

Formalism and American Art Criticism in the 1920s

SUSAN NOYES PLATT

Today, formalism is inextricably associated with the name and generation of Clement Greenberg. Scholars recognize that formalism, that method of art criticism that analyzes the abstract elements of form, color, line, space and composition, rather than story or content, has evolved from such late nineteenth century writers as Heinrich Wölfflin, through the early twentieth century English critics, Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Fry and Bell, in turn, are generally acknowledged as the primary source for Clement Greenberg's writings of the 1940s and later.

A fascinating, early chapter of formalism has been overlooked in this careful genealogy. In the 1920s, a little studied generation of critics provide an important link between the first articulation of a developed formalist theory by Fry and Bell and the emergence of Greenberg's important writings. Writers such as Walter Pach, Forbes Watson, Guy Eglington and Henry McBride, all embraced the new theories of formalism and used them as fruitful, if controversial,

means for understanding and writing about the art of Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, John Marin and Charles Sheeler, among many others. As these writers adopted the formalist method, they constantly analyzed its validity, recognized its shortcomings and discussed its strengths, in an extensive body of literature that has not heretofore been examined.

Before examining these writings, a brief summary of the theories of Bell and Fry themselves is helpful in clarifying their contributions to the introduction of formalism into America. While the two critics shared the idea of looking at a work of art in terms of form that led to an emotional response, they diverged significantly in their manner of presenting that idea. They will therefore be treated separately here.

Clive Bell

While Roger Fry had articulated a rudimentary approach to formalism in *The Burlington Magazine* as early as 1908,¹ Clive Bell's popularization of those ideas in his book *Art*, written in 1913, first introduced formalist ideas to the general public. Bell's theory as presented in *Art* is general and all encompassing. Two key phrases stand out: "aesthetic emotion" and "significant form." Bell's definition of these terms is most frequently circular, that is, the presence of one means the presence of the other, but careful examination of *Art* does reveal the specific context in which he used the terms, if not an exact definition.

Bell was reacting to Victorian esthetics in developing the idea of "aesthetic emotion" and "significant form." He opposed art that was descriptive, informational, historical, literary or scientific. He believed that art should be detached from the "concerns of life."² His model for good art was the painting of Paul Cézanne.³ In response to that work he felt "aesthetic emotion", and found an example of "significant form." The "aesthetic emotion" was distinct from common emotion: it made the viewer ecstatic and even giddy, but it was a feeling "lifted above the stream of life."⁴ Bell writes of Cézanne that he "carried me off my feet before ever I noticed that his strongest characteristic was an insistence on the supremacy of significant form."⁵ That form has no associations with life; it can be representative, but that is irrelevant; it must have "lines and colors combined in a particular way"⁶ that arouses "aesthetic emotion." "Significant form" is an "ultimate reality," an "end in itself."⁷

Bell goes on to suggest in subsequent chapters of *Art* that "significant form" and "aesthetic emotion" exist in selected examples of art throughout history. He sees art and religion as similar manifestations of spiritual universals.⁸ On the other hand, although "significant form" is apparent in many stages of art, it disappears in the nineteenth century, until Cézanne, who is, according to Bell, "the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form."⁹

Bell's book is a readable treatise on aesthetic theory. The energy and style with which he presents his terms led to a widespread and

positive response. During the late teens and early twenties, Bell wrote frequently for American magazines such as *The New Republic*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*.¹⁰ These articles primarily elaborated on his original principles in various ways. They never superceded the general public's identification of Bell with his first book, or the identification of that book as the primary treatise on modern aesthetics.

The impact of *Art* was immediate. Shortly after its publication Elizabeth Luther Cary quoted passages in *The New York Times*.¹¹ By 1916 it was familiar to intellectuals. One excited response to Bell's book appears in an autobiography by Madge Jenison, owner of the Sunwise Turn Bookshop, an intellectual center in the late teens and early 1920s. She writes: "I began to think about Clive Bell's essay on art. I had often thought of it that winter. Mr. Arthur Davies had brought it back from England in the fall and we had passed it around and talked it up to midnight."¹² As a result of that experience, Jenison decided to open her bookshop in 1916 to make *Art*, in particular, available to the general public.

Another example of Bell's influence that is clearly acknowledged appears in the writings of Sheldon Cheney. Cheney had begun his career as a theatre critic, but in the late teens he read Clive Bell's book and began utilizing the terminology of "significant form." It became the basis for his explanation of modern art in his influential *Primer of Modern Art* published in 1924. In the introduction to the *Primer* he states: "the clearest elementary treatise about [form]...is to be found in an admirable little book titled Art by Clive Bell....Despite the dangers in such a catch phrase, it is so serviceable that I shall use it often."¹³ The *Primer* remained in print for over forty years, with only minor editorial changes, and was read by generations of introductory classes in modern art. A clearer documentation of Bell's influence cannot be imagined.

