THE AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO NONREPRESENTATIONAL ART: A SUGGESTED MODEL

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Abstract

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This essay is an attempt to develop a rhetorical theory of the aesthetic experience of nonrepresentational art. Suggested steps in the process of this aesthetic experience include: (1) creation of a special reality by the art object, (2) vitalization of the special reality by the audience, and (3) creation of identification between artist and viewer that enables the vitalization to occur. The essay concludes with implications of the model for art educators, artists, and baffled viewers.

The typical visitor to a museum or gallery displaying nonrepresentational art[1] often has difficulty understanding and appreciating the works in the exhibition. Responses to a painting that consists of streaks of color on a canvas are likely to be, "Even I can do that — why is that considered good art?" or "What's the message? What is it supposed to be?" The visitor may be inclined to agree with the response of English diplomat Wilfred S. Blunt after he viewed an exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings in 1910: "The exhibition is either an extremely bad joke or a swindle."[2]

The root of the problem seems to lie in the fact that artists live in a world of images they experience empathetically and organize intuitively, while the general public lives in a world of symbols where verbal meaning or practical application is attached to almost everything. Art has been assigned in the minds of most people the function of presenting a representation of the natural world as we perceive it with our eyes. Nonrepresentational art that does not perform this function is incomprehensible to much of the general public. As a result, the typical viewer of nonrepresentational art is likely to become frustrated and retreat from these works of art.

A better understanding of how nonrepresentational art functions may be gained by applying notions of rhetoric to theories of art. By rhetoric we mean communication, or the study of how symbols evoke a response. Although scholars in the field of rhetoric tend to confine themselves to the study of verbal symbols, rhetoric as a discipline is also applicable to nonverbal symbol systems such as art. As Burke points out, symbolization includes not only talk, but "all other human symbol systems, such as mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on."[3] Duncan argues that to study communication in society, we "must study art, for the highest (because most complete) incorporation of natural forces and operations in experience is found in art."[4] Others, too, have recognized that art is a language and that it should be described in linguistic terms. Kaelin, an aesthetics theorist, points out that if "the arts can truly be said to compose a language, then one ought to be able to describe that language, both generically and specifically."[5] Add to the notion that art can be studied as a language the contemporary trend in which the scope of rhetoric has been expanded to encompass all of the ways in which symbols of any sort influence,[6] and the inevitable conclusion seems to be that we ought to attempt to study the visual arts as we do the verbal ones.

This essay is an initial attempt to develop a rhetorical model of the aesthetic experience of nonrepresentational art. At the base of the theory is a rhetorical definition of art — we view art as the conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, and other elements in a manner that affects or evokes a response. Although aspects of this theory will be applicable to representational art, our focus will be on nonrepresentational art because it poses the most difficulties for understanding the aesthetic experience involved.

Justification

The need for a rhetorical theory of nonrepresentational art can be seen in the limitations of past theories about art. These theories do not deal adequately with nonrepresentational art as seen in a cursory review of them.[7]

The imitation theory of art, which can be traced as far back as Plato, defines art as the literal representation of objects or events in real life. The goal of art, according to this theory, is to reproduce the object as nearly as possible in the manner in which it appears in nature. This theory, of course, omits a great deal of art by stipulating that art must portray literally an object; the focus of our attention — nonrepresentational art — is an obvious omission.

The emotionalist theory, which developed mainly out of the Romantic movement in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, represented a reaction against Neoclassicism, which discouraged emotionality, originality, and flexibility in art and relied heavily on Greek and Roman forms and styles. This theory defines art as an expression of the artist's emotion or the presentation of feeling controlled through some medium. It presents problems, too, for our purposes, because it attributes one motive to all artists: the expression of emotion and the communication of that emotion to others. But artists may have other motives, such as the creation of an attractive object or an attempt to solve a technical problem in a particular medium.

A contemporary theory of art — the formalist theory — defines art as significant form — the elements of line, color, shape, mass, light, shade, and tone organized into a formal pattern. Formalists believe that associations with persons, objects, or events outside of the work of art are irrelevant because they prevent viewers from becoming fully involved in the aesthetic experience of the work itself. The formalist theory falls short of explaining the aesthetic experience of nonrepresentational art in that it does not state how to tell whether or not a particular structure or form is significant and how this structure affects the viewer.

