CLEMENT GREENBERG

DETACHED OBSERVATIONS

"DETACHED OBSERVATIONS" (1976) is one of Greenberg's later essays, as yet uncollected. In a sense it's an answer or supplement to Bernard Berenson's "Aesthetics and History". It's a concise and wide ranging overview of some aspects of art history -- covering huge tracts of art throughout history and across cultures. Books can -- and I sincerely hope will -- be generated from its sentences, paragraphs, and sections.

The comparison to Berenson is apt. Greenberg used Berenson's phrase "life enhancing" frequently in conversation about art, and he remarked from time to time on Berenson's observations about late Roman art, specifically that the taste of the audience for that art surpassed the taste of the contemporary artist producers. Needless to say, Greenberg isn't a professional art historian, but like both Berenson and Roger Fry, his judgments are based on vast experience.

- *TF*

Picture-Making

PICTURE-MAKING, one art never at home on countryside; never a folk, peasant, or tribal art. Whenever and wherever pictures have been made on countryside, it's been under urban influence.

Paintings and engravings of hunters, from Paleolithic on, not pictures proper, but two-dimensional images self-contained in a way more sculptural than pictorial. When two or more such images are related on the same surface it's in an ideographic rather than pictorial way. This even in Mesolithic and Neolithic "compositions" that show hunting, fighting, or ceremonial "scenes"; there, flat and schematic images hang apart in space that's somewhere between the two- and three-dimensional. Pictorial space joins and contains and by containing makes everything it shows dis-contain itself and surrender itself to a unity which in turn contains itself.

Picture-making, not just picturing or depicting. More a question of delimiting and unifying a surface. As abstract art has shown, any kind of mark, any kind of inflection of any kind of surface, can serve to make a picture.

I'm not hypostatizing notion of picture or the pictorial (though I am wrenching the word "picture" from its etymological roots). Matter of sheer experience: experience of the pictorial is of its own specific and recognizable kind. Not that there's a hard and fast line between pictorial and non-pictorial; within the medium of the two-dimensional, categories and classifications overlap and merge, just as they do everywhere else in art, or in any given medium of art. Experience only guide here, not definitions or descriptions or anything else in nature of a concept. There's no essence of the pictorial either, only limiting or necessary and enabling or sufficient conditions--as registered by experience.

(Don't want to be understood as implying that pictorial, because it's an exceptional category of aesthetic experience in that it depends on urban-ness, is therefore an inherently superior category in point of aesthetic value. Nothing of the sort. As Croce emphasized once and for all, no category, form, class, or medium of art is inherently, or apodictically, superior in aesthetic value to any other.)

Rub in my argument--if it is an argument--comes from fact that anything on a surface can now be experienced as picture. Eye alone, without the hand, without the intervention of anything more material than eyesight, can provide the limiting and enabling conditions of the pictorial. Habits, "training," previous experience of the beholder make all the difference (in all the arts). All the difference, that is, in the creating of categories of aesthetic experience, but not in the creating of aesthetic value or quality. You can decide to see anything as a picture--just as the camera can make anything visible into a picture--but you

can't decide to see it as a good or as a bad picture. That is, you can control and direct your attention, but you can't control the actual experience you have as a result of the controlling and directing of your attention. (Nor is attention itself always amenable to control; it does get caught, aesthetically as well as otherwise, and when it gets caught aesthetically it gets caught by aesthetic experience in such a way that there's no distinguishing between the act of attention and the experience had as a result of this act. But this is getting off into deep water.)

... Did the making of pictures proper have to wait for the advent of writing, which is another practice that began only in town or city? Did the way in which writing gets organized physically, in lines and then in self-inclosed rectangles, make two-dimensional picturing (and bas-relief too) follow suit? What seems likely is that, just as writing was made more readily intelli-gible by being made orderly in spatial respects, so the connections among images were. It became no longer enough to establish two-dimensional or relieved images in isolation more or less, with the meant relations between them being implied. Now these relations had to be made more explicit, had to declare themselves in a more contained, more specifically limited physical context and frame. Thus one reason the picture replaced the two-dimensional image would be because it communicated more efficiently. There had to be other reasons or factors, but these too can only be speculated about.

