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THE PLAINE PLAIN PLANE SCHOOL OF AMERICAN PAINTING

WHEN GOVERNOR WILLIAM BRADFORD prefaced his *History of Plymouth Plantation* with the statement that he would write "in a *plaine stile; with singuler regard unto ye simple trueth in all things*", he set forth an aesthetic principle which has never been completely abandoned in the arts of America; a principle which has frequently been predominant and which has produced a pervasive tradition that has been peculiarly American.

In American painting as well as in the other arts, one of the most recurrent styles has been that of the "Plaine School": *plaine* because it seems to derive in part from the Puritan tradition; *plain* because it is singularly simple in subject and uncluttered in composition; and *plane* because it is marked both by a significant lack of emphasis on the third dimension and by a concurrent emphasis on the plane rendering of curved surfaces.

Further definition of these homonyms may help to clarify some of the characteristics. The archaic spelling *plaine* is intended to be reminiscent of the Puritan aesthetic of simplicity which has in diluted and secular forms pervaded much of the American ethos. The modern spelling of *plain* denotes the same simplicity, but it is not intended to connote a Puritan cultural tradition. It refers, rather, to sparseness and economy of composition, as well as to the social equalitarianism which is reflected in the colloquial terms "plain people." The geometric term *plane* refers, of course, to painting technique; but, further, it refers to a geometric-scientific way of looking at the world that reduces nature and man to simple elementary forms which smooth out surface complexities and ambiguities.

One can identify a "Plaine School" painting by examining it for both style and content. It is very likely that no painting represents all the characteristics at one time, and some artists have not always worked in the Plaine School mode. Winslow Homer's later work, for example, can only be re-

garded as remotely Plaine School, but his genre paintings of the 1870s are unmistakably in the Plaine School main current. Andrew Wyeth's brushwork does not have the plane gloss of such artists as Copley and Grant Wood, but the simple geometric composition of such paintings as *River Cove* and *Spring Sun*, and the plain democratic equalitarianism implied in the subject matter of much of his recent work makes him the most recent member of the Plaine School. As touchstones for judging the sweep of Plaine School paintings, the following often reproduced works are particularly strong examples: Copley's *Paul Revere*, Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, Audubon's *Hutchins's Barnacle Goose*, Homer's *Country School*, Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, Sheeler's *Upper Deck*, and Wyeth's *Spring Sun*. To analyze the style of the Plaine School, John Singleton Copley provides a good starting point.

Although a case could be made for earlier colonial antecedents, for a number of good reasons John Singleton Copley should be considered the fountainhead from which springs a mainstream that encompasses much of the work of the Peales, John James Audubon, George Caleb Bingham, Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keefe, Charles Sheeler, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Andrew Wyeth, and many others. Such a list of many of the greatest names in American painting may suggest that the Plaine School is the only native American style, but clearly this is not true. Equally pervasive in the nineteenth century, in particular, is what James Thomas Flexner has named the "Native School", which includes the great landscapists. A Cole or Bierstadt landscape is obviously neither plain, plane, nor plaine. Abstract expressionism is also outside the tradition.* Furthermore, there is not necessarily any unbroken chain of direct influences from artist to artist, although it is probably true that such influence exists more than can be documented. Nonetheless, the Plaine style does exist, it is almost continuous in America, and it pervades the whole history of our art.

One of the reasons that Copley can be regarded as the first of the Plaine School painters, is that his great colonial predecessor, Benjamin West, rather handily identified the style. He wrote to Copley on August 4, 1766, about his *Boy with a Squirrel*, "at first Sight the Picture struck the Eye as being too lincy, which was judged to have arose from there being so much neatness in

*There are some other things that the Plaine School is not. For one thing, it is not exclusively American: the school of Carravagio is similar and so (at least in the handling of surfaces) are the Dutch masters of genre—for example, Vermeer. The styles of Chardin, of David, of Cezanne, and of Dali show remarkable parallels.

