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From the Grafton Galleries to the Armory Show
Roger Fry's Influence in Britain and the U.S. (ca. 1910-1913)

In the years between the first and the second decade of the 20th century, thanks to the commitment of a few artists and critics, two countries that until that moment had been peripheral in the main stream of events in the world of modern art, Great Britain and the United States of America, had to address and deal with French Post-Impressionism and the influence it was having in the first ten years of the new century. The major difficulty was that in both countries artists, critics and intellectuals were not only unfamiliar with this new art, but also lacked critical and interpretative tools to understand a type of art which was quickly moving away from the representation of the external world. Such an understanding was somewhat urgent since modern art was being presented to a wide audience through large and important exhibitions: in particular by the two so-called "Post-Impressionist Exhibitions" held in London (*Manet and the Post-Impressionists* [1910] and the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* [1912]), organized by Roger Fry, and by the Armory Show (1913) in New York. The problem for art critics was to theoretically justify an art that was weakening its relation with the appearance of the external world in order to present a deeply reinterpreted image of it, as is the case with Expressionist art, or to dispose (almost) entirely of it, the way Cubism or abstract art does. The art critic who more than any other in the English speaking world of the time tried to offer answers to the questions posed by the new art produced (mostly in France) between 1886 and 1910, was Roger Fry. Fry had a good knowledge of the French and German symbolist criticism produced during the last decades of the century, and relied

mostly on these writings, rather than on the "decadent" art for art's sake theories which dated to late Victorian England. On these grounds, between 1908 and 1912, Fry was able to provide a strong and innovative critical and theoretical framework for the interpretation of post-impressionist art and its influence. Now that the referential function of art was lost, and the relationship between painting and visual sensations was in crisis, art could recover an expressive function; instead of representing the external world or transcribing the effects of natural light with colour on a canvas, art could instead express an emotion: with Post-Impressionism art becomes "a mode of experience" rather than "a mode of description" (Morrin 18).

In order to justify such a shift, in 1908 Fry stated that the move away from naturalism and towards expression was not new in art history: it had taken place, for instance, in the passage from late Roman realism to Byzantine art (Reed 72-75). After all, Fry had started out as a connoisseur and as an Old Masters scholar, and had discovered modern art and the work of Paul Cézanne (who in a few years was to become the pillar of his critical thinking about modern art) only recently, in 1906 (Spalding 116-17).

In one of his most important theoretical papers, produced in the first decade of the 20th century, "An Essay in Aesthetics," Fry points out that the aim of works of art is to express an emotion of a specific kind, very different from the emotions experienced in everyday life, an emotion whose appeal is addressed to the imaginative life. As he went along, Fry came to call this emotion the "aesthetic emotion:" such an emotion is conveyed not by the theme or the subject of an artwork, but by its form, or, even better, by the way the artist employs his or her specific means: line, colour, shading, mass, scale…

The task of the critic in analysing the quality of a work of art is something similar to what Immanuel Kant attempted in his *Critique of Judgment*: to give to the reader the anamnesis of his or her emotion in front of that form. And it is exactly because Fry identifies the point of origin of the aesthetic emotion in the form as such (and not in the form *qua* representation of something) that his theory is plastic and able to address any work of art, in any period of art history, in any place—from the Western world,

to "Mohammedan art" ("The Munich Exhibition" 81-91), to the "art of the Bushmen" ("Bushman Paintings"), only to mention a couple of areas related to non-Western art Fry was dealing with at the time he was supporting post-impressionist art (Green 126-27 and *passim*).

From 1910 to 1913 Fry had the chance to put his ideas about modern art to the test, both as curator of the two post-impressionist exhibitions (Fry was the one to invent the word "Post-Impressionism" in 1910) and as main supporter and promoter of modern French art in Britain. It was at the beginning of 1910, moreover, that he met Clive and Vanessa Bell, both much younger than him; he became friends with the two and also became acquainted with part of their circle of friends in Bloomsbury. In his articles on modern art written between 1910 and 1914, Fry displays a plastic thought: he is able to develop and evolve quickly, to correct his own weaknesses and mistakes, and clear obscure points. This is at least in part due to the fact that Fry had worked for museums—as curator for the painting department for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York between 1906 and 1910, and then in London as European adviser to the same department of the Met (Spalding 88-89, 101, 106)—and saw museums as institutions with educational purposes: art and its emotional content was something that an audience could be taught to experience and appreciate. Such a penchant for communication and divulgation characterizes Fry's propaganda in support of Post-Impressionism in the years following his discovery of modern French art. In his letters, especially those to his mother, Fry underlines his role in making modern art known in Britain. On March 28, 1913, for example, he writes: "As regards reputation, I'm not a failure […] I have accomplished a great deal for the understanding of art in England" (*Letters* 1: 366). I believe Fry's qualities, as communicator and supporter of contemporary art expressions, are to be found in his effort to build and bring about a better and broader understanding of modern art in Britain, in his insight, and in the brilliant way he had of asking his readers to follow him and share his ideas. This explains why Fry's theories are such a privileged source for those journalists and critics who, in Britain and the USA, tried in turn to explain to their audience a type of art that