A humorous glossary of art terms written in 1925 parodied Bell's terminology, particularly with respect to his accessibility and popularity. The "Complete Dictionary of Modern Art Terms for the Use of Aspiring Amateurs" commented on Bell near the end of the lengthy series of articles, although he is also mentioned at the beginning as one of the authorities consulted:

Form—An ancient diety whose empire, however, only reached its widest sway in the year 1920, which saw the publication of Mr. Clive Bell's *Art*. True, He bore a brand new name, having been hailed by Mr. Bell by the title of Significant, but neither Mr. Bell, nor any of his followers were at all clear as to the meaning of this new distinction. Having prostrated themselves before the altar of an Unknown God, they merely hoped that the addition of a still more ineffable and, by the same token, indefinable, title, would render His throne for all time unassailable. Alas for their piety. They were born in an age of Unbelievers and Blasphemers, who subjected their God to so merciless a fire of criticism that after five years the greater part of His empire has been wrested from Him and His title even to that remains in question.¹⁴

This lengthy parody foreshadows the objections to formalism that began to surface around the middle of the 1920s. While in 1922 Bell was celebrated by *Vanity Fair* as a nomination for the "Hall of Fame" and described as a "bringer of enlightenment,"¹⁵ by 1926 he was being attacked as too far removed from the real world.

One important article in *The Journal of the Barnes Foundation* provides the summary of the subtle arguments over formalism. The article admits the importance of Bell in the opening paragraph by saying that he "expressed a conviction and a standard widely influential in contemporary art criticism," that of the importance of form over subject. Bell is also credited with "driving home to the popular consciousness the truth that a picture is not good because it resembles the original." The objection was to the idea that a picture was "independent of its relationship to any real thing."¹⁶ In other words, art that was not an illustration was acceptable, but art that was unrelated to life in any definable way was not acceptable. This subtle distinction would be the basis for the heated attack on formalism and abstract art in general in the 1930s.

The Nation reviewed a later book by Bell, *Landmarks in Nineteenth Century Painting*, by attacking his "inadequate notion of life which more than anything else has led Mr. Bell to alienate and esotericize art.... It is clear enough that Mr. Bell does really consider modern industrial and social life to consist in humdrumery. The ideal artist is removed from the forces of our age because art has nothing to do with our crass concerns."¹⁷ Bell's intellectuality was an issue in a review of another book by Bell, *Civilization, An Essay*. The critic was even more adamant than the *Nation* reviewer had been: "Mr. Bell's reverence and Platonic adoration of the mind and understanding of man entangled him in a chain of conceits and abstractions from which all observations of experience are excluded.... Mr. Bell's civilized state mirrors only a conception of beauty, unreal and changeless."¹⁸

The reference to Bell's intellectuality relates to his formation as part of the Bloomsbury group, a brilliant group of thinkers that included Virginia Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and Roger Fry. Yet, this sophisticated metaphysical aspect of his thinking was generally lost, in the interest of his catchwords, "significant form" and "aesthetic emotion." Bell's oversimplification of complex ideas made him an easy target for superficial understanding.

Roger Fry

While Bell was a successful popularizer, although with a solid intellectual foundation, Roger Fry was a systematic analyser. Initially, his ideas were the springboard for Bell's book.¹⁹ In 1909 Fry's "Essay on Aesthetics," carefully identified what he calls the emotional elements of design: rhythm, mass, space, light and shade, color, order and variety. Even as Fry was more systematic and specific, he shared with Bell an emphasis on the emotional response to art. But that

emotional response was not identified by a *critère*, rather it manifested itself throughout Fry's writings, in his very personal response to individual works of art. Fry builds and expands beyond his initial thesis in a rich series of essays and lectures that encompass his excited responses to a wide variety of art from many artistic traditions. Fry, trained as a painter, as well as a critic and intellectual, allows the formal analysis to become a method, as much as a theory.

