Picasso

During the first twenty years of the twentieth century almost everything that happened in painting pointed to the growth of abstraction and its seemingly inevitable triumph over realism. Sixty years later, after a number of ups and downs, abstraction appears to be in a dominant position, but it still falls far short of victory.

For abstraction, the most important change of direction in painting in the twentieth century was made by Picasso when he turned away from Cubism (fig. 22) to his classical figure paintings of the 1920s (fig. 23). Picasso must have sensed that Cubism was played out; he saw that its dissipated and fragmented planes would inevitably lead to a flattening out of the space available to painting. At question here was the role of volume in the scheme of pictorial representation. The focus of attention was on the human figure. In Cubist practice the figure had been worn down by the pumice of structural analysis. However, the dissolution of the human figure was not the only loss; the emphasis on and consequent proliferation of planar representation had begun to dissolve the space around the human figure as well as the figure itself. If Picasso had cared to look, he would have had examples of this erosion of pictorial space close by: Kandinsky and Malevich would have provided very clear evidence.

Kandinsky (fig. 24) took the landscape—or better, our sense of the space around real things, what we might call our sense of the natural atmosphere—and dissolved it into a pigmented gesture, what we now call "pure painting." This fruitful act of liberation gave us the first really great abstract paintings. They had openness, freedom, spontaneity, clarity, purity, and just about everything else that the modern visual sensibility prizes. But Picasso, a man whose visual sensibility surely was equal to the thrust of modernism, saw the danger here of materiality—the danger that the new, open atmospheric space of abstraction would be clogged up and weighed down by the mass of its only real ingredient: pigment. Picasso's concern articulates the fear that abstraction, instead of giving us pure painting, would merely give us pure paint—something we could find on store shelves as readily as on museum walls.

If Kandinsky was filling up the landscape with pigment, Malevich was doing even greater damage to the figure inhabiting that landscape. First he flattened it like a pancake, and then with incredible dispatch he obliterated it. His method was simple substitution: he replaced the complex spatial coordinates of the human figure with a modest planar configuration. *White on White* (fig. 25), Malevich's abstract masterpiece, the touchstone of modernist flatness, still represents the solitary figure framed by a landscape, albeit clothed in pigment and severely compressed. This painting is probably what Picasso feared most—a painting with nothing but inert pigment and condensed pictorial space. In short, it is painting with nothing to work with, painting with no space to work in.

Now, by suggesting that Malevich's *White on White* was basically as much a figure in a landscape as it was a white rectangle askew on a slightly larger rectangle of almost the same color, and by insisting that Picasso's turning away from the abstract implications of Cubism to the volumetric realism of the classical figure paintings was a crucial event, I know that I am expressing a highly idiosyncratic viewpoint. But even if my emphasis and some of my examples have been exaggerated, I think that a basic point still comes across: that abstraction—or better, perhaps, abstract figuration—is bound to be tied to human figuration. As bland

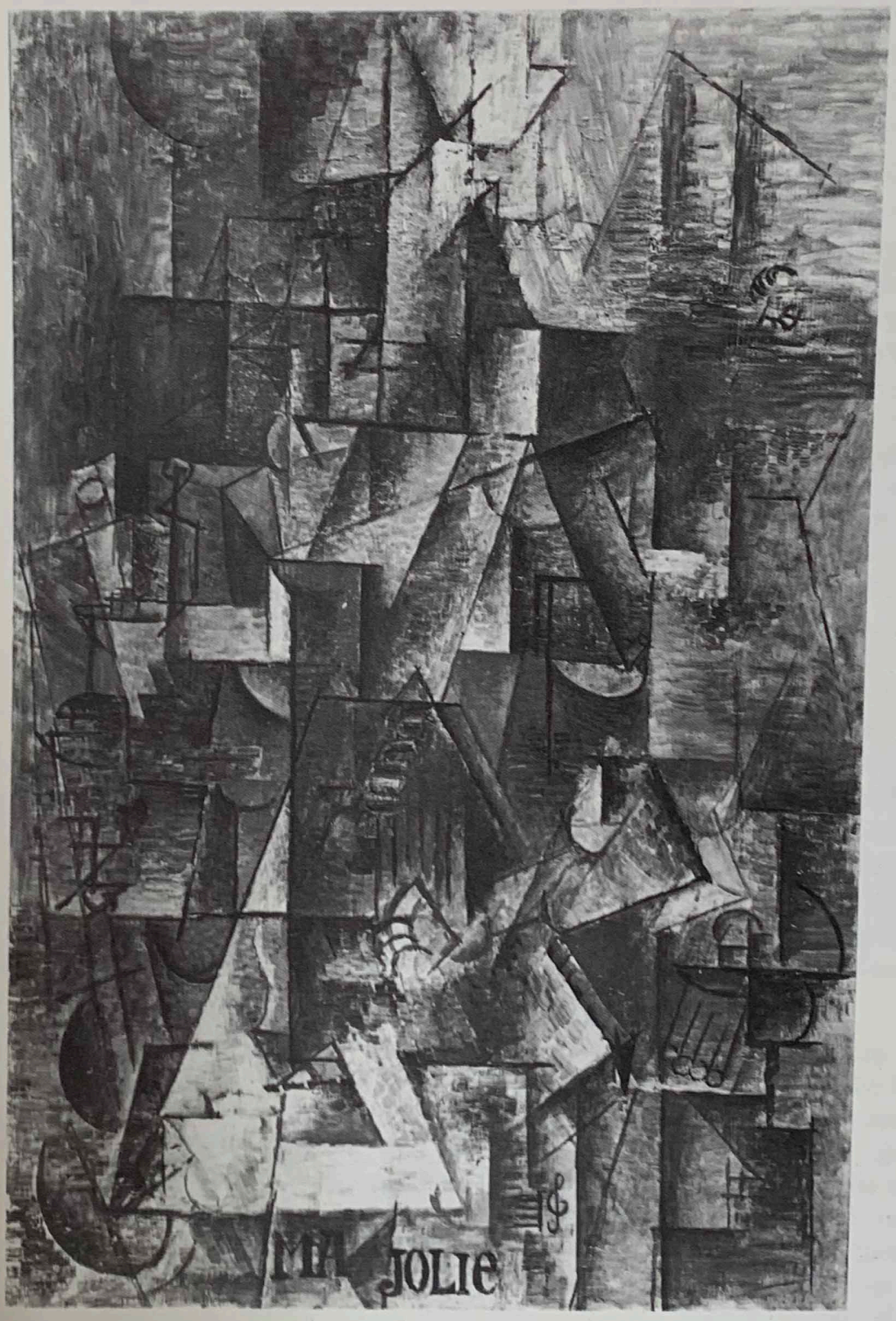

Figure 22 PABLO PICASSO
Ma Jolie (Woman with a Guitar) (1911–12)
Oil on canvas, 39⅜ × 25¾ in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

Figure 23 PABLO PICASSO
Woman by the Sea (1922)
Oil on canvas, 23¾ × 19¾ in.
Collection: Minneapolis Institute of Arts

and as lean as Malevich's efforts were, there is a human presence behind his rectangles; and as wild and artificial as Kandinsky's gestures were, there is a strong sense of observed nature emanating from all that pigment.

Our perception, at times, that abstraction and realism are bound together, almost like Siamese twins, is something that worries us, as it certainly bothered Picasso. For us the problem is that abstraction seems haunted by realism. For Picasso, abstraction appeared to smother pictorial reality. We fear that the twins can never be separated, while Picasso feared that one would devour the other.

If the major innovative goals of abstraction, heightened materiality and spatial purity, were to be achieved at the expense of human figuration, surely the gains were not worth the loss. The glory of the human figure is precisely its spatial versatility, and nothing confirms the glory and value of the figure more clearly than Picasso's post-Cubist paintings. Yet abstraction has dared to try to get along without the human figure. Today it struggles, at least partly, because it has failed to come up with a viable substitute for human figuration, for the spatial vitality and versatility provided by the human figure. It was not so much the loss of the human figure itself as it was the loss of what the figure did to the space around itself that has been so hard to replace. Spatial inertness has become a true concern for abstraction. Habitual dependence on materiality and flatness threatens to give us a very stagnant pictorial space.

