

THE ELEMENTS OF ART



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'Some thoughts about the basics of Western-European art'

In this essay I will try to describe a few simple basics of Western European art. An art-historian would say that this project is too ambitious. He would emphasize that the history of Western art is a far too big and far too complex to bring back to a few simple principles. But I am not a historian, I am an artist. An art-historian, in his quest for knowledge, will always open his mind for an ever increasing amount of information about his subject, with the result that the urge to create an overview of art will slowly fade away. The art-historian is increasingly forced, like every scientist, to focus on details. An artist looks at the history of art in a completely different way. This can be explained by looking at the practice of making art. The artist brings the endless flow of his impressions experienced into a static object. By creating an image he has to summarize; to bundle. He has to cut things out. He must ask himself which system he must use to reduce the great amount of visual observations, made in a never ending stream of time, into an image. Creating an image is therefore creating a Gestalt.

In art a Gestalt is an image in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Creating a Gestalt is to give an extra value to the parts on which the image is built. Creating a Gestalt means for the artists, on one hand, limiting information, and on the other, combining information. That combination of information produces something extra. What is this extra element? That is difficult to say. It is a mystery. It is not measurable and cannot be the object of any analysis.

Only within limitations creativity is challenged. In this essay I will try to detect the limitations which caused so much creative energy in Western European art. I will focus on the problems the artists of the Western tradition have met in their search for essentials. I will focus on the visual or optical aspect of art. This does not mean that philosophical and theological aspects are left out. They will play an important part in my story.

I will look at the history of art as an artist. In my analysis I will use a drawing taken from an education book written for amateur artists by Walter Foster, called: *How to draw animals*. Walter Foster's uses an old method

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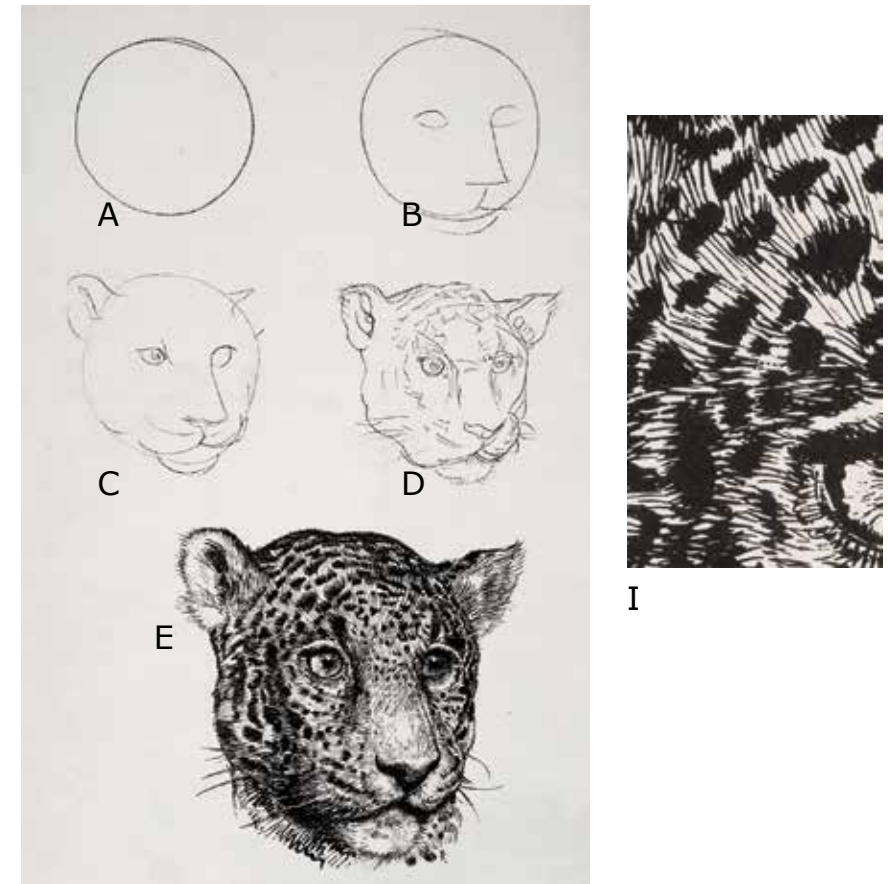
to represent reality, which was common for centuries. I will use one of Foster's drawings as a scale to measure Western art. With that scale I will show that, even though the styles in Western art may be changeable and contradictory, there was and is always an underlying conflict present that generates these styles. This conflict arose in the heart of Christian thinking, that dominated Western culture, and was nothing more than tension between its fascination with platonism and a desire to explore the physical world, an urge for realism. I will show that this conflict ensured that Western art became a dance around the middle. What this 'middle' is will be examined in this essay.

How to draw animals.

When I was eight years old my father gave me the book *How to draw animals* by Walter Foster. He knew I liked to draw and he thought the book would be helpful. I was instantly fascinated by the book. I looked in it for hours and hours, as children of that age are able to do. And of course I tried to practice Walter Foster's method. I believed that this method was useful for me because I wanted, like every eight-year-old child, to draw 'realistically' and Walter Foster provided the tools to reach that goal. However, I did not know that the method used by Foster was very old and that it had been used for centuries. I only wanted to draw animals the way they looked; to draw the way Foster did.

