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A Philosophy of Art

Robert Erickson

Eastern Illinois University

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A Philosophy of Art

(TITLE)

BY

Robert Erickson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1977

YEAR

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A Philosophy of Art

BY

Robert Erickson

B.S. in Education, Eastern Illinois University, 1971

Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the Graduate School of Eastern Illinois University.

Charleston, Illinois

1977

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There is no universally accepted concept of the nature of art. Many are contented in believing that it is just some mystical quality. However, I believe that art is a basic human trait which has evolved over millions of years. This paper shall explain my own belief as to the evolution of art and how it is used by myself and other artists.

That which we believe to be true is a product of our individual experiences. In technology, religion, and in art there are no universal truths. All human beings perceive the world in different ways.

Two billion years ago conditions were such in the seas that life began. One billion, nine hundred and fifty million years later, thru countless mutations, was produced a small, tree-dwelling creature called a lemure. The lemure was the first to use sight when making value judgments as to who would make a good mate. This trait accelerated the rate at which its ancestors evolved into higher, more complex forms of life.

Two million years ago, one descendant of the lemure made rudimentary stone tools. I feel that this activity is the first sign of art. Man is aware of the future. His actions are not driven by his immediate environment, as animal actions are.

Men alone can imagine situations which are different from those in front of their eyes. They can do so because they make and hold in their minds images for absent things.

In the most general sense, art is the creative process man uses to solve problems. Whenever a problem appears that has no apparent solutions, or an inadequate one, man uses the power of imagination to invent solutions.

Any attempt one would make at strictly defining art would surely fail. The organized art world has always been in a state of change. Even a casual review of the history of art will reveal contrasting ideals.

More important than marveling at an existing work is the experimental and experiential process of creating new works. If you know exactly what you are going to do, what's the good of doing it?

The spectator involved with a work is just as much an artist as the producer of the object. For him the art work is only raw material he uses mentally in his imagination to produce images which are unique.

When society claims that something is of great value, or of little value, it is expressing a kind of popularity poll. As the society changes a given work will be judged differently.

A common thing to say when one finds value in an artist's work is that he has talent. Usually this expresses the success the artist has had at pleasing the viewer. Often, it is taken to mean some magical quality the artist is supposed to possess that enables him to produce art works. All men who are able to conceive a future and are capable of creating unique solutions to problems.

Every artist is involved in a never ending progression of

attempts at new ideas. All human beings have the ability to invent new forms and should consciously do so. The result is a continual uplifting of the society of man.

There is no universally accepted concept of the nature of art. Many are contented in believing that it is just some mystical quality. However, I believe that art is a basic human trait which has evolved over millions of years. This paper shall explain my own belief as to the evolution of art and how it is used by myself and other artists.

I shall be stating a number of concepts which have been instrumental in the development of my philosophy of art. I do not feel that a lengthy proof of each of these concepts is necessary. Although some of these may be misconceptions, their effect on me has been real.

That which we believe to be true is a product of our individual experiences. In technology, religion, and in art there are no universal truths. All human beings perceive the world in different ways. The scientist explains his ideas using theories. Religions deal with beliefs which differ from culture to culture. Artists, especially contemporary artists, strive to use their own personal styles to express themselves in a unique manner. Picasso once said... "Truth can not exist. If I look for truth in my canvas, I can do a hundred canvases with this truth. Which, then, is the true one? And who is truth? The one who serves as my model or the one I paint? No, it's like anything else. Truth does not exist."¹

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep... And God said 'Let there be light;' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness...

And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together He called Seas.²

Two billion years ago conditions were such in the seas that life began. Carbon atoms combined with hydrogen atoms to produce methane, glucose, fructose, sucrose, glycogen, glycerol, and fatty acids. These combined with nitrogen-containing compounds which produced amino acids, proteins, purines, pyrimidines, and nucleotides.³ These compounds combined to produce the first living organism.

