

Robert Payne

Uncommon Guide to the World of Art

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

In these closing years of the twentieth century, when culture is plagued by a fevered confusion over the question, What is art?, it is salutary to revisit, if only vicariously, some landmarks in the long tradition of painting and sculpture. For such a pilgrimage, one could find no more inspiring or illuminating guide than the prolific British-born writer Robert Payne, who died a decade ago at the age of seventy-one.

Biographer, novelist, historian, poet, journalist, librettist, and translator, with well over a hundred books to his credit, Payne was neither an art historian nor a critic by profession. But in his deeply felt survey *The World of Art* (1972), and in highly literate travel books such as *The Splendor of Greece* (1960), he offers consistently penetrating insights into the visual arts—insights not only informed by wide-ranging scholarship but infused with the passionate enthusiasm of his own responses and communicated in a prose that is often breathtaking in its lucidity and grace.

Although Payne at times refers to art as a mystery that is "beyond the frontiers of reason," he in fact understands better than most twentieth-century historians and critics what art is and why it affects us so profoundly. He also understands the nature of artistic creation, and the role of the artist in relation to his culture. What the artist attempts, Payne explains in his Introduction to *The World of Art*, "is nothing less than a recreation of worlds, of universes, of people." The artist, like the shaman and the prophet, is a seer who holds us "within the concentrated circle of his own vision." While all art tends to reflect the physical circumstances and the cultural values of its time and place, each artist also imposes his individual stamp of value and feeling, albeit in varying degree from culture to culture and artist to artist.

Most important for an appreciation of the whole of art history, Payne is able to discern, through the veil of vast cultural differences, the transcendent, universal values relevant to humanity in any time or place. In his company, the products of millennia of art-making are seen as more than a dry succession of monuments and artifacts, pigeon-holed by period and linked mainly by notions of

stylistic development. They come alive as an intensely palpable legacy of the entire human race.

The Earliest Artists

"When we look for the first artists," Payne begins his survey of world art, "we see them

... standing on high scaffolding in the depths of limestone caves, ... the darkness lit only by the feeble flames of oil lamps. They are painting the shapes of horses, wild bulls, bison, reindeer, mammoth, and rhinoceros on the craggy walls. ... And there is nothing in the least tentative about their portrayal of these animals seen grazing quietly or racing across the prairies.

As Payne informs us in fascinating detail, the cave painter was a "sophisticated workman," whose technical means were much like those employed today. (In fact, the earliest extant paintings were probably the product of a tradition thousands of years in the making.)

Unlike most writers on the subject, who tend to focus on the supposed magic and ritual purposes of the cave paintings, Payne attempts to plumb the emotional depths of the Paleolithic artists by identifying the central values implicit in their work.

Their imaginative life was filled with the gleaming presences of the beasts who gave them fur and food and bone, sinew and hide and horn. So they painted them out of reverence and fellowship, with a deep compassion for them, knowing themselves to be sharers of the same kingdom. ... They filled the walls with them because their minds were filled with them.

Ever conscious of the vital connection between all art, Payne adds:

Just as Fra Angelico painted the walls of the cells of the Convent of San Marco with illustrations from the life of Christ, so the painters in these caves drew the outlines of the great themes of life and death. The wounded bison, dying in agony, was a subject for profound meditation, for the death of a powerful animal was

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an illustration of death's magnitude; and the procession of living animals was an affirmation of life.

The analogy seems entirely valid when one considers especially sensitive pre-historic images such as the remarkable painting of two reindeer from the Font-de-Gaume cave in France, in which a male tenderly nuzzles a crouching, apparently wounded female.

