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THE QUALITY OF SPACE IN PAINTING

by

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B.F.A., Illinois Wesleyan University, 1958

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Date

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The Quality of Space in Painting

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Wendell H. Black

This abstract of thesis is hereby approved as an
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For publication of this Thesis for the M.F.A. degree by

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by

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Date May 25, 1960

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This abstract of about 200 words is approved as to form and content. I recommend its publication.

For purposes of classification, the space of depth in a painting has long been considered in terms of the historical spatial concept prevalent at the time of the execution of the painting. Painting today does not necessarily require a literary or symbolic preconception on the part of the viewer. It asks only that he look at the painting; the painting is considered an independent entity in that its communication is totally within itself and not dependent on its provoking a great amount of associational response in the viewer in order to gain meaning. With this in mind, the author of this essay is proposing a classification of paintings on the basis of the visual quality of the space existent in them. Within this classification paintings are found to be grouped into three major categories constructed on the basis of the visual tangibility assumed by the space in the particular painting. The individuality of the artist is manifested, within the classification, through the specific use he makes of the means at his disposal in order to create space. The degree of visual tangibility of the space in two paintings by two different painters may be essentially the same, but the construction of the space is not the same due to the necessarily

individual means and the individual expression characteristic of each individual painter.

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Pierre Bonnard, quoted in *Journal of the History of Art*,
Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 120.
Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Discourses*, Vol. 1, p. 120, quoted
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¹Pierre Bonnard, quoted in Ideas and Images in World Art, by Rene Huyghe, N. Y., Abrams, 1959, p. 129.

²Leonardo Davinci, Notebooks, v. 1, p. 230, quoted by R. Huyghe, ibid., p. 139.

pages in terms of its perceptible space in contrast to its symbolic space. The author, supports the following statement by Rudolf Arnheim: "The location in depth of frontally oriented surfaces has been shown to be determined by

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"To represent on a flat surface, masses that are situated in space: this is the problem of drawing."¹
 ---Pierre Bonnard.

"Painting seems a thing miraculous, making things intangible appear tangible, presenting in relief things which are flat, in distance things near at hand."²
 ---Leonardo DaVinci.

The representation of the third dimension on a two-dimensional surface has long been, and continues to be, a major problem of Western painting. This representation of the space of depth has been made through symbolic means and perceptual means. As shall be discussed in detail later, the extent of the intended space of depth in symbolic pictures is dependent on the viewer's knowledge of the significance of the symbols used in the painting and the historical spatial concept that contributed to the execution of the painting. However, this essay is primarily concerned with the pure visual tangibility of the space of depth as it exists in the specific painting. Symbolic painting shall be discussed in the subsequent

¹Pierre Bonnard, quoted in Ideas and Images in World Art, by Rene Huyghe, N. Y., Abrams, 1959, p. 129.

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pages in terms of its perceptible space in contrast to its symbolic space. The author, supports the following statement by Rudolf Arnheim, "The location in depth of frontally oriented surfaces has been shown to be determined by a number of perceptual factors. Artists apply these rules intuitively or quite consciously, in order to make depth relationships visible, and there is no other way of representing space than by making the eye grasp it directly. It is true that knowledge of the subject matter will often allow the beholder intellectually to infer the relative spatial position of objects in a painting; but such knowledge has hardly any influence on the perceptual effect of the picture, and it is the perceptual effect that conveys the expressive meaning of the work."³

The major concern here, then, is not with historical spatial concepts or symbolic approaches to space but rather with the perceptible quality of the space in the completed work.⁴

Tangibility, in this context, is a matter of the degree of the visual perceptible quality assumed by the space of depth in the particular painting; that is, the degree

³Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1954, p. 189.

⁴Perceptible-Apprehensible as real or existent through the range of a sense, (in this case the sense of vision). Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 9th ed.

of the inherent visual reality of the space, without reference to nonperceptual agents. The author proposes that three degrees of third-dimensional visual tangibility exist. These degrees are represented by the following proposed divisions: Iconographical Space, Pure Plastic Space and Icon-Illusionistic Space, a space composed of a combination of iconographical and plastic elements. Iconographical Space represents the least amount of visual tangibility, Pure Plastic Space is representative of the greatest degree of visual tangibility and Icon-Illusionistic Space accounts for the vast area between the preceding extremes. These three idioms of space in painting are not historically chronological; all three are in evidence in the painting of today. Thus, this is not a history of spatial concepts but rather a discussion of the space of depth as it appears in paintings and its concomitant significance as an expression of the individuality of the artist.

The term space, regardless of application, is correlative to distance and implies the existence of at least two distinct units. These units may either be physically separated or be extremes of a single whole. In each case that which sets the units apart can be termed space. In the former example, the distance between the units is space, whereas in the latter, space is the difference between the extremes of the single whole. For example,

the "difference" space of a flat shape is the separating area between the "top" of the shape and the "bottom" of the shape and/or between the left and right extremes of the shape. This is two-dimensional space. Three-dimensional space within a single unit is also constituted by a difference between extremes. For example, in a chiaroscuro drawing of a single unit the difference in tonal value between a high-lighted area and an area of darker value is visually equated to spatial distance.