they were not culturally prepared to fully understand. These journalists and critics seem to rely much more on Fry's thought than on Bell's: it can be said that Fry led the way, and that his thought was much less rigid than Bell's. As is well-known, Bell tends to put forward ideas that, although drawn from Fry, are interpreted in a stiff and in a somehow tautological manner: according to Bell only the works of art that possess what he famously called the "significant form" can arouse an aesthetic emotion in the observer, and the aesthetic emotion evoked in the observer is the only evidence that the work of art possesses a "significant form." On the contrary in Fry the theme of the emotion conveyed by the work of art is much more nuanced and the question concerning the relationship between form and emotion is much denser and more problematic.[1] Moreover, Bell's important book *Art* was published only in 1914, after the first (and abundant) wave of critical reactions to the post-impressionist exhibitions and the Armory Show.

Fry first addressed the issue of expression of emotions in the works of art in his 1900-1901 essay on Giotto ("Giotto"), in which he outlined the idea that would (with many developments and changes) gain continuity and centrality in his critical and theoretical work. In "Giotto" Fry maintains that emotions conveyed by the works of art are not fundamentally different from the ones experienced in everyday life and that they are suggested through the expressions and the poses given by the artist to the human figures, making these similar to actors on a stage (e. g. 116-18). Such a point of view has much in common with the old academic theory about how emotions are expressed in art. According to these theories feelings in art are conveyed by facial expressions or by the eloquent poses of the bodies of the characters represented. While the conveyance of emotions through the facial expressions or the bodies being represented is a typical issue dealt with by art academies from the 16th to the 18th century, the notion that an art work *is* above all an emotion being expressed, rather than a piece of beauty or the representation of a corner of the world, was

[1] The literature on this point is too abundant to be quoted in full. A classic reading is Lang.

drawn by Fry from a more recent source, that is, admittedly, Lev Tolstoy's *What is Art* (1897), despite the fact that in "An Essay in Aesthetics" Fry states that Tolstoy is wrong when he "values the emotions aroused by art entirely for their reaction upon actual life" (20). In the "Essay" Fry has come to consider the emotion raised by the work of art as a specific emotion, devoid of any immediate practical purpose and conveyed by the formal structure and means of the work of art itself. The sea change that leads to the "Essay in Aesthetics" has to be traced back to 1908, when Fry, in the letter on "The Last Phase of Impressionism," maintains that the vehicle of the artist's emotion no longer consists in the faces or the bodily poses of the figures represented in the painting, but can be identified in specific means of art ("organs of expression") such as "line, mass, colour" (73). In this letter Fry still struggles to find an exact definition of the quality of the emotion conveyed by the work of art: he fluctuates between a notion of the work of art as a direct manifestation of feeling, and art as the expression of a specific emotion, more rarefied and detached from everyday life. Some months later, in the same year, 1908, Fry reached a clearer understanding: in a lecture on "Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts" maintains that "emotions aroused [by the work of art] do not at once translate themselves into action:" they are "ends in themselves" (64), the expression of something that differs from ordinary life. In fact they are connected to the imaginative life ("my idea—Fry writes to D. S. MacColl on February 28, 1909—is that there are moods of imaginative life and good for all arts" [*Letters* 1: 315]). In "An Essay in Aesthetics" Fry gives an even more exact definition of the quality of the emotions expressed by works of art, making a clear-cut distinction between the emotion conveyed by the works of art and the emotions experienced in real life; the latter have a practical function and enable us to respond adequately to the stimuli of the external world, while the emotions belonging to the imaginative life allow to concentrate on the "perceptive and emotional aspects of the experience. […] [T]he graphic arts are the expression of the imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life […]. Art appreciates emotion in and for itself"