Finally, the theory of the aesthetic field proposed by Berleant expands a definition of art into an explanation of the aesthetic experience. His theory includes the components of art object, perceiver, artist; performer, and the biological, psychological, material and technological, historical, social and cultural factors that combine to create an aesthetic transaction. Although this theory solves many of the problems encountered in earlier theories of art, it fails to explain how a work of art affects a viewer; it describes factors that may affect the response, but not how this response occurs.

A rhetorical model of nonrepresentational art, then, clearly answers a need. It can provide an understanding of the aesthetic process that is involved in an individual's response to a

nonrepresentational work of art that current major theories of art do not. In addition, we believe that the study of the visual arts as rhetoric will contribute to an understanding of society as a whole. We see three ways in which this contribution can occur:

(1) Ours is a visual age — the image seems to be taking over from the written word, perhaps because more information can be transmitted in less amount of time through visual rather than verbal imagery. We are confronted more than ever before with visuals in our everyday lives — photographs in the newspaper, posters, pictures on cereal boxes, glossy pamphlets in the mail, billboards along the highway, store window displays, maps, images on television, and postcards, to name a few. In short, we are urged to live by visual sensations. Because this is the case, we need to clarify how the visual image functions in our society, and the proposed model, which employs principles of the more traditional written and oral modes of communication, may assist in this understanding.

(2) We tend not to recognize the more mythical symbol systems such as religion and art as social facts or as hard data by which to study society. Science, in particular, seems to neglect these areas as legitimate vehicles for discovering information about society. Perhaps the study of the visual arts through the terminable equipment of an ancient, established medium such as rhetoric will help to legitimize art as acceptable data by which to study society.

(3) Many verbal symbols today have been stripped of their emotional energy, and few people respond to these old symbols. Americans today, for example, generally are not stirred by words that would have stirred our forebearers such as "liberty" and "justice." Nonrepresentational art, on the other hand, forces us to recognize new images because its symbols are visual, vivid, and striking; these works of art usually contain so much energy that we are forced to pay attention to them. A study of how nonrepresentational art functions, then, can help to meet the need for new symbols to take over when our verbal language falters.

A rhetorical theory of how nonrepresentational art functions to create an aesthetic experience, then, will hopefully escape limitations of past theories of art and will help clarify the nature and function of symbolism in contemporary society.

Limitations of the Theory

Before we begin to examine the rhetorical process by which an aesthetic experience occurs, we will first limit our theory by confining our concerns to the perceptual rather than the physical aspect of a work of art. Art theorists and critics long have recognized the distinction between the actual physical art object and the perceptual or aesthetic object that triggers the aesthetic experience. Beardsley, for example, suggests that a perceptual object is the object open to direct sensory awareness, while the physical object or the physical basis of the perceptual object consists of things and events describable in the vocabulary of physics.[8] In other words, the physical object is what it is, and the aesthetic object deals with the effects that object has on us. As Beardsley explains, "When a critic, then, says that Titian's later paintings have a strong atmospheric quality and vividness of color, he is talking about aesthetic objects. But when he says that Titian used a dark reddish underpainting over the whole canvas, . . . he is talking about physical objects."[9] Beardsley's use of the term "presentation" further clarifies this distinction. The physical object is not the object experienced by a viewer; what is experienced is the presentation of the physical object.[10]

Lipman also recognizes this twofold nature of an art object. He emphasizes that the "esthetic entity is not, either spatially or in any other appropriate sense, to be located within the physical object or event which serves to present it."[11] He labels the two aspects of a work of art "formal structure" and "functional structure." Formal structure (or what Beardsley calls the physical object) deals with the way things are put together, and functional structure (or Beardsley's aesthetic or perceptual object) deals with the way things behave.[12]

This proposed theory will deal only with the perceptual, aesthetic, or functional object. That is, we will attempt to discover how nonrepresentational art functions and the effects it has on a viewer, rather than analyzing the colors, forms, techniques, or themes of works themselves. To make the distinction between the perceptual and the physical object is not to deny the importance of the physical elements involved in the process of painting. The only way to obtain a perceptual or aesthetic object is to apply pigments to canvas or paper. But these elements have been subject to a great deal of examination and research by artists and art historians, and thus they will not be our concern here. We now will turn to an examination of the process involved as a viewer encounters the perceptual object.