Contrapposto (a figure with the hip up, shoulder down) and foreshortening (big feet obscuring a little head) are tried conventions that demonstrate how the human figure has helped articulate pictorial space in ways that abstraction now finds hard to simulate. The dictionary defines *contrapposto* as a representation of the human body in which the forms are organized on a varying or curving axis to provide an asymmetrical balance to the figure. The other technique from the past, foreshortening, reduces or distorts the human form in order to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space. Over the years representations of the human figure have successfully absorbed these devices, creating in the process a dramatic and diverse pictorial space that abstract figuration has been hard-pressed to match. This is not to say that abstraction has not tried; Kandinsky and Hans Hofmann, for example, made every effort to articulate their brushstrokes and knifed masses of paint with some of the flair and attack that such devices from the past imply, but still they have not been able to create an equivalent of the depth projected by the lush and rich Mannerist space of the sixteenth century. The advance beyond easel painting, with its emphasis on flatness and its glorification of the mechanics of paint manipulation, still has a way to go before it catches up to the pictorial dynamism of the past.

To recapitulate: consider the human form—skin, bone, and flesh. Consider the painting—surface, structure, and pigment. With a little license, the first gives us the ingredients for what might be called human or "figurative" figuration; the second gives us the ingredients for abstract or "nonfigurative" figuration. Blended together, these ingredients have yielded great painting. The question is, can we get along with half of the recipe? The skin, bones, and flesh that we have thrown out stand for a great deal in terms of visual power. In a pictorial sense, the volumetric and spatial contortions the human figure is capable of articulating are uniquely wonderful. Furthermore, the range of tactile, painterly sensations which the figure can carry remains surprisingly great. These effects are not easy for abstract figuration to replace or to supplant. In addition, abstraction suffers greatly from a diagrammatic, brittle quality. Its joints are often stiff and arthritic. It is as though we can feel the pain in the welded sockets of abstract sculpture when images of Rodin's flowing, erotic marble limbs drift through our memory.

Does abstraction need a substitute for human figuration?

Does it lead to stagnant pictorial space?

Figure 24 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Composition IV (1911)
Oil on canvas, 5 ft. 2⅔ in. × 8 ft. 2½ in.
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

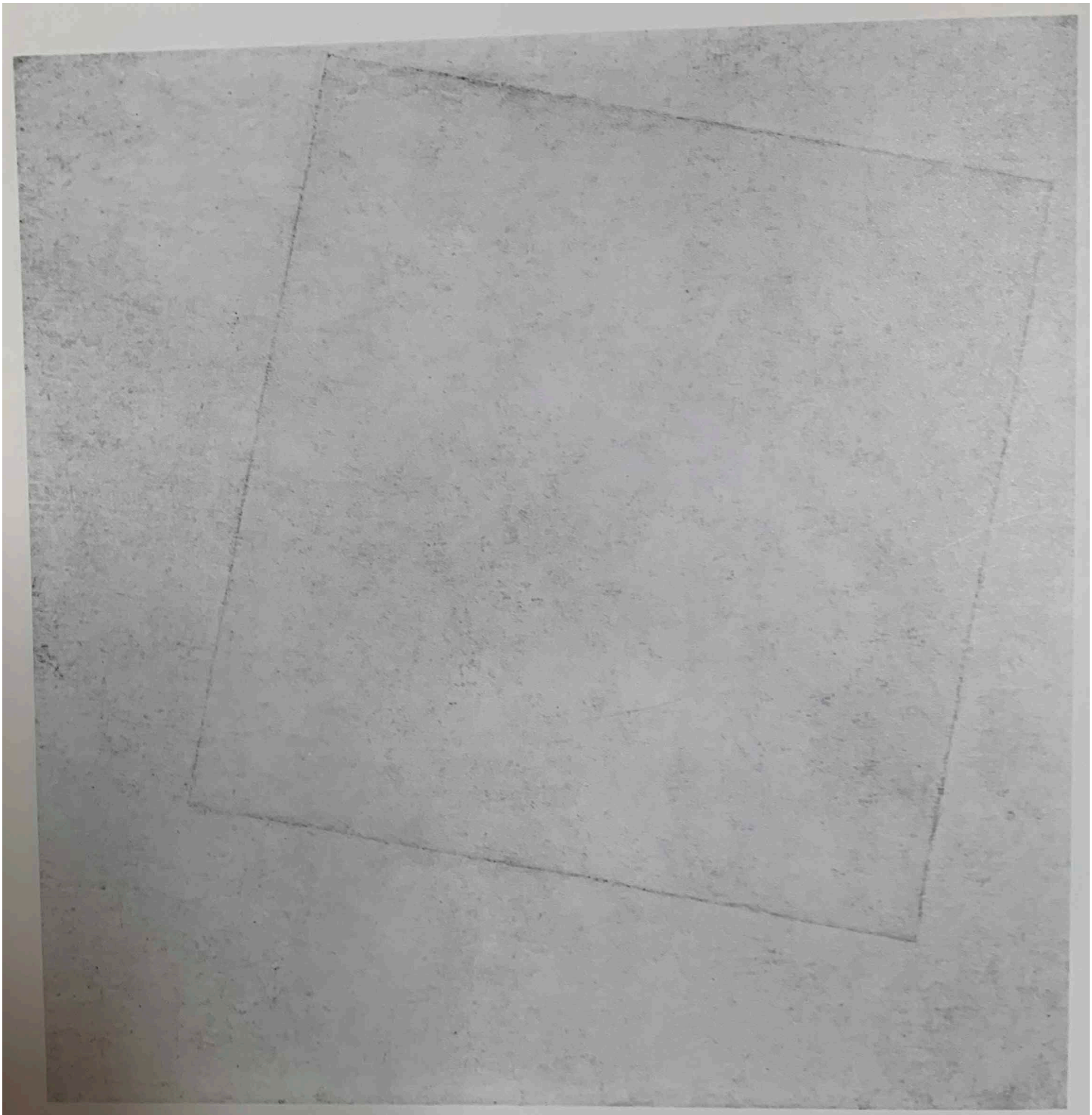

Figure 25 KASIMIR MALEVICH
Suprematist Composition: White on White (1918?)
Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 31¼ in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Sex is no joke. When Picasso left the arid desert of Cubism behind, he never looked back. His women of the 1920s and 1930s, awash in painterly volumetric rendering, left planar analysis with its future of modernist flatness standing on the beach. It is very hard for abstraction, or abstract figuration, to be sexy, and if it's not sexy, it's not art. Everyone knows that.

The success of Picasso's painting from 1920 on comes from the unabashed rendering of volume, and this is what has proved to be the most difficult thing for abstraction to deal with. What Picasso left behind—Cubism, the fragmented structure of solid figures—has been duck soup for abstraction. It appears that it is easier to take things apart than it is to keep them together. The real problem is that abstraction cannot have rendering; it must be literal. For example, the employment of the simple device of shading a surface to give the illusion of roundness or depth seems to be anathema to the modern visual sensibility. It just never looks right. Yet this experience has become no more than a powerless contradiction in the face of an obvious imperative—that abstraction must have a viable sense and expression of volume, because without them the space available to abstraction is simply too closed, too dull, too unimaginative.

The irony here is that the last really vibrant and exciting pictorial space was the Cubist space that Picasso had left behind by 1920. What abstract painting has to do is to take what Picasso left behind—Cubism—and develop it to include what Picasso went on with—a dynamic rendition of volume. That is, abstraction must go on with what painting has always had—line, plane, and volume, the basic ingredients. The problem is that in the twentieth century modernist painting has not yet been able to put all three together. This does not mean that its accomplishments are suspect; it simply means that there is still a great deal of room for growth and improvement. Abstraction must find a more robust way to deal with the space around line and plane—our sense of exterior volume; it must also find a more convincing way to deal with the space that line and plane can actually describe—our sense of interior mass.

