EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND MODERN PAINTING

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1. Introduction

Modern painting has become the subject of heated discussion and debate. The devotees of this art claim that it represents a widening of the possibilities of artistic expression associated with the throwing off of traditional methods and restrictions. They appear to find a pleasurable aesthetic experience in their paintings. The detractors of modern painting, who apparently get no pleasure from it, consider it an esoteric art perpetrated by a few crude craftsmen, that will soon pass away. Toynbee the historian takes the more serious view that modern art is indicative of the decadence of our civilization (70). The average man is bewildered—he can understand the developments in modern painting even less than he can understand those in modern music, sculpture, and literature.¹

Because modern paintings are much more extreme than traditional paintings in content, technique, and underlying theory, they present cases of particular interest to the experimentalist. They tend to bring to the fore aesthetic problems previously raised, but never so sharply and dramatically. There has often been controversy over the proper evaluation of this or that painter, but there has seldom existed so sharp a division of opinion as that concerning the new art. Theories of creativity in art have been formulated, but none as apparently odd and fanciful as the Surrealist theory. It has been known that a person’s attitude toward a painting may change if he is exposed to it, but an extreme change in attitude from extreme dislike to active enthusiasm has not usually been shown toward the older paintings. The present paper will deal with these three issues: (1) the evaluation of modern paintings, (2) the Surrealist theory of creativity, and (3) the learning process in appreciation of modern art. It is believed that of the problems raised by modern art, at least those in these areas are of particular interest to the psychologist.

Psychology has long been concerned with the problems of aesthetics. Fechner (27) in 1876 proposed several procedures for the scientific study of problems in aesthetics, and these have been amplified by later German workers (51, 54, 60, 65). Reviews of American experimental work may be found in several sources (16, 59, 73). Theoretical aestheticians, while primarily concerned with philosophical issues, furnish interesting suggestions for psychological study (33, 38, 67).

2. The Schools of Modern Painting

The modern movement in painting dates from about 1900 and comprises in the main the following schools: Cubism 1909—, Futurism 1911–1915, Abstractionism 1911—, Dadaism 1916–1922, Surrealism 1924—, and Expressionism (dating from Van Gogh). So-called Primitive paintings, while they do not constitute a

school with definite traditions, may be classified as modern art. These schools are comprehensible as reactions against the Impressionist school (1870–) which developed the technique of reproducing the effects of light, shade and atmosphere to such perfection that progress toward more exact representation seemed stalemated. All modern schools depart from exact reproduction of external appearances. The direction of the departure characterizes the school, and furnishes information concerning aspects of appreciation in painting. We will describe the more important of the schools in greater detail. Further information concerning the history and aims of the schools may be found in contemporary books and articles on art (3, 17, 18, 22, 41, 42, 61, 64, 72).

Impressionism, the school from which the modern schools differ, was founded by Turner, Constable, Delacroix, and Monet; its first exhibition was in 1874. The aim of the school was to portray the objects of nature as the artist saw them. Colors were applied in small variegated touches which very successfully simulated the scintillating effects of shifting light and atmosphere. Sunlight was found to be yellow. The complementary color of the prevailing illumination always appeared in the shadows. The subject matter of Impressionistic painting was largely landscapes, although human figures were often painted by Renoir and Degas. The most famous Impressionists were Manet, Monet, Renoir, Degas and Pissarro. The Impressionist school has never been surpassed in its achievement of optical realism and atmospheric effects.

Cubism was founded by Picasso and Braque in 1907. These artists were influenced by the angular distortion of African Negro sculpture, and by a statement of Cézanne’s: "You must see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone." The technique of Cubism aimed to reduce seen form to its geometrical essence and thus achieve a beauty of design. In the analytical phase of Cubism (1906–1913) natural forms were analyzed and separated into cubistic elements. In the synthetic phase of Cubism (1913–1928) pictures were constructed synthetically by the process of "collage": newspapers, matches, playing cards, sand and other materials were pasted to the surface of the canvas. Textures were drawn and imitated. The subject matter of Cubist paintings is of little importance, as the paintings usually bear little resemblance to the source of inspiration. Outstanding exponents of Cubism are Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger, and Roger de la Fresnaye.

