

The Exile of High Art and its Effect on the Picture Plane

The last seven centuries have witnessed four distinct paradigms in the artistic conception of pictorial conception. These changes are most evident when looking specifically at painting as High Art, and illustrate the relation of the artist to the viewer and vice versa. Moreover, looking at the possible underlying cultural causes of these shifts is useful to understand the role of Art in a larger context. Perhaps this will also allow us to understand how the present denigrated and marginal position Art occupies may begin to be reversed.

In the Gothic period, we find that the High Art of the time was primarily religious iconography. The artists of this period worked with a more or less formulaic approach to representation. The primary subject is centered and the compositions are generally symmetrical in nature. There is a charming awkwardness to these images: the space is secondary to the subjects and is not depicted in an illusionistic manner. Trapezoids are employed to stand in as variables for rectilinear forms in space, though multiple trapezoids in the same image will almost always contradict or cancel each other. Hieratic scale is employed to assist the lay viewer as to what is important in the image. There are antecedents to more modern illusionistic techniques, if one wishes to see them, in the work of Giotto, Duccio and Cimabue. However, such evidence of chiaroscuro or even impressionistic techniques should not be taken to suggest that the rendering of convincing volumetric forms was consistent with the mission of the Gothic artist.

The works of this period had a built-in purpose and served a specific function, which was particularly important to a largely illiterate society. They were designed to illustrate the realm of the divine. The surfaces are often lavish with burnished gold, not only due to its intrinsic value (though it certainly didn't hurt that it showed the literal value Catholic patrons assigned to their faith), but also because gold represented holy light. In a world without electric street lamps, light maintained an unshakable hold on the human psyche. Light was so important that the Gothic architects developed revolutionary ways of constructing churches that were tall and open, allowing light to flow through stained glass windows, unblocked by large supporting pillars.¹

Without sounding pejorative, the work of artists prior to the Quattrocento dealt with creating didactic tableaux. In other words, the painting surface was intended to be read in nearly hieroglyphic terms and to be understood by anyone. The goal was to depict a signifier for the holy realm and to ennoble the masses by giving them a focal point beyond the harsh reality of the everyday. This transcendent value of Art was reinforced by location, as they were almost always destined for sacred spaces.

¹ Charles Bergengren, <http://gate.cia.edu/cbergengren/arthistory/gothic/index.html> (Cleveland Institute of Art, accessed 12/05/2005)

For the viewer, things could not be clearer. The Virgin, saints and martyrs were literally crowned with more gold than the average viewer would ever possess in their own right. Gothic artists created works of such obvious religious and material worth that they could only be (often literally, as well as figuratively) looked up to. Though tasked with displaying an alternate realm of the divine unsullied with human impurities, the more talented artists of this era exceeded their mandate by making images that were a little too humanly aesthetic. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Martin Luther believed the Catholic Church had devolved into the idolatry of saint-worship.

If we take this as the base paradigm for the start of the fifteenth century, it is all the more incredible to see what a radical change was the Italian Renaissance. A confluence of coincidence on the back of Neoplatonic ideas converged in the wellspring city of Florence. Without meaning to sound glib, everything changed. For our discussion, the matter at hand begins with the (re)discovery of linear perspective.

Florence is built on a river basin with a relatively flat plane. Although this meant that the inhabitants were not afforded the normally requisite defenses of a hill-based city, it did mean that the effects of linear perspective could be more easily observed and codified. Though Filippo Brunelleschi did the lion's share of work in learning how to depict convincing illusionistic depth two-dimensionally, it was Leon Battista Alberti who distilled Brunelleschi's working method into a formula that was manageable for the learned artist.

As I mentioned, an epidemic of Neoplatonic thought was spreading through Mediterranean Europe. The belief in a geometrically ideal perfection, of which the existing material world was a mere corrupt reflection, became an encompassing idea. Albertian linear perspective fit perfectly into this meme. The artist now had a tool that would allow him to create a geometrically perfect world. Within this objectively constructed reality, every item in the picture would harmonize and reinforce every other item. Moreover, everything in the picture would harmonize with the viewer, provided the viewer stood at the station point used to create the perspective for the image.

