CHAPTER 6

The Modernist experiment

Introductory

The purpose of this chapter is: (a) to summarise and extend ideas on Modernism in panting discussed in earlier chapters (and other volumes in the series); (b) to provide clarifications of its main essentials of Modernism; (c) to give an idea of the variety of its manifestations in its early years. (d) to provide a flavour of the many ways Modernist Painters (starting with the Impressionists) have struggled with the problems of creativity; and, (e) to show how artists have always needed the constraint of a framework of ideas to push them forward into the new territory. It concludes with an anecdote coming from the mid 1960s which relates to the powerful will for change which was gathering momentum in those years and which led in the 1970s to so-called Postmodernism. The next two chapters provide a more detailed account of the work and ideas of two of the Modernist Artists mentioned in this one and these are followed by a chapter which asks whether or not Modernism is still thriving.

'Modernism in Painting'

Fashions in painting, like fashions in everything else, come and go with the passage of time. In *European* art a host of relatively temporary movements have taken their place within a sequence of what might be described as "*meta-fashions*". In the 1960s, few would have quarrelled with the claim that European painting since Medieval times could be conveniently divided up into three main periods:

- The *Christian (Mediaeval*) period, ending in the fifteenth century.
- The *Italian and Flemish Renaissances* and their ramifications, lasting from the fifteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth century.

- The *Modern* period, which was set on its way in the 1860s, 1870s, 1880s and 1890s by Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Berthe Morisot, Georges Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Emile Bernard, et al.

It is now fashionable to claim that we have entered a *Post-Modernist* phase. Whether we have or not is a question faced in *Chapter 9*.

Though it seems reasonable to include many aspects of painting as defining characteristics of *Modernism*, there is one, above all, which in recent years has been the butt of vigorous criticism. This is the emphasis on formal properties (sometimes described as "*painting for paintings sake*") at the expense of both symbolic content and social relevance. However, many, like myself, consider that much of this criticism misses the mark. On the one hand, it fails to acknowledge the view, which prevailed amongst the artists concerned, that working with colour, line and/or the surface/space dynamic can have profound symbolic significance and social relevance. On the other, it gives no cognizance to the richness of the response of the *Impressionists* and their successors to the two fundamental questions that were first given serious consideration in the late 1860s, namely, "*What is art?*" and "*Has the artist any valid role in society?*"

A primary stimulus for asking this question was provided by the camera, a small, brainless, black box which could equal the best efforts of the most talented draughtsman with respect to verisimilitude. The *Renaissance* artists had fought for being given equal status to poets and philosophers on the grounds that the making of veridical figurative paintings required an erudition, worthy of the highest aspirations of the human spirit and, in effect, the camera called their bluff. By the 1870s, the high level of accuracy in the representation of anatomical structure and perspective, two of the great achievements of the Renaissance artists, had been reduced to skill-free, mechanical processes. And this was not all, for the recent invention of colour photography suggested that soon the mysteries of representing colour and light in nature would complete the artists' discomfiture. The question arose as to whether there was anything left that human beings can do better than the camera. Once it had been asked, answers came thick and fast, bringing in their train revolutionary new perspectives on almost every aspect of painting.

Other factors both encouraged the process of radical re-thinking and hastened the pace of change. These included:

- The *Industrial and Scientific Revolutions*.
- The realisation by perceptual scientists that *all visual experience is made in the head*.

- The widespread enthusiasm for the *rule-defying Japanese print.*
- The perceived *sterility of academicism*
- The increasing popularity of *anarchistic tendencies in thought*.

All these factors pushed the progressive painting community into a reexamination of the criteria underpinning their value judgments.

However, the new ideas took time to evolve and mature and, consequently, many quintessentially *Modernist* qualities had to wait for the 1880s and 1890s before their radical exploration would be set in motion by Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and *Les Incohérents,* and much longer before any real appreciation of the full scope of their potential was possible. For that to reveal itself, it was necessary to watch an unfolding story, told in the work of such artists as Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch, Pierre Bonnard, Emile Nolde, Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault, Pablo Picasso, Franz Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp, René Magritte, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Diebenkorn, Francis Bacon, Michael Kidner, etc. etc..

Figure 1 : Gustave Moreau, "The temptation of St Anthony", water colour on paper 14cm x 24cm.

The placing of Gustave Moreau[1] in this list is significant. He is too often ignored in discussions about *Modernism in painting*. However, despite maintaining relations with academic circles, this erstwhile friend and onetime role model for Degas was one of the most adventurous spirits of them all. He was in the vanguard with respect to:

- The virtuoso mark-making and use of colour in his often near-abstract watercolours and oil studies.
- The surface-holding arabesques in his fully worked up paintings.
- His open-ended and revolutionary teaching.

How can we regard as outside the mainstream of *Modernism*: the creator of the painting reproduced in *Figure 1*.

Clearly, whether acknowledged as being so or not, Moreau was a *Modernist* in terms of this thoughts and actions. To account for this and many other anomalies in the accounts of historians, it is necessary to admit, what should be obvious in any case, that *Modernism* has always contained many strands, allowing for a such rich variety of expression that it will always be hard to pin down. It is also important to remember that it was a movement born of an historical context in which many of its lines of enquiry had been explored already, even if sometimes only to a relatively small extent. Why else did so many *Modernist Painters* search for inspiration in the works of their predecessors, such as Veronese, Poussin, Rubens, Rembrandt, Chardin, Constable, Turner, Ingres and Delacroix, et al?

Neither should we forget the ubiquitous influence of the poets and philosophers on the directions followed by the painters, nor that their inspiration more often than not had its roots in antiquity. There was almost half a century of *Modernism* before Mondrian, Duchamp and the Dada artists seriously considered the possibility of a root and branch sweeping away of tradition.

The revisionists

An early charge against the *Impressionists* was that of "*banality*", on the grounds that their work left no room for the imagination. The critic Armand Silvestre summed this view up when he asserted that *Impressionism,* "*proceeds from a completely new principle of simplification ... Concerned only with accuracy, it uses elemental harmonies, with little care of form, it is exclusively decorative and colourist*." Perhaps unintentionally, Jules-Antoine Castagnary confirmed this view when he enthused that "*imagination and style have given way to rational*

1 In Paladilhe, Jean, 1972, Gustave Moreau, Thames and Hudson, London

painting, the direct expression of nature, of life ...and the faithful representation of society." More recently, some critics and art historians have seen the *Impressionists* and *Post Impressionists* as representing a blip in the flow of history. These revisionists give pride of place to the importance of the image with its potential for powerful symbolism and mind-stretching conceptual underpinnings. They see a mainstream that jumps from such artists as Caspar David Friedrich, via unashamedly Symbolists like Gustave Moreau, to more conceptual and politically motivated aspects of 20th century art. One reason for questioning this view is that, although many today consider the 1870s as a golden age of straightforward representational painting, the artists concerned would not have recognised this view of their work. The careers of three leading *Impressionists*, Monet, Renoir and Pissarro, provide examples of this fact. None of them ever espoused what might be described as "*mere impressionism"* . If when they feared that they might be sliding into it, all three sought paths of deeper significance. Their immediate *Modernist* successors soon left any aspiration towards literal accuracy far behind, as they charged headlong into uncharted territory, and following generations contributed new twists to the ever-evolving situation.

Indeed, we are left asking, which of the celebrated early *Modernists* stayed with "*banality*"? Some might argue Cézanne, who advocated painting people and apples as if they were the same. Others might suggest Monet, either on the grounds, proposed by Cézanne, that he was "*only an eye*" or because his later productions could be said to have degenerated into very little more than coloured surfaces, albeit extremely complex ones. But the argument could be turned by pointing out that these two artists were following not only the poet Wordsworth in seeking (and, in the opinion of many, finding) the sublime in the ordinary, but also Charles Baudelaire with his double definition of beauty as comprising both *ephemeral* and *permanent* aspects of appearances.

Before coming to an easy conclusion on this matter, remember that the early *Modernist Artists* were influenced by *Neoplatonic* ideas and, for this reason, gave much thought to symbolism. Remember also: Van Gogh's search for a pictorial language capable of expressing the human condition; Gauguin's Goethe-inspired ideas about the symbolic charge of colour: Toulouse-Lautrec's rendering of brothels and the plight of their inmates: Edvard Munch's hard won and justly famous image of "*The Scream*"; and, more generally, the exploration of an *alternative reality* that gives priority to vital human experience rather than the rules of linear and aerial perspective. All these considerations were to lead to the possibility (to

be explored in the *Twentieth Century*) that even non figurative artworks might, at least in the minds of the artists, stand as symbols of profound significance. For example they might signify "*spiritual reality*" (Kandinsky and Mondrian), "*the collective unconscious*" (Pollock) and "the *dynamic universe*" (Kidner), etc..

The contribution of the Modernist Painters

So, what was the contribution of the "*Modernist Painters*"? One approach to answering this question is to refer back to a recurring theme in the volumes of this series, namely the value of *same/difference judgments* and how these provide a vital part of the process of learning at all levels of description, including neurophysiological ones. Following this idea, the focus in this chapter will be sharpened by comparing a list of the functions of painting which plausibly could have been drawn up before the game-changing meetings of the young *Impressionists* and their poet friends in the *Café Guerbois,* with a list which might have been produced after the influence of the mind clearing ideas discussed there had gained momentum. The items are by no means mutually exclusive.

The first list enumerates different reasons for making paintings which have recurred consistently through the ages and within different cultures. It includes: story-telling, spiritual uplift, moralising, memory aids (portraits, places, objects and events), flights of fancy (imagined realities), idealisation, expression, awareness enhancing (calling attention to hitherto little appreciated aspects of the visual world), realism, communication of ideas, social comment, aesthetic pleasure and, last, but not least, status claims. It is against this background that we can best appreciate the innovations of the *Impressionists* and their successors.

To avoid repetition, the second list will not be given in its entirety. Rather, it will be restricted, on the one hand, to the items in the first list that were thought to be well adapted to resisting the threat of the camera and, on the other, to the essentially new approaches that emerged. Thus, this second list consists of: imagined realities, expression, distortion, the latest ideas about the role of the brain in creating everyday visual experience, the object/illusion dynamic, a fundamental reexamination of the criteria underpinning value judgments and, finally, a focus on the importance of creativity itself and its two corollaries: going beyond the "*known*" into the "*unknown*" and the need for constant innovation. The camera was not thought to be capable of creating "*imagined realities*", "*expression*" or "*distortion*", while *"subjective realities*", "*abstraction*", "*object/illusion dynamic*", "*the fundamental reexamination of criteria*" and the "*need for constant innovation*"

had little or no significance in the thought of artists before the 1870s.

Assuming that the above lists to be reasonably complete, it can be deduced that the rudiments of *Modernism* lie in the second, abbreviated list and that bringing its contents into focus give us a better idea of how the *Modernist* movement combined radical changes in emphasis with new initiatives. The significance of the former can be made clearer by a number of subsidiary comparisons. Thus: (a) The *"imagined realities* "of Heironimous Bosch, Rubens and Goya are rooted in totally different conceptual frameworks to those of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and René Magritte; (b) The expression of Vermeer, Rembrandt and Delacroix are less obtrusive and probably less conscious than those of Vincent Van Gogh, Chaïm Soutine, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko; (c) and the distortions produced by the idealisations of Michelangelo and El Greco are tame in comparison to those produced by the projects of Toulouse-Lautrec, Matisse and Picasso.

Figure 2 : "A modern Olympia", by Cézanne

One reason for giving Silvestre some credit for his view that the early *Impressionists* were in danger of becoming mere recorders of appearances is that Monet, Renoir and Pissarro grew uneasy on this score and took avoidance measures in the 1880s. Meanwhile, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Moreau, Redon, Munch, Bonnard, could hardly be accused of banal figuration. Don't forget that Cézanne contributed his "*Modern Olympia*" (*Figure 2*) to the '*First Impressionist Exhibition*'. Hardly evidence that "*imagination and style have given way to rational painting and the direct expression of nature*."

Neoplatonism and transcendence

The next question to ask is, "Are there are any themes from the first list with special significance to the Modernists?"The answer is that there were several, of which two deserve special mention: "*spiritual uplift*" and "*social criticism*".

Over the centuries a recurring influence on European artists was the body of philosophical doctrine known as *Neoplatonism*. This had its origins in *Alexandria* and *Rome* in the third century AD. Its first proponent was Plotinus (AD 204–270) who sought to synthesise ideas originating within the then relatively new Christian traditions with older ones coming from further afield. Particularly important sources were the Greek philosophers (Pythagoras, Aristotle, and, especially, Plato) and religions from the *Middle and Far East* (*Persia* and *India*). The central notion was of the *"One*" from which all things come and to which all things return. The main aim was to discover methods by which human-beings could participate actively and creatively from within this *oneness*.

Not surprisingly, we find Plotinus and his successors advocating a search for a supra-rational mystical experience. From this premise came two ideas that were to inspire Western art through the ages, particularly in the *Renaissance* and *Modernist* periods namely that:

- There is a supra-reality beyond that of the visible world described by physical measurement.
- Opposites might be transcended, bringing them into harmony.

