

# The Search for the *Real*

## In the Visual Arts

Art is magic. So say the surrealists. But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magic reality? In truth, the latter is impossible without the former. If creation is not magic, the outcome cannot be magic. To worship the product and ignore its development leads to dilettantism and reaction. Art cannot result from sophisticated, frivolous, or superficial effects.

The significance of a work of art is determined then by the quality of its growth. This involves intangible forces inherent in the process of development. Although these forces are surreal (that is, their nature is something beyond physical reality), they, nevertheless, depend on a physical carrier. The physical carrier (commonly painting or sculpture) is the medium of expression of the surreal. Thus, an idea is communicable only when the surreal is converted into material terms. The artist's technical problem is how to transform the material with which he works back into the sphere of the spirit.

This two-way transformation proceeds from metaphysical perceptions, for metaphysics is the *search* for the essential nature of reality. And so artistic creation is the metamorphosis of the external physical aspects of a thing into a self-sustaining spiritual reality. Such is the magic act which takes place continuously in the development of a work of art. On this and only on this is creation based.

Still it is not clear what the intrinsic qualities in a medium actually are to make the metamorphosis from the physical into the spiritual possible. Metaphysically, a thing in itself never expresses anything. It is the relation between things that gives meaning to them and that formulates a thought. A thought functions only as a fragmentary part in the formulation of an idea.

A thought that has found a plastic expression must continue to expand in keeping with its own plastic idiom. A plastic idea must be expressed with plastic means just as a musical idea is expressed with musical means, or a literary idea with verbal means. Neither music nor literature are wholly translatable into other art forms; and so a plastic art cannot be created through a superimposed literary meaning. The artist who attempts to do so produces nothing more than a show-booth. He contents himself with visual storytelling. He subjects himself to a mechanistic kind of thinking which disintegrates into fragments.

The plastic expression of one relation must in turn be related to a like expression of another relation if a coherent plastic art is to be the outcome. In this way the expression of a work of art becomes synonymous with the sum of relations and associations organized in terms of the medium of expression by an intuitive artist.

The relative meaning of two physical facts in an emotionally controlled relation always creates the phenomenon of a third fact of a higher order, just as two musical sounds, heard simultaneously create the phenomenon of a third, fourth, or fifth. The nature of this higher third is non-physical. In a sense it is magic. Each such phenomenon always overshadows the material qualities and the limited meaning of the basic factors from which it has sprung. For this reason Art expresses the highest quality of the spirit when it is surreal in nature; or, in terms of the visual arts, when it is of a surreal plastic nature.

Let us explain our philosophical perceptions with the help of a practical example: take a sheet of paper and make a line on it. Who can say whether this line is long or short? Who can say what its direction is? But when, on this same sheet of paper, you make another shorter line, you can see immediately that the first line is the longer one. By placing the second line so that it is not exactly under the first line, you create a sense of movement which will leave no doubt as to the direction in which the first line moves, and in which direction the second is opposed to it.

Was it necessary to enlarge the first line to make it the longer one? We did not have to touch that line or make any change. We gave it meaning through its relation to the new line; and in so doing, we gave simultaneous meaning also to this new line, meaning which it could not have had otherwise. The dominating thought of any relation is always reflected in both directions. But it is the multi-reflex of a particular thought with respect to an over-all idea that finally lifts an artistic expression into the realm of magic. In other words, it is the surreal content of the work that absorbs and overshadows the structure and the physical foundation. The spiritual quality dominates the material.

But, is this all that happened when you made these two lines? You may think so, but that is by no means the case. You started out on an empty piece of paper. The paper is no longer empty. What has happened? Is there nothing but a combination of two lines on an empty sheet of paper? Certainly not! The fact that you placed one line somewhere on the paper created a very definite relationship between this line and the edges of your paper. (You were not aware perhaps that these edges were the first lines of your composition.) By adding another

line you not only have a certain tension between the two lines, but also a tension between the unity of these two lines and the outline of your paper. The fact that your two lines, when considered either separately, or as a unit, have a definite relation to the outline, makes the lines and the paper a unified entity which (since lines and paper are physically different) exists entirely in the intellect.

