



THE SHAPE OF CONTENT

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Artists in Colleges

I have come to Harvard with some very serious doubts as to whether I ought to be here at all.

I am a painter; I am not a lecturer about art nor a scholar of art. It is my chosen role to paint pictures, not to talk about them.

What can any artist bring to the general knowledge or the theoretical view of art that has not already been fully expounded? What can he say in words that he could not far more skillfully present in pictorial form? Is not the painting rather than the printed page his restatement? Will he not only expend his energies without in any way increasing the general enlightenment? And then, what can an audience gain from listening to an artist that it could not apprehend far more readily simply by looking at his pictures?

Here are a few of the honest questions, and I have tried to meet them with honest answers.

Perhaps the most pertinent of the questions has been as to just what I can accomplish by such a verbal Odyssey as this series of discussions promises to be. My personal answer has been that the need to formulate clearly those things which I think I think may be

of some value to me, and that the process will be interesting. But what about you?

From the point of view of both the audience and the university I can only suggest that the venture will probably prove about as worthy as the ideas will be good.

But there is a further reason for my being particularly interested in being here, and undertaking some such discussions. Within the past few years there has developed an increased interest in art within the universities with the promise—the possibility at least—that they may come to constitute the new art community. Such a prospect has so much to recommend it, so much in the way of intellectual stimulation for art, in the way of values and perhaps of sympathetic climate, that one hopes it may be realized.

At the same time, there is always the possibility that art may be utterly stifled within the university atmosphere, that the creative impulse may be wholly obliterated by the pre-eminence of criticism and scholarship. Nor is there perfect unanimity on the part of the university itself as to whether the presence of artists will be salutary within its community, or whether indeed art itself is a good solid intellectual pursuit and therefore a proper university study.

Such questions have been the subject of extensive conferring and surveying within the past few years, of changing attitudes on the part of the colleges and of heated disagreement; for the whole problem of creativity often reaches into basic educational philosophy, and sometimes into university policy itself.

I have a number of observations to make on this possible forthcoming alignment. They are not all of them optimistic, but they are based upon considerable familiarity on my part with the art-university relationship in process. They are made in the hope that something really fruitful may emerge and that some of the existing misconceptions and maladjustments may be erased. They are made particularly in the hope that the student who happens to be a young person of talent and ability in art may no longer be caught



between two impossible choices; the one whether to gain a liberal education at the cost of losing his creative habit, the other forego his liberal education in order to gain an adequate training in art.

But let us ask what possible interest the university as such can have in art? In what way can art possibly augment its perspective?

There is first the question of the educated man; and then I think there is the rather flat fact of which we are all most uncomfortably aware, that our average university graduate emerges from his years of study as something less than an educated man or woman. He is likely to be most strikingly wanting in the accomplishment of perceptivity, in the noncurricular attributes of sensitiveness and of consideration toward all those finer arts which are generally conceded to have played a great part in the humanizing of man. And our graduate is not unlikely to display total blindness with regard to painting itself.

Nowhere do his limitations become so conspicuous as in his contacts with Europeans of similar background and education. For the European, whatever his shortcomings in other directions, will be perfectly conversant with the art and literature of his own country as well as with that of others. It is not at all improbable that he will know considerably more about American art than will the American himself. Today, in view of our increasing commerce with European countries, this art-blindness of ours tends to become not just a cultural gap, but even something of a diplomatic hazard.

François Mauriac has said of us: "It is not what separates the United States from the Soviet Union that should frighten us, but what they have in common . . . those two technocracies that think themselves antagonists, are dragging humanity in the same direction of de-humanization . . . man is treated as a means and no longer as an end—this is the indispensable condition of the two cultures that face each other."

Jean-Paul Sartre has said, "If France allows itself to be influenced by the whole of American culture, a living and livable situation there will come here and completely shatter our cultural traditions . . ."

In England, V. S. Pritchett wrote of us, "Why they should not

be originally creative is puzzling. It is possible that the lack of the organic sense, the conviction that man is a machine—turns them into technicians and cuts them off from the chaos, the accidents and intuitions of the creative process?"

I do not agree with any one of these opinions, but I believe that they do serve to demonstrate the uneasy view that is taken of us by a few very eminent Europeans.

But that uneasy view is not confined to European countries. There have arisen some complaints on the domestic scene also, and some from very unexpected sources. A leading executive, for instance, of one of our really vast industries undertook a circuit through a number of American universities a year or so ago with only this in view: to persuade the colleges to do a better job of educating their graduates. He asked that the liberal arts be re-emphasized; he pointed out that, while technical, scientific, and other specialized training has been very advanced, there has been lacking a quality of imagination, a human view of things, which is as necessary to industry and business as is technical training.

I think that many universities today are seeking to counteract such overemphasis upon technological education and are beginning to re-emphasize liberal education. I note a great increase, at least I think I do, in serious theater, in exhibitions of painting and sculpture, in the loan of art to students, in publications of diverse sorts, but of a serious nature. I think all this activity represents an intelligent effort to place the student in a cultured and creative environment rather than to inject culture into him hypodermically, so to speak, via the specific, required, and necessarily limited classroom course.

Besides the practical objective of producing a better-educated graduate, one who may meet the new need for the international citizen, the university has other possible objectives in extending its hand toward art, these both philosophical and generous.

It has become obvious that art itself in America is without what

might be called a natural environment. Art and artists often exist within a public climate that is either indifferent or hostile to their profession. Or otherwise they may concentrate within small colonies wherein they find a sort of self-protection and self-affirmation. The art colonies are severely limited in the variety of experience and opinion which they can contribute to art. They become almost monastic in the degree of their withdrawal from common society; and thus their art product becomes increasingly ingrown, tapping less and less the vital streams of common experience, rejecting more and more the human imperatives which have propelled and inspired art in past times. By bringing art into the circle of humanistic studies, some of the universities consciously intend to provide for it a sympathetic climate, and one in which there will naturally be found sources of stimulation, of lore, of intellectual material, and even of that element of controversy on which art thrives so well.

Philosophically, I daresay such a policy will be an item in the general objective of unifying the different branches of study toward some kind of a whole culture. I think that it is highly desirable that such diverse fields as, let us say, physics, or mathematics, come within the purview of the painter, who may amazingly enough find in them impressive visual elements or principles. I think that it is equally desirable that the physicist or mathematician come to accept into his hierarchy of calculable things that nonmeasurable and extremely random human element which we commonly associate only with poetry or art. Perhaps we may move again toward that antique and outmoded ideal—the whole man.

Such, I think, is the university's view and objective in embracing the arts however cautiously it may proceed. But the artist's view must also be considered and the question of whether the university will become his natural habitat, or will spell his doom. This highly debatable point has its implications for all the creative arts within the university, as well as for the artist-teacher, the artist-in-



residence, and by all means, the artist-student.

The first observation to be made here is the rather obvious one that art has its roots in real life. Art may affirm its life-giving soil or repudiate it wholly. It may mock as bitterly as did Goya, be partisan, as was Daumier, discover beauty within the sordid and real as did Toulouse-Lautrec. Art may luxuriate in life positively and affirmatively with Renoir, or Matisse, or Rubens, or Vermeer. It may turn to the nebulous horizons of sense-experience with the Post-Impressionists, the Cubists, the various orders of Abstraction-

ist, but in any case it is life itself as it chances to exist that furnishes the stimulus for art.

That is not to say any special branch or section of life. Any living situation in which an artist finds material pertinent to his own temper is a proper situation for art. It would not have made sense for Paul Klee to have followed the boxing circuit nor for George Bellows to have chased the vague creatures that lurk within lines and squares or to have pursued the innuendoes of accidental forms which yielded so much treasure to Klee. Yet each of these artists found in such casual aspects of reality a form of life, a means to create an *oeuvre*, to build a language of himself, his peculiar wit and skill and taste and comprehension of things.

While I concede that almost every situation has its potential artist, that someone will find matter for imagery almost anywhere, I am generally mistrustful of contrived situations, that is, situations peculiarly set up to favor the blossoming of art. I feel that they may vitiate the sense of independence which is present to some degree in all art. One wonders how the Fauves would have fared without the Bourgeoisie, how Cézanne would have progressed if he had been cordially embraced by the Academy. I am plagued by an exasperating notion: What if Goya, for instance, had been granted a Guggenheim, and then, completing that, had stepped into a respectable and cozy teaching job in some small—but advanced!—New England college, and had thus been spared the agonies of the Spanish Insurrection? The unavoidable conclusion is that we would never have had “Los Caprichos” or “Los Desastres de la Guerra.” The world would not have been called upon to mourn for the tortured woman of the drawing inscribed “Because She Was a Liberal!” Nor would it have been stirred by Goya’s pained cry, “Everywhere It Is The Same!” Neither would it have been shocked by his cruel depictions of human bestiality, nor warned—so graphically, so unforgettable—that fanaticism is man’s most abominable trait.

Thus it is not unimaginable that art arises from something

stronger than stimulation or even inspiration—that it may take fire from something closer to provocation, that it may not just turn to life, but that it may at certain times be compelled by life. Art almost always has its ingredient of impudence, its flouting of established authority, so that it may substitute its own authority, and its own enlightenment.

