A Common Complaint

A common complaint holds that abstraction is emotionally impoverished. We often leave abstract painting wondering if we have seen anything worth seeing. It is a legitimate question, especially so if we acknowledge that our aesthetic instincts are rooted in the pictorial art of western Christendom, an art that has always made its mark by supplying meaningful information in the guise of aesthetic effort. Still, merely posing the question highlights a basic confusion confronting the viewer. The truth is that we expect to experience something worthwhile in the face of the general run of art, while in the face of great art we anticipate something definitive. This declaration explains how our accumulated experience bears on our expectation of new experience, accounting for much of what we bring to painting and helping to define what we expect from it.

More of a conceit is revealed here than we like to admit. We imagine ourselves as innocent in the face of painting, and we are quite upset when it disappoints us. The knowledge that abstract painting is relatively new and that its terms of self-definition and ambition are quite different from the art of the past is small comfort. The excitement of the pictorial past haunts the invention of the pictorial present.

Probably the most annoying characteristic of abstraction is its tendency to defend and explain itself in terms of problems. We assume that if pictorial problems have to exist at all they should be buried, or at least subsumed by an overall pictorial image whose force leaves us satisfied. We expect to experience aesthetic fulfillment on a level that denies the necessity of understanding complex pictorial mechanics and qualitative distinctions. While this attitude certainly makes a good definition of an ignorant, know-nothing pictorial sensibility, it also makes a good start at describing what great art actually does. At its most exhilarating moments, great art is manifestly indifferent to the niceties of composition and the issues of quality; however, even in the midst of these moments it is never indifferent to the creation of viable pictorial space, the vehicle of motion and containment. This is the bone that the viewer's inspired ignorance will inevitably choke on. Great painting will sweep us away knowing or unknowing, but if we do not know where we are being swept to and from it will all be for naught.

It is assumed that the expressive force of the great painting of the past overcomes any necessity of acknowledging its continually problematic relationship to the growing organism of art history; that its true value lies in this victory over the past, which is in itself a definition of pictorial greatness. There may not be any worthwhile purpose in denying this assumption, but it is clear that it is very hard to articulate the sense of value we feel in front of great painting without explaining the problematic nature of a painting's own internal relationships of discovery and creation, as well as its developing external involvement with the whole history of art. This seems particularly true of twentieth-century abstract painting, where so much explication still seems necessary just to identify the expressive force that we sense in front of great painting. With Kandinsky and Mondrian, for example, it appears that only pictorial dynamics are at hand. Human dynamics—something we could readily identify with, something that would really touch us—seems unavailable, essentially remote to abstraction. The loss of this added, somehow necessary element creates a sense of despair.

Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* (plate 21) and Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* (plate 22) are examples of painting from the past that do what we are afraid twentieth-century abstract paint-

ing will never be able to do: they are able to hit us with a pictorial force that we feel is independent of explication, and as such they are in no way dependent on illustration. In other words, their pictorial force completely subsumes any sense of dependence on pictorial technique.

One thing that these paintings have in common is their brutality. It may be that their florid sadism springs from a perversion hidden in the creative process. Certainly this thought comes to mind as both paintings declare their greatness at the expense of their immense effort and complication. By exploiting the dramatic potential of depicted savagery, these paintings put a tremendous burden on the immediate viewers. The savagery in these paintings cuts two ways: on one hand, it reveals a pictorial force so obvious that we can all see and share it; on the other hand, it demeans its own effort by denying to our understanding the importance and even relevance of each painting's component subtleties. In effect, this savagery challenges us by scrambling our equilibrium. Suddenly perversion dominates pictorial effect, and indifference rules both compositional nicety and aesthetic quality. We begin to ask ourselves if some of what we want from the great art of the past might not be worth leaving there. But it cannot be that easy. Wrapped in the expressive fabric of these paintings are the pictorial problems that we want at the same time to avoid and to solve—the articulation of surface and the creation of space. In order to grow and endure, painting must understand the mechanics of its expression.

The surprising thing about these paintings is that these familiar involvements should create such panic in the vision of artists, that surface and space should engender images of flaying and decapitation. A more normal explanation would reveal the causes of erupting pictorial brutality in our individual and collective psyches, showing that art is merely a mole betraying our interior selves. But within the enterprise of making art itself, this largely descriptive, commonsense explanation begs the questions of growth, discovery, and purpose, questions which the artist accepting his role as a creator cannot avoid. The artist is alert to the terrors of second-hand creation, his inevitable and undeniable role; he senses that he is a contradiction, a puppet-creator, half flesh, half wood, inflecting lines with tendons pulled by external strings.

In the *Flaying of Marsyas,* a painting of uncontestable gruesomeness, Titian appears to lay bare the steel heart of the sixteenth century, to show up the Italian Renaissance for what it really was—progress at a tremendous, barbarous cost, not unlike our view of the first eighty years of the twentieth century. The ideals of classic paganism and humanized Christianity are reduced to a bloody, blotted amalgam. Yet there is something about this painting that objects to a generalized view, almost as if it protests any dilution of its assaultive brutality. This picture forces us to take it personally, to identify it as a personal statement by Titian, first about himself and second about anyone, including ourselves, who would hope to succeed him as an artist. This painting is more accurate about showing the personal costs inherent in the mechanics of painting than it is profound about describing the human condition in sixteenth-century Italy. By stripping away a surface created by the artist's gifted touch, Titian reveals the blood-filled sinew and bone of pictorial technique, showing us how difficult it is for the artist to nurture and manipulate the body of his creation without mutilating it.

Although he admitted he had never seen the painting in the flesh, Panofsky objected to it anyway, arguing: "It is admittedly difficult to attribute this painting to anyone else (although in view of the *Pietà* in the Accademia one might think of the very versatile Palma Giovane); but it is equally difficult to accept Titian's responsibility for a composition which in gratuitous brutality (the little dog lapping up the blood) [fig. 31] not only outdoes its model, one of Giulio Romano's frescoes in the Palazzo de Tè at Mantua . . . but

Figure 31 Detail of Plate 21 (Titian, *Flaying of Marsyas*)

also, and more importantly, evinces a *horror vacui* normally foreign to Titian, who like Henry James' Linda Pallant, 'knew the value of intervals'" (Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian,* New York, New York University Press, 1969, p. 171).

This objection raises some interesting points. In the first place this painting is more than gratuitously brutal; it is overwhelmingly brutal. As I stood in front of the painting in London where it was recently on view, it was almost impossible to focus my attention. I glanced at the painting, then quickly turned my head down and away, averting my eyes. I was only able to look up in snatches, picking up isolated sections of the painting here and there. The idea of studying a picture of such cruelty became embarrassing. Naturally, my first reaction was to blame the anxiety on the proximity of other viewers, but then it seemed more than that. I realized that if the crowd disappeared I still would not want to face the painting. The reason for my distress now seems obvious, and I think that it may account in part for some of Panofsky's uneasiness as well. If painting as a manifest, tangible, consuming enterprise is really a part of our life, there is no way we can face up to Titian's assault. In this instance the brutality of a collective society and a collective psyche cannot be laid off; it is too well focused on the artist and the act of making art. Panofsky's sympathetic defense was to deny Titian's authorship. My defense was a cranky vision in which neophyte art students were forced, eyes open and uplifted, to kneel for several minutes in front of the *Flaying of Marsyas* in an attitude of uncomfortable, prepaid penance.