The underlying precepts of Neoplatonism, as well as the newfound power of linear perspective, meant that a comparable understanding of the ideal human form had to be unlocked. Perhaps this is why so much attention was given to a fleeting reference in the writing of a first century architect, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, suggesting that the highly revered classical artists had once employed an accepted canon of human proportion, read perfection. Though Leonardo's was perhaps the most satisfying, there were a great number of Renaissance artists who attempted to construct a *Vitruvian Man*. Michelangelo and Leonardo both went out of their way to study the physical human body via dissection, a practice that was strictly forbidden by the Church, not to mention quite dangerous in a time before the discovery of microscopic pathogens.

The intrinsic material value of gold had been replaced by the tautological value of mathematics to imbue a work of art with additional merit. Moreover, perspective meant that the image was now depicting the infinity of space, which converges at the vanishing

point. The nature of linear perspective requires that the station point be, by definition, on a level with the vanishing point. The realm of infinity had hitherto been solely within the purview of God. A privileged position to be sure: by placing the viewer at the station-point, Renaissance artists were, perhaps heretically, also elevating the viewer to the vantage point of God. Moreover, the best artists were able to fabricate a geometrically perfect world, something that, neoplatonically speaking, does not exist in the mortal realm. They were also able to people their creations with idealized beings closer to gods than mortal men. Perhaps this is why High Renaissance artists are, on occasion, entitled as divine.

Comparatively, the surface of the Renaissance painting is no longer indicative of the object itself. The surface of the painting is now a window through which the viewer looks upon a created world, a geometrically harmonious and idealized world. This idealization was where the real value of the work lived.

For the viewer, things are significantly more complicated. Although the illusionistic aspects of the works are impressive, the underlying philosophical demands placed upon the viewer are substantial, though not requisite. It is unlikely that the average Quintecento viewer—or modern viewer, for that matter—would fully understand the implications of what they were presented with. The convincing nature of the illusionistic depiction of space allowed anyone to view the work and understand the semiotic meaning of the image—a surface understanding of the work, so to speak. Philosophers (and art historians), however, would be able to probe a great deal further into the image.

The next major paradigmatic shift occurred nearly three and a half centuries after the end of the High Renaissance. This is not to say that the Renaissance paradigm went unchallenged for all of that time. With such an Icarian high, a fall was inevitable or perhaps even necessary. After all, only Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo (and possibly Albrecht Dürer) were able to master every aspect of High Renaissance Art. Leonardo and Raphael were dead by 1520. Michelangelo himself turned apostate to the implications of perspective (linear, atmospheric and chromatic) when he joined the Mannerist movement in creating post-renaissance art. Mid- to late sixteenth century Art has long been a troubling period, though it should not be surprising that the High Art of the time could no longer illustrate the triumph of humanity after the sacking of Rome in 1527 and the subsequent fracturing of the Church. The world was out of sorts and Art needed to reflect this.

With the advantage of hindsight, however, we know the Mannerist movement was something of an artistic dead-end. Even if that were not the case, a reversal of the ideal still implies the existence of an ideal against which one can represent the abject other. It was an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary one. Baroque art picked up where the Renaissance had left off in depicting, if not an ideal world, then at least an aesthetic one. Whether depicting the ideal, the abject, or the aesthetic, High Art after the Renaissance was concerned with the re-presentation of the world. As such, the paradigm of the

picture-plane as window onto worldview remained intact until the advent of a technology to challenge the utility of painting as the quintessential medium of images.

The mid-nineteenth century was a turbulent and revolutionary time. Neoplatonic ideas seemed outdated and elitist. Precision had replaced accuracy as the meme of aspiration. What was the point of attempting to create a single perfect sphere when one could make crates full of spheres, identical in all but the closest inspection? It was hard to make an argument for the superlative when the mechanical was close enough to be functionally indistinguishable. It was at this time that the camera made its debut. With photography, it became painfully obvious that machines were able to, in a fraction of the time, collect and re-present more information than the artist ever could.

While the documentation of the physical world was not the primary purpose for painting, it had always fallen well within the purview of painting. Overnight, that function was usurped. Contemporaneous with the spread of photography was the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species" (1859). Science was rapidly replacing religion as the arena of human understanding. Though depiction of the everyday was not the center of the art world, describing the sacred realm was. It was only natural to question what the function of painting was in the era of science and photograph. Painting had to evolve or re-invent itself if it was to remain culturally relevant as more than a luxury item.

