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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

The window is closed

Engaging with early to mid-twentieth-century painting

by Margaret Wilson

A painting in our European civilisation means far more than just a picture. It...function(s) in a framework...already very old...Many modern works would not be possible without this background.¹

It seems...that people are looking to art for answers...rather than to religion.²

The more horrible the world is, the more abstract will art become.³

Summary

This paper takes up the story of Western art from the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ It explores the move from realism and representation towards abstraction, the cultural influences on this move, and the purposes which this new art may pursue. It traces the development of painting in the first half of the twentieth century through ten representative works of art. By learning how to read these images, Christians may be personally enriched and challenged, gain a deeper insight into fundamental cultural influences on contemporary society and also be better placed to communicate with those who do not share their faith.

Opening up the way to twentieth-century art

The purposes of art are as varied as periods of time and culture. Cave painters' purpose was magical;⁵ medieval artists transmitted a visual theology and for three centuries prior to the twentieth century, painters were mastering the painting of the visible world, a way of suggesting three-dimensional bodies placed in space. This art was less realistic than it appeared as past great artists were aware, involving simplifying, rearranging, even abstracting. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, many artists thought realism an outdated idea. For them the window upon the world was closed. In 1890 the painter Maurice Denis observed, 'Remember: a picture before being a battle-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order.' Representation is merely one of several purposes of art: many artists believed it exhausted. It was not just the impossibility of 'painting what you see': they disliked the *illusion* of reality. They realised intuitively that the communicative, emotive power of shapes and colours suggest that humans share a submerged 'language', primitive and poetic, more powerful than representation.

Any idea that art is representation and nothing more is deeply problematic. Art, being a visual medium involving abstract structural and aesthetic qualities such as colour, design, distortion and symbolism, is always about something else besides representation. Even realistic art itself can only be 'read' when the viewer learns certain simple forms or schemata.⁶ Winston Churchill, who painted in watercolours, called it 'decoding cryptograms on canvas'. But there are alternative styles so it is essential to understand the conventions painters are adopting. An abstract or non-figurative painting is a different style with different rules. It should not be viewed as bad representational art and so rejected as incomprehensible, degenerate, or absurd;

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1 H. R. Rookmaaker, *The Complete Works*, vol. 5, ed. M. Hengelaar-Rookmaaker, Piquant, 2002.

2 Podcast, Arts Programme, Radio 4, 19.08.07.

3 Paul Klee.

4 This paper is closely linked to its prequel, 'A window upon the world: engaging with painting' (*Cambridge Papers*, vol. 11 no. 3, 2002) and assumes the key biblical principles relevant to art, its purposes, and characteristics of the paintings summarised there. A limited number of hard copies are available from the Jubilee Centre, or the paper can be accessed online at www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers. Further images are also available in *The 20th Century Art Book*, Phaidon, 1999.

5 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Phaidon, 2002, p.109.

6 *Ibid.* chs. I, V, XI.

rather, when properly understood, such art can be fascinating and intellectually challenging.

Here the literary genres of Scripture provide us with an analogy. *Narrative* approximates to representational art, straightforwardly yet selectively describing what happened. Similarly, no artist depicts an exact copy of the natural world showing every blade of grass or leaf. But Scripture also contains *figurative* language,⁷ especially in poetry and the prophetic literature, frequently with no coherent train of thought, and employing modes like symbolism, exaggeration,⁸ picture-language⁹ and metaphor.¹⁰ *Apocalyptic* literature exhibits a powerful mixture of colour and symbolism – of dreadful beasts and the victorious Christ on a white charger.¹¹ These all correspond to visual features found in much non-naturalistic, twentieth-century art. Given this diversity it is also valid symbolically to portray the wonderful universe's abstract qualities such as order, structure, light, beauty. As Hans Rookmaaker reminds us, 'Let's be careful not to lay down new rules. There are no biblical laws that art must be realistic or symbolic, for example.'¹²

Guido Ballo's illuminating approach divided viewers into the Ordinary Eye, the Categorical Eye and the Critical Eye.¹³ The first is simply unaware that different styles of painting function according to different rules. The second asserts there is one correct viewpoint for the art of all periods, measuring everything against this single criterion. The Critical Eye however, understands, responds to and evaluates the artwork in relation to the ideas of the artist's time. Viewers can develop this ability and wider angle of vision, but preconceptions may need unlearning first and the background to the work must be explored.

