A SYNTHESIS OF

EXPRESSIVE PAINTING WITH DESIGN

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts in Art.

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PROLOGUE

The physical act of painting and the mental process of designing are one. They should take place simultaneously, hand and mind operating together. When these processes are not thought of as one, but as separate acts, certain difficulties ensue. Unity and order are frequently sacrificed to spontaneity; or if an attempt at order is made after one has gotten his idea onto the canvas the spontaneous quality is often lost. Sometimes the idea itself is absorbed by a lot of unnecessary, added detail. Where the painting originally said too little, it now says too much. One can rarely divorce expression from good design successfully.

It is possible to know superficially that this is true, but one must also accept the knowledge on the subconscious level in order to practice it naturally. My own inability to fully assimilate this concept has been a trouble source for many years, and one that impedes my progress with painting. I therefore welcome the

opportunity to use this problem as the subject of my thesis.

This difficulty has been evident in much of my past work, as indicated by the tendency toward either of two extremes of style; one is completely non-objective, and highly designed, and the other freer, looser, and lacking form. The problem, then, is twofold: To evolve an approach that lies between these polarizations, yet retains elements of each; and while working toward this objective, to synthesize the concept in my mind as well.

In order to work with purpose and a sense of direction it seemed advisable to impose on myself certain limitations and criteria as a guide. In this context there are some philosophical considerations that cannot be ignored; questions about the validity and significance of various types of painting. Before establishing any criteria it was necessary to decide which side of the fence I was on, and to deal with semantics, since the terminology surrounding art is confusingly non-specific and vague. Therefore, I state the views that I have taken on the following points:

What is meant by the term "expressive" painting? About what, or about whom does it express something? Essentially, this is the old subjective-objective argument.

As I see it, an expressive painting conveys, with feeling,
something about human experience; it is one in which it is
possible to sense that the painter was deeply involved
personally. Intent is implicit, or it is not expressive
painting. The feeling or emotion need not necessarily
be that of the painter. He may speak for himself, for a
few, or for humanity in general, but the significance of
the work will vary according to its degree of applica-
bility to the human element. Although it is admittedly
impossible to be completely objective, a sensitive and
sympathetic person is capable of imagining how things
feel to other people. I believe it is this kind of in-
sight that should be cultivated, rather than the self-
analytical purges to which contemporary painting is so
prone.

When abstraction is carried to the extreme of
pure form, is it expressive painting? In general, no.
Probably 99% of the preoccupation with pure form is
emotionless. There is a certain kind of cross-word
puzzle satisfaction that derives from the act of juggling
form into a coherent design, but this should not be con-
fused with feeling. Some of the confusion and conflict
aroused by completely abstract painting probably is
engendered by their titles. When a composition that

appears to be non-objective is given a title with an
emotional connotation, one can only take the artist's
word for his intentions, but a painting should stand on
or fall by its own merit. The successful one does not
need a title to tell the observer how he should react to
it. One can enjoy and apprehend music without knowing
the name of the selection; this should also be true of
painting.

Should one create an expressive painting solely
for himself, or is he obliged to consider the public?
This question has been partially answered in the fore-
going discussion of the word "expressive". I doubt that
it is possible to paint without some consideration for
others, because of the element of sharing that seems to
go along with creative activity. When one says that he
paints only to please himself it might mean that he lacks
the ability to objectify his intentions successfully. The
artist cannot ignore the public, and then complain that
his work is not understood. From the standpoint of
practicality, some consideration of the public is a wise
investment, and a healthy attitude. This does not mean
that one should cater to the demand for realism in
painting, or that he should in any way sell himself short.
It means that the painter should strive for a more general

understanding of human nature outside of himself.

Painting has increased in subjectivity because it is no longer in demand by society, church, or state. The painter is left with only himself and a small following for whom to work. When self-expression, rather than functional need, is the reason for a painting's existence it is plain that this can spread out in several directions, many of them weak and devitalising. The honest painter is left floundering between contemporary whimsy and the need for sincerity. Somewhere in between he must find a middle ground that satisfies his need for self-expression, and his conviction that a painting should communicate with more than an esoteric few. I fail to see how an artist can estimate his own growth and development unless he works toward understanding, and being understood. Merely to paint is not enough. One needs to progress emotionally as well as technically.

