

## **‘Clement Greenberg: Modernist Painting’**

In his essay “On Modernist Painting”, Clement Greenberg discusses the importance of painting posing less emphasis on social and historical evidences in art history than to the aesthetics involved in a work of art. His theory strives to traditionalize art to the conventional ideas of painting through discussing works of artists such as Pollock, De Kooning, and Hans Hoffmann, all of whom he believed were key individuals in the rise of Modernist Art in America. Thus these artists, whom were classed by Greenberg as “Abstract Expressionists”, were emphasized when discussing the importance of the overall “flatness” of the picture plane in painting. “Flatness” which had been perceived by Old Masters to be a tedious conundrum in painting, unable to create the three-dimensional clarity in works of art, was now seen as quintessential to introducing a method of criticism that transports the mere decorative flatness in painting to a ‘high art.’ Greenberg’s theory constitutes issues from various angles such as the socio-economic perspective, the cultural perspective in which it arose, and its concern with the aesthetic means of looking at a work of art. To value the simplicity and clarity of this essay, I will analyze his essay from the point of aesthetics integrated within his idea of the art historical canon.

Greenberg’s constitution of a canon entailed a focus on self-criticism (both the experimental and the practical) without theorization, and believed that this was the fundamental key to perceiving art and modernism. He states, <sup>1</sup>“The tasks of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.” He valued practical experimentation in art and stressed the essential characteristics of modernist painting to be a form of self-expression. Greenberg strongly believed that there were three major aspects to painting that made it unique to all other art forms. These were: color, shape and flatness- all which can be seen as positive and negative aspects in modernist painting when viewed objectively. His critical overview of these elements in modernist painting

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote taken directly from Clement Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting’, first published in *Forum Lecture*, Washington, DC, 1960, then reprinted in *Art & Literature*, Lugano, no.4, Spring 1965 pp. 193-201

led him to believe that each tradition of art inherits the problems that arise within the materials in art. Modernity in its consideration with the “present” being a historical notion of “time” like the “past” makes it historically specific, and thus constructs a historical canon of the interest of modernity. This idea is posed specifically in his essay as he quotes, <sup>2</sup>“Modernism includes more than just art and literature. By now it includes almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture. It happens also, to be very much of a historical novelty.” Therefore, through connecting his theory of modernist painting to the history of painting within the past hundred years (in which his theory was constructed), he creates the notion that the discovery of artistic taste depends on a response to the self-critical tendency of painting in its aesthetic simplicity.

Greenberg’s composure of the canon was viewed by other art historians, who surfaced as a result of his theory, as being patriarchal and patronizing to the viewing of artworks. Greenberg being closely associated with the institutionalization of art, focused on the explicitness of works exhibited, and attempted to create a situation in which art was traditionalized and viewed as objects of aesthetic material. <sup>3</sup>“Each art had to determine through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself.”, is an opinion by Greenberg that indeed presents artworks in a spectrum of exclusivity, an unquestioned idea in his mind to narrow the “area of competence” when considering a work of art.

His absorbed interest in works of art by Jackson Pollock signifies his interest to support Abstract expressionism in America as advanced art, and to view these works as pictorial surfaces focusing on flatness and other aesthetic qualities such as color and line. Views such as, <sup>4</sup> “One sees a Modernist painting as a picture first” and “Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else” are both statements taken directly from his essay that support his views of the pictorial plane as being considered an object of aesthetics and that a Modernist painting is to be viewed merely for its visual

---

<sup>2</sup> Quote taken directly from Clement Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting’, first published in *Forum Lecture*, Washington, DC, 1960, then reprinted in *Art & Literature*, Lugano, no.4, Spring 1965 pp. 193-201.

<sup>3</sup> Same as above

<sup>4</sup> Same as above

tendencies on the contrary to the symbolism or conceptual ideas underlined within the work.