One main aim of this paper is to enable readers to begin developing a Critical Eye. By acquiring such a key to looking at art, Christians can gain fresh insight into our culture, and so better 'understand the times'.¹⁴ Paradoxically, while twentieth-century art closed the window on *representing* the world, it opened one onto both its own soul and that of its age.

Cultural influences on twentieth-century art

The first 20 years of the century saw extraordinary developments in many fields: an intensely creative period (sometimes destructively so) with long-held ideas and values questioned throughout the West, in the arts – music, poetry, literature, painting – but also in philosophy, politics, ethics and science. Belief in absolute values was lost and the world was perceived as random, fluid, chaotic: 'everything is relative'. There was a desire to discover artistic structure in increasing chaos. In Britain, the Bloomsbury Group of artists and writers were the trendsetters, with a non-representational theory of self-expression in art influenced by Lytton Strachey's overt aim of a lifestyle undermining moral standards. For Virginia Woolf, writing after the London Post-Impressionist exhibition (1910), 'human nature changed...human relations shifted...(leading to) a change in religion, politics and literature.'¹⁵ Within this cultural maelstrom we can identify four key factors influencing the move towards abstraction.

Loss of a Judeo-Christian worldview

A powerful current of naturalistic philosophy in nineteenth-century Western thought eclipsed the Christian worldview. It left human beings solitary in the world, alienated from God, fellow humans, self and nature. This erosion of faith led to a spiritual crisis in culture and art, arising from the loss of a shared religious foundation. Many artists adopted alternative religions, occultism and spiritist cults, particularly theosophy, or sought a new concept of 'spirituality', a yearning for mysticism. Still others turned to pagan myths and legends, as uncovering 'eternal truths' about humankind, obscured by civilisation. Art therefore no longer arose in a theistic context, as the prophetic Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer demonstrated, by exposing the existentialism and nihilism of the age.¹⁶ In one sense, non-representational art grew out of a profound sense of an abyss, an attempt to bridge the gulf between the isolated self and the world, a barely-felt longing for what was lost.

Cataclysmic thinking

Abstraction in art and themes of death and decay can be linked to deep anxieties of the time. The years around 1900 were characterised by a widespread premonition that a society in decline was heading for disaster, a cataclysmic war or the end of the world; fraught with fear, melancholia, angst, preoccupation with sickness and dying – leading some artists to near-insanity. Many works were signs of cultural crisis. These years of great restlessness and political tension in Europe eventually came to a head in the Russian Revolution and the Great War, causing cynicism, pessimism and despair: the resultant Dada spirit maintained that, being decadent, society and art must be destroyed.¹⁷ Fierce trench warfare also had a major visual impact on artists who fought; only the sky above and mud below were discernible, all usual landmarks being obliterated. Many artists refused to label the result 'abstract' but rather, 'an alternative form of realism'.

Interest in the unconscious

Following Freud's and Jung's theories of the unconscious, which illuminated the structure of the human mind, some artists rejected a realistic art with its use of conscious schemata to look inside themselves. Just as writers used 'stream of consciousness' techniques, this new art after Cezanne employed an 'unfocused mind' and deeply unconscious processes,¹⁸ a 'creative scanning' producing less realistic, more abstract art. Artists sought the 'figural equivalents' of sight, the simplified elements enabling us to identify e.g. a face as a face.¹⁹ Once this kind of painting (often as abstract as music) is tuned into, it is graspable as an indivisible whole, more powerful than realistic art. The external artwork serves to facilitate the sharing of an idea but the real work goes on in the artist's and viewer's minds.²⁰

Scientific revolution

Einstein's theory of relativity depicted a universe no longer capable of being understood directly through the senses. Cubism reflected the new scientific views of reality. One of Picasso's 'gang' was interested in advanced mathematics and Picasso saw the similarities – there is no true time, so no one true perspective in space; thus connecting the temporal to pictorial space. By reducing everything to geometrical forms, he was seeking to

7 See L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit and T. Longman III (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, IVP, 1998.

