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Drawing

Clement Greenberg

Clement Greenberg graduated from Syracuse University in 1930.

From 1940 to 1943 he was an editor of *Partisan Review* and from 1945 to 1957 an associate editor of *Commentary*. From 1940 to 1949 he was the art critic for *The Nation*. He is the author of books on Matisse (1953) and Hans Hofmann (1961) and of *Art and Culture* (selected essays, 1961). He is a frequent contributor to art journals.

There are the usual things said about drawing: that it's direct, spontaneous, intimate; that it gives more insight into an artist's temperament or character and into his processes of creation—and so on. When the same things are said over and over again about the same thing they cease to cast light; they may even cast darkness. I myself happen to wonder whether Michelangelo's drawings tell us more about him than his frescoes do. And I doubt whether Picasso's drawings go deeper into himself than many of his paintings do. Talking about drawings as such, drawing in general as distinguished from pictorial art in general, is hard for me. There's so little I can say about drawing in itself that I can't also say about painting. There are the differences of medium and technique, to be sure, that make it possible to call drawings drawings and paintings paintings, but I'm not sure that these differences count much for the appreciation as such of art, for aesthetic experience.

There used to be "unfinished" and "finished" drawings. Painters working from Nature used to make preparatory drawings, sketches, studies, notations—"unfinished" drawings. That practice began to fade with open-air landscape painting in the nineteenth century, and it had never had much of a place in portrait painting. "Finished" drawings were something else: they amounted to *pictures*. The preparatory drawings, the studies, the notations, the exercises usually didn't; they wouldn't fill out the sheet in most cases, or they would pay less heed to its shape and size, or the sheet might contain two or more different drawings. "Unfinished" drawings were more in the nature of *images* than pictures, and they demanded a different kind of focusing for appreciation. They challenged the discriminatory capacities of the eye as the wholeness of a picture didn't. You grasped the drawing of, say, a human figure more in the way that you grasped, and assessed, a freestanding sculpture: that is, by its internal relations, relations of

contour, shading, proportion. Or, as often as not, sheerly by the “feel” of the artist’s hand.

All the same, it turned out usually in the past that the best draftsmen were also the best picture makers, the best painters. Prowess in drawing couldn’t be separated from prowess in painting. Maybe there were exceptions. Maybe Holbein and Watteau and Ingres drew better than they painted—but I would hesitate to say so. Maybe Delacroix painted, by and large, better than he drew, but again I would hesitate to say so. (But what I won’t hesitate to say is that Picasso over his last decades drew far better than he painted.)

The advent of nonrealistic art has largely changed the relation of drawing to painting. Abstract painters (if not abstract sculptors) seldom make preliminary drawings, and even when they do they can’t so easily escape the control of the sheet. Even their merest notations tend to be pictures, “finished” that is. (The case of drawing shows, more clearly than anything else maybe, how difficult it is for abstract pictorial art to work in terms of parts, let alone details.) And then drawing as drawing—let’s say as line—tends to get less covered up as it were in abstract or quasi-abstract painting or in painting that takes broad liberties with Nature. So many Klees could be called painted drawings. In so much of Braque’s and Picasso’s painted Cubism, not to mention their collages, it’s hard to say what is drawing as drawing and what isn’t. The same for Léger’s paintings of 1912–14.

. . . I notice that I’ve let myself slip into the assumption that drawing can be defined more or less as line, as explicitly linear. This might do in the short run, but not in the long run. As I said earlier, drawing can’t be satisfyingly distinguished from pictorial art at large: not for actual appreciation or, for that matter, for the purposes of criticism.