

Decorative Aspects of Reality
with Reference to
Sociological Painting

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DECORATIVE ASPECTS OF REALITY

WITH REFERENCE TO

SOCIOLOGICAL PAINTING

The writer could not blame the reader for finding the title to this essay couched in somewhat academic terms. It must be said immediately that the title is a fake — or that the following essay is a fake; the title has pretensions to the academic — the essay has not. All academicism no longer has an independent existence — it operates by formulae, is mechanical, uses faked sensations and vicarious experience and borrows its tricks and themes from a mature, established culture close at hand. This 'culture's life's blood is looted, given new twists, watered down and served up in academic terms. For these reasons, academicism and Kitsch are the same — both change according to style and yet are always the same; both are the epitome of all that is spurious in our time. So, academicism could be said to be the 'stuffed shirt-front'¹ for Kitsch.

However, a piece of writing has to have a title — and the title to this particular piece serves a purpose in that it sets boundaries and so supplies a discipline of sorts — a discipline needed if one is to approach a central 'problem' without being side-tracked into attractive issues which belong to other fields. At the same time, the writer has no pre-conceived theories which are going to be proved in this essay — all it holds itself up to be is a 'walkabout' on some kinds of art and art itself.

The title will be stretched to full elasticity:

'Decorative' painting is not only Vuillard and Matisse, but all painting, which is decorative to some degree.

'Sociological' painting is not only that depicting the sentiment of the commune, but all painting which is a child of its time and society: art transcends both.

Although sociology can clarify art, even to the painter, it is absurd to assume that painters are pre-occupied with the sociological implications of their work — the authenticity of art depends on complete independence from financial, political or ideological concerns. Authentic art cannot serve as justification for any other activity except itself. However, lack of authenticity will not prevent certain 'types' of art from being discussed in this essay — for example, the Pre-Raphaelites, who, with their mentor, Ruskin, indulged in the ideological sanctification of art. This group anchored their problems on mythical themes and tried to get mileage out of the nobility usually attached to these themes so the work of the Pre-Raphaelite painters cannot merit the term 'authentic', but is of importance in that by deciding what is not art one can develop a personal philosophy of what art is/is art.

On the subject of what is art, charity cannot begin at home here. For the purposes of this essay, there are certain valid things about beginning at home, mainly that in doing so the reader can get a fair picture of the reliability of this witness: when issues outside of South Africa are discussed further on, the reader is aware of the viewpoint, the South African reality versus that of the rest of the world. Also, by beginning at home and working towards eras before and away from here and now, the false theories of the evolution of art can

be avoided. For the South African art student, the sense of such evolutions and origins is almost non-existent — all art is readily available simultaneously in the form of photographic reproductions: very little famous art can be seen in the flesh in this country: apart from the odd 'old master' in a National Gallery or the occasional travelling exhibition on loan from Europe. This paucity of heritage of visual art could be of use to the South African painter: hopefully it would mean that the problems of other peoples other times, would not cloud the issue, the painter's issue, which is art. Unfortunately the opposite has proved true — there has been a frantic scrabble for the problems of Europe, the S.A. painter has to date willingly shouldered other peoples' concerns and as a result there is no South African Art.

ART AND SOUTH AFRICA

In his book 'le Cinema ou l'homme imaginaire', Edgar Morin states his vision of the cinema, like other art forms, as being intimately dependent upon, as well as influenced by, its social context. It is only after this perception has been established that a work of art can be considered outside this context. So, in South Africa, we are looking at what makes art. As mentioned before, the most outstanding characteristic of S.A. Art is themes and influences lifted straight from Europe: sometimes the artists laid claims to trends in Europe because they had come from there (like Maurice van Essche b. 1906) or because they had studied there (Irma Stern (b. 1894) and Maggie Laubser (b. 1886)). Then came a new idea, which arose out of thinking and writing rather than by straight execution — this was that there should be a style indigenous to South Africa — a national art.



PRELLER

African Head

A

There were many attempts to realise this — the possibility was taken up by painters with some strange results — the same learnt styles from Europe super-imposed on African subjects and themes — for example Alexis Preller's 'African Head'. This painting is so transparent in its eclecticism that it stands for exactly what it is: the view of an outsider translated into the fashionable 'style' of the time, of a subject neither the style nor the painter can reach. In these ways this painting epitomises everything the painter must avoid, if he is to make any kind of a valid statement. The painting strongly shows one of the most consistent characteristics of European art in recent centuries — its arrogance.

Although it is not art, this painting in ways has an honesty about it. It does not attempt or pretend to feel through to the life-force of the subject — the head is placed, like the man who painted it, merely on top of the African landscape, with all its more obvious manifestations of African-ness i.e. the decorated wall of a mud hut.

