state that academic painters represent the world as it is. At that time "science" had a kind of cumulative and permanent meaning; since each optical fact is related to a physical, the painting of a collection of facts seemed to have a certain value as scientific data. To infringe on this pure representation, to distort imaginatively, would have been a sin against science. Since those days, though, science, having stalked matter into the atom, has shattered this atom into something more like energy than matter. The world, as modern science conceives it, is again full of mystery. Its laws are relative, submitted to a kind of free will on the part of matter. These unforeseen qualities, this dynamism, must be built into any picture that is to reproduce the scientific reality. And this structure we do find in the work of the greater subjective masters much more than in the clear-cut, clearly labelled, so-called academic painters. This justification in a larger meaning of what up to now passed as artistic temperament means that both objective and subjective beat with the same pulse. Our own human mechanism is also an integral part of the world, and as the Chinese clearly demonstrate, painting the laws of mountains and trees and riverfalls is but an introspective excursion. Painting, even if we start our quest with the commonplace assertion that one must paint "real," becomes on examination a very spiritual affair.

No matter what objects appear in the picture, the painter

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conjures them up through his use of space and volume. Their representation on a flat surface does smack of a magician's trick. That canvas and color should become human beings, trees, mountains or sheep seems more freakish than the pulling of rabbits out of hats. And it is true that a certain kind of naturalistic painting is no more than a magician's sleight of hand. Not the representation but the suggestion of space and volume is the painter's trade and therein lies the difference between imitative and creative art. If space and volume were to be absolutely convincing, art would be imitative. The painter dealing with lines and colors is bound to create a kind of third dimension, as lines and colors will do even when left to themselves. But to remain a painter one must use such magic properties with a grain of salt, wink at the onlooker to make clear the fact that the painting is only an illusion, preserve within the painting certain areas where color and canvas refuse to play the game. Hence those purposeful limitations that some deem defects in the masters: the strong unnatural outlines of Botticelli and Ingres, the undisguised brushwork of Rembrandt or Cézanne.

A sculptor achieves volume by gauging its internal space; the painter achieves volume by closing up space around it. In the true painter's language, concave and convex can stand for space and volume, as it is akin to the semi-space or semi-volume that the inside or the outside of a spoon illustrates. The painter who favors volume will contract the object and make it compact, avoid gaps between arms and torso, treat fingers as a single mass. Such shapes as those of Renoir would be translatable into good sculpture, were it not that the painter reasserts himself at the meeting point of shape and space, where the slight trembling of a line, a lack of focus will reassert this painted atmosphere that the rounding of the shape nearly denied.

Painters who select space as their major theme will prefer unsculpturesque elements whose thin members are like arrows pointing to width, height and depth. Hence the fondness of Chinese painters, space-hungry, for lean stems, bare branches

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—hence also the perspective lines and surveyors' stakes that are the lances of Ucello, the so-called "decorative" stripes of a Matisse.

Because of such hidden reasons art has built up its peculiar bric-à-brac of subject matter, a medley of fat or lean objects to which each painter and each school for an essentially abstract purpose comes back. And it is a happy coincidence that in the days when the Church was patron of the arts, the painters, translating the sacred symbols into terms of their craft, could well warm up to the combination of horizontal and vertical which is the Cross, those primary volumes with which biblical robes, stooping postures endow the human body, that pointing to cardinal directions of ladders, sticks and lances.

The hunting ground of the painter is strictly this physical world. The constructions of the mind which a philosopher, a scientist, may expose nakedly, can be referred to in painting only by representing objects possessing on the physical plane a similar order or set of properties. Many objects have a metaphysical meaning disconnected from their plastic appearance. For example though man, this microcosm, is the creator of balanced logic, his body, the only part of him with which painters may deal, with its shifting lines and suave modelings is no more able than other animal bodies to express such constructions of the mind. Yet those man-made constructions that come within the range of painting are eminent illustrations of mental processes. Hence the fondness of great periods for using the human body as only one of the ingredients of art, fortifying it with painted architectures that convey a static order; and it is this brand of human logic, that the human body fails to convey, which those tiny houses and those cubistic mountains of a Giotto bring to his pictures.