The First Civilizations

Payne's emphasis on the universality of art does not blind him to significant differences between cultures, however. Identifying the core values of each culture, he then shows how those values are reflected in its art. And he never commits the error, now endemic among "politically correct" art historians and critics, of judging art from other times and places in terms of a narrowly framed modern perspective. Instead, he reconstructs the original cultural context, beginning with the physical environment, which in pre-industrial societies had an especially powerful influence on culture. Consider this passage in relation to the ancient Egyptian world:

In the calm light of Egypt, where the never failing sun rises every day like a glory and the Nile rises every year like a dependable blessing, the earth and the sky proclaim a sense of order. In that sheltered world ringed round and protected by mountain barriers, nature seems to have restrained herself in order to provide a gifted people with the fruits of the earth, an unhindered livelihood.

For the ancient Egyptian, Payne explains, heaven was earth. Thus the paintings and reliefs adorning the Old Kingdom tombs depict scenes from daily life with amazing vivacity and delight—so that the deceased could "contemplate his life on earth, seeing himself hunting and fishing or attending the festivals of the seasons in the company of his wife and children." Those who think of Pharaonic Egypt as a harshly despotic realm, in which all but the king lived in wretched oppression and morbid fear, may be astonished at the values Payne discerns in its art.

The Egyptian artists were the first to explore the world of human relationships. They learned very early to depict husband, wife, and children together and to suggest the devotion they had for one another. . . . They invested the ordinary lives of ordinary mortals with a grave dignity, [as] in no other ancient civilization. . . . In the long noonday of Egypt this was perhaps the greatest triumph of all.

Equally satisfying is Payne's discussion of individual works, such as the wondrous portrait bust of Nefertiti,

wife and queen of the great reformer Akhenaton. In that work, Payne notes, the artist expressed not only "the self-consciousness inevitable in anyone so beautiful" but also "the changing, flickering pattern of her thoughts, so that we are aware of an intense inner life, of subtle and delicate meditations."

By striking contrast with the predominantly tranquil millennia of ancient Egyptian culture, Payne renders a forbidding picture of Mesopotamia. Explaining that, "unlike the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates are unpredictable in their rise and fall," he continues:

Harvests were uncertain, and wars were frequent, for those who lacked crops would fight those who brought in a good harvest. In these conditions of uncertainty, depending on the vagaries of nature, the Mesopotamians quite naturally came to possess an attitude toward life and the gods radically different from that of the Egyptians.

The result was, in Payne's words, "a pitiless empire [that] produced a pitiless art"—an epigram aptly characterizing Assyria, if not the earlier Sumerian civilization. But even in so brutal a culture as the Assyrian, in which "the faces of all men are alike," Payne finds a point of sympathy in its art—an affirmation of the value of life, amidst the scenes of battle and carnage. So I, too, discovered a couple of years ago. Rushing through the ground-floor rooms at the British Museum on my way to see the Parthenon sculptures before closing time, I was stopped in my tracks by a series of reliefs from Assurbanipal's palace in Nineveh. As Payne observes, in these royal hunting scenes, the animals are far more compelling than the hunters. A poignant intensity quickens the depictions of

wounded lions and lionesses as the blood pours out of them and they roar with pain, their muscles tense in the agony of dying, as they wearily attempt to lift their heads from the dust or turn to observe the heavy arrows in their flesh, snapping at them, for they would bite them off if they could. A wounded lioness with paralyzed hind legs tries to drag herself along by the forelegs, and every curve of the sagging back and belly, and every tendon of the fore-legs suggests the awareness of death.

Through the agony of that creature's death, the artist reminds us of the wonder and power of life.

Ancient Greece and Italy

For lovers of Greek antiquity, Robert Payne offers particular delights, in an excellent chapter in *The World of Art*, as well as in *The Splendor of Greece*. "The traveler visiting Greece for the first time

is shocked by the barrenness of the land," the latter volume begins. "The deserts of rock are everywhere." It was not from the land that the Greeks drew their special sustenance and inspiration, Payne continues, but rather from the

naked light—a light unlike any other light on the surface of the earth. It is a light that can be drunk and tasted, full of ripeness; light that filters through flesh and marble; light that is almost palpable. . . . It is a living thing: so living that the Greeks gave it the physical presence of a god and called it Phoebus Apollo, the god of the divine radiance.

