

## **Lecture delivered at the Royal Art Society, late 1978**

### **Section 1**

The sun shines upon earth with a white light.

All the colours that you you, as a human, can see, are part of that light.

All the things you see are perceived as having “identity colours”, which, perversely, are the colours they reject and reflect from their surfaces.

The colour of an object is major evidence in establishing identification.

You can't fool a child, who knows the nature of things, to accept a picture of a green cow eating red grass. Green apples, of course, may ripen into red ones, but red grass is contrary to reason.

Likewise, sunset shining into your room may invest everything with a lively red glow, but you have confidence that you will wake next day to see the normal colour of things restored.

Without going into detail, we may understand that aspects of the behaviour of light become the property of art. We paint the way light falls on objects:

Reflection of light from rounded bodies

Diffraction, the breaking up of light through textural fogs or clouds to produce rainbows; a useful adjunct to angel paintings.

Turbid media, the cloudy interference with the passage of light through water vapour, smoke or such liquid as a teaspoon of milk in a glass of water.

Look with the light into the liquid, and you see the interference throwing back blue influences. Look through the liquid at the light, and only reds and oranges meet the eye.

The assumption that things were constant in colour governed painting of the 12th century Italian Primitives. At this time Western Art was just getting up steam again after the decline it had been suffering since the fall of Roman Art, around the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., largely due to the iconoclastic activities of early Christian zealots. The rebirth of European art, which began to spread outside the confines of the monasteries and monastic scriptoria, was now due to the Church deciding to use Art as a weapon to woo men's souls. Saints were the “in” subject-matter. And even today, a figure-painter finds a fair bit of work in depicting saints. Likewise the sculptor of graven images set about modeling the figures of saints for churches.

### **Section II Development of Understanding of Light and Shade**

The history of Italian Art from Giotto to Raphael is of a development of Realist representation from its parent discipline of flat wall mural painting, figures whose outlines were filled in with washes of their identifying colour.

One can imagine the conflict that may have occurred between a parent's age-old concept of line-pattern decoration with a rebellious child saying: “But Papa! It's no good just putting a faint shadow on the ladies faces. See! It goes all the way down their gowns and along the floor!”

“Child! Do you want to ruin the Virgin's lovely blue gown?”

But truth prevailed, and shadows dull as dirt dimmed the richest mural for 500 years or longer.

In the “Madonna on the Rocks”, Leonardo, a diligent and conscientious worker, established the rights of shadows. His discoveries added to the problems overburdening Raphael (as may seen in the Vatican Lemettes) who laid down

and died at an early age. But Leonardo's work was a clear "go-ahead" signal to Caravaggio, who went on to compose pictures whose figures stood as if neatly crammed into a crateful of dark, with the planks pulled off one end to admit a controlled gust of light. (See "St Paul on the Road to Damascus", "The Good Samaritan", both night subjects.)

In painting, colour was suffering a decline, dark earths and stains were dominating.

Now we will skip the whole of the Venetian school to get the final product, Tiepolo, who died in 1770 while Captain Cook was sailing around our coast. Tiepolo, more than a century after Titian, had his baggage packed with every trick and facet of Art, excepting only economy and austerity. But his work provides a handbook of what was then known. He demonstrated clearly all the technical know-how of the Renaissance, but has lost the dignity and colour delicacy of the Primitives, which culminated in Piero della Francesca. It is to Tiepolo we owe the telescoping and association of techniques into a synthesis – a sensing of the dynamic principles underlying things seen.

### **Section III The Royal Art Society & Present-day Representational Art**

When I joined the Royal Art Society classes in 1920, I did so to add free-hand decoration to my Technical Drawing vocabulary. I did not know anything about the hopes, fears, and stinking bad feeling which existed between sections of the Art World.

About twenty years previously, Julian Ashton, who had been teaching at the R.A.S. School, stole all the students and set up business himself, as the Sydney Art School.

Signor D'atillo Rubbo, being on hand was enlisted to carry on the R.A.S. School. Paradoxically, instead of being grateful to Ashton for creating a vacancy for him to fill, Rubbo began a life-long hatred of Ashton.

