PLASTIC ORGANIZATION OF FORM AND COLOR

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All painters have an individual philosophy about their work, and they usually feel very strongly concerning that philosophy, although they may not adequately put their thoughts into words. Most of them feel that their paintings speak their philosophy more clearly than they can present it themselves. However, it crystallizes thinking and expression to analyze them. Also, often the layman does not get the idea or spirit felt so intensely by the painter.

It may be helpful as a preface to this article to note what great masters have considered important in the realm of painting. They have differed widely not only in different periods, but in the same period, due to their varying interests and personalities.

To some, exact representation of the subject is all important. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a really great painter to whom this is of tremendous significance. Probably Courbet, who thought that nature was so entralling in herself that she need not be changed, is the best example of a painter of this group. And yet, Courbet went somewhat beyond exact representation in much of his painting because of the way he used his color, and because he recorded the materialistic and common everyday life with such sincerity that it possesses the integrity of the man. He lived in the age that thought in terms of scientific discoveries, and that was bound to influence his thinking about painting.

There are others who consider light and atmosphere the essential quality. In this group come the Impressionists, with Monet at their head. To him, to portray the difference between the light of eleven o'clock in the morning and that of twelve o'clock noon was of great moment. He trained his eye so exactly that he could capture subtle differences not seen by the average person. He became completely involved in the study of how to achieve this effect, making his canvases throb with light, air and atmosphere; but they have little solid form. It was Cézanne who said of Monet, “He is only an eye, but what an eye!”

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Along with the interest in atmosphere goes the interest in moods. Whistler shows us this to perfection in his nocturnes, fragile and delicate glimpses of evening. Even his figures are expressive of moods, sometimes wistful, sometimes delicate, often with sweet sincerity. Most of his prints belong to another field of thought, so they must not be considered with his painting.

The painters whose dominant interest is that of the imagination may be represented by William Blake, whose creative interpretation of literary themes matches the theme itself in its poetic, fanciful, mysterious, idealized, spiritual or fantastic conception.

Cézanne, who so admired Monet’s ability to see and use color, found his painting insufficient, for Cézanne demanded in painting something more than the pulse of the atmosphere. He required solid, convincing form. We might class him with the realists, not the realists of exact representation for there is a much greater realism than that. Exact representation seems superficial, that which the camera catches, which is all right in its place but does not belong to the realm of great art. That is a bigger field. It represents the life of the spirit, the world of the mind. Cézanne’s realism presents the spirit of what he paints with integrity and sincerity. He felt that only solid, coherent form could do this. Many people may think that Cézanne distorts the exact appearance of things. To be sure he often does, but not without a reason far more important than the exact representation. If one takes the time to study Cézanne one finds an actuality in his painting that transcends exact representation. It has that quality which puts it outside time, for what it says is for all time. It is universal. His trees have strength, their foliage has mass, his ground is firm and will hold the houses, the trees and the people. His mountains have been there for eons.

There are those painters to whom the emotional reaction is paramount. They respond to their subjects in a very personal way. This is true of all great painters, but of some more than of others. Think of El Greco and the spiritual intensity that pervades his painting, drawing one into its meaning through most extraordinarily moving rhythms of line and value, saying what he has to say with exquisite refinement of thought.

How different is another painter of this group, Van Gogh, just as intense but less controlled, speaking through vital and exciting color and agitated and passionate line. Roualt in his rich color and heavy and powerful line is potent in his disturbing emotion. Perhaps Marin
of all Moderns is least understood in his emotional reaction to his sub-
ject, for he paints entirely what he feels. It is true, to painters who
feel as he does, he says more than do most men of our day. But it is
hard for the layman, or at least for that layman who gives Marin’s
painting casual attention, to feel how infinitely well he has put the
spirit of his subjects into a new language, a language that has its roots
in the old. One must hunt for them.

There are then these ways of thinking about painting. There are
also elements, line, mass, and color, that may be used to create a pic-
ture revealed through one or more of the means just discussed. These
elements are used in an extremely individual manner. It is their use,
combined with the artist’s personality and his philosophy, which pro-
duces his distinctly original contribution to the world of art.

All great painters have good structure in their painting. If they
did not their painting would not live. But there are some painters
whose basic architecture one feels first, and then the other things are
added unto it. Among the Moderns is Sheeler. He ably builds up
his idea. It may lack other things, but it always has structure, a
structure that you can count on in its clarity. Among the Old Mas-
ters is Giotto, a painter whom one loves for many things. He unfail-
ingly thinks of the design of his painting. One could not move a
thing from its appointed place without in some way compromising
the whole, it has been so well considered.

Expressing the theme in a plastic way is an integral part of the art
of some painters. This term plastic is an elusive one. It means that
the observer moves in and around, back and forth in the painting,
sensing a keen enjoyment in the movement itself. Such painting may
be produced by the rich and luscious color of Renoir as he creates with
his brush and pigment three dimensional form, not only in his figures,
but all through his whole composition, making you feel and enjoy the
rich depth and delicious color changes that create the rhythmical move-
ment. And among the Old Masters is Rembrandt, who brings mys-
tery and great spirituality to his fine portraits through the plastic
movement of his light as it glows subtly and warmly from the dark
areas of infinite depth and beauty, feeling out significant features,
revealing with sensitive touch.

