CUBISM AND JAPANESE CONCEPTION OF ART

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It has become now commonplace, when one speaks of cubism, to refer to the famous letter of Cézanne to Emile Bernard, in which the great master recommends strongly to "treat nature in terms of its geometrical shapes, of the sphere, the cylinder and the cone". Indeed, we find this statement almost in every study on cubism, to such a extent that sometimes it is misquoted, in which case the word "cube" substitutes for one of the geometrical terms, apparently in a goodwill from the author's part to establish more clearly the connection that links the master of Aix-en-Provence to the young Braque and Picasso.

Certainly, I would be the last to deny this connection which evidently exists and which appears more significant when we are reminded of the fact that the letter in question, dated on the 15th April 1904, was not published until 1907, that is to say one year after his death and at the same time with his big retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne, and also of the fact that it was precisely at this moment that Picasso was trying to complete his "Demoiselles d'Avignon". On the other hand, you have only to look at any one of Braque's landscape of l'Estaque, executed in the summer of 1908, to realize how big was his debt to the master of the Mt. Sainte Victoire.

However, if there is no question to see in Cézanne a precursor of cubism, it is, it seems to me, no less important to recognize the separation rather than connection between Cézanne and cubists and to measure exactly the distance from Aix-en-Provence in the Midi of France where Cézanne withdrew since 1878, to the "Bateau Lavoire", this old dirty building in Montmartre, in which Picasso held his studio in those crucial years of 1904～1909—the distance which is probably much greater than is usually considered, because it is no longer that of two generations, but that of two completely different worlds, of two completely different conceptions of art.

In order to see clearly this difference, we have to return again to that letter of Cézanne to which we have already referred, but not to that rather arbitrarily quoted phrase, but to the entire passage, so that we can understand exactly what Cézanne wanted to convey to his young friend. It reads as follows:

> "...May I repeat what I told you here: treat nature in terms of its geometrical shapes, of the sphere, the cylinder and the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth, that is a section of nature or, if you prefer, of the spectacle that the *Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus* spreads out before our eyes. Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature for us men is more depth than surface, whence the need of introducing into our light vibrations represented by reds and yellows a sufficient amount of blue to give the impression of air."

These lines tell us most eloquently Cézanne's conception of painting and we can point out in them at least two things which deserve our

attention. First, it is clear from what he says that he considered nature as principal generator to his creation. Indeed, we find in his other writings many statement confirming this view, such as:

"I don't want to be right in theory but in nature"

or,

"The Louvre is a good book to consult but it must only be an intermediary. The real and immense study that must be taken up is the manifold picture of nature"

or again that famous phrase which is also often quoted: "to do Poussin over again after nature". Secondly, it is also evident that he considered this nature in terms of three-dimensional space, having breadth and depth, into which each object comes to find its adequate place. So far, this is not particularly a revolutionary point of view, but rather a classical one, and it is important to insist upon it, because this is precisely what separates him from other fellow impressionists, for instance Claude Monet, to whom nature is nothing but reflexion of light. For Cézanne, a picture must give not an illusion but at least an equivalent of this "breadth and depth". But here, he comes across with a big problem: how to attain it? because, having passed through the experiences of the Impressionism, he no longer could rely upon such devices as a pure geometrical perspective or a traditional *chiaro-scuro*. The only means left to him are colours and it is why he speaks of the "need of introducing a sufficient amount of blue to give impression of air". This "sufficient amount of blue" plays so to speak the role of perspective especially in his later works which are results of this hard struggle to create a pictorial space only by means of colours. No wonder, then, the blue is dominant in his later works, as we can see for instance in that marvellous series of Mt. Sainte Victoire in which you can always feel an immense space which separates the painter and the mountain and which goes beyond the mountain, spreading out into an infinite blue sky.

A more amazing example is given by the small water-colour, entitled "On the Boat" (National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo). Here, there is no perspective, no *chiaro-scuro*, but only colours, colours dominated despotically by blue which creates the space and it is so solidly constructed that it loses nothing of its strength even if it is excessively enlarged on the screen. The way in which Cézanne constructs his pictorial space is essentially the same in his larger compositions. For instance, in the famous "Bathers" of Philadelphia Museum of Art, which is apparently composition of many figures, the space is not created by figures, but already exists "in its breadth and depth"—and that again by means of colours—before figures come to fit into it.