For the last half century sophisticates have jeered at paintings that tell stories. But as action follows reaction, subject-matter was to make a vengeful comeback. There is of course

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nowadays a group of painters who, stung by social consciousness, present subjects chosen to advise, infuriate, or arouse enthusiasm in the "masses." Their achievement is not weakened by the fact that such well-meaning painters did not fully realize that a new approach to the grammar of paint was the one condition essential to making the story legible. More profoundly typical of the new plebeian attitude, though forced into it very much in spite of themselves, is the position of the surrealists. It is true that the stories they tell are not at all nice, are barren of all social sense and have been industriously shorn of logic. But their pictures are definitely story-telling, with the special grammar, patient craftsmanship, photographic slavery to detail with which Gérôme glorified his odalisques and J. G. Brown his bootblacks. A look at such pictures makes it obvious that the painter is no longer painting for pleasure but that painting is truly a business which presupposes the existence of a public and caters to its reactions. Paradoxically, though there is little mental finesse behind a Monet picture, its disregard of convention, its sheer brawny relish in brush stroke and cheesy pigment, make it the aristocratic gesture of the man who does as he pleases. Though there is much sophistication behind a Dali picture its academic treatment spells the vulgarian, the man who works to please others. This is an important turning point, a very much needed attitude after the orgy of selfishness characteristic of the elder moderns. Much against their own claim, it must be said that Dali et al. bring painting back to a point where it is no longer a masturbation but a trade. In his new role of tradesman the painter must evolve a technique adjusted to the correct or moving recitation of a fable. Description becomes to him what diction is to the actor, and less trust is placed in the sheer qualities of paint.

A general comeback to story-telling is unavoidable. The craft of painting is in its healthiest state when painting is used to an end, just as a healthy body is put to work. Painting for painting's sake is like the man who is afraid of failing health and totters through desperate medication and endless build-up

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exercises. Both for art and for man an anatomical interest in one's own carcass is born of a pathological fear of death. Modern art has become thus a language of interrogation and exclamation signs, fit to express emotional climaxes or introspective states but lacking the articulations needed for objective description. To be vital the comeback to subject-matter must be linked with the creation of a fit plastic language. Unhappily the surrealists sidestepped this problem, choosing as more expedient the wholesale plundering of 19th century academies. This weakens their effort, and as is true in the case of the Pre-raphaelites and other "neo" movements, a still-born aroma pervades their achievement.

Braver pioneers of the new trend were perhaps the Mexicans who in the early twenties frescoed the walls of their public buildings with histories. Their painters, living as craftsmen in close union with the master masons and workmen with whom they collaborated, did work of social import, forgot the ivory tower, and were recognized as useful by their fellow men. And more important, their plastic language, though fit for descriptive purpose, was not a surrender to the past.

This is the new trend. But though it represents a most intelligent desire on the part of a painter to take his place openly in the social structure it is not without its drawbacks. Set on a pedestal the artist was at least removed from the crowd, did not interfere with its traffic. Shorn of his prestige he makes a poor showing among his would-be fellows; and workers, both the brawny and the white collared, eye him with suspicion. The truth is that painters are in the bastard position of being neither bona fide workmen, as are carpenters, plumbers, etc., nor in tune with intellectuals. Their craft is certainly manual and their dominion over their material and their zest in handling it are typically characteristic of a craftsman. But whereas one easily understands the use of a table, or of a chair, or of plumbing, and thus partakes in a social intercourse of exchange with their maker, one is more in doubt concerning the good of

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a picture. It is one of those baffling objects that like a piano are rather a nuisance unless you know how to use them.

