

Clement Greenberg

“The Crisis of the Easel Picture”

The easel painting, the movable picture hung on a wall, is a unique product of the West, with no real counterpart else-where. Its form is determined by its social function, which is precisely to hang on a Wall. To appreciate the uniqueness of the easel picture, we have only to compare its modes of unity with those of the Persian miniature or the Chinese hanging painting, neither of which matches it in independence of the requirements of decoration. The easel picture subordinates decorative to dramatic effect. It cuts the illusion of a box-like cavity into the wall behind it, and within this, as a unity, it organizes three-dimensional semblances. To the extent that the artist flattens out the cavity for the sake of decorative patterning and organizes its content in terms of flatness and frontality, the essence of the easel picture-which is not the same thing as its quality-is on the way to being compromised.

The evolution of modernist painting, beginning with Manet, is constituted in good part by the evolution toward such a compromise. Monet, Pissarro and Sisley, the orthodox Impressionists, attacked the essential principles of the easel painting through the consistency with which they applied divided colors; the operation of these colors remained the same throughout the picture, every part of which was treated with the same kind and emphasis of touch. The result became an evenly and tightly textured rectangle of paint that tended to muffle contrasts and threatened-but only threatened-to reduce the picture to a relatively undifferentiated surface.

The consequences of orthodox Impressionism did not work themselves out coherently in time. Seurat pushed divisionism to a logical conclusion, making something almost mechanically systematic out of it, but in his desire for clarity of design he turned divided color away from its inherent tendency toward a relatively undifferentiated surface, and used it for a new kind of light and dark contrast. While still making the picture shallower, he continued to build it on dominant shapes. Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Bonnard, Matisse went on reducing the fictive depth of painting, but none of them, not even Bonnard, attempted anything quite so radical in its violation of traditional principles of composition as the middle and later Monet did. For no matter how shallow the picture becomes, as long as its shapes are sufficiently differentiated in terms of light and dark, and kept in dramatic imbalance, it will remain an easel painting. It was precisely at these points that Monet's later practice threatened the easel-picture convention, and now, twenty years after Monet's death, his practice has become the point of departure for a new tendency in painting.

This tendency appears in the all-over, "decentralized," "polyphonic" picture that relies on a surface knit together of identical or closely similar elements which repeat themselves Without marked variation from one edge of the picture to the other. It is a kind of picture that dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, end. Though the "all-over" picture will, when successful, still hang dramatically on a wall, it comes very close to decoration-to the kind seen in wallpaper patterns that can be repeated indefinitely-and insofar as the "all-over" picture remains an easel picture, which somehow it does, it infects the notion of the genre with a fatal ambiguity.

I am not thinking of Mondrian in particular at this moment. His attack on the easel picture was radical enough, for all its inadvertence, and the paintings of his maturity are ostensibly among the flattest of all easel pictures. But dominating and counter-posed shapes, as provided by intersecting straight lines and blocks of color, are still insisted upon, and the surface still presents itself as a theater or scene of forms rather than as a single, indivisible piece of texture. All-over,"polyphonic" painting, with its lack of explicit oppositions, is perhaps anticipated by Mondrian, but in this sense it is also anticipated by Picasso's and Braque's Analytical Cubism and by Klee, and even by Italian Futurism (though more as a

vivid premonition thanks to Futurism's decorative heightening of Analytical Cubism, than as a source or influence). So that what we have to do with here is not an eccentricity or quirk in the evolution of modernist art. The diversity alone of the places in which "all-over" painting has appeared since the war should attest to that. In Paris the tendency to "polyphonic" painting has already made itself felt in some of Jean Dubuffet's larger canvases, and here and there in the works of several of the other artists shown at the Galerie Drouin. Another at least partial exponent of "all-over" painting is that subtle Uruguayan artist, Joaquin Torres-Garcia. In this country it has been arrived at more or less independently by artists as different in provenance and temper as Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollock, the late Arnold Friedman, Rudolf Ray, Ralph Rosenborg and Janet Sobel. The larger landscapes of Mordecai Ardon-Bronstein, in Palestine, likewise tend to be "polyphonic" in composition, if only because the subjects Ardon-Bronstein works from are "monotonously" designed in themselves; but what is significant is that he dares to accept this monotony.

I have advisedly borrowed the term "polyphonic" from music, encouraged to do so by the use to which Kurt List and Rene Leibowitz put it in their music criticism, with particular reference to Schonberg's methods of composition. Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, in his important book on Gris, has already sought to establish a parallel between Cubism and twelve-tone music, but in such general terms as to be almost beside the point: Mr. Kahnweiler makes it a question simply of restoring order or "architecture" to arts threatened by "formlessness."

The parallel I see is more specific. Mondrian's term, "equivalent," is to the point here. Just as Schonberg makes every element, every sound in the composition of equal *importance-different* but equivalent-so the "all-over" painter renders every element and every area of the picture equivalent in accent and emphasis. Like the twelve-tone composer, the "all-over" painter weaves his Work of art into a tight mesh whose scheme of unity is recapitulated at every meshing point. The fact that the variations upon equivalence introduced by a painter like Pollock are sometimes so unobtrusive that at first glance we might see in the result not equivalence, but an hallucinatory uniformity, only enhances the result.

The very notion of uniformity is antiaesthetic. Yet many "all-over" pictures seem to succeed precisely by virtue of their uniformity, their sheer monotony. The dissolution of the pictorial into sheer texture, into apparently sheer sensation, into an accumulation of repetitions, seems to speak for and answer something profound in contemporary sensibility. Literature provides parallels in Joyce and in Gertrude Stein, perhaps even in the cadences of Pound's verse and in the packed stridencies of Dylan Thomas. The "all-over" may answer the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been, literally, exhausted and invalidated; that no area or order of experience is intrinsically superior, on any final scale of values, to any other area or order of experience. It may express a monist naturalism for which there are neither First nor last things, and which recognizes as the only ultimate distinction that between the immediate and the un-immediate. But for the time being, all we can conclude is that the future of the easel picture as a vehicle of ambitious art has become problematical. In using this convention as they do-and cannot help doing-artists like Pollock are on the way to destroying it.