Step 1: The Art Object Invites Entrance to a Special Reality

Verbal symbols may function in a number of ways, including excitation, persuasion, or identification. But they have another possible function as well: the creation of a special reality for those who choose to participate. Bormann recognizes this function in his notion of a "rhetorical vision," a symbolic drama which catches up groups of people in a particular reality.[13] Campbell, too, sees rhetoric as a motivating force for the development of a reality: "From the point of view of theories of symbolic behavior, persuasion is a process in which the individual creates his meaning through detecting, identifying, and interpreting the stimuli he receives and which is integrated into and hence influences his perceptual framework."[14]

But verbal or written discourse is not the only medium that creates a world or a vision for participants. Most of our society's activities are evidence of this kind of perception. We view many events, disciplines, and ideas as dramas of some type which contain all of the necessary elements for the creation of a special world. For example, we speak of a "theater of war," "making a scene," or "working behind the scenes." A similar perception was conveyed by the black youth who was asked his attitude about serving in the Vietnam war. He replied, "Man, they ain't going to put me in that movie, even if they make me the star!"[15]

In politics, we see the existence of a dramatic world that functions apart from the actual administrative function of government. One writer has argued that Lyndon Johnson chose not to run for a second term solely because his performance was too widely jeered, although he was adequately performing his duties.[16] In music, too, we see rhetorical visions or worlds being created. Jim Morrison of The Doors explained the process of a concert in terms that are surprisingly rhetorical: "When I sing my songs in public, that's a dramatic act, but not just acting as in theatre, but a social act, real action. A Doors concert is a public meeting called by us for a special kind of dramatic discussion and entertainment. We make concerts sexual politics. The sex starts with me, then moves out to include the charmed circle of musicians on stage. The music we make goes out to the audience and interacts with them; they go home and interact

with the rest of reality, then I get it all back by interacting with that reality. When we perform, we're participating in the creation of a world, and we celebrate that creation with the audience."[17]

Art, too, creates a particular reality or world. This world is not a mirror or duplicate of a world that exists outside of the painting, but is instead a new and original world. Numerous critics and artists have recognized this function of an art object. Hodin, for example, explains it as "an imaginary, a subconscious, a visionary, a constructed, a personal world. . . ."[18] Lipman suggests that "to be a work means to set up a world,"[19] while Feibleman argues that a "work of art leads a life of its own, just as the artist does; it has its own value and validity and engages upon its own adventures."[20] We discover, then, that the function of art is, as Graham explains, to "discover new lands" or new worlds.[21] A natural corollary to this notion is that there is not only one possible world or vision available to us. Instead of seeing only one world, our own, we see it — through art — under multiple forms, and there are as many worlds at our disposal as there are original artists.[22] These worlds, of course, differ widely from each other, and there is no assurance that any one image of the world is truer than other images.

How does a work of nonrepresentational art create a world? The process begins, of course, with the artist. We may tend to assume that the reality created by the painting is the conscious representation of some idea which the artist holds and which is then realized on canvas. Examinations into the creative processes of artists have revealed, however, that the opposite is true. Art does not give name to preexisting objects or concepts as much as ideas are suggested or imposed by works of art. Picasso explained the process in this way: "One simply paints — one doesn't paste one's ideas on a painting. . . . Certainly, if the painter has ideas, they come out of how he paints things."[23] Perhaps the artist John Graham explained this notion best when he defined painting as "the Space articulating"[24] — in other words, the painting itself communicating rather than simply reflecting a thought its creator wished to communicate. Thus, we see the same process operating with visual symbols that Bormann and others suggested was a function of verbal language — the creation of a particular world or reality for those who participate in the symbolic reality. Art orders experience in a particular way through lines, colors, textures, and materials to create a new name for experience and, thus, a new reality.

