

Richard Shiff. *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 264 pp. \$29.95.

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"One can point to the moon with one's finger," some, probably well-invented, Zen Master is supposed to have said, "but to take one's finger for the moon is to be a fool." [Geertz 1975:92]

A master of a technique of originality could indeed represent a "leap" never taken. [p. 228]

In a culture that mistakes actors for the heroes they portray, it is perhaps not surprising that artists are confused with the myths they explore in their paintings. This is especially true because, like the "stars," the artists themselves operate in society, under the power of the myths they represent. Shiff has written an engrossing and important book about one of the most powerful artistic myths of the modern era, that of the painter Paul Cézanne. This exploration results in a fundamentally new image of Cézanne and a contribution to a historical understanding of the language of art. Most significant, however, it investigates some of the ways in which the myth of artistic creation informs artistic production and critical interpretation.

The Cézanne myth, in its most familiar form, places the artist at the critical transition between nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. Most frequently he is perceived as the most important representative of post-impressionism, a movement said to have sprung, in the 1880s, from a crisis in impressionism. Having abandoned the anarchy of impressionist painting, which sought to transcribe passively its impressions of nature, he forged ahead on his own to seek "structure." Evidence of Cézanne's intentions comes from letters and recorded remarks to the effect that he wished to "make of Impressionism something durable, like the art of museums," that he wished to "redo Poussin from nature," and "become classical again by way of nature."

In spite of Cézanne's "classical" intentions, and his contributions to modern art (or perhaps because of them), he is often considered to have, in effect, backed into his innovations, to have found them unintentionally, while looking for something else, leaving to others (the cubists) the recognition and conscious development of his art in the direction of modernism. His dissatisfaction with his own failure to "realize" coupled with his persistence in isolation has led to

the image of a fighter who lived a "heroic artist's life" (Greenberg 1951:58).

The present book rejects all of these assumptions. It offers instead an account of Cézanne as the impressionist he remained in his own eyes. Insofar as he possessed a theory, it was impressionist. His practice, too, fits readily into an impressionist framework. But the work that resulted was also interpreted in another way, more in accordance with symbolist aims. The symbolists claimed Cézanne as their reluctant father figure and set into motion the Cézanne myth, which then acquired its own momentum. Shiff does not urge unqualified acceptance of either the impressionist or symbolist view of Cézanne. The content of the myth and its historical fate are not the subject of the book; rather, the subject is the basis on which such interpretations rest.

The argument is too complex to summarize without distortion. It begins, however, straightforwardly enough by setting impressionism and symbolism into the context of their related responses to the same critical issues. Shiff is not the first to dispute the interpretation of impressionism as a naturalistic transcription of such elements of vision as the effects of light. Several scholars have recently argued that impressionists selected their subjects, deliberately omitted parts of them, and altered them according to their desires (Tucker 1982; Belloli 1984). Shiff attacks on another level. He denies that transcription of the external, or even the reproduction of a visible impression, was ever the end of impressionism. Making use of nineteenth-century psychology, he argues that impressionism was directed toward an epistemological problem: impressionist art was thought faithful to externals because only through the personal, subjective impression could one know externality, or "nature." In theory, the impression preceded the distinction between the external object and the internal subject, thus bridging the gap between subjective emotion and objectively observed reality. Its representation was thus presumed to unify subject and object in a primordial experience reminiscent of Schopenhauer's dream of a unified world soul. The lack of distinction between the objective and the subjective that pervades nineteenth-century hopes and dreams is the root of the mistaken belief, frequently encountered in the twentieth century, that the artists known as impressionists "copied" nature.

Symbolists pursued a similar goal. Instead of trying to express their subjective response to objective, external nature, they ignored it and placed their emphasis on the expression of subjective internal "ideas," which are also "objective" because universally shared. Where a subjective view of nature is universally shared, the impressionist who seeks to express it is also, perhaps inadvertently, a symbolist. Indeed, as the author shows, symbolists recognized impressionists like Monet as colleagues.

