Cubism and Abstract Art

Painting
Sculpture
Constructions
Photography
Architecture
Industrial Art
Theatre
Films
Posters
Typography

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Contrast—and Condescension

These two posters were published simultaneously to advertise, in railway stations and travel agencies, the Presa, the international exhibition of printing, held at Cologne in the summer of 1928. Both posters show Cologne Cathedral and the Exposition Tower, between which flows the Rhine crossed by a bridge. The poster at the left is done in the fairly realistic poster style common to mediocre travel posters the world over. The poster at the right is by contrast highly abstract. In it the natural objects are reduced to flat, almost geometric forms arranged on a strongly diagonal axis under the influence of Russian Suprematism (fig. 4). Why were two posters published and why do they differ in style? Because one was designed for the Anglo-American public, the other for the German public. In 1928 it was thought that Americans, accustomed to an over-crowded and banally realistic style, would not appreciate the simplicity and abstraction of the right hand poster. The German public, on the contrary, through the activity of its museums and progressive commercial artists was quite used to an abstract style. Today times have changed. The style of the abstract poster, which is just beginning to interest our American advertisers, is now discouraged in Germany.
Introduction

The early twentieth century

Sometimes in the history of art it is possible to describe a period or a generation of artists as having been obsessed by a particular problem. The artists of the early fifteenth century for instance were moved by a passion for imitating nature. In the North the Flemings mastered appearances by the meticulous observation of external detail. In Italy the Florentines employed a profounder science to discover the laws of perspective, of foreshortening, anatomy, movement and relief.

In the early twentieth century the dominant interest was almost exactly opposite. The pictorial conquest of the external visual world had been completed and refined many times and in different ways during the previous half millennium. The more adventurous and original artists had grown bored with painting facts. By a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance.

"Abstract"

"Abstract" is the term most frequently used to describe the more extreme effects of this impulse away from "nature." It is customary to apologize for the word "abstract," but words to describe art movements or works of art are often inexact: we no longer apologize for applying the ethnological word "Gothic" to French thirteenth century art and the Portuguese word for an irregular pearl, "Baroque," to European art of the seventeenth century. Substitutes for "abstract" such as "non-objective" and "non-figurative" have been advocated as superior. But the image of a square is as much an "object" or a "figure" as the image of a face or a landscape; in fact "figure" is the very prefix used by geometers in naming A or B the abstractions with which they deal.

This is not to deny that the adjective "abstract" is confusing and even paradoxical. For an "abstract" painting is really a most positively concrete painting since it confines the attention to its immediate, sensuous, physical surface far more than does the canvas of a sunset or a portrait. The adjective is confusing, too, because it has the implications of both a verb and a noun. The verb to abstract means to draw out of or away from. But the noun abstraction is something already drawn out of or away from—so much so that like a geometrical figure or an amorphous silhouette it may have no apparent relation to concrete reality. "Abstract" is therefore an adjective which may be applied to works of art with a certain latitude, and, since no better or more generally used word
presents itself, it shall be used from now on in this essay without quotation marks.

Near-abstractions and pure-abstractions

The ambiguity of the word abstract as applied to works of art is really useful for it reveals the ambiguity and confusion which is inseparable from the subject. Perhaps keeping in mind the "verb" and "noun" meanings of abstract may help to clarify. For example, the Suprematist painting by Malevich is composed of a black and red square (fig. 113). This painting has absolutely no dependence upon natural forms. It is purely abstract in its genesis as well as in its final form. In it Malevich carried out his program by combining two of the elementary geometrical forms which he had set up as the fundamental vocabulary of Suprematism (figs. 111, 112). This painting is abstract in the "noun" sense of the word. Similar to it are Mondrian's Composition (fig. 157) and Gabo's Space construction (fig. 138). Different in character and genesis but equally abstract, at least in intention are certain paintings of Kandinsky who used non-geometrical (fig. 3, page 18) as well as geometrical forms (fig. 53). These works of Malevich, Mondrian, Gabo, Kandinsky, may be called pure-abstractions.

However, Mondrian's "plus and minus" composition of 1915 (fig. 142) despite its appearance is not a pure-abstraction. It is actually based upon a seascape just as van Doesburg's painting (fig. 144D) has been abstracted (note the verb) from the form of a cow. After 1920 Mondrian and van Doesburg abandoned the process of "abstracting," and composed pure-abstractions (figs. 146,156).

Arp's reliefs (figs. 207, 208) are also impure abstractions even though their forms are so far removed from nature that it is often difficult to tell whether a given object represents a head or a cloud or Paolo and Francesca. Similarly, a Picasso landscape of 1912 may sometimes be mistaken for a still life or a portrait. The cords which tie these works to nature are tenuous, but unbroken—nor would the artist wish them broken. In fact Arp and Picasso usually name their works—"Guitar," "Head," or "Fork and Plate." Because of these vestiges of subject matter, even though little more than a name, it is clear that such works should be described as quasi- or pseudo- or near-abstractions. Perhaps the last is the least objectionable.