Step 2: The Audience Vitalizes the Special Reality

Just as the ultimate purpose of verbal communication is audience response, so nonrepresentational art relies on an audience. The audience enables a particular reality to be created by the work of art.

Although we have seemed to suggest thus far that the work of art creates a special world with no external aid except from the artist, this is not the case. The spectator must receive whatever impress the work of art makes upon him or her in the first step, but the process does not end here. The perceiver next must actively work on the art object, vitalizing it by setting off its aesthetic potential to help it create its reality. Dewey explains this process: "The *product* of art — temple, painting, statue, poem — is not the *work* of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties."[25] Huyghe's description of the process is more poetic; he notes that a painting tosses a "sumptuous gift at our feet; it is up to us to bend down and take it, and to breathe our life into it. Painting does not explain: it *is*, and shows what it is; it is up to us to experience it. . . ."[26] What we find, then, is that a nonrepresentational painting creates its own special world or reality, but this creation is possible only through the assistance of the audience or the perceiver. That is, the painting lives only through the individual who is looking at it.

The meaning of an art object, thus, is not inherent in the work itself. Rather, it grows out of social interaction that takes place between the artist and the viewer by means of the created work. The result is communication between the artist and the viewer or an aesthetic experience. For as the artist and the viewer cooperate, a community of action is established in which both the artist and the viewer respond in similar ways to the visual symbols. These symbols then take on a common meaning in the community in which the artist and viewer cooperate and reside.

The essential role of the audience in the aesthetic experience not only allows for the development of meaning in a painting and concomitant communication between artist and audience, but it also endows an art object with the potential to be experienced in various ways by various individuals and to be enjoyed repeatedly by the same person. Because each individual perceiver will view the art object from a different background of experience and a different perspective, the art object will create a reality that is different for each perceiver. Thus, a work of art cannot have the same meanings for all people. Rather, each viewer cooperates in his or her own way with the artist to create a particular community of meaning. And because of this capacity of the art object to interact with the individual framework of the viewer, he or she can enjoy repeatedly one art object and become involved in an aesthetic experience as a result of that one object. For each time that a person views a painting, his or her perspectives and values will differ to some extent. With each fresh new framework that is brought by the individual to the art object, a different reality or world and, thus, a new aesthetic experience will result.

At this point some are certain to assert that the artist does not need an outside or external audience, that communication need not come into this process at all. The argument might be presented that an artist may not want to show a painting to anyone, but rather allow it to serve simply as a focus for his or her personal images. But this view ignores the fact that the artist is his or her own audience. And because a painting has a life of its own apart from the artist, the artist is subject to the same processes of communication and interaction with the work as is the typical spectator. As Kaelin explains, "the artist learns as much from his work as does his audience. The artist is his first appreciator, . . . the first one surprised to discover 'his' idea."[27] Thus we see that the audience is crucial in the creation of a particular reality by a work of art, whether this audience is an outside viewer or the artist.

Step 3: Identification Is Created Between Artist and Viewer

What is left is to explain why some viewers succeed in vitalizing the vision offered by a work of art and thus enter an aesthetic experience and why others do not. Some individuals are able to enjoy, appreciate, and enter into the vision, but to others, as Jung explains, there "is no welcome, no visible accord in the cosmos created by the artist."[28] Or as Klee explained, the "modern work of art . . . is a sym-

bol. The symbol, by its nature, is only intelligible to the initiated. . . ."[29] But what accounts for the initiation of some and not others?

The process of viewing and experiencing a work of nonrepresentational art is naturally a divisive one. The art object presents a world that is puzzling, foreign, and bewildering to the viewer — a world that is novel and different from that which he or she has accepted previously and assumed to be true. This new world offered by the art object is, in a sense, a type of protest against these established visions of the world. Thus, the viewer is forced to confront two conflicting or different visions of the world, and the conflict must be resolved. The presentation of the new vision provides the starting point for communication between human beings because it demands that a particular vision be subjected to reconsideration, revision, and adaptation, communication occurs.