the lines. . . ." This "lineyness", (which incidentally is discernible in West's own early work), was considered a fault of primitive technique to be culled out as West himself had done, and as Copley was ultimately to do. However, the primitiveness is undoubtedly a matter of vision and style, not mere ignorance of technique. Primitive paintings tend to be cluttered in composition as can be seen, for example, in any Grandma Moses painting. The legitimate Plaine School painters are conscious artists who time and again demonstrate remarkable technical facility. Copley, in fact, seems to have deliberately put into his portraits some complex problems whose solutions, one might say, announce to the world that the Plaine style is not a reflection of provincial inadequacies but a matter of clear choice. Two famous portraits which he painted before following Benjamin West to England, *Paul Revere* and *Boy with a Squirrel*, show in their details extremely facile handling of reflective surfaces and depth. The pet flying squirrel which is depicted in the latter portrait sits next to a clear glass of clear water on a polished mahogany table. In other words, the problems of painting three reflective surfaces and two refractive media are successfully integrated. The "simple trueth" is, as it were, scientifically recorded, but without any clutter and without any subtraction of emphasis from the real subject of the portrait.

George Caleb Bingham, too, shows technical mastery in many of his paintings. While the Plaine School painters tend to flatten surfaces and to render them as almost cubistically hard, in Bingham's best known work, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, the soft rendering of the river mist is, in a word, masterly. The third dimension is evoked rather than stated, and some of the mysticism of the painting is produced by the tension between the hard rendering of the predominant plane and the implication of infinite perspective beyond. In Edward Hopper's work as well, the planeness is mitigated by the artist's handling of a most difficult problem, light itself. Light in Hopper's paintings is always an adjunct of surfaces—usually plane surfaces—but light is an abstract phenomenon in that it is quite beyond the restrictions of perspective. These are no mere primitive achievements.

The foregoing analytical description of a style of applying paint to a surface does not alone, however, make an American school of painting. The technical style must be welded to meaning, to purpose, and to the American experience. The style and the culture must be made one.

Governor Bradford's "singuler regard unto ye simple trueth" identifies the major content characteristics of the Plaine School. The paintings of the Plaine School are realistic to the degree of being, in an aesthetic sense, hard

to accept by people whose eyes have been trained by a half-century's exposure to the abstractionists. In this respect it must be admitted that the "singularity" of the subject matter and the scientific recording of "ye simple truth" makes for shallowness, or more exactly, narrowness of aesthetic scope. That is to say, in comparison with the subject matter of the high Renaissance, which is so far-reaching in depth and breadth of the accumulated symbolic meanings derived from history, religion, and mythology, the Plaine School is limited, materialistic, and plain. In so being, it is also peculiarly American. Grandeur, depth, and sublimity appear in American painting only when nature is the subject, and a Plaine style cannot reach deeply enough. Even when the painters of the Plaine School have been exposed to abstract cubism, and have accepted it, "ye simple truth" binds them to realism. Georgia O'Keefe's *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue* and Charles Sheeler's various industrial landscapes are abstract in composition, but the composition already existed in "ye simple truth" of the objective world, and the artist's selective eye saw, and his brush recorded with plain, and plane, literalness the material truth. Yet this plainness is not superficial, static, or repetitious.

Americans always have been dedicated to change, and so their histories of arts are made up of a succession of departures from previous styles. These departures are regarded as progress, and sometimes they lead to frenzied routs of artists who are rushing pell-mell from a tradition—any tradition. This progressive current (we might call it "linear A" to avoid value terms), is a valid and vital line of American art. Nonetheless, there is another strain, a linear B, in American art: the Plaine School.

It is true that Americans are dedicated to progress and change, but more and more students of their culture are recognizing that their supposed liberal-conservative, or progressive-traditional, splits are in a shadowland where all arguments are based on the same liberal premises of the founding fathers. In short, as Louis Hartz has said, there is only one tradition in America, the tradition which seeks to *conserve* the nation's simple *liberal* beliefs. America has a steady-state culture.

