

LECTURE OUTLINES
FOR THE COURSE
INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

By

Fernando Zobel de Ayala

Graduate School
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I

INTRODUCTION

This is a course on how to look at paintings.

Probably the best way to learn how to look at paintings is to start by painting. However I can't teach you to paint in this course.

What I can do, and what I will try to do is to show you how a painter looks at paintings.

This is not the only good approach to the subject, but it's the one we are going to use. It is an experimental approach. I expect you to teach yourselves as much or more than I will teach you. You will do this by seeing, which is something I cannot do for you.

What I am going to do is to expose you to paintings. In most cases these will be either original paintings in a variety of mediums, or they will be original prints, rather than reproductions or colored slides, though we will also use the latter. We will discuss these paintings; in some cases we will discuss them very thoroughly. If you can teach yourselves to take a half dozen different paintings apart and put them together again, if you can learn to exhaust their possibilities as a means of expression, the chances are that you will be prepared to enjoy and understand any painting the future may bring by yourself and by your own efforts.

Of necessity, because of the originals and reproductions available to us, we will concern ourselves with paintings in the contemporary or "modern" idiom almost exclusively. However, this is not entirely a course in "modern art". We will arrive at certain principles that apply to the art of all time "modern" or otherwise. We will not involve ourselves primarily with a historical study of art. We will briefly trace the development of the contemporary schools of painting but for a detailed knowledge of these extraordinarily interesting developments I must refer you to material in our libraries.

Despite the relative scarcity of original paintings and prints I have decided to use these in preference to reproductions because of an important point too often overlooked: a painting is an object and the manner it is constructed is an essential part of its value. A reproduction, at best, is only a shadow of the original. Reproductions are invaluable to a historical course; but for our sort of investigation the presence of original works is of prime importance.

A word about the way in which the course is to be conducted:

This is going to be an informal course. Discussion will be encouraged every means at my command. Do not hesitate to interrupt, ask questions, dispute points, or get involved in arguments. I do not have all the answers; in fact I intend to learn a good deal from this course myself.

With this syllabus at your disposal I feel that there will be little or no need for the taking of notes. Please pay attention to the discussion and join it. To take voluminous notes in this course will be a waste of time. I will expect you to use your eyes, ears and tongues, not your pencils.

Examinations and tests, of which there will be few if any, will be of the 'essay' type. Credit will be given to clear, original, and logically expressed thought. Little if any value will be given to the exercise or memory. Any attempt to memorize names, dates or portions of this syllabus will be (and in fact, is) a sheer waste of time.

A few short papers will be required. You will be expected, in writing them, to exercise your eyes and your mind. And remember, brevity is the soul or wit. Pity the person who has to correct them.

ASSIGNMENTS

This course is largely an experiment in teaching you how to see things. Accordingly, a good deal of your preparation for lectures will consist in looking at specific objects, either original works of art or reproductions.

These objects will be hung in the graduate library several days before each lecture. They will have labels with them asking certain questions. Except when a written answer is specifically required, you need not answer these questions in writing.

You should look at these objects for a sufficient period or time. Less than 10 minutes is hardly adequate. Do not look at them passively but actively. Ask yourself questions: what is the artist trying to do? Does this look like anyone else's work? If something disturbs you, what is it? How well has he accomplished what you think he is trying to do? etc. etc.

We have several books with reproductions in our library. My lectures are so labeled that you will readily find references to them in our books. Read if you wish, as widely as possible. Above all, however, look at the reproductions. You need not necessarily browse following the order of the lectures. Just browse. By so doing you will supplement the few demonstration works available to the lecturer, and you will enrich your own enjoyment of the lectures.

II

PAINTING AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION

Painting is a form of expression.

Like speech, music, writing, etc.

Painting is a way of getting an idea across.

In this course we will not explore such questions as "What is art?" or "What is beauty?" We will explore individual works of art and we will try to arrive at ways and means of picking out superior as against inferior works. "Education is the recognition of quality" (Henry Adams)

In other words, painting is a language.

It is a visual language.

Much of our trouble with paintings is that we expect them to communicate to us when we don't understand the vocabulary used. That is like a person who dislikes English poetry when he doesn't understand English. Painting has many languages.

Some people are disappointed with certain paintings because they do not speak in the vocabulary of another kind of painting. Sometimes they are disappointed because certain paintings do not speak in the vocabulary of another art. This is the case with "literary" paintings.

