

ELEMENTS

OF

MODERN PAINTING



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THOMAS M. MESSER

INTRODUCTION

The following pages are addressed to Museum visitors who find themselves unprepared for a confrontation with the new language of contemporary art. Traditionally accustomed to the notion that a painting is an easily recognizable rendition of landscape, figure, or still-life, many of us are startled by the absence of these time-honored images. Equally difficult is an attempt to adjust to the frequent distortions of recognizable subject matter.

What is the meaning of paintings in which subject matter is contorted or missing? Are such works meaningful? How can we tell whether they are valid? These are the insistent questions before us.

Such queries, when they are earnestly posed, deserve an answer, and the following pages will attempt one. But even more do they require a warning as to the insufficiency of words to deal adequately with essentially untranslatable visual experiences.

Before proceeding, one distinction must be made. It is necessary to give the term **understanding** a meaning quite different from and vastly superior to that of **recognizing**.

The search for subject matter, therefore, must not be allowed to monopolize our attention and blunt its focus. The more so, because subject matter is not always present in contemporary art, and when it is, it may be assigned to a minor role. The major parts are elements which under various names, and with varied emphases, have always constituted the painter's approach to his art. They are components that can be isolated and observed in the art of the past and in that of our own time, and it is through them, rather than through an obsessive insistence upon recognizability, that we may come closer to enjoyment and to true understanding.

1. REPRESENTATION

To render on a flat surface what has been seen—to represent—has been the painter's task for centuries. In a sense, therefore, all visual art is representational, since it is the process by which realities are represented through symbols. However, realities and their symbolic representation are two different things. In the span between them, in the field of tension that separates the real from the representation of the real, art is born.

When representation bears an easily establishable relation to the object to which it refers, we speak of realism and realist art. Dürer in 16th century Germany and Courbet in 19th century France were creating works that may be called realistic. The impressionists too, Monet, Renoir and others, were concerned with direct transformation of the seen into the rendered, and therefore fall within this same grouping.

A great many painters in the last two centuries aimed at realism without achieving it. Lacking the clarity of perception and the ability to select the essential features from the observed, they remain mere naturalists, craftsmen perhaps, who know how to imitate but lack the artist's indispensable ability to re-create.

If the 20th century is without a vital realist tradition, this is not primarily due to deterioration of the representational skills as is sometimes assumed. Rather, this is the effect of a philosophical shift that has replaced our former confidence in the reality of the external world with a concern for the unseen reality within us. This new emphasis, then, requires an imagery different from one that has used the visible, three-dimensional object as a carrier of the true and the real.

BLUE CHRYSANTHEMUM 1906-08. *Watercolor and ink, 10⁵/₈ x 8⁷/₈"*

Mondrian's "Blue Chrysanthemum" is executed on paper with pen and watercolors. This small work combines sureness of execution with qualities of extreme delicacy. The clarity of structure that we observe is an early indication of the revolutionary geometric art that Mondrian was later to embark upon. But apart from this, "Blue Chrysanthemum" is a meticulous floral representation, and as such an excellent example of 20th century realism.

Most prominent is the round white flower supported by a stem from which small and large leaves, exquisitely shaped, grow outward



and upward. The effect of richness and volume characterizing the work is achieved through a multitude of curved petals arranged in concentric circles and outlined by quick pen strokes.

The viewer is first struck by the narrow range of color and the delicacy of application. The tender nuances of blue and green, heightened as they are by a white brush, emerge upon closer scrutiny. The blue background from which the white flower emerges is also finely differentiated, and lends a quality of movement and of organic life to the represented subject matter.

2. EXPRESSION

What the artist sees in the observable world is filtered through his sensibility, sifted through his intellect and his discriminative, selective vision before it is returned as a unique, personal comprehension of the original observation. An encounter between outward appearance as perceived by the artist and his responding inner make-up takes place. The resulting imagery becomes a third thing, combining outer view and inner condition.