Fry dwelt on "vision" more than Bell. Where Bell defined a particular feeling in response to the work of art, Fry defined a type of looking: "This is at once more intense and more detached from the passions of the instinctive life. Those who indulge in this vision are apprehending the relation of forms and colors."²⁰

Fry then, like Bell, considers art and the art experience as a separate sphere from ordinary life. Yet, at the same time, in his discussion of particular work, he responds to art sensitively and specifically. He speaks of Mayan sculpture or the painting of Giotto equally eloquently using the language of form:

Now with Giotto, beautiful as his line undoubtedly is, it is not the first quality...that impresses us.... It is in its significance for the expression of form with the utmost lucidity, the most logical interrelation of parts that his line is so impressive...we feel at once the relation of the shoulders to one another, the relation of the torso to the pelvis.²¹

Thus, Fry looks at art concretely. While Bell introduced the general ideas of formalism, Fry demonstrated how they could be used creatively and not poetically.

Fry was familiar to the major art critics, less familiar to the general public. For example, Arthur Dow, Professor of Art at Columbia University, cited Fry in his 1917 discussion of modernism. While he also mentions Bell, Dow's definitions of modernism read like an excerpt from Fry's "Essay in Aesthetics."²²

The important philosopher-critic, Willard Huntington Wright, mentions the English critics as "the ablest and most discerning defenders of the modern spirit in England."²³ In Wright's 1916 essay, "The Aesthetic Struggle in America," he attacked American criticism, suggesting Fry and Bell as standards.²⁴ In his own book on art, *Modern Painting*, Wright differs from Fry and Bell by giving more emphasis to color and depth, as well as to the philosophy of Nietzsche. But he also adopted the language of formalism from the English critics. Wright was widely read by American critics, and reinforced the attention given to formalism in the 1920s.

Another reflection of the influence of Roger Fry in particular appears in reviews of his book *Vision and Design. The Arts*, a widely read and influential art magazine, carried two reviews of the book because the editor, Hamilton Easter Field, was a friend of Fry's. He saw Fry as a fellow Quaker and embraced the book as an example of tolerance. The first review, by Alan Burroughs, quoted extensively

from the text and contrasted Fry's broadmindedness with Bell's narrowness.²⁵ The second review, by Field himself, developed the issue of Fry's separation of "actual life and imaginative life." He took exception to Fry's attempt to separate them, although he otherwise celebrated the critic.²⁶ The reviews are significant, not only for their careful appraisal of Fry's ideas, but also for their lengthy quotations, which ensured direct transmission of Fry's ideas.

An even more detailed discussion of Fry's ideas was carried by *The Dial*, a magazine directed to the intellectual at large, rather than the art world specifically. Thomas Craven, a critic better known today for his Regionalist Criticism in the 1930s, stated that "*Vision and Design* is one of the few books written on art in the last decade that are worth reading."²⁷ He went on to state Fry's premise that "the meaning of art lies in its forms," but criticized him for failure to distinguish between meaning and representation. In subsequent issues of *The Dial*, Craven adopted Fry's principles of form in a lengthy examination called "The Progress of Painting," his own version of the history of art.²⁸

The discussion of Fry's views continued in *The Dial* in 1924. Laurence Buermeyer, an associate of the Barnes Foundation, objected to Fry's failure to distinguish between the aesthetic imagination and mere daydreaming. He also found Fry's separation of the emotions and the senses erroneous. He went on to attack Craven's articles as well.²⁹ Craven rebutted with a third article that claimed he had identified the weakness in the English critic's ideas, particularly concerning the "indivisibility of form and content."³⁰

By 1928, a review in *The Arts* stated more directly the central reservation about Fry's aesthetics and summed up the position of critics who were gradually rejecting formalism. The author, Virgil Barker, praised Fry for his brilliant writing and sensitive eye, but spoke of the "limitations of pure art." He saw Fry's purist aesthetic theories developing in a culture where "art itself has been reduced to a side issue out of touch with the main current of life."³¹

Even as a growing sentiment resisted the separation of art from life in the reviews of Fry's books, the methods of formalism were being increasingly adopted. One evidence of this approach appears in the theoretical treatises by artists published throughout the 1920s. Much like the watered down influence of Cezanne and Cubism on American painting, these treatises watered down formalism and combined it with individual artists' prejudices. Thomas Hart Benton's series of articles called "The Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting," is one example of this use of formalism. Benton combined ideas of Fry, Bell, Wright and other sources into a theory that formed the basis for his teaching at the Art Students League.³²

Formalism and the Art Critics

A specific analysis of the writings of selected critics demonstrates how they used formal analysis. In very few cases did a critic of the

1920s adopt it as the only perspective. The nature of the art under review determined the appropriate use of the formal terminology. Naturally, it appeared most frequently in discussion of artists whose pictorial aims were more abstract.

