

## REPRESENTATION AND ABSTRACTION IN PAINTING

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### INTRODUCTION

The question "what makes a work of art a representation of its subject matter?" has become more relevant since the advent of abstract painting and sculpture in modern art. Contemporary art has distinguished itself in many instances by the creation of new forms and inventions which render problematical the apparently clear distinction between representational and abstract works of art. Is this distinction any longer a useful one? We will discuss this question from the standpoint of aesthetic theory, attempting to resolve it by means of the critical analysis of a number of illustrations of abstract and representational paintings. The problem of finding a criterion by which representation can be marked off from abstraction in the art of painting has been raised by Professor F. David Martin in *Art and the Religious Experience* and more recently in his text, *The Humanities through the Arts*.<sup>1</sup> Martin's approach, which we will adopt here, is to elaborate the basic notions of subject matter, form and content in relationship to works of art and then to apply these categories to the analysis of abstract and representational painting.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the very problems which are encountered in attempting to distinguish between abstract and representational painting extend with equal force to pure and program music, "objective" and "non-objective" sculpture, and classical and modern dance.<sup>3</sup> Our discussion will be confined, however, to this distinction as it arises in our actual experience of a variety of paintings.

The threefold distinction between subject matter, form and content in art constitutes an appropriate starting point for the analysis of both representational and abstract painting. According to Martin, the subject matter of a painting is what it is most fundamentally about - its dominant idea or central theme. Thus Martin identifies the subject matter of Goya's "May 3, 1808" as "man's inhumanity to man."<sup>4</sup> Cezanne's "Mt. Ste. Victorie" is said to have as its subject matter the "mountainousness of mountains" and Siquieros' "Echo of a Scream" the destructiveness of a technological society.<sup>5</sup> These examples suggest that a painting's subject matter is to be characterized in general or abstract terms and not by means of references to the specific individuals or occurrences portrayed in each work. But Martin does not rest with a completely general characterization of subject matter in works of art. He allows for alternative statements of a work's subject matter on varying levels of abstractness. Thus the subject matter of Goya's painting "May 3, 1808" could be identified as man's inhumanity to man, as the horror and destruction of war or simply as the execution of civilians by a military machine. While these interpretations of the painting's subject matter are certainly not incompatible, they are clearly different. The identification of Goya's central subject as an execution, for example, can be subsumed under such broader characterizations of it as the horror of war or the inhumanity of man to man. Each of these interpretations of subject matter is in fact more general than that which precedes it. Martin's criterion for identifying a work's central subject is thus unclear, for he does not specify the level of abstractness upon which we are to search for it. In order to meet this difficulty, we will distinguish between a painting's major or dominant theme, which is always very abstract or general, and its subject matter, which is progressively more determinate and specific. The subject matter of Goya's "May 3, 1808" can be identified as the execution of civilians by a military machine, and the depiction of this event exemplifies the work's main theme (man's inhumanity to man).<sup>6</sup> The notions of subject matter and theme can therefore be distinguished by making clear the level of generality upon which the critic is operating in his discussion of a painting.

The content of an art work, according to Martin, consists in the transformation of its subject matter by means of the realization of artistic form. While subject matter and theme can be abstracted from a painting and considered independently of it, content is held to be *in* the work and thereby inseparable from it. Consequently, Martin directs us to ask not for the content but for the subject matter of a painting when we attempt to interpret it. For example the central theme of numerous paintings is the female nude but each individual

work which exemplifies this subject matter is *qualified* by the artist's distinctive interpretation of it. Rubens' female nude is qualified as Earthmother, Giorgione's as Venus, and Picasso's as the nude imprisoned in her flesh.<sup>7</sup> It might appear then that the introduction of such qualifications in an account of a painting's subject matter enables us to talk directly about its content, but this is not the case. Each qualification we introduce brings us no nearer to a concrete identification of the work's artistic content because it consists in nothing more than a further refinement of our previous characterization. It follows for Martin that the content of a painting cannot be captured in the language of art criticism, for criticism always occurs at a certain level of abstractness and content is irreducibly individual. Criticism, by virtue of its abstractness keeps us at a perpetual distance from the full concreteness of the artwork as it is present to aesthetic perception. The notion of content is therefore crucial to Martin's analysis of the work of art but plays no positive role in the elaboration of his theory of criticism. This is an implication of Martin's position which he seems to ignore, for in a different context he speaks of the job of interpretive criticism as the determination of artistic content.