(13, 15, 19). These pure emotions are conveyed to the beholder through "unity" and "variety" of design, and formal means such as the "rhythm of the line," "mass," "space," "light and shade," and "colour," which Fry defines as "the emotional elements of design" (23-24). Similar views on the quality of the emotion conveyed by the work of art were put forward with an awkward, difficult and at times obscure reasoning, in the introductory text ("The Post-Impressionists") to the *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* show, written by Desmond MacCarthy (the secretary of the exhibition) using notes by Roger Fry (rpt. in Reed 81-85). In the wake of the first post-impressionist exhibition Fry felt the moment had come to clarify to a wider audience his ideas about the history and the aims of modern art. Therefore, between 1910 and 1913 he became committed to an intense activity, as a lecturer and a journalist (Reed 86-132), trying on the one hand to better define the notion of art as the expression of the aesthetic emotion and, on the other, to enrich and specify the range of formal aspects capable of conveying such an emotion. The means he insists on in this phase are two: the decorative unity and the plasticity of the work of art. With the word "decorative" he meant the quality that defines the work of art as a self sufficient entity, independent from any referential connotation, and with the term "plasticity" a three dimensional quality that has to be evoked rather than simulated. This entails that in painting some sense of the third dimension must be suggested, not through illusionistic modelling however, but through modulation, as suggested by Paul Cézanne.[2] Fry's reflections on the work of Cézanne are actually the keystone of his entire critical building and, in treating the third dimension, he was probably reminiscent of Cézanne's doubts about the flatness of Gauguin's colours.

In his introduction to "The French Group" at the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, Fry epitomizes in a famous (and effective) formula his thoughts about the new art:

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[2] This is a point on which Fry and Bell do not completely agree, and it is probably Fry's insistence that leads Bell, in *Art* (27), to add the suggestion of a third dimension as a "non irrelevant" kind of representation; see, for example, Fishman 127.

> Those artists do not seek to give what can, after all, only be a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make 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 some of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality. (167)

Decorative unity, plasticity and, especially, the expression of emotions are three of the main headings under which the new art is discussed and interpreted by British art criticism that deals with the two post-impressionist exhibitions: I do not mean critics such as Walter Sickert or D. S. MacColl, who had a vast knowledge of modern French art and had already formed a well structured opinion about it, but those who had scarce or no acquaintance with it. From the critical response to the first post-impressionist exhibition (between the end of 1910 and the beginning of 1911), the expressive quality of art becomes a critical category of prime importance when defining the aims of Post-Impressionism, in order to introduce it to a vast audience. In at least one instance an explicit reference to Fry in this regard was made even before the opening of the first post-impressionist exhibition: introducing a show of modern French artists held in Brighton in June 1910, Robert Dell quotes a passage from Fry's introduction to Maurice Denis' obituary of Cézanne that Fry had translated and introduced for the January and February 1910 issues of *The Burlington Magazine*. In the words quoted by Dell, Fry talks about the "direct expression in painting of imagined states of consciousness which has for long been relegated to music and poetry" (qtd. in Dell 85).

Also Robert Ross speaks of the work of art as an expression of emotions in his (unfavourable) review of the first post-impressionist exhibition, where this quality is associated with psychiatric pathology (Ross 101).[3] The theme is also central in the (half-hearted) review of the exhibition written by the painter Spencer F. Gore, president of the Camden Town Group, who was

[3] Under this respect the most ludicrous contribution is by Hyslop.

very close to Sickert; Gore quotes some words from MacCarthy/Fry's introduction to the show, maintaining that "'the emotional significance that lies in things'" should be "expressed in painting […] through the outward character of the object painted" (141). A similar view was held in Holbrook Jackson's review.[4]

In his review, published in *The Burlington Magazine*, Arthur Clutton-Brock insists on the connection between form and emotion in post-impressionist art (196), and similar opinions are expressed in Charles Lewis Hind's *The Post-Impressionists*, one of the two books written as an immediate reaction to the first post-impressionist exhibition (the other was *Notes on the Post-Impressionist Painters* by Charles Holmes, co-founder of *The Burlington Magazine* and close to Fry, although Fry never missed a chance to mistreat him). In his *Notes* Holmes stresses the importance of decorative unity in post-impressionist works (8 and *passim*) on show at the Grafton Galleries rather than the importance of the expression of emotions, while the point at issue in Hind's longer 1911 study is, in fact, the expression of emotions: "Expression, not beauty, is the aim of art. Beauty occurs. Expression happens—must happen. Art is not beauty. It is expression; it is always decorative and emotional" (2).[5] The influence of Fry in Hind's book is pervasive, to the point that, in a dialogue between an "Ordinary Painter" and an "Imaginative Painter," Hind makes the same distinction made by Fry in the "Essay in Aesthetics" in order to differentiate the emotions of "actual life" from those of the "imaginative life" (59-64).