To resume: pure-abstractions are those in which the artist makes a composition of abstract elements such as geometrical or amorphous shapes. Near-abstractions are compositions in which the artist, starting with natural forms,
transforms them into abstract or nearly abstract forms. He approaches an abstract goal but does not quite reach it.

There are of course several variations within these two classifications and several without, for example, the famous Kandinsky *Improvisation, no. 30* (fig. 52) in which the artist intended to paint an abstract composition but unconsciously (he says) introduced a couple of cannon in the lower right hand corner. So we have in this case a near-abstraction which the artist had intended to be a pure-abstraction.

**Dialectic of abstract art**

Abstract art today needs no defense. It has become one of the many ways to paint or carve or model. But it is not yet a kind of art which people like without some study and some sacrifice of prejudice. Prejudice can sometimes be met with argument, and for this purpose the dialectic of abstract painting and sculpture is superficially simple enough. It is based upon the assumption that a work of art, a painting for example, is worth looking at primarily because it presents a composition or organization of color, line, light and shade. Resemblance to natural objects, while it does not necessarily destroy these esthetic values, may easily adulterate their purity. Therefore, since resemblance to nature is at best superfluous and at worst distracting, it might as well be eliminated. Hans Arp, although he long ago abandoned pure-abstraction, has expressed this point of view with engaging humor:

"Art is a fruit growing out of a man like the fruit out of a plant, like the child out of the mother. While the fruit of the plant assumes independent forms and never strives to resemble a helicopter or a president in a cutaway, the artistic fruit of man shows, for the most part, ridiculous ambition to imitate the appearance of other things. I like nature but not its substitutes."1

Such an attitude of course involves a great impoverishment of painting, an elimination of a wide range of values, such as the connotations of subject matter, sentimental, documentary, political, sexual, religious; the pleasures of easy recognition; and the enjoyment of technical dexterity in the imitation of material forms and surfaces. But in his art the abstract artist prefers impoverishment to adulteration.

The painter of abstractions can and often does point to the analogy of music in which the elements of rhythmic repetition, pitch, intensity, harmony, counterpoint, are composed without reference to the natural sounds of either the "helicopter" or the "president in a cutaway." He looks upon abstract painting

as independent painting, emancipated painting; as an end in itself with its own peculiar value.

To support their position defenders of abstract art during the past twenty-five years have often quoted a famous passage from the Philebus of Plato, Section 51c:  

"Socrates: What I am saying is not indeed directly obvious. I must therefore try to make it clear. I will try to speak of the beauty of shapes, and I do not mean, as most people would think, the shapes of living figures, or their imitations in paintings, but I mean straight lines and curves and the shapes made from them, flat or solid; by the lathe, ruler and square, if you see what I mean. These are not beautiful for any particular reason or purpose, as other things are, but are always by their very nature beautiful, and give pleasure of their own quite free from the itch of desire; and colors of this kind are beautiful, too, and give a similar pleasure."

Near-abstractions and their titles

Why then do Arp and Picasso give names such as "Head" or "Still Life" to works which are so abstract that at first glance they baffle recognition of any resemblance to nature? Why do they not, like Malevich and Kandinsky, go the whole way and call their pictures simply "compositions" or "improvisations"? This naming of near-abstractions after concrete objects certainly confuses and exasperates the layman who might otherwise be ready to enjoy the beauties of form and color which the near-abstractions offer.

For this reason critics and amateurs of abstract art have sometimes considered the titles given by Arp or Picasso to their near-abstractions as stumbling-blocks which may well be ignored or forgotten. This is, however, an unwarranted simplification of which, as has been remarked, the artists themselves do not approve. For a cubist painting or an Arp relief is a near-abstraction, and offers an impure and ambiguous enjoyment to which the title is a guide. It is not merely the primary relationship of form and color within the picture which are enjoyable but also the secondary relationships between the picture and the subject matter of which the picture is an abstraction. Take for instance Picasso's Violin (fig. 31): starting with the idea or image of a violin Picasso makes an angular, quasi-geometrical composition which displays his power not merely of composing abstract forms but of breaking up and assimilating natural forms. As evidence of this abstracting and transmuting process and as a guide to our enjoyment of it he leaves certain vestiges of the violin, the spiral line of the scroll, the shape of the sound-holes, the parallel lines of the strings and the


14
curves of the purlings; and as further explanation he gives the name of the original object—Violin.

Abstract art and subject matter

Further examination of subject matter not merely as a point of departure but as something of interest in itself may seem anomalous in a discussion of abstract art; for, abstract art, in so far as it is abstract, is presumably devoid of subject interest. Nevertheless, subject matter, although it can be ignored by the purist, has played a part of some importance in several of the movements which will be considered hereafter in these pages from a primarily formal point of view.