In painting, distance and difference can exist in essentially lateral and longitudinal terms, or two-dimensions. In Egyptian painting, the distance between distinct units is either lateral or longitudinal, and the space occupied by a single unit is determined by its flat contour. This two-dimensional ordering of the height and width of the picture plane has continued to be of great importance to artists from the Egyptian Era to our own day. However, even in the most two-dimensional painting an element of depth or third-dimension is perceived. A space in depth between the figurative element and the ground plane is visually confirmed through the phenomenon of the human eye in equating difference to distance. Psychologically, according to Rudolf Arnheim, we visually tend to maintain the integrity of the ground plane as a continuous whole. With the intrusion of a shape or line upon the ground plane, the simplest solution left to the eye is

to resort to a depth perception whereby, "the perceived surface is free to thrust the intruder forward, just enough to gain completedness."⁵

In painting, the space of depth is achieved through the difference between elements of the picture, which imitates or gives the illusion of distance in the physical sense. This spatial quality is interpreted through the intellectual and/or perceptual action of the viewer in response to the painter's manipulation of one of the proposed three idioms of space in painting. The major difference between these idioms is the relative perceptible quality of the space presented in each. Another difference closely related to the first, is that paintings in each idiom are dependent upon being seen in a specific frame of reference, or visual system, in order to fully transmit their special type of spatial representation to the viewer. For example, the spatial quality of a painting executed in the Iconographical idiom is dependent upon the viewer's awareness of the intellectual system of symbols proposed by the artist. On the other hand, a painting in the Pure Plastic idiom is dependent upon an optical response to pure form in order to have its spatial quality fully comprehended by the viewer. In the third idiom (the combination of iconographical elements and plastic elements), the spatial quality of the

⁵R. Arnheim, op. cit., p. 178. of Modern Painting, N.Y., Paris Book Center Inc., n.d., p. 102.

painting is dependent upon both the intellectual response to the symbol and the perceptual response to the applied plastic elements on the part of the beholder.

In his choice of a spatial idiom and a related form-language, the painter manifests a relationship of self to reality. The form-language is the particular utilization that a painter, or a group of closely related painters, makes of the design elements which, in turn, become characteristic of his, or their, finished work. In this sense, it is through the form-language that we are able to recognize the work of a given artist or group of artists. The "Fauves", for instance, maintained a general form-language characterized by the following elements: "a uniformity of light, space construction by color, purity and simplification of means, and an absolute correspondence between expression and decoration by composition."⁶ However, despite their adherence to this same general form-language, divergent individual approaches are readily evident in a comparison of the works of Matisse, Vlaminck, and Derain. In the art of the ancient past, when a style embraced an epoch of great duration, the manifestation of individuality is difficult to perceive. The art of Egypt gives evidence of a common acceptance of a form-language by a group of artists, a sharing, as it was, of generalities. Despite

⁶Fernand Hazan, ed., Dictionary of Modern Painting, N.Y., Paris Book Center Inc., n.d., p. 102.

the codification of forms, personal nuances or improvisations indicative of the individuality of the artist existed within the over-all language. As Rene Huyghe states, "In the case of the true artist, the individual character of the creative act is so involuntary that even if he tries to produce an exact copy of another's work, he inevitably marks it with his own imprint, with what pedants might call the personal factor. Indefinable and yet unmistakable, this factor is implicit in the artist's way of perceiving as well as of painting, in his eye as well as his hand; it is implicit in his very nature."⁷

In one way or another, the stamp of the individual artist is on his work and his formal usages are definitely related in analogy to the conditions of his existence. This analogy is not necessarily the case of a certain graphic representation equating to a known quality of his being, or a sort of code, the deciphering of which indicates the artist's most personal depths. However, often the spatial element of the form-language serves as a primary assertion of the artist's orientation to the world in personal terms and in societal terms. In the invention or selection of a spatial idiom, painters have manifested religious, humanistic or scientific concepts in accordance with the idiosyncracies of their historic ages. Paintings, through their spatial properties, serve as icons to the beliefs of their authors.

⁷R. Huyghe, op. cit., p. 262.

The polarities or extremes of approach to the problem of space in painting throughout history may be represented through the Iconographical and Pure Plastic idioms. These serve respectively as the ultimate division of painters into the camps of negation or acceptance of the reality of visual perception. As shall be discussed in detail in the following pages, the painter working within the Iconographical idiom denies the reality of visual perception; instead, he represents the space of depth through symbols. Though the spatial symbol may indicate a vast space to the conditioned viewer, the viewer unable to read the symbol finds the painting to be essentially flat due to the denial of visual perception by the painter and the consequent lack of visual tangibility in the symbolic representation of space. On the other hand, the painter working within the Pure Plastic idiom accepts the reality of visual perception and the consequent plastic space in his pictures is visually tangible to all viewers who look at them without a dominant associational reference to qualities or objects outside of the painting. These are the extremes; the largest camp, composed of painters working within the Icon-~~ographic~~ Illusionistic spatial idiom, lies between them. of the symbols of subjects known intellectually and through experience to be unlike in size. This example presupposes that the hypothetical painter's spatial ordering is dependent upon the viewer's equating of the reality of his

knowledge of the subject to the representative symbol.