We know for certain that Edouard Manet was aware of photography, as it was ubiquitous in Europe. Many artists embraced the camera as a tool to assist in their studio practice. While there is some debate as to whether or not Manet painted from photographs, the interesting point is how his work changed because of the camera. Manet's was certainly not the only work to be influenced by the lens. The advance of optics was directly related to the Impressionist movement. Claude Monet wanted to rid painting of emotional subjectivity by objectively documenting the phenomenological perception of light as it hit his retina. Automatic as this may seem, can it possibly be a coincidence that his philosophy precipitated at the same time that photography began to document the world in a mechanically equivalent way?

Manet created a paradigm in which the painting surface was no longer a window into another world. Instead, the gaze of the viewer was necessarily unable to penetrate beyond the surface of the paint. Both in terms of content (confrontational counter-gazes) and execution (flat planes of color), Manet insists that the viewer must deal with the image in terms of the painting surface. Denying the pictorial fiction of an illusionistic space might seem like a return to the Gothic, but in terms of intentionality, his work is significantly different.

The Gothic artists were creating a signifier for something else: through the use of tempera and gold, they created symbols to represent that which is not of the physical world. Manet is not using paint to represent an ideal; rather, he takes representations of the physical world and uses them as the building blocks of painting. It is a subtle

distinction, but where the Gothic artists worked in the medium of paint to create a tableau of divine symbols, Manet worked in the language of images to create a painting surface.

Could it be that Manet was less than sanguine about the future of painting? Transforming painting into an—albeit beautiful and expensive—flat object seems to argue for an acceptance of the luxury niche. Or perhaps he was simply attempting to sublimate the societal implications of the camera into a worldview that was consistent with (or at least supplementary to) painting. It could be argued that the next hundred years—the entire modernist movement—was simply a series of concerted efforts to present the world with images that could not be created through the medium of photography. It was a period of works that spoke to a conceptual and intellectual understanding of the human condition rather than documenting perceptual reality. By making it impossible to deny the existence of the surface and the physicality of the paint, High Art was able to differentiate itself from the mechanically slick nature of photography. As the techniques of photography improved, the art world found itself needing to look further and further afield to find untapped raw materials for advanced art.

Painting has sought to re-invent itself by aggressively exploring sumptuous color and impasto; the primitive and pre-historic; non-linear geometry; emotional evocation; the subconscious; mathematical composition; pure abstraction; and finally, the abject in all its myriad forms from the excrementally banal to the clinically insane. It seemed that the only ground left untrodden was in mainstream popular culture. Entering that field, fertile though it may be, would necessarily imply reciprocity for the mechanical view of the world.

By 1960, photography—not to mention film—had reached a maturation point. The average American was literally inundated with high quality, professionally designed images. Photography, in an attempt to ennoble itself as an art form, often dealt with the representation of idealized aesthetic beauty. The sheer number of images snapped ensured that there would be a sufficient number of them of undeniable merit such that photography could no longer be denied a place at the table of High Art.

Here is the ironic part: while the art world, especially painting, worked tirelessly to secure itself against the nascent medium of film (and was ultimately overrun), the true threat to art in all of its forms was silently demolishing the foundation of High Art. Critical theory deconstructed not just God, but humanity as well (and any concept in between). Perhaps this was inevitable after two World Wars; two lost generations who witnessed a hell of advanced mechanical warfare. The ideal seemed unbelievable and unattainable, and the abject looked like a mock parody of the battle-weary world's recent trauma. This had the seemingly contradictory effect of both reifying and normalizing the individual.

What ensued was a pluralistic art world where all opinions are equally (devoid) of value. There are no limits on subject, medium or conception. This also has the effect of leveling High Art; if anything is acceptable as Art (provided you can get at least one

other person who isn't your mother to agree with you), then literally everyone who has snapped a picture that is not completely devoid of merit is an artist.

So the avant-garde movement returned to fold of the mainstream and disbanded. Art, which had previously been employed to show the masses what transcendence looked like, was now relegated either to catering to the interior decorating needs of an expanding middle-class, or, in continuing Dadaist fashion, regurgitating a reflection of a plastic and hollow society back on itself. Either way, art was now free to return to mimetic representation. Though it did not return like the prodigal son.