A proponent of the first idea was Michelangelo who, influenced by his *Neoplatonist* philosopher friends, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, was searching for perfections beyond those which were possible to find in the world of his daily experience. An advocate of the second idea was Baudelaire with his ideal of beauty, combining, in one experience, the contradictory qualities of per-

manence and impermanence. In Baudelaire's train came the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who by using words to build up form from clusters of allusive elements, raised the question as to whether the essence of something lies in the something itself or in the concatenations of allusions? Parallel questions arise in painting, for what else are objects in paintings but concatenations of allusive elements (that is to say, patches of pigment-colour given meaning by context). For this reason it might not be so very far-fetched to draw a parallel between Cézanne and Mallarmé, who significantly spent much time with the *avant garde* painters, both at the café Guerbois and, in the 1890s, at the open house of Thadée and Misia Nathenson.[2]

Issues of this kind needed working through and historically the process was helped by the fact that each generation produced new batches of philosophers and poets whose thought was also much influenced by mystical ideas concerning the oneness of the universe. In the *Nineteenth Century*, the process was given an boost by a resurfacing of interest in ideas from the Middle and Far East, and a variety of consequent attempts to combine them with existing western notions. The resulting syntheses were to have an enormous influence on the arts. Of particular importance for the history of painting were the ideas of Madame Blavatsky (founder of the *Theosophical Society*) whose definitive book *The Secret Doctrine* was published in 1889. The fact that Kupka, Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, the four main pioneers of nonrepresentational art, were all influenced by her gives her an important role in the history of pure abstraction in painting.

By the outset of the twentieth century, mysticism was well and truly in the air and was soon being given new perspectives by the discoveries of modern physics. Thus, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire saw the circular dispersion of light, as a metaphor for the power of the mind to expand and embrace all being, and it was he who coined the word *Orphism* to describe a vision of a new, "*pure*" art, which he associated with the works of Kupka, Delaunay and others. In view of their espousal of esoteric ideas and convictions, it is not surprising to find that these pioneers of pure abstraction wanted to make paintings that could stand as ultimate symbols of the spiritual dimension of human potential.

The story can be continued in the same vein. André Breton, the poet and main theorist of *Surrealism*, using language reminiscent of *Eastern* mysticism,

2 Thadée and his elder brother Alexandre were the proprietors of the *avant garde* arts journal, "*La Revue Blanch*".

wrote:

> *"Everything suggests that there is a central point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the heights and the depths, cease to be perceived contradictorily. It is in vain one would seek any other motive for surrealist activity than the hope of determining this point*."

Nor were the *Surrealists* by any means the last in the line of artists who were to draw inspiration from religio-philosophical ideas. Hard on their heels came the *American Abstract Expressionists* who, in addition to their debt to the surrealists, tapped into the *Mystic Tradition* as interpreted by Karl Jung. Also, after the *Second World Wa*r; what was to become a widespread and profound influence of *Zen Buddhism* on artistic production gathered momentum.

In summary, although the search for transcendence, via abstraction has been described by politically committed people as escapist and head-in-the-sand, for the artists concerned, it was a way of delving into the most fundamental issues of all. They moved inexorably in the direction of abstraction for the very reason that they thought abstract elements, such as *pure-colour*, *pure-form* and *pure-arabesque*, capable of conveying the deepest spiritual meaning. It was by no means only Kandinsky who was driven by a desire to discover "*the spiritual in art*".[3] Rather, the idea of using use nonfigurative art as a means of creating symbols representing the highest possibilities of the human spirit was one of the main motivating forces of the first half of the twentieth century.

Social criticism

In the middle of the *Nineteenth Century*, the work of Karl Marx honed criticisms of the dark side of *Capitalism*. Artists, never having escaped being creatures of their time, reacted to the world in which they happened to find themselves, and it was not long before they joined the clamour against what was perceived as the inherent exclusiveness and inhumanity of the prevailing economic wisdoms. Their criticism was sharpened by outbreaks of war, which came to be considered as a by-product of the capitalist power-game. The political and social ramifications of the *Franco-Prussian War* helped *Modernism* on its way, and many artists were galvanised into action by what they saw as the senseless slaughter of the *First World War*. Perceiving *Capitalism* as a major cause of the unparalleled level

3 Wassily Kandinsky, 1977, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Dover, New York (originally published in 1914)

of destruction, bloodshed and human misery, they were loath to find themselves dependent on money generated by the *Capitalists*.

All in all, it cannot be wondered at that some artists were provoked into mounting a head-on attack on all that reflected this rotten state of affairs. More surprising was the form it took, namely a root and branch debunking of existing ways of thinking about art. The two most radical of these were:

- "*Dada"*, a movement, started in Switzerland in 1916 by the German war-refugee, poet and philosopher, Hugo Ball.
- "*Pure abstraction*", in the hands of the above mentioned quartet of *Theosophist* artists Franz Kupka (1871-1957), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944).

Dada

In *Dada* there were two strands: Some of its proponents believed in "*destruction*" as a prelude to "*creation*". They saw themselves as burning down the edifice of tradition so as to create the ashes out of which the phoenix of a truly modern art could rise. Others wanted only to use *"art"* (with a small "a") to bring about the downfall of "*Art"* (with a big "A"). Whatever their aim, their activity was bizarre and provocative in the extreme, going far beyond the timid gestures of *Les Incohérents* and other precursors. As one of their leading spirits, Hans Arp, wrote, "*Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today with the illogically senseless. That is why we trumpeted ...the praises of unreason*." It was *anarchism* in art with knobs on.

Two examples help give the flavour of what the *Dada* artists were up to: a sculpture by Max Ernst had an axe attached to facilitate its destruction by spectators and a work conceived by Picabia, consisting of a canvas covered in nothing but signatures of artists, pointing the finger at the importance given by the art-market to authorship as opposed to quality of content.

Also, by focusing attention on the role of the spectator, *Dada* contributed a highly significant new emphasis. According to Marcel Duchamp (in the long term, the most influential of all the *Dadaists*), it is not the artists themselves who create art, but those who responds creatively to their productions. This being the case, he argued, any object can be made into art, merely by the appropriate use of the spectator's imagination. It doesn't matter whether the object is man-made

or machine-made, whether it is structurally permanent or ephemeral, or whether it has been conceived with or without aesthetic considerations in mind. One conclusion that can be drawn from this line of thought is that trying to make art is a waste of time. If all objects are potentially art-objects, why not save the bother of fabrication and, taking on the role of spectator, use your own powers of imagination to turn everything around you into art objects. Duchamp made this point by exhibiting his bottle-rack and his urinal, but even these radical statements of his revolutionary attitude were compromises with his philosophy. The logical conclusion was the cessation of production. Duchamp eventually realised this and, in 1923, made the necessary gesture.

The ideas of the Surrealists and Duchamp heralded a change in certain artists' conception of their role. In future their purpose would not be the creation of permanent objects but to act as gadflies, provoking the imagination of others in relation to issues of importance. No longer would they be the child-bearers of art, but its midwives.

Theosophy and "*Pure Abstraction*"

The importance of the role of *Theosophy* in the evolution of modern art needs further emphasis. In 1911, Annie Besant, successor to Madame Blavatsky as the leading figure in the *Theosophical* movement, brought an Indian teenager to England with the intention of grooming him for the role of *"World Teacher*". Eighteen years later, the fledgling, having grown in maturity and wisdom, disbanded the organisation of which he was now head. He did so on the grounds that the dualistic nature of the disciple/master relationship is necessarily incompatible with the discovery of the non-dualistic inner-self which he saw as the ultimate realisation of human existence and creative potential. He advocated total acceptance of living in the present and argued that the only way of achieving this end was the destruction of all links with the past. His rejection of traditional religions (and, indeed, any thought-systems) was root and branch:

> *"There is nothing sacred about tradition, however ancient or modern. The brain carries the memory of yesterday, which is tradition, and is frightened to let go, because it cannot face something new. Tradition is our security and when the mind is secure, it is in decay ...There is no alternative, everything must end for the new to be".*

The name of the man who made this remarkable statement was Krishnamurti

and his ideas are relevant in the present context because of the light they throw on the thought processes of Kupka, Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, whose theosophist inspired ideas led them to throw off the bondage of representation.

Madame Blavatsky, like Karl Marx, was a utopian, believing that mankind was in the process of evolving through a series of stages which would eventually lead humanity to a better existence. However, in contrast to Marx's economics-based conception, the transformed state of affairs she envisaged was a spiritual one, in which the manifest negativity of materialism would be transcended. Our four abstract painters were united in seeing themselves as giving substance to her brave new vision and sought to create symbols of deep significance, untainted by the dross of tradition. In their quest, they found themselves led inexorably towards the purest possible abstraction using new symbolic forms. A few words will be said about each in turn.

Frantisek Kupka

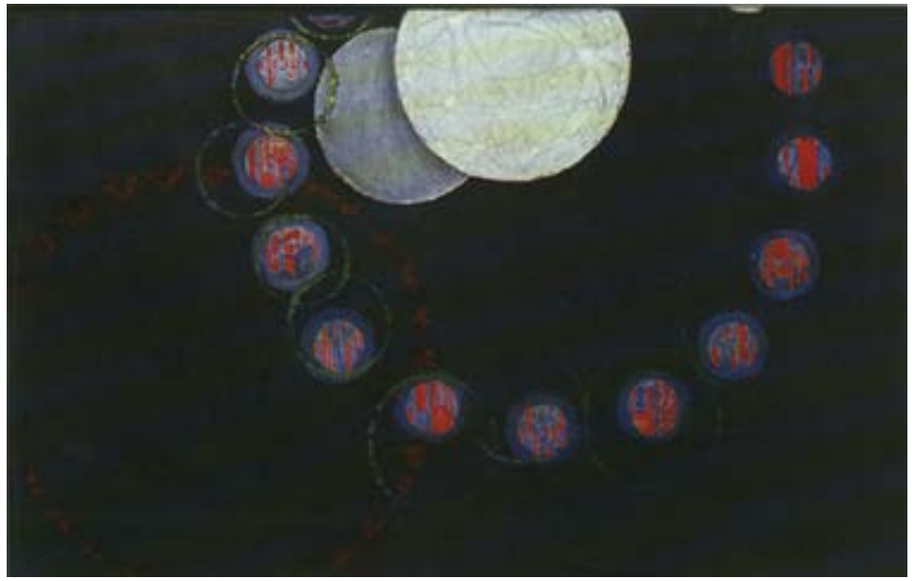

Figure 3 : Franz Kupka, "Discs of Newton" (1911-12)

Kupka saw geometric forms as capable of conjuring up the spiritual essence

of all things and was the first of the four to throw off the shackles of realism. A typical example, *Discs of Newton* (1911-12) is reproduced in *Figure 3*. Worth noticing are both its reference to science and the allusion to the mystic purity of light.

Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935)

Figure 4: Kasimir Malevich - Suprematist painting, 1913.

Early in the twentieth century, Kasimir Malevich was determined to create a *new language of form and colour* for his painting. This was the time when

physicists were first delving into the mysteries of the atom, giving confirmation to the idea that all objects in the world were made up of a relatively small number of basic units. A little older, but no less reductionist, was the idea that colours are all made from three primaries. In something of the same spirit artist were looking for a limited umber of basic elements and colours to use in the construction of paintings that could evoke new experiential worlds. Malevich who had gone through a *Realist* phase and a *Cubist* phase was well versed in the ideas of *Modernism in painting* and, in particular, in ways of creating pictorial space and spatial ambiguities, while keeping the elements in it close to the real picture surface. Overlap and diagonals and the push-pull of the different colours were the main ways of creating a dynamic space, while texture and the proximity of pictorial elements to the picture frame kept the real surface/illusory space dynamic in full play. Malevich chose blocks and lines of various dimensions and thicknesses and a limited number of basic colours as the alphabet of his new language such as those used in *Figure 4*. As he refined his objectives, he sought to symbolise the potential supremacy of mind over matter and he chose the *"square"* as the "*flagship*" of his enterprise, on the grounds of it being a form never found in nature. His idiosyncratic logic led him in 1918 to produce the famous painting of a white square on a white ground.[4] Since, for Malevitch, white stood for the experience of infinity which awaits those who adventure beyond material constraints, we may speculate that his objective in this key painting was to symbolise the ultimate spiritual freedom of human consciousness (represented by the square) when re-absorbed into the infinite essence of all things (represented by the ground). Significantly, this interpretation is both very Blavatsky and very *Neoplatonist*. The same description would fit Wassily Kandinsky.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

Wassily Kandinsky was much less clear about the elements he would use for his first group of abstract paintings (often described as the forerunners of *Abstract Expressionism*). His earlier work had been figurative, dynamic and very colourful. He too had read Madame Blavatsky and had taken on board her ideas about the symbolic and spiritual value of colours. Kandinsky's book, "*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*" (published in 1914), is predicated upon the desirability of freeing art from its traditional ties to material reality. In it, he attempted to codify the symbolic meaning of shape, line and colour, basing his first truly nonfigurative paintings on his conclusions. Though these mould-breaking works eschewed

4 "*Suprematist composition, white on white"*

geometry in favour of biomorphic forms and linear paint traces, their appearance of spontaneity is something of an illusion: Like the paintings of the other theosophist artists, his works were deeply considered and meticulously planned (*Figure 5)*.