We may, in general, speak of expressionism or expressionist art when the balance between the external and the internal vision shifts decidedly toward the latter. Whenever this is accompanied by a total absorption or elimination of objective appearances, expressionism turns abstract. In abstract expressionism, meaning is conveyed not through representation or figurative association, but through color, line and such other formal means as are at the painter's disposal.

As examples of historic expressionism, one may recall work by El Greco, Grünewald and many others, although the term itself was used only much later to describe an art movement of Germanic and Northern European origin that took shape in the first decade of this century and spread thereafter in modified form.

In modern painting, Vincent Van Gogh was first to emphasize this inner reality by imbuing painting that relied upon outward impressions with strong emotional overtones. Those who followed in his footsteps further intensified the expressive component. This first led to a reduction of representation and ultimately to the elimination of all conscious interest in the external scene.

The Russian-born Vasily Kandinsky, whose work is represented in the Museum Collection more richly than in any other museum in the world, is considered to be the first abstract expressionist. He is, as far as we know, the first painter who abandoned a concern for commonly recognizable objects in order to create a pictorial order in which color and form, free of subject matter, are the sole carriers of artistic meaning.

Painting — all art — is expression. But not all expression is art. Unaided by other qualities, expression, so prominent in an age of emphasized introspection, will not go beyond empty and grotesque manifestations.

COMPOSITION, NO. 2 1910. Oil on canvas, 38³/₈ x 51³/₄"

In Kandinsky's "Composition, No. 2," expressionist characteristics predominate. The canvas, furthermore, illustrates Kandinsky's transition from representational expressionism to abstract expressionism.

Subject matter is neither quite present nor quite absent. Without defining it, the artist presents us with a landscape in which people on foot and on horseback move about in varying degrees of agitation. Land and sky, trees and other natural formations, rocks and clouds perhaps, set the scene. A central group of horses and riders as well as other figures that seem to stand, sit, march and move in various positions and directions provide the action. Natural forms and human figures seem to grow from the same soil, and with no more than a slight shift of emphasis we may turn one into the other.

Dark, heavy lines define the free forms and enclose clear and



joyous colors. The primaries predominate, and their strength is increased by the white areas that run in broad currents throughout the picture space. The texture is rough, and the surface is made active by short strokes moving in different directions, as the figures themselves move.

Kandinsky's painting holds to the surface almost as if it were a woven rug. An effect of shallow depth is created through converging lines, through the device of structuring the painting so as to suggest that its bottom edge is nearer to us than its top, and through the use of projecting and receding colors. These means, however, are applied loosely, often contradicting one another, so that an illusion of the third dimension never quite results. We do, however, sense an ambivalence between surface and depth that goes hand in hand with the already mentioned tension between representation and abstraction.

3. DECORATION

The element of decoration is frequently interpreted as a sign of weakness in contemporary art. Yet, in a sense, the decorative component is as inseparably attached to art as is expression. Expression and decoration may, in fact, be seen as the two sides of a coin: one relating to the **what**, the other to the **how**.

In positive terms, decoration becomes the artist's commitment to the elegant solution. It means his sense of formal propriety, his ability not only to speak but to speak sonorously and melodiously; it means his awareness of cadence and rhythm, his utilization of the lure of texture and his capability to cajole and to beguile. Decoration is the artist's appeal to the sensuous demands of eye and mind.

Expression and decoration were not at odds when Michelangelo covered the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, nor were they when Watteau painted his lyric visions.

The father of a modern art movement in which the decorative element predominates is Paul Gauguin. Later Henri Matisse, more than anyone else, contributed to the 20th century its decorative current. Also, Oriental art, with its great affinity for the decorative, has exerted a strong influence in this direction.

Decorative painters today, particularly those who express themselves abstractly, are accused of producing meaningless paintings. More often than not, this charge is justified, since decoration when divorced from other creative elements does not make for art any more than does isolated emphasis upon expression. Abuse and incomprehension always render painting meaningless artistically. As realism can be reduced to naturalism, expressionism to caricature, construction to pedantry, so is decoration in inept hands perverted into an empty ornamentality that may at best be acceptable as design. In the hands of the skilled and talented artist, however, decoration is part of a varied and complex creative repertory.

