So you don't know anything about art, you just know what you like? An art historian and critic offers guidelines for those who would like to know more.

HOW TO JUDGE ART

by Victor Koshkin-Youritzin

[Beauty is] a regular harmony of all the parts of a thing of such a kind that nothing could be added or taken away or altered without making it less pleasing.

Leon Battista Alberti
(from *Ten Books on Architecture,* 1485)

In art as in life, we may admire originality, perception, imagination and a manifest understanding of the human condition, but ultimately artists must give structure to their visions. In the most triumphant art, form and content march together in a perfectly complementary manner to proclaim a powerful, enduring statement. Characterized by a vital interrelationship of such "abstract" properties as line, shape, color, texture, rhythm and light, such a declaration energizes us with its artistic rightness and lifts the human spirit.

To test the validity of this assertion, let us analyze the fascinating design of three celebrated 19th-century paintings by Renoir, Sargent and Henri Rousseau. After exploring some of these works' myriad compositional and other artistic subtleties, we shall pose a question: of two purported van Gogh drawings, which is the genuine one, which the forgery, and why? From even our brief discussion, it is hoped that the reader will gain further insights into how to appreciate art and determine artistic quality.

Continued

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Pierre-Auguste Renoir. (1841-1919).
The Luncheon of the Boating Party. 1881.
Oil on canvas, 51" x 68". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

As enchanting a painting as the French Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir ever produced, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* features a group of the artist's friends—including his bride-to-be, Aline Charigot, at the lower left—on a terrace overlooking the River Seine near Paris. Quite beyond the charm of its handsome gentlemen and winning young ladies—and the scintillating, seemingly flirtatious interplay between them—this painting is captivating in countless other more purely pictorial ways. Complementing the vivacity of human interaction is Renoir's brushwork, which dances across the canvas, striking in strategic highlights and judiciously repeated color accents. Nowhere can our eye permanently stop, for constantly one or another vibrantly brushed figure, object, hue or shape magnetically beckons.

Renoir has created a remarkable composition where every element plays a key role. At opposite sides of the painting, he cleverly inserts—almost as parentheses—two white-shirted men whose curving and counter-curving arms help contain the pictorial action and pull us into convivial interchange with the rest of his characters. Most of them are ingeniously related through such devices as bending of arms, glances, front-versus-back views and juxtapositions of left and right profiles.

Irresistibly, we are drawn into the picture space by two converging diagonals. One consists of the railing at the left, whose slant is picked up by such subtle motifs as even the diagonally set eyes of both foreground female figures. The other counter-diagonal rises from the lower right corner to culminate at a yellow-hatted girl leaning on the fence. How effectively she prevents our escaping into the distance behind her by gazing forward at a brown-clad gentleman, whose circular hat constitutes a compositional hub around which the painting's human action swirls. Accenting the triangular pull into the picture's space are the white-shirted men's yellow straw hats, whose angled brims help lead us back to our similarly hatted lass. Just as we are drawn left and right across the scene, we also are pulled both inward and outward, as if we were moving—social-butterfly-like—from one group of individuals delightedly to another.

As for his entire cast of characters, Renoir adroitly constructs them in either pairs or threes—indeed, all the figures can be broken down into triangular groupings (if one counts, as one must, Aline's wonderfully expressive dog!). In art, the compositional principle of "three" is an important one, and here Renoir develops it by offering us, in addition, three clustered bottles, three intervals between the awning's poles, even three quivering blue stripes along a girl's white cap. This quivering, incidentally, adds an essential vitality to that part of the painting and superbly helps evoke the breeziness of the afternoon by playing

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John Singer Sargent. (1856-1925). *Madame X* (Madame Pierre Gautreau). 1884. Oil on canvas, 82 ¼" x 43 ¼".
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against the awning's movement.

What a cleverly conceived prop the canopy itself is. Creating an appealing sense of intimacy vis-à-vis a refreshing view of the river beyond, this covering consists of various elements that complement others in the painting, adding to its extraordinary richness of formal interrelationships. The awning flutters almost as does, seemingly, the young people's conversation and perhaps some of their romantically palpitating hearts. How inventively the rise and fall of the canopy's fringe relates to that of the figures' heads, its alternating pattern of solids and voids echoing, on a chair at the picture's lower right edge, the fingers and spacings between them of two adjoining hands.

Finally, the awning's red stripes find visual counterparts in the width of the railing below, in the rhythmic sequence of the vertical fence posts and in the sensuous red band that travels down along the collar of Renoir's future wife, helping link her with her canine companion. Radiantly depicted as Aline is, with her pursed lips accented by the rising curve of her flower-bedecked bonnet, she remains the ultimate focal point of this surpassingly luminous work, which seems to have been painted with love, one of the most potent driving forces behind the greatest of artistic creations.

