ROGER FRY: CRITIC TO AN AGE

THESIS

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This study seeks to determine Roger Fry's position in the cultural and aesthetic dynamics of his era by examining Fry's critical writings and those of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. Based on Fry's published works, this thesis begins with a biographical survey, followed by a chronological examination of the evolution of Fry's aesthetics. Equally important are his stance as a champion of modern French art, his role as an art historian, and his opinions regarding British art. The fifth chapter analyzes the relationship between Fry's Puritan background and his basic attitudes. Emphasis is given to his aesthetic, social, and cultural commentaries which indicate that Fry reflected and participated in the artistic, philosophical, and social ferment of his age and thereby contributed to the alteration of British taste.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The materialistic, technological, scientific orientation of twentieth century life has often produced an attitude which questions the value and negates the role of art in modern society. When the significance of art is in doubt, the importance of the role played by those individuals who, like Roger Fry, devoted their energies to the examination, discussion, and creation of imaginative pieces is also problematic. But, from a historical standpoint, both aesthetic works and critical analysis of those works are universal aspects of human culture and function as "prime phenomena" of history by offering a unique opportunity to envisage the past through the crystalized visions of those who interpreted and animated it.¹ Both the fine and critical arts are forms of individual and communal self-realization in which the participants interact, reveal, and analyze contemporary life through the mediums of fantasy, satire, graphic

or distorted representation, social commentary, and "images of order."²

Art acts as an indicator of the attainment of civilization and captures the intellectual, sensual, and spiritual atmosphere which distinguishes one historical period from another. "To understand the spirit and inner life of a people--the joys, values, and drives that caused it to find life tolerable and meaningful--one must examine its art, literature, philosophy, dances, and music, because these are the instruments by which humankind takes its own measure, the expressions that provide the real record of man's experience as he lived it through perceptions and sensations both rational and irrational."³ Thus art, in both its plastic and theoretical senses, is a principal source of information regarding the essence and continuity of human existence. It is a manifestation of life, the signature of mankind, and is, thereby, an organic part of the society which spawned it.⁴

In the same way, Roger Fry's art criticism was not created in vacuo; it embodied and exemplified various aspects of his cultural milieu. His theories were and are meaningful not only within the confines of abstract aesthetics, but also within the broader spheres of time and place. When Fry wrote of art, he wrote also of human nature, social


³Ibid.

behavior, history, and Western civilization. His life illustrates that he was a man of his time whose actions and reactions were reflective of and tempered by the general atmosphere of late nineteenth and early twentieth century England.\(^5\)

Roger Eliot Fry was born on December 14, 1866, the second son of a successful middle-class family which traced its paternal Quaker heritage back eight generations to the conversion of Zephariah Fry, a friend of George Fox, in 1663. Roger's father, Sir Edward Fry, was a prominent jurist with a passion for science, which he passed on to his children; his mother, Mariabella Hodgkin Fry, came from the same "physical and spiritual stock as her husband" being a member of an old and respected Quaker family and the great granddaughter of the brilliant scientist, "meteorologist and classifier of clouds," Luke Howard.\(^6\)


There was "a want of simple humanity" in Roger Fry's upbringing. His childhood was characterized by the intellectual challenge of scientific inquiry and the spiritual regimentation of "narrow" Quakerism. The arts—theater, dancing, painting and so forth—were regarded with suspicion by his parents, who thought that only austere, utilitarian art was acceptable and that ornamentation was an inexcusable affectation. Roger Fry and his siblings were taught that a person who did not have a regular job with a high salary was "morally reprehensible"; to the Frys "wealth and virtue almost exactly corresponded."  

Most of Fry's relatives were interested in and encouraged his fascination with science. Presents were "often of a mineral or of a vegetable nature," and Fry carried a rock crystal to bed rather than a beloved toy. His first paintings were of botanical specimens complete with the proper Latin names, and his first passion was for a red poppy bush. Fry was so obsessed with the red poppies that he sat for hours hoping to experience the glorious moment when one of the

7Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 26; As Margery Fry noted in her Foreward to Woolf's Biography (p. 5), Virginia Woolf was a close personal friend of Roger Fry and was asked by his relatives and friends to write his biography. Virginia Woolf had access not only to Fry's private papers, but also to those of many of his friends and family members.

8DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger,"; Woolf, Biography, pp. 11-12; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 101.

9Woolf, Biography, pp. 11-19; Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 21.

bright crimson flowers burst forth from its green casing. His family laughed at his enthusiasm and thereby impressed upon him that "all passions even for red poppies leave one open to ridicule."11

As a student at Sunninghill House (1877-1881) and at Clifton School (1881-1885), Fry excelled in his scientific studies but also developed an independent attitude toward public school life and principles. He established a "life long friendship with John Ellis McTaggert, who later became famous as a philosopher."12 Fry overheard his fellow classmates ridiculing McTaggert's appearance:

I was already conscious of so deep a revolt against all schoolboy standards that my heart warmed to the idea of any creatures who thus blatantly outraged them. Here I thought . . . was a possible friend for me. I deliberately sought him out. My intuition was more than justified; that ungainly body contained a spirit which became the one great consolation of my remaining years at school.13

McTaggert stimulated Fry's social awareness and inspired him to think about and to question Victorian mores.14

In 1884, Roger Fry won an exhibition in science at King's College, Cambridge, and the following year both Fry and McTaggert entered Cambridge. While there, Fry moved about in a world of ideas where he evaluated and to some extent

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11Ibid., pp. 38, 15; Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 15.
12Woolf, Biography, pp. 31-39; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 101.
13Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 39.
14Woolf, Biography, p. 41; DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger."
rejected the social, political, and religious attitudes of his parents. He met Oscar Browning and George Bernard Shaw and was elected to the exclusive literary club, the Appenines. But Fry also sketched, painted in oils, visited museums and private art collections, and attended sessions of the Fine Arts Society and the private lectures of the Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge, John Henry Middleton. By 1888, when Fry received his B.A. degree with first honors in both sections of the natural science examinations, his philosophy and ambitions were altered to the point that he was determined to pursue a career in art rather than science. His parents were bitterly disappointed by their son's interest in painting, but they agreed to a compromise whereby Fry continued at Cambridge studying both biology and art. In 1889, Roger Fry lived with his family and took art lessons from Francis Bate, an arrangement which caused a great deal of emotional strain in the household.\(^{15}\)

For the next three years, Fry pursued his interest in painting and traveled on the Continent of Europe. In Italy he discovered the great Italian masters and broadened his aesthetic horizons under the tutelage of the art critic John Addington Symonds and the expert on Venetian art Horatio Brown. He also studied for a year at the Academie Julian in Paris but was disturbed by the "rampant Bohemianism" of the

\(^{15}\text{DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger"; Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 101-102; Woolf, Biography, pp. 48-62.}\)
French artists. Fry's love for the Italian Renaissance prevented him from adopting modern painting techniques; therefore, he was uncomfortable in the company of his fellow painters and spent most of his time alone, wandering around Paris looking at traditional aesthetic works. He did not see any of Cézanne's paintings, and he was not impressed by the new French pieces which he did encounter. According to Virginia Woolf, "modern painting had to strike through a Quaker upbringing, through a scientific education, through Cambridge and Cambridge talk of morals and philosophy, and finally through an intensive study of the old Italian Masters before it reached him." It did not reach him in 1892.

Fry returned to England in 1893, and sent his pictures to the New English Art Club, which rejected them. He and his friend R. C. Trevelyan took a house in Chelsea, where Fry not only painted, but also wrote articles and reviews for several weeklies. He became an extension lecturer and offered courses in Italian art in Cambridge, Eastbourne, and Brighton; he soon established a reputation as an authority on Italian and French primitives. Fry's lectures were successful; one of his paintings was finally exhibited by the New English Art Club.

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16Fishman, Interpretation, p. 102, Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 78.

17Woolf, Biography, p. 80.

Much to his parents' chagrin, in 1896 Roger Fry married Helen Coombe, a penniless, non-Quaker art student. After eighteen months Helen Fry began showing signs of a mental disorder; thereafter she was periodically confined to mental institutions and in 1910 she was permanently committed. The Frys had two children, a son and a daughter; all were devastated by Helen Fry's sickness. Roger Fry wrote to his mother:

It is terrible to have to write happiness out of one's life after I had had it so intensely and for such a short time. . . . I suppose we learn more from suffering than from happiness. But it's a strange world where we are made to want it so much and have so little chance of getting it. 19

In 1901, Fry became the art critic for the *Athenaeum* but continued publishing articles in various other magazines, journals, and weekly newspapers. When the *Burlington Magazine* was on the verge of bankruptcy, Roger Fry worked tirelessly to secure the monetary support which established it on a sound financial basis. The London Artists Association, the National Art-Collections Fund, and the reform of the Chantrey Bequest were other projects sponsored by Fry. He was also the curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

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19 DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger"; Woolf, *Biography*, pp. 94-103, 146-147; Roger Fry, Letter to Lady Fry, quoted in Woolf, *Biography*, p. 146; according to Virginia Woolf's *Biography* (p. 148), when Helen died in 1937, her doctors discovered that her illness was caused by an incurable thickening of the bone of the skull.
New York from 1905 to 1910 and traveled with J. Pierpont Morgan on "buying expeditions in Europe."\textsuperscript{20}

The turning point in Fry's critical and creative life occurred in 1906 when he first saw paintings by Paul Cezanne. Up to that point, Fry had been concerned primarily with the works of the old masters of continental European art, and his acceptance of Cézanne stemmed from the belief that the painter combined the visually acute color sense of the Impressionists with a contemporary understanding of the structural concepts of the grand tradition. In 1910 and 1912, Roger Fry created a furor and temporarily damaged his reputation by arranging the first large British showings of works by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, and other Post-Impressionists. He gained new confidence in his own skills and, while losing the affection of some old friends such as D. S. MacColl, gained prominence as the mentor of a group of young painters which included Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell.\textsuperscript{21}

Roger Fry also had a significant impact on the practical field of modern furniture design and decoration. In 1913, he established the Omega Workshop to provide young artists

\textsuperscript{20}DNB, s.v., "Fry, Roger"; Holmes, "Fry and Burlington Magazine," pp. 145-146; "Roger Fry's Paintings Shown in New York," Art Digest, 15 October 1933, p. 9; Woolf, Biography, pp. 189-190.

with the opportunity for creating sturdy but beautiful craft items for public consumption. Fry spent a great deal of time at the Workshop painting, making pottery, and organizing the business, which was fairly successful and provided work for struggling artists through the difficult years of the First World War. Even though the Omega Workshop closed down in 1918, it was considered the most stimulating impetus to the British decorative arts since William Morris.\(^2\)

In the following years, Fry continued his extensive travels in Europe, Greece, and Turkey, the publication of essays and books, the presentation of penetrating lectures on the arts, and, of course, his painting. He was a member of that elite coterie known as Bloomsbury, which also included such notables as J. Maynard Keynes, Lady Ottoline Morell, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, and Duncan Grant. The "Bloomsberries" were liberal-minded, philosophical, well travelled, well read, and distinguished by birth and education. They were a highly articulate group and "led the literary and art

\(^2\)Woolf, Biography, pp. 187-216; DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger"; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 104; James Johnson Sweeney, review of Last Lectures by Roger Fry and Roger Fry: A Biography by Virginia Woolf, in Art Bulletin, March 1941, p. 92; Clive Bell in Old Friends (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 78, said that Fry's best plastic works were the plain "white pots and plates that he made for the Omega"; Herbert Read in A Coat of Many Colours (London: George Routledge and Sons, LTD., 1946), p. 283, contended that the Omega products appealed only to a "small and snobbish" group.
worlds of London through their pens." Fry and his friends were Francophiles; Fry especially admired the French and "seemed to feel for England a sort of nervous distaste." 

His status as critic, art historian, lecturer, and expert on the visual arts was firmly established, and "he became incomparably the greatest influence on taste since Ruskin"; yet his application for the Slade Professorship at Oxford was rejected for the second time in 1927. It was not until 1933 that "the best critic of the age" received official recognition through his election as Slade Professor at Cambridge. He died of heart failure induced by a fall on September 9, 1934, before he had completed his first series of lectures for the Cambridge course.

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24 Lilly, Sickert, p. 139; Desmond MacCarthy noted in Memories (pp. 172-173), that "Bloomsbury" was often used as a perjorative term connoting "arrogant exclusiveness, anti-herd intellectualism, and a superior moral-frivolity," but he contended that such a characterization of the Bloomsberries was inaccurate; Herbert Read in Coat (p. 282), asserted that Bloomsbury "could never be identified with a true sense of reality" and that Roger Fry especially withdrew into his own world.

25 Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 104-105; DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger."

26 DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger"; Bell, Old Friends, p. 90; Herbert Read in Coat (p. 287), asserted that it was "monstrous" that Fry did not receive an appointment to an important official position until he was sixty-seven years old.

27 DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger."
Roger Fry was the first British critic to gain international recognition, and he had a pervasive influence "on taste and on the theory of art . . . [which] spread to quarters where his name was barely known."28 By the time of his death in 1934, public preferences in art reproductions had changed from "the meagre, respectable etchings which furnished houses of a preceding generation" to the colored prints of works by Cézanne and van Gogh.29 People who had never read Fry's criticisms had, nevertheless, assimilated his theories. His prestige was largely the result of his literary skills and his personality. Fry "was eloquence itself, in speech or on paper" and was "by common consent the most enthralling lecturer of his time."30 His "sonorous" voice, intense enthusiasm, vivid phrasing, and aura of reasonableness even when expressing his most "improbable" ideas impressed supporters and opponents alike.31 Although he was a scientist by training and temperament, he responded instinctively to and delighted in the discovery of aesthetic beauty. Virginia Woolf described Fry approaching works of

29Clark, Introduction to Fry's Last Lectures, p. ix.
30Ibid.; Lilly, Sickert, p. 121; DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger."
31DNB, s.v. "Fry, Roger."
art and "plunging his eyes into them as if he were a humming-bird hawkmoth hanging over a flower, quivering yet still."\(^{32}\)

Because Fry was a dedicated painter himself, he had an acute awareness of the problems artists encountered. This understanding, coupled with intellectual detachment and scientific training, made him an excellent critic. Roger Fry was, however, too methodical and intellectual to be a great painter. He was impatient with his art; he worked too fast and put all his emphasis on only one element at a time. Although Fry spent years experimenting with various aesthetic and structural problems, he was unable to unify his compositions. Instead of intuitively engaging in the imaginative act, Fry observed his visions and analyzed his sensations. Knowledge gained from careful examination of personal experiences was used to clarify artistic processes for the uninitiated public. His intellect dominated his artistic life, but "unmindful of the gods who had showered so many blessings on him, he did not want praise for "his scholarship or literary talents; he longed only to be accepted as a painter."\(^{33}\)

Fry was not as daring and innovative in the creation, as in the criticism of a picture. He was sensitive and serious, but his paintings "gave the public an impression of


relentless dullness." D. S. MacColl in "A Note on Roger Fry" quoted a letter written by Fry in 1912 wherein Fry explained that one of his first paintings was essentially Post-Impressionistic; however, since most people ridiculed the work, he did not paint another in the same style until after 1910. This clearly reveals that the self-confidence and defiance of popular tastes which Roger Fry praised in other artists and practiced in his own critical works, was absent in his plastic creations. Fry could muddle around working out technical problems in his art, but he could not and did not strike out in a new direction. After 1910, he religiously followed Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists; yet he never really mastered the style.  

Most of Fry's friends did not "know what to say about his painting." Marjorie Lilly, a friend and student of Roger Fry's, described a typical visit to his home:

Having lured his friends to his house in Dalmeny Avenue, he would spread his pictures on the floor inviting comment on each one in turn. The visitors had to maintain a constant polite response to his work... In many ways the most tactful of men, his passion for painting got the better of him when he was showing


35 MacColl, "A Note," p. 232; Bell, Old Friends, p. 77; Marjorie Lilly in Sickert (p. 138) described Fry, the painter, as "Mr. Facing Both-Ways" and asserted that his creativity was paralyzed by his theoretical knowledge; for more favorable reviews of Fry's paintings see "Fry as Artist," Art Digest, April 1931, p. 32 and "Measuring Roger Fry," Art Digest, November 1933, p. 12.

36 Lilly, Sickert, p. 138.
Fry was disappointed but not embittered by his contemporaries' responses to his pictures; as a critic he remained "a profoundly disinterested man" who was detached when viewing the works of friend and foe alike. There was no jealousy or envy apparent when he saw a good painting; instead he was thrilled by the work itself.

Roger Fry was also open-minded and flexible, but, according to his close friend and fellow critic, Clive Bell, he was not fair-minded. Fry tended to believe that his opinions were lofty principles, while opposing views were mere prejudices, a habit that Bell attributed to Fry's Quaker upbringing. Nevertheless, in Bell's opinion:

He was the most open-minded man I ever met: the only one indeed who tried to practice that fundamental precept of science--that nothing should be assumed to be true or false until it has been put to the test. This made him willing to hear what anyone had to say even about questions on which he was a recognized authority, even though "anyone" might be a schoolboy or a housemaid.

Fry was especially indulgent of young people; he took them and their ideas seriously.

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37 Ibid., p. 139.
38 MacCarthy, Memories, p. 185; Woolf, Biography, p. 293.
39 Woolf, Biography, p. 293.
40 Bell, Old Friends, pp. 68-70.
41 Lilly, Sickert, p. 141.
These descriptions of Fry are impressions of the impact of a dynamic, living being on his contemporaries: a man of unique mannerisms, forceful personality, obstinate will and contagious enthusiasm, but also a man of refined taste, methodical intellect, and extraordinary literary talent. The qualities which made Roger Fry a fascinating friend, colleague, teacher, and adversary also emanate from the pages of the written works he left behind. In his critical works, Fry was as daring as he was timid in his plastic productions; he constantly sought out and engaged in the confrontation of spectator with work of art, and from that encounter he spun a web of glittering prose that captured the mood of the experience as he both felt and intellectualized it. In his writing and "in his life we have not only a picture of those events through which he influenced the age, but also, in his evolution, a microcosm of the evolution of the tastes and interests of his day."42

42 Ibid., p. 93; Sweeney, review of Fry's Last Lectures and Woolf's Biography, p. 92.
CHAPTER II

ROGER FRY'S AESTHETICS

Once art is accepted as an expression of the human mind and spirit and seen as an index to both the particular and the universal qualities that characterize all cultures, the study of aesthetics, that branch of philosophy which deals most directly with theories of the fine arts and of beauty, becomes historically important. The source for most of the data analyzed by aesthetics is the realm of intuition, and the philosophy centers on the generic nature of certain human experiences.\(^1\) The aesthetic ideal is a simple one: that each person perceive and appreciate both the works of nature and the works of human imagination. It is the major responsibility of an art critic to examine and interpret specific creations in such a way as to facilitate understanding on the part of the aesthetically inclined.\(^2\) According to Clive Bell, Roger Fry possessed "an unrivalled power of getting close in words to thoughts and feelings," and various other critics have asserted that he fulfilled the promise of pictoral exegesis.