The first thing one notices when looking at Foster's drawings is that he approached his goal in an indirect way. He did not start with the head of the panther at once but he started with something completely different: a circle. So he took a detour. He took a detour on purpose. The question is if this detour is necessary. I think not. I believe that the artist who made the beautiful animals at Lascaux did not use this indirect way at all. So we see here a conscious choice. And Foster was not the only one who opted for this detour. In the long history of Western art this method was frequently applied. In this essay I will use Foster's method as a tool to look at Western-

European art. I will turn it into a measure to examine the important features of Western art. I will call the method Foster used, Foster's scale. But before we start to analyse art we first have to examine the scale itself.



For Foster the process of constructing the head of a panther begins with a circle. Before looking at this process I will compare the first drawing (A) with the last (E).

Drawing (A) has a flat surface, is symmetrical, simple, regular, a pure Gestalt and geometrical. Drawing (E) is complex, modelled, plastic, and includes light and dark contrasts, textures, and an irregular contour.

Drawing (E) has shadow and light. This means that

there is a notion of an individual moment in the drawing. There is a suggestion of natural light, which indicates a particular individual moment in time. In the same way the texture and the irregular contour give an individualistic quality to the subject of the drawing. The subject of the drawing gets a tangible aspect; it looks real. On the other hand, the abstract quality of drawing (A) suggests timelessness and a lack of individualism. This is because it lacks, amongst other things, light and shade. Geometric figures generate a feeling of timelessness. This makes them for many symbols of eternity and the divine. This aspect of time is an important element in our story. The difference between (A) and (E) is defined by time. There is not a gradual but a fundamental difference here. (A) and (E) represent two different and incompatible visions of time.

Looking at all the drawings it becomes apparent that Foster moves from a flat form to a suggestion of space, from a pure Gestalt to an irregular Gestalt, from simple to complex, from a symmetrical to an asymmetrical form and from a 'timeless' abstract geometrical form to a suggestion of immanent time. Foster moves from abstract to concrete, but this is not the only possible direction to move in. The whole process can be turned around. We can abstract the visible forms around us. The abstract forms which arise in the process are deduced forms. So there are two movements involved in the making of a drawing: from concrete to abstract and vice versa.

The circle used by Foster (A) indicates the border of the head of the panther. In that way he limited the amount of information he could give on the surface (the skin). The surface is most complex in our visual experience and when we get more information of that surface in time and want to add that information, the tension on the border (the circle) will increase. The result can be that the border or space will extend, the circle will be destroyed, and the tangible quality of the subject will disappear. The drawing will be more irregular and its content will be more difficult to determine. Space extends and in some way the picture will look more abstract, even though it is not. What has happened is that the details of the picture have increased at the costs of the general overview. The development of the work of Monet shows how extension can work. The paintings of Monet become larger and

larger and the fragments of nature represented become smaller and smaller. Monet showed that Foster's scale can be extended. The process doesn't stop at (E) but goes on infinitely (example I). Although Monet's paintings look almost abstract, they are not. Many so called abstract paintings are, like Monet's paintings, enlarged details and are not abstract at all but rather naturalistic representations (such as the De Koning in example 3).

Thus the movement which Foster uses can be extended. When making art, one is not limited to just movement between (A) and (E) but one can continue to infinity (I). The artist can stop at any stage of this process. Example 2 shows how just (A) can be expressed in art.

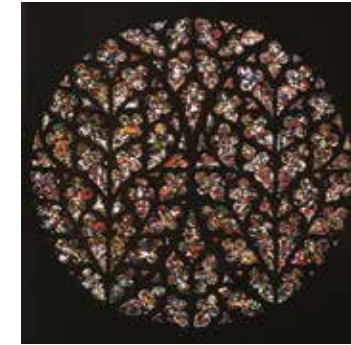
This extension of space from (A) to (I) deconstructs the abstract forms but can also create new ones. In the same way that chaos produces new Gods, so also an extended space produces new abstract forms. Example 4 shows how a deconstructed space can inspire new abstraction. Cezanne, tried to bend the extending space of impressionism. Cubism was the result.

Example 1: The development of Monet's work is a nice example of the process of extension. Monet was an artist who principally worked in front of his *motive*. He was the most important *plein-air* painter of its age. In the beginning of his career he started with rather small paintings of the French countryside with rivers, meadows, villages and skies. In his later years his canvases increased in size more and more, but at the same time he increasingly focused on smaller fragments of nature, for instance the bank and the water. In the end he produced very large canvases (9 meters wide) of just fragments of water. We see before our eyes the whole process of extension. The late work of Monet influenced the great abstract painters of the nineteen-fifties.



Example 1.

Example 2 shows how circles are used as symbols in religious buildings. The churchfather Augustine compared a circle with the nature of God 'as a sphere whose circumference is nowhere and whose centre is everywhere'.¹



Example 2.

Example 3. Without knowing it, Willem de Koning made paintings which resemble details of paintings by his 19th century predecessor Willem Maris. Many abstract paintings are enlarged details of fractions of nature.



Example 3.

Example 4. The work of Cezanne below shows how new abstract forms develop via the extension. Like Monet, Cezanne was an impressionist. There was something in his art however which resisted the deconstruction of form normally prominent in impressionist painting. This made his work ambiguous. It is a constant flow of deconstruction and building of form. This ambiguity opened the door to a whole new world of abstract forms and new spatial constructions. In this example we see how Picasso picked up the abstractions of Cezanne.



Example 4.

In summary, three main conclusions can be drawn :

- (1) The process of creating art involves a reversible movement from autonomous abstract forms to an unlimited extended space.
- (2) Every stage of this process (or scale) can be utilised by the artist.
- (3) In one particular stage, namely (E), the abstract form and the complexity of the surface are in harmony, and the tangibility of the represented object is at its highest level.