Figure 5 : Wassily Kandinsky - Painting with white form.

Kandinsky believed in the power of *expressive mark-making* and had probably taken on board some of the ideas that Seurat got from Charles Henry.[5] Accordingly, with respect to both colour and line he believed in an intellectual approach to expression. This placed him right in the middle of the debate as to whether the feelings being experienced when laying down the paint can be picked up by people looking at the result. Like Matisse, he decided that if he were

5 William Innes Homer, 1964, "*Seurat and the Science of Painting", MIT, Cambridge.*

to achieve his expressive goals, he needed to do many preliminary studies. Also like Matisse he needed these to arrive at a *"clear conception*" in his mind before he started out upon the final work.

In addition, Kandinsky considered the question of dimensions. As his main idea was to provide a pure spiritual experience, he felt the need to minimize the perception of physical reality due to the intrusion of the edges of the picture support. A solution was large paintings. This led to another idea, namely that a painting should not be looked at so much as a whole but as a collection of dynamic groupings allowing for a sequence of transitional experiences (*Figures 6, 7* and *8* are close up details from *Figure 5*). As far as I know he was the first artist to require spectators to approach the picture surface until they are close enough to experience the different events painted on it separately. To get the most out of the painting, it would be necessary to perceive it as a sequence of such close-ups, all of which excluded the bounding edges. Just try doing this with one of his big "*Abstract Expressionist*" works. If you can do so, you may find yourself, like me, bowled over by the experience.

Figure 6 : Wassily Kandinsky - Painting with white form (detail)..

Figure 7 : Wassily Kandinsky - Painting with white form (detail)..

Figure 8 : Wassily Kandinsky - Painting with white form (detail)..

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944)

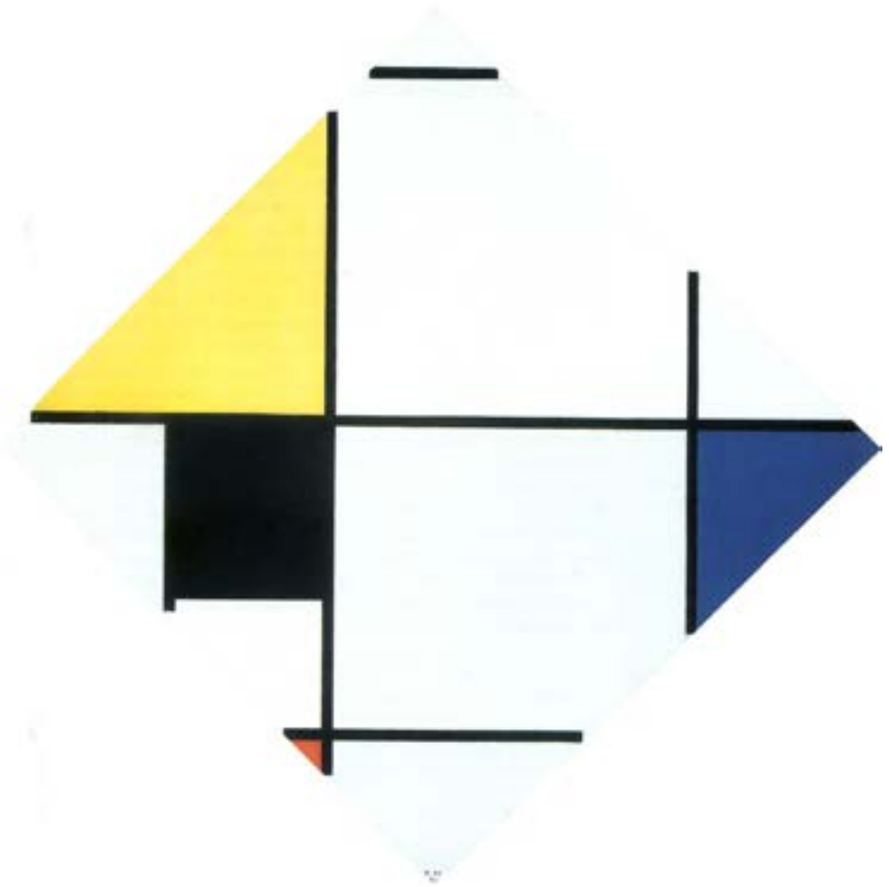

Figure 9 : Piet Mondrian - Composition with red yellow and blue, 1921

By the time Mondrian had made the transition from representation, via his own very special brand of *Cubism*, to pure *Abstraction*, it was the year 1917 and he had reached the age of forty-five. This is not the place to go into the details of the development of his ideas, which has already been done so brilliantly and comprehensively by Carel Blotkamp in his wonderful book *Mondrian - The Art of Destruction*.[6] What is important is the extent to which he took to heart the

6 Blotkamp, Carel, 1994, Mondrian - *The Art of Destruction*, Reaction Books, London, 1994

message, stemming from *The Secret Doctrine* of Madame Blavatsky and encapsulated in assertion of Krishnamurti, that "*everything must end for the new to be*". Long gone were the pioneer days of Toulouse-Lautrec's timid ventures into the unknown.[7] Mondrian's intentions were both clearer and very much more radical. He determined to rethink absolutely everything with a view to presenting a completely new concept of painting, worthy of what he termed "*the new contemporary consciousness*." Allies in his attempt to liberate painting from all reference to observed forms were Theo van Doesburg and Bart van der Leck (both of whom he met in the year before he produced his first truly nonrepresentational works). Together, by means of ongoing debates of a most extraordinarily dogmatical nature, they set out to radicalise the formal language of painting. A basic premise was that illusory pictorial space must be eliminated at all costs; there was to be no room for visual deception. The only space allowed was "*spiritual space"*, emanating from the actual flat surface of the painting-as-a-real-object.

Figure 10 : Bart van der Leck, "Composition no 5" (1916).

A question that inordinately taxed the minds of our triumvirate was that of whether the inclusion of diagonals in paintings could be justified. Two issues were at stake: (a) could there be any valid reason for going beyond the fundamental oppositions of vertical (masculine principle) and the horizontal (feminine principle)? And, (b) would it be possible to include diagonals, without creating illusory 3D space? It is eloquent testimony to the seriousness of the issue that

7 Chapter 7.

Bart van der Leck was to became *persona non grata* with his erstwhile friends for producing works like *Figure 10.* The unforgivable offence was the inclusion of the diagonals and the diamond shapes, which both Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg saw as implying 3D recession. This was despite the fact that, at the time, Mondrian himself was not against the idea of diagonals as such, only their spacial implications. We know this because, he experimented with the idea of holding them on the picture-surface by taking them from edge to edge, across the entire painting. However, he was not pleased with the result and abandoned diagonals definitively in 1919.

Having rejected all but combinations of vertical and horizontal straight lines and rectangles of primary colour, Mondrian faced up to the task of creating a *spiritual space*. A problem was that the combination of *male-principle* black verticals and *female-principle* black horizontals created crosses. Since these are full symbolic value of a kind that would distract attention from the purpose of the painting, the only way to avoid this undesirable outcome that occurred to him was to continue the lines across the picture surface. The inevitable result was the creation of *grids*. Whether he was expecting it or not, the black line grids situated on a white ground created *optical effects*, both in the form of ghostly grey discs emerging at the interstices of the lines and in a degree of spatial push-pull. The latter created a precursor of the "*new kind of space*" later identified by Clement Greenberg in the work of Jackson Pollock and brought to perfection by Bridget Riley in her black and white *Op Art* works.

For Mondrian, the colour rectangles added a mystical dimension to the *spiritual space* that he sought to embody. Since colour was to be firmly restricted to its symbolic role he never strayed beyond the three primaries which he saw as having primordial significance. There was no question of allowing relations between these blocks of colour to encourage illusions of pictorial space. This meant not only shackling them to the neighbouring verticals and horizontals, but also eliminating both modulation and subtle harmonies.

A number of issues remained for decisions had to be made with respect to the number of verticals and horizontals and how far apart they should be situated. Also to be decided was which of the rectangles formed within the grid should be given a colour other than white, and which of the three primaries should be used. Nor was this all. Other issues of fundamental importance to Mondrian were *framing*, the *dimensions* of the picture, and *how to terminate the black lines.*

Conventional frames were out of the question because they encourage the

illusion of pictorial space, so the solution Mondrian chose was thin batons just to neaten up and thereby make less obtrusive the edges of the picture support. Dimension was a matter of judgement, but if the male and female principle were to be given equal weight the painting would have to be square. It would also have to be big enough to create the desired effect but not so big that the spectator would lose contact with the reality-confirming edges. As for the issue of the termination of lines, because Mondrian had the idea that the *spiritual space* he was making should be self-contained, he did not want to allow the interpretation that the lines were going on indefinitely beyond the picture space. This is why they are so often stopped fractionally before the edge of the picture support, as in *Figure 9*.

Meanwhile the absence of the frame combined with the relatively small size of his paintings led directly to another problem. Because the paintings are no longer corralled off from the wall on which they are hanging, they are no longer perceived as separate experiences. Rather, people's response to them is influenced, not only by the colour and texture of the wall's surface but also by nearby paintings or objects of any kind. And, if the context of paintings is part of the perceptual experience, the artist must take it into account when looking at them. Mondrian's obsession with the visual appearance of his studios makes clear how seriously he took this matter.[8] In this aspect of his thought-processes, we see the origins of the notion that paintings should be experienced as objects in themselves, which would eventually lead in 1968 to the exhibition in the *Museum of Modern Art* in *New York* entitled "*The Art of the Real"*.

One might have thought that with all the aforementioned factors under control Mondrian could have filled in his paintings in a mechanical manner. But nothing could be further from the truth. However pleased he was by his first laying in of the linear elements and the colours, it seems that he was seldom quite satisfied. For example, the gap between two of the verticals might seem too wide or too narrow and, therefore, need adjusting. If so, one of the lines concerned would have to be moved a little to the right or to the left. Then, of course, he found that the change in location of that one line meant that all the other relationships, which had seemed right before, were thrown into question. As with Cézanne, when confronted with the unpainted knuckle in his portrait of Ambroise Vollard, any change however small would mean that everything else had to be adjusted accordingly. The seriousness of Mondrian's intentions can be judged from the fact that in the course of one particular year he only managed

8 Blotkamp, Carel, 1994, Mondrian - *The Art of Destruction*, Reaction Books, London, 1994

to produce one painting, even though he had been working on it with his usual single-minded obsessiveness throughout that time.

Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Johannes Itten (1888-1967)

Figure 11 : Paul Klee, 1938, "Insula Dulcamara" 88cm x 176cm.

Of course, not all artists working with pure abstraction were *Theosophists*. However, others were also moved by strong mystical convictions. Amongst these, Johannes Itten (1888-1967) and Paul Klee (1879-1940) had a profound influence on future developments through their approach to the teaching of the basic elements of painting at the Bauhaus. Both dedicated a great deal of time elaborating a body of formal ideas, which then appeared in their work. Both provide excellent examples of how the development of a *new academicism* could give rise to creativity. Paul Klee in particular shows how the application of highly formalised theory can be the midwife to the flights of fancy, as illustrated in *Figure 11*.[9]

Many other examples could be given, but enough has been said to show how artists guided by spiritual considerations, revolutionised ways of thinking about painting. One way of assessing their contribution would be in terms of the extent to which they were able to dot the "*i*"s and cross the "*t*"s of the questions relating to the formal and conceptual aspects of painting first anticipated in the *Café Guerbois* and subsequently opened up in the early days of *Modernism in painting.*

9 Paul Klee, 1960, *The Thinking Eye*, Lund Humphries.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

Figure 12 : Pablo Picasso - Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

What has been written so far is perhaps remarkable for the almost complete absence of the names of Picasso and Matisse, so often considered as the two giants of early twentieth century *Modernism in painting*. This is because their break with the past was less root and branch than that of Mondrian, Malevitch and the *Dada* artists. Nevertheless it was quite radical enough in its own way. Certainly both put a great premium on escaping the *straitjacket of taste* and creating something significantly new.

Although Picasso had much to say about the subject of painting, only too

little of it was concerned with his working thought processes. For this reason it is necessary to use the imagination when describing much of what he did. If this were a book about art history, such a tactic, however well informed, might be unacceptable. However, here we are talking about the constraints artists put upon themselves and how these help them in their creativity. Even if some of the ideas suggested are based on my fallible intuitions, they will still serve this purpose.

