Similarly some of the coloratura arias in operas and oratorios may seem tiresome and downright silly to modern ears, but the composers of *Messiah* and *Fidelio* were not silly. Acrobatics, mountain climbing, and most sports are as useless as the accumulation of tremendous fortunes, fortunes so large that their owners have to give them away. But human beings have always admired the victory of the mind and body over obstacles. We see no reason why pure design should not be given at least this minimum of admiration.

But pure design, regardless of the virtuosity of its makers, may also stimulate, as Gauguin said, the same kind of feelings which pure music stimulates. We say "may" since no one knows whether it does or not. Judging from the violent emotions which are expressed by people who dislike non-objective and abstract painting, it is at least capable of stimulating frenzy and hatred. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing whether these feelings are stimulated by the painting itself or by the failure of the observer to find in it what he was looking for. We know that all perception is influenced by expectation, that what one sees is in part determined by what one expects to see. Consequently the denunciation of non-objective painting may simply be an expression of the observer's disappointment. It is like the reaction of a man who finds that someone has put salt in his coffee instead of sugar.

Chapter III Painting as Representation

Our illustrations of design in paintings have already suggested that both visual design and representation may be present in a single picture. In fact the great bulk of paintings from the earliest days of the art have been pictures *of* something and not merely designs. If one goes to the caves at Altamira, Les Eyzies, and Lascaux (Fig. 57), one will see on the walls and ceilings animals which are recognizable and whose species have been identified: mammoths, oxen, reindeer, cave bears, and horses. But two features of these paintings can have escaped no one who has seen them. The beasts are all drawn in profile and when human figures are involved, they are represented schematically, much like the drawings which children learn to make, or else they are represented as magicians disguised as animals. If one skips to another group of paintings which are also early, those uncovered in Egyptian tombs, the use of the profile will also be found (Fig. 58), although we can be fairly sure that the Egyptians were able to draw anything any way they pleased. Moreover, in many of these painting the eyes and shoulders of human beings are usually drawn in a frontal position, even when the rest of the body is in profile. This too can be attributed only to the force of custom, not to the artists' incapacity. Byzantine painting (Fig. 59) on the contrary is largely frontal. We have then in these three types of picture a combination of representation with a schematic pattern. There were apparently rules which the artists accepted and which governed the way in which things should be represented. These rules were not simply the laws of optics but were independent of optics. For reasons which one can no longer discover, the artists seem to have believed that there was a right way and a wrong way to depict their subjects and that the right and wrong ways were not based on the way in which things looked in general but on the way people preferred to see them.

Consequently it is safe to say, though we make no pretense to a complete proof, that we have no record of paintings which were purely representational in the sense that they were painted in any way in which the artist happen to see them or imagine them. The artists always restricted the free play of their imagination by a set of laws which were as binding as the rules governing a game, chess, bridge, or football. We no longer know the origin

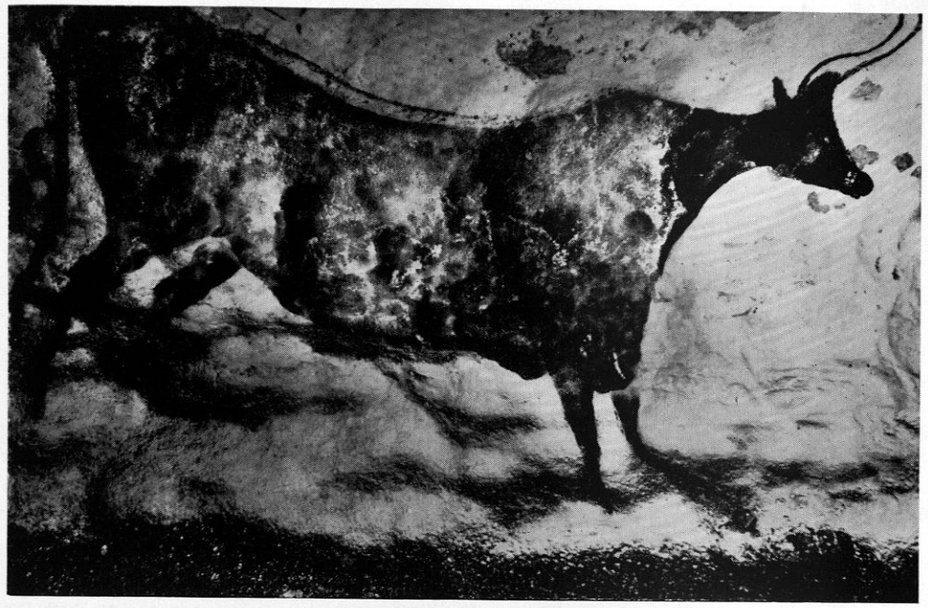


Fig. 57. Cave painting from Lascaux.

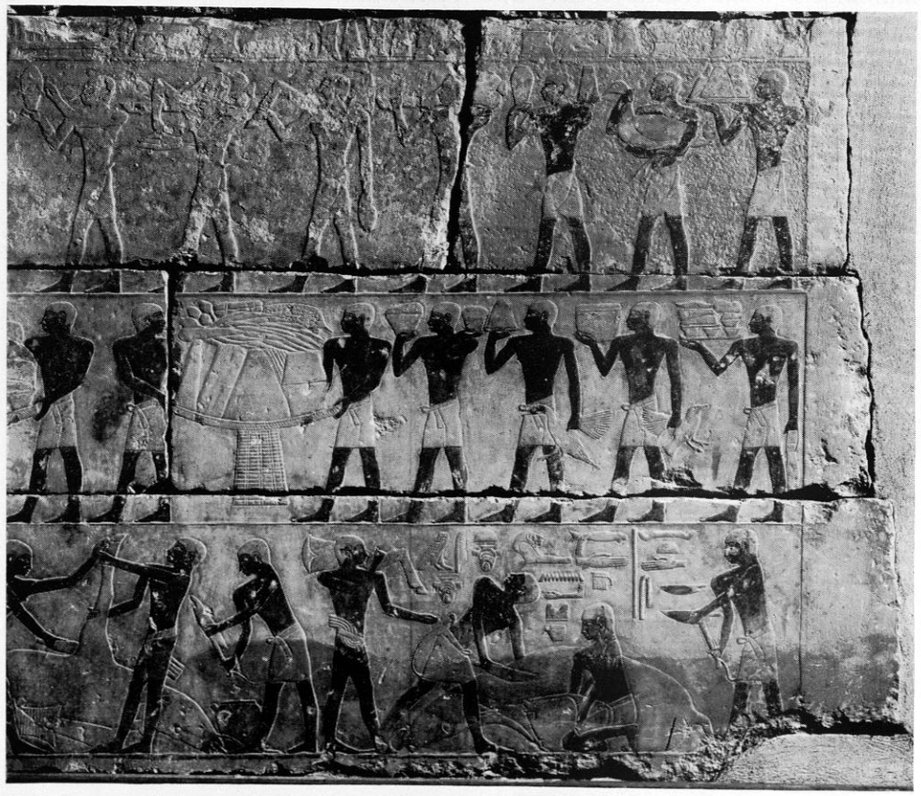


Fig. 58. Bas-relief, Mastaba of Ptah-Senkhem-Ankh, Vth Dynasty.



Fig. 59. Justinian flanked by Maximianus and a second figure. Byzantine mosaic. San Vitale, Ravenna.

of such laws nor even whether anyone was conscious of them. But for that matter, who knows why and when the rules of grammar were first laid down or when the first grammarian appeared in society to plague the young? Children learn to speak their mother tongue without the aid of books on how to speak and they usually soon learn to speak correctly, that is, in accordance with the grammar of their language, if their parents do. As far as paintings are concerned, neither logic nor the actual appearance of things nor the inability of the human eye to see things differently nor of the human hand to draw them differently can be invoked to explain these very early aesthetic customs. All that we know is that they exist and are observed with fidelity.

As for the cave paintings, anthropologists have maintained that they were made for magical or religious purposes and not for the simple pleasure which spectators might have in looking at them. The reason for this conclusion is simple. In the first place, the cave men were hunters and the animals painted were those which were hunted and, if one may judge from the bones left in the refuse piles, were also eaten. Second, in such a cave as that of Lascaux, there are vivid representations of animals being pierced by arrows and driven over cliffs or into what looks like traps. Third, it is well known that some preliterate people make little images of their enemies which they torture in the hope and belief that the people represented—or symbolized—will suffer from the same tortures which are inflicted on the images. So the cave man

may have believed that by painting an ox stuck with a spear he could obtain some power over the real ox. Fourth, the paintings are in those parts of the caves which were not inhabited and thus could not normally be seen; they were often painted one on top of another or overlapping another, as if the process of painting them was more important than the finished product. The conclusion is not foolproof, of course, but it is at least plausible. It does not explain why the animals are drawn in profile, but it does explain why they are all drawn according to one set of rules. For all magical and religious rites have to be performed according to a strict rule, a rule which must never vary. That is a cardinal principle of ritual.

Where magic ends and religion begins is not for us to determine. But just as preliterate man makes images for magical purposes, so civilized man makes them for religious purposes. A representation, however crude, may serve as an idol or as a focus before which the worshiper may concentrate his attention when praying. A person praying before a statue or picture may know that the physical object itself has no power of granting his prayer, but by fixing his attention upon it, as if it were identical with the being which it represents, his thoughts are less free to wander. Sometimes such images are the height of realism, sometimes they are far removed from realism. There are, for instance, crucifixes on which the body of Christ seems to be a real body with real blood flowing from the wounds; but there are others which are a cross with an almost schematic or symbolic body upon it or no body at all.

Not only have representational paintings served magical and religious purposes, but they have also served scientific purposes. For in the long run representation is the only way we have of communicating to others the visual appearance of things. The inadequacy of words to perform this task comes out when one tries to describe a person's face, a landscape, or a flower. It is much better to hold up a picture. Scientific drawings running all the way from the most meticulous literal reproductions of objects to diagrammatic devices are common. The scientist often resorts to pictures to illustrate a point which cannot easily be made in words. We are all familiar with the little men, each of which stands for a thousand men and the pies which are cut up in variously sized slices to show, for instance, how the national income is spent. But on the other extreme we are equally familiar with anatomical drawings in textbooks and colored photographs in seed catalogues. It may be that we resort to images in this way because we are so largely visual animals. If it is true, as is commonly believed, that all writing arose from pictograms—and we have already seen how our own alphabet so arose—then that would be added evidence of how communication relies on visual experience. We see another example of this in the sign language of the North American Indians as well as in the manual gestures with which deaf-mutes used to be taught to communicate. Whatever the truth may be, the visual method becomes simplified as it is practiced over the centuries and before very long as human history goes what was literal becomes symbolic.