With the preceding philosophy as a guide, I have tried to adhere to the following criteria:

1. By definition, the non-objective approach is ruled out. A painting having only itself as a subject is closer to decorative design than to expressive painting, and runs counter to a solution of the problem.

2. The painting should be either visually or philosophically clear. Either the form or the content should be apprehendable. Thus, if an idea or an emotion is not one that can readily be understood it should be conveyed in a known form; or if an invented or esoteric form is used it must be capable of communicating the intent. There should be congruence between symbol and idea.

3. By definition, the purely representational that serves as an end in itself is ruled out. These limitations bring us to abstraction, which, I submit, is the prime mover in expressive painting. I refer to the degree of abstraction that concentrates on certain aspects of the subject, and suppresses others in the interest of a particular truth or feeling -- not to the degree that completely loses sight of the original form.

These objectives formed the working bases for the paintings done in connection with this problem, photographs of which will be found on the following pages. Where a particular problem existed, or where drastic changes were made, stages in the painting were photographed as the work progressed.

CHAPTER II

CREATIVE PROBLEM

This plate is included for purposes of comparison with the final painting. It was begun as a composition intended, rather vaguely, to say something about Nature and Man. A suggestion of water, and the partially obscured form of a human figure evolved.

Without a clear idea of what I wanted it to be, I worked on this picture for several weeks, but the figure remained stiff, and the composition lacked purpose or conviction.

Taking stock of the situation, I realized that the painting would never come to life without real feeling to motivate it; hence, the idea of Man and Nature was narrowed down to a particular situation, and sketched in on the same canvas.

Plate I

(36"x25")

Once the idea was clear in my mind I could
visualize the qualities that I wanted the painting to
have. It was important that it convey an impression of
universality and timelessness, with what might be any old
man, anywhere, at any time in history. To this end the
background, the clothing, and even the color of his skin
were kept non-specific. The attention was centered on
his face, and on the hand holding the bird.

Because of this focus, the right expression for
the face and hands was one of the main problems -- a
sense of wonder and delight, with the feeling of arrested
motion in the twist of the body and in the dangling right
hand.

Plate II

MAN WITH BIRD

(36"x25")

Plate III shows the final stage in this painting. The form of the bird at the lower right has been partially obscured. It seemed to interfere with the central idea, but it also functioned as a needed design factor, giving strength to the composition. With its importance minimized, attention returns to the hands and face of the man.

Plate III

MAN WITH BIRD

(36"x25")

Plate IV shows the rather formless painting which was the start of HORSES. Begun as a study of the color and motion of fire, a more specific idea pinpointed itself in the first stage, and I visualized a group of frightened horses in various states of alarm.

Peculiarly, this composition seemed to dictate itself, and went along quickly and smoothly until I began more concentrated work on the center horse. At this point the head presented a problem that was never resolved to my satisfaction. The larger composition seemed to demand certain design qualities that were incompatible with the horse itself, as is shown in Plate V. The head sits poorly on the neck, and seems too small, yet it has the qualities needed to bear out the intent of the picture.

The problem was to find the head that was right for both horse and design, or to change the other two.
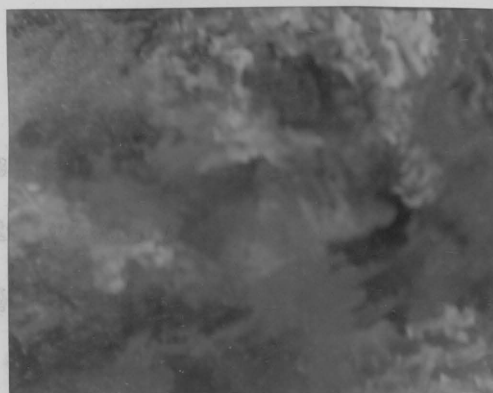
Plate IV

HORSES

(30"x24")

Plate V

HORSES

Plates VI and VII show further experiments with the head of the center horse in the attempt to find one congruent with both design and idea.

In Plate VI the head has been lowered and brought around to face in the same direction as that of the one in the foreground, thinking that the previous disunity might have come from the fact that their attention did not seem to be focused on the same thing. This, however, was also unsatisfactory; it lacked dignity, and had a Disney-like cuteness about it.

