

Centre for Continuing Education

Art Appreciation: caves to computers – how art evolves

Roy Forward

Art moves with the times. We study developments in drawing, painting and sculpture, ask why artists always innovate, and trace the evolution of nudes, portraits, religious & history painting, arts of everyday life, landscapes, still lifes, and abstracts in lively detail.

1. Figure drawing

6 October 2009

Kenneth Clark defended the nude in Western art as nothing to do with naked bodies in the real world, but as an idealised aesthetic form. Whereas to be naked, he argued, is to be deprived of one's clothes, with the idea of deprivation implying embarrassment, discomfort and defencelessness, the word nude suggests 'a balanced, prosperous and confident body.' However, Clark made a further distinction that would probably rule out any person without his or her clothes ever being described as a nude: he invited the reader to contrast the idealised body in the work of art with the ugly body of any real live unclothed person. While his jaundiced view may have been based on the scraggy pot-bellied bodies of ill-fed and sun-starved English, what are we to make of drawings of naked bodies that are not just unidealised but deliberately ugly?

2. Portraiture

13 October 2009

The classical Chinese portrait painter, Gu Kaizhi (c.344–c.406), said he sacrificed exact physical likeness to show the soul of a person, and Adolf Loos wrote underneath Oskar Kokoschka's portrait of him, 'This picture is a better likeness than I am myself,' but even such artists could present but one impression at a time: which can remind us that in many cases, especially pre-photography, there is no sure test of a portrait's verisimilitude; in traditional art a portrait often fell into a stock mould for that kind of person, or came out as a particular artist's stylised manikin. Paul Valéry recalled 'The great arguments I used to have with Marcel Schwob [1867–1905, writer] as we stood looking at Hals's *Descartes*. He would insist it was a "good likeness." "Of whom?" I would ask.' 'There's nothing more fascinating,' Bill Henson told Sebastian Smee, 'than to have someone stare out of [an image] into your eyes, yet never allow you to know anything about them.'

3. Religious & history painting

20 October 2009

In the sixth century the port city of Ravenna on the east coast of Italy was an important part of the Byzantine Empire ruled from Constantinople. The mosaics in San Vitale affirm the Christian piety of the emperor Justinian and the empress Theodora, confirm their power as legitimate, and advertise the union of political and religious power: Justinian is shown flanked by both soldiers and court officials as well as by priests, including Maximian, archbishop of Ravenna; Justinian's purple robe and crown show his royalty, his halo shows his divinity. Theodora is making an offering, like the three kings in the hem of her robe, and she too is crowned and haloed, even though she began life as a courtesan. Although Justinian and Theodora had never visited Ravenna the mosaics make them always there, virtually in the
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flesh, for like all idols this is performative art. Why have religious and history paintings all but vanished in the West today?

4. Everyday life

27 October 2009

The official view used to be that the highest kind of art was history painting, uplifting subjects from history, religion, or classical legends, carefully drawn and modestly coloured, and with a high finish and covered in brown varnish. Art was an institution, like marriage, that the State assumed it had a duty to regulate. Below history painting came lesser styles such as landscape, portraiture, still life, and so-called genre painting, or paintings of everyday life. Now the hierarchy is upended. Jean-François Millet was interested in the 'heroism of everyday life' in the countryside; his work being tonal, dignified, sentimental and universalised. Charles Baudelaire called upon writers and artists to create an art of 'modern life'. The Realists and the Impressionists and many who came after them did so, with their trains in railway stations, steamers on rivers, the life of the streets, jockeys at the race track, deck chairs on beaches, ballet dancers backstage, smoking factory chimneys. And all the time men and women have been perfecting the arts and crafts of everyday life.

5. Landscape

10 November 2009

'With the exception of love,' wrote Kenneth Clark, 'there is perhaps nothing else by which people of all kinds are more united than by their pleasure in a good view.' That may be because our ideas of landscape are rooted in primitive criteria of territorial advantage and biological survival, so that we prefer views of open ground so that we can see approaching enemies or predators. Those who see progress in art as an increasingly lifelike representation of the visible world belittle the art of earlier times, or of present cultures in supposedly earlier stages of development, as incapable of producing good likenesses. Why did it take artists so long to be able to depict things as they really are? Did ancient Egyptian artists, Leonardo da Vinci, and Pablo Picasso *see* the world differently from each other, or did they all see it in the same way but were prevented (by training, traditions, government or religious prohibitions, unavailable materials, inadequate technology, prevailing tastes etc) from *depicting* it as it really is? Perhaps they were not even trying to be naturalistic. Perhaps for most of human history artists have thought they were making art rather than making copies of the world. Either way, it emphasises how much of what artists know, see and do has to be *learned*: even Vassily Kandinsky could not tell that a painting by Claude Monet was meant to be of a haystack. Is it not possible, then, to see the world with the 'innocent eye' of a newborn babe?