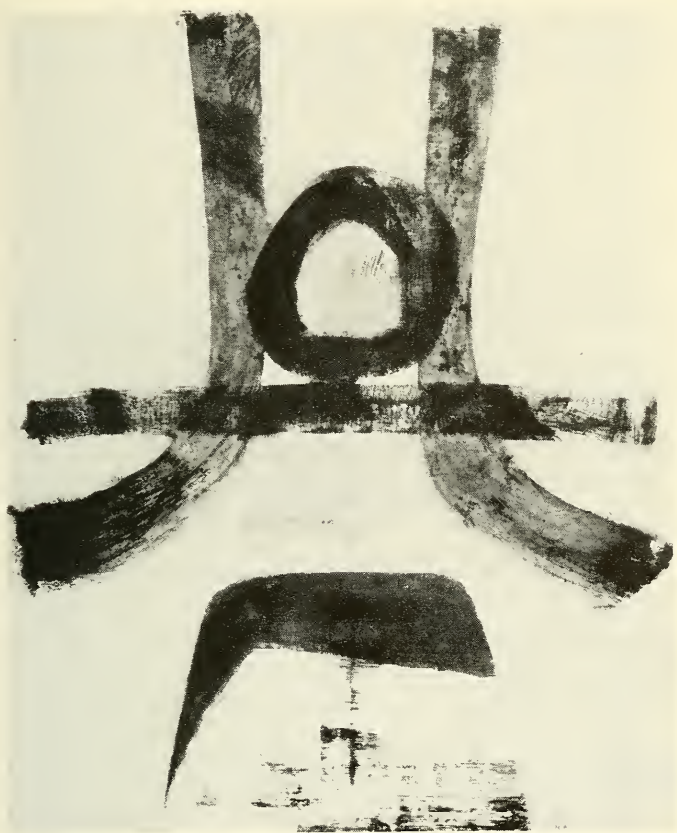
SHIRO 1957. Oil on canvas, 65 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 51"

Kumi Sugai was born in Japan and lives in Paris. "Shiro," the painting's title, is the Japanese word for white. Nothing tangible is represented here. Yet, the inquiring eye will find the work far from meaningless.

The artist's language is simple and refined. The large, rectangular canvas area is defined by two descending curves traced in a broad, irregular brush stroke. Almost parallel at the outset, each stroke turns toward the closest canvas margin, where the line thickens as if to indicate that the swift motion that created it came to an abrupt halt.

A superimposed horizontal crossbar divides the canvas area into two halves. It supports an irregular circle, which in turn harbors a spheric area. Below the crossbar, a sharp inverted hook balances the total composition.

Sugai's painting moves on the surface, avoiding, as much contemporary painting does, the illusion of the third dimension. Placed against a background in which white predominates, the main structural shapes are in various thicknesses of black, while the sphere within the circle and the inverted hook provide the main color accents in yel-



low and blue respectively. The white background is richly sprinkled with blue and yellow, as if the dominant color accents had shed themselves of some of their color. A beige-brown hue also gives body to the white ground. The surface is textured, and thus provides contrasts of concentrated and diluted pigment, leaving edges sharp or blurred. The brush strokes, the canvas, the oil paint in various degrees of concentration, in short, the physical nature of the materials, are undisguised and apparent to all.

The eye freshly trained upon its objective will respond to these visible marks of the painting's origin. It will also observe and admire the speed of stroke and its sureness; the airy yet monumental structure that conveys a sense of lightness and of strength; the restraint and delicacy with which the basic beige and white are enlivened with sparse color accents.

Sugai's highly controlled and polished art reveals itself, paradoxically, through images created with speed and spontaneity. The artistic intent is decorative in the sense that it strives for the ideal abstract solution. The result, on the other hand, implies meanings which each viewer is free to formulate.

4. CONSTRUCTION

There is no painting, no art without organization of form, without a successful structure, without the element of construction. With some painters, the urge to structure the picture space, much in the way an architect approaches his task, is primary and therefore determines the appearance of the work. Construction need not be obvious at first glance. It often exists, without reference to the straight edge or the precise geometric outline, as an underlying firmness that bears witness to the artist's ability to render thought in clear and identifiable form.