Thus a map is a representation but a highly simplified one. We do not expect to see actual rivers and mountains drawn upon it in order to enable us to read it. A map does reproduce some of the features of the country which it represents, but some others are entirely omitted and all are put down in a symbolic, not a literal, fashion. This interplay between the literal and the symbolic is normal in all forms of communication. Even when we have words which stand for the cries of the various animals, we find that they differ in different languages. The cock cries *cock-a-doodle-do* in English and *cocorico* in French. Neither is the exact equivalent of what cocks actually cry, but either will do for practical purposes. Representation then will always be blended with an element of schematism or symbolism and we shall accept the blend as normal. But sometimes, just as superstitious people may think of the statue of a saint as the saint himself, we think of the symbol as that for which it stands. There may be, for all we know, some childlike souls who think that Anglo-American cocks really say one thing and French another.

Mr. William Ivins, in his history of prints, *Prints and Visual Communication*, has shown what happened when there was no way of duplicating visual images. Seals had been in use from early days in Mesopotamia, but apparently no one thought of using something similar to seals in illustrating manuscripts. Consequently even in scientific treatises, such as herbals, books on anatomy, and geographical studies, drawings would be copied from earlier drawings by a succession of scribes, each leaving out some detail, until a single highly simplified picture might stand for a variety of plants, organs, or places. This survived even into the beginning of printed books and Mr. Ivins shows how in the famous *Nuremberg Chronicle* a standardized city stands for almost any city from Troy to Paris. As long as there was a tight group of houses surrounded by a wall, it was a city. To quote Mr. Ivins, "One view does duty for no less than eleven separate towns" (p. 38). Figure 60 shows what it looked like.

The painter's delight in accurate representation, that is, representation as accurate as the human hand can make it and within the tradition established by custom, needs no proof. No one who has seen the reproduction of the drawings of Pisanello or Dürer or who has visited the Ingres Museum in Montauban would deny that a painter takes pleasure in drawing all sorts of apparently insignificant things and in drawing them as carefully as possible. It has been said that the camera makes representation unnecessary, but as a matter of fact the camera distorts and the photographer selects, choosing a point of view and the lighting which he thinks most effective, in other words not submitting himself entirely to his machine. Regardless of that, even painters like Matisse (Fig. 61), Picasso, and Braque, who are famous for their non-realistic paintings, often have begun with very literal drawings as studies for pictures in which representative realism seems to have disappeared almost entirely. Leonardo drew clouds and rocks as well as faces and the anatomical drawings attributed to Vesalius have always aroused the admiration of critics. To see even familiar sights in drawings and paintings has always been a pleasure to the observer, as it seems to have been a pleasure

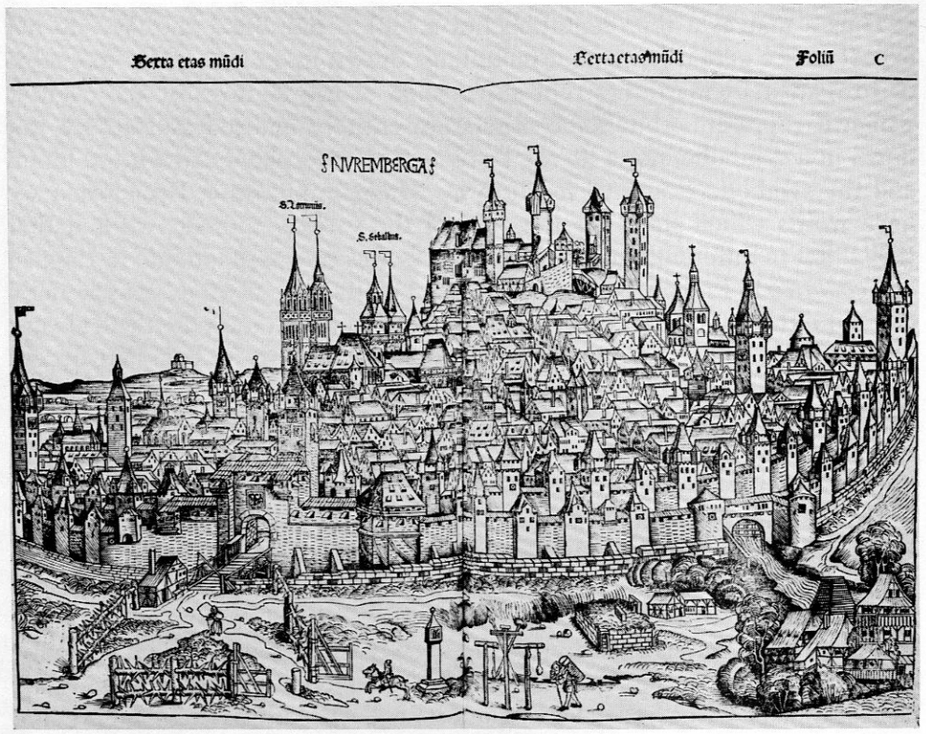


Fig. 60. *Nuremberg Chronicle*, folio 100.

to the artist to draw or paint them. One has only to think of the genre painters of the Netherlands and Flanders to appreciate this (Figs. 62 and 63).

Audubon (Fig. 64)and Gould and Bewick drew not only exotic creatures but familiar ones as well. Bewick's little tailpieces are often scenes which anyone could and did see in the English countryside and they are certainly as delightful as the larger engravings of his birds. But painting has always given men a duplicate world, sometimes as elaborate as the *trompe-l'oeil* of Harnett (Fig. 65), sometimes rough sketches such as those which can be seen in the thousand and one drawings of Hokusai in the *Mang-Wa* (Fig. 66). Only a psychologist could tell why we enjoy this duplicate world, when a sceptic might point out that it is merely a reproduction of the world in which we live. But one might risk the guess that it is both more and less than a reproduction of the world of daily life. It is more in that the artist is always present as he heightens the emotional effect of the objects and scenes which he represents, just as a good raconteur knows how to emphasize details in his story which most of us do not even notice. It is less, in that he has to select certain details and therefore eliminate others.

This art is not confined to painting; it has its analogue in music and in literature. Ring Lardner's astonishing gift of catching dialogue, Gertrude Stein's similar gift in her *Willie and Brewstie*, may appear to be a denial of the creative power of the writer, but nevertheless cannot fail to arouse the admiration



Fig. 61. Henri Matisse: Drawing for *Girl with the Plumed Hat*. Cone Collection, Baltimore Museum of Art.

of the reader for the very reason that they seem to reproduce conversation accurately. The digressions, the breathlessness, the ambling of fantasy, the very incoherence of talk, are something which it is next to impossible to catch, since we are all drilled from childhood to write in one way and to talk in another. Let us cite one example from Gertrude Stein. In *Everybody's Autobiography* occurs the following sentence:

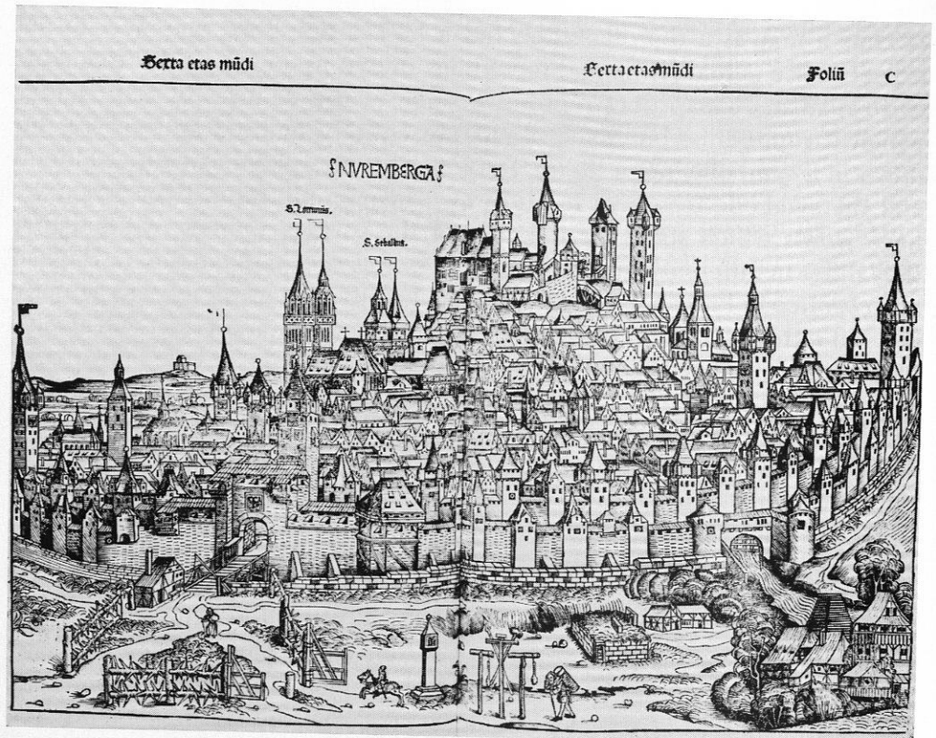


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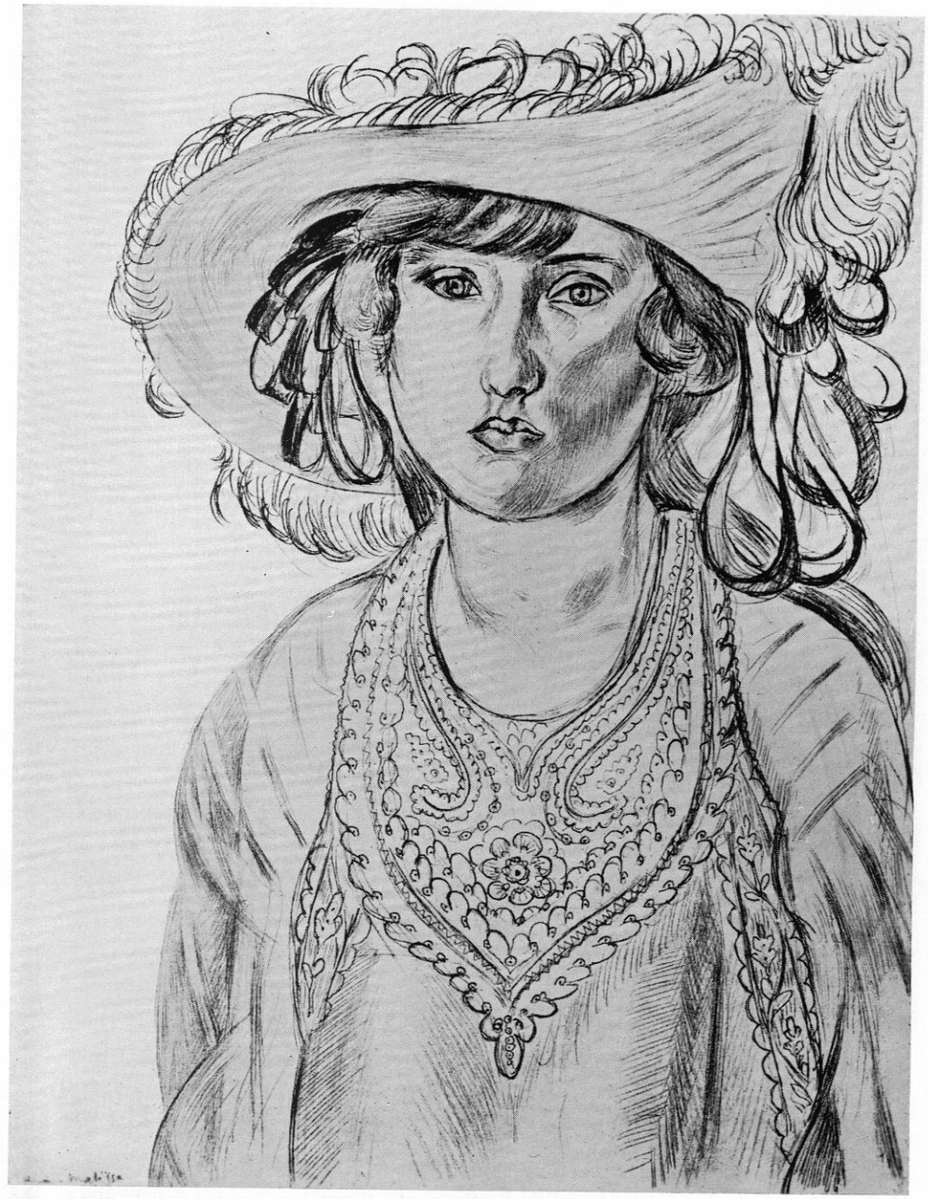


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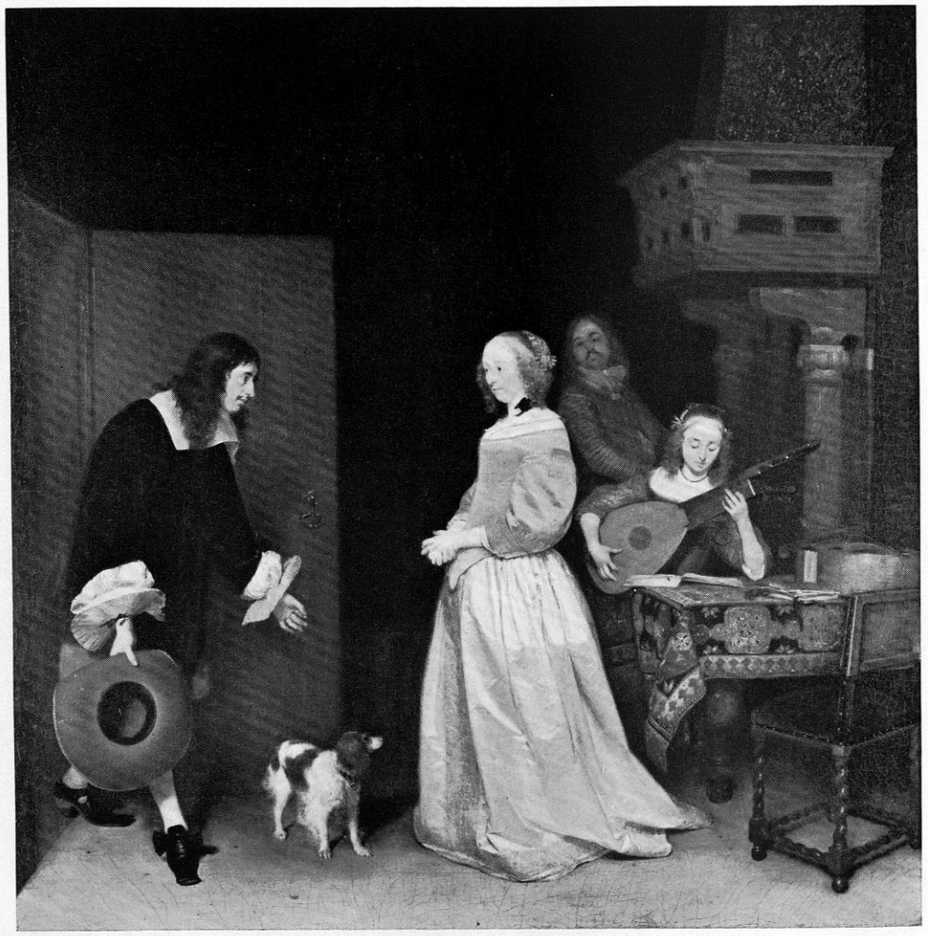


Fig. 62. Gerard Ter Borch: *The Suitor's Visit*. Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

> Bernard Faÿ had been appointed lecturer to the Collège de France which by the way had its four hundredth birthday just then, not that that mattered, not to him nor to us, but anyway we were very close friends then and we had talked about how you came to be appointed professor and he was and so we went to hear him.

It is a safe bet that no professor of English composition would allow a student to write a sentence like that one. He would insist that the irrelevancies be cut out and that the punctuation be seriously modified. He would reduce it to its logical essentials and hence eliminate its psychological overtones. But it is precisely those psychological overtones which give it life. When people talk, they do incorporate into their conversation bits which have no logical connection with the main subject of their talk and such phrases as "but anyway we were very close friends then," enter the conversation by the back door simply because the talker happens to think about them. No one ever got

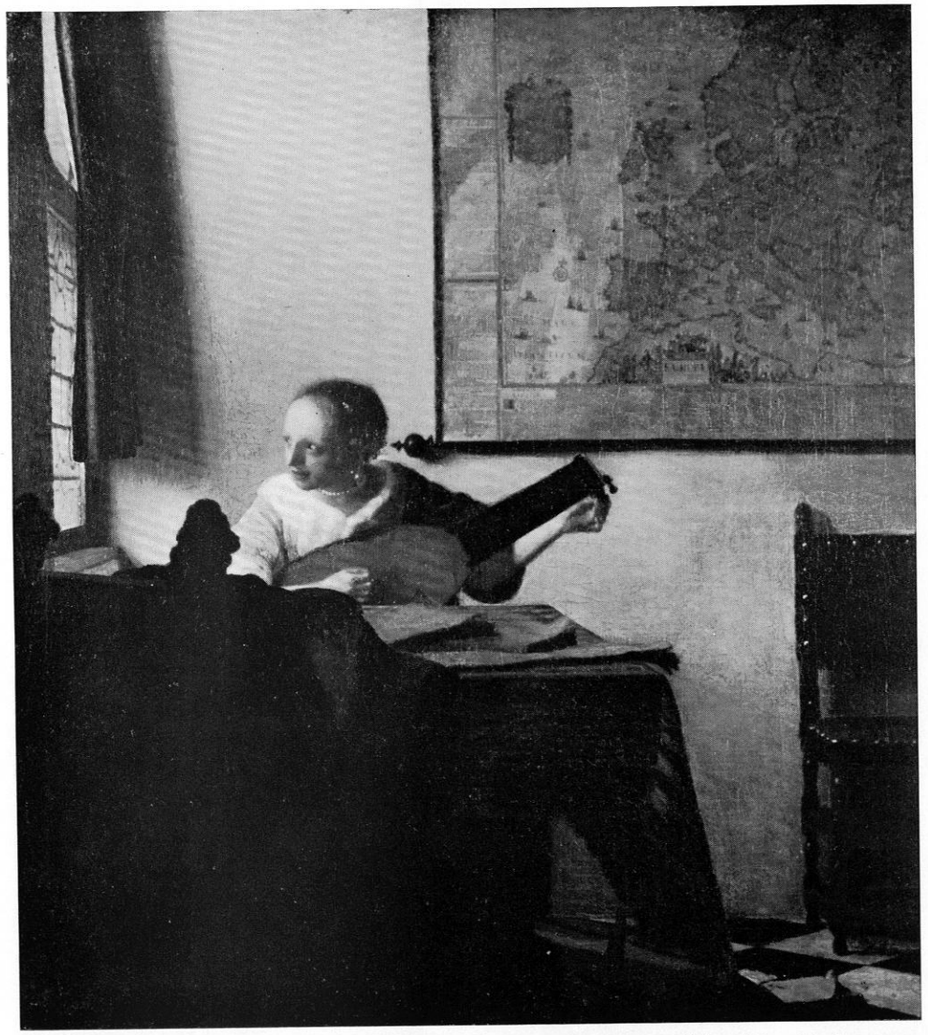


Fig. 63. Jan Vermeer: *Lady with a Lute*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

a clear idea out of anything that Gertrude Stein ever published. But that did not prevent readers from getting a vivid picture of a mind at work. Our point is not that Gertrude Stein could reproduce conversation accurately, but that to do so required self-discipline in the sense that she had to unlearn the rules of academic syntax.

But we can give another type of this sort of thing. No one would say that Shakespeare's greatness lay in the realism of his dialogue. We know perfectly well that no man ever talked in iambic pentameter blank verse. But when we see a play of Shakespeare's, we accept the convention of verse unconsciously, as if we were saying to ourselves, "This is the way people do talk in the Shakespearean world." We can then see a play in which the dialogue is a closer echo of ordinary speech and accept that too, regardless of what Shakespeare did.



Fig. 64. John James Audubon: *Carolina Gray Squirrel*. Baltimore Museum of Art.

For every work of art establishes a world of its own with its own rules and laws.

