

THEORIES OF ART

3

From Impressionism to Kandinsky

Moshe Barasch

THEORIES OF ART, 3

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MOSHE BARASCH

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For Berta—once again

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Preface

Since this is the final volume in a series of three dealing with art theory I take the opportunity to record some of the debts I incurred in the course of studying the subject and writing its history. My main debt of gratitude goes to the libraries and to the librarians in many universities who unfailingly helped in sometimes difficult searches. I cannot list all of these, but I should not fail to mention the National and University Library in Jerusalem and its devoted staff. Shlomo Goldberg earns my special thanks for continual assistance.

In the course of writing the volumes and preparing them for publication I enjoyed the stimulating interest of Colin Jones, the former director of New York University Press. Our many lively talks over many years helped to concentrate my attention on this work, when other projects often seemed very tempting. Closer home, I should like to thank Mira Reich for continuing intelligent help in many respects. My questions, I am afraid, were not always easy ones, but she always did her utmost to find what I was looking for. I am also grateful to Luba Freedman, colleague in my department and former student, for continuous assistance in many ways.

It is now more than two decades since I began to work with New York University Press, and it is a pleasure to record my gratitude to the staff of the Press, first of all to Despina Papazoglou Gimbel, managing editor, for steady cooperation, combining prudent responsibility for the quality of the book with friendly care for its author.

My most profound gratitude I owe to my wife. Without her encouragement, strict criticism, and patience this book, as well as my other studies, could not have been written.

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Introduction

In the present volume I shall discuss theories of art that emerged and flourished over the relatively short period of roughly four decades. In general, a marked continuity is characteristic of the theory of art; the heritage of the past lives for a long time. The demarcation of such a brief period in the field's history, therefore, calls for an explanation.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, artists and critics, now largely detached from their traditional social and cultural frameworks, have been fully exposed to the quickening pace of general intellectual change. Moreover, as other intellectual disciplines became increasingly concerned with art, they discovered, and often shed light on, new and often surprising aspects of artifacts created in many periods and cultures. Because of the diversification of the interests of artists and critics, their interaction with scientists and scholars in other disciplines, if indirect, increased sharply. One of the results of this versatile and complex process was that art theory, in earlier stages of history perceived as a more or less distinct discipline with a common structure and well defined subject matter, became obscured, its outlines were blurred, and its structure equivocal. On the other hand, however, reflection on the problems of art witnessed an outburst of original creativity which often broke up the time-honored patterns of thinking on the subject. In surveying these decades we necessarily ask ourselves what, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, can still be perceived as art theory? To whom would such a theory be addressed, and whom was it meant to serve?

This apparently chaotic appearance of reflection on art does not surprise the student. Not only has the quickening of pace, so characteristic of the modern world in general, contributed to this development, but there were also more specific reasons that should be outlined. Differing from what we know from earlier ages, these reasons perhaps also warrant us in distinguishing a "period" that extends over merely a few decades. The basic conditions within which art theory evolved (and within which we can fol-

low its development) changed dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century. The old institutions (such as workshops and art schools) in which styles were crystallized and in which aesthetic norms of art were sanctified and upheld for faithful imitation, either completely disappeared or lost whatever significance they may have had in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Already in the first half of the nineteenth century the artist's workshop, the traditional framework for articulating and transmitting style in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, was a thing of the past. Though it was occasionally romanticized (as in German Romanticism), it so obviously belonged to the past that nobody even felt the need to polemicize against it. These historic workshops were now the stuff of legend. But after the 1870s the more modern and more prestigious form of art education, that is, the art schools and influential academies of art where styles were forged, also came under attack. By the end of the decades discussed here the academies of art were not only regarded as the embodiment of "reaction," but they had in fact hardly any active contribution to make.

At that time the conditions under which art was presented to wide audiences, and painting and sculpture, judged and explained, also underwent profound change. The great exhibitions, the famous Salons, that had earlier presented normative models of established taste to both artists and audiences, completely lost their significance within less than a generation, while the exhibitions that made a real and lasting impact on both artists and audiences did not present the established norms. Increasingly it was the work of dissenting artists that evoked lively reaction. Exhibitions such as that of the impressionists (1873, 1874), of Cezanne's paintings (1904), and of the German Expressionists (1906) became the major cultural and artistic "events"; it was they, rather than the academics, that made a profound impact on the imagination of artists and shaped the expectations of audiences. These unorthodox exhibitions were discussed and remembered, and remained influential in the life of art.

Even more profound and drastic was the transformation of the literary discussion of painting and the other visual arts. In the course of many centuries two major forms for the presentation of the visual arts had emerged and became traditional. The first, which had crystallized in the Renaissance, was the art theoretical treatise. Although this type of treatise had many variations, all of them, throughout the centuries, retained the essential character of original art theory. The purpose of such treatises was to offer a systematic and comprehensive doctrine of what was often called the

“elements” of the visual arts. To be sure, sometimes these treatises seem quite lacking in systematic structure, and also seem far from comprehensive. Yet from Alberti in the fifteenth to, say, Richardson in the eighteenth and even Carus in the early nineteenth centuries, the desire to treat art, or part of it (as in Carus’s discussion of landscape painting), in a comprehensive, systematic, and “objective” way, remained unchanged. Art theory was a doctrine.

The other important form in the discussion of art was established mainly in the eighteenth century. It was the criticism of art, particularly of new and contemporary works. Beginning with Diderot’s famous Salons, that is, reviews of then recent exhibitions in Paris, art criticism became a separate literary category for dealing with works of art. For better or for worse, it became a mediating link between the public visiting exhibitions and the artists whose works were shown in them. Soon enough, it became one of the main functions of art criticism to pass judgment on newly exhibited work. Certain critical attitudes and elements of judgment were of course present in the art literature of all ages, but as a rule these were implicit, and were not the main purpose of literary composition. As a more or less independent field of writing on the arts, judgment on individual works emerged mainly in the eighteenth century. The critical review, though a new form of statement, must have satisfied a widely felt need; it was received with a great deal of approval, and within a very short period it became an established function in art literature. Already in the late eighteenth century Lessing, in his *Laocoön*, referred to the “judge of art” as one of the central figures in the theoretical consideration of painting and sculpture; he represented one of the principal approaches to art. Sometimes, as we shall see in the following chapters, art criticism yielded important evidence both with regard to the aims of different groups of artists (including avant-garde groups) and the taste prevailing in different strata of society. But since art criticism became increasingly devoted to the actual passing of judgment, it could only to a limited extent fulfill the functions that were traditionally those of art theory, namely, to reveal and analyze the rich and structured world of art, particularly as the artist experienced it, both to the artist himself and to the public that sought to respond to it.