Forbes Watson

Forbes Watson, a prominent critic of the 1920s, combined his duties as editor of *The Arts* with a regular column in the *New York World*. Watson had graduated from Harvard University and received a degree from Columbia Law School, but decided to pursue a career in art criticism instead. By the time of the Armory Show in 1913, he was already an established, if not particularly avant-garde, commentator on the art scene. In his newspaper column, written for a general audience, he utilized formal analysis to demonstrate that modern art was not illustration. Watson specifically praised Fry as "one of the best writers on art alive."³³

For *The Arts*, by contrast, he wrote long monographic articles, a novelty for art critics in those years. They were on a range of artists from the Renoiresque William Glackens to the more up-to-date Charles Sheeler. His criticism of Sheeler most clearly demonstrates his use of a formal vocabulary combined with his own concern with the indigenous design tradition:

What he evidently looks at and strives, successfully I believe, to put down, is its [the barn's] structural character—the relation of its planes, the inherent quality of its materials, the meaning of its forms. How do the planes move one against the other?...In his exquisite arrangement of space, in his complete destruction of the superfluous, Sheeler reaches the cool, refreshing heights of the best periods of American design and, most important of all, his work is imbued with the necessary element of life, that native tang and fragrance, that sense of inherent quality without which art cannot rise above logic.³⁴

In the art of Sheeler, Watson found a combination of form consciousness and meaning that he felt necessary for the highest quality in art.

While in *The Arts* Watson increasingly bemoaned the theoretical aspects of modern art and formalism, in his newspaper column for a more general audience, he emphasized the absence of literalism and photographic qualities, using more formal language. About Picasso's work in 1923 he wrote: "The parts are welded together in a whole, the quality of the form and the quality of the color belong together."³⁵ Careful reading of Watson's criticism reveals that he rarely analyzed individual works of art, but most often used the art as a support for a political position with respect to his ideas on modernism or nativism. As the decade progressed he increasingly supported the latter view and supported the artists like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton who emphasized subject matter reflecting American themes.

Henry McBride

Henry McBride was easily the best known critic of the 1920s. He began his career as a painter in New York City, created an art school for the Educational Alliance in the late years of the nineteenth century, then became director of the Trenton Industrial Art School. From 1900 to 1912 he travelled in the United States and Europe, reading extensively in American literature.³⁶ His career as an art critic began with *The New York Sun* in 1912; the Sunday art page of that newspaper remained his main affiliation until 1920, when he also joined *The Dial*.

McBride met Roger Fry as early as 1910, for he describes Fry showing him Matisse's bronze relief sculpture, at that time in London.³⁷ As a result of his early awareness of modern art and literature (he was also a close friend of Gertrude Stein), McBride's perspective was more sophisticated than that of many other critics. He could analyze work with magnificent sensitivity if he chose, although more frequently he enjoyed the gossip of the art world or more general issues.

In a 1924 review of the work of Abraham Walkowitz he admitted his bias toward formal components more than subjects. In speaking of Walkowitz's subjects he writes that it was "one of the rare instances in which I find myself as a critic thinking of the matter that an artist presents rather than the manner."³⁸

On the other hand, his style of analysis was Whitmanesque, or perhaps influenced by the aesthete Walter Pater. Like them, he felt the energy of the work as much as of the form. About Charles Demuth he said evocatively: "The Demuth color is like light that has glanced through jewels on its way to the paper." On John Marin, McBride wrote: "The opposing currents of modern life beat in upon Marin's spirit relentlessly. He feels each jerky jazzlike force that comes along and, to the death, must translate into rhythms."³⁹ McBride believed that Nadelman had "a sure enough knowledge of form, but doesn't hesitate to sacrifice a muscle or two for the sake of the greater rhythms."⁴⁰

Although McBride knew formalist aesthetics, his use of analysis was more impulsive and intuitive than systematic. He believed that people should learn about art by looking at it rather than by reading about it, and he was at heart an elitist. In a letter to Gertrude Stein, in which he remarked on a review of Stein's writing, he wrote: "It is fine—but I almost regret she did it, and I hated to see her help the mob so much."⁴¹ He also had a low appraisal of American modern art, although he frequently editorialized about his desire to see a strong modern tradition develop in America. Again to Gertrude Stein, he commented: "I dare say that our modernists are all replicas of Paris originals, just as our impressionists were."⁴² Thus, McBride's use of formalism was certainly part of a much larger position, based on his real understanding of modern art and modern aesthetics, but disdainful of derivative modernism.