The scale Foster used can be extended infinitely (I). Now we shall use this extended scale from (A) to (I) to analyse some basic elements of Western European art.

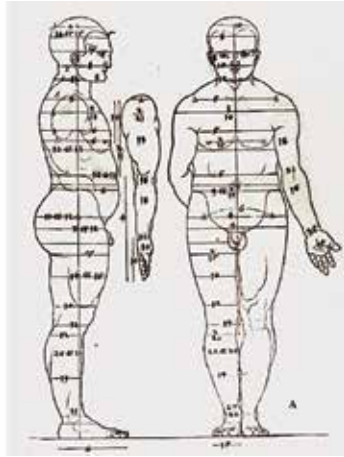
Construction of space

Foster uses geometrical forms to draw objects. He takes a detour. He starts with geometrical forms. For centuries geometrical forms have been used in art. One of the reasons for their use is that geometrical forms can be used to measure things. And to measure is to know. In the next four examples we will show how, with the help of geometrical forms, objects are measured and space is reconstructed on a flat surface. They show how eventually this process developed into a photographic representation of reality.

Example 5 shows an early attempt to construct a head of a human being with geometrical shapes. This drawing is made by the 13th century scholar Villard de Honnecourt. In example 6 one can see how Albrecht Dürer, three centuries later, used numbers to measure the true proportions of the human body. Not only the proportions of objects but also the space around the objects was subjected to the use of geometrical forms. The geometrical forms developed from two dimensional to three dimensional (see example 7). This led to the creation of a mathematical foundation for the construction process. Example 8 is an attempt to visualize the practice of perspective. A glass window is put between the subject (artist) and the object (the nude lady). From a single point (the eye) construction lines are pulled through the window to the object. The result is the projection of one single perspective of the object on the glass window. It is obvious that this method is far more accurate than the random attempts used in earlier times. Reality is literally subjected to a single eye. This makes the image more accurate but also more individual. It is only accurate when seen through this one particular eye in an enormous space. If we compare example 8 with the technique illustrated in Foster's drawings we see that the process of drawing is shortened. The detour Foster used (A) to (E) is now (D) to (E).



Example 5.



Example 6.



Example 7.



Example 8.

It is a small step from the projection shown in Dürer's drawing (example 8) to the photo camera. The eye is placed in front of the window and the window is changed into a box with light-sensitive paper. The image burns instantly in the paper. This is only possible when the opening time of the lens (the eye) is very limited. The photo camera registers the object only from a small point in space but also in a small fraction of time. If we compare the working process of the camera with the method Foster used we see that the whole process (A) to (E) is ignored by the camera. Also ignored is the possibility of extension, the movement towards infinity (I).

The disadvantage of the photo is that its space construction is rather predictable. It removes the possibility of moving from A and to I. It ignores time. In other words, it blocks the possibility of abstracting or adding more visual information. It gives only a middle solution; only one slice of Foster's scale, namely (E). This often frustrates the photographer and therefore it is not strange that an urge arises to manipulate the photo with the computer. The advantage of photography is that light-sensitive paper makes it possible to achieve gradations of tones so subtle that a trompe-l'oeil effect arises with an intensity that was never possible in painting. Another advantage is that photography gives a sense of objectivity. This is because a photo is like a footprint. It copies reality in an accurate, but limited way: limited in time and point of view. The trompe l'oeil effect makes one easily forget these limitations.

Foster uses geometrical forms to draw objects. They help to control the great amount of visual information we encounter in time. From (A) he reaches the middle where objects become visible. There are two other advantages of geometrical forms. The first is that we can learn to understand the proportions of the objects. The other is that we can reconstruct space on a flat surface. The paradox is that these abstract geometrical forms led to a form of representation what we call realism or naturalism. It also led to photography. Photography is a dominant feature in today's art. Photography sticks only to (E) as we have seen. (A) to (D) and (F) to (I) are left out. They could not play a role anymore. In the 19th century we see that this fact did not satisfy the artists at all.

High middle

"The "middle state" is where the most interesting phenomena often happen in physical systems".

Stephen M. Barr in 'Modern physics and ancient faith'.

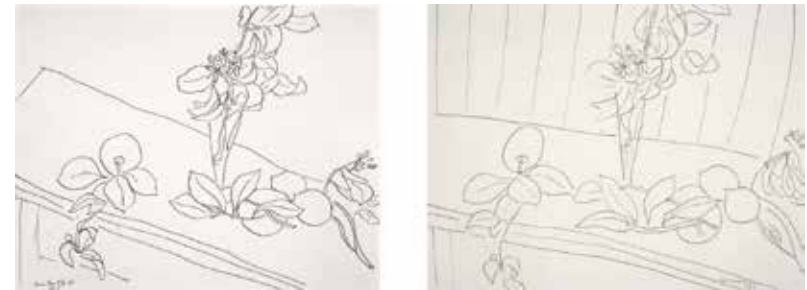


Example 9, a painting by Courbet and a 19th century photograph.

In the 19th century painting and photography were almost identical (see example 9). This art type of art satisfied the new rich, the bourgeois, who came to power at that time. The predictability of bourgeois realism however, increasingly frustrated artists and led to a longing for new ways of representation. One result was the extension of space by the impressionists described above (see example 1). Artists started to discover movement in perception. They discovered the flux of time. This resulted in many new problems and new opportunities.

One of the problems that arose can be described as follows: the window placed before the eye (see example 8) tends to direct our visual movement parallel to that window; from left to right and vice versa, from above to below and vice versa. Combined with the extension of space, which is a movement from back to front and vice versa, great tension in the representation arises. It is this tension that dominated art in the early twentieth century.

