ABSTRACTION AND DEPICTION: PAINTINGS AS PICTURES AND AS MERE DESIGN

By ANDY HAMILTON

ABSTRACT
This article assesses modernist claims by Greenberg and Harrison that abstract paintings exhibit at least residual depth and thus pictorial quality; and that they must do so, in order to avoid becoming mere designs. As Harrison writes, abstract paintings' status as "potential forms of high art…depends upon our tendency to look at their surfaces as other than merely flat – to look at them...as potentially figurative"; they have "a degree of content or meaning sufficient to satisfy the expectation that paintings – rather than 'mere designs' – had traditionally aroused". Weak and strong abstraction are distinguished, and the modernist claim that abstract painting exhibits residual spatiality is defended. Concerning the requirement that abstraction must avoid becoming mere design, the case is less clear. The article argues that there is a sector of overlap between high art and mere design, but also that there are many cases of mere design that cannot function as high art, and vice versa.

1. Residual depiction in abstract painting

Modernist art historian Charles Harrison writes that "Abstract painting depends for its status as art upon the expectations aroused by paintings which are pictures".[1] He refers to "the defining dialectic of the art of painting: the tension between marking of the surface and establishment of illusory depth", a dialectic hat even abstract painting trades on essentially. The latter's status as "potential forms of high art…depends upon our tendency to look at their surfaces as other than merely flat – to look at them...as potentially figurative". The tendency that Harrison discusses was noted relatively early in the history of modernist abstraction. In 1925, for instance, El Lissitsky commented that "New optical experience [in paintings by Malevich and Mondrian] has taught us that two surfaces of different intensity must be conceived as having a varying distance relationship between them, even though they may lie on the same plane" [i.e. are on the same physical surface].[2] For Harrison, as long as we see a Mondrian painting as flat, we see it as meaningless, as mere design. Abstract paintings have "a degree of content or meaning sufficient to satisfy the expectation that paintings – rather than 'mere designs' – had traditionally aroused".[3]

These are the claims addressed in this article. A friend and I were discussing them at Tate Britain's Bridget Riley exhibition in 2003, when we were overheard by a visiting Australian art lecturer. "'Mere design'?" he mocked. "Come on, this is the 21st century!" Many would agree with him that the modernist debate over

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[1] Harrison, Frascina and Perry (1993), Ch 3.
[2] In Harrison and Wood eds. (1993), p. 319.
[3] Harrison (2004), **p. 204**.

abstraction and design has long been superseded. Since the 1960s, conceptual art and other developments in the artworld seemingly make it possible to produce high art without deploying craft skills at all.[4] Hans Belting comments that conceptual art may be a continuation of abstraction: "Duchamp's abstraction of the <u>idea</u> from the <u>work</u> is more radical than the abstraction of the <u>form</u> from the <u>object</u>". Indeed, Karol Berger argues that conceptual art is "the achievement of complete abstraction…the distinction between the work and the world of art collapses and the artist's ambition is to make nothing but real objects".[5] The result, it seems, is to short-circuit the modernist debate over abstraction and design; hence, perhaps, Bridget Riley's work is not much criticised as mere design, if it ever was. Is the modernist subordination of mere design now outdated – or is the challenge to painterly abstraction an enduring one?

As a card-carrying modernist, I do not regard the debate as outdated, though qualifications of the most strident modernism must be recognised. One must first distinguish two senses of design: as decoration or ornamentation, and as structure. The modernist concern that abstract painting may collapse into mere design refers to the first of these two senses of design. Modernist aesthetics recognises classics of design in the second sense, and understands that design in that sense rewards serious attention – as indeed does decoration and ornamentation. It holds that Dieter Rams alarm-clock design for Braun, or a William Morris wallpaper design, warrants less artistic or aesthetic attention than a Shakespeare play or Beethoven symphony. But modernists can concede that the optimal aesthetic diet is a varied one – neither McDonalds nor superfoods exclusively.[6]