In the two years between the first and the second post-impressionist exhibition, British criticism gradually became more prepared and ready to answer the questions raised by the new art. Fry's theoretical and critical framework is however still important: for example in 1912 when O. Raymond Drey, reviewing the Parisian Salon d'Automne of that year for *Rhythm*, with reference to Cézanne's influence states that "a man is a great art-

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4 "The post-impressionist paints what he feels about the thing seen" (Jackson 146).

5 Hind's book was published in the United States in 1912, and it was one of the main vehicles for the diffusion of Fry's ideas about Post-Impressionism in the USA (Nathanson 5).

ist when he has something to express" (345). And critics such as Desmond MacCarthy, or the poet Rupert Brooke, who were personally close to Fry, draw direct inspiration from his thought. For instance, Brooke, reviewing the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, talks about the work of art "as the expression of an emotion of the artist, and *not*, as most people have been supposing, his impression of something he sees" (404). At the beginning of 1913 the display of the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* was modified, because some of the works on show were needed for the Armory Show in New York, and about thirty watercolours by Cézanne were added: at that moment two reviews were published, respectively in *The Times* and in *The Observer*, the first not signed (attributed to Robert Ross by J. B. Bullen [410]), the other by P. G. Konody. In both papers an idea of plasticity that seems to be close to Fry's is very important: Konody (414) and Ross consider a non-illusionistic three dimensional movement of the pictorial surface as being fundamental: Ross defined it as "a new music of masses" ("Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists" 411), typical of Cézanne's painting.

When, at the end of 1912 the Americans Walter Pach, Walt Kuhn and Arthur B. Davies came to Europe in order to choose the works for the Armory Show, they visited the "Sonderbund" in Cologne, and the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*. In both shows they selected an important group of works (that is why the display of the show at the Grafton Galleries had to be modified); hence there is a direct link between the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* and the Armory Show, and not only in terms of selection of the works, but also in terms of critical framework into which modern art was presented to the audience.[6] At the opening of the Armory Show in New York, February 1913, very few people in the USA possessed the critical tools necessary to understand modern art. When the young critic Carl Zigrosser, who was then 22 years old, stood before Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 2*,

[6] For an account of the American response to the *First Post-Impressionist Exhibition* see Nathanson. Nathanson notes that Fry was a friend of Davies (6) and that Pach acknowledges Fry's influence on the structure of the Armory Show (7).

for example, he scribbled on his copy of the catalogue "shingle artist" (Duchamp's painting had been nicknamed by the press "Explosion in a Shingle Factory" [Brown 137]). Fifty years later Zigrosser commented: "It must be remembered that at that time there was practically no interpretative literature on modern art. We Americans were confronted with odd and bizarre works without having any clue as to how to look or what to see" (45-46). Meyer Schapiro makes, more broadly, the same point when he states:

> Friendly critics praised the courage and vitality and integrity of the modern artist […] without venturing to analyze the new styles. The hostile criticism—narrow and shortsighted as it was—in denouncing the deviations from the past art, pointed more directly to the essential novelty: the image was distorted or has disappeared altogether; colors and forms were unbearably intense; and the execution was so free as to seem completely artless. (141)[7]

The organizers of the Armory Show were themselves struggling with problems of definition of the new art (e. g. Davies 150) while the art critics reviewing the exhibition had to introduce modern European art to an audience that was barely aware of its existence: this is why Fry's notion of the work of art as expression of emotions was particularly effective in justifying works of art that were not meant to be a sheer representation of the external world. Also other facets of the wide and complex critical response to the Armory Show may be connected to the ideas expressed by Fry in his writings between 1910 and 1912, for example that the works of modern art displayed both classicist or primitivist aspects; that these works of art were the expression of the "thing in itself;" or, that once the reference to the external world had been completely abandoned, art had become a kind of visual music. The notion of a work of art as expression of the aesthetic emotion, however, was put forward much more consistently and had been much better articulated theoretically by Fry, becoming a sort of a trademark of his criticism. In February 1913, when the Armory Show opened, Fry's

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[7] For an account of the critical reactions to the Armory Show, see Brown and Mancini.

thought was actually well-known in New York: until recently he had been an expert of the Old Masters' painting at the Metropolitan Museum (Nathanson 4).[8] Moreover, some of his ideas were indebted to those of American proto-formalist theorists, such as, for example, Denman Waldo Ross (Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics" 22; Stankiewicz 81, 84, 90-93 and Frank 80), and this provided a background for the American reception of his thought. Furthermore, he of course wrote in English and his writings were published in periodicals easily available to the American audience (excerpts from his introduction to the "French Group" at the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* and passages of his writings were quoted, reprinted or abridged in the U.S. press), and, last but non least, the turmoil caused by the two post-impressionist exhibitions had made him famous: right before the opening of the Armory Show, in January 1913, paragraphs from Fry's text for the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* were quoted in the catalogue of an Alfred Maurer exhibition at the New York Folsom Gallery (Zilczer 12), and in the same January 1913, Royal Cortissoz, the arch-conservative critic of *The New York Tribune*, defined Fry as a "hyerophant of Post-Impressionism" (qtd. in Olsen 34) and then cited his name in his review of the Armory Show (Cortissoz 807).