Walter Battis (b. 1906) along with Preller, joined this conscious attempt to get at the 'African mystique'. To make real art, the painter must use insight and foresight — these painters who sought AFRICA used hindsight — they went into the past — to ruins and legends belonging to other people. This could only lead, as it inevitably did, to the selfconscious Africanism which now reigns as S.A. Art. The resultant complete confusion as to the direction of art is gratifying as to be in doubt is part of our freedom.²

André Malraux, in the 'Voices of Silence' mentions the obscurity of fundamental experiences once known to all men, since obscured by

morality and 'culture'. Due to modern reproduction techniques, people have access to the artistic work of the whole world — this has re-introduced man to experiences like death, sex and passions he has forgotten — this has set up the quest to rediscover the directness of the 'nature' from which he has become totally separated. Surely painters who seek this 'nature' in the overtly African aspects of nature here, and old Africa at that, avoid the issue? It is not in any one isolated realm that the issue lies — although admittedly large parts of what HERE is all about comes from the relatively recent juxtaposition of dramatically different factors:

SUN + COLD BUILDINGS + EXTREMES OF LANDSCAPE +
PETER STUYVESANT OPTIMISM + NATIONAL SHAME +
SUN + NATIONALISM

But then there is the idea of beauty from Lautréamont:

'As beautiful as the encounter of a sewing-machine
and an umbrella on a dissecting table....'.

Encounters between elements of different realms produces a shock — it can be safely said that Art South Africa is in a state of shock.

Shock leads to apathy and inactivity — South African art treads the safe path of the known. A sick organism seeks only self-preservation; a healthy one is prepared to undergo new experiences.

Duvignaud, the French sociologist, writes telling things on the Dutch Reform principalities — that within them there was a definite effort to prolong a way of life by representing it, in order to overcome the fear of inescapable isolation, and to enhance the unexciting environment



MARTIN EAU

Last Day in the Old Home



SEKOTO

Street Scene

by instituting it as the only one possible — a kind of secret garden which shelters a way of life unsure of its own continuation. Although the Dutch Reform ethic is very prevalent in this country, and it pervades every part of life, because for a start the government is Dutch Reformed, and more than half the population work for the government in some way or another, there is no widespread attempt to portray the way of life in this country — which would be sociological art,³ like a lot of Victorian painting, for example 'The Last Day in the Old Home' by Martineau.

Hegel identifies the 'comfortable, middle-class life' with the determination to illustrate that life.

The only painting that approaches this genre is what is known as 'Township Art' which developed in the black suburbs surrounding Johannesburg. But 'township art' is not innovatory: it does not even meet Duvignaud's standard for good sociological art which requires such art to be a 'mirror of freedom which seeks through old determinisms to suggest new relationships between men'.

Sociology and psychology and history hold viewpoints on art that can only be used up to a point — a painter cannot afford to have much to do with any of the three systems unless he wants to paint groups of men, (sociological painting) men's minds or his own mind (psychological painting) — or what men have done (historical painting) — these are representations of an order and art should continuously oppose and question the order of things. Art anticipates the experience of men. The atmosphere in this country, perpetuated by the life-denying Dutch Reform and Calvinist way of thinking, is not conducive to exploratory and innovatory thought. The official and

popular view of the world is well typified by Tretchikoff, who is painting it rosy.

The artist transcends social structures and environments?

ART AND JOHANNESBURG

If the sociological aspect of creativity is to be exhausted in the inroads it offers to why and what art is in South Africa, city art is a thing on its own. Sociology says that the development of a city prompts the attempt by artists to feel out the new space between men caused by the new space of the city — sociology attributes the art of the Middle Ages, as men became concentrated in urban areas and the changeover from rural life took place, to the cities. Perhaps 'sociological art' only began with the city, which represented conquered and inhabited space. In rural districts, the speculation is on the space between man and nature: in cities it is focused on the space between men.

Either way, Johannesburg provides an interesting case.

The vast majority of the population in South Africa is removed from rural existence by only one, or, at most two, generations. The period since 1950 has witnessed phenomenal movements of people to the cities, which are few and separated by vast tracts of land, inconceivably vast to people who have grown up in the more densely populated 'spaces' of Europe. The two major groups participating in these movements are the Afrikaners and the Blacks — English-speaking whites (the third largest population group) have always been concentrated in the towns and the cities.

The first impression one gets in Johannesburg is an absolute dearth of art, even of city-art, when, according to sociology, every condition is right for the emergence of prolific attempts to feel out the new space of the place - especially by the Afrikaans-speaking people and the blacks. There is a numbness in Johannesburg that could account for artistic inertia there: the same state of shock mentioned before. Johannesburg is almost an instant city like Brasilia — it took only twenty years to become what it is.

The majority of city-art, that in public places, is done by foreigners — people whose background elsewhere seems to prevent them making any visual statement applicable to the air it stands in, not to mention qualities that go beyond local limitations to universal artistic concerns. For example the sculpture of Eduardo Vila, which is found in many airport buildings, university campuses and prestigious office blocks in the country. Technically perfect as they may be, the sculptures have little impact — they seem to have become diluted by the slackened instinct of amorphous international *laissez-faire* — Airport Art.