Although this might appear to be a peculiar reaction to a powerful work of art, it nonetheless acknowledges Titian's intentions. He clearly meant for us to understand the perils faced in a lifetime committed to the making of art. For the professionals who were to follow him, he warned that the artist's gifted touch would violate, perhaps irreparably, any surface that it graced. He showed that the articulation of surface can be as destructive as it is creative, that a blurred, pulsating surface often announces the exhaustion of space. It may be that this is part of what Panofsky sensed when Titian's pictorial intervals shrank under his inspection.

This painting has been seen as an extended metaphor depicting the triumph of high art, in the person of Apollo, over low art, played by the victim, Marsyas. The whole scene is witnessed by King Midas, whose features here form Titian's self-portrait. It has also been seen as alluding to the Redemption, with Marsyas as a crucified Christ and Apollo as the risen Christ. There is no reason to challenge these views of Titian's painting, but there is reason to consider as well a view that sticks closer to home. We are looking, after all, at a painting made by a painter surveying a career of perpetually successful work. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to see him telling us something about himself, his endeavor, and its future. Painters, even though their chances of breaking out of the cocoon of the present are no better than anyone else's, are more interested in the future than we might guess. Titian shows us a concern for painting beyond the usual worry about individual success and immortality. He shows a concern for the future which points out all the brutality and vulnerability inherent in the endeavor of painting. Yet in front of the *Flaying of Marsyas,* we want to believe that beauty of presentation overcomes the cruelty of revelation. We concentrate on our knowledge that the artist is blessed, that while he works, he remains at least one step removed from reality. As a result we prize the pulsating surface, the work in flux, the unconsummated suggestion because they obscure the finished cruelty, the immediate gesture of sadism. We pretend we are interested in color, in brushstrokes, and in overcrowded composition, but in the face of this painting it does not work. The sham is obvious.

In the end we are left like Midas and Titian—bewildered, involved observers wearing asses' ears for undefined sympathies, unsure whether we have been witnessing necessary

surgery or gratuitous torture. The skin of a defeated artist is scored and peeled away, his body is openly violated to reveal the anatomy of pictorial creation rather than the details of human suffering.

Roughly thirty-five years later, near the untimely end of his career, Caravaggio gave us another equally unsavory view of an artist's summation of his experience in art, here forcefully combined with his view of the future assumed in that summation. Titian, naturally enough, expressed his vision in terms of pictorial surface, while Caravaggio followed suit in terms of pictorial space. Both knew and expressed what modern painting agonizes over today: that disembodiment is the crucial element in making the success of painting. To put it another way, there has to be a convincing exchange of vitality between the viewer and the painting if both are to live, and the truth is that this is a risky transplant of energy, one that is constantly threatened by systemic rejection. However, even this radical surgery is not enough: both Caravaggio and Titian call our attention to a subsequent operation which must be endured to ensure the vitality of art—the transfer of responsibility between generations of creative artists.

In Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* this concept is an implicit overture; in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* it is an explicit declaration. There is no mistaking the message of young David's display of the older warrior's head. To see this painting only on the level of a victory of good over evil, or the eventual triumph of Christianity over paganism, is to ignore the message the artist sends about his personality, his craft, and their common endurance. The ultimate strength of this painting rests on its insistence in telling us about the durability of painting in the face of the corrosive threats of the artist's individual personality. All the things that make this painting so revealing in terms of psychology have to be harnessed to the gait of pictorial impact—an impact that is immediately felt and perpetually recoverable. It is the nerve of this sensation that Caravaggio touches today. *David and Goliath* gives us an intuition that great art can do more than provide an example of its own greatness; that its sense of continuing usefulness can, in fact, supply something like the notion of reproducible proof we prize so highly in other areas of human thought.

By offering us the elevated, protruding head of Goliath, Caravaggio freed the encrusted pictorial space that Titian was beginning to pierce at the end of his life. In passing he melded the Gothic and Renaissance sensibilities of western Christendom into a pictorial space which continues even now to absorb us. If we imagine a single Renaissance vanishing point moving toward us, encircling the condensed pictorial experience of the past, we can see it transformed at the limits of our focused recognition into Caravaggio's face. As we register this perception we see Goliath's head (Caravaggio's pictorial will, as it were) pass by us as an exploded point about to disperse itself into a continuum of movable pictorial space, going beyond us to create the space of our pictorial present and future.

If this view of human pictoriality seems too far-fetched, perhaps we can see Caravaggio's suspended, rotatable head absorbed into the present in a more palatable, rational way. If we keep Caravaggio's face in mind as a suspended point comprised of a condensation of our pictorial past, we can see it beautifully integrated into the art of the present in Stanley William Hayter's powerful account of Kandinsky (*Magazine of Art,* May 1945). He points out that

> so far Kandinsky's use of space has been discussed as a static frame in which pictorial elements could be organized, but the interrelation between these elements and the space in which they are presented cannot be ignored. It should be obvious that such relation must modify the space itself, that a point in a closed volume sets up tensions throughout the volume, that the antithesis between space and object is illusory. When, as the development of movement as flow or direction in his work evolved about 1920 into the integration of motion in the space, that space acquired a further series of dimensions.

Hayter continues with a wonderful, succinct account of Kandinsky's genius:

> In the traditional art of the West motion had been represented almost exclusively as arrested; depicted as that position of an object which called for a conclusion by the observer as to its consequence. Kandinsky, however, figures motion as an element itself without invariably representing that which moves or has moved . . . Sometimes a series of points, traces like trajectories or orbits describe this movement; often an unbalance of tension between the forms demonstrates the motion. (p. 177)

My reason for introducing Kandinsky as an aid in understanding Caravaggio is not as arbitrary as it may seem; it is the same reason that a painting as profound and savage as Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* still has to be seen as a meditation on the life of an artist engaged in a struggle with surface and touch. If it were not seen in this way—or if Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* were not seen as an essay explaining a lifetime involvement in the creation of projective, spherically informed pictorial space—these paintings would be understood merely as successful illustrations. They would not reveal their true and purposeful aim as painting—painting as self-contained art rather than as moving, edifying narrative craft. They would not realize the difference that creates the continuous soul of art, the difference between realized, immediately available visualization and after-the-fact representation. It could be argued that it is not necessary to be so literal about the mechanics of painting, that Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* meets these criteria on the level of allegory, vividly encapsulating the contest of high art against low art. But allegory is only metaphor; it keeps its distance, and it does not really clarify the distinctions between art and illustration, between visualization and representation. In addition, unappealing as the thought may be, it is Titian's primal engagement with the physicality and the manipulation of pigment that creates the clarity necessary for artistic progress. Metaphor merely signifies a temporary location for painting—its humble origins.

The connection of the past to the present should not be seen defensively, and it should not be seen as diminishing any of the sustaining and projective power of the past. Caravaggio could not have known what Kandinsky's painting would look like, but he surely knew that the painting of the future would be contained in a pictorial space capable of being surveyed from within by a rotatable, live eye that could see 360 degrees in any direction. His problem was that he could not imagine this freedom except at a great cost—in this case his own head.