Since both impressionists and symbolists rejected the "reality" of anything purely external, they found themselves confronted with a common problem of verification. In principle, the subjective impressionist vision could be verified only by anyone who could discard all conventions and see the world immediately and freshly, while the symbolist universal ideal (i.e., that which is internal to all) was verifiable only by intuition. Shiff argues, however, that symbolist and impressionist artists and critics in fact solved their problem in the same way. The works were to be read through their "means of expression," and these means of expression were techniques. Symbolists sought techniques which produced images that could be read as a universal language. They stressed scientific method as the means to achieve their goal and saw impressionists as directed at a worthwhile goal, but blindly, idiosyncratically. Conversely, impressionists rejected method as convention and sought to manifest their individuality. Their techniques would have to seem spontaneous and idiosyncratic. External standards might be evoked. Zola traced Manet's "blond" tonality to his "temperament" yet argued that his tonal scale accurately translated the scale of values found in nature. But both impressionists and symbolists depended ultimately upon the persuasiveness of technique for verification. Persuasiveness counted for more than resemblance of the "finished" product to anything external. Shiff's expression for such persuasiveness is mastery of the "technique of originality," or "making a find."

The central role played by the "technique of originality" makes the heart of this study of theory into a detailed analysis of artistic practice. Shiff prefers the term "technique" to the alternative "style" and, one assumes, "form," because it calls attention to the conscious—learned and trained—"skilled" aspect of art. Accordingly, the book plays on an opposition between the "made," suggesting craft, and the "found," suggesting genius and inspiration. In modern art, according to Shiff, "finding" is represented, not achieved, and works of art are in fact "made" by the skillful application of technique.

The problematic nature of the relationship between theory and practice comes into focus when we ask whether *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* offers an intentionalist reading of Cézanne. An intentionalist argument would begin and end with the proof that Cézanne subscribed to known tenets of impressionist theory. The section "Seeing Cézanne" does indeed carry more authority than Shiff grants to Fry, Denis, or later critics. The reader assumes that the chapter "Cézanne's Practice" provides the key to the "real" Cézanne. Yet Cézanne's "practice," though informed by, is not identical with his rather rudimentary theory. Moreover, the reader emerges from the book with the ability to "see" Cézanne in mutually contradictory ways. Shiff's multilayered readings of tech-

nique seem to argue against the assumption of a one-to-one (or cause and effect) relationship between theory and practice. Without such an assumption, even the most elementary reading of intention demands an understanding of the language—technical and verbal—in which it is framed.

If Shiff's interpretation is not intentional, it is not iconographic either, at least not in any traditional sense. It could be called an iconography of technique if this term did not suggest either the search for "sources," for which iconographical analysis is frequently employed in modern art, or a "personal iconography" of the artist. But Shiff's purpose is not to identify the source of Cézanne's coloristic method or to translate any particular mark into a perceptual or philosophical hypothesis concerning the retina, the fourth dimension, or the relation between space and time. Nor does the book attempt to identify a universal formal language of art. To the contrary, it assumes the impossibility of such a language, demonstrating instead that the same formal devices, even in the same society and even by those who hold similar values, can be interpreted in very different ways.

If *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* is neither an intentional nor an iconographical reading of style, then in what sense does this book contribute to the understanding of artistic form? In fact, the book has to carve out its own methodological niche, for it proposes a way of viewing art's role in modern society, and does so differently from the iconographical studies presently identified with the social history of art. Its concern is to show how the appearance of a modern work conveys a shared meaning to its audience, past and present. The result is an understanding of the means whereby the myth of the artist affects the practice of artist and critic, and helps determine how paintings "look." Hence the book focuses not on private languages but on the public language of criticism and the techniques, conventional and social, which give this mythology expression.