8 Gen. 37: Joseph's dreams. John 12:19: 'the whole world'.

9 C. Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, Introduction, Stride, 1988.

10 Ps. 23:1: The LORD is the Shepherd.

11 Zech. 1:8; Dan. 7; Rev. 19:11–16.

12 H. R. Rookmaaker, 'Letter to a Christian Artist', 1966.

13 G. Ballo, *The Critical Eye*, Heinemann, 1969.

14 1 Chron. 12:32.

15 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Baker, 1988.

16 F. Schaeffer, *Trilogy*, esp. Book 1, *The God Who is There*, IVP, 1990.

17 H. Richter, *Dada*, Thames and Hudson, 2006, esp. pl. 36: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (a urinal, inscribed R. Mutt), 1915.

18 A. Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art; a Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002.

19 V. S. Ramachandran, 'The Artful Brain', Reith Lecture, 2003.

20 Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, Vol. 1, Lund Humphries, 1961.

express the beauty of nature beyond appearances, the structures behind reality. A contemporary artist, Amédée Ozenfant, later wrote, 'The physical world...is so astonishing as to be increasingly difficult for artists to paint what they see. Yesterday the sun, moon, stars, oceans and mountains were necessary...I predict changes in the arts; an interplay of forms and colours compelling our sight to integrate them into the motion of time.'²¹

Thus both art and science sought higher degrees of creative, conceptual abstraction; tapping into deep unconscious levels of the mind was found to solve real, practical tasks, both in modern physics, and in painting a good picture possessing a lively pictorial space. This explosion of ideas, radically influencing early twentieth-century painting, was explored and reacted against for the rest of the century.

The purposes of art: 1900–1960s

If this art does not represent, what does it do?

Firstly, this art *expresses feeling and meaning*. While twentieth-century existentialist and nihilist worldviews caused art to struggle with the concept of meaning, it was not, indeed could not, be eliminated. For painters such as Matisse, painting was a vehicle for the expression of human values and emotions; for others such as the Cubists, it was concerned with formal, structural problems to do with reason and understanding. These need not be attached to representation.

Secondly, this art *asks ultimate questions*. It serves to open up, interpret and expose our reality, enabling it to ask ultimate questions, as in Gauguin's last painting (see below). Earlier art was related to some form of religion, now abandoned as the source of meaning and spiritual fulfilment. 'Great works of art arise as exceptional individuals (try to) come to terms with facts of their existence – within themselves and...the world.'²² Artists' nature is to ask ultimate questions, though without necessarily giving answers.

Thirdly, this art *seeks for universals*. The early twentieth-century generation wanted to express the truth behind the superficial appearance of things; it was 'looking for absolutes...the deep reality of human life.'²³ Kandinsky thought realistic art had killed the spiritual, seeing art as the revelation of a new mysticism: 'abstract painting sheds the skin of nature, but not its...cosmic laws.'²⁴ Mondrian²⁵ (T), influenced by Plato, Picasso and theosophy, sought simplified geometrical forms and primary colours as the deepest truth behind reality. Given such aims, Gombrich could well query, 'is there really such a sharp division between representation and expression?'

Art's purposes, its role as a mirror and shaper of society, and its movement away from representation towards abstraction, are explored in the following paintings.

