

# THE PRESENT PROSPECTS OF AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

CLEMENT GREENBERG

THE American artist with any pretensions to total seriousness suffers still from his dependency upon what the School of Paris, Klee, Kandinsky and Mondrian accumulated before 1935. Hardly anywhere around him does he find, in either décor or activity, impulses strong enough to send him further. The three, four or five best artists in this country yearn back to Paris as it was, almost, in 1921, and live partly by time transfusions. Not that they do not reflect the present period—they would not count if they did not—but they cannot consult the present for any standard of quality and style: all excellence seems to flow still from that vivacious, unbelievable near past which lasted from 1905 until 1930 and which not even the First World War, but only Hitler, could definitely terminate.

American culture has in any case seldom fed our painters and sculptors as it has our novelists and poets. We have had painters in this country, and some of them—Allston, Cole, Homer, Eakins, Ryder, Blakelock, Newman, Whistler—accomplished more than a little; yet they could in the end distinguish themselves only by a heightening or idiosyncratic twisting of ideas imported from Europe, and could never create or re-create a new vision that the rest of the world had to take account of and on which artists coming after could nourish themselves substantially. Washington Allston played a variation on the Baroque landscape; Cole inflected it in another way; Eakins got something more out of that last dramatic chiaroscuro derivable from French painting before Courbet; and Ryder worked from the Barbizon School and Monticelli without breaking out of the frame of academic art. John Sloan, George Bellows, William Glackens, Maurice Prendergast, and Arnold Friedman (a contemporary of theirs who came to fruition thirty years later) managed, along with John Marin, what is still the most considerable effort of American art in the twentieth century, yet

they simply extended and refined various phases of French Impressionism without—except perhaps in Friedman's and Marin's cases—driving them towards the future. Winslow Homer, in small part, and John Kensett of the later Hudson River School, in even smaller, anticipated Europe—that is, the bright *à-plat* colour of early Impressionism—by five or ten years. But Homer, with nothing to answer or echo him in the America of his time, could found a school on his gift only when he had thinned it down, toward the end of his life, in water colour; while Kensett was a mere picturesque flash in the pan (still under-rated, however).

The situation is no longer what it was, but I hardly know whether the gains have or have not cancelled out most of the losses American culture in general has sustained since 1918. America, in two or three big cities, is being rapidly divested of its provincialism, but the cosmopolitanism replacing it is the product of a levelling out and rationalization of culture, which we now import or imitate the way we do French wines and British cloth. The cultured American has now become more knowing than cultivated, glib in a kind of fashionable *koiné* but without eccentricity or the distortions of personal bias, a compendium of what he or (more usually) she reads in certain knowing magazines—anxious to be right, correct, *au courant*, rather than wise and happy.

He or she may have a minimal judgement in literature but hardly any in art. It is merely the stumbling ability to read the language of paint that the American artist asks for and so sadly fails to find. In our advanced circles there is an amazing disjunction between literature and art. Delacroix wrote to Baudelaire: ' . . . bien des gens . . . regardent un tableau comme les Anglais regardent une contrée quand ils voyagent'. In this country ninety-nine—not eighty-five—per cent of the art world itself is composed of tourists, some of them permanently in pension no doubt, but tourists for all that, flashing the stickers on their bags and always on the point of leaving for the equivalent of Mexico or of having just returned from there. The discussion of American art, even in the most exalted circles, is a kind of travelogue patter—this is what fills the three or four art magazines that live an endowed existence in New York and whose copy is supplied by permanent college girls, male and female.

It might be thought that in a country like ours, where pictorial communication, as in the movies, comics, and tabloids, has encroached so much on the printed word, even for very literate people, and where industrialism insists more and more on the graphic—it might be thought that in such a country painting even at its remotest from mass taste would receive some stimulus from the sheer overflow of pictorial consumption. Certainly a kind of vulgarized modern art derived from Impressionism and its immediate aftermath has penetrated *Life* magazine, the calendars and advertisements. But all this has had but the same effect as the invasion of the *New Yorker* and *Harper's Bazaar* by *ex-avant-garde* literature. Art has become another way of educating the new middle class that springs up in industrial America in the wake of every important war and whose cash demands enforce a general levelling out of culture that, in raising the lowest standards of consumption, brings the highest down to meet them. For education always means a certain number of concessions.