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\(^2\)Ibid., p. xii.
to a greater degree than did either his predecessors or his contemporaries.³

Communication of aesthetic impressions from artist and critic to public involves the employment of an imprecise but essential device, language.⁴ Roger Fry recognized the disparity between the written or spoken word and the elusive, intrinsic properties of an event, object, or emotion. He stressed the importance of the empirical method for analysis of works of art and experimented with words, phrases, and metaphors to convey as clearly as possible the depth and breadth of his ideas.⁵

The basic factors generally accepted as inherent in the aesthetic experience are the work of art, the artist, and the viewer, with social milieu and culture acting as contributing influences. Once the artist has externalized whatever conscious and unconscious visions he possesses through the creation of an art object, that object is subject to evaluation by everyone who views it. The process of evaluation gives rise to innumerable questions concerning the nature of the imaginative


act, the nature and purpose of the product of that act, and the role of the observer in the overall experience. Certain aspects of the work of art which initiate a specific response are isolated. The individual apprehension of the critic is then expanded into broader generalizations which describe the character of good or bad art. Finally, the total encounter is rationalized in order to explain why selected features produce a corresponding reaction.\footnote{Alexander Sesonske, ed., What is Art?: Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xii.}

Any venture into the field of aesthetics is an inherently subjective undertaking. Not only analytical theories, but also personal preferences and prejudices constitute the substance of criticism, the former often being rationalizations for the latter. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Roger Fry was no exception to the rule. His method was based on principles of scientific objectivity, but his attitude when confronted with an artistic piece was grounded in the fertile soil of individual intuition and personal sensitivity.\footnote{Fishman, Interpretation, p. 5.} In his passionate pursuit of knowledge, Fry helped to build the foundations of that austere formalism which has dominated twentieth century thought.\footnote{Rosenberg, On Quality, p. 99.} A brief survey of the British aesthetic tradition and an intensive exploration of the evolution of Fry's concepts...
identifies him as a participant in the intellectual ferment of his age; he inherited from the past and gave a legacy to the future.

Classical aesthetics, best represented by Plato and Aristotle, established the precept that art was an imitation of nature. The artistic object was considered of primary significance; artist and audience were secondary. Coupled with the concept of mimesis—imitation—, the contemplation of beauty became the ideal. Classical theorists were more interested in the question, "What is beauty?," than in the question, "What is art?" and to many of them the two were synonymous.9

Greek aesthetics were generally accepted until the nineteenth century when modern art criticism developed. Before this time, expositions on art were a priori speculations, descriptions of technical innovations, and biographical studies of artists. Although some journalists included personal observations and evaluations of exhibitions in their writings, art criticism, as such, was non-existent.10 The real revolution in apprehension and approach was the result of fascination with the role of the imagination and, more importantly, with the personal involvement of the spectator in the aesthetic experience.

9Sesonske, What is Art?, pp. xiv-xv.
10Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 4-5.
"Taste" was the key term in the new criticism and referred almost exclusively to the viewer rather than to the creator or his handiwork. Beauty, of course, was still a factor, but its role was diminished by the addition of "the sublime" and later by the concept of genius, which became a major preoccupation in the early twentieth century.11

Although British critics were extremely provincial and virtually unacquainted with much of the art of the world, they made significant contributions to the development of modern critical theory.12 The three dominant trends in modern English aesthetics were moralism, represented by John Ruskin, aestheticism, represented by Walter Pater, and formalism, represented by Clive Bell and Roger Fry. The writings of John Ruskin reflected the Victorian glorification of "material and practical values," which elevated intellectual and moral issues above aesthetics. Ruskin insisted that great art combined visual truth with imaginative personal expression.13 Although he could and occasionally did produce penetrating analyses of plastic elements in art, usually he concentrated on subject matter and surface beauty.14 Later critics rejected

11Sesonske, What is Art?, p. xv.
12Fishman, Interpretation, p. 6.
13Ibid., pp. 8-15.
Ruskin's ideas because of his ethical bias and his contention that the morality of an artist was directly related to the quality of his work; for example, he thought that only a saint could paint a saint.\textsuperscript{15}

Walter Pater and the aesthetes, on the other hand, advocated an amoral approach to art by engaging in the experience of "art for art's sake."\textsuperscript{16} They asserted that art was justified by its own existence and that the spectator's response was more important that either the artist or the art object. Art was a means of transcending or escaping reality; therefore, morality was irrelevant. Aestheticism was anti-intellectual, unsystematic, overtly subjective, and passive; it ignored many of the basic aesthetic questions which had intrigued philosophers for centuries.\textsuperscript{17}

Formalism rejected imitation of nature and ethical and literary content in favor of a more systematic concept which elevated the formal elements of art above all other considerations. Clive Bell originated the theory of "Significant Form"--defined as "relations and combinations of lines and colours" which evoked aesthetic emotions in the audience--as the common denominator of art.\textsuperscript{18} Despite the abstract and practical

\textsuperscript{15}Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 35-37; Clark, Ruskin Today, pp. xvi-xv.

\textsuperscript{16}Fishman, Interpretation, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., pp. 48-56.

\textsuperscript{18}Clive Bell, Art (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914), pp. xvii-x, 6-8.
potentialities of his simple, bold, and absolute idea, Bell seldom participated in a one-to-one confrontation of his hypothesis with a work of art. Instead, it was Roger Fry who adopted, adapted, and expanded significant form as an instrument for the sustained analysis of individual art objects. Bell attested to Fry's unique ability to apply formal theories to actual creations and noted that Fry delighted in puncturing Bell's theoretical balloon:

His task was not arduous: he had merely to confront me with some work over which he was sure that I should go into ecstasies, and then to prove by the most odious and irrefragable evidence that it belonged to a period which I had concluded, on the highest a priori grounds, to be utterly barren. . . . I have travelled with him. . . . suffering acutely. . . for the man who stabs a generalization with a fact forfeits all claim on good-fellowship and the usages of polite society.

Roger Fry did not begin his critical career as an advocate of ascetic formalism; instead -- in his essay "Giotto," originally published in 1901 -- he emphasized the import of the artist's development of "the dramatic idea." His opinions at this time were similar to Ruskin's.

19 Fishman, Interpretation, p. 77.
20 Bell, Art, p. x.
22 Fishman, Interpretation, p. 112.
Fry's fascination with the monumental art of the great Italian masters was the cornerstone of both his early and his mature criticism; his favorites from the eighteen-nineties on were Masaccio, Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Pisanello, and Leonardo da Vinci. In "Giotto," Fry credited the Franciscans with the development of a harmonious consciousness, which eventually engendered the distinctive attributes of Italian art. According to Fry, Saint Francis's "whole life had the pervading unity and rhythm of a perfect work of art," and thereby inspired a reinterpretation of the New Testament which concentrated on the "poetical and dramatic elements of the story." Other native artists were influenced by the Franciscans and "without altering the doctrine...brought into full relief its human and poetical significance." Thus, the emergence of "monumental painting" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries marked the ascendance of a new and uniquely Italian style which was, Fry maintained, unadaptable to any other modern European nation.

Giotto, according to Roger Fry, was the "most perfect representative" of the "expansive ideals of neo-Christian

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24 Fry, "Giotto," p. 133.
25 Ibid., p. 133-134.
26 Ibid., p. 134.
art." He asserted that Giotto created a feeling of actuality:

Here at last after so many centuries of copying the traditional forms handed down from a moribund pagan art--centuries during which these abstractions had become entirely divorced from the life of the time--here at last was an artist who gave a scene as it must have happened, with every circumstance evidently and literally rendered.

Fry emphasized the importance of two factors: subject matter, as the source of the artist's vision; and psychological insight, as the key to the paintings' enrapturing power. He was thrilled by Giotto's ability to "interpret all the variety and richness of human life and...[to] intensify its appeal to the emotions." Despite Fry's positive evaluation of the anecdotal aspects of Giotto's works, he did not deny formal qualities altogether. The artist's inventive, original compositions, "enveloping atmosphere," and development of form "within a strictly limited scale of tone" were praised. Fry was also favorably impressed by Giotto's "discovery of new possibilities in the relation of forms to one another" and by the painter's almost perfect understanding and use of volume and mass.

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27 Ibid., p. 144.
28 Ibid., p. 145.
29 Ibid., pp. 162, 168, 163.
30 Ibid., p. 157-159.
31 Ibid., p. 165.
Fry's initial concept of form was limited to reducing the "greatest possible suggestion of real form into the simplest, most easily apprehended line." In his opinion, Giotto's lucid and direct draftsmanship immediately communicated the relations of the parts of the body to the whole and provided the major instrument of structural organization. Thus the realization of form was tied almost exclusively to the linear description of visually recognizable objects. When he wrote "Giotto," Fry was uncertain about the possibility of separating the dramatic from the pictorial elements; he concluded that both illustration and design were essential qualities.

In "Giotto," Fry extolled the portrayal of specific emotions, the apprehension of which produced corresponding sympathy in the viewer, as a significant attribute of art. He noted that Giotto occasionally condensed emotion into a visible form by creating a figure personifying a certain virtue or vice, by depicting not "merely an angry woman, but anger" itself. At this stage Fry did not deal directly with the question of the extent to which enjoyment of a work,

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32 Ibid., p. 175.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 168.
particularly one of psychological and dramatic import, depended upon the spectator's knowledge and identification of the characters and the story represented. A non-European might not have recognized the supposedly universal human feelings presented in Giotto's paintings. Lack of recognition of this possibility was one of the primary weaknesses of the literary interpretation which led eventually to Fry's almost total rejection of the relevance of subject matter. When "Giotto" was republished in *Vision and Design* in 1920, the author included a disclaimatory footnote explaining that, while he still considered Giotto a great artist, he no longer believed the inspiration of the artist and the appreciation of the observer were predicated on awareness of the dramatic idea.36

"An Essay in Aesthetics," originally published in 1909, reveals Fry's progression toward a more obvious formalism. In this essay Fry attempted to disassociate art from social, political, cultural, and religious connections.37 He asserted that there was more to art than mere graphic representation, for creative works engendered a response in the

36Ibid., p. 121.

37Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," *Vision and Design*, pp. 16-38; this essay was praised by both Clive Bell in *Art* (p. ix), and Kenneth Clark in his Introduction to *Last Lectures*, by Roger Fry (Cambridge: The University Press, 1939), p. xiv, who asserted that it was "one of the most coherent and satisfactory of all" Fry's works.
spectator that could not be explained simply on the basis of copying nature. Fry distinguished between what he believed were the two aspects of human awareness: actual life, in which one responded instinctively to outside stimuli, and imaginative life, in which one engaged in detached concentration on certain characteristics of experience. He stressed the difference in values and perceptions: in real life the individual was a participant in the action and was burdened with moral responsibilities, while in imaginative life the individual was a passive observer who reacted emotionally but was free from ethical considerations. Fry's ideas at this point regarding the importance of the imagination and the non-ethical nature of emotion were similar to, but more moderate than, those of the aesthetes.

Fry rejected the claims of the moralists, because he was convinced that "morality... [appreciated] emotion by the standard of resultant action," while art appreciated "emotion in and for itself." He explained his conception of the nature and purpose of a work of art:

If, then, an object of any kind is created by man not for use, for its fitness to actual life, but as an object of art, an object serving the imaginative life, what will its qualities be? It must in the first place be

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39Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 116-117.
40Fry, "Essay in Aesthetics," p. 27.
adapted to that disinterested intensity of contemplation, which we have found to be the effect of cutting off the responsive action. It must be suited to that heightened power of perception which we found to result therefrom. And the first quality that we demand in our sensations will be order, without which our sensations will be troubled and perplexed, and the other quality will be variety, without which they will not be fully stimulated.41

Thus art was created solely to satisfy the imagination, not to fulfill utilitarian needs nor to illustrate popular mores.

Fry's definition of the unique qualities of the art object did not include the traditional attribute, beauty. As a young man, Roger Fry had sought beauty in art but was unable to rationalize and objectify this pursuit. He credited Alexei Tolstoy's "What is Art?" with setting him free from obsession with the ideal. Although he disagreed with Tolstoy's belief that the value of art corresponded to the morality of the expressed emotion, Fry was greatly influenced by the idea that art "had no special or necessary concern with what...[was] beautiful in nature."42 He saw the search for the "criteria of the beautiful" as the chief stumbling block in the path of those seeking establishment of an aesthetic which was applicable "to concrete

41Ibid., p. 29; Herbert Read in A Coat of Many Colours (London: George Routledge and Sons, LTD., 1945), p. 287 labeled Fry "an aesthete" because he sought only "the self consistent unity of the work of art itself, always sticking to his sensibility as the only reliable guide."

42In "Retrospect," published in Vision and Design in 1920 (p. 293), Roger Fry explained the origin of his attitude toward beauty and discussed the evolution of his theories as expressed in "An Essay on Aesthetics."
cases."\(^43\) Fry, therefore, transformed the meaning of beauty to accommodate his altered aesthetic perceptions.

To Fry the existence of "purposeful order and variety" designated a work as beautiful.\(^44\) Unity, which made possible the comprehension of a piece in totality, was a major feature of order. Fry did not, however, equate unity with geometric balance; he defined it as the presentation of forms "in such a sequence that each successive element is felt to have a fundamental and harmonious relation with that which preceded it."\(^45\)

He carefully distinguished between sensual and aesthetic beauty which "in the former sense belongs to works of art where only the perceptual aspect of the imaginative life is exercised; beauty in the second sense becomes as it were supersensual, and is concerned with the appropriateness and intensity of the emotions aroused."\(^46\) In the classical sense of the term, beauty was irrelevant, and Fry argued in favor of the artist's right to distort form in order to transform his vision into a material entity. He exclaimed that most people never seriously looked at the objects that surrounded them; as a consequence, their concepts of appearances were derived from

\(^{43}\) Fry, "Retrospect," p. 292.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., pp. 32-33.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 30-31.
pictures, not from reality. They could not accurately judge whether or not a painting was true to nature. Only the artist saw reality and embodied it in a work of art, which was the primary "organ" of the imagination and was characterized by clear comprehension and pure, unbridled emotion.\(^{47}\)

In "An Essay in Aesthetics," Roger Fry also asserted that the realization that the artist "made this thing in order to arouse precisely the sensations we experience" was an intrinsic part of aesthetics.\(^{48}\) Both viewer and artist were united in a process of revelation and recognition, and both shared the same original emotion. The idea of the art object as a precise, direct form of communication between creator and observer was and is a highly debatable topic. In 1909, Fry insisted that understanding the motive of the painter was not only possible but necessary for the fullest apprehension of the work.\(^{49}\)

Emotion was the key term in Fry's theories. In order to account for the intense emotional content of art, he isolated what he called the "emotional elements of design:"

(1) The rhythm of the line. This "directly" communicated the artist's feelings to the viewer.

\(^{47}\)Ibid., pp. 25, 24.

\(^{48}\)Ibid., p. 30.

\(^{49}\)Ibid., p. 30; Susanne Langer in Feeling and Form (p. 393), disagreed with Fry's concept of art as a communicative device. Langer said that art only communicated as an historical document, not as a personal statement.
Fry's elements were and are those included in modern definitions of form, except that he omitted texture and brushwork. He did add texture as a necessary ingredient of sculpture and pottery in *Last Lectures*, but he never considered it important in painting. In "An Essay in Aesthetics," Fry asserted that the elements of design had a powerful effect on personal feelings, because they contained "overtones of some of our primary physical needs." Thus, the formal features of imaginative pieces somehow reified the passions and sentiments natural to the human condition. Although graphic representation was irrelevant, the emotional essence of form was still tied to the depiction of real objects. Fry did not totally reject naturalism; he only denigrated the use of popular standards of accurate imitation as the sole criteria for judgment and value. To Fry, aesthetic emotion was irrevocably interwoven

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50 Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," pp. 33-34; Kenneth Clark in his Introduction to *Last Lectures* by Fry (p. xvi), characterized Fry's emotional elements as mystical ideas.


53 Ibid., p. 38; Fishman in *Interpretation* (p. 120), said that Fry's major problem was that he could not clearly relate emotion to design or classify and rank emotions.
with the depiction of the human body or other natural figures.\textsuperscript{54}

During the years between 1909 and 1919, Fry's exposure to Clive Bell's concept of significant form and to the works of the Post-Impressionist artists, particularly Paul Cézanne, resulted in the resolution of some of his theoretical problems and in the solidification of some of his earliest personal preferences and historical biases.\textsuperscript{55} His essays "The Art of Florence," written in 1919, and "Retrospect" and "El Greco," both written in 1920, reveal the consistency and inconsistency of his critical evolution.

In "The Art of Florence," Fry reiterated his beliefs that the "rise of modern art" began in thirteenth century Italy and that the European tradition stemmed primarily from the heritage of Florentine and French creativity. To explain the primacy of the Florentine artists, Fry investigated the operations of the intellect. He concluded that the mind was characterized by the activities of, on the one hand, observing, analysing, and distinguishing between objects and, on the other hand, discovering "fundamental realtions between these objects" by creating a synthetic system.\textsuperscript{56} He saw a correlation between the mental processes of the scientist and the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54}Fishman, Interpretation, p. 119.
\item \textsuperscript{55}Ibid., p. 120.
\item \textsuperscript{56}Roger Fry, "The Art of Florence," Vision and Design, pp. 178-179.
\end{itemize}
artist, both of whom were only satisfied by factual truth, logic, and unity. The greatness of fifteenth century Italian art, Fry asserted, was the result of the Florentine painters' combination and utilization of both aspects of the mind. They were interested not only in abstract ideas, but also in the particular attributes of forms.\textsuperscript{57}

Naturalism, of course, was an inherent property of the art of fifteenth century Flanders and France as well as Italy, but the trait which distinguished the Florentines from all others was their refusal "to admit the given facts of nature except in so far as they could become amenable to the generalizing power of their art. Facts had to be digested into form before they were allowed into the system."\textsuperscript{58} Fry credited Giotto with the establishment of "formal completeness" as a canon of monumental art. Thus, although the artists of Florence often catered to the public taste for natural appearances, they continued creating within the framework of unified design.\textsuperscript{59} The factual data which the Italians acquired through extensive use of knowledge of perspective and autonomy was incorporated into a larger plan, a grand composition. Fry insisted that "art begins where...fact ends."\textsuperscript{60} His ideas,

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., pp. 179-180.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 180.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 182.
as seen in "The Art of Florence," were increasingly more intellectual, abstract, and formal.

By 1920, when he wrote "Retrospect," Fry had accepted the theory that significant form was the key ingredient in aesthetic works. The shift from the emotional elements of design to form as the source of feeling was extremely important in the evolution of his aesthetic, yet he found it difficult to define and explain the substance of his concept scientifically. Roger Fry acknowledge his inability to objectify significant form clearly:

I think we are all agreed that we mean by significant form something other than agreeable arrangements of form, harmonious patterns, and the like. We feel that a work which possesses it is the outcome of an endeavor to express an idea rather than to create a pleasing object. Personally, at least, I always feel that it implies the effort on the part of the artist to bend to our emotional understanding by means of his passionate conviction some intractable material which is alien to our spirit. I seem unable to present to get beyond this vague adumbration of the nature of significant form.

In "Retrospect," Fry also reassessed his opinions regarding aesthetic emotion. This reassessment was, to a large

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61 Roger Fry, "Retrospect," pp. 284-302, Susanne Langer in Feeling and Form (pp. 24, 409), agreed with Fry's idea that significant form was "the essence of every art" and the source of emotion.

62 Fry, "Retrospect," p. 302; Solomon Fishman in Interpretation (p. 122), said that significant form was illogical and not useful for evaluation of most works.
extent, the result of his acquaintance with the Post-Impressionists who represented, to Fry, "a return to the ideas of formal design which had almost been lost sight of in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation." Fry was, thus, forced to separate the emotions of daily life from those of the aesthetic experience and to conclude that the artist was only interested in "the expression of a special and unique kind of feeling, which was embodied in significant form. According to Fry, this extraordinary feeling was "the one constant quality of all works of art. . . independent of all the prepossessions and associations which the spectator brings with him from past life." Finally, in assessing the value of aesthetic emotion, Roger Fry admitted that "one can only say that those who experience it feel it to have a peculiar quality of 'reality' [ ], which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives.