I remember a young male model being instructed by Rubbo: "When you go along to the Sydney Art School, you tell Ashton that Rubbo will one day take as much pleasure in sticking a knife into him as he would into a pig!"

Loyalty to this state of affairs prevented association between the pupils of the two schools. The students of "Watty", J.S. Watkins, were on better terms with both schools.

Ashton taught traditional academic techniques. The Royal Art Society, led by Rubbo, were sympathetic towards the new movement supporting Cezanne's work. Julian Ashton's son, Howard, was art critic for the Sun newspaper. He vilified Wakelin, Roy de Maistre and Grace Cossington-Smith for their support of this perversity, wrote of Wakelin's impertinence in thrusting the ideas of the son of a pork butcher before the Australian public.

Nonetheless, in 1922 Wakelin was awarded the N.S.W. Government Travelling Scholarship, which had lapsed since Lambert won it in 1900.

In 1922, Rayner Hoff opened a sculpture school in the East Sydney Tech. College. I joined the sculpture class one day a week. It was mainly my work in this subject that won me the 1925 Travelling Scholarship.

On my return in 1927, it secured me employment with George Lambert, to assist with the Henry Lawson Memorial for the Domain, and with the Dead Soldier for

St Mary's Cathedral. My early years, until Lambert's death in 1930 were cushioned by this employment.

I found Lambert in sympathy with the notion I had developed in Europe to explore painting as if I were a pilgrim traversing the years, visiting Giotto (1266-1337), Piero della Francesca ( -1492), edging my way carefully through the Renaissance, discovering the nature of pre-Raphaelite draughtmanship, even through that great period of synthesis which taught us to see in groups and associations, dropping in on people like Caravaggio. You have probably paid your respects to all the well-known lads of art, but I was chasing specials: those who had introduced a new principle for dealing with the recurring intricacies of the behaviour of light colliding with objects.

While in London, I did not go to the Slade School, nor meet Tonks or Orpen. But after working along Slade School lines in Sydney, I produced a diagram of a rationalization of Degas' shading techniques. This, with a letter, I sent to D'Auvergne Boxall who was then studying at the Slade, to pass on to Tonks, hoping for his blessing on my rationalization. Tonks replied that my idea was sound, but I would find students too lazy to bother with it!

But whenever I get a reasonably captive audience, I try out a questionnaire. The early portraitist had trouble illuminating the faces of their sitters, they did not understand the reflection of light from a curved solid.

I ask for the student to explain how the phases of the Moon come about. I am sure that a gathering like this would argue out the correct answer in time. And it certainly took time for the early Dutch, Flemish and German artists to learn to control light on portraits.

(Fortunately, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fashion was not for trousers but for hose, which allowed the thighs and calves of male sitters to offer themselves continually as models of curved surfaces in relation to light.)

From being at first carefully copied, ovoid heads, firm rounded necks and the whole body's divine design became, over two centuries, so much practiced patterns that one could reasonably go on with work, model or no model, using recipes memorized from Raphael.

Caravaggio's solid, stolid block of shadow need not be used. Rubens, for instance, let winds wantonly blow away the chaperoning satins on his ladies. Reflected light dismissed gloomy shadows.

More than a hundred years later Tiepolo completed life's voyage amongst mural heavens and sea in pictures keyed up to sunlight, figure whose immaculate limbs were inflated to all tastes and practiced recipe hands.

Remember Tiepolo, a master of painting – no problem too difficult. His busy, vulgar beauties were the vehicle which carried the know-how of five centuries. Delacroix (1798 – 1863) carried this know-how forward into the nineteenth century.

The work of Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917), a sensitive enthusiast, was known to Cezanne, Morel, Sisley and Pissaro, who all experimented in the new colour, revolution, all with a different purpose. Only Degas and Cezanne had a complete sense of tone and colour. The spot-by-spot area cover adopted by the others produced an evasion of realism. (Perhaps their mothers fed them too many hundreds-and-thousands sandwiches when they were young.) The work of Degas and Cezanne has a new objective: the use of colour, as well as light and

shade, to show form. The uniqueness of Cezanne's work is that he saw in tonal gradings change of colour only, not the addition of a darkening agent. Cezanne, unlike any major colourist before him, sensed that when lowering tones, nature did not, at a point of fatigue, give up and use burnt umber colourings, raw siennas, or other arbitrary earth pigments which were current in early landscape painting.

