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THE IDEA OF MAN AND ART

by

Linda Carroll

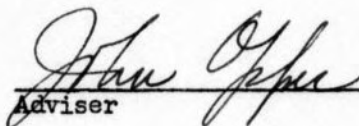
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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of
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PAINTINGS

One: Eggshells	Eight: Figure
Two: Grapefruit-shells	Nine: Plant Group
Three: Objects A	Ten: Tin Can Garden
Four: Objects B	Eleven: Grass
Five: The First	Twelve: Green Things
Six: Prickly	Thirteen: Dandelion
Seven: Leaves	

WOOD BLOCK PRINTS

One	Five
Two	Six
Three	Seven
Four	

Poetry must be as well written as prose. . . No words flying off to nothing. . . Rhythm must have meaning. . . There must be no cliches, set phrases, stereotyped journalese. . . Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression. . .nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. . . I have always wanted to write 'poetry' that a grown man would read without groans of ennui, or without having it cooed into his ear by a flapper. . . Damn it all I want the author talking to the one most intelligent person he knows, and not accepting any current form, form of story, form of anything. Hang it all, how the hell does one say what I'm trying to get at.

Ezra Pound

. . .let's drop the word Truth, which might lead one to believe that the despotism of certain ideas is legitimate. Instead of Truths, let's say Ideas. And let us call Idea any perceived relationship; if you wish to speak metaphorically, it is the refraction in a man's mind of an effective relationship. The number of Ideas is infinite like the number of relationships, or almost.¹

The Idea is perceived in life and conceived in art. Some of what is witnessed and experienced in life is chosen; most of it has an uncanny way of presenting itself as it chooses, no matter how much the man may stomp and fume. The artist never closes his eyes. He sees as much as possible until he is saturated and cannot absorb any more. The night descends. Sometimes he can work his way to the light and sometimes he must wait for the day.

If life begets life, the fact of life is the same. It is the quality that is different each time a human being or a flower or a painting is born. Life is never static. It flows. Its accents pull ever on, the unheard sound of music that spans the

¹Justin O'Brien (ed.), The Journals of Andre Gide (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), Vol. I: 1889-1913, p. 74.

breach between notes, ever flowing into the sound itself. If the earth ever ceased to turn, the surface of the earth and with it man would fly off into a void, a chaos. So that any order is moving and when the order becomes static - chaos. The man stands with his fingers at the pulse of life, and he feels the movement, the flow snagged on rhythms, sound hushed or shrieking, the textures traced as the thing moves; and he asks why, and how. For he is the vehicle of this life. It streams through him and it is HE who gives it form. The color is his. The textures and rhythms and shapes are drawn out of the moving world of these things and given form by man, the artist.

The quality of art depends partially upon the seed and the action of elements upon it, as in life. Thus the idea of fruit and vegetables, eggshells, leaves, the structure of creatures is important. These objects happened to be near, seen, and loved. One can love the whole world through the vein of a leaf. Man loves intimately only a few things. Through this intimacy, he becomes aware and knows and is able to conceive, as the painter conceives by his intimate involvement with paint. Man chooses what he does with his life, the creatures he clings to and the places he goes. Or is it a fate that drops him into each decision? There seems to be an order to life that is like pushings in particular directions, or tall structures, invisible save at certain times when the sun strikes them or they fade into view. If man perceives, life becomes

a pattern in which the man walks. In art as in life there is a fluctuation of will and fate. Sometimes it seems there is infinite choice; and then at times as if there were no choice at all.

It seemed to me that I had my ear to a great spiral shell and that these sounds rose from it. The shell was the vortex of time, and as the birds themselves took shape, species after species, so their distinctive songs were formed within them and had been spiralling up ever since. Now, at the very lip of the shell, they reached my present ear.

As I lie looking at the stars with that blend of wonder and familiarity they alone can suggest, a barge turning the bend in Regent's Park Canal hoots, a soft wedge of sound in the darkness that is cut across by the long rumble of a train drawing out from Euston Station. Touched by these sounds, like a snail I retract my thoughts from the stars and banish the picture of the earth and myself hanging among them. Instead I become conscious of the huge city spreading for miles on all sides, of the innumerable fellow creatures stretched horizontally a few feet above the ground in their upstairs bedrooms, and of the railways, roads and canals rayed out towards all the extremities of Britain. The people sitting in those lighted carriages, even the bargee leaning sleepily on his long tiller, are not individuals going to board meetings in Manchester or bringing in coal for London furnaces. For the instant they are figures moved about the map by unknown forces, as helpless as the shapes of history that can be seen behind them, all irresistibly impelled to the achievement of this moment.²

The large and the small, always plucking at the man, calling his attention to one or the other.