This is not always the case. As we shall see in the subsequent pages, though the artistic means and the perceptible

ICONOGRAPHICAL SPACE

space in iconographical paintings are very similar, the

kind The intended space in iconographical pictures is less reliant upon the intrinsic plastic perceptual elements of the picture and more reliant on an established way of reading symbols. The correct reading of these symbols leads to the viewer's intellectual extension of the subject matter into the spatial context intended by the artist. This conceptual approach to space can be exemplified in the case of a hypothetical painting featuring flat representations of a human figure and a mountain form of equal size, value, and color on the same plane. The space in this painting is confirmed by the viewer through his common knowledge of the nature of the subject matter. Despite the flatness of representation of both the mountain and the figure, the tendency will be for the viewer to relate the spatial realities of his experience of mountains and men to the symbols. Consequently, the mountain will normally be relegated to the distance and the figure to the foreground in order to compensate for the equal size of the symbols of subjects known intellectually and through experience to be unlike in size. This example presupposes that the hypothetical painter's spatial ordering is dependent upon the viewer's equating of the reality of his

knowledge of the subject to the representative symbol. This is not always the case. As we shall see in the subsequent pages, though the artistic means and the perceptible space in Iconographical paintings are very similar, the kind of space extended by the viewer is largely determined by the spatial concept conditioning his vision.

We cannot deny that a visually perceptible space exists in Iconographical pictures. The space of depth exists the moment a line is drawn or one form overlaps another form. But, the perceptible depth in the Iconographical idiom remains essentially two-dimensional. A case in point would be Egyptian painting wherein the difference between the figurative elements and the background plane produces a basic depth between the two planes. However, the appearance is not that of a three-dimensional whole, but rather of two separate two-dimensional surfaces with a shallow space between them. In the Iconographical idiom the subject matter and the intellectual orientation of the viewer to the concept are the real determiners of space.

The artistic means of Iconographical pictures vary slightly from epoch to epoch, but the spatial ends provoked by the paintings range from a negligible space in depth to the space of infinity. The extent of the space implied is determined by the concept to which the painting is a vehicle. The polarities of these spatial ends mentioned above, brought about through the conceptual determination

ized occupation of a certain quantity of two-dimensional

of space, may be readily seen in a comparison between the Etruscan wall paintings at Tarquinii and Byzantine mosaics. In both examples, the figures are flat with no essay into the space of depth through conventional plastic means. The perceptible difference-distance is the most simple relationship between a flat ground plane and flat figurative elements. Physical distance between these separate figurative elements exists in lateral and longitudinal terms only. Were it not for some internal treatment both the Etruscan and Byzantine figures would become silhouettes. Line serves to bound shapes as well as to decorate the surface but it never approaches a cross-contour, in active denial of the two-dimensional wall plane. Modeling is absent and color is assigned locally with no real concern for its spatial properties. In the Etruscan paintings, the feet of the figures, as well as the bases of trees and furniture, are firmly planted on a colored band allowing for no representation of depth through foreshortening or perspective, but only a two-dimensional spatial placement. Likewise, in the Ravenna Mosaics, notably the Processions of Virgins and Saints in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, the feet of the martyrs are planted on the same level and each occupies an equal two-dimensional space, the only exceptions being the hierarchical dominance of size assumed by more divine beings through theological necessity. This is in keeping with the symbolic conception of the mosaics wherein the formalized occupation of a certain quantity of two-dimensional

space serves to aid the viewer in his identification and subsequent extension of the subject. One example of what could be regarded as a spatial device is the depiction of the Byzantine Emperor and Empress overlapping their cohorts in the mosaic in the Church of San Vitale. However, this overlapping is not conceived in terms of establishing a perceptible depth but rather as a hierarchical element. The author believes that the Byzantine mosaicist did not consciously use the element of overlap as a spatial device but rather as a means of indicating exalted rank through the monarchs' symbolic dominance by virtue of their uninterrupted contours. This is a possible variation on the Egyptian means of indicating rank through the relative size of figures.

The similarity of the Etruscan and Byzantine works extends beyond mere consideration of the artistic means employed, but into the kind of expression as well. Both the Etruscan and Byzantine paintings are concerned with a "world beyond". The Etruscan works are tomb paintings and the Byzantine mosaics transmit the precepts of the Church. Both are religious works (as are the great majority of iconographical paintings), but here the similarity ends. Though both styles share approximate approaches in execution, they differ in the extent of space implied, as a result of the conceptual differences of the groups who fostered them.

The Etruscan paintings are flat and decorative. They are symbols indicating and fulfilling the needs of the dead in the afterworld, as well as depictions of gods and other religiously significant subjects. This art is man-oriented, thoroughly manifesting the intellectual tendencies of the era preceding transcendental thought. Even the gods are represented as perfect examples abstracted from man and are conceived in a localized, concrete, measurable, spatial sense. Often the extent of a god's realm is a national boundary. The spatial quality employed by the Etruscan painter fully reflects the local and logical tenets of the period, paralleling the then contemporary concept of space as being "qualitative rather than quantitative", it was a two-dimensionality in accordance with the feeling that "the limits of space are defined by the geometric surfaces of the solids which contain or confine it."⁸ In comparison, "the mosaicist of Monreale stylized his figures so as they might participate in his vision of transcendence."⁹ The Byzantine artist manifested space and self through his orientation to the symbol and his subjugation to a system. He affirmed his created Heaven through contrast to his earthly being and the chaos of worldly expresses the space of infinity while at the same time denying

⁸ Irving L. Zupnick, "Concept of Space and Spatial Organization in Art", Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. XVIII, Dec. 1959, p. 14.

