

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIGHT AND PAINTERLY USAGES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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VOLUME 1: TEXT

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ABSTRACT

In pursuit of the relationship between light and painterly usages, this dissertation has sought to secure the candidate's interpretative concepts concerning each of the two component parts to be related.

Together, the premise of light as an imaginative construct (originating in the partiality of her world-view) and the premise of the painterly impulse (germane to her creative identity) induced distinctive attitudes towards the processing of paint by means of which a relationship between light and painterly usages could be creatively realised.

The condition of relation between light and painterly usages was founded on the affinity, intuitively divined by the candidate, between her apprehension of the effects of physical light on matter and her sensibility towards the manipulation of paint as both colour and substance. From this intuitive beginning, conceptual congruity between light and painterly usages came to be centred on the protean principle of changeableness and alterability. This principle functioned as a basis for both the practical and the theoretical research programme.

During the course of investigation, the concepts 'painterly' and 'light' underwent major shifts and enlargements in meaning. In time, the predominant direction began to move, in response to the title, towards redefinitions in the candidate's mind of these terms.

In the exposition that follows, Chapter One enunciates differences in meaning implicit in the term 'painterly', and Chapter Two unravels aspects of light and colour.

The candidate's approach to the painterly concept straddles the formal principles pertaining to the painterly style, as advanced by Heinrich Wölfflin and Clement Greenberg, and the creative core of a sensibility towards painterly procedures as understood by the painter.

The concerns attached to each meaning have been referred to as categorical and non-categorical painterly concerns, respectively.

Intent on transposing an attitude towards light and its effects from the natural to the pictorial context, the candidate's gathering of a quality of luminescence, through modulations of hue and fluctuations in coloured appearances, is seen to represent a particular condition of 'light' in painting. Such a condition is central to the textural, as opposed to unbridled, colour appearances evident in the candidate's paintings.

While visually synthesised in the body of paintings executed for the purposes of this study, the function of the text is to determine verbally that from the extensive scope of the two central areas of research, special issues were extracted and a particularised relationship between light and painterly usages was reached.

When read in conjunction with the illustrations in Volume 2, Chapter Three is concerned with intrinsic pictorial aspects effecting this relationship.

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When read in conjunction with the illustrations in Volume 2, Chapter Three is concerned with intrinsic pictorial aspects effecting this relationship.

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and that it has not been submitted to any other University.

I am appreciative of the guidance given to me by my supervisor Mr Robert Hodgins and value the encouragement of others throughout the length of the working period, and the willingness of those who assisted in the technical production of this dissertation. I gratefully acknowledge bursaries from the Human Sciences Research Council and the University of the Witwatersrand.

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PREFACE

'... the real existence of any matter becomes of secondary importance, and the chief thing is what happens to it'.

(Wölfflin, Principles)

'The notion of uniformly persisting ground colours is shaken, the appearance oscillates in the most manifold tones ... colour lies only as a gleam, hovering and in endless movement'.

(Wölfflin, Principles)

'Die Farben sind Taten und Leiden des Lichts'.

(Colours are the actions and sufferings of light).

(Goethe, Farbenlehre)

Vivid in their visuality, these three axioms concerning light and matter, colour, and the painterly mode of ... have been singled out as those satisfactorily capturing the candidate's imaginative attitude towards effecting the relationship between light and painterly usages. This attitude informed the creative aspect of the research programme, that is, the body of paintings, and directed the orientation of the theoretical research.

From the painter's viewpoint, while theorising may assist in clarifying creative motivation, such theorising can only provide access to the resultant paintings, and cannot define the works themselves. Although particular painterly usages were applied for the express purposes of engendering light in painting, the paintings are about many things besides. It must be appreciated that such is the potency of the psychically motivated painterly painting process, that the paintings extend beyond rational qualification and exist as moot objects, particularised universes, with which the viewer must contend.

INTRODUCTION

The following exposition revolves around a small body of works, during the painting of which, certain questions came to the fore. These questions concerned the nature and possibilities of the painterly concept. One of these possibilities was the potential of painterly usages to support, in part at least, a condition of pictorial light. From painting her paintings came the candidate's insight into the painterly concept, and from manipulation of her own painterly usages came the quality of coloured luminescence.