David pushes Goliath's dismembered head at us as he pushes it at Caravaggio to remind us that we should not separate the artist from the mechanics of his work, from the structure of his art, and to remind Caravaggio himself that it is the body of his own work that he will be judged by, not the body of his hysterical psyche. But more than this, both we and Caravaggio are confronted by the nightmare of the management of pictorial space. As Hayter points out, the antidote, the first, initially reassuring step, is obvious enough. Painting wants to deal with the modification of pictorial space in a closed volume. In a sense, since a point in a closed volume sets up tensions throughout the volume, we are already moving toward a solution. By exploiting this possibility, Caravaggio's head of Goliath creates articulate, expressive pictorial space.

But as Hayter enlarges his description of the potential for movement in Kandinsky's space, it becomes harder for Caravaggio's head to follow. The contentions that in the pictorial space of abstraction the antithesis of space and object becomes illusory and that the integration of motion in space allows space to acquire a further series of dimensions begin to lose us, testing our comprehension as they challenge Caravaggio's pictorial cosmology—although in Caravaggio's defense it could be argued that an elision of space and object is implied, and that, furthermore, the body of pictorial space actually does support the severed head of the self-vanquished artist. In a similarly forced vein, the glance of David can be seen as a different, distinct, continuing extension of time

Plate 21 TITIAN
Flaying of Marsyas (c. 1570–76)
Oil on canvas, 83½ × 81½ in.
State Museum, Kromeriz, Czechoslovakia

Plate 22 CARAVAGGIO
David and Goliath (1610)
Oil on canvas, 49¼ × 39⅜ in.
Galleria Borghese, Rome

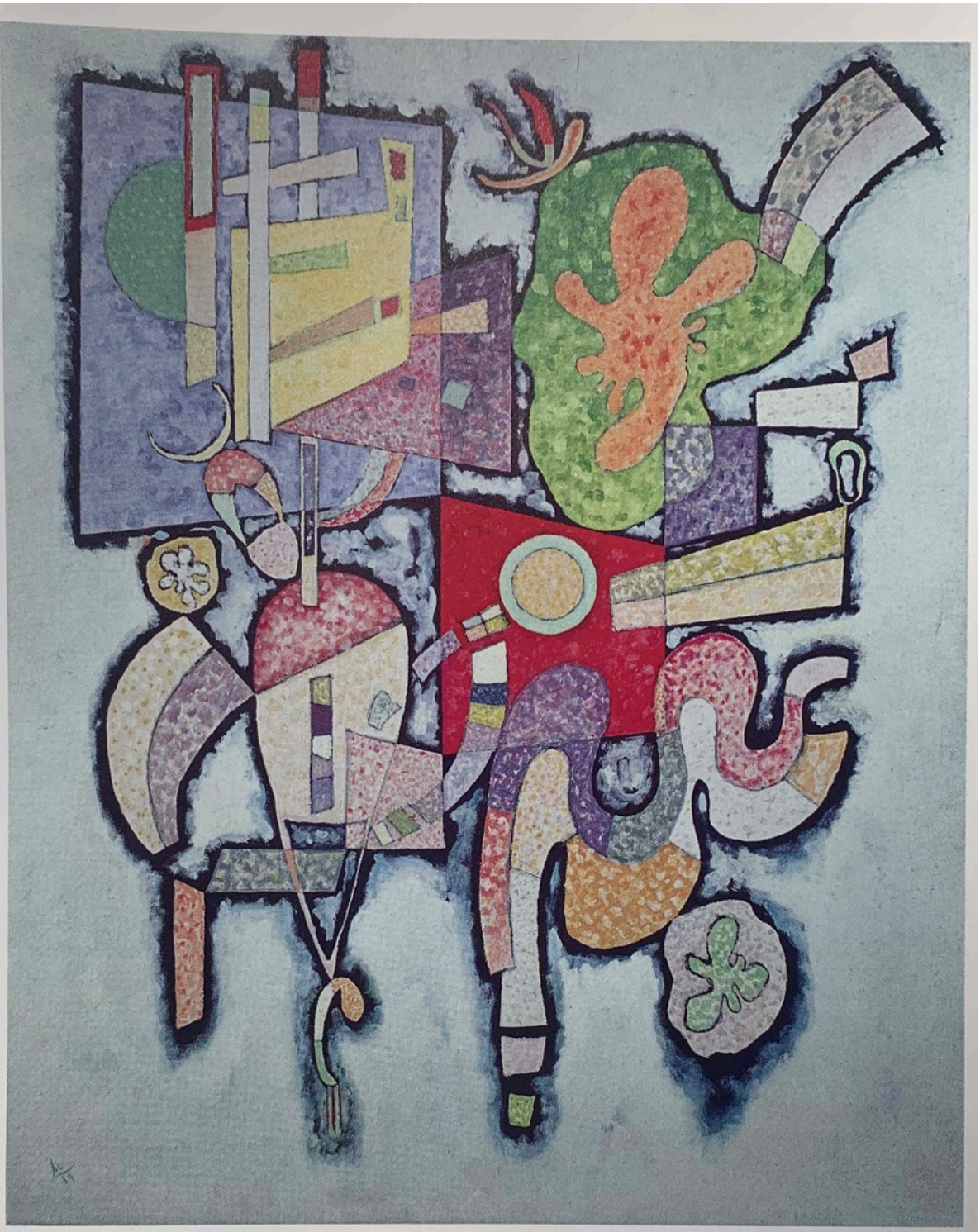

Plate 23 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Ambiguity (Complex/Simple) (1939)
Oil on canvas, 39⅜ × 31⅞ in.
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Plate 24 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Composition IX (1936)
Oil on canvas, 44⅞ × 76¾ in.
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

at odds with the fading temporal measurement expressed in the disjointed vision of Goliath, where one eye is fixed while the other forces a last blurred look at what it had experienced as reality. However, when Kandinsky begins to figure motion as an element in itself, without representing what moves or has moved, he seems to have confounded the past, to have put himself beyond Caravaggio's desperate stare.

Looking again at Hayter's account of Kandinsky in the context of the genius of Italian painting, it is hard at first to imagine how an unbalance of forms demonstrates motion, and how in turn a series of points successfully describes motion. The notions tend to become abstract in a mathematical rather than a pictorial sense. Still, there is something about great Mannerist painting, culminating in the pictorial force of Caravaggio and Rubens, that accommodates itself to these notions. Furthermore, there is something intriguing in itself about motion being generated by an unbalance of forms; it holds our interest in the way that the generation of energy from fluctuations of temperature in ocean water might. Somewhat more to the pictorial point, though, is the thought that the head of Goliath can be sent spinning by the force implied in the multiple, moving visions caught by the glances within and outside of the painting—glances from the eyes of David, Goliath, and Caravaggio perpetually reactivated in the eyes of successive viewers, glances whose energy turns the perfectly poised head of Goliath suspended from David's hand the way air currents almost automatically turn a Calder mobile suspended from its fixed point.