⁹ Andre Malraux, Voices of Silence, Garden City, Doubleday, 1953, p. 106.

appearances. "What they, (the Byzantine), depicted was neither what they saw, nor a dramatic scene; it was a superb negation. Like so many oriental styles, theirs arose from a passionate desire to represent that which, rationally speaking, cannot be represented: to depict the superhuman through the human. Not the world but that which, in this world or beyond it, is worthy of depiction."¹⁰ Though visually, Byzantine painting is essentially two-dimensional, its spirit creates a space through both symbol (blue and gold backgrounds symbolic of infinity) and the gulf of difference between Heaven and earth manifested by its mysticism. The coeval Byzantine viewer, aware of Christian doctrine, applied the mystical spatial concept of the divine in response to the conditioning symbols in the painting. In this way the beholder gives the work a spatial extension which, though not wholly inherent in the work itself, is none the less prompted by it.

The space, like the painting (mosaic), is emotional, evoked by the symbol, and requires no tangible perceptual confirmation for the Byzantine viewer. In the "world" created on the walls of Ravenna, the earthly quality of mass is denied by the ethereal symbol. The Byzantine artist expresses the space of infinity while at the same time denying

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 208.

the space of worldly forms. For as Andre Malraux states, "Christianity claims to be the truth, not reality."¹¹

PURE PLASTIC SPACE

Paintings representative of the Pure Plastic idiom present a space in depth engendered with the greatest amount of perceptible spatial quality. This space is independent of the viewer's intellectual preconception. Instead, depth is manifested in purely visual terms as a result of the total interplay of plastic elements.

Pure Plastic Space, as stated previously, presents the greatest degree of visual tangibility as it is the natural space of painting, being dependent solely on the intrinsic spatial qualities of plastic elements rather than the plastic enhancement gained by a symbol of a known mass or space as is the case in paintings representative of the Icon-Illusionistic idiom. "When Uccello put a diagonal in his picture, it had to be a lance."¹² The distance-difference quotient of the Pure Plastic Space is reliant upon natural tensions between variations of a design element; for example, the tension between warm and cool color, or between adjacent value areas or areas of intensity, or the tension between a straight and curved line. In its independence of the world of natural appearances, Pure Plastic Space is

¹¹ Ibid., p. 217.

¹² P. Hazan, op. cit., p. 136.

endowed with the greatest degree of visual reality in that, when controlled, the space in no way denies the two-dimensionality of the picture plane through reference to

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¹²F. Hazan, op. cit., p. 136.

endowed with the greatest degree of visual reality in that, when controlled, the space in no way denies the two-dimensionality of the picture plane through reference to qualities beyond itself, instead it transmits the appearances natural to a panel of color and line.

Cubism in its developed stage, is exemplary of Pure Plastic Space in its affirmation of the two-dimensional plane. Though Braque and Picasso used recognizable subjects as points of departure, this in no way alters the argument in that the level of abstraction is such as to render the subjects totally within the plastic reality of the painting thereby counteracting their iconographical value. In the Analytical phase of Cubism (1907-11), Braque and Picasso intellectually denied the traditional means of the three-dimensional representation of volume; instead, they were intent upon delimitating volume by measurable planes and subjugating the subject matter to the self-sufficient order of the picture. The formal existence of the picture plane became the primary consideration of Cubist painting to the extent that all space was conceived in reference to it. Consider the collage; space no longer exists solely within and behind the plane, or as in the case of Giotto, as a bas-relief, but both before and behind. As Daniel Kahnweiler states, "the paintings and collages push the objects out into the room to make the object, as

Boack and Sabartes, *Picasso*, New York., Abrams, 1957, p. 186.

it were, partake of the same space as the spectator."¹³

The collage element, originally conceived as a point of identification for the viewer, becomes equally important as an ultimate spatial device and yet retains the two-dimensionality demanded by the rigorous discipline of the Cubists.¹⁴

The aesthetic theories of Cubism provided an impetus for other painters in whose work Pure Plastic Space is realized in a non-objective form. In the Neo-Plasticism of Piet Mondrian and the Suprematism of Casimir Malevitch, we find a discipline based on plasticity extending to pure color, line, and geometric shape to the ultimate denial of subjective association. The paintings of Wassily Kandinsky

¹³Daniel Kahnweiler, quoted by P. G. Pavia, "The Second Space: The American Sense of Space on Space," It Is, No. 2, p. 4, Autumn, 1958.

¹⁴"For many years it was to be the aim of Cubist painting to combine color and form elements into objects which recalled only this or that aspect of the accustomed natural things but which were just as individual as natural objects because they were born of individual creative imagination. It was thus important to get the beholder to discover associative clues within the picture that would enable him to link the new kind of object with what was already familiar to him. To guide the beholder's eye, the Cubists first resorted to rather clumsy devices - the so called details reels, realistic details which were intended to serve as sign posts in the necessary re-translation from the language of abstraction into that of reality. The technique of papiers colles, or collage, was particularly favored from the early days of Synthetic Cubism, because it is more suited to the two-dimensional character of the picture surface than illusionistically painted details." Boeck and Sabartes, Picasso, New York., Abrams, 1957, p. 166.

also exemplify a pure plastic orientation in both the Amorphous and the Geometric phases of his work. In his book, Glimpses of the Past, Kandinsky wrote, "The separation between the domain of art and the domain of Nature grew wider for me, until I could consider them as absolutely distinct, one from the other. I knew then that objects harmed my painting."¹⁵

The use of pure plastic space is an affirmation by the painter of the reality of perceptual existence and of himself as a pure creator by virtue of both his intellectual and sensory abilities.