One billion, nine hundred and fifty million years later, thru countless mutations, was produced a small, tree-dwelling creature called a lemur.⁴ This creature, which belongs to the Adapis family, had finger nails, a thumb which could be opposed part-way to the hand, and two features which were important for the evolution of man. "The snout is short; the eyes are large and widely spaced. That means that there has been selection against the sense of smell and in favour of the sense of vision."⁵ This creature has evolved a use for the sense of sight which makes it superior over other animals existing at that time. The lemur was the first to use sight when

making value judgments as to who would make a good mate. This trait accelerated the rate at which its ancestors evolved into higher, more complex forms of life.

Two million years ago, one descendant of the lemur, the Australopithecus, made rudimentary stone tools by hitting two rocks together to create a sharp edge. This creature had made a big jump in evolution from the lower animals to man. The simple act of creating a tool, which was saved and reused, meant that he was aware of the future and was capable of preparing for it.⁶ I feel that this activity is the first sign of art.

The fact that these early men were aware of the future is extremely important. "Naturally there are physical differences between man and the other animals. Yet, such differences are secondary by comparison with the overriding difference, which is that the human's actions are not driven by his immediate environment, as animal actions are."⁷

It is true that a common squirrel gathers nuts to eat during the winter. This might seem to be an awareness of the future, but the squirrel's actions have been evolved biologically. He is not aware of why he is gathering nuts, nor of the fact that he will starve if he does not gather them.

In the course of the next million years man made other biological refinements.

The evolution of the brain, of the hand, of the eyes, of the feet, the teeth, the whole human frame, made him what he is; fastest in evolution, and richer and more flexible in behavior than other animals. Unlike the creatures (some insects for instance) that have been unchanged for five, ten, even fifty million years, he has changed over this time-scale out of all recognition. Man is not the most majestic of the creatures. Long before the mammals even, the dinosaurs were far more splendid. But he has what no other animal possesses, a jig-saw of faculties which alone, over three thousand million years of life, make him creative."⁸

This creative ability that man has could not exist if he was not aware of the future. Along with a memory, which other animals also possess, "the ability to foresee several different courses of action, and to weigh them in the mind might be thought to be purely logical and scientific faculties. But, in fact, this is the nature of all imagination, in art and science alike."⁹ Everything that man consciously creates, he does so because of the future.

The awareness of that which is to come, has given man another uniquely human trait; 'deferment of action.' We are able to resist the temptation to react immediately to a given stimulus. This trait has allowed men to improve their lives and shape their environment. For instance, early man was able to see the value in not eating all of the available grain so that some of it could be planted and a crop harvested the next year. A squirrel planting a nut to grow a tree is unheard of. Only men see the value of long-term satisfactions being

of more value than short-term ones. He is the only animal which is not locked into his environment. He does not accept it, but changes it.

When man changes his environment he is said to be creative. In order for him to do this he must first conceive what needs change. Then he must conceive what a given change will accomplish. The creative act can only be accomplished with the use of what I believe to be the most important human trait, the imagination.

The "...human habit of making images inside one's head,"¹⁰ called imagination, is different from memory. Other animals are able to recall from their past. Men alone "...can imagine situations which are different from those in front of their eyes; and they can do so because they make and hold in their minds images for absent things."¹¹

When man developed the ability to see into the future, and developed the imagination, he was capable of conceiving more than one solution to a given problem. For example; he experimented with different types of tools, clothing, and shelter. This experimentation forced him to make judgments; to decide which methods should be repeated and which discarded. "Imagination is always an experimental process, and this whether we are experimenting with logical concepts or with the fancy-free material of art."¹²

In the most general sense, art is the creative

process man uses to solve problems. Whenever a problem appears that has no apparent solution, or an inadequate one, man uses his power of imagination to invent solutions.

"The conception of man as the being that uses art is the ground of distinction of man from the rest of nature."¹³ Other animals make simple tools, have simple social lives, even language. Rhesus monkeys, for example, communicate with a developed vocabulary. They make about twenty sounds and about twenty gestures, so that they have a total of about forty distinct 'words'.¹⁴ But man alone, whether he is making weapons or painting on cave walls, is solving problems thru art. He is the only animal with imagination and thus the only animal who can change his environment.