In example 10 we see how Matisse deals with this problem. We see two drawings from the series *Themes and Variations*. Matisse always worked in front of the object, as all impressionists did. However he did not go for the whole extension, as Monet did, but tried to save the contours of the objects. So Matisse combined two incompatible movements with each other. The examples show that by doing that the pressure on the borders is incidental and not systematic. This explains why the same objects appear to be different in each drawing. We see reality in a new way every time.



Example 10.

The scale Foster presented (A to E) with the added extension to infinity (I) is the space in which the artist must find his way. Within the scale there is always a movement in time from (I) to (A) and vice versa. Tension arises when different levels compete for dominance (see example 10). We have already seen that the greatest tangibility of the objects manifests itself in the middle area around (E). It is in the middle area that objects become visible. It is as if two forces restrain each other, the force from (A) to (I) and the force of (I) to (A) and that restraint makes objects visible. I call art which represented objects and makes them recognizable middle art. Middle art is what we also call figurative art.

There are two sorts of middle art: the low middle and the high middle. The low middle is just (E) without any reverence to the space from (A) to (D) and (F) to (I). The high middle is (E) plus traces of (A) to (D) and (F) to (I) visible in the work of art. High middle art is art which represents objects by using the whole scale of Foster. It is built, like a tower, in layers.

Drawing (E) on Foster's scale is an example of the low middle. We see the head of a panther in its final stage. Foster reached that point by using a detour. The stages of that detour, are invisible in the final drawing. I remember, when I used Foster's method as a child, that the previous stages always got in the way. In Foster's drawing however, the previous stages are invisible. Like photography it is just, one slice of the scale. This makes the drawing an example of low middle art. The photo, and art which looks like photography, are an expression of the low middle. They are low because they are independent slices cut out of the scale from (A) to (I). In building the image they ignore other aspects of the scale. These aspects are invisible. Low middle art ignores movement. It ignores the course of time because the artist and the viewer cannot detect other aspects of the scale in a further stage of their perception. That makes low middle art univocal.

Example 11 illustrates high middle art. It shows how different stages of the scale can be combined. De Honnecourt's drawing on the one hand shows texture belonging to (E), on the other hand the body of the lion is a stylization closer to (A). In high middle art the stages of the detour stay visible, or at least detectable.



Example 11.

The drawings of Matisse are also an expression of the high middle. Matisse built his image making use of several

stada from the scale. In his work he rejects none of the aspects of the scale. It appears that he wants to save the abstractions and wants to use some newly detected data. He wants to harmonize them. That is why these elements are always traceable in the image. The image is built in layers. That is why I call this the high middle. In general Western art is an expression of the high middle. I will return to this later.

In some forms of art, the gap between abstract forms and empirical phenomena is very large. Great difficulty arises when harmonising the concrete and the abstract, which results in a high level of tension. Between these two extremes the middle is rarely visible, yet in a strange way it is present.



Example 12.

The Evangelarium of Echternach and Malevich. Tensions arise when opposites of Foster's scale are combined. Sometimes this occurs when artists are forced to adopt their style due to changing circumstances. Malevich was forced to adapt his abstract style under pressure of social realism. The pagan geometrical style changed under Christian influence.

In summary, abstract forms are necessary to make objects visible, to prevent the object from dissolving in the mist of time. But abstractions are not enough. We need observations on the surface to give the object its maximum tangibility. This tangibility is reached in the middle of the extended scale of Foster. (A)-(I).

There is a high middle and a low middle form of representation. In the low middle slice of the scale (E) is isolated from the rest. In high middle several stages of the scale (A)-(I) are incorporated and layered in the image.

Geometrical forms can be used to measure observed objects. This makes them a tool to reconstruct the relationships between objects in a visual field and to reconstruct the true proportions of objects.

Pictures and images generate feelings, emotions, ideas, and theories of philosophy and theology. In the history of Western art one thought that constantly returns is the question of essentials. What is the most essential aspect in art? Are abstractions more important or are our visual observations more important? In the next chapter we will look at this problem.

Essentials

When I was at school a teacher said at the end of the drawing class while looking at the drawings the children made: "Your drawings are all equally nice". I remember that I found this remark very unsatisfactory because instinctively I knew it was not true. I knew that working very hard on a drawing only made sense if there was a sort of scale to distinguish a bad drawing from a good drawing. Saying "all drawings are equally nice" was for me the same as saying "all the drawings are equally bad". I would have preferred him to say that my drawing was the worst of all the drawings. The teacher did not want to upset us, though, and he thought he acted correctly. However, what he did not know was that by making this remark he himself was practicing some sort of postmodern philosophy long before its time. One of the important concepts in postmodern thinking is that the creative flux must never be interrupted by any form of criterium or measure. Postmodern thought rejects every hierarchical principal in art and wants all the flowers in the garden to grow without distinction. The problem of this thinking is that one very soon concludes that postmodern thought is completely uninterested in any garden at all. Whether the garden is full of beautiful flowers or full of junk seems not to matter to them. When looking at postmodern art, though, one could easily get the