In sum, we can conclude that the traditional patterns for explaining art were broken up, some modern forms only inadequately doing the job once performed by the old-fashioned treatise. What happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the core functions of art theory? In aesthetic reflection during the few decades to which the present volume is

devoted, these tasks were in part taken over by workers in other, partly new, fields of intellectual effort. Some students in these new fields were now contributing to the task of explaining art, and what they had to say became, as we shall see, increasingly important. On the other hand, the literary form, and to a certain extent the essence of artists' presentation of their insights and aims, also changed profoundly. The writings of painters at the turn of the century were very different in form as well as in outlook, from writings in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even early nineteenth centuries. By way of introduction it may be useful to outline briefly the overall character of these different new factors and forms.

One characteristic feature of the modern age that immediately comes to mind is the increasing significance of science in attempts to understand art. Nobody following the story of art theory needs to be told that at several crucial periods of history, close and profound ties linked the visual arts and the sciences. Thus, during the Renaissance the two domains, art and science, were closely linked in making new discoveries, in scientific illustration, and in the precise presentation of new insights in anatomy, botany, and zoology. Perspective, the doctrine and practice of the representation of space so crucial for many centuries of painting, was always understood as hovering between optics and art. In the decades with which we are concerned, however, the relationship between art and science changed. While artistic representation ceased to be of any real significance for scientific investigation or teaching, and the scientific illustration became a photograph rather than a woodcut or an engraving, art for the first time explicitly became the object of scientific investigation. In the past while some scientists had interested themselves in the arts from time to time, and occasionally made some surprising observations, there was no scientific concern with art on the scale experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The range of questions asked by scientists about the arts became surprisingly wide.

A whole group of disciplines, many of them grouped in the nineteenth century under the common label of "psychology," concerned themselves with exploring different aspects of art, or questions that had a bearing on art. The interests of the "psychologists" were often quite different from one another, as were their points of departure. Yet, in one way or another they all made an impact on the art that was being created, on the trends that were being articulated in those decades, and on the theoretical interpretation of art in general. Beginning with the perception of light intensities in nature and the question of whether or not it was feasible for the painter to

translate the bright sunlight of a summer day into the color patches on his canvas, to the fascinating problem of how we perceive and correctly understand the emotional character of a work of art created in a distant period and alien culture—these were problems that the different “psychological” disciplines approached from their particular viewpoints. In nineteenth-century culture it was commonly believed that psychology held the key to solving these problems. In the following chapters these themes will appear time and again, as they were seen from different points of view and treated by different branches of learning. In the course of these intellectual efforts significant aspects of art, hitherto not sufficiently studied and not at the center of awareness for artists and scholars, were discovered and explored. They were among the core questions continuously discussed in reflection on the arts throughout the twentieth century. Looking back from a distance of almost a hundred years, there can be little doubt that what the “psychologists” presented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a profound and lasting effect. Contemporary approaches to art would be unthinkable without these historical contributions.

Other great complexes of themes and images that emerged in the decades considered here made a lasting imprint on twentieth-century culture and art as a whole. They, too, were the result of an interaction between art and science. Prominent among them was the rise of “the primitive” as a new model for art (and not only for art). The primitive came to be considered by avant-garde groups as well as by large audiences both as an ideal art form and as a source of culture in general. Anthropologists brought to the consciousness of the western mind the very existence of cultures that were highly articulate yet radically different from our own. At the same time archaeologists excavated and studied the famous prehistoric sites, and students of religion discovered in these sites clues to highly developed systems of belief and ritual.

It was in this intellectual and emotional atmosphere that artists, searching for radically new forms of expression, found in the artifacts of prehistoric times and of the “primitive” cultures in our own time aesthetic and expressive patterns of art. With the advantage of hindsight we are now able to see that these different interests and trends converged. The participants in these historical developments were not aware of these interactions. Some of the critics who were conscious of the profound crisis of traditional models and inherited ideal types in European art did not necessarily realize the crucial role the primitive was about to assume. But looking back from the distance of a full century we can clearly see that all these phenomena were

aspects of a powerful common trend. The primitive became a central feature in twentieth-century art; it was also a focal theme in the attempts of our time to solve what has often been called “the secret of art.”

The part played by the sciences in the profound changes in art was accompanied by another feature, or another process, that was characteristic of the modern age. This second process is less easily measured and described. What I have in mind is the change in the spiritual world of the artists themselves, and in the ways in which they articulated their views. The decades studied here abound in statements in which artists reflected on their work. These consist not only of fragmentary utterances made in specific contexts, but also of whole treatises written by painters and sculptors, as well as articles and books composed by critics close to the new movements that crystallized in the art of the period.

Reading these statements, mainly those written by artists, one is struck by their distinctly subjective character, their “confessional” tone. This kind of written statement was often employed with full awareness, with the explicit desire to reflect the artist’s personal world. To a contemporary reader this seems almost natural. In fact, however, it was a novel feature, particularly in art theory. For centuries it was typical for artists to lay claim to a doctrinal “objectivity” in their craft and to aver that they were motivated by the desire to formulate a doctrine valid beyond mere individual taste and preference. This was true not only for the theories of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, but also for the teachings of the academies of art in the nineteenth century. Even if in the later centuries, mainly in the nineteenth, the “objective” character of the doctrine of art was less closely knit, the aspiration of artists and critics to formulate, and to follow, a supraindividual, suprapersonal doctrine was a guiding motive. This changed dramatically in the late nineteenth century.

To the historian following the shifting emphases in what the artists said about their work, impressionism seems to mark a distinct caesura. Painters now explicitly made their personal visual experience, the way *they* saw what was around them, the basis and criterion of pictorial representation. As I shall try to show in the next chapter, what the impressionists proclaimed to be their personal experience was in fact often influenced by comprehensive intellectual, particularly scientific, trends. Nevertheless they intended to depict their individual, direct, and immediate experience, and believed that such personal experience could be the ultimate basis for pictorial rendering.

Considering the developments just outlined, we can conclude that between the early 1870s and, say, 1912, the theory of art as a separate disci-

pline did not have a common form, nor a common framework. What in earlier stages had been called “the elements” of the doctrine of painting disappeared, the methods of teaching disintegrated, and the normative models faded. Given these developments, one wonders whether the modern reflection on art has any common core. Are there any links, overt or hidden, between the different concerns with art which lend them unity? And if there is such a unity, open or obscured, how can it be discerned, and in what does it actually consist?

One recalls, of course, that the theories of art from impressionism to abstract painting have a common background. All the opinions and doctrines we are about to discuss in the present volume occurred not only in a limited period of time, but also in the same cultural atmosphere. We are dealing with phenomena in western and central Europe. Most of the artists, critics, and thinkers who produced this body of revolutionary thought on art originated and worked in western or central Europe. Even if some of the artist-thinkers who played an important role in the emergence of the new art theory came from a more distant region (Wassily Kandinsky coming from Russia is, of course, the most obvious example), their theories were developed in western Europe, and they grew from, and took a position against some of, the intellectual traditions in the culture of central and western Europe. The very complex but closely knit fabric of western European culture at the turn of the century is the matrix of the doctrines to be presented. This highly developed culture, permeated by abstract concepts and the desire for scientific understanding, formed the frame of reference for all the theories of art that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even the attraction that the primitive, the alien, and the exotic exerted on painters and critics between impressionism and abstract painting bears witness to the dominant position of western concepts in the reflection on painting and sculpture.