The modernist challenge to abstract painting is that is merely decorative or ornamental, therefore – though much still remains to be said concerning the concept of design.[7] Although it is entrenched in the critical discourse of 20th century visual art, the term "abstract" is equally problematic. Abstraction is one strand of modernism – realism and surrealism are others – but it has become regarded as the dominant or most characteristic one. Realism in painting had been in decline since the appearance of photography, a factor in the development of Impressionism and abstraction – for many artists and commentators, realistic depiction ceased to be central to high art. Hence Harrison's comment – an expression of the orthodox view – that "painting has had progressively to relinquish the task of first-hand depiction in order to survive as art". In 1882, Oscar Wilde remarked that "a picture is primarily a flat surface coloured to produce a delightful effect on the beholder"; in 1890, Maurice Denis declared that "a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface with colours assembled in a certain order".[8] These remarks were prophetic, and the first abstract paintings, in a strong sense, were produced in 1910-11, almost simultaneously, by Kandinsky and Kupka.

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[4] The concept of high art is elucidated and contested in Hamilton (2009).

[5] Belting (2001), p. 315; Berger (2000), p. 154. "Subtraction of the idea from the work" may be a more correct description. Michael Fried describes this process as the "gradual apprehension of the basic 'truth' that paintings are in no essential respect different from other classes of objects in the world" – a "truth" that he vehemently rejects (quoted in Danto (1981) p. 86).

[6] I gather that a version of this view was defended by Pop Art critic Lawrence Alloway.

[7] The concept of design is the topic of Hamilton (2010, forthcoming).

[8] Wilde, "The House Beautiful", in his (2001), p. 916; Denis, "Definition of neo-traditionalism", trans. in Harrison et al (1998), p. 863.

As Alfred Barr commented, the description "abstract painting" is confusing and even paradoxical: "For an 'abstract' painting is really a most positively concrete painting since it confines the attention to the immediate, sensuous, physical surface far more than does the canvas of a sunset or a portrait".[9] The paradox perhaps arises because of an ambiguity in the adjective "abstract". One sense is of having had properties taken away, to reveal an essence. Hence the abstract of a paper – a summary, the essence of the argument. The second sense, which Barr focusses on, is non-concrete – having no causal interaction with the world, possibly as the result of the abstraction, in the first sense, of concrete properties. Numbers, and universal qualities, if not ideas in general, would be examples of abstract objects in this second sense. Hence, perhaps, one could abstract (in the first sense) from the abstract (in the second sense) concept of a real number, to arrive at the abstract concept of a rational number.

It is difficult to assess these attempts at definition without close examination of how the descriptions "abstract painting" and "abstract art" originated – and they appeared not as philosophical or aesthetic ideas, but as stratagems in artworld polemics, through which artists and critics expressed their competing visions. But one can say that although abstract paintings are not much like article abstracts, or numbers and ideas, modernist painting is abstract in the first sense – the painting's figurative, pictorial or spatial properties are taken away, to reveal a non-representational essence. The development of Mondrian's mature style, for instance, was a matter of essentialising in this sense, in which representations of landscape became more abstract. As features are stripped away from a scene or object depicted in naturalistic detail, it no longer represents the visible world. Artists such as Mondrian argued that fundamental or essential properties were preserved – the underlying truth behind the veil of everyday appearance. The connotations of non-concrete are unfortunate. One should not infer that if abstract art has lost connection with the world, then it has lost concreteness, immediacy and physicality – as Barr says, abstract painting is often the most positively concrete.

This is not true of Mondrian's mature output, which have surrendered concreteness in becoming essentialised. But weak abstraction, where the subject of the painting is hard but not impossible to identify, and solid forms may be abstracted into geometrical solids, can display concreteness, immediacy and physicality. In Kandinsky's "Composition IV" (1911), assisted by the alternative title "Cossacks", one can see Cossacks with a lance in a more genuine sense that one can see landscapes and buildings in Bridget Riley's stripe paintings. Picasso, who painted no abstract paintings in the strong sense, also displays concreteness. Strong abstraction, in contrast, such as the work of Mondrian and later Kandinsky, is not concrete; it makes no claim to having a subject, and presents itself simply as a composition, suggesting a parallel with music that Kandinsky in particular sought. Malevich's highly abstract work, or Frank Stella's aluminium-painted canvases of 1960, are most nearly a literally flat painted surface. The latter treats the canvas as a sculptural object rather than as a "hollowed-out surface".

