

## Det moderna mleriets historia

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My aunt gave me the book as a Christmas present. It must have been Christmas 1961, as the book was printed in 1960. It cost 38 SEK, which at that time almost fifty years ago, was quite a sum of money. She had told the people in the bookstore that it was meant for a ten year old. They had been suitably impressed as she reported. Needless to say I never read the book, although I must have looked at some of the pictures, because at the time I was quite interested in art. It has stayed in my library ever since then, until I finally decided to check it out, the identity of its author in the meantime having become known to me.

The author claims that the limited space does not allow anything but a most superficial account, lest it reduces to a mere compilation of names. As it is, a large part of the book is indeed a long list of names (along with birth-dates, the majority of the players of modern art being still alive at the end of the 50's when the book was written) as well as a list of different movements and what they had to do with each other.

Modern Art is indeed a rather well-defined concept, apart from the fact that anything contemporary by default earns that epithet. The traditional ambition of art having been mimesis, even if extra-mimetical aspects such as harmony and decoration, have always been present. This has fostered in generations of artists a search for ways of depicting reality as realistically as possible. Old representational art has for good reasons been referred to as primitive, because of its unintentional failings and shortcomings. The discovery of perspective proved momentous to art in the medieval ages, and the problem solved was as much a geometrical problem in mathematics, as a visual one in the arts. In fact the two ambitions of being a mathematician and an artist can be seen to have converged. However, perspective is just one part of mimesis, and not the most difficult. Anyone can learn the principles of perspective, not anyone has the ability to paint a face lifelike and to endow it with a luster of life. The amazing thing is rather that something so elementary as precise as perspective remained so poorly understood for such a long time, testifying to its basic non-intuitiveness. In painting there are other deformations than those imposed by a faulty perspective, but they are more hidden inside our ways of intuitive interpretation, and one can see the stimulus in modern art in trying to identify those problems. As far as mimesis was concerned art had reached perfection by the end of the 15th century, and no artists have ever surpassed the skills of the masters of the following centuries. With the invention of photography in the beginning of the 19th century, the solution to the problem of mimesis had become moot, as it now could be done mechanically. This was heralded as the death of painting, but it also meant, which was not so obvious, the liberation of the same. Yet that this liberation would take so long, more or less a century, is rather surprising and hence quite interesting.

Read singles out Cezanne as the precursor of modern art. He was the first to really pose new questions of visual representation, questions he pursued relentlessly, and the result is,

I think, a rather narrowly conceived oeuvre of still-lives and landscape paintings, with the intermittent portrait, testifying not so much to a lack of imagination as a singleness of purpose bordering to the obsessive. What those questions really were, Read is not too explicit, maybe neither was Cezanne. The impressionists were a somewhat later movement (although Monet, the one we mostly associate with the movement, was only born one year later) and they had a clearly articulated motto. Catching the ephemeral impression, especially that of the play of light. Thus the extended series of a Monet, displaying in chronological sequence, the gradual changing of a subject. Impressionism was a revolt against the prevailing dominance of academic painting. Painting up to the end of the 19th century was an exalted occupation, requiring long apprenticeship. In many ways it provided a parallel track to science, and it was expected to produce work of enduring nature. Beauty being thought of as permanent and objective as truth itself, thus the academy was a fitting setting for it. The exhibition of the refused in 1874 could be seen as one of the pivotal dates of the era of Modern Art, and if you prefer its birth, although this might be conceived as rather premature. The impressionists knew each other, they formed cliques united as well riven by rivalry, and joined the bohemia, their lives dominated by the tension between free expression and commercial success. But the impressionists spawned their own revolts, and the Fauvists emerged as an even more heterogeneous group, far more primitive in their execution than the impressionists, and with no clearly articulated program. Their recognized master being Matisse. This was France, but similar movements also took place in Germany and Austria, the Wiener Secession naturally springing to mind.

All those movements converged during the turn of the last century which was culturally a most intense and turbulent period. There were also societal influences, maybe the strongest being the wide dissemination of crafts of the last decades of the 19th century. It was a result of industrialism and the emerging consumer society. It made images of whatever kind far more common in the life of ordinary people. It started movements to educate the masses as to taste. And above all it made decorative elements in art become more interesting and important, as noted by the mannerism of Art Noveaux, the Jugend style of the Germanic world. Art was no longer to exclusively serve sacred purposes, nor to be confined to a moneyed elite. Thus the ground was rather receptive for influences from the East. Chinese and Japanese woodcuts of a rather different kind of visual sensitivity, which awoke artists from a dogmatic slumber of what visual art should be and made them less set in their minds and more apt to experiment.