To a certain extent each painter creates his own vocabulary. However, paintings are meant to communicate, and few if any paintings are unintelligible.

Painting, as I have said, is a visual art.

The first thing we must do is learn to see paintings. There is more to seeing than just looking. Give a picture a chance, rather than a glance. Paintings are at the mercy of the glance.

III

PAINTING AS A FORM OF EXPESSION

What can a painting express? Almost anything.

A painting can give information, tell stories, move the emotions, produce propaganda, moralize, etc.

A painting is at its best when it expresses a pictorial idea. That is to say an idea that cannot be adequately expressed except by pictorial means.

In a sense this is what is meant by the old cliches "a picture is worth a thousand words."

The Chinese meant the same thing when they insisted that a truly educated man had to know

music
painting
writing

Because each of these arts can do things the others cannot. It is a well established corrolary that when one of these arts intrudes into the territory of the other, it does so at its own peril.

Ex: "program" music
musical prose
"literary painting"

One of the time honored tests of a good painting is "does it express a pictorial idea?" In other words, could music, or could literature express it better? If so, why bother to paint it?

Example of the development or a pictorial idea:

IV

THE COMPONENTS OF A PAINTING

Painting, as a form of expression, appeals to the intelligence through the eye.

A painting is made up of two elements

- An object
- An intelligence (the artist)

A painting can be broken down into 4 parts:

1. Idea - ARTIST (conception)
2. Skill
3. Form (appropriate) - OBJECT (execution)
4. Materials

The excellence of a painting depends on all four of these factors. This excellence can be tested by four questions:

1. What is the man trying to express! (Idea)
2. Does he have the vocabulary to express it? (Skill)
3. Is he expressing himself as simply and directly as possible?
(Style or appropriate form)
4. Is he using his materials efficiently? (Materials)

For practical purposes these questions can be boiled down to two:

WHAT IS THE ARTIST TRYING TO DO?

HOW WELL DOES HE DO IT?

THE MATERIALS OF THE ARTIST

We can pick up our ideas on the conceptions, skills and styles of painting as we look at examples, but before we do so, it is essential that we have at least a nodding acquaintance with the materials available to the artist, and the effects he can produce with them.

The artist has at his disposal three elements:

line (measurement)
tone (weight)
color (emotion)

These can be applied by a huge variety of means. With them the artist can make either paintings or prints. Both paintings and prints are original works of art. They differ in that:

PAINTINGS - are directly executed on their final ground and therefore exist only individually.

PRINTS - are directly executed on a ground from which an impression is later taken. The advantage of prints is that more than one original work of art can be produced by the artists. Disadvantage: relative lack of flexibility of execution.

NOTE: Do not confuse prints with reproductions (which are often carelessly called prints). A reproduction is a copy or imitation of a painting or print, generally reproduced mechanically, and is only a shadow of a work of art instead of a work of art in its own right.

THE MATERIALS OF THE ARTIST (PAINTING)

Any means of producing a mark, either by placing or by removing a color from a surface is suitable to painting. Custom however has developed certain time-tested techniques which are most commonly used. All of them are used in marking and consist of:

1. The base (canvas, wood, paper, cardboard, etc.)
2. Pigment (the coloring agent, natural or chemical)
The problems of pigment as against natural color
3. Medium (that which makes the pigment stick. Glue, oil, varnish, etc).
4. The transferring tool (brushes, spatulas, knives, fingers, etc.)

Among the most popular painting techniques we have:

OILS: Most flexible. Pigment mixed with drying oil. Color changes little from wet to dry; will dry rapidly or slowly; may be applied thick or thin and with a great variety of utensils to achieve many different textures, etc. Brilliant darks.

WATERCOLORS: Pigment mixed with water soluble glue. Advantages: great transparency and brilliancy, quick drying. Disadvantages: need for rapidity; not usable over large areas; impossibility of correction.

PASTELS: Almost pure pigment held together by very little glue. Applied dry. Advantages: ease of application; maximum brilliance in the light range. Disadvantages: lack of darks, fragility.

TEMPERA: Watercolor mixed with opaque tones. Depth of oils but without transparency of watercolors except when combined. Same disadvantages as watercolors, more brilliance in the light range than oils. Ideal in mixing with other mediums (In the same family: caseins made with a very tough milk base) Difference between wet and dry color.

FRESCO: Watercolor mixed with plaster. Advantage: great brilliance and permanency. Disadvantage: extraordinary difficulties of application, especially in the matching of wet against dry color.