For the Greeks,

The whole body of Apollo poured across the sky, intensely virile, flashing with a million points of light, healing everything it touched, germinating the seeds and defying the powers of darkness.

"The ancient Greeks had no illusions about the depth of darkness in the human soul," Payne hastens to add. "Yet they were essentially creatures of light, believing that the lucidity of the mind could put an end to the darkness of the soul."

Following the Greek victory over the Persians in 479 B.C., the triumph of light over darkness found its supreme expression in art. For the next fifty years, Payne writes,

The Greeks lived, thought, built temples, sculpted and painted as though they were the natural children of the gods. . . . In the space of two generations, . . . they set out to conquer the furthestmost regions of the human spirit, and they progressed so far that all the works of art and literature composed since that time are hardly more than footnotes to the vast page they wrote.

Such an encomium will not endear Payne to today's "multiculturalists," eager to discredit Western civilization. Yet years before their politicized viewpoint began to gain a stranglehold on thought, Payne himself was oddly ambivalent about certain aspects of Western culture. Regarding the great bronze figure of Poseidon, retrieved from the sea off Cape Artemision, he notes in *The Splendor of Greece*: "It seems to be one of the fatal flaws of Western consciousness that it can only represent power in terms of murderers and their victims"—a baffling indictment when one considers that the Poseidon figure celebrated a just victory over foreign invaders. In *The World of Art*, written a decade later, however, Payne more appropriately singles out the Poseidon figure as the epitome of the heroic spirit of the Golden Age.

No more dramatic representation of human majesty has ever been conceived. . . . There is about that naked bearded figure, so calm in his divine savagery, an authority surpassing any surviving statue of this time, or of any time. Poseidon is at once a man of transcendent beauty and a divinity with human features and a human body, and we shall not see his like again until Michelangelo carved his David for the Florentines.

Also eloquent is Payne's account of the Parthenon sculptures—from the Panathenaic procession depicted on the frieze (a work that "preserves the character of an entire people in the years of their triumph") to the monumental equine heads at the angles of the east pediment: the horse of the sun god Helios, "youthful and arrogant, rearing his arched neck"; the moon god's steed, "sink[ing] down in exhaustion and fatigue." Implicitly re-affirming the principle of the *selective* re-creation of reality involved in all art, Payne notes:

These horses are not rendered naturalistically: the natural forms have been rethought and reshaped to present them in powerful well-defined masses, with gaping nostrils and bulging eyes; they are the huge elemental horses which gallop across the fields of heaven.

Payne remarks in *The Splendor of Greece* that the period commonly known as the "classical age" was, rather, a "fiercely romantic time," whose apparent calm, order, and self-restraint in fact contained intense passion and enormous energy. Passion and energy were more manifest in the later, Hellenistic period, of course, in work such as the splendidly animated *Victory of Samothrace*. In its original setting, on the prow of a stone ship surrounded by water, Payne informs us in *The World of Art*, the great wings would have reflected the rippling light of the water, thus increasing the illusion of movement. In this magnificent work, he sees "the purest image yet conceived of divine grace hurrying to earth to offer her protection and blessing to men."

When Payne shifts his attention from Greece to Italy, it is Etruscan rather than Roman culture that elicits his particular sympathy. Etruscan art gives him the sense "of having lived among a people who were content with life and in love with vigorous joys." Apparently intended to warm the dead with memories of life, the frescoed burial chambers simulated the form of an Etruscan house, Payne observes, each reflecting its owner's individuality, for "the Etruscans rejoiced in their differences and took their separate personalities with them to the grave."

(Payne points out, in the sort of scholarly gloss that consistently illuminates his work, that our word *personality* itself derives from the Etruscan word *phersu*, meaning "mask.") Etruscan frescoes and life-size terra-cotta sarcophagal figures depicted husband and wife reclining together on their funerary couch, with evident "tenderness in [their] half-formed embrace and lingering smiles." No other culture, Payne notes, has so richly documented conjugal affection.