From the beginning, your paper is limited, as all geometrical figures are limited. Within its confines is the complete creative message. Everything you do is definitely related to the paper. The outline becomes an essential part of your composition. Its own meaning, as a limitation, is related to the multi-meanings of your two lines. The more the work progresses, the more it becomes defined or qualified. It increasingly limits itself. Expansion, paradoxically, becomes contraction.

Expansion and contraction in a simultaneous existence is a characteristic of space. Your paper has actually been transformed into space. A sensation of movement and countermovement is simultaneously created through the position of these two lines in their relation to the outline of the paper. Movement and countermovement result in tension. Tensions are the expression of forces. Forces are the expression of actions. In their surreal relationship, the lines may now give the idea of being two shooting stars which move with speed through the universe. Your empty paper has been transformed by the simplest graphic means to a universe in action. This is real magic. So your paper is a world in itself—or you may call it, more modestly, only an object, or simply a picture with a life of its own—a spiritual life—through which it can become a work of art.

Your two lines carry multi-meanings:

They move in relation to each other.

They have tension in themselves.

They express active mutual forces.

This makes them into a living unit.

The position of this unit bears a definite relation to the entire paper.

This in turn creates tensions of a still higher order.

Visual and spiritual movements are simultaneously expressed in these tensions.

They change the meaning of your paper as it defines and embodies space.

Space must be vital and active—a force impelled pictorial space, presented as a spiritual and unified entity, with a life of its own.

This entity must have a life of the spirit without which no art is possible—the life of a creative mind in its sensitive relation to the outer world.

The work of art is firmly established as an independent object; this makes it a picture.

Outside of it is the outer world.

Inside of it, the world of an artist.

A consciousness of limitation is paramount for an expression of the Infinite. Beethoven creates Eternity in the physical limitation of his symphonies. Any limitation can be subdivided infinitely. This involves the problem of time and relativity. A glimpse heavenward at a constellation or even at a single star only *suggests* infinity; actually our vision is limited. We cannot perceive unlimited space; it is immeasurable. The universe, as we know it through our visual experience, is limited. It first came into existence with the formation of matter, and will end with the complete dissolution of matter. Where there is matter and action, there is space.

Pictorial space exists two dimensionally. When the two dimensionality of a picture is destroyed, it falls into parts—it creates the effect of naturalistic space. When a picture conveys only naturalistic space, it represents a special case, a portion of what is felt about three-dimensional experience. This expression of the artist's experience is thus incomplete.

The layman has extreme difficulty in understanding that plastic creation on a flat surface is possible without destroying this flat surface. But it is just this conceptual completeness of a plastic experience that warrants the preservation of the two dimensionality. A plastic approach which is incomplete conceptually will destroy the two dimensionality, and being incomplete in concept, the creation will be inadequate.

Depth, in a pictorial, plastic sense, is not created by the arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point, in the sense of the Renaissance perspective, but on the contrary (and in absolute denial of this doctrine) by the creation of forces in the sense of *push and pull*. Nor is depth created by tonal gradation—(another doctrine of the academician which, at its culmination, degraded the use of color to a mere function of expressing dark and light).

Since one cannot create "real depth" by carving a hole in the picture, and since one should not attempt to create the illusion of depth by tonal gradation, depth as a plastic reality must be two dimensional in a formal sense as well as in the sense of color. "Depth" is not created on a flat surface as an illusion, but as a plastic reality. The nature of the picture plane makes it possible to achieve depth without destroying the two-dimensional essence of the picture plane. Before proceeding, however, the artist must realize the necessity of differentiating between a line and a plane concept.

A plane is a fragment in the architecture of space. When a number of planes are opposed one to another, a spatial effect results. A plane functions in the same manner as the walls of a building. A number of such walls in a given relation creates architectural space in accordance with the idea of the architect who is the creator of this space. Planes organized within a picture create the pictorial space of its composition. In an old master composition, the outline of a figure was considered as a plane and as such the figure became plastically active in the composition. The old masters were plane conscious. This makes their pictures restful as well as vital, irrespective of the dramatic emphasis.