Although the painterly concept is traditionally associated with notions of light in painting, this association will not be the focus of attention for the study that follows. Rather, from her own pictorial investigations, and personally-found configurations of textural colour, the candidate will attempt what she considers to be necessary reconsiderations of the concepts 'painterly' and 'light' for the painting discipline.

While elaborating on those questions first raised during the course of the practical programme, the study that follows will tend towards a critical essay on the far-reaching consequences of the painterly premise and the conceptual viability of attending to light in painting. Importantly however, being written from a painter's viewpoint, the study will offer a particular orientation to theoretical matters concerning the two central concepts. From research into the surrounding theoretical data of these concepts, arguments will be presented to show how and why only certain aspects of 'painterly' and 'light' were extracted by the candidate.

CHAPTER ONE

'PAINTERLY': CONTEXTUAL DIFFERENTIATIONS

1.1 Categorical: The Art Historical and Critical Contexts

The historial genealogy of the painterly mode from the Baroque to Abstract Expressionism will not be plotted in this dissertation. However, by means of the examples of Heinrich Wölfflin¹ and Clement Greenberg,² distinctions will be made between the old and new models of painterly style. The term 'painterly' for both theoreticians refers to the characteristics of the painterly style as determined by the methodology used in their formal critiques. Attributed to a particular style, these painterly characteristics have been designated of a categorical type in the context of this dissertation.

The fixing of the painterly concept is accredited to Heinrich Wölfflin, after being made operative in his influential yet controversial publication of 1915: Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst (Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art).³ By means of a devised system for ascertaining differing styles, and for analysing changes of style, Wölfflin contrasted those pictorial appearances he found and considered intrinsic to the painterly style with those he deemed appropriate to the opposite pictorial tendency, the linear style. Founded on the conviction of two distinctive creative forces, or modes of vision, themselves referred to as the linear and the painterly, Wölfflin, through his system, maintained that the identification of differing pictorial appearances attested to their being an embodiment of either the linear or the painterly mode of vision.

Wölfflin confirmed the existence of the painterly style by utilising five sets of descriptive polarities as the basis for a formal critique, namely: linear and painterly, planar space and recessional

space; closed form and open form; multiplicity and unity; absolute clarity and relative clarity.⁴ The differing pictorial appearances thus determined were attributed to their being generated by one of the two modes of vision, to result in either the linear, or the painterly style, respectively. Only through confidence in the linear mode of vision as propitious for the painting discipline did Wölfflin tap the assertive presence of an alternative pictorial presentation. While the devised mechanism for formal analysis made an alternative creative concept accessible, the painterly style was established inductively by Wölfflin, and was considered to deviate from the classical norm of the ultimate pictorial presentation attaining lucid balance and harmony.

It must, at this stage, be emphasised that Wölfflin's system was indeed orientated towards categorising pictorial appearances derived from two distinctive modes of vision, but, types of pictorial appearances were scrutinised with a view to their efficacy as representations. Wölfflin stated, under his general observations concerning the linear and painterly concepts:

They are two conceptions of the world, differently orientated in taste and in their interest in the world, and yet each capable of giving a perfect picture of visible things.⁵

The painterly mode of vision was defined as, 'the apprehension of the world as a shifting semblance',⁶ and thus distinct from, 'the perception of individual objects as solid, tangible bodies'.⁷

The immediate appearances, as opposed to the tactile data of objects are registered when Nature is viewed in accordance with the painterly mode of vision. Effectively, three-dimensionality is neutralised and objects are converted from volumetric bodies that hold visual attention, to surfaces that continually intercept vision. For Wölfflin, this urge towards opticality, or moving over surfaces rather than around each object, marked the end of the primacy of objects and functioned as the motivation for the painterly representation of Nature.

The findings of Wölfflin's formal categories may be tabulated in the following way.

Table 1 Wölfflin's Analytical System and Pictorial Principles

PAINTERLY LINEAR TWO OPPOSING MODES OF VISION	
OPTICAL: INTELLIGIBLE TO SIGHT	TACTILE: INTELLIGIBLE TO TOUCH
<u>RECESSIONAL SPACE</u> Diagonal thrust and the pictorial unification of forms Connective: merging of figure-ground relations, integration Ambivalent illusion of space and depth	<u>PLANAR SPACE</u> Perspectival constructs and the planar extension of forms Separative: articulation of figure-ground relations, progression Coherent illusion of space and depth
<u>OPEN FORM</u> Relaxed definition of edge as outline Coalescence of forms not fixed in extent	<u>CLOSED FORM</u> Fixed definition of edge as outline Discrete forms with contours
<u>ORGANISATIONAL PRINCIPLE:</u> <u>UNITY</u> Non-hierarchical distribution of parts to whole, homogeneity Compliance with compositional forces to determine total image	<u>ORGANISATIONAL PRINCIPLE:</u> <u>MULTIPLICITY</u> Hierarchical ordering of parts to whole, congruity Compliance with established spatial system to determine proportioned images
<u>RESULTANT VISUAL EFFECT:</u> <u>RELATIVE CLARITY</u> Subordination of isolated forms, fused mass Plurality Dynamism Baroque	<u>RESULTANT VISUAL EFFECT:</u> <u>ABSOLUTE CLARITY</u> Relational harmony of independent forms, clearly distinguishable formation Singularity Stasis High Renaissance

Wölfflin stated:

If an advanced type of art dissolves the line and replaces it by the restless mass, that happens not only in the interests of a new verisimilitude, but in the interests of a new beauty too.⁸

The following points emerge from brief elaboration of Wölfflin's painterly principles for the rendering of 'non-plastic qualities',⁹ central to the painterly mode of vision. A dramatisation of the continuity of space by the positioning of forms on the diagonal, eliminating a succession of well-defined planes, was referred to as 'recessional space'. The resultant spatial reading was said to correspond to the ambivalence experienced in the painterly mode of vision in that, 'the eye relates objects essentially in the direction of forwards and backwards',¹⁰ as opposed to 'seeing by volumes'.¹¹ 'Loose form',¹² or the de-emphasis of the boundaries of single forms, and the relaxation of a compact compositional arrangement, results in 'open form'. By maintaining pictorial continuity and visual cohesion, integrating factors such as a pervasive rhythm, texture, or accents of light and dark, could effect 'a union of parts in a single theme',¹³ or 'unity'. Such overall fusion or 'unified unity',¹⁴ was distinct from the 'harmony of free parts',¹⁵ or 'multiple unity'.¹⁶ When '"tangible" design',¹⁷ is abandoned for the plurality of transitory sensations, the adjustment in focus results in the condition of 'relative clarity', and:

The presentment remains indeterminate, and is not meant to settle into those lines and planes which have a meaning for the tactile sense.¹⁸

The optical and tactile division between the painterly and linear modes of vision is effected according to the way in which space is represented within a given painting. Richard Wollheim was referring to Wölfflin when he explained:

... it now turns out to be characteristic only of works of art in one of the two great styles that space is represented by suggesting how things would seem to the sense of touch. This is a feature uniquely associated with the linear style: whereas inside the painterly style this is rejected and spatial represen-

tation is secured solely by appeal to the eye and visual sensation.¹⁹

The reorientation of visual focus and the gathering of impalpable spatial sensations, the alternative to the tactile sense, is that of the optical, towards which the painterly style is decidedly biased. Optical qualities were regarded by Wölfflin as those deceptive qualities recorded on the retina which undermine structural, substantial form. The superficial or casual aspects grasped in this way, rather than being seen as a misapprehension of the true state of affairs, were considered by Wölfflin to be an alternative interpretation of Nature. This realisation constituted an essential distinction between the linear and painterly modes of vision.

Without presupposing any particular philosopher's theory concerning an awareness of space, it is accepted that there are degrees of conviction in securing a sensation of space when experiencing Nature. That is, there are precise and ambiguous sensations of space. Similarly, the painting discipline demands the recognition of two distinct types of spatial reading: illusionistic depth and pictorial space, or 'space-in-flatness'. The former elicits a tactile, three-dimensional response relating to a conditioned spatial understanding of the external world, the latter is an optical awareness, after taking cognisance of the two-dimensional picture plane.