There is a pedestrian quality to the incessant defense of abstraction against the accusations of emotional impoverishment; yet this constant argument does occasionally yield fruitful results. Sometimes when we are forced to look around to try to see things differently, newer, more varied insights present themselves to us. In a sense, if each new generation must doubt Kandinsky, perhaps we will keep learning more and more about Kandinsky as new connections to the past, new relevances for the present, and new hopes for the future emerge. Nonetheless, it does seem annoying on the face of it that Kandinsky must be defended. The truth is my argument that Kandinsky is an apt and committed successor to the work of Titian and Caravaggio on a deep and brutally realistic level will convince none of the detractors of abstraction, and for that matter, probably few of its advocates. In terms that are simple, but sometimes difficult to deal with, the detractors of abstraction deny its connection to the past, while its adherents often celebrate this broken connection as invention.

Kandinsky's lowest moment was reached in London on Tuesday, June 30, 1964, at 9:30 P.M., precisely as the catalogue directed. The preface for the sale catalogue written by Sotheby and Company tells the story:

> The late Solomon R. Guggenheim, benefactor of the Museum, collected no less than one hundred and seventy works by Kandinsky during his lifetime. Many were bought directly from the artist himself.
>
> The Guggenheim Foundation has, on numerous occasions, exhibited some of these paintings, or sent them on travelling exhibitions throughout the world. However, it has always been impossible to show the collection in its entirety owing to lack of space.
>
> Taking this into consideration the Trustees of the Foundation have decided to offer fifty paintings by Kandinsky for sale rather than keep them in the vaults of the Museum. They have taken care to choose the best examples from each period which could be released without diminishing the standard of the Museum's permanent collection.

There is an amusing echo here of Hayter's perception about Kandinsky's painting. We can imagine that the lack of space alluded to by the Guggenheim was caused at least partly by the pushy tendency of Kandinsky's pictorial space to acquire a further series of dimensions as it integrates motion in space. Another item that catches our attention is the conflict about value revealed in the notion of offering for sale the contents of a vault while at the same time maintaining a standard by diminishing the collection.

Still, the Guggenheim trustees do not deserve any special credit for their inability to appreciate Kandinsky's value to the future. In 1964, at perhaps the apogee of American abstraction's worldwide success, there was no one who thought that Kandinsky had made great paintings after, say, 1921, when he left Russia for good. That is, no one in New York really prized the work from Kandinsky's last twenty years. In fact, in some ways the situation was worse than that: early Kandinsky watercolors were called great because they were like Helen Frankenthaler.

It is ironic that just when second-generation abstract expressionism had taken a nose dive and a new, more rigid form of abstraction was taking hold, no one could appreciate the later work of Kandinsky. As fancy, extreme compositional ideas for the organization of abstract configuration came into vogue, Kandinsky was still seen as too prissy and academic. The most obvious reason to explain the difficulty the art world had in the 1960s—and perhaps still has even now—in seeing and understanding Kandinsky's post-1920 work is that his later work appears "dated" while his earlier work remains "fresh." There is a tremendous irony in this contradiction. The closer his work was to representation (figs. 32, 33), to expressionistic landscape, the more we see it as relevant to our idea of what abstraction should be and has come to be. The farther his work was from representation—the more fundamentally abstract it was (figs. 34, 35)—the more irrelevant it becomes to our idea of abstraction, the more it seems to be a schematic version of nineteenth-century pictorial mechanics. Basically we see Kandinsky as a late nineteenth century painter, as we see most of the other early abstract painting of the first half of the twentieth century. That is to say, for us abstract painting begins after the Second World War in New York City. After 1945 abstract painting became truly autonomous and self-sustaining. The change in pictorial gesture and scale that manifested itself in New York after World War II marks the beginning of twentieth-century painting—a painting that is not so directly beholden to nineteenth-century ideas and accomplishments, a painting that holds its fate in its own hands.

The adjusted peripheral vision of recent art history watches the sweep of Rubens' brushwork, the driving force of two hundred years of painting, exhaust itself in the daubs of Monet and then promptly extinguish itself in the facets of Cubism. This is an abbreviated way of calling our attention to the fact that, for abstraction, the light of Impressionism and the structure of Cubism were not enough. An additional element, a catalyst was needed: a burst of pictorial energy similar to that created for the seventeenth century by Rubens' space-expanding gestures. This energy was provided in the late 1940s by de Kooning and Pollock, who resuscitated the spirit and the articulate swipe of Rubens' brush. This new track of paint marks the beginning of twentieth-century abstraction. The new gesture born in a gallon can and risen from a tin alloy bucket created the real, permanent space of abstraction—a space equivalent in grandeur of dimension and creative possibilities to the pictorial space of Caravaggio and Rubens. What we failed to see is that it was the loss of the palette, not the easel, that changed the face of what we see as painting. The size of what one dips the brush into counts for more than the size of what one paints on; that is, the load of pigment carried determines the scale of gesture more than the dimensions of the area to be covered.

We might do well here to look at what has become a basic confusion for painting in the last quarter of the twentieth century. What we want to understand is the relationship of abstraction to the meaning and future of modernism; whether abstraction is more than a necessary ingredient in the development of twentieth-century art. We already know that there is no longer any serious competition between abstraction and realism in the sense of a battle between nineteenth-century academicism and twentieth-century modernism, and we already know that the pictorial accomplishments achieved in the establishment of abstraction form the core of our thinking of how painting should be conceived and understood.

Figure 32 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Black Lines (1913)
Oil on canvas, 51 × 51⅝ in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Figure 33 WASSILY KANDINSKY
White Center (1921)
Oil on canvas, 46¾ × 53¾ in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

What we have, then, is a basic agreement about what painting should be in the twentieth century. What we are worried about is the balance among and the future development of the ingredients of that painting. Modernism is the painting of the twentieth century, and abstraction forms the core of its pictorial growth and strength. Realism is an attitude that embraces the mechanics of twentieth-century abstraction while still seeking possibilities in the semiabandoned techniques of mechanical and representational illusionism. For abstraction, the problem is simple: it must decide about and act on its future. It has to decide if purification by exclusion is the road to the future; if the emphasis on surface and materials can pave the road to Shangri-la.

If abstraction has doubts about its ability to survive on its own, it has to take another look at where it came from, to reconsider its relationship to the mechanics of representation. After all, the gestures of abstraction are no more than the revealing magnification of the gestures of its heritage. It may be that some of the cyclical obstinacy of realism in the twentieth century suggests that abstraction should make a better accommodation to the illustrative urge; or perhaps it simply indicates that realism stirs because its bones have not been picked completely clean.

One way to look at the possibilities for an accommodation between abstraction and realism—or, to put it differently, the possibility that abstraction might be able to find possibilities in overlooked, overworked representational techniques—is to consider the devices of shading and skeletal structure, two devices that have danced throughout all of the numbers abstraction and realism have written together, two devices that Kandinsky has handled with touching genius, and two devices that still provide painting with an amazing amount of its momentum—as well as, of course, with an inordinate amount of its worry.