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63 Fry, "Retrospect," p. 290; Clive Bell in Art (pp.43-44), also saw Post-Impressionism as a "return to first principles."
64 Fry, "Retrospect," p. 294.
65 Ibid., p. 295.
66 Ibid., p. 299; Clive Bell in Art (p. 10), explained that significant form was the common element in all art that appealed to him but emphasized that his was a purely subjective attitude.
Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop."67

The value of Fry's theories of aesthetic emotion and his development of the idea of significant form as critical implements was demonstrated in his essay, "El Greco." The article was inspired by the public reaction to El Greco's "Agony in the Garden," which was purchased by the National Gallery in 1919.68 The crowds which daily gathered in front of the picture expressed a wide range of feeling from anger to delight. Fry exclaimed that they responded to "Agony in the Garden" as if it were a contemporary work, because it was "not like most old pictures, a thing classified and museumified, set altogether apart from life, an object for vague and listless reverence, but an actual living thing, expressing something with which one has got either to agree or disagree."69

He conceded that El Greco's representational abilities and use of melodrama—"the 'horrid' rocks, the veiled moon, the ecstatic gestures"—contributed to the overall effect of

68 Roger Fry, "El Greco," Vision and Design, p. 205; Fry did not mention the name of the painting, and he included a picture of El Greco's "Saint Peter" with his article in Vision and Design. A. C. Sewter in "Roger Fry and El Greco," Apollo, August 1950, p. 32, identified the painting as "Agony in the Garden."
the painting and set it apart from other pictures by making the viewers feel that they and their surroundings were unreal or extremely dull.\textsuperscript{70} Still, Fry insisted that the formal aspects of "Agony in the Garden" were the real sources of power. The painting was an exciting, stimulating work of art in which all parts were coordinated into an imposing whole. El Greco's genius manifested itself in the combination of heightened religious drama with an "intense feeling for plastic unity and rhythmic amplitude."\textsuperscript{71} To Fry, El Greco, along with Michelangelo Buonarroti and Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, represented the fruition of "the Baroque idea in figurative art," because they accentuated "the utmost possible enlargement of the unit of design."\textsuperscript{72} El Greco was described as "a singularly pure artist" who never compromised his art; "the only issue. . .[was] between him and his idea."\textsuperscript{73}

More important in relation to Fry's formal aesthetics was his use of El Greco to illustrate the irrelevance of literary content. Fry contended that the spectators who reacted strongly to the painter's creations did not notice the subject matter "in the illustrative sense."\textsuperscript{74} El Greco's puissance

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., p. 206.
\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., p. 207.
\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., pp. 207-208; A. C. Sewter in "Fry and El Greco" (p. 32), disagreed with Fry's characterization of the artist as a Baroque painter and insisted that form and design were not El Greco's main concerns. In Sewter's opinion, Fry's separation of form and content was a mistake.
derived, not from his ability to depict scenes of religious ecstasy, but from his talent for rendering evocative, magnetic formal compositions which engaged the observer in a singularly aesthetic experience. One did not need to know anything about the story or individuals portrayed in order to appreciate an El Greco, because the artist's works were distinguished by the "permeation of every part of the design with a uniform and continuous plastic theme." 75

During the years from 1909 to 1920, Fry clearly moved gradually away from sensual and sentimental preoccupations toward a progressively cerebral, dehumanized aesthetic. Once he established the concept of significant form as the central unit in his critical system, he was confronted with the problem of evaluating a broad spectrum of artistic productions. It was apparent that few creative pieces of the past or present fulfilled the stringent qualifications of pure form; yet Fry recognized the necessity for validating his theories through the process of analyzing various types of creative activity. 76 Further modification of his ideas was evident in his essay "Some Questions in Esthetics," published in Transformations in 1926.

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., p. 212.
In "Some Questions In Esthetics," Fry differentiated between the aesthetic emotion elicited by formal elements and the non-aesthetic emotion elicited by informal elements. He contended that the response of the viewer to a work of art was different in quality and intensity from that same viewer's response to other ordinary situations and objects. The provenance of the "esthetic state of mind" was no longer the emotional elements of design or even significant form as such but was "a reaction to a relation." He explained that most art contained sources of pleasurable sensation such as color, but enjoyment of color, in and of itself, was not the same as appreciation of the creative piece as a whole. Significant form was redefined as the internal interrelations between pictorial constituents devoid of associative connotations. The aesthetic emotion, then, was not tied to sensations, people, places, objects, or events; it was "a special orientation of the consciousness, and above all, a special focussing of the attention, since the act of esthetic apprehension implies an attentive passivity to the effects of sensations apprehended in their relations." Fry believed that an individual looking at the work of art used his mind and senses in a unique way.

77 Ibid., pp. 2-3; this essay was written in response to I.A. Richards', Principles of Literary Criticism (1924; reprint ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), pp. 11-18, in which Richards asserted that there was no special "esthetic state," which was different from other ordinary mental states.

78 Fishman, Interpretation, p. 127.

79 Fry, "Questions," p. 5.
that differed radically from other mental and sensual activities. He compared the aesthetic state to that of one engaged in contemplation of higher mathematics and noted that the theory was most applicable to the art forms of music and architecture. 80

Roger Fry's austerely formal theories, as expressed in "Some Questions In Esthetics," were best represented in disciplines which were non-representational and remote from daily life. Sensuality was totally eliminated as an integral part of form when Fry's speculations progressed into the intellectualized realm of pure abstraction: there was nothing physical or concrete about the interrelationships which he explored. Unfortunately for his readers, he did not analyze or classify these formal relationships; thus their nature and special qualities were and are problematic. Fry did, however, insist that a synthesis of pure and impure components within a work was impossible. Formal and informal aspects of a given piece had to be evaluated separately, and ultimately the latter had no bearing on the former. 81 Thus, although many works of art had "ulterior values"--to impart religious or political platitudes or to make money--these were not related to the impact of the piece on the senses. 82 The validity of each

80 Ibid., pp. 6, 3; Susanne Langer in Feeling and Form (pp. 37-38), attacked Fry's belief that the "art experience is really such a sophisticated, rare and artificial attitude." She stated that few people could attain Fry's detached state.

81 Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 123-125.

82 Fry, "Questions," p. 3.
work of art was established within the structure of the painting itself; all other considerations were extrinsic to the aesthetic experience. Fry's ideas, though refined in regard to the source of value and emotion, remained constant in respect to the autonomy of art. He reiterated that "the moment anything in...[a painting] ceases to serve towards the edification of the whole plastic volume, the moment it depends on reference to something outside the picture, it becomes descriptive of some other reality." Literal representation, therefore, was justified only to the extent that it was subordinated to and supportative of the spatial values of the work.

From 1926, when "Some Questions In Esthetics" was published, until 1934, when he died, Roger Fry's basic critical position remained fairly static. His establishment of a formal system for the dissection, description, and interpretation of aesthetic impressions provided the impetus and rationalization for the complete intellectualization of art; yet Fry, himself, never carried his ideas to the logical extreme. He never really accepted the obvious extension of his theory of autotelic art to the justification of non-objectivity. He continued to envision the creative process as one of transforming observable phenomenon into a unified aesthetic entity and concluded his

83 Ibid., p. 42.

84 Kenneth Clark, Introduction to Last Lectures by Roger Fry, p. xiv; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 127; Herbert Read in Coat (p. 290), said that Fry was "Insensible" to abstract art.
essay "Some Questions In Esthetics" with the hope that his writings would help artists "concentrate on the development of their specific response to the spectacle of nature." 85

This examination of the maturation of Roger Fry's critical hypothesis has focused on his writings which dealt primarily with the aesthetic medium of painting. This was not arbitrary, for Fry seldom discussed the purely three-dimensional arts. In the last year of his life, however, he devoted a complete series of lectures to the sculpture, pottery, and architecture, not merely of the European tradition but of the world. 86 These lectures, published posthumously in Last Lectures in 1939, indicated that Fry was philosophically moving toward a stronger accent on the roles of personality and individual expression in the creative process. 87

A significant alteration of emphasis was evident in his assertion that the artist's initial participation in the imaginative act was the result of a need for self-gratification, not of a compulsion for direct communication with others.

The artist is then a man who has experiences of one kind or another which excite him in such a way that first of all for his own satisfaction he wishes to hold them in the focus of attention until

85 Fry, "Questions," p. 43; Roger Fry in the Preface to the Catalogue of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912, entitled "The French Post-Impressionists," reprinted in Vision and Design, p. 239, admitted that the complete abandonment of representation was part of the logical progression of art forward from the re-evaluation of formal design, but he refused to judge abstract and non-objective art, because he was not yet accustomed to it.

86 Fry, Last Lectures, pp. v-vii.

87 Fishman, Interpretation, p. 135.
he has exactly appreciated their quality, and this holding in focus results in the work of art, poem, picture or what not. Most men live through one experience after another without, as it were, stopping the current of life to enquire further about them—with the artist certain experiences have the power to arrest his attention so much that he turns aside from the current of life and waits until he has fixed that experience fully in his consciousness and extracted its full savour. . . . The experience is composed of two elements: one the situation, the external stimulus. . . . and the other the whole nature of the artist which causes his reaction to that stimulus to be just what it is . . . . No two artists subjected to the same outward stimulus can possibly produce identical works of art. 88

Thus, Fry incorporated subliminal personal motivations into his ideational system, which in turn was rendered more humanistic through recognition of the uniqueness of each artist and, at the same time, more remote and abstract through disassociation of the artist from purposeful interaction with other human beings.

In Last Lectures, Fry also elevated the power of the subconscious in determining the quality of both the artist's and the spectator's experience. Apparently the detached contemplation of formal relations was no longer a fully satisfactory explanation for the "magic" of the aesthetic state of mind. There was more involved in the creation of a work of art than simple conscious manipulation of spatial elements; art served

88 Fry, Last Lectures, p. 12.
as a link between the unconscious feelings and associations of creator and viewer. Fry explained that "the ideal trans-
action would be one in which the artist embodied his 'experience'
completely in the work of art and met with a spectator capable of perfect response to that experience." Such a situation seldom, if ever, occurred. Art, therefore, still served as a "liaison" between artist and audience, but its function was relegated to the transference of non-cognitive feelings and associations and was thereby further removed from actuality.

In one instance Fry regressed to a stance similar in tone to that of the aesthetes: he advocated consideration of art objects not "as isolated, static phenomena," but "as potentiali-
ties for evoking in ourselves certain states of mind." The evaluation of various creations would then hinge on a comparison of the states of mind induced by prolonged contemplation of numerous art objects. Fry proclaimed that "we shall feel before some works of art that they set up vibrations in the deeper layers of our consciousness and that these vibrations radiate in many directions, lighting up a vast system of correlated feelings and ideas. Some other paintings may touch us "very poignantly," but give "only a narrow range of feeling."

90 Ibid., p. 15.
91 Ibid., p. 16.
92 Ibid., p. 17.
93 Ibid.
Fry commented further that "deeper, vaguer, more indescribable emotions" were intertwined with the significant form which gave art its "texture and substance." Newly enriching his aesthetic were two subsidiary qualities, sensibility and vitality, which he isolated and discussed. In explaining sensibility, Fry differentiated between two features "of the artist's feeling:" the first feature was the "feeling for organization" which was revealed in the design; the second feature was "the sense of texture" which was involved in the execution of the design. To Fry, sensibility implied a constant principle behind variety, a rhythmic, continuous recurrence "of similar though not identical sequences." He added that "design... [was] conceived in terms of its appropriate texture and... in a perfect work of art the texture" supported and completed the design. A copy, therefore, would have the same composition but not the same texture as an original.

Design was a matter of conscious control--the mind seeking order--while rhythm was unconscious--the imprecise fluctuations of intuition. Roger Fry felt that art was a compromise between the intellect's demand for regularity and conformity and the subconscious' predilection for organic disorder and "infinite variation." Creative works intrigued viewers not only

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94 Ibid., pp. 19-20.  
95 Ibid., pp. 19-26.  
96 Ibid., pp 24-25.  
98 Ibid.  
99 Ibid., pp. 28-29; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 137.
because they supplied a "sense of fitness or harmony," but also because they provided "alternating moments of wondering inquiry and surprised satisfaction." The artist's imagination operated within the confines of a province which existed "between rigid order and chaos." Fry felt that surface sensibility, i.e. texture, was important as a means of keeping "the mind and attention fixed in the world of sensation."

The second aesthetic property which Roger Fry employed in his examination of the three-dimensional arts of the world was vitality, the illusion of inner life. An art object possessing vitality was not just a copy or picture of something else, but was a vibrant image which aroused "the idea of . . . energy expressing itself in the form." Fry defined vitality only imperfectly:

It seems to me very mysterious, and I find it difficult to allege any explanations of why it occurs when it does, by what exact processes the artist gives the illusion; and yet further I do not know quite what value we ought to attach to the quality, or what its relations are to other aesthetic qualities.

100 Fry, Last Lectures, p. 30.
101 Ibid., p. 33.
102 Ibid., p. 36; Herbert Read in Coat (p. 289), declared that Fry's "quasi-scientific terms"—sensibility and vitality—were "psychologically naive" and ill defined; Kenneth Clark in Introduction to Last Lectures by Fry (p. xxiii), criticized Fry's definition of sensibility and suggested a narrower use of the term sensitivity instead.
103 Fry, Last Lectures, pp. 40-45.
104 Ibid., p. 40.
Though he was unsure of the precise nature and worth of vitality, Fry was definite in his insistence that this artistic ingredient did exist and was observable in various works.

Fry impressed upon his readers that an art object which possessed inner life was not necessarily good, any more than one which lacked it was necessarily bad. In using the concept he was "not expressing approval or disapproval,. . .[but] merely noting the presence or absence of a quality."105 When he assembled a number of works which he considered both vital and unsatisfactory, Fry discovered that all were Expressionistic. But Fry disliked Expressionism, "a marked peculiarity of German Art," because "the artist. . .[tried] not only to realize his idea but to express to the world his feeling about his idea."106 The observer, in Fry's opinion, did not need the artist whispering in his ear; he only needed to be "left alone with the artist's vision."107

In Last Lectures, Roger Fry applied his selected criteria, sensibility and vitality, to the interpretation of the artistic creations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Africa, Meso-America, China,

105 Ibid., p. 45.

106 Ibid., pp. 45-46; Solomon Fishman in Interpretation (p. 139), noted that Fry's attitude toward German Expressionism resulted from his knowledge of fifteenth century painters like Matthias Grunewald. Fry did not discuss twentieth century Expressionism.

107 Both Jakob Rosenberg in Quality (p. 119), and Kenneth Clark in Introduction to Last Lectures by Fry (p. xxiv), criticized Fry's use of the vague, limited, "almost too experimental" term vitality; Solomon Fishman in Interpretation (p.138), however, contended that Fry's vitality was a purely formal concept, since it was non-representational.
India, and Greece. Of these, his criticisms of the art of Greece, which he detested, and of Africa, which he greatly admired, were especially informative. Fry despised the "religion of Greek art" and asserted that Hellenic creations were exceptional only because the artists were preoccupied with "beautiful human beings" and dealt exclusively with the human figure. Fry also felt that the Greeks erred in their insistence that artists only portray noble and dignified poses. He contended that "all those expressive elements of the grotesque and ugly which play so large a part in most arts are left

108 Fry, Last Lectures, p. 175.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., pp. 176-177.
111 Ibid., p. 177.
out almost entirely in Greek [art]. . . . Their habit of
generalized form and of a bland unaccented line, their
ignorance of what makes individual character, prevents them
from seizing on the significant accent."112 Thus, in Fry's
estimation, Hellenic works were lifeless, mechanical, and
overtly intellectual. He charged that the artistis controlled
their designs and exhibited a mathematical attitude toward
proportion, a combination which eliminated sensibility from
their productions. They sought geometric harmony at the
expense of their sensual logic. To Fry, perfection was a
negative goal implying the discarding of irregularities,
blemishes, and variety and the restricting of the imagination
to conformity to a certain pattern. Perfection was also non-
aesthetic, because statements of mechanical precision pro-
hibited, by their very nature, sensual apprehension. Fry
reiterated that the aesthetic experience was an emotional
activity which combined appreciation of diversity with orderly
intellectual perception. In Greek art, the intellect interfered
with the senses.113

112Ibid., p. 178.

113Ibid., pp. 181-184; In Last Lectures (pp. 187, 203-206),
Fry did offer faint praise for Greek architecture, Archaic works,
the "Nike of Samothrace," and the "Laocoon."
In contrast to the Greek ideal, Fry extolled African sculpture as the exemplar of three-dimensional form. He was intrigued by statues in which the heads dominated the bodies and asserted that the heads were not created for beauty, erotic stimulation, or personal characterization but simply to express "the vital essence of man." The concept of man's vital essence was clearly a generalization.

Fry's praise of African art seems puzzling in view of his distaste for Greek creations, unless one recognizes his distinction between African sculpture's embodiment of the total being, spiritual and physical, and Greek sculpture's assemblage of perfect parts to construct the whole. Fry was also delighted by the freedom the Africans exhibited in their modeling of form and facial features. He contended that the style was neither conventional nor habitual and that the artists utilized the attributes they wanted and ignored the rest. In Roger Fry's

114 Kenneth Clark in Introduction to *Last Lectures* by Fry (p. xxv), stated that Fry's admiration for African art revealed "the independence of his aesthetic judgment from all associative and literary elements;" but both Jakob Rosenberg in *Quality* (p. 119) and the author of "Art Critic's Testament: The Last Lectures of Roger Fry, A Theorist Who Changed Taste," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 21 October 1939, p. 612, disagreed with Fry's assessment of African art, implying that it was inconsistent with his formal theories and a matter of faulty judgment.