In any case the very improvement of general middle-brow taste constitutes in itself a danger. Whereas high art used to remain untempted, simply because it had no chance whatsoever of complying with the market demand, today the new mass cultural market created by industrialism is seducing writers and artists into rationalizing and packaging for mass distribution even the most pretentious products.

Taken on other terms, however, the American effort at mass culture—not, let me emphasize, mass education, which has already been accomplished—is an unparalleled venture, one not to be sneered at. Culture means *cultivation*. Only the enormous productivity of American industrialism could have led any society to think it possible to cultivate the *masses*. Given our ethos, given our public education, given the fact that nine out of ten Americans know how to use water closets and automobiles—that is, already have culture in the Soviet Russian sense—given all this, as made possible by our productivity, it was to be expected that sooner or later the American ‘common man’ would aspire to self-cultivation as something that belonged inevitably to a high standard of living as personal hygiene. In any event the bitter status struggle that goes on in a thoroughly democratic country would of itself have served by now to put self-cultivation on the order of the day—once it became clear, to the commonalty,

as it has by now, that cultivation not only makes one's life more interesting but—even more important in a society that is becoming more and more closed—defines social position. Whether it succeeds or not, the very fact of this experiment in mass cultivation makes us in several respects the most historically advanced country on earth.

Yet high culture, which in the civilized past has always functioned on the basis of sharp class distinctions, is endangered—at least for the time being—by this sweeping process which, by wiping out the social distinctions between the more and the less cultivated, renders standards of art and thought provisional. In his effort to keep a step ahead of a pedagogic vulgarization that infects everything, and in his endeavour to locate the constantly shifting true centre of seriousness, the ambitious American writer and artist must from moment to moment improvise both career and art. It becomes increasingly difficult to tell who is serious and who not. At the same time that the average college graduate becomes more literate the average intellectual becomes more banal, both in personal life and professional activity.

There is also the fact that a society as completely capitalized and industrialized as our American one, seeks relentlessly to organize every possible field of activity and consumption in the direction of profit, regardless of whatever immunity from commercialization any particular activity may have once enjoyed.

It is this kind of rationalization that has made life more and more boring and tasteless in our country, particularly since 1940, flattening and emptying all those vessels which are supposed to nourish us daily. Our difficulty in acknowledging and stating the dull horror of our lives has helped prevent the proper and energetic development of American art in the last two decades and more. The emptiness of our American life is not something to be declaimed about or expressed as such. What has to be recognized are the circumstances in which such emptiness becomes the common fate. These, endemic to bourgeois industrialism, were already recognized, among painters, by the French Impressionists; and if their outlook, as that of most Parisian art up to 1925, was not dark, it was because industrialism—and history—still permitted the individual a little confidence in his own private solution, a modicum of space in which personal detachment could survive and work up its own proper interestingness. Standing off

in the preserves of Bohemia, the Impressionists, Fauvists and Cubists could still indulge in a contemplation that was as sincere and bold as it was largely unconscious; and the soberness of their art, a soberness indispensable to all the very greatest painting, from Ajanta to Paris, stemmed from this automatic contemplation.

The Impressionists and those who came after them in France put themselves in accord with the situation by implicitly accepting its materialism—the fact, that is, that modern life can be radically confronted, understood and dealt with only in material terms. What matters is not what one believes but what happens to one. From now on you had nothing to go on but your states of mind and your naked sensations, of which structural, but not religious, metaphysical or historico-philosophical, interpretations were alone permissible. It is its materialism, or positivism, presented more explicitly than in literature or music, that made painting the most advanced and *hopeful* art in the West between 1860 and 1914.