China and Japan

Early in life, Robert Payne was captivated by Asian culture. From the age of seven (when he wrote a story called "Adventures of Sylvia, Queen of China, Princess of Denmark") to the end of his life, the theme that occupied him was, he once said, "the marriage of East and West." And it was his books on China—beginning with his journal *Forever China* (1945) and the novel *Torrents of Spring* (1946)—that gained him his earliest and most lasting reputation. In *The World of Art*, he writes of the profound effect that "the misty gorges, the terraced fields, the tiger-headed rivers, and the haunted lakes" had upon Chinese art. Yet, the peculiar genius of that culture's landscape tradition is not captured nearly so well in his chapter on China as in the contrasts he draws with Japanese art.

Payne brilliantly conveys the essence of the Japanese artistic imagination—an imagination wrought in an unstable natural environment. "A secluded village in the heart of the mountains might vanish overnight in an earthquake," he explains, "or be torn to matchwood in a hurricane or be burnt to the ground if a thunderbolt fired the surrounding forests." Citing a characteristically Japanese sentiment—"the world is fleeting; it can never return"—Payne opposes it to the Chinese spirit: "The world is here, and endures forever."

But unlike other peoples obsessed with the impermanence of life, Payne suggests, the Japanese *rejoice* in it.

Throughout their lives they have an awareness of the pathos of existence, that trembling quality of the mind which they call *mono no aware*. Life is forfeit; it has gone almost as soon as it occurs; and what remains is the memory of a sudden splendor. Instead of a monumental art the Japanese concentrated on producing an art that was fragile, restless, exquisitely refined, explosive.

Also illuminating is the contrast Payne draws between the worlds of Japan's greatest printmakers, Hiroshige and Hokusai: "one gentle and compassionate, the other strenuous and almost merciless in [his] judgment on mankind." Payne continues: "A famous print by Hokusai shows the Chinese

poet Tu Fu departing into exile in the midst of a snowstorm. A tree laden with frost hangs over him, the narrow road is sharp with stones, and the snow falls like bullets." Hiroshige, on the other hand, represented "a gentler and more indulgent tradition which sought to render landscape with luminous intensity and brooding affection." In his winter scenes, "the snow enfolds the earth like a garment," and the countryside is "transformed into a foretaste of paradise." In Hiroshige, Payne concludes, "it was as though it were given to a single man to express all the graces of Japanese feudal society and none of its violence."

The Italian Renaissance

Sensitive as Payne is to the influence of geography and climate on culture, he is no less keenly aware that a people can transcend the limitations of circumstance through ingenuity and industry. Setting the stage for the Florentine Renaissance, he writes:

A visitor to Florence about A.D. 1260 would have found a small walled city living luxuriously but without visible means of support. The soil was stony, patched with scrub and occasional cypresses and clumps of pine. Some of the hill slopes supported vines and olives, but the grudging soil demanded almost more labor than it was worth. . . . Having no resources of their own, the Florentines made a virtue of necessity. They became entrepreneurs on a massive scale, traders in far countries, experts in rates of exchange, bankers to everyone. . . .

During the three centuries between the birth of Giotto and the death of Michelangelo, Payne observes, the Florentines were inspired by a passion to excel and by their sense of human freedom, illuminated and fed by the pure, clear, steady light of the Tuscan hills.

Regarding Giotto's incomparable fresco cycle for the Arena Chapel in Padua—a series of unprecedented compositions "alive with emotion"—Payne comments:

For the first time in European painting we become aware of the weight of human bodies and the air in their lungs, and we almost hear their voices. . . . At the same time Giotto's sense of the dignity and monumentality of the human form permits him to endow his figures with such power that we do not question their divinity.

