

## THE MOTIF IN PAINTING

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The interpreters of the artistic lives of the three fathers of modern art have told how Van Gogh tied his canvas down against the wind to catch the torment of olive trees or stared red-eyed at the Arles sun; how Cezanne sought the motif to the point of fatal pneumonia and Gauguin had to seek inspiration in dusky beauties on beaches. How these commentators slide away from the fact that the three often finished works in the studio; that, in fact, they sometimes even looked at the *painting* as they explored the motif.

The fact that once a picture is launched the stimulation will then come from the work already commenced is the basis of theories urged to support abstract expressionism and American action painting. In discussing Turner as a progenitor of abstract art, Douglas Dundas recently said at a gallery lecture, that, in *Heaving Coals by Moonlight* the light was just as much a part of the medium as the paint. Such artists approach painting without aesthetic preoccupations or extra-canvas preferences. Jackson Pollock can say: "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a short 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about." In brief, there is a stage in which the painting takes charge of the painter and then the motif is redundant. The impressionists have obscured the fact that what the artist finally does is to separate the painting from its motif. In the same way German expressionism almost insists that it be judged as an interpretation rather than as a self-sufficient autonomous work of art, its relationship to its origins being irrelevant. Perhaps it was only by eschewing direct reference to real subjects that the Americans, by showing that the picture results from the action of painting itself, were able to reinstate expressionism. No one can now be side-tracked by a Rewald or Norah going about photographing motifs, for the motifs and the painting are one in abstract expressionism.

The casual and accidental nature of works by Pollock, Ferren, Rothko etc., has aroused the ire of critics. Without nature's guiding hand, or some academic touchstone like cubism or geometrical abstraction, how, they ask can the artist test his achievement; but now preconceived design is replaced by the exploitation of 'accident' (Of course we've always had this to some degree: monotypes, for example). But the 'accident', the whirlwind and dripping quality of the paint have become the painting; technique and subject are really one. Unconscious symbolism is no doubt present, since it approaches surreal automatic writing, but, as an art form, it is not merely a fashionable innovation in contemporary art, for, as a recent *Listener* points out, it has its forerunners in those traditional art forms where wilfulness and caprice play a dominant part - in particular the irrational operas of Mozart, whose plots often defy logical analysis, yet whose musical cohesion laughs at logicians. Is it not a fact that in all art the process is one of accepting and exploiting the accidents, the not-intended, that artists are always choosing and selecting not so much from nature, but

from what is already on the canvas? This intuitive acceptance of the unpremeditated and use of wilful shapes has no relation to the irrational juxtaposing of unassociated objects in some forms of surrealism, which had a spurious coherence, if one was ill-read in Freud and Jones. These works were, like academic efforts, all motif and no painting. Those who asked the artists to explain them certainly got some emasculated psychological theories and were assured of the 'meaning'. On the contrary, with most abstractionists one has to be content with the picture and get one's literature and psychology elsewhere— and better literature and psychology will always be found elsewhere, anyway.

To those who say that abstract expressionists have as a motif the aim to express a particular emotion I can only refer them to previous broadsheets and to the fact that emotions are in minds and not in paintings.

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