Early to mid-twentieth-century European painting

Beginnings of the revolution

For Cezanne, landscape replaced the primacy of the human body, and so began the dehumanisation of Western art. He aimed not to imitate nature, but to construct an interpretation of nature. Painters realised that he had opened the way for an abstract art of pure colour and form. Impressionists like Monet had from 1870 experimented with free colour and form, discovering that looking at nature we see not individual coloured objects, but a

kaleidoscope of tones blending in our mind. But the public refused to see Cezanne's painting as a further development of this and were outraged by the posthumous display of his work in 1907. For the first time in 300 years painting was being (painfully) liberated from its representational function.

Gauguin, *Whence do we come? Who are we? Whither are we going?*²⁶ (Plate 1)

Paul Gauguin was a pioneer of the new age, the most primitivist, using strong, non-realistic colour and flattened forms. This complex painting is a summary of his work and ideas: iconic, containing despairing metaphors of human life; painted in gloomy blues and beautiful, complementary oranges, it reads right to left like a medieval frieze. At the right (Whence?) the child, source of life, leads to an idyllic peasant life. Next, (Who?) before 'the tree of knowledge' (science), stand two sad figures; in the middle a figure reaching for the fateful apple questions the meaning of life. To the left (Whither?), a prominent blue idol symbolises 'the mystery of our origin and future'; finally an old hag and a strange bird of death. Gauguin confessed 'I have put into it all my energy before dying', and attempted suicide.

Rouault, *Hommes de Justice*²⁷ (Plate 2)

Georges Rouault trained as a stained glass window-maker; black lines outline the simplified shapes of his figures. An expressionist painter, he was 'of his age' yet, with a Catholic worldview, stood outside the zeitgeist of religious doubt. His images dealt with human concerns, and implicitly or explicitly with the divine. Moved by courtroom sessions, he was concerned with the dilemma of responsibility for condemning a fellow human to death. A grim judge presides; beside him a thoughtful colleague, sans hat, directs the viewer's gaze to Christ, the divine victim on the wall behind. For Rouault the cross is where all are judged and human injustice corrected, the Judge of all submitting to the farce of human judgement. The immobility of the figures is structurally important; significance in frozen time.

Towards abstraction of colour and form

Matisse, *Red Studio*²⁸ (Plate 3)

Henri Matisse originally set the background of this painting in three-dimensional space. But developing Cezanne's exploration of colour, he painted over the whole with flat, Venetian red so that the objects are floating free spatially, the ghostly remains of table, chair, sideboard and pictures on a non-existent wall. The viewer needs to concentrate to make sense of its ambiguity, a contradiction between perspectival objects and the revolutionary idea of flat space constructed on the canvas. To mystified onlookers Matisse responded, 'You're looking for the red wall, it simply doesn't exist.' He reckoned it would take viewers 50 years to 'catch up', and indeed the viewer today is more aware that it can be seen as a whole – objects-in-space, structure, rhythm, the colour a strong unrealistic harmony of pinks, greens, oranges against the overwhelming red. Expressing his emotional responses and visual pleasure, Matisse's pursuit of abstraction resulted in colour mastering illusionist space. This most revolutionary phase emerged from profound meditation on art and life, the nature of space, time, perception and reality itself. His work later influenced other artists concerned with the struggles of humankind, especially the American Abstract Expressionists.

21 A. Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, Dover, 1952.

22 J. D. Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, Yale, 1995.

23 H. Rookmaaker, *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, p.67.

24 *Kandinsky*, ed. Adrian Glew. MoMA, Boston, 2006.

25 *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, 1937–42. (T) indicates paintings which can be viewed at www.tate.org.uk/collections/login via My selection (user name: MgtAWilson; password: colour).

26 1897–8, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

27 c.1913, watercolour, Illustr. in W. Dyrness, *Rouault*, Eerdmans, 1971, p.117.

