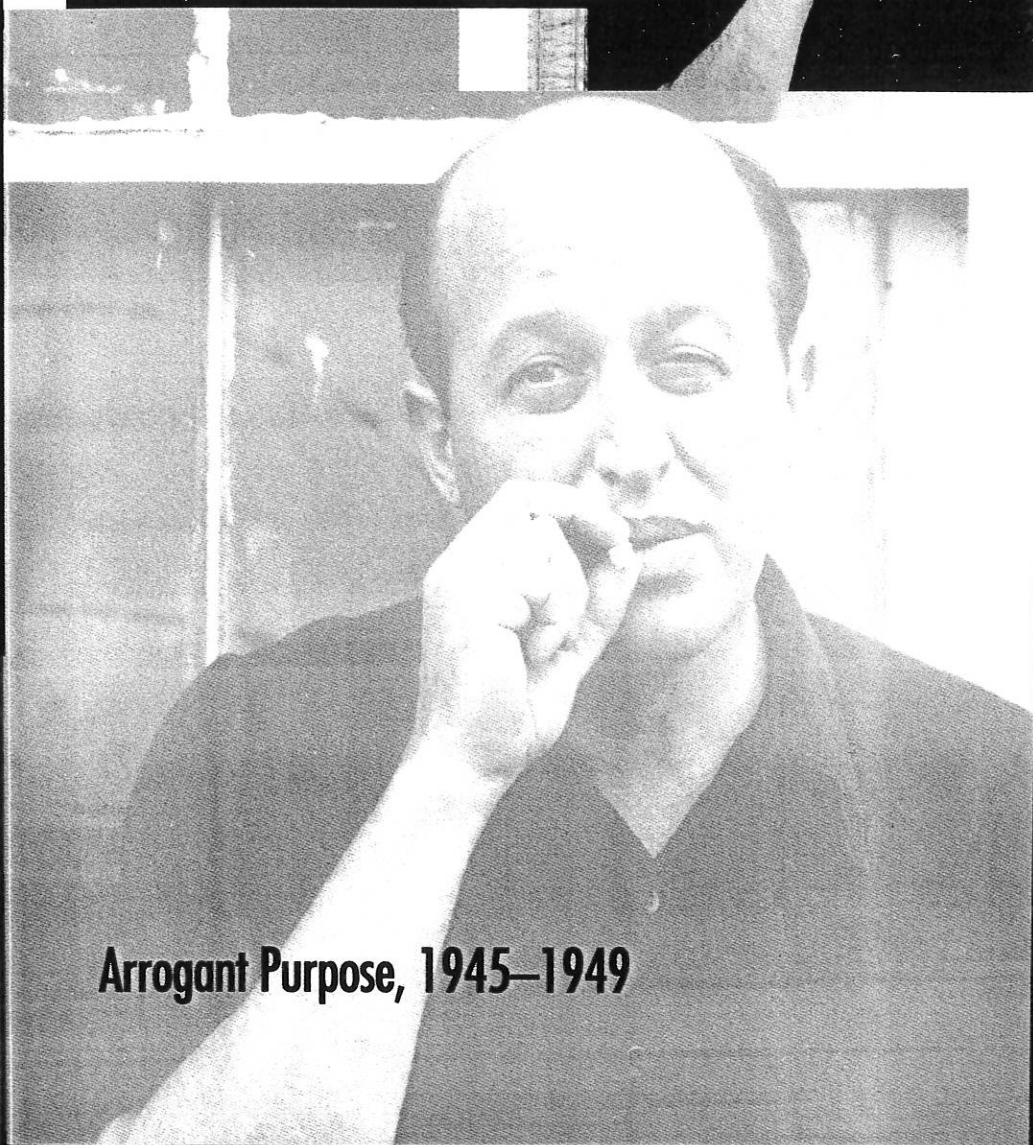
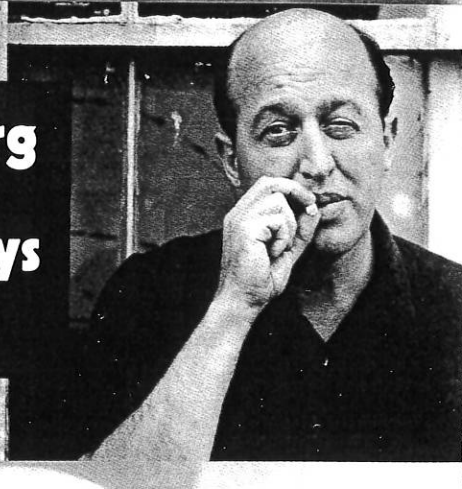


**Clement Greenberg**

**The Collected Essays  
and Criticism**



**Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949**

EDITED BY JOHN O'BRIAN

**Volume 2**

Eugène Boudin, the nineteenth-century French landscapist and forerunner of impressionism, likewise runs the danger of giving a false notion of this artist's stature. Boudin's forte lay in the orchestration of grays, and it would seem almost that he could paint at his best only on an overcast day. Over the last few years Durand-Ruel has from time to time shown in its foyer superb examples of Boudin's "gray" style—small, concentrated pictures in which a leaden sky that overhangs a narrow strip of darker sea and shore is put together with, for that time, audaciously juxtaposed touches of gray ranging from soot to pearl. These canvases are among the most exquisite and subtle of all gems produced by the art of painting, and they place Boudin high among the artists of his wonderful century, however narrow and repetitious he may have been in the choice of his themes. Boudin was not an uneven painter, and every one of the sea-scapes on view at the Durand-Ruel show reveals the hand of a master: particularly the *Falaises de Villerville* of 1893, *La Plage de Villers* of 1891, *Le Bassin de Fécamp, coucher de soleil* of 1894, and the *Port du Havre* of 1884. But unfortunately there are only one or two genuine examples of his gray style, and we see in the other pictures, almost all of which seem to have been done under sunlight, somewhat too much of that timid blondness, along with dull acid greens and starchy blues, which marked the French academic landscape in the long post-Barbizon period. Here Boudin's crucial shortcoming is made plain, a lack of largeness, breadth, or fundamental boldness that denied to him the first order of greatness. Yet in his gray canvases this is a lack we are grateful for—how else but as the products of a policy of limited objectives could we have got such jewels?

The first American show, at Buchholz's, of John Piper, the British painter of whom we have heard so much lately, reveals another delicate painter. But whereas Boudin's delicacy pointed toward the future and was in many respects bold despite itself, Piper, who used to paint abstractly and now does landscapes and architectural views in a sensitive, lyrical manner compounded of Klee and traditional English landscape painting, goes backward in time and pays for his delicacy by surrendering his ambition to say anything really important. Yet there can be no question about Piper's talent, however limited its application and fragile its results. As it happens, he is a much better artist when using color than when confining himself to black and

the large majority of the gouaches which his show. It is their exquisite pastel tints and some of their color from the effect left by peeling off various layers of the cardboard on which they are painted and then applying the color—Reznikoff ventures into the more dangerous and exciting territory of the abstract. Again, Reznikoff's talent is indisputable, and it shows to good effect in his two most abstract pictures—*Brown Figure*, which is a work of perfection, and *Dances*. Both of these are almost monochrome in color and have a strength that is belied elsewhere in this show. Reznikoff is betrayed too often by a certain literary cuteness and a kind of virtuosity that brings him close to prettiness, operating in his off-shade color just as much as in his drawing. His other pictures, though they seem so various among themselves in conception and design, are almost uniformly spoiled—some of them, like *Party in the Evening* and the *Picassoid Masks*, are just barely spoiled—by a decorative and faintly academic slickness and syrupy grace which in many cases ruin works that appear initially to have been well felt out. It is probable, however, that Reznikoff has it in him to say much more than he does in this show, and I look forward to his next.

*The Nation*, 21 February 1948

## 82. The Decline of Cubism

As more and more of the recent work of the masters of the School of Paris reaches this country after the six years' interruption

between 1939 and 1945, any remaining doubt vanishes as to the continuing fact of the decline of art that set in in Paris in the early thirties. Picasso, Braque, Arp, Miró, Giacometti, Schwitters—exhibitions, samples, and reproductions would indicate exhaustion on the part of those who in the first three decades of the century created what is now known as modern art. This impression is supported by the repetitious or retrograde tendencies of the work of the notable School of Paris artists who spent the war years here: Léger, Chagall, Lipchitz. And there is also the weakening Mondrian's art suffered between 1937 and his death in 1944 (in this country). On the other hand, Matisse, the late Bonnard, and even the late Vuillard seem to have been spared by the general debility, going on in the thirties and forties to deliver themselves of some of their supreme statements: in the usual way of painters, who, unlike most poets, get better as they grow older.

The problem for criticism is to explain why the cubist generation and its immediate successors have, contrary to artists' precedent, fallen off in middle and old age, and why belated impressionists like Bonnard and Vuillard could maintain a higher consistency of performance during the last fifteen years; why even the German expressionist, Max Beckmann, so inferior to Picasso in native gifts, should paint better today than he does. And why, finally, Matisse, with his magnificent but transitional style, which does not compare with cubism for historical importance, is able to rest so securely in his position as the greatest master of the twentieth century, a position Picasso is further than ever from threatening.

At first glance we realize that we are faced with the debacle of the age of "experiment," of the Apollinarian and cubist mission and its hope, coincident with that of Marxism and the whole matured tradition of Enlightenment, of humanizing the world. In the plastic arts cubism, and nothing else, is the age of "experiment." Whatever fears fauvism in the hands of Matisse, and late impressionism in those of Bonnard and Vuillard, have been capable of, cubism remains the great phenomenon, the epoch-making feat of twentieth-century art, a style that has changed and determined the complexion of Western art as radically as Renaissance naturalism once did. And the main factor in the recent decline of art in Europe is the disorientation of cubist style, which is involved in a crisis that—by a seeming quirk—spares

the surviving members of the generation of artists preceding it in point of historical development.

Yet it does not matter who is exempted from this crisis, so long as cubism is not. For cubism is still the only vital style of our time, the one best able to convey contemporary feeling, and the only one capable of supporting a tradition which will survive into the future and form new artists. The surviving masters of impressionism, fauvism, and expressionism can still deliver splendid performances, and they can influence young artists fruitfully—but they cannot *form* them. Cubism is now the only school. But why, then, if cubism is the only style adequate to contemporary feeling, should it have shown itself, in the persons of its masters, less able to withstand the tests of the last twenty years? The answer is subtle but not far-fetched.

The great art style of any period is that which relates itself to the true insights of its time. But an age may repudiate its real insights, retreat to the insights of the past—which, though not its own, seem safer to act upon—and accept only an art that corresponds to this repudiation; in which case the age will go without great art, to which truth of feeling is essential. In a time of disasters the less radical artists, like the less radical politicians, will perform better since, being familiar with the expected consequences of what they do, they need less nerve to keep to their course. But the more radical artists, like the more radical politicians, become demoralized because they need so much more nerve than the conservatives in order to keep to a course that, guided by the real insights of the age, leads into unknown territory. Yet if the radical artist's loss of nerve becomes permanent, then art declines as a whole, for the conservative artist rides only on momentum and eventually loses touch with the insights of his time—by which all genuine artists are nourished. Or else society may refuse to have any new insights, refuse to make new responses—but in that case it would be better not to talk about art at all.

Cubism originated not only from the art that preceded it, but also from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism, of a period in which the scientific outlook had at last won a confirmation that only some literary men quarreled with seriously, and in which society seemed to have demonstrated its complete capacity to solve its most serious internal as well as

environmental problems. Cubism, by its rejection of illusionist effects in painting or sculpture and its insistence on the physical nature of the two-dimensional picture plane—which it made prominent again in a way quite different from that in which Oriental, medieval, or barbaric art did—expressed the positivist or empirical state of mind with its refusal to refer to anything outside the concrete experience of the particular discipline, field, or medium in which one worked; and it also expressed the empiricist's faith in the supreme reality of concrete experience. Along with this—regardless of whether the individual cubist happened to believe in God, David Hume, or Hermes Trismegistus, for it was a question of a state of mind, not of a reasoned, consistent philosophical position—went an all-pervasive conviction that the world would inevitably go on improving, so that no matter what chances one took with the new, the unknown, or the unforeseeable, there was no risk of getting anything inferior or more dangerous than what one already had.

Cubism reached its height during the First World War and, though the optimism on which it unconsciously floated was draining away fast, during the twenties it was still capable, not only of masterpieces from the hands of Picasso, Braque, Léger, but also of sending forth such bold innovators as Ap, Mondrian, and Giacometti, not to mention Miró. But in the early thirties, by which time both Picasso's and Braque's art had entered upon a crisis from which neither artist has since shown any signs of recovering, the social, emotional, and intellectual substructure of cubism began crumbling fast. Even Klee fell off after 1930. Surrealism and neo-romanticism, with their rejuvenated academicism, sprang up to compete for attention, and Bonnard, painting better and better within a discipline and frame of mind established as long ago as 1905 and for that reason, apparently, more impervious to the prevalent malaise, began to be talked about as the greatest French painter of his time, notwithstanding the presence of Matisse to whom Bonnard himself owed so much.

After 1939 the cubist heritage entered what would seem the final stage of its decline in Europe. True, Dubuffer, a cubist at heart, has appeared since then, and the best of the younger generation of French artists—Tal Coat, Kernadec, Manessier, Le Moal, Pignon, Tailleux, etc., etc.—work within cubism; but so far they have added nothing but refinements. None of them,

except Dubuffer, is truly original. It is no wonder that the death of abstract art, which, even in its Kandinsky and Klee variants, is still essentially cubist, has been announced so often during the last ten years. In a world filled with nostalgia and too profoundly frightened by what has just happened to dare hope that the future contains anything better than the past, how can art be expected to hold on to advanced positions? The masters of cubism, formed by the insights of a more progressive age, had advanced too far, and when history began going backwards they had to retreat, in confusion, from positions that were more exposed because they were more advanced. The metaphor, I feel, is exact.

Obviously, the present situation of art contains many paradoxes and contradictions that only time will resolve. Prominent among them is the situation of art in this country. If artists as great as Picasso, Braque, and Léger have declined so grievously, it can only be because the general social premises that used to guarantee their functioning have disappeared in Europe. And when one sees, on the other hand, how much the level of American Art has risen in the last five years, with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky,<sup>1</sup> Jackson Pollock, David Smith—and also when one realizes how consistently John Marin has maintained a high standard, whatever the narrowness of his art—then the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power.

Not all the premises have reached this shore—not by a long shot; but enough of them are here and enough of them have abandoned Paris to permit us to abandon our chronic, and hitherto justified, pessimism about the prospects of American art, and hope for much more than we dared hope for in the past. It is not beyond possibility that the cubist tradition may enjoy a new efflorescence in this country. Meanwhile the fact remains that it is in decline at the moment.

*Partisan Review*, March 1948

1. This essay was accompanied by illustrations of two paintings by Gorky: *The Barabhad I* (1947) and *Agony* (1947). [Editor's note]