Throughout art history, we can observe the kinship of painters who have in common an approach that is predominantly structural. It is a kinship that transcends the often exaggerated difference between representation and abstraction. Among the painters of the Italian Renaissance, Piero della Francesca is most frequently identified with constructivist trends. The classic current of French painting—Poussin in the 17th century and David, Ingres and Degas in the 19th century—can also be seen in these terms.

Modern reassertion of structure begins with Georges-Pierre Seurat and with Paul Cézanne. It continues with cubism, neo-plasticism, constructivism and other movements that all have in common an interest in the work of art as a construction. The Collection of the Guggenheim Museum includes works by the modern pioneers of construction, and is particularly rich in examples by Picasso, Braque, Léger, Gleizes, Mondrian and others.

The structural element, for all its indispensability, cannot stand alone. Neat arrangements unrelated to observation, reflection and emotion remain thin and sterile exercises, conveying pedantry rather than order, inanity rather than intellect.

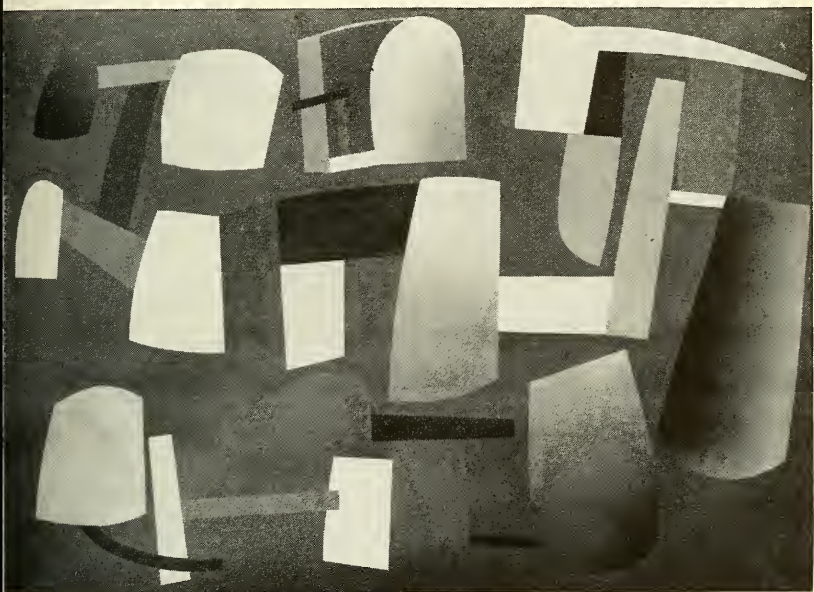
COMPOSITION 1934. Oil on canvas, 56⁵/₈ x 78³/₄"

"Composition" is a fitting title for this large rectangular canvas by the French contemporary Jean Hélion.

Viewing it, we are aware of an ordered geometric construction that alludes to subject matter without revealing it and that contains implicit meanings within the structured surface itself.

The shapes are set against a neutral background. They are geometric and defined by hard edges. Central to the arrangement is a portal made of columns and lintel. Joining it on both sides are irregular rectangles which lead to a connected system of supporting and supported members. Below the central arch a satellite system made up of similar components provides the necessary balance.

The portico assumes its central compositional role primarily through a simple contrast. This is achieved by giving the left column a clearly accentuated third dimension while all other forms in the



canvas remain two-dimensional, or at best slightly bulging with implied volume.

Color is applied deliberately. It moves subtly between the polarities of black and white, which are bridged by various shades of grey, leading toward blue-green hues on the one hand and to a warmer brown and beige on the other. The primary colors of red, blue and yellow and the secondary green are used sparingly for accents. In addition to its role as a carrier of emotional content, color assumes a structural function. It defines the individual geometric shapes as these emerge from the neutral grey, and also produces an effect of limited depth by the shallow modeling of individual forms and by the projections and recessions that appear when one colored shape is superimposed upon another.