If this common cultural framework lends to the theories of art of these four decades a hidden unity, what makes them even more manifestly an interlocked pattern, a more or less organic body of thought, are the problems they were concerned with. The time span in which all theories we are about to discuss in this volume was a very short one—merely four decades, or roughly the period of a single generation. Even considering the accelerated pace of the modern world, four decades are too short a period to allow a historian, particularly a historian of aesthetic reflection, to speak of a historical development. While in the following chapters I shall occasionally have to indicate, however incompletely, a certain growth in time, that is,

progression from a “beginning” to a fuller, more developed articulation, that is, something recalling history, the historical narrative cannot be applied here. It is primarily the problems with which the theories are concerned that show their underlying unity.

The most obvious example of this is the intense concern with sense perception, beginning with impressionism’s desire to be true to sense perception to the transcending of regular sense perception in abstract painting. These two attitudes to the same problem—the desire to fully immerse painting in sense perception and the urge to transcend the domain of sense impression—do indeed mark a beginning and an end, the first and the last phases of a process that lasted only a short time. Yet though occasionally some processual developments can be discerned, the characteristic structure of art theory in the decades considered here is that the great trends of thought—impressionistic theory, psychologic reflection on empathy, the concern with the primitive—existed simultaneously, alongside each other, and sometimes even influenced each other. It is for this reason that in the present volume the art theories are presented and analyzed in terms of problems rather than as stages.

The issues discussed, the themes or what we have called the “problems,” also overshadowed the doctrine of the individual artist or critic. Significant as the single artist’s individual experience may have been in the thought of artists and critics at the turn of the century, theoretical reflection on art in the decades considered here cannot be limited to the doctrine of a single figure. Insofar as we can tell from the distance of a century, the doctrine of a single thinker, whether artist or critic, cannot be properly considered as a unit unto itself. Transpersonal issues which go beyond the borders of the merely subjective form the conceptual framework of all art theory in the four crucial decades that mark the limits of this period. For this reason, too, the discussion of art theory between impressionism and abstract painting has to follow theoretical issues rather than any other framework.

PART I

Impressionism

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Introduction

The Crisis of Realism

In May 1867 Edouard Manet made a kind of programmatic statement when he wrote: “The artist does not say today, ‘Come and see faultless works,’ but ‘Come and see sincere works.’” Later in this part (in the chapter on style) I shall come back to the specific meaning of these words. Here we shall only say that when it was made, this programmatic statement that brought up a central problem in the theory of art, was unusual and differed from the issues commonly raised in discussions of art. Does it mark the beginning of a new theory of art? When, and in what context, did modern reflection on art begin? Periodization is always a peculiar matter. While we usually cannot trace a precise demarcation line between the old and the new, we also cannot help but divide up the continuous history we are studying into periods. Hence we cannot stop asking for beginnings. This question also imposes itself upon the student of modern thought on art.

The doctrines to be considered in the present volume emerged within four crucial decades: the late sixties or early seventies of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth. Replacing anonymous dates by terms denoting well-known art movements, we would say this was the period from the emergence of impressionism to the full crystallization of the principles of abstract art. The ideas that characterized the emergence and impact of what is called “abstract art” so profoundly stirred the minds of artists, critics, and audiences throughout the twentieth century that they came to overshadow the theoretical significance of impressionism, its spiritual and cultural sources, and the disturbing and revolutionizing effects that this movement had on critical reflection on the art of image making in later decades.

In the critical literature, impressionism is frequently treated as a “painter’s art,” an art that embodies specific pictorial values, and is devoted to them alone. This means, in fact that, on the one hand impressionism is considered to be largely detached from other, nonpictorial domains, such as literature, philosophy, and science, and on the other, that the impres-

sionist's work concentrated on the painter's actual performance, and was thus detached from any theoretical reflection even on itself.

In the present section I shall try to show that these assumptions, while they may seem justified in view of the artists' almost exclusive concern with visual phenomena and their rendering in painting, do not reveal the comprehensive breadth of impressionism as a trend in its own right. I shall, therefore, try to show first that some of the problems that result from impressionistic painting arose also in various other fields of intellectual and cultural activity. In philosophy and literature, in social doctrines and even in the natural sciences, ideas and attitudes emerged that had a basic affinity to the principles of impressionism in painting. Seen in this broad context, the pictorial movement of impressionism seems to be the expression, perhaps the climax, of a many-sided historical process that encompassed most of late-nineteenth-century culture in western Europe. With all its exquisite pictorial values, impressionistic painting was not an isolated phenomenon. To be properly understood, the cultural movements around it must be taken into consideration.

Nor is impressionistic art as antagonistic, or even outright hostile, to theoretical reflection as some later critics, and mainly popular presentations, have made it out to be. To be sure, unlike some other trends of art, impressionism is not a systematically formulated theory; there is no "treatise" representative of the ideas of the painters belonging to this movement. But from a careful reading of fragments of personal statements and short critical reviews, a consistent body of thought emerges. It should be noted that impressionistic thought has themes and emphases. Suffice it to recall the concern with the effects of sunlight and atmosphere, the fascination with the phenomenon of reflection (in water and other materials), and the development of a particular technique of painting in perceptible, sometimes contrasting brush strokes and dabs of color. Impressionistic doctrines, whether articulated openly or only implicitly suggestive, make some specific assumptions with regard both to what we see and experience in the world around us, and to how these visual experiences should be represented in painting. None of this attests to a detachment from theoretical reflection; rather it shows a particular and distinct theory of painting, calling for a study in its own right. To this the second part of the present part is devoted.

Only when we see these two sides—the intrinsic links of impressionism in painting with related trends in other fields, and the immanent theory of painting in this movement—can we understand how impressionism formed the beginning of a new age in the theory of art.

Aesthetic Culture in the Literature of the Time

In the second half of the nineteenth century both philosophy and science contributed, and, as we have seen, formed a comprehensive background to, what might be called the crisis of Realism. The solid world, made of a tangible material substance, seemed to crumble, to slip away, or simply to disintegrate. What remained, it seemed to writers and artists, were only appearances, sensations, something which you could look at for a fleeting moment, but which you could not grasp, hold, or rely on. How did the arts, or culture as a whole, reflect this state of affairs, or this intellectual trend? Philosophy, one could say, has some inherent links to the abstraction of science. How did the arts linked to real life approach a world in which there were only appearances? To answer these questions, we turn first to literature and to the literary criticism of the time.