In Plate VII a larger, profile head was tried, and the nose of the animal on the right has been brought into view. This might have been a good arrangement, had the canvas been larger, but as it was, the space was much too crowded.

In some way, the horse at the right was painted more realistically than the other two, and in the attempt to make the painting more consistent I lost many of the qualities in the original sketch that I would like to have kept. Much of the excitement has gone from the composition.

Plate VI

HORSES

(30"x24")

Plate VII

HORSES

(30"x24")

All told, I worked on this painting for nearly a year, putting it aside and letting the problem rest from time to time, but renewed effort failed to solve to my satisfaction the question of the center horse.

At length I was forced to conclude that it simply did not belong in the composition; there was not enough space for the position it seemed to demand to be "right" for the rest of the picture. Once it was removed, the completion of the painting was a comparatively simple matter.

It is not a satisfactory painting with reference to my initial idea. The horses have some quality of alertness, but the wild alarm is gone, and I have lost the original feeling.

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Plate VIII

HORSES

(30"x24")

I tried not to think in terms of familiar sea forms as I began this painting, but of forms that by their own nature would suggest the undersea world. In the initial stage, shown in Plate IX, the approach is fairly abstract. Thus far, the forms are too obvious, suggesting an active, almost omnivorous quality rather than the serene, mysterious, timelessness that had been my intent.

A glaze technique was used throughout because it seemed to give support to the idea. The glaze, however, made photography difficult in that it caused detail to become obscured by light reflection.

Plate IX

SEA SHELLS

(24"x20")

The forms at the center as shown in Plate X have been removed, and in their place a somewhat architecturally structured rock formation has been used.

One shell form, less abstract, and the most clearly defined was used in the foreground. Flanking it on either side are shells less obvious, partly submerged in shadow. The main directional line made by the shells was kept horizontal to reinforce the feeling of serenity and stability.

Plate X

SEA SHELLS

(24"x20")

Plate XI shows the final state. In the interest of unity two minor changes have been made: A touch of green was carried into the water at the upper right, and into the opening in the rock structure at the center left.

The main problem encountered in this composition seemed to concern the size, shape, and prominence of the shells. At mid-center they seemed to be working against the desired feeling, and when delineated sharply they tended to become fussy, and created a confused look. It would seem that shells in a painting can very easily become too lush, and rich looking -- almost a study of shells, rather than a painting.

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Plate XI

SEA SHELLS

(24"x20")

This painting attempted to objectify the lush, damp, dim mystery that one associates with deep woods.

Plate XII shows the quest toward shapes that might connote organic, woodsy things. Though more concise in some areas than in others, it is still more enthusiastic than organized, and the color is not right for the idea.

Plate XII

WOODS

$(29\frac{1}{2}"x24")$

In this state the color has been somewhat sub-
dued, but the tree coming from the lower left corner is
not aesthetically pleasing, and creates monotony by
repeating the essentially forked shape of the center
one.

The foliage is undefined and lacks form, and
the stump at the lower left needs simplifying because
it creates confusion in that area. There is also the
need for more distance in the picture plane.

One of the problems of this composition was
that of using trees as design, yet avoiding a forced
look. I was also trying to concentrate the light in
one area, as though it filtered through a break in the
foliage, while keeping the rest of the picture rela-
tively dark.

Plate XIII

WOODS

$(29\frac{1}{2}"x24")$

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The states shown in Plates XIV and XV are very
similar, except for changes made in the foliage masses.
The stump at the lower left has been simplified, and
reduced in importance. Tree forms have been suggested
in the distance, and ground levels going back have been
added to help give the illusion of mystery and deep
space.

Plates XIV and XV

WOODS

$(29\frac{1}{2}"x24")$

This is the final painting as it appears in Plate XVI. Both of the stumps have been removed, and so has the tree that slanted from the left toward the center of the composition. A few trees were lightened in value and accented, while the rest were suggested by the use of vertical lines and foliage masses. The brook in the foreground has been generalized into an expanse that could be either water or damp leaves and soil. The tree that slants diagonally across the foreground has been straightened and simplified.

Once again a painting that was intended to be somewhat abstract has drifted toward realism without my being aware of the process -- a good illustration of the problem central to this thesis; how to keep the abstract quality with which I begin, and still have a sense of organization.