It might be objected here that the consideration of time—the often discussed fourth dimension—should be taken into account by abstraction. To this I could offer some arguments, but suffice it to say that abstract painting has pretty well integrated a proper sense of time into its mechanics of perception, its way of seeing things. In fact, this is the one area in which it is superior to any form of representational painting. For the most part realism today can only look through a viewfinder out the window of perspective. It is the fixed focus and limited—one might almost say unique—point of view that most separates realism from abstraction. The field of vision of realism is closed; that of abstraction is open.

So far abstraction has struggled to get by without the associative spatial dynamics of figuration. It has been hard-pressed to give us anything resembling what Picasso did in the *Bather with a Beach Ball* (1932; fig. 26). But abstraction has not been without resources; it has gone so far as to give us painting whose pictorial drama is provided by what is not there. Malevich has given us two shades of white for figure and ground, and Mondrian has stretched landscape so taut across the painting surface that only pigmented traces of its structure remain. But brilliant as these maneuverings have been, we feel that there is something lacking; flatness and materiality (that is, pigmentation for its own sake) still close up pictorial space. Volume and mass—things that seem so real, and things, not so incidentally, that seem so natural to sculpture, need to be rediscovered, reinvented, or perhaps even reborn for abstract figuration. This is what Picasso said when he became a post-Cubist painter. Not surprisingly, thirty years later we find this same message reiterated by Jackson Pollock, in his *Frogman* of 1951 (fig. 27) or *Sounds in the Grass* of 1946 (fig. 28).

- Does abstraction have to ignore volume?

What has been difficult for abstraction to deal with? Flatness & its absence volu

Figure 26 PABLO PICASSO
Bather with a Beach Ball (1932)
Oil on canvas, 57⅝ × 45⅛ in.
Partial gift of an anonymous donor and promised gift of Ronald S. Lauder to
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

It was realism, hammering home the lessons of the past, driving the concerns of volume, mass, and three-dimensional rendering relentlessly forward, that denied abstraction the promises of its future. A future that Cubism had seemed to assure sank under the weight of Picasso's retrenchment. The huge stone feet of the classical seashore bathers, sinking in the sand, should have crushed their way through the paintings' ground plane, and the mass of figures themselves should have forced out all the viable pictorial space. These paintings should have failed. Realism itself should have collapsed with this effort, and if it had not been for Picasso's genius, it would have. Can we imagine a credible Surrealism without Picasso's bathers and bulls propping it up from behind?

If realistic figuration had failed after Cubism, it would have left the way open for Mondrian's extension of Cubism toward abstraction. Unfortunately, Mondrian's effort to make do with the more abstract, basically descriptive elements of art-making had to contend with the flamboyant success of Surrealism. Still he persevered. Mondrian tried to make paintings with line and plane alone, using only the descriptive elements of volume, the elements that defined its boundaries. This was a search for reality without substance, a search for a visual world charged with enough energy so that mass would not be missed—so charged, in fact, that the mere depiction of mass would appear to be an awful and inappropriate intrusion. In short, this was a search for a world in which figuration, human or abstract, would not be necessary.

At least, this is what we would have to believe if we thought that Mondrian's neo-plasticism was the *only* way to true abstraction, that the best that Cubism had to offer was quasi-abstract figuration, and that ultimately the future of Cubism would always be bound to depicted reality and to three-dimensional expression.

But, we ask ourselves, can there be abstraction without some kind of figuration? Can there be art with only two-dimensional depiction? The answer to the first question is probably no, because art, even when limited to line and plane, will yield shape, and the shape itself becomes the figuration. The answer to the second is probably yes—there can be art with only two-dimensional depiction, if we are not too fussy. In this case we have to accept some substitution—basically energy for mass, something we can feel for something we can see. If Picasso's mass, his pictorial power, was drawn from structural considerations through Cézanne with line, plane, and volume, Mondrian's strength, his pictorial energy, was drawn from surface concerns through Impressionism with color, light, and rhythm—the other basic ingredients of painting.

Surrender to sensation was the source of Mondrian's success. It enabled him to extend abstraction after confronting Cubism, while Picasso's sense of physicality bound him to retrenchment in the face of his own great discoveries. Mondrian was able to go on because what he saw in his own work, as well as in the work of Kandinsky and Malevich—materiality and flatness, the same things that Picasso had seen—did not seem so destructive or threatening to him. If he saw that these developments, the consequences of Cubism, were a threat to the depiction of reality as defined by its essence—three-dimensionality—he was not worried. He was confident that he could accept the structural limits of two-dimensional depiction, that is, accept the obvious flatness of the canvas surface, and build from there without recourse to illustrational illusionism. He felt that he could replace the lost sense of reality, the loss of depicted volume and mass, with energy derived from his handling of color, light, and rhythm, which, correctly focused, would appear to be equally real—or at least, real enough for painting. Of course, throughout the development of Mondrian's later

Figure 27 JACKSON POLLOCK
Number 23, 1951 (1951)
Enamel on canvas, 58⅞ × 47¼ in.
The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia
Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

Figure 28 JACKSON POLLOCK
Sounds in the Grass: Shimmering Substance (1946)
Oil on canvas, 30⅛ × 24¼ in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Lewin and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn Funds

painting there were hints and suggestions of volume and mass. It is not as if these things were ever really lost; it is, rather, that their representation by the devices of conventional illusionism was properly suppressed in order to get on with the business of abstraction.

Pure color is the beginning of Mondrian's sensationalism. Its application reveals the intensity of hue as a pleasure and a tool in its own right, as well as a surprising conveyor of feelings echoing volume and mass. Bright, radiant light follows, created by a preponderance of white pigment and numerous high-contrast encounters with the black bars cutting across the painting's surface. This surprising light, emanating from a background which has the ability to assert itself as foreground, is hard to pin down, but it does seem to suggest that color travels as it radiates, which in turn suggests that color has some graspable pictorial substance of its own. Finally, Mondrian pulls it all together with rhythm, the painter's ultimate tool. *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (plate 13) is a measure of all abstract painting.

It is here that Mondrian rattles the bones of human figuration for the last time; it is here that the white rectangle steps out of the background landscape into its own space. It is here that abstraction is truly born again. Mondrian has shored up the shallow space of abstraction so that color and shape can float freely; their extension in any direction, and of any duration, is fully supported. This is what Mondrian's paint-encrusted black bars did when they successfully spanned the surface of the painting: by spanning the pictorial surface rather than dividing it, the structural bars became the infinitely flexible and extendable supports of abstraction. These supports helped build modern pictorial space, replacing the traditional structural underpinnings of realism, the horizon line and the ground plane.

It is here too that abstraction may be able to find a cure for the redundant painterliness and sterile, self-limiting two-dimensionality that plagued abstract painting in the 1970s. Two of Mondrian's paintings from the 1940s, *New York* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie,* have the live-wire armatures, the hot-blooded structure both to support the collapsing space of shapeless materiality and to anchor the lightweight atmosphere of shallow, arcanely colored surfaces. With help like this, anything is possible.

A modest leap of the imagination will link Mondrian's late paintings with the famous drip paintings of Pollock, especially paintings like *Number 1, 1948* (fig. 6) and *Number 28, 1951* (fig. 29). What is interesting about this link is the way in which it shows us the marriage of rhythm and structure, the salient feature of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* being repeated a few years later with what appear to be surprising results. From Mondrian's very tight and worked-over painting came Pollock's very loose and expansive painting, painting in which everyone could discover "freedom."

This link manifests itself in the playing off of various pictorial elements against each other in both Mondrian's late paintings and Pollock's drip paintings. The rhythm of sensation and mass (color and pigment) mingles with the beat of descriptive two-dimensionality, where the moving line dressed as a black bar defines a plane, and the moving plane, in turn, defines a volume. In this dance abstraction may discover its potential to overcome modernism's spatial inferiority.

