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THE CARPET PARADIGM

INTEGRAL FLATNESS FROM DECORATIVE TO FINE ART

EDGewise
PREFACE

In September of 1976, the late Richard Martin, then editor-in-chief of *Arts Magazine*, dared to publish what, for a general art magazine, was an extremely long essay on an unashamedly academic theme. This was something of a history-of-ideas inquiry into carpet, textile and related figures for integral flatness in surface design as they emerged out of the early modern design movement to serve the modernist cause. Such figures evoking an essentially crafted surface, uncompromised by illusion, served to advance the modern case for pure form in the sublimated, ‘fine,’ perhaps all but spiritually useless, art of painting.

In the established artworld of the time the basic idea was being charged to a particular ex-Marxist critic, notwithstanding its deep roots in basic production processes and its, one would have thought, advantageously rich developmental history. As a young democratic socialist critic of unrepentant idealist inclination, I would set that remedially right, neither fetishizing nor attacking — maybe not even mentioning! — the great patriarchal name while reminding my brothers and sisters of the Left a lesson: no idealism, no properly dialectical materialism. For as the editorial blurb had it in 1976: “Art has spiritual value, not because it can be used to escape sublunary reality but because in displacing only a little of the world it can implicate the world so generally. Painting is an ornament of life because, as at best in the ‘applied’ or decorative arts themselves, it magnifies (or celebrates) qualities already present in material life and work.”
Despite endless rehearsal, what Clement Greenberg’s doctrine of ‘flatness’ and the integrity of the medium owed even to a broader modernism has never become apparent. Among major predecessors still usually ignored are the patrician, anti-fascist, Spanish cultural philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, and the well known German émigré painter and teacher Hans Hofmann, whose teaching is known to have impressed Greenberg in the late 1930s.

Consider what Ortega had already written in 1924 on Velázquez in light of impressionism: “Painting becomes planimetric, like the canvas on which one paints.” This is from an essay ‘On Point of View in the Arts’ reprinted in 1949 in Partisan Review, for which Greenberg wrote, and also soon after in a collection which made it popular shortly before Greenberg’s Art and Culture: Critical Essays (1961), along with another title to which Greenberg’s title may allude: namely, Ortega’s The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art and Culture (1956).

Hofmann’s text, ‘The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts,’ written in 1947 and collected in 1948, emphasizes suitability of form to medium. Consider, too, in the same collection, ‘Painting and Culture’: “[B]ecause of the difference in the nature of the mediums of expression and in the emphasis induced by the nature of each medium...[t]he key to understanding lies in the appreciation of the limitations, qualities, and possibilities of variation and relation of these presentational elements” (The Search for the Real and Other Essays, ed. S. T. Weeks and B. H. Hayes, Jr., 1948; 1967; the importance of Hofmann is discussed in my C’s Aesthetics: Philosophy in the Painting [Slought Foundation and Bryn Mawr College Visual Studies Center, 2004], ch. i).
I remember well how the present project traces far back in my own experience to as early as the late 1950s. As a teenager already aware of Matisse from expeditions to the Museum of Modern Art, I had bought in an old Fourth Avenue bookshop a coverless copy of Aleksandr Romm’s little Moscow 1937 monograph *Henri Matisse*, translated by “Chen I-Wan” (i.e. Jack Chen). Finding in our house a scrap of Matisse-blue cotton inspired me to improvise, at my father’s workbench, an asymmetric, modernist binding for the marvelously exotic little book. Only much later could I appreciate the sophistication of Romm’s Marxist sense of Matisse’s luxuriousness as hardly something to be puritanically despised — or today, thuggishly dismissed as ‘utopian.’ For example: if, by recourse to such luxury wares as oriental carpets, “Matisse’s formula of ‘tranquility’...transported the spectator...into an abstract self-sufficient world,” even the notoriously tired businessmen of the “progressive...bourgeoisie” might quite like the painter’s “daring experiments” whose sheer “intellectual” challenge was recreational equivalent to “working out the blueprints of a machine or a chess problem.” After all, Matisse himself, the great ‘fine’ artist, had emerged from the design reforms of the previous century: he had not quite given up on the career of a young lawyer when he first “attended the evening classes of the Latour Art School organized for textile workers” — according to Chen.

It is easy enough to accept how in fluorescence a critical notion as telling as the carpet paradigm is effectively non-linear; and how one could never hope to find even all the most significant examples. Even if one
could, each would not lead to the next in a neat web of relays, the density of instances being so great that one might better imagine a thick felt, holding together just in being so densely impacted. For instance, in one of the many books I have collected over the years, with *The Carpet Paradigm* in mind, a great English literary scholar of a century ago, A. C. Bradley, in asserting formalism very early on, imagined the resistance of the “general reader” running like this, as if painting must be meaningless apart from the message-bearing function that is still the only aspect of art that many philosophers consider ‘cognitive’: “You are asking me,” he says, ‘to look at the Dresden Madonna as if it were a Persian rug’” (*Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1909).

As a young man the great musicologist Donald Francis Tovey actually heard Bradley say that, and realized, “This lecture accomplished for me something more than its author’s immediate purpose of emancipating the notion of ‘pure poetry’ from the limitations of a Persian rug.” Tovey proceeded to reflect on how Bach could ever have published nearly half of his keyboard output under the title *Clavierübung* (Clavier Exercise): “The fact is that every technical problem connected with a work of art has its aesthetic result” (‘Musical Form and Matter,’ 1934). (And this is important even if Bach considered the pieces in question, for an aesthetic reason likely pertinent to applied art, something less than full-fledged compositions.)