6. Still life

17 November 2009

The French call still life *La nature morte* – dead nature. Even recently Norman Bryson could write a book on still lifes and call it *Looking at the Overlooked*. Seventeenth-century Dutch artists painted tables overflowing with tulips, fruit, fish and feathers; Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) is generally regarded as having established still life painting of a more humble and reflective kind. Around 1920 Giorgio Morandi stated that he regarded still life painting as a way of transcending time, of confronting 'inert objects,' of meditating upon their 'inherent beauty and spending an eternity in placid contemplation.'

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7. Abstraction

24 November 2009

Another more recent and very popular view of progress in art is just the opposite. Basing itself on the idea that increasingly complex perceptual and logical structures in the brain lead to scientific, rationalistic and conceptual ways of thinking, it sees art history culminating in modernist art and especially in abstraction. However, one strand of this approach holds that true progress is only possible if each artform concentrates on perfecting its own unique characteristics (painting, for instance, is the application of colour to a flat surface, dance is human movement, and so on), and that if you mix them up it all just degenerates into theatre. An opposing strand argues that on the contrary, the only way forward is through amalgamating all the arts into a kind of Wagnerian synaesthesia of coloured music, dance poems and multimedia happenings.

8. Sculpture

1 December 2009

Sometimes we seem to experience a numinous quality, aura, or sense of presence in sculptures that two-dimensional works lack, a capacity in sculptures to evoke a physical relationship, so that we relate to them with the rest of our bodies as much as with our eyes or minds. Johann Gottfried Herder separated the 'representation' of painting from the 'embodiment' of sculpture. Theodor Lipps's theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*), that people experience art with reference to themselves, has been used to suggest that when we look at a building such as a Greek temple we identify ourselves with the columns, feeling uncomfortable if they are either too thin or too fat: Vernon Lee applied the idea to Renaissance architecture. Empathy would seem especially applicable to sculpture. 'Sculptures cannot be looked at rapidly,' wrote John Pope-Hennessy; 'they must be recorded slowly and seen repeatedly. They convey a message to the eye, but it is a message that must be confirmed by touch. The longer I looked at them, the more vital did it seem to regard them as things made and to reconstruct the process by which they were produced.'

Does art reflect the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the age? Many changes seem to be fuelled by the rising generation's need to oust the oldies, shock the bourgeoisie and generally shout for freedom. Other changes occur because the authorities impose order and discipline. So is art the initiator of change in the wider society or civilisation, or does it tag along behind? Paradigm shifts in the history of science may be relevant to finding an answer. Perhaps style-change is part of a continual effort to anticipate threats by adapting the tribe's protective colouration, by ingesting and domesticating what is ugly and offensive into something familiar and beautiful. Changes in technology, in the boundaries of knowledge and the state of the world allow artists to move into what up to that point has not been regarded as a material or subject for art, as recently with comics, graffiti, advertising, computers and AIDS.

Suggested reading (full notes are emailed during the course)

Mary Acton, *Learning to Look at Modern Art*, London & New York: Routledge, 2004
Christopher Allen, *Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1997

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Kenneth Clark, *The Artist Grows Old* (The Rede Lecture 1970), Cambridge, 1972; in Kenneth Clark, *Moments of Vision*, London: J. Murray, 1981

Béatrice Fontanel, *Daily Life in Art*, trans. by Liz Nash, New York: Abrams, 2006

Suzi Gablik, *Progress in Art*, New York: Rizzoli, 1976

Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, London: Thames & Hudson, updated & enlarged edition 1991 (first pub. London: BBC, 1980)

Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, London: Harvill, 1997

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger, New York: Dover, 1950 (first pub. 1915)

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DATES/TIMES: 6-8pm on 8 Tuesdays from 6 October
NB no class on 3 November

FEE: \$275

COURSE LOCATION: The venue for this course can be found on your tax invoice/receipt under "Course Information". Please allow enough time to locate the venue on the first evening.

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