Through the utilization of conventional plastic means the artist can approximate within the painting the spatial realities of men and mountains as he sees them. In this context, conventional plastics are defined by the author as those means arrived at for the purpose of strengthening the spatial reality of the subject matter of the painting in relation to the appearances of the actual object it represents. On the other hand, pure plastics are those which assert their own spatial reality foremost, being independent of the identification of subject matter for the expression of three-dimensional space. Conventional plastics may be arrived at either intellectually

¹⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, Glimpses of the Past, quoted by F. Hazan, op. cit., p. 136.

Among the possibilities would be linear perspective, which is a product of a logical calculation of space as well as the visual reality of diminishing

form receding into the distance. Atmospheric perspective, or the depiction of the sensory phenomenon by which forms in the distance become increasingly obscure in relationship to forms near at hand, could also be applied. The use of

ICONOGRAPHICAL-ILLUSIONISTIC SPACE

The third idiom of space in painting has an iconographical element of representation plus the strength of illusionistic or conventional plastic means which, in combination, tend to make the spatial configuration of the subject matter even more convincing to the viewer. Consider again the example of the figure form and the mountain form of equal size used previously in reference to the Iconographical spatial idiom. Through the utilization of conventional plastic means the artist can approximate within the painting the spatial realities of men and mountains as he sees them. In this context, conventional plastics are defined by the author as those means arrived at for the purpose of strengthening the spatial reality of the subject matter of the painting in relation to the appearances of the actual object it represents. On the other hand, pure plastics are those which assert their own spatial reality foremost, being independent of the identification of subject matter for the expression of three-dimensional space. Conventional plastics may be arrived at either intellectually or sensorily, and examples of both can be applied to the man-mountain situation. Among the possibilities would be linear perspective, which is a product of a logical calculation of space as well as the visual reality of diminishing

form receding into the distance. Atmospheric perspective, or the depiction of the sensory phenomenon by which forms in the distance become increasingly obscure in relationship to forms near at hand, could also be applied. The use of modeling on the figure and the use of the receding and advancing qualities of color are other examples of conventional plastics which could serve to make the relationship of man and mountain more convincing spatially. These elements when applied to the subject present a third dimension more perceptibly real than the quality of space implied through the identification of the subject matter alone.

Spatially, the great majority of Western paintings are composed of fractions of iconographical representations of objects known to have spatial existence, combined with fractions of illusionistic, or conventional, plastic elements in reciprocal affirmation; thus, a dual difference-distance quotient exists in Icon-Illusionistic paintings. The first quotient is that between recognizably distinct objects, distinguished through subjective identification, and the second, between their applied plastic qualities, which further differentiate the objects from one another through visually perceptible means. Through the Renaissance, the Baroque, and up to our own time, artists have been concerned with creating the spatial reality of recognizable subjects in denial and in affirmation of the two-dimensional nature

of the picture plane through the plastic potentials at their disposal.¹⁶

Giotto is foremost in the evolution of the convincing representation of three-dimensional form. Elements of the Byzantine, channelled through the Gothic, remain in his work, plus a humanistic strain as opposed to the earlier Byzantine denial of appearances. "When he (Giotto) reconciled Gothic love with Byzantine reverence he did this by upholding the honor of man's estate. His noblest figures are a worthier court of that Beau Dieu who at Amiens is surrounded only by a retinue of groveling henchmen."¹⁷ In Giotto's paintings, Christ walks among men rather than dominates them and is Himself a man; His divinity is manifested only by the halo. In this treatment of Christ, Giotto affirms "self" through a belief in the perceptual realities of this world which figure in the plastics of his pictures.

Giotto's space is similar to classical space in its

¹⁶For example, as F. Hazan states, Matisse affirms the two-dimensionality of the plane though dealing with recognizable subjects and a perceptible space of depth.--"Refusing the techniques of trompe-l'oeil and perspective--for he (Matisse) did not want to hollow out the picture and conceal its nature as a plain surface--he resorted to oppositions of tone: behind the colored figures, for example, he spread out tones of various colors which, in their relation to one another and to the figures themselves, give an impression of space, a space full of light, without hiding the fact that the picture is a plane covered with color." Ibid., p. 180.

¹⁷A. Malraux, op. cit., p. 268.

logical recession of discrete parallel planes, which through their lack of connection become "stage sets" for his powerfully modeled figures. Consider, for example, Giotto's painting, Joachim and the Shepherds, at the Arena Chapel in Padua. This painting is composed of three distinct planes; the figurative (including the shed), a middle ground (the mountains), and a sky plane. The relationship of the middle ground to the sky plane presents a very shallow space due to a limited plastic differentiation between them. The difference-distance between the middle ground and the sky plane is similar to that spoken of earlier in regard to Egyptian painting; that is, the appearance is that of two separate, parallel, two-dimensional surfaces with a very shallow perceptible space between them. On the other hand, the difference between the figurative plane and the background (sky and middle ground) presents a very distinct space in depth as a result of the plastic strength lent through the heavy modeling of the figures. Consequently, the space occupied by the mass of figures is convincing but the background appears as a theatrical "flat", due to its less convincing plastic treatment. This quality of difference between the figures and the background tends to give the painting a spatial character much like that of a bas-relief.