Kandinsky hints that the goal of painting is to rise above these devices, to defuse their literalness and achieve a purer artistic, abstract expression (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* trans. M. T. H. Sadler, New York, Dover, 1977, pp. 30–31):

> The impossibility and, in art, the uselessness of attempting to copy an object exactly, the desire to give the object full expression, are the impulses which drive the artist away from "literal" colouring to purely artistic aims. And that brings us to the question of composition. . .
>
> A good example is Cézanne's "Bathing Women," which is built in the form of a triangle. Such building is an old principle, which was being abandoned only because academic usage had made it lifeless. But Cézanne has given it new life. He does not use it to harmonize his groups, but for purely artistic purposes. He distorts the human figure with perfect justification. Not only must the whole figure follow the lines of the triangle, but each limb must grow narrower from bottom to top. Raphael's "Holy Family" is an example of triangular composition used only for the harmonizing of the group, and without any mystical motive.

Kandinsky had a dream that the efficacy of abstract pictorial expression would give full expression to the object; that is, that the object could become more real by being freed from literal representation. It turned out to be a lot harder than Kandinsky thought, or perhaps more generously, it turned out that the pictorial component of abstract expression turned out to be a lot different from what he imagined it might become. Kandinsky conceived pictorial space as an examined slice or plane of a larger spatial whole, an idea that represented the most advanced cosmology of his day. He gave us a much better window, a more mobile window, from which we could see created and creatable pictorial worlds, but magnificent as this window was, it did not satisfy for long.

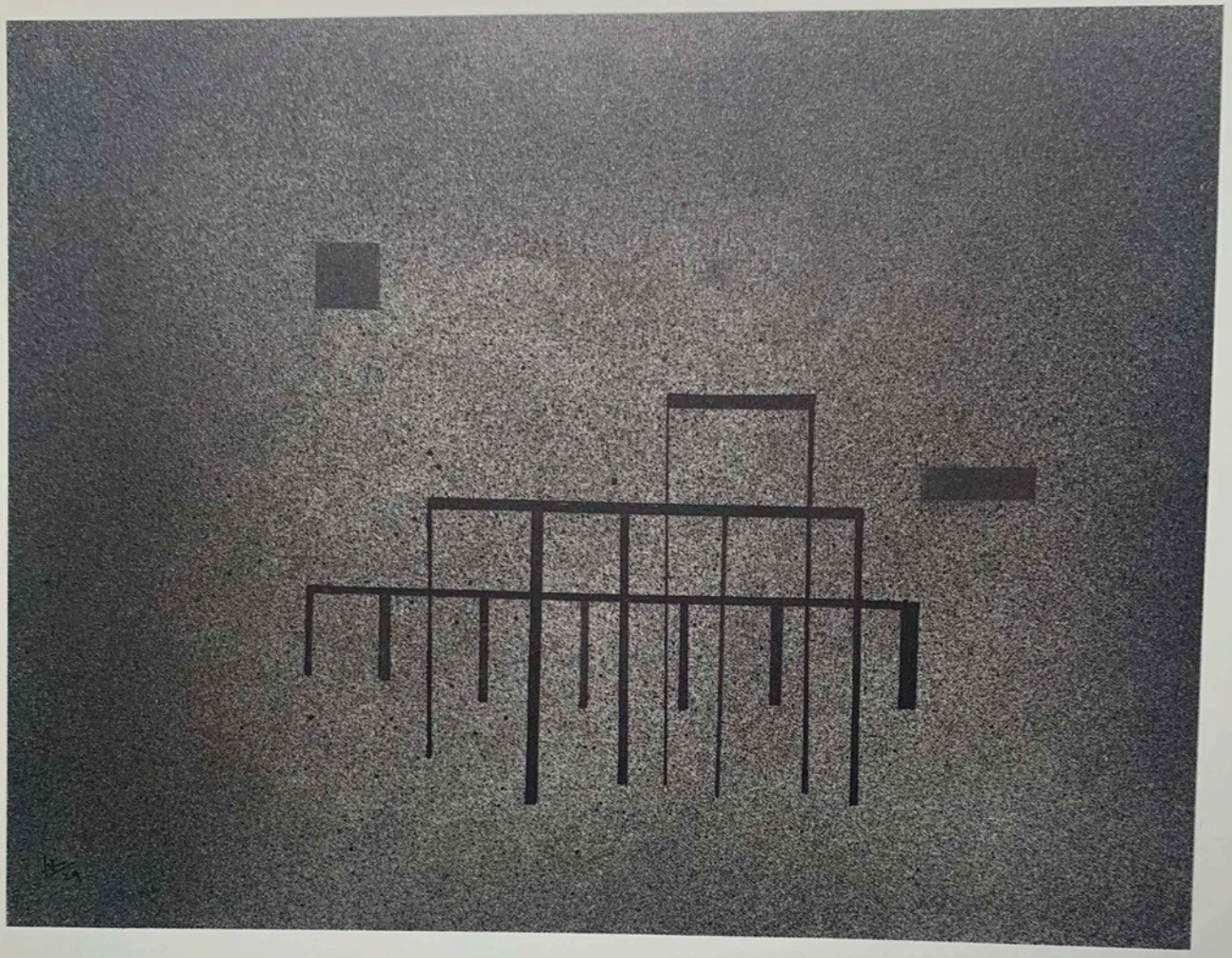

Figure 34 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Horizontal Blue (1929)
Watercolor, gouache, and blue ink on paper, 9½ × 12½ in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Hilla von Rebay Collection