One way in which early man changed his environment was thru cave paintings. These paintings show us a glimpse at the artist's way of life. The cave man was expressing what he imagined would happen, or that which he wished would happen in the future. The obvious thing to say is that the paintings of animals were magical to the artist. "No doubt that is right, but magic is a word which explains nothing. It says that man believed he had power, but what power? We still want to know what the power was that the artist believed they got from the paintings. I think that the power that we see expressed here for the first time is the power of anticipation:

the forward-looking imagination."¹⁵

Man is the only animal with the forward-looking imagination. It is the most important unique human trait. There are no great biological differences between cave painters and modern man. The creative processes we use today are the same ones used by them. One reason that the life of modern man is superior to cave man is that we have a greater amount of knowledge to draw from.

"All religions, arts, and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling man's life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual toward freedom."¹⁶ Whenever man is aware of this uplifting and reacts to it he is expressing his aesthetic values. He has taken from his memory, beliefs, and imagination and attached to them a judgment of their value. Man has never been satisfied with his existing life since the development of aesthetics. As the experiences and desired results change, the value judgment also changes. The over-all result is that man makes progress toward improving his life. Changing aesthetic values are responsible for the high standard of life enjoyed by modern civilization.

Both scientists and artists concern themselves with improving life. The difference is in the method. The scientist makes observations of the real world and forms

theories which are proved by measurements. The artist uses technology like the scientist, but also that which can not be measured.

Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."¹⁷ In early civilizations religion was used to explain and express the nature of the world. As man's life became more complex, science was used to define and improve his environment. Art was used to express emotional and aesthetic states. Today, the duty of religions has been reduced to dealing with the problems of the supernatural.

Aesthetically, "there is no difference between a great theorem, like that of Pythagoras, and a great poem like Homer's Iliad. The difference lies at a deeper level: Pythagoras is deliberately trying to mean the same thing to everybody who listens to him--one thing and one thing only--and Homer is not."¹⁸ A theory in science is judged by its predictability and usefulness. "The work of an artist may rest its merits in traditional qualities; it may constitute a remarkable feat in craftsmanship; it may be a searching study into psychological states; it may be a hymn to nature; it may be concerned with its degree of newness; or any of an infinite number of concepts."¹⁹

Today we generally use the name 'artist' to describe

anyone who produces something which is meant to be aesthetically pleasing.

The term 'artist' is irreplaceable, whatever strains and paradoxes it leads us into because it combines the sense of visionary/philosopher/prophet with the sense of craftsman/technician/designer. A visionary or philosopher is not called an artist, nor should he be, unless he can transmit his perceptions in terms of a technical medium. A craftsman is not called an artist unless his medium is informed by some unusual clairvoyance or imagination. An artist, like other workers, has to organize his resources and find economical solutions to problems; but the kind of organization that distinguishes him is a matter of coordinating technical resources with psychological or spiritual resources, so that there is a continuous process from idea to technical expression and back to idea. Given this definition, it is self-evident that there is an artist in every man, since no one would be able to get through life without a measure of this organizing or coordinating power.²⁰

To be an artist means more than just an organizer of information, technology, and emotion. When an artist creates a work of art he is also expressing his individuality. No two human beings have identical past experiences. Because each person's perceptions are molded by different experiences, their art will express a unique quality.

As individuals we make judgments of concepts held by ourselves and others. The process of evaluation is not an exact science. Each individual has his own set of standards, which have been formed from his past experiences. Those ideas we like are continued to be used. Those we find not to our liking we discard.

"Niels Bohr, a founding father of twentieth century physics, was a consummate artist. He had no ready-made

answers. He used to begin his lecture courses by saying to his students, 'Every sentence that I utter should be regarded by you not as an assertion but as a question'."²¹

In art, science and religion there may exist the perfect truth, but there does not exist the perfect proof.

Although we may believe something to be true, there is no way to be absolutely certain. Therefore, art and science are both continuous modes of inquiry. All that we have learned are only provisional models. Everything that we see as beautiful now may someday seem ugly.

Any attempt one would make at strictly defining art would surely fail. The organized art world has always been in a state of change. Even a casual view at the history of art will reveal contrasting ideals.

In response to changes in society during the 1500's, the High Renaissance style of art gave way to Mannerism. Then during the 1600's a return to classic simplicity occurred in the formation of the Baroque period. In the 1800's the Rococo period meant a style full of ornamental abstract invention.