Plate XVI

WOODS

$(29\frac{1}{2}"\text{x}24")$

The sketch of the singer in Plate XVII
suggested itself from certain shapes in a very freely-
done preliminary painting, while feeling my way toward
a new composition. Refining and organizing this rough
beginning went poorly, and I could not get a clear-cut
idea of what I wanted it to look like.

Annoyed at finding myself sliding into the
same dilemma, I painted out the entire sketch and
began over with a definite objective in mind -- the
feeling of some powerful destructive force; and I
worked for shapes that would project this idea.

Plate XVIII shows the first state. It had the
general atmosphere that I wanted, but was more gruesome
than thought-provoking.

Plate XVII

(36"x24")

Plate XVIII

DESTRUCTION

(36"x24")

The angle of the right arm has been changed,
both for the sake of design, and because it con-
tributed more to the expression sought -- a fragile,
yet implacable strength, coupled with dignity.

Drapery suggestive of a shroud has been added,
and the faint outline of a cross in back of the
figure.

Plate XIX

DESTRUCTION

(36"x24")

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In the state shown in Plate XX changes have
been made in the torso. There was a too-open quality
lacking in weight and tangibility, and the cello-like
shape was harsh in outline and unrelated to the idea.
It was therefore altered in form, the edges softened,
and the drapery continued up the chest and over the
left arm.

The distortion of the left arm seemed an
unnecessary overstatement, and was somewhat changed,
both in shape and in line direction, while the area
around it was lowered in value to minimize its im-
portance; the right leg needed this same treatment.

Plate XX

DESTRUCTION

(36"x24")

Plate XXI is the final painting. There were
a few minor changes made between this state and that
in Plate XX. The left arm lacked strength, and needed
to be given a slight arch to give the effect of push-
ing. Other changes were concerned with value con-
trasts; both arms were brought into closer relation-
ship with the background, and the contrast of the
white headband with the black hood was lessened.

According to my working criteria and goals,
this painting is quite successful. It was begun
abstractly, and remained abstract, and merges expression
with design.

Plate XXI

DESTRUCTION

(36"x24")

In this composition I was interested in the undulating, shifting quality of violently agitated water. Plate XXII shows the first sketch. This was done very rapidly, because I had a clear mental picture of what I wanted, and it was necessary to get it onto the canvas while I could still "see" it.

The rocks and pilings were used as forces opposing the water, and because I thought at the time they were necessary as an interest factor. In the upper right corner is a small strip of beach with a few trees.

I have been interested to note that nearly all of the paintings were begun in a fairly high key, but the final state is invariably darker and closer in value. Note, in this particular composition, the progression toward a lower key.

Plate XXII

SEASCAPE

(38"x28")

In this state changes have been made in an attempt to get more feeling into the picture. The shoreline at the upper right has been removed, and rock cliff suggested. Both the sky and the water were made bluer. Because it seemed to catch the eye too much, the detail at the lower right was blurred, and, instead, the inner aspects were accented, as is shown in the detail of this plate.

None of these changes helped. I finally realized that the composition was much too general; it tried to tell too much, instead of stressing one particular truth or part. It needed to be much more abstract, perhaps using one section greatly enlarged, and omitting all the rest.

Plate XXIII

SEASCAPE

(38"x28")

Detail of Plate XXIII

One by one the shoreline, the rock structures,
and the pilings were removed, noting with each dele-
tion whether or not it altered in any way the quality
of the water. It was not until everything but the
water had been taken out that the composition really
improved. They were all excess baggage. It was then
possible to concentrate all emphasis on the water.

