University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2005-6: Word & Image

Undergraduate Humanities Forum Research Fellows

4-1-2006

# Envisioning Cultural Visions: Visual Arts in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

Janine Catalano
*University of Pennsylvania*

*2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image*, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

URL: http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/05-06/mellon_uhf.shtml

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2006/9
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

# Envisioning Cultural Visions: Visual Arts in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

**Abstract**
In studying modern art and poetry for the past several years, I have become interested in how these two categories are defined and conceptualized. Too often the visual and literary arts are envisioned as decidedly separate spheres; but, particularly in the art of the twentieth century, these lines begin to blur. As critic Roger Shattuck describes, "To a greater extent than at any time since the Renaissance, painters, writers, and musicians lived and worked together and tried their hands at each other's arts in an atmosphere of perpetual collaboration." The great minds from both comers cross their genre boundaries for intellectual discussion and exchange of ideas and theories. Textual aesthetics become a part of art and artistic practices influence writers as these modernists collectively strive to follow Ezra Pound's credo, "Make it new."

**Comments**
*2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image*, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

URL: http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/05-06/mellon_uhf.shtml

This presentation is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2006/9

# Envisioning Cultural Visions: Visual Arts in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

## Conference Presentation

Janine Catalano
Penn Humanities Forum 2006
Undergraduate Humanities Forum
Conference Presentation

In studying modern art and poetry for the past several years, I have become interested in how these two categories are defined and conceptualized. Too often the visual and literary arts are envisioned as decidedly separate spheres; but, particularly in the art of the twentieth century, these lines begin to blur. As critic Roger Shattuck describes, "To a greater extent than at any time since the Renaissance, painters, writers, and musicians lived and worked together and tried their hands at each other's arts in an atmosphere of perpetual collaboration." The great minds from both corners cross their genre boundaries for intellectual discussion and exchange of ideas and theories. Textual aesthetics become a part of art and artistic practices influence writers as these modernists collectively strive to follow Ezra Pound's credo, "Make it new."

Perhaps no one takes this saying to heart more than T.S. Eliot, arguably the preeminent modernist poet. Due to his incorporation of dense allusions and multiple languages, he is often deemed frustratingly opaque for the average reader. However, I contend that focusing on these allusions undermines a crucial element of Eliot's poems—namely, their integrity as potent works of art on an immediate, unmediated level. At the heart of his oeuvre is a poetry which is accessible, which is striking and powerful on a visceral level that requires looking no deeper than the text of the actual poems themselves—an effect that is achieved, I believe, through Eliot's understanding and application of the techniques of modern trends in the visual arts.

My research explores two realms of Eliot's interaction with the visual arts. First, I will demonstrate how he uses overt references to classical and Renaissance art to scorn the vapid elitist snobbery with which they have become connected. Second, I will suggest the ways in which Eliot utilizes contemporary artistic tenets and theories and

incorporates them into his own work as literary renditions of these artistic techniques in a way that achieves similar effects on the reader. Given time constraints, I have chosen to focus on Eliot's relationship to Cubism to exemplify this point.

So first, an examination of Eliot's relationship with the classical arts. In Eliot's body of poetry, allusions to the visual arts are relatively scarce; however, where he does employ such direct allusions, they are by no means laudatory. Take, for instance, the famous refrain of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (SLIDE):

> "In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo"

To Eliot's modernist sentiments, these women represent an elitist sector of society, in which the ability to discuss art and culture has become a superficial symbol of one's status. Prufrock's own uncertain grappling with his existence proves him to be, however timidly, capable of introspective reflection; these women, by contrast, are void of independent, meaningful thought. Instead, they are stuck in an endless and familiar routine of impressing one another in a present based on uninspired conversation mired in the past. One imagines that their "choosing" to talk about Michelangelo requires little more creativity than "deciding" to take "toast and tea," as occurs later in the poem. The repetition of these lines furthers this elitist talking-head redundancy, as no matter what occurs in the world around them, the women will obliviously "come and go," discussing what they deem timelessly impressive, rather than what is fresh and interesting. The women are not interested in the impact that Michelangelo's creations might have on them personally; rather, the emphasis is on one's knowledge of and eloquent discussion about the artist to conform with accepted opinions on the subject.