In music there are dozens of examples of imitative sounds. When Beethoven wrote his *Sixth Symphony* and Rossini his overture to *William Tell*, they introduced passages reproducing the noise of thunder and rain. Thunder and rain are not normal musical sounds and the gods of the weather do not use drums and violins to express themselves. Nevertheless we overlook the obvious fact that convention and selection played their part in these compositions, for no storm was ever so submissive to the limitations of an orchestra

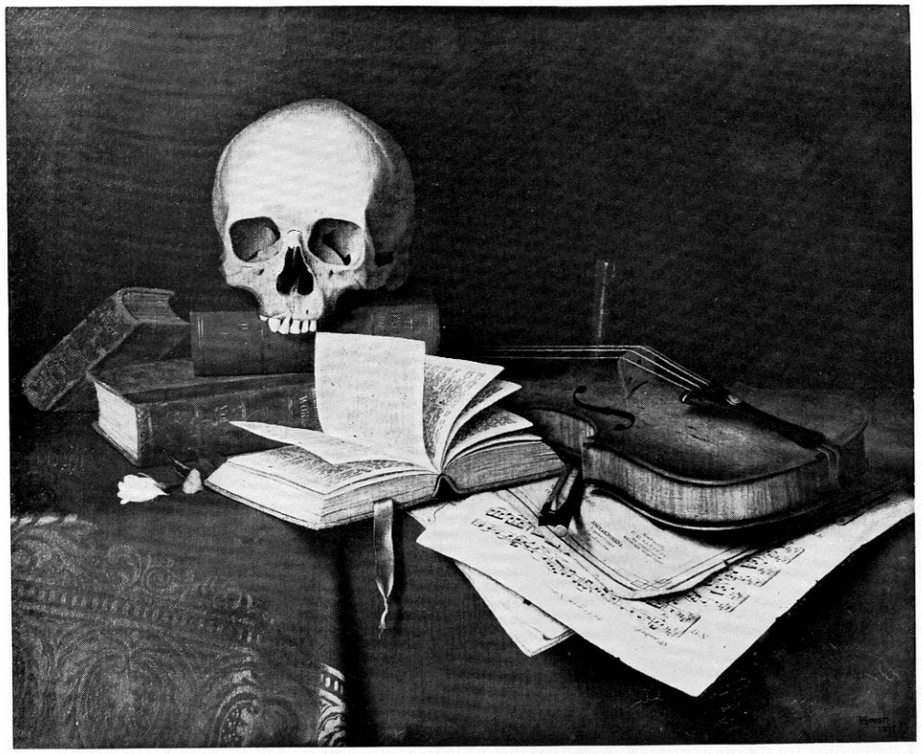


Fig. 65. William M. Harnett: *Mortality and Immortality*. Roland P. Murdock Collection, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kan.

as these were. And no speakers were ever so selective of characteristic mannerisms as those of Lardner and Gertrude Stein. No artist can reproduce all reality.

For however self-denying he may be, he is always there. His contribution may be very great or very small, depending on how self-assertive he is. Sometimes he seems to withdraw and let Nature, as he will say, play the major role. Sometimes he frankly admits that he does the selecting and gives emphasis to the details which he wants emphasized and pours his material into a mold of his own devising. When Dickens made a hypocrite like Uriah Heep talk, he made every sentence hypocritical, though there must have been occasions when there was no call to be hypocritical. Similarly when Jane Austen brings Mrs. Bennett into the conversation, she has her say something which is invariably silly, though again no one can be silly twenty-four hours a day. But both Dickens and Jane Austen were simply following the ancient precept of consistency of character. That precept is a convention for establishing character and is no more true to life than any other technique of communication. Real people are not all of a piece, as we all know, and their mixture of qualities is one of the most difficult obstacles to surmount when we try to understand them. We should prefer them to be all good, all bad, all

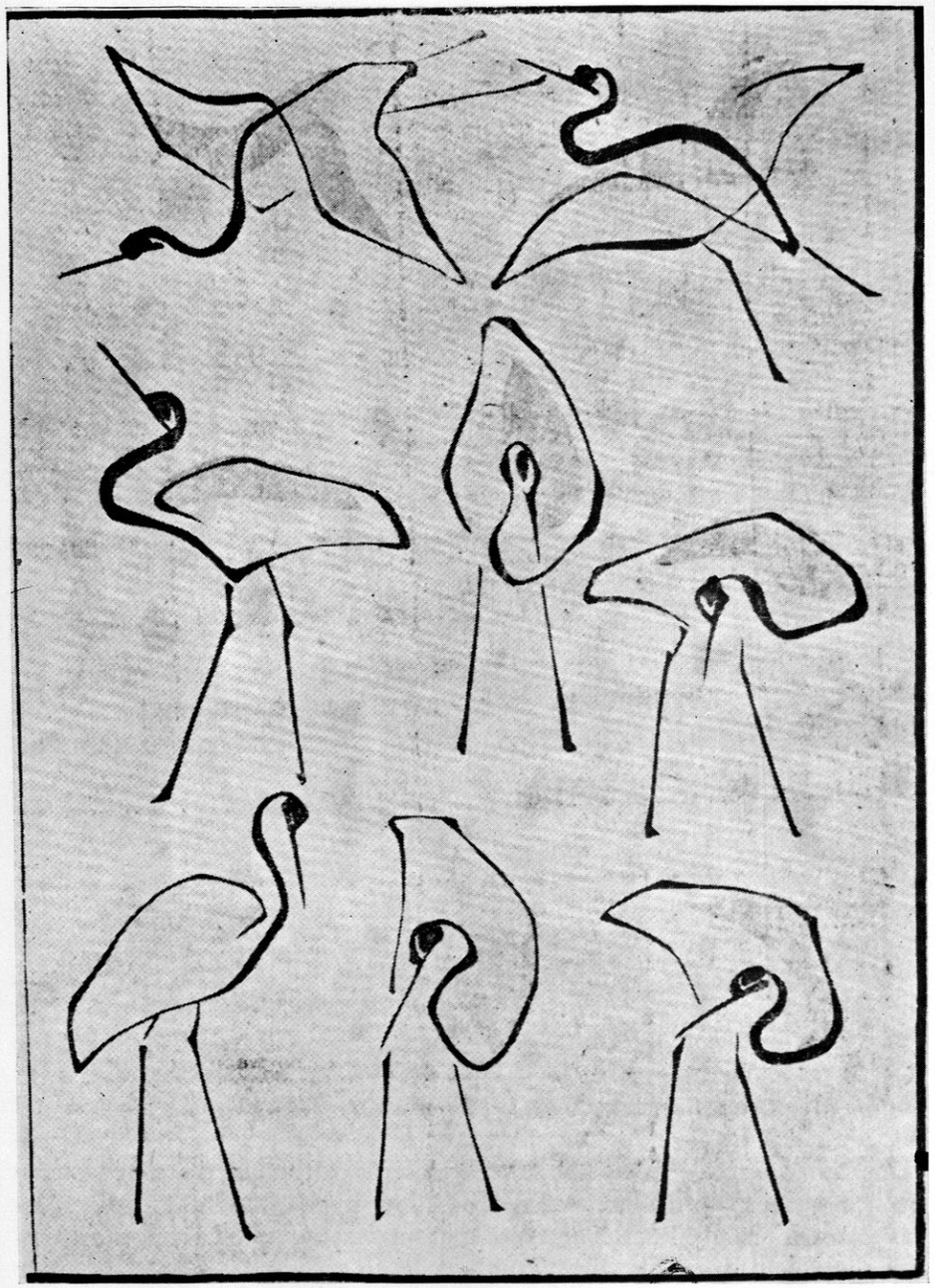


Fig. 66. Hokusai: *Cranes*. Courtesy of Miss Barbara Ivins, Jr.

wise, all foolish, so that we could classify them easily and make their behavior intelligible. But the moment we invent characters we have to simplify them if only to make our narratives move along. To put down everything that goes on in the mind of a human being would not only be confusing to a

reader but impossible. One of the longest novels in English is *Ulysses* and the action takes but a day.

A curious paradox arises from this. It is a platitude that we see Nature through art; the world becomes the justification of the artist's eye. We not only see the Greeks and Romans as their sculptors portrayed them—how else could we see people who died two thousand years ago?—but we have begun to see our contemporaries as they are depicted by whoever happens to be the most popular recorder of the times. A few years ago undergraduates began to look like advertisements for Arrow collars, clubwomen looked like Helen Hokinson's, and their mothers in their youth looked like Gibson girls. Now a ride in the New York subway shows one Modiglianis (Fig. 67) and even Soutines. This phenomenon is due to a multiple cause. First, the people tend to imitate the paintings when they admire them. Second, our eyes begin to see what the artist's eyes see.[1] One of the main roles of representational painting may well be that of stimulating our powers of observation, showing us things which we are not used to seeing. To use an old example, shadows have always been colored, but they were painted either gray or brown until the nineteenth century. If we now see them as colored, it is thanks largely to the Impressionistic painters of France.

In spite of the contribution of painting to accuracy of perception, there have at all times been men to point out that literal representation was not enough. Assuming that the purpose of painting was to produce something beautiful, various schemes were worked out which told the artist how he could be both faithful to Nature and yet represent her in an idealized manner.

One of the earliest of such schemes in modern times has been studied by Professor Erwin Panofsky in his essay on ideal proportions.[2] Proportions in this context are geometrical relations and the tradition that the human body must fit certain geometrical patterns goes back at least to the Greek sculptor, Polyclitus, whose Canon was supposed to exemplify the ideal human body. Both the mediaeval architect Villard de Honnecourt and the German painter Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 68) had their special theories of the correct way to represent the most beautiful proportions. The influence of this tradition has been to make us expect that a canvas, whether a human body is represented on it or not, be so divided that a discernible order may be found in it. The antiquity of this idea has been attested by numerous writers. The Egyptians are said to have had a fixed system of relations between the parts of their temples and these relations are supposed to have had a religious significance. "In the fifth century B.C.," says Eduard Sekler in his lecture, *Beliefs behind Architecture*, "the whole design of the Doric temple became governed by the strict application of a coherent system of proportions." But in more recent

1 The problem of visual perception is extremely complicated. Of recent years the traditional solution, that only an object is needed—in the long run light rays—has been almost entirely rejected. We now know that the perceiver's expectations count at least for as much. The artist helps build up our expectations and forms our habits of seeing things.