There are still other artists who build up their painting with pat-
tern. To these the three dimensions of the plastic painter are not
essential. They feel in the length and height of their canvas or paper.
As with Gauguin color is their medium, but a color that stays within
its space. It will be repeated again and again but it need not move back and forth, in and around as the plastic painter feels it must. It may be the exotic, compelling color of Gauguin; but it can not move one with the intensity that the color of the plastic painter can, for it is used more as the decorator uses his color and has not the emotional content of the plastic. Matisse is another painter who uses his elements this way. He employs line as well as unusual color, a fine melodic line, a swinging rhythm, but the plastic element is not for him.

The artists who are dominantly interested in line are of two kinds, those who use line for itself alone, and those who build up their paintings in that manner. Of the first is Ingres who has an assured, exquisite and poignant treatment of this element, line. The actual line itself is lyrical as is a Mozart theme. Holbein also belongs to this group but his line is more austere, more downright, saying clearly and concisely, and with truth, what he has to tell the world. Botticelli is of different caliber. His music swings through his painting, touching it here and there with sweetness, with gracious charm, with ease and refinement.

People usually think of three different approaches to the study of painting from the viewpoint both of the painter himself and of the observer. They are (1) the intellectual, (2) the emotional, and (3) the combination of the intellectual and the emotional. It is our opinion that to make a significant painting, the artist must be possessed of both intellectual and emotional potentialities, and that both contribute to his art. Should he possess just the intellectual way of creating, the result leaves one cold. On the other hand if his work possesses only the emotional aspect one turns away unsatisfied; the painting cannot hold one’s interest over a period of years, it will not last. We believe also that to thoroughly enjoy painting it is necessary for the observer to have both the intellectual and the emotional viewpoint, for if one leans entirely to one side or to the other something of vital significance has been lost and the painting has not been enjoyed in its entirety.

On thinking over our philosophy of painting we decided to determine just why we paint as we do. Of course many factors enter into such a consideration, but the primary elements involved are those qualities which are indeed truly essential to any painting which is satisfying to us.
First and foremost we place the actual desire to paint, plus the feeling that one is about to embark on a highly exciting adventure and that the chosen subject is more thrilling at the moment than anything else in the world. In other words, unless the subject makes an emotional appeal to us, we have nothing to express on paper with brush and paint. It is absolutely necessary that a painter have something specific that he wishes to say, and when water color is his medium, he should say it with enthusiasm, directness, and assurance; in order that his finished work may have clarity, brilliance, spontaneity and a consistent mood.

Next in importance is design or composition, which is the orderly arrangement of the individual parts into an organic whole. This must have a dominant theme with minor elements and details subordinate to it. There should be a rhythmical quality of line and color which would act as a unifying agent and tie together all the divergent parts of the composition.

In order that a painting may satisfy us, it must have, in addition to good design, meaningful form, which we try very hard to achieve. Form is that quality which makes objects appear three dimensional and tangible, and gives to the entire composition a feeling of depth, space and inner structure. In the case of a landscape we want the buildings to look solid and convincing, the trees to seem round and to be growing out of the ground. The ground should not only have the substantial quality of earth but it must also be a moving plane or a series of planes which will lead the eye back into the picture, giving one that necessary sense of limitless space. The sky, in turn, should be so well organized as to its dark and light values that it will give a semblance of distance at the horizon and appear as a domelike expanse extending up into the heavens with strength sufficient to keep the entire composition a unified whole and within its framework.

To a watercolorist, color is not only extremely vital, but in it exists the very essence of his painting and a source of his great delight. When he handles it successfully it will assist him in many ways—in the building of solid form, in giving the illusion of space and distance, in making a notation of surface hues, and in expressing the texture of various objects and areas. The color itself must be appropriate to the subject and to the treatment of the subject. The repetition of each color used or some of its variations produces a feeling of harmony. We take for granted in the painting of a water color, that the white
paper itself should function as color and it does do so when it is sensitively related to the painted areas.

Variety, though a minor element, is one that adds spirit and zest to a composition. It is attained by means of contrasts, such as dark and light tones, broad plain areas and detailed ones, rough and smooth textures, boldness and subtlety, bright and grayed color, and variation in size and shape of areas and objects. All of these however, need to be considered carefully and to be integrated with the main theme of the design.

Whenever it is appropriate we like to introduce some touches of human interest—people, animals, birds, etc.—to indicate life and activity, and to make the local scene as convincing as possible.

If an artist really has something to say, and has the sufficient urge to say it, he will evolve a means of expression. Therefore to us the technique or the actual manner of handling of the brush and the pigment is a skill, which comes with practice and with the study of the possibilities of the medium, and is of less importance than either the intellectual process or the sensitive, creative and imaginative approach to the subject. Each painter has a highly personal feeling for the particular subject which he is painting, and he always hopes that his composition will be so fully realized that the observer will not only feel the artist's sensitive approach to his subject, but will also understand and appreciate his point of view and have a sympathetic fellow feeling for it, thus experiencing to a certain degree the joy which the artist felt in painting it.