There is no doubt that Pollock, like Mondrian, enlarged the space available to abstraction by spanning the surface of painting with his enameled tracery. But how is this tracery tied to the edges of its support? Can the paint skeins be self-supporting? Do they float from the edges of the picture surface, or do they float in front of them? We cannot help noticing that these are the same questions that come to mind when we confront Mondrian's grids, as in *Composition in White, Black, and Red* (1936; plate 14). It seems possible that what we can say for Pollock's tracery we can say for Mondrian's gridwork. In any event, we do not know exactly

Q. Seeing vs. sensing

Figure 29 JACKSON POLLOCK
Number 28, 1951 (1951)
Oil on canvas, 30⅛ × 54¼ in.
Collection: Mr. and Mrs. David Pincus

how the enameled tracery is tied to the edges of its support. The paint skeins appear to do two things at once: first, they float, billowing up from the surface of the picture apparently attached only to the edges; and second, they float freely in front of those same edges parallel to their surface, apparently unattached.

The question of where the paint skeins are in relation to the painting's surface is an important one because it seeks to define the working space of abstract painting. The fact that this working space is defined by a contradiction which allows the paint skeins to be in two places at the same time should give us pause. The notion that we see the paint skeins sometimes on the canvas surface and sometimes floating in front of it leaves the space surrounding the skeins with an ambiguous but strangely compelling set of coordinates which essentially describes a location in motion. Here we have Pollock's tracery (plate 15) lifted free of the painting's surface, bringing loosened bits of the background with it. This lifting is close to the final twist. Up pops the ghost of the draped figure (plate 16), which had been caught and partially hidden in the webbed extravaganzas. She surprises Pollock so that he grabs his black-and-white baton (silhouette and ground) for support. As he regains his composure, he turns his stick into a weapon, prodding her back into the painting's surface, thereby reenacting the ring-around-the-rosy of twentieth-century painting—abstraction and realism chasing each other's tail.

Perhaps the one thing Pollock really could not do was to break with the easel picture. When Mondrian realized that the freeing of his spanning grid had the simultaneous and equivalent effect of freeing the background, he put these discoveries to work in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie,* but he did not live long enough to face, as Pollock had to, the inevitable consequences of these ideas. It is certainly possible that Pollock never saw that Mondrian's grid could be "in front of itself," and that paintings like *Blue Poles* and *Autumn Rhythm,* which seemed so expansive and so surely to be pointing to a wider vision, were anomalies. But we have to wonder, because it seems wrong to sell Pollock's talent short.

In the end, it was left to Barnett Newman to break definitively with easel painting and to account finally and determinedly for the emergent binocular vision of twentieth-century abstraction. It is a vision that gives us more room, confirming the potential spatial fecundity that Mondrian and Pollock suggested when they made us realize that with our two moving eyes we could sense more than one spatial location at a time for shapes and their silhouetted backgrounds. The marvelous thing about this is that through the magic of abstract art we can almost digest this space as one experience, with one stare. But herein lies the rub: abstraction has, no doubt, enlarged our vision, but Picasso's realism still challenges us to strengthen it.

In order to understand Picasso's realism of 1920, it is helpful to take a quick look at some of the momentous painting preceding it. Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911–12), Kandinsky's *Painting with Black Arch* (1912), and Malevich's *Black Cross* (1915) are representative examples of the pictorial intensity from the second decade of the twentieth century. The differences among these paintings are obvious; each declares its individuality in terms of identity and purpose as clearly as we could wish. What may not be so obvious is that they have a common goal: all three of these paintings strive to be real. Yet one of these paintings is at a tremendous disadvantage when it comes to converting paint on a brush into reality on a surface.

If the problem were posed as a quiz, asking which painting of the three would have the most difficulty shedding the restraints of illustration, most of us would answer Picasso. Some of the more clever might choose Malevich on the grounds that a search for fundamentals is bound to be

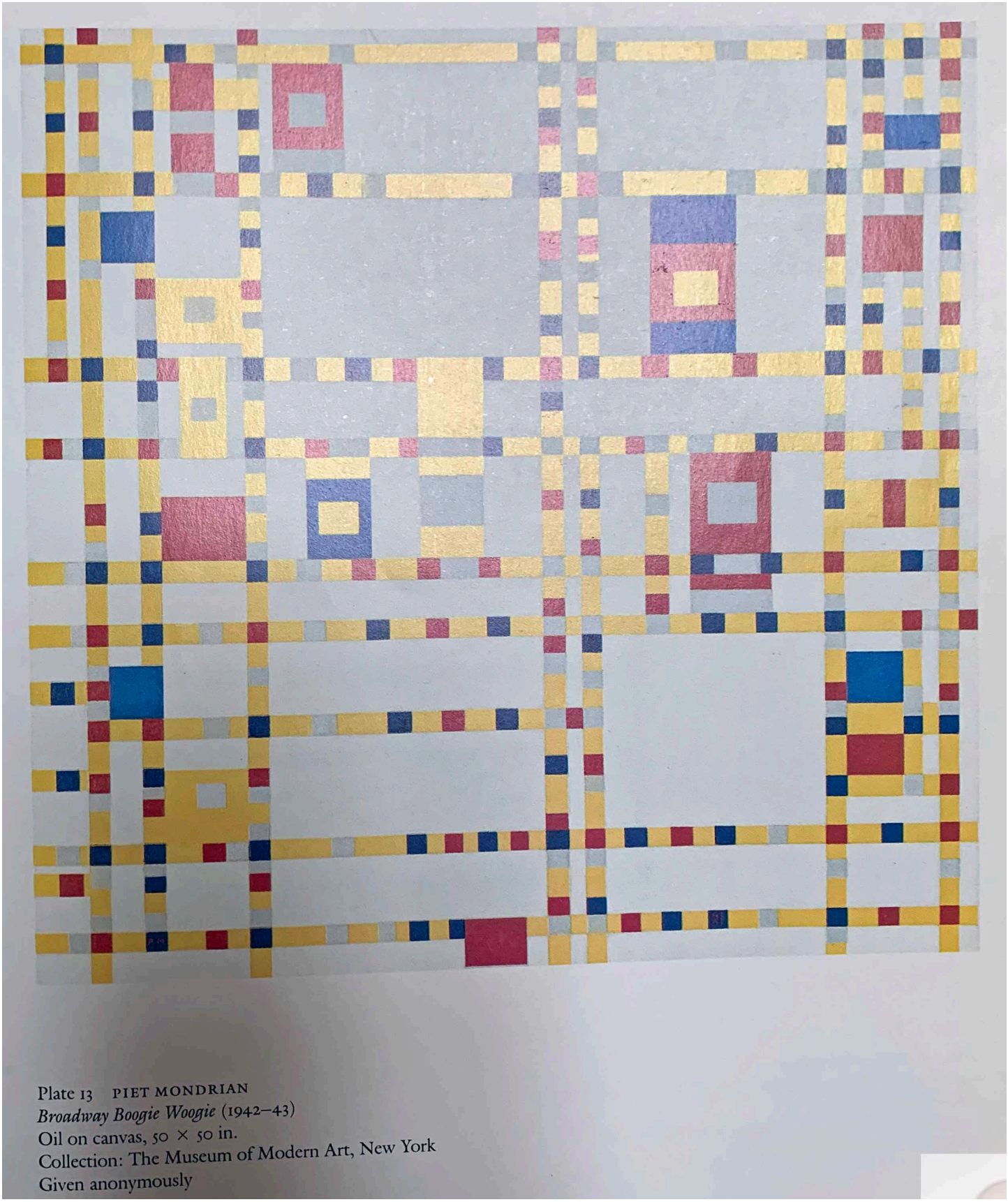

Plate 13 PIET MONDRIAN
Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942–43)
Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Given anonymously