The man walks and walks. Almost unnoticed he paces the streets and peers in at store windows, passes dusty books in a bin,

²Jacquetta Hawkes, A Land (New York: Random House, 1952), pp. 8-9.

sees the squint of an ice cream vendor, fruit in stalls and cheese hanging from a nail. A train roars off somewhere very far away. The man sits to see couples linked to each other, strolling without destination. A woman hangs out her wash on a pulley, the shadow of a bird in flight crosses the cobblestones and is gone. " - not to possess any thing, or to count upon possession but to ride life with light hands, taking with pleasure what comes one's way but never trying to hold it."³

When the man speaks, he speaks not from some narrow by-path but from the streets of a city. He has known them all, the sordid and the light, the dark and gay. He has seen his loved one turn away because he must walk these streets in order to speak. The way is very lonely and because he cannot love man he loves Man, and tells the world about his love. He finds himself committed, he who ran from the commitments of love, who continually loosed himself from entanglements, who put his roots in moving water to float a vertical living thing with all the parts, but free: to suddenly find he is dependent upon the water, the sunlight, the objects that float past. They become subject, these objects of his life, they have become food and he takes them, devours, and conceives.

There is a door. It has a double entrance and exit, one for the man and one for the artist but it is enclosed by one

³Marian Walker Williams in a letter to Gertrude Stein, January 21, 1930. Donald Gallup (ed.), The Flowers of Friendship (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 240.

frame. E. E. Cummings wrote a play about this called HIM.

And there is always question at the end, because the end is beginning, always. The man who has the last word or the last laugh has nothing: he is fooling himself, like the man who thinks he can control another man's life forever. Death will cease the one and free the other.

A man's life and the making of art is a twin conflict. It may be carried on by a glittering matador with the world clustered around his ring, or it may occur by the waters where the man crouches with his poised spear and only the birds and the blue move above his head.

The man is tense with attention. He approaches the object, watches, veers from the challenge, plays with it, muscles and emotions twitching. The world leans forward in its seat, breathlessly - or not at all. The man plunges, the conquest is made. The world shouts, acclaiming or disclaiming - or not at all.

For the man the moment is over and for the moment, won. Because he is a man, the artist - or because he is an artist, man - knows something warm and once has happened. How can he explain it? But if he is truly either, he stretches the next morning and steps into his work-clothes. What was period becomes question, asking him on. "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."⁴

The ambiguity of life forbids its being pinned within a frame

⁴E. E. Cummings, Poems 1923-1954 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), p. 332.

and called art. Nor will art fare as well when it is corseted by wooden staves or set upon pedestals or placed like some rare pheasant under glass. The grapefruit has a rind but man may hold it in his hand as he eats. Painting came out of the caves from some primitive need, it enclosed man and his life. He carved a mask and wore it, it became him. It is the savage man occupied with crayon or knife who is of importance, creating out of his life the violence and serenity of art. Man the savage becomes for the moment man the artist. The gift turns and tempers the savagery, but the fierceness, the intensity, remain.

But man is no savage! He is civilized and yearns for security and happiness, for calm. It is the artist who is wild, Gauguin the Savage who ran off to some island and left his wife and children to the care of the four winds.

It is the duality of things which poses the excitement and the problem. The unique difference of a thing provokes the search and feeds the imagination; the basic likeness and the order keeps man from losing his sanity. He looks at each white acanthus blossom and in the center of each one is a green dot; it is always there. And then he looks and there is one flower that has not formed, it is blighted and there is no dot. Man wonders at this too, and he will ask why and how, just as he will wonder at the recurring wave or season. The violent serenity is too much for the mind, it must be taken by feeling one's way.

Painting and carving are close to the earth, to the dropping of seeds that germinate and push up out of the ground in a new form, to make seeds and go back into the earth. Fear of the familiar and mysterious earth causes man to place his dead in a coffin to protect man from that which bore him. Artificial separations are not happy ones. If the creative impulse does not flow from the hand of the artist through a brush to the canvas, the artist picks up a knife and slashes away with the paint. He may take the paint in his hands and work it into the hard or flexible plane. A block of wood may be scraped and worked over for a long time, and like a painting may become more handsome with age. It may also be a brilliant black and white burst of spontaneity, like something dropped which splatters and remains. The print takes drawing very close to painting.

To the artist there is nothing to surpass the excitement of a new canvas. At the same time it can strike terror. Dare it be touched? It is so white, so clean and bare. It represents a veil between two worlds, and the artist penetrates beyond all barriers. For every fear man has been given a courage to combat that fear. The paint in his hands is vile or beautiful, depending upon how he uses it. Seeing life and setting it free, releasing the spirit in each thing, bringing forth an inward life which might not be the same as the exterior: these things concern the artist. The non-essential and trivial he smothers in paint or slits its throat. He murders with regret, but with large intent.

But what does it mean

you say,

it must have meaning in some way

or perish from the shelf of man.

The meaning

said the man

is you yourself wondering at the work,

its meaning in its being on the earth at all.

For why are jonquils yellow and ivy green,

and worms abounding in the earth.

Today I saw a squirrel with his tail up too,

asking repeated questions of the world.

Answer his, and he will yours.

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