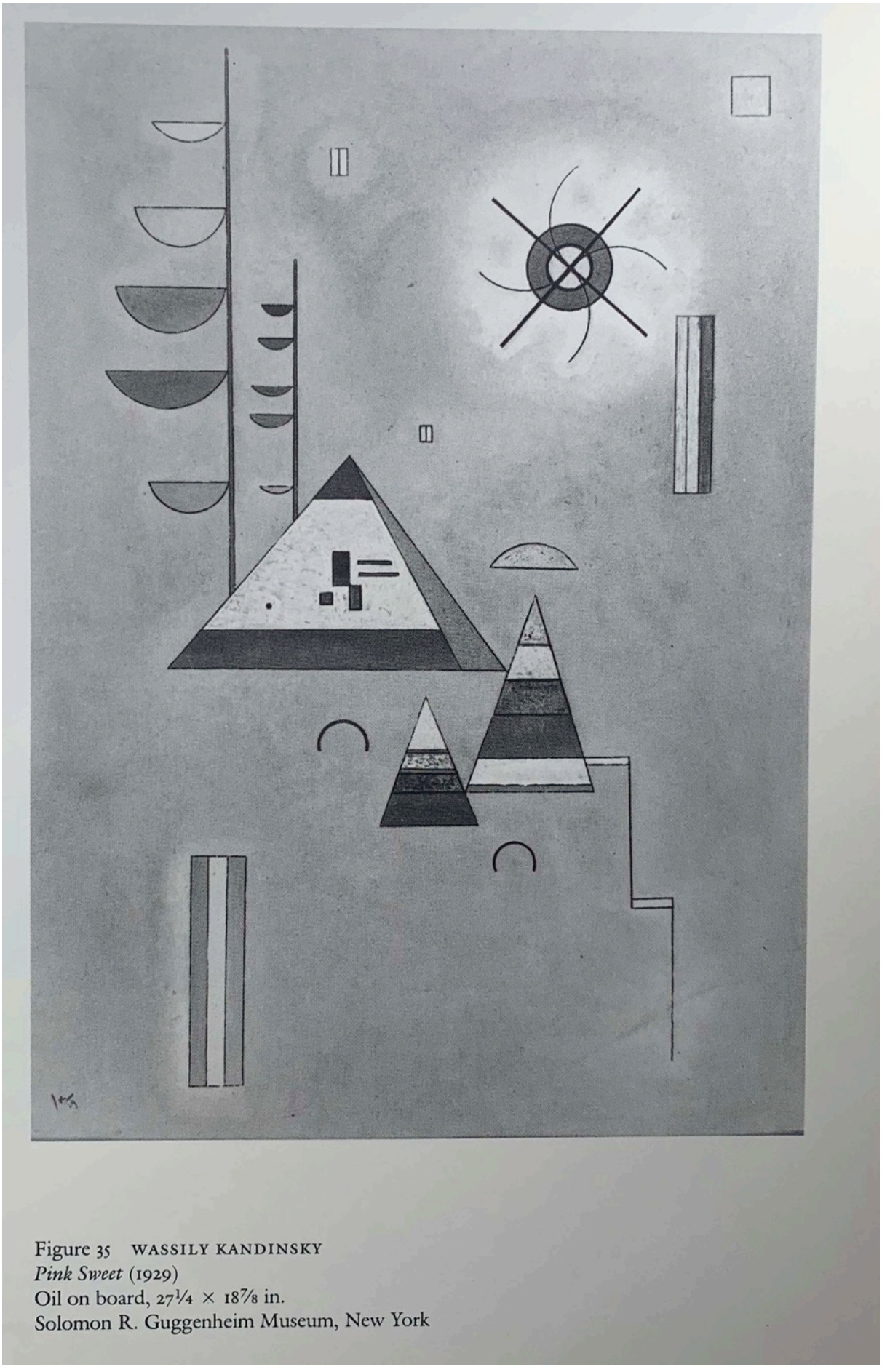

Figure 35 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Pink Sweet (1929)
Oil on board, 27¼ × 18⅞ in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

When he came to examine things closely, Kandinsky showed us the problems nagging abstraction (or, as he called it, pure artistic composition). He is probably a bit off the mark in noting the *Holy Family*'s lack of a mystical motive because Raphael's composition could more accurately be described as pyramidal rather than triangular (fig. 36), and as a consequence Raphael's strong reference to the pyramid might actually have just the mystical motive that Kandinsky found wanting. In any case, mysticism aside, the pyramidal quality suggests solidity, and perhaps Kandinsky's concern represents a fear of the power of that solidity to warp and weigh down the pictorial space of abstraction.

Kandinsky was right to appreciate Cézanne. The emergence of triangularity in the *Large Bathers* (fig. 37) was an unconscious step in the right direction, a step about to break through the crust of the future's pictorial surface. However, agile and muscular as it may have been, Cézanne's triangle could not shake the pyramid anchoring Raphael's composition. The dogged perseverance of this pyramid illuminates the mystical dead weight which Kandinsky and all abstract painting following him have always had difficulty accounting for, and which in the end we, if not they, cannot live without. This mystical weight is the leaden ballast of Cubism buried before our eyes under the shield of fragmented volume, reminding us that if abstraction is to prosper it has to lift the burden of figure and ground.

Kandinsky knew that composition was the heart and soul of art. By expressing a preference for the triangle over the pyramid, for Cézanne over Raphael, he was preparing the way for a compositional preference which he largely invented and which to this day underlies most advanced painting. This preference, which might be called the principle of weightless composition, reveals a horror of solid form, a fear of the weight of material objects. It reminds us that Kandinsky's goal was to elevate art—to soar, much as he admired him, far above Cézanne.

One way to see Kandinsky's weightless composition in action is to look at the transformation of his linear design instincts into suspended structures that imply the ability to rotate and travel in a free-floating manner. It is as though he wants to raise the Holy Family and bend the landscape out of sight at the same time. In the process of bending the landscape away from us as well as from the Holy Family, Kandinsky intends to undermine the viewer's ground plane, our literal support, in order to free our vision—or in this case, more specifically, our point of view. The suggestion is that as we experience the potential motion of the suspended linear structures, we experience the potential mobility of our point of view.

Kandinsky realized that on a number of levels the attempt to elevate art conflicts with the desire to be grounded in reality. It was more than the binding relationship to the ground plane that weightless composition intended to correct. Kandinsky knew from his experience of Impressionism and Fauvism that twentieth-century art was infatuated with the reality of pigment, that it was stuck to the plane of pictorial surface. This reality of pigment, the inevitable weight of the touch of the artist's hand, was something Kandinsky hoped to deny. He expected to paint and compose with a new freedom, seeking to dissolve the ground plane of the past into a surface of contiguous weightless relationships.

If we can understand this vision we grasp a salient point, one that explains what Kandinsky was trying to do in his late paintings (fig. 38). In the process we take hold of something that has eluded us for a long time—the basically levitational and rotatable nature of abstraction. At the same time, we can get a very good picture of where painting is today and what it might hope to do in the future.

In Kandinsky's late paintings a lesson of composition asserts itself. It advocates the last system of pictorial composition that could function without the complete domination of at-hand, physical gesture, a dominating bodily gesture which expresses the desire to limit pictorial space to the actual,

Figure 36 RAPHAEL
Canigiani Holy Family (c. 1506)
Oil on panel, 51½ × 42⅛ in.
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 37 PAUL CÉZANNE
The Large Bathers (1906)
Oil on canvas, 82 × 99 in.
The Philadelphia Museum of Art
W. P. Wilstach Collection

Figure 38 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Composition X (1939)
Oil on canvas, 51 3/16 × 76 3/4 in.
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

available working space. This gesture is the triumph of a pragmatic, American pictorial intelligence. This development has created a decisive and original space, but in spite of this, in recent years it seems to have lost its bearings.

By being literally on top of the pictorial surface and then falling, at least figuratively, inside the body of our work, we have changed our location and distorted our point of view. When we think of a coherent point of view, a privileged access for pictorial expression, we are forced to use our memory. Our eyes are bleary from the surface fumes. In some ways, though, it is not such a bad thing that our immediate perceptions are forcibly tempered by a recall mechanism of our visual imagination. Up close we are still confident. We have plenty of room to work, but our distanced view of the past induces the fear that our expression is isolated. Our enlarged tactile working space searches for an accommodating pictorial space. We have a sense of directed effort, a sense of engagement, but the boundaries surrounding our activity are unclear; their dimensions and strength are unknown. As always, discovery and definition create impossible tasks, but then again painting has always been more serious and difficult than we expect.

In spite of our apprehension of similar compositional interests and goals, we often fail to see a connection between Kandinsky's late efforts and the successful efforts of postwar American abstract expressionism. It follows then, almost without saying, that we tend to see little relevance in Kandinsky's late work for our present predicament. Yet Kandinsky's effort is more than an ironic foil. It is true that the differences between his early work and his late work give the most telling account of abstract expressionism's success, but this does not tell everything we need to know. It seems clear that it would have been much harder for abstract expressionism to find its true, close-up, reachable surface if it had not been for the example of the late Kandinsky. Most assume that abstract expressionism's debt to Kandinsky comes from the abundant release and freedom of the gesture drawn from the abstract landscapes. Although this is obviously true, it is not so obvious when and how these gestures got to the new surface of painting.