His history is one of perseverance, of unrewarding experiment which resulted in a new charter for artists, written in paint. He does not seem to have been loquacious otherwise.

I do not know of any active collaboration between Degas and Cezanne. Degas, a superb draughtsman, applied the new colour to figure work. Degas' figure painting and pastel, keyed to swiftly arrested movement of dancers, dealt in subtle shapes of tones like plumes, half-tones like films, which swiftly related limbs to bodies, but which resulted from careful and long study. But finally, it seems he practiced this as a ever-ready recipe.

Think of them in his box of tricks: ballerina's calf, plump variegated ladies in tubs. But that plume-shaped shadow on the lower limb, the buttock and the thigh is not a carefully hatched plot, it is a shadow –shape inevitable to a limb in this light, a recipe carefully stored in the mind of Degas.

Henry Tonks brought this immediate shadow rendering to the Slade School.

William Orpen as a young student was called "the Boy Kodak" because of his immediacy. Orpen's mental kit held an array of ready-made patterns of tonal rendering, ready-made lights, high tones, half tones, low tones, and to reduce the shadows, high darks, stolen from Degas' ballet dancer's leg.

Tones are not planes, but patterns. Tones, if you can comprehend them, are unit shapes. Not arbitrary dabs put on at visual prompting. They are shapes sought out where you know you will find them.

Orpen stands at the end of a chain of contagious techniques from the overpowering Tiepolo through Degas and Tonks and to Orpen.

But Orpen became ill and died before he reached fifty years of age, his real work uncompleted.

Orpen, some have said, by his speed and immediacy of working, brought his works to completion before time for consideration could be given.

There may be a destiny, but destiny is no master of cultural ceremonies. The line of inheritance through Tiepolo, Degas, Tonks and Orpen, which evolved toward economy and facility of technique failed to link up with Cezanne.

Cezanne needed this technique to draught his unique awareness of colour change in relation to diminishing light. But he could not recognize the facility of Degas, and he did not know Orpen.

The central message of Cezanne is that as a surface turns away from a source of light, a colour change occurs.

The Munsell light-to-dark spectrum chart shows plainly how this affects colour: eg yellow changing through orange to yellow-green.

I have, but with difficulty, attempted in landscape to tackle a broader range than Cezanne.

Those whom Rubbo used to speak of as the 'Holy Trinity of Art', Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, were rough-and-ready draughtsmen.

Cezanne adopted the touch-by-touch build-up (Pointillist?). His touches were square-edged, but not demonstrations of geometrical erudition.

“The basic idea of Cubism....implicit in his teaching – paint to look for cones, spheres and cylinders.”

But his touches were too clumsy, his drawing too devoid of organic structure to follow his own precept.

It is ironic that the hard struggle of Cezanne, as with Van Gogh and Gauguin, was that their elementary art drawing was at a low ebb. But the three did damn well with the shoddy draughting that their teachers had handed them.

It is ironic also that although Cézanne was an old man when Orpen was a child, Cézanne’s work did not impinge itself on Orpen’s development. A reasonable destiny should have ensured that it would. Cézanne should have lived twenty years on into Orpen’s early life.

Do people discuss Cézanne any longer? – Not sufficiently.

Do they know anything of Orpen? Orpen organized tonal geometry. Penicillin came too late for Orpen who was only 46 years old when he died.

### **In Our Art Schools Today There Is No Consciousness Of The Meaning Of Synthesis**

The height of absurdity was reached in the Impressionism cult, when a teacher could say: “Never lift your brush to canvas unless the model is before you.”

If you are to consider yourself as a contributor to this age, you must bring to it a considered synthesis of the essential contributions previous ages have handed down. This is a tall order to which, in totality, I would scarcely ask any student to attempt. But it is a totality which implies an attempted comprehensive study as an obligation. Without this comprehensive study, there can be no honest rejection of matter that has not been studied.

The teacher’s obligation is to present this totality of background to show where each of today’s, and these are many, favoured special studies, fit into a total historical scheme – where into the past and whether into the future.

All must be grateful to the age of faith and unquestioned precedent for the orderly conduct and forward march of the Primitives into the Renaissance.

This is not a knowing how and why of the traditional capability of the past.

Arrogant untrained playboy of art, Picasso, wrote the confession:

‘an obligation lies on prophets, teachers and priests. They must be able to do and show how, all that their predecessors had handed them. They must complete the unfinished weaving together of things’.

Life is not life unless it takes up the unfinished work and brings it to satisfactory sequence using an anatomy of structure, organically and geometrically based.

In the struggle to find a visual device to portray the change of curved solids when affected by a known angle of light, the visual assessment may be anticipated by a tone-angle light scale which portrays surface change in light-related solids in protractor degrees, or if measured by chemical sensitivity to light, by a time-exposure scale.

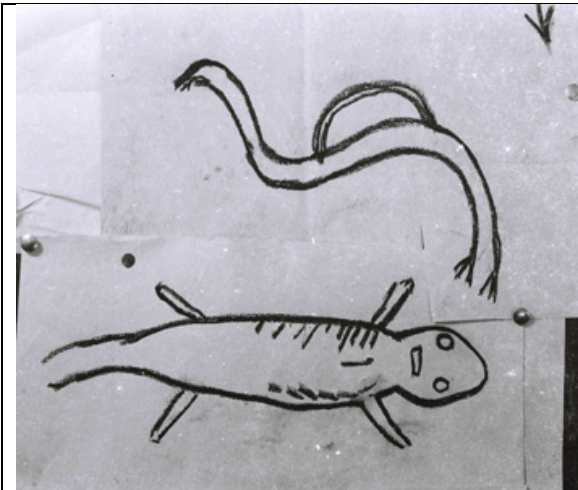
Positive shadow shape characteristics identify the basic geometry of a solid form.

A solid form retains its identity, but a shadow may, by change of light source, distort, enhance, or intensify the presentation of a characteristic visual identity.

Symbolic synthesis is the vernacular of drawing. Is accuracy then, the first goal of drawing?

Without risking a curb to my poetry by reference to a textbook, I would say:  
The tortuous course of evolution moulded us in expedient obedience to functional efficiency; expedience turned our fins into paws, our float-bladders into lungs and the intimate water of our jellyfish ancestors to the lymph system which parallels our blood circulation.  
It is doubtful whether even an angel's ear is a thing of beauty.

*[Murch then presented a number of slides and spoke to them. There were approximately 70 slides and some films were presented. Following is one example; Murch was speaking to the film that he shot in Central Australia 1933-34:]*



*Drawings by the old man and young man to which Arthur refers*

The first drawing was Nature's, the wind and water ripple, footprints in the sand. Dawn man, speaking but a few words, hunting down his food could read the day's menu. It is easy to imagine him teaching his children a creature's identity by finger-made tracks. When we asked an old man of Mt Liebig, Central Australia in 193 to draw an emu, he drew its footprints. He was of the tribe quite unused to realist drawings. His creatures were identified by geometrical totemic symbols. So here we have stone age man about to make his first representational drawings. He knows now that it is the bird we want. He draws the upper outline of the bird, a side view. The key line of the identification of the quarry against the sky. This took many minutes. He was fatigued. His fellow huntsmen out of camera range tell him: "Draw his feet". He pins them on the end of the tail and is well applauded. The under-side of the bird needs attention. He thickens it but does not seem aware that an under-side outline could be used..... I remember George Lambert's advice on beginning a portrait, 'Draw the top silhouette of the head carefully, it is the key to the likeness. Watch this lad draw. He is no novice. Fourteen years old, from 400 miles south-west near the Petermann Ranges. He has never seen white man before, nor white-man's animals. But he knows his lizards.