115 Fry, *Last Lectures*, p. 76.
opinion, the African artists went "behind the facts of appearance," something he believed Westerners, who were inhibited by the Greek tradition, could never do.\textsuperscript{116}

Although he felt that "modern art. . .[owed] more to the Negro than to any other" national style, Fry admitted that his ideal was a combination of the vitality and sensibility of the African with the "clear logical organization of the Greek mind."\textsuperscript{117}

Despite Fry's tremendous admiration for African art, he devoted only ten pages to it in \textit{Last Lectures}. His championship of primitive tribal works was neither arbitrary nor sporadic: it was of long standing; as early as 1920, he had praised African creations in an article entitled "Negro Sculpture." In that essay, Fry noted that Europeans believed that expressive sculpture was one of the greatest achievements of humanity; therefore, they could not cope with the fact that nameless savages were capable of producing masterpieces. African statues, in Fry's estimation, were superior to any British sculpture, past or present. He claimed that African sculptors utilized "complete plastic freedom"; this, to Fry, was rare in any national artistic heritage.\textsuperscript{118} He felt that Europeans were confined to the two-dimensional plane and invariably distorted

\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., p. 77.
\textsuperscript{117}Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{118}Roger Fry, "Negro Sculpture," \textit{Vision and Design}, p. 100.
form to symbolize noble characteristics. Fry was convinced that the Africans had no such prejudices and were free to emphasize solid three-dimensional forms; their creations possessed vitality and were not "mere echoes of actual figures."\(^{119}\)

Thus, Roger Fry's basic attitudes toward Greek and African art remained relatively unchanged. There was little difference between his initial reactions to the two traditions--he disliked the former and liked the latter--and his final analysis in the last year of his life. \textit{Last Lectures} represented not so much a reassessment as an amplification of his theories. It is apparent that as early as 1920 vitality and sensibility were the main features of African art which attracted Fry. In his last lectures, he merely expanded and explored these recurrent themes into criteria for evaluating works of art on a more universal scale. His original prejudices were fortified, rather than modified by his endeavor. Although Fry's lectures did exhibit a new interest in the psychological reverberations of the aesthetic experience and the unique, personal involvement of each artist and spectator, on the whole, there was not a marked departure from his established position. One should bear in mind that Fry's \textit{métier} was always the analysis of paintings, and he was less rigorous in the application of

\(^{119}\)Ibid., pp. 101-102.
formal standards to three-dimensional creations. He remained a classical critic who employed vitality and sensibility as valuable complements to, not indispensable components of, formal aesthetics.120

It is difficult to define precisely Fry's aesthetic, because it contains inconsistencies and because it was constantly subject to subtle alteration. His theories were not solidified doctrines but were malleable, versatile instruments employed in the sensitive probing of the depths of the art experience. The continuity of Fry's ideas involves certain fundamental concepts: The realm of real life was separate and different in intensity and quality from the world of pure art. Human beings had an aesthetic sense which made possible the detached contemplation and enjoyment of art without regard for any extrinsic associations.121 The appreciation of autotelic art, therefore, depended entirely upon the apprehension of the interrelations of the plastic elements within the work; unity, order, rhythm, color, line, mass, volume, and so forth were important aspects of a truly creative work. Significant form, the indispensable factor in great art, was aesthetic in nature; it was the embodiment of the artist's emotions and the stimulus of those of the spectator.122 Although Fry's critical

120 Fishman, pp. 133-134, 139; Clark, Introduction to Last Lectures, by Fry, p. xxiv.
121 Rosenberg, Quality, p. 112.
122 Fishman, Interpretation, p. 111; Rosenberg, Quality, p. 112.
system was extremely intellectual, he insisted that the total domination of the intuition by the intellect inhibited free expression and interfered with the aesthetic quality of artistic productions. He maintained that a balance of conscious control and subconscious inspiration were both necessary for genuine creativity. Roger Fry's basic beliefs formed the core of his mature criticism and provided a foundation for the formal aesthetics of his successors.
CHAPTER III

THE CHAMPION OF MODERN ART

Although Roger Fry's critical writings and lectures significantly contributed to public understanding and appreciation of various art styles, he was and is primarily remembered for "discovering" and popularizing the late nineteenth century artists usually identified by the generic term "Post-Impressionists." Fry established his reputation as the champion of modern art by participating in two of the most "crucial events in the evolution of twentieth century English art interests"—the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912—and by establishing an aesthetic foundation for analysis of modern art movements based on knowledge of art history and tradition. Fry as critic played a pivotal role in awakening the British to an awareness of the virtues of Continental trends and in creating and disseminating a rationale for those trends. In order to place "the great art critic and prophet of modernism" firmly within the context of his times, it is necessary to examine the confusion and controversy surrounding

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1 "Roger Fry Dead," Art Digest, September 1934, p. 10.
the two Post-Impressionist shows and to survey his theories regarding the nature and value of traditional as well as current French painting.³

Nineteenth and early twentieth century Englishmen resisted the importation of new ideas or artistic concepts from across the English Channel. Even as the British Empire expanded to encompass a wide diversity of territories and racial groups, England itself remained culturally isolated from the rest of the world.⁴ There was a genuine fear that contemporary innovations would undermine and eventually destroy the social order of the nation. Many felt that "Europe was an infection" that could precipitate a serious moral crisis.⁵ Artistically, the British were just emerging "out of the chrysalis of impressionism" when Roger Fry heralded the arrival of a new age of aesthetic expression.⁶

In the summer of 1910, the Grafton Gallery sent Roger Fry to Paris to select paintings representative of recent French styles for an autumn exhibition. Fry was delighted to have the opportunity to indulge his growing interest in Cézanne and other new painters and to present a collection of modern works to the

³"Fry as Artist," Art Digest, April 1931, p. 32.
⁵Ibid., pp. 287, 209.
British public. He considered the show of the utmost importance and hoped his fellow countrymen would respond favorably and "share his sense of revelation" on viewing the works.\(^7\) Desmond MacCarthy, the Grafton Gallery Secretary, was called upon to assist in choosing the pictures and in writing an introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue to explain the intentions of the artists and persuade viewers to examine the pieces fairly and thoughtfully.\(^8\) Fry also attempted to enhance the respectability of the show by publishing a list of well known individuals who, while they endorsed the exhibition, refused to be held accountable for its content.\(^9\)

Fry's exhibition, entitled "Manet and the Post-Impressionists," opened at the Grafton Gallery, London on November 8, 1910, and was on display until January 15, 1911.\(^10\) It was Fry, indeed, who coined the name Post-Impressionist in order to distinguish the modern artists chronologically without defining them stylistically.\(^11\) Included in the collection he had put together were nine paintings by Edouard Manet, twenty-one by Paul Cézanne, twenty by Vincent Van Gogh, thirty-seven by Paul Gauguin, two


\(^9\)Hynes, Edwardian Mind, p. 327.


by Paul Seurat, nine by Maurice de Vlaminck, six by Georges Ronault five by Maurice Denis, three each by André Derain and Henri Matisse, and two by Pablo Picasso. Prior to November 1910, very few Englishmen had even heard of Cézanne, Gauguin, or Van Gogh, and probably not fifty people in the entire country had actually seen works by Matisse or Picasso. The exhibition hit "the ordinary sober-minded lover of art" like an electric shock. People of all classes and aesthetic temperaments flocked to the Gallery where they "cried aloud and made themselves heard and absurd." Many were convulsed "with paroxysms of rage and laughter" as they passed before paintings which seemed more like bad jokes than works of art.


13 Clive Bell, "How England Met Modern Art," Art News, October 1950, p. 24; MacCarthy, Memories, p. 180; the only previous exhibition which included works by Cézanne, Matisse, Derain and others was held at Brighton in the summer of 1910 and was reviewed in "Modern French Pictures at Brighton, Times (London), 11 July 1910, p. 12a.


16 Woolf, Biography, p. 153; Phillip Burne-Jones in a letter to the Morning Post, 17 November 1910, p. 3, claimed the show was a "huge practical joke organized in Paris."
Desmond MacCarthy was compelled to provide a book in which the public recorded its complaints.17

All the established professional artists and critics responded negatively to "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" with the exceptions of Sir Charles Holmes, the Director of the National Gallery, and Walter Sickert, the most prominent living English artist of the period, both of whom gave half-hearted support to Fry's efforts.18 The influential London Times critic attacked the works as deliberate affectations, rather than naturally primitive expressions of the artists' visions. Post-Impressionism seemed to represent a "rejection of civilization," and the Times critic was fearful that Roger Fry's reputation as a "sane and learned" authority on aesthetic matters would influence many people who had not or could not establish their own standards of taste.19 The outraged critic of The Spectator felt that most of the pictures were ugly, unrealistic visions spawned by the innate French love of violence and anarchy. He declared that Manet was the only fine artist exhibited in the collection; the other painters were obviously inspired by "the pavement pastellist or . . . the

17 MacCarthy, Memories, pp. 182-183; Woolf, Biography, p. 154.


19 "'Post-Impressionist' Painting," p. 12c.
Roger Fry was branded a charlatan and a madman, and his reputation was severely damaged by the furor over the exhibition. Fry was surprised and amused by the public outcry; he was also angry and shocked to realize that the cultured classes joined the general public in hating not only the new art for being so disturbing, but also its defender for what they thought of as his abandonment of the aesthetic principles which he had upheld for many years. Yet the champion of modern art had not really forsaken his earlier ideas, for he viewed the creations presented in "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" as a continuation of, rather than a break with, past art movements. Fry felt he was encouraging the natural evolution of artistic expression not disrupting that evolutionary process. He told himself that he and the public loved the old masters for different reasons: as a sensitive artist and critic, Fry responded emotionally to the aesthetic implications of the grand tradition, while the "cultured public" sought knowledge of art to satisfy its egotistical craving for social prestige.  

Despite the general condemnation of the works displayed in the exhibition, the Post-Impressionist show was a success:


many paintings were sold, the gallery was crowded with spectators, and everyone in England was discussing modern art. Clive Bell claimed that many "who... had gone to mock... remained, if not to pray, at least to wonder." Young British artists were especially impressed by the French creations, and Roger Fry became a hero to the struggling younger generation of painters, who eagerly sought his advice and support. The long-term effect on Fry's career of the introduction of the new art in Britain was gradually to broaden and expand Fry's influence and to redirect his energies toward the promotion and encouragement of the maturing, rather than the matured artists and art enthusiasts of his era. Thus, although Fry did not receive monetary payment for his services to the Grafton Gallery, he was rewarded with the knowledge that he was instrumental in pushing England into the mainstream of European art.

The second Post-Impressionist show organized by Fry opened October 5, 1912, and included current works by French, Russian, and British artists. Of the old masters of Post-Impressionism, only Cézanne was well represented; the emphasis was on living

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23 Ibid.
25 MacCarthy, Memories, p. 183.
painters, and Cubist paintings dominated the presentation. The English artists who participated in the exhibition were Vanessa Bell, Frederick Etchells, Roger Fry, Eric Gill, Spencer Gore, Duncan Grant, Henry Lamb, Wyndham Lewis, and Stanley Spencer; most were either members or friends of members of the Bloomsbury group. Although overall the pictures were of lesser quality than those of the first Post-Impressionist show and were not as shocking, the public and press were outraged once again. The new art was described as distorted, unintelligible, and unrealistic, yet "too monotonous and too dull to have been produced by a mere desire to startle." The Times critic severely criticized the English Post-Impressionists for their lack of understanding of the relationship between mass and form, which rendered their works empty instead of simple. According to the critic, the English were inferior painters even within the context of an art movement which had standards low enough to permit individuals with little or no talent to create acceptable pieces.

Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Spencer Gore, Henry Lamb, and other British Post-Impressionists were prominent members of the middle class and their social status was a significant factor in promoting popular acceptance of the new trends. They projected an image of sobriety and respectability which indicated that neither they, nor their paintings constituted a threat to society. Contemporary critics felt that the British creations were mediocre, Anglicized renditions of the Post-Impressionist themes and were typical of what some critics saw as the traditional English response to foreign art. To most writers, the passion and vitality of the European styles had been subdued, toned down, and domesticated. Thus, although Fry and his associates guided their fellow countrymen into acceptance and appreciation of truly imaginative Post-Impressionist artists of their day, they did not produce great works of art themselves. They remained dedicated followers of, rather than genuine contributors to, the major movements of their times. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1914 modern art "had entered England and had become established." Even the Times critic had become accustomed to Post-Impressionism and regarded it as simply another

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30 Hynes, Edwardian Mind, pp. 334-335.


32 Hynes, Edwardian Mind, p. 345.
method of painting.\textsuperscript{33} The Europeanization of English art had begun.\textsuperscript{34}

During the period from 1910 to 1912 and the years thereafter, Roger Fry defined and refined the aesthetic concepts which had inspired him to praise and defend the new art. He emphasized the Classic spirit of the French artists, which distinguished their creations from those of contemporary painters of other nationalities. Fry explained that Classic art was the record of "a positive and disinterestedly passionate state of mind," which communicated "a new and otherwise unattainable experience."\textsuperscript{35} Post-Impressionist paintings had elicited a warm response from Fry, because he recognized them as signifying "a return to the ideas of formal design which had almost been lost sight of in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation."\textsuperscript{36} By tracing the manifestations of Classic ideas recurring in "the best French works of all periods from the twelfth century onwards," Fry provided a penetrating vision of the nature and value of both traditional and modern art.\textsuperscript{37} He isolated the two crucial factors, which he claimed were, inherent in the French psyche and which, he thought, determined the character of the grand tradition: "the

\textsuperscript{33}The Grafton Group," \textit{Times} (London), 3 January 1914, p. 11c.
\textsuperscript{34}Hynes, \textit{Edwardian Mind}, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 290. \textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 242.
ability to see and express relations between things" and the ability to see and accept life on its own terms. 38

Fry asserted that even the early French primitive painters of the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries had emphasized formal design and realistic observation of natural objects and events. These artists possessed the power to recognize subtle, yet evocative, human mannerisms and to transform their mental images of facial expressions and significant physical movements into enduring plastic forms. Fry insisted that the primitive painters and sculptors exhibited an intense awareness of life, which vitalized their productions and promoted the creation of realistic rather than idealistic portraiture. In those early works, Fry saw a reflection of "that sudden alert turning of the mind in its tracks which is the special quality of French art." 39

Jean Fouquet, a master of the school of Tours and one of the outstanding miniaturists in French history, was, in the critic's estimation, the most typical painter of the early period. 40 Fouquet's figures were stylized but graphically rendered and frankly realistic. Fry pointed out that even when religious subjects were depicted, the artist carefully

39 Ibid., pp. 7-11.
exposed and delineated parts of the anatomy which were unacceptable by the canons of propriety of Fry's own times. He saw the artist's compositions as well organized constructions in which form dominated the design and enticed the viewer to look deeply into the pictorial space to observe the details. Fry concluded that the French primitives in general represented a direct, honest approach to aesthetics based on the precept that actuality was the proper source for both sacred and profane inspiration, and that Jean Fouquet, in particular, combined the traditional Gallic realism with a strong grasp of plastic relations.  

As Fry traced the history of French art, he pointed out that during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, French kings imported Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Sarto, to create works which would glorify the power of the state and satisfy the elegant and erotic tastes of the royal court. Thus, Fry explained, Gallic painters were exposed to Italian innovations which emphasized the "general principles underlying all appearance," that is, perspective, anatomy, unity of design, "the mechanics of bodily motion, and proportion through measure." Fry

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42 Ibid., p. 13.
maintained that the French, at first, failed to understand the basic principles of sixteenth century Italian art and, therefore, merely adopted its surface decorations. By the sixteen hundreds, however, Gallic artists had grasped the underlying techniques and organizational methodology of the Italians and employed their knowledge in the production of imaginative pieces exemplifying "an exaggerated worship of Graeco-Roman art." According to Fry, seventeenth century French art was dominated by logic and the desire for regularity and order; the emphasis was on formal design, and the painters fashioned "a pure classic style of indisputable clarity and logical coherence." For Fry, Nicolas Poussin's original, austere, coordinated landscapes and historical scenes were characteristic of seventeenth century French Classicism. Fry analyzed the psychology he thought was revealed in the artist's self portrait and concluded that Poussin was "unsociable, suspicious and misanthropic," just the type to use art as an escape from reality. To Fry, Poussin represented the special French capacity for controlled expression as opposed to the tradition of apprehension of actual life. Fry contended that instead of recognizing and

44Fry, French Art, p. 22.
46Ibid., p. 23.
recording the significant actions and activities which were everyday occurrences, the Classic artist generalized features, idealized forms, dealt with exalted themes, and attempted to make painting an adjunct of drama. The figures, he continued, were posed, unnatural, and inexpressive; the paintings in general were uninspired and artificial. In Fry's opinion, the true value of Poussin's works was inherent in the artist's masterful control of plastic relations and pristine harmony. His conclusion was that the artist established "a high standard of artistic consciousness, which enabled the French alone of all European schools, to keep their art alive through the disastrous period of the nineteenth century."47

Roger Fry contrasted the paintings of the methodical, precise, sophisticated Poussin to those of the other great seventeenth century French landscape painter Claude Lorraine, who was characterized as instinctive, imprecise, and often inept. Fry considered Claude's human figures "almost grotesque," his cattle and sheep "absurd."48 Although, in Fry's opinion, the artist was unintelligent and crude, he exemplified the immediate reaction to nature native to French art; his works possessed "a kind of beauty which...[was] not only compatible with these defects but perhaps... .

47 Ibid., pp. 27, 28, 39.
48 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
depended on them."49 Claude's principal concern was the envelopment of a scene "in a luminous atmosphere;" therefore, Fry explained, the objects depicted were of secondary or often negligible importance.50 Fry pointed out two major achievements of Claude: he illuminated his paintings with a diffused light that seemed to vibrate across the canvas, and he mastered the complexities of unified composition. Fry insisted that, despite the monotony of Claude's designs, the painter's works conveyed a "mood of placid reverie" and were more expressive and evocative than the pure examples of Classic themes.51

When Fry turned to eighteenth century French art, he found that the polarization of artistic consciousness became more pronounced. On the one hand the officially and socially powerful Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture founded by Louis XIV followed a doctrine based on classical theories which deified Poussin as a direct aesthetic descendent of Raphael; on the other, the followers of Peter Paul Rubens employed "diagonal Baroque design" as a means of maintaining "a more direct contact with life."52 Roger Fry identified Antoine Watteau, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin as the most typical French painters of the

49 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 221-224.
50 Fry, French Art, pp. 42-43.
51 Ibid., pp. 45-46; Fry, Vision and Design, p. 227.
52 Ibid., p. 51.
period. He saw in the works of Watteau, a Flemish artist who lived in Paris, a reflection of the witty, genteel, romantic aspects of the ancien régime. Watteau's was, to the English critic, an enchanting "art of escape," which captured the essence of French society. Fry stressed that Watteau—as one of the great poets of eighteenth century aesthetic expression—not only revealed penetrating insight into the spirit of his times, but also produced unified, harmonious compositions. He felt that Fragonard was similar to, but not as capable as, Watteau. For Fry, Fragonard was primarily a decorative painter, who typified the trend toward "superficial and elegant make believe." According to Fry, Chardin was the exemplar of the Gallic tradition in the Rococo era. He was "the first modern artist. . . to accept as his material the full complexity of visual appearance." Fry stated that Chardin's ability to produce highly stimulating works by skillfully manipulating reflected light made him a forerunner of the Impressionists. The artist also concentrated on the ordinary activities of average people; thus in Fry's estimation, both Chardin's methodology and his subject matter revealed his connection with the typical French approach to

53 Ibid., pp. 53-56.
54 Ibid., pp. 70-72
55 Ibid., p. 63.
reality. Fry asserted that Chardin achieved the grand style, while the Academy members and "their imposing machines" did not.56

From the Romantic period (1750-1850) through the twentieth century, no single style or imaginative concept dominated the art world. The gradual transition from generation to generation of painters was disrupted by artists who often rejected the superficial trappings of Christianity, classical humanism, and contemporary society and searched for affirmation of the uniqueness and validity of the individual consciousness through the medium of artistic creativity.57

"The course of painting ever since has been a history of revolutions and counterrevolutions" of taste in which successive, influential styles—Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism—have risen quickly to ascendency only to decline in the wake of the next movement.58

After the French Revolution, Jacques Louis David assumed the position of "art dictator of France, where his paintings influenced everything from philosophical morality to interior decoration."59 Roger Fry felt that David's leadership produced

56Ibid., pp. 64-69.
57Gardner, Art Through Ages, pp. 651-652.
59Ibid..
"a period of strange aberration and pedantic exaggeration." He insisted that the Neo-Classical doctrine espoused by the revolutionaries was only an intensified and indurate version of seventeenth century Classical theories. Fry condemned David for confining the purpose of art to the reflection of "the ostentatious austerity of the Revolutionaries" and for reducing painting to exaltation of "the frozen elegance of...sham Graeco-Roman heroes." The Neo-Classicists signified the triumph of formal design and the momentary abandonment of the vitality and "sense of life" that had characterized much of the best French art of the past.

Romanticism, in Fry's eyes, was "an abnormal phase" in French history. To him, the Romantic movement represented neither the tradition of lucid apprehension of reality, nor the tradition of controlled expression and unified composition. In discussing the two great Romantic painters Eugène Delacroix and Theodore Géricault, Roger Fry emphasized the talents of the latter. He compared Géricault's powerful designs and modulating rhythms to the masters of the High Renaissance, and he praised the artist's masterful ability to

60 Fry, French Art, p. 79.
61 Ibid., pp. 79-80.
62 Canaday, Mainstreams, p. 18.
63 Fry, French Art, p. 86; Kenneth Clark in Introduction to Last Lectures, by Roger Fry (Cambridge: The University Press, 1939), pp. xx-xxi, stated that Fry's ethical biases accounted for his dislike of Romanticism.
combine complex movements and forms into ordered constructions. Géricault, he concluded, had a natural gift for working in the grand style. On the other hand, Fry dismissed Delacroix as an excitable painter, who imagined grandiose compositions but lacked the skill necessary to translate creative ideas into plastic reality. Fry felt that Delacroix's use of and experiments with color, which were usually considered one of the artist's greatest accomplishments, were overrated: "the pictures were 'coloured' rather than great orchestrations of colour." In Fry's estimation, Delacroix was a great man but not a great painter. The vivid emotional content, lush colors, and opulent, exotic themes of the Romantics in general disturbed Fry and convinced him that the movement was an unpleasant aberration of Gallic culture.