The commercial galleries in Johannesburg are constantly having exhibitions of contemporary Italian graphic artists and the like — whose work is quickly sold. This shows a certain attitude, present throughout the country to some extent, and definitely present on the part of the art-buying public of 'This is from EUROPE - so it must be real art'. This attitude is symptomatic of S.A. life in general — the inability of the South African people to feel the S.A. reality - this is reflected in the art of this country — which has avoided the crux of the matter so far.



SKOTNES

Head and Ancestors

D

When one thinks of S.A. Art, one must take as examples the most famous painters i.e. those who have been most successful in that there has been the greatest demand for their work. Jensch, Bonzaaier, Batiss, Scully, Boys, de Jongh, Van Essche, Pierneef — all these names, just to name some, command high prices on the S.A. Art market, although not one, whether abstract or landscape painter (and serious painters they no doubt were) has said anything of resounding truth of what it is like to walk this particular part of the earth.

Attempts are being made to dissect out the nexus of the life-force of this country from the bewildering chaos of groups of people at cross-purposes. Say Cecil Skotness' latest venture, 'The Assassination of Shaka' a series of woodcuts on the death of a Zulu king of the last century. This illustrates the instinct to return to old established myths, legends and images thereby avoiding dangerous new and innovatory⁴ ones, when the artist cannot quite come to terms with the reality of himself in the external world. Also, just in terms of making a valid statement, the S. A. artist must be able to lay some claim to his material, by means of his own experience — or what he produces can never be authentic art. Skotness can lay no claim to the Zulu legend — the subject could be far more honestly rendered by a Zulu artist.

History has shown that the 'Dark Ages' only appear so because they were written about by foreigners with Latinised minds — painters on the lookout for ethnic material not their own should bear in mind a certain responsibility not to banish potentially vigorous images by their own interpretations, which, of necessity can never be truly sympathetic to the subject. This is a common occurrence in this country — these attempts by members of one group to get at the heart of another's matter in the name of the search for the S. A. reality.

S.A. FILMS: offer another example of this — the standard of these is abysmally low — a kind of standing joke. Recently, a film was made about two coloured people forced to wander about the country perennially, unable to feel themselves on any level in society, a direct result of the official attitude toward coloureds — simply that they do not exist. There were some fairly vigorous aspects of 'Boesman and Lena' that lifted it far above the usual S.A. lame musicals; but it failed — the film was written, directed and acted by whites. All it could ever become was an 'art-movie' made by one group in sympathy for another — herein lies its only statement. The best art is that produced by individuals for their own specific needs, people and climate.⁵ The signs and symbols of one group must needs lie in opposition to those of another.

In this country there is government sponsorship of films — but only of those films that enjoy a certain box-office success. So prospective film-makers have to choose a script and theme that will have the general masses in queues if they want to break even on the venture — by perpetuating and encouraging the Kitsch that is the S.A. film, the government hopes to perpetuate the status quo — nobody queues to see home truths. Should the official culture be one superior to the general mass level, there would be a danger of isolation of the rulers from the people — which is when the statue smashing-begins.

"When everyman is dissatisfied with the society created by the ruling class, one of the first things to be attacked is the culture of the ruling class."⁶

Black Art is immediately identifiable as such — firstly by a kind of honesty of subject (people, animals) and secondly by a common stylistic language, whatever the medium: a certain round, bulging, turgid '5 D' form, a largeness and generosity, a confidence of statement in a clumsy, sometimes rhythmical way. But cohesion of style does not necessarily make for validity in the far-reaching sense. The black artist whose work hangs in the Johannesburg commercial galleries sells his work, as black art, in the most part to whites who buy it for reasons mainly of conscience or fashion — so the authenticity of all readily available black art is thrown into question. It remains to be seen if any black artist who, realising the dead-end situation for the serious black painter or sculptor, has taken 'the road to Paris' and gone to paint elsewhere, will produce an enduring statement of universal and all-time value.

African art appeared in Europe for the first time early in this century and influenced Picasso and Giacometti, amongst others. Malraux acknowledged the discovery of African art thus: 'a new area of human experience has now been revealed to us'. African art in Johannesburg is very different from that art which was first seen in Europe — it has lost its ability to communicate to the sub-conscious because it has become conscious art, transported out of the human world where art is made into the world of museums, galleries, theories and objets d'art. A common sight in a Johannesburg art gallery is a scratchy crayon drawing of everyday life in a black suburb: many figures, naively drawn (with sometimes a powerful sense of unlearned vigour, movement and aliveness like Breughel). These drawings are hung in huge important seventies chrome frames. The two together somehow represent the whole incongruity of the genre of Johannesburg Art.