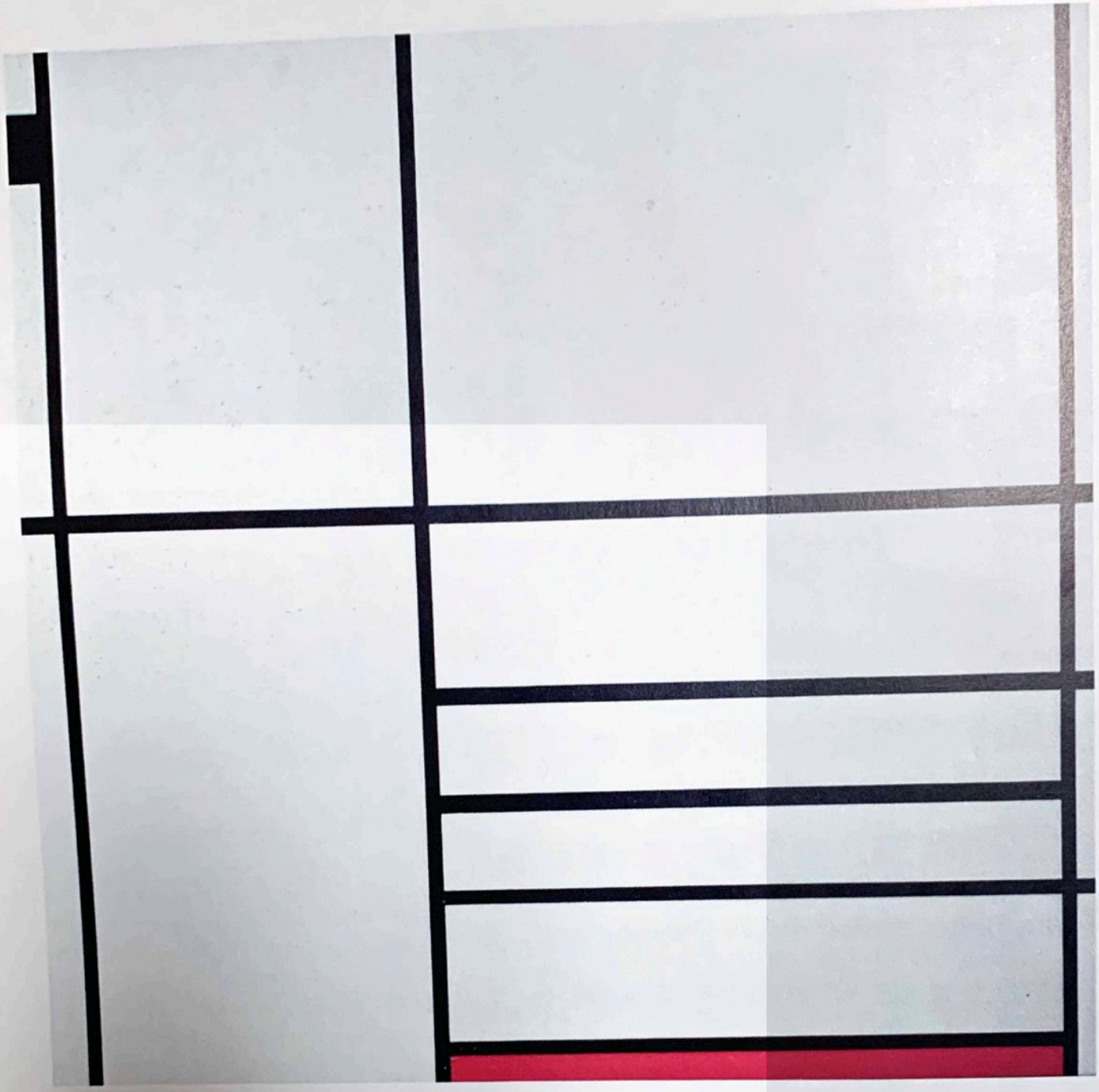

Plate 14 PIET MONDRIAN
Composition in White, Black, and Red (1936)
Oil on canvas, 40¼ × 41 in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of the Advisory Committee

Plate 15 JACKSON POLLOCK
Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949 (1949)
Oil and enamel on masonite, cut out, 48 × 96 in.
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

Plate 16
Wall painting frieze (c. 50 B.C.)
Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii

expressed in terms of illustrational generalities; but few would guess Kandinsky. However, it now seems clear that Kandinsky was the one who was disadvantaged in the struggle to be real. In their acceptance of materiality, Picasso and Malevich both came to terms with the surface of painting. In a casual manner they could make concrete the efforts that contained their notions of observed and ideal reality. Both Picasso and Malevich were able to make pigment coincide with their convictions about pictorial presence, to paste their vision on a temporary portable surface, creating in the process an amalgam that we now perceive as a permanent, fixed surface for art. They troweled pigment onto a self-sustaining surface which they had willed into being.

Toward this end Kandinsky is never as convincing as Malevich or Picasso. He never seems to push the paint as hard; he never seems to penetrate the surface as successfully. Consequently his efforts never seem as engaging or as real as those of Picasso and Malevich. He always seems to be giving us a picture or an illustrated abstraction of what Picasso and Malevich would have made into an immediate physical reality.

Although this assertion might appear to demean Kandinsky, that is not my intention. The freedom from materiality that Kandinsky sought was an important freedom, one that expresses what painting today so sorely lacks—pictorial expansiveness. Kandinsky came to his sense of expansiveness indirectly. In trying to lighten and at the same time to color what he observed, Kandinsky formed a trenchant, pictorially useful vision of the unruly nature of sensory perception. He knew that what he saw and what he had an urge to depict were but small parts of an expanding whole, what we think of as a knowable universe. Yet he became as excited about what he could see, limited as it was, as he was about the opportunities for representing it when he realized that the limits to perception in art are largely self-imposed. He saw that by simply ignoring the stationary pose of the artist at work, the fixed point of view, he could set the orientation of his own point of view completely free. Instead of using his easel to prop up a window on the world, Kandinsky used it to support a windshield moving through the universe. We see Kandinsky in front of his easel, at the controls (fig. 30), confidently aware that both he and his painting are in motion.

Kandinsky always took a limited, planar slice out of the imaginary spherical whole that stands for our intuition of what we know and see. In this sense he always had to give us a picture of what he saw. It follows, then, that he had a very difficult time shedding his illustrational cloak. He was always separated from the action of painting by his point of view. On the other hand, the flexibility and maneuverability of his point of view opened up endless possibilities for painting. Malevich and Picasso gave us the hard reality of accomplished, incontrovertible material creation, but it is Kandinsky who gave us a bright, expanding vision which in turn gives us hope that we can revivify our dulled surfaces.

Picasso's *Seated Woman* (Paris, 1920; plate 17) has to be a shock to any person of refined sensibilities, to any person who prizes his "eye." In a word, the painting must shock a critical art audience, one such as ourselves. Yet to see how this shock works we have to separate working artists from the viewing public, because even though it is possible to imagine the public slipping into a stunned, placid silence, it is difficult to imagine a tempered reaction from Picasso's practicing professional competition, especially from those committed to abstraction, to what seemed to them to be the inevitable consequences of Cubism. To Mondrian and Kandinsky, Picasso's *Seated Woman* must have cast a dark glance backward. To an inveterate polemicist like Malevich, the aggressive spirit of Suprematism, Picasso's woman must have appeared as a reactionary icon, a stony, academic goddess gazing out over an impossible future. But surprisingly

Figure 30 Kandinsky in front of his painting *Dominant Curve,* 1936
Courtesy Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

enough it was Malevich, not Mondrian or Kandinsky, who was seized by the same enigmatic force of the past that beset Picasso.

The background that explains the seated woman of 1920 is Picasso's trip to Italy in 1917 in pursuit of Olga. Rome and Naples pretty much describe everything that goes into this seated woman; she is both Caravaggesque and classical. Her introspection and absorption derive their intensity from the mysteries of Pompeii, while her projective drama emanates from the fire of seventeenth-century Neopolitan painting, from the Caravaggio, Reni, and Ribera of Capodimonte. Her classicism, manifested in a Roman guise of monumentality and gigantism, springs from the fragments adorning the Capitoline courtyard.