Walter Pach

Walter Pach's criticism was also a peculiar blend of formalism and other theories. Pach was trained as a painter and lived for many years in Paris. Although he was more directly involved with French aesthetic theory than with English formalism, he acknowledged a specific and long term debt to Roger Fry in an article of 1922.⁴³ As one of the principal informed commentators on the Armory Show of 1913, Pach had written on modern art prominently since that time. In a 1913 magazine article he commented, for example, that Post-Impressionism was "the embodiment of living ideas in forms which respond to the sense of beauty in men...[It is] the conveying of the particular emotion which has seemed important to the producer.... [It is] an aesthetic equivalent of thought."⁴⁴ While Pach gave the "particular emotion" a more intellectual quality than did Fry or Bell, he shared with them a concern for separating responses to art from other types of experiences.

Pach was usually vague when he wrote about an artist's work, preferring to use sweeping generalities that implied an on-going development or evolution, rather than examining a piece in detail. For example, he identified Picasso's "investigation of pictorial structures."⁴⁵ When he looked at a painting by Matisse he interpreted it as an intellectual act: "[The] purity of design, the calm beauty of color...are guarantees that the image has passed through the alembic of his mind."⁴⁶ His wedding of an intellectual version of formalism with evolutionary determinism is clear in his comment on Diego Rivera: "The lines and colors of his frescoes are brought to a unity even severer, more organic than that which he could attain in the previous stage of his evolution."⁴⁷

By the mid 1920s Pach's combination of formalism and evolutionary determinism was considered obsolete as a method of analysis of modern art by the more up-to-date commentators. The clearest statement on Pach's critical position as a promulgator of formal aesthetics was made by his colleague, Guy Eglinton, in a review by Pach's 1924 book *The Masters of Modern Art*. He writes:

[One] is grateful to Pach for reminding us that there are still a few people in the world capable of thinking clearly on art and presenting their conclusions logically and with concision.... [This book] gives such a definite expression to accepted modern esthetic theory, that one is tempted to wonder whether that theory has not seen its best days....

It has long been growing evident that the greatness of these men is dependent on other things besides their mastery over light.... Likewise...the concept of *form* [emphasis Eglinton] too is a useful illusion that has had its day.... Pach's book carries the theory almost to a point where further development is almost impossible.⁴⁸

Guy Eglinton

Guy Eglinton, author of the review, was one of the most outspoken critics of the period. He is unknown today because his career was cut

short by accidental drowning at the age of thirty-two in June 1928.⁴⁹ An Englishman who had studied in Germany, Eglinton came to the United States as editor of *The International Studio*, a post he held from November 1920 to March 1922. He later became co-editor of *The Art News*. While his signed articles in the latter publication are few, he probably played a significant part in the excellent reviews that *The Art News* carried during the middle years of the 1920s. Eglinton's relationship to formalism is sophisticated. He used it as a means to analyze art, but never let it become a limitation in his interpretation of the object.

Eglinton's real contribution to the art criticism of the 1920s was in his skeptical attitude to the overuse of the language of criticism: he is the author of the "Complete Dictionary of Modern Art Terms" already quoted above. Utilizing specific analysis of a painting was an unusual approach for him. In 1925 he writes in an article on Seurat's *Baignade*:

[The *Baignade*] is the outcome of two preoccupations which he was later to subordinate, the preoccupation with light, ... which grew out of his crayon drawings, and a preoccupation with mass, which he had been developing simultaneously in the drawings and in his early essays in paint. If he relies here as later on the horizontal, it is by instinct and not in response to any compositional theory, and the too logical corollary of the horizontal, the perpendicular, is conspicuously missing...he is not concerned with subtle distortions in the direction of compositional angles, but is content to let figures and trees keep their own shapes, only simplifying, rounding, rendering more and more palpable, dissolving in one breath in the brilliance of his *eclairage*, in the next throwing into relief by the sharpness of his contrasts.⁵⁰

Eglinton's analysis is underlaid by a subtle determinist or evolutionary strain that he shared with Walter Pach; he looked at an early work in relationship to what he knew would come next.⁵¹ On the other hand, the freshness and accuracy of the analysis puts him in a separate class from the other critics concerned here. Unfortunately, he chose to use his sensitivity to mock the use of art critical terms rather than fully develop his own approach to art criticism.