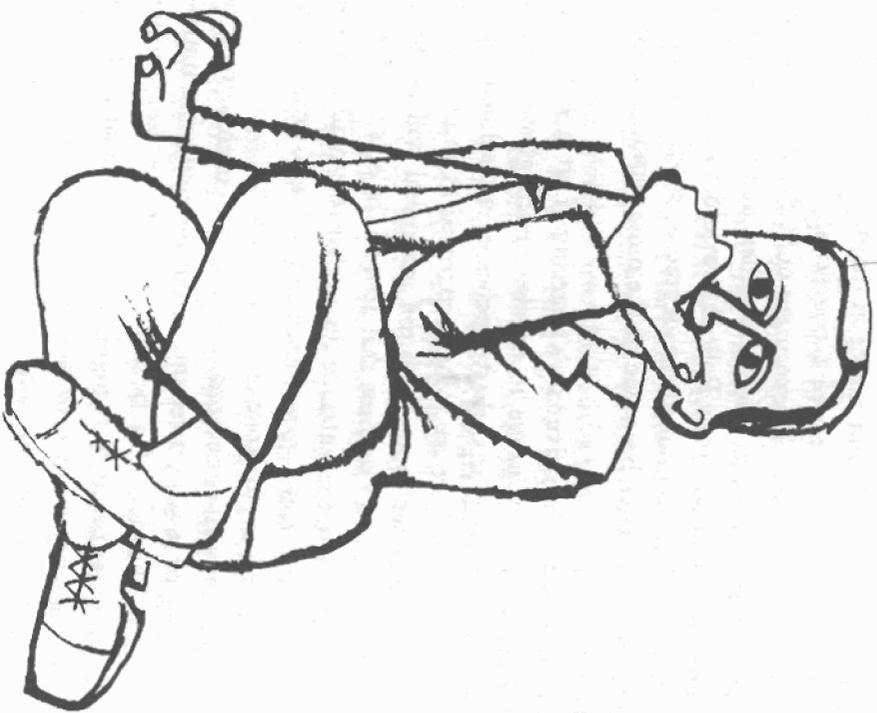
How many ponderous tracts have been written upon those drips and threads of paint by which the late Jackson Pollock made himself known! If his peculiar decor has its human dimension, that does not lie within the time-space, the interplanetary meanings so often ascribed to the work, but rather in the impudence of setting forth such work; the boldness of recognizing the beauty which does reside in such a surface; the executing of it, the insistence upon presenting such effects as art. I doubt whether, in a completely benign atmosphere, such an art as Pollock’s would have been born; whether it would have produced the degree of shock and opposition which may well have been one of the most stimulating factors in its growth.

So I believe that if the university’s fostering of art is only kindly, is only altruistic, it may prove to be also meaningless. If, on the other hand, the creative arts, the branches of art scholarship, the various departments of art are to be recognized as an essential part of education, a part without which the individual will be deemed less than educated, then I suppose that art and the arts will feel that degree of independence essential to them; that they will accept it as their role to create freely—to comment, to outrage, perhaps, to be fully visionary and exploratory as is their nature.

Art should be well-subsidized, yes. But the purchase of a completed painting or a sculpture, the commissioning of a mural—perhaps the publication of a poem or a novel or the production of a play—all these forms of recognition are the rewards of mature work. They are not to be confused with the setting up of something not unlike a nursery school in which the artist may be

spared any conflict, any need to strive quite intently toward command of his medium and his images; in which he may be spared even the need to make desperate choices among his own values and his wants, the need to reject many seeming benefits or wishes. For it is through such conflicts that his values become sharpened; perhaps it is only through such conflicts that he comes to know himself at all.

It is only within the context of real life that an artist (or anyone) is forced to make such choices. And it is only against a back-



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ground of hard reality that choices count, that they affect a life, and carry with them that degree of belief and dedication and, I think I can say, spiritual energy, that is a primary force in art. I do not know whether that degree of intensity can exist within the university; it is one of the problems which an artist must consider if he is to live there or work there.

So the answers to the question—Is it possible for an artist to function fully within the university?—must be a series of provisional ones.

Ideally, yes, for as an intellectual center, the university can provide background and stimulation to the artist; it can broaden him as an individual; it can conceivably provide new directions for art. All this, if one accepts the thesis that art is an intellectual as well as an emotional process, and that it thus profits by an expanded range of knowledge and experience.

Ideally, yes, for art scholarship itself should provide continuity and perspective for the artist, should enrich his imagery, should in every way complement the creative process by the scholarly one.

Ideally, yes, the artist ought to function well within the university community for it seems desirable that the one-sidedness of the educational pattern be counteracted, and in this sense art has a mission to perform as well as an advantage to gain. Yes, too, because within the university art may become familiar to, and accepted by, those young people who will probably constitute the taste-makers of tomorrow, the intellectual leadership, the future audience of art.

Thus, ideally we may conclude that the university holds great promise for art. Factually, however, there are circumstances which render the prospects less optimistic.

One such circumstance is the record itself of artists who have lived in residence or taught in the universities over a number of years. In the report issued in 1956 by the Committee on the Visual

Arts at Harvard University we read the following well-considered lines:

In too many cases, unfortunately, the artist-teacher gradually develops into something else: the teacher who was formerly an artist. Too often the initial basis of appointment was fallacious. In the desire to find an artist who would "get along" with art historians, the department acquired a colleague who got along well enough but turned out to be neither much of an artist nor much of a teacher. Few artists [the report continues] are sufficiently dedicated to teaching to make a career of it. Over a long time, the danger is that the artist will produce less and less art while still preserving the attitude that his teaching is of secondary importance to it.

In support of this observation, I will recount a few instances: I have one friend who has been artist-in-residence at a great Western university for some years. He is well paid. When I first knew him he was a bright light in American art, one of the good names. Full of vigor, imagination, and daring—and good thinking too—he was then producing one impressive canvas after another, and he was beginning to be sought after by collectors and museums. Today he is painting small decorative vignettes, I cannot understand why. One cannot help but observe that his work today reflects what must be polite good taste—a sort of decorator taste—in the small city in which the university is situated. The university itself seems to have absorbed very little of this man's influence. On the walls of his fine studio there still hang a number of his large earlier canvases, a sort of indecorous reminder that he was once a brash and bold young painter.

Such a change may certainly take place in a man for a number of reasons and under all sorts of circumstances, and it would be unfair to attribute it to the academic situation were it not for other similar instances.

I can at the moment recall three other artists each of whom has

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formerly been prominent in the gallery world. Each is now a university professor, the head of his department, and each is now primarily an administrator and teacher. And in addition to his administrative and teaching work, he undertakes a certain round of promotional duties which seem to us on the outside peculiarly unfitting for an artist. Two of these men have disappeared completely from the gallery world, and I have not seen a picture from the third—to my mind a great artist—for several years.

With all this before me it is small wonder that I have had misgivings as to whether my own present undertaking is a right one. (Actually, I am not very deeply concerned about my own persistence in remaining a painter.) My real concern is for the whole prospect of the artist within the university, for increasingly, and whether for good or ill, the artist is becoming a familiar figure within the university environs. The question of his ability to survive as an artist is not, we might say, wholly academic.

On the basis of fairly extensive observation I have concluded that there are about three major blocks to the development of a mature art, and to the artist's continuing to produce serious work within the university situation. And perhaps these major blocks may reach beyond the field of art.

The first of them is dilettantism. Dilettantism, as we all know, is the nonserious dabbling within a presumably serious field by persons who are ill-equipped—and actually do not even want—to meet even the minimum standards of that field, or study, or practice. Dilettantism in the university is best observed in the so-called "smartening" courses themselves, but it is by no means confined to such academic routine; it is a fairly pervasive attitude.

I understand fully the need to educate broadly. And I understand and applaud that breadth of interest that impels the bright human being to dip into or to investigate all sorts of divergent fields. Obviously there is a contradiction here. For to have a broad ac-

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quaintance with a number of different studies means that at least some of these studies cannot be met on a professional level.

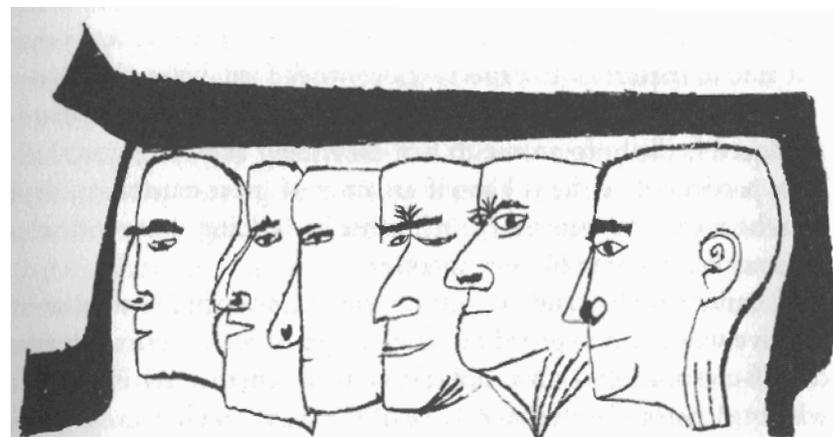
I think that the university has met the contradiction fairly successfully in some fields, but has certainly not done so in the field of art. For in this field, dilettantism governs the whole departmental attitude, whereas in other fields of study the department itself is regarded seriously, however little may be absorbed by the student whose main interest is elsewhere.