Once again I had taken a long, circuitous
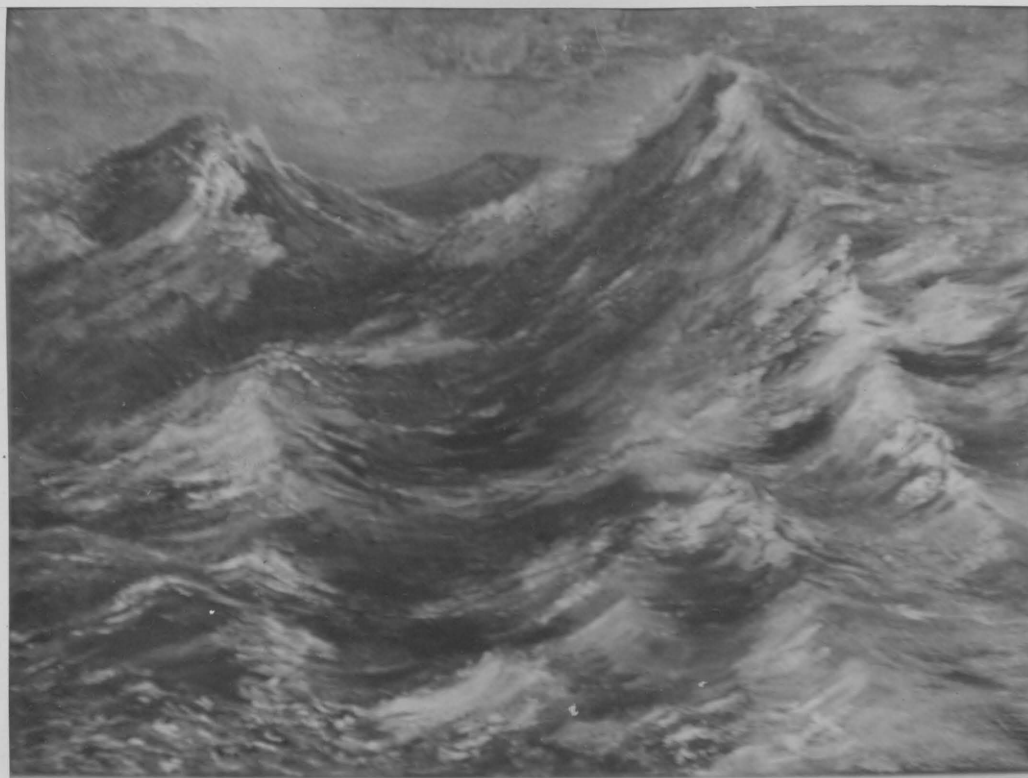route to return to a single, first idea.

Plate XXIV

SEASCAPE

(38"x28")

The central idea for this picture was memory, in a stream-of-consciousness kind of way. Plate XXV shows the first try at getting the idea visualized.

This Plate is another example of the tendency to regard expressive painting and design as separate acts; many of the areas, particularly at the upper left, are formless and without purpose. They should have been designed simultaneously with the main idea. Plate XXVI gives an indication of the same tendency. I have settled on the facial expression to convey the intent, but am getting away from the point in making the background too important.

Plate XXV

MONTAGE

(27"x17")

Plate XXVI

MONTAGE

(27"x17")

In this stage the forced edges have been removed, and instead, cloudy, nebulous areas were used, the white face surrounded by darkness.

The colors were chosen to further support the idea, blues, browns, and whites predominating.

Plate XXVII

MONTAGE

(27"x17")

Plate XXVII had been planned as the final state, but after a time something about the neck struck me as awkward and opposed to the larger design. Its removal improved the composition, but something was needed to keep the head from appearing to float in space. The hand acted as a stabilizing factor, and reinforced the idea of thought as well.

Plate XXVIII

MONTAGE

(27"x17")

This painting attempts to get the feeling of bleakness and isolation that is inherent in a rocky, desolate strip of beach on a sunless day.

In this state the rocks need more definition in some areas; the water is too blue, and the sky not leaden enough.

Plate XXIX

BEACH

(30"x24")

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This is the final painting. The rocks have
been given more form and definition, and a rougher
textured surface was accomplished by means of a
palette knife.

The color of both sky and water have been
changed, the sky to a gray-blue, and the water to a
gray-green. A gray-blue mist partially obliterates
the horizon, and is carried forward over the water
at the right, and over the jut of land at the left.

The spray over the rocks at the center left
was used mainly as a means of carrying more gray-
white into the painting.

Plate XXX

BEACH

(30"x24")

As the title implies, this painting is a symbolic projection of renewal, or regeneration.

The forms chosen to carry the idea have an organic, growth quality, while the negative shape at the center suggests both a seed and the fetal position.