Futurism was an Italian literary and artistic movement, originated by

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2 It must be recognized that exact representation is never achieved. Use of oil paints limits the amount of form detail that may be shown, and the colors of the paint do not duplicate in brightness-range those found in nature. Furthermore, it is not possible to accurately depict the three dimensional world on a two dimensional surface. Although all paintings depart from exact representation, some do so relatively more than others.

3 Thus Cubism and Abstractionism stress form and color composition, Expressionism emphasizes the emotional content, and Surrealism depicts the dream and fantastic aspects of visual experience.

4 The names of the various schools have a particular artistic significance which does not usually correspond to the everyday meaning. It is obvious that paintings of all schools are impressionistic, expressionistic and abstract. Surrealism means super-reality, an effect which surrealists hope to attain. Primitivism refers to the work of untutored artists, not to that of primitive peoples.
Marinetti and effective in art from 1911 to 1915. The aim of the movement as stated in its manifesto was to "exalt every kind of originality, of boldness, of extreme violence, rebel against the tyranny of the words 'Harmony' and 'Good taste' (44)." Futurism was allied to Fascism, glorifying the fascistic ideals of war, violence, patriotism, and mechanization. The technique utilized bright colors and cubistic designs. An interesting attempt was made in many canvases to portray such dynamic effects as force and motion (See Fig. 1). Prominent Futurists were Carra, Russolo, Serverini, Balla, and Boccioni.
Expressionism was strongly influenced by the paintings of Van Gogh (1853–1890), Gauguin (1848–1903) and Edvard Munch (1863–1934). The aim of Expressionism is to show emotional feeling on the canvas. Colors are bright, often sharply contrasting, applied with a broad full brush, or are sometimes applied from the tube. The effect is turbulent and vibrant. Paintings are not realistic, but there may be enough recognizable similarity to the original to make the change appear as a radical, often "brutal" deformation. The subject matter of Expressionistic painting is often concerned with themes of "social significance," religious scenes, and mystical or violent scenes from nature. Important expressionists are Van Gogh, Gauguin, Honoré Daumier, Albert Ryder, Chaim Soutine, Jules Pascin, Georges Rouault, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse.

Abstractionism developed around 1910 from the Cubistic tradition. The school has become formally defined as comprising compositions completely lacking resemblance to naturally seen forms. It is a natural climax of the shift away from the exact representation of the impressionistic school. The source of pleasure in paintings of this school is the organization of color, line, light, shade and texture. There are two traditions in Abstract painting. The first stems from Cubism and tends to use a technique involving rectilinear, carefully planned geometric forms. The second tradition stems from the paintings of Kandinsky and tends to be vaguely life-like (biomorphic) and curvilinear. The appearance of these later paintings is romantic and apparently spontaneous. Abstract paintings are to be regarded as pure designs. They are analogous to musical compositions—yielding sensory beauty with no suggestion or imitation of ordinarily heard sounds. Important abstract painters are Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Helion and Feininger.

Dadaism sprang up in Switzerland in 1917 as a social protest against World War I. The name Dada, (hobby-horse) was discovered by chance in a dictionary, by Tristan Tzara. The group sought complete revolt against social conventions. "Their philosophy involved a complete nihilism, satirical disillusionment and violent protest, disgust with and ridicule of civilization, iconoclastic destruction and programmatic disorder, systematic demoralization, and a glorification of the irrational or anti-rational, and anti-aesthetic, and the amoral (18)." Dadaists held meetings, gave exhibitions, sponsored several publications and ran a nightclub. The artistic methods of the group were expressed in such unconventional techniques as: rayographs, ready-mades, fatagaga, rubbish constructions, exquisite corpses, and collages. Productions bore such names as: Catch as Catch Can, Infant Carburetor, Wet Paint, Here Everything is Floating, The Little Tear Gland that says Tic Tac, The Human Eye and a Fish, the Latter Petrified, Two Children are Menaced by a Nightingale. Prominent Dadaists were Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco, Huelsenbeck, Hugo Ball, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, André Breton, Phillipppe Soupault and Guillaume. The chief importance of Dada was its influence on the school of Surrealism, which followed.

