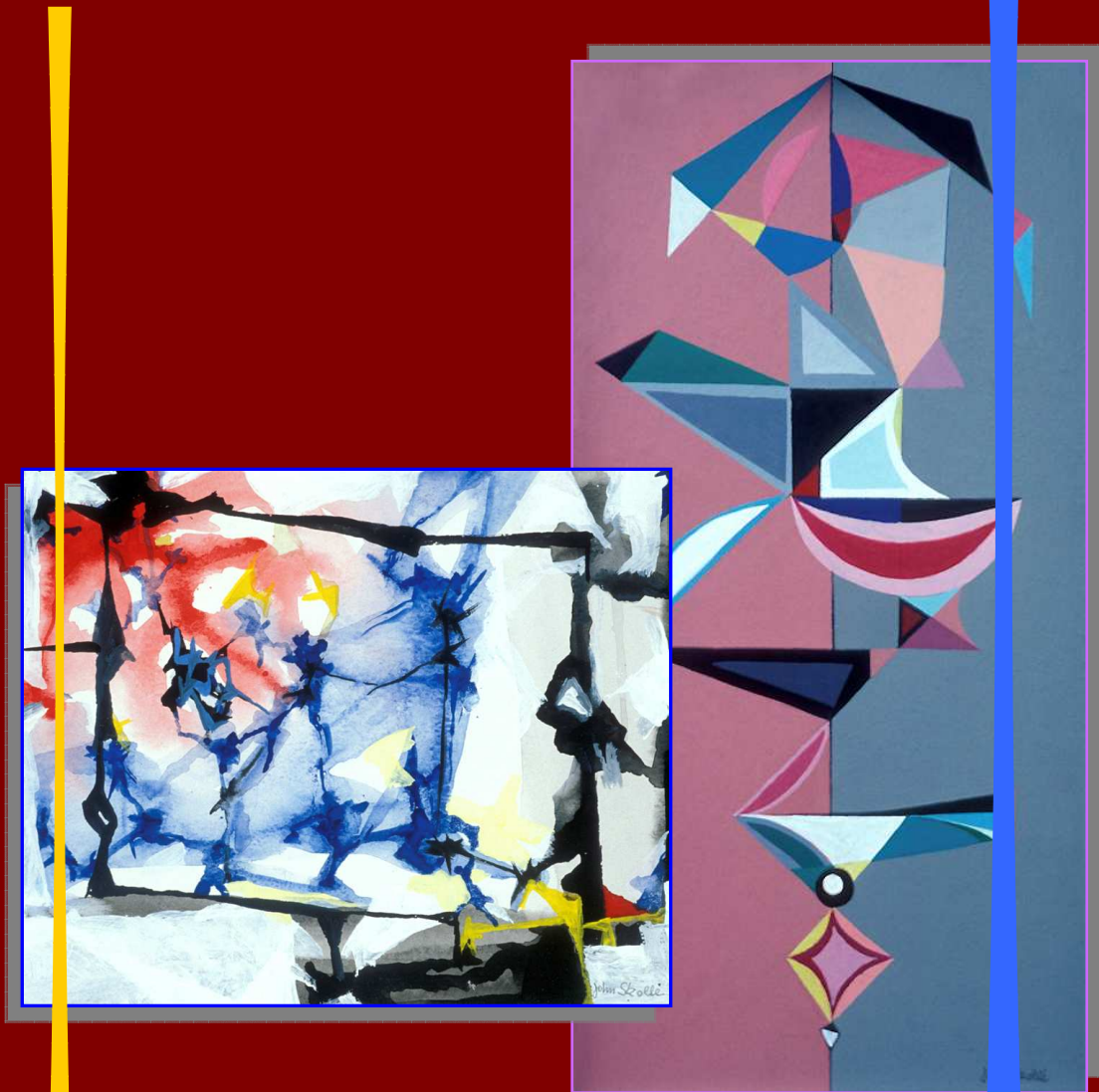


# THE OUTLINE OF IMAGINATION



JOHN  
SKOLLE

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(Excerpts)

By John Skolle

(...)

It is generally assumed that realistic art forms are the most widely practiced and accepted. This assumption is not historically warranted.

From the earliest known works of art – those of the Upper Paleolithic Period of 20,000 B.C. – to the present, the basis of creative art has been, predominantly, man's imagination. In the various "primitive" Pacific, Indian, and African cultures as well as in those of the Far East and Europe, man rendered what he felt, thought, and knew rather than what he saw. Consequently we may infer that the value of a work of art is not relative to existing objects – it is intrinsic.

(...)

We may conclude that primitive artists lacked the ability to depict visible reality convincingly; yet the Indians of the Northwest and the Maoris of New Zealand reached such high degrees of technical perfection that the exclusion of realism, in our sense, would seem intentional. The skill possessed by the Haida Indian who designed a raven claw and wing would have permitted him to depict a realistic bird. In keeping with the tradition of his culture, however, he created an abstract fragment charged with the symbolism of a tribal legend. Meaning, not imitation, is the underlying principle of these widely divergent art forms.

(...)