A line concept cannot control pictorial space absolutely. A line may flow freely in and out of space, but cannot independently create the phenomenon of *push and pull* necessary to plastic creation. *Push and pull* are expanding and contracting forces which are activated by carriers in visual motion. Planes are the most important carriers, lines and points less so.

The forces of *push and pull* function three dimensionally without destroying other forces functioning two dimensionally. The movement of a carrier on a flat surface is possible only through an act of shifting left and right or up and down. To create the phenomenon of *push and pull* on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the picture plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process. *Push* answers with *pull* and *pull* with *push*. For example, the inside pressure of a balloon is in balance in every direction. By pressing one side of the balloon, you will disturb this balance, and, as a consequence, the other end will swallow up the amount of pressure applied. Needless to say, this procedure can be reversed. Exactly the same thing can happen to the picture plane in a spiritual sense. When a force is created somewhere in the picture that is intended to be a stimulus in the sense of a *push* the picture plane answers automatically with a force in the sense of *pull* and vice versa.

The function of *push and pull* in respect to form contains the secret of Michelangelo's monumentality or of Rembrandt's universality. At the end of his life and at the height of his capacity, Cezanne understood color as a force of *push and pull*. In his pictures he created an enormous sense of volume, breathing, pulsating, expanding, contracting through his use of color. His watercolors were forever exercises in this direction. Only very great painting becomes so plastically sensitive, for the expression of the deepest in man calls for unexpected and surprising associations.

The graphic arts deal only with basic problems of form. Painting, however, involves a formal problem which depends in its last analysis on the function of color as well as on the essential nature of the picture plane. A painting (which means no more than "forming with color") may embody the same images as does a work of graphic art through the control of form, but it must be realized by very different ways and means since color has an intricate life of its own. To understand this seemingly dual problem of form and color involved in painting, we must first make clear what the intrinsic life of color really is, and what makes this life a vital factor in plastic creation.

Color is a plastic means of creating intervals. Intervals are color harmonics produced by special relationships, or tensions. We differentiate now between formal tensions and color tensions, just as we differentiate in music between counterpoint and harmony. And just as counterpoint and harmony follow their own laws, and differ in rhythm and movement, both the formal tensions and the color tensions have a development of their own in accordance with the inherent laws from which they are separately derived. Both, however, as we have stated, aim toward the realization of the same image. And both deal with the depth problem.

The creative possibilities of color are not limited to plastic expression. Although the composition and function of color are two of the most important factors in determining the qualitative content of a painting, the reciprocal relation of color to color produces a phenomenon of a more mysterious order. This new phenomenon is psychological. A high sensitivity is necessary in order to expand color into the sphere of the surreal without losing creative ground. Color stimulates certain moods in us. It awakens joy or fear in accordance with its configuration. In fact, the whole world, as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color. Our entire being is nourished by it. This mystic quality of color should likewise find expression in a work of art.

One must realize that, apart from considerations of color and form, there are two fundamentally different ways of regarding a medium of expression: one is based on taste only—an approach in which the external physical elements of expression are merely pleasingly arranged. This way results in decoration with no spiritual reaction. Arrangement is not art. The second way is based on the artist's power of empathy, to feel the intrinsic qualities of the medium of expression. Through these qualities the medium comes to life and varies plastically as an idea develops.

The whole field of commercial art and much that comes under the heading of applied art is handled in the first way and is chiefly decorative arrangement. The so called fine arts are handled in the second way to give the total of man's inner self—his spiritual world which he can offer only as an artist in the most profound sense.

There have been two separate revolutions in the visual arts which coincided. A revolution started in the field of the fine arts at the decline of Impressionism, with the birth of Cubism. The Impressionists, who preceded the Cubists, rediscovered the full plastic significance of the picture plane as a two-dimensional entity. The reason for this re-discovery was a search for the entity of light, expressed through color, which resulted in re-establishing the two dimensionality of the picture plane.