2 Now easily found in his *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955).

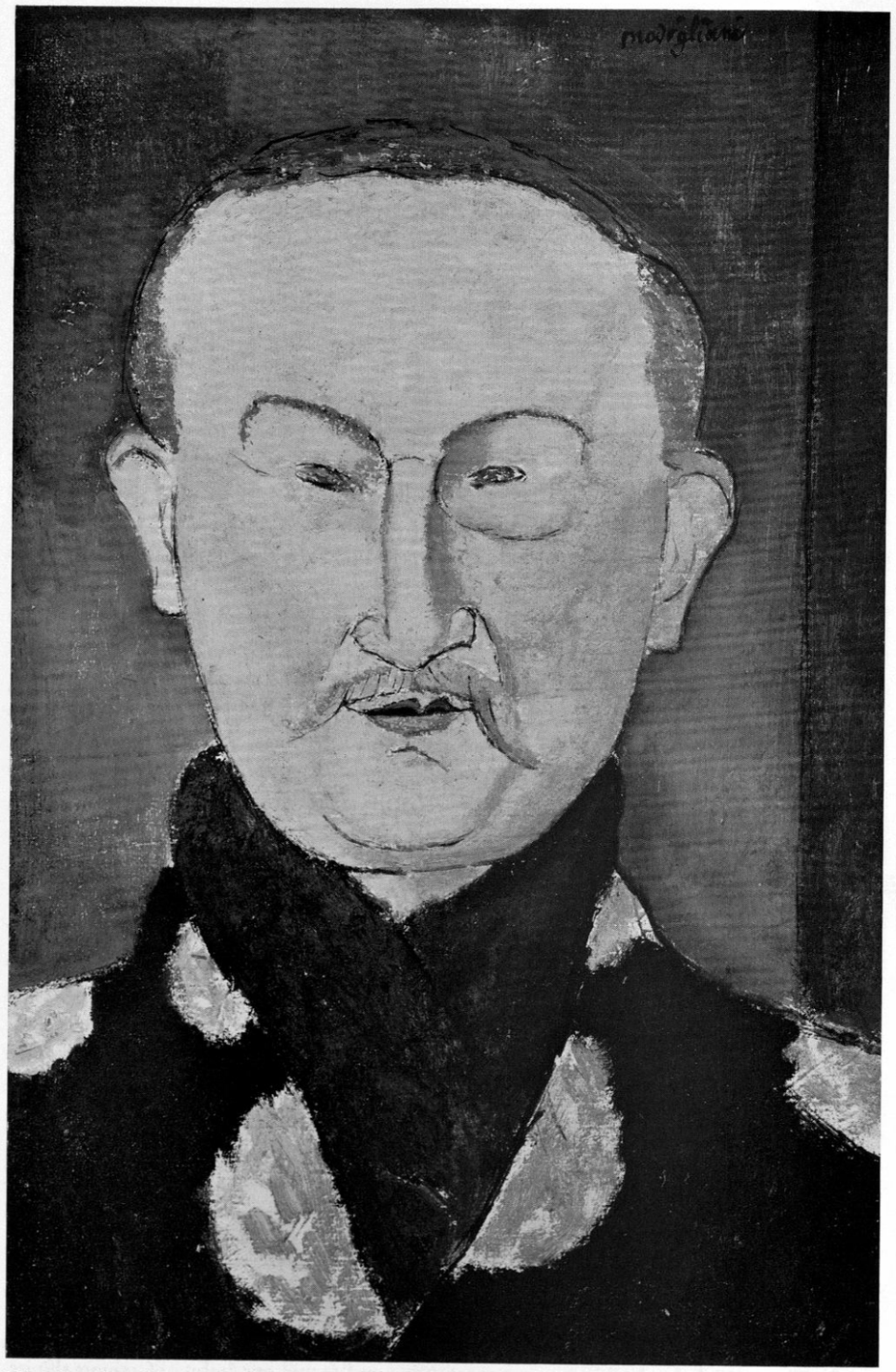


Fig. 67. Amedeo Modigliani: *Portrait of Léon Bakst*. Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Fig. 68. Albrecht Dürer: *Artist Sketching a Recumbant Woman*. Baltimore Museum of Art.

times too we find a man like Degas reported by Paul Valéry as seeing in art "certain mathematical problems, subtler than real mathematics, problems which nobody had been able to elucidate and the existence of which few people surmise. He liked talking of 'scholarly art' saying that a painting was the result of 'scholarly art' while to the innocent eye works of art seem to be born of the happy encounter of a *subject and a talent*."

One of the most famous examples of the mathematical definition of the ideal is that given by the German psychologist Fechner in what he popularized as the Golden Section. The Golden Section could be represented by a line which is so divided that the shorter section is to the longer as the longer is to the sum of the two. This formula could be embodied in the sides of a rectangle, the façades of buildings, or presumably in any object whose short axis could be so related to its long axis. Fechner derived his formula from answers given by subjects in his laboratory to questions of preference which he had put to them.

Professor Jay Hambidge of Yale published in 1920 a book called *Dynamic Symmetry: the Greek Vase*, in which by detailed measurements he discovered a set of spatial relations based upon the "whirling square" which will also be found in paintings (Fig. 69). An analysis of some of the most famous paintings—and we illustrate a few of them here—provides material for demonstrating that whether the artist is aware of it or not, he will use dynamic symmetry in building up his composition. If he is conscious of what he is doing, as George Bellows was in his triple portrait, *Eleanor, Jean and Anna* (Figs. 70a-b), there is of course no argument. But when an artist like Daumier draws a picture and presumably by his eye alone organizes it in accordance with what Hambidge's theory demands, then the aesthetician has a very serious problem on his hands (Figs. 71a-b).

This relationship is mathematically expressed in the Fibonacci series, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21[3]. . ., though 118, 191, 309, 500, 809, 1309 . . . approximates it more closely. In other words, any member of the series divided into the succeeding

3 For a recent discussion of this, see *Symmetry*, by the late Hermann Weyl. The part which is of interest here is reproduced in James R. Newman's *The World of Mathematics* (New York, 1956), pp. 718 ff.

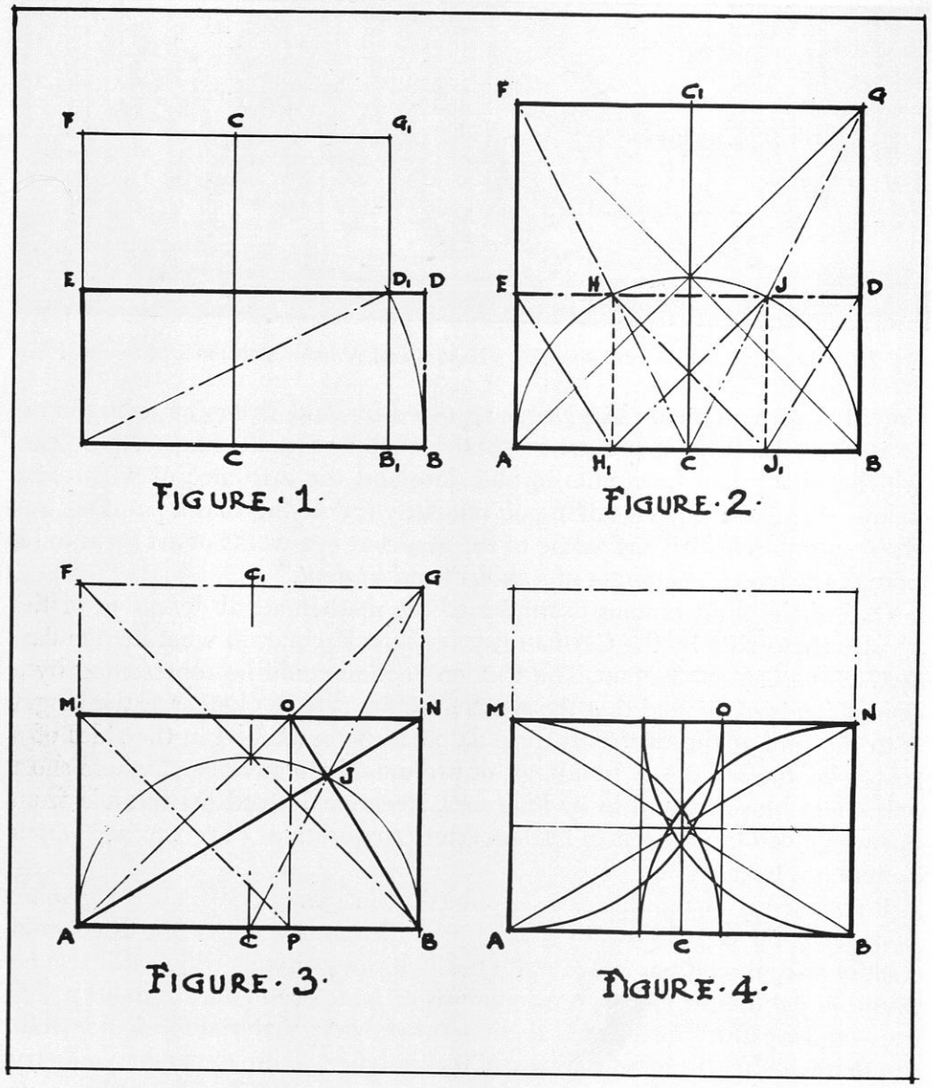


Fig. 69. Diagrams of pictorial construction.

member approximates 1.618 which is the Golden Section. Members divided into alternate members, for instance 500 into 1309, give a quotient which approximates the ratio 2.618 or what is known as the root 5 rectangle ($\sqrt{5}$).