His rejection of pop art and performance art is evidenced through his belief that Modernism had provided a critical commentary on experience. It was this traditionalization of art which perhaps lead to the rise of anti-Greenberg theorists such as Rosalind Krauss, who refuted Greenberg's theory of Modernism, criticizing its inability to address <sup>5</sup>“the larger Modernist self-critical sensibility”, and believed that Greenberg's theory lacked in credibility in consideration of art from the conceptual angle. She mentions in her essay “A View of Modernism”, artists such as Manet, Cezanne and Picasso in the historical context of the artists themselves as she writes, <sup>6</sup>“Within each room the individual artist explored, to the limits of his experience and his formal intelligence, the separate constituents of his medium. The effect of his pictorial act was to open simultaneously the door to the next space and close out access to the one behind him.” This brings to question the idea that a work of art is influenced by the artist's biography and the historical context in which the work rises. It presents the potential idea that the notion of artistic Avant-Gardism is historically specific and that art is not necessarily context bound. For example, Greenberg would view a work of art by Pollock as an abstract painting, commenting on its use of color and movement, yet would not touch on the issues of symbolism behind the work or its connotations. However, Pollock's powerful dribbles of paint could be viewed as a symbolism of machismo and masculinity, a signification of power and zest as he moves across the canvas creating his piece. Many art critics view his work as a performance, placing value on the work in progress as well as the finished product itself. <sup>7</sup>Hans Namuth, photographed Pollock in working, and presented the photographs as elements of performance art.

Thus, Greenberg's theory constitutes the idea that Modernism was a way to redefine parameters in artistic practice in which his critical model of the constitution of prehistory

---

<sup>5</sup> Quote taken from Rosalind Krauss' essay, 'A View of Modernism', published in *Artforum*, New York, September 1972, pp. 48-51 (in which she refutes the idea of Greenbergian Modernism).

<sup>6</sup> Same as above

<sup>7</sup> Early in October 1950, Namuth took over 500 photographs of Pollock working in his studio.

presents a justification of a canon, declaring something as a bigger movement that already exists. The artist reassesses the repertoire of painting in which formality becomes an abstract concern, and as represented in the notion that Modern art, like philosophy, explored the conditions under which we experience and understand the world. Modernist painting does not simply provide information about itself- in the manner of an illustratively accurate depiction of the world. It is no longer linked with the creation of an immaculate image in representing history, as in the autonomy of art, formality becomes an abstract concern.

In traditionalizing art, Greenberg emphasized the freedom of the artist to pursue art forms in its 'purity' without necessarily dwelling on conceptual based ideas. He believed this to be a way of cognitively projecting art, and that Flatness was intentional in Modernist painting, posing an allegorical mode of history. He believed that formal factors in art (such as the emphasis on aesthetics as the purest form of viewing art), was imperative in representing a sense of crisis in culture, which he considered to have stripped traditional art of its original qualities. Therefore the presentation of his theory was to adapt to the ever changing Kitsch culture, which he believed was a means of mass culture, production, and degraded copies of material. This mode of thought was to represent the response of the artist to culture, as the protection from reproduction and inwardness within the Kitsch culture.

The exclusivity of art is that it is non-reproducible and that <sup>8</sup>“the making of pictures as against images in the flat, means the deliberate choice and creation of limits” thereby the deliberateness and limitations is what makes pictorial art unique, that the canon is a framework that is a limitation in itself. Hence Greenberg draws a distinct line between Sculpture and painting, as sculpture being volumetric and flatness being uniquely exclusive to painting which defined itself under Modernism. <sup>9</sup>“Flatness and two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art” and the Modernists were not interested in created an immaculate three-dimensional illusion

---

<sup>8</sup> Again, quote taken directly from Greenberg's essay, 'Modernist Painting'

<sup>9</sup> Same as above.

within the picture plane. Also, it is important to note that Modernist painting is not concerned with the representation of recognizable objects which substitutes Greenberg's high regard for artists such as Pollock and De Kooning whom he considered to be the leading figures in American Abstract Expressionism.

Greenberg presented the notion that Abstract expressionism in the 1950s and 60s arose as a response to European abstract art such as Cubism, yet the best avant-garde artists in his opinion were arising in America as opposed to those already existent Europe. His support of the hype of Abstract expressionist artists in America could be viewed as patriarchal and a cultural propaganda of his time, creating somewhat a problem of bias in his theory as works by European artists, which in many cases seem to be overlooked throughout his theory. It is almost as if he constitutes his theory merely on the work of selected American artists, presenting an idea only workable when these artists are considered. There is very little mention of European Abstract artists such as Picasso and Cezanne, which gives critics such as Krauss basis for refutation. Despite his theory posing a great influence on the art historical canon, the validity of his theory is questionable, as it is a narrowed down mode of classification and viewing which does not necessarily concern all works of Modernist Painting created within that historical time period, as well as striving to achieve the impossibility of considering a work of art merely for its aesthetic contents.