And those heady decades were of fervent experimentation be it in literature and music. And also a time of 'isms' many of them relating to styles of painting. The great thing that the visual art had to liberate itself from was to be representational and figurative. The great technical ability of painters to depict reality in terms of trompe d'oeuil had been paralyzing. The movement to non-figurative painting, as if ever anything more characteristic of modern art could be found, took a few decades, and was never fully implemented.

Read singles out three major figure in the history of modern art. Picasso, of course, not too surprisingly and unconventional, but also Kandinsky and Klee. Picasso, whether you like him or not, is hard to ignore. Read marvels at his energy, the eclectic range of his work, and his versatility<sup>1</sup>. Picasso went through many stages, periods in his youth, named

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<sup>1</sup> My father told me when I was a child, that Picasso could paint as realistically as anyone, but that

after particular colors, to be followed by the cubist period being the most well-known and philosophically the most articulate of his phases, and the one in which his influence was the most noticable and his sources (Cezanne) the most obvious. He even had a neo-classic period, in which his skill as a draughtman became obvious<sup>2</sup> To this add his delving into sculpture and ceramics. An institution by himself, yet how many people are really touched by him? He has become the icon of modern art, very much like Einstein became the icon of modern science, but among artists he is not as appreciated as others, occupying less exposed niches in the public imagination<sup>3</sup>. The choice of Kandinsky and Klee may strike the general reader as more excentric. The reason is not hard to divine. Kandinsky and Klee were articulate visual artists of a theoretical and philosophical mind, and thus natural for a man like Read to engage with directly.

In Kandinsky he finds the theoretical midwife of modern art. It is in Kandinsky the strife towards the abstract and the non-figurative becomes explicit. Why should art be representative? Why should it depict entities in the external material world? Why should beauty consist in the faithful rendering of things which by themselves are not necessarily beautiful? The shapes that surround us in nature are they not accidental? Music is not representational, sounds are not taken from nature at all. Imagine a piece of music intended to depict as faithfully as possible the cackle of geese, or the farting of horses<sup>4</sup> Pieces of music create their own intrinsic reality based on harmony, talking directly to the soul. Could not the same be done for visual art? A visual art based solely on the harmony of forms and contrasting colors, just as in music. To Kandinsky, who had started out in music, this was a very natural idea, and indeed it is remarkable that it had not been conceived before. (It might have, of course, but the time was obviously not ripe.) For a brief time Munich rivaled Paris as the Mecca of Art, albeit of a more cerebral kind. The student of modern art history is of course familiar with 'Der Blaue Reiter', the name taken more or less randomly from one of Kandinskys paintings.

And so came the First World War. Totally unexpected, but of course from a retrospective point of view inevitable. It reaped the lives of many a young promising man, artists like Macke and Marc, part of Kandinskys circle, not exempted (although statistically young artists of some renown, were rather under-represented in the list of fatal casualties). It was a catastrophe and did once and for all do away with traditional Victorian belief in progress and replace it with apocalyptic visions. This tearing asunder of the social fabric fitted well into the distortions exalted by modern art. The First World War was a trauma. It seriously undermined the traditional respect for human reason and rationality. Art became a seductive way of shedding its shackles. It is in this light the short-lived phenomenon of Dada should be viewed, a movement as much literary as painterly, a movement celebrating

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he grew tired of it. This intrigued me very much

<sup>2</sup> Read refers to various films being made of Picasso in action, and where his supreme ease with the hand becomes striking. Never a movement of hesitation, the brush or pen flowing effortlessly from the wrist.

<sup>3</sup> Read spends almost no time on Matisse, maybe he does not think that he really plays a central role in the development of modern art?

<sup>4</sup> Attempts of this kind were taken by Moussorgsky among others, but the result was of course very stylized.

the absurd. Breton, one of its founders, also proposed the notion of automation. Just as the patient on the couch reveal the inner self by a stream of spontaneous associations, an artist should abandon his rational self and let the truer inner self speak.