Moreover, the very fact that they are not talking about Michelangelo's *work* but simply about the general idea of "Michelangelo" shifts the focus from his artistic prowess to the esteem of his name. He is, it seems, a pawn of their superficiality, there to serve their whims. As Helen Gardner characterizes their choice of artist:

> "Why not? One must talk of something and Michelangelo is a cultural topic. The absurdity of discussing his giant art, in high-pitched feminine voices, drifting through a drawing-room, adds merely extra irony to the underlying sense of the lines: the escape into any kind of triviality, implied by the phrase: 'Let us go and make our visit.'"

When the protagonist later describes himself as "an easy tool/Deferential, glad to be of use...Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;/At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—/Almost, at times, the Fool," he may equally be describing the glib manner in which these women appropriate Michelangelo for their own purposes, to the point where this great master is rendered vacuous and absurd. In this context, therefore, Eliot sees Michelangelo as little more than a figure of the past turned modern-day status symbol.

In Eliot's private correspondence as well as his published verse, he maintained a distrust for the exaltation of outdated art. After spending time working at the British Museum library in late 1914 and early 1915, Eliot penned a poem entitled "Afternoon" in a note to his former Harvard classmate Conrad Aiken in February of 1915 (SLIDE):

> "The ladies who are interested in Assyrian art
> Gather in the hall of the British Museum.
> The faint perfume of last year's tailor suits
> And the steam from drying rubber overshoes
> And the green and purple feathers on their hats
> Vanish in the sombre Sunday afternoon
>
> As they fade beyond the Roman statuary,
> Like amateur comedians across a lawn,
> Towards the unconscious, the ineffable, the absolute." (Letters 89)

These women enter the museum already mired in the past, with their musty perfume and outdated clothing. Even their one potentially distinctive feature—the "green and purple feathers on their hats"—becomes subsumed into the bland, lifeless world of their antiquated interests. Eliot again refers to Italian art, reaching back even farther to ancient Rome. With the brilliant image of the ladies "fad[ing] beyond the Roman statuary," these women have become so invested in studying the past that they become a part of it. By literally removing themselves from the realities of the modern world and instead investing all their energies in the museum's relics, they are subsumed by a past that no longer exists, and figuratively vanish from existence as they have mentally vanished from contemporary discourse. There is a finality in the last line, in the "absolute," that underscores this preclusive nature of the past.

In his conversational writing, Eliot's biases are even more blatant. In December of 1914, he wrote to Aiken (SLIDE):

> "Come, let us desert our wives and fly to a land where there are no Medici prints, nothing but concubinage [sic] and conversation. That is my objection to Italian Art: the originals are all right, but I don't care for the reproductions." (Letters 74)

This statement wonderfully captures Eliot's views on the stagnancy of classical art in the modern age. While the original impression of an Italian master painting might be thought-provoking, these images are so copied and codified by the twentieth century that it is impossible to view them with fresh eyes. Instead, one's immediate interaction with the work of art becomes secondary to one's expectations, much as a sexual relationship with one's wife may come to lack the excitement and unexpectedness of new sexual endeavors. With Medici prints and reproductions, the aura of originality surrounding a unique work of art is stripped away. It no longer lends itself to the "conversation" Eliot

refers to here—not the superficial drivel of the museum-going women, but meaningful, intelligent, inquisitive challenges and innovations shared among thoughtful individuals. In this rejection of the veneration of traditionally touted art, Eliot expresses his own iteration of Ezra Pound's demand of the modern age to "make it new."

Ultimately, then, in the few instances where Eliot employs these direct allusions, his goal is to elucidate the frivolity and banality of most discourse about art. The ability to exchange platitudes about master painters means nothing to Eliot. Instead, he is interested in originality and freshness. This distinction can be seen by comparing these examples with Eliot's attitude in the poem "La Figlia che Piange", which describes a statue of a weeping girl that the poet missed seeing in a museum in Italy. The last stanza of this poem reads (SLIDE):

> "She turned away, but with the autumn weather
> Compelled my imagination many days,
> Many days and many hours:
> Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
> And I wonder how they should have been together!
> I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The trouble midnight and the noon's repose."