Also Walter Pach, one of the minds behind the organization of the Armory Show, in an article written about one year after the exhibition, returns on the topics that are dear to Fry, such as the importance of Cézanne for the new movement in art, the classicism of the new school, Cubism as "an expression in painting without representation" (863).

If Pach was conversant with what was happening in recent European art, and consistent in his opinions, many other critics who wrote about the Armory Show, friends or foes of modern art, between 1913 and 1915 repeatedly referred to modern art as the expression of an emotion. It is this notion, more than any other, that helped to define the new art. To bring only a few examples Ernest Blumenschein, in *The Century Magazine* of April 1914, defined Cubism as an art "of the decorative and emotional sort"

[8] For Fry's importance in the critical reception of Cézanne's art in the USA see Rewald 132-139 and *passim*.

(848). (It must be remembered how much the idea of a "decorative" art, meant as an art that relies only on its formal economy, is central to Fry's thought). The sculptor Jo Davidson, speaking in defence of the Cubists, states: "They are not painting what they see, but what they feel" ("The Extremists" 170). And the critic John Nielsen Laurvik, after having discussed at length Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 2* (one of the works that caused more stir at the Armory Show, and that Laurvick didn't like) wrote:

> This movement has gained its impetus largely from a very general revolt against materialism that is substituting a new individualism for the old realism and I have no doubts that these men are sincerely and earnestly trying to discover a new form that shall express with greater intensity the new feelings and emotions aroused in men by all objects of the natural world. (19)

Laurvik was friends with Marius de Zayas, an artist, photographer and art critic close to Alfred Stieglitz (one of the few people in New York to have carried out, before the Armory Show, with his gallery and his review, *Camera Work*, a pioneering job in supporting modern art). Writing an article about Picasso from Paris for *Camera Work* in 1911, de Zayas talked about a picture that "should be the pictorial equivalent of the emotions produced by nature" ("Pablo Picasso" 66). The idea of a painting being the equivalent of an emotion resembles Maurice Denis' theory of "plastic equivalents," though in de Zayas it has such an emotional inflection that it is also close to the theories Fry was developing in those months.[9] Fry is explicitly quoted in *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*, by Arthur Jerome Eddy, of 1914, one of the two major texts devoted to modern art published by American authors in the wake of the Armory Show (the other is Willard

[9] Mecklenburg insists on the similarity between de Zayas' and W. H. Wright's opinions, on the one side, and Fry's and Bell's theories, on the other, but she thinks that this is due to the fact that "the four drew from similar sources" (119). De Zayas, introducing an excerpt from his article on Picasso in his *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York* states that he was only quoting "a few ideas Picasso had on painting at that time" (23).

Huntington Wright's *Modern Painting. Its Tendency and Meaning*, published in 1915). "After the painting of *things* [Realism] and *light* [Impressionism]—Eddy writes—one would say the art of painting had touched its limits, that there was nothing more to do. But, no, there is the painting of *neither* things nor light—the painting of *emotions*—the painting of pure line and color compositions for the sake of the pleasure such harmonies afford—*the expression of one's inner self*" (11).

Also in Wright's *Modern Painting. Its Tendency and Meaning* one can find ideas close to the ones expressed by Fry, and at this point also by Bell. For instance, Wright states:

> Modern painting strives toward the heightening of emotional ecstasy; and my *esthétique* is intended to pave the way for an appreciation of art which will make possible the reception of that ecstasy. With this object ever in view I have weighed the painting of the last century, and have judged it solely by its ability or inability to call forth a profound aesthetic emotion. Almost any art can arouse pleasing sentiments. Only great art can give us intellectual rapture. (10)

In another passage of his book, Wright maintains that "significant form must move in depth—backward and forward, as well as form side to side" (93).

Art as an expression of emotions, plasticity, significant form, are all notions drawn from Bloomsbury art criticism: another evidence of the fact that, in the years between 1910 and 1914, Roger Fry's theories in English speaking countries on both sides of the Atlantic seemed apt to provide a safe guidance for those artists and critics who wanted to make sense of the shocking novelties proposed by modern art.

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