That he could create three-dimensional space only by means of colours without resort to linear perspective or *chiaro-scuro*, or even to disposition of figures, is demonstrated by an earlier work such as this landscape which represents

l'Estaque and which is executed in 1884 (Tate Gallery, London). In this painting, as well as in those we have already seen, the space on the canvas is essentially the same as that in which stands the painter himself—and consequently the spectators. The natural space has its equivalent on the canvas, and in this respect the pictorial space of Cézanne's landscapes with their "breadth and depth" is not different in its nature from traditional one, such as we can see in this admirable "View of Delft" by Vermeer (Mauritshuis, The Hague) though the means to attain it are completely different.

The same relation with traditional space construction can be observed in the figure painting, too. In the marvellous portrait of a gardener, painted probably shortly before his death in 1906 (Tate Gallery, London), Cézanne seems to have nothing to do with traditional ways of representation. There are no perspective, nor *chiaro-scuro*, but only *taches* of colours beautifully displayed on the canvas. Nevertheless, we can easily see the three-dimensional space around the sitter and the relations between the sitter and the background, between its pictorial space and ourselves. These relations are fundamentally the same as those in the more figurative portrait of Mrs. Cézanne in a private collection in New York or even those in the portrait of Lady Innes by Gainsborough of the Frick Collection. Obviously, means used are different, but as far as the pictorial space is concerned, the result is essentially the same. If so, it is not difficult to go back farther in the history and find the same construction of an unified three-dimensional space in the famous portrait of Mona Lisa in the Louvre.

But what does this unified three-domensional space mean exactly? and what are its characteristics? I mean by that a pictorial space which is organized in its breadth and depth in such a way that each object or each figure in the picture should have an exact relationship to the artist. In another words, in such a picture, the space is not confined within the framework of the picture, but tends to spread beyond its frame, reaching up to the artist himself. Consequently, in front of such a picture, you can tell exactly how far each object or figure is placed from the position where the artist stood and consequently, where the spectator is supposed to stand.

This unified three-dimensional space was born—or more exactly, reborn, because it had existed already in the Antiquity—in the Renaissance period and it is without saying that the geometrical perspective, or so-called linear perspective, is one of the most successful devices to create such a space. Everybody understand without difficulty that, if in the famous "School of Athens" by Raphael in the Vatican, Euclid in the front plane is bigger in size than Plato in the rear plane, the fact does not mean that Euclid was a much taller man than Plato, but simply that he was much closer to us in the given pictorial space. Here the difference of distance is translated into the difference of size, just as in Cézanne's later works it is translated

into that of colours, different "amount of blue", to quote his own words. In either case, the three-dimensional space is wonderfully created. It is often said that the perspective was invented to represent the outer world as it is. But what is represented in such a work as this amazing view on a *piazza* of an ideal city, attributed to Luciano da Laurana (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore), is clearly not the outer world as it is (supposing that such an ideal city exists somewhere), but the world as it appears to the artist, because the whole image would have been completely different, if the artist had chosen a different view point. Consequently, the picture is only one of thousands possible aspects of the object (in this case, object being an ideal city), the aspect which is entirely defined by the position of the artist. In fact, when you look at such work as this, you can tell exactly the point where artist stands and this position has always its place in that wider space, of which the pictorial space is only a small part.

Whether the picture represents an ideal landscape as is the case of Laurana's work, or a calssical subject such as the marvellous "Legend of Lucretia" by Botticelli, another fine example of the composition in perspective (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), one cannot help remembering, when one looks at it, that there exists a particular eye which looked at the scene in this particular way, the eye of the artist, and one is compelled to identify oneself with that eye when one stands in front of the picture.

One may even go so far as to say that in many of the paintings since the Renaissance until the middle of the 19th century, the true subject is artist himself, even if he is not represented physically, because we feel always his presence in the picture, we feel the artist looking at from a certain view point and organizing his own world on the canvas. This is so much true that sometimes, artists felt the cecessity of representing himself in the picture, as is the famous case of "The Arnolfini Marriage" (National Gallery, London), in which the artist Jan van Eyck appears in the small mirror on the rear wall as he is standing exactly at the position where he executed the work.

