

Of Monkeys and Machines

Do You Really Understand Modern Art?

Here's the 'Why' Behind Abstract Painting

By JAMES A. JOHNSTON

"Who the hell wiped their brushes on this rag?" is a time-worn comment that I hear frequently ringing through the Morrill Hall Art Galleries along with such brilliant and knowing remarks as: "I could do that. My five-year-old boy could do that. Who the hell did this, a monkey?" or "Goddam, they must have a machine up here." These comments are art instead of more stuffed elephants and bears. The collection, but by the abstracts.

For a year and a half of my college career in Fine Arts I have been employed as a member of the University Art Gallery staff. In that period I have heard these trite comments literally hundreds of times. Some of them are merely casual comments made between visitors to the art galleries, and some are obviously vindictive remarks intended to be heard by any of the staff members within range of the loudmouths who made them. The latter we shall ignore, as they are probably beyond hope, judging from their usual appearance which gives me the impression that all life means to them is sex, a bottle of beer, and digging ditches eight hours a day. Why they end up in the galleries at all is open to question. I presume that it is because, when they run out of stuffed elephants and bears on the first floor and basement of the museum to look at, they wander up to the second and third floors of the galleries out of curiosity, possibly experiencing acute disappointment at finding nothing more than sloppy old contemporary art instead of more stuffed elephants and bears.

But I digress. During my first weeks in the galleries these taunts used to irritate me, but only because I was involved with the visual arts. I eventually became as hardened as the other members of the staff. One cannot assume an attitude of snobbery because everyone does not share his interests, or look down on anyone because he knows nothing of the technical aspects of this particular interest. No one knows something about everything. This is why Socrates was considered the wisest man by his contemporaries, because he was aware that he really knew very little considering the infinite knowledge there is to be found in the universe. Now, when I hear these comments by the uneducated (I shall use this term to refer to those lacking knowledge of the visual arts), I no longer feel a resentful anger but rather that the person who speaks them is missing, and probably will never experience an integral part of life. It is quite possible, however, that he could not care less. Whether he knows it or not though, art has been an important part of human existence ever since man lived in caves, and its study can be exciting.

Modern art today is esoteric. It is for the few, not for the many, but it could be for everyone, as art has been through centuries, up until the latter part of the nineteenth. Objections made to abstract works by those interested, or uninterested, in art, are made only because they lack knowledge, and therefore do not understand the "why" of modern art. It is not difficult to understand.

Art today, as it has always been, is nothing more than a reflection of the times in which



"Walk in the Puppies," by Theodoros Stamos, from the F. M. Hall Collection, University Art Galleries. (Photo by Dave Hillman)

men have lived. As has been mentioned previously, art has been important since the Stone Age, a reflection of that time. The cave dweller painted crude images of bison and mammoths on the walls of his cave and proceed to throw stone axes and spears at the images in the superstitious belief that this would weaken the living animal and so, aid him in his hunt the next day. Evidence of these rituals has been discovered in the caves of Lascaux in France, inhabited 30,000 years ago. Paintings made 15,000 years ago have been discovered in the cave of Altamira in Spain, and the cave of Font de Gaume in France. The paintings discovered in the pyramid tombs of Egypt constructed around 2700 B.C. also reflected a way of life, as did Roman and Greek art, and the art of the Middle Ages, the Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic eras, in which the emphasis in art was on religious and Biblical themes.

During the Middle Ages very few people were educated, most were illiterate, and what stories they could not read in the Bible, they could see in the stone sculpture and painted murals of the Romanesque basilicas and the Gothic cathedrals. The stone gargoyles, grotesques and monsters that started down at the Medieval man from the high buttresses and cornices of the Gothic structure of Notre Dame de Paris reminded him of the fate that awaited him in hell should he depart from the paths of righteousness. The Renaissance witnessed the rebirth of religious art and a surge of church building and decoration. And so it evolved up to the present.

Contemporary art then is a reflection of the times in which we live—chaotic, turbulent times

with the thunder of possible nuclear annihilation constantly cracking in our ears. I think most of us feel that there might be no tomorrow, but because most of us still have a certain amount of hope, we do not become beatniks, become completely nihilistic, but are prompted only to live at a greater rate of speed since the majority of us still have an inherent desire to accomplish something and a feeling that there is little time in which to do it. But we still want to do it regardless of what the future might be.

This thought is quite apparent in the work of the American "action" painters, the abstract expressionists, Jackson Pollock, for example, with whom everyone should be as familiar with as Pablo Picasso. Pollock rolled out standard six-yard lengths of canvas on the floor of his studio and like a maniac dribbled scrolly, vibrating, splochy lines from the end of a stick or brush dipped in gallon buckets of house paint. He lived at such an accelerated pace that he killed himself about four years ago when his car skidded off a road into a tree as a result of excessive speed.

The uneducated will scoff at Jackson Pollock's work as that of a charlatan, and cannot comprehend why some people would be willing to spend thousands of dollars for an original. The uneducated person is the victim of a traditional concept that the subject of a painting should "look real," that an orange in still life should bear some resemblance to an orange, that a flower should look like a flower, and that a figure study should look human, that an abstractionist is an excuse for not having the ability to draw or paint objectively. Hardly true. Some of Picasso's prints, drawings, and paintings are almost classic in their proportions and beautifully done, but he is renowned for his geometric, most classic in their proportions and beautifully done, but he is renowned for his ge-

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The Daily Nebraskan

MAGAZINE ISSUE

Vol. 74, No. 56 Tuesday, Jan. 17, 1961

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