The result is a deliberate balance, in which varied and interacting shapes create a moment of exquisite harmony.

5. FANTASY

The element of fantasy in art lies on the reverse side of reason. It draws upon caprice and magic, upon visions and dreams, and creates a world in which space and time, cause and effect, and other contrivances of logic dissolve in an extra-rational, intuitive order. The painter's ability to think is reinforced by his capacity to dream.

The often macabre imagination of such Flemish painters as Peter Breughel and Jerome Bosch, or the visionary painting of the Englishman William Blake, are examples of an art in which fantasy predominates.

Among the moderns, Henri Rousseau has created in his painting a world that is naive and childlike. Odilon Redon and Marc Chagall are painters of the 20th century with whom fantasy prevails. They all are represented in the Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

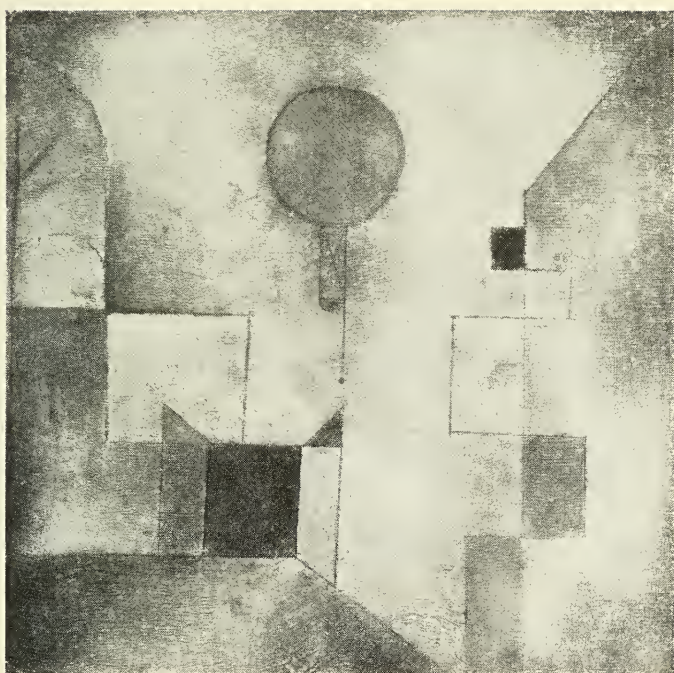
After the First World War, surrealism becomes the movement that relates most obviously to the element of fantasy. Eventually, its pictorial language cuts across the boundary separating representation from abstraction. With or without the aid of subject matter, surrealism evokes the verities of an irrational world.

Extra-rational, fantastic inventions often stand beyond the acknowledged limits of art and therefore are not easily subject to qualitative judgment. Unrelated to art, fantasy may produce mere eccentricity. However, when assimilated and combined with other elements, fantasy will enrich the painter's vocabulary and deepen the meaning of art.

RED BALLOON, VI 179 1922. Oil on gauze mounted on board, 12½ x 12¼"

In Paul Klee's small, square canvas, a deep red balloon, complete with gear, is suspended in mid-air over a cityscape that is at once fantastic and believable, enchanted and enchanting.

The circular balloon itself is first to draw our attention. Thereafter, by means of other red accents, triangular and rectangular, our eye explores the remaining portions of the concentrated small picture space. It encounters the scaffolding of a man-made scene: a house, perhaps a street, behind which we sense a city or the world at large. Yet this scaffolding consists of nothing more than an indication of possibly a roofed structure in the foreground and, recessed in the picture space, what could be a door and a suggestion of other buildings. This scene, convincing and readable in its totality but indefinable in its parts, is conjured up through a few lines, a few two-dimensional geometric



forms, squares, rectangles, triangles, all bound together by a color scheme of infinite subtlety, sophistication and richness.

Ground and sky, walls and doors, are intimated by colors that evoke rather than depict these realities in our minds. We are aware not only of objects, but also of a concentrated human presence that emanates from the scene.