Due to the afore-mentioned humanistic strain in reference to visual reality, the basic spatial problem of the

Renaissance continued to be that of relating the traditional classical planes to a continuum.¹⁸ In keeping with this classical orientation however, the schemata arrived at as possible solutions were conceived in rational, mathematical terms and included such concepts as linear perspective and foreshortening. The precision of drawn edges, characteristic of so much of Renaissance painting, often rendered these optical effects impotent. This point may be exemplified by Mantegna's painting of the Dead Christ in which the plastic difference between Christ's feet and the pillow beneath His head is not relative to the distance required by the foreshortened figure.²⁰ Another important element of

The ultimate solution of the problem of three-dimensional representation follows the overthrow of the Renaissance practice of subjugating sensory data to theoretical, mathematical systems of representation. This revolution was brought about through the discovery of the plastic elements of sensory or Empirical space, through which space

¹⁸ In reference to the humanistic strain of the Renaissance and its spatial manifestation, Wylie Sypher states, "for the architect, sculptor, and painter resolutely set about attacking the problem of the third dimension which, being solved, furnished an adequate theater for the image of man created by Gothic artisans. Inevitably this new rendering of space brought man into new psychological, as well as physical, relations with reality." Wylie Sypher, Four Stages of Renaissance Style, Garden City, Doubleday, 1956, p. 56.

²⁰ This space is further subdivided into a number of minor planes through the applied plastics.

was painted more closely to the way in which it was seen in nature.¹⁹ Foremost of the plastic elements of Empirical space is the quality of atmosphere and its application as atmospheric perspective. Atmospheric perspective is the adaptation of the natural difference-distance quotient in terms of the contrast between hazy distant objects and the greater precision and clarity of objects near at hand. Leonardo's Mona Lisa demonstrates the perfection of this method. Though the painting is one composed essentially of two major planes, the transition from foreground to deep space is totally convincing in the relative gradation from clarity to obscurity.²⁰ Another important element of Empirical space is the utilization of light as an "antagonist" to the primacy of idealized forms. Previously light had served merely as an area in which forms become visible. Unaltered, even illumination contributed to the precise, measurable, Classical form.

¹⁹ Irving L. Zupnick defines Empirical space as that in which Empirical observation supplants conceptual knowledge and he specifies paintings employing Empirical space to be those in which the subject is a recreation of what is observed without the inhibiting factor of a theory or precept.
op. cit., p. 14.

²⁰ The Mona Lisa is considered by the author to consist of two major planes, foreground and background, through basic difference-distance, although it is recognized that each of these major planes is further subdivided into a number of minor planes through the applied plastics.

²¹ R. Bayha, op. cit., p. 145.

Through the sensory concern for things as they seem to be, as opposed to the classic concern for the measurable, light no longer remains neutral but becomes a convincing spatial element. The manifestation of light as a conditioner of three-dimensional space may be found in the paintings of Caravaggio who manifests "self" through the "assertion of (his) right to stress some aspects at the expense of others."²¹ An exemplary Caravaggio painting, The Conversion of Paul, is indicative of the Baroque concept of continuous space in which he worked. Through light, the dominant medium of his form-language, and the ordering of his subjective elements, he creates a fluid space that seeks to project through the plane of the canvas as well as through the depth of the space field. The dynamic thrust of Paul's body is such as to project the head to the limits of the close foreground, and the contrast of light to dark creates an extreme difference-distance quotient through which deep space assumes a limitless quality.

Rhythm is also an Empirical spatial quality that culminated in the Baroque concept of a continuous, incorporeal space. Rubens is the master of this dynamic device. As in the works of Caravaggio, the space of a Rubens' painting attempts to transcend the picture plane. However, this attempt is made not only through plastic means but also

²¹R. Huyghe, op. cit., p. 148.

with the addition of an element of psychological involvement. The viewer is swept through the continuum of the picture by the curvilinear rhythm of its totality. Rubens' forte was the creation of a whirling grandiose space which moves back and forward through the space field of the canvas. Space is never arbitrary in the work of Rubens, existing merely because of basic necessity as an arena for his figures to exist in, but is a primary compositional factor serving to relate all elements to the totality of the painting.