It could be argued that if it had not been for the example of Kandinsky, the scattered gestures of expressionism would have hardened into the compressed planes of Picasso, Malevich, and Mondrian, or would have simply dispersed themselves into the turpentine washes of Matisse. Kandinsky supplied the imaginative leap, the missing pictorial ingredient, the necessary ingredient for modernism's most meaningful step. He created an example of atomized, dematerialized space which could be conceived of as an endless spattering of pigment in motion. Kandinsky may have taken his indirect example from Klee's spray gun, but the real power of this shot comes from an extension of the original ammunition. What happened in the 1930s was a dispersal, a magnificent redeployment of Kandinsky's brushstrokes of the previous thirty years.

Thus the pictorial space in Kandinsky's later paintings, which we often perceive as a drawback and an annoyance, had a positive effect on painting. This moving, particulate, yet totally pigmented space made it possible for artists like Tobey, Pollock, and Hofmann to imagine themselves set free, floating among the colored substances they had hurled into action. In a sense they closed their eyes and jumped into their work. It surprised no one that they hit the floor. But by knocking themselves out chasing paint thrown in frustration at the ineluctable surfaces of European modernism, they found their own dizzying space and their own independent pictorial identities; they found comfort and support in a void of doubt.

These artists must have garnered a sense of meaning from some of the more baffling examples of Kandinsky's late work, such as *K622, Allusion,* and *Ambiguity (Complex/Simple)* (plate 23). If it had not been for the promise of these late

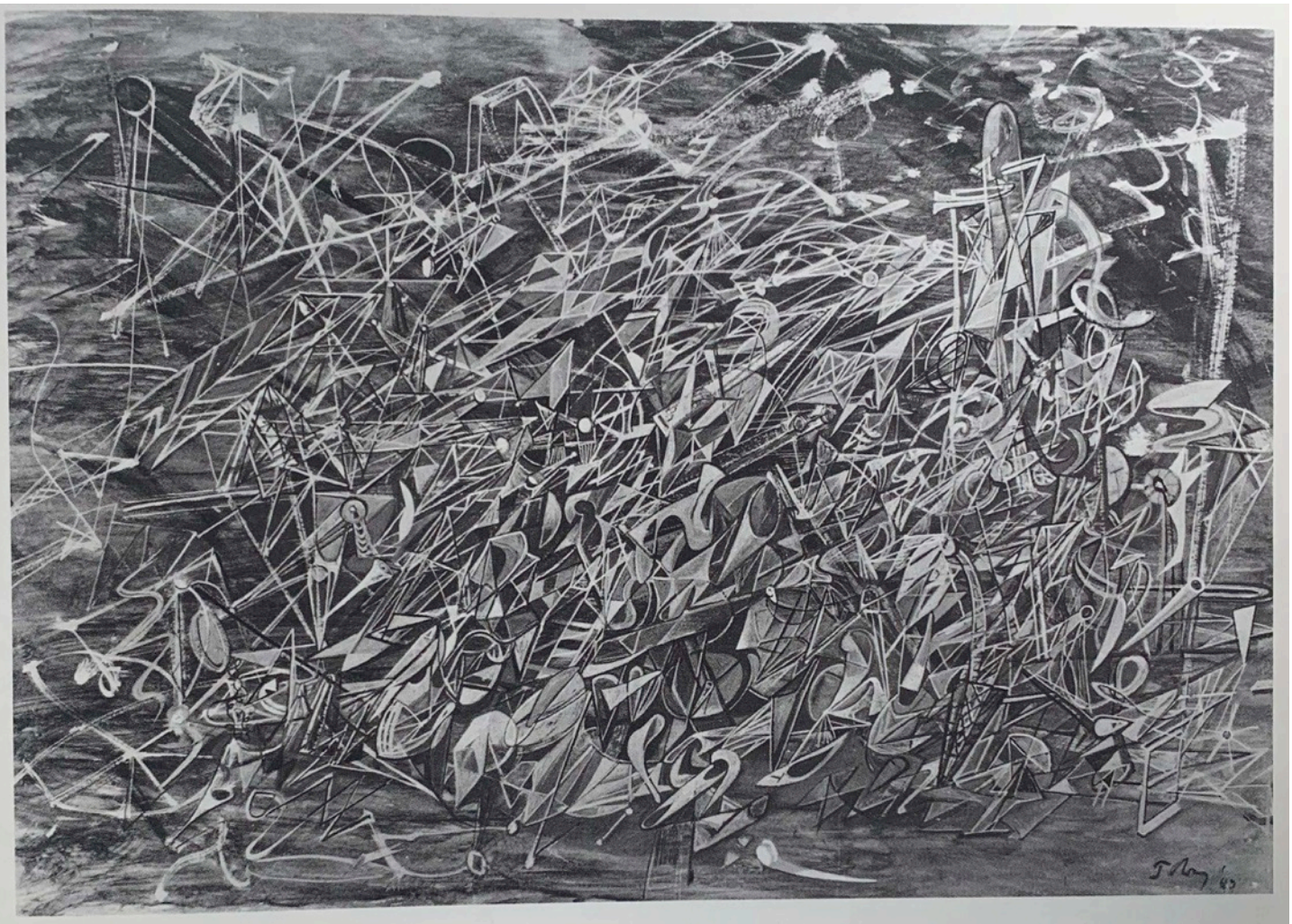

Figure 39 MARK TOBEY
Form Follows Man (1941)
Gouache on canvas, 13⅝ × 19⅝ in.
Seattle Art Museum
Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection

Figure 40 HANS HOFMANN
Spring (1944–45)
Oil on wood panel, 11¼ × 14⅛ in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Rübel

paintings, it is doubtful that the accomplishments of the earlier ones would have come to fruition. Although he appears to have lingered self-effacingly in the background of painting in the 1930s, Kandinsky himself ultimately formed the background that enabled expressionism to display abstraction properly. To Tobey (fig. 39), Pollock, and Hofmann (fig. 40), he was known and understood. From their hands, Kandinsky's ashes were scattered to form the new surface of abstraction.

In the process of laying groundwork for the future, Kandinsky exhibited much of the same terrifying courage that Titian and Caravaggio showed in the *Flaying of Marsyas* and *David and Goliath:* the courage to show what painting is in terms of personal cost and ultimate fear. For Titian it was obvious that the success of creation, the vitalization of painted surface, would cost him his skin. Caravaggio never doubted that fate would have his head to mock the power of the pictorial projection he engendered. Similarly, Kandinsky never flinched in the face of his successors' taunts of sterility and senility. From what we have a hard time seeing as other than academic whimsy, he created a heroic container, a pictorial space resilient and flexible enough to ensnare the future.