Thus modern art is one of wilful distortion, although it does not always go all the way to abstraction, in fact only exceptionally. Picasso, although doing violence to figurative representation, never questioned the basic tenets of representational art. The Germans, such as Kirchner, Dix and Beckmann, associated with Expressionism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* stayed true to the figurative premisses. Abstraction was carried across to the Atlantic and made the backbone of the revival of American art, mostly driven by European exiles and known as abstract expressionism. With abstraction in visual art, some very disturbing questions had to be posed.

For one thing, art traditionally wedded to beauty, lost its supposedly objective basis and became defiantly subjective. While before the artist may just been the medium, now he tended to become the main focus of attention<sup>5</sup>. What was the ulterior motivation for such pieces of art and on what should it ultimately be judged on? For one thing, as suggested by Kandinsky, the point of a painting would be to express the soul of the artist; or for those made uncomfortable by the religious notion of a soul, the inner subjective and subconscious realities of the human psyche. Thus, to put an appreciative gloss on it. While traditionally artists were supposed to represent a common objectively shared external physical reality, the modern artist would instead try to depict the Jungian archetypes of a shared collective unconsciousness. Jungian psychology, even more than Freudian, provided a heady inspiration for modern art. Still, modern art did not put any demand on craftsmanly skill of its practitioners, the practical skill involved seemed no more demanding than a child would have been able to do it as well, or even apes and asses<sup>6</sup>. This led the way for charlatans of any kind and color to enter the scene. If every painting had its own authenticity as a true expression of the inner turmoils of the artist, on which he was the ultimate authority, how could any painting be rejected? In this post-modernist chaos, was not every painting as good and legitimate as any other, just as each human being is supposed to have unique qualities, and that we all are, at least in the eyes of God, of equal worth. Those are not frivolous questions, nor are they libertine. And Read addresses them, without pursuing them in depth. There are no easy solutions, the modern art world is bound to be polluted by cranks and con-men, the latter maybe more represented by the thriving underside of the art-world, - art as an object of speculation. What it really means is that visual art has come of age and become a mature form of art<sup>7</sup> There is no going back, the fundamental problems of what really constitute visual beauty have been

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<sup>5</sup> Klee likened the artist to the trunk of a tree, transforming through the root system the soil of the earth into the foliage of the crown

<sup>6</sup> Tie a brush to the tail of an ass, and let it be dipped into buckets of paint and splattered on a canvas, in what ways does the result differ from a modern painting? That this is not just a joke is illustrated by an incident I remember from Sweden in the early 60's. An artist had submitted a painting to an exhibition and to his horror discovered what had been hung on the wall was not the intended painting, but a piece of cardboard he had used to scrape off the excess paint on his brushes on, and which had then been used to protect the real canvas during transportation.

<sup>7</sup> A typical tour of a comprehensive art museum involves a long preliminary tour marked by charm

raised and cannot be pushed back again. Abstractness, even if it still is but a small part of the art-scene, has come to stay. After all nature is filled with abstract patterns, and human life is impossible without abstract human artefacts, such as words, letters and the like. To take such a mundane phenomenon of calligraphy, not really a major thing in western society (even if we all can recognize a beautiful handwriting), but very important to the writing of the Arabic script or the Chinese character. Beauty is of course here a social construction, but a very persuasive one, almost bordering to that of a non-human objectivity.

Read wrote his book in the late 50's, at a time which might have been the pinnacle of modern art, at least in its most avant-garde non-figurative stage. Most of the pioneers of modern art were, as already noted, still alive. Now when reading this book fifty years after its conception, I am as distant to that time, as that time was distant to the very early birth-pangs of the movement. It is a book with a philosophical touch, but a very light one considering its didactic ambitions catering to a wide audience, and mostly concerned not so much with individual artists as such, but with the relationships and influences among them. A history not so much of art or artists, but of art-movements, whetting your appetite not so much to individual works of arts or individual artists, but the more abstract relation between art, artists and society.

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and inspiring admiration; when modern art comes to the scene, there is palpable relief. The modern artist is foremost an individual whose special style and personality is far more pronounced than in traditional paintings. The range of subjects and styles are far wider than what went on before. And to most people they will inspire a desire to paint themselves, for which more traditional works are too inhibiting to allow. Of course this ties in with the egalitarianism of modern painting. Expression is all, and execution is subservient.