

## A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF ABSTRACT ART

By Wayne Ensrud

Everything in humanity's earliest attempts at art gives evidence of an effort toward realism. There is also an attempt to simplify the too-great complexity of nature. This attempt reflects his concern to show significant forms. That the primitive artist was able to conceive forms is demonstrated by the abstract designs he produced as decorations, motivated by a need to leave his or her imprint on things.

What do these "abstract" decorations aim at? Obviously, no longer at resemblance, but rather at something new - ornamentation!

Prehistoric peoples were not satisfied with the unformed, involuntary marks left by their impatient, disorderly activity - they wished subconsciously to transform them in such a way that they might give them pleasure when they looked at them - that they might gratify certain inner needs and were the source of the aesthetic impulse.

At every step, people are confronted with the unlimited, the infinite. Humanity can only focus his or her attention and consciousness upon one object at a time, and in order to apprehend multiplicity, they must invent or discover some means of classifying the elements of reality. People must have the power of logically connecting the different elements. Failing either of these solutions the mind loses its way in a maze that confronts it. Thus, faced with the multiform reality which threatens to overwhelm him, to dissipate his energies, to dissolve his being, man sets himself to weaving a net that will encompass the widest possible range of objects.

The human intellect desires to comprehend an art completely abstract in its essence is as old as realistic art. We are obliged to recognize that there are two innate tendencies in man, and that art depends on both of them. The opposition which the modern era has established between the two is artificial as well as pointless.

Total abstraction is not a caprice of our era, as some people think. It reflects a deep tendency that manifested itself in the art of the past.

We may observe that in music the basic elements (sounds) are combined and elaborated with no restrictions save those imposed by aesthetics. The composer is not required to reproduce or imitate the noises the ear perceives in nature. Thus music is the prototype of an art that lives solely through its means: its only aim is to accomplish its own form and to evoke or provoke emotion. It is concerned only with problems of sonorous perfection or suggestive power, which find their counterparts in the realm of painting, in those of plastic (constructive) quality and evocative intensity.

Modern art, encouraged by the example of music, has tried to isolate these elements and liberate them from all alien elements such as that of copying nature. So, on logical grounds, purely abstract painting came to proudly exclaim *“it is for myself, my sake alone that I am flowering in the wilderness.”*

We must guard against absolute judgments. In the past as today, the elaboration of plastic form produced amazingly varied results, the range of which we must consider in order to avoid confusing one kind of solution with another - in present day art as well as in that of the past.

Sometimes “reality” is forced into submitting to basically geometric organization - the space being divided into planes or masses whose arrangement is conceived as a new order and as a harmony. But, the perfection sought by such geometric arrangements presupposes their being unchanged by time, and thus being “outside” life. Life however, also has a right to inspire human creation, and the style in which it is executed. The assertion of this right leads to the replacement of static geometric arrangements by more dynamic ones. This dynamic tendency may be confined simply to the forms, which continue to serve as the basis for creation but are given a new appearance and order. This was the direction taken by the so-called *ART NOUVEAU* which was inspired by the rhythms of plant life.

Occasionally the surge of life manifests itself, not in forms and masses, but simply in the line that registers the movement of the artist’s hand, its impulses and intentions. A whole new art developed out of this trend, using primarily lines and slashes or touches of color. The trend was first seen in the prehistoric age as well as Chinese calligraphy, in Irish illumination and Viking ornamentation and Polynesian art.

So, abstraction is not a new or modern development.

Whether the artist seeks to divide his or her space into plane or masses, or sees it primarily as a medium for depicting explosive energies by means of lines and color touches, he is always concerned solely with the plastic aspect of his art; he or she thinks of it above all as a construction. But, that is not all there is to it. After discarding nature in favor of forms that can be detached from it or created out of it, art has come to discard forms in favor of the materials of which they are composed - and in the case of painting - in favor of the pictorial substance - the paint itself.

Along with the painters of abstract form, we now have the painters of the "formless." Their work is sometimes given the name of "concrete art" or "new art." Such painting aims at liberating the artist from the habitual notions of form and from the obligation to re-present nature and compels him or her to obtain effects from the very materials they use.

Modern art, by carrying its solutions to the extreme, has contributed to our understanding of the inner resources of painting, which might otherwise have remained insufficiently defined.