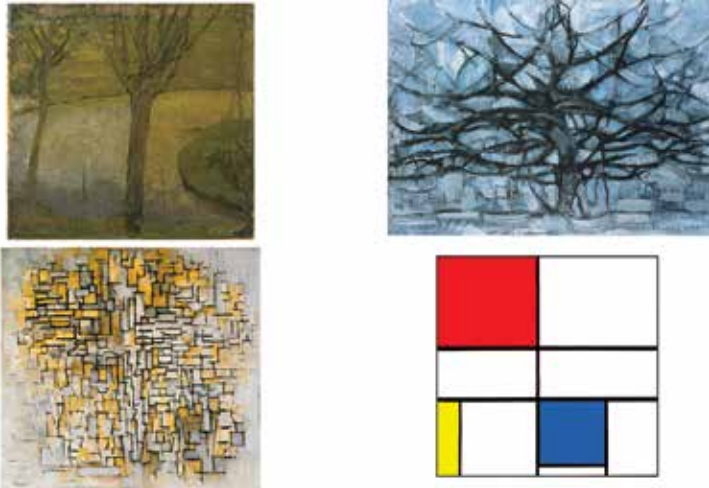
impression that postmodern thinkers secretly or without knowing it have a preference for junk.

As a child I did not think in a postmodern way at all and I do not think any child does. Children know that when you say everything is equally good you in fact mean that their quality is of no interest to you. This post modernism developed rather late in the history of western art. It did not play an important role. However, Platonism, the opposite of postmodern thinking, did play an important role in the development of Western art. Platonic thinking, by focussing on the essence of things, contrasts with postmodern thinking. It claims that some properties are more important than others and that the most important things are at the top and the least important things are at the bottom. For Platonism the unchangeable eternal forms were the most important. Forms and ideas not corrupted by time were essential. They are the source of all living things. The movement from that source to ever changing matter was called emanation. In this ever changing matter, which constitutes the shadow world of the real world, the eternal forms were detected by the philosopher. Man, longing for liberation, was trapped between eternity and ever changing matter.

For the arts, the scale created by Platonism was an advantage. If we look at the extended scale of Foster we see how easily art can be harmonised with Platonic thinking. It is easy to see Foster's scale as a form of emanation. At the top (A) we have timeless geometrical forms, at the bottom (I) we have infinitely changing matter. The extended space created by the impressionist is at the bottom and lowest point. The impressionists, running after ever changing light, would not have impressed Plato at all. For Plato naturalism was out of the question because a visible object was already a copy of an eternal primordial form. Naturalism was copying a copy, for Plato a very stupid thing to do.

Geometrical forms are from a Platonic point of view superior not only because they are an expression of motionless reality but also because they give access to the truth about our individual experience of nature. A quote of Galileo illustrates this: "Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and

read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it."² So geometric forms provide access to the understanding of reality.



Example 13.

Platonism has always found fertile ground in art. It dominated Western art in waves and was prominently present in the 20th century. The development of Mondrian's work is a perfect example of how Platonic thinking can be visualized (example 13). Mondrian began as a naturalist. Slowly he grew from impressionism, through a series of abstractions, to completely abstract work, in which from his point of view all the basics of nature are represented: the three primary colours, black and white, and squares and rectangles. It is important to notice that Mondrian's late work, just like low middle art, fits only in one slice of the Foster's scale; namely ultimate abstraction (A).

The history of Western art is dominated by Platonism and one would therefore assume that this must have resulted in a cerebral, non physical art. For a long time it did, but ultimately it was prevented by Christian thought (see example 11). Nietzsche described Christianity as Platonism for the common people. Here he missed the

point. Christians adopted the Platonic pursuit of eternal forms. For them there was nothing wrong with that. But on the other hand, the individual, particular, bodily objects were equally important.

This importance is expressed in the story of the incarnation. God becomes man. The individual and the particular matter. Matter matters. Christianity tries to link eternity with the temporal. It connects transcendence with immanence. This is of course a contradiction and this could only be achieved by maintaining a paradox. This Christian paradox is already visible in the gospels, where historical accounts are mixed with strange supernatural afflictions. A paradox is for many people horrific because two incommensurable systems must be maintained. But for Christians this was the only way to save the framework in which human thought was operating. We can say that by doing this Christian thought looked more like postmodernism than Platonism, as Nietzsche argued. It took the whole scale for granted. That scale was, however, not the end of the story, such as in postmodernism, but was used for another goal: to make visible the eternal in the individual. In other words, to harmonize the different stadia of the scale; to create a high middle. The Christian paradox was expressed in the dogmas of the 4th century: the Holy Trinity and the double nature of Christ. A paradox can be a horror but it can also provoke the active search for new harmonising solutions. It was in the Catholic West that the Christian paradox was pushed to its outer limits by adding the *filioque* to the creed. This resulted in a new approach in art, namely the road to realism or naturalism.³

Naturalism.

In art naturalism questions the adoration of geometrical forms. What do geometrical forms have to do with real life? Do they have a real substance of their own? What role do they play when we encounter real life? When do we experience life in a physical way?

It is not difficult to see the weaker points of Platonism, since the philosophy of essence can be reversed. Why should timeless forms be the essence? Why not the here and the now?

Why are the abstract forms not the foreplay for that one

moment when we spot objects in a direct and immediate way. Is that immediacy not the real thing, the only thing that matters?

Looking at those questions, we see the second great pillar, besides Platonism, of Western art; namely naturalism. Naturalism tried to incorporate observations in geometrical schemes. This was a slow and difficult process. Platonism slowed this process down. This because naturalism strengthens individualism, follows the senses instead of the intellect, and focused the ever changing nature of life. This conflict between naturalism and Platonism dominated Western art and was accompanied not only by aesthetic questions, but also by moral dilemma. Should the artist accept nature as it is, or must he correct nature? Shouldn't he avoid vulgarity or the common (example 14)?