André Lhote, the French painter, in his *Treatise on Landscape Painting*, as well as Hambidge, speaks of how those familiar with morphology find this proportion in nature. He goes on to say, "Minds trained in the study of natural forms . . . know that natural plastic manifestations: whirlwinds, waterspouts, shell or plant-structure, etc., contain in them the most felicitous proportion of those exciting and reassuring elements of which I have been speaking. Since then the art of drawing and painting, subservient to the art of feeling,



Fig. 70a. George Bellows: *Eleanor, Jean and Anna.* Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

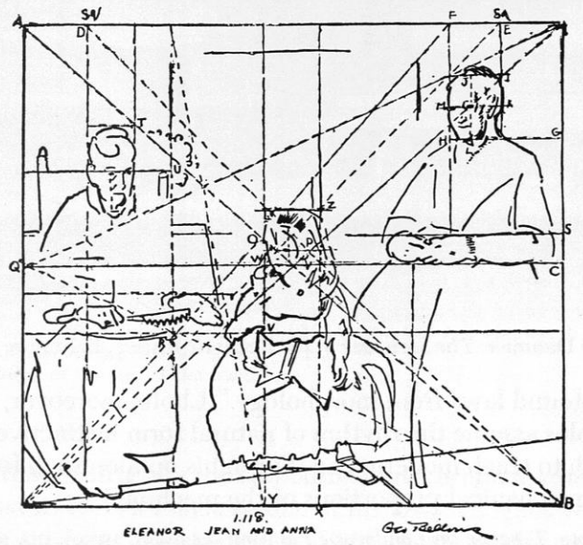


Fig. 70b. George Bellows: Diagram of *Eleanor, Jean and Anna.*

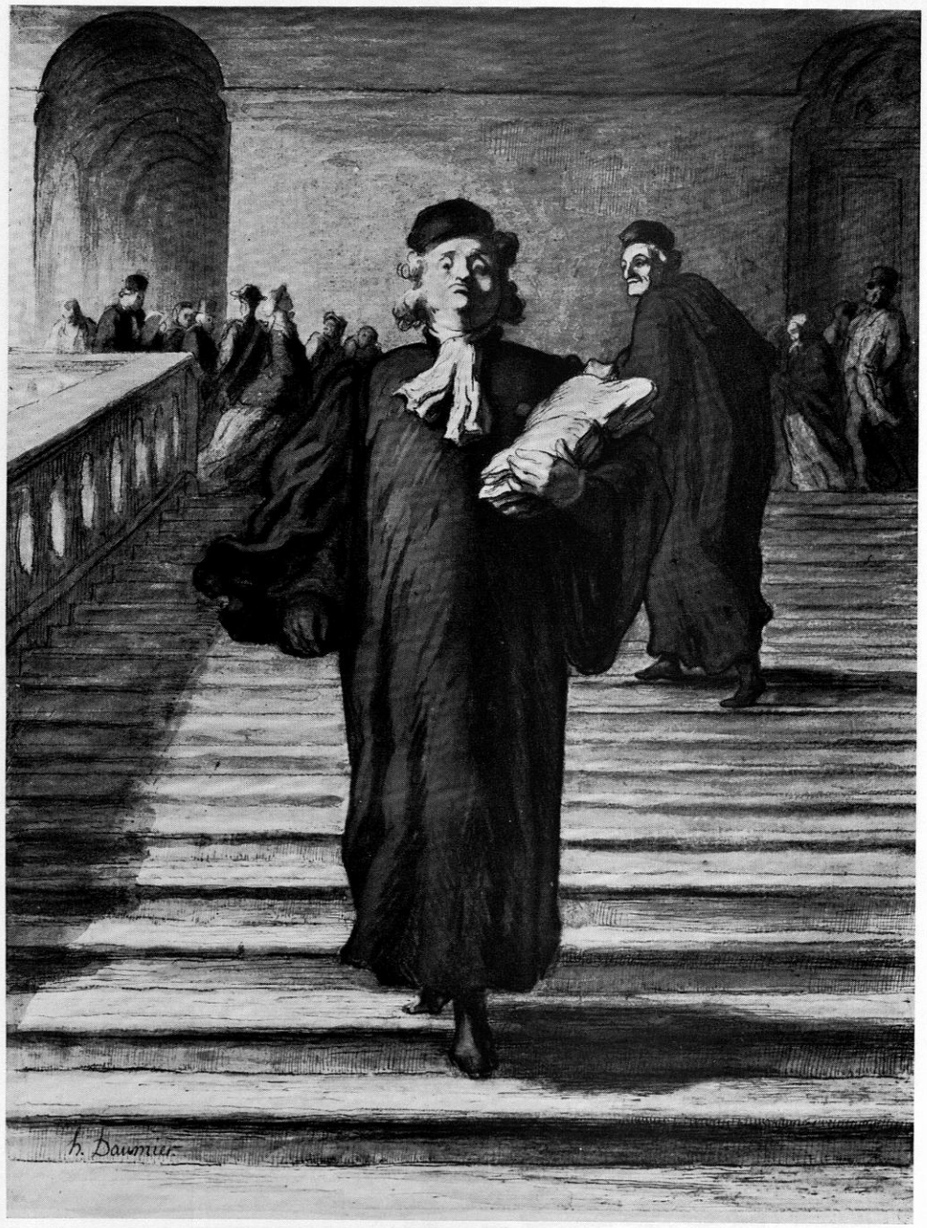


Fig. 71a. Honoré Daumier: *The Staircase of the Palais de Justice*. Baltimore Museum of Art.

derives its profound laws from morphology." Lhote, moreover, believes that primitive peoples assume the rhythm of natural form instinctively and therefore have much to teach modern man. For in his opinion such forms are more vital than the mechanical proportions of the machine.[4]

4 Cf. André Lhote, *Treatise on Landscape Painting* (London, 1950), pp. 38-43. Trans. by W. J. Strachan.

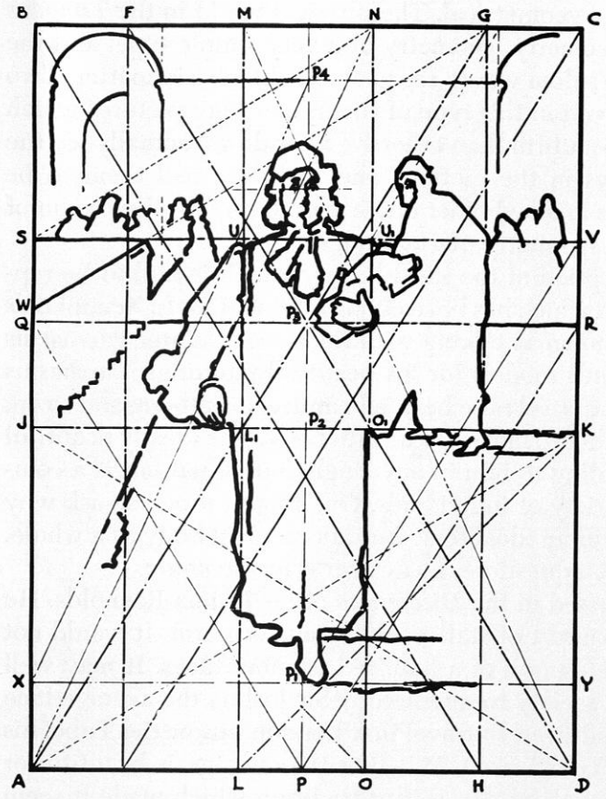


Fig. 71b. Diagram of *The Staircase of the Palais de Justice*.

A.B.G.H.—a whirling sq. rectangle with B. H. the long side being the total height of the picture.
E.F.C.D.—overlapping whirling sq. rectangle, same size.
A.G. & B.H—diagonals of whirling squares.
P^3—point where diagonals cross.
A.Q.P.^{3}P. & P.P.^{3}R.D.—2 whirling sq. rectangles.
A.R.—top of stairway.
L.L.K.D. & A.J.O.O.—overlapping squares, this rectangle forming L.L.^{1}O.^{1}O.
L.M.N.O.—contains the lawyer's body.
J.K.—the top of the shadow and the bottom of lawyer's hand.
S.B.N.U. & U.M.C.V.—overlapping whirling sq. rectangles.
S.V.—the top of balcony and lawyer's shoulders.
W.G.—whirling square diagonal, which parallels S.N. which follows the line of ramp & lawyer's cap.
X.S.V.Y.—two whirling square rectangles divided by the center line at P^1.
X.Y.—lawyer's toe and lower part of his shadow.
A.N. & M.D.—cross at top of lawyer's forehead (M.D. runs through his thumb).
X.P^4—parallels A.N. following shadow & edge of cap.
P^4—on the horizontal of the top of the moulding.

The notion that beauty was the embodiment of certain mathematical ratios is as old at least as Plato's *Timaeus*, one of his few dialogues which has been widely known since its composition and surely one of the most influential documents in Occidental history. To Plato the beautiful was the intelligible

and the intelligible was the geometrical. The physical world in the *Timaeus* was the embodiment of geometry, geometry of a very simple type, and the problem of the Lover of Wisdom was to see geometrical laws in matter. Two problems are always involved in this type of theory: (1) are pictures which embody these laws more beautiful than others? (2) or do we actually see the exemplification of the laws in the pictures and therefore feel them to be beautiful? These questions arise whether one is meditating on the Canon of Polyclitus or the dynamic symmetry of Hambidge.

There is a second conception of the ideal beauty which is said to be represented by the painter and which has been equally influential. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* Socrates is shown as talking with the Greek painter Parrhasius and asking him how he finds models for his beautiful paintings. Parrhasius replies that he chooses a beautiful nose here, a beautiful arm there, and so on, and then fits them all together to make a beautiful body. The ideally beautiful body is never found according to him in any single individual but is a composite collected from a variety of individuals. One might of course ask why one can find an ideal nose or an ideal torso but not an ideal body as a whole. But, alas, as to so many such questions, no answer is forthcoming.

A similar notion is expressed in the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds. He maintains that the ideal is a sort of statistical average or norm. It would not be unlike a composite photograph of a hundred or more faces. It may well have been true that in the society frequented by Sir Joshua the average face was beautiful. But if he had lived to travel in a London bus or the Tube, his impression might have been different. Whether the average is beautiful or not, it must be granted that there was a long tradition which made it seem reasonable to look for it and represent it. For instance, when one reads a book on botany, one hears about "the" rose, "the" lily, "the" dianthus, and not about "this" rose or "some" lilies or "a" dianthus. The scientist is interested in talking about what he would call typical or standard or perfect specimens and to get them he has to generalize. But in order to generalize, he has to overlook individual differences or peculiarities. His specimens can be only what are known in statistics as the mode, those most frequently found. And we all know that in literature criticism often objects to a character or incident on the ground that it does not seem real in the sense of not seeming normal. Is the critic here turning into a sort of scientist? It would seem so.