Abstract paintings vary, therefore, in the extent to which they yield imaginative

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[9] Barr (1936), p. 11. Barr was curator of the famous "Cubism and Abstract Art" exhibition in New York, 1936.

space. "Non-figurative" implies "offering no space, either technically or conceptually, which a solid body might be imagined as occupying". So "abstract" does not mean "non-figurative", since even when presenting no recognisable form, weakly abstract painting may use figurative techniques. For Harrison, "figuration" means "presentation of a solid body", and solid forms are given shape in pictures by traditional techniques including modelling by light and shade, creating the impression that the form is being seen under specific lighting conditions and thus in a believable situation; and figure-ground effects, through which individual forms are contrasted with background. (The latter may be present without the former – Barnett Newman, Mondrian). Surrealist paintings by such as Dali or Tanguy – the latter not a fully paid-up Surrealist perhaps – present a world of dreams and hallucinations, with microscopic organisms and illogical conjunctions, in a realistic picture space.

Three elements of picturing should be distinguished, therefore:
(1) The two-dimensional array of coloured marks on the surface of the canvas
(2) The representation of abstract volumes, spatially related to each other (the pictorial form)
(3) The subject-matter of these volumes.
Where (2) is present, the painting is only weakly abstract. It is (3), and not (2), that formalists such as Bell declare irrelevant to aesthetic or artistic value. Cézanne's advice to Émile Bernard, to "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone", inspired unduly formalist interpretations of his work, that neglected the way that he registered sensations of nature in an Impressionist manner, applying individual touches of colour.[10]

In its first phase, in the early decades of 20th century, two justifications for abstract art were offered. A literal justification treated the abstract work as the end result of a process of abstraction in the first sense defined earlier. An expressive justification, in contrast, cites truth to feeling and expression, and applies to Kandinsky's expressionism, and to later modernists such as Howard Hodgkin. Hence art writer Robert Clark's definition of abstract art as "art that tries to represent things that don't have a physical form, i.e. ideas, emotions, feelings and experiences". (The claim of early commentators that it depicts ideas or emotions is, however, a fairly transparent verbal fudge.) Later 19th century Symbolists complained that resemblance suppressed the capacity of art to represent emotion; a realm of psycho-spiritual subjectivity would replace nature as a representational source. This is a reason for not calling abstract painting "non-representational"; and "non-figurative", as we have seen, does not convey the whole story.

A caveat should be entered, however. Although Harrison's definition of "figurative" reflects its normal use in art history and theory, one should distinguish what is being depicted, from the manner of its depiction. It might be argued that medieval painting "offers no space, either technically or conceptually, which a solid body might be imagined as occupying", but that although it does not aim to present solid human bodies, it is figurative. (An alternative view is that medieval artists were just not very good at presenting solid human bodies, at least to a modern eye, until early Renaissance artists took the first steps into a modern conception of illusory space; the truth may be that

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[10] Gaiger (2008), p. 119.

advances in the ability to represent went hand-in-hand with the desire to do so.) As in pre-modern Chinese painting, there is no realistic depiction of space; the scale of figures reflects social status rather than distance. Medieval statuary, in contrast, clearly exhibits the skill of rendering human figures in three dimensions.

2. Residual depiction: Greenberg on flatness

Harrison's thesis may appear to conflict with Clement Greenberg's seminal writings on modernist painting; critics of Greenberg's neo-Kantian formalism, who treat his advocacy of flatness too literally, may regard his position as a modernist affirmation of design. In fact, although Harrison was a conceptual artist, a member of the Art and Language group, he took Greenberg seriously. His position arises from Greenberg's standpoint and differs primarily in emphasis. The appearance of conflict arises from the way that late Greenberg has, especially for philosophers, come to represent the whole of his thought. In fact, as Gaiger argues, his late thought, with its stress on a "logic of development" of art, and affirmation of flatness, expresses an ossified standpoint.[11] The earlier work recognises the same data, without drawing such inflexible normative consequences from them.