The dominant creative tradition in America during the last century and a half, as in England and Germany, has, however, been Gothic, transcendental, romantic, subjective. Industrialism exacerbates and drives us to extreme positions where we write poetry but are unable to calm ourselves and live long enough to fix abiding plastic representations. The School of Paris rested on a sufficient acceptance of the world as it must be, and it delighted in the world's very disenchantment, seeing it as evidence of man's triumph over it. We, confronted more immediately by the paraphernalia of industrialism, see the situation as too overwhelming to come to terms with, and look for an escape in transcendent exceptions and aberrated states. True, it was a Frenchman who eminently taught the modern world this way out—but one suspects that one of the reasons for which Rimbaud abandoned his own path was the realization that it was an evasion, not a solution, and already on the point of becoming, in the profoundest sense, academic.

It is only by one of those inevitable confusions prompted by uneven cultural development that the aberrated and deranged could have become so intimately involved with modern art. Cubism and Impressionism have nothing to do with them, nor has Matisse. The great modern painters and sculptors are the

hard-headed ones—or at least they are great only as long as they remain hard-headed: Cézanne, his paranoia notwithstanding; Bonnard; Picasso, as long as he was a Cubist; Gris; Léger; Miro; Brancusi; Kandinsky, before he discovered the Spiritual; Lipchitz, before he re-discovered the Mythological. Here, as in all great periods of art, scepticism and matter-of-factness take charge of everything in the end, even as they did for the architects of the Gothic cathedrals.

A temporary solution for the latest American painting has been Klee, the one original modern painter whose nominal inspiration was the 'mystical', fantastical, transcendental-subjective—the one twentieth-century artist, moreover, who was able to assimilate the School of Paris and still stay apart from it without suffering harm (unlike Kandinsky). Klee was a genius and he founded a school, but he was not a big genius, remarkable as he was, and his influence has been viable precisely because it could not occupy for its exclusive use all of the new territory it opened up. Klee could go as far as he did because he was capable of a detached irony toward himself as well as toward the world (in any case the mysticism attributed to him seems more and more a fiction of the critics). But his American disciples, however worthy, are less capable of detachment and irony than of almost anything else; therefore they are incapable of varying and extending themselves and they have all remained minor artists in a way Klee never was.

The two most original American painters today, in the sense of being the most uniquely and differentiatedly American, are Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, both products of the Klee school, both somewhat under the influence of Oriental art, as Klee himself was, and both from Seattle in the Northwest. But since they have finished stating their personalities, Graves and Tobey have turned out to be so narrow as to cease even being interesting. Sensibility confined, intensified, and repeated this way has been a staple of American art and literature since Emily Dickinson; but it has also been an evasion, even in the person of such a wonderful poet as Marianne Moore. The art that results does not show us enough of ourselves and of the kind of life we live in our cities, and therefore does not release enough of our feeling.

In painting today such an urban art can be derived only from Cubism. Significantly and peculiarly, the most powerful painter

in contemporary America and the only one who promises to be a major one is a Gothic, morbid and extreme disciple of Picasso's Cubism and Miro's post-Cubism, tintured also with Kandinsky and Surrealist inspiration. His name is Jackson Pollock, and if the aspect of his art is not as originally and uniquely local as that of Graves' and Tobey's, the feeling it contains is perhaps even more radically American. Faulkner and Melville can be called in as witnesses to the nativeness of such violence, exasperation and stridency. Pollock's strength lies in the emphatic surfaces of his pictures, which it is his concern to maintain and intensify in all that thick, fuliginous flatness which began—but only began—to be the strong point of late Cubism. Of no profound originality as a colourist, Pollock draws massively, laying on paint directly from the tube, and handles black, white and grey as they have not been handled since Gris' middle period. No other abstract painter since Cubism has been so well able to retain classical *chiaroscuro*.

For all its Gothic quality, Pollock's art is still an attempt to cope with urban life; it dwells entirely in the lonely jungle of immediate sensations, impulses and notions, therefore is positivist, concrete. Yet its Gothic-ness, its paranoia and resentment narrow it; large though it may be in ambition—large enough to contain inconsistencies, ugliness, blind spots and monotonous passages—it nevertheless lacks breadth.