I believe that it is an objective of any one of the major departments within the greater universities to constitute in itself a center for its field, so that individuals and institutions in the practical world customarily look to the university for the most advanced work or opinion obtainable. Ideas and leadership then flow out of the university and into general currency. And need I cite the leadership of the universities in such fields as that of physics, of all the branches of sociology and psychology, of archaeology and numerous other fields!

In this connection, the Visual Arts Committee Report comments:

All the timidity that now surrounds the thought of bringing artist and studio into the university, on a par with other fields of scholarship, lately surrounded the same venture with regard to scientists. Just as the scientist has found his place within the university, just as his laboratory has become academically respectable, so the artist and studio, given time and opportunity, should find their places. [And the report also says] Though research laboratories in industry and government contribute increasingly to the advancement of fundamental science, the university is still the primary source of the most important scientific progress.

Students then—even those who do not expect to follow a particular field itself—may still derive some sense of its stature and its real meaning. And the individuals who teach and who work under



the university aegis are actually working in the center of their field and not on its fringe. Thus the university may be assured of gaining the foremost talent in such studies, while the teacher himself, the physicist-teacher or the sociologist-teacher, let us say, need not be disillusioned nor bored by the level at which his profession exists.

Quite the opposite is true in the field of art, that is, of creative art. In the first place the university directorship is quite likely to look somewhat askance at its art departments and its art courses as somewhat frivolous. (It is not inconceivable that the great public blind spot toward art extends even to such high places.) The student of art in a college is almost required to guard himself against becoming involved or too serious about his art. He will dabble a bit once or twice during a week, but must not and literally can not make of art a field of major interest.

He may be an art-history student, or an architecture, or an aesthetics student, in which case he will do a little painting "just," as the saying goes, "to get his hand in." Or a student may display a passionate interest in painting; but even in that event he is

still required only to play about lightly. He cannot devote either long hours or concentration to his work. The artist-teacher is thus not able to require or to expect serious work from his students—not even from the talented ones. And thus the level of the work that is produced is likely to arouse in him something akin to physical illness, particularly if he is himself an artist of great capability. And then he must perforce ask himself what he is doing there and why he is not off painting his own pictures.

I cannot understand why there should exist such mistrust of creative work. Is it to guard the student against an incautious degree of self-committal? Or is it indecision as to whether art is really a wholly decorous profession? Or is there some conflict in value as between the art that has already safely taken place, and that which—alarming enough—may take place?

Some such conflict appears within the Visual Arts Report itself:

[On page 10, for instance, we read] *The Committee believes that the visual arts are an integral part of the humanities and as such must assume a role of prominence in the context of higher education.* [Yet, on page 66, we find] *It is still doubtful if a student at Harvard can find space or time to apply himself seriously to creative work in the visual arts.* [On page 9, the enlightened comment] *at no moment in history since the invention of printing has man's communication with his fellow man been so largely taken over by visual media as today.* [But, on page 65, we read the following] *We do not propose to inject the art school into the academic life, but rather to give the experience of art its rightful place in liberal education.*

I wonder whether the university would also suggest offering the *experience* of calculus, of solid state physics; the experience of French or German; the experience of economics, of medieval history, of Greek.

I was one of those asked to give an opinion concerning the

desirability of the university for the education of an artist. I expressed preference for the university as against the professional art school. But my rejection of the art school was certainly not on the grounds of its professionalism; indeed that is the one thing that **recommends** it. My preference for the university is based upon a belief that the very content of the liberal education is a natural content of art, that art will profit by and greatly needs the content of liberal education. Further, that the humanities and the humanistic view have been the companions of art during the great periods of both.

But if dilettantism is to pervade the whole atmosphere of art, and even the very department in which it is taught, then, far from being the best influence for the young artist, the university may prove to be the worst, and may further prove equally unfavorable to the artist-teacher.

The second major block to the development of a mature art and to the artist's thriving within the university community is the fear of creativity itself. The university stresses rather the critical aspects of knowledge—the surveying, the categorizing, the analyzing, and the memorizing. The reconversion of such knowledge into living art, into original work, seems to have diminished. In a few universities—particularly in the East—discouragement of original work has achieved the status of policy. I was told by a department head in one university that in that institution the creative arts are discouraged because “it is felt that they may interfere with the liberal arts.” I have never been able to understand actually what he meant, but the result of the policy is brilliantly clear, and that result is that the student misses the vital opportunity to integrate what he knows with what he thinks—that he fails to form the expressive, the creative habit.

In another university I once had occasion to pay a number of visits to its very large ceramics department. I noticed that there was

a great leafing about among books whenever a piece of pottery was to be decorated, and that not even the shapes of pieces were original. It seemed to me that the students were missing whatever pleasure there may be in the work. In talking to them, I made the odd discovery that they did not consider themselves capable of originating a decoration; it was not for them. In fact one student explained to me that that was not the course they were taking.

A very trivial incident indeed, but still a disturbing one. Could it be that the students were too impressed by the past of ceramics, by the Greek, the Chinese, the Etruscan, to be able to surmount that and create something of their own? It is not impossible that within the university the pre-eminence of scholarship itself may become an impassable block to creativity, and may over-impress and stifle both the artist-teacher and the student.

The artist who is only a painter may well become intimidated by his degree-bearing brethren. Under the charmed light of their MA's, their PhD's, their accumulated honors and designations, the scholars speak of art in terms of class and category, and under headings of which the artist may never have heard. While he himself may have read extensively about art—and I think that most artists do read a great deal about art, and know a great deal about it—while he may have looked at scores of paintings, have dwelt upon them and absorbed them, his interest has been a different one; he has absorbed visually, not verbally. The idea of classifying such work would never have occurred to him, because to him the work is unique; it exists in itself alone. It is its distinction from other art, not its commonality with other art, that interests him. If the work has no such distinction, if it does not stand alone, he has no reason for remembering it. And yet, surrounded by abstract and learned discussion, his own vision may waver and its reality grow dim.

At the same time I feel that both art history and art theory are of immense value to the creative artist. All such material lends depth and subtlety to art, and it is definitely stimulating to most

artists. Only when, in the verbalizing or the teaching process, the original creative necessity is obliterated does art theory or art history tend to suffocate the artist.

I have a young friend who, through most of his high-school years, was given to writing poetry. He is now entering his junior year in the university. The other evening I asked him what sort of verse he had been writing, and whether I might read some of it. He replied, "Oh, I've stopped writing poetry." Then he explained, "There's so much that you have to know before you can write poetry. There are so many forms that you have to master first. Actually," he said, "I just wrote because I liked to put things down. It didn't amount to much; it was only free verse."

Perhaps my young friend would never under any circumstances have become a good poet. Perhaps he should have had the drive and persistence to master those forms which have defeated him—I myself think he should. But I wonder whether it was made clear to him that all poetic forms have derived from practice; that in the very act of writing poetry he was, however crudely, beginning to create form. I wonder whether it was pointed out to him that form is an instrument, not a tyrant; that whatever measures, rhythms, rhymes, or groupings of sounds best suited his own expressive purpose could be turned to form—possibly just his own personal form, but form; and that it too might in time take its place in the awesome hierarchy of poetic devices.

Scholarship is perhaps man's most rewarding occupation, but that scholarship which dries up its own creative sources is a *reductio ad absurdum*, a contradiction of itself.

And there is the loneliness and isolation of the artist upon the college grounds. Of course we know that many artists have painted alone with great success. But of these we may say that they chose loneliness: loneliness was their theme and their way of painting. There's been a different loneliness from that of the artist who, safely cushioned within the pleasantest and most agreeable environ-



ment known to man, must at some point arise from the good conversational table, move off, don his paint-spattered pants, squeeze out his tubes and become involved in the nervous, unsure, tense, and unsatisfactory business of making a picture which will have cohesion, impact, maturity, and an unconscionable lot of sheer work; which will, most uncomfortably, display an indiscreet and

unveiled feeling about something; and which will then proceed to violate every canon of good art behavior just delineated by his recent companions.

These latter have no need to create something new. It is enough that they discover the old and bring it home to the common consciousness in all its radiance.

The third major block to the successful functioning of the artist within the university is a somewhat romantic misconception as to what sort of man he is. The more venerable academic element, still under the sway of Trilby, looks upon an artist as a mad genius. This group believes, and I think the public joins it, that an artist has no idea of why he paints; he simply has to. Among the younger and more advanced collegians, the New Criticism has taken over, but the artist himself fares no better. For according to this very avant-garde view, it makes little difference what an artist paints or what he himself happens to think; it is the viewer who really accounts for the meaning of the work, and even he would flounder about hopelessly were it not for the theorist, or critic. In his hands rest all the clues to art; he is the high priest of the art process.