There are countless other mediums, some absolutely grotesque. There is also an infinity of combinations possible within mediums such as a picture drawn in pastel worked-out in casein, completed in oil, etc.

VII

THE MATERIALS OF THE ARTIST (PRINTS)

Almost all prints must be printed off a flat surface, therefore considerations of texture depend on handling rather than materials. Actual materials are generally soluble pigments (inks) of various kinds. Impressions may be taken off an inked surface by a variety of ways:

(a.) By printing directly off a planned surface (white areas cut away).

Woodcuts (rough, forceful, simple technique)

Wood-engravings (as above, but permits also extreme delicacy in tone)

Also certain varieties of etching and monotypes.

(b.) By picking up ink from inked grooves in a cleaned surface.

Engravings (outmost finesse in line, but hard, difficult).

Etchings (rougher than above, but permits spontaneity).

And all the varieties of etching including mezzotints, etc.

(c.) By printing off an adhesive surface surrounded by unadhesive surfaces.

Lithography (extraordinarily flexible. Permits direct tone values.)

(d.) By printing through a mask or stencil.

Serigraphs (silk screens) (Coarse, but permits easy register and economical color work.)

As in paintings, the various types of printing techniques may be and are often combined. Each technique has its own attributes.

VIII

THE MATERIALS OF THE ARTIST (RESUME)

Considerations on the proper and improper use of materials with examples.

The field of materials so briefly discussed is a vast and complicated one. Inevitably you will have questions; this is your best chance to ask them.

VII -VIII

A print, in the specialized sense in which we use the word, is an impression taken from an original work of art. Obviously, there are a great many ways of taking such impressions but we will concern ourselves with some of the commonest and most effective.

A. Woodcuts and Wood Engravings

Wooden surface. Black areas left, white areas cut away. Surface inked, then pressed on paper.

The difference between a woodcut and a wood engraving, basically, is one of degree. In the wood-engraving, white areas are scratched rather than cut.

EFFECT:

- a. Woodcut: Strong contrasts or black and white.
- b. Wood engraving: the massing or thin white lines produces a wide range of tones from black, through the entire gamut of greys, to white.

B. Etching and Engraving

Reverse of woodcuts and wood engravings.

Metal surface scratched, then inked, after which the surface is wiped by a cloth. Ink stays only in the scratches. Plate is pressed (with great pressure) on paper.

The difference between etching and engraving is a technical one. In engraving, the scratches are made by a hard pointed instrument directly on the plate. In etching, the scratches are made by the action of acid.

EFFECT:

- a. Engraving: Hard "controlled" lines permitting very delicate minute effects. Silvery quality. Lines same thickness.
- b. Greater freedom in drawings. Lines vary in thickness. Relative coarseness.

NOTE: Etchings can be made by means other than line. The explanations given above are enormously simplified and should be accepted as snapshots rather than definitions.

C. Lithography

In this case there is no cutting or scratching. The principle involved is that oil and water do not mix.

Drawing made on porous stone with grease pencil. Stone is saturated with water. Water does not cover greasy drawing, only areas left white. Surface inked with greasy ink. Ink sticks only to dry drawing, not to wet white areas. Stone is pressed on paper. (Nowadays stones are seldom used, but the above is the basic explanation).

EFFECT:

Outmost freedom in technique, perfect for tonal effects, but relatively uneffectual if a sharp linear quality is decreed.

D. Serigraphy

Drawing made on silk with water-soluble glue. Entire surface varnished with water-resisting varnish. Water-soluble glue then washed off, leaving blank areas. Paint pushed through these blank areas onto paper.

E. Final Note:

These techniques can be and often are combined, as in painting. There are a great many other ways of making prints.

F. General Considerations on the proper and improper use of materials.

IX

THE PAINTER AND HIS TRAINING

The Economics of Painting

- Patronage by the community
- Patronage by the ruler
- Patronage by the state
- Patronage by nobody in particular

The Effects of Free Lancing

1. His income - how does the painter live?
2. His public - who "uses" his paintings?
3. His paintings - who is he responsible to?

The painter as "artist".

The Training of the Painter:

The development of the artist. Difference between the child's and the mature eye.

1. Apprenticeship
2. The Academy
3. The explorer

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Painting is the expression of a visual idea. How does the painter set about capturing this idea?

Several approaches are possible:

1. The Western "classical" approach:

The arranged picture in which each item is individually studied in relation to the whole, by means of separate studies. The picture itself often evolves on the canvas. This approach calls for -

sketches
drawings
prints

2. The Western "spontaneous" approach:

Evolution, if any, takes place on the canvas. The automatism.