A new element has entered painting—intelligence. In Giotto's work the mind and the body are in movement.

Giotto's fellow Florentine, Michelangelo, is the only artist to whom

Payne devotes an entire chapter. This “elemental and titanic” sculptor, painter, architect, and poet was called by his contemporaries *divino*—a title that, Payne points out, had been previously reserved for emperors.

Even when Michelangelo borrowed a timeworn compositional convention of Flemish art—the *Pietà*—he thoroughly transformed it. In place of the tearful, bloody agony of the earlier treatments, Payne notes, he brought splendor and dignity to the subject. “The dead Christ resembles a Greek warrior fallen in battle and the Virgin might be Athena mourning for her lost son”—tenderly and with compassion.

Whereas Michelangelo’s *Pietà* is an expression of “the ultimate blessedness, the certainty of divine love,” Payne observes, his *David* embodies “a pagan reliance on strength, cunning, and intelligence.”

He stands there like a god who has descended to earth in order to chastise the mighty and to tear kings from their thrones. His brows are knit, his eyes are watchful, the youthful body stands in absolute composure, conscious of its own strength, its own power to accomplish whatever the intelligence demands. Authority and self-reliance have become so habitual that he scarcely knows they exist, and he wears his flesh with the same divine negligence. . . . In his arrogance and splendor, superbly defiant, celebrating his own humanity, beauty, and magnificence [he] is more Apollo than David, and belongs more to Greece than to the Renaissance. Here Michelangelo stated once and for all, in a manner he would never surpass, the ideal inhabitant of the visionary earth.

While “the very air and atmosphere of Florence call for a sculptor to fill all the empty spaces,” Payne aptly observes, Venice demands paintings. He likens the Venice of the Renaissance to “an open jewel box blazing with color. . . . Color is the sovereign lord of Venice, and the painters are her priests, her servants, and her worshippers.”

As Payne makes clear, the Venetian school encompassed artists radically different from each other in temperament and output—from Giovanni Bellini, who for three generations painted Madonnas and Pietàs “with an enthralled tenderness” and an unflinching imagination, to Tintoretto, who depicted “the rush and fury of things, the brilliant revelation of sudden colors, the confrontation of God and man.” There was also the elusive Giorgione, who created “an enchanted golden age” and who moved painting into a secular realm “of luminous forms, imaginary mythologies and dreamlike images.”

In works such as his *Sleeping Venus*, “the flesh of a woman was an object of veneration, and the earth was bathed in the divine light of the sun.”

Payne contrasts Giorgione’s pagan innocence with the worldly sophistication of his pupil Titian. Unlike Giorgione, who created a visionary world, Titian remained at home in this world. Profound in his study of portraiture, he also “reveled in sumptuousness and splendor, and all his works convey his electric excitement in portraying the flesh and the lineaments of the human face.”

“While the Florentines always resembled youths and were in love with youth,” Payne concludes, “the Venetians were mature men in love with maturity,” who “achieved an astonishing plenitude in their art.”

Flanders and Holland

“The great periods of art nearly always come when peace is secure, when the barriers of trade are thrown down, and when there are great accumulations of wealth,” Payne notes. “[Art] flourishes under gifted and wealthy patrons, and languishes under tyrants. It withers away if it cannot breathe the air of the outside world, and it is the first victim of wars.”

So the golden age of Flemish art began in the fifteenth-century Duchy of Burgundy, ruled over by Philip the Good (1396-1467)—“a man of exquisite taste and formidable knowledge of the arts.” Payne’s evocation of the Flemish bourgeoisie clearly reflects the sumptuous paintings of the period.

They enjoyed great processions and festivities, . . . but they especially enjoyed their own intimate daily lives. . . . In small rooms cramped with possessions, the narrow windows open to let in the sound of the cobbled streets, their families gathered round them, rich food on the table, and fine linen spread below the silver drinking vessels, these burghers seem to have known a contentment we can only envy. Their days were full and they died peacefully.

