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The Rise and Decline of Cubism

By CLIVE BELL

THERE is no reason why an artist should not express himself as completely in abstract as in any other kind of form: there is, therefore, no reason in the nature of things why a cubist picture should not be as good as any other kind of picture. And, in fact, Picasso has expressed himself as completely in his cubist as in any of his earlier or later works; and Picasso at his best holds his own with no matter which of his contemporaries. So let us hear no more about Cubism being an elaborate joke—a *fumisterie;* the fact that so many able, ambitious and hungry young painters submitted themselves for so many years to so rigid and so very unlucrative a discipline should dispose once and for all, I think, of that popular middle-class fallacy.

Cubism followed logically from the enthusiastic rediscovery by the Cézannides of an artistic platitude—a platitude which, since the Renaissance, had fallen as Victorian preface-writers used to say "into a strange neglect"—the platitude that the science of representation has nothing to do with art. Art consists in formal self-expression: a pot, a carpet, a tile or a temple is as much a work of visual art as a portrait or a landscape. The subject is important only as a means: either as a means of provoking the mood the artist is to express; or, more often as I begin to suspect, of suggesting the form in which an artist can express a pre-existent mood. Only the other day, in conversation, Vlaminck was categorical on this point. I wake up, said he, with a mood—*une disposition, une inquiétude*—and I look about me indoors and out till I have found an equivalent. At any rate, when you hear a globe-trotter talking about Siena or Hong-kong being full of "good subjects", mistrust him: there is no such thing as a good subject unless you have a temperament to match it.

Cubism

Geometry and Painting

WHEN the school of 1900 had discovered once again that representation has nothing to do with art you would expect it to have begun looking attentively at primitive pictures and oriental carpets. That is just what it did.

There was no reason why the young painters of that age should have looked at geometrical diagrams; and no reason why they should not. They did. The story goes (I vouch not for it, though I have it on excellent authority) that the eyes of two or three of them who found themselves one day with Maurice Princet, the actuary, lighted on a geometrical problem at which he had been working—I should like to believe that it was Euclid 1.47, but Princet I suppose would despise such child's play. "Ah! how beautiful that is—how very very beautiful," exclaimed the painters. Princet thought they were talking about the demonstration; they were talking about the picture. Be that as it may, for one reason or another, the school of abstract painting which was the necessary outcome of the new movement became quite unnecessarily wedded to geometrical forms. Also, ever since M. Princet's unlucky misconception, a cloud of imbeciles who understand neither pictures nor sums have been endeavoring to prove that bad painting is good mathematics.

In theory there is nothing the matter with cubism; only, in practice, there are very few painters who can express themselves completely in abstract form. There are plenty of artists who can so express themselves, and they become musicians, architects, designers of furniture, etc., etc.; but precisely what makes a man turn painter is, as a rule, a desire to express himself through what he sees outside him and not through what goes on inside his head. Picasso and perhaps Braque expressed themselves completely in cubism; Metzinger, Gleizes, Gris, Léger, Hayden and Marcoussis have all expressed something worth expressing; nevertheless, the best cubist pictures are, for the most part, sensibly poorer than they need be, while the bulk are mere frauds.

In the first class you will find the work of a number of excellent painters, who by submitting to the severe discipline of abstract composition have, as I hope presently to show, permanently strengthened their creative power, though for the moment limiting it by working in a medium through which they cannot transmit a great part of what is most urgent in them for transmission.

The second class—the frauds—consists of people who have never understood, and never could have understood by reason of their temperamental grossness, cubism at all. The mere conception of abstract beauty is something beyond them. To invite a modern melodramatic hot-gospeller of painting, with his passion for small profits and quick returns and his businesslike belief in the newspapers, to consider the beauty of the Parthenon or of a Bach fugue and aim at achieving that, is like appealing to modern statesmen for the old diplomacy of Vienna in the name of history and culture.

Look at the English vorticists or the Italian futurists, and you will see that all the former and almost all the latter are, in fact, at the old, old game; they are not discovering significance in abstract form, they are recounting anecdotes and criticizing life. All that differentiates them from the royal academicians and the picture-postcard makers is their spirit—that audacious cynicism of the

bar-parlour atheist. Cubism for them is just an up-to-date method of caricaturing, a dodge for making cheap illustrations look funny or terrible—whichever you like. A friend of mine, a lady, meeting one of those redoubtable "black shirts" in the streets of Rome asked him why all *fascisti* went hatless. "To appear more terrible" was the reply. That is why Mr. Wyndham Lewis became a cubist.

The Future of Cubism

I SHALL not deny that one cause of the decline of Cubism— . . . for Cubism has declined, is declining, and will soon be as dead as Burne-Jones, though you should not on that account believe that painters are returning to the old damned doctrine of scientific representation. Only a very stupid person could believe that: only wise old critics and special correspondents who send home to their papers accounts of the *salon d'automne* and *les indépendants* believe it. As a matter of fact, those pictures by Matisse and Friesz, Segonzac and Marchand, which are now extolled for their "return to sanity" are, more often than not, quite as much "distorted", quite as remote from "faithful representation" as were the pictures by these same artists which, fifteen years ago, were ignominiously thrown out of the *salons* amidst the howls and jeers of these same critics. Only, happily, as eels are said to get used to skinning, critics get used to art. And once they have got used to it they never notice it: that is how the old masters come to be put up with. Meanwhile, I shall not deny—to complete the sentence with which I began the paragraph and to show that I am not afraid of disobliging my friends—that there may be some truth in Picabia's saying that one cause of the decline of cubism is that no cubist painter has yet become rich enough to buy a motor-car. (Somehow I thought that Braque had: but I must allow M. Picabia to know best.)

The Services of Cubism

THERE are, however, other causes, in every sense better. As I have said, painters are not architects, and most of them feel the need for a larger vocabulary with which to express the whole of what is in them. The best cubist pictures—I except always those of Picasso—have a way of looking empty, and when—to enrich his vocabulary—the cubist painter begins systematizing natural forms his pictures have a way of looking unpleasantly caricatural. (Léger, however, in the current *salon d'automne*, has succeeded most happily, in my opinion, in imposing his abstract formula on natural forms—I see nothing in that exhibition, unless it be the green Matisse or the large Segonzac, so complete in design and sonorous in colour.)

But, though in two or three years' time Cubism may have disappeared, its influence should endure for a generation at least. The service it has rendered art is inestimable. Without it the liberating impulse given by Cézanne had been incomplete. Cézanne freed artistic sensibility from a hampering and outworn convention; Cubism imposed on it an intelligent and reasonable discipline. If a generation of free artists is now turning spontaneously towards the great tradition, it was through Cubism that it came at Ingres and Poussin.

For if Cézanne drew the attention of painters from what was superficial in natural forms to what was essential, from the fat to the muscle, it was cubism that gave us the anatomy

of the picture itself. Cubist pictures are skeletons, and I admit that it is in human nature to prefer flesh and blood—to say nothing of a white skin and silky hair. But the cubists are unquestionably right in maintaining that you cannot have these delicacies without a skeleton underneath them, or, at any rate, cannot have them long: flesh decays. And so, amongst the better modern painters, the influence of Cubism is manifest and will continue to manifest itself, I hope, in an intense and self-conscious preoccupation with the problems of design. Certainly they are trying to clothe the bones with flesh; but they do not forget that the bones must be there and, what is more, must be in their right places.

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