This small picture gives the impression of introspection on a large scale, suggesting stolid bemusement fueled by a billowing, wistful remembrance of the excitement and potential brightness of Cubism. Painting sits painted in and into a dark corner. Picasso has taken another look at the past, a look back beyond the accomplishments of Cubism to reinforce his basic perception of painterly reality, which asks weight and mass to define the essentials of what we see. As a result he decides that he prefers distance and space to remain in the background, to remain discreet atmosphere. He does not want space to be the surface of painting; he does not want unnecessary, weight-reducing, trivializing notions of surface and space to dilute the force of pigment hand-driven to create a monumental image of art. Picasso feared that the future might dematerialize the past. He saw the artist's job as one of hardening and compressing pigment into a gesture posterity would find difficult to erode.

Although reworking was part of Picasso's working method, this seated woman seemed to give him a lot of trouble. This appears to be a painting that did not come easily. What is supposed to be so obvious and easy about representational painting—the manipulation of high contrasts, the deployment of light and dark—presents a rather awkward struggle throughout the bottom half of the painting. Confronted with this overworked passage, the connoisseur in us is likely to say that this split, caused by the differences in handling between top and bottom, is what makes the picture. However, it could be that these differences are simply calling attention to a real problem. In any event, what happens to the bottom half of the toga brings out two obvious facts. Picasso knew that the past use of chiaroscuro was part of a general problem for painting, as witnessed by his quoting of Le Nain in 1917 in a pointillist mode, and he knew that the present use of chiaroscuro was part of a specific problem for painting, as evidenced by the struggle from top to bottom in this seated woman of 1920. Equally obvious, of course, is the fact that Picasso could not or would not ever desert the contrary alternative, the other structural part of the problem for painting—the abstract, planar, dimensionally impoverished modality of Cubism. Nonetheless, the seated woman, whether through ignorance or omniscience, gives us the impression she knew one thing for sure: that the planar mode would never again dominate. She believed that from 1920 on the image of art would be wrapped in the swaddling cloth of volume and mass fashioned from the remnants of classical drapery, the drapery once entwined about the initiates of Pompeii and the mythologies of Guido Reni, the same drapery later to emerge from Pollock's webbing.

This description of the seated woman's prophetic vision holds itself within the bounds of critical thought, but there is a further extension of her vision that cuts into the real world in an unsettling way. There is a brutal simplicity in this painting, an echo of imperial Rome and seventeenth-century Naples, which makes Picasso seem both cruel and clairvoyant at the same time. Picasso's view of the past, his view of Western culture as seen through the medium of his experience of art in Italy in 1917, denies all of the highly prized subtlety and complex genius of what grew to be the combined greatness of Western and Italian painting. Picasso has seized upon the most blunt, dull, and obvious mechanics

of art making to succeed his investigations, his inspired discoveries of Cubism. How could he see a future for the broken, empty, blank monumentality of imperial statuary? How could he see a future for the cliché of chiaroscuro, especially in the aftermath of Cézanne and Monet?

Two things stand out. One is the idea that "what's good is good." Picasso knew what every father preaches: the fundamentals will never let you down. The other is that innovation must remain a mirage. Picasso taught himself the difference between progress and change; he saw that in the aftermath of necessary change, progress was slow. There is in the seated woman an expectation that for painting to continue, a strong base must be built. Picasso declares that pictorial strength must always be made explicit, that weight and volume, light and dark must be clearly present, especially if painting is to meet its future intact.

At Royan in June of 1940, the *Woman Dressing Her Hair* (plate 18) came to realize everything that the seated woman of 1920 had foreseen. The fundamental barbarity of Fascism is portrayed here in a fusion of obtuse Roman imperialism with the bigoted savagery of Naples. In Italy in 1917, Picasso came to a view of the past emphasizing the primitive fundamentals of pictorial invention which both supports and constrains our efforts to this day. In classical Rome he found the encouragement to petrify pigment, to give it an enduring, stonelike weight. In Naples he was reminded of the power of light and dark to reveal action, to encapsulate stroke, to immortalize gesture. With this recycled power in hand, Picasso was able to block out a convincing space for modern pictorial drama.

"What saves me is that every day I do it worse," said Picasso, and he was not joking. If we look at the mother of the seated woman of 1920, the *Seated Female Nude with Crossed Legs* (1906; plate 19), we see the beginnings of a progression of similar work which spans the generations from mother to daughter to granddaughter—from the *Seated Nude* (1906) to the *Seated Woman* (1920) to the *Woman Dressing Her Hair* (1940). The progression seems to trace a history of self-parody; each painting threatens to become a rehash of what had come before, beginning with a monumentally dull restatement of Cézanne, continuing on through a retreading of Italian art and all of Western visual culture by association, and finally ending in a restyling of Cubism as a kind of aggressive, semiabstract, new realism. In front of our eyes, Picasso keeps his word. Indeed, from generation to generation he makes it worse, yet stunned as we are we manage to applaud.

In the 1928 painting *Girls in the Field* (plate 20) Malevich follows Picasso in an uncanny way, echoing Picasso's basic concern about the depiction of weight and volume at the expense of planarity. Malevich seems also to be very concerned with difficult, old-fashioned pictorial problems such as shading and lighting; in this painting he tries to do it in the manner of Picasso, lighting the features and clothing of his peasants from different, contradictory directions. While Picasso sought to hold onto a dark strength from painting's past, Malevich was seeking to project the mechanical core of that strength into the future. Picasso's disregard for the future, his disinterest in his successors, his total involvement in the issue at hand make his accomplishments seem more definitive and impenetrable than perhaps they really are. If we look at Malevich in 1920 we see a confusion in the face of growing pictorial problems, but the struggle takes place within an aura of bright hope; everywhere the pigment radiates a sense of positive direction, whereas Picasso's seated woman seems to drift off on a gray mental cloud, pointed toward some random assignation.

Kandinsky easily avoided the gravity of the situation that overwhelmed Picasso and Malevich in 1920. One way or another Kandinsky kept things moving, kept painting in motion. He evaded the problem that Picasso and Malevich thought so pressing. Kandinsky was never worried about