The key datum, for Greenberg, is that "It is not in principle that Modernist painting in its latest phase has abandoned the representation of recognisable objects. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognisable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit".[12] However, like Harrison, Greenberg recognises that even strong abstraction depicts residually, and he locates a "dialectical tension" between flatness and illusionistic – or as I would prefer to say, pictorial – content: "The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configuration of a Mondrian still suggests a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension".[13]

We will consider this qualification – that the third dimension is strictly optical – shortly. First it is important to place Greenberg's claims in the context of his Kantian history of modern art. His position is that in the 19th century, as art was threatened with assimilation into entertainment, each artform was forced into a self-critique, analogous to Kant's in relation to reason, through which it struggled to clarify its "unique and proper area of competence" as a medium. It had to demonstrate "through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar to itself":

> Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to [painting]. The enclosing shape of the support was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm or means shared with sculpture as well as the theatre. Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist

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[11] Gaiger (2008), Ch. 6.
[12] Quote in Harrison **(2004),** p. 202.
[13] "Modernist Painting"**, in Harrison and Frascina (1982),** p. 8.

painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else".[14]

The avantgarde's preoccupation with formal questions is not art for art's sake or apolitical aestheticism, but a "salutary reaction" against the confusion of the arts, an attempt to preserve painting by delimiting its field of activity, Greenberg argues – a contentious historical claim, when one considers the pressure, from eminent representatives of high art such as Kandinsky and Schoenberg, to bring together rather than separate different artforms.

Greenberg has little to say on the question of the flatness of photography; but although, unlike "mere" design, photography is a representational medium, photographers do not confront the same struggle between flatness and illusionism that painters do. To reiterate, it is not painting's flatness, but its "dialectical tension" between virtual flatness and pictorial content, that Greenberg stresses in his more considered statements. "Modernist Painting", a later article from the early 1960s, champions painting's rejection of the sculptural, and maintains that while it is not possible for painting to completely avoid "illusion", its avoidance is nonetheless an ideal. This strong claim contrasts with Greenberg's more moderate earlier view, according to which an Old Master gives precedence to content over flatness, while modernist painting affirms the essence of the medium – physical qualities of pigment, shape of the support, flatness of the surface – before we are made aware of content. Greenberg conceded that Renaissance artists paid attention to the picture surface, including properties of facture, handling and design, but notes that they sought to avoid the push and pull effect of Cézanne, who emphasised the "equally valid aesthetic rights" of the painting's physical surface.[15]

What Greenberg is referring to is brought out by the contrast between early and later Cubism. During the movement's first, analytic phase, the painting's fictive depths were drained, its action brought forward and identified with the canvas's physical surface; the invention of collage in the movement's second, synthetic phase more radically focussed attention on that surface.[16] On Greenberg's formalist standpoint, which is indifferent to the subject matter of the work, the relation of the picture surface's materiality and the representation of depth is central to the development of modernist painting. The avantgarde's achievement is "the recapture of the literal realisation of the physical limitations and conditions of the medium and the positive advantages to be gained from the exploitation of those limitations".[17]

Greenberg holds, with Harrison, that if a flattened picture indicates spatial depth so that "forms are sufficiently differentiated and kept in dramatic imbalance",

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[14] "Modernist Painting", in Harrison and Frascina (1982), p. 6.

[15] Gaiger (2008), p. 127.

[16] Picasso's "collage" breakthrough around 1912, in "Violin", did not, like design, emphasise surface pattern for its own sake, but created dynamic tension between surface and representation of depth: "The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another… every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it…The effect is to fuse the illusion with the picture plane without derogation of either…" (Gaiger (2008), p. 128).

[17] Gaiger (2008), p. 131.

then it remains a picture and so has the potential for high art.[18] As Greenberg recognised, Barnett Newman wanted to avoid traditional kinds of figure-ground relation, involving contrast between forms modelled in the foreground by light and shade, and plainer backgrounds or extensive distances; in Onement I, for instance, brown is "ground", and the red zip is "figure". But when Newman, Rothko and Pollock began producing large-scale paintings filling the viewer's visual field, they risked undermining that final indispensable convention of pictorial art, Greenberg felt; Pollock's new "all-over" style of painting – "decentralised", "polyphonic" – threatened to undermine the distinction between easel painting and decorative design, the former seen as a "single, indivisible piece of texture" rather than as "the scene of forms".[19]