John Singer Sargent

In striking contrast to the melting loveliness of Renoir's *Luncheon* is *Madame X*, perhaps the finest of all paintings by the American, John Singer Sargent, who, at the turn of the century, reigned as the western world's most successful society portraitist. Depicting Madame Gautreau, an infamous beauty and wife of a Parisian banker, the picture ignited a furor when exhibited at the 1884 Paris Salon. The portrait—flaunting her haughtiness, lavender-tinted skin and challenging décolletage—was considered an affront to public morality. (Originally, in fact, her right shoulder-strap was shown as having provocatively slid down along her twisted arm—a detail that Sargent only repainted after the exhibit closed.)

But what an elegant painting this is, its stark simplicity and blank background recalling such artists as Whistler, Manet and Velázquez. In reality, not all commentators were vituperative in their judgment. Henry James

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Henri Rousseau. (1844-1910). *The Sleeping Gypsy.* 1897.
Oil on canvas, 51" x 79".
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.

praised the picture's "audacity of experiment" and "singular beauty of line," while *Gazette des beaux-arts* critic Louis de Fourcaud stated that "the purity of his model's lines must strike one first of all. . . . From head to toe, the form 'draws' itself—in one stroke, it becomes a harmony of lines." Indeed, the painting is a marvel of formal harmonies, all proclaiming the sleek beauty of its subject, who becomes an icon of arrogance.

Dazzling in his play of light flesh against darkness, Sargent sets the upper curve of Madame Gautreau's aristocratically disdainful profile against the counter-sweeping line of her left arm, which descends with stylish ease into the drapery below. Writhing in sensuous counterpart, her other arm culminates in a thumb artistically so ingeniously turned that its curve complements the far side of her body, beginning with the concealed outward thrust of her hip and proceeding down to her hemline's lower "V"—a shape that, interestingly, emphasizes her plunging neckline and also a small triangular area of drapery that evocatively cloaks her abdomen.

As for other subtleties, let us relish how the properties of the table relate to other visual forces. Not only does the table top itself find a counterpart in the oval shadow on the floor to Madame Gautreau's right, but the ascending curve of the table surface also cunningly accents the left arc of her bodice. Similarly, the curving base of the table helps pull our eyes upward into the picture, affirming her bustline's other curve. Crowning her head, Sargent provocatively incorporates another, often-overlooked arc: a tiny crescent-shaped headdress representing Diana, goddess of chastity and the hunt.

This painting—deceptive in its simplicity of form—contains an almost infinite amount of exquisitely interrelated, important artistic nuances, last of which, for purposes of our discussion, is the fan that Madame Gautreau clutches. Let us envision the painting without just this one shape: suddenly the entire right vertical background of the portrait would become boringly inert and segregated from the rest of the design. Not only does the fan's extension into space activate the right portion of the painting, but, in its decisive downward thrust culminating in a triangular point, it also echoes and helps assert the outward projection of Madame Gautreau's sharply angled nose and, with it, her timelessly beguiling countenance.

Henri Rousseau

"A hand-painted photograph of a dream." How aptly these words, paraphrasing Salvador Dali's description of his own art, fit *The Sleeping Gypsy* by the Frenchman, Henri Rousseau. In his magical, imagination-based paintings, Rousseau by over two decades anticipated the dream-like juxtapositions between reality and unreality of the 20th-century Surrealists. They were not the only ones to admire him; so, too, did such modern masters as Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi,

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Beckmann and even the pioneer Russian non-representationalist, Kandinsky, who stated that "through his admirable form, Rousseau has made the inner voice of the world resound."

While self-trained and often stylistically referred to as "naïve," Rousseau was often, as seen here, an artist of consummate sophistication, coupling a distinctive vision with compositional genius. In this enigmatic masterpiece, where there are no footprints in the sand and it is uncertain what is real and what is not, Rousseau sets up a seemingly imminent but ultimately impossible confrontation between beast and human. While the lion's back paws appear perilously close to the reclining female—and while the front curve of his mane sweeps forward into her shoulder and neckline, as if he were about to devour her—his rigidly immobile front legs are safely (for her) on the other side of a hill. This pictorial phenomenon suddenly pulls the creature back into space, with his circular white eye perhaps now appearing less frighteningly trained on its potential human prey (whose eyes, intriguingly, are open) than on the large white lunar orb. While the lion is both near and far off and confronts us broadside, the gypsy herself is strangely positioned at almost a right angle to the picture's surface.