Example 14.

The tension generated by the Christian paradox becomes visible in Western art. This results in the contrast between naturalism and classicism. Classicism was inspired by Platonism. Classicism focused on the primordial forms behind our daily vision on reality. When we look at Foster's scale we see that classicism, with its regular clear sharp edged symmetrical forms, tends to (A). Like the nude of Ingres,

bodies are idealized. Drawing is more important than colour. On the other hand, Rembrandt was deliberate anti-classical. His forms are soft and irregular, catching the individual moment, catching 'real' life.

Naturalism attacked Platonism and the idea that the essentials lay in the timeless forms. Remarkably, this extreme reaction led to a new form of 'Platonism', which could be described as; a 'Platonism on its head'. This can best be illustrated by the remark of a anonymous monk. The monk shouted to the minstrels who were singing night after night under the window of there beloved ones: 'You know what a woman is: just a bag with blood and bones.' This monk practiced what Aldous Huxley called in his essay *Meditations on the moon*, 'only but' thinking. The moon is only a rock, Bach's music is only sound waves, and falling in love is just some stuff in your brains. In other words, only matter counts or matter is the only thing there is.

In art this meant that naturalism often developed a way of thinking that put the essentials at the other end of Foster's scale (I). Instead of avoiding Platonism, the realists created a reversed Platonism. In their search for a just representation they rushed beyond the middle and ended in the eternal expanse of matter (example 15). There arose a longing to show the material side of the work of art. Matter became the essence. In modern art matter often becomes heavy and dominant. There is only matter and that is what you see. This is Platonism on its head. The essence lies in matter itself.



Example 15.

This work of Antoni Tàpies entitled 'Straw and Wood' is a nice example of 'matter art'. The artist shows matter without any intention to create illusionistic effects. Still even this kind of works has roots in tradition. It shows the same interest in the texture of the surface as the illusionistic art of the past.

Christian thinking accepted two contradicting systems in art: Platonism and Naturalism, and by so doing that art became a dance around the middle. A search for tangibility and immediacy and a search for pure forms, expressing timelessness. It is Christian thought that kept art in the middle and maintained the high middle. In this middle area things become visible on a human scale. When Christian thought diminished, in the modern era, a change appeared.

Modern art started with impressionism. Impressionism attacked middle art because high middle had changed into low middle art. When we look at the extended scale of Foster we see that the extended space of impressionism (I) is the opposite of geometrical forms (A). Impressionism was a severe attack on Platonism in art. It was not the first one, but it was the heaviest. Impressionism focused with a unique intensity on the immediate effect. Impressionists wanted to work faster. They wanted to catch the moment. No eternity for them. In this they were mistaken. They did not know

that painting was not fast enough for that. And so reality slipped through their fingers and more and more they became conscious of the flux of time. They were running after the facts and fell behind. Instead of gaining immediacy and tangibility, they lost it. They could not compete with the speed of photography. In terms of time, photography is the real opposite of (A) because it limits time to its smallest fraction. Still impressionism achieves some beautiful things: it developed a new vision on colour and it opened the road to expressionism. Monet's enlarged details, where space was spread out and lost its depth, was useful for a new focus on the self. By flattening space, optical problems diminished. The outer world moved to the periphery. This gave the artist the opportunity to create signs of the self. Art became a tool to show the hyper personal.

Is the self more than a tiny fraction of reality? Is self expression more than an enlargement of details? In the self expression of modernism, the myth of Narcissus took on a new meaning. The pond shown in the last of Monet's paintings (example 1) became the pond where modern man wrapped himself in a deadly embrace.



Example 16.

Joseph Beuys: 'Fat Chair' (example 16). Joseph Beuys was one of the leading figures of the conceptual movement. In his art the artwork becomes an expression

of the self. Beuys was a pilot in the German army during the second World War, and was saved after a plane crash by the local population, who wrapped him in wax and felt. This was for him a reason to use this material frequently. For Beuys art becomes an expression or a sign of the self. For him every individual is an artist. This approach has no predecessors in the history of art. Here, self-expression and creativity become synonyms. This concept gives the work of Joseph Beuys a gnostic character.

We conclude that naturalism generates an extension of space. The movement to (I) results in self expression as purpose and the priority of matter. Here immanency in its pure form arises.

The reaction to impressionism was severe. It was attacked for its formlessness and subjectivism, and for its immanence. Therefore, in response to criticism artists moved to the opposite side of Foster's scale: to abstract art and constructivism. Geometrical forms became visible again. Modernism showed abstractions more radical than ever seen before in the history of art. In modernism Foster's scale was not destroyed. It was kept intact, but many artist tended to stay on the periphery of the scale. They had a romantic enthusiasm for the extreme. The creation of abstract art is like sitting on a mountain. One gets a celestial view of eternal beauty. But one can not go further. To go further one has to climb down to the vulgar world of the phenomena.

With modernism, on the one hand, a pure form of immanent art arose but on the other hand, a pure form of transcendent art also developed. Purism played an important role in modernism. In modernism there is a romantic urge to push things to their outer limits and one tends to think that modernism is only an expression of purism. That is not true because this purism did not prevent a high quality high middle art from arising in modernism. This variety made modern art, especially in its early stages, one of the high points of Western European art. In post-war Europe, art was dominated by postmodern thinking and the high middle became rare. Middle art in postmodernism is mostly low middle. In the postmodern era the romantic spirit of modernism had exhausted the artist. Therefore purism and the belief in essentials faded.