In fact, the more serious challenges that easel painting faced during the 1960s came from a different direction: flatness, opticality and "painterly abstraction" – Greenberg's term for Abstract Expressionism – were undermined by movements such as Pop Art and Minimalism. Abstract art of the mid-20th century is now recognised as a high point in the development of painting, after which interest in the medium declined; the "crisis of the easel picture" was caused not by Pollock, Rothko and Newman, but by Oldenberg, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Robert Morris and Judd.[20]

The modernist claim that abstract painting exhibits residual spatiality is plausible, but how one interprets it depends on one's view of how the phenomenon arises. Greenberg's qualification cited earlier, that "now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension", seems hard to grasp – surely, it may be argued, painting can only ever be concerned with pictorial dimensions, at least until Jaspar Johns' development of painting into real objects? What Greenberg is claiming, however, is that the third dimension can now be recognised for what it is – a virtual dimension, and not Alberti's transparent window onto nature. In viewing a Mondrian grid painting, one sees the blue in front of the black – but for Greenberg, this space is not habitable, it has become "silted up". In contrast to the 19th century realism of Courbet, for instance, one cannot tell a narrative, involving imaginative engagement with the subject of the painting; this is not a world that one can enter, there are no characters with which one can have a personal relation. So the "optical third dimension" is meant to contrast with the kind of pictorial space one can imagine oneself inhabiting. This "strict" space of painterly abstraction, Greenberg seems to suggest, is entirely formal. It does not seem plausible to argue that since one can see such a space in a Mondrian, one could imagine oneself in that space, given sufficient imaginative resources.

What factors, for Greenberg and for Harrison, underlie the appearance of this residual spatiality? The answer is not clear. Harrison makes residual spatiality relative to expectations aroused by traditional and contemporary figurative art; presumably, these expectations arise from cultural rather than optical factors. I would regard as central the institutional fact that the canvas is exhibited in a gallery, and resembles figurative paintings also exhibited there. Since Western paintings traditionally were pictures, the figurative is normally expected. Frank

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[18] See Gaiger (2008), p. 133.

[19] Gaiger (2008), p.133.

[20] Robert Morris, as a Minimalist, straddles late abstraction and the ascendancy of sculpture; his sculptures, whilst three-dimensional, are frontally viewed.

Stella, pioneer of 1960s Minimalism, concedes that he "wouldn't argue with anyone who said that the figurative impulse is the dominant impulse".[21] So strong is this impulse, that even monochrome paintings by Malevich, Manzoni et al can be seen as offering a space – that is, they can be seen as recessive rooms or depths, ones that a solid body could be placed into. Perhaps there is no painting that is truly "non-figurative".

An institutional explanation of residual spatiality makes the high art status of abstract paintings parasitic on the existence of non-abstracts – though without exhibiting the radical dependence of readymades on the art status of non-readymades. All art is about art to some extent, but Duchamp's Urinal is essentially "art about art"; as Radnoti argues, "art-philosophical gestures" such as Duchamp's cannot become a dominant form of art practice.[22] Such gestures gain their meaning from the existence of art that is not simply "about art"; hence it is difficult to envisage readymades constituting a society's art tradition. (Perhaps there could be a society where there is no crafting of artefacts, but where gifted individuals select remarkable objects – banded rocks, trees embedded on railings, bird skeletons – for display in galleries.) Abstract painting, in contrast, is not an art-philosophical gesture; it is not essentially a comment on pictorial painting, and one might even imagine it forming a society's visual art tradition – indeed, it is sometimes argued, mistakenly, that it forms the visual art tradition of Islam.