Surrealism ("Beyond the Natural") was founded in 1924 by André Breton, a physician and writer who was much influenced by Freud. He attempted to apply Freudian doctrines to artistic creation. Surrealism was also influenced by the unconventional methods, and the irrational and anti-aesthetic content of Dada. Two
types of technique have been used by the Surrealists: (1) spontaneous "automatic" technique supposedly tapping the unconscious, in which the free flow of images is recorded, and (2) old master technique in which the Surrealist images are carefully drawn in photographic style. Products of the latter technique have been called by Dali "hand-painted dream photographs." Inspiration for

Fig. 2. Upper left: Dadaist, Ernst—The Gramineous Bicycle garnished with Bells the Pilfered Greybeards and the Echinoderms bending the Spine to look for Caresses; Upper right: Dali—The Persistence of Memory; Lower Left: Van Gogh—The Starry Night; Lower Right: Rousseau—The Sleeping Gypsy.

Surrealist paintings comes from "subjective" experiences such as dreams, free associations, images from fantastic poems (Lautréamont and Rimbaud) and the hallucinations of simulated insanity. The world of external reality is not depicted. The content follows Breton's maxim: "the marvelous is always beautiful, anything that is marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvelous is beautiful (11, p. 64).” Prominent Surrealists are Miro, André Masson, Hans Arp, Salvador Dali and Yves Tanguy.
Artists classed as Primitives are entirely self-taught, and usually take up serious painting late in life. The first modern Primitive was Henri Rousseau, a Paris custom clerk who devoted full time to painting after he had retired. His first exhibition was in 1886. All primitive painters satisfy the following requirements (63): (1) They have received no formal training as artists, (2) They take a very simple view of life such as is usually found only in children, (3) They show a relative incapability of being influenced in any way by looking at the work of other painters (hence we may not speak of a Primitive school) and (4) They produce a sufficient quantity of work to become widely known. The subject of primitive paintings is real or imaginary scenes of landscapes, jungles, disasters, nursery tales, circuses, historical events and the like. Scenes are painted in bright hues with apparent feeling for form and color. The manner of depiction is realistic; failure to achieve accurate representation is due to the absence of sophisticated art techniques and is not purposely aimed for. Those who like Primitive paintings appreciate in them their "homemade quality," naïveté, "cuteness," charm, and sincerity. Important primitive artists are Henri Rousseau, Morris Hirshfield, Camille Bombois, Horace Pippin, Joseph Pickett, Israel Litwack, and Anna Mary Robertson Moses (Grandmother Moses).

3. The Evaluation of Modern Paintings

The problem of evaluation is a central and stormy issue in the debate on modern paintings (41). Most of the strongly stated opinions commending or condemning the new art reduce to mere expressions of personal preference. Such statements settle nothing: "de gustibus non est disputandum."

As a scientist, the psychologist is concerned with describing events belonging in his realm of interest, but he is not able to set standards of "good" and "bad," of "better" and "worse" for art or anything else. The standards must come from common or expert agreement, based on biological necessity, tradition, or some other source. The scientist's contribution to evaluation of paintings would consist in a clarification of standards through classification, codification, and a statement of the standards in measurable terms.

Operationally, the task of setting standards might be carried out by analyzing to determine the factors causing past paintings to be successes or failures: (1) Experts would distinguish and place in two separate heaps good and bad paintings of the past. Presumably judgment has sufficiently crystallized on these older paintings to allow the task to be reliably carried out. (2) An analysis would be made to find the factors on which the judgments were made. It would be hoped that the standards evolved would enable us to judge the new art, and that they would serve to guide future artistic efforts.

Step (1) of this program presents no difficulties. The rating of paintings may be accomplished by well known ranking or rating techniques (34). The jury must be selected from leading painters and critics. The rationale of the method has been started by Cattell (15, p. 314), "There is . . . no other criterion of a man's work than the estimation in which it is held by those most competent to judge." The monetary value, based on purchase price, might be substituted for expert opinion in evaluating the paintings.

Step (2), the analysis of "good" and "bad" paintings to reveal standards, presents greater difficulties. The criteria of good art, to attain scientific useful-
ness, must be objective.\(^5\) Otherwise, the ratings of paintings will be a matter of conflicting, subjective judgments.

Well known standards of judging art, arrived at by philosophers through mystic communion with the Goddess of Beauty, far above the level of actual observations, have been notoriously subjective. Santayana (62) (1906) gives the following three basic factors in good taste: (1) vivacity and volume of feeling, (2) purity and consistency of experience, and (3) pertinency and width of appeal. Deacey (22) gives the following three criteria: (1) form in relation to matter, (2) meaning of medium in art, and (3) nature of the expressive object. Torosian (69) gives two standards of criticism: (1) perfection—based on functional fitness, harmonious pattern, good use of material, etc., and (2) greatness—based on magnitude of subject matter, complexity of form, and intensity of expression.