#### *REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING*

Martin utilizes the notion of subject matter as a basis for his initial attempt at defining representation in painting.<sup>8</sup> A representational painting is one which designates specific objects and events as its subject matter. The paintings by Goya, Cezanne and Picasso mentioned earlier are clearly representational, for each includes within its subject matter a reference to definite objects and events. It follows that a painting is abstract if it does *not* contain as part of its subject matter any reference to specifiable objects or events.<sup>9</sup> This seemingly straightforward account of representation in art is modified by Martin when he turns to a number of paintings which he considers only ostensibly representational. Arp's "Mountains, Table, Anchors, Navel" appears to be representational because the objects referred to by its title are easily identifiable in the painting. However, Martin claims that this work can be appreciated more readily as an abstract painting for the following reasons: ( 1 ) The painting's form does not clarify or illuminate its ostensible subject matter i.e. we obtain no insight into the nature of mountains, tables, etc. through participation with this work. ( 2 ) If this painting is appreciated purely as a study of color, shape and line, it becomes aesthetically rewarding. In fact, Martin proposes that we retitle this work "Colors and Positions".<sup>10</sup> A second example of a painting whose real subject matter is not representational

is Parmigianino's "The Madonna with the Long Neck".<sup>11</sup> Viewed as a representation of the Madonna and child, no insight whatsoever is provided into the work's ostensible theme. Viewed, however, as a study of shape, color and light, Martin claims that this work continually rewards us by the power and appeal of its sensuous forms. Martin's initial criterion for identifying a work as representational has therefore changed in the course of his discussion, for he now relates representation to a work's content as opposed to its subject matter. If a painting can *best* be appreciated through the apprehension of its sensuous and formal values, it is to be classified as abstract regardless of the fact that it contains references to specific objects and events. It follows that Martin has made a work's content, or rather our perception of its content, the appropriate standard for classifying it as representational or abstract. In effect, Martin has not so much abandoned his previous characterization of representation in terms of subject matter; he has rather proposed that the perception of content becomes the very criterion by which a work's subject matter can be determined. So stated, it is insufficient that a painting contain references to specific "objects" for it to be properly classified as representation; these "objects" must be part of its content.<sup>12</sup>

We have seen that Martin holds that a painting, to be representational, must ( 1 ) designate definite "objects" and ( 2 ) clarify a subject matter relating to these "objects" by means of artistic form. In addition, Martin distinguishes between paintings which contain artistic value and those which claim to be art but are not i.e., artistic failures. In other words, he employs the expression "work of art" in a normative fashion: a work of art is by definition a work which is artistically successful. Otherwise, it would manifest no content, for content is the result of a transformation of subject matter through artistic form. A work which merely *illustrates* a subject matter without clarifying or interpreting it does not qualify as a work of art. Consequently, Martin's initial characterization of representation is inadequate for it pertains solely to subject matter without introducing considerations of artistic content. His initial characterization of representation therefore applies not only to works possessing artistic value but to any work which depicts, whether through interpretation or merely as an illustration of its subject, a specific event or state of affairs. By relating the concept of representation to artistic content, Martin has in the process narrowed the class of paintings which are appropriately regarded as representational. Only paintings which possess artistic merit now qualify as representational works of art. However, Martin does not argue for a strictly objectivistic position when the question is raised of the precise means by which a painting's content is to be determined. In his discussion of Ar hile Gorki's

