

# A LAYMAN'S APPROACH TO ART



By **DON BRAZIER**

I shall attempt, in this essay, to show that in art there are three dichotomies, a controversy concerning the definition of art, the question of what is the field of the art critic, what is the field of the psychologist, and the relation between emotion and the intellect.

The first dichotomy concerns the definition of art. These definitions I shall designate as conservative, liberal, and radical. To the conservative the activity of the artist is to "evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling so that others experience the same feeling". To the liberal, however, this definition is too restrictive. He sees in the work of art not an attempt at conveying a feeling that the artist has experienced, but the transmission of an idea or feeling from the artist's experience into words (or painting or music) so that the reader (viewer, listener) may interpret its "message" in accordance with his own feelings and artistic knowledge. The majority of modern "abstract" art would, therefore,

fact with the work of art is not necessarily identical with his own. The only sure way of making sure that one's feelings are transmitted directly is to narrate them. Thus prose literature would degenerate into philosophical essays or scientific tracts.

As an illustration of the conservative's error let us examine the effect of the intercourse scenes from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence. These scenes were intended, apparently, to convey the purity, simplicity, and wholesomeness of true erotic love whether it be within or outside of matrimonial vows. To a cross-section of society, however, this was not the feeling conveyed. To many these descriptions of the act of intercourse were nothing but immoral sex scenes. (It is a sad reflection upon the contemporary world that this minority was powerful enough to have Lawrence's book castrated so that any who might see more in than they did were denied the chance to read it.)

The liberal, however, is not hampered by this emotional involvement since he is more interested in individual interpretation. His analysis goes beyond an attempt to re-enact the feel-

present art, since they can instill emotions. However, these emotions may be no more than psychological interpretations. No meaning can be gotten from this junk since no meaning was intended. The radical has failed to understand the subtle difference between artistic feeling and a psychological interpretation.

Artistic feeling or emotion is a reference to conscious physical past experiences, which are recreated when one comes into contact with the art. The art reminds one of the past experience. Therefore the art must have meaning. But some of this "art" espoused by the radicals has no meaning, since no meaning was intended. It can have no effect on the conscious mind, since there is nothing that the mind can refer back to. The only effect it can have is on the subconscious, or psychological part of the mind. This junk is an abstraction (i. e. does not refer to reality), so one cannot become emotionally involved with it.

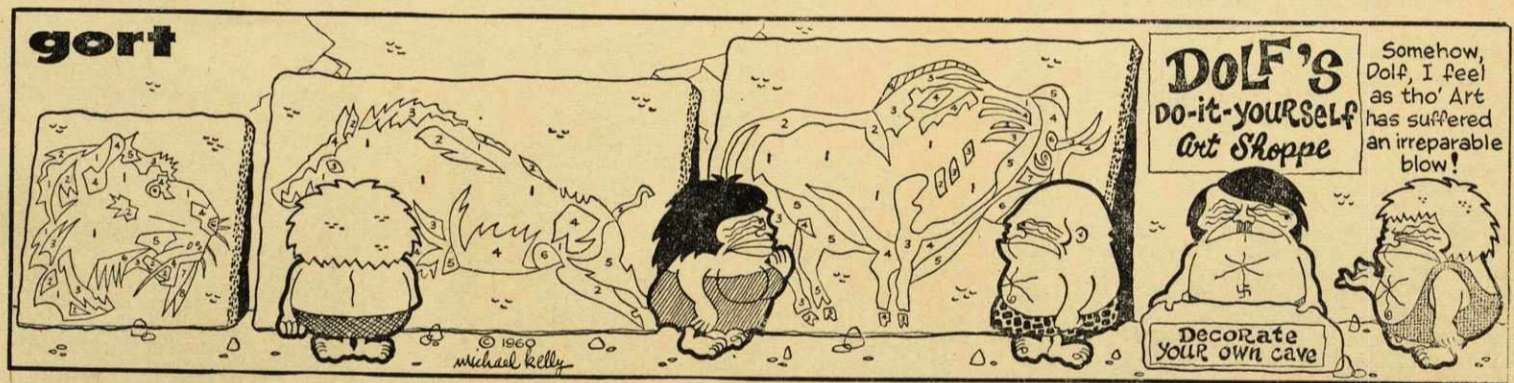
An example from outside the field of art may help to clarify this. Mathematics is a discipline which has no reference to reality. Someone confronted for the first time with the equation  $x + y = 1$  could not possibly say he has any feeling towards it since there is nothing to have feeling about. However, from out of his subconscious he may say, for example, that it looks like the three crosses that St. Andrew, St. Peter, and Christ died on, but there is still no

intellect in art. To do this I will deal primarily with abstract art. Abstract art is just that—it is abstract. It does not refer to reality (which, incidentally, is **not** a fault). Therefore one cannot become emotionally involved in abstract art since emotional involvement as I have stated, refers to the re-creation of a past experience. Since there is no reality, there can be no past experience and there can be no emotional involvement. There can, however, still be a psychological interpretation. For an example, while visiting friends I noticed in their house an abstract painting consisting of a number of blue rectangles (apparently) scattered indiscriminately throughout the entire work. Each rectangle was a different shade of blue and this was what the entire work consisted of. At one time while looking at it I heard the observation "that looks like a lot of chalk marks on a blackboard". This was, however, subconscious interpretation of this work of art. To no other person could this look like a series of chalk marks, and this certainly cannot be put down as an emotional involvement since no past experience was being recollected, and no emotions were being used.

