Abstract Art
The Contribution of the 20th Century

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A most interesting phenomena in the study of art, is that centuries often pass before a thought which held the imagination in the past is again reborn. Certain expressions in art which have been neglected and forgotten are once more brought to the fore and the beauty which lay hidden, sometimes for centuries, is once more revealed to an appreciative public.

Only by knowing one's history of art, can one, therefore, differentiate between those expressions which are the contribution of our century and those which, having been neglected, are once more voicing themselves.

Thus we find that it is not the rhythm or exaggerated form, simplification or even the fluidity and breaking up of surfaces which is the great contribution of today - but rather the psychology of color and what we term the abstract in art - which is not pattern or design as they appear to many Americans - and it is of this that I want to speak to you this afternoon.

Having however an orderly mind which likes to go back to go forward - or - I might say - likes to build up from the bottom - I want to
speak first of these other expressions and draw your attention to their roots in the past.

It will help you to see more clearly WHY I made the statement which I did — that the psychology of color and Abstract Painting are the contributions of this century.

We all know Ruskin's contribution to the understanding of what we term the early Italian Primitives — which in his day were utterly neglected and which he revived and restored to the world.

Though we all know that contribution — I wonder how many of us are conscious that this fundamental work which Ruskin did in emphasizing the importance of thoroughly knowing your subject and in not slurring your work as well as emphasizing the freshness of vision which the Italian Primitives brought to their work — prepared the way for the Modern Spirit to enter.

For it is interesting to note that Ruskin's work in swinging appreciation back to fundamentals CAME AT THE VERY TIME THAT THE IMPRESSIONISTS WERE DESTROYING THE FOUNDAMENTALS IN ART BY EMPHASIZING THE MOMENT.

And the strange part is that without the Modern Spirit entering the world of art — El Greco would still be hanging hidden in Museums — just as there will always be painters waiting for their time of
appreciation to come again.

A new approach in art reveals masters who have already sown the seeds of future expressions - for thought is slow to reach fruition - which means the giving and appreciating of this expression by the many in place of the isolated few.

It is the advance guard who break the ground for the future reaping - for the seed sown ripens in time and it is in general the lesser men who in turn bring to the notice of the general public the fruition of that which has already been sown.

Thus it is possible to trace the fluidity of matter through men like Matisse and giants like Cezanne, back to El Greco.

Before El Greco there was no fluidity - there was a grace of line which to the casual observer might be mistaken - but it is not fundamental. It is wonderful to think that after being bound by materialism for centuries - bound by the belief of the solidity of matter - science should come to the aid of art and religion and liberated the bondage of matter to enable the spirit to penetrate. No greater change could have occurred than the change from the belief in the solidity of matter to the belief of the fluidity of matter which the scientists are teaching since the discovery of the electrons which
forms matter and which are held together by the affinity of their vibration.

El Greco—who at the end of the 16th Century was conscious of the fluidity of life—expressed it in his paintings and thus once more showed how the art of music and painting precedes the art of speech and science.

The reason El Greco did not suffer at the hands of his fellow men as did Rembrandt was that living as he did amongst the Spaniards, who saw in it a great revelation of religious ecstasy, they accepted his interpretation from that angle.

The power which the thought on the solidity of matter exercised during the last century also explains why El Greco was lost to the world—hanging silent and hidden in church and museums.

It is in his last pictures that Cezanne began to be conscious of the fluidity of modern life and the lack of the solidity of matter which he introduced through the breaking up of surfaces.

Ruskin draws our attention to the fact that a master's greatest period is his last where he has combined the knowledge of his years with the careless and light touch of his youth; thereby conveying something which the severity of his middle life destroys. To quote direct from Ruskin: "Childhood often holds a truth in his feeble fingers which the
grasp of manhood cannot retain and which it is the pride and understand-

of age to recover." Of course there are always exceptions but what of-
ten appears as exceptions is the fact that the artist often brings a
message ahead of his times, - which not understood is brushed aside as
deterioration. We find it constantly - it is what was said of El Greco
Rembrandt, Cezanne, Van Gogh and many more.

