



Painting, an expression of the desire for clarity  
by Judith Nesbit Marchwick

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Of  
MASTER OF APPLIED ART  
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**Abstract:**

It is my belief that the creative act is an expression of man's desire for self-knowledge and clarity. In an attempt to investigate the nature of clarity, however, the problem of definition arises. The statements I make are based on my own understanding of certain terms, which I will attempt to define, and are not intended to represent universal truths.

This thesis reflects responses' and conclusions that I, as an artist and an individual, hold at this time and this place. Since my own endeavors have involved me in the area of painting, I have formed my thesis around that medium in order to express myself more clearly; the creative act, however, is performed in many kindred areas, and the medium is important only as the vehicle of the artist.

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PAINTING: AN EXPRESSION OF THE DESIRE FOR CLARITY

by

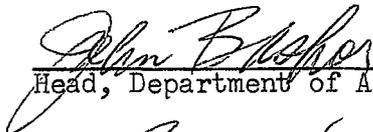
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## ABSTRACT

It is my belief that the creative act is an expression of man's desire for self-knowledge and clarity. In an attempt to investigate the nature of clarity, however, the problem of definition arises. The statements I make are based on my own understanding of certain terms, which I will attempt to define, and are not intended to represent universal truths.

This thesis reflects responses and conclusions that I, as an artist and an individual, hold at this time and this place. Since my own endeavors have involved me in the area of painting, I have formed my thesis around that medium in order to express myself more clearly; the creative act, however, is performed in many kindred areas, and the medium is important only as the vehicle of the artist.

## INTRODUCTION

Unity is, as the word implies, a oneness. It is an harmonious working of all parts, but more than that it is the dependence of one element upon another to produce this "oneness." To translate this idea into the area of painting, we may consider that a painted surface has unity not just if the visual elements go together, but that they are all necessary to one and another. It is impossible to imagine, for example, one of Franz Kline's paintings without just those lines and dynamic thrusts.

The word "clarity" presents a multitude of problems, as there are no satisfactory dictionary definitions. One may find "freedom from obstruction or hindrance," or "lack of uncertainty." To be sure, clarity has to do with a lack of visual hindrance, but the idea of clarity is a positive thing, and it is disturbing to hear it defined as a "lack of" this or as "freedom from" that, which seems to define the word in terms

of its negation.

If the painter achieves clarity in his canvas, his senses tell him he has made a statement -- complete, personal, and positive. It is the affirmative nature of this response that most closely resembles the idea of clarity.

Man has a desire for unity and clarity. As confusion is an unhappy state of mind for man, so is it an unhappy state on a canvas. There are those for whom the statement of chaos is an end, but if one sees confusion as a comment on his environment or even his existence, then it is a positive perception for this individual. His very negation of apparent order has clarity for him. The very fact of his translation indicates the artist's attempt to clarify something in his own mind, and the creative act, that interaction between artist and canvas, is the process by which he does so.

The direction of a canvas is irrevocably tied up with the

artist's own responses. The artist responds to what he sees or feels; he projects this response on canvas. He must then respond to his own response, so to speak, as it appears on a canvas. For example, the artist may perceive a landscape in such a way that he has projected an abstract equivalent of this landscape, but from that point on his concern is with the surface itself; he pushes the forms and colors, patterns and values back and forth, acting with an intuitive sense of placement which is in itself a response to that expression of himself that he has translated onto a canvas.

This "intuitive placement" is in fact the artist's search for clarity. Obviously he has something to say or he would not be painting. His problem is to achieve a statement of total clarity. If the surface is complete and clear, the eye and the intuition will tell him so. If not, there will always exist that uneasiness which accompanies a lack of certainty.

Such a discomfort is not present if a painting has clarity.

At this point I am speaking of the artist and his sensitivities and responses to his own work. The uninvolved viewer will experience something totally different from the artist, perhaps even a definite displeasure. Whether one likes or dislikes a painting, however, has nothing to do with its having or lacking clarity. One might even say that if a painting lacks clarity, there is nothing there to like or dislike, as it is nonexistent in terms of a whole. If one accepts a work as complete in his own mind, then for this person the work has clarity. It is far more difficult, however, to express something with clarity than to accept as clear something another has produced. This is understandable, since the artist has an involvement that the viewer cannot share.