In contrast to the Romantic artists, Fry contended that the Realists of the nineteenth century signaled a return to an interest in actual life and in the nature of appearances. Gustave Courbet insisted that as painting was a purely visual medium, an artist could not paint anything that he could not actually see. According to Courbet, "Real and Existing objects," rather than imaginative ideals, were the

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64 Canaday, Mainstreams, p. 48; Fry, French Art, p. 90.
65 Fry, French Art, pp. 90-91.
only fit subjects for art. Fry believed that the Realists' theories were reminiscent of the sensitive concepts of representation of the early French Primitives, but he criticized the painters for merely stating the facts without contemplating or interpreting the significance of the experience. He noted, however, that Courbet at his best produced carefully arranged, complex designs and direct, honest statements about the nature of the visual world.

To Fry, Edouard Manet was a transitional figure, whose career spanned both Realism and Impressionism and whose works exemplified the best qualities of each. Roger Fry compared Manet's early creations to those of the seventeenth century Italian painter Caravaggio: both used strong light, minimal shadowing, rounded contours, and dark backgrounds. He observed that Manet's forms were solid and vigorous and his vision frank and bold. Fry praised the pre-Impressionist paintings by Manet but asserted that the artist's Impressionist works were "vulgarily brilliant and harshly accented."

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67 Fry, French Art, pp. 105-110.

68 Ibid., p. 122.
Fry accused the painter of forsaking true aesthetic expression by adopting Impressionist techniques.69

According to Fry, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne, and Georges Seurat were the four outstanding painters of any nationality of the late nineteenth century.70 Degas was praised as an exemplar of French genius, because he responded quickly and accurately to the life around him. Fry felt that the artist's works were subtle, complex and profound embodiments of "a kind of passion of disillusionment."71 Fry refused to classify Degas as an Impressionist despite the painter's use of unusual visual angles, which was characteristic of other Impressionist creations. Degas noted all the possibilities of appearances and combined his observations into original, formal designs; he reduced his figures to the essential elements without eliminating significant details and gave the spectator the "sensation of having stumbled upon the scene unawares."72 Fry especially admired Degas' last paintings, which seemed to symbolize a return to the formal values of "the great European tradition."73

Fry believed that Impressionism departed from, but eventually returned to, the mainstream of continental art; it

69 Ibid.
70 Roger Fry, Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), p. 188.
71 Fry, French Art, p. 31.
72 Ibid., p. 132.
73 Ibid., p. 136.
added valuable new material but discarded important traditional concepts. Fry noted that the Impressionists emphasized atmospheric effects and attempted to record visual sensations as precisely as possible. Their experiments revealed a new range of colors available for artistic expression as well as "new effects of perspective, new patterns made by odd juxtaposition of things." Unfortunately, to Fry, these artists sacrificed too much in their scientific pursuit of reality; they abandoned formal design completely and failed to produce truly, great art. Renoir was the one notable exception to Fry's criticisms of the Impressionists, for he was "one of the most obvious 'old masters' of the nineteenth century." His works reminded Fry of the Venetians, and of Titian and Rubens as well. Fry praised Renoir for creating rich, harmonious works which "expressed the joys of life of the average healthy, unsophisticated man."

Because Roger Fry had misgivings about the value and significance of Impressionism, he sought pure form and structure elsewhere and found in Paul Cézanne "the savior of

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75 Fry, French Art, p. 125.

76 Ibid., pp. 126-128.

77 Ibid., p. 140.

78 Ibid., pp. 140-143.
art from anarchy." Fry asserted that most people were introduced to Cézanne's ideas not through exposure to the artist's own creations but through contact with imitative works by other painters. Fry attempted to bridge the enormous gap between popular conceptions of Cézanne's message and the message itself. According to Fry, Cézanne was not perfect; the artist was timid, insecure, and even incompetent in certain areas, but he was determined and possessed "desperate courage in face of the elusive theme." The artist's great contribution to art was his concept of color as an integral part of, rather than an addition to, form. His early paintings were characterized by strong brush work, impasto, sensitive forms, fragile tonal values, and deft handling of contours. Fry continued that eventually the artist reduced the representation of objects to the utmost simplicity and rediscovered the use of parallel planes, a style established by Poussin.

Fry was very impressed by Cézanne's still lifes, which did not simply illustrate natural objects but embodied profound

79 Nicolson, Edwardian Mind, p. 11.
emotions as well. He pointed out Cézanne's discovery that color changes corresponded to alterations of planes and his attempt to record the interrelationship between color and form. In Fry's opinion, the artist's medium complemented his ideas: the creative message was exemplified in the impasto as well as in the composition, color, unity, rhythm etc. The artist created simple relations in which every object was "infallibly in its place." Fry found Cézanne's forms austere, solid, and weighty, yet vibrant and moving. Fry contended that when the artist reduced natural forms to geometric shapes--cones, cylinders and spheres--they were easily understood by the spectators and maintained a "concrete reality" of their own. The artist's "real gift," Fry asserted, was his unique sensitivity to his personal response to actuality combined with his ability to transform that reaction into a plastic design which utilized the subtleties of Impressionistic vision without destroying the structure of the painting. Cézanne always was aware of the architecture behind the color and the logic of plastic relationships not represented in color alone. Fry praised the artist for seeking the "reality hidden beneath the veil of appearance." 

Thus, Fry maintained that Cézanne was the first artist to use color as an integral part of form, the first to relate

82 Ibid., pp. 39-47.
83 Ibid., p. 53.
84 Ibid., pp. 34-38.
complex appearances to a systematic, geometric framework, and the first to illustrate successfully that the formal plastic relationships within the picture were aesthetically the heart of true expression and the source of genuine emotion. To Roger Fry, Cézanne's realistic vision and formal compositions represented the "triumph of that pictorial probity which it is the glory of modern art in France to have asserted." He proclaimed that Cézanne was a Classical artist whose paintings heralded a return to traditional art concepts.

For Roger Fry, Georges Seurat, like Cézanne, combined a refined sensitivity to reality with a dedication to logical ordered composition. Seurat's paintings were based on Impressionist techniques but were architectural, precisely balanced, carefully proportioned, and basically "remote from appearance." Fry noted that the artist was able to unify his compositions through the use of infinitesimal changes of tone. He felt that the painter's theories, although based on observation of nature, were artificial and were designed to create an absolute system which could be imposed on nature through the plastic arts. Fry said that Seurat created

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85 Ibid., p. 73.
86 Ibid., pp. 86-87.
monumental geometric constructions and delicately fit each object into the overall conception. He described the artist's figures as lifeless, "pressed specimens of humanity held forever isolated and fixed in the pellucid amber of... space." Fry placed Seurat within the context of the European tradition, for the artist's works contained a pure, almost abstract harmony similar to that of the fifteenth century Italian artist Piero della Francesca and exuded a sensation of detached tranquility and repose comparable to that of Poussin.

Roger Fry took a broad view of French art history and envisioned successive art movements experimenting with logical organization of forms within space and participating in the "gradual discovery of appearances." He selected, what he considered, the essential characteristics of French consciousness, a penetrating awareness and acceptance of life and an almost mathematical propensity for controlled expression. Utilization of the traditions of vision and design, therefore, became the rule by which he measured each artist and period style. In Fry's view, the Primitives made unsophisticated use of both concepts, the Classicists and Neo-Classicists

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88 Fry, French Art, pp. 147-149.
89 Fry, Seurat, pp. 13-14; Fry, French Art, pp. 147-148.
emphasized formal relations, the Romantics were too bizarre to classify, the Realists and Impressionists carried the exploration of techniques of graphic representation to its climax, and the Post-Impressionists restored true aesthetic values by employing Impressionist vision and "structured design and harmony."\(^9\) Thus, Roger Fry attempted to provide a theoretical foundation for the new art movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The general effect of Fry's efforts on behalf of modern art in the years after the first Post-Impressionist show in 1910 was to impress upon the public the seriousness of art—socially, culturally, emotionally, and intellectually. "What lasted and has in some measure survived... was the forgotten truth that art matters to everyone."\(^9\)

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 12.

\(^9\)Bell, "How England Met Modern Art," p. 27.
CHAPTER IV

ART HISTORY AND BRITISH ART

The nineteenth century was a period of cultural synthesis marked by an almost constant interaction between opposing political, economic, and aesthetic philosophies. As traditional institutions and attitudes crumbled before the onslaught of new revolutionary ideas, the English barricaded themselves behind fortifications of psychic insularity and increasingly elaborate decorum. Roger Eliot Fry occupied the precarious position of artist and critic in a period of extreme tension and diversity, when Victorian and modern England coexisted in an arthritic but symbiotic relationship.¹ Fry's emphasis on the importance of a scientific attitude, a careful study of art history, and an unbiased contemplation of the great works of the past placed him in the vanguard of the movement toward formalism, which characterized twentieth century art criticism until the 1960's.² His attempts to isolate and analyze the factors which influenced public and private tastes and to apply a


disciplined methodology to the evaluation of imaginative creations illuminate the dynamics of British tradition, society, and art.

Roger Fry's theories rested firmly on the foundations of extensive scholarship, refined personal sensitivity, and persuasive expressive powers. In comparison with other leading British critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Fry, as painter, museum director, and "expert on the authentication of works of art," was the most broadly experienced. He was painfully aware of his position as a spokesman for the visual arts in a period characterized by public hostility and indifference to innovation. The fields of literature and politics remained the nucleus of British genius, while the plastic arts digressed to a "most timid and parasitic condition." Industrialization and the accompanying rise of the middle class created a group of powerful people who adhered to the art styles and the traditions of the past and rejected aesthetic non-conformity.

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4 Soloman Fishman, The Interpretation of Art: Essays on the Art Criticism of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Herbert Read (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 2; Fry's role as an expert witness on art topics is examined in Tancred Borenius' article "Roger Fry as Art Historian" (pp. 235-236) and in Samuel Hynes' Edwardian Mind (pp. 316-323).

At the same time, many socially prominent individuals regarded art as a leisurely pastime and contributed, along with the Royal Academy, which resisted all deviations from its principles of artistic merit, to the lowering of the quality of plastic creativity.6 This belief that the visual arts in England were degeneratory was a value judgment made, not by the public, but by the art critics of the period.7 There was a huge market for the type of works disparaged by the critics; many popular artists were highly esteemed and were rewarded financially, if not critically, for their efforts. But until recent times the Victorian and Edwardian artists' "inability to rise in inspiration above the popular standards of their age . . . deprived them of the immortality on which they counted."8

Roger Fry was a dedicated combatant of the pervasive beliefs that art was either "nothing but a trivial amusement for the idle rich" or a symbol of social status and prosperity for the nouveau riche.9 When viewing various works, he


8 Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, pp. 103-104.

stressed the importance of "comparative applied esthetics" based on awareness of cultural traits.10 Thus, for Fry, the examination of the past was essential for the understanding and appreciation of art. Fry felt that carefully trained art historians would possess a detached mentality which would enable them to remain cognizant of each creative object both as a unique entity and as an embodiment of the ethos of an age. He thought that a scientific attitude could free art from the orthodoxies and conventions which impeded the delicate perception of artistic quality.11

Fry considered the British "terribly ignorant" in the field of systematic investigation of period styles and compared his fellow countrymen unfavorably to the Germans, who had included studies in Kunstforschung in university curricula for more than one hundred years.12 Kenneth Clark credited Roger Fry with partial responsibility for introducing the scientific study of art history in Britain, and Fry, who was delighted when London University in 1930 offered its first art history classes, asserted that Burlington Magazine had participated in the awakening of the English to the need for such courses. Art history and criticism were,


11Ibid., p. 55.

12Roger Fry, Art History as an Academic Study (Cambridge: The University Press, 1933), pp. 7-8.
for Fry, a necessary part of a liberal education. In a letter to the editor of Burlington Magazine, the defender of art history advised the faculty of London University to encourage the application of scientific rather than literary standards in reviewing works of art. He considered the discipline of science as crucial to an objective treatment of an expressive work, because art, by nature, was highly subjective. Science could provide methodology for the art critic and historian, but Fry warned against the establishment of rigid theories and the veneration of old masters or historical schools. He insisted that the individual viewer reject tradition and approach all works, ancient and modern, with an alert, sensitive, and unprejudiced attitude. Roger Fry believed that the "tendency to regard all the work of one school and period as sacrosanct" was "the most dangerous of labour-saving devices." 13 It was of the utmost importance to him that students possess open, inquiring minds and form their own opinions based on observation and contemplation of a wide spectrum of works. 14

Fry emphasized that art history was equal to other forms of history so long as a "disinterested search for truth" was

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14 Ibid., p. 318.
involved. Thus, when the art historian confined himself to the description of works of art and the tracing of the chronological evolution of techniques, his writings were purely historical. Once the question of beauty entered the examination of creative pieces, however, Fry contended that the investigator was "in a world of strong convictions based on no demonstrable reasons, of feelings vehement in proportion to their insecurity." The art historian was transformed from a scientist into a theologian by the debate over the superiority or inferiority of individual artists and works. Fry asserted that everyone believed in the existence of "an orthodox standard of values," and ultimately each person contended that he alone upheld the eternal truths. Thus, to Fry, universal aesthetic judgments were an impossibility, and healthy skepticism was the most effective foil for sweeping generalizations and was necessary, because reversals of taste were common: "not even the most established reputation . . . [could] be held exempt from the changes and chances of mortal life." 

According to Fry the elusiveness of artistic concepts and history was beneficial and stimulating. He felt that if "demonstrable truths" existed in art, critics, historians, and connoisseurs would be in "a very deplorable condition."

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15 Fry, Art History, p. 10.
18 Ibid., pp. 17-22.
for the knowledge of the high aesthetic value of a work was absolutely useless; what mattered was "the intensity and significance of its effect upon" the viewer. He argued that an absolute scale of values would cause those whose feelings differed from the standards either to become aesthetic hypocrites by expressing insincere fervor or to give way to despair over their ineptitude and "throw themselves from the terrace of the National Gallery to perish in the traffic of Trafalgar Square." Therefore, Roger Fry was thankful that the artistic merit of creations was open to discussion and disputation.

As an art historian and critic, Roger Fry examined contemporary society in order to isolate and analyze the British attitudes which, he believed, impeded the exercise of aesthetic freedom, and he concluded that Culture, Snobbery, and Philistinism were responsible for the obtuseness of English tastes. According to Fry, Culture had both a positive and a negative role in society by maintaining traditions on the one hand and by discouraging the development of innovative ideas and forms on the other. Supporters of tradition failed, he claimed, to realize that changes were "signs of life"; therefore, they continued to worship "the dead trunk" of the past. Fry singled out Sir Claude Phillips, a writer for the

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19 Ibid., pp. 23-24.  
20 Ibid., p. 24.  
21 Ibid.  
22 Fry, Transformations, p. 56.
Daily Telegraph, as the "High Priest of Culture" and as representative of critics who daydreamed about painting, instead of actually looking at them. Cultured individuals like Sir Claude, Fry argued, ignored intrinsic qualities by arbitrarily classifying pictures which fit into a preconceived artistic hierarchy as "great" works. This hierarchial classification, Fry continued, meant that artists and styles of the past were sanctified, while contemporary painters and movements were attacked or disregarded: an artist had to die to be accepted. Fry asserted that "reverence is, of course, as inimical to the esthetic experience as it is to the appreciation of truth." Ingrained cultural prejudices, he felt, hindered genuine understanding and enjoyment of imaginative pieces and made British "galleries and museums . . . Temples of Culture, not of Art." One example can illustrate clearly Fry's awareness of the inability of his fellow Englishmen to make sound aesthetic judgments. In 1934, a panel of contemporary artists was chosen to determine the authenticity of a portrait of Henry VIII attributed to Hans Holbein. Although the panel

23Ibid.  24Ibid., pp. 56-59.

25Ibid., pp. 56-57, 61, 60; George Moore in Impressions and Opinions (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), p. 344, emphasized that living artists shown in the National Gallery were "pandering to contemporary vanities"; therefore, an artist should be dead at least fifty years before his works were represented in the Gallery.

26Fry, Transformations, p. 60.
concluded that the portrait was an inferior work, they did not deny that it was an original Holbein. The critic for the London Times reported the episode and insisted that since Hans Holbein was great master he could not have created a picture of poor quality. Fry was incensed by the affair and feared that the Times critic would destroy all semblance of critical and historical standards in Britain. According to Fry, only individuals trained in art history were qualified to judge whether or not a given work was authentic. It was not relevant, he continued, to ask if the "Portrait of Henry VIII" was good or bad but only if the style, brush work, pose, color, etc. were characteristic of Holbein. He concluded that both the panel and the Times critic were using the wrong standards and the wrong approach.27

Roger Fry attacked the antiquarian bias of art collectors and connoisseurs and emphasized that there was a marked difference between a response to an imaginative piece based on historical associations and a response based on intrinsic, evocative qualities. Fry felt that the popularity of classical Greek sculpture exemplified the worst aspects of aesthetic dogma and antiquarianism, and he asserted that for almost four hundred years classical works were considered the exemplar of plastic beauty. Many Englishmen bought collections of Greek statuary and were greatly admired for "their

enlightened taste"; however, Fry pointed out that in the late nineteenth century more scientific studies of the works revealed that large numbers of second and third-rate copies made by modern forgers had been sold as originals.28 Thereafter, he continued, "many of these statues which had received the votive offerings of generations of conoscenti" were relegated to positions in the collectors' gardens.29 The value of the sculpture, Fry insisted, was determined by social considerations and reverence for ancient cultures, not by aesthetic factors such as beauty, plasticity, or form.

Snobbery--"the uncritical and enthusiastic acceptance" of social, intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual values--was another aspect of English society which Fry abhored. Like Culture, Snobbery was characterized by an almost religious reverence for certain forms of art and required continual "communion with fellow worshippers."30 According to Fry, the snob willingly embraced the doctrines of the elite and went to all the right places at the right times with the right people.31 The snob, he continued, bowed to popular opinion and was hesitant about expressing genuine, personal ideas.

29 Ibid.
30 Fry, Transformations, pp. 60-61.
Fry felt that the only true significance of any concept rested on "the quality of experiences which . . . [were] summed up in that statement." Theories were meaningless, he asserted, when the individual failed to respond emotionally to artistic creations. Fry contrasted the men of culture, who were usually conservative, to the snobs—according to Fry the majority were women—who were eager "to march in step with the vanguard of any esthetic movement as soon as its victory . . . [was] no longer in doubt." Snobbery and Culture worked together to canonize artists and to eliminate objective criticism of works of art.

In Roger Fry's opinion, British art was dominated not only by Culture and Snobbery, but also by "a vast inert mass" of Philistines: "Esthetic atheists who . . . [owed] no obedience to any doctrine, whose only allegiance . . . [was] to their untutored and wayward satisfaction." Fry contended that the Philistines were the smug, self-centered members of the middle class; they were pampered and powerful and were offended by unique and provocative creations. Fry described Philistinism as "an ignorant disinclination to recognize that the apprehension of great art requires more

32 Fry, Transformations, p. 61; Fry, Reflections, p. 19.
33 Fry, Reflections, p. 19.
34 Fry, Transformations, p. 61.
35 Fry, Reflections, p. 19.
36 Fry, Transformations, p. 63.
effort and attention than the effort to recognize the likeness of a painted figure to a real one.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, he concluded, the cultured person insisted upon emphasizing irrelevant qualities in art, the snob demanded novelty and popular notoriety, and the Philistine hated all forms of creative expression and attempted to "lay down the law out of the abundance of his ignorance and insensibility."\textsuperscript{38}

A thorough examination of Roger Fry's views concerning the historical and social nature of the process of evaluating a work of art necessitates a discussion of an inconsistency in the critic's philosophy.\textsuperscript{39} Fry steadfastly maintained that, on the one hand, a study of past styles and methods was essential for understanding creative pieces, while, on the other hand, such a study was irrelevant to the ultimate assessment of aesthetic merit and appeal. He felt that value judgments were useful only to the extent that they aided others in sharing similar reactions, for "the fullness, richness and significance of our feelings in face of works of art" was paramount.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., pp. 63, 143; Fry, Reflections, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{38}Fry, Transformations, p. 63, 141.