"Waterfall", he claims that our capacity to recognize the bounce and rhythm of the colors of waterfalls in this painting is relative to our past experience, but not to the existence of objective characteristics which are simply "in" the work.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while viewer A is able to discern the expressive power of the color and motion of waterfalls in this work and B is not, it does not follow that they are any shortcomings or inadequacies in B's perception of the painting. For, on this view, each viewer's response now becomes crucial in determining what the content of this work is. Martin thus appears to adopt a subjectivist account of the sense in which content belongs to a painting. Accordingly, he now holds that no single viewing of a painting is decisive for the determination of its content. For numerous paintings, according to Martin, can be viewed no less profitably as abstractions than as representations, in which case the percipient's attention will be directed to the purely sensuous and formal values of a painting. If we adopt this position, it follows that a painting becomes abstract or representational in accordance with what a viewer brings with him to his encounter with the work. A painting is abstract if it can be enjoyed purely as a configuration of lines, colors, shapes and textures. It comes representational when its content is perceived as clarifying a determinate situation or event. Martin's position is here reminiscent of those Wittgensteinian philosophers who analyze visual perception in terms of seeing-as. If we employ the familiar example of the figure which can be perceived either as a duck or as a rabbit but not as both simultaneously, we can understand how a painting can be viewed in either but not both of two ways at the same time. And this point can be generalized to cover a considerable number of works which possess both "plastic" and "dramatic" values. It begins to appear that Martin is in the camp of such formalists as Roger Fry who holds that it is possible to value certain paintings *either* as pure designs *or* as illustrations of a subject matter, but not as both in a single, unitary aesthetic experience.<sup>14</sup> Martin, however, rejects this account of aesthetic experience, for he argues that the formalists' efforts to separate plastic and dramatic values is mistaken, and that "somehow" we participate with a work's dramatic subject matter *through* our grasp of its design.<sup>15</sup> A second difficulty for Martin arises from his unwillingness to relativize aesthetic experience in such a way as to make the content of a work depend upon our individual responses to it. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways of responding to works of art, as Martin shows in his discussions of "The Madonna with the Long Neck" and "Mountains, Table, Anchors, Navel". Each of these paintings is properly viewed as abstract rather than representational, notwithstanding its ostensible subject matter. But to maintain that a painting becomes abstract or representational solely in

relation to its "cash value" in aesthetic perception opens the door to just the sort of subjectivism regarding artistic value and "taste" which Martin rightly criticizes at the outset of *The Humanities Through the Arts*. Formalism, as Martin argues, severs the appreciation of art from the distinctively human values realized in the artist's interpretation of his chosen subject matter and theme.

### ABSTRACT PAINTING<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, Martin is unwilling to interpret abstract painting as pure design or "significant form" alone. In fact, he singles out the formalists for criticism because they divorce aesthetic experience from the apprehension of significant human values. He claims that even abstract painting interprets a subject matter, which he identifies with the "schema of the sensuous" - the universal features of the visible - as revealed in a painting's lines, shapes and colors. "The primary subject matter of abstract painting is surely the sensuous in all its qualitative infinity abstracted from definite objects and events.<sup>17</sup> But how can the treatment of line, color and shape be relevant to human concerns? For Martin, abstract painting is humanly significant because it reveals the meaning of the most general pervasive qualities of the visual world. His assertion that abstract painting clarifies a universal subject matter - the "schema of the sensuous" brings it closer in its aesthetic function to representational painting than might initially appear: both types of painting seek to reveal elements or aspects of reality. The difference between them is not that abstract, in contrast to representational painting, fails to *designate* an aspect, of reality, but that it thematizes the most abstract and general characteristics of the visual order. Representational paintings, Martin argues, designate specific objects and events while abstract paintings designate the "primary qualities" of visual phenomena. A representational painting can therefore be interpreted as abstract if it is viewed purely as a configuration of lines, colors, shapes, etc. The formalists' error is that they generalize a mode of perception peculiar to abstract painting and treat it as an account of aesthetic perception (simpliciter).

Martin's account of abstract painting is rooted in two key concepts borrowed from Whitehead: *sensa* and presentational immediacy.<sup>18</sup> Martin utilizes the notion of *sensa* or presentational qualities as a means of clarifying the content of abstract painting. What we see and directly experience in our encounter with abstract paintings is a configuration of sensuous qualities. Martin thus rescues the concept of *sensa* from its misuse by "sense-datum theorists" who