3. The Oriental "spontaneous" approach:

The method of irrevocable decisions after meditation.

These basic approaches depend largely on the temperament, training and personal circumstances of the individual artist.

Directness

All artists are interested in getting their idea across as simply and directly as possible. The most simple, most direct course not necessarily the "easiest". Expression more difficult than description.

THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN ART (1)

1. The Academic Tradition

The "realist" position

- (1) The importance of story-subject-description.
- (2) The illusion of reality. Its mechanics
 - a. Perspective
 - b. Proportion
 - c. Chiaroscuro
 - d. The invisible brush stroke.
 - e. The Fixed viewer.

What do things really look like? To whom?

2. The invention of photograph

The sacrifice of description to "truth". The great photographers.

3. The impressionist position.

Impressionism, basically the final development of "realism."
Position: everything seen is light. Not a revolt against academic tradition, rather its logical last stand.

Revolutionary aspects of impressionism: The murder of the literary subject; and the emancipation of color. Subject description.

THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN ART (2)

Analysis of the "Classical" approach

All the examples you are about to see imply the questions "what is the artist trying to do?" and "how well does he do it?"

Also ask yourself

Does this picture look real? Why?

Is the subject-matter important? Does it tell a story?

What devices does the artist use to make his meaning more powerful?

Analysis of Impressionist approach

Ask yourself.

Is the subject-matter important? Why?

In which way is this picture like a color photograph? In which way is it different?

What devices does the artist use to make his meaning more powerful?

Ambiguity:

No approach to painting is "bad" in itself. The "badness" of a painting usually depends, not on whether it is modern or classical, spontaneous or studied, but on a confusion of motives. In the examples that follow try to locate this confusion.

XIII

POST-IMPRESSIONISM (1)

Paul Gauguin

The "primitive" position.

The "subject" of this picture and the "harmony" of the picture.

Expressive color.

Vincent Van Gogh

Subjective emotion and its technique.

Expressive form, texture, color.

Ask yourself at this point: What are Gauguin's, Van Gogh's pictures really about? Do not let mere titles fool you; use your eyes. How does Gauguin differ from Van Gogh?

Did you have any trouble identifying the subject-matter or Van Gogh's pictures? His contemporaries did. What does this suggest?

XIV

POST IMPRESSIONISM (2)

Paul Cezanne

The subject matter: the symbolic apple "Construction."

Its color

Its line

Its texture

Depth without perspective.

Compare these examples with your memory of Gauguin and Van Gogh. You will undoubtedly notice a radical difference in purpose. Which of the three painters do you find the most exciting? Why?

Cezanne was considered a painters' painter right from the start? Why?

Cezanne's medium is oils. He did watercolors, now considered magnificent, which he used to leave abandoned in the fields. The two facts are closely related. Can you suggest why?

Van Gogh's medium was also oil, but he habitually worked fast, sometimes completing a picture within an hour. Why didn't he use watercolors? Or, to put it differently, did Cezanne and Van Gogh use oils for the same purpose?