Picasso had a long life and painted in many different styles. For simplicities sake we will concentrate on the most adventurous project he ever engaged upon, namely that which resulted in *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon* (*Figure 12*). The factors which gave rise to this remarkable painting will give us quite enough food for thought. In the year before starting on the work itself, Picasso had produced a number of paintings influenced by African masks and a remarkable portrait of Gertrude Stein, which bore the imprint of his new interest. These were the first harbingers of the possibility that Picasso might one day become a leader within the *Modernist* movement. Earlier his notoriety was due to: (a) what was seen as a precocious ability to draw in traditional manner; (b) his ability and, make clever pastiches of the work of Toulouse-Lautrec; and, (c) the *Blue* and *Pink* period paintings. Although today this early output is prized and fetches high prices, it is relatively unadventurous and tame when compared with the experiments of his *Modernist* contemporaries. None of his paintings would have caused a scandal capable of earning him the soubriquet of "*wild beast*", which was accorded to Matisse and his friends in 1905, when they exhibited their brightly coloured, relatively atonal and flat-painted works. By virtue of age, intellectual clout and adventurousness, Matisse was their acknowledged leader.

Picasso, being both exceedingly ambitious and miffed to be left behind, determined to make a statement in painting that would leapfrog him past Matisse as the artist to be watched. Many young artists of today, who feel the pressure to create something that is dramatically and, if possible, shockingly new, would recognise his dilemma.

So what did Picasso do? Amongst other things, he visited the studio of Matisse and saw one of his rival's most prized possessions, the recently purchased "*Figures in a Landscape"* by Cézanne (*Figure 13*). Also, he would surely have seized the opportunity to pick the brain of the older man.[10] Assuming he did so,

10 Picasso became well known for his ability to make use of other people's ideas, to the extent that it is said that, later in life, his erstwhile collaborator, Georges Braque used to hide away his recent works when Picasso came on a visit.

he would surely have been impressed by the adventurousness of Matisse's mind. Two of the things he might have learnt were: (a) that Matisse was never satisfied with anything that did not provide the shock that comes with the unexpected; and (b) that the distortions which are a characteristic of his paintings were the fruit of a formidable amount of preparatory studies and sketches.

Figure 13 : Paul Cézanne - Three Bathers

One bit of evidence that Picasso was influenced by Cézanne's "*Three Bathers"*, is that the right hand side figure in *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon* is said to be a reference to it. Even today this key painting in art history seems awkward in many ways. For example, the figures are crudely constructed and not at all easy on the eye. The whole is clearly done from the imagination and the lack of direct

reference to nature shows in the many features that some people might describe as ineptly drawn. We can imagine Picasso wondering how the power of this apparent incompetence reflected on the value his own exceptional drawing skills. Would they help or hinder him in his quest to shine as a *Modernist* painter?

Figure 14 : Henri Matisse - Marguerite

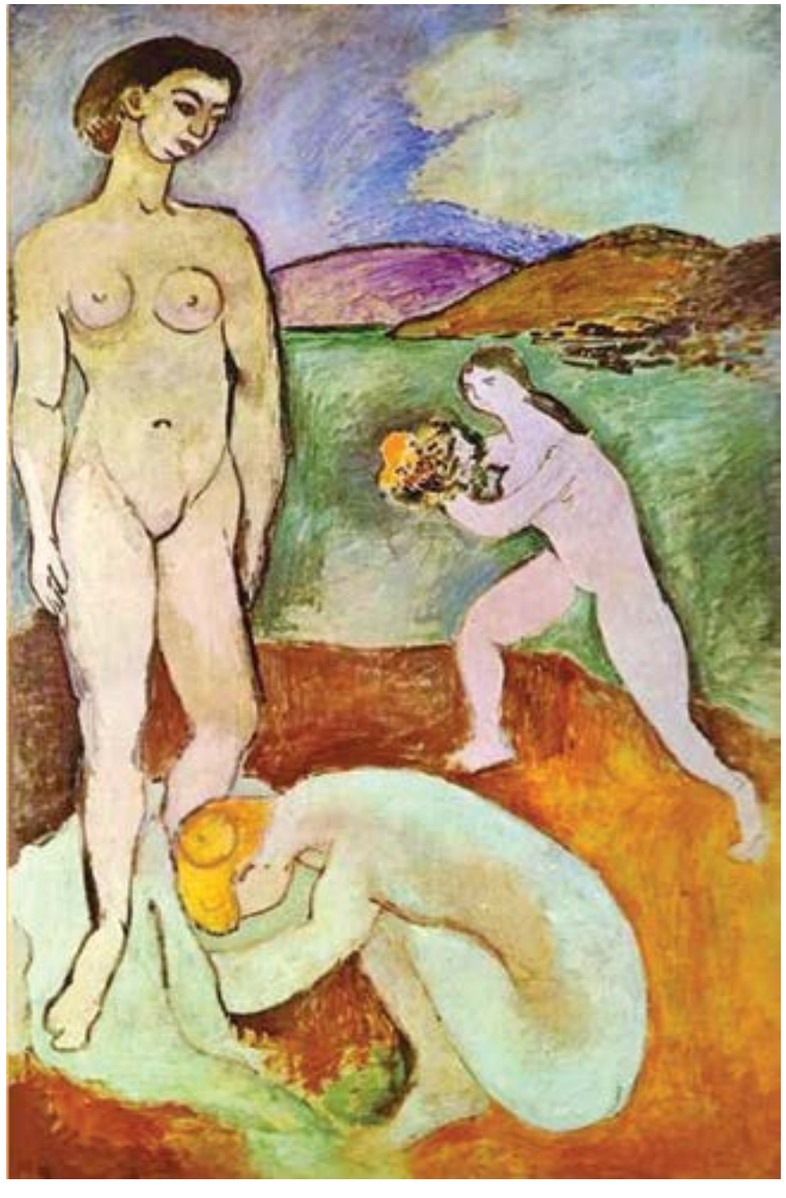

Figure 15 : Henri Matisse - Lux 1

While visiting Matisse, it is probable that Picasso saw some of his recent works. Amongst these, he may have come across the portrait of his daughter, *Marguerite* (*Figure 14*), since it was painted the same year. If so, he may well have learnt from its radical simplifications, restrained colour and the flatness of the way the paint has been applied.

In addition, it is not inconceivable that Picasso might have been shown some of the preparatory work for the ground-breaking *Lux 1 (Figure 15*). It is a painting that some might find difficult to digest, which shows the kind of radical departure in terms of crudely realised figures that Matisse was capable of contemplating. What could Picasso learn from all this? How was he going to upstage the older man?

We might also ask whether the Matisse visit had anything to do with the influence of *African masks* and the move to simpler, flatter and more stylised images, which appeared in Picasso's work about this time? Two things we can say are, first, that these developments indicate a radical break with his relatively conventional past and, second, that what he learned from exploring them fed into *Les Damoiselles d'Avignon*. Another lesson he may have gleaned from Matisse is that any significant new departure requires a long period of preparation and much difficult heart searching. If so, this might explain why he shut himself up and worked secretly on his new idea over many months, making innumerable sketches and studies, to help him sift the ideas he was obsessively turning over in his mind.

Eventually Picasso was ready to embark on the painting itself . Still isolating himself from the gaze of others, he struggled with it for a long time before he brought it to its current state of development (*Figure 12*). We can imagine how, like anyone that had produced something so radically departing from existing norms, he might well have been uncertain about what to think of or feel about it. Perhaps we should not be surprised that he excluded it from exhibition for another ten years. But what was so different? One answer may come from imagining the painting before the three mask-like faces were put in place (the ones that can be seen to have been rather crudely added both to the figure on the far left and the two figures on the far right). Would it, at this stage in its evolution, have astonished the art world? It easy to suppose that Picasso might have felt that it would need to be considerably more provocative, if is was to achieve this aim. We can also imagine that he shocked himself by what he did next. Could it even be that he saw the mask-like additions as a disaster? If so, was there any way of rescuing matters? For example, could he do so by completing the painting in the style of the mask-like

parts? If he did ask such questions, he clearly concluded that it would be better to leave these uncomfortable questions to the side, at least for the for the moment.

If this speculation is correct, the *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* as we know it today was at first thought as being in an unfinished state and perhaps even in an irretrievably ruined one. Over subsequent years, the few selected artistic friends whom Picasso allowed to see it were intrigued and challenged by its awkwardness, a characteristic that, perhaps, more than any other provided it with the shock of the new thereby, helping it to become a watershed masterpiece in the evolving history of *Modernism*. As for Picasso, he never again made quite such a radical step, unless it was the move out of *Cubism* into his *Neoclassical*, figurative style that, in many ways, was a dramatic retreat back in the direction of conventionality.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954)

A key to the understanding the work of Matisse lies in the artist's obsessive search for the "*new*", and the radical approach to experimentation that this engendered. He battled to push himself beyond habitual ways of doing things and welcomed situations where existing criteria failed to provide him either answers or route maps. He relished both the shock of finding himself in the uncharted territory and the challenge of forging new pathways. A working assumption, not only for Matisse himself but also for both his obediently critical family and his faithful client Shchukin was that if a painting was easy on the eye, it should be rejected as "*bad*". Only when it provoked a negative reaction was it worthy of further research.

A big difference between Matisse and Picasso lay in their use of colour. This can be seen in the comparison between *Figure 12* and *Figure 15*. While for Picasso colour was little more than a support for an image, for Matisse it was primordial. This is why, if we move our eyes around "*Les Damoiselle d'Avignon»* from one region of colour to the next, we get few colour-based excitements. In contrast, if we look at "*Lux 1*", we find an abundance of unusual colours such as the light green and purple that respectively characterise the two smaller figures and the dark green, purple and blue-purple in the background. If we examine the mauve figure more closely, we see the many subtle variations within it (redder, bluer, less fully saturated). The same subtlety is to be found in every part of the painting, which is replete with carefully chosen colour nuances and dynamics.

Achieving this abundance of variety would require (a) a great deal of colour mixing, (b) large number of parent colours and (c) a colour-mixing philosophy to some degree analogous to that proposed by Professor Bohusz-Szyszko. Nor could such a result have been achieved without much experimentation, involving the exploration of a large number of alternative possibilities.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)

When we get down to the nitty-gritty of Cézanne's working practice, we see that there was much in common between his approach to colour and that of Matisse. However, the Master of Aix wanted to keep his colours within nature's relatively narrow range and to abide by its limitation that no two patches of colour are ever quite the same. The outcome is an amazing variety of nuance. The challenge of the number of colours that have to be found is not eased by the extensive use of small, separate touches of paint. To meet it Cézanne made use of a palette of approximately three times as many tube colours as the six advocated by the early *Impressionists*. His task would have been virtually impossible without the extra capacity for exploring the minutest gradations of hue saturation and lightness within colour-space enabled by the extended range of pigments.

The role of the intellect

One of the key issues of *Modernism*, not yet been broached in this chapter, is the role the *intellect*. Ever since the time of Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin, the limitations of the intellect as a tool for innovation had not only been recognised but also deeply understood. Creativity must entail a journey beyond the bounds of previous knowledge and, therefore, beyond the reach of intellect and logic. The "*bad drawing*" and dripping paint of Toulouse-Lautrec[11] were but hesitant steps in the direction of twentieth century artists who: (a) emphasised the importance of going beyond knowledge into the unknown; (b) mistrusted every preconception; (c) sought to become instruments of universal forces; (d) sought to release repressed emotions lurking in the "*unconscious*" and/or (e) believed in relinquishing matters of choice in favour of the vagaries of chance. This being the case, it is not surprising that, though often notable for their quickness of mind and depth of thought, a good proportion of the most highly regarded of them joined in the collective attack on *intellectualisation.*

11 *Chapter 7.*

However, since so many of the more highly regarded twentieth century artists were only too willing to expound their own ideas, we can conclude that it was not the intellect in itself that they were against, but its misuse. Despite a number of famous protestations to the contrary, they were, without exception, prepared to use their intellects in the search for creative constraints on their working method and to place their productions in historical and theoretical contexts. In other words, although they inveighed against certain aspects of knowledge-driven artistic practice, their practice showed them to be in favour of using knowledge-driven strategies to force themselves beyond the limitations of their current knowledge.

Experimentalism

An alternative to the phrase "*using knowledge-driven strategies to force themselves beyond the limitations of their current knowledge*" is a word, well known to science, that keys us into the *Modernist* emphasis on thought-constrained investigatory activity, namely, the word "*experiment*". However, since the artistic community has always had its fair share of experimenters, this can hardly be claimed as unique to recent times. What was new was not the fact of experimentation but the variety and the quantity of it, boosted as it has been by the rich harvest of new materials, tools, processes and ideas generated by the *Industrial and Scientific Revolutions*.