I have one critical fencing companion who assures me that the meaning of one order of art—the nonobjective—is a supra-human, that is, a cosmic one. The artist, as he describes him, is a medium through which all sorts of ineffable forces flow. Any willing, however, on the part of the artist, any intending, would be an interference, would only destroy the time-space continuum, would render impure the art produced.

And, by implication, that art which is the product of willing and intending must be impure.

As criticism itself flourishes particularly within the universities, so does this particular critical view find its warmest advocates there. In several universities, the critical circle has formed itself into a small cultural nucleus which exerts a powerful influence, one not

free of snobbery, upon the arts—a Gorgon-like power that turns the creative artist into stone.

This curious academic mutation is corroborated within the Visual Arts Report in a most understanding passage.

It is a curious paradox that, bigly as the university esteems the work of art, it tends to take a dim view of the artist as an intellectual . . . one encounters the curious view that the artist does not know what he is doing. It is widely believed and sometimes explicitly stated that the artist, however great his art, does not genuinely understand it, neither how he produced it, nor its place in the culture and in history.

At this point I cannot resist a few somewhat crisper lines in this direction from Francis Bacon: "Some there have been," says the philosopher, "who have made a passage for themselves and their own opinions by pulling down and demolishing former ones; and yet all their stir has but little advanced the matter, since their aim has been not to extend philosophy and the arts in substance and value, but only to . . . transfer the kingdom of opinion to themselves."

Before the artist can be successfully oriented within the university environment there will be needed a calmer view toward both the qualities of the man and the qualities of the work. No artist will be at ease with an opinion that holds him to be a mere handy-man of art—the fellow who puts the paint on. Nor will any artist rest well with the notion that he is a mad genius—something other than human, either more than human or less than human or tangential to human. The whole notion of genius needs to be reassessed, needs perhaps to be deglamorized somewhat. For genius is certainly much more a matter of degree than of kind. The genius so-called is only that one who discerns the pattern of things within the confusion of details a little sooner than the average man. Thus the genius (again, I insist upon saying so-called) is likely to be impatient with those

individuals who fail to discern such patterns, such larger meanings, within common affairs.

If the artist, or poet, or musician, or dramatist, or philosopher seems somewhat unorthodox in his manner and attitudes, it is because he knows—only a little earlier than the average man—that orthodoxy has destroyed a great deal of human good, whether of charity, or of good sense, or of art.

It seems to me that, far from setting the "genius" apart, the university should constitute itself the natural place toward which the young person of such exceptional talent may turn for an education suitable to his talent. Otherwise we announce, in effect, that the broadness of view, the intellectual disciplines, the knowledge content which the university affords are reserved for the unproductive man—the uncreative, the nonbrilliant. Such an assumption would be an absurdity, and yet how often do I hear voiced the sentiment that the university is not for the young person of genius.

Withal the foregoing, I do not attribute to the university an intentional undervaluing of art, nor do I believe that creativeness in other fields is discouraged by intention other than in a few conspicuous instances. In the abstract, I believe that creative art is eminent in the university hierarchy of values. But reaching itself is so largely a verbal, a classifying, process that the merely intuitive kinds of knowing, the sensing of things which escape classification, the self-identification with great moods and movements in life and art and letters may be lost or obliterated by academic routine. They are not to be taught but rather absorbed through a way of life in which intensively developed arts play an easy and familiar part. For it is just such inexact knowing that is implicit in the arts. And actually I believe that it is toward this kind of knowing that the classifications of the classroom reach, if sometimes unsuccessfully.

It is this kind of knowing also—the perceptive and the intuitive—that is the very essence of an advanced culture. The dactyl and the spondee, the heroic couplet, the strophe and the antistrophe

may be valuable and useful forms to the poet; but the meaning of the poem and its intention greatly transcend any such mechanics.

I hope, in the following discussions, to give you my view of art, of its forms and its meanings, from that particular, isolated, uncriticized promontory which I as an artist occupy, which perhaps any artist occupies. But I have thought it desirable first to locate art, artists, and the creative process itself vis-à-vis the university and its prevailing point of view. That I am here at all is evidence of the changing attitude toward art within the universities.

The Biography of a Painting

In 1948, while Henry McBride was still writing for the *New York Sun*, I exhibited a painting to which I had given the somewhat cryptic title, "Allegory." The central image of the painting was one which I had been developing across a span of months—a huge Chimera-like beast, its head wreathed in flames, its body arched across the figures of four recumbent children. These latter were dressed in very commonplace clothes, perhaps not entirely contemporary, but rather as I could draw them and their details from my own memory.

I had always counted Henry McBride as a friend and an admirer of my pictures, about which he had written many kind words. Even of this one, he wrote glowingly at first. Then he launched into a strange and angry analysis of the work, attributing to it political motives, suggesting some symbolism of Red Moscow, drawing parallels which I cannot recall accurately, but only their tone of

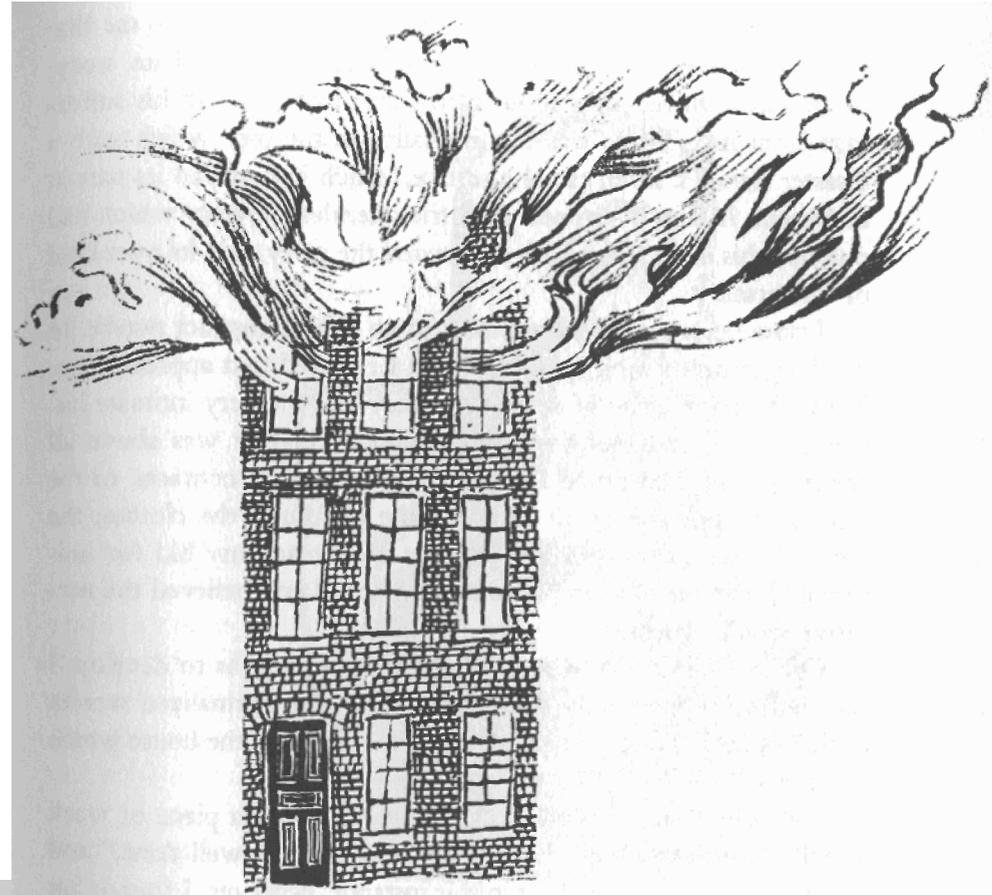
violence, completing his essay by recommending that I, along with the Red Dean of Canterbury, be deported.

Mr. McBride's review was not the first astonishing piece of analysis of my work that I have read, nor was it the last. Perhaps, coming as it did from a critic whom I had looked upon as a friend, it was one of the most disconcerting. In any case, it caused me to undertake a review of this painting, "Allegory," to try to assess just for my own enlightenment what really was in it, what sort of things go to make up a painting. Of the immediate sources I was fully aware, but I wondered to what extent I could trace the deeper origins, and the less conscious motivations.

I had an additional reason for undertaking such an exploration besides the pique which Mr. McBride's review had engendered. I had long carried in my mind that famous critical credo of Clive Bell's, a credo which might well have been erased by time, but which instead has grown to almost tidal proportions and which still constitutes the Procrustean bed into which all art must be either stretched or shrunk. The credo runs as follows: "The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful, but it is always irrelevant. For to appreciate a work of art, we must bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its affairs and ideas, no familiarity with its emotions."

Once proffered as an isolated opinion, that view of art has now become a very dominant one, is taught in the schools, and is laboriously explained in the magazines. Thus, in reconsidering the elements which I feel have formed the painting "Allegory," I have had in mind both critical views, the one which presumes a symbolism beyond or aside from the intention of a painting, and the other, that which voids the work of art of any meaning, any emotion, or any intention.