From the beginnings of art expression, as exemplified by the cave paintings at Altamira, good art was mature relative to the social and geographical environment which engendered it. Following a basic requisite of creative procedure, the men of the Stone Age already possessed a keen sense for essentials, an unflinching selective capacity, and a full understanding of structure and composition.

(...)

The Chinese masters, also, were little interested in recording external facts, either in their figure or in their landscape paintings. (...) They rendered aspects of nature but neither imitated nor competed with what they saw. Their aim was not to copy – not even,

necessarily, to achieve beauty; it was, above all, spiritual harmony. Thus their painting radiates inner being as a result of experience, not observation; the real force of the work of art lies behind its appearance. It does not matter *what* it is but *how* it is.

(...)

The skilful descriptive realism of Assyrian-Babylonian art was superseded by the introspection of the Egyptians whose abstract formal concept is summarized by the pyramids of the Old Kingdoms, 3000 B.C. Even in the best of the lifelike statues hewn from diorite, the portraiture is hardly more than incidental if we consider the unequalled sculptural order, the rhythm, and the vitality of the work in itself. In painting, realistic representation was subordinated to expressive conventions which showed the human figure not as it appears to the eye but as an assembled entity of its most characteristic attributes. Literal exactitude has never been the decisive factor in any creative art. Its chief merit is always the completeness with which inner vision and material have been blended into an essential synthesis. This synthesis was achieved by the Ancient Egyptians with superlative craftsmanship.

(...)

Through century after century a potent inner sensibility, indifferent to the visible world, shaped the astounding art of India, an art abstract, anonymous, and fabulously imaginative. For several thousand years, in strict contrast to the Hellenic ideal of copying nature, East Indian artists identified themselves with the spirit of things and the flow of life itself.

(...)

While Western artists were concerned with the materialistic problems of representation, perspective, and anatomy, the masters of the East were interested in the creation of abstract expressive form in outline and flat areas, excluding three-dimensional interpretation and the use of shadows. This attitude is in radical opposition to the literal, imitative art of Greece.

(...)

In Rome, lack of imagination and originality came to a climax in the stark, detailed realism that portrayed ruthless and dissipated politicians and glorified the vulgar exhibitionism of the emperors. Here there is no trace of archaic Greek fancy or Etruscan elegance. It is blunt recording, a pictorial journalism with the triumphal arch as fitting advertisement of imperialism, the typical official art of a powerful nation. Of formal creative invention there is none.

(...)

The murals of Pompeii are salient examples of a decorative Roman style born of material wealth and artistic aridity.

(...)

The Renaissance ushered in the illusionistic method of three-dimensional painting in light and shade. Figures and animals are now rendered as if they were alive in an artificially contrived space.

(...)

It is art that requires no mind; it has neither spiritual implication nor searching form. A child can understand it.



**Sodom and Gomorrah**

But since human ingenuity has invented many things unsuitable for children, it is reasonable that there should also be an art of different requirements and higher merit. One of its most exalted representatives is Michelangelo. At a time when fraud and licentiousness ran riot in Italy he created – against his will and by the order of the Pope – the most stirring, masterful, dramatic mural paintings ever attempted by one man. Michelangelo's art is representative, yet his figures are far from realistic and certainly not sentimental. They are not people with whom one could imagine sitting down to breakfast.

(...)

After Italian painting had degenerated into empty photographic exactitude and pretty romantic scenes, El Greco re-established the function of creative form.

(...)

Perhaps no art so perfectly offers the comforts of mediocrity as Flemish painting, of which Michelangelo wrote: *"The paintings of Flanders seem beautiful to women, especially to the very old and very young ones, as also to monks and nuns*

*and to a few persons of quality who are blind to rhythmic values. It is an anecdotal and sentimental art, which aims only at success and obtains it easily, not by value of painting but by its subject matter."*

(...)

Although Europe was saturated for four centuries with genre painting, it also produced masters such as Dürer, whose comprehension of abstract art was demonstrated by his pertinent and keen admiration for the samples of Mayan and Aztec art which reached Europe during his lifetime, and Rembrandt, who

retained his integrity to the last, indifferent to a public interested only in prostituting his art. His achievement disproves the common notions that "you've got to give the people what they want." Beyond subject matter and physical fidelity Rembrandt was intensely concerned about the realization of his art: its form, its method, and its expression. He had all that the unimaginative recorders of visual reality – Steen, de Hooch, Ter Borch – had not. Where others painted scenes, Rembrandt created works of art.

(...)

Amid the 19<sup>th</sup> century morass of sentimentality which blandly and unknowingly followed upon so uncompromising and impassioned a commentator on human stupidity as Goya, the Impressionists emerged – and with them Cézanne. Although a keen student of nature, Cézanne adhered to realization, not realism; to the realization of an art form. He did not copy nature; he recreated the objects he observed as detached compositions, filling them with his searching and constructive personality.

(...)

The artist paints not because he *sees something* but because he has within himself the impulse to create something *never seen before*. The Impressionists practiced a purely visual art without ulterior meaning: the transposition of physically recorded sensations of light and color. Since Cézanne and especially through the influence of Picasso, this attitude has changed.

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