28 1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Braque, *The Lute*²⁹ (Plate 4)

While Matisse developed Cezanne's colour, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso³⁰ (T) experimented with his use of form. They crossed the watershed to a non-representational art, dissecting visual reality then reconstructing it on the canvas. So why *Cubism*? Braque's statement is simplest: that it was necessary to draw three figures, so as to portray every physical aspect, just as a house must be drawn in plan, elevation and section. Renaissance painting only portrayed one aspect of things. Braque worked within this tradition, but was seeking a new expression. *The Lute* suggests fragmented objects whose shapes attract the eye more because of their subtle colour and tone rather than by any relationship with the visible world. The central lute is clear, but surrounded by shards and zigzag planes, so the effect is of an unstable and mobile space, weaving in and out of the picture-plane as the eye tries to find stability in the rhythmic, vibrating pattern of shapes.

This deliberate fragmentation was the beginning of a new abstract geometrical space, conceptual as opposed to realistic. For Mondrian, Cubism was self-evidently the road to complete abstraction. Philosophically, if geometry is the deepest idea behind reality, then personality or a personal God are excluded, and humankind has no more value than anything else. Cubist figures seem strangely mechanistic. Nevertheless the use of limited colour is beautiful and that of space highly original, influencing the rest of the twentieth century.

Surrealism

Magritte, *The Annunciation*³¹ (Plate 5)

The Great War caused a faultline throughout European culture and thought, leading to pessimism, cynicism, absurdity, anarchy, heightened imagination and horror. Surrealist artists, influenced by Dada, reacted by turning inward to mysticism and occult experiences. Pictorial space changed, expressing images not conveyed by our senses, but derived from dreams and nightmares. Influenced by Freud, awed by the creative power of the imagination, they championed the super-reality of fantasy and dream as humankind's true dwelling.

Rene Magritte's style seems reactionary beside Cubism, but masks his Surrealist strategy of undermining the past. His images are clear, but disguise the paradoxes within. There is a brooding silence in *The Annunciation*, a mystery, as if something ominous is about to happen. All is static within the strange landscape, with white clouds in a blue-grey sky and strong light glancing in from the left. The clear design and structure lead the eye back towards the randomly tumbled rocks, but to what? Two dominating stair-rail supports, a paper cut-out and metal tubes hung with bells, surrounded by realistic trees – deliberately disorienting and strange. And the title? Magritte was a painting *philosopher* and each painting represents an idea. Traditionally in France, a Catholic country, the figures at this sacred event would be the angel and Mary, but instead there is *this*. The allusion is subversive, a statement that religion is meaningless. The Surrealist spirit perverted past sensibilities, attacking faith and reason. However, after the first shock, Surrealist works no longer excite or have meaning – they're just another style.

Icons of war

Picasso, *Guernica*³² (Plate 6)

Picasso hesitated to paint a mural for the 1937 Paris

International Exhibition – until Germans bombed the town of Guernica. The work is a modern secular descendant of a religious altarpiece, a triptych with three panels. There is no contrived emotion in this largely monochrome composition, but a strange airlessness and lack of space. The cruel bull lowering over the distraught mother with dead child taps into the Spanish love of the bullfight as a national spectacle, or the ancient myth of the Minotaur living in the Cretan labyrinth, demanding human sacrifices; both appropriate symbols for the bombing of helpless Guernicans. Others include the screaming horse with gaping mouth, vulnerably open to the naked light bulb, symbol of raw power. The fallen warrior's hand stretched along the floor was a clenched fist, now helplessly open. Imagery of despair and defeat raises the question of pointless, meaningless suffering.

But there is a metaphor of hope; a woman's head and arm, the Lightbearer, stretching a lantern into the darkness beyond, defies the light bulb's merciless glare. Picasso's Catholic background shows: the fallen warrior, on his hand faint stigmata, dies a martyr's death, arms thrown wide like the crucified Christ. In an epic battle between good and evil Picasso's art is defiantly modern, but reminds us of age-old tragedy. This is meant to shock the viewer: it has happened, can happen, and happens now in our time, the 'heritage of appalled humanity' in the face of indescribable suffering and evil. The shapes are abstracted from the visual world; expressive and symbolic they are powerful and timeless, going beyond the surface of things to the core of reality. The mural raises the whole issue of what art should be about: pleasure, or challenging a response, fulfilling a more profound function, *when the bombs are falling?*³³ (T)

Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*³⁴ (Plate 7)

Though Francis Bacon inverted its Christian meaning, this painting is a further example of the long European figure-painting tradition, also deliberately structured like a religious triptych. In the apparent context of crucifixion, each panel contains a pagan figure, the three revengeful, mythological Furies. Half animal, half human, they are confined in a windowless, geometrically-constructed space with a violent, blood-red, symbolic background. Two are sightless, long, eel-like necks looking as if they could probe, suck and bite, straining to expel their demonic evil: frightful, ambiguous, phallic horrors. The left head looks strangely human, the central like a plucked and head-banded ostrich; and the right one, from a photo of Mussolini, has ears, a gaping mouth and stands on a bed of nails. They demonstrate a bestial, mindless insatiability, endless capacity for hatred and a desire to destroy.

The painting caused complete consternation; this was not thanksgiving for deliverance from past perils, but vultures at a carcass. No-one wished to believe such an irreducibly evil element in human nature existed. Yet these 'crucifixions' were everywhere: Auschwitz, Belsen, Dachau; Mussolini's body hanging from a hook in Milan. The human image, largely lost in twentieth-century art, again became visible, albeit distorted and alienated. Bacon's message, 'nothing will ever be the same again', was a frightening affirmation of evil at work in a godless world. *Three Studies* expressed pictorially what was happening in society, a global, timeless cry of horror. Both *Guernica* and this are defining icons, but the former was painted before World War II when the 'old' religious worldview still had a hold, with

29 1909–11, Tate, London.

30 *Seated Nude*, 1909–10.

31 1929–1930, Tate.

32 1937, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid.

33 See also Nash, *Totes Meer*, 1940–1.

34 c.1944, Tate.

hints of redemption. *Three Studies* came afterwards, with the general suspicion that Bacon was less separate from the cruelty and evil and without any ray of hope.

Post-war painting: Britain – an art of place

Lanyon, *Lost Mine*³⁵ (Plate 8)

Peter Lanyon's abstract paintings are still rooted in the English landscape tradition, where natural forms were used to express the deepest feelings of the painter: imaginative, aesthetic and spiritual insights. British artists apart from Bacon had swum against the tide of contemporary ideas.³⁶ With their strong sense of place they conserved something important from the previous worldview. For while abstract art helps to experience the emotional power inherent in pure form, it is important to return periodically to studying the outside world, as this cuts across preconceived visual clichés and taps into hidden parts of the personality, thus renewing art. Ironically however, the influential School of Art in St Ives, Cornwall,³⁷ in abstracting forms from nature, paved the way for the acceptance of total abstraction in New York. Lanyon seems to use an abstract language, but is expressing his experience of the forms, colours and light of land/seascape filtered through memory.

This later study³⁸ (T) of the action of water and sea on sand and man-made structures probably refers to his local Cornish Levant Mine, scene of a fatal accident, later inundated by the sea. The dark, twisted mine shapes, the stabilising shape on the left and hints of ochre sand contrast with the blues, greens and whites flowing and breaking above them. Lanyon expresses anger, in slashing brushstrokes and the red, burning centre, towards the invading power of the sea, conveying its destructiveness more powerfully than a realistic style. American artists and critics who respected Lanyon's work were attracted to St Ives as a European centre of abstraction, yet rooted in the observation of nature. Contrary to the belief of many, St Ives was a primary influence on Abstract Expressionism. Lanyon's exhibition in New York in 1957 reflected his international stature.