This unified three-dimensional space, which had dominated Western Art for more than four hundred years, was threatened to be destroyed for the first time when appeared the Impressionism some hundred years ago. In his famous "Sunrise, Impression" (Musée Marmottan, Paris) of 1872 which was shown in 1874 at the memorable groupe exhibition which was to become the first Impressionist Exhibition, Monet tried already to reduce whole the world to a flat assemblage of innumerable touches translating his visual sensation. Evidently, if the world is nothing but reflexion of light, there is no logical ground to organize it "in breadth and depth" with three-dimensional forms in it. It is no wonder, then, that Monet's world became more and more ambiguous as to space and form construction, as is evidenced in the famous "House of Parliament in London" (Louvre,

Paris), painted in 1904.
We have another example of about the same period: painting inspired by the Waterloo Bridge in London (National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo), where no distinction is made between water and sky, between river and land. I have often heard, in front of this painting, people say knowingly to their companions: "you see, it is very foggy in London." But it is not necessarily fog which is responsible for such an ambiguity.
Cézanne, though he learnt very much from the experiences of his fellow-impressionists, was never satisfied with this ambiguity. When he declared "to do Poussin over again after nature", he wanted to create a solid space construction with "its breadth and depth", such as we find in the well-known "Arcadian Shepherds" by Poussin (Louvre, Paris). Only, Cézanne had to achieve this task with the only means he was disposing of, that is, colours.
Many compositions with figures by Cézanne in his later years are nothing but results of his essay to construct the unified space, in which he gloriously succeeds with the final big compositions, one of which, perhaps the best, is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In this painting we are faced to that solid, unified three-dimensional space as in nature, into which figures come so naturally that we are almost unaware of the strong deformation of figures. In fact, they are far from being realistic. Most of them have a too small head in proportion to their body. One of them, the woman in the front plane at the left, has even completely lost her head. But all these contribute to create a real pictorial space.
We are faced now with a entirely different world when we come to the famous large composition "Demoiselles d'Avignon" by Picasso (Museum of Modern Art, New York). Though there are lot of references to Cézanne's example particularly in its motif of individual nude, the space conception is completely new and has no progenitor in the Western art since Renaissance. In fact, in this painting, we find no longer that unified three-dimensional space. There is no free, originally unoccupied space before the appearance of these women. Its space, if there is any, has been created by their bodies themselves and by intervals between them. Here, space is function of forms rather than environment for them.
Same is exactly the case with landscape. Cézanne wanted something solid in his landscape and it is no wonder that he put often buildings in his composition, as we can see in the "Paysage de Gardenne" (Private Collection, New York). Buildings are by their nature apt to create a "breadth and depth" and in this landscape of Gardenne, almost the whole canvas is covered by buildings, giving impression of full three-dimensional space. But this space "in breadth and depth" is going to be lost in the Braque's "Montmartre" (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris), where all the houses are put together on the same plane, just as the women are in "Demoiselles d'Avignon".

Exactly the parallel can be pointed out also in figure painting. In the portrait of Mrs. Cézanne in the Metropolitan Museum, the impression of depth is given mainly by the edge of the fence which runs in diagonal behind Mrs. Cézanne and by the tree and other landscape elements beyond that fence in upper left corner. In another portrait of the same person, "Mrs. Cézanne in Red Armchair" (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), almost every object including the sitter herself seems to be subordinated to the flat picture plane. But nontheless we can see clearly the space in depth behind Mrs. Cézanne, generated by the ingenuous colour scheme making full use of the contrast between bright red armchair and dark back wall, and also by the small portion of a window (or is it a picture frame?) on the wall in the upper left corner. This is also true in the portrait of Ambroise Vollard, very perspicacious art dealer (Musée de Petit Palais, Paris), in which Cézanne has resort to a small device of open window, again in the upper left corner, through which we can percieve a part of outside landscape. The interior space is thus connected with the outer one, which gives the impression of depth. Such a device is very conventional in the 18th century, as we can see in one of the marvellous portraits owned by the Frick Collection, "Portrait of Lady Talor" by Reynolds, where the right half background is covered by a heavy yellow curtain, whereas in the left half, we see a landscape through the opening of a window. Curiously enough, this convention is still alive in Picasso's early cubist painting such as in the portrait of Fernande Olivier executed in 1909 (Private collection, Chicago), in which the right half background is covered by a curtain as in Reynolds' portrait, whereas in the left half, we notice a table with a pot and pears and also a framework of a window on the wall.

But this allusion to a three-dimensional space is completely absent in another portrait painted almost at the same time and which is now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In "the Woman in a Chair", in fact, the sitter is placed in a kind of abstract space which becomes entirely irrelevant to the natural space in the "Man with a Guitar" by Braque, also in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and painted in 1911. In this picture, all the small facets which were in various directions in previous works become now parallel to the picture surface, and consequently the work combines a number of different view points, denying thus all allusion to a natural space. The unity of the picture here is guaranteed not by a single view point which might dominate the whole composition, but by a coherent relation between every plastic element. The final stage of this evolution is attained by this simplified "Man with a Hat" of 1912 by Picasso (Museum of Modern Art, New York), in which we notice no trace of perspective, no modeling, no *chiaro-scuro* at all, but only a man's image in a flat surface, rendered with an amazing draftsmanship and invention.

