Towards a simplification in painting

Monica Smith
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By

Monica Smith

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I, Monica Smith, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address.

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"We shall reach peace and calm,"
"through the simplification of ideas
and plastic things. Unity is our
sole idea."

Henri Matisse
What I have tried to accomplish in my painting is a simplification of ideas and pictorial elements. It seemed to me that I should begin to simplify. During the past years, I have experimented with various methods to discover my personal manner of simplification. I wanted to relearn how to express my ideas with directness and simplicity. This evolved from my earlier overly-active watercolors from nature, which failed to satisfy me. Simplification was essential for my development.

It is one thing to ape ineptitude in technique and another to acquire simplicity of vision. Simplicity—or rather discrimination of vision—is the trademark of the true Post-Impressionist. He observes and then selects what is essential. The result is a logical and very sophisticated synthesis. Such a synthesis will find expression in simple and even harsh technique. But the process can only come after the naturalist process and not before it.

Wassily Kandinsky

Simplification is most essential today because of the complexity and confusion in our world. The world is visually confusing. Even to the profusion of nature—the stars and trees, but of course, the traffic, the architecture. Our surroundings have an abundance of objects that add to the complexity. This is why simplification is important, because everything seems so complex.
Technology has also added complexity to our lives, as well as providing convenience, pleasure and comfort. Automation has removed us from some of the simplicities of life. In the process it has taken away some of our personal spirit. Before these technical advancements art and daily life were closer together. The cooper, tinsmith, and potter are a few examples of craftspeople that communally created art and useful objects. Our society has developed beyond self-sufficiency into an urbanized lifestyle. This produces a dehumanized atmosphere. Art is important because it is not mechanical.

Art can redeem our personal spirit. It is a basic way of relieving us from the complexity and automation in this modern age. Our lives need this human touch. In particular, good paintings enrich our lives through their intimacy. They visually participate in our living environment. What would our interiors and exteriors be like without them? Painting, I feel, should relieve us of technical overkill in ways that express the warmth and emotion of human nature.

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like appeasing in-
fluence, like a mental soother something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.

Henri Matisse

In order to begin to simplify my painting, I imposed many limitations. I decided to narrow my concern to a few artists, subjects, sizes and colors. Temporarily, limiting my means enabled me to gradually simplify my painting.

For in art everything is best said once only and in the simplest way. Paul Klee

My desire is to express my spirit. The medium though which I convey this feeling is the still life. I select common objects from my surroundings, such as pitchers with plants, surrounded by various rounded and angular forms. A simplification of organic forms combined with geometric forms. I interpret the arrangements through my personal abstract vision, continually searching for beautiful, simplified shapes.

We depart always from an impression of nature. Well, relative to nature, one can't put everything into a painting, and is not only that one can put so little. This little becomes everything, the work of man. The sacrifices are forms, values, colors, according to the idea which rules the work to be accomplished...

Henri Matisse

Many of the objects in my paintings are intimate.
Throughout my life, I have always had a fascination for natural objects and love for antiques. I collect these various objects that inspire my imagination. I have painted various combinations of antiques, fruit, and contemporary items. Such antiques as a fan, a hat, quilt patches and boxes. Usually I start, by arranging various combinations of forms into a pleasing order. The grouping of forms is visually arranged to reveal what is intuitively felt.

Prepartion is extremely important to obtain an organization with clarity. Drawing is a quick means of juxtaposing forms on their surrounding space. Each painting is a different arrangement with a movement of the various forms.

Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter's disposal for the expression of his feelings... All that is not useful in the picture is detrimental. A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety, for superfluous details would, in the mind of the beholder, encroach upon the essential elements.

Henri Matisse

What is needed, I have come to believe, is an ordered unity and balance of pictorial elements. A simplification of design, form, line and color in harmony to the whole. My aim is a combination of abstraction and realism, spontaneity and control;
but not in either extreme. I feel that areas of greater realism complement the abstracted, flat shapes, and areas of control balance the fresh spontaneity. All of the elements require the balance of the opposite without any excesses. This holds true in life as well: an excessive use of anything can be detrimental. Even the basic needs of sleeping, eating, and drinking should be practiced in moderation.

There is a proper measure in all things, certain limits beyond which and short of which right is not to be found.

Horace

In character, in manner, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity.