Art theories have provided a point of reference from which the artist takes off. The fact that there are no universal truths in art means that the artist has as much artistic freedom as he wishes to exercise.

To restrict one's creative process would be to take away this freedom. "In order to be content, men must have

the possibility of developing their intellectual and artistic powers to what ever extent, in accord with their personal characteristics and abilities."²²

Picasso once remarked, "If you know exactly what you are going to do what's the good of doing it? There's no interest in something you know already. It's much better to do something else."²³ More important than marveling at an existing work is the experimental and experiential process of creating new works. Of course we can always learn from that which has preceded the present; but only so that we can take that information and improve upon it. What is the good in re-creating an existing work. "You can try anything in (art). You even have the right to. Provided you never do it again."²⁴

No artist has included every possible aspect of a form in a work. Each work is a stepping stone to the next. The artist is constantly looking for new ways of approaching a given design problem. The importance of an object is not in its being a final solution; rather the making of it is a learning process.

"Art becomes increasingly free, it has freed itself from meaning in many cases and freed itself of responsibility. In some of the recent phases almost the only ingredient left in art besides paint seems to be freedom. To be 'static' is negative, for...(meaning and responsibility) seem to inhibit the freedom of a work."²⁵ This

freedom is most desirable. Although considerable amounts of time seem to be wasted experimenting with unproductive ideas, the effect over the long run will be progress into new realms.

The spectator involved with a work is just as much an artist as the producer of the object. For him the art work is only raw material he uses mentally in his imagination to produce images which are unique. "The internal relations that make it beautiful to him have to be discovered and in some way have to be put in by him. The artist (who produces the work) provides a skeleton; he provides guiding lines; he provides enough to engage the viewer's interest and to touch him emotionally."²⁶ The spectator takes the object and gives it 'life'. Both are experiencing an aesthetic activity.

The viewer is the one who determines the value of an art work. One reason this is the case is that if the producer was unimpressed by the object he would have destroyed it. If the artist sees meaning in it, if the object gives him pleasure, and a feeling of well being, he may then share it with spectators. A viewer of the work may not share the producer's feelings, and if so, to him the work is bad. Evaluation is a personal reaction one has to an art work. The value the viewer gives it is directly related to his past experiences. Those things which he does not understand he does not like. Those

which are harmonious with his past experiences he finds value in.

When society claims that something is of great value, or of little value, it is expressing a kind of popularity poll. As the society changes, a given work will be judged differently. If something is not valued today does not mean it never had value or never will have value.

The creative person seldom is faced with the problem of finding pleasure in working.

No imaginative activity is dull to those who are willing to re-imagine it. Of course, many individual scientists are personally dull; but I assure you, ...that many artists are dull people too. But they are not dull inside their work--neither the artist nor the scientist. Inside their work they are at play, they are imagining and creating new situations, and that is the greatest fun in the world for them.²⁷

As an artist, having fun creating is one of the most pleasurable activities in my life. Although it may sometimes cause anxiety, frustrations I may have while working out a design problem are worth it because of the joy created from the solution.

A common thing to say when one finds value in an artist's work is that he has talent. Usually this expresses the success the artist has had at pleasing the viewer. Often it is taken to mean some magical quality the artist is supposed to possess that enables him to produce art works. There is nothing mysterious about the creative process. All men who are able to conceive a

future have an imagination. It is as much a part of us as our intelligence. Some use art more in their life than others, some better, but we are all capable of creating unique solutions to problems.

Works of art do not just happen. They are produced for a reason. This is as true for a painting, a piece of jewelry, a ceramic bowl, a symphony, a ballet, as it is for a decorated cake. All artists, no matter what media, are attempting to express an idea. They are exploring their imaginations, often actually looking for problems so that they can have the satisfaction of solving them. Every time we consciously do something to improve our existence we are involved in art. Even when we are the spectator, the good is in discovering a meaning for another's work. The joy and value is contained in the process of problem solving. "Man ascends by discovering the fullness of his own gifts and what he creates on the way are monuments to the stages in his understanding of the nature of self."²⁸

An artist who concerns himself primarily with the creation of beauty thru such activities as painting, sculpture, crafts, theater, or music is considered to be working in the 'fine arts'. The term usually describes activity requiring specially developed skills. However,