In the centre of all this stands the 'cradle of culture', the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Museums should lead, not follow. The furore that followed the Gallery's purchase of a particularly expensive Picasso drawing has occasioned the strange situation any visitor finds on approaching the work. One is handed a leaflet by a man on duty which is headed 'Why We Bought It'. Where else in the world, etcetera.

Cultures in a healthy society should rub together — not produce an indistinguishable mass.

Ezra Pound wrote:

"Are you for American poetry or for poetry?

The latter is more important, but it is important that America should boost the former, provided it doesn't mean a blindness to art. The glory of any nation is to produce art that can be 7 exported without any disgrace to its origin.'

Decorative Reality and Real Decoration

"We also know today that what we admire is not only the representational technique or 'facture' of a picture but the qualities that differentiate it from its model; which differentiate Manet's Olympia and Cezanne's portrait of his wife from Victorine Meurent and Madame Cezanne respectively."

André Malraux 'Metamorphosis of the Gods'.

If these 'qualities' which differentiate the picture from its model are decorative as well as describing the human nature of the painter and his model then the painting may transcend the dangers of decoration. Decorative painting always has a lushness, just about always to the loss of certain other things which have to do with the vigorous unconsciousness of rock paintings, which made them valid for ever. The decorative instinct can easily sway the painter towards making an image which is merely pleasing — which side-steps the issue of art. An independent decorative art is only possible where there is limitation and discipline; however as ornament becomes an end in itself its inner substance diminishes. So the 'spitting stone' with which one can arm oneself when looking at decorative art would involve a feeling out of whether the painting evokes a forgotten domain where man himself is still nature, and whether his unconscious experience of the world is defined by, or in spite of, decorative images. These images should have the character of the marvellous and can become mythical, if by 'mythical' we mean the intuitive symbols of an experience of the world which lies beyond the world of the senses and the intellect.⁸



TOMB OF SEN-NEDJEB

Deir el Medineh



DETAIL

'Vegetal Ornament'



Wilhelm Worringer, in 'Abstraction and Empathy' goes into the psychology of style and dedicates whole chapters to his conception of ornament. His view is that art proper satisfies a deep psychic need that imitation, or the copying of nature never can — art proper showing 'the psychic state in which mankind finds itself in relation to the cosmos'. Anyway, he regards the abstract as the only real art and sees 'ornament' as abstraction, and it is through the ornament of a people's art that the keys are found to their aesthetic sense.

However, Worringer goes on to state that 'all primitive peoples exhibit the urge to abstraction' i.e. geometric linear ornament and that the art of the Early Stone Age illustrates a contradiction to this in that their Art shows 'a pronounced and disconcerting naturalistic mode of decoration'. This 'disconcerting' naturalism is found 'incompatible to authentic Art' by Worringer. He regards the wall paintings of the Dordogne as pure products of what he calls the imitation impulse and that they 'have nothing to do with Art in the proper meaning of the term'.

Art, for Worringer, is all that is 'aesthetically accessible'. As a theoretician he requires a traceable evolution of Art before he can see it — also he believes that once abstraction is based on a natural model it is no longer abstraction — just clumsy 'imitation impulse'. But then his treatise was written in 1908, long before major discoveries of rock paintings were made, particularly Lascaux in the late forties.

However, Worringer's ideas on the beginnings of plant motifs as ornament are enlightened. He says they sprung from a universally valid feeling for the regularity of organic law. It was not the vegetal organism itself, but its structural law, that man carried over into art.



OSIRIS

Tomb of Sen-Nedjeb



DETAIL

'Vegetal Ornament'



H

Thus the ornamental style was devoid of a natural model although the elements of it could be found in nature. Organic regularity with its arrangement around a centre, circular rhythms, equilibrium between carrying and burdening forces and proportionate relationships is most purely and perceptibly disclosed to us in the structure of plants. It is strange that Worringer cannot then see that the cave paintings, in their ability to feel right through to the life-force of a depicted animal or man in one stroke, have the same validity as he accords geometric ornament, whether plant or animal derived. He repudiates the notion that animal - derived ornament arose from an exact acquaintance with any particular animal, whether domestic, sacrificial, sacred, or animals of the hunt: Northern Graeco-Roman, Arabian and Middle-age animal ornament has structural peculiarities of certain animals like the relationship between wings and body, head and trunk and sometimes these were combined without hesitation -- later these combinations became well-known as the fabulous beasts of ornamental art.