To digress for a moment, once the Empirical means for representing three-dimensional space on the two-dimensional canvas were resolved, painting in the Iconographical-Illusionistic spatial idiom suffered a schism of direction. Each direction is characterised by its fractional reciprocity of iconographical elements in relation to illusionistic plastic elements. Briefly stated, the one extreme is the application of the illusionistic plastic spatial elements for the total benefit and enhancement of the subject matter; the ultimate manifestation of this direction is the trompe-l'oeil. The other direction, which we might call the main-spring of modern art, is that in which the primary concern is for the formal manipulation of the plastic spatial elements in the interest of developing more personal expressive meanings. Edouard Manet, for example, retained recognizable subject matter but found new meanings through the investigation of the spatial qualities of color. In this second

approach, the subject matter, as such, takes an increasingly subservient position in relation to the assertion of plastic reality. This does not mean that meaning and expression are subjugated and lost to technical gymnastics, but that the importance of the reality of painting overcomes the importance of the realistic appearances of the object, thus opening new areas of meaning which transcend naturalistic objects. This attitude can be seen in the dominance of form-language over subject matter in the paintings of the French Impressionists. Their form-language, related as it was to the contemporary scientific concept of optics, was one of light and color in which form was described by the light catching qualities of its surface. Since light is a fugitive element, this concept implies a relative reality and carries a concomitant relative space which is subject to the variable factor, light. It follows that relative light is in need of a medium on which to work, in this case, recognizable subject matter; however, the nature of the subject matter is, in turn, relatively unimportant. The only important thing about the subject is that it exists.

of Byzantium as it, in turn, is divorced from the naivete of the primitive. The similarity that the paintings share is that of the kind of difference-distance quotient, which is the same in all of these examples despite the variance of concepts that fostered them, and that they, in turn, express. This qualification extends to the Icon-

Illusionistic differentiation in a somewhat different way, as this classification embraces the evolution of the representation of three-dimensional form, which follows a more or less chronological order. However, even in this case,

SUMMATION

We have seen that the element of space in painting is divisible into three major idioms based on the degree of visual tangibility assumed by the third-dimension in each. This division is compounded in terms of the perceptible depth existent in the particular painting and not in terms of the prevalent historical concept that may have contributed to the painting's execution. The concern here is not with theory but with the finished product. Despite a great divergency between theories of space expressed in particular paintings, often the paintings of diverse cultures maintain a similar visual tangibility in terms of their spatial realization. Certainly all primitive paintings fit into the Iconographical designation, as would in Greek vase paintings and Byzantine mosaics, but not through virtue of common concept. The logical basis of the Greek painting is as far divorced from the emotional, religious concept of Byzantium as it, in turn, is divorced from the naivete of the primitive. The similarity that the paintings share is that of the kind of difference-distance quotient, which is the same in all of these examples despite the variance of concepts that fostered them, and that they, in turn, express. This qualification extends to the Icon-

Illusionistic differentiation in a somewhat different way, as this classification embraces the evolution of the representation of three-dimensional form, which follows a more or less chronological order. However, even in this case, the evolution up to and surpassing the convincing representation of the extended dimension is paralleled by a daily shifting of reciprocal fractions of icon to plastics; that is, the gradual diminishing of the importance of the subject matter as a determiner of space and the ascendance of the importance of plastic elements in their spatial capacities. The shifting of fractions accounts for the inclusion, under one general classification, of such diverse spatial concepts as those of Giotto, Caravaggio, and Monet. These painters are representative of varying degrees of reciprocity between icon and plastics. This is not to say that the space of Caravaggio and that of Velasquez are of different fractional combinations, nor that the space is the same in two finished works if the fractional equation of icon to plastics is the same. The space is different because of the individual artist's choice of the element of form-language with which to work. However, it is an equal space in representing three-dimensions by the degree of the difference-distance resulting from a similar fractional combination.

York Museum of Modern Art within the past year, there An enigmatic aspect of the Icon-Illusionistic spatial classification is the level of the abstraction of the subject

matter. If the subject is recognizable as a specific form strengthened through plastic spatial elements, regardless of the identification or non-identification of the form, it is Icon-Illusionistic. An example of this aspect is the work of Yves Tanguy. The reciprocity of applied plastics is such as to make Tanguy's forms appear spatially convincing though they lack reference to objects of everyday experience. On the other hand, the Synthetic Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque are of the Pure Plastic spatial classification despite the existence of recognizable subject matter. The level of abstraction in these Cubist paintings is such as to make the subject matter subordinate to the reality of the painting thus minimizing the degree of its iconographic reference to a known object.

The perceptual tangibility of space in contemporary painting is represented in the same range of degrees covered thus far by our three proposed spatial idioms. Contemporary painting in the United States, and for that matter, the remainder of the Western World, seems to be essentially divided into two major directions; these may be represented by the "Figurative Painters" and "The School of New York" (for lack of better designations). Both directions have been the subjects of major exhibitions at the New York Museum of Modern Art within the past year, therefore, all specific paintings referred to in the subsequent pages of this essay may be found reproduced in the

catalogues of these exhibitions.²²

Though each group may be said to adhere to one kind of conceptual space, a non-objective plastic space in the New York group and an objective plastic space in the Figurative group, the perceptible space in the finished works varies greatly from painter to painter as the result of an individual manifestation of the form-language. Though Alfred Barr collectively characterizes the space of the "New American Painting" thusly, "Their flatness is, rather, a consequence of the artist's concern with the actual painting process as his prime instrument of expression, a concern which also tends to eliminate imitative suggestion of the forms, textures and spaces of the real world, since these might compete with the primary reality of paint on canvas,"²³ we find, in looking at individual works, that Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning each manifests an individual spatial resolution. In Gorky's painting, Agony, 1947, despite the fact that the objects are non-representational, the pure plastics employed leave no doubt as to which forms exist in front of other forms.²⁴ The perceptible space in this painting puts Agony in the

²² Alfred H. Barr, New American Painting, N. Y., Museum of Modern Art, 1958.