Debts to the art of other cultures

The influence of the art of other cultures is not mentioned in the list of similarities found in works made before and after the *Modernist* watershed. Perhaps it should have been for the *Italian Renaissance* owed its name to the idea of mediating a rebirth of the classical art of *Greece* and *Rome*: Looking back proved to be a wonderful catalyst to looking forward. And, in the nineteenth century, the artistic community, in its search for new possibilities found themselves looking beyond the *Post-Renaissance, Western European* paradigm. The role of the Japanese print in breaking the stranglehold of academicism is well known. But this was far from all. Once alerted to the idea artists looked backwards to *pre-Renaissance Christian* and *Pagan* art and sideways to the so-called "*primitive*" societies of the *Pacific islands* and *Africa*. Gauguin was an acknowledged pioneer, but innumerable artists followed in his footsteps, including Picasso. Other avenues of exploration were found in the innocent eye of the child and in the perturbed imaginations revealed in the psychotic art of the insane.[12] It is difficult to say to what degree the distortions of Bonnard may have been influenced by the alterna-

12 Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis. Hayward Gallery, London 1996.

tive realities found in the *intellectual realism* of the artistic productions of young children, but Klee's debt to both children and psychotic patients is incontrovertible.

The American Abstract Expressionists

The *Second World War* disrupted the life of European artists and sent many of them to the *USA*, where their influence was profound. Particularly important for the origins of *American Abstract Expressionism* were Ashile Gorky (1904-1948) and a veritable posse of *Surrealists* with their belief in the value of dreams.

My introduction to the ideas of these path-breaking artists was provided by Michael Kidner when he was one of my tutors at the *Bath Academy of Art* in the 1960s. What follows is a slightly elaborated version of what he told me. Later I was to discover that this provided me with a typical example of a phenomenon well described by John Gage in his book *Colour and Culture*. According to this authority, accounts of the past are inevitably filtered through the sensibilities and conceptions of the present, and that this process allows oversimplifications and other distortions to become essential threads in the fabric of evolving ideas.[13] This is certainly true of Michael's version of the philosophy behind *American Abstract Expressionism*. What he told me was full of sins of omission. For example, it had little to contribute to our understanding of Rothko, and far too great an oversimplification to embrace the degree of complexity and ambiguity that characterised the working practice and theoretical stance of Pollock, which it was supposed to characterise. However, it does have the virtue of telling us something about the messages that came through to artists of the next generation, who, like Michael, cherry picked strands that were to become part of their own practice.

Thus, according to Michael, the *American Abstract Expressionists* were responsible for a paradigm shift. Like many breakthroughs in art and science, the originality of these pioneer artists owed much to ideas coming from outside the field of their own specialism. These had a very long history, being recent manifestations of an ancient and respectable tradition, which can be found in all the major religions of the world. In Christianity, it is the notion that, by relinquishing selfish desires, one can function as an instrument of God's will and thereby become a vessel of divine creativity. Thus, as suggested earlier, many artists have acknowledged their debt to "*inspiration*", rather than claiming all as the fruits of their own efforts. Even the aphorism that, "*creativity is 95% perspiration and*

13 John Gage, 1985, *Colour and Culture*,

only 5% inspiration",[14] attributed to the iconoclastic Bernard Shaw, acknowledged a role for forces beyond his control. Other artists, like Paul Klee, with his simile of the tree, have been more generous in their assessment of the contribution of some vitality-giving power working through them. In Eastern religions, similar ideas are of central importance. Again universal forces take possession of the "*enlightened*" beings and make their actions wholesome, benign and creative. This transformation occurs when the "*self*" (ensnared by desire and fear) is "*transcended*". As with Christians, the lucky ones are quintessentially humble, for without the aid of their equivalent of the "*breath of god"*, they can do nothing.

For Jackson Pollock the link with these religio-philosophical ideas was Carl Jung. This one-time collaborator with Sigmund Freud, criticised what he came to see as the narrowness of his mentor's ideas about the nature of the unconscious. What he objected to was Freud's concentration on the individual and idiosyncratic traits in human nature, to the exclusion of the more universal ones. As an alternative, he proposed his theory of the "*collective unconscious*". In this, he emphasised the common ground in human experience and focused on those aspects which he saw as enabling fruitful communication.

Jackson Pollock and other *"American Abstract Expressionists*" were following Jung when they reacted against the Freudian influence in art of the *Surrealists*. They denigrated the kind of dream-related images produced by them as a form of self-indulgence. They asserted that their idiosyncratic nature rendered their meaning inaccessible to others. It would be much more valid if they could discover and communicate universal truths. Being persuaded of the validity of Jungian ideas, they thought they could do this by tapping into the "*collective unconscious*".

Characteristically, though perhaps ironically, the *American Abstract Expressionists*, in reacting against the *Surrealists*, were, nevertheless, greatly influence by them. In particular, they owed much to their idea of "*automatism*".

I use the word "*characteristically*" in this context because, in the history of art, the process of rejecting predecessors, which so often helps give birth to new movements, is seldom root and branch. I chose the word "*ironically*", because the *Surrealists* used automatism as a method of achieving exactly what the Americans wanted to avoid, namely access to the individual psyche. How it could be that the different groups might have supposed that the same method could be used to bring about a diametrically opposite end gives pause for thought.

14 Also attributed to a host of other people.

Notwithstanding this slight puzzle, the philosophy of the *American Abstract Expressionists* was admirably coherent. Faced with the problem of tapping of the collective unconscious, their solution was straightforward: transcend the influence of the personal aspects of the self and, by so doing, allow the universal forces to take control. It is not difficult to see how, with ideas of this kind, they found themselves mounting an assault on personal taste and the traditional values that inevitably underpin so much of it. Accordingly, their project was to develop a working method capable of eliminating conscious decision-making. The propositions that they evolved proved to be creative because, by constraining thought and action, they forced all sorts of decisions and innovations out of the artists being guided by them, thereby affecting almost every aspect of picture production.

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956)

As intimated earlier, Michael's description of *American Abstract Expressionism* was almost exclusively based on the working philosophy of Jackson Pollock and a small number of so-called "*Action Painters*". According to him Pollock's objective was to get his conscious self out of the way and allow universal forces residing in the *Collective Unconscious* to guide his activity. His problem was that so much of the painting process requires the participation of conscious awareness. For example, it is called upon when:

- Selecting the paint colours to use.
- Deciding on the proportions of the component colours in paint mixtures.
- Choosing which brush or brushes to use.
- Locating the colours on the palette or in the selection of pots.
- Selecting the place to start applying the paint.
- Determining the direction and pressure of the brush-mark.
- Deciding when to stop a mark-producing movement.
- Navigating the necessary body movements.
- The edges of the picture surface inhibit freedom of mark-making.
- Deciding that the painting is finished.

All this without considering the ever-present risk of interference from habitual ways of doing things, and preconceptions as to what a painting should look like.

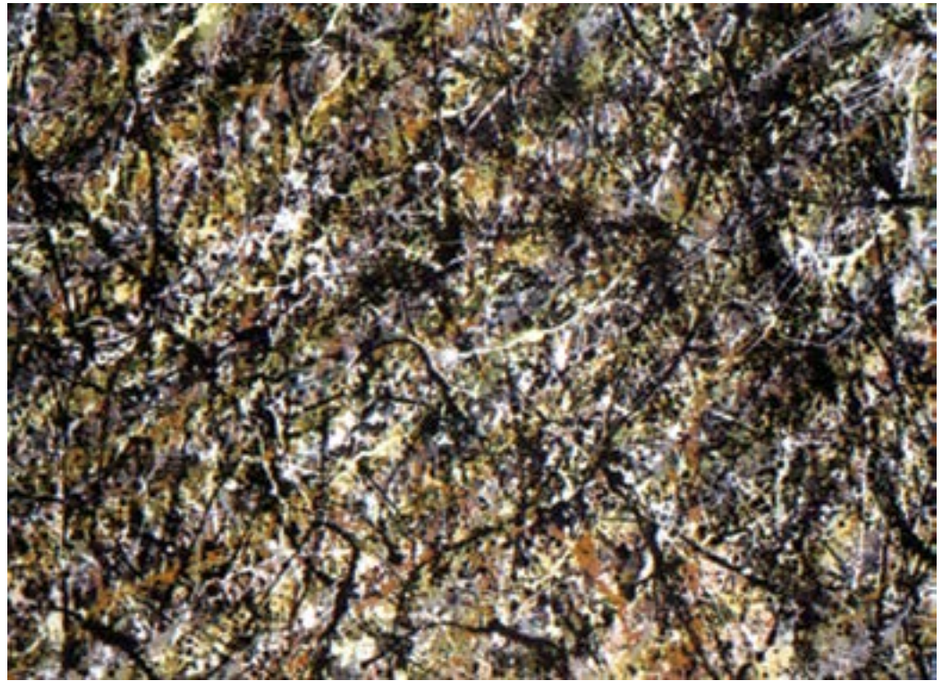

Figure 16 : Jackson Pollock - No 31

Michael saw Jackson Pollock's famous "*Drip paintings*" as a result of the artist's attempt to solve these problems. Thus, he limited the number of colours he used and did not mix them. He put them in large tins with a hole punched in the bottom such that a trail of paint emerged, fast enough to create continuous lines when moved across a picture surface and slow enough that it took as long as possible for the tin to empty. As paint cannot easily be dripped onto a vertical surface, the canvas to be used had to be laid out on the floor. The problem of the intrusive edges was to some extent solved by making very large canvases.

The purpose of Pollock's practice of walking around his emerging painting and delivering drip trails from each of its four sides was to eliminate habits of looking and doing that he saw as being dependent on our inbuilt sense of *up/down* and *left/right*. The problem of when to end a trail was solved by the finite size of the paint tin. It was left to others to come up with the idea of setting an alarm clock to decide when a painting was finished.

Although the purpose of these precautions was to reduce the likelihood of distractions, Pollock still believed that emptying his mind of the "*self*" was the key to the success of his enterprise. To achieve the necessary state of mind, he took guidance from Eastern meditational practices and found ways of entering a trance-like experience when making his paintings. It was this that he saw as taking himself out of himself and, by doing so, clearing the way for the *universal unconscious* to speak through his actions.

Not surprisingly, these ways of thinking and consequent procedures produced paintings, the like of which had never been seen before. The art-world was shaken to its core and yet again found itself confronted with the question, "*What is art*?"

Mark Rothko (1903-1970)

Though Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock are both classified as *American Abstract Expressionists* they had little in common, except the radical nature of their different enterprises and the determination to get to the roots of human experience. After many years of playing about with ideas that owed much to *Surrealism* and *Greek Myth*, Rothko sought to realise his ambition to make paintings that would be catalysts to states of mind. The kind of pictorial space he was seeking to create contrasted with the one which interested Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse. This implied spectators looking in from the outside since only from there could the real surface/illusory space dynamic be experienced. Rothko wanted to enable viewers to experience a palpable experience of getting inside both, and thereby finding themselves in a space created by colour and texture alone.

To achieve his objective Rothko felt it necessary, not only to remove the distraction of the easily readable image, but also to find ways of dissolving the picture surface. Experiment showed him that this meant the use of large regions of colour with fuzzy edges on surfaces large enough to be experienced without interference from the borders of the canvas. After that, it was a matter of giving the colours depth, which he attempted to do by means of many scumbled layers.

Once he had sorted out the main ideas relating to the method, he could explore the impact of different colours, covering different areas of the picture surface. His primary objective was to evoke strong feelings. He would have felt it to be appropriate should tears of deeply felt emotion were to well up in people entering into the mysteries of his surfaces.

Figure 17 : Mark Rothko

Like so many Modern artists who build up their surfaces by means of many layers, each of which takes time to dry, Rothko was more or less obliged to work on more than one canvas at a time. We can easily imagine how this state of affairs could have led him to the conclusion, reached earlier by Mondrian, that the experience of paintings can be considerably affected by the characteristics of other works in their vicinity. It as a natural step to become interested in the idea of exploring the possibility of filling rooms with his paintings with a view to explore the experiences that could be generated by their cumulative effect. Whether the offer of a commission to decorate the walls of a restaurant in the *Seagram Building*[15] in *New York* was the catalyst that brought such thoughts to mind or an opportunity to try out an already seeding idea, it set him up for a seemingly exciting new departure. It also faced him with new problems.

15 Designed by Mies van der Rohe.

As any artist knows, lighting can make or break a painting in which colour relations play a pivotal role. Commonsense logic makes it clear that uneven illumination will inevitably distort colour relationships.[16] But even the flattest lighting has its problems because, as was explained earlier, the degree of perceived reflectivity and its consequences in terms of the desaturating shininess of a surface is dependent on the triangular relationship between: the location (or locations) of the main light sources, the picture surface and the viewing position of the spectator. Only if the angle is acute will the interfering desaturation be minimized and the colours be seen in their purest form. If the painting is very large, such purity will be compromised if, as can often be the case, this angular relationship is different for different parts of the picture surface.