But, Payne emphasizes, these “eagerly acquisitive” burghers were also deeply religious. For them, earthly beauty and domestic comforts were but a manifestation and reflection of the ultimate splendor of Heaven. Thus Payne likens the vision of the great early Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck, in his masterwork the *Ghent Altarpiece*, to the vision that inspired the creation of the Gothic cathedrals: both were informed by the conviction that “the splendor and beauty of God could be conveyed through rich adornments, brilliant vestments, the fire of precious jewels.” And Van Eyck’s image of a

“plump and mild-eyed” Lamb of God is

like an image in a dream, at once beyond belief and totally credible in that mysterious landscape of forests and rosebushes, churches and strangely shaped rocks. Toward this Lamb, as though propelled by some force greater than themselves, come the rich and the humble, the knights of Christ and the holy virgins; and in their movement, and in the way they hold themselves, there is a kind of quiet relish, as though they knew themselves to be blessed.

How removed from the pious serenity and innocence of Jan van Eyck’s world is Payne’s account of Peter Paul Rubens, who epitomized the mature phase of Flemish painting two centuries later. “Painter, art collector, secret agent, ambassador to the courts of the most powerful kings in Europe, scholar, linguist,” Rubens “seemed to be living six lives at once.” He was “robust, sensual, addicted to all the pleasures of life,” and yet was “capable of fantastic powers of concentration, so that on one occasion he completed a huge altarpiece in six days.” In Payne’s view, Rubens was unrivaled in communicating “the excitement of the flesh.” Even in his religious paintings his sensuality is ever-present—as in *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, in which he shows us “a cascade of tumbling naked bodies plunging helter-skelter into the flaming pits of hell.”

By way of introducing the art of Holland’s golden age, which began with the Dutch liberation from Spanish rule in 1609, Payne roots its bourgeois sobriety in the character of the land and its people. “Holland was a land at the mercy of the sea, and every Dutchman knew that a man must live cautiously if he was to safeguard the land reclaimed from the sea.” Unlike the Catholic Flemings—who reveled in festivals at which they “joyfully paraded the sins of the flesh under the watchful eyes of the priests”—the Dutch were sober Calvinists.

The influence of the more flamboyant Flemish art, especially that of Rubens, is apparent in the early work of Frans Hals, the first of the great Dutch painters, whose “slashing brushstroke . . . conveys a finger or the curve of a cheek in a single throw.” At close range, Payne points out, his work seems to disintegrate into “meaningless ridges and troughs of color exactly like the paintings of the Impressionists, who admired and imitated him.” But viewers who consider Hals shallow, Payne cautions, do not fully appreciate his ability to depict, with “staggering intensity” and “lusty warmheartedness,” the broad gamut of the Dutch people—from burgomasters and preachers to fishwives, strolling players, and devout old women.

Born just a quarter-century after Hals, Rembrandt carried the study of character to far more profound depths, with an “unerring sense of nobility.” By the age of fourteen, Payne reports, Rembrandt had resolved to be a painter, and within a few years the earmarks of his art were evident: “an insistence on character, a love of darkness and chiaroscuro, a delight in rich embroidered fabrics to offset the rich embroidery of the human face.” Whereas Michelangelo “saw heroic form in the naked body,” Payne observes, Rembrandt found it “in the wrinkles of an aging face.” One sixth of Rembrandt’s entire output consisted of portraits of family members and of himself. In the threescore self-portraits he produced, it was, Payne stresses, the image of his inner life that he sought.

Always attentive to the individual life behind the work of art, Payne often enriches *The World of Art* with biographical details about the artists that lend their work added poignancy. So we are reminded of Rembrandt’s life, with its unremitting series of tragic losses—from the death of his first wife, Saskia, after only eight years of marriage and the loss of three of their four children in infancy; to the early death of his second wife, Hendrickje, leaving behind a daughter; and finally, the loss of his beloved son, Titus, at the age of twenty-seven. Rembrandt died a year later, “working to the very end,” Payne adds. “An unfinished canvas stood on the easel: it was a picture of an old bearded man with a child in his arms.”