Peter Selz, New Images of Man, N. Y., Museum of Modern Art, 1959.

²³ A. Barr, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid., plate, p. 35.

Pure Plastic spatial idiom, but in a different way than the works of Motherwell and de Kooning. Gorky approaches the Icon-Illusionistic idiom in somewhat the same sense as Tanguy. Robert Motherwell manifests a very different Pure Plastic space. His painting, The Voyage, 1949, is a collage in paint, fully reflecting its two-dimensional nature, yet at the same time presenting a perceptibly real space in depth by virtue of the plastic qualities of color and shape.²⁵ Willem de Kooning's Woman 1, 1950-2, further illustrates an individual space within the fold of a conceptual heading.²⁶ The space in his painting, regardless of recognizable image, is totally within the Pure Plastic idiom in terms of its visually perceptible qualities. As Thomas B. Hess states, "de Kooning meets the crisis of modern art (that stipulates an ethical flatness in painting and then adds that flat is an academic notion), by saturating the picture with his own shapes. He recaptures complex illusions of depth by making the image all of a piece; with no pauses or rests, no in-betweens. The artist finishes a picture as the image becomes complete, as it assumes its own countenance; all separate shapes are obliterated in the form. As he has said, 'I paint myself out of the picture.' When the artist is finished, the

²⁵ Ibid., plate, p. 59.

²⁶ Ibid., plate, p. 53.

picture begins its own life."²⁷

In the realm of figurative painting, represented by the "New Images of Man" exhibition, we find that the great majority of paintings fall into the Icon-Illusionistic idiom on the basis of their perceptible space. We also find that the space is less reliant upon the identification of subject matter and more dependent upon the manipulation of plastic elements. The paintings of Alberto Giacometti, Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliviera are similar in that each creates a space in reference to recognizable images; however, this is the extent of the similarity. The kinds of space and the plastic elements involved in creating this space are individual, as is the case with the "New York Painters" as well. The perceptible depth in Giacometti's figure paintings is brought about through a maze of diagonal and cross-contour lines whereas, Diebenkorn's Girl on a Terrace, owes its space to the plastic qualities of color.^{28, 29} Nathan Oliviera's Standing Man with a Stick presents a very shallow space as a result of the relatively simple difference-distance quotient existent between the figure and the ground plane.³⁰ However, in Man Walking, Oliviera creates

²⁷ Thomas B. Hess, Willem de Kooning, N.Y. Braziller, 1959, p. 24.

²⁸ P. Selz, op. cit., plate, p. 74.

²⁹ Ibid., plate, p. 56.

³⁰ Ibid., plate, p. 112.

a vast space as a result of an increased element of difference between the figure and the ground.³¹ In both paintings, the form-language is the same, a heavily painted figure against a broad void-like ground, but the slightest variation has completely altered the perceptible quality of the space from one painting to the other.

These examples of the divergencies between the spatial resolutions of individuals within general conceptual camps, indicates the problem of speaking of the space in a painting in terms of the concept preceding its execution rather than of the actual manifestation of space in the finished work. A similar spatial concept may be shared, but the space is different in each specific painting as a result of the form of representation assumed by the individual painter. As we have seen, even totally different concepts of space have been manifested with the same degree of visual tangibility. The identification of an individual artist and the space in his paintings cannot be accurately made in terms of that concept which precedes the execution of the work. We cannot deny that concepts influence the painter, however, the painter's influence on the concept results in the finished painting. The painter's use of an individual form-language is responsible for the visual perceptible quality of the space in his painting and this, the space in the finished work, is what must be considered. To quote Rudolf Arnheim

³¹Ibid., plate, p. 115.

once more, "there is no other way of representing space than by making the eye grasp it directly."³² The indirect, symbolic representation of space in the Iconographical idiom is not the space of painting because it does not exist in the painting but in the mind of the conditioned beholder. By the same token, the manifestation of "self" by the painter is considerably less apparent in this idiom because of the strict conventional form-language through which he works. Modern art begins with the dominance of the will of the individual painter over the restrictions of present and past canons. The space in painting today is, more than ever, individual and must be considered in and of itself on the basis of its existence as the space of painting rather than through the medium of a collective concept before the fact.

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³²R. Arnheim, loc. cit.

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48" x 35"
Size

Boy and Dog in Landscape
Title

22" x 30"
Size

Baby and Dark Dog
Title

22" x 35"
Size

Female Animal
Title

which is in the permanent possession of the University of Colorado and recorded with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

Richard Black
Chairman of Committee

Allen L. Megraw
Head of Fine Arts Department

Date 1 June 1960

Thesis statement to appear on
all theses presented by candidates
for the M.F.A. degrees in Creative
Arts as of February 25, 1948.

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree M.F.A. in Creative Arts

James J. Hennessey
NAME

has submitted this written thesis
as a supplement to the creative thesis

TWO OIL PAINTINGS, ONE DRAWING, ONE COLLAGE
No. and Medium

42" x 54"
Size

Caped Figure
Title

48½" x 58"
Size

Boy and Dog in Landscape
Title

22" x 30"
Size

Baby and Dark Dog
Title

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Approved by

Richard H. Koch
Chairman of Committee

Alden L. Megraw
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