The effect of perceived reflectivity on colour relations can be bad enough for any painting, but it likely to be is particularly pernicious for works characterised by many glazes or scumbled layers, such as those of Titian, Cézanne or Rothko. For me the defining example of how a work can be enhanced or diminished by these factors came when I had the great luck to go to a "*New Purchases*" exhibition at the *National Gallery* in *London,* in 1963. One of the works on display was the "*The Grounds of the Château Noir*" by Cézanne. It was hung on a temporary screen in the middle of the room, almost directly under a skylight and, therefore, illuminated b*y flat* natural light from an angle such that it would not be noticeably reflected back from the picture surface into my eyes. In short, viewing conditions were perfect and, "*Wow"* The result was stunning. The painting was jewel-like, with the ensemble of colours giving off a radiance of an extraordinary, seemingly luminescent richness. However, when I next saw the same painting, now in its more permanent place, it seemed a drab affair. The reason for this unhappy transformation was that in its new location I could not escape the effects of unwanted reflectivities on the surface. Since then the painting has been moved several times but, to my knowledge, never into the ideal lighting conditions under which I first saw it.[17] The difference between a Cézanne or a Titian and a Rothko is that the earlier painters works have an *image* to take over should the impact of the colours be diminished. Where Rothko's paintings are concerned, in as far as the forms that they contain can be described as images, image and colour are inseparable: The one has no meaning without the other.

Being well aware of these factors, it must have been clear to Rothko that

16 In some cases this can help an indifferent painting to look better, for example, when the faces or other key parts are picked out by a spotlight.

17 It is now in the *Tate Modern.*

lighting would be a big problem for the *Seagram Building* commission. Given Rothko's exacting requirements, it would be extremely difficult to reconcile a space illuminated for a functioning restaurant even if there had been only one painting to hang, and the problem could only be exacerbated by the prospect of many paintings hanging on different walls, set at different angles to one another. There could be no question of providing viewing conditions that would be right for all of them simultaneously. At least some and probably all of them would be plagued by experience-killing shine. For an artist of principle, such a set up would create an impossible situation. It is hard to believe that Rothko didn't realise this. No wonder he let the commission lapse.

Some of the paintings are now in a special room in the *Tate Modern*, in *London*. Much trouble has been taken to give them the best lighting possible, but after failing to find shine-free surfaces, I am forced to the conclusion that the result is far from what Rothko would have wanted.[18]

Michael Kidner (1917-2010)

Michael Kidner[19] was much influenced by both Mondrian and Pollock. Although he himself was not concerned with painting a "*spiritual space*", he took on board virtually all the factors listed above to describe Mondrian's working practice.[20] From Pollock, he acquired what he described as the "*propositional approach".*[21] His argument was that, unless you can describe what you want to achieve, it is going to be difficult to know what to paint. But, if you can provide the necessary conceptual framework, it will help with every decision to be made.

Michael was also attracted to Pollock's idea of tapping into a *collective unconscious*, in as far as it promised a channel of communication between artist and spectator. However, in his view Pollock's way of doing so had failed. However rigorously he tried to follow it for himself, he had found his mark-making remained frustratingly repetitive and idiosyncratic. The method simply did not work as a way of rising above habit and skill.

To bypass this cul de sac, Michael adopted the use of *"systems"*, using simple mathematics to determine (constrain) the structure of the his painting. He believed that submitting himself to of mathematics enabled him to take a great

18 It was much better when in a smaller, more dimly and evenly lit room, in what is now the *Tate Britain.*

19 For more on Michael, see *Chapter 8* which is devoted to his work.

20 And, indeed, the working practice of many of his contemporaries.

21 This is what he told me, although he might have gleaned much the same idea from Mondrian.

stride in the direction of eliminating habit-driven mark-making.

With the main structure taken care of in this way, Michael looked to eradicate all possible manifestations of habit-driven personalised sensibility. This is why he and other *System*s painters sought to eliminate all signs of personal brush-marks and avoided modulated colours. Colour was a big issue for him. Obviously aesthetics would have to be sidelined, leaving functionality as the sole criteria. What this meant was that colours should only be used as an aid to making sense. This is why so many of Michael's paintings are in black and white or, otherwise in one, two or three primary colours.

If the system required more than two colours, the choice of which additional ones to use became an issue. Since his propositional approach excluded the possibility of resolving it on the basis of personal taste, Michael preferred to use colours straight from the tube that, if necessary, he adjusted for lightness using white or black. The reason for lightness adjustments was his belief that *equal-lightness* colours[22] stay on the picture surface, while *unequal-lightness* encourages the perception of undesirable in front/behind relations.

In his early days as a "*Systems Painter*", Michael was attracted to the optical effects which his equal lightness philosophy encouraged, but eventually realised that, like colours chosen on the basis of taste, these functioned as a highly distracting element. People even mistook his paintings for *Op Art*.[23]

Back to the beginnings

It is so usual to start at the beginning and work forward, that it may seem strange to end this run through the projects of artists by back tracking to a number of key figures from the second phase of *Modernism in Painting*, namely Georges Seurat, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Vincent Van Gogh, Emile Bernard, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch. However, it seems to me that much can be learnt concerning the significance of these artists' work by placing it in the context of the ideas and working practices of successors.

Earlier, the example of Monet was used to exemplify the new emphasis on *feeling* that, at least in the minds of the artists concerned, was a fundamental characteristic of *Modernism in painting*. When he and his like-minded friends painted a subject, it was of primary importance to the that the feelings it evoked would be reflected in the resulting art work. Cézanne spoke for them all when

22 Other wise described as "*atonal*" (England) or"*equal value*" (USA).

23 Not surprisingly for that is what they looked like.

asserted that, "*Painting from nature is not copying the object, it is realising one's sensations*." Cézanne also believed that, when drawing or painting from nature, it is important to *"feel very exactly; and also express oneself distinctly and with force.*" They may be difficult instructions to follow, but they lie at the core of the figurative project of the early *Modernist painters.*

The prioritisation of the feelings also opened the door to *abstraction*, in as far as they come as a response to relationships between different pictorial elements (especially colours), whether local or whole-field. For Cézanne, these were the *melodies* and *chords of visual experience*.

The permanent and the ephemeral

As frequently made clear in this series of books, a major dynamic in *Modernist* painting is the visual tension that occurs between perceptions of the picture-surface as an object and as an illusion. As mentioned earlier, a catalyst to the awakening of the young *Impressionists* to its potential was the poet Baudelaire's definition of beauty as a quality of experience that transcending the opposition between the *permanent and* the *ephemeral.*[24] In their efforts to depict this paradoxical duality, the artists identified the *permanent* with the real paint on the actual picture-surface and the *ephemeral* with the ever-changing nature of the natural world as represented in the images. Using their paintings as experiments, they were able to discover significant variables: Ones that opened up a new range of pictorial dynamics for themselves and their successors. What they found was that:

- Visible brush marks and textural effects indicate the real picture-surface.
- Variations in thickness of impasto can be used to control the viewing distance from which the textural effects impinge on the viewing experience.
- The objectness of a painting is enhanced when the edges of the picture support are visible and, diminished when obscured by a picture frame.
- Viewing distance is an important variable: the nearer the viewer is to the picture surface, the more evident the cues to objectness.
- Perspective, overlap and shading cues, and surfaces painted with complex colours, including pigments from both sides of the colour circle, encourage the perception of an illusory pictorial space, whereas absence of the depth cues and the use of flat, atonal, unmixed colours discourage it.

In the wake of these realisations came, not only the early experiments with

24 Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) who was important in the discussion sat the Café Guerbois.

expressive, surface revealing mark-making pioneered by Manet, Morisot and Monet, but also, in the fullness of time to the:

- Highly textured surfaces of Frank Auerbach.
- Removal of the frame by Mondrian and Pollock.
- Extremely large paintings of Kandinsky and the *American Abstract Expressionists* which were to be viewed from close enough to the picture surface that the influence of the edges would be excluded entirely.

It was also responsible, both for the:

- Explorations of *real surface/pictorial space* dynamics by Toulouse-Lautrec, Pissarro,[25] Cézanne, Matisse, Albers, Diebenkorn and many others (including myself),
- S*quashing of picture-space* by Cézanne, Bonnard, Matisse and the *Cubists*, as well as its elimination in the work of Ellsworth Kelly and other artists looking for an *Art of the Real*.

And that was not all, for it also: inspired Mondrian in his search for a "*spiritual space*" and led to the discovery by Pollock and Rothko of what Clement Greenberg described as "*a new kind of space within the picture surface*" .

Georges Seurat (1859-1891)

Seurat's painting *"La Grande Jatte"*, first exhibited in 1886, stands as a watershed in the history of the use of colour in painting. Sadly, Seurat used pigments that have radically changed appearance over time. In particular, his brightest yellow[26] now looks a dirty brown. Since this was extensively employed in mixtures with oranges, greens and whites, the colour dynamics of the painting have been catastrophically distorted.[27] This means that contemporary comments on their appearance no longer make sense. Accordingly, we have to make do with verbal accounts of those who experienced Seurat's work before the deterioration set in. For the same reason it is difficult to match theory with appearance.[28]

25 Who, as mentioned earlier, gave great importance to the viewing distance at which the mosaic of dots in his *Pointillist* paintings became fused, for it was from here that the image and the painted picture-surface were perceived as being in a dynamic equilibrium.

26 Zinc yellow

27 The zinc yellow has darkened significantly, causing yellow, green–yellow, and orange to become dirty yellow brown, olive–green, and orange–brown, respectively.

28 Theory will only be briefly summarised here as it is treated extensively in "*Painting with Colour and Light*". See also, Innes Homer, 1964, "*Seurat and the Science of Painting*"; MIT Press.

Guided by information coming from contemporary physics, Seurat came to the conclusion that he could paint the light reflecting from surfaces, independently of the body-colour (absorption/reflection properties) of the surfaces themselves. He believed that he could achieve this goal by using arrays of closely packed dots of fully-saturated, complementary colours that blended in the eye according the laws of additive colour mixture. According to the critic Félix Fénéon, the result was both a never-before-witnessed sense of whole-field luminosity and new richness in the quality of the individual regions of colour. The method represented a paradigm shift because, from at least as far back as the Renaissance, artists had represented light by means of gradations of lightness.[29]

A requirement of Seurat's method was that the colours used in his optical mixtures would have to be as pure (*fully-saturated*) as possible.[30] They would also have to be create complementary pairs in all parts of the colour circle, which meant using greens, oranges and violets (the so called secondary colours). For these, like others before him, he turned to tube colours, since many of these were purer than could be made by mixing any pair of adjacent colours. In practice this meant that Seurat used ten different tube colours and surely would have used more if more had been available.[31] In doing so he exploded the idea, espoused by the *Impressionists*, that six tube colours was all that were needed for creating the full gamut of possible colours.

Another requirement was that the juxtaposed dots of colour should be of fairly equal lightness. This is because the more unequal they are, the further the viewing distance at which they blend. Presumably this property of approximately equal lightness explains why Felix Fénéon was so excited by the optical effects resulting from interactions between juxtaposed dots when viewed from close enough that they appeared as abstract elements independent of the image.[32] The near equal lightness would also enhance the vitality of the visual experience at the point of fusion, another of Fénéon's enthusiasms.

Whereas most of the artists who took up *Pointillism* in its early days eventually found the method too restrictive and lost enthusiasm, nearly all of them took important lessons from it. In particular, they found that the experiential quality of the colours in their in paintings was transformed by the combination of using

29 For this reason, the so called "*Renaissance Colourists*" would be more appropriately classified as the *Renaissance Lightists*"

30 Contemporaries rather optimistically referred to them as "*prismatic colours*"

31 A friend, Alan Cuthbert, seeking the same objective with the colours available in the 1970s found he needed 18 parent tube colours.

32 A first report of what came to be called "*Op Art*".

a wider range of *parent-colours*[33] and mixing complementaries into all colours painted onto the picture surface. Also many artists benefitted the realisation that *body-colour* and *reflected-light* could be conceived of as being independent of one another. This was because it encouraged the freedom to explore both variations on or alternatives to natural colours and the dynamic possibilities of the colour-contrast effects provided by juxtaposed equal lightness colours. For these reasons a whole new world of colour was born and the word "*colourist*" came to have a new, more exciting and less misleading meaning.

The combination of the extra tube colours and the systematic use of complementaries in paint mixtures exponentially increased range of colours available to artists, whether, like Cézanne, they were seeking to parallel the range of colours offered by nature or, like Gauguin, they wanted to explore the riches of colour-combination for their own sake. With a palette of sixteen or more tube colours, Cézanne was able to achieve previously unparalleled numbers of subtle colour variations and Gauguin was able to dream beyond nature into unimagined realms of colour delights.

But, Cézanne and Gauguin were by far from the only beneficiaries. The colour related lessons learned from *"La Grande Jatte*" had a transformative effect on the look of paintings by the whole community of *Modernist Painters*.

Vincent Van Gogh (1858-1892), Emile Bernard (1868-1941) and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901)[34]

When Vincent Van Gogh, the pioneer of exaggeration, came to Paris, he signed up for the studio of Fernand Cormon. There he found that his fellow students included Émile Bernard, the originator of *"Cloisonism*" with its delineated outlines and its relatively large regions of relatively uniform colours and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, the explorer of distortion and minimal cues. Later they were to be joined by John Peter Russell, who had previously studied under Alphonse Legros, the pupil of Lecoq Boisbaudran and publicist for his teacher's ideas concerning the creative potential of painting from memory.