The Cubists seem to have had little conscious interest in subject matter. They used traditional subjects for the most part, figures, portraits, landscapes, still life, all serving as material for Cubist analysis. On the contrary, to the Italian Futurists subject matter was of real importance. The exaltation of the machine and of the noise and confusion of modern life was as conscious a part of their program as the abstract analysis of movements and forces. The French Purists after the War used the silhouettes of deliberately chosen familiar objects with which to make near-abstract compositions.

In Germany the Russian Kandinsky passed beyond subject matter except when it appeared without the conscious intention of the artist. But Franz Marc's poetic sentiment for animals lingered even in his most Cubistic compositions and Feininger never eliminated entirely his romantic feeling for architecture and the sea. Klee's subject matter is as ingenious and interesting as his form.

The Dadaists, who mocked all kinds of art including abstract, had no prejudice against subject matter though sometimes they eliminated it. Their successors, the Surrealists, however, would, as conscientious Freudians, maintain that even squares and circles have symbolic significance. But even in much Sur-

1 In spite of the fact that the Cubists themselves and their most ardent admirers attached little importance to subject matter, Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University advances an interesting theory that consciously or unconsciously the Cubists through their subject matter reveal significant preoccupation with the bohemian and artistic life. It is possible of course that the things in a Cubist still-life: bottles, playing-cards, dice, violins, guitars, pipes, which Dr. Schapiro calls "private instruments of idle sensation," may be a direct rather than a symbolic inventory of objects in the cubist's studio; and the painting of letters, introduced by Braque into Cubism, may be, like his use of imitation wood and marble textures, merely a reminiscence of his early apprenticeship as a house painter, rather than a symbol of the art of literature; and the repetition of such word-fragments with artistic connotations as Etude, Bal, Bach and so forth may be balanced by the names of daily newspapers, Figaro, L'Intran, Journal—and "Hennessey" (fig. 67) by "Baker's Cooza" (fig. 96). Nevertheless, the continual repetition of figure paintings called Pierrot, Guitarriste, Clarinetiste, Harlequin, in later Cubist pictures suggests a concern with the world of art instead of the world of life and may consequently be taken as a symbol of the modern artist's social maladjustment—which is, however, not limited to Cubists. In any case the iconography of Cubism should not be ignored.
realist painting subject and symbol are obscured or entirely lost in what is virtually an abstract design.

The cows and seascapes and dancers which lurk behind the earlier abstract compositions of Mondrian and Doesburg have no significance save as points of departure from the world of nature to the world of geometry. Malevich, however, who founded Suprematism by drawing a perfect square (fig. 112) discovered inspiration for some of his subsequent and more elaborate compositions in the airplane photographs of cities.

In summary it may be said that only in Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Purism had subject matter any real importance, at least so far as the conscious program of the artists was concerned.

Abstract art and politics

It is its style, its abstract quality, as a general rule, and not its content or avowed program, that has from time to time involved abstract art in politics. Exceptions to this generalization were Futurism and Surrealism. The former in much of its program anticipated Fascism and the latter has been involved in Communism.

Pre-War Italian Futurism was latently Fascist in its patriotism, esthetic enjoyment of war and exhortation to the dangerous and dynamic life. Marinetti, its promotor, is now a Fascist senator, and Boccioni, its most important artist, died in military service, from the effects of a fall from his horse.

In Moscow after the Revolution, the Russian Futurists, Suprematists and Constructivists who had been artistically revolutionary under the Czar came into their own. For three years they dominated the artistic life of the larger cities, taught in the art academies, designed posters, floats in parades, statues to Marxist heroes and gigantic Cubistic facades to screen the Winter Palace during mass celebrations. Malevich’s White on white of 1918 (fig. 115) might have counted as a tabula rasa upon which to build a new art for a new order, but it was as unintelligible to the proletariat as his earlier Suprematist pictures had been to the bourgeoisie. Tatlin’s and Rodchenko’s constructions may have been abstract exercises in technological discipline but what the land desperately needed was practical mechanics. Highly cultivated Bolsheviks, such as Trotsky and Lunacharsky, understood and supported the artists of the advance guard, but Lenin, with his broad and penetrating vision of the practical needs of the U.S.S.R., found no joy in the Suprematists, the Cubo-Futurists and Tectonic Primitivists. He summarized the left-wing art and literature of 1920 as “the infantile disorder of Leftism” and felt that movies were more useful
to the Soviet State. In 1921 came the New Economic Policy, the era of reconstruction and practical materialism. An attitude of toleration towards Leftism turned to impatience. A schism appeared in the ranks of the artists themselves. One faction wanted to maintain art for art's sake; their opponents wanted to put art at the service of the new order. The atelier of Pevsner and Gabo at the Moscow Academy was closed; they and Lissitzky left for Berlin; Kandinsky left for Germany to join the Bauhaus; Malevich took a post in less influential Leningrad; and most of the Suprematists and Constructivists who stayed in Moscow left art, in the narrow sense of the word, for typography, photography, posters, movies, engineering, stage design, carpentry—anything but painting or sculpture. Today abstraction or stylization in art is still considered a "left deviation" in the U.S.S.R. and is discouraged.