H.W. Longfellow

I have studied various artists and their approach to simplification. I find Matisse the most influential in my development. During his early years, Gustave Moreau told him that he (Matisse) would simplify painting. About ten years passed before he developed simplification further than other artists. Throughout his artistic development his work progressively developed towards further simplification. Matisse, I believe inspired the American Painting that ranged from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism. Mark Rothko, an
abstractionist, dedicated a painting to Matisse to represent his appreciation. Rothko simplified his subject into a pure abstract essence. Matisse continually simplified the same subject with variations; yet the presence of recognizable objects never disappeared.

Because for Matisse, to perfect is to simplify; because consciously or not, as a matter of program or in spite of himself, every time he strives to improve what he has done, he achieves greater simplicity.

Marcel Sembat

This degree of simplification enabled Matisse to express himself with refreshing directness. One can sense through his vision his love of life. Often he exaggerates the forms in terms of size, position, and color for expression. His work reveals a childlike simplicity, balanced by a mature sense of order.

One must still be capable of keeping this childhood freshness in one's contact with objects, and of preserving this simplicity. One must be a child all one's life and yet still be a man and take one's strength from the existence of objects.

Henri Matisse

Matisse simplifies objects by flattening their volumes into of color, without much modeling. Form becomes a pure and simple pattern. He reduces every-
thing to a minimum and eliminates unnecessary line and detail. Then dramatically emphasizes the color and decorative qualities. The appeal is in the highly ornamental patterns, alternated with un-patterned areas. This adds a touch of playful excitement. Some of the repeated motifs are stripes, dots, squares, and rosettes. Matisse's work is picturesque with its interplay of gaily colored pattern. His forms depend primarily upon the expressive and emotional colors. Matisse uses lots of neutral colors. He suggests spatial qualities by his use of color value and intensity; with proportional relationships. His paintings are bright, exotic and harmonious around a dominant color scheme.

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact-invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impentrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment.

Oscar Wilde

During the process of simplification, I found that squinting my eyes obscured the details of the
forms in the still life, enabling me to see how I might simplify them. I tried to find beautiful shapes instead of a purely representational copy of the forms. I wanted to render the emotion of the objects' character.

Among those who study painting some stive for an elaborate effect and others prefer the simple. Neither complexity in itself nor simplicity is enough.

Luch' ai

Areas of realism hold the viewer's attention, encouraging a closer view. These more complex areas complement the flat, simple areas of color. This is also true in patterned areas compared to unpatterned areas. Often, fabric is a source for decorative pattern. I transform motifs to dance into the design. This started by placing my arrangements on quilt patches. Gradually, I discarded the quilt motif, and selected repeated patterns from various fabric designs. Some of the recurring motifs are dots, triangles, squares, and arabesque lines. I use these elements in decorating forms and background space.

I wanted this to be a very simple, direct picture, really boiled down. It has all the details you want in it, if you want to look at it that way, but I think you can get close to it or far away from it and it still holds its own just as a piece of simple pattern.... I want both detail and simplicity at a distance.

Andrew Wyeth
Oriental Art has influenced my method of painting. I have studied the elegant simplicity of Japanese prints, the extreme simplification of design, perspective, objects, brushwork and color. Many of these elements reflect in my method of simplification.

Taoist philosophy has influenced my own feelings about painting. Tao means 'the way' to an order in harmony with nature, this should be expressed in everything. The Tao of painting was not separate from the Tao of living. In painting, the purpose is to apply the principles, ideas, and methods, with a fusion of spirit as a means of expressing the harmony of Tao. My interests are in their method of simplification.

The Oriental, asymmetrical design has influenced my sense of arrangements. I find interesting its unusual spatial placement of forms. The off-setting of a large form, balanced by a number of smaller forms. In Taoism, space is important in unifying and harmonizing all the pictorial elements. The amount of space is expressive, sometimes with vast open areas. Objects placed along the edge, as the Orientals do, also influences my arrangements.

The Taoist perspective is attained by laws of nature. This is in contrast to laws of science
which provide rules for traditional perspective in Western painting. I found the Eastern manner to be an elementary simplification of space. It is more a suggestion of space rather than a realistic illusion. Deep space is converted into flat color planes. The forms are spatially placed on top of each other from the bottom to the top. In the process of simplification, I flattened the background space; in my case a tilted table top, wall or window. I tried variations of viewing my arrangements, looking straight forward, downward, and upward at the setting. I found that I combined the several perspectives. Some objects appeared to be resting on the table and other angles seemed tilted upward.

As does Matisse, Oriental artists simplified forms to basic shapes and colors. Often, they used contour line to represent an extreme simplification. Sweeping arabesque line and decorative patterns enhanced their extreme simplification. Borrowing from this method, I used line to simplify some objects and produce a positive-negative reversal. I found that arabesque line can connect objects, and add diversity to flat, geometric areas.

In my method of painting, I attempt to combine spontaneity and control in my brushwork. Usually,
I begin with thin layers of paint applied spontaneously. This enables me to express my interpretation of the objects. I try to retain some of the fresh transparency of color, balanced with controlled, opaque areas. I believe that painting should consist of both these qualities in the brushwork. In the Tao of painting, these are two essential qualities, without labored movement.

Painters summed up this aim of harmony in the saying "Heart (the inner, yin resources and guiding instinct) and hand (the outer, yang, snf technical expression) must be in accord," and they further referred to oneness and harmony in hundreds of ways.

Chieh tzu Yuan

I found that much practice is necessary in achieving controlled brushwork, without being laborious. Experimenting with various methods proved that long preparation for each painting becomes contradictory to retaining a fresh spontanrity.

My intuition is important, on my choice of objects, arrangements and sense of color. As with Matisse, my colors are not based on scientific theory. I intuitively place color based on my observations, feelings and experience. I experiment with a limited color palette. I use relatively few colors, six or seven at the most. This visually
lessens the complexity and confusion of too much color in too wide a range. I have used the basic primary colors with variations. I plan a color scheme, with a dominant color to interweave the surrounding colors.

Color ought to be, as it were, embroidered on the canvas.... the same color ought to appear in the picture continually here and there, in the same way that a thread appears in an embroidery... in this way, the whole will form a harmony.

Jimes H. McNeill Whistler

I begin with dark and light colors, then apply the middle values. This produces a full tonal range. Often, the still life objects were warm and bright on a dark, neutral background.

It is important to integrate the color, pattern, and texture of each form to its surrounding forms and color. I build up the underpainting with layers of color to produce a pleasing visual sensation. Much time is required to harmonize the surrounding colors. I painted the same objects in variations, emphasizing different qualities. There are variations of objects, arrangements, colors and decorative details. I notice that my palette changes according to my moods and the seasons.

Often, I try to incorporate the paper or linen
into the design. I like to paint on the natural linen because it’s not as harsh as a white background. The unpainted surface can work in the design as its own form. Sometimes I scratch into the paint to produce texture, pattern or light. This adds another dimension to the painting.

You see, although I understand very well the value of words abstract and concrete in the dictionary, I no longer grasp them in painting. I have tried to interpret my vision in an appropriate decor without recourse to literary means and with all the simplicity the medium permits: a difficult job. You may say that I have failed, but do not reproach me for having tried, nor should you advise me to change my goal, at one with other ideas already accepted, consecrated.

Paul Gauguin

Gauguin’s belief reflects my own feelings about painting. Mine is just a beginning of a long search that will take years of hard work and commitment. I shall perhaps never achieve my goal. Yet, my self-exploration anxiously continues with each painting.

Mies Van der Rohe, developed the slogan "Less is more", implying the elimination of the inessential to architecture. This holds true about everything in life. Along with painting, I try to simplify my own life. I have found that it is easy to make
everything complex, but very difficult to simplify.
I fell that everyone should try to see the simplicity
in all things.

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!
I say, let your affairs be as two
or three, and not a hundred or a
thousand.... simplify, simplify.

Henry D. Thoreau
Footnotes


Bibliography


Goldwater, Robert and Treves, Marc. Artists on Art From XIV to the XX Century. N.Y.: Pantheon Books Inc, 1945


Scott, Temple. The Wisdom of Oscar Wilde. N.Y.: Brentano's Union Square, 1908.


List of Paintings

1. The Red Pitcher
   acrylic
   32x33

2. Stripped Quilt Patches
   acrylic
   23x24

3. It Must Have Been The Roses
   watercolor and gouache
   16x19

4. Anemones In The Night
   watercolor and gouache
   17½x21½

5. Under The Cactus Tree
   acrylic
   19x27

6. Salmagundi Box
   acrylic
   34x36