The analysis of techniques is carried out on several levels. Within a single, impressionist frame of reference, one technique of originality succeeds another by creating a new way of avoiding the appearance of compositional hierarchy (chap. 8). A new technique may convince the viewer that the artist has copied, imitated, or found, only within the discourse of technique, by unmasking the conventional, technical element in other representations of originality. But the same technique may be interpreted differently. In Rashomon-like sequence, the same illustrations reappear attached to new interpretations. For example, the warped table top in *Three Skulls* enters into a discussion of the role of "deformation" or "gaucherie" in nineteenth-century critical discourse. Such departures from convention, Shiff explains, could be interpreted by symbolists as either "subjective" (individual, idiosyncratic, owing to the faithful transmission of subjec-

tive impressions) or "objective" (conveying universal truth, as a correction of nature). "Impressionists" could view them, on the other hand, as the sign of a "continuing immediacy rather than any finalizing connective vision" (p. 191). When *Three Skulls* resurfaces in the context of Cézanne's technical practice, its warped table top is viewed as a consequence of Cézanne's technique of making a find (pp. 212–213). Not an observation, a missed observation, or a failure in translating an observation caused the warping of the table, but Cézanne's method of unifying his canvas with contrasting but closely valued hues. This technique of originality results in the effect of "modeling" of flat surfaces and backgrounds, which viewers may translate as signs of continuing immediacy or objective distortion. Cézanne's technical activity enabled him to make such finds—to produce the impression that became the end of his art.

The critical terminology of the book undergoes a metamorphosis similar to its illustrations. Terms such as "impression," "imitation," "copy," and "classic" collect layers of meaning as they appear and reappear in the arguments of critics from Quatremère to Fry. Uncovering these meanings, Shiff shows that the subject of the discourse remains originality and how it can be, paradoxically, "made," even as a term such as "copy" switches allegiance from one side of the question to the other. One of the most convincing excavations is that of the term "classic," which twentieth-century scholars identify with emotional distance and certain formal characteristics. Shiff demonstrates conclusively that in the nineteenth century this term denoted an originality thought to be found again and again by independent artists. This meaning underlies Denis's concept of the "spontaneous classic" and Fry's natural classicist. A fascinating discussion of Poussin reveals that even his classicism was thought to be "found" and that shared originality, not formal similarity, was the basis for Cézanne's legendary resemblance to Poussin.

Shiff explores this discourse without subscribing to it. He turns the finder into a maker, even a "faker," one who "fakes a find." The "original" artist in our society, he argues, *makes* this originality. He fashions a technique that could be mistaken for the thing itself. Acceptance of Shiff's findings may mean disappointment for those reluctant to exchange the dream of the heroic artist for the less inspiring image of the artist as "faker." It may provoke resistance from those who feel accused of having mistaken their finger for the moon. It may even seem as though the author means to charge the artist possessing the skill to "fake a find" with being a "fake artist." For Shiff he is not. He is the only artist we have. Far from demeaning him, the argument returns to the artist's responsibility for the public side of his art. The ability of the "master of originality" to "represent a leap not taken" is power enough. If Shiff denies the artist his ability to find him-

self, he gives him credit for making more than solutions to formal problems. The artist makes, and bears responsibility for, his (public) self.

Perhaps Shiff's message, like the emperor's new clothes, touches on something most of us have probably understood on some level. The message is almost too obvious: paintings are made, not found, and the artist uses techniques to make them. They point to, rather than exemplify, their objects. Yet how many critics and historians stumble over the perhaps not so banal fact that paintings, whatever they signify, do so by virtue of techniques? The most powerful of twentieth-century artistic theories rely on the assumption that art is nontechnical. Art is expression, vision, experience, but not technique. The source of the myth perhaps explains some of its power. The discourse of "making and finding" migrated, in the nineteenth century, from the realm of the divine to that of the personal. If the romantics found God in the self, by the early twentieth century God had disappeared from the discourse and one searched oneself for one's own inimitable individuality. In the transference, individuality maintained some of the aura of the divine. Hence much modernist art criticism continues to partake of the rhetoric of religion and feels uncomfortable with attempts to reveal signs of performance or skills suggestive of human, as opposed to divine, intervention.