The concept is further carried out by the essentially circular movement, and an upthrusting of forms toward light or the source of life.
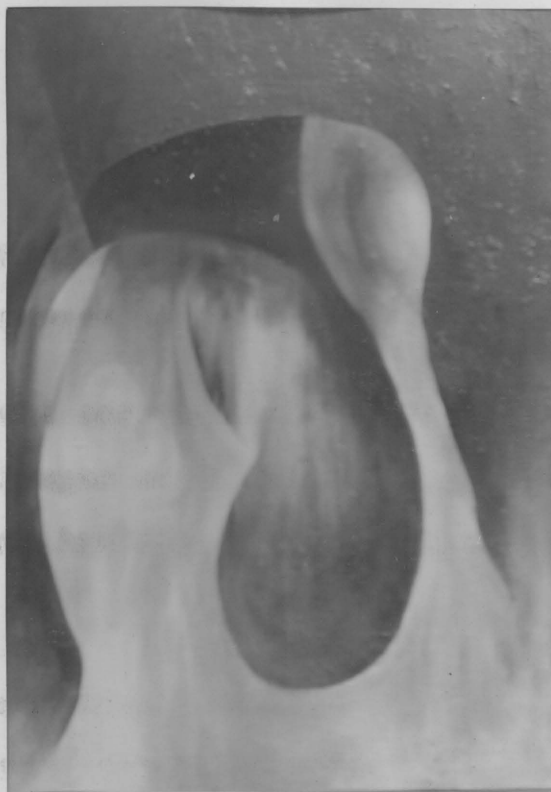
Plate XXXI

CYCLE

(27"x21")

"The Web" is a symbolic reference to life,
and to the intricacies and complexities of all real
existence.

A circular spiraling movement suggests
inevitability, and the futility of attempted escape
from the pattern. Humanity, as the victim, is either
swept into the vortex, or is enervated by the struggle
to break out of the web, while the survivors are
those who accept its flow and rhythm.

Plate XXXII

THE WEB

(38"x15")

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER III

The three criteria that served as a working
basis for this problem were selected arbitrarily, with
some concern at the time that these self-imposed limits
might be a hindrance, rather than a help. I have now
completed a group of ten paintings following these
precepts, and I feel that they have been a constructive
guide. Paradoxically, narrowing the range has seemed
to widen the view, and has made it possible to see the
problem in an added dimension.

Obviously, there can be no one right answer
to the problem, since it is as much a psychological
as a physical one. The approach must be personal, and
consciously, or unconsciously, will be directed toward
what one demands of an expressive painting. An ex-
pressive painting should be a powerful statement about
something. Not necessarily profound, it may only say
that a tree is beautiful, but the statement should
have conviction, force, and vigor. The attempt to
achieve this kind of expression necessitates some

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degree of abstraction.

My third criterion expressed the thesis that abstraction was the key factor in the integration of expressive painting with design. I am now thoroughly convinced of this, although it has taken me a long time, and much retracing of steps to find out that less actually says more. I have also discovered how difficult it is to abstract deliberately and knowingly. Whether one acquires selectivity with time and experience I am not prepared to say, but at the present time the process seems to demand a constant reappraisal of the whole to avoid inclusion of material that does not contribute to the main idea.

It is also a process full of surprises. Very often a detail that seemed of prime importance is found to be completely non-functioning, while another that seemed relatively unimportant is discovered to contain the essence of the idea. After experiencing this reversal of intent a few times one becomes wary of those areas to which one is especially attached; these are usually the ones that have to go in the interest of unity.

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The truth of this statement was forcibly driven home while working on "Seascape". In the lower, right foreground were some old, sun-bleached pilings with which I was very pleased. It became obvious that the painting needed to be much more abstract before it had anything to say, and everything in the composition was simplified and pared down except the pilings, certain that they could not be at fault. But there was no real progress until they were removed. Not only was this particular area an over-statement, but it formed a composition in itself, and as such, served to divide rather than unify.

Basic to successful abstraction is the necessity for objective knowledge of the subject. Before deciding which aspects are the working factors one needs to know how things actually look -- and to react to them; to form the habit of analyzing essential relationships, much in the same way that we do not try to remember extraneous material, but concentrate on what is most vital and important. The process of abstraction might be called going from the real to the ideal.

There is another factor in the process that
has proven to be of equal importance -- and that is
feeling for the subject. The kind of abstraction
that produces a powerful statement does not seem
possible without feeling. A comparison of the later
work of Piet Mondrian with that of John Marin is a
good example. Although it is true that their abstrac-
tion varies in degree, the work of Mondrian appears
more mathematical than emotional, while one can sense
that Marin has a great deal of sensitivity for his
material.