Quite in the same way, the evolution of the still

life painting, subject "par excellence" of the cubism, gives witness to this dislocation and decomposition of a unified space. In Cézanne's painting, even in such a "close-up" as this "Pears and Apples" (Private collection, Paris), we can see still clearly the natural space with its "breadth and depth", but which already is threatened to disintegrate into an aggregation of small facets seen from multiple view points in Braque's "Mandoline" of 1911～1912 (Tate Gallery), to attain finally to a new unity with no reference whatever to the artist's single view point, nor any reference either to the distance between objects and artist, as it is evidenced by Braque's "Composition with Playcards" painted in 1912～1913 (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris), or by this "Pipe, Glass, Bottle of Rum" also by Braque, executed in 1914 (Museum of Modern Art, New York). In front of such works, we can fully understand Braque's statement: "the eyes deform, but mind forms", or another one made by Picasso: "I paint forms as I think them, not as I see them".

Now what has this new esthetics of cubism to do with Japanese conception of art, I mean, Japanese traditional conception of art?

As it is often pointed out, one of the most peculier characteristics of Japanese traditional painting is absence of a fixed view point. Consequently, this unified three-dimensional space rendered by various devices such as perspective, modeling or *chiaro-scuro* which, as we have seen, dominated Western painting for more than four hundred years since Renaissance, is entirely unknown to Japanese artists until the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century, when began our contact with Western art. As a result, there occurs sometimes a curious similarity between cubism which denied the unified pictorial space and Japanese traditional painting which had not yet been familiar with it.

For instance, in this lovely *Makie* decoration executed by Ogata Korin at the beginning of the 18th century and which represents the "Bridges in a Iris Pond", the irises are represented in their full side view, whereas the bridges are rendered as seen from above. This kind of co-existence of multiple view points is one of the most common features in Japanese art, of which another example is given by a famous folding screen by Sakai Hoitsu at the beginning of the 19th century. Here again, we have a complete side view of grasses and flowers in the lower part and a kind of bird's eye view of a river in the upper part of the screen. And as the rest of the screen is entirely covered by a silver background, there is no logical relation of distance or space between the grasses and river, except that of a decorative effect.

In a composition with many figures such as this famous scene from the "Tales of Genji" of the 12th century, again the same remark can be made. There is of course a suggestion of a space, which is given by the diagonal setting of a screen-curtain. This screen-curtain is seen obviously from a fairly high view point, but each figure is represented as seen from a normal view

point. There is no perspective either, because every personage, that of the front plane as well as of the rear plane, is of the identical size. A more interesting example is given by the "Legend of Taimadera" which relates the story of Princess Chujo, painted in the 13th century. Here again, the general setting is seen from above; the ceiling and roofs are taken off, in order to show clearly the interior, but the Princess herself is seen from our normal view point. And what is more interesting is that in this painting the passage of time is indicated because we see the same Princess four times, leaving her room, and going to the weaving machine. We have here multiple view points and a succession of time represented in one composition.

As for the portrait, there is no concern about spatial rendering nor any allusion to the depth, as is seen in this "Portrait of Yoritomo" at the end of the 12th century, with its completely naked background and its flat costume without any hint of fold. Even if there is a fairly complicated drapery as is the case in the portrait of a woman by Kaigetsudo Ando at the beginning of the 18th century, the effect is rather flat, with its distinct outlines and bright, pure colours. As is already well known, it is this kind of flat, decorative rendering of an object which attracted so many Impressionists or Nabis painters in the late 19th century, who put an end to the long established tradition of three-dimensional space construction in Western art. Japanese traditional painting could have an influence on the course of Western art, because it had not known the unified space construction.

In this respect, it is not without significance that Cézanne, who was the last great advocate of this unified three-dimensional space, is almost the only important artist of his generation who remained outside of the Japanese influence which was so strong in the late 19th century. And it is also significant that the young Picasso and Braque, continuing and denying at the same time what Cézanne had achieved—or to put it more exactly, successors to Cézanne, precisely because they denied what he had achieved—have created this new esthetics of Cubism, which is so to speak the conclusion of the artistic revolution which started in the late 19th century and to which Japanese traditional art had a small part of contribution.

* This lecture was given at the Frick Collection on February 10, 1968.