The principles of art ordinarily taught to students (rhythm, proportion, balance, dominance, subordination, etc.) do not fulfill the requirements of scientific objectivity. Munro (53, p. 260) states that these principles are "so vague and abstract as to mean very little in practice... . The current definitions of them are so broad and general that almost any work of art can be shown to possess them to some extent, in one way or another."

Taubes, a painter, believes that the competent artist acquainted with his medium will follow certain procedures (66). He will avoid painting exotic scenes whose brilliance the palette cannot reproduce; he will attempt to be original. Taubes proposes that paintings be judged on several technical criteria: paint quality (brush stroke, contour, and texture), use of colors, depiction of illumination, use of design and draftsmanship, imagination, originality, taste, etc. Taubes' listing has the virtue of indicating that evaluation of a painting is a technical matter best accomplished by persons acquainted with the actual problems involved. Criteria such as Taubes suggests might be satisfactory with experts as judges, but are not objective enough for scientific usefulness.

The main difficulty in setting absolute standards of evaluation is that paintings are not strictly comparable. Paintings differ in utilitarian purpose and in the medium and style employed. Artistic aims have greatly changed in time, and differ from culture to culture.

Paintings may be used for wall decoration, for magazine covers, museum pieces, cartoons, etc. A different standard is probably effective for each of these uses. Religious paintings, originally displayed in a cathedral, and ancestral portraits intended to lend dignity to a home, may appear out of place in a museum where the original function is lost.

The medium employed may be oils, water colors, tempera, crayons, collage, or some combination of these. Each medium has its own rules of use.

The ideal striven for in painting has varied in time and differs from culture to culture (16, p. 355): "... the highest praise given Phidias by his contemporaries was that he had enriched the religion of the state... the only aspects of art objects besides moral effectiveness and usefulness which were praised by the 4th century B. C. were size, costliness, and fidelity to nature (37)."

"Until the dawn of the Renaissance in Italy the beauty of mountain scenery

\(^5\) By objective criteria, we mean those which may be verified by "normal" observers.
was a closed book to the medieval mind. A mountain was a thing to be shunned, an impediment to traffic, a source of danger and fatigue (23)."

"Victorians sought elegance, ornamentation, and the type of feeling that we now term 'sentimentality'. Contemporary critics, surfeited with Victorian excesses, are likely to praise strength, intensity, and simplicity (23)."

"... If one were to make the broadest kind of generalization on the situation in art during the last hundred years, one might attempt it in the following manner: from 1830–1865 the main interest centered around the 'story'; from 1865–1900, roughly speaking, 'more light' was the slogan; and from that time on until recently 'form' for its own sake has been the battle cry of art (56, p. 116)."

The shifting of ideals in the past should make us wary of trusting the permanence of present day standards. The fact that paintings have been created in different times leads to paradoxes in evaluation. Paintings, crude to present-day eyes, may be highly rated because they were outstanding at the time of their origin. Two paintings may be almost indistinguishable in appearance, but one may be very valuable and the other worth little; the first was painted by an artist who was ahead of his time, the other by an "imitator." Objective measurement would not reveal the basis for the differences of ratings in these instances.

Similar difficulties hold in evaluating paintings of different cultures.

It is not easy to see what absolute standards of painting could apply to the styles of Abstractionism, Surrealism, Primitivism and the more conventional types of painting. H. Hungerland (39, p. 192) states: "... the judgment that a Norman Rockwell is better than a Braque because the figures in the former painting are anatomically correct will be found inadequate, not because it is factually wrong, but because one is aware of the fact that the kind of painting of which Braque is an exponent is usually understood as not being concerned with anatomical correctness."

Adequately to appraise a given painting, it would first have to be classified on such characteristics as purpose, medium, style, time and place of origin, and compared only with paintings in its own category. "The situations for which art is produced are so infinitely variable; the types of person who will make use of it are so variable; the ideals and styles of art in different times and cultures are so numerous and changing that no brief set of principles can possibly serve as an adequate yardstick of values (53, p. 261)."

It would be rash to say that objective and quantitative evaluation of paintings will never be achieved. But considering the difficulties to be overcome, such as those considered, one should not be optimistic of seeing this endeavor carried through in the near future.