The immediate source of the painting of the red beast was a Chicago fire in which a colored man had lost his four children. John Bartlow Martin had written a concise reportorial account of the



event—one of those stories which, told in detail, without any emotionalism being present in the writing itself, manages to produce a far greater emotional impact than would a highly colored account.

I was asked to make drawings for the story and, after several discussions with the writer, felt that I had gained enough of the feel of the situation to proceed. I examined a great deal of factual

visual material, and then I discarded all of it. It seemed to me that the implications of this event transcended the immediate story; there was a universality about man's dread of fire, and his sufferings from fire. There was a universality in the pity which such a disaster invokes. Even racial injustice, which had played its part in this event, had its overtones. And the relentless poverty which had pursued this man, and which dominated the story, had its own kind of universality.

I now began to devise symbols of an almost abstract nature, to work in terms of such symbols. Then I rejected that approach too. For in the abstracting of an idea one may lose the very intimate humanity of it, and this deep and common tragedy was above all things human. I returned then to the small family contacts, to the familiar experiences of all of us, to the furniture, the clothes, the look of ordinary people, and on that level made my bid for universality and for the compassion that I hoped and believed the narrative would arouse.

Of all the symbols which I had begun or sought to develop, I retained only one in my illustrations—a highly formalized wreath of flames with which I crowned the plain shape of the house which had burned.

Sometimes, if one is particularly satisfied with a piece of work which he has completed, he may say to himself, "well done," and go on to something else. Not in this instance, however. I found that I could not dismiss the event about which I had made drawings—the so-called "Hickman Story." In the first place, there were the half-realized, the only intimated drawings in a symbolic direction which were lying around my studio; I would develop some of them a little further to see what might come of them. In the second place there was the fire itself; I had some curious sense of responsibility about it, a sort of personal involvement. I had still not fully expressed my sense of the enormity of the Hickman fire; I had not formulated it in its full proportions; perhaps it was that I felt that



I owed something more to the victim himself.

One cannot, I think, crowd into drawings a really towering content of feeling. Drawings may be small intimate revelations; they may be witty or biting, they may be fragmentary glimpses of great feeling or awesome situation, but I feel that the immense idea asks for a full orchestration of color, depth, texture, and form.

The narrative of the fire had aroused in me a chain of personal memories. There were two great fires in my own childhood, one only colorful, the other disastrous and unforgettable. Of the first, I



remember only that the little Russian village in which my grandfather lived burned, and I was there. I remember the excitement, the flames breaking out everywhere, the lines of men passing buckets to and from the river which ran through the town, the mad-woman who had escaped from someone's house during the confusion, and whose face I saw, dead-white in all the reflected color.

The other fire left its mark upon me and all my family, and left its scars on my father's hands and face, for he had clambered up a drainpipe and taken each of my brothers and sisters and me out of the house one by one, burning himself painfully in the process. Meanwhile our house and all our belongings were consumed, and my parents stricken beyond their power to recover.

Among my discarded symbols pertaining to the Hickman story there were a number of heads and bodies of beasts, besides several Harpies, Furies, and other symbolic, semi-classic shapes and figures. Of one of these, a lion-like head, but still not a lion. I made many drawings, each drawing approaching more nearly some inner figure of primitive terror which I was seeking to capture. I was beginning to become most familiar with this beast-head. It was, you might say, under control.

Of the other symbols I developed into paintings a good menagerie of Harpies, of birds with human heads, of curious and indecipherable beasts all of which I enjoyed immensely, and each of which held just enough human association for me to be great fun,

and held just enough classical allusion to add a touch of elegance which I also enjoyed. (And this group of paintings in turn led off into a series of paintings of more or less classical allusion, some only pleasant, but some which like the "City of Dreadful Night" or "Homeric Struggle" were major paintings to me, each having, beside its classical allusion, a great deal of additional motivation.)

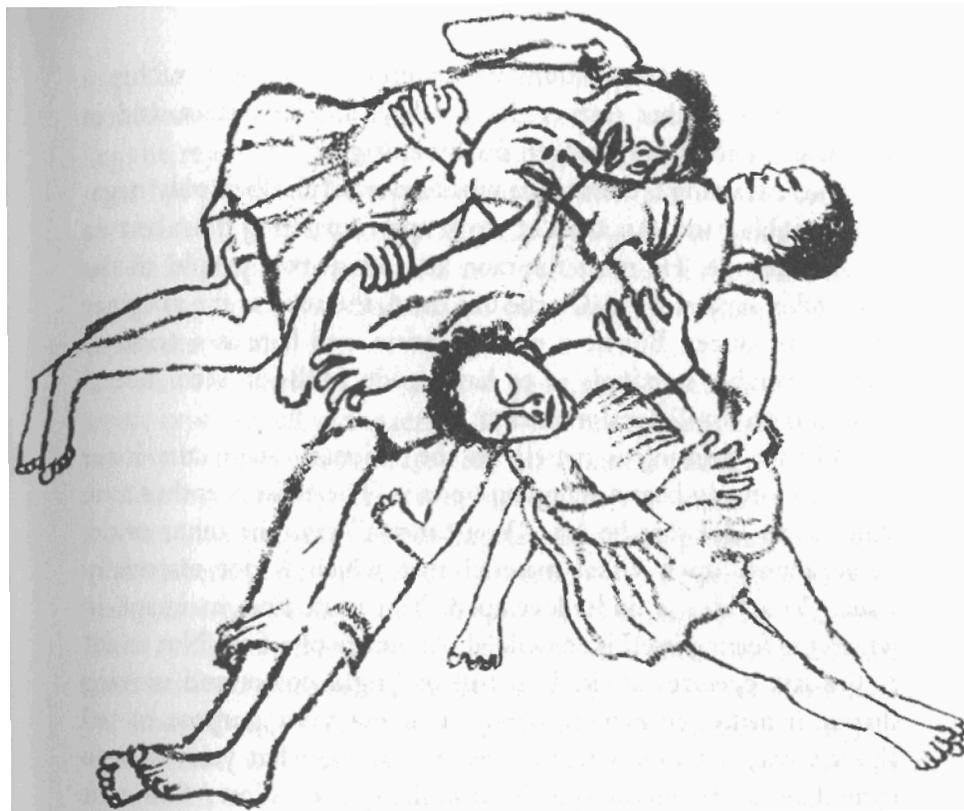
When I at last turned the lion-like beast into a painting, I felt able to imbue it with everything that I had ever felt about a fire. I incorporated the highly formalized flames from the Hickman story as a terrible wreath about its head, and under its body I placed the four child figures which, to me, hold the sense of all the helpless and the innocent.

The image that I sought to create was not one of a disaster; that somehow doesn't interest me. I wanted instead to create the emotional tone that surrounds disaster; you might call it the inner disaster.

In the beast as I worked upon it I recognized a number of creatures; there was something of the stare of an abnormal cat that we once owned that had devoured its own young. And then, there was the wolf.

To me, the wolf is perhaps the most paralyzingly dreadful of beasts, whether symbolic or real. Is my fear some instinctive strain out of my Russian background? I don't know. Is it merely the product of some of my mother's colorful tales about being pursued by wolves when she was with a wedding party, or again when she went alone from her village to another one nearby? Does it come from reading Gogol? Whatever its source, my sense of panic concerning the wolf is real. I sought to implant, or, better, I recognized something of that sense within my allegorical beast.

Then, to go on with the wolf image: I had always found disconcerting the familiar sculpture of Romulus and Remus being suckled by the She-Wolf. It had irritated me immensely, and was a symbol that I abhorred. Now I found that, whether by coin-



idence or not I am unable to say, the stance of my imaginary beast was just that of the great Roman wolf, and that the children under its belly might almost be a realization of my vague fears that, instead of suckling the children, the wolf would most certainly destroy them. But the children, in their play-clothes of 1908, are not Roman, nor are they the children of the Hickman fire; they resemble much more closely my own brothers and sisters.

Such are a few of the traceable sources of imagery, and of the feeling of a single painting—mine, only because I can know what these sources are, because I am able to follow them backward at least to that point at which they disappear into the limbo of the subconscious, or the unconscious, or the instinctive, or the merely biological.

But there are many additional components present within a painting, many other factors that modify, impel, restrain, and in unison shape the images which finally emerge.

The restraining factors alone wield a powerful, albeit only negative, invisible hand. An artist at work upon a painting must be two people, not one. He must function and act as two people all the time and in several ways. On the one hand, the artist is the imaginer and the producer. But he is also the critic, and here is a critic of such inexorable standards as to have made McBride seem liberal even in his most illiberal moment.

When a painting is merely in the visionary stage, the inner critic has already begun stamping upon it. The artist is enthusiastic about some idea that he has. "You cannot," says the inner critic, "superimpose upon visual material that which is not essentially visual. Your idea is underdeveloped. You must find an image in which the feeling itself is embedded. An image of a fire? Not at all! A fire is a cheerful affair. It is full of bright colors and moving shapes; it makes everybody happy. It is not your purpose to tell about a fire, not to describe a fire. Not at all; what you want to formulate is the terror, the heart-shaking fear. Now, find that image!"