In 1868, the year in which impressionistic painting was crystallizing, Walter Pater composed the “Conclusions” to what became his best-known work, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. In the few pages of the “Conclusions” Pater gave concise expression to an important intellectual and artistic trend of his time. “To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought.”¹ Walter Pater, as we know, was the principal representative of the movement we call Aestheticism. To this movement we shall return in another part of this volume. Here I shall mention only one of its characteristics, the concern with a contemplative attitude.

“At first sight,” Pater said in the Conclusions, “experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality. . . .” But, he continued, “when reflexion begins to play upon these objects they are dissipated under its influence: the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic: each object is loosed into a group of impressions—color, odor, texture—in the mind of the ob-

server.”²² Impression, or sensation, as it was later called, was the initial (and the last) place where contact was established between ourselves and the world surrounding us.

In French letters of the late nineteenth century, the main proponents for the attitude of mere contemplation were the brothers Edmond and Jules Goncourt. They were not painters (though originally both brothers intended to become artists), but the visual arts played an important part in their writings. Painting was a significant influence in their work and a constant source of inspiration, for the attitude they considered the most appropriate to man was most fully realized in painting. This was the attitude of mere contemplation, of passive looking. In this sense they spoke of “*optique intellectuelle*.”²³ It is characteristic that Jules Goncourt should have coined the term.

What is “*optique intellectuelle*”? A concise answer is not easily given. The Goncourts were not philosophers. They did conceive of general, abstract ideas, but as a rule they did not invest great effort in conceptual clarifications. At a late stage in their lives they regretted that they had not formulated a theory of art. “What a misfortune,” we read in the *Journal* (IV, p. 72), “that we did not have time to formulate our revolutionary doctrine of art.” But the Goncourts did not define their term “*optique intellectuelle*.” Moreover, the words “*optique*” and “*intellectuelle*” suggest a theoretical discourse, as they have a scientific ring. Scientific and theoretical discourse, however, does not fit the spirit and style of the Goncourts. What they had in mind, and probably denoted by Jules Goncourt’s term, was the kind of pure contemplation that leads to, or is based upon, complete detachment from cognitive as well as emotional purposes and involvements. This type of contemplation became a kind of ideal. Such an attitude of detached, pure contemplation, as I shall try to show, lay behind all that may be called “*impressionistic culture*.” It was a culture that played a major part in the last third of the nineteenth century, and paved the way for some of the radical, revolutionary movements in aesthetic thought.

Mere contemplation, mere looking, was the Goncourts’ central attitude, at least insofar as their views of art were concerned. Since they nowhere defined what such contemplation was, we have to rely on different allusions scattered in their works. Both in their entries in the *Journal* and in some of their novels, they suggested, at least vaguely and in fragmentary comments, what they understood by such looking and watching. To be sure, when they conjured up the image of mere looking, they did not have looking at pictures or other works of art in mind; usually they were referring to looking

at nature, social reality, or at people. From these descriptions, however, we also learn in some detail how, in the Goncourts' view, the spectator looks at pictures and statues.

Why did the Goncourts strive for pure contemplation? Critics have looked for what might have motivated the Goncourts in their search for a perfect attitude. It has been said that the brothers' views of mere contemplation were informed by an "aesthetic hedonism," by a drive for pleasure and satisfaction achieved by looking alone. The Goncourts did indeed frequently, and in various contexts, speak of the "pleasures of the eye." They said one is concerned with "shaping one's environment artistically, so as to give pleasures to the eye."⁴ The "joy of the eye" was a significant and recurring theme in their consideration of both art and visual experience in general.

Nevertheless, it seems to me it would be a mistake to try to derive the Goncourts' aesthetic doctrines from a drive for pleasure, satisfied by the eye. This would suit some twentieth-century trends in psychology that make the "pleasure principle" and the desire for pleasure the main motivating force. It is not valid, I believe, for late-nineteenth-century culture. While the concern with the "pleasures of the eye," or, in theoretical terminology, the hedonistic motivation for aesthetic visual experience, is indeed a continuous thread in the Goncourts' reflections on art, it is not the central motif in their doctrine. Were we to present a comprehensive system of the Goncourts' aesthetics, the desire for visual pleasure would be marginal and would not be sufficient to account for an attitude of mere contemplation.

Mere looking is a basic existential situation, and this is particularly true for the arts. "To see, to feel, to express, this is the whole of art" (II, p. 251)—this is how the Goncourts defined art. Terms such as "feeling" and "expression" should not mislead us; they should not be taken in the sense they have acquired in the twentieth century. We should understand "to feel" (*sentir*) as "to sense," to become aware. The concept of "sensation" became a central notion in impressionism. When we come back to it in greater detail, the difference between the impressionistic reading of this term and the one common in expressionistic trends will become even more obvious.⁵ Nor does "expression" have the emotional meaning it acquired early in the twentieth century. When the Goncourts said that art should "express" something, they did not think of expressing our inner experiences, but of showing what we perceive.

The suggestive descriptions the Goncourts often gave in their literary works indicate what they meant by these crucial concepts—pure contem-

plation or mere looking. Thus Edmond Goncourt wrote that Faustin, the heroine of one of his novels, “received from her contacts with objects and people particular impressions . . . in a manner unexpected, unusual. . . .”⁶ Note that the impressions received from inanimate objects were of the same nature as those derived from people. The Goncourts looked at the world around them without empathy for particular parts or components; their gaze was detached. Passions, emotional involvement, and empathy have been taken out of the whole domain of the visible, from the vast sphere from which impressions are received.

How far removed from any emotional involvement the spectator’s experience can be, may be seen from a description in *Manette Salomon*, a novel originally published in 1867, a crucial date in the crystallization of impressionistic painting and thought. Just listen to the Goncourts’ description of one of the personages looking at Manette. “When he was outside, he sat in sunny places, letting his eye rest for quarters of an hour on a piece of the neck, a bit of Manette’s arm, a spot on her body on which a sunray fell.”⁷ Reading such observations one cannot help but think of impressionist paintings, say by Renoir or Monet, representing a nude in a landscape. Not only do the individual optical effects remind us of these famous paintings, but so does the general atmosphere of emotional detachment.

Finally, in the Goncourts’ thinking visual impressions were not permanent and stable, nor did they reflect the unchanging features of reality; their temporary nature was emphasized. On the contrary, what they saw in their mind’s eye was “a succession of extraordinarily rapid and fugitive sensations.”⁸

These characteristics of mere contemplation, selected, as I have said, from observations scattered in the Goncourts’ writings, do not sustain the “hedonistic” thesis: the purpose of pure looking was not to give pleasure to the eye. On the contrary, contemplation seems altogether detached from any psychologicistic orientation. Mere looking is an original condition of man.