The tradition that the artist, whether painter or writer, is representing the ideal is clearly seen in the doctrine of consistency of character. Aristotle's famous pupil, Theophrastus, seems to have been the first to argue that human beings, like everything else, fell into certain classes or types. He advanced this thesis to explain why the Greeks, who all spoke the same language and had the same education and descended from the same primordial ancestors, were nevertheless so different from one another. His *Characters*, the Grandiloquent Man, the Slanderer, the Flatterer, were apparently doomed to be such from birth, and if a man is to be presented in a novel, his innate character must first be discovered—or decided upon—by the novelist, whereupon he

must be "true to himself" all through the story. So Horace in the *Ars Poetica* wrote,

> If again
> Honor'd Achilles' chance by thee be seiz'd,
> Keep him still active, angry, unappeas'd,
> Sharp and contemning laws at him should aim,
> Be nought so 'bove him but his sword let claim.[5]

There must, however, have been moments when even Achilles was not angry or bloodthirsty, but such moments did not count when one was estimating his character. So firm was the belief that each man exemplified a type of man, that in the eighteenth century the Swiss mystic Lavater published a book on physiognomies attempting to correlate character with facial types. The influence of Lavater on painting must have been very great (See Fig. 72). It has been shown to be great on the way novelists have described their people.

5 Translation of Ben Jonson.



Fig. 72. Johann Kaspar Lavater: Physiognomies.

Though we are perhaps more interested than our forefathers were in individual rather than class traits, we too have to face the problem of how it happens that thousands of individuals, not merely human but also vegetable and animal, can be so much alike. One of the most famous answers is that of Plato to the effect that to each natural class of things there corresponds an "idea" or archetype in accordance with which it is formed. In Saint Augustine these ideas became the divine patterns in the mind of God the Creator. These archetypes were eternal; their particular exemplifications were temporal. The archetypes were immutable; the exemplifications changeable. The archetype was symbolized by an abstraction, let us say, *Humanity*, while its individual exemplifications were concrete things. The differences between the two were so great that some philosophers believed there must be two worlds, one of which was called the Intelligible World, the other the Perceptual World. And then since most men wanted to identify the real with the everlasting, it was inferred that only the Intelligible World could be called real in any serious sense of that word. Oddly enough, the artist who wanted to paint the real would according to this way of thinking have to turn away from what he saw with his eyes to what he believed to be ideal. And it was sometimes maintained that artists had the peculiar faculty of seeing the ideal in the particular spatio-temporal things and of reproducing it in paintings. Realism thus became the very opposite of copying ordinary visual objects.

Sometimes the ideal in this context was called the essential. If now one asks why it is better to reproduce the essential rather than the non-essential, the answer is given in still another meaning which was attached to the word "idea." The ideal was not only that which a class of things had in common or the pattern in accordance with which they had been created by God, but it was the ideal also in the sense of what ought to be. In common speech we often hear people say that no circle drawn on paper is a perfect circle and no flesh and blood man a perfect man. If one wishes to identify reality with perfection, then it is obviously what ought to be, not what is. Like the definitions at the beginning of a book on plane geometry, it expresses the standards which actual things approximate but never reach. They are like mathematical limits. This gives rise to a shocking dilemma: "We want absolute perfection and live in an imperfect world. We have to choose between perfection and imperfection, between certainty and plausibility. If beauty were a perceptual revelation of perfection, the ideal, then it would be that link between the two worlds to which we aspire. But we know perfection through the reason, not through the senses. Beauty, however, is revealed to us through the senses, not through the reason."

This gave the artist a noble and indeed an indispensable task to perform, a task which the camera could never do so well. If a portrait, for instance, presented to the human eye the essence of the person portrayed, then the onlooker saw something more than an image of a particular man, a sort of map; he was being shown what the person *really* was, not what he seemed to be. The artist is still representing something, but he is putting into material form

something which in its true nature is not material. If it is true that artists have that kind of insight and that they can put it down in visual form on canvas, then they are depicting things as they ought to be, not as they are in the Perceptual World. There would always be some resemblance between, let us say, a statue of a beautiful woman and the beautiful woman herself, but whatever imperfections might exist in the flesh and blood woman would disappear in the statue. Who decides what are imperfections is usually not stated by the men who adhere to this theory.

To go into all the details and ramifications of such a doctrine would involve us in the history of Platonism and Neo-Platonism and that would befog the issue. It is enough to say that all such theories of the artist's purpose are based ultimately on philosophy, not on psychology. Nevertheless they gave rise to a split in the camps of painters and critics as early as the seventeenth century when Cardinal Bellori attacked Caravaggio for turning his eyes away from the Ideal to the Natural. The Naturalist maintained that all one did was to look at things and paint them; the Idealist that one looked at things and painted their ideal or essential traits. By the time of Ingres, in the early nineteenth century, the breach widened and on the one hand there were the academic painters who said that they were painting ideal beauty and on the other the Anti-Idealists who were inclined to ridicule such claims and satisfy themselves with copying nature as it appeared to them.

This latter program was more easily stated than carried out. When Courbet came along and boasted of copying nature without embellishments, it did not take him long to realize that the artist's temperament would never be eliminated and that, as Zola said, he would always be seeing the world through it. If this was true, then it was impossible for a man simply to see objects-as-they-are; one can see only objects-as-they-seem-to-oneself. The personal equation is always there, so that each painter has a visual world of his own. There was immediately let loose upon the aesthetic public a series of manifestoes expounding the supposed nature of vision.[6] For instance, in Cézanne the object became a construction of geometric solids with colors determining their distance. With the Impressionists, on the other hand, the object dissolved into light, since what we see, they quite correctly said, is colored surfaces. A painter like Monet (Fig. 73) soon woke up to the fact that if a visual object was a pattern of colors and if the painter was confined to reproducing the visual object, there would be no permanent object to paint. For the visual surface changes with the illumination and the sun as it moves from east to west modifying the colors which can be seen. Hence he followed the doctrine to its logical conclusion and set down a series of impressions of the same forms—haycocks, cathedral façades, poplars, water lilies—at various hours of the day. The object, having become the purely visual object, is a shimmering surface of spots of color, something which changes from moment to moment, something which the painter must catch on the wing. If in addition to this the artists each saw things in their own personal

6 Some of these are discussed in Gauss, *Aesthetic Theories of French Artists*.



Fig. 73. Claude Monet: *Rouen Cathedral*. Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

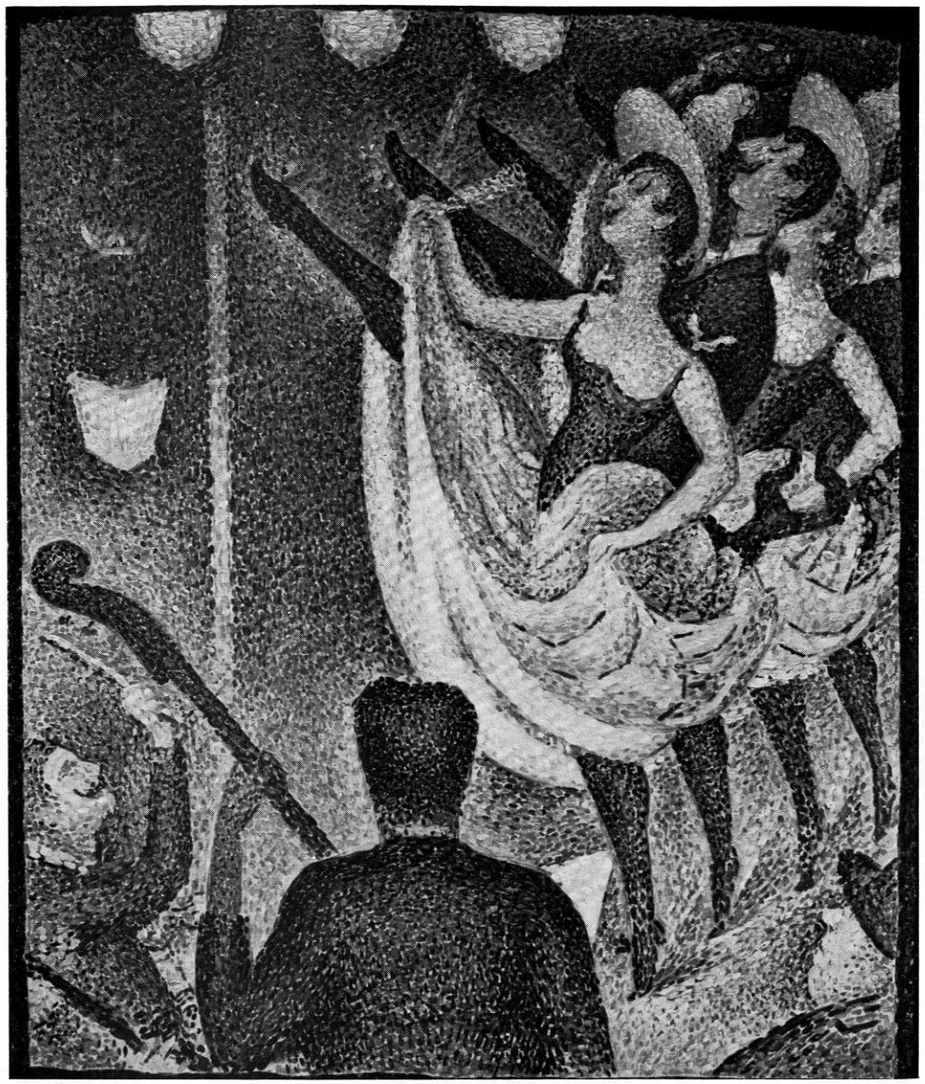


Fig. 74. Georges Seurat: *Le Chahut*. Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

way and if what they saw was fleeting, then it would be folly to talk about a single world which would be the world of *The Painter*.

This would seem to imply that the artist is nothing more than a machine for recording impressions of color and shape and few artists wanted to turn into cameras. When Seurat entered the scene (Fig. 74) he was willing to accept the visual theories of the Impressionists, but he reintroduced the notion that the artist must also organize what he saw when he came to putting it down on canvas. Few painters were ever more conscientious than Seurat in designing their pictures and, as is also true of Poussin, his canvases were constructed in accordance with the laws of the Golden Section. If one were



Fig. 75. Paul Cézanne: *Still Life*. Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

to eliminate the recognizable objects in a painting by Seurat and leave only the structural lines, one would have a non-objective painting similar to those of our own times.