3. Abstract painting and "mere design"

So much for the modernist claim that abstract painting exhibits residual depth. Now we must address the claim that it needs to do so in order to avoid becoming mere design. Almost from its beginnings, abstract painting was criticised as merely decorative. Kandinsky felt that he confronted a "frightening depth of questions" once he had plunged into abstraction: "And the most important: what should replace the missing object? The danger of ornamentation was clear...".[23] Greenberg reviewed a Kandinsky exhibition in 1941 and noted "how easy it is for the abstract painter to degenerate into a decorator…[the] besetting danger of abstract art". Kandinsky's later tendency towards rather sterile geometric abstraction shows that he was right to be concerned. Matisse, however – who never developed a strongly abstract style – embraced the charge: "The decorative for a work of art is an…essential quality. It is not pejorative to say that [a painting is] decorative". He also commented in 1908 that "Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings".[24] His Interior With Aubergines (1911) – a painting that is only very weakly abstract – might be interpreted as a modernist assimilation of painting and design.

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[21] "I never felt that minimal", interview in Daily Telegraph, 30.4.03.
[22] Radnoti (1999).
[23] Harrison **(2004),** p. 204.
[24] Matisse (2001), p. 165; Matisse, "Notes of Painter", trans. in Harrison and Wood (2003), p. 70. Greenberg thought an excess of the decorative was responsible for the "failure" of Matisse's paintings of the 1930s and early 40s (Coles (2005), p. 41).

Despite Matisse's advocacy of design, its separation from high art, insisted on by Harrison and Greenberg, is a theme of high modernist criticism and art practice. Modernists see abstract painting as part of a continuous painterly tradition, distinct from and incompatible with design. (There is an equivalent hostility to decoration in musical modernism, shown in the impulse towards total thematicism found in Brahms and Schoenberg, which aimed to eliminate the merely decorative and ornamental.) Is the story so seamless, or is a more fractured, disrupted account more plausible? Alex Coles comments that "Formalists from Roger Fry to Michael Fried have tended to foreground what they termed the 'design' of a work, while at the same time paradoxically playing down the design context". But the position of Fry and Fried – both of them modernists and neither of them fish and chip shop owners – is consistent if one distinguishes functional or structural from decorative senses of design. To reiterate, it is the latter which Harrison and Greenberg generally refer to as "mere design". Design in a structural sense, in contrast, is one of the skills that painters must have, an essential element of the art of painting; it was in this sense that Renaissance writers contrasted Florentine disegno with Venetian colorito.

Mere design is, in a terminology I have explained elsewhere, heteronomous – that is, it cannot achieve the autonomy of high art.[25] This claim is sometimes expressed, as it is by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in their essay "Du Cubisme" (1912), in terms of the portability of painting:

> …decorative work [is] the antithesis of the picture. [It is] essentially dependent, necessarily incomplete…A painting [in contrast, may be taken] with impunity from a church to a drawing-room, from a museum to a study. Essentially independent, necessarily complete…[it] does not harmonise with this or that ensemble, [but] with the totality of things, with the universe.[26]

The concept of portability suggests striking parallels with the growing autonomy of the musical work in the 18th and 19th centuries; in the later 20th century, the reaction against it took the form of the authentic performance movement.

As we saw, the decorative has its modern defenders such as Matisse, and a reaction to portability is found in the Victorian founders of the Arts and Crafts movement. Ruskin, who like William Morris idealised the medieval era for its equal valuation of art and craft, argued in 1859 that

> there is no existing highest-order for art but is decorative. The best sculpture yet produced has been the decoration of a temple front – the best painting, the decoration of a room…Get rid, then, at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or separate kind of art.[27]

Ruskin attacked the "portable picture", autonomous from its social origins and context, and advocated instead a socially-embedded, non-autonomous art, non-elitist and assimilated with craft. For him, art for art's sake was anathema; to separate art from its social context and wider human concerns was to trivialise it.

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[25] Hamilton (2007), Ch. 6.
[26] Quoted in Harrison and Wood (1993), pp. 195-6.
[27] Ruskin (1956), pp. 74-6. His later views on the purpose of art were more didactic.