The novelty, perhaps even uniqueness, of the Goncourts’ approach to art in general can be seen with particular clarity when we concentrate on a detail, and compare what they said about it to what earlier generations had said. Such a detail is the eye. In the writings of the Goncourts the reader often finds lengthy praise of this organ. Indeed, such praise of the eye was characteristic of their reflections on art. The historian of painting, and of artists’ reflections on their metier, remembers, of course, the praise of the eye as a recurring literary topos. Who would not think of Leonardo? (One

should perhaps recall that the great editions of Leonardo's notes were being prepared and published in the very years that the Goncourts were reflecting on painting.)⁹ The Goncourts, cultivated and well read, were certainly aware that they were moving on traditional ground here. Yet what they said about the eye often departed radically from established tradition.

Throughout the history of European culture, the eye was praised mainly for two reasons. One type of praise is associated with the Neoplatonist writings of late Antiquity, and transmitted by a variety of media, from philosophy and erudite literature to various kinds of popular psychology and common beliefs: here it was claimed that the eye was "the window to the soul." The unique value of the eye, it was believed in this widely diffused tradition, consists in what it reveals of our inner self. Were it not for the eye, we would have no insight into another's soul. However, the intellectual and emotional world of impressionistic philosophy and art had no affinity with such views, and this kind of praise for the eye left no trace at all in its work.

Another traditional type of praise is of more significance in our present context. Here the eye was valued because it is the organ of cognition. The best formulation of this approach is found in Leonardo da Vinci's famous statements. The eye, Leonardo said, makes it possible for us to attain objective cognition of the world around us, and to record the knowledge gained by visual observation. The eye, he said in the exalted style of laudations, "is the prince of mathematics, its sciences are most certain, it has measured the heights and dimensions of the stars, it has found the elements and their locations."¹⁰ What we see is the most "correct," most truthful cognition of reality (although Leonardo was well aware of optical illusions). Briefly summarized, the central value of the eye is that vision makes possible, and leads to, cognition.

The impressionists, too, praised the eye. But the spirit that informed their acclamations differed radically from Leonardo's as well as the Neoplatonists' praise. The unique nature and value of the eye, the Goncourts' writings as well as those of lesser critics suggested, do not consist in the ability to measure the objects around us precisely and to represent them truthfully (so that the pictorial representation may serve as a scientific illustration); nor do they follow from the fact that the eye is a window to the soul. Looking and contemplation are not a means to something; they are a kind of primordial experience, sufficient unto themselves, and not in need of justification by a different end to be served (cognition or revelation of the soul). When we immerse ourselves in pure contemplation and are detached from everything else, we do not aim at cognition, nor do we wish to

reveal our inner being. Such contemplation is an immediate, irreducible experience. Pure visual experience is not a means to an end, it is an end in itself.

The views of artists, writers, and critics belonging to the impressionistic trend about the eye and about visual experience in general has a profound affinity to what we call the “aesthetic.” Indeed, mere contemplation has often been characterized by its affinity to the aesthetic realm. The term “aesthetic,” especially as used in the language of nineteenth-century criticism, is not free from a certain ambiguity. Thus the term “Aestheticism” is used to describe artistic or critical movements and attitudes that make the “Beautiful” (whatever that may mean in a given case or context) a characteristic feature, as distinguished from other movements or attitudes. With the Goncourts, and with impressionism in general, it was not “Beauty” that counted; what allows one to use the term “aesthetic” in speaking of them was their emphasis on mere contemplation, on just looking.

The Goncourts were well aware of the conceptual difficulties, perhaps even contradictions, inherent in the notion of aesthetic experience, particularly when coupled with that of pure contemplation. The eye, they said, searches for “joys.” Here complications arise. To savor all the delicacies of visual experience, the eye must be educated. The demand for the education of the senses, particularly of sight, appears time and again in the Goncourts’ writings. But this demand implies an intrinsic contradiction in the impressionists’ philosophy of aesthetic experience and of art. On the one hand, the impressionists wanted to reach the level of “sensation,” which they believed to be an aboriginal, primordial layer of our human experience preceding culture and education, and hence available to every human being. On the other hand, however, they knew that in practice it is acquired taste, shaped by social conditions and collective memory, that enables the eye to enjoy much of what it perceives, or that prevents it from enjoying other sights. The Goncourts’ awareness of the social and historical conditioning of the pleasures of the eye found succinct expression in their famous dictum: “The beautiful is that which appears abominable to eyes without education.” But though the Goncourts were aware that education can make a difference, social and cultural elements remained marginal in their concept of contemplation. They were not primitivists in the sense that they did not as a matter of principle deny the significance of culture. But what mattered to them—this is what the student of cultural tendencies concludes—was detached contemplation as a unique activity that in principle is common to every human being.

Detached contemplation, as we have seen in several cases, is not primarily concerned with singling out the figures and objects we perceive and lifting them up from their surroundings, but with their appearance only. This acceptance of appearances leaves figures and objects fully embedded in, and merged with, their environment. This is also true of the Goncourts. One of the many manifestations of this attitude can be seen in their preference for the sensation of color to the significance of line within visual experience.¹¹ In art theory, at least since the Renaissance, a well-known competition has been going on between line and color. In the conceptual developments and literary records that accompanied this competition it was accepted as a matter of course that the preference for line or color indicated different, even opposing, artistic aims: the adherence to line was understood as an expression of the desire to make an objective statement about the reality portrayed; the predilection for color, on the other hand, was understood as indicating the wish to reproduce physical reality as it appeared to the senses, without the intermediacy of inquisitive, discriminating observation. The Goncourts, concerned as they were with art and widely read in the literature dealing with it, must have been well acquainted with this traditional competition.

The Goncourts' preference for color was noticed and commented on by other critics and writers even during their lifetimes. Let me quote Paul Bourget, a well-known novelist and influential literary critic of the period, mainly in the 1880s. Juxtaposing the Goncourts' views concerning the elements composing painting with those held by more traditional critics, he said that "the Brothers Goncourt do not prefer plastic forms in the manner of Theophile Gautier. They have quickly grasped that the form is nothing but a particular case of color, and that the salience of objects results from a degradation of shades; it is thus the color one should strive to reproduce."¹²

Reading the Goncourts' literary prose one is struck by their frequent attempts to describe subtle effects of color and shade in nature. The colors so evocatively described usually appear as patches of hue, as bits of shaded extension rather than as hard, tangible objects having a special color. This kind of description invokes impressionistic painting, and indeed has an intrinsic affinity to it. The brothers themselves may have felt that in describing the colors we perceive in nature, they were thinking of painting. Sometimes such a submerged feeling is even expressed. Thus, in an entry in the *Journal* describing the sun in the sky suspended over a pearl-gray sea, they noted that "It was only the Japanese who in their color prints venture to depict such strange effects" (II, p. 213).