THE PROGRAM OF REVOLT

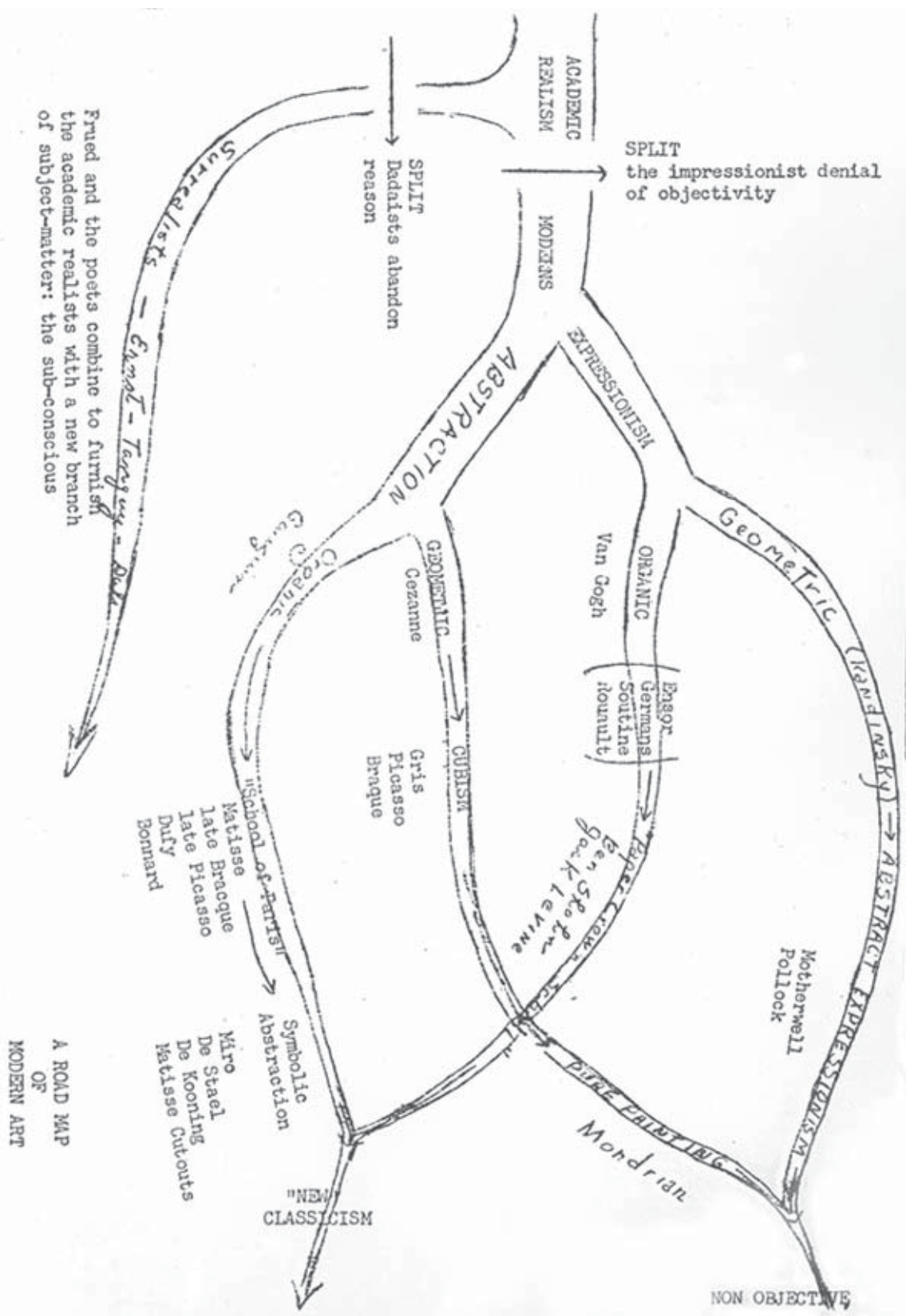
The term "modern art" covers a multitude of different, sometimes even contradictory aims. Many people who are confused by "modern art" owe their confusion to their desire to find a common aim that will apply to all of its manifestations: that is to say, a common aim that will apply to pictures by Picasso, Matisse, Klee, Dali, Kokoschka and Pollock. No wonder they are confused. The common principle does not exist, unless it be the principle of revolt.

A revolt must be a revolt against something. The moderns revolted against the academic concept of painting, which held to itself certain "immutable truths" among them:

Art is a mirror held up to nature.
Painting is an illusion of reality.
Skill leaves no traces.
Color is an effect of light.
Beauty is the approximation to the ideal.
Beauty is transferable.
 etcetera, etcetera, ad infinitum.

You will notice that all of these "truths" assume that the artist is an objective eye. His job is to record, more or less accurately, what his trained eye sees. The revolt was a revolt against this assumption. The new assumption (only gradually recognized and openly used by the artists themselves) was a revolt on behalf of the subjective artist. Or to put it more differently, the artist does not paint what he sees; he paints what (he thinks) he knows.

A look at the chart on the next page will show quite obviously that artists know a lot of different things.



Fried and the poets combine to furnish the academic realists with a new branch of subject-matter: the sub-conscious

A ROAD MAP OF MODERN ART

SPELLING GUIDE TO CHART

ACADEMIC REALISM

SPLIT - the impressionist denial of objectivity

SPLIT - Dadaists abandon reason

SURREALISTS - Ernst - Tanguy - Dali

Freud and the poets combine to furnish the academic realists with a new branch of subject-matter: the subconscious.