So the inward critic has stopped the painting before it has even been begun. Then, when the artist strips his idea down to emotional images alone and begins slowly, falteringly, moving toward some realization, that critic is constantly objecting, constantly chiding, holding the hand back to the image alone, so that the painting remains only that, so that it does not split into two things, one, the image, and another, the meaning.

I have never met a literary critic of painting who, whatever his sentiments toward the artist, would actually destroy an existing painting. He would regard such an act as vandalism and would never consider it. But the critic within the artist is a ruthless destroyer. He continually rejects the contradictory elements within a paint-

ing, the colors that do not act upon other colors and would thus constitute dead places within his work; he rejects insufficient drawing; he rejects forms and colors incompatible with the intention or mood of the piece; he rejects intention itself and mood itself often as banal or derivative. He mightily applauds the good piece of work; he cheers the successful passage; but then if the painting does not come up to his standards he casts aside everything and obliterates the whole.

The critic within the artist is prompted by taste, highly personal, experienced and exacting. He will not tolerate within a painting any element which strays very far from that taste.

During the early French-influenced part of my artistic career, I painted landscapes in a Post-Impressionist vein, pleasantly peopled with bathers, or I painted nudes, or studies of my friends. The work had a nice professional look about it, and it rested, I think, on a fairly solid academic training. It was during those years that the inner critic first began to play hara-kiri with my insides. With such ironic words as, "It has a nice professional look about it," my inward demon was prone to ridicule or tear down my work in just those terms in which I was wont to admire it.

The questions, "Is that enough? Is that all?" began to plague me. Or, "This may be art, but is it my own art?" And then I began to realize that however professional my work might appear, even however original it might be, it still did not contain the central person which, for good or ill, was myself. The whole stream of events and of thinking and changing thinking; the childhood influences that were still strong in me; my rigorous training as a lithographer with its emphasis upon craft; my several college years with the strong intention to become a biologist; summers at Woods Hole, the probing of the wonders of marine forms; all my views and notions on life and politics, all this material and much more which must constitute the substance of whatever person I was, lay outside the scope of my own painting. Yes, it was art that I was producing,

perfectly competent, but foreign to me, and the inner critic was rising up against it.

It was thus under the pressure of such inner rejection that I first began to ask myself what sort of person I really was, and what kind of art could truly coincide with that person. And to bring into this question the matter of taste I felt—or the inner critic felt—that it was both tawdry and trivial to wear the airs and the artistic dress of a society to which I did not belong.

I feel, I even know, that this first step in rejection is a presence within the fire-image painting of which I have undertaken to speak. The moving toward one's inner self is a long pilgrimage for a painter. It offers many temporary successes and high points, but there is always the residuum of incomplete realization which impels him on toward the more adequate image.

Thus there began for me the long artistic tug of war between idea and image.

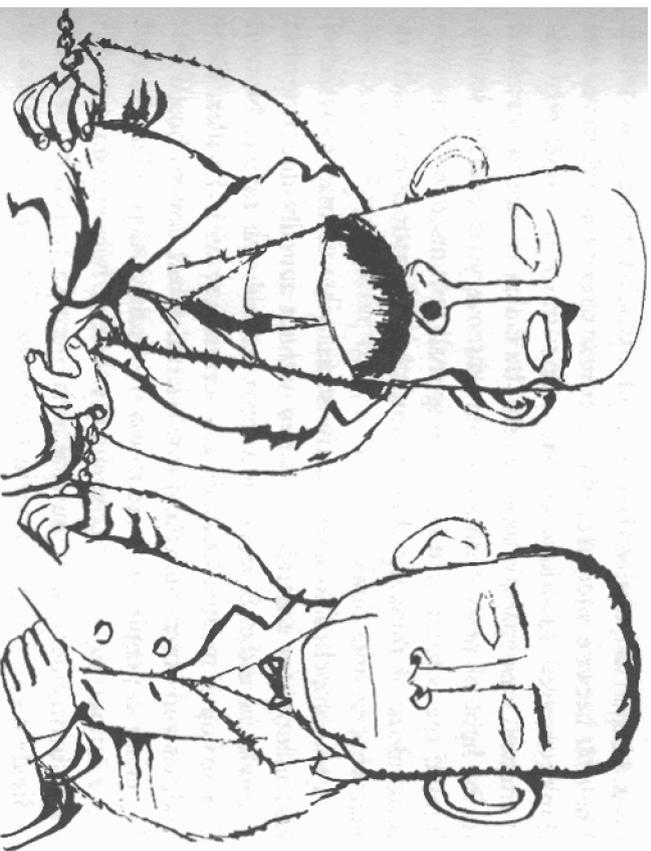
At first, the danger of such a separation did not appear. For my first disquisition in paint was only semi-serious. My friend Walker Evans and I had decided to set up an exhibition in the barn of a Portuguese family on Cape Cod. He would exhibit a series of superb photographs which he had made of the family there; I would exhibit a few water colors, most of them not yet in existence.

At just that time I was absorbed in a small book which I had picked up in France, a history of the Dreyfus case. I would do some exposition of the affair in pictures. So I set to work and presented the leading malefactors of the case, the defenders, and of course Dreyfus himself. Under each portrait I lettered in my best lithographic script a long or short legend setting forth the role which the original of the portrait had played in the celebrated affair.

What had been undertaken lightly became very significant in my eyes. Within the Dreyfus pictures I could see a new avenue of expression opening up before me, a means by which I could unfold a great deal of my most personal thinking and feeling without loss

of simplicity. I felt that the very directness of statement of these pictures was a great virtue in itself. And I further felt, and perhaps hoped a little, that such simplicity would prove irritating to that artistic elite who had already—even at the end of the twenties—began to hold forth “disengagement” as the first law of creation. As artists of a decade or so earlier had delighted to *épater le bourgeois*, so I found it pleasant, to borrow a line from Leonard Baskin, to *épater l'avant-garde*.

Having returned only recently from France where the Sacco-Vanzetti case was a national fever, I now turned to that noted drama for the theme of a new group of paintings, and set about revealing the acts and the persons involved with as rigorous a simplicity as I could command. I was not unmindful of Giotto, and of the simplicity with which he had been able to treat of connected



events—each complete in itself, yet all recreating the religious drama, so living a thing to him.

The ensuing series of pictures was highly rewarding to me. First, I felt that my own work was now becoming identified with my person. Then there was the kind of response which met the pictures; not only did the customary art public receive the work kindly, but there was also an entirely new kind of public, a great influx of people who do not ordinarily visit galleries—journalists and Italian immigrants and many other sorts of sympathizers. And then there was the book about the case which Benchley sent to me, inscribed, “to Ben Shahn without whom this crime could never have been committed.”

I continued to work in terms of pictures which related to a central theme, the inner critic being somewhat appeased and exercising only a certain technical stringency. A new series of questions now arose for me, and with them the inevitable consequent rejections. I began to question the degree of my belief in the views which I held. It became uncomfortably apparent to me that whatever one thinks as well as whatever one paints must be constantly re-examined, torn apart, if that seems to be indicated, and reassembled in the light of new attitudes or new discovery. If one has set for himself the position that his painting shall not misconstrue his personal mode of thinking, then he must be rather unusually alert to just what he does think.

I was impelled to question the social view of man to which I had adhered for a number of years without actually doubting that it might be either a right view or a natural one to me. Now it dawned upon me that I had always been at war with this idea. Generalities and abstractions and vital statistics had always bored me. Whether in people or in art it was the individual peculiarities that were interesting. One has sympathy with a hurt person, not because he is a generality, but precisely because he is not. Only the individual can imagine, invent, or create. The whole audience of

art is an audience of individuals. Each of them comes to the painting or sculpture because there he can be told that he, the individual, transcends all classes and flouts all predictions. In the work of art he finds his uniqueness affirmed.

Yes, one rankles at broad injustices, and one ardently hopes for and works toward mass improvements; but that is only because whatever mass there may be is made up of individuals, and each of them is able to feel and have hopes and dreams.

Nor would such a view invalidate a belief which I had held about the unifying power of art. I have always believed that the character of a society is largely shaped and unified by its great creative works, that a society is molded upon its epics, and that it imagines in terms of its created things—its cathedrals, its works of art, its musical treasures, its literary and philosophic works. One might say that a public may be so unified because the highly personal experience is held in common by the many individual members of the public. The great moment at which Oedipus in his remorse tears out his eyes is a private moment—one of deepest inward emotion. And yet that emotion, produced by art, and many other such private and profound emotions, experiences, and images bound together the Greek people into a great civilization, and bound others all over the earth to them for all time to come.

So I had crossed the terrain of the “social view,” and I would not return. At the same time, I feel that all such artistic terrain which one has crossed must to some extent affect or modify his later work. Whatever one has rejected is in itself a tangible shaping force. That all such work improves the skill of the hand or the discernment of the eye is only a minor consideration. Even of one’s thinking, however much his views may change, one retains a great deal, rejecting only that which seems foreign to him or irrelevant. Or, one may wholly reject the social view of man and at the same time cherish its underlying sympathies and its sense of altruism.