Cultures which have a steady-state ethos have always produced some kind of steady-state art. Thus, we do not ask for dramatic progressive shifts in oriental art. We do not ask for a Joycean literary experimentation in the later books of the Old Testament. A culture which is sure of its philosophical base produces an art in which the variations are seen in nuance, not rebellion. From century to century in Chinese art we see change, but we do not see revolution. From dynasty to dynasty in Egyptian art there is change which

smacks of rebellion only in the few decades when Ikhnoton revolutionized the ethos.

It is this same kind of steady-state ethos which has perpetuated one stream of American painting, although in America things are not at all simple. The steady-state ethos in America paradoxically includes the principles of the Declaration of Independence, which stands for revolution, change, and an innocent faith in progress. This is what makes a perfectly legitimate linear A of the typical progressive history of American art, which has at the moment produced abstract expressionism and light sculpture. But the other line, which at present is exemplified in the works of Andrew Wyeth, needs further analysis.

As William Bradford was a Separatist, as the Puritans were to erupt a utopian new Jerusalem—a City on a Hill for all men to see, as the founding fathers declared their independence and produced a geometrically balanced plain Constitution, so the artists of the Plaine School, being Americans, have been separated from the main institutional currents of the Old World. These Americans have been exemplary of a New World, and have been geometrically plain in their artistic views; and therefore they became divorced from the richly spiritual historic subjects and symbols of the Europeans. Thus, the narrowness and singularity of the subject matter for the Plaine School are “American” from the beginning. And in the centuries which have passed and have made the United States one of the oldest states in the modern world, few basic myths and grand abstractions of mind and culture have been added to the ethos. Materialistic reality has continued to colour our old grand abstract values of individuality, equality, and democracy. Thus, although Copley’s *Paul Revere* represents the abstract values of individuality and independence of spirit, it is yet a portrait of a businessman-craftsman: a materialist. Similarly, although Bingham’s *The Jolly Flatboatmen* represents equality and democracy, the flatboatmen are physical labourers almost devoid of spiritual depth: they too are materialists.

Paradoxically, then, the very simplicity and flatness of the subjects sound the depths of the American experience. The twentieth-century members of the Plaine School also express the paradox that the American abstract values, for all their theoretical loftiness, are inextricably interknitted with the material and superficial. Charles Sheeler, Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, and Andrew Wyeth all express the paradox in both their choice of subjects and the superficiality (if we regard the term as expressive of surface reality) of their styles.

That it is a paradox, and a nagging one, is obvious when one examines the uneasiness with which Andrew Wyeth’s painting has been greeted by the

critical public. This uneasiness can be partly resolved by examining Wyeth's work in the context of traditional American transcendentalism where "universal intelligibility" and democratic faith are intimately joined to spiritual mysticism; but the uneasiness can be further resolved by viewing Andrew Wyeth as a contemporary member of one of America's most characteristic schools, the Plaine School. Wyeth's art put us back on a track—not the only track, and not a dead-end spur of a main line, but a track which is American, though not naïvely or chauvinistically so. Stuart Davis once said "An artist who has lived in a democratic society has a different view of what a human being really is than one who has not." That "different view" is the subject of the Plaine School painters, and one quality which makes their painting great is that the subjects are treated with seriousness and with affection for the abstract ideas which they imply. A cynic can easily satirize the inconsistency of a materialistic society that reveres ideals which are self-evident in their patent simplicity: it takes a thoughtful man to see that the paradox is the essence of the American experience, and it takes a true artist to make us see it.

MY BROTHER CONRAD

Dora M. Pettinella

His paintings, subtle riddles
 to decipher, decorate one wall;
 a woman's naked skeleton
 with embryo of infant;
 an eyeless mask as sculpture;
 a lamppost with hanging head.
 A flask of chianti wine unopened,
 designs crisscrossed like thick barbed wire;
 splashes of colour unlike sun,
 a downcast snake flaring its tail,
 a Paisley countryside wind-blurred,
 an Indian symbol, a canoe,
 a dagger and a broken sword—
 who knows what all these objects mean?
 Oh Conrad! Tell me I am wrong!