More than other critics, and more perhaps than most artists, the Goncourts were aware of the intimate, if subtle and subdued, interaction between the art we remember, the paintings that have impressed us and that we store in our memory, and the immediate impressions of the nature we are looking at. Their writings yield fine examples of such interplay. The brothers' sensitivity to color in their descriptions of natural sights often betrays the eye's education through art, the wealth and interiorization of artistic memories, and the way they tinge what we perceive, seemingly directly and immediately, in nature. Take, for instance, the description of the pearl-gray shade of the sea over which the sun descends (*Journal*, VIII, p. 99). What has this hue in nature to do with the symbolic shades of gray in the pictures by Eugène Carrière whom the Goncourts so admired? Whatever one may think about the interaction of artistic memories and natural views, by making color the primary element in looking at both nature and art the Goncourts revealed their intellectual proximity to impressionism, and also indicated their general attitude to art.

The significance the Goncourts accorded to color formed part of a comprehensive view on art and life. Particularly in what they said about painting, the Goncourts have come to be considered the representatives of what is termed "aesthetic culture." It was precisely in contributing to this culture that they shaped the conceptual framework for impressionistic thought and art.

"Aesthetic culture" is an ill-defined concept that would not bear careful logical analysis; it is suggestive rather than clearly outlined. And yet we know what it suggests: namely, the extension of an aesthetic attitude to matters of life itself. Oversimplifying, we might say: it is a culture in which the attitude of detached contemplation is maintained not only with regard to works of art, but with regard to everything, all the realities surrounding us. If such an attitude were maintained, people and events in actual life would assume a certain remoteness that is characteristic of works of art.

An aesthetic attitude to life, demanding total dedication to art alone—so it appeared to the Goncourts and to some of their readers—fosters a psychological detachment from the active life and from any involvement in the problems of society. The Goncourts were indeed extreme in this respect. Few authors would have been ready to claim what the brothers recorded in their *Journal*: "One should not die for any cause, one should live with every government, whatever the aversion you feel to it; one should not believe in anything but in art, and one should not admit anything but literature. All the rest is a lie and a booby-trap" (II, p. 84).

The brothers Goncourt testified that they lived up to this ideal of art as the only reliable, permanent value that counted, the only reality that could be fully trusted. "I believe that since the beginning of the world one has not seen living beings so swallowed up by, so engulfed in, matters of art and matters of intelligence as we are. Books, drawings, engravings are the landmarks on the horizon of our eyes. Perusing, looking—with this we pass our existence" (II, p. 6).

A comprehensive attitude of this kind necessarily affected their approach to literature and to the literary masterpiece. What the Goncourts said about literature does indeed shed light on their thinking in general. In their judgment, the ethical meaning of a literary work of art, its general human subject matter, tends to recede into the background; the admiration for perfect configurations becomes the dominant factor. In other words, for them the central value of a literary work lay in its application of aesthetic norms to the subject matter it described.

It was this attitude of detachment, of total restriction to the world of appearances, that brought the Goncourts' worldview so close to the frame of mind of the impressionists. The crystallization of their concepts of aesthetic culture (and hence also their affinity to impressionistic painting) evolved in a continuous discussion with the art of the past. They felt the need to set themselves off from the classical heritage. Their treatment of Greek literature, and mainly of Homer, is particularly illuminating in this context; it bears witness to their approach to the general problems of literature and art. Their low opinion of Homer is particularly striking; it is a judgment they proclaimed several times. A derogatory attitude to Homer, openly stated, was in their time and world something of a heresy. Though the brothers did not say so explicitly, in their mind Homer clearly stood for the whole of Greek culture. In the *Journal*, Edmond Goncourt expressed the reasons for their disparagement of Homer as follows: "Your Homer paints only physical suffering. To paint moral suffering, this is more arduous. . . . The most modest psychological novel moves me more than all your Homer. Yes, I take more pleasure in reading *Adolphe* [by Benjamin Constant] than the *Iliad*" (II, p. 112). What they found so attractive in Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* was the author's inclination to transform what went on in his own soul into some kind of object, and to look at it from the outside, as it were.

Contemporaries of the Goncourts were quick to note the brothers' critical attitude to Greek literature and art. As early as 1866 Sainte-Beuve discussed in an article still worth reading the brothers' lack of respect for clas-

sical Antiquity; *their* Antiquity, he said, is the eighteenth century.¹³ Though the Goncourts' attitude to Antiquity was perhaps not as consistently negative as it was later made out to be,¹⁴ their rejection of the Greek and Roman cultural and artistic heritage was far-reaching. In their view, this rejection was part of their affirmation of modernity, a condition of belonging to the world of today. Sainte-Beuve understood this motive. The "Querelle des anciens et des modernes," that great dispute between traditionalism and modernity that nourished the literary and artistic debate of former centuries,¹⁵ is not yet over, he wrote in his article.

The Goncourts' critical attitude to, perhaps even outright repudiation of, the Greek tradition in literature and art, whatever the motives that inspired them, made it imperative for them to indicate what should replace the classical model. The question was, of course, crucial at the time; even today, reading the criticism of those years, one senses its urgency. But if the Goncourts did not intend to replace the classical tradition by another specific tradition as coherent and self-contained as the Greek, they did want to supplant one "organic" culture by another. In this they were pioneering a new attitude, one that was rare even in the great trends of modern times. For example, when around the turn of the century the trend known as primitivism also rejected the Greek tradition, its advocates offered what they called the "primitive" model instead. This model, they believed, though spread over many periods and dispersed over many continents, was in spirit and form no less coherent and articulate than the Greek one.

The brothers Goncourt did not present a new systematic philosophy, but they did offer another principle. What they were concerned with was the individual art object. The aesthetic object, the work of art, was considered by itself, totally detached from its cultural and historical context. Therefore objects belonging to altogether different cultures could be seen (and shown) next to each other, without losing their inner completeness and beauty. It was in this form, as isolated objects, that they could inspire the modern artist. In *Manette Salomon*, a novel written jointly by the brothers, they described an artist's *atelier*. It was an embodiment of the Goncourts' eclectic ideal, and resembled a strange museum. "Everywhere astonishing vicinities, the confusing promiscuity of curiosities and relics: a Chinese fan issuing from an earthen lamp from Pompei."¹⁶

Such "confusing promiscuity" was the result of detaching what you see from all that is linked with it, and valuing only what the eye sees. It is a principle quite close to the one that, as we will see in the next couple of chap-

ters, dominated philosophical and scientific thinking. And it had an inherent affinity to the attitude of impressionistic art.

NOTES

1. Walter Pater, *Three Major Texts (The Renaissance, Appreciations, and Imaginary Portraits)*, edited by William E. Buckler (New York and London, 1986), p. 217.

2. Pater, *Three Major Texts*, p. 218.

3. Edmond and Jules Goncourt, *Journal des Goncourt. Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, II (Monaco, 1956), p. 294. The entry was written in 1865. Further references to entries in the *Journal* will be given in parentheses (by volume and page number) in the text.