David Smith, a sculptor and kind of constructivist, is several years older than Pollock and more fully realized. He is the only other American artist of our time who produces an art capable of withstanding the test of international scrutiny and which, like Pollock's, might justify the term major. Like Brancusi, Arp, Lipchitz, Giacometti, Gonzales, Pevsner, Smith derives from painting much more than he does from what we usually know as the tradition of sculpture: his art being linear, open, pictorial, rather than monolithic. Identified by its materials and methods—steel, alloys, the blowtorch—with industrial procedures, this art also reflects American industrialism and engineering by its denial of weight and mass and its emphasis on direction and trajectory rather than locus. If Pollock is Gothic, Smith revolves between the Baroque and Cubist classicism; a wide-open temperament supplies substance and invention that require for their ordering a Cubist sense of style. Smith's periodic lapses from excellence

come when the Baroque gets the upper hand, yet these lapses are essential, so to speak, to his art, for they provide the raw material for the successes. Smith's art is more enlightened, optimistic and broader than Pollock's, and makes up for its lesser force by a virile elegance that is without example in a country where elegance is otherwise obtained only by femininity or by the wistful, playful, derivative kind of decorativeness we see in such artists as the sculptor-constructor Alexander Calder and the painter Stuart Davis, both of whom have great taste but little force.

The presence of two artists like Smith and Pollock, both products of a completed assimilation of French art, relieves us somewhat of the necessity of being apologetic about American art. But they are far from being enough. The art of no country can live and perpetuate itself exclusively on spasmodic feeling, high spirits and the infinite subdivision of sensibility. A substantial art requires balance and enough thought to put it in accord with the most advanced view of the world obtaining at the time. Modern man has *in theory* solved the great public and private questions, and the fact that he has not solved them in practice and that actuality has become more problematical than ever in our day ought not to prevent, in this country, the development of a bland, large, balanced, Apollonian art in which passion does not fill in the gaps left by the faulty or omitted application of theory but takes off from where the most advanced theory stops, and in which an intense detachment informs all. Only such an art, resting on rationality but without permitting itself to be rationalized, can adequately answer contemporary life, found our sensibilities, and, by containing and vicariously relieving them, remunerate us for those particular and necessary frustrations that ensue from living at the present moment in the history of western civilization.

What did Nietzsche say? He knew in spite of his profession of the Dionysian: 'Zukünftiges.—Gegen die Romantik der grossen "Passion".—Zu begreifen, wie zu jedem "klassischen" Geschmack ein Quantum Kälte, Luzidität, Härte hinzugehört: Logik vor allem, Glück in der Geistigkeit, "drei Einheiten", Konzentration, Hass gegen Gefühl, Gemüt, *esprit*, Hass gegen das Vielfache, Unsichere, Schweifende, Ahnende so gut als gegen das Kurze, Spitze, Hübsche, Gütige. . . .' Balance, largeness, precision,

C

enlightenment, contempt for nature in all its particularity—that is the great and absent art of our age.

The task facing culture in America is to create a *milieu* that will produce such an art—and literature—and free us (at last!) from the obsession with extreme situations and states of mind. We have had enough of the wild artist—he has by now been converted into one of the standard self-protective myths of our society: if art is wild it must be irrelevant. We stand in need of a much greater infusion of consciousness than heretofore into what we call the creative. We need men of the world not too much amazed by experience, not too much at loss in the face of current events, not at all overpowered by their own feelings, men to some extent aware of what has been felt elsewhere since the beginning of recorded history.

As it happens, and for reasons not too difficult to expound, painting and sculpture have been in the twentieth century those of all the arts most intimate with Bohemian life, and therefore most sensitive to its passing fits and spasms. Bohemia has been able to influence painting and sculpture with an immediacy unthinkable in literature or music.

The purchase taken by international Bohemia on these arts in New York since 1940 has served to counteract the influence of artiness on the one hand and of the Whitmanesque blowhards on the other; but it has also reduced the climate of American art to an even more neutral temperature, since international Bohemia has not asked anything really positive of it and has merely imposed upon it the rule of its own banal good taste, which is superior to what we had before only in being less provincial.