In retrospect: the completion of the original essay must have been stimulated by the first appearance, in *Harper’s Magazine* in the spring of 1975, of Tom Wolfe’s ‘The Painted Word,’ which irritated me by its
framing of the discourse of modernist flatness as farce for new ‘tired businessmen’ quite happy not to take art intellectually seriously. If anything, the critical situation has grown still worse in the last generation, as art has been bent to serve insider trading, with critique withdrawn into cynically cordial marketing.

A word on the title. The term ‘paradigm’ is much less intellectually fashionable today than it was in 1976, when it can be said to have been itself paradigmatic, especially for its air of natural-scientific inevitability, thanks to Thomas S. Kuhns’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (first version, 1962). Actually, the term ‘model’ was also already in play, but all too often pedantically. I myself had such innate sympathy for the Kuhnsian notion of a gradual crystallization of exceptions to consensus as eventually precipitating categorical revision, in the spirit of Engels’ dictum ‘A change in quantity becomes a change in quality,’ that I recall wondering why it was being celebrated as an original idea. So I do now find my old title dated, yet all the more happily for a tinge of academicism, because this text was really an ‘inaugural dissertation’ into a favorite concern of my own.

Three years after my essay appeared Sir Ernst Gombrich published his 1970 Wrightsman Lectures, The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (1979), as an obvious pendant to his 1956 Mellon Lectures, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (1960). Frankly, I have never been able to sit through long stretches of The Sense of Order. Here Gombrich seems too constrained to the sewing together of a perhaps inevitable theoretical
patchwork, if anything quite oblivious to the production of high art as de-alienating work, especially in highly sublimated abstract painting. I believe that if he supposed he had captured the purport and limits of art between his two poles he was mistaken in the extreme. For anyone who took Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian as artists of the highest possible rank, as I did and do, the nature of art as manifest at least as vitally in early modern as in Old Master art must seem effectively to escape Sir Ernst. Oleg Grabar’s 1989 Mellon lectures, *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), would prove more interesting to engage, but other things, including the rise of ‘pattern and decoration’ painting in the later 1970s as an American movement fanned, if not in some measure fueled, by the present text (and, notably, by writings of Amy Goldin, even in the last weeks of her life), might claim to be taken into account were there opportunity to review developments since 1976 for a major expansion of *The Carpet Paradigm*.

I had begun to expand the text, with a view to the theoretical development promised in the original subtitle, while editing *Artforum*, from 1977 to 1980 (I still have some 800 sheets of notes for that purpose), when the project was radically disrupted by loss of my academic position and subsequent distraction by other writing commitments. Nevertheless, several papers have since developed as offshoots of the 1976 article: on expressionist ‘primitivism’: ‘Raw Art: “Primitive” Authenticity and German Expressionism,’ in *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 4 (Autumn 1982) and collected in my *Modernities: Art-Matters in the Present* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); on Arthur Wesley Dow as
relay of a Gauguinesque postimpressionism in America from the turn of the century onward: ‘Dow’s “Way” to Modernity for Everybody,’ introduction to a reprint of his classic Composition (1899; 1913), (University of California Press, 1997); and on Alois Riegl: ‘The Vital Skin: Riegl, the Maori and Loos,’ for Framing Formalism: Riegl and the History of Art, ed. Richard Woodfield (G + B Arts International, 2001). Other tangential studies are mentioned in the notes.

One new addition can stand for many more. A recent translator of Ernst Bloch’s Spirit of Utopia (1918; 1923) has pointed to Georg Lukács’ comment on contemporary drama having “the undefinable order of a carpet or dance,” so that “to interpret its meaning seems impossible, but it is still less possible to give up trying to interpret it” (Soul and Form, 1910). He suggests this as a source for Bloch’s positing “between chair and statue, perhaps even above the statue,” a third mode of art, so to speak “a higher-order ‘applied art’ in which, instead of a comfortable, as it were stagnant carpet, assembled from moments of stabilization, a purely luxurious carpet for use, a true carpet extends, pointing beyond, a carpet of pure, abstract form” (trans. Anthony A. Nassar, 2000). The thrust of the present study, then, ought to show how Lukács’ figure is postimpressionist-decorative, whereas Bloch’s crosses a definite frontier in allowing that ornamental non-objectivity may attain to a condition of “pure” (Bloch’s word) abstraction.

While very different art practices have come into prominence since 1976, especially on the ‘conceptual’ side, the condition of painting in particular has a way not only of never quite withering away but of engaging new
modalities of art-work, and even of work at large. Today it seems there is more need among a new generation for a sense of the matter of form and material as conditioned by general human experience, including ordinary, everyday work — though now more often than not means work with little or no tangible materiality at somebody else’s monitor, with all the alienation thereunto appertaining.

In the not so brave new world of today, I am exceedingly grateful for the generous invitation of Richard Milazzo to reprint in book form this essay which has become even more inaccessible since the demise of *Arts Magazine*. Thanks must also go to Joy L. Glass for her indefatigable patience with an endless stream of digital difficulties with the text. I also gratefully acknowledge Jacques Soulillou, art critic and philosopher, for undertaking to produce a French translation of the original text which is to be published under the imprint Mamco / Les Presses du réel by the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva.

The original work was dedicated both to Meyer Schapiro on his retirement and to a young novelist and painter, Bjørn R. Rye, who understood and abetted my obsession; so I present it again now in memory of both my late beloved teacher and my late beloved friend.

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