Michel Foucault

The extended scale of Foster teaches that if we want to make objects visible we must stay in the middle of the scale. It is there that objects get their tangibility. This does not mean that the outer areas of the scale are not important. It is in those areas that our vision of objects can be renewed. They give us new angles for observation and it gives us new abstractions to control those observations. They give us a new way to understand the visual world around us. That is why high middle art uses the outer areas. In the post-war era high middle art is rare. In the fifties art was dominated by abstract art and Pop-art which favoured low middle art. By cutting a slice out of the scale, (E), low middle art prevents our vision of objects in space from changing. The development of the art of representation seems to stagnate.

When we stay at the bottom (I) of the scale we lose our selves in the endless movement on the surface and objects become invisible. If we stay at the top (A) we stagnate in a motionless eternal world where movement is impossible. Only in the high middle it is possible to find evolution within art, although not without the help of the work done in the periphery of the scale. The whole scale is necessary.

High middle art is a difficult type of art, both for the artist and for the viewer. It asks from both the artist and the viewer to look beyond the surface and to look in two directions. It fights a two front battle. It demands an experienced observer with the capacity to detect abstractions. High middle art provides the opportunity to combine several aspects of the extended scale of Foster.

The difficulty of comprehending high middle art can be shown when we look at an article on Manet by the French philosopher Michel Foucault called *Manet and the object of painting*. This article shows that Michel Foucault is not able to get a grip on all the aspects of middle art, with the result that for him (almost unconsciously it seems), low middle art becomes the norm for the representation of objects. In my opinion this equalizing of the figurative with the low middle is a common problem of the postmodern era. In the following paragraphs I shall analyse Foucault's text.

Foucault concludes his article as follows: 'Manet certainly did not invent non-representative painting because everything in Manet is representative, but he made a representational play of the fundamental material elements of the canvas. He was therefore inventing, if you like, the "picture-object", the "painting object", and this no doubt was the fundamental condition so that finally one day we can get rid of representation itself and allow space to play with its pure and simple properties, its material properties'. What Foucault is saying is that in the paintings of Manet a shift of major importance took place. He accomplished this by materializing the elements of the canvas. He did not bother to hide the stuff of which the painting was made of. Instead, Manet started to play with the physical properties of paint and canvas. Foucault's thesis is that Manet originated a shift to non-representational art. For Foucault Manet's work is a breakthrough in the history of art. To prove his point Foucault looks at several paintings by Manet and analyses them in terms of space, lighting, and the position of the viewer. In this analysis he compares the Olympia of Manet (17 a) with the Venus of Urbino of Titian (17 b) particularly with regards to lighting.



Example 17 a and b.

Foucault states that Titian's work has three elements; nudity, lighting, and the viewer who witnesses (by surprise) the game of nudity. In the Manet, on the other hand, we have only two elements: nudity and the viewer. Titian's light is soft and the source of light comes from above while Manet has a violent light 'which strikes her full shot'..... 'a light which comes from in front, a light which comes from the space found in front of the canvas, which is to say that the light, the luminous source indicated, which is assumed by the very lighting of the

woman, this luminous source, where is it, if not here, precisely where we are?' And further; 'our gaze upon the Olympia is a lantern, it is that which carries the light.'

Foucault's central point is that Titian has a light source within the painting and Manet does not. By excluding this light, Manet pushed art more to the non-representational. Foucault concluded rightly that the Titian has a light-source within the painting. The question which matters here, of course, is how do we find a standard for representation? This is difficult to determine. Manet would say to Foucault: 'Listen, it is not me who moves away from representation. I paint things the way they look. Objects can look flat from a certain angle. The old masters were mistaken. They did not know that shade has colour. By giving shade its colour, one flattens the objects.'

Foucault was right when he said that the light source within the painting is eliminated by Manet. Light within a painting arises when the artist applies granularity, when there is the application of a gradual change of tone; a dividing of light. Because Titian used this method, Titian's painting is, according to Foucault, more representational than Manet's. The flat forms used by Manet were for Foucault a reason to judge the work of Manet as playing with autonomous material elements.

We can question this conclusion. First it is impossible to conclude that the observed objects are always presented in a gradual division of light. This was one of the main themes within impressionism. The impressionists discovered that objects seen instantly are experienced more flatly. Foucault does not understand that Manet's vision is a result of a his longing to catch the moment. Secondly; why does Manet play and why doesn't Titian? Can't you play with granularity? Can't you play with light? Isn't that a material property too? Thirdly we must consider the question of what the act of 'representation' is in practice. There are so many aspects which can be represented that we must be careful when we use that word. We see this problem arises when we look at Foucault's analysis of another painting by Manet.



Example 18 a and b.

Discussing *The Execution of Maximilian* (example 18 a) Foucault states: '... we enter a pictorial space where distance does not offer itself to be seen, where depth is no longer an object of perception, and where spatial positioning and the distancing of figures are simply given by signs which have no sense or function.' I think Foucault makes a mistake here. Manet, eager to catch the moment discovered in his observations of the racecourse that in the tumult and excitement of fast moving horses the appearance of things could change dramatically. He discovered that in a tumultuous situation people lose control of their visual field. It is this experience that he uses in his painting of the execution. In the stress and tumult of this event appearances change. So changing figures do have a purpose and a function: they represent the chaos of the event. Therefore the 'signs' do have sense and function.