Thomas Craven

The heavy debt that Thomas Craven owed to Roger Fry has been established earlier in this article by analysis of his reviews of Fry's *Vision and Design*. Craven taught English to support himself as a poet in the teens. He became affiliated with *The Dial* in 1920. Since McBride was the art critic for that publication, his writings for it were mainly book reviews. Occasionally he wrote longer articles, e.g., his "Progress of Painting," a rudimentary history of art.⁵²

Craven's coverage of specific artists appeared in *Shadowland*, a theatre and movie publication. In a series of essays written between 1921 and 1923, Craven looked at the art of Thomas Hart Benton, John

Marin, Edwin Dickinson, Charles Demuth, Joseph Stella and Charles Sheeler. His articles usually opened with a theoretical discussion. In the Benton piece, for example, he treated the connection between modern and classic art in their dependence on the principles of form. Craven, like Pach and Watson, rarely treated specific works, but generalized about compositions and colors. For Craven, Benton's compositions were "still an exceedingly conscious process with him and his struggles to make a form obey a certain curve or fill a given amount of space are evinced in the finished work."⁵³ In an article on Marin, he primarily commented on Marin's own art theories, but finally commented about the recent painting that "his design is larger, more direct and strengthened in general effect by heavier masses and sharper, more assured drawing."⁵⁴

Craven reveals his formalist approach most clearly in his analysis of Charles Sheeler's painting and photography:

Compare his oil study of skyscrapers with his camera study of the same. In the painting I find a certain definite quality, a linear precision and a remarkable tonal range which suggest the photograph, but the beauty of the painting lies in its design, in the imaginative reconstruction of the basic planes to produce a new form stronger than the literal object of the negative.⁵⁵

In the late twenties Craven took up the cause of Thomas Hart Benton, abandoning intellectual subtlety for a celebration of American subject matter and a denigration of modern theory. Craven abandons the carefully argued subtleties of his reviews of Fry's *Vision and Design* over the relationship of art and life, and adopts instead a harsh rhetoric in support of American art. Yet, even at the height of his success as celebrator of Regionalism, Craven maintained a clear respect for Bell and Fry. In a bibliographic note for his survey of art called *Men of Art*, published in 1931, he concludes:

Eglinton's analysis is underlaid by a subtle determinist or evolutionary strain that he shared with Walter Pach; he looked at an early work in relationship to what he knew would come next.⁵¹ On the other hand, the freshness and accuracy of the analysis puts him in a separate class from the other critics concerned here. Unfortunately, he chose to use his sensitivity to mock the use of art critical terms rather than fully develop his own approach to art criticism.

Thomas Craven

The heavy debt that Thomas Craven owed to Roger Fry has been established earlier in this article by analysis of his reviews of Fry's *Vision and Design*. Craven taught English to support himself as a poet in the teens. He became affiliated with *The Dial* in 1920. Since McBride was the art critic for that publication, his writings for it were mainly book reviews. Occasionally he wrote longer articles, e.g., his "Progress of Painting," a rudimentary history of art.⁵²

Craven's coverage of specific artists appeared in *Shadowland*, a

theatre and movie publication. In a series of essays written between 1921 and 1923, Craven looked at the art of Thomas Hart Benton, John Marin, Edwin Dickinson, Charles Demuth, Joseph Stella and Charles Sheeler. His articles usually opened with a theoretical discussion. In the Benton piece, for example, he treated the connection between modern and classic art in their dependence on the principles of form. Craven, like Pach and Watson, rarely treated specific works, but generalized about compositions and colors. For Craven, Benton's compositions were "still an exceedingly conscious process with him and his struggles to make a form obey a certain curve or fill a given amount of space are evinced in the finished work."⁵³ In an article on Marin, he primarily commented on Marin's own art theories, but finally commented about the recent painting that "his design is larger, more direct and strengthened in general effect by heavier masses and sharper, more assured drawing."⁵⁴

Craven reveals his formalist approach most clearly in his analysis of Charles Sheeler's painting and photography:

Compare his oil study of skyscrapers with his camera study of the same. In the painting I find a certain definite quality, a linear precision and a remarkable tonal range which suggest the photograph, but the beauty of the painting lies in its design, in the imaginative reconstruction of the basic planes to produce a new form stronger than the literal object of the negative.⁵⁵

In the late twenties Craven took up the cause of Thomas Hart Benton, abandoning intellectual subtlety for a celebration of American subject matter and a denigration of modern theory. Craven abandons the carefully argued subtleties of his reviews of Fry's *Vision and Design* over the relationship of art and life, and adopts instead a harsh rhetoric in support of American art. Yet, even at the height of his success as celebrator of Regionalism, Craven maintained a clear respect for Bell and Fry. In a bibliographic note for his survey of art called *Men of Art*, published in 1931, he concludes:

Fry *Vision and Design*, *Transformations*. Miscellaneous essays by one of the best living critics. Fry is an ardent champion of modernist art which he defends with the highest intelligence. Bell *Art*, *Since Cézanne*, art for art's sake applied to the Modernists.⁵⁶

John Dewey

Perhaps the most surprising analysis from the waning days of the first wave of formalism came from John Dewey, the inspiration of critics like Forbes Watson and Thomas Craven, who sought an alternative to the formal approach to art. In a 1931 lecture Dewey acknowledged the importance of Fry with lengthy quotations from the English critic about aesthetic vision. Dewey comments that Fry gives

an excellent account of the sort of thing that takes place in artistic perception and construction. It makes clear two things: Represent-

ation is not, if the vision has been artistic...of 'objects as such'.... It is not the kind of representation that a camera would report...⁵⁷

However, in a crucial passage Dewey goes on to say that "one thing may be added.... The painter did not approach the scene with an empty mind, but with a background of experiences."⁵⁸ Thus, Dewey's philosophy of the importance of experience in art is basically an elaboration and response to Fry's formalist esthetics. Such a closely reasoned study of Fry by the man who most effectively offered an alternative to formalism suggests the profound importance of that aesthetic theory in yet another context.

Conclusion

The formalist criticism of the 1920s is, then, a crucial chapter in the history of American art criticism. While individual contributions are not heroic, the collective writings of American art critics of the 1920s form an important episode, particularly with respect to the assimilation of the theory of formalism articulated by Clive Bell and Roger Fry. That theory constituted a well-defined focal point for the understanding of modern art. British formalist theory was a rallying point that led American critics to assess their ideas and to formulate their positions. The American awareness of formalism can be documented so thoroughly that, even with the controversies that followed it and the alterations that were made to it, the debt that the American critics owed to their English colleagues cannot be obscured.

Even the episode of Regionalism in the 1930s, that style and criticism that celebrated subject matter in contradiction to formalism, can be seen as much as a reaction against formalist methods as a celebration of American scenes. Thomas Craven's writings are but one clear example of a critic who began with a belief in formalism, but subsequently embraced Regionalism. Other critics like Forbes Watson went through a similar philosophical shift that was reflected in their art criticism.

In the mid to late 1920s, while the critics treated in this article were still discussing the validity of the ideas of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, the next generation of critics, such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Alfred Barr, already had their first contacts with the art community.⁵⁹ Their earliest exposure to contemporary art criticism would probably have included reading magazines such as *The Arts*, *The Dial* and *Vanity Fair*,⁶⁰ where articles on and by Clive Bell and Roger Fry were often prominently featured. Certainly, these later American writers were also subject to other influences. Yet, writings such as Barr's catalogs for the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s⁶¹ and the art criticism of Greenberg and Rosenberg of the 1940s and 1950s⁶² can be regarded as a sophisticated development that builds on the complex, sometimes awkwardly self-conscious, occasionally incredibly informed British and American formalist art criticism of the 1920s.