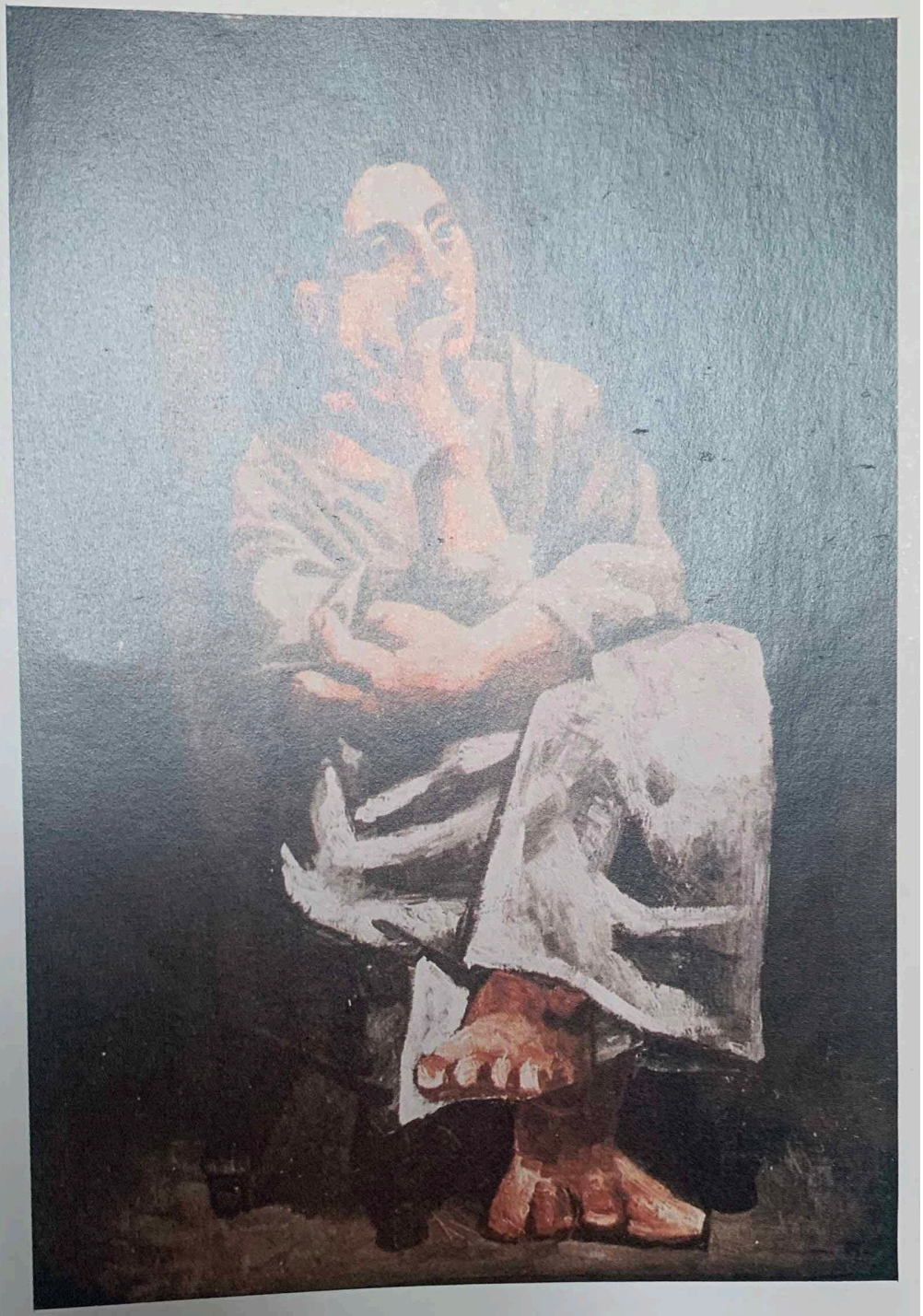

Plate 17 PABLO PICASSO
Seated Woman (1920)
Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 25⅝ in.
Musée Picasso, Paris

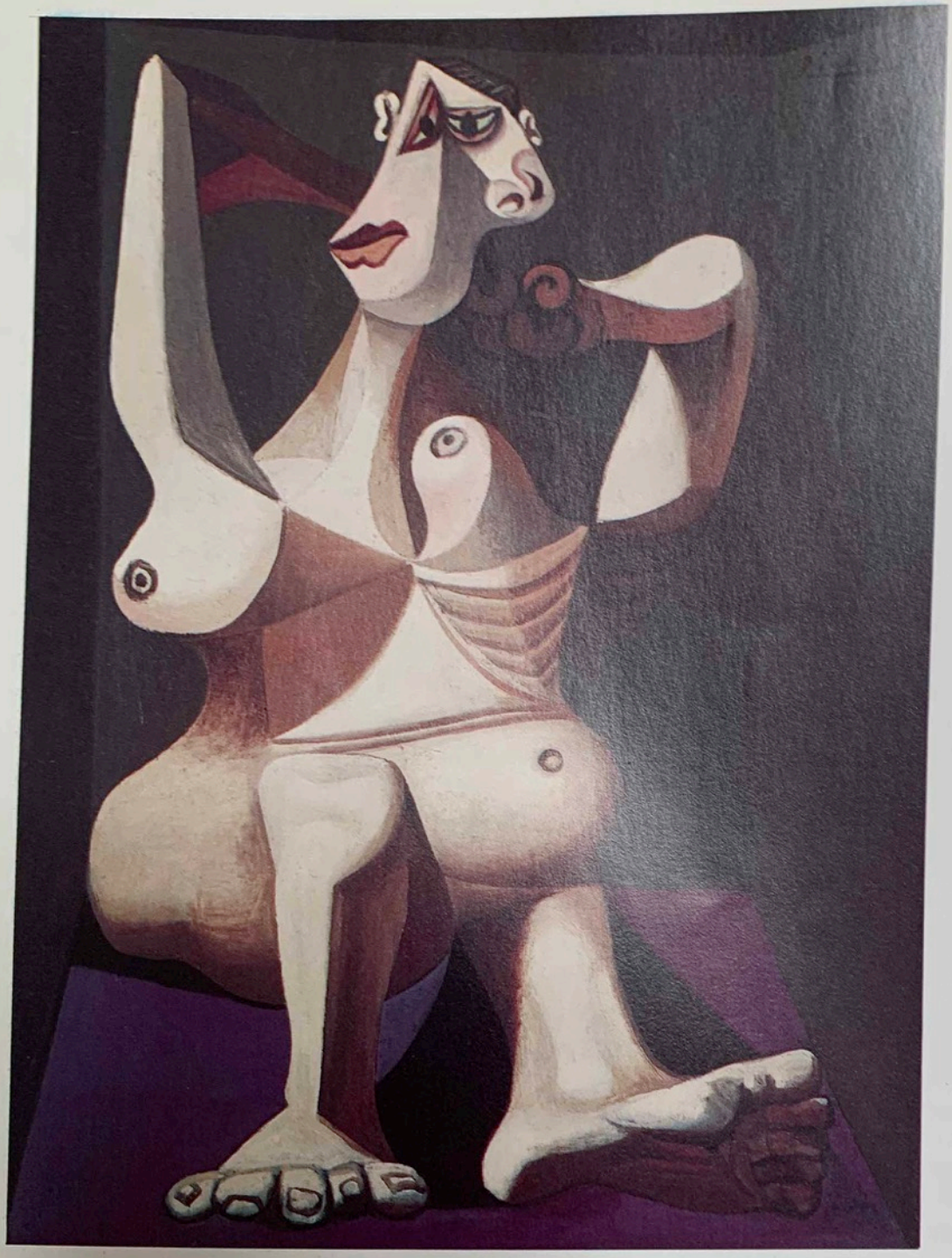

Plate 18 PABLO PICASSO
Woman Dressing Her Hair (1940)
Oil on canvas, 51¼ × 38¼ in.
Collection: Mrs. Bertram Smith, New York