The process by which the division between the artist and the viewer (or the artist and the art object) is resolved is identification. As Fry explains, "If we take an analogy from the wireless — the artist is the transmitter, the work of art the medium and the spectator the receiver. Now for the message to come through, the receiver must be more or less in tune with the transmitter."[30] Division remains unresolved only when the audience is unable to find a point of identification that is sufficiently persuasive to entice it into the reality of the work. And individuals are persuaded to enter the vision only insofar as the artist talks their language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, and idea.[31]

Thus, we have in nonrepresentational art a process that is familiar to communication theorists. The artist makes choices on the basis of what will be most persuasive to the audience or what will induce the audience to an acceptance of a particular vision of the world. The world view of the artist can be expressed in various ways, but some of the choices made by the artist will be more effective than others in persuading viewers to recognize a new vision or reality.

The artist must choose from among canvases which are small or large and which can be made of linen or cotton. Paints may be organic or synthetic, and they may be applied with brushes of varying thicknesses, a palette knife, a finger, or a tube. The artist also is confronted with choices as to method — whether tonal painting, contrasted color painting, or painting a preliminary charcoal sketch. The particular elements chosen by the artist to express reality will determine how the viewer will perceive that reality and be persuaded by it. If a work of art does not provide means of identification for the viewer with the artist and a special reality, then the artist's choices have been inappropriate for the audience, have assumed values or capabilities in the viewer that were not there, or have been directed at another audience.

Thus, some degree of identification with the artist is a part of any aesthetic response to a work of nonrepresentational art. At the most basic level, the artist and the viewer must hold some similar notions about the function of art, what is quality in art, and what is pleasing in art. Both must acknowledge the validity of nonrepresentational art and share some awareness of the artistic choices available to the artist from which the work was formed.

But there are some viewers whose identification with the artist's world is much greater, who enter fully into the vision of a world. These viewers we call connoisseurs; they are perhaps the ideal audience for the artist and result from a variety of factors such as acquaintance with the general style of the work, cultural background, and knowledge of art. In other words, the viewer, too, makes choices that will influence the degree to which he or she can participate in the vision of a work of art. The process of identification, then, allows us to discover the aesthetic experience less in terms of minds mysteriously attuned to one another than in terms of people ready to appreciate each other's choice of alternatives.[32]

Implications of the Model

The process that is involved in the aesthetic response to nonrepresentational art, we have seen, can be described in rhetorical terms. The viewer confronts a work which offers a particular view of reality, and the viewer vitalizes that reality by identifying with the artist's choices. This process and its accompanying definition of art as conscious production to evoke a response have implications for art educators, artists, and baffled viewers.

Museum directors and art historians traditionally have emphasized the learning of names and dates of works and artists as the proper method for studying art. Although some degree of familiarity with particular works, styles, and schools assists in the understanding of nonrepresentational art, it does not guarantee that the viewer will be equipped with the tools necessary to respond aesthetically to an unfamiliar work of art. What is needed, according to our model, are methods of education about art that stress ways of seeing and a basic knowledge of the variety of choices available to artists. These can be implemented through educational supplements to exhibitions that explain how works — such as intaglio prints — are produced, the artist's view of his or her work, or perhaps — more generally — explanations of various theories about art. Art educators also need to encourage visitors to their galleries to talk about their own responses to works of art, helping them to understand the choices they are making in their responses, rather than simply smiling at their ignorance as it surfaces in expressions of bewilderment.

This theory, too, provides a basic framework in which the artist can function. The framework that results from this model can be summarized best in one question that an artist might want to consider as he or she works: How can I expedite the vision that is emerging in terms of the materials, techniques, and compostion I use so that the audience identifies with the vision? With this focus, the artist is forced to think of art in terms of an audience (even if it is only him or herself), to make deliberate choices as to how to expedite a vision, and to allow the work to emerge according to its own rules rather than according to any external dictates of a school, style, or trend. This means, too, that standards by which art is judged remain flexible and evolve as art changes, and these standards will differ from work to work. Rather than attempting to judge *all* art according to imitation or formalist standards, it must be judged according to the rules that are operating in the particular reality created by the work. This is not to say that there are not certain standards of competence, technical skill, or originality that are expected from all works of art and all serious artists. But the skills necessary to expedite a particular vision will vary from work to work, and what a critic demands in one work may not be necessary in another if the vision asks the viewer to enter a very different reality.

