



Willem de Kooning, . . . Whose Name Was Writ in Water, 1975, oil on canvas 77 x 88".

SERVANT OF TIME

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The ethical interest of art resides in its demonstrating the necessity for choosing. Artists who attempt to eliminate choice, or to reduce it to a few simple operations, eliminate an all-important element of psychological interest and create objects which find no echo in our moral lives. Now the justification of irresponsibility is an immensely popular position. Consequently, the programs and propaganda of such artists arouse widespread interest and millenarian hopes. But their work invariably disappoints: it cannot be made to matter, since choice—even humble

preference—is absent. Not mattering enough to one person (the artist), it finally doesn't matter to anyone. A sense of the absolute rightness of the thing is missing. And that quality of rightness is a function of judgment, which is a faculty developed through the exercise of choice.

Behind choice, behind preference, there looms, immense and awesome, desire. Denying choice, denying the ethical life, is tantamount to denying desire. Every mark that goes into the making of a painting is a wish fulfilled, a desire granted. One hopes that the painting will ultimately possess "the

lineaments of Gratified Desire"—William Blake's wonderful evocation of what the lover wishes to see in the beloved. Here, in fine art, where appetite, desire and want must be at their greatest intensity, we paradoxically feel surcease—release from the dreary treadmill of needing. Here we can serenely contemplate what is so often a torment elsewhere.

Desire inspires the imagination, which in turn expands on notions of the possible, increasing our sense of freedom. Yet these welcome developments often arouse timidity and fear, although those feelings can be allayed in fine art—or their opposites even

engendered—when the artist is secure in the knowledge of his craft. He knows that he can never make a "mistake," that in art there are no mistakes, though there is incompetence. Everyone's mental life is affirmed when the artist has faith in his own mental processes, when he has taught himself to be at home in his own mind. Choice, desire, fantasy, impulse: all find their rightful place. But willfulness is banished, since it is the enemy of mental motion and always results in the separation of conception from execution. That is not invariably deadly in representational art, but it is anathema in abstraction, since the loss of the psychological interest inherent in representation is then not compensated for by a new kind of psychological interest.

I believe that the unquestionable moral authority embodied in the work of the very greatest artists—men such as Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Velasquez, Watteau, Cézanne and Picasso—was founded upon an unswerving allegiance to desire, combined with a rare capacity for absorbing unpleasant facts. The relentless pursuit of the desired brought them up against the limits of life. Only desire could have lured them so far, ineluctably drawing them toward wisdom, wisdom being nothing if not a knowledge of the limits of life. When it does not destroy, the horror of this awareness produces pity, the most humanizing of emotions. For the uniquely consoling and healing properties of art derive from the artist's attempt to save himself from despair. To the extent that he

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1658, oil on canvas, 52 1/4 x 40 1/4" (© The Frick Collection, New York).



"Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have / immortal longings in me. —Antony and Cleopatra, V. ii. 283-84.



Jackson Pollock, *Ocean Greyress*, 1953, oil on canvas, 57 1/4 x 90 1/8"

succeeds in doing this, to the extent that he feels his own humanity—that his situation is not unique but universal—he is in a position to save lives, his own first, then those of others.

In great art, desiring and knowing are not separate things doomed to perpetual conflict. They are united in a blaze of ecstatic unity, a double image in which we can gaze both alternately and simultaneously at what is most glorious and hopeful in life, and also at what is most painful, most leading to despair. This grand metaphysical drama of embracing spiritual faculties, of the splendors and miseries of life, is played out only on the very peaks of art. In the foothills we have mere affirmation on the one hand, mere negation on the other. And false authority—based on fear—is everywhere on parade.

Starting from choice, we are inevitably led to a consideration of judgment. From judgment itself we are led on to the concept of justice, the realm of the law and of the entire fabric of social intercourse.

Starting again from choice, we are led to desire, and from desire to love. For desire cannot achieve its object except by loving. Fine art embodies and exemplifies our search for love and justice: when we speak of the humanity of great art we speak of this.

Were we to search for a word into which we might pack all of our sense of what constitutes the limitations of life, could we hope to find a more capacious one than time? When we become thoughtful we are made so by it—and saddened also, though this comes to the same thing. Yet only time—limited time, historical time—allows our lives the grandeur we have learned to crave.

When we stop to consider the extraordinary gravity and melancholy of classical art, it is easy to understand how ready the soul of Western man must have been for Christianity. The new religion offered him a way out of the honeyed, impacted sorrow of the Greek athlete, the merely personally significant. The notion of the happy, healthy Greek is a sentimental fiction

which does justice neither to the range of classical culture nor the dilemmas it faced. (In literature, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius are a telling instance of the pall of glumness which hangs over much of classical culture.) The sorrows of the Man of Sorrows break the bonds of self and are given universal meaning by being undergone for others. From Greek athlete to crucified Christ we take an immense stride. Yet this, too, was only a step in a regression.