Hal Foster has argued that the return to realistic representation came with a form of image-making more vitriolic than what had previously been created. Certainly there is a long tradition of re-presenting the other as grotesque or horrific, but the pop artists, and Warhol in particular, attempted to create a *Traumatic Real* by creating a rupture in the picture plane. Instead of presenting the abject other like some caged animal in a zoo, Warhol wanted to show the traumatic wound of present-day dehumanization, and to do so through an open window—that is to say, without the surface of the support working as a safety net for the viewer.

Foster describes this effect as “this point [where] the real *ruptures* the screen or repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of the subject *touched* by an image.”² (Foster's emphasis) The picture plane is once again a window, but the world presented is not idealized or aestheticised, and is in fact dangerous to the viewer. Roland Barthes describes the rupture as “this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”³ The picture plane has become activated and aggressive.

Warhol famously suggested that he was merely an automaton, consuming popular culture and exuding (after much processing) his own imagery from this raw material. Dehumanized imagery in—dehumanized imagery out. Aside from allowing the artist to probe the wound of the post-modern human condition, the creation of a traumatically arresting image works to transfix the viewer's gaze on the image. Much like an auto accident, the average viewer is unable to easily wrench their gaze from the reality before them. Some would argue that as viewers become better and better at filtering aesthetic images, a requisite skill for successful existence in modern life, it is necessary for the artist to find new and more powerful ways to create images that will be thoroughly examined (willingly or no).

As I have suggested, we are currently in a pluralistic modality. The existence of a new way of conceptualizing the picture plane does not suggest that the traumatic real is the new overarching paradigm, although finding a way to capture and hold the viewer's

² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1996), 132.

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 55.

gaze is a popular meme with contemporary artists. All conceptions have been successfully deconstructed to the point that no idea(l) is better or worse than any other. The only currency seems to reside with opinions, and then only insofar as the expressed opinion does not infringe upon the opinions of others.

Donald Kuspit has argued that we are currently in a post-aesthetic era where the progressive art of the day is essentially Protest art, which re-presents the ugliness of the world. "Protest artists fail to realize that beauty is the ultimate protest against ugliness, which is why the absence of beauty in their work shows that they are not critical... Indeed, the inability to imagine beauty is a sign of the creative inadequacy of post-aesthetic modern art."⁴ Sadly, it could be argued that even beauty has been deconstructed to the point of irrelevance: John Berger was able successfully to deconstruct idealized human beauty in his 1973 work, *Ways of Seeing*. Kuspit believes that High Art has a transcendent value that is essential to humanity. Certainly this was true in the past.

The artist Vincent Desiderio believes that painting is critical because it is one of the few remaining venues for a truly individual voice. In a society where people are differentiated mainly through their social security numbers, he may be right. Other contemporary artists such as Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville also seem to be working to re-invest humanity into painting, albeit a warty and post-modern humanity. Perhaps Art has been exiled so far that this is a prerequisite stepping stone to reaching once more for the transcendent potential that High Art contains. Art has previously gone transcendently dormant in periods when the culture of the time was unable to conceptually support it; arguably this is what the Mannered period was.

The twentieth century witnessed more innovation than the previous two thousand years combined. Interestingly, the mathematician Ray Kurzweil has suggested that human innovation is not a linear progression, as a graph of technology over time seems to imply, but rather an exponential progression as each new technology has an additive value to research, also known as a positive feed-back loop, making the next technological paradigm that much easier to achieve⁵. Comprehension of the moral, cultural and human implications of this observation are left as an exercise for the reader. However, in my humble opinion, simply knowing that the next fifty years will easily outstrip the last two centuries in terms of change means that society likely will not have the attention-span necessary to support a High Art. That said, in a world of ever-accelerating change it will become all the more critical for the artists of the world to cling to and document what it means to be human. It is my sincere hope that the artists who choose to look into that Pandora's Box will find at the bottom a shadow of the divine.

⁴ Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31.

⁵ Ray Kurzweil,
<http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?main=/articles/art0610.html>
(Kurzweilai.net, accessed 12/05/2005)