We can offer the untrained viewer some understanding about nonrepresentational art as a result of this model. Our interaction with symbols — including the visual symbols of nonrepresentational art — helps us understand ourselves and our society. Thus, if individuals are puzzled by works of

art and cannot even recognize them as art perhaps, they should look at their own choices regarding art and how these choices affect their attitudes toward art. For example, they might ask why they have decided that one type of art is good and another bad, they might think about why they choose not to study art, and they might want to investigate their reasons for visiting galleries to view art. Choices such as these affect how they respond aesthetically to art, and if viewers seek a fuller aesthetic experience with nonrepresentational art, they may want to examine choices made about art that might be obstacles to this experience.

We do not pretend that this application of rhetoric to art represents a definitive and complete theory of how an aesthetic response results from nonrepresentational art. Rather, we see it as a beginning step that hopefully will encourage theorists and scholars — whether they study and work in visual or verbal modes — to share visions as they work toward a full understanding of this process.

Footnotes

1. By nonrepresentationl art we mean works of art which do not depict something in the "real" world — i.e., abstract, nonobjective, or nonfigurative art.
2. Wilfred Scawen Blunt, "An outraged public confronts modern art," in *The Nature of Art*, ed. John Gassner and Sidney Thomas. New York: Crown, 1964, p. 32.
3. Kenneth Burke, *Language as symbolic action: essays on life, literature, and method.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1966, p. 28.
4. Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and social order*. New York: Bedminster Press, 1962, p. 56.
5. Eugene F. Kaelin, *Art and existence: A phenomenological aesthetics*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970, p. 35.
6. Douglas Ehninger, ed., *Contemporary rhetoric: A reader's coursebook.* Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1972, p. 3.
7. For a more comprehensive discussion of these theories, see Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and philosophy of art criticism.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960, pp. 109-90 and Arnold Berleant, *The aesthetic field: A phenomenology of aesthetic experience.* Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1970, pp. 24-90.
8. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the philosophy of criticism.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958, pp. 31-32.
9. Beardsley, p. 33.
10. Beardsley, p. 44.
11. Matthew Lipman, *Contemporary aesthetics.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973, p. 136.
12. Lipman, p. 159.
13. Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and rhetorical vision: The rhetorical criticism of social reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, **58** (December 1972), 396-407.
14. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The ontological foundations of rhetorical theory," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, **3** (Spring 1970), 104.
15. Lee Baxandall, ed., *Radical perspectives in the arts.* Baltimore: Penguin, 1972, p. 388.
16. Baxandall, p. 376.
17. Baxandall, p. 386.
18. J. P. Hodin, *Modern art and the modern mind.* Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972, p. 214.
19. Lipman, p. 370.
20. James K. Feibleman, *Aesthetics: A study of the fine arts in theory and practice.* New York: Humanities Press, 1968, p. 6.
21. John Graham, *System and dialectics of art.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971, p. 123.
22. Rene Huyghe, *Ideas and images in world art: Dialogue with the visible.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1959, p. 257.
23. Dore Ashton, *Picasso on art: A selection of views.* New York: Viking Press, 1972, p. 17.
24. Graham, p. 103.
25. John Dewey, *Art as experience.* New York: Capricorn, 1958, p. 214.
26. Huyghe, p. 244.
27. Kaelin, p. 38.
28. Carl G. Jung, *Man and his symbols.* New York: Dell, 1968, p. 287.
29. Gassner and Thomas, p. 506.
30. Roger Fry, *Last lectures.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1939, p. 15.
31. This is Burke's notion of identification. See Kenneth Burke, *A rhetoric of motives.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1950, pp. 45-46.
32. E. H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a hobby horse and other essays on the theory of art.* London: Phaidon, 1963, p. 63.

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