... If Christianity is the most urban in origin of all major religions, then it seems appropriate that it should be the one to cultivate the pictorial most. As it certainly has. Pictures--portable pictures and mural pictures--have gone wherever Christianity has as with no other big religion (or even culture). Not even with Tantric Buddhism. Christianity, and Christianity alone, brought wall pictures into Ethiopia. Spasms of iconoclasm have made no difference. Even the strictest of Puritans seem to have construed Old Testament iconoclasm as applying only to three-dimensional likenesses.

Shading-Modeling

USED ONLY IN Greco-Roman and Western pictorial art in a thoroughgoing and integral way. I mean sculptural shading, shading-modeling that goes from light to dark to create an illusion of third-dimensionality, of volume and unevenness of surface. Far Easterners knew how to shade in this way, but did so only gingerly (never applying it to depictions of human beings or animals). That Indian painters during the high Buddhist period (Ajanta) shaded somewhat more freely could be attributed, I suppose, to Greco-Roman influence, as remote as it was by that time. I sense that the Persian miniaturists knew how to shade sculpturally too, though I might be hard put to show real evidence of that.

Paleolithic artists in Southwest Europe and "Bushmen" artists in Africa did use a quasi-Impressionist kind of shading by differences of hue more than by gradations of light and dark. This kept the image or depiction "light"--the way, for that matter, almost all picturing outside Europe has tended to be. Only the Greco-Romans and Westerners seem to have been willing to let a depiction or a picture get "heavy" with the relief effects achieved by thoroughgoing sculptural shading: the stereoptical bulging and receding.

Photography shades with gradations of light and dark, even color photography, where the shading will brown, gray, or blacken local color in much the same way it does in post--medieval West European painting. But photography stays "light" all the same. Not just because of the smallness of the usual photographic print but more importantly, as I think, because of how the shading sticks to the surface, lets itself be flattened by the surface, get imbedded and become one with the surface, instead of resting on and coating it, which is what oil and even tempera do, and fresco, in Western hands, has usually been made to do (though nothing can match oil for real "heaviness"). Curious and yet not so curious: early photography, for technical reasons, met the then current taste in the West for "heaviness"; since then it has met the more modern taste for "lightness," again for technical reasons.

But what about Western watercolors and prints? Don't they stay "light" and yet bulge and give with shading the way oil painting does? Yes and no. But maybe the "no" doesn't matter. Vision, ways of looking and feeling, can overcome almost any circumstances of a medium. Though not necessarily in the interests of aesthetic value. But in this case, yes. I'll say that it's the combination of "heaviness" with lambency that makes for the supreme distinction of Western watercolors, prints, and drawings. Rembrandt, who did a lot in his late drawings and etchings that he couldn't quite match in most of his late figure compositions ....

Greco-Roman and Western "heavy" painting sees more three-dimensionality, more relief, in nature than the eye does. The eye sees more relief, as well as more in the way of depth, than the camera does (given that the latter can't focus with the same freedom and that what it sees it has to see on a flat surface). But it seems to me that the eye still sees more like the camera than like "heavy" painting. "Heavy" painting digs in for the third dimension as the eye doesn't--because it doesn't need to; "heavy" painting has to make an emphatic point of the third dimension; it can't just indicate it; the eye knows it's there and makes do with hints. (The Impressionists realized this, I feel, without saying it aloud.) "Heavy" pictorial art, even in drawings and watercolors, model-shades beyond the point of necessity as it were (and darkens cast shadows too beyond the point of necessity; for that matter it's only "heavy" art, along with photography, that sees cast shadows).

It's arguable that geometric perspective was devised not primarily to expand spatial illusion but to accommodate sculptural illusion; that sculptural, plastic illusion demanded and forced the systematizing of perspective. It may be that the Chinese didn't formalize their perspective geometrically because such sculptural shading as they did use (as in the de-picting of tree trunks and rocks) didn't need to be accommodated and organized by it.