4. Some quotations are collected by Erich Koehler, *Edmond und Jules de Goncourt: Die Begründer des Impressionismus* (Leipzig, 1912), especially pp. 183 ff. See also the still fundamental work by Pierre Sabatier, *L'esthétique des Goncourts* (Geneva, 1970; original edition: Paris, 1920).

5. See below, the part on empathy.

6. Edmond de Goncourt, *La Faustine* (Paris, 1907), p. 233.

7. Edmond and Jules Goncourt, *Manette Salomon* (Paris, 1906), p. 210.

8. E. Goncourt, *La Faustine*, p. 237.

9. The six monumental volumes of Leonardo's manuscripts, edited by Charles Ravaisson-Mollien, *Les Manuscrits de Leonard de Vinci. Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de l'Institut*, appeared in Paris between 1881 and 1891.

10. Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, translated by Philip MacMahon (Princeton, 1956), p. 34. See Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art: From Plato to Winckelmann* (New York, 1985), pp. 134 ff. For Leonardo's views on the eye in science, see V. P. Zubov, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), chapter 4, pp. 124–68.

11. See Sabatier, *L'esthétique des Goncourts*, pp. 98 ff., 296 ff.

12. Paul Bourget, *Nouveaux essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, 1894), p. 186.

13. Sainte-Beuve's article, called "*Idées et sensations*," that appeared originally on May 14, 1866, and was reprinted in *Les grands écrivains français* (Paris, 1927), pp. 258–78.

14. See François Fosca, *De Diderot à Valéry: Les écrivains et les arts visuels* (Paris, 1960), chapter 16, in which he shows that in the Goncourts' judgment of Antiquity there were also positive elements.

15. For the significance of the *Querelle* for the theory of the visual arts, see Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art, 1: From Plato to Winckelmann* (New York, 1985), pp. 360 ff.

16. E. and J. Goncourt, *Manette Salomon*, p. 131.

Impressionism and the Philosophical Culture of the Time

The utterances of the impressionistic painters and of the roughly contemporary art critics I quoted in the previous chapter have a seemingly narrow, “professional” ring; they seldom refer to comprehensive problems lying outside the work of the painter. One thus easily gets the impression that these artists were intent on stressing the specific, unique nature of the artistic, pictorial domain, detaching it from other domains of experience, reflection, and life. We read of light and color, of tones and brush strokes, and thus of art as isolated from thought and culture as a whole. Considerable contemporary criticism and interpretation of art still vividly reflects this attitude. It goes without saying that the characteristics of impressionistic painting are unique, and that they pose issues that cannot be fully compared to the specific characteristics of contemporary science, literature, or philosophy. Nevertheless, impressionistic painting has much in common with trends prevailing, or developing, in these other domains, and these common attitudes or problems bear investigation.

The intellectual attitudes characterizing the culture that produced impressionism as an artistic trend were not inherently conducive to strict philosophical reasoning or the building of philosophical systems. To build a philosophical system one has to strive for completeness of presentation, for a full and reasoned connection between the system’s distinct parts, and for a fully and evenly articulated argument, requirements seemingly in direct opposition to the leanings that shaped impressionistic art. Nevertheless, the emphasis on certain philosophical notions both in France and in other parts of Europe, as well as the explanations offered for them in late-nineteenth-century reflection, show a remarkable, more than accidental similarity with tendencies in impressionistic painting. A glance at these theoretical speculations will shed some light on the spiritual world of impressionism.

The student of modern culture may be familiar with the central significance accorded to immediate experience and the empirical ideal in the thought of the second half of the nineteenth century. But notions like “experience” are complex, and may be understood in different, even contradictory, ways. What did western philosophers of the late nineteenth century mean when they evoked this notion? One of the meanings the notion of “experience” had in the philosophical reflection of the time was that of a continuous flow of impressions, rather than an encounter with some real, independent object “out there” in the world.

Here it may be useful to adduce Henri Bergson as a witness to this intricate trend of thought. Although Bergson belongs to a somewhat later generation than the impressionist painters, he sums up the impressionistic trend of thought more profoundly than other thinkers. Right at the beginning of one of his great works, *Matter and Memory* (*Matière et mémoire*), which appeared in Paris as early as 1896, he offered his theory of the real world as consisting of the presentations of everyday experience. Characteristically he called these presentations “images.” The term is not employed by chance. By making what we would otherwise call an “object” or a “thing” into an “image” he in a sense emptied the object of its full material reality. True, Bergson did not want to be seen as a “subjectivist,” that is, as one who conceived of objects as mere “appearances.” Without denying the existence of an outside world, Bergson in fact concentrated on what we perceive in our experience as the contents of our consciousness. He very powerfully conveyed the feeling that we are surrounded by a web of immaterial images. “Here I am in the presence of images,” he wrote in the opening sentences of *Matter and Memory*, images “perceived when my senses are opened to them, unperceived when they are closed. All these images act and react upon one another. . . .”¹ Representation, he said, is “the totality of perceived images” (p. 64).

The truth or philosophical validity of Bergson’s doctrines does not concern us in the present study. However, philosophical doctrines often expressed the social trends of their time, and were of great consequence in shaping their culture. Seen from this point of view, Bergson’s ideas are important for our understanding of the intellectual and emotional character of impressionism, and the attitudes it articulated in the domain of the visual arts.

One of the central problems in Bergson’s philosophy is the relationship between experience and memory. Disregarding the philosophical implications of Bergson’s discussion, we will look at what a painter or an art critic

may have derived from this theoretical reflection (even if the philosopher himself wished to emphasize different aspects). Painting, it was generally accepted, is based on, and reflects, visual experience. "We paint what we see" became a slogan, repeated countless times by artists and critics. But artists always felt (though the degree of their awareness greatly varied) that visual experience is not as naive and direct as this concise sentence suggests. In fact, human vision is not naive; it is tinged, blurred, some would say "distorted," by the accumulated memories we carry in our minds. It is this accumulation that Bergson called "memory." There could hardly be a subject of more profound concern to the impressionists than this juxtaposition of experience and memory.

Bergson had much to say about the nature of memory, and particularly about the functions it fulfills in our experience of the world around us. In fact no experience of present reality is unmixed with memory. The question is, which of the two factors, perception or memory, determines the overall character of experience? According to Bergson, memory is often so powerful that it in fact replaces perception; actual perception may become the occasion that triggers a memory (p. 162 ff.). It has correctly been concluded that memory may thus become not so much an augmentation of, as a hindrance to, perception.²

Given the cultural mood of Bergson's reflections and theories it is no surprise to encounter the notion of "pure perception" here. Of course, Bergson was aware that "pure" perception exists only in theory. Our real perception, "concrete and complex" as it is, is never pure; it is "never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it" (p. 170). Already, earlier in his work he said that actual perception is "enlarged by memories and offers always a certain breadth of duration." Bergson introduced the concept of "pure" perception in order to understand what perception is in general.