were preoccupied by the pseudo-problem of the relationship between sense-data and physical objects in perception. Ignoring this question, Martin employs the notion of *sensa* to characterize the phenomenologically given in our aesthetic experience of abstract painting. What is thus given is not a canvas covered by swirls of paint nor a depiction of any kind, but instead a unified configuration of line, color, shape, etc. The notion of *sensa* thus enables Martin to differentiate the functions of abstract and representational painting, for abstract painting attracts the percipient through its interpretation of line, color and shape alone rather than by representing anything specific. Even a representational painting, may move us aesthetically through the appeal of its sensuous and formal qualities. If the object of aesthetic perception is *sensa* or the sensuous alone, we will value the painting on account of its presentational qualities. If, in addition, the work successfully interprets a representational subject matter, we will further value it on account of its representational content. The difference between presentational and representational qualities can be readily seen in works which possess one short of content to the exclusion of the other. Thus, "The Madonna with the Long Neck" attracts Martin purely as an interpretation of the "schema of the sensuous" and not at all as a representation of its ostensible subject matter. In contrast, another painting may depict the same religious subject matter while failing to reveal the "schema of the sensuous" through its presentational qualities. Furthermore, we may distinguish between the mood created by the work's sensuous and formal values and the mood created by the portrayal of "subjects" in a representational painting. This point can be restated in such a way that we may speak of a work's sensuous-emotional values and not merely of *sensa*. As Collingwood and others have maintained, every *sensum* carries with it an emotional charge.<sup>19</sup> Each configuration of *sensa* creates a mood or emotional "world" which is peculiar to itself; therefore we may hold that the emotional aura or mood of a successful painting is qualitatively unique, and constitutes the basis of the work's aesthetic value. We are not given in aesthetic perception a mere collection of *sensa*, each having a separate emotional charge, but rather a pattern of *sensa* which contains an emotional charge that is not merely the sum of its parts. If this observation is correct, a painting will possess an emotional tone through a combination of its sensuous and its formal qualities and, if the work is also representational, through its depiction of a character, event or state of affairs. Both abstract and representational paintings, then contain an expressiveness native to the presentational and representational qualities which they possess. And it is the "expressed world" of painting which constitutes the source of its aesthetic value.<sup>20</sup> The question of whether the emotional overtones attendant upon presentational and representational

qualities give rise to a unified or "fused" aesthetic experience is not one which we will pursue in detail here. It is, however, implicit in Martin's account of representational and abstract painting.<sup>21</sup>

Martin employs Whitehead's notion of presentational immediacy to characterize the percipient's distinctive mode of perception in this encounter with abstract painting. Presentational immediacy denotes a state of mind in which the beholder is immersed in colors, shapes and textures of the painting before him. In this mode of perception, the viewer's attention is undisturbed by references to objects, events or situations outside the here and now of aesthetic enjoyment. In contrast, the appreciation or representational painting requires that the percipient divert his attention from the presentational qualities before him in order to consider the social and historical significance of the "objects" depicted in the work. He is thereby drawn outside the "magic circle" of the here and now to an awareness of the past and future. However, Martin cannot consistently maintain that our participation with abstract painting involves a state of sheer presentational immediacy, for the claim that abstract paintings designate and clarify the universal qualities of phenomena cannot pass unnoticed in the aesthetic experience. We are thus outside the circle of sheer immediacy to think about a painting's references to the qualities of things. If this is correct, our absorption in the immediacy of the here and now is compromised,<sup>22</sup> although Martin can emphasize the fact that paintings are further insulated by their frames from outside world. As a result, our attentiveness to sensa or presentational qualities frees us from engaging in any conceptual mediations during our aesthetic encounter with abstract paintings. To the extent, then, that Martin stresses the element of concreteness in the work of art, he is able to gain support for his phenomenological description of the mode of our participative experience with abstractions as a kind of presentational immediacy. However, when he emphasizes the designative dimension of abstract painting, the direction of interest in aesthetic perception appears to shift from the apprehension of a painting's sensuous content to an awareness of its latent universality. Pure consciousness of sensa becomes a form of self-consciousness; a state of immediacy gives rise to mediations leading beyond a concern with the here and now.

## CONCLUSION

1. The concept of representation is applicable to any class of artifacts, including paintings, which depicts specific objects, coarctees, events or states of affairs. The artifact which depicts such objects, etc. may or may not



claim to be fine art. It may pretend to be no more than illustration, on the one hand, or pure decoration, on the other. It may be an artistic failure or a genuine work of art. Consequently, any such artifact is representational in the descriptive sense of this term simply because it is a recognizable depiction.