But instead of immediately following Seurat, painting followed Monet and Cézanne (Fig. 75), taking from Cézanne his theory of spatial perception and from Monet his theory that the object was the purely visual and not tactile object. In such a painter as Matisse the tactile qualities of the object all but disappear. It becomes flattened and modified to fit a visual pattern which may be suggested by its skeletal shape and movement but which is supposed to be free to elongate itself or compress itself as the painter's imagination desires. The fact that people, jugs, flowers, tables, and chairs are solid objects which can be moved about in space is irrelevant to him. Probably no painter was ever more faithful to Denis' dictum that the painting is first of all a flat surface divided into colored areas. He created a new visual world, a world which was derived to be sure from the world of three dimensions, but one in which the artist's eye and imagination were the dominant sources of order.

This world was also explored—and with quite different results—by Picasso and the Cubists (Fig. 76). Reverting to what they had been interested in taking over from Cézanne, they openly admitted that they were not copying



Fig. 76. Pablo Picasso: *Two Girls Reading*. Garrett Collection, Evergreen Foundation, Baltimore.

the world as it seems to the eye but as it is known to thought. An object, they said, may seem flat, for the eye can see only one side of it at a time, but after all we know that it is solid, occupying three dimensions, and it is folly to turn one's back on knowledge. Hence the cylinders, cubes, and prisms were brought back and, regardless of naturalistic vision, were organized on the canvas. This was one of the greatest revolutions in painting that had occurred since the Italian Renaissance. If Matisse rejected physics for the sake of vision, the Cubists might be said to have rejected vision for the sake of physics, though both statements are exaggerated. At any rate both camps

liberated the artist's imagination from what they believed to be slavery to tradition and yet both were representational. Matisse maintained that lines, movement of forms, and colors could stimulate an emotion which could be stimulated only by painting. Picasso maintained that by presenting the world as it was known to be through physics a similar emotional shock could be stimulated.

Ever since the beginning of the twentieth century painters have been divided into what, in order to avoid the standard labels, we shall baptize the Visualists and the Intellectualists. One of the most ironical aspects of the two approaches is that they reproduce the conflict between Ingres and Delacroix who held respectively that structure and color were the two essential marks of a good painting. For Ingres, as for David before him, painting was colored drawing; for Delacroix it was above all color. Yet no one nowadays looking at a Delacroix would fail to see the structure emerging out of the color; no one looking at an Ingres would fail to see more than drawing.[7] This is inevitable, for all objects, unless they are transparent, have some color and all colored areas have some shape.

The Visualist camp now raised again the question of vision. And the outcome was that they asserted what is probably true, that we see with our whole minds and not merely with our eyes. But the whole mind includes the unconscious as well as the conscious, our emotions as well as our sensations, and it might be argued that the purest form of vision is that of dreams where the laws of physics seem to have little jurisdiction. But for that matter we know that we do not see all that is to be seen in waking life. The eye is selective and the selection may be made by what we are looking for, what our interests dictate, just as our rejections may be made by what repels us, what we hate, what we do not want to see. In dreams, as we have learned from psychoanalysis, the inhibitions of waking life are often released as they are in fantasy, and though there are also laws which govern our dreams, they are the laws of psychology, not of physics and chemistry. The eye awake suffers from the discipline of speech, of science, of morals, of social custom. We are constantly correcting our vision by what we know to be the facts, saying, as it were, to ourselves, "This cannot be so." When we look down a street or a railroad track, we see the curbs or the rails converging in the distance, but we know that they do not so converge as physical objects. When we look at a solid object, we see only the side facing us, but that does not prevent our saying that we are seeing something solid.

If the artist, it is claimed, is not to turn his back on his personal vision, he must forget these corrections, this discipline of knowledge, and be open and above board in seeing things freely. His personal reality must become a super-reality, his own individual vision of the world unlimited and uncorrected by either reason or logic. To free the painter from the chains of rationality was the problem, just as for Matisse and his group it was to free

7 The difference is of course one of emphasis. It corresponds with certain modifications to what Eduard von Woelfflin called the linear and the *mahlerisch*.

him from convention. But exactly as our dreams and fantasies are self-propelled and proceed without regard for the laws of physical science, so our paintings will reproduce objects which have been transmuted into psychological rather than physical objects. The kind of picture which would result might be horrible rather than beautiful, but at least it would be faithful to the artist's personality.

The Intellectualists soon saw on the other hand that if they were to reproduce the world as they knew it to be and not as the eye saw it or the mind imagined it, the essential features would be lines, flat surfaces, shapes, organized according to some system of order. Popular expositions of physics had said that physical objects are electric charges whizzing about in empty space and that our belief in solidity is due to human frailty. A painter would be hard put to it to paint electric charges, but he could give an observer some idea of the whizzing by drawing lines moving rapidly in this direction and that. The lines of course do not actually move, but they could be so drawn that they would look as if they were moving. According to the German aesthetician Theodor Lipps, our bodies tend to take on the pattern of what we see in paintings, sculptures, and architecture. We "feel ourselves into" such objects. We make incipient movements when we see the reproduction of a dynamic pattern, stretching ourselves upward with verticals and expanding with horizontals. So when we hear highly accented music or verse, we tend to beat time with our fingers or feet. No one doubts any longer that musical rhythms are emotional. And it may well be that visual rhythms are also. The truth may be that sensitivity to such things varies from person to person and that just as music leaves some people unmoved, so does the dynamic force of paintings.

We have tried to suggest in this chapter how ambiguous the simple sentence is that says that a painting is a representation of real or imaginary objects. The ambiguities are not our invention nor is the list of them complete. It is derived from both the history of painting itself and from that of aesthetic theory. The point is that the word "object" means and has meant a variety of things: the object as described by physics, the visual object supposedly seen by all men in common, the object as it ought to be (the ideal object), and so on. If we do not always recognize the objects which we see in pictures, we should never forget that the camera itself distorts (Fig. 77). To state flatly what an object looks like without including the conditions of observation is then impossible.

Yet we often do criticize paintings on the ground that they have distorted the objects represented. We are like the child who thinks that there is "a way to draw a man," or a house or a cat or dog. Upon examination it turns out that we assume a standardization of vision. The child speaks as if he thought that what has a standard name, man, horse, dog, or cat, must have a standard appearance. In a sense he is right, for historically appearances do become standardized. But the artist may be expected to see things in his own way.

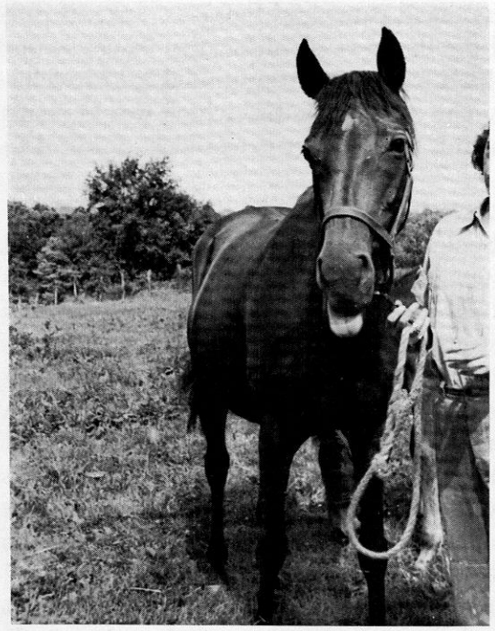


Fig. 77. Photograph of a horse.

We see such standardization when we look at religious paintings, paintings of the Annunciation,[8] the Crucifixion, the Deposition, where changes in the manner of illustrating these events have occurred very slowly. Standardization need not cramp the artist's imagination any more than grammar and syntax cramp the writer's. For, as we have said, *all communication demands a standard code or language.* In fact, no sooner does an innovation occur in the history of an art than it too becomes conventionalized. The great innovators are likely to be called unintelligible since they break away from the customary modes of expression. But their disciples may follow obediently in their footsteps and carry on their master's innovations as standard operating procedure. If one were to be utterly individual, individual in choice of subject matter and in the manner of presenting it, clearly one would be also utterly unintelligible. For there would presumably be nothing in common between oneself and one's fellows. Such complete individuality would of course be impossible, since we happen to be all human beings, and even the simplest gesture of a child can be interpreted by those who know him. We may never succeed in accurately reading an artist's intentions, but we can certainly make some sense out of practically everything. For nothing made by a human being will be without some traces of his humanity.

Such then are the problems of representational painting. They vary from what the artist believes to be the most literal reproduction of his subject matter to the freest interpretation of it. As the artist moves away from literalness he will move in the direction of interpretation. Our next chapter will deal with that aspect of paintings.

8 See Chapter IV.

Chapter IV Painting as Interpretation

Though we may have the impression that when we look at the world we see it objectively and simply note "the facts," it is more likely that all perception contains an element of what we can only call "interpretation." The very selection of detail is determined by the observer's interests and expectations. We do not merely see, we look. And looking, as contrasted with undirected seeing, is guided by curiosity or by a desire to find out whether an idea is true or not. Moreover we are often aware of situations in which we unconsciously interpret what we see or hear. When we are talking with a friend, we read into his facial expression or his tone of voice or his choice of words or his gestures indications of his state of mind and character which are not on the surface. When we say that someone looks pleased or happy or angry or hostile or worried, we are interpreting what we see. For we obviously cannot see the pleasure or unhappiness or worry or anger or hostility. And sometimes we make serious mistakes in our interpretation of the outward signs.

We do the same sort of thing when we are dealing with animals whose states of mind are even more concealed than those of human beings. We have no way of really knowing what a dog feels when he wags his tail or what a cat feels when he switches his. But we interpret their gestures as signs of inner feelings nevertheless. Sometimes we even extend the technique to landscape, as when we indulge in what Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy and speak of smiling meadows, frowning mountains, angry seas, majestic trees, and laughing brooks. How conscious we are of what we are doing in such cases depends on how sophisticated we may be.

Some of us are more aware of our perceptual interpretations than others and would admit that the extension of human emotions to animals, plants, and natural scenery at least gives us a feeling of kinship with the universe, if it does nothing more. It is probable that anyone, if confronted with the question, "How do you know that Mr. Soandso was hostile to you?" would answer, "Well, he looked hostile," or, "He spoke in a hostile manner." It is very seldom that a hostile person introduces the subject of his hostility himself. Indeed if he really is hostile to you, he might try not to show it. Speech may not exist for the exclusive purpose of concealing thought, but it frequently does conceal