Where many have seen simple religious faith and affirmation in the extraordinary developments of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, one could also see the substitution of a belief in the works of man for a belief in God. The early centuries of the Church were chiliastic in spirit. Enduring monuments were pointless when the millenium was daily expected. Its perpetual postponement, however, prompted greater efforts. So these mighty edifices, designed to draw a miracle down from on high, failed in their purpose. Men turned away in disappointment from the future



Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Le Mezzetin*, oil on canvas, 21¼ x 17" (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



Pablo Picasso, *Large Heads*, 1969, oil on canvas, 76¼ x 50½".

which they had promised themselves and set about to forge a new one, a future of human agency. Ironically, they did so by turning to the past, immersing themselves in classical antiquity, ultimately producing that significant hybrid of the Renaissance, the crucified classical athlete.

With Dante and Giotto we enter the modern age. At last we feel at home. Everything is dramatic and conceived in terms of the uniquely individual, of the concretely, conditionally physical and human manifestation, totally historical in thinking. The timeless effect of their work is not produced by an attempt to escape time, as in Egyptian art, or so much Classical, Oriental and Byzantine art, but by its very timeliness. Much as the dying moments of a struggling insect trapped in amber can be preserved for eons, so in the work of these two great originators we find moments of unprecedented dramatic intensity preserved for us. Their psychological vividness is created through gesture and expression. Fleeting conditions of utter

precision and specificity are captured, eternalized in the moment.

It can truly be said of these artists that they helped to create the future, for their work forms a part of our present. That future—our present—was created by a completely new abandonment to the now. In our own time we have T. S. Eliot's dizzyingly beautiful closing lines to the *Four Quartets*:

Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.¹

Entertainment sets itself the task of making time flow effortlessly. It palls because it cannot make us forget that we are *wasting* time. Fine art also beguiles the time. But it makes the passage of time part of its

content, and by providing a social context for this painful awareness of mutability, diminishes its discomfort in the very process of its being shared.

We speak of those in jail as "serving time." Those outside jail "kill time." Given the choice between killing time and serving it, the fine artist chooses the latter. But anyone, in any field of life, can also choose to serve time. And because he will find any single one of its dimensions too cramping, he will insist upon serving them all—past, present, future: his own, humanity's, the past, present, future of the universe. This is responsibility: to see now as forever. This will make of one a servant of time.

Jackson Pollock divorced his life, allowing a simple flirtation with death to become a solemn marriage contract. But before the terrible events, there had been important developments in his work. He rejected his by then popular mode of all-over painting out of sheer integrity, no doubt, finding that the results had become predictable and the actual act of painting without savor or adventure. In his last years Pollock painted a number of superb, one-of-a-kind masterpieces in which he rejected simplified procedures, with their inevitably simplified contents, and tried to advance on the broadest possible front, using all that he knew.

It should be remarked that this characterization is at odds with received opinion, which insists upon viewing Pollock's late paintings as the work of a confused man who had lost his way. But what a difference there is between losing one's way and seeking, and finding, a new one. Is it so surprising that the audience for contemporary art (including artists) has still not caught up with paintings now well over 20 years old, nor with Pollock's implicit criticism of his own earlier work? Pollock examined and criticized assumptions about art-making which still have common currency, though often in monstrous parody.

What a singularly depressing spectacle the art world must afford to anyone with a just appreciation of the achievements of Hofmann, Pollock and de Kooning. Polarized between the vapid and triviality of Minimalism and the relentless vulgarity of representationalism (two tendencies which have in fact nurtured each other over the years), the art scene makes the most convincing argument one could imagine for the middle way—not the middle way of which the conventionally wise are so scornful, but the middle way of Montaigne. Writing in a France tormented by civil strife and religious intolerance, he was in a position to estimate its worth. In his essay "Of Experience" Montaigne tells us that "popular opinion is wrong; it is much easier to go along the sides, where the outer edge serves as a limit and a guide, than by the middle way, wide and open, and to go by art than by nature; but it is also much less noble and less commendable."²

Our recent art tells us how we have chosen to live through a very difficult period of our history, but not how we will live. Will we have a culture by and for fanatics, or is something possible to us in our collective destiny which is finer and higher? ■



Hans Hofmann, *In Sober Ecstasy*, 1965, oil on canvas, 72 x 60"

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1958, p. 145.
2. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. Donald Frame, Garden City, N.Y., 1960, p. 363.