

THE PASSING OF THE FUTURISTS

And a Word on the Problems of the Subjective Painter

BY MARY CASS CANFIELD

THE pained astonishment created by the first appearance of Futurism is, happily, a thing of the past. In polite circles the subject is now ignored, much as if it had been a saddening aberration of the human mind. The multitude having had its laugh out, has passed on—to fresher objects of derision.

To an outsider, the aim of the Futurist seems to be to express, on canvass or in clay, the abstract and composite reactions personal to the artist, by means of lines, or patterns, or masses, or colors, springing arbitrarily from his consciousness and having no necessary connection with any lines, or patterns, or colors existing in the visible world before him.

When in front of a violin, for instance, the Futurist will not draw the violin as his eye sees it, but the total impression produced by it upon his sensibilities, not only by its shape and texture, but by its emotion-evoking associations. He must necessarily express himself in symbols, and his method will not differ from that of the man who first chiselled signs upon a rock and, in his own mind, identified those signs with some sight, or sound, or sensation actually experienced by him. The method of the Futurist, then, is the method of the creator of an alphabet. He is a dealer, not in *representations*, but in *associations*.

HE will not, he asserts, be limited by the mere rendering on his canvas of the *objective*. His art—an expression in symbols of his most subjective sensations—seems to him more inspired by the rhythm of the universe, more poetic, more sincere, than could be any accurate representation of mere objective form. The hieroglyphics that he traces are abstracts of past experiences and emotional adventures. They are marks made on his soul by the seething spirit of his time.

It is, for instance, a very noticeable tendency in Futurist art to cover the canvas with a confused mass of lines, occupying every inch of available space and giving an impression of crowding and lack of repose in the design. This is not an accidental phenomenon but a very definite result of the impression made on the minds of such artists by the speed, tension and chaotic complexity of modern life.

OBVIOUSLY a man's temperament is inseparable from his handiwork. Thus, we can obtain in Titian's creations, his love of the splendors and greatnesses of life; in Giorgione's, his strong sense of the passing moment; in Michael Angelo's, the tortured violence of his sensibilities, or in Watteau's, his graceful and melancholy scepticism. These are the spiritual qualities dwelling subtly behind those artists' revelations of recognizable form. And it is in this union of the objective and subjective worlds—in life seen through the colored window of a temperament—that we have been accustomed to find the complete and satisfying work of art.

CONCERNING the sanity of the Futurist's process, there have existed many—for the greater part hilarious—doubts. It is a process which any of us might indulge in.

Were I, for instance, to order myself to put

down in symbols the impression produced upon my subconsciousness by a ride on the top of a Fifth Avenue bus on a fine winter's morning, I think I could manage to cover a canvas with signs which would, with the utmost sincerity, represent to me that particular impression. I would first draw two parallel and perpendicular lines, starting them somewhere near the bottom of the picture, and I would top them with a horizontal line about half way up the canvas. This arrangement of lines would, for some reason which I am unable to explain, satisfactorily symbolize the bus. Then I would choose a point higher up on the canvas and from it draw two heavy descending lines set at an angle wide enough to include the hieroglyph already referred to. These new lines would, for some equally obscure reason, accurately represent to me the velocity of the rapidly moving motor. Then I would probably introduce in various corners of the picture, three or four red streaks indicating morning sunlight, a portion of a fur neckpiece, the crown of a man's derby hat, a small, round disc near a stiff black line (symbolizing the obligatory dime and its relation to the conductor's metal box) and, with a few more touches of like nature, my work would be complete. I would call it "The Top of the Bus" and it would doubtless be the source of infinite merriment among unbelievers at the Futurist exhibition, where there seems to be no cause to imagine that it would not be hung.

TO suspect the sincerity or good faith of a Futurist is a good deal like questioning the integrity of a man who chooses to pass his entire life alone on a mountain top. It is the peculiar irony of his position that, striving as he does for a self-revelation more complete than the ordinary, seeking somehow to synthesize and give form to his most complicated reactions and sensations, he should yet discover his final creation to be, as a rule, an insoluble puzzle to the greater part of humanity.

Futurists like to point to El Greco as a fine example of deliberate distortion of form and to ask you triumphantly if you can deny the Spaniard's greatness. In the face of El Greco's imaginative power, his rhythmic sense, and decorative instinct; in the face of the charm and sincerity of the Italian Primitives—often so ignorant of the rules of perspective—or in the face of Cézanne's significant simplifications of form, it is obviously ridiculous to insist on accurate representation as the *sine qua non* of great art.

Art should be "stronger than rules." It is only when a man's objection to rules or conventions is ascribable to laziness or to the lack in him of a sense of harmonious structure that his works fail to justify themselves. A Whitman or a Cézanne is strong enough to create, not only new thoughts, but new forms.

The case of the Futurist, is, however, different. For he has chosen to express himself in a language which is not only exempt from past rules, but is deliberately coined and constructed by *himself alone*. His mental associations between sensation and form are merely hieroglyphs, signs to the meaning of which we can have no clue, inasmuch as the meaning of them varies in every artist.

ART as subjective as this can hardly have a universal appeal. I remember that I once walked through an exhibition of canvasses by Matisse, Picasso and other painters, catalogue in hand, conscientiously examining the pictures one by one. Presently I came across a pen and ink drawing, which, by consulting my catalogue, I discovered to be entitled "Nasturtiums." It was a series of intricate lines woven into a diagram that the most skilled of geometers need not have blushed for. Well, curiously enough, the network of the design somehow found an obscure echo in my subconsciousness and I was forced to admit to myself that the artist's psychic impression of nasturtiums did, by some rare chance, coincide with my own abstract and until then unformulated idea of these flowers.

The outside response, however, depending as it does on identity of mental concepts is, for the Futurist, bound to be of the slenderest. He can only hope to hit the target once in a great many attempts. Perhaps those who are "in the movement" fully understand each other. But, somehow, one doubts it. A similarity of brain tissue would be necessary, one imagines, before two minds could, with complete and immediate comprehension, grasp all of one another's abstract conceptions when expressed in such purely arbitrary terms.

COULD I, for instance, commission a painting entitled "The Violin" from sixty futurist artists and be at all certain that any two of them would in any way resemble each other? Could Max Weber, for example, understand the personal hieroglyphics of Boccione's "Violin"? Could Matisse follow Picasso's? Could any one of them guess that the emotion-stirring germ at the bottom of each canvas was the same—namely, a violin?

It is only fair to the Futurist, however, to explain that he lays a marked emphasis on design, on the creation of harmonious forms, and colors, as vital parts of the *Pattern* which he imposes upon his canvas.

The Futurist often asserts the unimportance of subject and prefers to give his work no definite title. He dislikes the word "picture" as applied to his creations, for he is not, in any sense, *picturing* anything in the world. He is merely writing down an abstract of his emotions. He is in revolt against "story telling," or literary pictures. He claims that his work is in a region of pure esthetics where the artist's only preoccupation is with form, line and color, in and for themselves, and untouched by any limiting purpose of representation or verisimilitude.

THIS implies that, since there are no tactile values in his work, he can only be judged according to his power as a decorative artist. But if his aim is more complex; if he gives his work a title and if his purpose is not only to appeal to our feeling for form, and color, and pattern, but to convey to us his moods and sensations as well, then the Futurist is a failure, because his symbols, however decoratively grouped, can give us no certain clue as to their meaning inasmuch as they are the result of an unreasoning and purely instinctive method of mental association, *personal to him!*