...the nature of (fine) art has become uncertain. No one can say with assurance what a work of (fine) art is--or, more important, what is not a work of (fine) art. Where an object is still present, as

in painting, it is...an anxious object: it does not know whether it is a master piece or junk. It may, as in the case of a collage by Schwitters, be literally both.²⁹

There have been attempts to define exactly what fine art is, but none of these have been successful. "In every age there is a turning point, a new way of seeing and asserting the coherence of the world."³⁰

It is my belief that the most important basic trait that separates men from the lower animals is his imagination. This is what enables him to have a superior intelligence and the ability to be creative. All men, and only men, are artists and scientists.

As was said of Niels Bohr, I consider myself to be a "consummate scientist" in the field of fine arts. As a scientist, my experiments use various media, techniques, and psychological concepts to "prove" my own unique theories of that which will create beauty. I am "consummate" because I accept none of my present theories to be laws. I am free to learn from the past and experiment in the present, so that I may improve the future.

The artist is involved in a never ending progression of attempts at new ideas. To learn by doing is superior to the idea that an artist's duty is to produce finished works. There should be no conscious effort to make a perfect one-of-a-kind item. Each art production will suggest variations and/or reveal imperfections that could be used in or eliminated from another work. The

artist who believes that he has produced the best that he is capable of most likely has. The one who is constantly striving for perfection will never obtain it but will be constantly improving.

The sculpture in figure #1 was originally to have three smaller forms on top which were closely related to the base. During the firing process one of these smaller forms was damaged. Faced with the problem of how to repair the work, I decided to remove the forms and replaced them with animal designs. My interest in these "beasties" increased and a series of experiments with them occurred. Figures #2, 3, 4, and 5.

Each one in the series became more complex. Those qualities, such as facial expression and body structure, which were to my liking were retained. Other qualities, like proportions and extremity structure were changed.

My duty as an artist is to experiment and improve. Self-evaluation is important, but is basically an awareness of what is happening and a reaction to it. The damage to the original work during the firing was not a catastrophe. It forced me to re-evaluate and resulted in a new approach to the problem. Someone else who was unaware of the unlimited possibilities might have attempted to duplicate the original design.

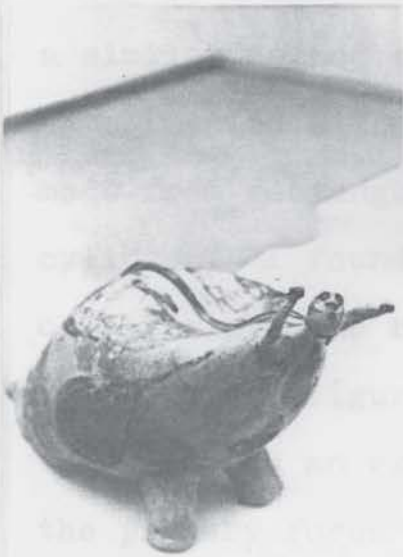
There is an evolutionary process in the creation of my works. I use my imagination to try to invent unique



1.

2.

3.



4.

5.

6.

non-existing ideas for possible forms. During the process of actually creating a new form, either from the design itself or from the technique of production, new possibilities will occur to me. The result of working in series is an increasing amount of complexity.

Often this evolution would have been impossible using the imagination alone. As illustrated by the development of the "beasty" form, physical experimentation will also suggest new ideas. Without actual construction, information will be lost.

I desired an efficient method of producing mugs by a hand built method. A process utilizing clay slabs resulted. (Figure #6.) Interest could be added by simple distortion (figure #7) and by the addition of textures (figure #8).

After attending a workshop in metalsmithing in which a similar method of using sheet material was explained, I experimented with more complex forms. The mug forms were made from rectangular shaped clay slabs bent into a cylinder. I found that by curving the joining side edges of the slabs the resulting hollow form will be much more interesting (figures #9, 10, 11).