Footnotes

- ¹Roger Fry, "The Last Phase of Impressionism," *The Burlington Magazine*, March 1908, p. 375.
- ²Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 54. All further references to *Art* are to this edition.
- ³Bell, *Art*, p. 36.
- ⁴Bell, *Art*, p. 27.
- ⁵Bell, *Art*, p. 27.
- ⁶Bell, *Art*, pp. 17-18.
- ⁷Bell, *Art*, p. 46.
- ⁸Bell, *Art*, p. 63.
- ⁹Bell, *Art*, p. 139.
- ¹⁰Clive Bell, "The Rise and Decline of Cubism," *Vanity Fair*, February 1923, p. 53; Clive Bell, "Modern Art and How To Look At It," *Vanity Fair*, April 1924, pp. 56, 58.
- ¹¹Elizabeth Luther Cary *The New York Times*, January 26, 1913, sec. 7, p. 10.
- ¹²Madge Jenison, *Sunwise Turn, A Human Comedy of Book Selling* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1923), pp. 2-3.
- ¹³Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer of Modern Art* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), pp. 39-40.
- ¹⁴Guy Eglinton, "Art and Other Things," *International Studio*, August 1925, p. 377; other installments of the "Dictionary" appeared in Eglinton's column in *International Studio* throughout 1925.
- ¹⁵"We nominate for the Hall of Fame," *Vanity Fair*, September 1922.
- ¹⁶Laurence Buermeyer, "Pattern and Plastic Form," *The Journal of the Barnes Foundation*, January 1926, reprinted in John Dewey, et. al., *Art and Education* (Merion: Barnes Foundation Press, 1929), pp. 99-102.
- ¹⁷Henry Ladd, "Art: Since Clive Bell," *The Nation*, January 4, 1928, p. 28.
- ¹⁸Leo Gershoy, Review of *Civilization, An Essay*, *The Arts*, November 1928, p. 296.
- ¹⁹Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 164.
- ²⁰Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1925), p. 49. All further references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.
- ²¹Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 175.
- ²²Arthur Dow, "Modernism in Art," *American Magazine of Art*, January 1917, p. 116.
- ²³Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York: John Lane, 1915), p. 341.
- ²⁴Willard Huntington Wright, "The Aesthetic Struggle in America," *The Forum*, February 1916, p. 208.
- ²⁵Alan Burroughs, Review of *Vision and Design*, *The Arts*, May 1921, pp. 57-58.
- ²⁶Hamilton Easter Field, Review of *Vision and Design*, *The Arts*, May 1921, pp. 57-58.
- ²⁷Thomas Craven, "Mr. Roger Fry and The Artistic Vision," *The Dial*, July 1921, pp. 101-106.
- ²⁸Thomas Craven, "The Progress of Painting," *The Dial*, April 1923, pp. 357-367 and June 1923, pp. 581-593.
- ²⁹Laurence Buermeyer, "Some Popular fallacies in Aesthetics," *The Dial*, February 1924, p. 116.
- ³⁰Thomas Craven, "Psychology and Common Sense," *The Dial*, March 1924, p. 240.
- ³¹Virgil Barker, "Aesthetics and Scholarship," *The Arts*, January 1928, p. 64.
- ³²Thomas Hart Benton, "The Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting," *The Arts*, November 1926, pp. 285-289; December 1926, pp. 340-342; March 1927, pp. 145-148. For another discussion of Benton's aesthetics see my masters thesis "Thomas Hart Benton as Aesthetic Theoretician" (Brown University, 1972).
- ³³Forbes Watson, clipping from *The World*, February 1, 1925, n.p. on microfilm D49, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- ³⁴Forbes Watson, "Charles Sheeler," *The Arts*, May 1923, pp. 341, 344.
- ³⁵Forbes Watson, "Pablo Picasso Knocks loudly at the Doors," *The World*, November 25, 1923.
- ³⁶Henry McBride Papers, microfilms NMcB 7, frames 350-648 (miscellaneous letters and journals).
- ³⁷Henry McBride, *Matisse* (New York: Knopf, 1930), pp. 14-15.
- ³⁸Henry McBride, "Walkowitz and the Parks," *International Studio*, November 1924, p. 156.
- ³⁹Henry McBride, "Modern Art," *The Dial*, June 1926, p. 527.
- ⁴⁰Henry McBride, "Modern Art," *The Dial*, April 1927, p. 353.
- ⁴¹Henry McBride, letter to Gertrude Stein, December 12, 1913. McBride Papers, Yale University, New Haven.
- ⁴²Henry McBride, letter to Gertrude Stein, January 5, 1920, McBride Papers, Yale University, New Haven.
- ⁴³Walter Pach, "An Artist's Criticism," *The Freeman*, October 25, 1922, p. 165.
- ⁴⁴Walter Pach, "The Point of View of the Moderns," *International Studio*, April 1914, pp. 861-863.
- ⁴⁵Walter Pach, *The Masters of Modern Art* (New York: B.W. Huebsch 1924), p. 94.
- ⁴⁶Pach, *Masters*, p. 98.
- ⁴⁷Pach, *Masters*, p. 99.
- ⁴⁸Guy Eglinton, "Art and Other Things," *International Studio*, January 1925, p. 341. Another review that criticized Pach was by Robert Allerton Parker in *The Arts*, January 1925, pp. 51-52.
- ⁴⁹"Eglinton Drowned," *The Art Digest*, July 1928, p. 4. The article mentions that Eglinton had been in a German detention camp during World War I where "he had nothing to do but read and think, and ponder upon the meaning of things."
- ⁵⁰Guy Eglinton, "The Theory of Seurat," *International Studio*, July 1925, p. 290.
- ⁵¹The clearest statement of Eglinton's interest in evolution as a method of criticism is in his "The American Painter," *The American Mercury*, February 1924, pp. 218-220.
- ⁵²Craven, "Progress," see footnote 28.
- ⁵³Thomas Craven, "Thomas Hart Benton," *Shadowland*, September 1921, p. 66.
- ⁵⁴Thomas Craven, "John Marin," *Shadowland*, October 1921, p. 77.