Worringer goes on to cite examples of world art and how they fit in with his theories -- he exemplifies Celtic-Germanic Decorative Art with its absolute predominance of linear-geometric form as showing man's relationship to Nature in the North --

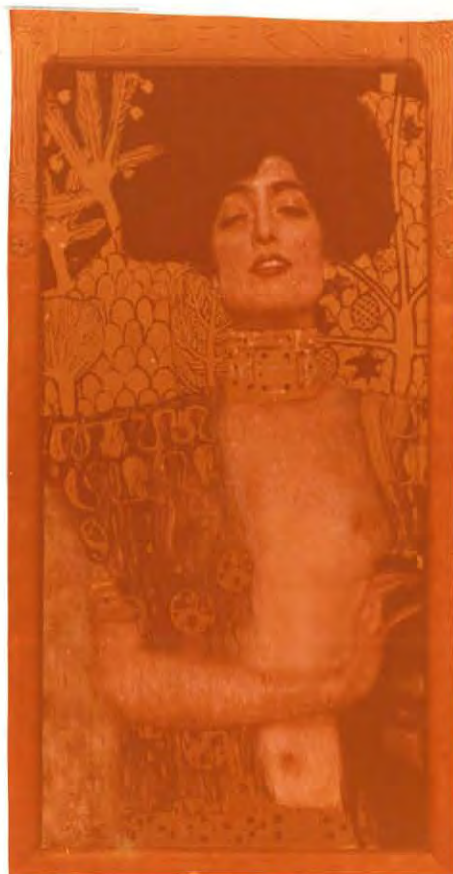
"No clear blue sky arched above them, no serene climate, no luxuriant vegetation surrounded them to induce them to a world-revering pantheism."

This contrasts with the Greek world-view which was one of confident familiarity with Nature -- Northern man felt there to be a veil between himself and Nature, a veil that he would one day surely be able to raise through art. The pivot of Worringer's whole theory of Abstraction and Empathy is that the more man feels disharmony between himself and Nature, the more abstract is his art -- the art of man at ease with the external world tends toward naturalism. He ties all this in very neatly with susceptibilities to religion,⁹ and ends



TOMB OF PASHEDU

Deir el-Medinet



KLIMT Judith

with his view that Abstraction is the only hope for Western Art.

To return to Worringer's ideas on vegetal ornament, an attempt could be made to find similarities between decorative aspects of easel paintings and the abilities of say, Egyptian vegetal ornament to give the viewer the organic structure and inner relationships of objects. The perception, common to all men, of the way in which living things relate to each other — from the broad idea of man and the whole external world, to plant and animal, plant and plant.

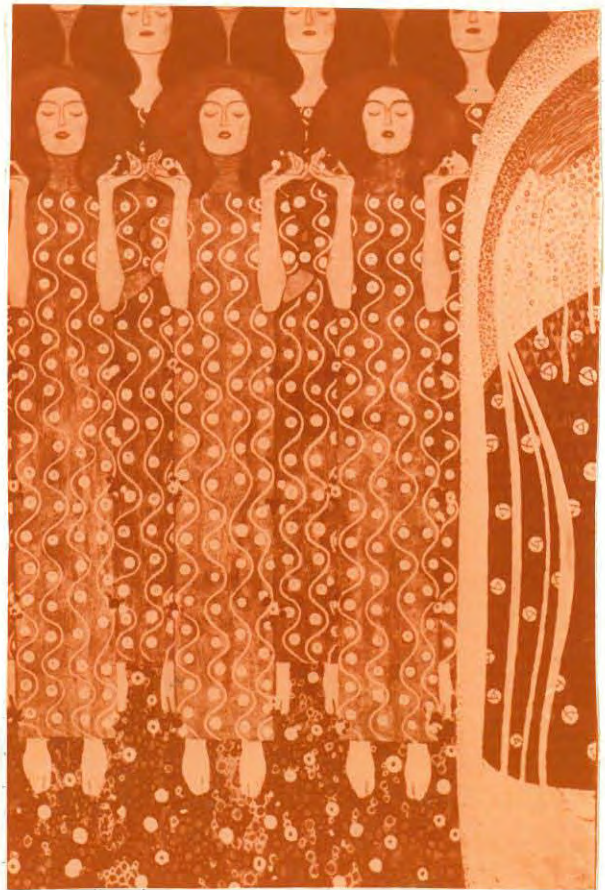
(See Plates of Egyptian ornament and Klimt)

Some of Klimt's paintings have elements of decoration that are purely abstract in a linear way and evoke organic relationships. His use of the wavy line



has the uniformity and rhythm which echoes deeply in our biological make-up. The decorative plant motifs painted behind 'Judith's' head are abstracted to give a feel of growth true to all plants everywhere although the form does not represent any plant anywhere; see also the plant ornament in the tomb of Sen-Nedjem. Larger spaces and forms are abstracted and worked decoratively as well — the women in Klimt's 'Joy' mural grow like trees — the women in the Ramose tomb wall-painting mourn in waves; the figures are placed in rolling, oncoming groups like moving water.

Sometimes Klimt's decorative abstraction was of his own invention although he often used the spiral, an ancient abstract decorative motif capable of evoking movement, life, the cosmos, growth — the nature of things.