2. The term 'artistic representation' applies solely to paintings (and other representations) which have "content", i.e. are successful works of art. In this sense the conception of representation is normative or evaluative for the critic. According to Martin, a painting's content is revealed in the clarification of its subject matter by means of artistic form. It is, therefore, essential that the critic be able to distinguish between a work's real as opposed to ostensible subject matter. The artistic value of a representational painting does not arise from the fact that it is a successful depiction, however interesting or valuable its "subject" may be. Artistically, its interest may reside wholly in its revelation of sensuous and formal values. As a purported interpretation of a representational subject matter, the painting may be uninteresting, puerile or inauthentic. Its real - as opposed to ostensible - subject matter will consist of its treatment of line, color, shape, light, texture, etc., which alone will account for its artistic success. In such cases the sensitive beholder will interpret the painting as an "abstraction" and be guided in his appreciation by its sensuous-formal values alone.
3. Abstract painting is properly characterized as painting which interprets such sensuous and formal values as line, color, shape, texture, etc. As Martin shows, the subject matter of abstract painting is "the schema of the sensuous" as this notion applies to the visual world. Moreover, there is a wide range of abstract painting which at one extreme can be illustrated by Mondrian's "Composition in Red, White and Black" and at the other by his "Broadway Boogie Woogie". Mondrian's "Composition" lends itself to nothing more than an appreciation of its sensuous-formal values and the emotions which the contemplation of these values gives rise to, while "Broadway Boogie Woogie" is more complex in the demands it makes upon the viewer, for this painting can be valued both for the power of its sensuous-formal qualities as well as for its interpretation of the subject matter referred to by its title. "Composition" is in fact a paradigm case of an abstract painting, for it attempts to distill the universal significance of the colors, shapes and patterns which it interprets. By contrast "Broadway Boogie Woogie" might be considered a paradigm of a painting in the "mixed mode," for it seeks to clarify representational as well as sensuous-formal values.

4. The test of whether a (successful) painting is abstract or representational or both at once rests, as Martin argues, squarely upon the nature of its content. A painting which attempts and fails to reveal a potentially significant representational subject matter can succeed artistically only as an abstraction. It may also be effective as *illustration*, but this is not an aesthetically valuable characteristic of a depiction. A painting whose sensuous and formal qualities fail to inform us about the "abstract" values of line, color, etc. can succeed only as *decoration*, assuming that no representational values are present in it. But a painting which possesses *both* representational and sensuous-formal content will succeed artistically as a representation *and* abstraction. Whether our response to a painting containing both kinds of artistic value is all of a piece or not can be determined only by the test of aesthetic experience. On the one hand, the proponents of formalism are undoubtedly correct in holding that our experience of many paintings containing both representational and sensuous-formal content does not result in a psychological fusion of "dramatic" and "plastic" values. On the other, those who maintain, with Martin, that we somehow perceive representational content at work in the realization of painting's "plastic" values, at least in certain cases, may be correct. Surely, the sensitive viewer of Cezanne's "Mt. Ste. Victorie" cannot but discover the coalescence of representational and sensuous-formal values in a single, homogeneous aesthetic experience.

## Notes and References

1. *Art and the Religious Experience* (Lewisburg, 1972), *The Humanities Through the Arts* (New York, 1975) with Lee A. Jacobus.
2. *The Humanities Through the Arts*, Chapters 2 - 3. Hereafter cited as *HA*. For a critical discussion of these categories, see the present author's "Martin on the Revelatory Nature of Art", forthcoming in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.
3. Martin notes the analogy between abstract and representational painting, on the one hand, and pure and program music, on the other, in *Art and the Religious Experience* P. 139. For the sense in which this comparison is warranted, see footnote 21 below.
4. *HA*, pp. 32-3
5. *Ibid.*, P. 6. Elsewhere, however, Martin identifies the subject matter

of "Mt. Ste. Victorie" as the mountain itself and not as the "mountainousness of mountains". Which characterization of this painting's subject matter is to be preferred appears to depend for Martin on the direction of the beholder's interests. If the mountain in its individuality is the real focus of aesthetic interest, the general character of mountains will be of secondary concern. But if an insight into the nature of mountains is the primary goal of aesthetic attention, "Mt. Ste. Victorie", will be regarded merely as an *instance* (perhaps a paradigm case) of this general idea.