The only possible instance of "heavy" pictorial art that I know of which isn't full-bodiedly illusionist is Byzantine (and Russian icon painting in its wake). And what a curious instance it is. The scheme of Greco-Roman sculptural shading is stood on its head and made to serve effects that largely deny illusion. The gradations of light and dark are rendered as successions of flat strips or bands that do more to affirm the impenetrability of the surface than to ease it. The "heaviness" here, if it is heaviness, seems due mostly to "decorative" loading and a forceful backdrop that remains a backdrop. Byzantine wall art bulges by virtue of radiance, not plasticity, and I'm not sure it really can be accounted as "heavy": light does, after all, stay light. This may not be true of the frescoes (of which I've seen very few) as against the mosaics; in the frescoes the color itself is "heavy," and all the heavier because on a large scale. All the same, I would have to say that the "heaviness" of Western and Greco-Roman pictorial art still seems something quite different, by virtue of the integral presence of sculptural shading, which is what really puts meaning into the word "heavy" as I've used it here.

One more word about photographic illusion. The television tube, especially when confined to black and white, can body forth a remarkably vivid illusion of relief if not of space. It outdoes the printed photograph in this respect. And so does the movie screen. The reasons are obvious: a transparent or reflecting support lends itself better to illusion than an opaque and non-reflecting one. I don't mean to imply that the superior illusionism of TV and movies confers greater artistic value. Once again: mediums or categories of art have nothing inherently superior or inferior about them as far as quality is concerned. This doesn't keep me from saying that there's a sheer aesthetic pleasure to be gotten from sheer illusion that can't be gainsaid. I've gotten such pleasure from old stereopticon views, and I got it from the plastic "renderings" of the human body I saw, watching wrestling matches on black and white TV twenty years ago; these "renderings" rivaled anything I've known of in the way of two-dimensional plastic definition; not only did they "keep the plane," sometimes even the framing of the TV tube worked beautifully. Whether color television can do as well, I can't say--not yet, though I've seen some remarkable pictures in that medium too, but remarkable in a different way, one that has less to do with sculptural illusion and for which I can find only a scant precedent in the Mannerism of Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo. This isn't to suggest a comparison in point of aesthetic value. But I will say that hardly anything in the new wave of photographically realistic painting--except certain pictures by

Richard Estes--does compare in point of quality with some of the momentary pictures I've seen on color TV.

Also: abstract art has come out better, so far, in moving pictures than in still and printed photography. I don't think there's a necessary reason for this: working in an abstract vein on light-sensitive surfaces in the one case shouldn't meet more difficulties, aesthetically, than in the other. The only explanation I can offer is that most of those few artists (I can think of Len Lye, Judson Belson, Norman MacLaren) who've tried their hands at abstract movies have been better *painters* than the many who've attempted abstract still photography. You have to be a good painter to make good abstract art, in whatever medium; it's not enough to be a good photographer. Not that a good photographer can't make as good art as a good painter, but two really different submediums are involved, though they both eventuate in pictures. Good photography has meant, so far, good *straight* photography, photography that deals with Nature transparently more or less, exploiting capacities unique to the camera. A different gift and a different kind of inspiration are required from those of the painter. It's not enough here, conversely, to be a good painter. Good painters have been mediocre photographers, and good photographers have been mediocre painters or not painters at all. It remains, anyhow, that the best printed photographs I've seen are straight photographs, and that some of the artists who made them, when they attempted anything like abstraction, failed lamentably (Stieglitz with his cloudscapes, Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, to name only names).

Decoration

CASE COULD BE made for the Persians as best of all decorators. Because consistently better colorists: Achaemenid brick-tile reliefs (the example in the Louvre), ceramics of the first Islamic centuries, miniature paintings (which aren't decoration), 16th-18th century rugs (which become less and less decorative and more and more pictorial as our eyes get widened by modern art). Persian color can generate sufficient rightness of design and shape. Though it has to be allowed that the pottery shapes of the Persians don't always compete, purely as shapes, with those of the Chinese and Japanese. Nor do the Persians seem equally interested in ceramic textures. But it remains, for me, that there's nothing to match Persian color....

Theodor Hetzer (a great German art historian-critic whose writings were introduced to me by Kenworth Moffett) said that decoration (*Ornament*) "died only in the 19th century." But maybe it really fell dead only in the 20th. Lincoln Center inside and sometimes outside; the interiors of the recent public and quasi-public buildings in which decoration has been attempted. Art Nouveau and Art Deco were better, but still not good enough to hang on, nor were the *tours de force* of Louis Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright, as good as they were.