The foregoing has been primarily concerned
with what I have found to be true about one level of
the problem -- the physical act of painting. Perhaps
the process of abstraction tends more toward the crea-
tion of a physical synthesis, while emotional conviction
works on behalf of the psychological. Truth about
painting comes slowly. A lot of painting and a lot of
thought are required before a theory can be formulated.
First, a pattern has to form. When one becomes aware
of repetition he can draw a tentative conclusion, and
when the conclusions themselves form a pattern it is
possible to see the larger significance. It seems, at
this time, that there are some philosophical

considerations inherent in the problem.

A creative problem of this type requires a personal philosophy of art as a guide. One must work according to his own convictions and beliefs, but these do not appear of their own volition. They must be actively sought through thought and analysis. There are no obvious standards for what is good or bad in any of the art fields, and it is easy to be drawn into this "anything goes" atmosphere. One needs to resist, and to establish his own standards and credo. It is better to be one's self, although at the present time it is more fashionable to be someone else -- and easier.

It is necessary to believe in the dignity and significance of painting as an art form, even in an era when art for art's sake is on very thin ice. Painting as psychotherapy, painting as psychoanalysis, painting as a "how-to" by numbers, and paintings done by monkeys and donkeys all tends to cheapen art, and to diminish its importance. One needs to believe in the importance of every painting -- to believe that what he is creating has significance beyond himself, and beyond today. A painting can only be as successful as the artist's convictions about it.

Along with the need for a well-thought out,
workable philosophy of painting goes another equally
basic -- the need for a well-thought out, workable
philosophy of life. Life itself is contradictory,
based on juxtaposed pairs of opposites -- blacks and
whites for which there is no completely satisfying
explanation. One must adjust, in some way, the
discrepancy between what he sees and what he is
supposed to believe.

It was remarked in the introduction that
expressive painting and design were one indivisible
process, and that this fact must be accepted on the
sub-conscious as well as the conscious level in order
to achieve a synthesis. This statement may be
carried a step further. The truth about life must
be accepted in the same way; the contradictions
must be faced and rationalized. One must subscribe
to what Joseph Conrad has called "the true lie".

This is not to imply that one need adopt
a teleological philosophy, for everywhere there can
be seen too much chaos and irrationality to support
such a view. It might be argued, however, that if
Man were less prone to interfere, some semblance of
a natural order might be visible. One must accept

the antitheses -- the living and the dying, the
senseless cruelty and the touching kindness,
bigger, better cars and slaughter on the highway,
cruelty in nature and the beauty beside it -- to
accept these, and learn to view them calmly as
part of life.

More directly related to painting is another
antithesis capable of generating confusion -- the
so-called Romantic style of painting as opposed to
the Classical. The Romantic view of nature has never
been fully dissipated, despite our saturation with
science and natural history, and neither has the
stress on emotion. What has changed is the reason
for the stress. The ensuing dichotomy in personal
feeling -- an emotional involvement with nature vs
a liking for classical order in design -- could be
a carry-over; coupled with this the also-carried
over value that what is natural is good, and what is
artificial is bad. Might one not conceive of free
and fanciful painting as natural, and therefore good,
as opposed to the restrictions of design as arti-
ficial, and therefore bad?

We are not too far from teaching this very attitude in art in the Public schools. The near-cult of originality has perhaps also tended to take one away from form toward the spontaneously formless. The more formless, the greater assurance that it is original. Design, as such, becomes suspect.

This, then, is also part of the problem -- to develop a synthesized view of life, as well as a synthesized view of painting, and it would seem that one must go through much the same process with both. Feeling and abstraction seem to be the keys to each. Just as one condenses, simplifies, and eliminates needless detail to get at the essences in his paint-ing, so much one condense and simplify to get at the essence of life. The result of this process should be a clarity of feeling. Only when reactions and feelings are clear to the artist himself can he successfully project them into his work. When he is unsuccessful at conveying his intent it may be his philosophy that is at fault, rather than his technical ability. To know what one feels, and to feel what one knows necessitates a firm resistance to the pre-vailing atmosphere of total acceptance and non-feeling, and a secure grasp on one's ability to discriminate and select.