KLIMT

Joy



KLIMT

Expectation

J

In Egyptian painting, details are treated in a purely decorative way, making geometrical patterns out of the folds of robes for example, and anywhere else that opportunity offers — like the hair. In this way the rendering of the figure is embellished with abstract values the mere realistic depiction of hair and robes would not have the power to put across. On this hinges the whole reason why some decorative art is Art — the decorative elements, in the nature of their abstraction,¹⁰ transcend decor, pattern, and the ease with which they merely please. These decorative elements abstract the constant timeless organic elements and eternalise them.

The Ionic column is perhaps the best example of true 'decoration'. In comparison to the uncompromising, virile Doric capital, the Ionic is decorative with its graceful volutes and linear inscriptions — the column is slim but strong, not effete. The Ionic column has been compared to a tree — but it is not a matter of imitating reality or of representing the living thing in its relation to nature, but on the contrary, of abstracting the constant, of carving the living into the rigid impenetrable stone and recreating in it another, inorganic nature. Which is exactly what Gaudi did.

Aubrey Beardsley and Art Nouveau use decorative abstractions, but the kind that are more concerned with style than with truth. The over-slender, over-long, sinuous and perversely elegant forms find no echo in nature, but rather bring to mind a foppish snake.

AUSTRIA

On the subject of fops vs. truth, in Austria in the 19th and 20th



HUNDERTWASSER

Devouring Fishes and Cyclists



HUNDERTWASSER

Magic Cube

K



HUNDERTWASSER

Animal on Feet



HUNDERTWASSER

Sunset

L

centuries the prevailing decorativeness of art contrasted strongly with the seriousness of scientific research. The world in which Klimt lived was effeminate, melancholy and decadently erotic — the atmosphere in Vienna was that of a deep need for beauty and embellishment by a dream of luxury and good living — Dada would have been impossible in Vienna. So it is not suprising that Klimt fell into the trap occasionally that caught Egon Schiele more often — that of decoration for its own sake. A modern Austrian decorative painter, Hundertwasser, whose overlapping spiral forms characterise all his work, may also be said to have escaped the Austrian trap. Werner Hofman likens Hundertwasser to the old Roman soothsayers, the diviners of entrails. The spiraloid rhythms of some of the paintings have a kind of Narcissism about them however — every new coil twines in self-love around its predecessor, the spiral circles ceaselessly round itself, watching its own past.

DECORATIVE ART AND POWER

The Egyptian Kings and Gods were depicted as those with a knowledge of the 'beyond' — all that made men aware of power was concentrated in these figures. The figure of king or god is always shown many times larger than the surrounding objects over which he has power — men and women, plants, boats, animals, food the sun and so on. From this a correlation may be drawn to all painting of human figures surrounded by decorative motifs or objects treated in a decorative way. If it is true decoration, (what Worringer calls ornament) in that it reveals the inner structure of things, it portrays two kinds of power:-

the power of the artist to know and realise
the nature of objects via abstraction, and
the power of the man over the things with which he
is painted; the human figure in an environment
of decoratively treated plants/animals/interior/
landscape.

For example, a common Rousseau theme of man or animal amongst myriads of stylised leaves; the Matisse painting of a woman in a red room — a red table — cloth and red walls are marked with the same arabesque and Klimt's paintings of women who look 'real' surrounded by welters of decorative minutiae which are organic in feeling.

Before easel painting, decorative art was important in the question of the preserving of domestic and familial unity and ensuring that change did not endanger their security and survival. Thus decorative art gave a specific weight to the natural weight of objects, like the ornamentation of vessels, pots and Achilles' shield.

So then:-

Decorative Art: as in decor; the stamping
of objects with pattern and design as a
collar is placed around the neck of a dog
— to show its domesticity, where it belongs.

Decorative Painting: as a twice-removed thing —
if the painter chooses a decorative subject
as well it can be a thrice-removed thing —
once away from reality by the act of painting,