4. The Surrealist theories of artistic creativity

The Surrealists have proposed two methods of creation in art. The passive methods stem from André Breton's experiments beginning about 1919, and

include automatic writing, rapid writing, hypnotism, and dream transcription. The active methods originated with Dali’s “paranoiac critical” technique, 1930. The latter procedures include simulation of various mental diseases. The aim of both passive and active methods is deliberately to tap the “unconscious,” which is considered to be the prime source of artistic inspiration.

André Breton’s early experiments are reviewed in his “First Surrealist Manifesto” (10) which appeared in 1924. The author, a physician specializing in nervous and mental diseases, was impressed with the methods of psychoanalysis, and attempted to apply them to writing of prose. He describes his attempts as follows: “Preoccupied as I still was at that time with Freud, and familiar with his methods of investigation, which I had practiced occasionally upon the sick during the War, I resolved to obtain from myself what one seeks to obtain from patients, namely a monologue poured out as rapidly as possible, over which the subject’s critical faculty has no control—the subject himself throwing reticence to the winds—and which as much as possible represents spoken thought. It was in such circumstances that, together with Phillipe Soupault, whom I had told about my first ideas on the subject, I began to cover sheets of paper with writing... By the end of the first day of the experiment we were able to read to one another about fifty pages obtained in this manner and to compare the results we had achieved. The likeness was on the whole striking. There were similar faults of construction, the same hesitant manner, and also, in both cases, an illusion of extraordinary verve, much emotion, a considerable assortment of images of a quality such as we should never have been able to obtain in the normal way of writing, a very special sense of the picturesque, and, here and there, a few pieces of out and out buffoonery... I must give him credit... for having always forcibly opposed the least correction of any passage that did not seem to me to be quite the thing. In that he was most certainly right.” These early Surrealist writings appeared in “Champs Magnétiques” (12).

The experiments in rapid writing, along with others concerned with hypnotism, automatic writing and other automatic techniques, led to the following early definition of Surrealism:

“SURREALISM, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought’s dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations (10).” While the first efforts were applied to literature, the method was soon used in art creation by Arp, Klee, Miro, Tanguy and others. Tanguy for example has stated: “I expect nothing from reflection but I am sure of my reflexes (2, p. 39).”

The active phase of Surrealist theorizing on creativity was influenced by Dali’s statement that in painting he employs a “paranoiac-critical” method to achieve the symptoms of paranoia. In La Femme Visible, he writes: “I believe the moment is at hand when, by a paranoiac and active advance of the mind, it will be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thus to help to discredit completely the world of reality.” A painting done with this method is described: “The figuration can theoretically and practically be multiplied:—everything depends upon the paranoiac capacity
of the author. The basis of the associative mechanisms and the renewing of obsessing ideas allows as in the case of a recent picture by Salvador Dali now being elaborated, six simultaneous images to be represented without any of them undergoing the least figurative deformation (20, p. 17)."

Breton and Eluard attempted to extend the active method to other mental diseases. In all seriousness, they wrote poetry and prose while assuming the symptoms of feeblemindedness, manic-depressive psychoses and dementia praecox. The literary results of these attempts appear in "The Immaculate Conception" (1930) (9).

Paintings presumably applying Surrealist methods have been weird creations, depicting incongruous objects, animation of the inanimate, fantastic machinery, dream pictures, collage, alteration of perspective and similar devices (2). Surrealists in talking of beauty often quote Lautréamont's remark: "Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table (11, p. 33)."

The Surrealist group has sponsored several other doctrines which may be mentioned in passing to show something of the flavor of the movement. Following the Freudian belief that the unconscious holds the important forces of personality, the Surrealists have favored an extreme subjectivism, going so far as to reject objective reality, or at least to suggest its fusion with subjective experience into a great "surreality." Surrealists have also dabbled in politics; Breton has published several issues of "Le Surréalisme au Service de la Revolution." The strange marriage of subjectively-minded Surrealism with objectively-minded Communism might be expected to lead to a serious lack of harmony:

Thought must be dictated outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations—one must not forfeit the burning desire for truth and justice; one must affirm the omnipotence of the dream and the disinterested play of thought—one must deepen the foundations of the real and be intensely interested in the proletarian revolution; one must accept the superior reality of the dream and of the paranoid mode of thought—one must attain a clearer consciousness of the perceptive world; one must reject all control exercised by reason, but this does not prevent a "reasoning epoch" in surrealism from arriving (1, p. 39).