Ruskin's ideal of integration had modernist adherents such as the Bauhaus, De Stijl and the Russian Constructivists. In "The Theory and Organisation of the Bauhaus" (1923), Walter Gropius insisted that

> The Bauhaus strives to coordinate all creative effort, to achieve…the unification of all training in art and design. The ultimate [goal] is the collective work of art…in which no barriers exist between the structural and the decorative arts.[28]

But Ruskin and Gropius had very different conceptions of how structural and decorative arts are to be assimilated, and De Stijl artists questioned whether the Bauhaus seriously aimed to create a unified work of art.[29] In subsequent decades, through dialogue with architects, such disparate artists as van Doesburg, Buren, and the Independent Group produced installations and environments manifesting an "impulse to the interior" in modern and contemporary art.[30]

Why not let a thousand flowers bloom, to borrow a Maoist slogan? (With the Great Helmsman, of course, the slogan was never sincerely meant.) To criticise an abstract painting for being mere design, is consistent with holding that a synthesis of painting, design and/or architecture is viable – that an artist may move between art and design and energise both. Discussing artist-designers Sonia Delaunay and Ray Eames, Coles comments that:

> Were either [of them] to have resisted the relationship between art and design, they may have ended up more like Bridget Riley or Donald Judd…Riley may never have had any desire to dabble in design, but her practice would surely have been more racy if she had; likewise, Judd's sulky attempts to parry with design led to a limited sense of practice.[31]

In 1965 a dress manufacturer affiliated with New York's MOMA presented Riley with a mass-produced textile version of one of her paintings. The artist, more upset by the ineptness than the fact of transfer to another medium, took legal advice to stop it.[32] Her influence on 60s fashion design was considerable, nonetheless.

Donald Judd described how, in the early 1970s, he was asked to design a coffee table, and adapted a sculpture: "This debased the work and produced a bad coffee table which I later threw away. The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional. If a chair or building is not functional, if it appears to be only art, it is ridiculous…The art in art is partly the assertion of someone's interest regardless of other considerations".[33] Judd created chairs and tables close in ethos to his Minimalist sculptures, but kept the two activities separate, for fear that his artworks would be treated as design – as Greenberg did anyway, commenting that they made him feel he was "back in the realm of Good

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[28] Gropius, in Harrison and Wood (1993), p. 340.
[29] Coles (2005), p. 85.
[30] Coles (2005), p. 98.
[31] Coles (2005), p. 134.
[32] See Coles (2005), pp. 43-6.
[33] Judd (1985), no page numbers.

Design".[34]

Although there is a continuum between them, there are clear cases in which it is a fact of the matter whether the artwork is a painting or a sculpture; there may be no comparable fact of the matter, not even an institutional fact, about whether something is a genuine abstract painting or a mere design. This is because the distinction in question involves critical judgment, for instance that an abstract painting by Poliakov is sterile, and close to mere design. The artworld might confer status of candidate for appreciation on Emin's bed, or on a furniture or wallpaper design, but it cannot confer high art status. Confer implies "for no non-arbitrary reason", and high art or classic status cannot be conferred on that basis, or lack of basis. Equally, mere conferral of high art status by the artworld cannot mark abstract painting from mere design.

These claims may be elucidated and developed by considering the instructive parallel of the music-muzak distinction, which like that between high art and mere design, lies partly in use. By this I mean that the opposed categories overlap, creating a domain where the same item can count as either music or muzak – or high art or design – according to its use. In a series of images which became well-known to art historians, Jackson Pollock's paintings were the backdrop to a fashion shoot by Cecil Beaton in New York's Betty Parsons Gallery, appearing in the feature "American Fashion: The New Soft Look", in the March 1, 1951 issue of Vogue.[35] And in the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Artists Project in New York found it easier to obtain commissions for abstract murals when these were labelled "the decoration"; just as atonal avantgardism is accepted as film music but not by concert audiences. Some of Magritte's work is effective as wallpaper design – appropriately, as at one point he worked in a wallpaper factory. In such cases, high art status is decided by size, framing and institutional presentation. Analogously, pieces by Mozart and Vivaldi function as muzak or musical wallpaper, a use that need not condemn the original artistically.

There is a sector of overlap, but there are also many cases of mere design that cannot function as high art, and vice versa. William Morris wallpaper designs with floral motifs are strictly non-pictorial; they are too stylised, the representation too conventional, to count as pictorial. Conversely, masterpieces of high art, such as the works of Rembrandt or Wagner, or Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony – as opposed to his masterpiece of aristocratic entertainment, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" – are too demanding to function successfully as wallpaper, visual or aural. Rembrandt wallpaper and Wagner muzak would be equally incongruous, though the latter product could be heard in Barkers of Kensington department store when I worked there in the later 1970s. (A disanalogy is that "muzak" tends to be a pejorative, whereas some wallhangings – tapestries for instance – might constitute high art.)