Painting shares with sculpture and architecture the distinction of being a plastic art - in so far as it attempts to solve the essential problem of those arts - the construction of forms. But the moment painting asserts its individuality, its own nature, it breaks away from those other arts and turn toward life and movement, employing resources of its own.

Then the line ceases to be merely a contour bound to a specific mass, and becomes a mobile outline that winds freely in and out, suggesting the living movements of the artist's hand - the colored paint is used not merely to fill in the previously drawn silhouette but to display the charms of hue and nuance and the felicitous impulses of the brush. It becomes a record of the movements by means of which the work was executed. All this distinguishes painting from the other arts, opening up to it a world of new possibilities, to which the principal keys are the pigment, the brushwork and the color.

Art results from a creative act, but an act that has no other goal save that of its own perfection.

Art is an image re-presenting or expressing that which man perceives within him or outside him - or - that which he or she perceives within them in relation to that which they perceive outside. But this image, in order to become art, must be organized into a coherent and independent whole, which has no goal beyond its own consummation which will have been achieved or not. People can only decide through an assessment of value - a specific value which is called the beautiful.

The judgment involved is qualitative, since in the realm of the spirit values cannot be measured without being experienced. They cannot be made to fit some fixed and mechanical standard. That is why all formulas for achieving beauty that have been devised have proved false. No such prescription, no measure or proportion will automatically produce beauty. The value judgment is as much a part of the work of art as is the process by which it is realized. The good and the beautiful can never be pinned down in an equation. They can only be achieved by a surge of creative power, indefinitely sustained - without this they do not begin to exist, and a new and genuine act of appreciation is required on the part of both the creator and of the "consumer," to endow the work with lasting value.

For those who thirst after absolutes nothing is more disappointing and irritating than the impossibility of exactly defining this value, which is nevertheless self-evident to anyone who perceives it. This is why "quality" evades all the automatic devices designed to ensure it. For quality cannot be conquered, it has to be deserved. It must be re-created afresh each time, by an effect of which the result cannot be predicated in advance.

Imitation, even of the most excellent models, is always and has always been a sure guarantee of failure, precisely because its results are predictable.

Art, together with morality, is the last stronghold of exclusively human values. Art is for this reason one of our most precious possessions, because it utilizes that capacity which makes it worth while to be human. People have the unique gift to

express freedom of choice and give form to the very pressures to which he or she is subjected and in turn subjects them to a scale of values which is free by definition since it will always remain inaccessible to machines.

The work of art, beyond what it re-presents, beyond its formal aesthetic resources, happens to be the vehicle of man's inner life. The work reflects the entire range of this inner life, from its conscious core to the unconscious depths, to merely describe a work of art is not enough. Art is a product of a unique human experience and is foremost a visual experience.

Every work of art, provided it is not the product of imitation or an exercise in theory, conveys a message from the unconscious. Only in our time which has cast light on hitherto obscure areas of the soul, has this been fully realized.

Is then art an illusion, a mirage - no - for the work of art is more durable than the moment it records, than the artist who creates it, than the appearance it evokes. It has grasped the ungraspable.

A human's mind must be capable of abandoning the traditional structure of form in art. Thinking out another form not previously existing. This will be genuine creativity. The new art begins by being absolutely a work of imagination. Imagination is the liberating power possessed by man.

Imagination is the power to form mental images of things not present to the senses or never before perceived in reality. The purpose of art is to communicate by touching the human center of emotion. All and everything is in perpetual motion. It is all vibration. Art is the bridge to the supernatural, a medium which makes contact with the invisible. There has been a limit to man's evolution. The imagination will set man free.

As for myself, I really do not desire to re-present nature, I only want to express the emotions ignited in me by the experiences that life awakens. I am eschewing "traditional structure". I am inviting you to not "see" my paintings as representing "things" but as movement of light and color that proclaim the fullest passion of both joy and rage that chart the turbulent climate of my living. I am willing to risk the mess that may emerge with faith that clarity and harmony will merge in unity. I

hope my paintings provide liberation for the mind and spirit.

My paintings do not attempt to describe anything but desire to create an atmosphere of joy and love without resorting to literal description. It matters not if I choose to use recognizable forms or forms “abstracted” from nature or purely free flowing gestures.

It is possible that I have caught a “glimpse of joy as it flies.”