In evaluating the Surrealist theories of creativity, the scientist will find it unwise to tell the artist what he shall or shall not do. As with golf, it is the end result of the effort that is crucial, and the artist must be given freedom to use any technique he chooses, including slinging paint on the canvas. (We do not advocate this rather haphazard method, however, or believe that great works would result from it.) The psychologist is interested in artistic creativity particularly as it is related to the topic of thinking, and he will approach the Surrealist theories from the viewpoint of the mental processes proposed.

Recently, Surrealists have tended to abandon the automatic methods of hypnosis, automatic writing, and rapid writing. These methods are cumbersome, they are not to be successfully applied by everyone, and there is little evidence that they produce better results than conventional methods of writing a manuscript or painting a picture. The present discussion will therefore be concerned chiefly with the active Surrealist methods.

The active methods, insofar as they take as their models of excellence the art
of the insane and of children, are open to severe criticism. Psychotic art is relatively crude and inferior to that of normal persons (4, 5, 6, 7, 8). The paintings of psychotics have been considered as "distorted meaningless reflections" of the art of the culture (4, p. 205). Works of the artist usually decline when he suffers a psychosis, and improve as clinical normality is approached (48). The common belief that all or many great artists are psychotic is not supported by any real evidence (6). It is claimed that Surrealist artists, in particular, are not insane (66). The art of children is not considered excellent by those acquainted with it (43). The Goodenough test indicates a close relation between chronological age and realism in drawing a simple figure of a man (32).

It may well be doubted if the normal person can assume any more than the most superficial symptoms of insanity; the fundamental organic or functional causes are absent. The psychotic lives in a distorted world which he attempts to deal with as best he can; the normal person can see only a "normal" world. Frois-Wittman, a psychoanalyst, discounts the attempt to draw a parallel between the thought processes of the artist and those of the psychotic:

The psychotic makes use of few images,—he shows a constant effort at logic, at disentangling thoughts which seem to him self-evident, and so his text or picture is easily comprehensible with the interruption here and there of some inescrutable absurdity due to the unconscious suddenly laid bare. The artist, on the contrary, not having his unconscious at his disposal (since he is not insane) uses artificial means to hunt it out (uncontrolled drawings, free associations, etc.). The result is a seeming effort to entangle, a deliberate refusal of logic, and a wealth of images in which his product far outbids the psychotics. With these reservations there is, nevertheless, a certain resemblance, consisting, for instance, in a great earnestness, and a great degree of apparent absurdity and arbitrariness (28, p. 905).

The ability to plan and organize a picture in particular would be lost with the impairment of intelligence found in psychotics (8, p. 255).

The Surrealist claim to tapping the unconscious and depicting it on their canvases runs into logical difficulties. An analysis of the products of such painters as Dali and Tanguy reveals obvious planning which must require considerable conscious effort:

Coupled with the minute handling of detail... is the placing of small objects in vast flat expanses, the use of a distant horizon and much sky, the extension of space parallel to the picture plane, and the exaggeration of perspective so that the eye sees into immense distances. While recognizing in these methods an attempt to reproduce the unlimited dream spaces of the mind, we may nevertheless point out that they derive from painters who were

7 Taubes states: "One of the most popular errors is to suspect the originators of surrealist art of being victims of insanity, perversion, and assorted neuroses. More than two decades ago I was an ardent follower of Surrealism and can assert from my own experience and the experience of my distinguished colleagues that it takes a sober and methodical mind to synthesize a surrealistic theme. Only one with an elastic perception, dexterous in handling associations and metaphors, can manage successfully surrealistic subjects. Painstaking tenacity and shrewd prefabrication of hallucinations are required to engineer a project often highly complicated in structure and invention. There are proportionately more mental disorders among stockbrokers and realists in practical fields than among the professional Surrealists (66, p. 153)"."
consciously engaged in the representation of the exotic . . . as in the case of Meissonier (from whom Dali’s smaller pictures stem) or, as in the pictures of Boecklin, with romantic-classical and archaizing suggestions (31, p. 165).