\textsuperscript{39}Jacob Rosenberg in On Quality in Art (p. 20), attacked Fry for his failure to consider the "orginal intention of a work of art and its historical circumstances, its central function and its content." Rosenberg felt that it was impossible to evaluate art other than in terms of its social and historical origins and motivation.

\textsuperscript{40}Fry, Art History, p. 48.
Throughout his career, Fry struggled with the two-fold problem inherent in his distinction between the conscious, intellectual nature of historical knowledge and the essentially instinctive nature of the interaction between art object and viewer. If one were to accept completely Fry's dicotomy, one would also have to accept both the existence of an unbridgeable gap between understanding and appreciation and the contention that appreciation is primarily non-rational. Fry, himself, never fully resolved this dilemma, but in his later years he elevated the art object to a position where it formed a link between the mind and the senses. Thus, he concluded that the fine arts, such as music, poetry, painting, etc., served as organs to communicate "the quality and quiddity" of human experiences. The primary function of art, for Fry, was to serve as "the liaison in a transaction . . . between the artist and spectator." Fry believed that art history filled a valid need for careful analysis of past creators and works, for study of chronological development of technique, and for introduction of cultural influences, but was destined to remain imprecise in its establishment of criteria for absolute judgments. He reiterated that, while it was important to set up relative values and to arrange items according to merit, the standards should always be "open to alteration and correction."

[^42]: Ibid.  
an art historian, Fry was scientific in his method and approach but was, by necessity, unscientific when dealing with the emotional content of artistic pieces. He maintained that objectivity was an unattainable goal, because either art was passion, or it was nothing.44

When dealing with his nation's aesthetic heritage, Roger Fry utilized his scientific and historical concepts by employing a "patiently appreciative but sharply discriminating critical spirit."45 Unlike other English critics, Fry asserted that nationalism had no valid relation to art, and he refused to recant his opinions when accused of desecrating the memory of the giants of the British tradition.46 Fry, in _Reflections on British Art_, declared that the historical masterpieces of English art were not part of the grand manner of European schools and were inferior when compared with French, Italian, Spanish, and Dutch works. He systematically searched the past for an explanation which would account for the inadequacies of British painting, architecture, and sculpture.47

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45 Fry, _Reflections_, p. 20.


47 Fry, _Reflections_, p. 23, 18; For a comparison of British, French, and Dutch painters favorable to the English see George Moore, _Modern Painting_ (p. 38).
Fry noted that English art historically was derivative of continental European styles. He claimed that in the Middle Ages, England's only contribution was in the field of embroidery which emphasized intricate, colorful, flat patterns. While other Europeans were dealing with volume and space in complicated constructions, he found that the British works remained linear, decorative, and non-structural. During the fifteenth century, Flemish painters introduced shading as a means of adding fullness to painted figures, but the English resisted even this slight innovation. Hans Holbein, a German painter who resided in England, was influential in the sixteenth century; his works combined detailed surface configurations with European techniques of light and dark contouring. Fry maintained that English imitators of Holbein's style ignored the modeling of figures characteristic of the German artist and returned to linear description. In the Elizabethan era, he asserted, "the embroidered dress was the real subject" of British pictures.\(^4\)\(^8\)

Fry noted that Charles I introduced plastic design to his realm in the seventeenth century by purchasing works by Peter Paul Rubens, a Flemish painter famous for his massive figures. By the end of the period, the English artists were addressing themselves to the problems of relating three-dimensional shapes to the picture plane. But Fry believed that none of the painters of the period were especially gifted.

\(^{48}\) Fry, Reflections, pp. 28-30.
They understood the techniques, he thought, but lacked the spark of genius necessary for full utilization of the concepts. In surveying the English pictorial heritage, Roger Fry saw the willful, obstinate resistance to innovative and experimental approaches on the one hand and the absence of innate, creative imagination on the other. British artists and society, he concluded, suffered from a cultural deficiency.49

Fry felt that the majority of capable English painters--and the greatest artists in British history--lived during the Georgian period (1760-1820): William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, J. M. W. Turner, and William Blake. In Fry's estimation, they were, with the exception of Constable, all inferior to other Continental Europeans. Social conditions, he asserted, contributed to the debasement of the imaginative powers of Georgian painters. According to Fry, George III was "an industrious, conscientious, obstinate and narrow-minded Philistine" who absentmindedly ruled a nation that was gradually acquiring an empire, engaging in continental wars of considerable magnitude, and dealing with economic expansion and a rising middle class.50 The nouveau riche, he pointed out, were eager to acquire artistic creations in imitation of the upper classes but regarded their collections as evidence of

49 Ibid., pp. 33, 25.

financial status rather than as an inherent aspect of a refined aesthetic consciousness. Fry maintained that "the pretensions of this crowd of newly-arrived people to social positions lowered the standards of taste and manners." Fry turned next to William Hogarth, who established a reputation during the period as a "story-teller in paint." Fry found the artist's completed paintings too detailed and disorganized; only Hogarth's sketches retained a freshness and spontaneity which characterized works of quality. Even though Hogarth employed shading and modeling of forms, Fry felt that his works lacked a "focus of vision."

Fry's most devastating criticism of Hogarth was that the artist was a propagandist who created "puerile," unintelligent, humorless, obvious works to satisfy public demand. He blamed him for establishing the erroneous idea that the value of art depended upon an ability to teach a moral lesson. Fry considered Hogarth's paintings and engravings to be adulterated art.

Sir Joshua Reynolds was another influential eighteenth century artist of whom Fry was critical. Reynolds was both a painter and theorist whose emphasis on the spiritual

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51 Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, p. 104.
52 Fry, Georgian Art, p. 5.
53 Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, p. 104.
54 Fry, Reflections, pp. 35-39.
55 Ibid., pp. 40-42.
56 Ibid.
aspects of art influenced the formation of Fry's critical concepts. Reynolds maintained that the rendering of a picture rather than its subject was the source of emotion and spirit, an idea which Fry later refined to an almost austere emphasis on formal design. Although he praised some of Reynolds' ideas, Fry contended that the artist's paintings were mediocre and empty. He accused Reynolds of typifying the English desire to copy techniques of great masters without understanding the process by which masterpieces were created. Fry believed that, even though the artist was serious, set high standards, and rejected artificial exaggeration in favor of naturalness and quiet dignity, he lied in his art. Fry felt that Reynolds worked in flat patterns but attempted to give an impression of depth by artificial means, such as thickening his paint with wax.57

Fry also could never forgive Sir Joshua for participating in the establishment of the Royal Academy, which the artist believed would raise the standards of artistic production and encourage "ideal monumental art."58 In Roger Fry's opinion, the Royal Academy championed an "official national art" that was both an object of ridicule to the people of other countries and a "gross misrepresentation of . . . [British] national artistic talent."59

57 Fry, Reflections, pp. 49-52.
58 Fry, Georgian Art, p. 8.
59 Fry, Transformations, pp. 50-51.
Fry was more favorably impressed by Thomas Gainsborough, a thoroughly distinctive artist who worked with directness, delicacy, and control atypical of other English painters. Gainsborough's compositions were unified, his figures subtly defined and shadowed, his subjects detached and non-literary, but Fry exclaimed that the artist himself was lazy and was corrupted by the social pressures of his period. Fry believed that Gainsborough had such a flair for and a grasp of landscape that he could have led English art down fertile, unexplored avenues of expression had he not allowed the "national vice of portraiture" to limit his time. According to Fry, the artist never opened himself up to new experiences or exercised his talents on complex artistic problems; therefore, his landscapes eventually became elegant, "generalized summaries" of nature. Fry concluded that Gainsborough was a master of design who betrayed his potential and his art.

In assessing the impact of William Blake, Roger Fry incisively distinguished the powerful emotional essence from the inferior technical quality of the artist's creations. Fry considered Blake a visionary, who turned his inner eye on the "vast and vague cosmic references" of the Old Testament.

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60 Fry, Reflections, p. 70.
61 Ibid., pp. 70-75.  
62 Ibid., pp. 75-78.
63 Fry, Reflections, p. 84.
The artist summoned forth monumental images which embodied the "immortal hopes and infinite terrors" of an embattled humanity. Fry responded to Blake's pure, intense, dream-like visions but condemned the artist's linear style, vapid forms, and incoherent compositions.

In Fry's opinion, the English contributed directly to the European tradition in only one field, that of landscape painting. The outstanding British landscape artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were J. M. W. Turner and John Constable. Fry was careful to distinguish between poetic landscape, which depended upon associated ideas and literary content, and true landscape, which dealt only with the artist's "personal experience before nature." He upbraided Turner for looking at nature rather than interacting with it. Fry believed that real artists were "seers"; therefore, Turner seemed too precise; he was merely making pictures instead of expressing a personal revelation. The works of Turner which gained popularity in the twentieth century, such as "Rain, Steam and Speed," were too romantic for Fry's taste. In his estimation, Turner's impressionistic works were not the forerunners of Manet's and Monet's works.

64 Fry, Vision, p. 215.
65 Ibid., pp. 217-221; Fry, Reflections, p. 86.
66 Fry, Reflections, p. 124.
67 Ibid., pp. 125-127.
momentary glimpses of reality, because Turner had no "idea," no consistent theory upon which to base his later works. 68 Fry criticized Turner for creating uncoordinated paintings made up of "vague splashes and dabs." 69

According to Roger Fry, John Constable was the one British artist who was receptive to new aesthetic experiences. Fry felt that each of Constable's paintings represented the discovery of an instant of harmonious variation of color and light. The artist openly responded to nature and in his paintings reflected the subtle complexity of the moods elicited by his experience. Fry asserted that Constable was a true contemplative artist and, therefore, a man of science. Constable was daring, imaginative, and adventurous, and Fry deplored that succeeding generations did not follow his excellent example. During Constable's lifetime, Fry pointed out, the Royal Academy and the public rejected his work, and only the French profited from exposure to his experimental attempts to capture light on canvas. 70

Politically, England was at its zenith in the nineteenth century. In literature the British were pre-eminent; the

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68 Ibid., p. 127-133.

69 Ibid., p. 133; for a rebuttal of Fry's criticism of Turner see the otherwise favorable E. K. Waterhouse review of Relections on British Painting, by Roger Fry, in Burlington Magazine, July 1934, p. 45.

70 Fry, Reflections, pp. 136-140.
time was ripe for a flourishing of the arts, but Fry pro-
claimed that by 1850 the quality of production of plastic
creations had "sunk to the level of trivial ineptitude." Fry
despised Romanticism, the major art movement of the
era, because of its pictorial opulence and exaggerated
emotion. Edwin Landseer—who painted dramatic dogs,
horses, ducks, and other animals—and William Powell Frith—
who specialized in riotous illustrations of popular middle
class activities—were among the most acclaimed artists of
the period. Even though many painters understood the basic
principles of design, their works, according to Fry, were
theatrical, flashy, sentimental, picturesque, and vulgar. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, for example, was highly skilled, but
his fame, in Fry's opinion, resulted from his ability to
create the "weak illusion of marble itself." Fry empha-
sized that the viewer's response to works by Alma-Tadema
could never be more profound than the simple statement "How
like marble!"

71 Ibid., p. 90.
72 Ibid., pp. 94-102; Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, p. 104.
73 Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, pp. 104-105; Fry, Transformations, p. 41.
74 Fry, Transformations, p. 41; George Moore in Modern Painting (pp. 42-44) and James Bone in "The Tendencies of
Modern Art," Edinburgh Review 217 (April 1913): 420-434,
make comments similar to Fry's opinions regarding the value
of Alma-Tadema's works; For a defense of Alma-Tadema see
Phillip Burne-Jones' letter to the editor concerning "The
Alma-Tadema Exhibition," Times (London), 7 January 1913,
p. 9c.
Thus, for Fry, painting—abetted by the Royal Academy, which produced popular art to meet the needs of the "new-rich Philistine," and by the aesthetes, who overindulged in the enjoyment of art for aesthetics' sake—began its "terrible descent into Victorianism."\(^75\) At mid-century the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, led by Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, tried to re-emphasize spiritual qualities, but in Fry's opinion, they also, like Blake, retreated into the mysteries of their visions. To Fry, Pre-Raphaelite passion was "an artificial hot-house growth" which had no lasting influence on British creative activity.\(^76\) He felt that the members of the Brotherhood ignored the possibilities for new experiences and diminished their imaginative powers through neglect.\(^77\)

Roger Fry's most vehement criticism was aimed at his contemporaries. He chastized his fellow artists for lowering their standards and pandering to public taste. Great artists, he claimed, enthusiastically attacked new problems and investigated various aspects of visual reality, but English painters were complacent, timid, and disinterested in purity.\(^78\) His point of view was shared by other critics, who observed that the 1934 Exhibition of British Art at Burlington

\(^75\)Fry, Reflections, p. 106, 108.

\(^76\)Lindsay and Washington, Portrait, p. 105; Fry, Reflections, p. 108.

\(^77\)Fry, Reflections, p. 108.

\(^78\)Ibid., p. 24.
House revealed the weaknesses of both traditional and con-
temporary creative efforts. Most of the participants had
restricted their activities to portraiture; few dealt with
difficult structural relations, and even fewer contributed
nudes or still lifes. Fry believed that portrait painting
was an inferior form of expression, because the artist had to
subordinate his feelings to the desires of the patron. In
Fry's opinion, the portrait painter's freedom was limited,
and his art became an extension of and a support for, the
prestige of a social class. According to Fry, the objec-
tive of a real artist was to transform his inner vision into
a plastic statement. When painters became concerned with
pleasing a customer, Fry felt that the quality of the creative
effort was diluted. He exclaimed that painters had become
"commercial artists," who were championed and protected by
"their great Trade Union, The Royal Academy."

Institutions such as the Royal Academy and the Victoria
and Albert Museum had been established to train artists and
to encourage the production of works of quality; instead, Fry
contended, they hindered innovation and creativity. Fry was
skeptical of the possibilities of teaching individuals how to
engage in imaginative activities. He commented that "there
can be no doubt in any case that the average child has

79 Waterhouse, review of Reflections, by Fry, p. 45.
80 Fry, Reflections, p. 25.
81 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 49.
82 Fry, Transformations, p. 45.
extraordinary inventiveness in design and the average adult none whatever, and that in between these two states there occurs the process known as art teaching." He felt that one of the most serious defects of the educational system was the insistence on copying historical styles; students learned to imitate appearances but not to understand the essential concepts which were the foundations of various art movements. Thus, he continued, young artists could only borrow ideas from the past; they were not capable of creating a "style" of their own.

Although painting was Fry's major interest, he also wrote scathing commentaries on English architecture and sculpture. He insisted that the epoch of significant architectural production ended in the eighteenth century with the stately, elegant Georgian style. Even though Georgian structures relied heavily on pictorial decorations in the form of painted and inlaid surfaces, he asserted their superiority to the eclectic monstrosities of succeeding eras. Fry was contemptuous of the abundance of fake architectural pieces which proliferated over the English countryside. He stated that the need for a style, any style, was characteristic of the snobbery of British society. Fry felt that the home builders were more interested in impressing their neighbors

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83Ibid., pp. 47, 46.
84Ibid., p. 47.
85Fry, Georgian Art, pp. 5-6.
than in building original and functional structures. Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill was described as an "apt monument to the peculiar mentality of this period with its gimcrack Gothic chambers, its bric-a-brac of all kinds and countries, its elegant flimsiness and want of common sense." In opposition to popular taste, Fry demanded that houses be designed to fit the specific physical needs of the inhabitants. He asserted that a building should be something, not just look like something. To prove his point, Fry designed his own home, Durbins, to accommodate his life and tastes. Fry took great pride in his creation and proclaimed that his home would be a "genuine and honest piece of domestic architecture . . . when the last style . . . already stinks in the nostrils of all cultured people." He noted that his neighbors did not agree.

Roger Fry contended that Philistine hatred of imaginative expression was responsible for the artificiality of domestic art and that academic dogmatism was the official embodiment of public prejudice and insensitivity. Fry felt that the middle class wanted art that was banal and meaningless, and he blamed their hostility to the creative manipulation of

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86 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 273-278.
87 Fry, Georgian Art, p. 8.
88 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 278; D. S. MacColl in "A Note on Roger Fry," Burlington Magazine, November 1934, pp. 231-235, praised the simplicity, solidity, and directness of Durbins and considered the house Fry's best creative work.
89 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 278.
plastic forms for the prevention of the production and display of quality sculpture in England. London, he said, possessed hundreds of pieces of sculpture which were "devoid of all significance" and, therefore, pleasing to the mindless public.  

Anyone who actually looked at British public monuments was either insane or American. Fry exclaimed that "of all the forms of boredom which afflict civilized man, there are probably few more acute or more unvarying than that which results from having, on occasions, to contemplate ordinary works of sculpture." The statue of Charles I in Trafalgar Square was usually considered an admirable work, but Fry could only praise its pedestal as "one of the few exquisitely proportioned structures in London." The single piece of sculpture which he considered worthy of positive commentary was Dalou's Maternity. The outstanding work was so remarkable that the Philistines had been compelled to mount it upon a granite drinking fountain and cover its head with a cast iron canopy.

Roger Fry's criticisms of British art illustrate his perceptive utilization of scientific training and historical knowledge in the analysis not only of various styles and artists, but also of certain distinctive features of English social life. The sixty-eight year span from 1866 to 1934

90 Fry, Transformations, pp. 141-144.
91 Ibid., p. 136.  
92 Ibid., p. 145.
93 Ibid., pp. 149-150.
encompassed both Fry's lifetime and the period which reversed the process of cultural ossification that characterized Victorian and Edwardian England. Beneath the superficially placid stability of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, the forces of disorder were at work. The decline of the British Empire, the women's suffrage movement, the awareness of the extent of destitution among the poor, and the demand for social reform intensified public anxiety concerning the state of the nation, community, and family. It was an "Age of Propriety" distinguished by obtrusive institutions which upheld a rigid, empty morality, and an obsolete class structure.94

English imaginative works, the inadequacies of which Roger Fry so brilliantly exposed, were created in this system and were the natural outgrowths of the conservative effort to hold back the tide of modernity. Reactionary intellectual and artistic activities were aimed at bolstering an uncreative national heritage and could have resulted in cultural stagnation. Fry, in his role as artist and critic, represented the most advanced taste of the period.95 His opinions were significant not only because of the lucidity of his comments, but also because of the subsequent popular acceptance of his basic theories. At a time when his nation was self-isolated and defensive, Fry could and did launch

94Hynes, Edwardian Mind, pp. 3-6.
95Ibid., p. 307.
zealous attacks against the legacy of the past. Whenever he lectured, Queen's Hall was filled to capacity, and those in attendance were tolerant toward even his most unreasonable ideas.96 England was still a country in which it was possible for a critic "to lay impious hands on the idols of the tribe."97


97 Fry, Reflections, p. 17.
CHAPTER V

THE AESTHETIC PURITAN

Roger Eliot Fry, the scion of a prominent Quaker family, was imbued from earliest childhood with the pathos and ethos of Puritanism. 1 English Puritanism was primarily a derivative of Calvinist doctrines but also included Martin Luther's "solitary conception of man's relationship with God." 2 The Society of Friends represented "the ne plus ultra of Puritan thought," and most "Quaker teachings were . . . puritan attitudes pushed to severe conclusions." 3 Despite the fact that as an adult Fry externally rejected and often attacked Puritanism, he, nevertheless, remained under the influence of the basic beliefs and refinements of taste impressed upon him during his formative years. He combined within his own psyche and illustrated in his lectures and writings both the best,


most invigorating, and the worst, most stifling, aspects of Quakerism.\textsuperscript{4} To accept Fry's formalistic theories at face value—as remote, impersonal, empirical principles—and not to recognize the "mystically intuitive, non-rational bases" of his ideas would cause one to miss the opportunity of understanding the origin of his value/thought system.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, a brief survey of fundamental Puritan beliefs should precede examination and facilitate comprehension of the relationship between Fry's religious heritage and his personal philosophy and specific ideas on art.