In truth a picture is an object only in appearance. That is, a picture in the dark, though physically unchanged, is no longer a picture. Only its optical projection into the human eye gives a picture its sense and its worth. The physical object is just a projecting machine; and the optical image, the real picture, exists and functions only in the semi-physical, semi-spiritual world of the human brain. With its body as physical as is a chair or a table, its function confined to the sensorial fringe of our mental reaction, and its aims those of spiritual introspection, painting bridges our whole universe. The painter who deals in such a dubious and impractical affair will never, try as he may, be accepted as a worker among other fellow workers.

The attempt on the part of the artist to adjust his relationship to the living is only part of the problem. If all that he asks is food and shelter, the probability is that he can sneak through this life without awaking much antagonism, meanwhile making ready his post-mortem shows. More important to him, however, than this compromise with the living, the artist has to compete in his trade with the dead. They have been his tutors, too, for more painters were made conscious of their gift while making the rounds of museums than while standing in front of beautiful sunsets. But as soon as the artist starts to paint, the dead become his rivals, and from the level attained through the slow sifting of the centuries, from the vantage point of their Olympian position, they become formidably alive.

There is of course a hypnosis in museums, an awe born of the gold curlicues on frames, the dust-encrusted varnish, the labels with their ominous dates. Even more impressive, if simpler, is the approach of the painter who, though he strips the work of all this ballyhoo and the men who did it of their unwanted halos, is still confronted with an excellence so great that matching its qualities means the work of a life-time and surpassing

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them seems forbidden. The "bigger, better, faster" slogan of the mechanical engineer is here useless. Progress in paint, the amazing new colorings born of organic chemistry, the scientific theories of color separation, are of little help. The more the painter knows, the simpler his technical needs. All human expression may still come out of the few earth colors, yellow ochre, red ochre, terre verte, the black and the white that composed Apelles' palette.

This chumming with the dead, which is both a spur and a restraint, is mysteriously spoken of as Tradition. It is a popular belief that the modern artist remains aloof from such, that he willingly would burn the museums the better to build from new premises. Yet paradoxically the fact that his work has an appearance distinct from that of the masters gives it the earmark of the true follower. For the masters are such because they did not copy. Their work eternizes a peculiar climate born of themselves and their own passing world. To follow them one must also face one's self and one's world. To assume their surface quality is to misunderstand its deeper spring. Thus tradition is not, as some would have it, a pedantic historical knowledge but straightforward human relationship.

Tradition is also this continuity of the craft that leads the worker wisely to submit to the laws of his material. Instead of curving his own will to their logic the beginner fights against natural laws. He will polish a wood sculpture and make it look like china, but an adzed plank has more organic beauty. An egotist may paint a mural that surpasses architecture, but the very doors and windows of the building shame it out of plastic existence. When one knows more, one learns to collaborate with wood and pigment. A closer and more widespread bond than even that of historical tradition will thus bring into close relationship, through their use of similar materials, craftsmen who have never heard of each other. The Mayan sculptor in Yucatan, and the medieval carver of European cathedrals never met. Yet they both learned to cut their stone the same way, to re-

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spect the trace of the chisel as an enrichment to texture, to strengthen their angles towards an ideal ninety degrees, to suggest round surfaces by "cubing" them into polyhedric facettes.

If the good craftsman must be at peace with his material, he must also collaborate with his tools, including his hand and eye. Too often does the artist put them to freakish uses. Yet the way of least resistance seems to be the way to beauty. Leonardo's stroke is the left to right and downward one natural to the left-handed man. A Pompeiian fresco, a Monet, both bespeak the easy twist of the metacarpian bones that rule the brush. The perfect lines of an Altamira bison, of Michelangelo's Adam or of Rouault's Christ all obey the commonplace laws that arm and hand muscles dictate.

The laws of the body, of the material used and of history cooperate to bring all art to some common denominator. They account for much of what we know as style—that is, to the layman, the quotient of artificiality in the grasp the artist has of Nature.