VUILLARD

Decoration for Dr. Vaguez

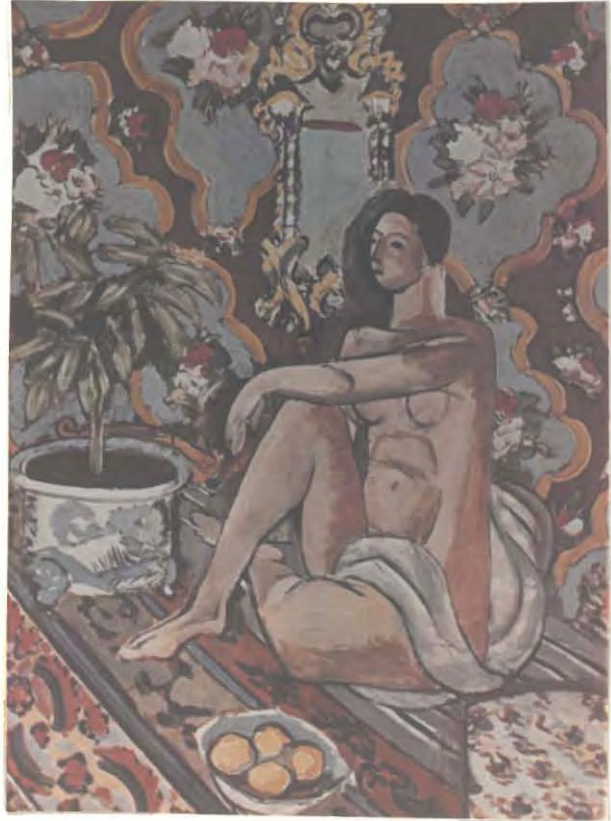
M

twice because the painter of necessity interprets that reality, and three times if the reality he chooses to paint embodies other men's patterns, or the subject is in itself decorative. A woman is often painted as a decorative subject.

There are many examples of the female form used as a decorative motif — Egyptian, Greek and Roman wall paintings all have friezes of maidens. Often, even before the painter has begun, he sees the female model, because of the part she plays in society and the things with which she is associated — home, warmth, bed, appearances, food, glamour, illusion and pleasurable things generally, to be a decorative being, unconcerned with any cosmic significance — essentially a lightweight force, easy on the eye. The anonymous caraytid figures decorated the building as well as holding the roof up — by contrast the great Greek sculptures of men convey more serious issues — a eulogy of man, and individual man at that, individualised by his body and physical bearing — a protest against mortality. The Egyptians expressed women in a cultured, beautiful way.

DECORATIVE INTERIORS

"the long Sunday of life which smoothes out all problems and lies beyond the reach of corruption."



MATISSE

Decorative Figure against a Decorative
Background

N

Decorative paintings like those of Vuillard and Bonnard give the ambience of the whole thing of the interior which as a subject has none of the potential vigour and uncompromising nature of say landscape. The interior is all stilled air, undramatic transitions from space between furniture to space between people. Figure in interior is not exposed, like figure in a landscape. Decorative elements like wall-paper and patterned furnishings are used by interior painters to tone down the vastly emotive potential of their medium — paint. Overt decoration lets the viewer 'off the hook' to take his time to feel out the room the painter describes. It tells the viewer immediately to relax, the subject is not serious, it is an atmosphere he must feel for just as it would be if the viewer walked into the same wall-papered room which has been painted.

Matisse never abandoned drawing from nature altogether — his interior paintings do have a vigour and timelessness about them that say Vuillard's do not. Matisse transcends the style and fashion of his time — in most of his paintings of females in interiors he has selected those elements which never date. Vuillard's attention to detail of clothing and hair mark his paintings as pertaining to their time. Vuillard's paintings are to do with tranquillity, resting and slowness — Matisse's interiors go beyond the genre of the interior — his decoration moves, it is to do with life and strength. Vuillard's colour never jars — it is shy, like the paintings, of shocking the viewer — Matisse uses colour in a strong, joyful really decorative free sense.

Suzanne Valadon's interiors are not shy paintings — they have no leanings toward abstraction — the figure is placed largely, simply, clearly amongst everyday yet decorative objects — flowers, drapes



HOPPER

Early Sunday Morning

P



LOWRY

River Scene

Q

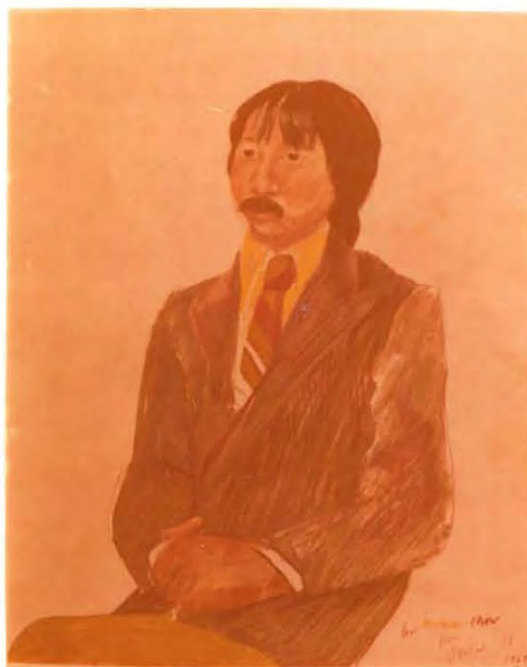
wall-paper. Flesh is painted almost flatly yet has tremendous roundness — large comfortable women: comfortable paintings.