The underpinning of Puritan theology was the assertion of the innate goodness of God and the innate evil of man. God decided, in a way which seemed arbitrary to the Christians, who would bask in the glories of heaven and who would suffer eternal torment. The concept of predestination implied that life was the unfolding of a preordained plan which could not be altered by human action.\textsuperscript{6} Although the Society of

\textsuperscript{4} Fry's Puritan bias was noted by Woolf in Biography (p. 292); Kenneth Clark in Introduction to Last Lectures, by Roger Fry (Cambridge: The University Press, 1939), p. xvi; D. S. MacColl in "A Note on Roger Fry," Burlington Magazine, November 1934, p. 232; and by Clive Bell in Old Friends (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 89.

\textsuperscript{5} G. Price-Jones, review of Roger Fry and Other Essays, by Howard Hannay, in Burlington Magazine, October 1939, p. 196; J. J. Sweeney in his review of Last Lectures, by Roger Fry and Biography, by Virginia Woolf, in Art Bulletin, March 1941, p. 91, described Fry's theories as illogical, inconsistent, and reactionary.

Friends rejected strict predestination, their concept of "Election" was an offshoot of Calvinism. "The Seed of the Spirit and the Second Birth came by God's power and not from men."\(^7\) Inherent in Quaker philosophy was the isolation of the individual in the face of his destiny. Each had to follow his own path to its end without the possibility of intervention by priests, sacraments, churches, and so forth. No one could alter the pattern or change the future, not even the individual himself. There was no magic key to salvation, no ceremony or ritual to revoke the irrevocable. Thus, each person, alone, bore the burden of his human inadequacy and yet desperately hoped that the experiences of his life were signs of the benevolence of his creator. The individual was responsible for his actions even though he could not be certain of his salvation, and, therefore, was involved in a uniquely intimate relationship with God. Each person "had to find God's power for himself, solely from within."\(^8\)

Despite the fact that John Calvin maintained that no human was capable of determining whether or not a person was one of the elect, most of his followers believed that exhibition of Christian virtue and adherence to a strict code of behavior were outward signs of inward spirituality.\(^9\)

\(^7\)Barbour, The Quakers, pp. 140-144.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 143.

Good works could not save anyone, but were indications of salvation, nonetheless. These concepts posed serious problems both for Puritan churches which established criteria for membership and for individual Calvinists whose mental security depended upon confidence in their own election. Constant self-examination and doubt were necessary qualities of true Christianity. "In order to be sure, one . . . [had to] be unsure."\(^\text{10}\)

According to the Calvinists, people joined churches so that they might share in the goodness of Christ, but church membership was not necessarily a sign of salvation. There were supposedly two churches, the one--the pure and invisible--included all those chosen by the Deity and the other--the impure and visible--admitted all who professed belief, and, therefore, many who were not of the elect. The visible church was corrupt and had to be reformed by the elimination of superfluous ceremonies and doctrines and the expulsion of recalcitrant members and officers. The Calvinists put great emphasis on the necessity for the purification of the church and especially the removal of all traces of Romanism, because they believed that the congregation was and, indeed, had to be a select group "set apart from the wicked" by adherence to the true faith.\(^\text{11}\)

The Puritans carefully balanced mysticism with rationalism. On the one hand they emphasized the importance of the

\(^{10}\) Morgan, Saints, pp. 34-35, 68-71.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., pp. 1-9, 14.
religious experience, the "inner light," and the contemplative life, while on the other they stressed the significance of the intellect as a means of controlling the emotions. "Only a life guided by constant thought could achieve conquest over the state of nature." Intuition and feelings were necessary facets of human existence but had to be mastered and channeled by the mind into productive and acceptable modes of conduct and expression. An "alert, intelligent life," devoid of spontaneity and impulsiveness was the goal of the Puritans. Inner constraint and "methodically rationalized ethical conduct" were used by the elect to keep their actions and aspirations in line with Christian principles. Sensuality and emotionalism were rejected because they encouraged "sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions." Sincere religious fervor was viewed with suspicion, and sex, even in marriage, was confined to the rational fulfillment of the Biblical command to "be fruitful and multiply." The visible saints condemned "anything that was not patently innocent or didactic" in order to avoid


13Ibid., p. 119.


16Ibid., pp. 114, 158.
distracting "the mind from God" and, thereby, corrupting the soul.  

To the Puritans, life was a serious, grave undertaking, and work was a calling, "a strenuous and exacting enterprise pursued with a sense of religious responsibility." Labor was a spiritual as well as an economic endeavor. The individual who developed and utilized his talents to the best of his abilities glorified God, while the person who failed to exercise his capacities by seeking out new challenges and making the most of opportunities sinned against the light. The usefulness of a calling was determined by its contribution to the welfare of society as a whole. Thus, science was a highly respected occupation and pastime, but the arts, even spontaneous religious paintings, were unjustifiable "superfluities," which extolled the finite rather than the infinite. A carefully directed, goal-oriented, active life was the ideal; therefore, idleness was the most deadly sin. Puritan virtues such as honesty, thrift, sobriety, hard work, dutifulness, etc. were the key to physical and spiritual success.

17 Houghton, Victorian Frame, p. 236.  
20 Tawney, Religion and Capitalism, pp. 115, 211, 230.
Good Calvinists rejected the comforts of society in favor of an austere, disciplined regimen. All external indications of luxury were idolatrous; glittering ornamentation and self-indulgent extravagance were contrasted with Puritan simplicity, cleanliness, and solidity. Asceticism discouraged all enjoyment of life for its own sake and emphasized the practical motivations for daily activities. Sports, for example, were acceptable for the rational purposes of increasing coordination and improving health but unacceptable for the sheer joy of physical exercise and competition. Likewise, the wealthy individual who continued to work diligently and to praise God was applauded for his acquisition of material goods, but the monetarily successfully person who indulged in idleness and succumbed to worldly temptations was soundly denounced. It was not what one did but why one did it, not what one owned but how one used it, that was significant.  

Puritan concepts of virtue and vice--honesty/dishonesty, frugality/wastefulness, simplicity/ostentation, hard work/laziness, duty/dereliction of duty, obedience to a higher authority/obedience to worldly authority, purposefulness/impulsiveness, utility/luxury, self-discipline/spontaneity, rationality/intuitiveness, and austerity/sensuality--permeated English society even in the midst of the religious decay of

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the nineteenth century. The attributes of civilizations, humanity, and works of art isolated, examined, and illumined by Roger Fry's analyses mirrored the fluctuations and constancies of the cultural and religious milieu of his era. With "the air of a scholar-prophet" whose ideas often seemed, at least to him, to embody "the will of God," Fry employed his mental and emotional powers to the fullest extent possible: first to establish the exalted position of what he considered pure art and artists in the hierarchy of the ethereal sphere, and second to probe compassionately the heights and depths of those movements and individuals who did not meet his standards and, therefore, were relegated to the corporeal realm. In most instances Fry's terminology and his attitude were Puritanical.

Roger Fry was deeply concerned over the popular attitude that painting was an inexpressive medium incapable of communicating elevated emotions. He insisted that "understanding of the artistic products of mankind" was a very serious affair and emphasized spirituality and purity as inherent aspects of truly aesthetic creations. According


23 MacColl, "A Note," p. 231; Bell, Old Friends, p. 68.


to Fry, art was a major source of and support for the life of the soul. He believed that existence was more than simple physical gratification; in fact, he stressed that "the man who . . . [worked] at some uncreative and uncongenial toil merely to earn enough food to enable him to continue to work . . . [had] not, properly speaking, a human life at all."26

In his Preface to the catalogue of the 1912 Post Impressionist Exhibition, Roger Fry dealt with the spiritual nature of modern art as opposed to the non-spiritual character of the illustrative, illusionary works demanded by the public. Fry felt that true artists created rather than imitated form. They produced their own reality and found "an equivalent for life," instead of copying it.27 He explained that the Post-Impressionists invented "images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness" as actual objects.28 Illusion was not the goal of great artists, actuality was. According to Fry, true art eliminated "practical responses to sensations of ordinary life" and freed the pure, disembodied spirit of both the artist and the viewer.29


28Ibid., p. 239. 29Ibid., pp. 239, 242.
Aesthetic pieces which exhibited classical concepts by recording "a positive and disinterestedly passionate state of mind" provided a new experience that was unavailable elsewhere. Great art did not fulfill the "personal egoistic wishes" of the spectator but lifted the individual "to a complete detachment in which . . . [he lost] sight of . . . personal" existence.

Roger Fry asserted that, although there were no absolutes in art, one could distinguish between "pure and impure works." A perfect creation did not exist, but some pieces were more perfect than others. Pure art did not have to resort to the use of objects, people, or events to arouse an emotional response; instead, the relations between inherent visual elements elicited the appropriate reaction from the observer. If a work illustrated a story or depended on psychological revelation of character, it was not good art. The validity of the creative effort was established within the structure of the work itself. Fry's criteria for judging purity were based on the Puritan concept of the necessity for intellectual control and assumed that the artist selected observable


31 Roger Fry, Characteristics of French Art (New York: Brentano's, 1933), p. 54.

32 Fry, Transformations, p. 3; Kenneth Clark in his Introduction to Last Lectures (pp. xv, xvi-xx), disagreed with Fry's use of the term purity and the implication that art could be totally free of associative qualities. Clark felt that purity, emotion, and truth were mystical concepts.

33 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 5-9.
phenomena and transformed the mental visions into a unified, self-contained entity which could be appreciated without reference to mundane reality.\textsuperscript{34}

Art also had a unique purpose which was unrelated to politics, economics, or morality.\textsuperscript{35} It expressed the imaginary essence of the psyche and could not be defined or evaluated on the basis of external social standards. Fry disputed both the Calvinist concept of the imagination as sensual, pleasurable, and, thereby, reprehensible and the moralist idea of creativity as an extension of ethical precepts.\textsuperscript{36} To Fry, the world of the imagination was the fullest expression of human nature, and art, the embodiment of the interaction between mind and spirit, was a form of communication, "a language of emotion."\textsuperscript{37} The work of art symbolized a sensation "felt by the artist and conveyed to the spectator."\textsuperscript{38} Thus art was not a "moral gymnasium," and only inferior works adhered to ethical standards which were merely "the mechanism of civil life."\textsuperscript{39} Fry felt that honesty was

\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Fry, Transformations}, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Fry, Reflections}, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Fry, Vision and Design}, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 20-24.

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 292-293; the source of these concepts was Alexei Tolstoy's "What is Art?" which greatly influenced the formation of some of Fry's formal theories.

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 247, 29; Roger Fry quoted in \textit{Woolf, Biography}, p. 230.
was the single moralistic quality that affected aesthetic creations, and it applied only to objective as opposed to mystical artists.\textsuperscript{40}

A comparison of Fry's criticisms of the works of two nineteenth century French cartoonists and illustrators, Honoré Daumier and Constantin Guys, exemplifies his prejudice against the subordination of aesthetics to worldly values and his puritanical distrust of exaggerated emotional content.\textsuperscript{41} Daumier's righteous indignation in the face of injustice imbued his creations with an obvious mood of cynical condemnation.\textsuperscript{42} Fry attacked the artist as a propagandist who subjugated the formal qualities of art to an ethical message. According to Fry, Daumier just missed being a great creator by trying too hard to teach a lesson and, thus, producing pieces which were neither satirically humorous nor poignantly tragic. Guys, on the other hand, was praised as an "utterly detached" observer whose social commentaries were "more terrible" than those of Daumier, because

\textsuperscript{40}Fry, \textit{French Art}, pp. 63-64.

\textsuperscript{41}Fry's distaste for moralizing also influenced his attitude toward the works of William Hogarth, see Chapter IV, pp. 98-99.

the former artist simply drew what he saw and did not preach to his viewers.  

Roger Fry also examined the relationship between patrons of art and the quality of aesthetic productions and asserted that both the aristocrats and the plutocrats contributed to the impurity of creative endeavors. He noted that traditionally the aristocracy maintained that the wealthy few supported the spiritual life and that valuable works existed only in nations which permitted the concentration of capital in the hands of an elite minority. Fry did not agree with the concept of an economic, social aristocracy as the last bastion of true creativity, because he felt there was a close correlation between the idea that "only useless work" was valuable and the enthronement of the wealthy as custodians of taste. The aristocrats wanted art for self-glorification; they tried to purchase "living beauty" which, according to Fry, "cannot be bought; it must be won."

In Fry's opinion, the rise of the plutocrat in the nineteenth century resulted in the proliferation of pseudo-artists catering to the demand for instant, synthetic art; "they and their patrons rollicked good-humouredly through the Victorian

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43 Fry, French Art, pp. 114-117; Daumier is usually considered a great artist and Guys a mere predecessor of the modern news photographer, but Fry's Calvinistic emphasis on motivation and purpose tilted his evaluation of the two artists in favor of Guys.

44 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 56-57.

45 Ibid.
era."\textsuperscript{46} When interest turned to ancient art, Fry claimed that the \textit{nouveau riche} recognized the vacuousness of most Victorian creations and decided that "the only beauty ... [they] could buy was the dead beauty of the past."\textsuperscript{47} Thus, Fry continued, \textit{patine}--"the adventitious material beauty which age alone" provided--became more important than the essence of imaginative expression enshrined in the work.\textsuperscript{48} Fry felt that \textit{patine} was an "adjective and ancillary" charm, which could not turn a bad piece into a good one.\textsuperscript{49} He asserted that the plutocrats' artistic tastes emphasized the superficial quality of age, which they lacked as a social class. He concluded that true art was nurtured by neither the aristocrats nor the plutocrats, because both rejected spiritual values and purchased art for base, egoistic reasons.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite Roger Fry's rejection of the claims of heredity and wealth as protectors of artistic purity, his own attitudes were clearly elitist and emphasized a form of aesthetic predestination. "A fine and discriminating taste ... [was] a natural gift," which needed to be exercised continuously.\textsuperscript{51} Some absolute authority separated the tasteful from the tasteless i.e. the elect from the non-elect. His incessant assaults against popular culture and the herd mentality and

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., pp. 57-58. \quad \textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., p. 59. \quad \textsuperscript{49}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid, pp. 59-61.
his open contempt for authoritarian stultification and aristocratic dilettantism were inspired by his inbred Quaker asceticism and mysticism. Virginia Woolf in her biography of Roger Fry described his attitude in the following passage:

The studio at Dalmeny Avenue . . . was both an ivory tower where he contemplated reality, and an arsenal where he forged the only weapons that are effective in the fight against the enemy. More than ever it was necessary to oppose the emotionalism and chaos of the herd by reason and order. If the political man, as he told Lowes Dickinson, is a monster, then the artist must be more than ever independent, free, individual.52

Fry saw himself and those who agreed with him collectively as an open, honest, sensitive minority—embattled followers of the true faith defending aesthetic righteousness against the encroachments of the pagan hordes.

Fry pictured the role of the artist in modern society as that of a martyr, dissenter, prophet, and sincere individual. He often spoke of the creative person as "protestant" who waged war against materialism, cultural orthodoxy, and the "capricious interferences of Snobbism."53 He felt that artists followed a personal religion based on private visions and values and were doomed to be outcasts within the societies which spawned them. He asserted that "in modern life great works of art have generally been, . . . almost must be, produced in defiance of the tastes and predilections of society at large."54 In Fry's opinion, truly imaginative

52Woolf, Biography, pp. 237-238.
53Fry, Transformations, p. 64.
54Ibid., p. 65.
persons were seldom financially secure unless fortunate enough to be born wealthy.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, real artists, he contended, were condemned to lives of "physical privation . . . poverty and . . . moral martyrdom."\textsuperscript{56} Nineteenth century artists were described by Fry as "a band of heroic Ishmaelites" trying to realize the ideal of aesthetic freedom.\textsuperscript{57} The French, he felt, were especially inspiring, because they supported one another, bravely faced that "strange monster," the public, and maintained their dedication to the pursuit of the very qualities which caused popular condemnation of their creative efforts.\textsuperscript{58}

Fry insisted that real artists remained true to their convictions in the face of all adversity and dutifully protested against one of the worst features of contemporary existence, the "inanely fatuous and grotesque commercial art."\textsuperscript{59} He expressed amazement and disgust at the tremendous quantity of "art" that was "produced and consumed" by the average citizen of his era.\textsuperscript{60} He illustrated the

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{56}\textit{Fry, French Art}, p. 103.

\textsuperscript{57}\textit{Fry, Vision and Design},

\textsuperscript{58}\textit{Fry, French Art}, pp. 101-103.

\textsuperscript{59}\textit{Fry, Vision and Design}, p. 66.

\textsuperscript{60}\textit{Ibid.}; Fry's use of the word "art" in this instance indicated that he considered industrial creations artificial, soulless substitutes for, rather than genuine works of, art.
non-aesthetic nature of commercially produced designs in his
description of a railway refreshment room:

The window towards which I look is filled in its
lower part by stained glass; within a highly elaborate
border, designed by some one who knew the conventions
of thirteenth-century glass, is a pattern of yellow
and purple vine leaves with bunches of grapes, and
flitting about among these many small birds. In front
is a lace curtain with patterns taken from at least
four centuries and as many countries. On the walls,
up to a height of four feet is a covering of lin-
crusta walton stamped with a complicated pattern in
two colours, with sham silver medallions. Above that
a moulding but an inch wide, and yet creeping through-
out its whole with a degenerate descendant of a
Graeco-Roman carved guilloche pattern . . . Above this
is a wall-paper in which an effect of eighteenth-
century satin brocade is imitated . . . In the center
of each table is a large pot in which every beautiful
quality . . . has been carefully obliterated . . .
Within each pot is a plant . . . apparently made of
india-rubber.61

Fry asserted that public places, such as railway stations,
were reflections of the soul of the ordinary person and
concluded that "display . . . [was] the end and explanation
of it all."62

Roger Fry particularly abhorred detailed ornamentation,
which he described as an "eczematous eruption of the surface
of modern manufactures."63 Industrial demands, he claimed,
atrophied the abilities of the designers, who produced "dead
patterns" devoid of spiritual qualities.64 Fry exclaimed
that most works were decorated by and for dull people, who

61 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 67-68.
62 Ibid., p. 69. 63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 70.
regarded art as "symbolic currency"—a part of the "instinctive life" chosen for its inability to arrest the attention or engage the imagination of passersby.\textsuperscript{65} In Fry's opinion, expressive art was a part of a "reflective and fully conscious" existence and, therefore, an abrogation of an unreflective, unconscious approach to life.\textsuperscript{66} Exemplifying the Puritan tradition, he stressed the role of the intellect in shaping and purifying the aesthetic experience and lamented that art like truth had to be deformed for popular consumption.\textsuperscript{67} Fry attacked the members of "the great public," not because they desired and acquired "art," but because they did so for the wrong reasons.\textsuperscript{68} He chastized the masses for prostrating themselves before worldly idols and ignoring the mystical needs of the soul.

Fry contrasted the role of the artist as a pure individual with the irrational conformity of the herd. He insisted that despite the fact that industrialism numbed aesthetic sensibilities and led to the rejection of genuinely spiritual works, the creative person had become a figure of popular imagination. He found evidence for this in the reverence for dead artists, remembered long after soldiers and government officials were forgotten, and in the middle class's secret admiration for and desire to imitate deviant life styles. In Fry's opinion, the artist appeared irresponsible,

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid., p. 73. \textsuperscript{66}Ibid. \textsuperscript{67}Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{68}Fry, \textit{French Art}, pp. 101-102.
free, and individualistic and lived in a manner possible only for those who spurned social approval and success. "In a world where the individual . . . [was] squeezed and moulded and polished by the pressure of his fellow men," the artist remained uniquely himself and refused to conform to an acceptable image. Fry felt that the creative person established his own values, dedicated himself to a higher ideal, and maintained his capacity for independent thought. These characteristics were quite appealing to one raised with the Quaker concepts of obedience to eternal authority, personal responsibility, and asceticism.