In this passage, it is the mystery of the sculpture that fuels Eliot's thoughts, providing him with "many days and many hours" of "imagination," and "cogitations" that "amaze". In remaining unknown, the sculpture is free from expectations. One cannot just recite accepted platitudes about the work, but rather can and *must* invest personal thoughts and ideas. In doing so, Eliot actually crafts the unseen work of art out of words to create something new, and by challenging the conventional perceptions of art, he actualizes his own assertion from The Sacred Wood that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

It is through this verbal crafting of the visual arts that Eliot employs the modern art and artistic theories he so respects. He eschews direct references to artists such as Picasso and Wyndham Lewis in his work—allusions which would require a knowledge of the art to fully understand. Instead, Eliot's poems are in many instances literary renditions of contemporary artistic theories, adaptations of visual practices to a poetic medium. Through this approach, I believe that Eliot invests his work with an immediate accessibility, by which the reader can be viscerally affected by the aesthetics of his language, imagery, and style upon a first reading.

An exploration of Eliot's relationship to Cubism is perhaps the best example of these effects. Cubist artists were among the chief pioneers of early twentieth-century textual-visual explorations, and Eliot himself was privy to many of the conversations in which these ideas were being discussed. As he wrote to longtime friend Eleanor Hinkley in January of 1915 (SLIDE):

> "I have just been to a cubist tea. There were two cubist painters, a futurist novelist, a vorticist poet and his wife, a cubist lady black-and-white artist, another cubist lady, and a retired army officer who has been living in the east end and studying Japanese....We discussed poetry, art, religion, and the war, all in quite an intelligent way, I thought." (Letters 77)

Two months later, after a brief time away from London, he proclaimed to Hinkley, "Now I am back in London, the town of cubist teas, and find it is more delightful and beautiful than ever," showing his clear esteem for the practice of and ideas behind cubism.

One of the most salient examples of the cubist relationship to art and writing is the incorporation of text into cubist paintings and collages, a popular practice of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Their work was decidedly familiar to the London intellectuals during the mid-1910s, a decade before two Picasso nudes were published in

the same November 1922 issue of *Dial* as Eliot's "The Waste Land". The very act of collage, blending paint, text, and other materials, and mingling elements of contemporary life with traditionally recognizable "artistic" practices, challenges conventional classifications.

Of particular corollary interest to T.S. Eliot's practices is the use of text in Cubist works to create artistic-linguistic puns. Picasso's 1912 collage Still Life with Chair Caning exemplifies just such a manipulation of language (SLIDE). In this composition, Picasso includes a string of three letters: "JOU". These letters appear to be cleaved out of the French word for newspaper, *journal*, rooting the composition in mundane life and café culture. However, these letters also recall the root of the French verb for "play", *jouer* ("zhoo-ay"); thus, they become a meta-text, referring to their own function as a means of playing with language, art, and the boundaries between them.

Obviously, knowing French is helpful for understanding the puns in this instance. However, though this and many other cubist works are enhanced by a body of information—for instance, a knowledge of French—their apprehension is in no way entirely dependent on such references. These works have an inherent intrigue, in their fracturing and refiguring of mundane elements; images of coffee cups and common materials like sand and wicker are recontextualized in unexpected ways. As critic Rosalind Kraus aptly describes, such works "insist that there is a logic immanent in the surface and…[one's] conception arises from experience rather than prior to or apart from it." These pieces are compelling for their aesthetic merit, but not because they are conventionally beautiful—and herein lies an important distinction. In compositions such as Still Life with Chair Caning, the complex interplay of planes and textures, the

unpredictable rendering of the recognizable, is compelling in its own right, independent of any external explanation. The viewer is immediately drawn in by the immediacy and surprise of the composition, and subsequently remains invested in its further density and complexity.