For a historian so careful to keep his terms and "readings" of paintings historical, Shiff is reserved about his own historical position. In effect, he dons impressionist and symbolist glasses in order to "see" Cézanne through his nineteenth-century context. Yet it is impossible not to have the feeling that the interpretation arose from a "seeing" of Cézanne that is peculiarly of Shiff's own time. This late-twentieth-century position, the only one left inexplicit in the text, is present as a subtext throughout the book, and Shiff admits as much in footnotes in which he interprets the impressionists as "postmodernist in their artistic practice" and refers to poststructuralists and other challengers of the modernist myth, including Barthes, de Man, and Ricoeur (pp. 249, 253, 254). Shiff's book could be seen as reading postmodernist strategies, which purport to embrace the historicity of the artistic image, anachronistically into impressionist art. Such an interpretation could impute Shiff's objectivity. If the postmodernist reading is appropriate, however, as I believe it is, then it suggests that the discourse of originality and creativity has merely taken on a new challenge in postmodernism.

Shiff's approach bears significance for more traditional iconographic and psychological approaches to modern art. Such approaches must reckon with the social technique of originality. Shiff suggests an interpretation of Cézanne's subject matter when he comments that Cézanne used stereotypically traditional subjects such as bathers in the woods, still lifes, and views of mountains "to transform conventional art all the more decidedly by way of an unconventional technical procedure designed to appear natural" (p. 214). This line of investigation is a promising avenue for studies of modernist subject matter. It allows for sophisticated readings without denying the banality of most modernist subjects, or worse, investing them with an undeserved iconographical significance.

Shiff's rehabilitation of "technique" makes clear, however, the fallacy of such apologies as the following one, from Ringbom's otherwise excellent study of theosophical imagery in another pioneer of modern art. Ringbom burdens Kandinsky's essay *Composition 6* with the necessity to prove that he "sincerely believed . . . that he was responding to the inner *Klang*," even though he in fact "achieved abstraction through the manipulation of a figural prototype." Such an endeavor, in Ringbom's eyes, falls short of the "considerable degree of imagination and autosuggestion" required to "perceive the 'inner sound of a word' and translate it into form and colour," because seeing a painting abstractly "only requires some exercise and may, moreover, be facilitated by devices such as turning the picture on one side" (Ringbom 1970:154–155). But, as Ringbom well understands, Kandinsky's paintings are art, employing a technique of originality, and not rivals to Besant and Leadbetter's *Thought Forms*. Hence Kandinsky's essay, which mentions some of the technical procedures to which Ringbom refers, need only testify to his desire to let his technical manipulations achieve for him his response to the inner "*Klang*." He consequently need not be regarded as insincere if he manipulates his paintings technically and pillages theosophical manuals to achieve the appearance of meaning without its representational substance.

Similarly, psychological approaches to modern art, before they uncover the artist's unconscious self, or "signs of [his] destructiveness and black moods" (Schapiro 1959:41), must take into account the extent to which the paintings manifest a special insight, not into the mysteries of this self in its isolation, but into communally held values. The iconography of technique is therefore shared and social, not merely personal. If the work of art does not embody the realization of society's values, it renews itself and its society by pointing to them.

Mercifully, this book makes its sophisticated argument in plain English, devoid of fashionable jargon or mystification. Unfortunately, its rather labored style sometimes has an effect as bewildering as any jargon. The organization of the book, which "itself imitates and illustrates the historical process of interpretation, change and accretion" (pp. xv–xvi), leads to repeated reformulations, which continually send the reader flipping pages in search of previous formulations. If a historical argument must imitate its historical subject (which is doubtful), perhaps it could at least have been done with more grace. The weakest part of this book, however, is not its literary style, but its black-and-white illustrations. Shiff's argument about color would be difficult to substantiate even with color illustrations of very high quality (it demands observation of original paintings). The mere repetition of some illustrations does not help. Would it not have been more efficient to separate the illustrations from the text and include at least a few color details? But the very fact that illustrations are a problem of the book demonstrates the unusual dependence of this study of theory on detailed visual evidence. These minor criticisms should not affect the reception of a major contribution to the study of modern art.

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