In opting to move away from the literal transcriptions of nature, these artists were implicitly confronting questions as to what, if anything, could be gained by doing so. It can be speculated that the answers of Van Gogh (*Figure 18*) and Bernard (*Figure 19*) would have been relatively straightforward: *"Better levels of expression", "More colourfulness"* and "*a shallower illusory pictorial space*", with its potential for influencing the real-surface and illusory-space dynamic. Both also saw the creative potential of channelling their images through the idiosyncrasies of memory.

33 The word "*parent*" is preferred to the word "*primaries*" because it is perhaps too closely associated to the theory of three primaries to use it in this context.

34 See also *Chapter 7*, for examples of his exploration of the real-surface/illusory space dynamic and *Chapter 10*, for a mathematical exposition of his ideas concerning distortion.

Figure 18 : Van Gogh - Gauguin's chair

Figure 19 : Emile Bernard - Breton women

As we will see in the next chapter, the response of Toulouse-Lautrec would have been less clear cut. Although sharing the conclusions of others, he wanted to explore yet further. One can imagine his response being something like, "*I would prefer to leave the answers open. Can't you see that what is so exciting about our situation is that we have hardly started exploring the possibilities. To my way of thinking, priority must be given to open-ended, route and branch experimentation*".

Of the three artist friends, the ambition of Toulouse-Lautrec is by far the most challenging, and he himself may have been astonished at the degree of distortion and omission that he could get away with (see *Figure 19, and Chapter 7*). But he need not have been so if he had drawn the necessary implications from the well known phenomenon of seeing images in clouds (Shakespeare's Hamlet), in dampness stains on the walls of a house (Leonardo da Vinci) or in a multiplicity other suggestive concatenations of visually perceived elements.

Figure 20: Toulouse-Lautrec, Dans le Maison Close.

When confronted by a representative selection of the works of Toulouse-Lautrec, we see the artist exploring four related questions:

- How far can inaccurate marks stimulate accurate interpretations?
- What are the limits of distortion?
- What is the minimum information required to give rise to appropriate percepts?
- How far can colour and line give independent messages without causing confusion?

Only through experiment could he find answers. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see how fruitful his researches proved to be, not only for Toulouse-Lautrec himself, but also for many of his contemporaries and successors, including Bonnard, Munch, Matisse, Picasso, Klee and Bacon. All these artists and many more were able to: (a) Take advantage of the possibilities of distortion; (b) Research the limits of omission: (c) Explore the riches of ambiguity; And, (d) Exploit the new freedoms with respect to the use of colour and mark-making.

Toulouse-Lautrec, in his exploration of minimum cues, must have sometimes surprised himself at how few lines and marks are necessary for stimulating coherent visual interpretations. His main difficulty would have been in predicting which marks would achieve his goal. It is not just a matter of finding a the smallest number, but also of testing how far from accuracy it is possible to stray. Fruitful answers to such questions come only after long and exacting research and, when they come, they will never be quite what the artists had in mind in the first place.[35] Value judgements have to be made in retrospect. For example, if we compare the Degas study illustrated in *Figure 21* with the drawings of a less observant and less knowledgeable amateur, we can i*mmediately* see a difference. We sense without really understanding that the mark-making, however roughly produced, reflects a strict adherence to the facts of anatomy,[36] Likewise, if we compare the distortions of Matisse, who took an inordinate amount of time to get to know his subject-matter, through innumerable studies and sketches, before eventually arriving at his final solution, with those of artists who have not taken so much trouble, we can sense the authority of the one and the weakness of the other. How many artists work on an image until they can honestly claim, along with Matisse, that it is "*representative of my state of mind*"?

35 *Chapter 3*
36 *"What Scientists can Learn from Artists", Chapter 5.*

Figure 21 : Edouard Degas - Study

The same issue arises when people talk of finding the "*essence*" of a scene or the "*character*" of a face or of a pose. Michelangelo, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Matisse and Picasso, to mention a few of the more outstanding examples, worked long and hard in forging the exaggerations, distortions and simplifications for which they are famous. Few artists, if any, manage the same level of quality without similar exertions. They may be lucky with one image, but the chances of their being so on many occasions are extremely remote.

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947)

Figure 22 : Pierre Bonnard - "France Champagne"

Pierre Bonnard was only three years younger than Toulouse-Lautrec and they knew each other well. It is said that Toulouse-Lautrec's interest in poster-making was aroused by Bonnard's poster "*France Champagne*" (*Figure 21*). Later, both contributed illustrations to "*La Revue Blanche*" and joined in the social life centred around its editor Thadée Nathanson, his much loved wife Misia and a rollcall of now famous avant-garde artists, poets, playwrights and composers. He described himself as an "*impressionist*", but what he meant by this word was not that he painted "*impressions of nature*" in the manner associated with the original *Impressionists*, rather that he was trying to conjure up "*impressions of the feelings*" he experienced when confronted by views that caught his imagination. Accordingly, he was well on the way to being what would now be called an "*Expressionist*".

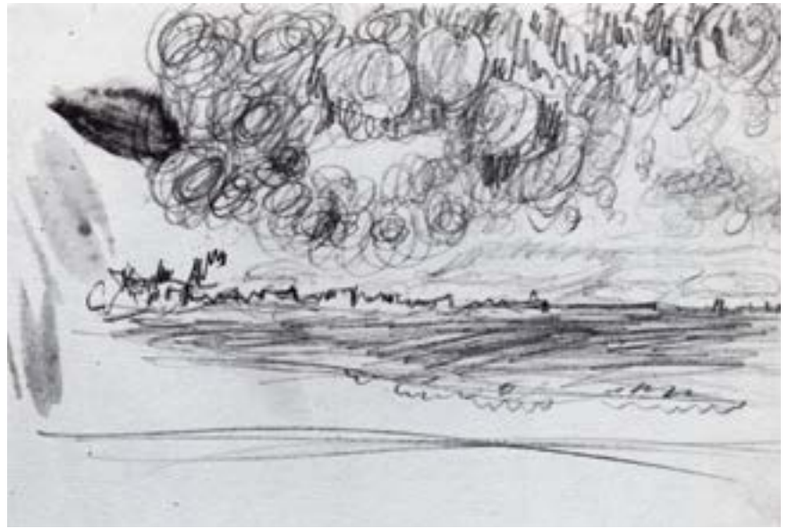

Figure 23 : Pierre Bonnard : Gathering storm.

Figure 24 : Pierre Bonnard - Boat on river

Figure 25 : Pierre Bonnard - Drawing of Marthe Bonnard.

Two quotations from the Bonnard puzzle many of my students but they are well worth keeping in mind when looking at his work. The first provides advice. The second is a an assertion. Both surprise many people.

- "*Get away from nature as quickly as possible*."
- "*Drawing is sensation. Colour is reasoning.*"

How do we explain them? One way of doing so relates to his commitment to representing "*experienced reality"* rather than *"measured reality"* (whether in terms of the characteristics of shape, size orientation, colour or linear perspective). He emphasised that nothing should be allowed to get in the way of his expressionist goals, insisting that, "*you can take any liberty with line, with form, with proportions, with colours, in order that the feeling is intelligible*."

Figures 23, 24 and *25* reproduce drawings by Bonnard. They were made in one of the small sketch books that he habitually kept in his pocket. If he came across a scene that grabbed his feelings, he would get this out while his first reactions were still fresh, and seek to create an equivalence using line, texture and lightness relativities. While working, the priority was to "*feel very exactly*".[37] Literal accuracy was not important. On the contrary, Bonnard relished deviations from it, whether due to the filtering effect of working from memory or to the above mentioned influence of the *constancies* of visual perception.

Bonnard's longer term hope was to make use of what he learnt from the drawings in his sketch pads as a starting point for paintings. Thus, it was important for him to keep a hold on his memories of colour relations and atmosphere generated by the scene in question until he got back to the studio. There, he would get out his paints and embark on the process of applying colours to a canvas. At first, he would work relatively quickly because too much dithering would interfere with the precious memories. Only when the canvas was covered, would he pause to take stock. However excited he was by what confronted him, he would never consider it as more than a beginning. Like his friend Matisse, he felt it necessary to work on it until it became "*representative of his state of mind"*.

So, how did he proceed after this first rush of memory-guided activity? Firstly, he slowed down. At first he would be guided by his highly personal response to the interaction between the *suggestive marks* in his study and his *dimly-sensed but powerful memories*. However, as the painting evolved it would take on a life of its own, and he would be progressively driven by the dynamics of the events that were emerging on the picture-surface. An analysis of the outcomes shows Bonnard tended to conceive of his paintings in terms of a relatively small number of flat, fairly equal brightness colours complexified with a riot of textural and colour excitements. Beyond that, assuming that the testimony of Professor Bohusz-Szyszko is to believed, he followed the dogmas of *not repeating colours* and *ensuring that all colours were mixtures containing at least some proportion of complementaries*.

37 The words are quoted from Cézanne (see also p. 87).

Figure 26 : La Descente au Cannet.

In these ways Bonnard managed to make paintings that combine simplicity with complexity. In art-historical terms, he was exploring pictorial possibilities coming from Gauguin, Seurat and Cézanne. In particular, he squashes lightness space, ratchets up the colourfulness and gives great importance to mark-making and whole-field colour/texture relations. He was aware that each application of paint would face him with a new situation.[38] With every new look at the emerging painting, an unexpected element within it would force itself on his awareness. Sometimes it would trigger excitement, at others, a sinking feeling. Whichever way, he would find himself presented with a series of "*what if*" questions, relating to the possible future actions. In other words he would embark on *imagination-*

38 *"Painting with Light and Colour", Chapter 1*, where I describe watching Marian Bohusz-Szyszko at work.

experiments concerning possible adjustments, whether subtle or dramatic. Whichever was the case, the outcomes would be funnelled through the frameworks of feelings, experience and theory with a view to evaluating them. The process invariably led to new "*what if*" questions, more mulling over and further evaluation. Throughout this long drawn out process, taking weeks, months or, occasionally, years, Bonnard would eschew easy solutions suggested by the twin enemies of *taste* and *habitual ways of doing things*. Like Matisse, he was determined to guard himself against the influence of these at all costs. *Figure 26* illustrates one example of an outcome of procedures and thought processes along these lines.

One suggestion that I make to students, when they tell me that a particular colour is causing problems, is to set them the task of giving validity to it without changing it in any way. In theory, this should be possible, since the way we feel about a colour is critically effected by the context in which it is perceived. An easy-to-understand example of this context-dependence would be if a colour is not felt to be light enough. If so, it can always be made to appear lighter, by darkening all the other colours on the picture surface. In this and analogous but more complicated ways, using *reason* to initiate experiments and *feeling* to assess their outcomes, all sorts of unforeseen excitements can be forthcoming.

All three of the drawings illustrated repay careful analysis. A first thing to notice is the range and economy of the mark-making, a second is the *unfinished look* and a third is how the characteristic of the mark-making concentrate the attention on the main dynamics of the image. For example, in the drawing illustrated in *Figure 23* the feelings are concentrated upon the dynamic between the left hand end of the cloud and the jagged skyline at the left hand end of the horizon. As if the pull in that direction were not enough, the three splodges of ink, one of which is much darker than the others, are placed in just the right place to emphasise the critical relationship. In *Figure 25*, the subject of the drawing seems to be the link between the eye which is almost hidden in the shadow of the face and the thumb held out in front of the body. We can also see that the importance of this thumb has been boosted by making the five dark scribbles to its right the most active part of the background. Notice also how the head is emphasised by its overall darkness, and the examining eye, by being the blackest part of all. This part of the image is given added force by the multiplicity of heavily drawn, overlaid lines which are used to emphasise the left-hand side shoulder and the dark edges of the rectangle adjacent to it. Between these two emphasised regions there is a diagonal force which encourages the eye in the direction of the thumb

and its characteristic position. Notice also that the lack of importance of the other hand is clearly indicated by the extremely sketchy way it has been drawn.[39] One can assume that Marthe Bonnard's gesture was very familiar and full of associations lurking in her husband's feeling centres. Certainly, although the thumb and hand are crudely drawn, the image as a whole provides a perfectly embodiment of well observed feelings. Presumably it was these that moved him to take his pencils and drawing pad from his pocket.

One point that needs to be emphasised here is that none of these dynamics would have been so well indicated if Bonnard had given priority to *measured reality*. Another is that Bonnard's practice is just one of many possibilities. Matisse, for example, was very far from "*getting away from nature as quickly as possible*." Rather, he placed great importance on having an actual model to analyse. It was only after he had used *accuracy* as a tool for getting to know the structure of his subject matter that he felt ready to start experimenting with distortions. For him, even if the end product entailed large deviations from *measured reality,* a long process of careful observation was necessary if he were to find solutions "*worthy of his state of mind*". Indeed, of the two friends, it was Matisse who proved capable of producing the more dramatically unrealistic images.