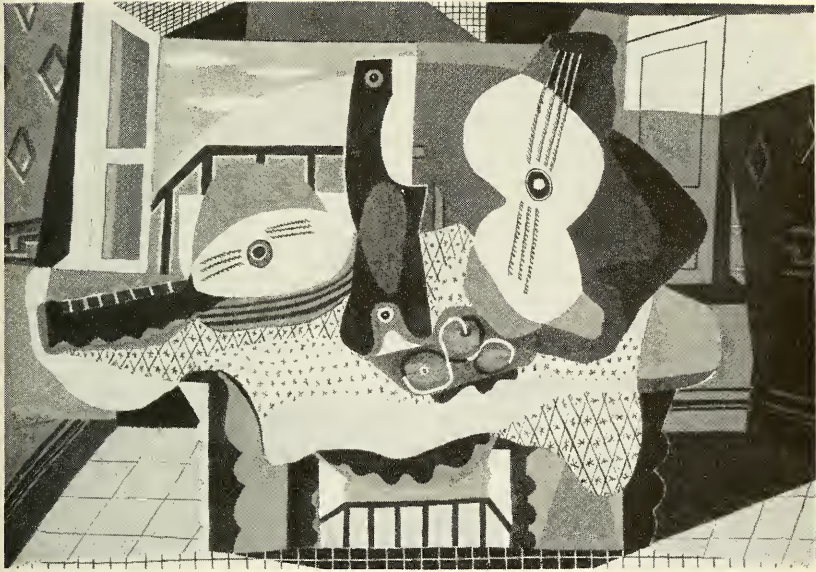
Klee in the "Red Balloon" has achieved weighty results with the slightest of means. Through a bare suggestion of subject matter, fullness of association; through concentration upon a small area, great monumentality; through the use of a fragile texture, solid permanence; through reduction of form to a geometric scheme, richest expression; and through the release of the element of fantasy, an acute sense of reality.

MANDOLIN AND GUITAR 1924. Oil on canvas, 56 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 79 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Picasso's masterpiece combines in varying degrees all the elements described as relevant to the understanding of modern art. Representation, expression, decoration, construction and fantasy, first discussed separately, must now be recombined in our minds to experience their full impact through their simultaneous presence.

A mandolin, a guitar, a dish with three apples, and a jug rest on a curved, sturdily supported table which is covered by a white, yellow and blue patterned tablecloth. The still-life arrangement stands in a room in which a pink tile floor, walls covered with a brown pattern and a blue and white door in the right background are the most prominent features. The open window allows us to see a terrace railing and beyond it the blue skies of a Mediterranean landscape.

The expressive and decorative elements are so closely related as to become inseparable. While, unquestionably, the point of departure remains external, the observed subject matter is radically transformed by the artist's inner comprehension of the still-life subject. At



the same time, the work is so carefully balanced as to become unfailingly decorative in the best sense of this term.

Most conspicuous, as with most cubist art, is the element of construction. Without limiting himself to a composition of straight-edged geometric forms, Picasso shapes each plane and each volume with absolute consistency. The various aspects of the instruments, including their colored shadows, each portion of the room and even the sky itself, are so clearly formed that they could be reconstructed in a three-dimensional model. The individual items are combined in a relationship of such vital logic and are kept together by an order so tense and unbreakable as to make the slightest shift of any part unthinkable.

Finally, the objects are seen through a vision that combines the utmost sophistication with the unprejudiced and direct view of a child. It is as if no one else had seen the full implication of a still-life arrangement that carries within it a sense of the whimsical, the joyous, and the mysteriously ominous, all at once.

CONCLUSION

The terms discussed under the headings representation, expression, decoration, construction and fantasy are relevant to 20th century painting. There is no movement, no stylistic departure that cannot be related to one or a number of these. However, their isolation from one another is entirely artificial. While one or the other component may predominate and thereby impress itself upon our consciousness, these elements exist in undiluted form only in painting of lesser quality. In our examples they co-exist, each complementing and enriching the others.

The concepts themselves are presented here for purposes of orientation. They are frail vessels, meant to be discarded after having conveyed those who can use them downstream into a wide and wordless sea of silent forms.

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