What then is the artistic function of abstract art? If it doesn't appeal to the emotions, then it must appeal to the intellect. By intellect I mean knowledge: knowledge of art, music or literary criticism, knowledge of

involvement, since these emotional involvements are based on past experiences, not on knowledge that one can pick up. It is true to say, however, that the emotions can be increased to a point as one connects the art with past experiences that maybe escaped the recipient at first contact. But the emotions involved cannot be increased indefinitely. It would probably be more true to say that in most cases the emotional involvement would wear off, rather than increase, but this might well depend on the recipient.

The natural question to ask is what is more important, the emotions or the intellect? We have shown that in realistic art both are involved but that in abstract art only the latter is used. One would assume therefore that the intellect is more important. This is most probably true. Emotional involvement forces one to be entirely subjective, and any criticism must be so regarded. Exponents of emotionalism will claim that they can "communicate" more with the art. This may be true but any such communication is superficial. They fail to grasp the more intellectual problems involved. Billy Graham can sway the rabble to a point of emotion where they will claim to be "saved". Ask them a question of a theological nature, however, and you will find yourself talking to a complete ignoramus. "A little knowledge" however, "is a danger-



be more meaningful and have more artistic value to the liberal than to the conservative. Furthermore to the liberal the intellect (of the recipient) is more important than his emotions, whereas the conservative would be inclined to give more to the latter. The third definition is that of the radical. To the radical anything that can be interpreted as having meaning can be considered as art. Art to the radical therefore can range from Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to inkblots, or from *Tom Jones* to behind-the-counter pronography. This last viewpoint could be discounted entirely but for two reasons. It has a great number of adherents who are earnestly trying to get it recognized; the other is that the radical fails to make the distinction between the art lover's artistic feelings and his psychological make up. (More of that later).

The criticism of the conservative position is quite simple; it is practically, if not totally impossible to achieve. The conservative artist with his great reliance on the transmission of feeling does not realize that the emotional involvement that will result from the recipient's con-

ings that Lawrence puts into the scenes, to that point where he asks the question, what is the purpose of these scenes? What artistic function do they perform? To the liberal, only when these scenes become appendial to the plot and do not help to illustrate the main philosophy expressed can they possibly be regarded as obscene.

The conservative, who becomes emotionally involved can only view subjectively. The liberal because he stands above the art can therefore be objective. John Keats, by his own admission, could not appreciate music. His personal feelings became so entangled with the music that they made him cry. Had he stood apart and viewed from a distance his overall appreciation would have been much greater.

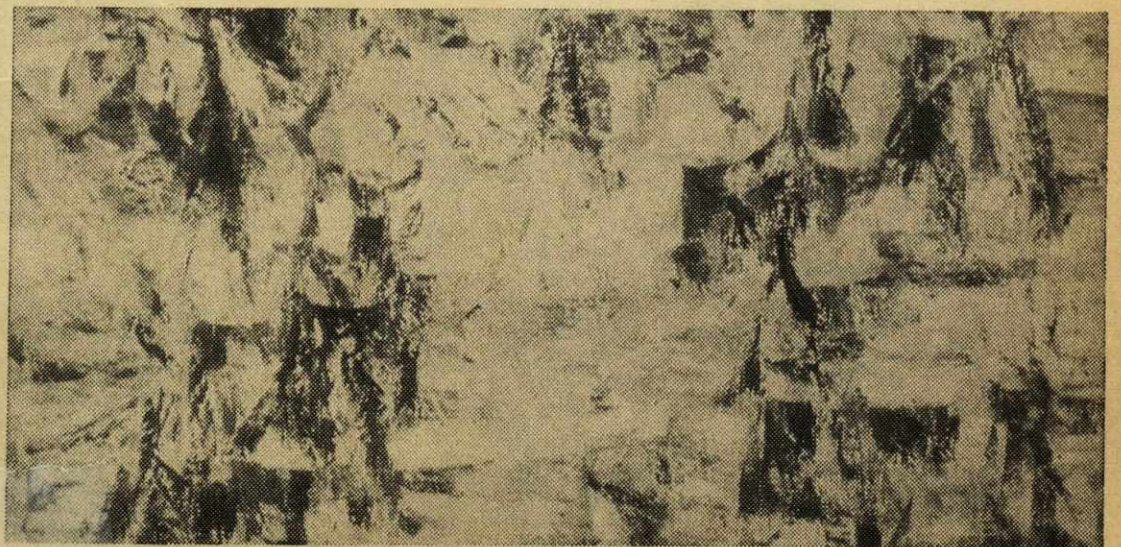
The radicals, by their definition, throw sensible art out of the window. A necessary and sufficient characteristic for art is that feelings and meaning be put into it and that feelings and/or interpretation be taken out. To the radical, however, meaningless junk, such as paint indiscriminantly thrown at a piece of canvas, or pornography on a lavatory wall, re-

feeling involved, just this psychological interpretation, which like all psychological interpretations is based upon irrationality and subconscious analysis, neither of which lend themselves to the critic of art.

It may be felt that in my differentiating between what I have called psychological interpretation and artistic feeling I have been splitting hairs. However, I have not, as I shall show now as I turn to the parts played by the emotions and the

meaning put into the work by the artist, knowledge of artistic techniques in general and the artistic techniques used by the artist in particular. We now turn to the major difference between the intellect (or knowledge) the emotions. By increasing one's intellect one can thereby increase one's appreciation of art (or in the case of abstract art since there is no emotional involvement), one can **begin** to appreciate; however one can **never** increase one's emotional

ous thing" and it leads to what is known as pseudo-intellectualism (a complaint from which the huge majority of Dalhousie students are suffering), and an opinion expressed by someone who knows nothing about what he is talking can be worse than no opinion at all. The art lover must attempt therefore to cultivate and suppress his emotions and to increase his knowledge. One can therefore become more open-minded and objective. This is the ultimate aim of all would-be intellectuals.



ABSTRACT ART — Jardin sous La Neige by Paul-Emile Borbuas.