Finally, it may seem far-fetched to associate Bonnard with the ideas Lecoq Boisbaudran,[40] the highly influential teacher, at the core of whose teaching was the belief that channelling *measured reality* through the memory enables transformations that bring out the individuality and the creativity of artists. However, his students Alphonse Legros, Fantin-Latour, Felix and Marie Bracquemond, Jules Chéret and Rodin, were close friends with Manet, Whistler and Degas and spread his ideas to them. Later, Legros became Professor at the *Slade School of Fine Art* where he taught John Peter Russel, the Australian artist, who soon after went on to the studio of Cormon where he met and befriended Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh and Emile Bernard, all of whom demonstrated their ability to get away from nature and channel their personal creativity through memories of their *experienced realities*.

A further plausible link between Bonnard and Lecoq Boisbaudran was Chéret, the most prolific of the *fin de siècle* poster makers, for he also was a pupil of Lecoq Boisbaudran, presumably influenced by his ideas on the creative use of memory.

39 Compare this with the drawings of his friend Toulouse-Lautrec in *Chapter 7*.
40 See the *Glossary and* "*Drawing on Both sides of the Brain*".

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

Fig 26 - Paul Gauguin- The White Horse.

Gauguin, a late starter, gave up his previous job as a stockbroker to become a full time practising artist in the mid 1880s. It was a particularly dynamic time in the history of *Modernism in Painting* for there was an abundance of new ideas, both artistic and scientific, swilling around in Paris, where he lived. He

learnt much from other artists. Initially from his teacher Pissarro and his friend Cézanne, but also from the group of mould-breaking artists who first met at the studio of Cormon and became lifelong friends: Van Gogh, Bernard, Toulouse-Lautrec and Russell, the one time student of Legros who had taught him the ideas of Lecoq Boisbaudran on training the memory of the artist with a view to enhancing individual creativity. Particularly important in the mix of ideas was the paradigm-changing realisation coming from the scientists of visual perception that *colour* and, indeed, visual experience as a whole is made in the head, and, consequently, that there is a fundamental difference between the *measured reality,* and *experienced reality*.

Of the many things the artists referred to above had in common, perhaps the most important was a belief in their right to question established rules. As Gauguin put it *"Today you can dare all and nobody is astonished by what you have done."* And, *"People say, follow the masters. But why should we follow them? The only reason they are masters is that they didn't follow anybody!"*

The search for ways of depicting *experienced reality* encouraged Gauguin in his belief in the "*innocent eye*": *"To make something new, it is essential to go back to the primary sources, that is to say, to humanity in its childhood."* It also encouraged his focus on memory: *"It is better to paint from memory, for thus your work will be your own; "I shut my eyes in order to see"; "Wherever I go I need a period of incubation so that I may learn the essence of nature, which never wishes to be understood or yield herself"; "Don't copy nature slavishly. Art is an abstraction, draw her out from nature while dreaming and think more of the process of creation than of the result."*

Influences on Gauguin's ideas about *colour* were multiple. They included: Seurat's demonstration of the value of an extended palette accompanied by the greater range of tube colours that had become available as a spin-off from the *Industrial Revolution*; The same artist's separation of *reflected-light* from *body-colour* that brought in its train a release from the straitjacket of *measured reality* and encouraged artists to paint larger areas of flatter and more fully-saturated colours; Chevreul's research into equal-lightness colour-contrast effects; Goethe's ideas about the symbolic significance of colours; The writings of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, three *Symbolist Poets* that encouraged him to dream.

As a conduit of all these influences, Gauguin helped to open up possibilities for other artists, not least, for Bonnard, as a colourist, and for Munch, as a dreamer.

Edvard Munch (1863-1944)

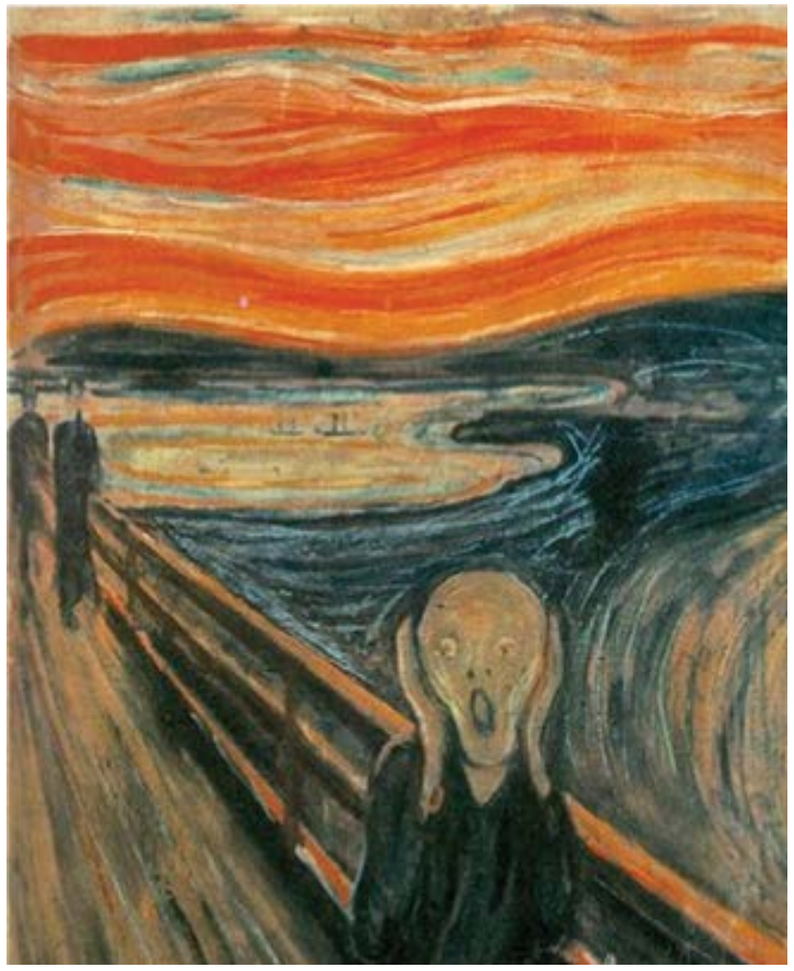

Figure 27 : Edvard Munch, a version of the "The Scream."

Edvard Munch is not always given his rightful place in the hierarchy of the pioneers of *Modernism in painting,* even though "*The Scream*"(*Figure 27*) is one of the best known of works by a *Modernist Artist*. A notable feature of his working method was the length of time he devoted to developing images, with a view to maximising their impact. He was like a terrier with a rat: He would not let go

of an image that interested him and he would work and work, over many paintings and, often, over many years to realise its full potential. It is no surprise that, when he came to Paris, he was particularly impressed by the images of Toulouse-Lautrec, the great pioneer of distortion. But, in "*The scream*", Munch surpassed the Frenchman and most other artists in the history of painting with respect to the extraordinary force of emotional charge it manages to convey. Nor is it just a matter of his treatment the screaming figure itself: It is the picture as a whole that exemplifies Matisse's assertion that expression is found in the "*entire arrangement of the picture-surface*".

1968

It is now time, to jump to the 1960s and to complete this chapter with an account of the origins of the sea-change that led to the present state of affairs in the plastic arts. For this purpose, rather than follow slavishly in the footsteps of others, I prefer to focus on to a largely autobiographical passage concerning events that took place in 1968 when I was at Art School. It was a year in which the horrors of the wars of independence in *Algeria* and *Vietnam* were very much in mind and which turned out to be a watershed period in both the *Universities* of France and the *Art Schools* of Britain. Large numbers of students rose up in rebellion against their teachers, demanding a better deal. As far as the British art students were concerned, they felt themselves to be in the grip of a new academicism, based on a combination of ideas coming from the *Bauhaus* and what they saw as the sterile productions of artists belonging to what their teachers were calling *"Mainstream*". Examples of the artists they were expected to revere were Piet Mondrian, Joseph Albers, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Willem De Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Ad Reinhardt, Michael Kidner and Ellsworth Kelly.

Coincidentally and significantly, it was also the year of an exhibition in *New York* called "*The Art of the Real*", which could be described as the end of the line for the *object/illusion dynamic*. Following ways of thinking not so far removed from those pioneered by Mondrian, the illusion part of the equation had been removed, leaving only the object, which now became a quasi-sculptural presence on the wall.

The logic of the situation pointed to artists:

- Taking over large spaces and filling them with many related paintings,

as did Rothko in the chapel in *Houston, Texas*.

- Moving in the direction of sculpture, as did Ellsworth Kelly and many others.
- Creating "*installations*", whether within or without the art gallery, as did Carl Andre.

As far as the art students were concerned, all this faced them with fundamental questions about what kind of work they should be doing and it was no coincidence that many of the most imaginative of them found themselves moving away from painting in the direction of sculpture and installations.

Concurrently, other aspects of the *Modernist* ethic of experimentation and questioning the artists' the role in society had been forging their own lines of development. Not for the first time in history, the focus turned to the contents of the image and the underpinning ideas rather than painterly considerations and aesthetics.[41] It was not that the artists productions were entirely divested of physical props, but that the role they played had become sufficiently peripheral to raise questions about the need for paintings at all. If the *"idea"* could be presented more coherently with performances, documents or video's, then so be it. Thus, figures like Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp, the Dadaists, John Cage and Joseph Beuys prepared the ground for the coming of art-forms in which the art-object-as-itself progressively lost significance and, as a result, found themselves lionised by the art students of 1968. My Art School friend, Pete Bateman failed his degree because, for his degree-show, he exhibited himself, naked and at-the-ready to answer questions. He argued that "*The most important result of my art education is the extent to which it has made me what I am*" and he dared to take this perception to what he saw as its logical conclusion.

Implications

When we ask the question what was, or is Modernism in painting, we find two kinds of answers. We can think of it as:

- *A list of tendencies in the productions of artists, whose origins can be traced back to the 1860s and 1870s.*
-
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41 The art of the *Italian Renaissance* was very image and much idea-centred.

- *An attitude of mind that led to a root and branch questioning of the nature of artistic production, whether in terms of the range of possibilities that can be explored by means of applying colours to a flat surface, or whether with respect to the meaningfulness of the activity in terms of its value to society.*

It was this combination that gave birth to the cornucopia of ideas, approaches and movements that were to emerge over the years to come.

When we ask what is the significance of all this to the practicing artists of today, we look for something in common between the different Modernist artists. If we do, the most obvious conclusion we can draw is that all have needed ideas both to motivate them and to constrain their imaginations. The grander, overarching ideas and ambitions led to a variety of more precise ones that refined the focus. In some cases, these were to lead to radical departures from previously explored aspects of painting. In others, they distanced artists from making paintings at all.

Another common theme is the large amount of work the pioneer Modernist painters needed to arrive at the results achieved. All those mentioned in this chapter exemplify this aspect of the creative journey.

The emphasis of this chapter has been on artists who were responsible for important developments in the story of Modernism in painting. It will be noticed that hardly any names from the recent past have been mentioned. The reason is that contemporary Modernist Painters are not making the substantial breakthroughs that were made by so many of the artists who were active in the earlier days of Modernism, when the melting pot of new ideas was first coming to the boil. This is no surprise for the paradigm-shift that gave rise to Modernism in Painting took place well over a hundred years ago. We are now in the phase, well known in the case of scientific paradigm shifts, of testing the veridicality and of filling in the details of the outline map provided by the artists, poets, critics or scientists responsible for the original breakthrough. It can hardly be a matter of surprise that painters alive today, who aspire to break new ground are finding the going extremely difficult. It is natural that they should be wondering whether painting and drawing have lost their potency, and it is understandable that they should be seeking salvation in other, largely technology-based, disciplines. Whether they will fare better in these is a matter that only time will tell. What is more certain is that they are unlikely to fulfil their ambition unless they approach their task with the same degree of motivation, tenacity and intelligence that characterised the enterprise of the acknowledged masters of Modernism in Painting.

As for those who stick to painting, history suggests that they will have to downgrade their ambition and aspire to the kind of advances made by artists who came after the Italian Renaissance, like El Greco, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Goya, Constable and Turner. When these are compared with artists of the High Renaissance such as Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Botticcelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, we find that the difference revealed is not one of quality, which was certainly not lacking in the later painters. It is that the earlier group of artists were in the process of breaking an old paradigm and creating a new one, while the later group were working within the new paradigm that their illustrious predecessors had opened up for them. Very possibly, their ability to make a significant contribution in already well charted territories required a harder grind, but their success is there for all to see.

This perspective on the past should stand as an inspiration to all who find themselves working within the now well established frameworks provided by the early masters of Modernism in Painting. There is plenty of room for significant creativity even if it is less likely to be so spectacular. All that is needed is people with the motivation and perseverance necessary to follow a learning journey for long enough to allow it to reveal its secrets.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the next two chapters go a little deeper into the ideas behind the work of two of the Modernist Artists introduced above, namely Toulouse-Lautrec, who was active in the pioneer days, and Michael Kidner, who was hard at work well into the 21st century.