Such a process of acceptance and rejection—the artist plus the

inner critic—or you might just say, the informed creator—is present in the most fragmentary piece which an artist produces. A small sketch of Picasso's, a drawing by Rouault, or Manet or Modigliani, is not to be dismissed as negligible, for any such piece contains inevitably the long evolutionary process of taste, deftness, and personal view. It is, if brief, still dictated by the same broad experience and personal understanding which molds the larger work.

I was not the only artist who had been entranced by the social dream, and who could no longer reconcile that view with the private and inner objectives of art. As during the thirties art had been swept by mass ideas, so during the forties there took place a mass movement toward abstraction. Not only was the social dream rejected, but any dream at all. Many of those names that, during the thirties, had been affixed to paintings of hypothetical tyrannies and theoretical cures were now affixed to cubes and cones and threads and swirls of paint. Part of that work was—and is—beautiful and meaningful; part of it does indeed constitute private experience. A great part of it also represents only the rejection, only the absence of self-commitment.

The change in art, mine included, was accomplished during World War II. For me, it had begun during the late thirties when I worked in the Resettlement Administration. I had then crossed and recrossed many sections of the country, and had come to know well so many people of all kinds of belief and temperament, which they maintained with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life. Theories had melted before such experience. My own painting then had turned from what is called "social realism" into a sort of personal realism. I found the qualities of people a constant pleasure; there was the coal miner, a cellist, who organized a quartet for me—the quartet having three musicians. There was the muralist who painted the entire end of his barn with scenes of war and then of plenty, the whole painting entitled "Uncle Sam Did It All." There were the five Musgrove brothers who played five harmonicas—the



wonderful names of people, Plato Jordan and Jasper Lancaster, and of towns, Pity Me, and Tail Holt, and Bird-in Hand. There were the poor who were rich in spirit, and the rich who were also sometimes rich in spirit. There was the South and its story-telling art, stories of snakes and storms and haunted houses, enchanting; and yet such talent thriving in the same human shell with hopeless prejudices, bigotry, and ignorance.

Personal realism, personal observation of the way of people, the mood of life and places; all that is a great pleasure, but I felt some larger potentiality in art.

During the war I worked in the Office of War Information. We were supplied with a constant stream of material, photographic and other kinds of documentation of the decimation within enemy territory. There were the secret confidential horrible facts of the cartloads of dead; Greece, India, Poland. There were the blurred pictures of bombed-out places, so many of which I knew well and



cherished. There were the churches destroyed, the villages, the monasteries—Monte Cassino and Ravenna. At that time I painted only one theme, “Europa,” you might call it. Particularly I painted Italy as I lamented it, or feared that it might have become.

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It had been my principle in painting, during all the changes that I had undertaken, that outer objects or people must be observed with an acute eye for detail, but that all such observation must be molded from an inner view. I had felt consistently, also, that any such content must be painted in a way wholly subject to the kind of medium, whether oil, tempera, fresco, or whatever.

But now I saw art turning abstract, courting material alone. It seemed to me that such a direction promised only a cul-de-sac for the painter. I wanted to avoid that direction, and at the same time I wanted to find some deeper source of meaning in art, a constant spring that would not run dry with the next change in political weather.

Out of the battery of acceptances and rejections that mold the style of a painter, there rises as a force not only his own growing and changing work, but that of other work, both contemporary and past. He must observe all these directions and perhaps continue those which appear to be fruitful, while shunning those which appear to be limited and of short duration. Thus a degree of sophistication is essential to the painter.

While I felt a growing conviction as to the validity of the inner view, I wanted not to re-tread the ground which had been so admirably illuminated by Surrealism. Indeed the subconscious, the unconscious, the dream-world does offer a rich almost limitless panorama for the explorations of art; but in that approach, I think we may call it the psychological approach, one may discern beyond the rich imagery certain limits and inevitable pitfalls.

The limitation which circumscribed Surrealist art arose from its effort to reveal the subconscious. For in that effort control and intention were increasingly relinquished. Surrealism and the psychological approach led into that quagmire of the so-called automatic practices of art—the biomorphic, the fecal, the natal, and the other absurdities.

The subconscious may greatly shape one's art; undoubtedly it

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does so. But the subconscious cannot create art. The very act of making a painting is an intending one; thus to intend and at the same time relinquish intention is a hopeless contradiction, albeit one that is exhibited on every hand.

But the great failure of all such art, at least in my own view, lies in the fact that man's most able self is his conscious self—his intending self. The psychological view can at best, even assuming that it were accurate, tell us what man is in spite of himself. It may perhaps discover those animal motives which are said to lurk beneath the human ones. It may unmask selfish purposes lying within altruism. It may even be able to reveal primitive psychological states underneath the claims and achievements of philosophy—the brute beneath the intellect. But the values of man, if he has any at all, reside in his intentions, in the degree to which he has moved away from the brute, in his intellect at its peak and in his humanity at its peak.

I do not conceive it to be the role of art to regress either into the pre-natal or into the pre-human state. So while I accept the vast inner landscape that extends off the boundaries of consciousness to be almost infinitely fruitful of images and symbols, I know that such images mean one thing to the psychologist and quite another to the artist.

One might return to Oedipus. For, to the psychologist, Oedipus is a symbol of aberration only—a medical symbol. But to the artist Oedipus is a symbol of moral anguish, and even more than that, of transcendent spiritual power.

Or, consider Van Gogh; to the psychologist it is the periodic insanity of Van Gogh that is pre-eminent, and the psychologist deduces much from that. But to the artist it is clear that it was the great love of things and of people and the incredible suffering of Van Gogh that made his art possible and his insanity inevitable.

I know that there must be an ingredient of complete belief in any work of art—belief in what one is doing. I do not doubt that

those artists who work only for pure form believe in form alone as the ultimate possible expression in art. Those who look upon their art as therapy probably believe with equal fervor in what they are doing. And I am sure that the artists who only manipulate materials believe firmly in that method. But here again one must be impelled by rejection. Such art can contain nothing of experience either inward or outward. It is only a painted curtain resting midway between the subjective and the objective, closing either off from the other.

To me both subjective and objective are of paramount importance, another aspect of the problem of image and idea. The challenge is not to abolish both from art, but rather to unite them into a single impression, an image of which meaning is an inalienable part.

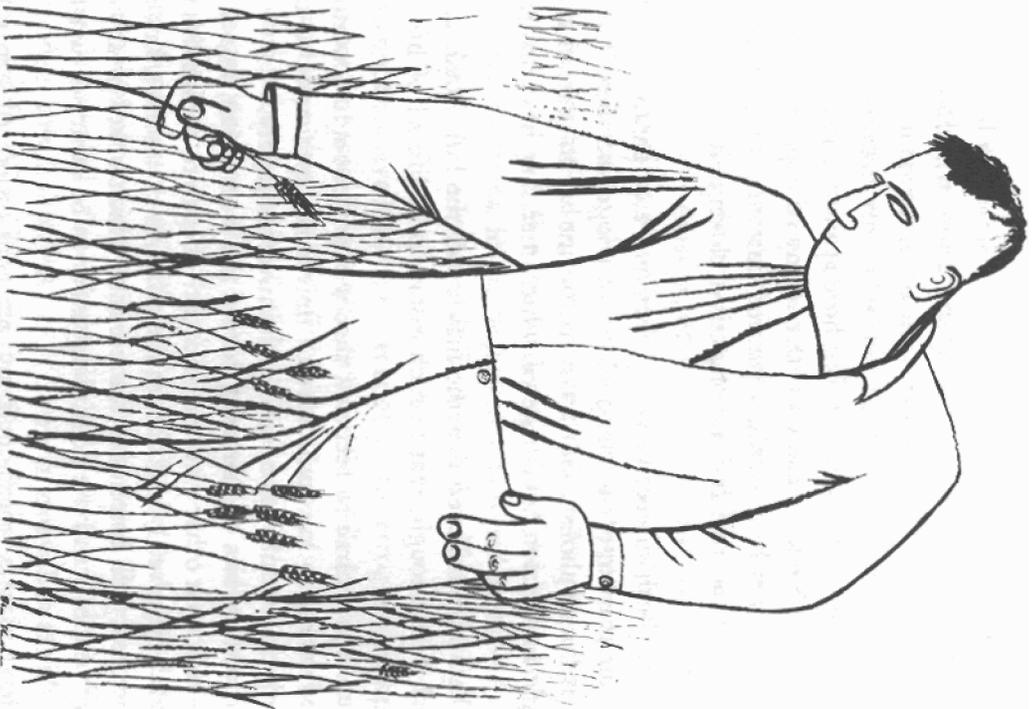
I had once believed that the incidental, the individual, and the topical were enough; that in such instances of life all of life could be implied.

But then I came to feel that that was not enough. I wanted to reach farther, to tap some sort of universal experience, to create symbols that would have some such universal quality.

I made a series of paintings during the war which, in my own view—and what other view has an artist?—began to realize this more difficult objective. I shall discuss the pictures themselves, but again it is necessary to emphasize the conflict which arises in any such change of view, and the painful necessity to be aware of what one really thinks and wants in art.