6. *Ibid.*, P. 31, 68, 85.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 52. Martin's statement of the various ways in which a particular theme (e.g. the female nude) can be qualified is presumably intended to apply only to representational paintings. No similar treatment of abstract paintings seems possible.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
9. It must be stressed that there is a spectrum of 'values' ranging from paintings which are explicitly representational through borderline cases to those which are undeniably abstract. In the actual world of works of art, there are borderline and exceptional cases of paintings which frustrate every attempt to formulate a universally applicable and unambiguous classificatory scheme of artistic genres. The

distinctions drawn in this paper should not be considered as theoretical absolutes; they are intended to be useful in clarifying the interpretive possibilities implicit in our perception of paintings.

10. *HA*, pp. 111-112.
11. *Ibid.*, PP. 105-107. Martin thinks that a more apt title for this painting would be "Sinuous Spiraling of Sensuous Volumes".
12. *Ibid.*, P. 109. This, notwithstanding the fact that the artist's selection of subject matter (and therefore them) precedes in time its transformation into artistic content. It is the subject matter of a painting which is significant for the historian and the sociologist of art rather than the work's content,
13. In the following examples a painting's title is taken to be a plausible interpretation of its representational subject matter. For more on this subject, see Martin's valuable discussion of the role which titles have in determining our perception of a painting's content in his article "Naming paintings", *The Art Journal* Vol, XXV, No.3 (Spring 1966).
14. See *Transformations* (New York, 1926), Chapter 1.
15. *HA*, P. 31. *Art and the Religious Experience*, P. 148.
16. For a helpful discussion of some of the differences between abstract and "non-objective" painting, see Mieczyslaw Wallis' paper "The Origin and Foundations of Non-Objective pain-

- ting,' *JAAC* 19 (Fall 1960), pp. 61-71.
17. *Art and the Religious Experience*, P. 153 ff. See also *HA*, P. 85 ff.
  18. *HA*, pp. 86-92.
  19. R.G. Collingwood, *The principles of Art* (Oxford, 1938), PP. 162-3, 232, 266. Collingwood distinguishes between three different degrees of representation. Representation to the "second degree" presents the viewer with the pattern or *Gestalt* of an 'object' as opposed to depicting it in empirical detail; for example, the abstract pattern of a ceremonial dance articulated in the design of much Celtic pottery. Representation to the "third degree" projects a definite mood through the work's sensuous and formal aspects; in this context Collingwood mentions Brahms' song "Feldsamkeit" which captures perfectly the mood or emotional state of a person lying in the grass and gazing at the procession of clouds directly overhead. We follow Collingwood in characterizing both sorts of works as "representational," although only works which are representational to the "third degree", such as "Waterfall," concern us here.
  20. For the sense in which the "expressed world" of the work of art is the source of its artistic value, see M. Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston, 1973), PP. 176 f.
  21. Do we *see* the colors of motions of waterfalls in Gorki's "Waterfall", or does the work, aided by its title, merely *evoke* in us the feelings which we recall having in the presence of waterfalls? Probably the latter. The title of this work *directs* us to look for certain qualities in it which we otherwise might have missed. But it would be simplistic to conclude that "Waterfall" contains a literal representation of its subject. Rather, the mood or emotive tone which accompanies our perception of the colors and motions of waterfalls is somehow evoked by the sensuous patterns of this work. Here we may speak of an emotional charge on a specific *Gestalt* or sensuous pattern. For example, Debussy's "La Mer" evokes in us a certain mood which, after acquaintance with its title, we proceed to associate with our experience of the sea. As a result, the tone poem is interpreted as representational art to the "third degree".
  22. According to Martin, "the participator (with an abstract painting) loses his self-consciousness" with the result that "mediation is kept at the outskirts of our attention." See *Art and the Religious Experience*, PP. 148-9.

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