The two painters who best exemplified Fry's description of the true artist were Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. Roger Fry praised Cézanne not only because of the significance of the artist's imaginative pieces, but also because of his personality and life style. In Fry's opinion, the painter was a genuine "original," who was motivated by an inner vision and compulsion to create. "For him the synthesis was an asymptote towards which he was forever approaching without ever quite realizing it; it was a reality, incapable of complete realization." Cézanne, he said, could never

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69Fry, Vision and Design, p. 256.
70Ibid.
71Ibid., pp. 261, 257.
completely externalize his "sensation" on canvas; thus, his struggle for self-expression symbolized the unfulfilled striving of inadequate humanity toward the unattainable goal of perfection. The artist, Fry continued, spent years working, searching, and developing his expressive powers; like a true ascetic, Cézanne "sunk into total failure and neglect" as a public figure, while he became more and more a pure artist. Fry noted that although the painter was virtually unknown during his lifetime, he was "a heroic figure" to posterity.

To Fry, Cézanne represented the tension between corporeal and incorporeal values, between the physical and spiritual selves. On the one hand the artist was never satisfied with his work and was overly aware of his shortcomings; on the other he was sincerely convinced of his abilities and was totally dedicated to his art—all else was insignificant by comparison. Like a good Quaker, Cézanne was both sure and unsure of his aesthetic salvation. The artist desperately desired public acceptance, awards, and honors and was deeply hurt and surprised by the reaction to his works. His Paris friends called him "l'écorché," which meant "the man without any skin to protect his sensitiveness from the strokes of

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73 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 259.
74 Fry, Cézanne, p. 6.
75 Ibid.
fate and the malice of his fellows." To Fry, Cézanne was a martyr who submitted to the ridicule and hostility of his contemporaries, because he could not and would not betray his vision of conforming to popular concepts of truth and reality. According to Fry, Cézanne flailed himself incessantly with his own imaginative and tactile shortcomings and, thereby, refined and defined the true expressive capacity of his talents; he did not turn aside from the path of artistic righteousness despite its hazards, and he persevered.

Roger Fry emphasized that Cézanne was a participant in the "thrilling epic of individual prowess against the herd which ... [marked] the history of French art in the nineteenth century."  

Vincent van Gogh also embodied Fry's theories regarding the artist-martyr. Roger Fry described van Gogh as "a saint," who was "the victim of the terrible intensity of his convictions." According to Fry, the painter searched for absolute values and "taught himself to find an expression in paint for the desperate violence of his spiritual hunger." Like Cézanne, van Gogh "had the heroic fire in him" and was

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76 Fry, Vision and Design, pp. 258-260; Fry, Cézanne, p. 7.
77 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 257.
78 Fry, Cézanne, p. 88.
79 Fry, Transformations, p. 178.
80 Ibid.
driven to create by an "irresistible compulsion." Fry felt, however, that van Gogh was inferior to Cézanne, because the Dutchman was not a contemplative artist—he did not deliberate, he acted—and because he was "in this sense of pure subjectivity of his experience . . . mad from the beginning." In Fry's opinion, van Gogh's main "impulse was a passion of universal love," a love so intense that it irritated and repelled the very people the artist sought to embrace.

Roger Fry declared that van Gogh was not basically an artist but had such a strong personality that his creations were "pure self-expressions," rather than realizations of specialized reactions to external stimuli. Thus, according to Fry, the painter's purity prevented him from making the mistake of attempting to express his religious fervor through traditional subject matter and a rigid methodology. "His creative energy made his judgment infallible," and he painted "with a feverish haste . . . [to capture on canvas] the image which . . . obsessed him." Fry concluded that van Gogh was "an inspired illustrator" with an arresting "power of communication," who recognized the dramatic importance of all objects. Although the painter represented pure spirituality, he was too unstable, anti-intellectual, and emotional to

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81 Ibid., p. 179.  
82 Ibid.  
83 Ibid.  
84 Ibid., p. 180.  
85 Ibid., p. 181.  
86 Ibid., p. 185.
symbolize completely—for Fry—the self-contained creative being. Van Gogh was an exception to Fry's formalistic theories.87

Just as Roger Fry applauded the crusading artists who remained true to their inner visions, he attacked those who succumbed to the temptations of mortal fame and, thereby, betrayed the promise inherent in their talents. He selected the sixteenth century Italian artist Michelangelo de Merisi, known as Caravaggio, as the harbinger of the commercially successful, popular painter.88 Caravaggio was the first to defy eminent professional opinions and to disregard classical standards in favor of techniques and subjects which appealed directly to the ignorant masses.89 Fry pointed out that the artist capitalized on methods for creating melodrama, sentimentality, and illusion developed by previous generations of innovators and sought personal glory and monetary rewards from "the gross public in recognition for the gratification of its untrained instincts."90 Fry admitted that Caravaggio

87Ibid., Pp. 182-186; A. C. Sewter in "Roger Fry and El Greco," Apollo, August 1950, p. 33, stated that the passion and spiritual power of van Gogh "disconcerted" Fry, who could not fit the painter into his "narrow aesthetic system."


89Gardner, Art through the Ages, pp. 594-595; Fry, Transformations, pp. 105-106.

90Fry, Transformations, p. 106.
was a man of genuine talent with a gift for observation and that he was the only sixteenth century Italian to discover "a new angle of vision, a new power of expression and the possibility of a new system of design." But according to Fry, the artist had no principles or standards and worshipped the false gods of popular acclaim and worldly eminence. Fry declared that Caravaggio used his abilities to achieve non-aesthetic goals and was, therefore, not a pure artist.

In Fry's opinion, John Singer Sargent was Caravaggio's modern counterpart. He asserted that Sargent's reputation rested largely on his ability to produce numerous paintings without the necessity of employing assistants. Fry exclaimed that the painter's productive capacities were "wonderful indeed, but most wonderful that this wonderful performance should ever have been confused with that of an artist." According to Roger Fry, Sargent took a totally non-artistic approach to painting and aimed only for "the most striking impression." The painter was criticized for his insolence, indifference, and lack of "esthetic scruples." It was easy for the painter to create a tremendous volume of work, Fry claimed, because he had a well trained hand and eye, could grasp necessary elements to recreate appearance, and was not hindered by the compulsion to deal with difficult plastic

91 Ibid., pp. 118-119.  
92 Ibid.  
93 Ibid., p. 125.  
94 Ibid., p. 127.  
95 Ibid.
problems. Fry rebuked Sargent, because the artist never stretched his abilities or knowledge or revealed a sincere, personal response to life in his paintings. Sargent's works were characterized as transparent, undistinguished, obvious, "desperately commonplace originalities of aristocratic vulgarity." The critic continued that since a real artist could never have painted so many pictures which were merely adequate, Sargent was a "practitioner in paint" whose contribution to posterity was the recording of the "precise social aspect" of various prominent individuals. His creations would provide valuable, though superficial, historical information for future researchers. Fry concluded that although the painter was a "nice" man, he was "striking and undistinguished as an illustrator and non-existent as an artist."

A Puritanical aversion for sensuality and eroticism inherent in Fry's aesthetics, were evident in his discussions of the works of Indian artists and of Aubrey Beardsley. Most of the imaginative creations from India were "intensely and acutely distasteful" to Fry. He disliked Indian art, because

It is excessive and redundant, it shows an extravagant and exuberant fancy which seems uncontrolled by any principle of co-ordination and, above all perhaps,
the quality of its rhythms displeases me by its nerveless and unctuous sinuosity.\textsuperscript{100}

The theme of most Hindu works, including religious pieces, was eroticism, a circumstance which surprised and annoyed Fry. Roger Fry explained that he objected to eroticism, because it interfered "with aesthetic considerations by interposing a strong irrelevant interest which tends to detract both the artist and the spectator from the essential purpose of a work of art."\textsuperscript{101} Sensuality, to Fry, was an extraneous though powerful influence which interfered with the interaction between the artist, the art object, and the viewer. Erotic art was designed to excite and arouse the observer, rather than to encourage the detached contemplation of formal qualities; the emphasis was physical and worldly not spiritual and ethereal.

Fry insisted that he had no ethical biases against pornography but simply felt that it was non-aesthetic. He was not hostile to the portrayal of nude men and women when the artists, in his judgment, dealt primarily with basic artistic elements such as forms, planes, volume, and so forth and did not attempt to magnify sexual titillation.\textsuperscript{102} Although he never precisely defined pornography, his position on the subject was based on his preference for works which, in his view, emphasized formal qualities and his aversion for pieces

\textsuperscript{100}Ibid. \textsuperscript{101}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{102}Roger Fry in French Art (pp. 106-107), praised Courbet's "Nude" as a unified composition with fullness and density of form.
which he thought emphasized subject matter. Fry reiterated that overt eroticism always dominated plastic values and was irrelevant and extrinsic to the art experience. He declared that "only bad art . . . could be truly pornographic."\(^{103}\)

Roger Fry did admit that the Indian artists were talented in the field of plastic representation and possessed both a "vivid sense of natural form" and the ability to see "logical necessity" in seemingly unrelated figures and concepts.\(^{104}\) He maintained, however, that the inhabitants of India produced "one of the most completely anti-rationalist civilizations that . . . ever existed," a comment which implied severe condemnation of the entire culture.\(^{105}\) Most Westerners, he claimed, were unable to understand and appreciate Indian creations because of the non-intellectual combination of "gross sensuality . . . and crude erotic representations" with symbols of exalted spiritual entities.\(^{106}\) He compared Indian illustrative capabilities "to the photographic realism of much bad modern art" and lamented that "the extremely

\(^{103}\) Roger Fry quoted in Woolf, Biography, p. 230.

\(^{104}\) Fry, Last Lectures, p. 151.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.; Fry's attitude toward Indian erotic art was clearly the result of his Western religious and cultural biases. There was nothing inherently illogical in the Hindu conception of spiritual beings with human desires; Greek and Roman gods were credited with human appetites, but were not so graphically portrayed in the act of satisfying themselves.
free plastic imagination" of the artists was used to produce invertebrate and "freakish absurdities." 107

The black-and-white drawings of the nineteenth century British artist Aubrey Beardsley were also denigrated by Fry. Beardsley, a decorative artist associated with the Art Nouveau movement, was obsessed with the edification of decadent themes, and Fry emphasized that even the childhood sketches of the artist were expressions "of moral depravity." 108 Although Beardsley controlled and organized his compositions and rendered his figures with a precise line, his style was degenerate, his motives base. Fry declared that Beardsley's ethical perversity prevented him from being an accomplished designer and alleged that the artist's choice of subject matter was not an affectation but was a genuine product of dedication to corruption. According to Fry, no creative individual whose ideas were morbid and profane would produce great art, for "nobility and geniality of design . . . [were created] only by those who . . . cherish these qualities in their imagination." 109 To Fry, Beardsley was the "Fra

107 Ibid., pp. 152-154, 159-160.
109 Fry, Vision and Design, p. 236.
Angelico of Satanism" who personified two aesthetic evils—obsessive surface decoration and vapid, degenerate illustration.110

Roger Fry's criticisms of the art of India and Aubrey Beardsley were tinted by his personal, religiously oriented distaste for the artists' choice and rendering of subject matter. His attitude seems inconsistent with his avowed adherence to the formal concepts of art as the lucid expression of plasticity, volume, unified composition, coordinated spacial relations, and so forth, and his inference that content was irrelevant and distracting. One must bear in mind that both Fry's most austere theories and his most impassioned praise or condemnation were nurtured in the fertile philosophical soil of Quaker theology. His espousal of the aesthetic virtues of simplicity, honesty, purity, and spirituality, his portrayal of the true artist as a saviour of civilization, and his refusal to recognize beauty in works "that seemed to be sinning against the light" were subtle variations of the same theme, not contrasting aberrations.111

Fry's opinions were flexible, subject to constant re-evaluation and alteration; his critical process involved an enthusiastic response to a creative work, followed by careful analysis of both the art object and the sensations it evoked.

110Ibid.

111Bell, Old Friends, p. 69.
and completed by broad theorizing on the ultimate essence of the aesthetic experience. He maintained a fragile, tenuous balance between intellect and intuition, between reason and emotion. Roger Fry was a man of science, but he was also a priest, and art was his calling.

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112 Ibid., pp. 69-70, 74.

113 Woolf, Biography, p. 292.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Roger Eliot Fry was "the foremost [English] exponent of . . . [the formalist] position in aesthetics and criticism."¹ In analyzing composition and technical performance, he was more competent and "more articulate than any of the earlier [British] critics."² Fry's own emotional response to each separate work was the basis for his flexible system and the starting point, rather than the finish as it was for the aesthetes, of an objective analysis of the causes, nature, and results of that very subjective event, the aesthetic experience. Although, in his early writings, he stressed the importance of literary associations and subject matter in art, Fry, as a mature critic, saw each "work of art as a finite object, possessing a life of its own, which could be apprehended and discussed in exclusively visual terms."³

He was at his best describing the works of artists whom he admired--Cézanne, Manet, Chardin, Claude, Courbet, Constable,


³Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 128, 106.
El Greco, Seurat, African sculptors, and so forth—for when he was discussing these individuals and their creations, Fry genuinely responded to formal qualities and maintained a state of detached contemplation wherein he employed his scientific methodology. But, when examining works of art by artists whom he considered inferior, Fry's criticisms were often irrational and unreasonable. He looked for and found shortcomings in the imaginative works themselves, or in the character of the artists, or in the cultures which produced both art and artist, instead of in his own personal prejudices.

For all his scientific method, he was really on the side of those who protest that they know what they like when they see it. His criticism of art is nothing but an extensive rationalization and justification of this unscientific attitude.

Fry's religious and cultural heritage distorted his perceptions of value and imbued his negative judgments with a lingering aura of sin. One cannot wholly accept Fry's ideas without feeling guilty for enjoying the styles of art which he condemned. He did not like psychological art, Northern European art in general and Expressionism in particular, Medieval art,

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6Clark, Introduction to Last Lectures, by Fry, pp. xx, xxii.
Romanticism, and Neo-Classicism, and could not appreciate or accept the creations of Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Salvadore Dali, and other Cubists, Surrealists, and Dadaists. Thus, he was first a sincere art enthusiast and an apostle of aesthetic purity and second a scientist and theoretician, who utilized the imperfect but valuable tools of spontaneous emotion and intellectual vigor in the struggle to understand the mysteries of human creativity.

Roger Fry determinedly grappled with a problem common to philosophy and exegesis: that of inventing one hypothesis which could embrace the totality of art. Formalism, however, was not a truly universal theory, because, although it did encompass Italian and French art, it did not cover, among others, German, Futurist, or Surrealist works. Fry was aware of the inadequacies of his theoretical system; he noted that "such analysis halts before the ultimate concrete reality of the work of art, and perhaps in proportion to the greatness of the work it must leave untouched a greater part of its objective." In 1933, he admitted that he was still a

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7 Rosenberg, On Quality, p. 119; Fishman, Interpretation, p. 132; Read, Coat, p. 287.


long way from organizing a "body of aesthetic." Nevertheless, Fry's intensity and communicative powers impressed upon the public the significance of art; his clarity and persuasive passion aided comprehension of individual works; and his scientific approach encouraged the application of formal principles to the critical analysis of artistic creations.

Many of his contemporaries considered Roger Fry radical, but, in comparison to his successors, he seems almost reactionary. Fry was ahead of his time in some ways; yet he was "always lured by inquisitiveness, by that glorious refusal to ever make up his mind. . . into rich provinces of the past where pure form was of secondary, or even minor, importance." Because he was not receptive to new movements after Post-Impressionism and only appreciated the more architectural Post-Impressionist paintings, Fry appears overly cautious and conservative. Formalism, as he developed it, was too limited to serve as a suitable explanation for much of the great art of the past as well as the present. He never imagined how far the changes which he helped initiate in English aesthetic sensibility would go or that "experimentation far in excess of his own tastes" would be accepted in the

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10 Roger Fry quoted in "Obituary: Mr. Roger Fry," Times (London), 12 September 1934, p. 14d.


future.\(^\text{13}\)

Roger Fry's concepts were not so much expanded as restricted by his followers; eventually the intellectual bias of his theories was exaggerated, and aesthetic emotion, which was the heart of his artistic experience, was discarded. Modern art is characterized by "abundance and heterogeneity," and much of it is so remote, so austere, so clever, and so witty that the pleasure it engenders in the spectator is purely mental rather than sensual.\(^\text{14}\) Art criticism in the twentieth century has gone beyond significant form, but it has been inescapably influenced by Fry's fecund exegesis. His theories are somewhat narrow in scope, but offer penetrating insight into the art of the grand tradition and the Post-Impressionists, and the evolution of his ideas exposes the reader to critical aspects of the aesthetic, cultural, and social milieu of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain.

Roger Fry was representative of the psyche of his nation, hesitantly but irrevocably facing the advent of modernity with an air of mingled dread and anticipation. He looked longingly toward the past and grasped the rock of formal plastic values to steady him in his often unwieldy position as he inched his way into the twentieth century. Fry was

\(^{13}\text{Fishman, Interpretation, pp. 141-147; Clark, Introduction to Last Lectures, by Fry, p. xiii.}\)

\(^{14}\text{Fishman, Interpretation, p. 148.}\)
the radical champion of modern art, because he saw Post-Impressionism as a continuation of the evolution of artistic expression, as a reassurance of the progressive growth and maturation of mankind, as a new variation of an old theme. Because he was a traditionalist, he was in the avant garde, but the tradition which he supported was of his own choosing. Roger Fry was a paradox in a paradoxical era: a Puritan who rejected his religion but maintained its strictest values; a scientist who pursued the most elusive of philosophical butterflies and came close, on occasion, to catching it; an historian who subordinated history to aesthetics; and the most influential modern British critic who imagined himself as a great painter. He has been called an aesthete, a madman, an impressionist, and a reactionary, but he insisted that he was isolated "on the deserted island of orthodox classicism."  

He was a scientist, an intellectual, a scholar, a teacher, a lecturer, an author, a painter, a critic, an historian, and, despite his worship of France, very thoroughly an Englishman. Many of the conflicts, inconsistencies, anxieties, biases, and pleasures of Fry's fellow countrymen are reflected in his soul-searching analyses of art and society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries successive waves of new and

seemingly radical ideas crashed headlong onto the shores and wore away the foundations of cherished British traditions, thus producing a mood of frustration and spiritual discontent. The shock of scientific theories concerning the mechanistic, impersonal universe, the alienation and dehumanization of city life and industrial growth, and the "psychological burden" of Calvinist theology caused the English to idealize the past and to cling more tightly than ever to the fragments of their apparently disintegrating social and philosophical system. They demanded conformity and they feared abrupt change.

To Roger Fry, England was a country of Culture, Snobbery, and Philistinism, of religious inflexibility, and rigidly conventional social habits and beliefs, but it was also a nation of tremendous energy, competence, strength, and tolerance. As Fry crusaded against "academic prejudice and bourgeois apathy," he found a sympathetic, if not completely enthusiastic, audience. The British were hesitant and apprehensive, but they were also receptive. No one could have led an unwilling public into the mainstream of European

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18 Ibid.
19 Clark, Introduction to Last Lectures, by Fry, p. xiii.
life. Fry acted as a prophet and protagonist for a nation vacillating on the edge of a new consciousness. His ultimate success was symbolic of England's emergence from the myopia of its traditions. Fry fulfilled an essential function within the context of his era by providing a theoretical focal point from which his contemporaries could view the aesthetic past and present and glimpse the future. "In so far as taste can be changed by one man, it was changed by Roger Fry."\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., p. ix.
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