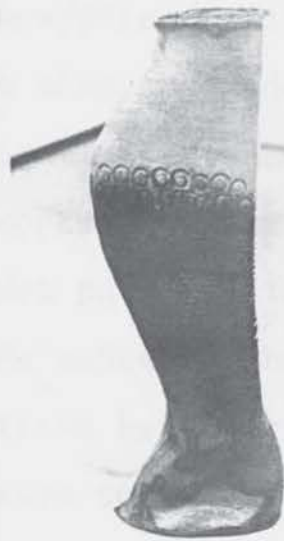
This is an excellent example of the technique being the primary force behind the evolution of forms. These works were not foreseen in my imagination. Only thru experimentation did I learn how to control the production



7.



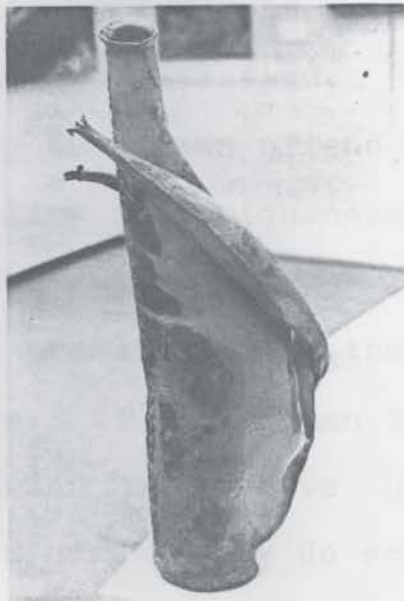
8.



9.



10.



11.

of these new forms.

In ceramics, I prefer to utilize hand built techniques rather than to use thrown forms. This prejudice reflects my belief that my works should show that they are made strictly by hand. Informal balance, slightly warped walls, and other imperfections give my works a unique quality. They directly reflect the effort put into them.

The evaluation of my works by others concerns their own artistic processes, which are prejudiced by their past experiences. One should be responsive to the aesthetic values of others, but not to such a degree as to inhibit freedom and progress.

As an artist I seek to improve my own environment. It is important for me to be aware of the aesthetics of others, so that I can draw from their experiences. In the end though, it is my own self interest and aesthetic appetite which should be satisfied.

Although it may sometimes offend others, my artistic independence will allow for uniqueness and promote improvement of my design ideals.

The ability to produce art is the most wonderful of all the human traits. It allows man to explore into the unknown. All human beings have the ability to invent new forms and should consciously do so. The result is a continual uplifting of the society of man.

FOOTNOTES

¹Parmelin, Helene, Translated by Christine Trollope, Picasso Says... (South Brunswick, New York, A. A. Barnes and Company, 1966), p. 70.

²Holy Bible, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America (Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York, 1952), p. 1.

³Alfred M. Elliot, Zoology (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), pp. 32-37.

⁴J. Bronowski, The Ascent of Man (Boston, Mass., Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 37.

⁵Ibid., p. 37.

⁶Ibid., p. 40.

⁷Ibid., p. 36.

⁸Ibid., p. 42.

⁹Jacob Bronowski, Imagination and the University (York University, University of Toronto Press, Canada, 1964), p. 16.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹Ibid., p. 9.

¹²Ibid., p. 25.

¹³John Dewey, Art As Experience (New York, Capricorn Books, 1934), p. 26.

¹⁴Bronowski, Imagination, p. 7.

¹⁵Bronowski, Ascent, p. 50.

¹⁶Albert Einstein, Living Philosophies (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1933), p. 6.

¹⁷Albert Einstein, Out of My Later Years (Scranton, Pa., Philosophical Library, Inc., The Haddon Craftsmen, Inc., 1950), p. 19.

¹⁸Bronowski, Imagination, p. 16.

¹⁹Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 101.

²⁰Jonathan Benthall, Science and Technology In Art Today (New York, Praeger Publisher, Inc., 1972), p. 12.

²¹Bronowski, The Ascent of Man, p. 334.

²²Einstein, Later Years, p. 12.

²³Parmelin, p. 33.

²⁴Ibid., p. 115.

²⁵Shahn, p. 99.

²⁶Bronowski, Imagination, p. 13.

²⁷Ibid., p. 26.

²⁸Bronowski, Ascent, p. 24.

²⁹Harold Rosenberg, The De-definition of Art (New York, Horizon Press, 1972), p. 12.

³⁰Bronowski, Ascent, p. 20.

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