So why can we in the West no longer decorate--that is, cover unfree surfaces--pleasingly? Why does even good jewelry design nowadays have the character of a *tour de force* when it's not borrowing some historical style?

It's easier to begin to understand why *Ornament* has died by now in all the other urban cultures, those of the Far and other Easts; almost all their traditional visual arts have died too: died that is, in point of quality. (Of natural causes as it were; most certainly not because of the intrusion of the West.) But all the other traditional visual arts in the West have not died, not yet. Indeed I think that a good part of the reason for the death of decoration lies precisely in the continuing vitality of Western painting, sculpture, and architecture (for all that's become "problematical" in them).

The vitality seems connected with Western rationalizing: that insistence on making means accountable to their ends which has come to mark our civilization as it has no other. Things are to be fined down, ideally, to their ultimate uses (whatever these uses may be). The ultimate use of art is construed as being to provide the experience of aesthetic value, therefore art is to be stripped down towards this end. Hence Modernist "functional-ism," "essential-ism" it could be called, the urge to "purify" the medium, any medium. "Purity" being construed as the most efficacious, efficient, economical employment of the medium for the purposes of aesthetic value.

"Purity" of and in art--any art, including music and dance--is an illusory notion, of course. It may be remotely conceivable or imaginable, but it can't be realized because it can't be recognized any more than a "pure" human being or a "pure" (or, for that matter, gratuitous) act can be. All the same, for Western art in its Modernist phase "purity" has been a useful idea and ideal, with a kind of logic to it that has worked, and still works, to generate aesthetic value and maintain aesthetic standards as nothing else in our specializing culture has over the last hundred-odd years.

But this logic has also worked to exclude the decorative--the decorative insofar as it functions solely as decoration. It's as though aesthetic value, quality, could be preserved only by concentrating on "absolute" or "autonomous" art: thus on visual art--including even architecture--that held and moved and stirred the beholder as sheer decoration could not. Decoration is asked to be "merely" pleasing, "merely" embellishing, and the "functional" logic of Modernism leaves no room, apparently, for such "mereness." This is part of the pity of Modernism, one of the sacrifices it enjoins....

What also helps explain the death of *Ornament* is the fading of that *horror vacui* which used to belong to Western sensibility in what seems a special way, a way that has to do with that "heavy" pictorial art of the West which I've already mentioned. (The Greeks might have been somewhat less affected by *horror vacui*, but not the Romans, who appear to have felt it in a decided way

too.) Modernist visual art has tended on the whole towards lightness and openness. It tolerates increasingly, nay it demands increasingly, empty spaces and blank surfaces. That's been its long-term if not consistent tendency. Economy: "less is more." Orientalization? Not exactly. Islam, India, China have their own kinds of *horror vacui*, even if these haven't been as unrelenting as those of the West and the Greco-Romans. The Japanese have, on the evidence, "suffered" from *horror vacui* least (and their culture is the only one that can match the West's when it comes to rationalizing); it's thus no accident--as Bolshevik Marxists used to say--that Japanese art once had such an encouraging influence on Modernist painting, architec-ture, and poetry: more than that of any other exotic tradition.

But as I've indicated, Modernism hasn't been consistent in its overcoming of *horror vacui*. Many of its heroes went on feeling it and acting on it: Picasso, Proust, Joyce, Pollock, Stravinsky; others felt it but resisted it, or resisted it off and on: Valéry, David Smith, Bonnard, Mallarmé, Stefan George. But I don't want to make too much of *horror vacui*; it's too hard to say where it begins and where it ends....

Decoration and the decorative are, into the bargain, no longer free to be themselves. That's another factor in the decline of *Ornament.* What used to belong exclusively to visual decoration-- the patterned and the repetitive and the blank flatness which relieved them--has been taken over by painting and even sculp-ture. By intruding on and appropriating the means of decoration painting and sculpture have excluded decoration itself.