Cubism was a revolution in that the artist broke with tradition by changing from a line to a plane concept. The earlier school modeled with color between the outlines of a linear composition. The new school became plane conscious. As already noted, this change occurred as a revolt against the decadent emphasis on taste alone. Having become aware that the revolution in the fine arts carried the key for a vital and unlimited expression, some leaders in the fields of applied art and of architecture discovered that this was also the key for the vitalization of the applied arts. This was the second revolution. With the awareness of the difference between a line concept and a plane concept, the foundation of applied art was newly laid.

It was especially Gropius in Germany, the founder of the Bauhaus in Weimar, later the Bauhaus in Dessau, who called together highly advanced artists like Klee and Kandinsky, in an attempt to make this school the real leader in the rejuvenation of the applied arts, particularly with respect to modern architecture. At this time, however, there was only a vague comprehension of the essential differences which divide and characterize the two fields in the visual arts.

It was the tragedy of the Bauhaus, that, at the beginning of its existence, it confused the concepts of the fine and applied arts. As we have noted, the first must serve the deepest in man. It concerns man's relation to the world as a spiritual being. The second serves only a utilitarian purpose. The Bauhaus, at this time, was primarily concerned with blending art and craftsmanship. The name, Bauhaus, suggested the medieval ideal of the cathedral architect, with whom all the other arts and crafts of the land were not to be sub- but co-ordinated. The Bauhaus, however, soon became aware that its directives had to be adjusted more to the industrial and mechanical needs of our time. From this very moment on, the Bauhaus was on the right track. It understood the revolution which it had started in the field of applied art. The establishment of the Bauhaus in America coincided with this understanding. The conceptive faculty of America's engineering and utilitarian genius was ready to embrace the new ideas in functional design and their eventual standardization.

The new revolution gave an aesthetic foundation to design once again. The aesthetic discoveries of the Bauhaus were mainly directed toward a vital surface animation by abstract design. This does not require plastic empathy—it is only a surface affair, two dimensional and decorative. It requires, however, deep understanding of textural differentiation and pattern contrast and, furthermore, of rhythm and balance in design—these can be sensed in any medium by a sensitive individual.

The idea of the Bauhaus found further expression in so-called Non-Objective art. Klee and Kandinsky are considered to be the leaders of this group. They must not, however, be considered the initiators of the Bauhaus. They gave impetus to its basic idea because the art of each was considered the highest development in pure two-dimensional, plastic perfection.

We should differentiate between decorative, in a plastic sense, and decorative in a non-plastic sense. The works of these two artists are diametrically opposed to ornamentation and decorative, abstract design. The fact that any great plastic work is also decorative in its two-dimensional completeness does not mean that any design on a flat surface is a plastic creation. The phenomenon of plastic movement determines whether or not a work belongs in the category of the fine arts or in the category of the applied arts. It is the greatest injustice done to Mondrian that people who are plastically blind see only decorative design instead of the plastic perfection which characterizes his work. The whole de Stijl group from which Mondrian's art was derived must

be considered a protest against such blindness. This group aimed toward the purest plastic perfection.

We have spoken of a seemingly dual problem involved in painting. Only a few very great painters in history have understood how to approach or proceed in this seemingly two-fold concept. I emphasize "seemingly" because this double—or to say it more correctly—this multi-problem characterizes the very nature of painting. Painting at its greatest is a synthesis arrived at by mastering its multi-problems. Only painters of the stature of Rembrandt and El Greco have been artist and painter in one, not only because they have understood how to compose with color, but, at the same time, how to express with it the profoundness of man. Throughout his life, Cezanne struggled for a synthesis. Renoir mastered it in a high degree by instinct. Van Gogh and many others have despaired of it. America possesses great potentialities in the search for creative clarification, though she may look back on a generation entirely misunderstood—the tragic generation of the pioneers of Modern Art.

We have explained that quality, a pure, human value, results from the faculty of empathy, the gift of discerning the mystery of each thing through its own intrinsic life. In this life, an intuitive artist discovers the emotive and vital substance which makes a work of art. In the passage of time, the outward message of a work may lose its initial meaning; the communicative power of its emotive and vital substance, however, will stay alive as long as the work is in existence. The life-giving zeal in a work of art is deeply imbedded in its qualitative substance. The spirit in a work is synonymous with its quality. The *Real* in art never dies, because its nature is predominantly spiritual.