The technique involves conscious control; what of the content? May it be considered as depicting the unconscious? It would not seem possible to express in pictorial form the latent content of the unconscious, motives, urges and complexes. What appears to be depicted on Surrealist canvases is manifest content—visual appearances similar to the images or items experienced in a dream. Such images are not unconscious, and no unconscious inspiration is necessary to paint them. All in all, if we say that Surrealist art depicts incongruous objects and dream images in planned arrangements, we have pretty well described it, and the theories of creativity based on tapping the unconscious seem unnecessary.

A side-problem of some interest to psychologists is raised by the Surrealist claim that their symbolism is universal. Dali states:

The subconscious has a symbolic language that is truly a universal language, for it . . . speaks with the vocabulary of the great vital constants, sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space—these vital constants are universally echoed in every human. To understand an aesthetic picture, training in appreciation is necessary, cultural and intellectual preparation. For Surrealism the only requisite is a receptive and intuitive human being (19).

Critics have most frequently attacked Surrealism for this claim to a universal symbolism: “. . . Mr. Jennings explains the presence of a jam-roll in his chef d’oeuvre ‘Life and Death,’ as the result of a ‘personal fixation’ and for that reason it no doubt possesses a profound emotive significance for him. Unfortunately a ‘jam-roll fixation’ . . . is not a universal possession; the spectator with a suet pudding or other fixation is left cold (1, p. 36).” Dali’s assertion would demand a fixed response to Surrealist symbolism, i.e. that Surrealist symbolism be objective. If dreams could similarly be interpreted, psychoanalysis would be unnecessary—the patient’s latent content would be immediately apparent to anyone, including the patient himself.

An easy test of the universality of reaction to Surrealist symbolism may be made by observing whether the associations evoked by a given Surrealist picture are similar in all observers. If similar associations are evoked, we would not, however, have to rely for explanation on “vital constants” or a racial unconscious (40). Indeed, to prove that the source of pleasure is the racial unconscious, it would at least have to be demonstrated that all observers liked the picture, and that observers could give no plausible reason for liking it: i.e., that the source of pleasure could not be traced to every-day experience with common aspects of our culture. On the other hand, studies so far made have shown the sources of pleasure or displeasure in pictures to involve concrete, unsubtle factors (45, 68).

5. Learning Appreciation of Modern Painting

The appreciation of a modern painting often involves an obvious learning process; the observer who first finds a modern art creation incomprehensible may later come to accept and even enjoy it. Fechner (27) early pointed out that repeated presentation of an aesthetic stimulus causes it to increase in pleasant-
ness for most observers, and this rule has been shown to hold in such modalities as melody endings (24), musical recordings (30, 50), quarter tone music (47), tonal intervals (49, 71), pictures (13, 45, 46), and foreign names (46). The rule holds for paintings, but the “mechanism” of the change in pleasantness has not been systematically investigated.

To investigate the mechanism of changes in appreciation, we must first determine what aspects of a painting give pleasure. We would then expect subjective changes in the perception of these aspects to explain increase in pleasure with continued exposure to a picture. It is known that many widely varying pleasurable reactions may be given to a painting. These reactions may be shown by factor analysis methods (35) or more directly by questioning the subjects. Todd (68) found that the basis of preference in children 10–12 years of age varied widely, but that a broad classification based on subject matter and art quality could be made. Preferred subject matters included landscapes, water, peaceful and quiet scenes, trees, and persons who look happy. The most popular art qualities were color, poetic feeling, type of brush stroke, and design quality. A study by L. Martin with older subjects gave some very individual reasons for preference:

H liked the pictures of Ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, the portraits of Holbein, especially those pictures where techniques was an important element. M took especial pleasure in pictures with people, especially if the facial expressions were well brought out and she liked them . . . K, whose judgment as compared with the others is very low . . . gives her judgment in general on some unimportant detail, as the vase of lilies in Andrea Della Robbia’s ‘Annunciation’. . . . There was one detail . . . which was always largely determinative for H. It is the kind of day in which she feels ‘blue and despondent,’ her ‘gloomy day,’ as she calls it. Such a day as is presented in Carpecco’s ‘Return of the Ambassadors to England,’ Corot’s ‘A Gust of Wind,’ etc. For M also there is a determining factor, and that is the presence of a mother and child in the picture, especially if the child is held in the mother’s arms. Over and over she speaks of the delightful physical sensations arising from the sense of touch in connection with the child’s flesh, which she experiences on seeing such a picture . . . The judgment was lowered during a long exposure of Pieter de Hooch’s ‘The Butterly’ because H felt the room became ‘hot and stuffy’, of Corot’s ‘A Road in Sunshine’, because she felt she ‘was going along a road on a hot day’. Both H and K heard the noises while looking at Hogarth’s ‘The March of Finchley’, and H ‘was troubled’ by them . . . Of Holbein’s ‘Madonna of the Meyer Family’ . . . The row of kneeling women and the carpet are unpleasant to me; the kneeling youth and standing child indifferent, the rest pleasing, chiefly the Madonna’s face and the light on the ornaments at the back, also face of kneeling man (45, p. 183).