EXPRESSIONISM

GEOMETRIC (Kandinski) - ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Motherwell

Pollock

ORGANIC - Ensor

Van Gogh Germans

Soutine - "Paper Crown School"

Roualt Ben Shahn

Jack Levine

ABSTRACTION

GEOMETRIC - CUBISM - "PURE" painting

Cezanne Gris

Picasso Mondrian

Bracque

ORGANIC

Gauguin - "SCHOOL OF PARIS" - SYMBOLIC ABSTRACTION

Matisse Miro

late Bracque de Stael

late Picasso De Kooning

Dufy

Bonnard Matisse cutouts

XVI - XVII - XVIII

EXPRESSIONISM

Premise: Painting is an expression of a subjective state of mind or emotion.

Corrolaries

"Expressive" line, form, color
The "inspired" artist and his amateurish technique.

ORGANIC EXPRESSIONISM

Exploration of morbid and extreme states or mind

The visual pun

Ensor
Germans
Munch
Nolde
Kokoschka
Soutine
Rouault

The Expressionist landscape

The Expressionist vocabulary

Limits of organic expressionism

GEOMETRIC AND ORGANIC ART

GEOMETRIC EXPRESSION

Is it possible to express subjective thoughts, emotions directly without recourse to the figurative vocabulary?

Kandinsky

XIX

ABSTRACTION

Premises: Expressive impact and clarity are enhanced both by

1. Exaggerating and otherwise drawing attention to essentials
2. Eliminating the non-essential.

Classical conventions or an abstract nature

Drawing
Distortion
Prepared palettes

The new abstraction is new in degree; by its ruthlessness. Its archaeological models.

African sculpture
Child art
Primitive art

As in expressionism, abstraction split into organic and geometric paths.

XX - XXI

ORGANIC ABSTRACTION

Premise: To reduce the natural world to its essentials.

The abandonment of photographic realism.

Simplification and distortion of form.

"Abstract" color.

Revival of line as an element, not only of form, but of color.

The "Wild Beasts" (Fauves)

Matisse

Dufy

Bonnard

The School of Paris

late Picasso

late Bracque

GEOMETRIC-ABSTRACTION

Premise: The structure of things is more interesting than their appearance.

Corollaries:

1. A picture is not an "open window".
2. A picture is a construction.
3. A picture need not "resemble" anything.
4. The surface of a picture is a part of its subject-matter.

CUBISM

The reduction of natural forms to abstract shapes (Picasso, Bracque) "Hermetic Cubism".

The discovery of natural forms in abstract shapes (Gris).

"Lyrical cubism" The decorative use of arbitrary shapes.

Cubist use of line, shape and color to suggest depth without the traditional aids (perspective, chiaroscuro, etc.)

The logical question posed by geometric abstraction: Why relate a painting to natural form?

Mondrian
"De Stijl"

XXIV

THE TRIUMPH OF "MODERN" ART

The Critics

The result of their battle with impressionism.

The new school of art criticism; its extremes.

The Dealer and the Client

Art as an "investment".

The Poets

Their curious role as propagandizers of "modern painting".

Museums

Established institutions and their lumber rooms.

Shyness. The "great" exhibitions. The cathedrals of modern art.

Modern Art and Education

The attraction of clear theories plus minimal techniques: R
Revolt without risk.

The New Academy.

How modern is "modern" art?

What fields are left for development?

1. Synthesis
2. Complete non-objectivity

XXVII - XXVIII

NON-OBJECTIVE PAINTING

Premise: A painting is an object. The subject of a painting is the painting itself.

Corollary: A painting need have no relation with the appearance of natural objects. It can deal either with emotions (organic school: abstract expressionism) or with constructions (geometric school).

Both stands have obvious musical analogies. Shopenhauer: "All arts aspire to the condition of music."

The background of non-objectivity in design, calligraphy.

The special problems of criticism in non-objective art.

XXVIII

CONTEMPORARY ART

The gradual shift from Paris to New York.

Difficulty of seeing beyond the critic.

The future of the non-objectives.

The "new" classicism.

The new public for painting.

Renaissance in Spain, Italy, Mexico. A different "realism", or a will-o-the-wisp?

The situation in Asia.

CONTEMPORARY PAINTING IN THE PHILIPPINES

Background: The French academic tradition and the Impressionists.

The originality of Amorsolo. The Philippine "Academy".

Voices of revolt. Edades.

"Modern" art and World War II. The American influence.
Nationalism.

The difficulties of creating a national style.

Arturo Luz
Hernando Ocampo
Vicente Manansala

The Filipino painter

His training
His finances
His public
His critics
His opportunity