SOCIAL REALISM by its very nature can never be called authentic art in that it is done for other reasons than art itself — in America, social realists like Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper and Ivan Albright, whatever their qualities or virtues may be, their work, offering little that was new or experimental, is not in essence innovatory. The direction of Art is toward life, not death or pessimism.¹¹ L.S. Lowry gets past his local attachment to make more universal statements about man. His industrial panoramas, painted in the ^{North}~~Black~~ Country of England, peopled by myriads of moving figures have found life and point to it where other visions would be grinding a moralistic axe — 'see what has happened to man....'

Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist, paints a decorative social realism — flat simple treatment of figures, animals and flowers sometimes most conscious in its effort to create a style reflecting both the history of Mexico and the socialist spirit of the Mexican revolution.

British Cool

David Hockney and Lucien Freud are both concerned with sociological painting — but with a weird side of the truth which is the reverse to rabid pantheism — one could say that they are looking for a magic in their portraits of the people they paint — but it is a highly refined, stiff upper lip intellectual slackened magic that is very much of this day and age — in Hockney's case especially the watering down of what once was the glory of man is undertaken almost joyously —



HOCKNEY

Mr. Chow

R

he depicts his friends as runts and his travels as boring with great detachment from both — not exactly pessimistic, or anti-life but hardly vigorous. The western obsession with the individual is apparent in Hockney's highly subjective drawings and paintings: the artist's whole life becomes the proffered work of art, not his work. Creative, not imitative portraiture can paint the whole of man and men for all time.

12

UNIVERSAL CULTURE AND PESSIMISM

Kitsch has become the first universal culture ever — art was beaten to it. Artists will continue to modify their work under the pressures of Kitsch without even knowing it — often succumbing to it entirely. Kitsch is not confined to the cities where it was born — it spreads out into the country wiping out indigenous culture — Kitsch was gone on a triumphal tour of the world defacing cultures in one colonial country after another. Kitsch predigests art for the spectator, provides him with a short-cut to the pleasure of art which detours all that is necessarily difficult in art. This is the common pitfall for decorative art — providing short-cuts to pleasure. But given the fact that all men still share the same instinct to look at painting, whether that instinct takes them to see Kitsch or art, when there is now so much to choose from in the way of 'visual entertainment' art must remain true to itself, and continue to draw upon the laws of the universal, timeless Art, vigorously discarding non-art and the anti-art.

Pessimism is anti-art. Pessimism has caused painting to shut down altogether in some countries for whole eras.

"the main thing is freedom, a freedom which does not necessarily retrace the course of evolution, or project what forms nature will some day display, or which we may some day discover on other planets; rather a freedom which insists on its own right to be just as inventive as nature in her grandeur is inventive. The artist must proceed from type to prototype.

The artists with real vocations are those who travel to within fair distance of that secret cavern where the central organ of all temporal and spatial movement — we may call it the brain or heart of creation — makes everything happen. What artist would not wish to dwell there — in the bosom of nature, in the primordial source of creation where the secret key to everything is kept?"

Paul Klee 'The Shaping Forces of the Artist'
1924.

R. S. Thomas: "The bulls still lurk in the caves."

NOTES

- 1 From an article by Clement Greenberg:
'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' 1939
- 2 Duvignaud: The Sociology of Art Page 141
- 3 "It has been said that art can only repeat artistically what is already clearly realised by the contemporary. Since it is not germinative, but only a child of the age, and unable to become a mother of the future, it is a castrated art. It is transitory; it dies morally the moment the atmosphere that nourished it alters."

KANDINSKY concerning the Spirited in Art 1913

- 4 Even Esme Berman, in 'The South African Art Market' advises would-be investors in art to look for work that is 'shocking' in its innovation!
- 5 The image should be the result of the creative unconscious — what Jung called the 'collective unconscious' which is far greater than the individual.

Philosophy lecture 8.3.74

- 6 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' Clement Greenberg
- 7 From 'Selected Letters of Ezra Pound'
- 8 From 'Painting in the Twentieth Century'
Essay on Max Ernst. W. Haftmann



- 9 The whole question of Art and Religion lies outside the framework of this essay. It should not, but it does. Worringer equates Art and Religion in that what he calls 'the desire for redemption' gives rise to both — man attempting to explain phenomena by imposing an order on things. He says a certain disharmony between Man and Nature in Western Europe made it incapable of resisting the advent of Christianity — that it offered more security than the old gods.
- 10 To abstract is 'to make a distillation of indispensable qualities'.
Philosophy lecture 8.10.74
- 11 Not so, according to Francis Bacon:
- Also, man now realises that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. I think that even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain religious possibilities, which man now, you could say, has had cancelled out for him. Man now can only attempt to bribe himself for a time by prolonging his life — by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors. You see painting has become — all art has become — a game by which man distracts himself. And you may say, that it has always been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is 'fascinating' is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all, so that he can make life a bit more exciting'.

12 Pessimistic Herbert Read saw the main function of art as being "to reconcile Man with his destiny, which is Death". The writer would disagree: the role of art is to connect man with his destiny, which is life.

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