There is a strong suggestion of this ambition in *Composition IX* (plate 24), a curiously organized painting with six separate parts, each outlined as a plane, but each also capable of extension. From left to right a yellow triangle, a blue diagonal band, a red diagonal band, a red-violet diagonal band, a yellow-orange diagonal band, and finally a light green triangle are linked together to form the surface of the painting. The disposition of these component planes and their method of cohesion are ambiguous, but at the same time very forward-looking. The diagonal planar repetition in this picture creates a moving continuous surface which suggests that a faceting, a kind of fragmentation is taking place on an unfamiliar scale. It is as though the obvious posture of Cubism is being fed into the wringer of abstraction. The results are draped on a clothesline, exhibiting an alternative to the usual rectangular pictorial whole. The lateral movement in this painting suggests extensibility of the kind that appeared in the sixties, for example in the work of Motherwell and Noland and also in my own work. What is really interesting, though, is how unique Kandinsky's method of cohesion remains. The flow and touch of the planar colors still represent an untapped marvel.

Kandinsky did something in *Composition IX* that we might consider obvious and unmemorable, perhaps even undesirable: he put a series of disparate geometric and organic figures into motion, floating in front of the colored planes. These figures are a miracle of balance, movement, and placement. Yet they do not particularly appeal to us, and as a result there is a tremendous temptation to see the painting without them, to see the painting as a wonderful dispersement of planar color, prefiguring the abstract triumphs of Barnett Newman and, later, of Morris Louis. If we do this, though, we miss a sophisticated display of pictorial motion that is not only an accomplishment in itself but also an achievement from which we could benefit. The figures have a kind of directionless, weightless motion associated with freedom from gravity. This unfettered, almost purposeless motion is a perfect foil and support for the motion imparted to color, whose tense, controlled dispersion makes up the background. The motion guiding the figures is random and independent, at odds but also somehow interwoven with the diagonal thrust of the truncated rainbow backdrop. As the color and figuration both move, we see them released into the abstract space of a white, imaginary pictorial wall.

No one exploited this new perception of a figure's relationship to background better than Barnett Newman (fig. 41). The strength of his painting comes from the ability of the stripes (or, as he liked to call them, "zips") to attach themselves to and into the background. They fit beautifully, zipping the space together. Newman sets up the motion of

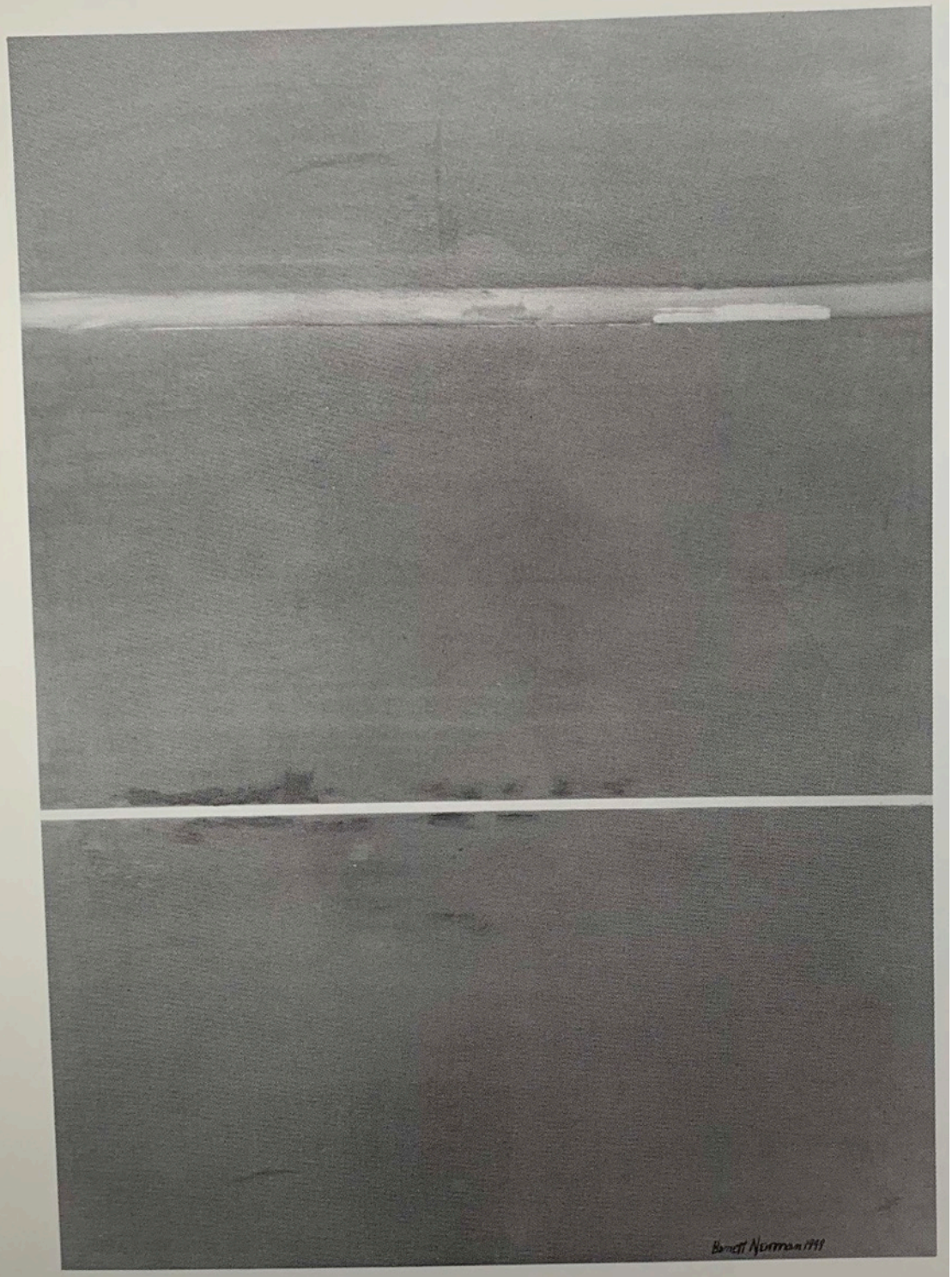

Figure 41 BARNETT NEWMAN
Dionysius (1949)
Oil on canvas, 69 × 48 in.
Collection: Annalee Newman, New York

his figuration counter to the motion of the space supporting it. In this he is more direct and less ambiguous than Kandinsky. When the stripe travels from top to bottom, the space around it moves from side to side; when the zip cuts from side to side, the surrounding space floats up and down. Convincing as this effect may be, the complexity and delicacy of Kandinsky's spatial movement hunger for rediscovery. It may be that what makes Morris Louis's late paintings so appealing is their peculiar Kandinsky-like understanding of Newman. Louis brought a determined looseness to Newman's abstraction that Kandinsky would have applauded. Louis had the opportune sense of contiguous touch that is so necessary to link the moving elements of abstraction. This touch enabled him to exploit separation in a way that modern painting admires but cannot seem to imitate.

Although *Composition IX* is not a large painting by recent standards, it is clear that Kandinsky saw his scaled-up effort in this painting as a confrontation with the compositional traditions of the past. Basically, *Composition IX* quietly disrupted the spatial conventions of Western painting—their continuous, whole backgrounds. It represented a definitive break with the restrictive, narrative flatness of mural painting and the stationary, enframing limits of easel painting. We feel that Kandinsky appreciated his ability to temper painting to the service of abstraction; in the face of his own accomplishments, he magnanimously pointed the way to the future. What *Composition IX* added to the lessons of its eight predecessors was a program for the future success of abstraction.