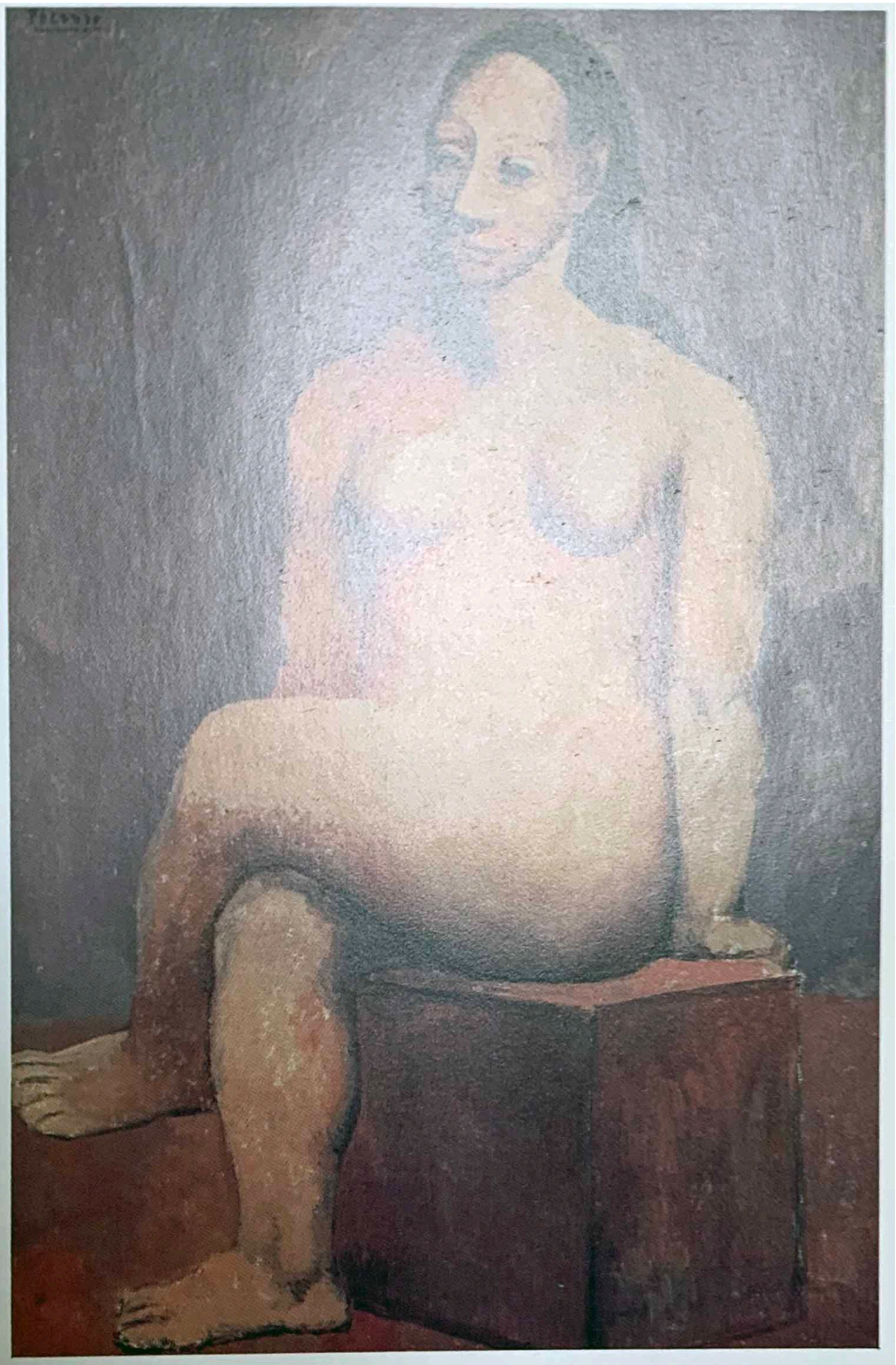

Plate 19 PABLO PICASSO
Seated Female Nude with Crossed Legs (1906)
Oil on canvas, 59½ × 39⅜ in.
National Gallery, Prague

Plate 20 KASIMIR MALEVICH
Girls in the Field (1928 and 1932)
Oil on canvas, 42⅛ × 49⅜ in.
Ministry of Culture, Moscow

guaranteeing pictorial reality; he never believed that painting lived or died with the viewer's conviction that in looking at painting one must have a convincing, palpably real experience. While Picasso and Malevich had something to prove, Kandinsky had something to suggest. He argued that painting should not become bogged down in the creation of concrete, monumental artifacts. He used his antimaterial, antisculptural bias to insist that painting develop its own sense of motion, that it concentrate on moving its component parts and the accompanying space around them.

The *Red Oval* of 1920 catches Kandinsky at a wonderful moment, working in Russia in the midst of a turbulent, productive art scene. The first thing that engages our attention in this painting is not the red oval but the yellow quadrilateral that surrounds it. Kandinsky's yellow quadrilateral is a reference to Malevich's *Yellow Quadrilateral on White* (1916–1917). With impish abandon Kandinsky has converted Malevich's industrial rug into a magic carpet; he transposes the floor covering of nascent modernism into a tapestry, outlining its future development. If one looks at the two paintings side by side, it is not hard to see that Malevich's *Yellow Quadrilateral* serves as an outline for Noland's diamond-based stripes and chevrons of the 1960s, while Kandinsky's *Red Oval* gives a premonition of my own reliefs of the 1970s. This is a slight reversal of our expectations. If anything, one would have expected the concrete sensibility of Malevich to show up in my literalist work, just as one would have expected the antimaterialist feeling of Kandinsky to come through in the color-weighted abstraction of Noland.

One thing this dichotomy might suggest is that Malevich's painting of 1917 was the ultimate expression of a planar ambiguity fostered by Cubism—an ambiguity that was causing doubt and concern for all of the best painters across western Europe. By 1920 Picasso and Malevich were beginning to question the weightlessness of the two-dimensional plane itself. Kandinsky seemed to share the same worry, but instead of turning to a mode delineating volume in an exact, literal way, he emphasized the ambiguity of the plane and launched it smartly into the pictorial space of the future.

Of all the things that dog the ambition of abstract art in the twentieth century, illusionism seems to be the most sticky item. Everyone has had his say about the mechanical aspects of illusionism that have retarded modernism's growth. Everyone knows that the future belongs to surface and color, self-generating and self-sustaining abstractions bound together in an undeniable presence that makes itself felt as art. Everyone knows that illusionism gets in the way of an uncluttered, pure expression of surface and color. But everyone also knows that the few rare moments of uncluttered, pure expression of surface, say Malevich in the distant past and Louis in the recent past, enjoy their success not on the basis of what they leave out, but on the basis of what they put in. Malevich and Louis are convincing not because they eschew the illusionism of the past, but because they incorporate an important, fragile aspect of that illusionism—an aspect that contains a different, more ephemeral, but ultimately necessary kind of illusionism. It is the illusion of vitality that sustains painting. This is the illusion without which painting cannot live.

Still, it might be argued that the illusion of life in the art of the past actually resides in the devices of mechanical illusionism that abstraction is so anxious to abandon. It is hard to find a better example than Picasso to illustrate the vitality ingrained in the traditional mechanics of illusionism. But then, nearly anything we say about Picasso's classical bathers can be said about Malevich's 1920 *Girls in the Field*. What we see in Picasso and Malevich are three traces of mechanical and psychological illusionism which abstraction in the person of Malevich hated to leave behind and which realism in the person of Picasso could not give up. The embodiment of these leftovers, the albatross of semiabstraction, was a reality in 1920 and is still flourishing in the 1980s.

The first gift of illusionism that modernism wants to reject is the pictorial illusion of three-dimensionality. It is obvious that three-dimensionality carries our basic notion of visual reality, anchoring our perceptions. In painting, volume is suggested by shading, which in the past combined light and dark contrasts with subtlety and effect. But in the twentieth century, in the drive toward literalism, shading became brutal, almost ugly in effect, testing our tolerance for "bad," naive technique. For a time in the 1960s abstraction had largely eliminated the device of shading, but something has brought it back. The temptation is to say that the return of shading is a misbegotten revival, a desperate attempt to shore up a popular taste for pictorial realism. However, a more generous view might be that the elimination of the sense of volume and mass in pictorial representation simply creates a void that ultimately must be filled. The progressive wing of abstraction has only deferred the day of reckoning; it is clear that abstraction has to come to terms with volume.

The second benefit of illusionism that modernism struggles to do without is the space created between the objects which are rendered successfully in three dimensions. In effect, the intangible gift of shading is the space created around the objects it represents. Malevich obviously likes what happens in the pictorial space behind his peasants. Traditional illusionism is good at creating what abstraction often lacks—interior space.

In addition to volume and interior space, abstraction must pick up on another aspect of illusionism: its success at caricature, at catching everyday associations, recognizable sparks of life. In a sense, abstraction has to humble itself. It has to realize that although the gesture of creation may be real and direct in execution, as realized art it lives only as a representation; it will never be as literal or as independent as it dreams of being.

One thing that seems clear about all three of these aspects of illusionism—the successful depiction of volume, the creation of interior space, and the power of caricature—is that they are very comfortable in a realist pictorial setting. Because they lend themselves to a limited, bounded mode of pictorial expression, they are easily accommodated as a picture. Thus they create a relaxed situation for realism, but an anxious one for abstraction. It is possible that the stubborn necessities of realism suggest that the expansive literalism of abstraction may not be suited for pictorial expression. Abstraction cannot accept limitations graciously; it refuses to tolerate the pictorial boundaries so comforting to semi-abstraction. It has no stake in the continuous surface that guarantees wholeness for conventional art. But abstraction must find a way to expand the boundaries willed by the pictorial past. It has to create a working space in which both the limits and the accomplishments of the past can be envisioned as expanding in a meaningful way under the pressure of our everyday efforts.