But how exactly does residual depth or spatiality forestall the danger, if it is a danger, of decoration or mere design, and yield the possibility of high art? A

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[34] Coles (2005), pp. 10, 13, 14. Ironically, his book Designart is so poorly-put together than the cover fell off before I had read half-way.
[35] The Beaton/Pollock story appears in Mattick article "The Avant-Garde in Fashion", in Mattick (2003). At the time, Pollock was not famous and needed the publicity.

common view is that it does so through pictorial <u>two-foldness</u>, as analysed by Richard Wollheim.[36] On his view, the appreciation of painting involves simultaneous and interpenetrating concern with its material surface and depicted content. The modernist claim is that the phenomenon of two-foldness must be extended to abstract art in order to distinguish it from design or decoration.[37] That phenomenon implies the creation of an imaginary world – an artwork rather than mere design, something which, as Danto says, has meaning, and is <u>about</u> something. Design, in contrast, has no world-making qualities, and is not about anything.

Karol Berger's contrast between a building and an architectural work helps to elucidate these elusive ideas. His initial statement seems inadequate, however: "a building may be seen simply as an artifact designed, like any other artifact, to perform a given set of functions. But it may also be seen in addition as a work, an object in which we may see embodied its builders' and owners' aspirations, values, preferences as to the forms of life worth cultivating". Berger recognises that the embodying of aspirations may be seen as a function; I would add that conspicuous consumption of consumer goods also embodies such aspirations, without making the latter into artworks.[38] More pertinent is his claim that a work is "a real embodiment of an imagined world…of human practices and aspirations" – with the proviso that "imaginary" does not have to mean "fictional", since one can imagine both real and fictional objects. On his view, a work must be interpreted as a world, whereas an artefact leaves it open whether we shall so interpret it, thus making it a work; I would add that some artefacts cannot be interpreted as works, except as readymades which pointlessly reiterate the Duchampian insight.[39]

High or autonomous art does not appear at least until the Renaissance; most cultures have not possessed the concept. In artistic cultures such as the Islamic, which place less importance on the pictorial functions of art and more on patterning and ornament, an "abstract art" would be less remarkable. Islamic art is a predominantly non-figurative tradition built on abstraction, though the received view that depiction of human and animal forms is proscribed is largely mistaken.[40] The meaning of such works is not something that emerges against a backdrop of expectation about pictorial representation, therefore; much of it is geometrical design, not based on natural forms, and therefore does not create a 3D illusionistic space – though the construction of the designs may produce kinetic effects, as Bridget Riley's Op-art does also, through optical illusion. It is not "about" anything, in Danto's terms. Like calligraphy in Japan, it may be the highest art in that culture; but still it is not a high art in the Western sense of autonomous art.

I acknowledged near the outset that for modernists, a Dieter Rams alarm-clock design, or a William Morris wallpaper design, warrants artistic or aesthetic

[36] For Wollheim, most abstract painting is representational; see his (1987), pp. 46, 62.
[37] Gaiger (2008), Ch. 6.
[38] The contrast between artefact and artwork may be expressed in terms of <u>defining</u> and other functions – see Hamilton (2010, forthcoming).
[39] Berger (2000), pp. 23-4.
[40] This highly complex question – complex, for one reason, because of the many different traditions of "Islamic Art" – is discussed **in the excellent chapter on Art and Architecture in Esposito (1999).**

attention, if less than a Shakespeare play or Beethoven symphony; and that the optimal aesthetic diet may be a varied one – neither McDonalds nor superfoods exclusively. If presented in Michael Fried's language of high artistic ambition, however, these concessions will appear grudging to postmodernists; and as a committed modernist, I would never reject Fried's position out of hand, and thus cannot accept the option of letting a thousand flowers bloom. But the resulting questions about high art status must be pursued further on another occasion.

ANDY HAMILTON
Dept. of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham DH1 3HP
a.j.hamilton@durham.ac.uk
www.andyhamilton.org.uk

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