Reflecting on the issue of 'spatial positioning', mentioned by Foucault, some interesting things can be observed in the two nudes by Manet and Titian. According to Foucault, for Manet 'depth is no longer an object of perception'. This can be questioned when we look at the contours of the two nudes. According to the extended scale of Foster the contours of Manet's nude tend toward (E). The painting tends toward the low middle. Even without the deviation of light the 'naturalism' in the drawing gives a strong impression that the nude is really lying on the bed. The cushions are carrying the nude.

In the Titian, however, this 'lying position' of the nude on the bed is a strange case. Titian's nude is idealized. This means that Titian moves in the direction of (A). A long elegant curve is created on the underside of the body.

The arms, the breasts and the belly are styled toward a counterpoint of arabesques. The deviation of light is stressing instead of diffusing the form of the body, so the body becomes a cut out form, isolated from the cushions, the curtains, and the draperies. These attributes are arranged in an abstract rhythm, which hints at medieval art, and they are stabilized by a strong flat rectangular form. What is that rectangle? A wall, a curtain, or a door? And where is the inner light source now? What is it doing with that rectangle? The answer is nothing. Titian is playing with an autonomous form without any 'spatial positioning'.

Foucault's emphasis of the gradual division of light and linear perspective as standard elements for representative art makes him a companion of the 19th century, bourgeois, academic, low middle artists. That is the irony of his negative attitude towards representative art, which dominated modernism. He attacks a 19th century low middle method in which he silently still believes. In his heart he is still a 'pompier'. This contradiction reveals an interesting phenomenon in postmodern thinking: a century after the death of bourgeois realism their low middle vision of space still works as a counterpoint, present as standard.

Looking at the Foster's scale we see that both Manet and Titian sometimes move in the direction of (E); and sometimes they move from the middle (E) in both directions. They both play with material properties. Foucault thinks that by flattening space the work becomes less representative. In an age of photography this attitude is not surprising. In the 20th century the low middle often becomes synonymous with representation. Foucault is a victim of that perception. It is an attitude which ignores the high middle because one is fooled by the trompe l'oeil effect.

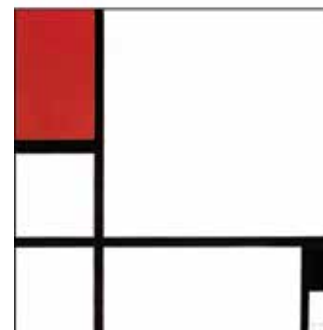
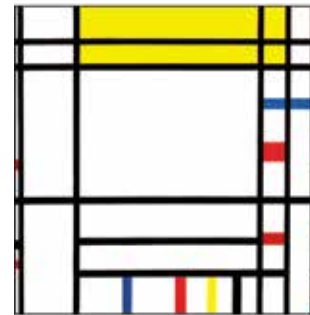
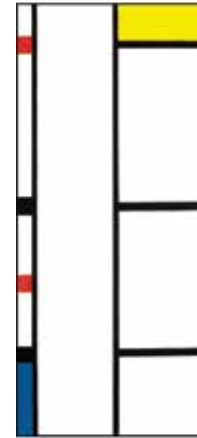
Conclusion

High middle art is difficult to analyse, as shown above. It has many faces because the combinations of stages between (A) and (I) are infinite and because reality is constantly changing over time. That is why the high middle must be conquered over and over again. We do not know what things look like. It is a mystery.

Our gaze penetrates space in time. This habit makes it almost impossible for us to experience a flat surface. Even a painting by Mondrian generates an optical illusion. On the other hand the material side of art eventually always reveals itself. It can never be denied for long. In art there is always a turning point, the point of representation changes into physical presence and visa versa.

There is an inherent circular movement in a work of art. The tangibility, the trompe l'oeil effect, and illusions of a concrete presence seduce the viewer and can lead him to the abstract counterparts. On the other hand abstractions can give the art work a strong physical presence from which the individual objects can arise. The viewer can move from one system to the other and experience both in a new way. He can detect movement while looking at a motionless object. He can witness movement and motionlessness at the same time. The extended scale of Foster provides the tools to comprehend this circle movement which is the paradox of the high middle. High middle art expresses the tension between the transcendental and the immanent at the same time. Translated in a Christian metaphor we can say that we witness in high middle art, in an analogue way, the eternal dialogue (the Holy Spirit) between the transcendence (Father) and the immanence (the Son).

I end this essay by showing high quality, high middle art (example 19) of Vermeer (right column).



Example 19.

Abstract painting in the 20th century made people aware of the hidden abstraction in Western-European art. Vermeer, although very naturalistic in nature, was able to let us enjoy the beautiful play of his hidden rectangular forms. It is this double play, this paradox, of the realistic and the abstract that makes a circle movement in our perception possible. And so our vision can be renewed eternally.



Example 20.

This work of Mathias Weischer shows that high quality, high middle art is still created in our time.
'Der Gelben lamp', 2004.

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1. P. Cowen, *The Rose Window, Splendour and Symbol*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2005: p. 197.
 2. J. Hannam, *God's Philosophers, How the Medieval World Laid the Foundation of Modern Science*, London, Icon Books, 2009: pp. 317 & 318.
 3. Filioque: The adding of the word filioque to the creed by the western Catholic church was one of the reasons for the Great Schism, the break between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This adding of the filioque meant for the Catholics that The Holy Spirit not only proceeds from the Father, but also from the Son. It proceeds from not only an eternal principle but also a temporal one. This looks like an unimportant issue for modern men but for the Catholic church this was important because it meant that truth is not only revealed in our intellectual (logical) speculations but also within the course of history, in our daily observations of our surrounding world. This way of thinking gave a positive attitude to empirical observations. It is not strange therefore that science and naturalistic art arose in the West.