When one's eyes are confronted with an image or images,

a response results, a response being a reaction to something that touches the senses. Presume that a person looks at a painting; his eye may be pleased or offended, or he may be disinterested in what he sees. Any of these reactions, even disinterest, is a positive response, in the sense that the viewer is reacting after a split-second acceptance that what is before him is complete. If the eye or intuition rejects the image as lacking or incomplete, it cannot accept it as a finished statement and thereby make a decision. If the eye is puzzled as to the conviction of a statement, the eye and intuition are therefore confused; in this event it may be said that the painting lacks clarity, and since it is the nature of man to insist on order, the painting is either unfinished or unsuccessful. Visual response, then, is an indication of unity - or lack of it.

Whether or not one responds favorably to Jackson Pollock,

for example, there is no question that the viewer is responding to a completed statement. Pollock's paintings convey a tremendous amount of tension, perhaps, but never disorder. They are as complete and controlled as a Rembrandt or a Velasquez. His creation of controlled yet frenzied movement is an enormous accomplishment. The drips and spatters of color are just that, but drips and spatters placed in exactly the desired location. His eye, his intuition, told him when the canvas was complete and clear. It is this response to the finality of a surface that makes the artist stop. He goes no further because he cannot. He may have a new statement to make, but he will start a new canvas.

If we could somehow know ahead of time what an artist was trying to do or say, we would have a standard, for that artist anyway, by which to decide whether or not he was successful in that particular problem. This, however, is rarely the case,

and even if a painting were an unsuccessful solution to a given problem, it would not necessarily follow that the painting was without value. It remains an expression of the artist; an expression of himself at a given time, a given place, and under given circumstances.

Though it is tempting to take the safe course and refrain from making statements which cannot be ultimately resolved and perfectly defined, I feel that I must insist that a work of art, while it may not be judged fairly in terms of "good" or "bad," must contain certain elements without which its validity is open to question. Otherwise, one could assume that any scribble on any surface could be submitted as a work of art, and this premise I find unacceptable. Clarity and conviction must be present. The artist gives to his work, even as he takes from it. I do not feel that it is possible to create a work of art without this interaction. Mr. E. P. Richardson

expresses it well: "Good painting...like good art of any kind, rises from very deep sources in the human soul, deeper than words can penetrate; and it speaks to the wordless depths of others."<sup>1</sup>

Does the artist, then, paint for himself or for others? The artist must satisfy his own need for clarity. In this sense he paints for himself, though in a larger sense this desire for clarity springs from the need to communicate and be understood; thus he appeals to the intuition, the "wordless depths of others."

As I look at a painting, it is my intuitive response that matters. When an artist has touched my soul through clarity in expressing his own, I experience an insight I cannot share verbally. Nicholas de Stael and Andrew Wyeth, among others,

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<sup>1</sup>E. P. Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," Atlantic Monthly, vol. 213, June 1964, p. 71.

have touched me in this manner. I cite these two artists because they are painters who on the surface have little in common, yet there are many similarities, though each resolves his problem in ways unique to his own intuition, and the clarity they achieve appeals to mine in turn.

My own sense of clarity, then, is not dependent on bright colors, sharply defined forms, a mood, or any other device. If it were possible to evoke a desired response solely by technical means, one could establish a formula for painting, and this would of course eliminate any of the communicative possibilities and destroy the very meaning of the creative act.

The more one increases his awareness of nature, of man, and of himself, the more he is aware of obstacles, and it is a further characteristic of man to try and surmount them. The more the artist is faced with complexity, the greater becomes his problem of maintaining order in his search for solutions,

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for clarity, and for self-knowledge.

THE PAINTINGS



fig. 1

LANDSCAPE WITH RED HILLS

acrylic and collage; 22 x 30



fig. 2

LANDSCAPE

oil; 21 x 28









