El Greco
Just as XXXXXX took the problem of light which Correggio introduced
into his painting and added to it fluidity, so Cezanne took the problem
of fluidity and extended it to solid masses pertaining to the earth,
and Matisse took the fluidity and extended it by adding rhythm and move-
ment. Thus something new is added to the past, which bespeaks the time
in which it is revealed. And each new extension demands a new technique.

Cezanne achieved his new technique primarily through his new use of color
Through his color withing color, with which he breaks up his surfaces,
he permits the inner urge - the true force of all living matter to be
perceived. Since this was achieved through color, he places a new con-
struction on color. It is here that we find the first note sounded of
the increasing importance of color and what it is to mean to the eye.

From all great masters one can study more than one thing. For the
great masters must give expression to the richness of their natures.
And thus El Greco made another very great contribution.

He took the problem of light which Correggio introduced almost a hundred years earlier and which had not been even taken up as far as we know by any other artist during that period and carried it further by not following the conventional lines of light and dark as did Rubens, Frans Hals and all the great painters of his day which brought out the fine contour of the bone and muscle construction of a figure - but instead he followed the light as it travelled over the body. It was Rembrandt about fifty years later who carried the power of light into another world.

First the study of the light from a lamp introduced by Correggio and given a new significance by having it shine from the Christ child as a light of illumination - then El Greco's further contribution and next Rembrandt taking the mystery of the shadow and extending it to the mystery of life which reaches such tremendous heights in his painting of The Old Woman Paring Her Nails which eliminates the importance of subject matter to which I will refer again a little later.

For I first want to draw your attention to an interesting phenomena and that was that in the study of light centuries later the Impressionists took up this same problem - not from the angle of the lamp but from the very sun itself. And to the study of the shadow was added the color in
shadow—which was so great a contribution that it blinded a whole
generation to the destructive quality of their message as a whole.
And thus it was that in spite of this great contribution of revealing
color in shadow, it was Ruskin's contribution of drawing attention to
fundamentals which kept the way open for the Modern Spirit to enter.
But before taking up this contribution of this modern group, I want to
draw your attention to two other contributions which Rembrandt made.
These are the exaggeration of form when needed and reducing the subject
matter to a minimum of ver realism.
Most people are under the impression that the exaggerated form which is
met with constantly among present day painters is something which has
not existed before—forgetting entirely that Rembrandt in using it
constantly secured thereby finer balance of form and weight.
A notable example is the picture at the Metropolitan of—Pilate Wash-
ing His Hands—where the hand of the young boy who is pouring out the
water is far too big for a child's hand and would be considered distinctly
out of drawing by the average academician.
Some years ago I invented a term which I called the Invisible Line
which is the underlying pattern of all great works of art. The greater
the artist the more sensitive he is to this pattern of the invisible line
and unless this pattern is as beautiful as he knows how to make it — the picture will leave him dissatisfied. Now a man like Rembrandt in his later years cared more for this than to please the untrained eye of a buying public and thus you will find that if a larger mass is needed that he will simply exaggerate the form which must fill it to satisfy this sense of balance. For all great artist recognize that the more beautiful the pattern underlying a picture, the more satisfying it is and of deeper and more lasting beauty.

When we take this into consideration we will be able to understand these exaggerated forms better and give them their proper place, for we realize that they are based on fundamental laws — not on rules — and these fundamental laws are — Proportion — Balance — Rhythm — with their roots in imagination.

Now if we do not understand the Invisible Line or the reason for the existence of the exaggerated form, they become distasteful — but if we see the importance we begin to realize their contribution and that they enlarge the conception of the beholder and add a bigness which the so-called correct drawing cannot bring — for it is based on rules and not on laws.
Now the other great contribution which affects the present strongly is Rembrandt's attitude towards his subject especially as exemplified by this marvelous picture of The Old Woman Paring Her Nails.