The many tantalizing contradictions that exist in this painting are resolved by a remarkable unity of overall design. As in Sargent's *Madame X*, the artist so places his forms that there is a riveting tension between all solids and voids. Exquisitely illuminated, for example, the lion, gypsy, lute, bottle and moon all hold their own dynamically against the vastness of desert and sky, which themselves are beautifully modulated from light to dark. Other subtleties abound, endlessly relating one form to another. The lion's mane, constituting a superb pattern in itself, flows into the parallel lines of the gypsy's headdress, which, in turn, travels into the parallel, multi-colored bands of her garment (a cut-out detail of which could be mistaken for an early 1960s' Morris Louis striped canvas).

The theme of parallelism is further picked up by the gypsy's blanket and the strings of the lute. Placed at a comparable angle to the woman, this instrument culminates in an angled tuning neck, which—its white pegs evoking the twinkling stars—not only parallels the rising diagonal of her right foot but also constitutes an important diagonal force that ascends from the jug up through her face to the lion's eye, helping focus attention on it.

As a final observation, let us concentrate on one of the most deceptively essential of all pictorial factors, the lion's tail (a variant on the gypsy's cane), and particularly on its seemingly alert, radar-like tuft. If we were, in our imagination, suddenly to clip off that tuft, what would be the result? The entire magic, drama and ingenious circulation system of the paint-

Opposite Page:
Vincent van Gogh. (1853-1890).
The Starry Night. 1889.
Oil on canvas, 29" x 36 ½".
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.

At Right:
Figure A: *Harvest at Arles,*
from *On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present* by Jakob Rosenberg.
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ing—so based as they are on a tense, vital relationship between all elements—would instantly be destroyed. Visually we would simply follow the tail upwards and out of the picture. As it is, however, we tend to enter the painting from the lower left, progress up the slant of the gypsy's body, reverse direction and move up to the tail all the way to its tuft. At this point our gaze bounces across the sky to the moon (whose curve crucially repeats not only that of the tuft it illuminates but also that of the lute, jug, lion's mane and white ring of the woman's collar). From high in the sky, we then drop down to the painting's lower right corner, travel back across the canvas and are swept upwards by the bottom arc of the gypsy's dress into a clockwise rotation from near foreground to the heavens beyond.

Vincent van Gogh

Having exposed at least some of the structural subtleties of three paintings and emphasized the overriding importance of harmonious, resolved pictorial relationships, how can we apply this principle of organizational unity to, for example, such a seemingly esoteric problem as the detection of forgeries? Borrowing a forged Vincent van Gogh drawing published in one of the classic books on art criticism, Jakob Rosenberg's *On Quality in Art*, let us juxtapose the spurious piece with a real van Gogh and ask the reader to pick the genuine work. Is it Figure A (above right) or B (on page 26)?

Just as we did with Renoir, Sargent and Rousseau, let us look for an expressive, dynamic integration of all visual forces. Which of the two drawings seems executed with love, involvement and commitment? In which piece, on the contrary, do we sense a fragmentation of concentration—an attempt to walk, as a forger must, conceptually in someone else's shoes, not building a momentum of his own? Which of the drawings possesses the finer quality of line—one that sings, breathes and lives? On the other hand, in which work are we assaulted by an inexpressive crudeness of line, seeming resentment of approach, muddiness in areas and lack of clarity and overall coherence?

As we gaze at these drawings, in which do the motifs play vibrantly in concert and in which are they hopelessly scattered, clashing and discordant? Ultimately, which of these pieces increasingly communicates chaos and which a feeling of strength and formal resolution?

The answer is that A represents the forgery and B the real van Gogh. *Cypresses* (B), in fact, has the same intense, surging, rhythmic, organic quality that characterizes one of the tormented Dutch artist's most celebrated and incandescent creations, *The Starry*

Figure B ***(at right):***
Vincent van Gogh. (1841-1919).
Cypresses. 1889.
Drawing, 32 ¼" x 24 ¾" (framed).
The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Night, reproduced on page 24. As this picture bears eloquent testimony, at least within the controllable realm of his art, van Gogh could achieve an apparent stability and spiritual serenity.

Despite the passionate rush, pulsing and explosion of visual elements, in *Starry Night* he magnificently orders his vision, painting with brilliantly sustained calligraphy and balancing the titanic horizontal forces of his work with the verticals of church spire and cypresses that forever lick the star-spangled sky of his imagination. Here, as in most great works of art—whether representational or not—all abstract elements combine to create a series of relationships so dynamically resolved that, in the end, the piece becomes virtually a self-perpetuating visual battery that communicates not only its profound spiritual content but also its energy, harmony and eternal life to the viewer.

What we seek in art tends to be what we seek in life—among other things, order, variety, truth, meaning and ultimately life itself. As we who love art in all its forms—from painting and sculpture, to literature, music and dance—strive to sharpen our aesthetic awareness and critical skills, let us look for art's underlying structure, constantly asking ourselves what compositional and other forces are at work to produce artistic statements that are truly powerful, coherent and lasting.

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