Many of T.S. Eliot's poems are themselves a breed of literary cubism. His frequent shifting of perspective can be seen as a textual rendition of the planarity and simultaneous representation of multiple perspectives that is so common in cubist compositions. For instance, in "Sweeny Among the Nightingales," Eliot rapidly transitions between different scenes (SLIDES):

> "Gloomy Orion and the Dog
> Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
> The person in the Spanish cape
> Tries to sit on Sweeny's knees
>
> Slips and pulls the table cloth
> Overturns a coffee-cup
> Reorganised upon the floor
> She yawns and draws a stocking up;
>
> The silent man in mocha brown
> Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
> The waiter brings in oranges
> Banana figs and hothouse grapes;
>
> The silent vertebrate in brown
> Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
> Rachel *nee* Rabinovitch
> Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;"

One might imagine these to be independent vignettes, linked thematically but perhaps not temporally. However, the next two lines change this opinion (SLIDE):

> "She and the lady in the cape
> Are suspect, thought to be in league"

Thus, one may assume that these disparate characters and events separated by semicolons are in fact varying vantage points on one setting, as though a photographer has turned and captured different perspective on a café scene which Eliot has then described. As such, they coexist as representations of the same moment.

A similar argument can be made for the cubist nature of "The Waste Land". Nancy Hargrove contends that Eliot may have gleaned many of the cubist elements of this poem from Picasso's radical sets for the avant-garde ballet *Parade* of the late 1910s. Much as Picasso incorporated multiple perspectives and positions in this and many of his works, fracturing bodies and words in unprecedented ways, Hargrove sees many of these characteristics at play in "The Waste Land":

> "[T]he reader's position in relation to the poem is ambiguous at best, since the traditional, noninvolved status is challenged by the direct addresses at the ends of Section I ('You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblabe,--mon frere!) and of Section IV. Further, the protagonist has multiple identities which are constantly shifting, and many characteristics are described solely in terms of body parts (arms, hair, eyes, back, knees, feet, fingernails, hands), altering the conventional manner of presenting a whole person"

Hargrove also argues that the constant shifting of angles and locales conflates multiple settings into one, resulting in "an effect of disorientation and confusion" akin to a cubist composition.

However, Hargrove fails to mention an important distinction between "The Waste Land" and a Picasso painting; unlike a cubist work of art, this is a poem that is inherently read linearly, precluding the visual simultaneity of perspectives that a painting or collage affords. While Eliot may verbally equate seeming disparate locations in "Sweeny Among the Nightingales" and "The Waste Land," the images here are in the reader's

imaginative mind's eye rather than literal eye. Eliot brilliantly compensates for this typical textual shortcoming in his poem "Le Directeur" (SLIDE).

It is interesting that Eliot would publish this French poem in Chicago's *Little Review* in 1917, and in a 1920 collection that is otherwise written in English. Admittedly, many intellectuals would have had a knowledge of French; but this cannot be the only explanation. "Le Directeur" is a poem that plays with the aesthetics of language, or more accurately with the aesthetics of text on paper. In keeping with his claim to Pound that he "distrust[s] and detest[s] Aesthetics, when it cuts loose from the Object, and vapours in the void", Eliot has adhered rigidly to the integrity of the object he is manipulating: text. Without a knowledge of the French language, the relationships between the words as textual objects rises to the forefront, overshadowing the usually primary role of language as a signifier of external objects. In "Le Directeur," Eliot takes his frequent technique of appropriating foreign language to an extreme, omitting referential English entirely. What Eliot has seemingly done is adopt a Cubist mode of fracturing and recombining to create similar yet slightly skewed perspectives. For instance, a relationship between the words "directeur," "conservateur," and "spectateur" is obvious even to a non-French speaker—they share the same ending. Their placement on the page, one on top of another, allows a reader to view all three words at once, noting their similarities and observing their differences, playing with the potentials of linguistic roots. One can almost imagine Eliot adopting Picasso's practice of splicing fragments of words out of newspapers, finding a "teur" and adapting it to various ends. Eliot manages to create this visual play in a way that does not rely on the unconventional placement of words on a page which characterizes typical visual poetry; instead, he relies entirely on the properties of the

word-objects themselves, much like the "thought-pictures" of Chinese characters that Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa are exploring at this same time. The text becomes the equivalent of Picasso's reconceptualized coffee cups. If meaning is later taken into consideration, the Cubist nature of the work is further reinforced; the identity of the subject of the poem shifts simply by altering the beginning of the word which defines him, thereby causing the figure to embody multiple roles in the same moment.