Here the subject matter is of no importance.

The one thing one is conscious of is the way Rembrandt has treated his light effects. He has brought out the mystery of life.

One does not know from whence the light comes - or for that matter what form of light touched his imagination to this degree that he could raise it to such heights. For we must remember that just as the quality of line will reveal the knowledge and power of an artist on the material plane, so his spiritual approach is revealed through the more subtle qualities of his work.

There is one more contribution which I want to speak about which comes out of the past and yet which so many people believe is this century's contribution and that is the great simplification of form which one finds today in sculpture, architecture and even in painting.

This simplification goes back as far as early Egypt, 2800 B.C.

It is interesting to note that at the time when all these great Egyptian
excavations are going on - that we are leaving our old conception of
Time and entering a new conception of Space - which the Egyptian had also.
Their Space Consciousness was different from ours - for each cycle has
its special angle but they also were governed by a Space Consciousness
just as we are beginning to be.
Formerly we believed that the terms of Time and Space were almost in-
terchangeable - so closely related were they.
But today through the Radio - even the man in the street realizes that
they are not. This great change of conception which the radio and
telephone has brought about in our mode of thought has formed new con-
cepts of Time and Space which have not only affected our thoughts in
general but especially those relating to art, since the true artist be-
longs to the vanguard because of the highly developed sensitiveness of
his receptivity.
It is therefore interesting to note how Spengler in his book - The Decline
of the West - brings out clearly this point - and though he does not
give expression to its manifestation in the art of our century - his clear
vision of what the western soul was seeking, to which it gave complete ex-
pression, clarifies the subject for us, who are living in the now. All
that he writes about Time and Space - is very illuminating and I would
like to quote just a little from what he says on this subject.
"Space is a conception - but Time is a word - to indicate something
inconceivable - a sound-symbol."
and yet if both are an expression of art they will have the same fundamentals inspite of the outer difference. That is why all art springs from one and the same root.

Before closing and going on to discussions I will touch briefly on these fundamentals -

Proportion - Balance - Rythm - with their roots in Imagination.

For without imagination they become dry problems based on logic - which have no power of radiation for they sink to the level of rules. You all recall Wagner's delicious take off in the Meistersinger when Beckmesser finds the jotting of a song made by Hans Sachs and applies his thumb-rules to it.

We need proportion because it creates the proper relation of each part to the whole.

Next Balance - because it gives enduring quality.

and Rythm - because it gives vitality.

Now through the various weights given through proportion we receive the sensation of third dimension even when the picture has no actual perspective. This is a very important thing to remember in connection with the abstract in art.

And why I was asked should the abstract in art have entered the realm of art? Because it is an extension to the subject matter of art when
apparently it has done away with subject matter.

It has done away with realism — but it has extended the realm of what may be expressed through the art of painting.

For the first time in art abstract subjects can be expressed — and for those of us who believe that the **Mystic** art of painting and music proceed as I have already said — speech and science — we believe that great new powerful thoughts can now once more find an outlet for expression and reach many people through the senses before the words which will express that the same thought can be found.

Mr. Henri Barzun, Professor of Modern Art in Fordham University who is equally concerned with modern poetry believe that it will take the critics another seventy years before they can find the words with which to explain what the moderns are saying.

It was Kandinsky's contribution to bring to the attention of the world that color if organized, as music is organized, should bring the same quality of emotion through the eye that music does through the ear.

This could never be achieved through realism. And it is interesting to note that his picture bring much more the sensation of what we term music than do those painting which often introduce musical instruments relying as they do on association of idea — which is never sound art.
I have brought a few abstract pictures for us to have as a basis of
discussion - and so with your permission we will start on our questions.

Though I do want to say just this about the psychology of color -
Franz Marc - thus far has made the greatest contribution.

I have tried to work out a series of portraits based on abstract forms
and thinking the psychology of color which have been most illuminating
to many people. My two most successful ones have been of Marcel Duchamp
and Ted Shawn the dancer.