I have already mentioned my personal dislike of generalities. Now, one must ask, is not the universal merely another term for the generality? How can one actually achieve a universality in painting without becoming merely more generalized and abstract? I feel that this question is one which greatly concerns artists. Its resolution will greatly affect the kind of an artist one is to be.

My own approach can only be to ask myself just why it is that



I so dislike all statistics and most generalities. The answer that I find is simply that I dislike such material because it is impersonal. In being average to all things, it is particular to none. If we were to attempt to construct an "average American" we would necessarily put together an effigy which would have the common qualities of all Americans, but would have the eccentricities, peculiarities, and

unique qualities of no American. It would, like the sociologist's statistical high-school student, approximate everyone and resemble no one.

But let us say that the universal is that unique thing which affirms the unique qualities of all things. The universal experience is that private experience which illuminates the private and personal world in which each of us lives the major part of his life. Thus, in art, the symbol which has vast universality may be some figure drawn from the most remote and inward recesses of consciousness; for it is here that we are unique and sovereign and most wholly aware. I think of Masaccio's "Expulsion from the Garden," so intensely personal that it leaves no person untouched. I think of a di Chirico figure, lonely in a lonely street haunted by shadows; its loneliness speaks to all human loneliness. As an experience, neither painting has anything of the average; both come from extreme limits of feeling and both paintings have a great universality.

The paintings which I made toward the close of the war—the "Liberation" picture, "The Red Staircase," "Pacific Landscape," "Cherubs and Children," "Italian Landscape," and quite a number of others did not perhaps depart sharply in style or appearance from my earlier work, but they had become more private and more inward-looking. A symbolism which I might once have considered cryptic now became the only means by which I could formulate the sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave me, and the sense of the littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war. I think that at that time I was very little concerned with communication as a conscious objective. Formulation itself was enough of a problem—to formulate into images, into painted surfaces, feelings, which, if obscure, were at least strongly felt.

But in my own view these paintings were successful. I found in them a way to go, actually a liberation of sorts for myself. I became most conscious then that the emotional image is not necessarily of that event in the outside world which prompts our feelings;

the emotional image is rather made up of the inner vestiges of many events. It is of that company of phantoms which we all own and which have no other sense than the fear sense, or that of the ludicrous, or of the terribly beautiful; images that have the nostalgia of childhood with possibly none of the facts of our childhood; images which may be drawn only from the recollection of paint upon a surface, and yet that have given one great exaltation—such are the images to be sensed and formulated.

I became increasingly preoccupied with the sense and the look, indeed, with the power of this newly emerging order of image. It was, as I have indicated, a product of active intentions plus the constant demands and rejections of the inward critic; even perhaps of a certain striving to measure my own work critically with some basic truth in art. At the same time I read and do read comments about my work by outer critics, some referring to the work as "Social Realism," some lamenting its degree of content, holding that to be irrelevant to any art, but most employing certain labels which, however friendly they may be in intention, have so little relation to the context of a painting. I believe that if it were left to artists to choose their own labels most would choose none. For most artists have expended a great deal of energy in scrambling out of classes and categories and pigeon-holes, aspiring toward some state of perfect freedom which unfortunately neither human limitations nor the law allows—not to mention the critics.

I don't just think, I know, that this long historical process which I have just described is present within the one painting of the fire animal which is called "Allegory." There is considerable content which extends through one's work, appearing, disappearing, changing, growing; there is the shaping power of rejection which I have discussed, and the constant activity of revising one's ideas—of thinking what one wants to think. All these elements are present to a greater or less degree in the work of any painter who is deeply occupied in trying to impress his personality upon inert matter.

But allowing all this procedure and material, I must now say that it is, in another sense, only background. It is formulative of taste; it is the stuff and make-up of the inner critic; it is the underground stream of ideas. But idea itself must always bow to the needs and demands of the material in which it is to be cast. The painter who stands before an empty canvas must think in terms of paint. If he is just beginning in the use of paint, the way may be extremely difficult for him because he may not yet have established a complete rapport with his medium. He does not yet know what it can do, and what it cannot do. He has not yet discovered that paint has a power by itself and in itself—or where that power lies, or how it relates to him. For with the practiced painter it is that relationship which counts; his inner images are paint images, as those of the poet are no doubt metrical word images and those of the musician tonal images.

From the moment at which a painter begins to strike figures of color upon a surface he must become acutely sensitive to the feel, the textures, the light, the relationships which arise before him. At one point he will mold the material according to an intention. At another he may yield intention—perhaps his whole concept—to emerging forms, to new implications within the painted surface. Idea itself—ideas, many ideas move back and forth across his mind as a constant traffic, dominated perhaps by larger currents and directions, by what he wants to think. Thus idea rises to the surface, grows, changes as a painting grows and develops. So one must say that painting is both creative and responsive. It is an intimately communicative affair between the painter and his painting, a conversation back and forth, the painting telling the painter even as it receives its shape and form.

Here too, the inward critic is ever at hand, perpetually advising and casting doubt. Here the work is overstated; there it is thin; in another place, muddiness is threatened; somewhere else it has lost connection with the whole; here it looks like an exercise in paint

alone; there, an area should be preserved; thus the critic, sometimes staying the hand of the painter, sometimes demanding a fresh approach, sometimes demanding that a whole work be abandoned—and sometimes not succeeding, for the will may be stubborn enough to override such good advice.

I have spoken of the tug of war between idea and image which at an earlier time in my painting had plagued me so greatly. I could not reconcile that conflict by simply abandoning idea, as so many artists had done. Such an approach may indeed simplify painting, but it also removes it from the arena of challenging, adult, fully intellectual and mature practice. For me, there would be little reason for painting if idea were not to emerge from the work. I cannot look upon myself or upon man generally as a merely behaving species. If there is value it rests upon the human ability to have idea, and indeed upon the stature of the idea itself.

The painting of the Red Beast, "Allegory," is an idea painting. It is also a highly emotional painting, and I hope that it is still primarily an image, a paint image. I began the painting, as I have said, with no established idea, only with the sense of a debt to be paid and with a clamoring of images, many of them. But as to the fire itself, and as to fires, I had many ideas, a whole sub-continent of ideas, none of which would be executed to measure, but any one of which might rise to become the dominating force in the painting. So it was with the series of paintings which I made during and after the time of the fire animal. There was the painting "Brothers." Paint, yes, but also reunion, reconciliation, end of war, pain of strong feeling, family, brothers. There was the painting called "City of Dreadful Night"—a forest of television aetials—lines in paint—splashes of light, or heads of ancient demons tangled in the antennae—a somber building with moldering Greek heads. All of these images arose out of paint, yes, but they also arose out of the somewhat ominous implications of television for the mind, for the culture. Out of a chain of connective ideas, responding to paint and color,

rises the image, the painted idea. Thus the work may turn in an amusing direction, in a satirical direction. Or sometimes images are found—image ideas which are capable of great amplification, which can be built up to a high point of expressive power, at least for my purposes.

I cannot question that such a two-way communication has always constituted the painting process, sometimes with greater insistence of idea, sometimes with less, or none. Personal style, be it that of Michelangelo, or that of Tintoretto, or of Titian or of Giotto, has always been that peculiar personal rapport which has developed between an artist and his medium.

So I feel that painting is by no means a limited medium, neither limited to idea alone, nor to paint alone. I feel that painting is able to contain whatever one thinks and all that he is. The images which may be drawn out of colored materials may have depth and luminosity measured by the artist's own power to recognize and respond to such qualities, and to develop them. Painting may reflect, even brilliantly, the very limitations of an artist, the innocence of eye of a Rousseau, of a Bombois, of a John Kane. Painting can, and it has at various times, contained the whole of scholarship. Painting can contain the politician in a Daumier, the insurgent in a Goya, the suppliant in a Masaccio. It is not a spoken idea alone, nor a legend, nor a simple use or intention that forms what I have called the biography of a painting. It is rather the wholeness of thinking and feeling within an individual; it is partly his time and place; it is partly his childhood or even his adult fears and pleasures, and it is very greatly his thinking what he wants to think.

For the sake of a few lines [wrote Rilke] one must see many cities, men and things. One must know the animals, one must feel how the birds fly and know the gesture with which the small flowers open in the morning. One must be able to think back to roads in unknown regions, to unexpected meetings and to partings which

*one had long seen coming; to days of childhood that are still unexplained, to parents that one had to hurt when they brought one some joy and one did not grasp it (it was a joy for someone else); to childhood illness that so strangely began with a number of profound and grave transformations, to days in rooms withdrawn and quiet and to mornings by the sea, to the sea itself, to seas, to nights of travel that rushed along on high and flew with all the stars—and it is not yet enough if one may think all of this. One must have memories of many nights of love, none of which was like the others, of the screams of women in labor, and of light, white, sleeping women in childbed, closing again. But one must also have been beside the dying, one must have sat beside the dead in the room with the open window and the fitful noises. And still it is not enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many, and one must have the great patience to wait until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not until they have turned to blood within us, to glance, to gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not until then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them. [From *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, New York, W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1949.]*