The art of that other great Dutchman Vermeer was, like Rembrandt’s, “intensely personal.” It consisted mainly of paintings of his wife and daughters, with an occasional self-portrait. On the vexing question of why Vermeer’s recognition as a master was so long delayed, Payne suggests that “he was not so much an innovator as an artist who, coming at the end of a long tradition, concentrates all its energies in his own person.” Vermeer, in truth,

did not invent the silence and clarity we associate with his name. To a quite extraordinary degree he deepened the silence and gave to clarity a hitherto unknown brilliance.

The Eighteenth Century

Surprisingly, one of the most absorbing chapters in Payne’s *World of Art* covers the Age of Enlightenment, a period far less distinguished for its painting and sculpture than for its philosophy and science. It was a troubled time, Payne explains. Traditional mores were breaking down as the industrial revolution advanced and the Church’s influence waned. And tyranny was rampant, availing itself of the latest instruments of war. While philosophy, science, and technology had challenged the old order, a humane new

order had not yet been forged. This tumultuous era gave rise to artistic personalities as different as Watteau, Chardin, Piranesi, and Goya.

Antoine Watteau, a master draftsman and brilliant technician, painted elaborate courtly *fêtes*, set in the pleasure gardens of the rich—portraying weary “masqueraders in an indifferent world, where everything is transient.” His art is the fragile, poignant expression of a sensitive and vulnerable spirit.

Although similar to Watteau in temperament and in his mastery of painting, Payne tells us, Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin gave form to a very different vision of the world.

He painted only the things he knew, and he had not the slightest interest in the world of the court, or of fashion. . . . He would paint a kitchen and put his wife or a maid-servant in it, and this was enough. Paradise was a pomegranate on an earthenware plate. . . . Jugs and roughhewn cups and all the bare necessities of life reigned in perfect silence, every object in harmony with every other object.

Chardin’s work was highly valued only by other artists, Payne points out. Yet by his hand a loaf of bread or a jug of wine gained “more true dignity than anything that existed in the palace at Versailles.”

The Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Chardin’s close contemporary, seems, as contrasted by Payne, to belong to another world entirely, a world of “immense crumbling ruins, palaces and triumphal archways,” which he envisioned in countless engravings of Roman antiquities and vast, empty prison scenes—all the product of the same desperate, intense vision.

Of Francisco Goya, who was active well into the nineteenth century, Payne relates that much of his work depicted “the nightmare of a world going mad.” And yet, even when Goya was himself on the brink of insanity, he continued to paint, as Payne notes, superb portraits which are entirely sane—“sober, earthbound, filled with human character and affection.” Payne thereby calls attention to an essential aspect of this artist that is neglected by most twentieth-century interpreters, who are intent on viewing Goya’s work as a seminal expression of the modern spirit of alienation and despair. That distorted view has been substantially corrected by Priscilla Muller’s scholarly monograph *Goya’s ‘Black’ Paintings: Truth and Reason in Light and Liberty* (1984) and by the exhibition and catalog “Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment” (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), both of which have amply documented Goya’s humanist aspirations and the cautionary, constructive intent behind his most horrifying images.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Though far from comprehensive, and at times uneven, Payne’s account of successive upheavals in the world of art from the Impressionist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century to the brutish canvases of Jean Dubuffet in the mid-twentieth offers telling observations. For example, after praising the Impressionists for “re-awakening the eye” by their emphasis on the direct study of nature, Payne then remarks: “If they . . . failed to produce a single artist who could rank with Michelangelo or Rembrandt, this was because they were concerned with the appearance of things, not with the dark depths.” (The pessimism implicit in that last phrase aside, Impressionist work, however appealing, often does lack psychological and philosophic depth.) In contrast with the Impressionists, Payne observes, Gauguin attempted to plumb the “ancient springs” of mankind’s being. His exotic, visionary paintings exude “primitive wonder and a [profound] sense of the wholeness of the earth.”