Post-war painting: Europe to America

De Kooning, *Women Singing II*³⁹ (Plate 9)

Abstract Expressionism emerged as the major post-war style in the United States, rejecting 'old' European art as 'the sterile conclusions of decadence'; it was time for a new art. With the rise of Nazism, Willem de Kooning fled Europe as a trained painter. Viewers were struck by the freedom and mastery of his brushstrokes; a mark-making, gestural art, portraying a human being, or landscape, or focusing on deep levels of the artist's personality. This brilliant, savage work based on televised pop singers – gyrating figures, lips gashed across the face, vibrant non-realistic colours and violent brushstrokes, destructively views these women as sexual beings alone. Although Abstract Expressionism was abstract, and did not include figures, an art by thinkers for thinkers, American artists had great respect for de Kooning so they did not disown him. He considered that complete abstraction could limit a painter's versatility and 'even abstract shapes must have a likeness'.

Rothko, *Black on Maroon*⁴⁰ (Plate 10)

Mark Rothko, another fugitive from European oppression, went

the whole way to abstraction. On seeing Matisse's *Red Studio* with its floating patches of colour, he was thunderstruck, thereafter maintaining that only 'flat forms destroy illusion and reveal truth'. He believed figurative art was finished – it could no longer connect humankind to the tragedy of 'this century of mass incinerations'. Rothko thought only a radically new visual language portraying the alienation of American life could awaken sleepers from moral torpor. He insisted that his forms were not arid and meaningless, but conveyed the universal tragedy of the human condition. When viewers cried before his paintings, he commented, 'I'm communicating elemental emotions.' His works are profoundly meditative, projecting contemplation from within himself. Obsessed with the relationship between artist and viewer, he thought the image itself evolved when observed.⁴¹ This can be illustrated by one of his murals painted for the Seagram restaurant in Manhattan, *Black on Maroon*.

These works with their 'standing pillars' should be seen together in a low-lit room; with no glare from gallery walls and surrounded by 'velvety obscurity', the viewer enters a different visual realm where sombre colours seem to move off the wall towards him. Believing their 'mantle of light' was the same as in Rembrandt's glowing works, Rothko wished the viewer to be enfolded, as in a drama, within the painting. Post World War II, abstraction became the mainstream style in America; many believed art could only thus sustain a transcendental dimension. But major originality like Rothko's belonged to the earlier twentieth century. After the 1960s, abstraction was a dead issue.⁴² Rothko's last visit to Britain (before he slashed his wrists) – the place finally chosen for his murals – was a pilgrimage to St Ives, his original inspiration towards abstraction.

Responses

If we consider the range and depth of paintings the earlier twentieth century produced, there can be deep pleasure, real challenge and surprising opportunity in engaging with these works of art.

Understanding a 'visual culture'

Christians are rightly people of the Word, but our age is preoccupied with the visual image. If we wish to speak to its concerns, we need to be familiar with the world's ideas, modes of expression and communication. While Christians may sometimes lament the contemporary lack of biblical knowledge, we may need to ask whether at times our lack of visual understanding impoverishes our ability to let the Word speak to the world. In fact the art of the first half of the twentieth century continues to influence the visual language of today. Artists are 'hidden persuaders', changing the viewers who emerge from an art gallery and influencing many aspects of society. Advertising, album covers and film, e.g. Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* dream sequences, have been affected by Surrealism; abstract, geometrical forms in architecture, typography and modern design have been influenced by Mondrian, e.g. Le Corbusier and sans serif typefaces; movies, e.g. Wiener's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, show the effect of expressionist art on early film.⁴³ All these, among other visual manifestations, change the culture artists inhabit. The more we learn its language, the more we will be able to understand our culture, and what is going on beneath its surface.

35 1959, Tate.

36 P. Fuller, *Modern Painters*, Methuen, 1993; *Theoria and the Absence of Grace*, Chatto and Windus, 1988.

37 M. Toobey, *Tate St Ives*, Tate Gallery Publications, 1993.

38 Earlier Sutherlands and Lanyons are more realistic.

39 1966, Tate.

40 1958, Rothko Room, Tate.