Apparently a painting is an ambiguous stimulus capable of evoking many possible aesthetic reactions. Cognitive interpretations concerned with the characteristics of form, color and shape may be uniform from person to person, but aesthetic judgments of pleasantness, based as they are on the features of the stimulus particularly attended to, the observing set assumed (14, 55, 58) and upon the specific associations brought up, will be widely variable from person to person.

We would expect then, that learning to appreciate modern paintings would

*Modern paintings well illustrate the many sources of appreciation of a painting. Content may highlight the mysterious and incongruous as in Surrealism or social themes as in Expressionism. Style, from Cubism to Primitivism, shows an even greater variation. The modern schools indicate but do not exhaust the main sources of pleasure in paintings.
consist in the discovery by the observer of the pleasurable aspects to be looked for in paintings of the various schools. The average man never gets to this discovery: on first seeing a modern painting he asks: "What does it mean?" His previous experience with paintings and his long practice in interpreting visual appearances lead him to expect in modern paintings a representational meaning which is usually not present. (Abstract artists often add to the public's mystification by giving concrete names to their aesthetic designs). The trained art observer will come to look for imaginative themes in Surrealist paintings, themes of social significance in Expressionistic paintings, no theme at all in Abstract paintings, and he will come to know the subtleties of the various modern styles. Munro (52, p. 366) mentions that students go through several stages of acquaintanceship in attaining appreciation of art. At first they notice only a few conspicuous details of a painting; next they are able to identify styles and the work of particular artists. Finally, they are able to say in what particulars a given picture differs from a typical product of the style and painter represented. The process seems similar to the gradually acquired knowledge of any unfamiliar subject.

An interesting phenomenon related to the appreciation of paintings is the changes in appearance reported with continuous observation:

In connection with the gradual lowering of the judgment on a picture and the final feeling of indifference with respect to it . . . all movements cease in the picture ("dead" is frequently applied here and 'alive' to the pictures greatly liked), that it grows flat . . . the picture ceased to be seen in perspective, and there is difficulty in holding the attention . . . If says, after looking at Pieter de Hooch's 'Cottage Interior' for a while, in lowering her judgment, 'the figure seems to have stopped work to pose'; of Franz Hals' 'The Jolly Man,' the 'man smiled at first, then the smile ceased and the mouth just seemed open' . . . a face which was at one moment expressive the next is expressionless (45, p. 187).

One would like to know whether or not these subjective changes are found with observation of a picture over several sessions. If they are, they would help to explain the increase in pleasantness of pictures on long time observation. It might also be interesting to see if these subjective changes are related to style which supposedly determines a painting's lasting quality, and to prestige suggestion which strongly influences preferences (25, 36).

Summary

The psychologist will find several interesting problems posed by modern paintings. The present paper deals with three such problems, concerned with: (1) the possibility of a scientific evaluation of modern paintings, (2) evaluation of the Surrealist theories of artistic creativity, and (3) the learning of appreciation of modern paintings. The following conclusions were reached:

1. It is probable that the measurement specialist will find the evaluation of modern (and older) paintings extremely difficult: (1) the relevant variables may be too many and too subjective for scientific treatment, and (2) paintings are hardly comparable; they are designed for different uses, they employ different media, and they have been created at different times and in different cultures.

2. The Surrealist theories of artistic creativity based on tapping the unconscious
for inspiration are to be rejected. In so far as these theories take as their model of excellence the art of the insane and of children, they are open to severe criticism. The Surrealist claim to an exclusively unconscious source of inspiration leads to logical difficulties. The psychologist may find a problem of some interest in checking the universality of reactions to symbolism in Surrealist pictures.

3. Appreciation of modern paintings probably involves learning by the observer of the pleasurable aspects to be looked for in paintings of the various schools. The subjective changes in appearances of pictures over several sessions should be studied.

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