The Museum of Modern Art, which fifteen years ago replaced Alfred Stieglitz as the principal impresario of modern art in America, is the chief exponent of this new good taste, substituting for Stieglitz's messianism a *chicté* that in the long run is almost an equal liability. Pusillanimity makes the Museum follow the lead of the most powerful art dealers; only once in a while will it show or buy an artist lacking 57th Street's imprimatur. But it cannot be blamed too much, since it reflects rather accurately the prevailing taste in American art circles.

In any case the fate of American art does not depend on the encouragement bestowed or withheld by 57th Street and the

Museum of Modern Art. The morale of that section of New York's Bohemia which is inhabited by striving young artists has declined in the last twenty years, but the level of its intelligence has risen, and it is still downtown, below 34th Street, that the fate of American art is being decided—by young people, few of them over forty, who live in cold-water flats and exist from hand to mouth. Now they all paint in the abstract vein, show rarely on 57th Street, and have no reputations that extend beyond a small circle of fanatics, art-fixated misfits who are as isolated in the United States as if they were living in Paleolithic Europe.

Most of the young artists in question have either been students of Hans Hofmann or come in close contact with his students and ideas. Originally from Munich and himself a painter, Hofmann lived in Paris for a time and felt the point of School of Paris painting as only an outsider could—and as no one else in our time has. Hofmann will in the future, when the accomplishment of American painting in the last five and the next twenty years is properly evaluated, be considered the most important figure in American art of the period since 1935 and one of the most influential forces in its entire history, not for his own work, but for the influence, enlightening and uncompromising, he exerts. Hofmann's approach, in spite of himself and his own verbalizations, is essentially a positivist, immediate one that insists on a radical discrimination between what is pertinent and permanent in the art of our times and what is merely interesting, curious or sensational. Like the best literature, the best visual art of our time is that which comes closest to non-fiction, has least to do with illusions, and at the same time maintains and asserts itself exclusively as art. Hofmann is not at home in English and his terminology, no less than his private and irrelevant preoccupation with the 'spiritual', may mislead one at first, but those who spend time with him and watch his taste operate are soon disabused: this is the core of the artistic sensibility and intelligence of our age. Hofmann's presence in New York has served to raise up a climate of taste among at least fifty people in America that cannot be matched for rigour and correctness in Paris or London. No matter how puzzling and ugly the new and original will appear—and it will indeed appear so—the people who inhabit this climate will not fail to perceive and hail it.

So far, however, all this has not received commensurate

expression in works of art themselves. The tentatives are promising, seven or eight people make them; but still, aside from Jackson Pollock, nothing has really been accomplished as yet. The difficulty remains our failure to relate this high conception of contemporary art to our own lives, our inability to be detached about either art or life, detached and whole as people are who are at home in the world of culture. What we have instead is the ferocious struggle to be a genius, which involves the artists downtown even more than the others. The foreseeable result will be a collection of *peintres maudits*—who are already replacing the *poètes maudits* in Greenwich Village. Alas, the future of American art depends on them. That it should is fitting but sad. Their isolation is inconceivable, crushing, unbroken, damning. That anyone can produce art on a respectable level in this situation is highly improbable. What can fifty do against a hundred and forty million?

## NOTES ON BEING AN AMERICAN

### WILLIAM BARRETT

'It is a difficult thing to be an American,' said Archibald MacLeish, somewhere around 1929 if I remember rightly, a good while before he had discovered how easy it is to be an Under-Secretary of State. The American who tries to grasp his nationality is inevitably thrown into a peculiarly personal venture: part of the meaning of this nationality seems to be that each American, if he puts the question at all, has to explore his own personal relation to the American fate. This is not the case for the young Frenchman, even now when the French tradition seems to stand at a moment of strange crisis in France; his tradition is there, known and articulated, and he may place himself in one or other direct relation to it, even that of violent rejection. And I imagine this is also true, though to a lesser degree, for the young Englishman. But the American confronts something much more indefinite and amorphous; something which exists, certainly, otherwise how should he be so persistently haunted by its challenges and opportunities; but which, just as certainly, is not yet defined, and to that extent does not yet quite exist but has to be made, and so