Thus, as cubist paintings simultaneously present multiple perspectives on the same object, this poem successfully treats the variants on words in a similar way, capitalizing on their surface qualities first and foremost. However, where Eliot has an advantage is that this poem is aesthetically compelling not only visually, but aurally. The letters translate into sounds which further underscore the similarities and differences between the words, the splicing and splaying from a shared root. Thus, this work manages to embody both the visual simultaneity of a cubist painting and the inherent temporal progression of poetry, both in sight and sound.

Therefore, through this innovative practice, Eliot proves that language and text can, when properly implemented, share the same universalizing characteristics as paint on a canvas. Eliot's poem is not meaningful only to those fluent in French. One may not fully apprehend the entirety of the composition, but right away there is undeniably an immediately available interaction stemming from its sheer appearance. Much as cubist paintings were new, confusing, non-codified, and therefore thought-provoking to audiences both elite and general, so too can "Le Directeur" be envisioned. No high-brow ladies could spout generalizations about Éliot at this time; he was no Michelangelo, nor did he want to be.

# Envisioning Cultural Visions: Linguistic Treatment of the Visual Arts in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

Janine Catalano

"In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo"

- "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

"The ladies who are interested in Assyrian art
Gather in the hall of the British Museum.
The faint perfume of last year's tailor suits
And the steam from drying rubber overshoes
And the green and purple feathers on their hats
Vanish in the sombre Sunday afternoon

As they fade beyond the Roman statuary,
Like amateur comedians across a lawn,
Towards the unconscious, the ineffable, the absolute."

- "Afternoon", Feb. 1915, Letter to Conrad Aiken

"Come, let us desert our wives and fly to a land where there are no Medici prints, nothing but concubinage [sic] and conversation. That is my objection to Italian Art: the originals are all right, but I don't care for the reproductions."

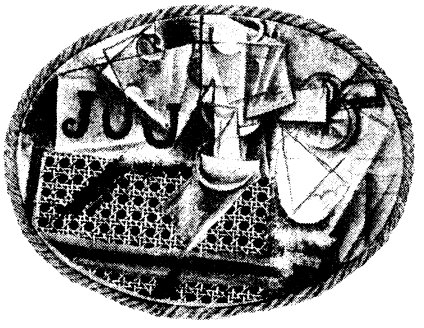
- Dec. 1914, Letter to Conrad Aiken

"She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The trouble midnight and the noon's repose."

- "La Figlia che Piange"

"I have just been to a cubist tea. There were two cubist painters, a futurist novelist, a vorticist poet and his wife, a cubist lady black-and-white artist, another cubist lady, and a retired army officer who has been living in the east end and studying Japanese....We discussed poetry, art, religion, and the war, all in quite an intelligent way, I thought."

- Jan. 1915, Letter to Eleanor Hinkley



Pablo Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning, 1912

"Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeny's knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee-cup
Reorganised upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;

The waiter brings in oranges
Banana figs and hothouse grapes;

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel *nee* Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;"

- "Sweeny Among the Nightingales"

"Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeny's knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee-cup
Reorganised upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;

The waiter brings in oranges
Banana figs and hothouse grapes;

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel *nee* Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;

She and the lady in the cape
Are suspect, thought to be in league"

- "Sweeny Among the Nightingales"

"Malheur a la malheureuse Tamise
Qui coule si pres du Spectateur.
Le directeur
Conservateur
Du Spectateur
Empeste la brise.
Les actionnaires
Reactionnaires
Du Spectateur
Conservateur
Bras dessus bras dessous
Font des tour
A pas de loup.
Dan un egout
Une petite fille
En guenilles
Camarde
Regarde
Le directeur
Du Spectateur
Conservateur
Et creve d'amour."

- "Le Directeur"