41 P. Fuller on 'the mother', *Art and Psychoanalysis*, Writers and Readers, 1980, pp.220–231.

42 J. Spalding, *The Eclipse of Art*, Prestel, 2003.

43 See also J. Coffey, 'Engaging with Cinema', *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1999.

We need a Critical Eye in order to understand these (sometimes challenging) paintings for what they are, and not make the mistake of dismissing them. We can enjoy their genius, their qualities of colour, rhythm, form, but also find them intellectually challenging. *Then* we are in a position to critique them, to address the issues they raise. For these works reflect the inadequacy of a secular age divorced from the earlier Western worldview. Yet being made in God's image some painters were still drawn back to this Christian past, as evidenced in paintings such as *Guernica*. Others rebelled against it with defiant mockery, as Magritte, or attempted to smash it as did Bacon. The involvement of some in mysticism is a longing, a kind of quasi-religious substitute for Christian belief and experience: a hunger for 'spiritual' experience but, sadly, largely a rejection of the historic Christian faith.

Responding as a Christian

So how might the Christian viewer respond to the paintings discussed in this paper? In the same way, in principle, that we respond to any other creative aspect of culture.⁴⁴ Some art raises questions, other art makes statements. When it does so, we may respond to what the artist is 'saying' in each painting, by affirming, disagreeing, critiquing, debating, creating. We may have answers to Gauguin's questions, Whence? Who? Whither? We have grounds for saying that the powerful distortion in Bacon's *Three Studies* and portraits is a violation of the divine image. With Picasso, we can affirm, as does *Guernica*, the value of human life and his outrage at the bombing of innocent civilians. Our responses may be at the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional or spiritual level. These can combine to give rise to greater insight into our world, deeper compassion for our world and more relevant communication to our contemporaries.

Insight: We have traced the way in which the Critical Eye enables us better to appreciate these works of art and, in so doing, to gain an insight into the 'soul' of our age. Further, some may find this art prompts us to a deeper appreciation of Christ.⁴⁵ We might use Rothko's *Black on Maroon* for our own meditation on the horrific events resulting in paintings which 'bear the tragic weight of human history' (Rothko); and as a reminder that it was *Christ* who bore the weight of human sin and rebellion and is still our 'wisdom...righteousness...and redemption'.⁴⁶

Compassion: We live in a damaged, fallen world and most of us have at some time echoed the Psalmist: 'the darkness is my closest friend', or wept with the prophet at the broken state of an apostate world.⁴⁷ Christians who view these works cannot and

must not cut themselves off from the pain and despair radiating from some of them, as they make us aware of the brokenness of a world without God; for our presentation of the gospel of healing and salvation to be credible, such awareness is vital. We must feel with the artist, but then respond with compassion and hope – as Christ did when he exclaimed over the Jews, 'how often have I longed to gather...(you) together, as a hen her chicks...but you would not.'⁴⁸

Communication: This art mirrors and shapes our age and, if we wish to communicate with it we need to understand its thought-forms. There are striking similarities between some of the paintings' implied values, such as the nihilism in *Three Studies*, and the tragic message of Ecclesiastes: 'Utter vanity! All is vanity.'⁴⁹ Centuries later, Paul's apologia to the philosophers on the Areopagus⁵⁰ drew on his understanding of the cultural, architectural and literary background of Athens; he began where his hearers were, and from there could reveal to them a deeper, clearer understanding of their own world. It was because he was familiar with that world and knew 'the God who made (it)' that he had clear insight into the spiritual dynamics at work around him and was equipped to persuade them of their error and idolatry. Consequently he could unerringly proclaim the truth for which they instinctively sought and point them to the one true God.

48 Matt. 23:37.

49 Eccl. 1:2.

50 Acts 17:16–31.

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44 In addition, see N. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, Eerdmans, 1980, part 3, ch.1.

45 See J. Hardyman, *Glory Days*, IVP, 2006, especially ch.13 'Creativity and the Arts'.

46 1 Cor. 1:30.

47 Ps. 88:18; Jer. 14:17.

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Next issue: Promises, promises