Style is in a way an unwanted interference with the artist's end, for what he aims at is to give us Nature. He is unconscious of style, for style is a thing of his bones, of his craft and of his birth. But the artist, seeing Nature as a spectacle outside himself, wishes consciously to capture and assimilate her as a desirable thing that his job will make available to others. Just like the scientist, he wishes to make a census of the world in a most objective way. But his gathering of facts through optics instead of logic results in an unorthodox version, a shuffling of facts as methodical but as unexpected in its implications as the neighboring of words in a dictionary. It may be the effort needed for this new reading, the jolt to established habit, which so irks the layman that he prefers to deny the validity of such research.

Yet, while Nature contains many elements that are easily translated into words, many pragmatic things whose "why" even a dry mind may fathom, it contains also a luxury of creation, an interplay of shapes and colors that up to now no sci-

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entist has touched. A butterfly wing seems as gratuitous in the natural realm as a painting in the man-made world, and mimetism seems a poor explanation for both. Representational painting is a subtler and richer instrument than abstract art in that it gathers to our human use facts that like the bloom of a cheek, the white of a swan, the glow of the underbrush, are not as yet defined or labelled by a selfish need.

Critics, being by trade bookish, have created a fictitious artist in their own image. They jam him full of historical pedigrees, for dates are to be found in books and can be argued or authenticated. They make him also a battleground of styles, for with most of them comparison has taken the place of appreciation. They thus emphasize facts concerning historical tradition, but the laws of material and body, and this all-important holding of the mirror to Nature, are minimized or forgotten.

The artist is scarcely the introvert busy within a cult of technical "chinoiserie" that the critic makes him out to be. The few direct sayings from artists on art are so astonishingly simple they hardly bear quotation. Typical of the painter's point of view are Ingres' "Copy the model with great application" and Matisse's "One must feel that one is copying Nature."

Considering himself as a copyist the painter spares no pains or expense to catch Nature from some vantage point. Cézanne would wait patiently for days before he could ambush the sunny day, lightly clouded, which his critics translate into an esoteric geometry of color. He ordered special windows for his studio, whose carefully increased light endows still table and bottles with a Cézannian style. Rembrandt became the mechanic of his own studio, juggling light and shade through a system of panes and shutters of his own device, in whose aid he had more confidence than in the mysteries of the soul's alchemy. It is little guesswork to see Correggio musing lovingly through the Correggiesque hours of twilight. Nature, more than man, has mothered all styles. Impervious to color theories, much color photography of our own day will insistently happen in the manner of Caravaggio.

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The old-fashioned literary critic, rather a poet himself, saw more keenly than the scientific critic of today Nature's imperial quota in art. Observing through the picture the natural spectacle that had given it birth he praised the painter for his women's beauty and the serenity of sunsets. Raphael's work may be divided and studied successively for its unbroken line, its subdued use of space, its geometrically oriented volumes, its insistent local color. Those aspects may be bared under the scalpel of the critic, like the liver and lungs of beautiful women under that of the surgeon. Yet the good public are within their own right to enjoy their women undissected and state simply that Raphael is the painter of virginal beauty.

It is true that the painter, a Nature lover wishing to give you Nature undiluted, between the contemplation of a model and the exhibition of the finished picture has to go through many bizarre manipulations, many plastic speculations that will seem artificial to the lay mind. But the critic, instead of exposing these intermediate stages, should give the public a chance at the blessings of ignorance. One can enjoy the beauty of a child without rehashing the sometimes unsavory secrets of the nursery. One can see a play without crowding in the wings to rub elbows with the stage-hands. This fashion of knowing all and telling all about this craft of art-making will probably become obsolete together with the fad of art for art's sake. If representational painting is to stage its comeback soon, critics and public would do well to go back to their seats and face the stage, so that the "representation" may begin.

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