From this we understand what "pure perception" may be. It is an altogether instantaneous grasping, totally freed from memory. Such a perception would be "absorbed in the present and capable, by giving up every form of memory, of obtaining a vision of matter both immediate and instantaneous" (p. 26). Pure perception would mean the immediate apprehension of an "uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions." And it necessarily implies that the person doing the perceiving is totally immersed in what he or she experiences.

Bergson the philosopher knew that "pure perception" and "pure intuition" cannot be achieved in reality. Such perception would presuppose that

we are able to experience the world around us without our views and impressions being shaped, at least in part, by the accumulated treasure of crystallized images that make up our human world; Bergson himself called them “memory images.” In other words, “pure perception” would require us to shed the impact of the accumulated culture that is part and parcel of our human existence. We need not follow the philosophical problems that arise here. We need only say that, from the vantage point of the historian, the very appearance of the notion of “pure perception” was a significant development in the thought of the time. That the subject attracted attention and became topical indicates that it touched on one of the central themes of the period.

Here we have to turn from Bergson the philosopher to his role as a herald of the culture of his time, and from what he said to how he was perceived, at least in certain circles (and regardless of whether or not the reception of him was “correct” in a scholarly sense). As a philosopher, it goes without saying, Bergson did not attach any value judgment to the two elements, perception and memory; he did not in any way suggest that the one was better than the other, that it belonged to a more basic layer of human existence, or that it was more desirable. But one can well understand how a generation that was tired of its inherited culture, that longed for a direct, “immediate” experience of reality (and made the primitive an ideal figure), imbued Bergson’s “pure perception” with high value, even as a kind of paradisiac land which people longed to reach.

The theory of thought that shaped Bergson’s interpretation of experience culminated in his view of time. His treatment of time is not only among the most characteristic and influential elements in his philosophy; it also sheds some light on an intellectual and cultural attitude that was central to what may be called the impressionistic worldview, and may even have had a more direct relation to the impressionistic painter’s approach to his experience of “nature.” The core of this Bergsonian contemplation is the notion of *durée*. The concept of duration (*durée*) was a persistent theme in his philosophy, which had played a central part in his first major work, the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Essay on the Immediate Data of the Consciousness). The *Essai*, a short book, appeared in print in 1889,³ but it was composed several years earlier, mainly in 1886. It is worth recalling that the mid-1880s were years in which impressionistic painting became better known among, and was taken more seriously by, some progressive circles in Paris, the city where young Henri Bergson lived and composed his philosophical discussion.

Duration (*durée*), and time in general, continued to occupy Bergson's interest. In a later work, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Paris, 1903), he approached the subject from another angle, one that may be of interest to the student of art. There are two ways of knowing, relative and absolute, he said here. Relative knowledge is achieved by piecing together fragmentary views, while absolute knowledge is achieved by experiencing something from within, that is, by intuition. Intuition is "the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible" (1.6). Now, *durée*, Bergson believed, can be grasped by intuition only. The real experience of duration is altogether distorted by our attempt to make the flow of time measurable. What is measurable is the projection of time onto space, or surface, and we tend to mistake the projection for the movement itself. "A quarter of an hour *becomes* the 90-degree arc of the circle that is transversed by the minute hand."⁴

In his attempt to show that the uninterrupted flow that is the nature of time cannot be measured, that is, cut into pieces and projected onto space, Bergson took up the classical formulation of a problem in Greek thought, Zeno's paradox. Arguing against Zeno's famous paradox (the ancient philosopher's "proof" that movement is impossible) Bergson stressed the unfortunate consequences of projecting time onto space. Zeno concluded that if an arrow in flight passes through the different points on its trajectory, it must be at rest when at them, and therefore can never move at all. The mistake, said Bergson, was to assume that the arrow can be *at* any point. The line may be divided, but the movement may not. It is the same with time. Time is a great flux that cannot be divided, counted, and summed up; it can be understood properly only by means of intuition.

How then, if at all, does Bergson's discussion of time and movement tell us something about the spiritual world of impressionistic painting? Painting, after all, is an art of space. The fact that the picture is grounded in spatial perception was distinctly part of the cultural awareness of many periods, especially in the modern world. The early Italian Renaissance already conceived of geometrical and stereometrical figuration as the essential framework for the art of painting. Thus Alberti began his treatise on painting—the birth certificate of the "modern" theory of art—with what the painter takes from the mathematician⁵—and what he takes is geometry. For centuries painting and sculpture were considered the "arts of space," while music and poetry were seen as the "arts of time."⁶ Why, then, should we look at Bergson's theory of time in the context of impressionistic painting?

The answer is that Bergson's theory of time is important for our understanding of the impressionistic approach because he discovered, or articulated, a new principle for seeing the world around us. This principle also dominated the art of impressionism. If one accepts Bergson's thought one has to abandon our view of painting as an art of space. For centuries it was firmly believed that the reality, or "nature," we see around us and that our painters represent in their pictures is made up of discrete, material figures or other bodies placed within empty space. That space is altogether unrelated and indifferent to the objects it contains. Objects are tangible bodies, space is a mere extension. But as we have seen, Bergson believed that in our actual experience both can become parts of a continuous flow. Reality, perceived in a highly intuitive way, is "mobile and continuous" rather than static and discrete. This doctrine of *durée*, Bergson felt, has an inherent affinity to art. He did not write a special treatise on art, but the concern with art permeates his whole work. A few examples will make this clear, I hope.

When Bergson wished to show that intuition, as he understood that notion, was not merely a conceptual construction but a reality of life, something that can be observed and experienced, the artist was his main witness. In one of his most famous works, *L'Évolution créatrice*,⁷ he tried to show that intuition can to some extent, be initiated intentionally. Again it is the artist who proves this. That intuition is not impossible in real life, Bergson said, "is proved by the existence in man of an aesthetic faculty along with regular perception." The artist is the embodiment of this faculty. The artist achieves this aim of expanding our faculty of perception by way of intuition, "by placing himself within the object with a kind of sympathy." Thus he succeeds "in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts up between him and his model" (p. 641).

A few years later Bergson presented the essence of his philosophy before an Oxford audience, under the significant title "The Perception of Change."⁸ Here he came back once more to what the artist's existence and work told him. Those who claimed that the intuition that enlarges the reach of our sensual experience is not possible in the world we actually inhabit were disproved by facts. Their claim "is refuted, we believe, by experience. The fact is that there have been for centuries men whose function it has been to see what we should not perceive under natural conditions. These are the artists" (p. 1370). Moreover, such extension of our perceptual faculties was the very goal of art. "What is the object of art if not to make us discover . . . outside and within ourselves, a vast number of things which did not clearly strike our senses. . . ?"