The pictorial consequences of the optically based painterly mode of vision are far-reaching, and were indicated by Wölfflin:

Not that artistic form had become confused, for that always produces an unpleasing effect, but the explicitness of the subject is no longer the sole purpose of the presentment. Composition, light, and colour no longer merely serve to define form, but have their own life.²⁰

When Wölfflin said that, 'composition, light, and colour' are capable of transmitting 'their own life', he was suggesting how the qualities

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When Wölfflin said that, 'composition, light, and colour' are capable of transmitting 'their own life', he was suggesting how the qualities

of painting could disconnect themselves from serving as representations of Nature. Rather than solely aiding in the definition of observed appearances, such qualities had the potential to refer only to themselves, and to support each other in a vital way. That the painting discipline is capable of sustaining autonomous pictorial statements was suggested. This implication has been taken as a presupposition by Clement Greenberg in his critical examinations of modernist painting.

The optical orientation when viewing visual circumstances, whether natural or pictorial, was interpreted by Greenberg in a more rigorous way than Wölfflin. For Greenberg, painting became identified with its two-dimensional support and the internal logic of the painting gained precedence over a mode of vision of the external world for the determining of form. By virtue of its properties of flatness and frontality, the format itself, together with appropriate sets of pictorial circumstances, was considered by Greenberg capable of paralleling that painterly situation when Nature is viewed as a screen of insubstantive appearances. Correspondingly, for the conditions of opticality to be met in painting, structural organisation had to be modified and all-over visual connections came to the fore.

The emphasis on the optical condition, as opposed to tactile, plastic appearances, arose as a matter of course out of the painterly attitude. José Ortega y Gasset²¹ in his 1924 essay, 'On the Artist's Viewpoint' recalled Wölfflin when he stated: 'Sensations are no longer in any sense things but are subjective states through which and by means of which things appear to us'.²² In his 1943 essay, 'Introduction to Velazquez', Ortega y Gasset made the following statement, in which Wölfflin's precedent, and what were to become Greenberg's preoccupations with modernist abstraction, are evident:

In every picture there is in fact a struggle between the 'artistic' forms and the 'natural' forms of the objects. One can almost speak of a general law in the evolution of every great artistic cycle, according to which, after a first stage in which this struggle is indecisive, the constructive forms begin to predominate over the forms of the object. The object is, in the last instance, respected, but its 'natural' forms are obliged to serve for the realization of 'artistic' forms.²³

Bearing in mind the critical dilemma as to whether Impressionism in general constitutes the last vestige of naturalism or the beginnings of the abstractionist mode, the following observation on Impressionism made by Greenberg, is notable with regard to Ortega y Gasset's observations concerning transitional, developmental circumstances:

... exclusively two-dimensional, optical and altogether untactile definitions of experience conformed alike to the essence of visualized nature and to the essence of art. In this "purity" of the optical, all conflicts between nature and art, it was expected, could be resolved.²⁴

Wölfflin appreciated that the all-over, optical tendency was particularly prone to a patterned, and repetitive, distribution of pictorial elements across the picture surface and that such a decorative approach could become detrimental to the painting discipline. He noted that when the interests of painting moved farther away from a composite rendering of observed appearances, towards the optical condition itself, then, 'the objection will certainly be made that it is no longer a matter of seeing, but only of a certain decorative arrangement'.²⁵

Greenberg countered Wölfflin's anticipation of the painterly attitude's degeneration into decorative tendencies by directing critical attention to how the painterly conception of space could be effected, and made vital, in modernist painting. Greenberg stated:

Space, as an uninterrupted continuum that connects instead of separating things, is something far more intelligible to sight than to touch (whence another reason for the exclusive emphasis on the visual). But space as that which joins instead of separating also means space as a total object, and it is this

total object that the abstract painting, with its more or less impermeable surface, "portrays."²⁶

Wölfflin had qualified decorative tendencies in painting when he said, 'but the effect which is sought by means of choice and arrangement is not incompatible with what the eye can draw from mere reality'.²⁷ However, Greenberg illustrated both Wölfflin's fundamental pessimism, and his own optimism concerning painterly principles of unity when he gave the following example:

Decoration can break the plane with abrupt contrasts of light and dark and then restore it simply by repeating these contrasts at regular enough intervals. This used to be the antithesis of the pictorial; now it's part and parcel of it.²⁸

Greenberg has continued to concentrate on painterly principles of unity, thus distilling the decorative consequence, in his pursuit of the optimum spatial condition for abstractionist painting:

Pictorial space joins and contains and by containing makes everything it shows dis-contain itself and surrender itself to a unity, which in turn contains itself.²⁹

Such critical machinery is totally dependent on the priority of the fixed spatial location, the integrity, of the picture plane.

The idea of the optical has been taken, by way of Wölfflin, as the encompassing premise from which formalism, as an aesthetic doctrine pertaining to the two-dimensional painting discipline, developed. A standard for formalist critiques was thus established.

Wölfflin had initiated, early in the twentieth century, the term 'painterly' as an indicator of a broad system of creative expression. The pictorial appearances provoked by the painterly creative attitude, as evidenced in the Baroque, were considered according to pictorial principles, and described in terms of categorial style referents. Greenberg, somewhat later, adopted Wölfflin's term 'painterly' and proceeded to apply the term to suit, with seeming aptness, certain

pictorial appearances as evidenced in Abstract Expressionism.³⁰ That a particular creative urge underlies the painterly appearances of Abstract Expressionism, to return painting to an instinctive threshold, was not a factor in Greenberg's evaluation. The outward appearances of an Abstract Expressionist painting were thus considered by Greenberg to be of the categorial painterly type.³¹

Wölfflin's terminological apparatus, by means of which a methodology for pictorial analysis was structured, is taken as the decisive point of contact between Wölfflin and Greenberg. Greenberg laid particular emphasis on the linear/painterly proposition, the pivot of Wölfflin's entire analytical system.

When Greenberg concerned himself with artists directly involved with Abstract Expressionism, artists reactionary to this phase, or with artists merely cognate to it, Wölfflin's critical requisites appeared in his writings. A spate of didactic articles was written in the 1960s, the chronology of which is significant to the development of his critical constructs: 'After Abstract Expressionism', (1962 and revised in 1969), 'The "Crisis" of Abstract Art' (1964) and 'Post Painterly Abstraction' (1964). Wölfflin was deliberately credited in these articles, and his terms used verbatim.³²

Just as it is not within the scope of this dissertation to discuss in detail either the merits or defects of Wölfflin's system, similarly, it is not appropriate here to expand fully on either the extent, or the viability, for contemporary modernist painting of Greenberg's borrowings from Wölfflin. Greenberg himself is not seen to be wholly original in view of his attachment, in the first instance, to Wölfflin's formal analytical system, and is considered extremist in his subsequent adaptations of Wölfflin's findings.

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Greenberg adopted derivative devices from Wölfflin in order to shape a distinctive, and formalist, critical meaning for directions in American abstractionist painting of the recent past. This means that, in formalist terms, the illusory space of a nominally abstract painting is made to coincide with a 'purely optical experience as against optical experience modified or revised by tactile associations'.³³ Wölfflin, on the other hand, had complied with a more fundamental procedure, that of analysing the intrinsic structure of pictorial forms and the organisational principles evident in the arrangement of outward pictorial appearances. Such a procedure constitutes formal analysis. Significantly, formalist critical concerns are distinct from formal analytical concerns, despite the fact that the former partakes of the fundamentals of the latter. Unfortunately, these two approaches towards pictorial comprehension are frequently considered synonymous, and are unremittingly applied as such in literature pertaining to modernist painting.

In view of her own practices as a painter, the candidate is distanced from the demands made of the painting discipline arising from the conceptual refinements of Greenberg's formalist critical schema. However, she may apply particular aspects of formal analysis when viewing her paintings in retrospect.

Greenberg utilised Wölfflin's critical apparatus in his essay 'After Abstract Expressionism', in which he stated:

If the label "Abstract Expressionism" means anything, it means painterliness: loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken colour; uneven saturations or densities of paint, exhibited brush, knife, or finger marks - in short, a constellation of qualities like those defined by Wölfflin when he extracted his notion of the Malerische from Baroque art.³⁴

Importantly, the candidate is in full agreement with Greenberg when he affirmed the retention of pictorial structuring within the abstraction-

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