Picture-making now exploits devices of *Ornament* as it did not before. Decoration can break the plane with abrupt contrasts of light and dark and then restore it simply by repeating these contrasts at regular enough intervals. This used to be the anti-thesis of the pictorial; now it's part and parcel of it. Easel paint-ing began to assimilate the "mechanical" repetitiveness of the decorative with the Analytical Cubism of Braque and Picasso and the 1911-14 Cubism of Leger. These masters did far more than Matisse to take over the "essentially" decorative for pictor-ial art. (Matisse was held to be decorative only because he was flat and incorporated decoration as such in his pictures, but pictorial art in places outside the West, and in the West before the Renaissance, was as flat by and large as Matisse usually was, and abounded in *representations* of decorated objects.) It was left, however, to Tobey and Pollock to make the assimilation of the decorative complete: their all-overness. Now all-overness has become academic and too often is allowed to become a *patterned* all-overness, which it never was in Tobey's or Pollock's hands. Nor in David Smith's; in certain works of the 1940s he embraced the mechanically repetitive in a way that was triumphant because it was matter of fact--which was the same way in which he embraced the look of the two-dimensional. Since Smith, abstract sculpture has often made too much of a point of all-overness and repetition, as if the mere assertion of these were enough, the mere presentation.

Are there equivalents in the other arts of this absorption of the decorative? That is, are there equivalents of the decorative in literature, music, and dance, and have these too been wrenched away from their function? Is there decoration or decorativeness in the *Aeneid* or in Lyly's *Euphues* or in a cadenza? What an invitation here to the worst kind of interpretive ingenuity. And who's to say when elaboration or incrustation or flourishes or figures of speech become decorative instead of substantive in any of these non-visual arts?

Quality

HETZER AGAIN WRITING about Goya: "The spread between good and bad in art was never so great as it became in the 19th century.'' That spread may have become even greater since the advent of abstract art. The badness of abstract painting and sculpture--I mean the badness they can attain, not the badness inherent to abstraction, far from it--doesn't seem to have any precedent, not even in unschooled art, not even in 19th-century *Salon* art (uniquely abysmal as some of that was, in part precisely because it was schooled or half-schooled).

But the badness of most of the far-out or "novelty" art that has come up since the 1960s, in the wake of Abstract Expres-sionism, is even more extreme. This is the real novelty in "novelty" art. The spread between good and bad in seriously taken art is so much greater than Hetzer, thirty or forty years ago, could have imagined.

It's not that art in general has gone to hell. If that were so the spread between good and bad wouldn't be so newly enormous: an Andre wouldn't look quite so bad, for the moment, without the presence of a Caro, a Brice Marden quite so feeble without the proximity of an Olitski. But good Lord, what am I talking about? Andre and Marden, in their turn, make the likes of a Samaras, a Richard Tuttle, a Nauman, a Beuys and a Buren look as bad as they ever will. There's a spread inside the spread between good and bad. Yet this ultimate spread between the best and the so much less than good remains. Good, superior, excelling art continues to be made in this time, art that measures itself against the best of the past.

Art, like the rest of reality, has a way of upsetting, turning on expectations. So now the best new art comes in unclamorously, conservatively as it were, precisely because it's expected to come in otherwise. But it still comes in unacceptedly and relatively unnoticed, as it has ever since the mid-19th century and maybe before. No, Western art isn't decadent yet. It's only that its public--the current public for current art--is. That public started to be "decadent" decades before any one noticed. It's possible to say that the bourgeoisie have offered the worst public for art ever, once they became--as they did in Western

Europe after the 1830s--a public and the public. (The poor bourgeoisie: I'm tired of the name and of the abuse it received.)

Resurrections

REAPPRECIATION OF GEROME, Meissonier, Alma Tadema, Landseer, Bierstadt, Bouguereau, *et al*. as revisions of taste? Of course not. Only journalists view it that way. Years ago enough people saw that when these artists were good--which was almost always in small, informal pictures or else in early ones (Bouguereau)--they were really good. But it's no use pretending that even at their very best they were on the same *level* as a Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir. And anyhow there were several dozen lesser known contemporaries who were better day in and day out: Bonvin, Ribot, Leibl, Trübner, Stobbaerts, Lépine, Menzel, Rayski, and others in the Lowlands, Germany, France, Britain, Austria, Russia, Eastern Europe. Painting reached a high general level of "culture" in the 19th century.

But to repeat--and not repeat: it still took Manet and the Impressionists to save Western painting, to keep it going on *the* high level, the level higher than, say, that of Hokusai and Hiroshige in Japan, which was the last level of any height that I'm aware of in exotic art.

*-- Published originally in **Arts Magazine**, Dec. 1976*