As for Cézanne, he strove to create, in Payne’s words, a “sturdy, incontrovertible world of solid forms arranged in space in such a way that their solidity was maintained. . . . He was obsessed with the enduring and the eternal, and he had the Provençal peasant’s passion for the land, the only enduring thing under the sun.” Most of his paintings were landscapes or still lifes; and his occasional portraits treated the human face “as though it were a roughhewn rock quarry, full of sharp splintered planes.”

Whereas Cézanne aimed to create “constructions after nature,” Payne pointedly relates, Picasso wrote: “For me, a picture is a sum of destructions.” *Cubism* was therefore a misleading term, Payne argues.

The Cubists were not attempting to rearrange their figures into elementary forms; they were attempting a revolution which would drastically change the nature of painting itself by means of “a sum of destructions.”

Nevertheless, Payne makes the mistake of echoing the conventional modernist claim that the destructive new forms, evident in music and literature as well as in painting and sculpture, were inevitable reflections of the “growing disorder of society.” Such a claim is belied by the work of at least one prominent modernist—Matisse—whose work projected, over a long career (documented in a vast exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art last year), a sensuous, childlike joy of life. It is also belied by the output of countless painters and sculptors working in traditional forms throughout the twentieth century.


As Payne notes, Matisse detested

Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (the savagely cubistic rendering of five nudes in a brothel), which he foresaw would retard the development of painting. Yet Payne does not seem to recognize that the great gulf between Picasso and Matisse is not merely formal or stylistic but stems, more fundamentally, from their disparate attitudes toward life.

Acknowledging that Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* began a revolution in painting that has produced work "increasingly remote from ordinary human preoccupations," Payne nonetheless heartily praises modernists such as Miró. Instead of faulting their abstract works for being divorced from human concerns, he admires their "new worlds . . . of non-representational forms."

To Payne's credit, however, he was extremely critical of the dominant trends in painting and sculpture following World War II. He excoriates Dubuffet for "pronouncing a sentence of death on all human values," and he ironically observes that "Jackson Pollock would simply pour paint on immense stretches of canvas . . . and the finished painting would solemnly be presented to collectors as a work of art." By thus suggesting that Pollock's work is not art, Payne separated himself from the vast majority of art historians and critics today. If he did not fully understand the kinship between the modernists he admired and Pollock, he nonetheless saw that something fundamentally human was lost in the "piling up of abstraction upon abstraction."

Equally important, Payne rejected the nihilism at the very root of modernism. "The visitor to museums of modern art," he lamented, "sees paintings and sculptures made in derision and hatred of men, gallery upon gallery filled with a fierce, intoxicated calligraphy designed to remind men of their helplessness." It is not at all surprising that such statements led one writer, reviewing *The World of Art* for the monthly *Art in America*, to call it a "dangerous commodity."

In concluding his survey, Robert Payne reminded readers that, contrary to the "all-encompassing doom" purveyed by modern art museums, art has long proclaimed "the beauty and divinity of man; the subtlety of his mind, the joy of his handiwork." The nihilism of modernism, Payne suggested, is but a temporary aberration, inimical to human nature. His conclusion, albeit entirely intuitive, is essentially correct, of course. Indeed, it is remarkable that, though Payne lacked a consistent philosophic perspective, his intuition and innate sensitivity so often led him straight to the fundamental truths about art. 

Bibliographic Note

Most of Robert Payne's work is, regrettably, out of print, but perhaps the foregoing article will help to prompt a reprinting of *The World of Art* and *The Splendor of Greece*. (*The World of Art*, in particular, might serve as an enriching supplementary text for any historical survey of art.) Meanwhile, readers may be lucky enough to find these titles in their local library or used-book store, or through a search service for out-of-print books.