The political atmosphere of the Dadaists, the West-European contemporaries of the Russian Leftists, might be described as anarchist. That of their successors, the Surrealists, was Communist, although it would be hard to find anything specifically Communist in their paintings. The schism which had divided the Moscow Constructivists of 1920 reappeared ten years later in Surrealism. Aragon, the Surrealist writer, insisted, as Tatlin and Rodchenko had done, that the artist should place his talents practically and exclusively at the service of the Revolution. The Constructivist heretics who insisted upon the independence of art had found it advisable to leave Communist Moscow for Social Democratic Germany; but the Surrealists, Communist or not, continue to work in Paris without serious molestation from either the Left or the Right (except when showing films).

Abstract art which had begun in Munich flourished in post-War Germany. In addition, the esthetic ideals of the Dutch Stijl group and of the Russian Constructivists were brought to Berlin by refugees from active Soviet philistinism or its more passive Dutch equivalent. Gradually abstract art, and the architecture which it influenced, became associated with the Social Democracy in the minds of its bitter enemies, the National Socialists. Modern architecture of the "International Style" had been used extensively in the housing developments authorized by Social Democratic burgomasters.

To the Nazis the cultural expression of the shameful fourteen years between the Treaty of Versailles and the National Resurgence of 1933 was—and is—anathema. Abstract art was considered Kunstbolschevismus, and after the Nazi revolution many artists were dismissed from official positions or otherwise "discouraged." The flat roof and the white, clean lines of "Bauhaus"
architecture were likewise forbidden in favor of a renascence of genuine Biedermeier (the German version of the International style of the 1830's).

About the same time, in the early thirties, the U.S.S.R. turned against modern architecture in favor of a monumental style derived from Imperial Rome and the Czarist 18th century. But Fascist Italy and conservative England, to complete the confusion, accepted modern architecture with enthusiasm. The railroad station in Florence has been completed in the *stile razionale*, and Lubetkin, a former Russian Constructivist, has designed new buildings (fig. 139) for that British stronghold, the London Zoo.

This essay and exhibition might well be dedicated to those painters of squares and circles (and the architects influenced by them) who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power.¹

¹As this volume goes to press the United States Customs has refused to permit the Museum of Modern Art to enter as works of art nineteen pieces of more or less abstract sculpture under a ruling which requires that sculpture must represent an animal or human form. Some of the nineteen pieces are illustrated by figs. 47, 49, 96, 97, 104, 105, 106, 155, 202, 209, 210, 216, 217, 222, 223. They are all considered durable as plaster, bronze, stone, wood, etc., and have been entered under bond. The hand-painted canvases in the exhibition were, however, admitted free, no matter how abstract.
Two main traditions of Abstract Art

At the risk of grave oversimplification the impulse towards abstract art during the past fifty years may be divided historically into two main currents, both of which emerged from Impressionism. The first and more important current finds its sources in the art and theories of Cézanne and Seurat, passes through the widening stream of Cubism and finds its delta in the various geometrical and Constructivist movements which developed in Russia and Holland during the War and have since spread throughout the World. This current may be described as intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic and calculation. The second—and, until recently, secondary—current has its principal source in the art and theories of Gauguin and his circle, flows through the Fauvisme of Matisse to the Abstract Expressionism of the pre-War paintings of Kandinsky. After running under ground for a few years it reappears vigorously among the masters of abstract art associated with Surrealism. This tradition, by contrast with the first, is intuitional and emotional rather than intellectual; organic or biomorphic rather than geometrical in its forms; curvilinear rather than rectilinear, decorative rather than structural, and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational. Apollo, Pythagoras and Descartes watch over the Cézanne-Cubist-geometrical tradition; Dionysus (an Asiatic god), Plotinus and Rousseau over the Gauguin-Expressionist-non-geometrical line.

Often, of course, these two currents intermingle and they may both appear in one man. At their purest the two tendencies may be illustrated by paintings of twenty years ago: a Suprematist composition by Malevich (fig. 4) and an Improvisation by Kandinsky (fig. 3). The geometrical strain is represented today by the painter Mondrian (fig. 158) and the Constructivists Pevsner and Gabo (figs. 137, 138); the non-geometrical by the painter Miro (fig. 204) and the sculptor Arp (fig. 209). The shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba.