

STUDYING MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART
IN THE JUNIOR CYCLE:
PROBLEMS AND PREJUDICES

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on modern and contemporary art in education. Their importance within the art, craft and design curriculum is considered with reference to relevant literature and research. Possible problems faced by pupils and teachers when dealing with modern and contemporary art are outlined and suggestions for overcoming these problems are proffered throughout the chapters and in the conclusion.

An introduction outlining the place of support studies in the Junior Cert and the place of the history of modern art and contemporary art studies within support studies is followed by a review of the relevant literature in the first chapter.

Chapter two deals with the current state of art history in the Junior Cert examining the syllabus and how it is and can be taught. This is followed by a rationale proposing reasons why junior cycle students should learn about modern and contemporary art and citing reasons for the possible reluctance of some teachers to teach these subjects.

In chapter four I list my own expectations of the reactions and responses of junior cycle students to modern and contemporary art and propose methods of research to test these expectations. Chapter six provides an analysis of the research, draws possible lessons from it and concludes the dissertation with observations gleaned from the studies carried out within it.

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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
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Introduction

Support Studies and Modern Art

“The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.”

John Dewey¹

In recent years, art education in schools has developed, from being a child centred activity with expression as its motive force, into a teachable, learnable and assessable subject. Curricula have been formulated and rationalised to enable teachers to present planned schemes of work to their pupils. These schemes are comprised of lessons incorporating technical, exploratory/research, historical and wider artistic learning.

The Junior Cert Art, Craft and design curriculum is a prime example of this all round approach to structured art education. The range and types of learning that today's art, craft and design syllabus covers are so wide, however, that it is impossible for all aspects to be given more than cursory attention during the six years of secondary school and most art teachers will concentrate on a number of areas within the prescribed curriculum. Remaining areas will merely be given lip service or they will be ignored until the following year (or all

together). The thinking behind this would be that a few selected options from the course covered and explored in depth will benefit pupils more than summary visits to all or as much as possible of the curriculum. It might, therefore, be beneficial for pupils to have a firm grounding in certain aspects of history of art.

One skill within art, craft and design can contain learning and methods which cross over into others. If we take printmaking as an example the preparatory studies which are carried out before commencing with cutting a block and printing an edition will involve drawing and planning. These two skills are used in a host of other art craft and design options. Similarly, history of art and support studies can be used across options depending upon the learning objectives of the lessons.

Art historical support studies are used to compound ideas, introduce or demonstrate techniques or art elements and to lend a historical or cultural background to art lessons. As well as enabling pupils to engage more closely with the subject and question or explore its ideas and concerns they gain a deeper understanding, and respect for art history and, perhaps, an eagerness to explore aspects and areas not dealt with in class.

This dissertation focuses on modern and contemporary art in education. Their importance within the art, craft and design curriculum is considered with reference to relevant literature and research. Possible problems faced by pupils and teachers when dealing with modern and contemporary art are outlined and suggestions for overcoming these problems are proffered throughout the chapters and in the conclusion.

CHAPTER I

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN EDUCATION:

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Art Learning and Support Studies.

When reading about this subject, certain texts are useful in giving a general introduction to art learning and history of art teaching. They outline the mental processes involved in artistic education and point towards the importance of critical studies of art history. Others provide arguments for and against the use of modern and contemporary art in education.

The chapter entitled "How Artistic Learning occurs" in Elliot W. Eisners book, *Educating Artistic vision* concentrates on the combination of different activities involved in art learning: "Artistic learning deals with the development of abilities to create art forms; it deals with the development of powers of aesthetic perception, and it deals with the ability to understand art as a cultural phenomenon;- Productive, Critical, and Cultural."² The study of artworks, past and present, has to be crucial to both the critical and cultural abilities, cited by Eisner. In developing a critical ability, pupils must become aesthetically aware and conscious of their own

abilities and potentials. they must learn to evaluate their own work as well as the work of artists and other pupils thus placing themselves within a creative context and working and developing within that context. The cultural aspect to artistic learning occurs within studies of political, economic and social backgrounds to artists and their work. This should be related to and put in context with students' cultural backgrounds.

A Cautionary Argument

It is clear from his article, "Art History in the Classroom: a Plea for Caution"³ that Brandon Taylor does not believe that art history, especially that of the modern period, has either relevance or meaning for younger pupils. In referring to a major study made by Parsons, Johnston and Durham in the United States⁴ in which experiments were carried out to ascertain topics in art education which contained child developmental levels, Taylor points out that the artworks which were used in the experiments consisted of "canonical works of the modern tradition". This, he says, is an assumption on the parts of Parsons, Johnston and Durham, firstly, of the 'goodness' of 'high art' and, secondly, of the 'goodness' of modernity. While acknowledging the importance of the debate over what types of images are to be used in the classroom and how they are to be used, Taylor argues that some newer concerns in within art history should and will herald

a rethink by art historians on how artworks are used in the classroom. He says that art history can no longer be understood only on the basis the "emotional system" of the artist, it must include an understanding of the "social, economical and ideological interchange of society as a whole." In other words, it is not enough to know why an artist made the works he made, but one must also be aware of the social context in which they were created, the economic climate of the artist's country, and dominant ideologies of the time. These, and their relationship to the viewer's own situation, must be of paramount importance in the understanding and appreciation of artworks. The case of modern art is central to his argument.

Art teachers will be aware that modern art - the term is at once contentious and contested - came into being in circumstances which are both extraordinary but also historically specific. Denoting nothing so simple as a stylistic 'development', modernity in painting and sculpture announced itself sometime in the course of the nineteenth century, partly as a symptom of shifting class identifications, partly as a vogue for contemporaneity, partly as a response to the changing inner life of the individual under conditions of developing capitalism.⁵

It is not clear what age group Taylor is dealing with in this article. It is, of course, futile to pin down specific ages when talking about 'cognitive developmental' studies of art appreciation as there will always be variations on the norm. If one chooses to interpret ambiguous terms like 'the child' or 'the young adult' as those under or over twelve years old respectively then it is difficult to argue with Taylor when he says "... the meaning of modernism is a complex but

also a controversial topic, of high relevance, one would think, to the education of the young adult - but scarcely suitable for the younger child." With the threat of a possible abolition of history as a compulsory subject in Irish secondary schools after first year, art history may be the only brush with past cultures that many pupils get in the future. The lessons to be learned from studies of artists lives and their environments together with the events and climates that were instrumental in influencing their work could prove to be valuable introductions to historical areas which would otherwise go uncharted. As to the argument of relevancy, most young people like to collect facts and the more interesting the facts the better.

In a later paragraph and on another point - that of the child's intolerance for pictorial distortion in modern expressive images - he cites findings from studies of childhood art appreciation. These show that "... before the age of perhaps 12 or 13 - I tread carefully here for fear of simplification - a typical response to the situation is simply that all distortions are bad." They go on to note that children between the ages of 5 and 15 will express varying misgivings from unqualified dismissal as "bad" or "amateur" to more discriminating responses which accept some distortions (the buckled fingers in Picasso's Weeping Woman (1932)) but not others (both eyes positioned on the same side of the face.) Here there seems to be more

ambiguity surrounding this argument where age is concerned, and although one has come up against comments and reactions similar to the above Taylor is not persuasive enough precisely because of this ambiguity. The fact that some acceptance was expressed should indicate possible ground on which to build. Teachers could take this initial uncertainty in pupils in their early teens and point to the artists reasons for distorting the features and shapes in the painting. This lesson could lead into technical studies of drawing distorted reflections in uneven surfaces for example, or discussion and exploration of how different moods distort what we perceive - even visually.

One of the most useful conceptions of artistic learning has been developed by Gestalt psychologists, especially by Rudolf Arnheim.⁶ The Gestalt theory of perceptual development argues that as people mature their ability to discriminate among the qualities that constitute the environment increase. Thus, an adult, according to this theory, is able to perceive qualities and relationships between qualities that are much more complex and subtle than those that most children perceive. This process of being able to perceive, compare, and contrast qualities is what gestalt psychologists call perceptual differentiation. One must deduce from this theory that there is a gradual development involved where the individual

progresses from childhood through adolescence gaining greater understanding as they grow.

Given the complex nature of modern art and taking Brandon Taylor's warnings into account the Gestalt Theory of perceptual differentiation indicates that it is possible for pupils to form judgements and opinions on even the most difficult aspects of non-representational art and for the teacher to offer some answers to its puzzles. If the class is a mixed ability group there will be a variety of reactions and opinions playing off each other and informing the teacher who in turn can build on what pupils already know. This can be done only if the pupils were not allowed to retain a completely negative view of this art as a result of their first encounter with it.

Some of the difficulties faced by teachers when explaining why artists made abstract art are explored by Rudolf Arnheim when he asks "what is Art for?"⁷ In answering he tells us that in the past, the function of art was "to make the Gods present and visible to show and preserve the sight of important or beautiful things or events or persons - to transmit strong feelings from one person to another, or to decorate the human environment."

In the past art was representational; it had subject matter. The difficulty arises in comprehension of art that does not represent.

Arnheim says that abstract art is three things

- The result of the complete abolition of subject matter,
- A kind of Freudian Wish fulfilment - creating a world which can be manipulated
- A direct way of facing life.

The first point is a basic description of abstract art which states what must be obvious to pupils but does not offer any explanations as to why it is made or what function it serves. In other words - if subject matter is not supposed to count then what is art for ?

The second explanation can be interpreted thus: The artist seeks escape from the ordinary physical and material world and, in creating a new world for him/herself, chooses to reject the old and present reality and invent a new one. In other words we, the viewers, are invited to change our perceptions by artists who profess to view the world in an alternative way - a way formulated by them for the enrichment of their minds and ours. It is up to pupils whether they accept this explanation or not.

The third can be taken to mean that in making abstract art the artist is engaging with life honestly and without the need for embellishment or hyperbole. His or her art holds a mirror up to a

complex mechanised existence which can not be represented by
idealised portrait or landscape.

CHAPTER II

A LOOK AT THE PRESENT STATE OF
HISTORY OF ART IN THE JUNIOR CYCLE

The Syllabus

A study of the junior cert curriculum for art, craft and design reveals that prescribed areas of study within art history include “examples from past and present, world-wide as well as local Irish or European work.”

Given this expansive field of reference teachers must make choices with their pupils finding areas, artists or art movements which would serve as suitable support studies for the individual student’s work. This may be the pupils first major study of history of art as their first two years in the art, craft and design classes were spent learning practical skills in various art disciplines or options with support studies on an ad hoc basis.

The syllabus introduction provides a rationale for the study of art, craft and design saying that it enables “the person ... to understand and appreciate the work of others.” A further section in the introduction states that “Support Studies involve History, Critical

Appraisal, Evaluation, Appreciation, Science, Technology and correct working vocabulary.”

So far the prescription is broad and general. In fact it is so broad that one might feel lost for a starting point were it not for the fact that each lesson in each area of the course begets its own support studies and the nature of these depends on how the teacher chooses to teach the lesson. Using Alexander Calder as a support study for making mobile or kinetic art, for example, would provide an introduction to the inventor of the mobile sculpture, instruction on how to construct a mobile and could perhaps lead into a study of abstraction.

The next relevant reference in the junior cert syllabus comes in the *Course Objectives* where it states in section (xii)

[The Art, Craft and Design course develops the student's ability to:] develop an awareness of the historical, social and economic role and value of art, craft and design and aspects of contemporary culture and mass-media.

The Course Structure gives the most in-depth definition of support studies but goes no further to tighten the parameters than previous references. Support studies for drawing are more specific in suggesting “Durer, Japanese brush drawings, and ink drawings of Van Gogh” which any art teacher worth their salt should not need to be reminded of. Support studies for painting suggest a range of references from ancient Egypt to “modern American and Irish work”

and also advises viewing “real paintings” in the gallery environment and becoming familiar with the relevant sections of public libraries.

How the Syllabus is Taught

Some teachers spend so long on teaching pre-modern art history in the senior cycle, that by the time they reach exam time in a class group’s final year, pupils may have adequate knowledge of art history but only up to and including post impressionism or, perhaps, early expressionism. This may not be a problem as far as the Leaving Cert exam is concerned as the choice of questions on the Art History and Appreciation paper is wide enough for pupils to avoid the modern art option. This omission would be due, again , to the huge amount of material to be covered within a time period spanning from 3000 BC (Neolithic Ireland) to the present day.

If modern and contemporary art were studied during the junior cycle pupils would at least have some grounding to stand them in good stead for the leaving cert. Teachers can pick up on certain suggested areas of support studies in the junior cert syllabus and build on them with lessons which bring the concerns of modern and contemporary art into the comprehension of junior cycle pupils. For instance, the stipulation of “modern American and Irish work” in the painting section of the syllabus could prompt a comparison between the

painted work of the two countries at a given time leading perhaps to an exploration of national identity in art images and objects.

CHAPTER III

WHY SHOULD JUNIOR CYCLE PUPILS

LEARN ABOUT MODERN OR CONTEMPORARY ART

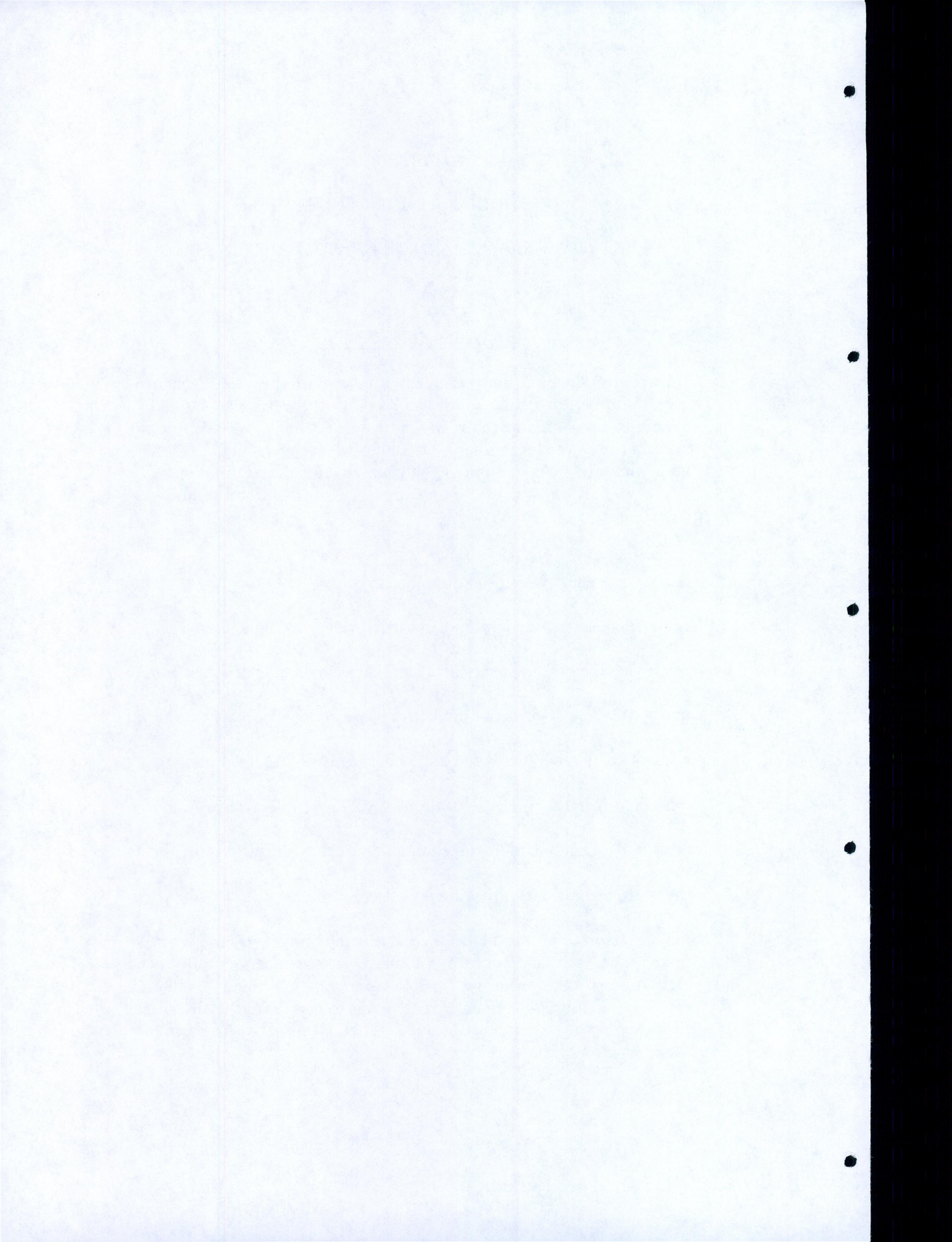
Arguments in Favour

No work of art has been created with such finality that you need contribute nothing to it. You must recreate the work for yourself, it cannot be presented to you ready made. You cannot look at a picture and find it beautiful merely by the passive act of seeing.....there is no picture and no poem unless you yourself enter it and fill it out.

Jacob Bronowski⁸

In her Article "Using Contemporary Art"⁹ Lucy Dawe Lane acknowledges the anxiety and confusion that confronts many people when viewing contemporary art. In the classroom she does not blame teachers who rely on "tried and tested examples of quality, seminal works [with] readable histories." Her argument in favour of using contemporary art in the education of young people stems from the fact that it has not been run through the art historians mill and is therefore open to interpretation by all.

Art objects are purpose-built for receiving meanings by those who use them. Currently artists are making works which actually need audiences to take on an active role in completing them by finding potential meanings in them. Art is made to be treated with critical rigour rather than swallowed whole. What is more, it does not bite back.¹⁰



In the Irish Museum of Modern Art there is an education department and it is a daily occurrence that pupils from the neighbouring schools, come to look at and learn about the work exhibited there. They will either come in with all their pre conceptions and prejudices or they will have had lessons or worksheets or both to prepare them for what is to come. In the museum any completely negative or dismissive reactions are immediately arrested and, by providing pupils with information, vocabulary and some of the artist's ideas and rational, the education officer can guide them towards furnishing mute art objects with diverse and often startlingly sophisticated readings of their own making.

If we say that contemporary art reflects on current cultures and that this a compelling reason for including it in the secondary school curriculum, then what does art from earlier this century reflect? Lane says pupils can feel a "sense of ownership" over contemporary art simply because their experience is that of the late twentieth century and is reflected in works which are products of this time. Because much of the contemporary art that they will encounter will be from around the world and will reflect many diverse cultures, education can come in the form of developing awareness of cultural difference. That cultural difference can be said to exist in art which preceded today's work and in many instances was precursory to it. The leap of

understanding it takes to become aware of meanings, concepts and stories embedded in art from other cultures can be taken to grasp the ideas and backgrounds involved in earlier twentieth century art.

Reluctant Teachers

I would not wish to speak for every case in the country but, too often I have, heard it said many secondary school art teachers skip or ignore the modern art section, or certain parts of it, in senior cycle art history and appreciation classes. I can only surmise as to some of the reasons for this. It may be due to teachers own aesthetic sensibilities - they can not bring themselves to convey enthusiasm for art which leaves them unmoved. The reason is more likely to be due to their lack of understanding of the concepts involved in modern and contemporary art, and their consequent failure to identify the possibilities that a study of some of its ideas can provide for pupils.

A lot of academic teaching is a monologue. If this is carried on in the art room the teacher might assume that pupils could not have any valuable understanding or opinions on such a technically involved and conceptually difficult subject as art. The concept of delving into the convoluted philosophies behind modern art would, therefore, be an anathema to them.

In Pre modern art the ideas are somewhat more self evident, the concerns of the artist are more readily understood. An event, idea or imaginary scenario is illustrated. A person or group of people is depicted. History is told in paintings and ideals were incarnated in sculpture. A formal representation of reality or fantasy mirrors life, raises ethical, moral or political questions or symbolises complex aspects of human existence. There is subject matter; there is recognition.

As art history reaches the twentieth century things become a little more complicated. Many more factors come into play in both the making and the appreciation of modern art. With the advent of abstract art the whole question of subject matter and representation is called into question. This period in the history of art can provide pupils with an arena for developing an awareness of alternative ways of thinking - not just about art but about

When pupils are exposed to images from the innovative artists and movements of this century they may be encouraged by the freedoms espoused and the lack of formal restraint displayed in the work. If, for example, a pupil feels stunted by her own lack of ability in observational drawing but shows strength in a more imaginative or

free-form direction, her work may be encouraged and validated by introducing her to the work of Expressionists or even the abstract expressionists.

It may be argued that this is giving weaker pupils an easy answer and could promote a certain complacency and an unwillingness to learn other ways of working. The danger exists that pupils who find making art difficult because of lack of ability or real interest, will latch onto the more minimal aspects of modern art using the apparent simplicity of image as an excuse for shortcomings in their own work. The recurring chant of "I could do that and it wouldn't be art" is heard once more this time with a twist - "I did that. Why isn't it art?" Pre-empting this would require a comprehensive introduction to the context, philosophy, concepts and physical processes involved in the type of art being dealt with.

Here is where lessons can be learned from visits to studios of practising artists. Until pupils can see for themselves the amount of thought, preparation, planning, trial and error and time spent on the execution of a piece of art they can not really begin to answer this question for themselves.

Junior Cycle Pupils

Pupils in the first, second and third years of secondary education are of an age when they begin to become aware of concepts such as self identity, environment and relationships with others. They begin to question things which they had, heretofore, taken for granted and to look for new ways to express themselves through dress, mannerisms, pastimes and interaction with family and friends. At the risk of appearing philistine, trotting out the same dusty old renaissance and impressionist artists, time and time again as historical support studies, may be counter productive. Twelve to fifteen year-olds want to know what is going on around them now and where they fit into it.

These pupils, as well as those older and younger than them, are bombarded with representational images in the form of photographs, illustration and film every day - indeed they are required to study aspects of the mass media as part of the junior cert course. A great deal of modern and contemporary art is concerned with looking at, analysing, commenting on and, in some cases, debunking both representational images and the mass media. It also questions and comments on those other aspects of contemporary life which concern adolescent pupils.

An example could be *House* by Rachel Whiteread (1983). This piece is not only useful in demonstrating how art is given mass recognition becoming embedded in a collective memory (for it no longer exists in reality) but also for the way it takes and subverts the most mundane, everyday yet personal subject - the home- and literally turns it inside- out. The appeal of this kind of informed subversion to teenage pupils is obvious.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Expectations

“Teaching implies learning just as performance implies an audience. Both are dialogic in form. What is said or made or taught is conditioned by what is replied accepted or understood. Learning is contingent upon a dialogue in which we feel ourselves addressed and answered, especially in the arts.”

Edmund B. Feldman.¹¹

“He couldn’t paint,” he just slapped the paint on,” “that’s not art,” “I could do that” These are all recurring comments made by pupils and the general public alike. They seem to be born out of an unquestioning acceptance of the classic canon (any art produced before, say, 1880) as Art and any thing that came after that as suspect, unintelligible, gratuitously weird - they feel they are being cheated.

What we make of a situation that we encounter depends in large measure not only on the objective characteristics of that situation but on what we bring to the situation in the form of our immediate needs and our general past life history. Teachers should be aware of these frames of reference in their pupils interactions with art works

If a study is made of the mass media with which junior cycle pupils come into contact, it becomes obvious that television, film, photographic and printed graphic images form a huge part of their daily lives. The technology for producing today's images and effects has developed to a stage where a photographic image no longer necessarily reflect an actual event and filmed special effects no longer look like special effects - they look REAL. Half an hour spent viewing MTV can be the television equivalent of digesting everything on a fast food menu with a few fresh fruit thrown in for good measure. One can only imagine a kind of image fatigue setting in which could turn a young person's hunger for new and exciting imagery and ideas into a prematurely jaded pallet. How can people, used to such bombardments of constant sensation find interest in a mere painting - daubs of colour static on a rectangular frame?

We must assume here that the intelligence of most pupils who choose to study art (for it is not compulsory in Irish secondary education) can transcend the superficial aspects of mass produced imagery or at least show some potential for doing so.

If teachers can overcome their pupil's possible lack of interest in art history due to ignorance and a predisposition for junk mass imagery

the next step is to identify what would appeal to them in the world of art imagery. Going back to those cognitive development studies it may be deduced that different levels of complexity will be tolerated and understood by different age groups or even different pupils in the same mixed ability class.

Previous exposure to modern and contemporary art is a key factor in the reaction of the individual pupil to what he or she is shown in an art history lesson. Again this will differ throughout each class depending on pupils parents and families views on art and perhaps on the creative tendencies of the pupil.

A better understanding of early/pre-modern art will not necessarily help the pupil to accept the progressions into the modern period. Those progressions were so turbulent and fragmented that pupils used to the idea of a smooth development from one movement into another - as with renaissance - high renaissance - mannerism for example - may become confused and disillusioned.

Testing the Ideas

I proposed to test these ideas, amongst others, by letting first and second year pupils answer the questions posed for themselves.

First of all I wanted to gauge their reactions to various art images both modern and early. The aims of this exercise would be

- to identify the range of tastes and preferences in a given age group
- to identify as far as possible the frames of reference within that group
- to assess reactions with a view to formulating lessons on modern and contemporary art that would neither go above pupils heads and thus alienate them from the subject nor would they oversimplify and reduce the subject to a tedious rant which would patronise the pupils.

Secondly I wanted to find out the level of their understanding and knowledge of art history.

Methodology (1) First Year Slide Show

To find out how receptive pupils in first year are to abstract and contemporary art I gathered 6 slides of various paintings (illustrations 1 to 6) and showed them to a group of twenty pupils.

The choice of images was made with a view to exposing the pupils to a small amount of different types of modern and contemporary painting with one early work from the Italian renaissance as a contrast. Two of the images are contemporary (1980s), two are from

the '60s, one from the 1920s and one from 1895. I requested them first to look at each image for at least 30 seconds and then I took a show-of-hands poll on who liked and disliked the image. This was followed by a discussion on the merits or otherwise of each painting. I did not provide any information about any of the images leaving the pupils free to comment at will and without judgement. The session was recorded on audio tape.

Methodology (2) Second Year Questionnaire with Reproductions

The Questionnaire consisted of a series of carefully chosen questions which I endeavoured to make simple with an element of interest and personal opinion so that the pupils would not feel they were being tested and would be forthcoming with honest answers. I took care to avoid leading pupils to presupposed answers to questions which were both open and unassuming.

1. Name 2 Artists.
2. Describe their work.
3. What kind of art do you like?
4. What, in your opinion, makes good art good.

Questions 5 and 6 apply to a selection of images (illustrations 7 to 17) which the pupils are invited to view.

5. Which one of these images do you like the most? Say why.

6. Which one do you like least? Say why.

The images were Laser-copied reproductions in A3 size. They were numbered from 1 to 10 and shown to pupils only after they had completed the first four questions.

About the Groups

Both groups of pupils taking part in this research were from an all girls Voluntary Secondary school in the north of Dublin. The school has a large catchment area and has two well equipped art rooms. Art is not compulsory in this school.

CHAPTER V: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Slide Show

When the first image was projected the pupils first reaction was one of contempt for the image and a call for concentration was necessary to get them to give the image some consideration. This resulted in some pupils volunteering more thoughtful observations on this abstract image by the New York Pop artist Jasper Johns. The more positive comments ranged from describing what the painting evoked in the pupils themselves such as "Mediterranean looking - warm and colourful", "there is a rhythm in it" to those identifying recognisable elements in the painting: "Looks like numbers and letters painted over each other." Similar observations were made on the Picasso evocative: "A town... a labyrinth... confusion" and description: "you can see 3d shapes and faces." There were fewer exclamations of derision directed at the Picasso than there were for the Johns image which incurred such reactions as "its just blobs of paint" "it doesn't really express anything" More pupils liked the Picasso than did not.

A division in the group was starting to emerge with those seemingly intolerant of abstract art making their feelings known. When asked to justify their dislike of this type of painting one of the pupils said that she felt cheated by this kind of art. She seemed to be genuinely

affronted by it and was sure that if she had painted it, which she claimed she could, she “would get nothing for it” meaning no money would be paid to her. The subject of the price of art was used in criticism of abstract or minimalist painting. The old chestnut actually came up in the form of “I saw a picture in a gallery in America and it was just like somebody had taken a brush with paint and splashed it once across the page and the price was two thousand dollars...”

After the Picasso came a Raphael. when asked for a show of hands from those who liked the image only three did. The group seemed to grow restless and bored. When asked why she liked the picture one pupil answered weakly “well its the colours”.

I put this image into the selection to see if there would be any difference between the student's reaction to this kind of classical Renaissance art and more modern and contemporary art. Perhaps if it had been placed after the Keith Haring painting, which was next, there would have been a more pronounced reaction. As it was the Raphael coming after the Picasso didn't seem to be much of a jump in style for the group. They identified both paintings as having been created in a past age.

The Keith Haring painting inspired equally voluble reactions for and against the work with one side jumping on literal meanings- "it's a computer bug" "with his head being x-rayed"- and claiming it was "cool" and the other saying it was "Childish... easy... simple" and again "not expressing anything." I have taken this last phrase to mean that, to these pupils, the image was not communicating anything interesting or of any great significance or that the subject matter bore no relevance to their view of art.

The Scream by Edvard Munch was instantly and excitedly recognised. Apparently the image is used in an animation on MTV to promote the station itself. Words like "deadly" and "cool" were shouted out and one pupil claimed that this was her favourite painting. Encouraged by this other pupils began to voice opinions as to what they thought the painting was saying. Pupils who said they had not seen the MTV promotion were enthused by the painting anyway and indeed this image does seem to be a perennial favourite with teenagers.

The next painting got the biggest reaction of all. The image of a figure with a large wide head holding open its mouth in which there is a skull got immediate positive responses from most of the group. "I think that it was painted by a really cool person" was one comment.

Because of the lack of restraint in the painting style this image almost encouraged an unbridled response. Pupils were also prompted by the possibility that they could figure out a satisfactory meaning to the image. "Speak no evil", "displaying the bones inside, and not just the flesh outside", "Showing us what's inside ourselves" were some of the rather predictable suggestions. I eventually lead them to a more appropriate interpretation with a series of questions; What part of the body is the skull in? What does a skull usually represent? What are the functions of that part of the Body? In the end I asked one girl who I knew suffered from asthma what she thought it was about. When the penny dropped there was general approval and pupils seemed more than satisfied that there was a less cliched meaning than the ones they were giving it.

It should be stated at this point that, on more than one occasion, these pupils have expressed a dislike of slide shows. In their opinion art lessons should provide them with time for their own expression. The medium or method was up to the teacher but, more than in any other class, they could take proceedings into their own control. Slide shows involve not only sitting quietly and passively in a darkened room looking at projected images but also being in a situation which is all too similar to their other subject classes where the teacher dictates the pupils every action and, to some extent, reaction.

It became apparent that the more images that were shown and the more pupils reacted to them the more they found to say. Discussion bred discussion and by the end of the session a heated debate on definitions of art and the goodness of abstraction and minimalism was under way. Pupils were arguing and discussing without knowledge or use of art terms and without any knowledge of the real context and concepts behind the art they had just viewed on the screen. Yet the debate seemed to be urgent and relevant to these pupils. These were issues important enough to become genuinely exercised over

The Questionnaire

The second year group taking part in this questionnaire have learned about the renaissance in History so the artists Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo are known to them, although I am sure they were quite aware of these two examples before they came upon them in secondary school. The only other artists which came up in their answers were Van Gogh and Picasso.

The question 'Describe their work?' elicited answers which were indicative both of the students' knowledge of history of art and of their level of art appreciation. The level of art historical knowledge did not extend beyond basic and brief descriptions the best of which

came from those pupils who identified Picasso and Van Gogh in their first answers. "Picasso's Paintings are very unusual. He used bright colours and unusual shapes to show how he saw an object of scene." was one of the more thoughtful answers. Michelangelo is very famous for painting the ceiling of the Cistine Chapel and for creating David" was typical of other answers which merely reiterated facts learned in history lessons and did not attempt to enter into any real discussion of the work itself. Other answers, whether descriptive or factual, indicated a general lack of any real interaction with artworks: "their work is very artistic", "...weird paintings", "it is renaissance work", "Van Gogh's work showed his true feelings", "they worked in Italy", "Picasso did a lot of abstract work and some collages."

Answers to question 3 provided some insight into the range of types of art that pupils were sufficiently aware of to express opinions and preferences. A majority of pupils stated that they liked modern or abstract art: I like some Abstract paintings and sculptures because they allow you to decide for yourself what they are", "I like abstract art because it expresses more and is more interesting and everybody can gave their own interpretation of the artists view." The next largest group of similar answers were those which, although ambiguous in their preferences, indicated an interest in experimentation and a disdain for the ordinary: "I like a real arty

attack...black moody paintings...Themes set of deaths and other worlds...the unusual and weird images of painting", "I like unusual art... paintings of odd or weird subjects."

Some answers were specific in identifying subject matter or elements within the work or types of art: "I like animal paintings and pictures with silhouettes and shadow... I love pottery work", "I like pictures of people and pictures of patterns and designs of shapes... bright colours... I don't like colours that are too dark in a painting."

Others specified realism: "I like paintings which are very life like and look very realistic", "I like paintings of scenes especially if the artist makes them as true to life as possible."

While question 3 looked for an expression of personal preference question 4 was after an opinion on art as something which has been set up to be judged either good or bad. The question was "What, in your opinion makes good art good?" A number of pupils identified use of art elements in their answers: "...use and contrast of colours... use of objects, a background", "Imagination, colour blending, texture", "...interesting shapes and designs and a combination of dark and light colours." Some considered the role or activity of the artist: "hard work and time", " Skill, effort, planning", "People who truly make their art their project and stick by it and don't get annoyed by other

people's views", "good art has to be interesting to look at and have a meaning in it and it should allow you to see things from the artists point of view", "I think art is good when an artist puts feeling into his/her project especially when it shows in their work."

Others considered the viewer: "...when a person looking at the painting has to look closer and every time they do they see something different, something new that wasn't there before", "...that people know what it is about and are able to recognise what the artist is feeling."

Questions 5 and 6 were set in order to gauge pupils preferences and tastes and how they articulate and justify these views. As the question read "Which of these images do you like the most?" and not "which one of these images" pupils often expressed more than one preference. The most popular image was Enzo Cucchi's Painting of the Precious Fires. In second place came Metamorphosis of Narcissus by Salvador Dali. Three pupils each liked Renoir's Gabriele and Jean and Chagall's Self Portrait with Seven Fingers and Ross Bleckner's Examined Life and Munch's The Scream had two votes each.

The image which met with the most derision was the Rothko with ten pupils expressing dislike and bewilderment: " Boring, no image, no

nothing. Its a waste of paper and paint", "I think it's horrible. I know I said I like abstract art but this is too much. How could it be popular"

CHAPTER VI:
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS,
RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The slide Show: Analysis

My analysis of the research is based on the results compared with my original aims.

The range of tastes and preferences expressed in the first year group during the slide show was not quite as wide and varied as one had expected. When asked for a show of hands to express like or dislike of an image the same hands went up on each side. Perhaps the images were such that there was little for the pupils who enjoy art which is both realistic in its representation and uncontroversial in its subject matter.

Some frames of reference came through quite strongly. There were responses which indicated directly or indirectly that some pupils had travelled widely and their views were influenced by what they had experienced abroad - e.g. describing the Johns image as Mediterranean or the American gallery reference. Other responses were conditioned by the mass media. The fact that *The Scream* is

used in a promotional animation on MTV seemed to endow it with extra credibility and "coolness."

The reactions and responses of this group would indicate that there is a majority among them that would be open to and enthusiastic in learning about modern and contemporary art provided the work was not too abstract and there were elements of psychological interest and relevance involved such as the Walter Dahn painting *Asthma* provided. It may also be wise to avoid slides as much as possible with first years, concentrating instead on good quality reproductions when gallery visits are not possible.

The Questionnaire: Analysis

My first objective in analysing the questionnaire was the assessment of levels of knowledge and understanding of history of art in a second year group. This would provide a basis on which to build a possible scheme of art history lessons which would fill in gaps in knowledge while nudging pupils towards an appreciation of modern and contemporary art.

It was clear after analysing the answers to the first two questions that almost every pupil in this group had no more than a here-say knowledge of a very limited number of artists. The lack of any

previous study in the area was born out even in the more informed answers - the misspelling of the word abstract as obstruct.

The reasons for liking abstract art which were expressed by some pupils pointed to a willingness to try to interpret ambiguous images which would be useful in a lesson devoted to expressionism, abstract expressionism or, indeed minimalism. Even those in the group who seemed to favour the more traditional or conservative aspects of art, craft and design can be encouraged to become interested in some form of modern or contemporary art. If a pupil is a stickler for realism, for example, they might find that the photo realists of sixties and seventies American art such as Chuck Close of interest. Or, on the other hand, if portraiture was their main interest the work of Cindy Sherman might be brought to their attention as a twist on conventional portraiture leading to an introduction to photography.

For the most part, the reactions of these pupils to the reproduced images went against my expectations of this group in that they seemed to be open to work which was not traditional, realistic in its representation or obvious in its message. The two most popular images, the Cucchi and the Dali indicated more of an interest in atmosphere and mood than narrative meaning and more of a

willingness to decypher ambiguous images than to be spoon fed with obvious symbolism.

Making the most of Support studies

Support studies are included in lessons giving historical grounding and validation to pupil's work. For any real learning to occur, however, it is necessary for the teacher to devote considerable time to the support study sections of lessons and to get the pupils to keep support study copy-books. These would be used to collect information images and material (such as contemporary images from magazines etc.) related to the lessons. Depending on the length and number of lessons each week a set period (say thirty minutes during an eighty or ninety minute class) may be given over to concentrated lessons in Art history using slides, video, discussion and text to bring the lessons alive for pupils.

The prejudices against the more difficult aspects of modern art such as abstraction, can be overcome by encouraging analysis and criticism and by furnishing pupils with an appropriate vocabulary. The learning involved here can equip pupils with the knowledge and confidence to understand and contextualise the visual imagery around them

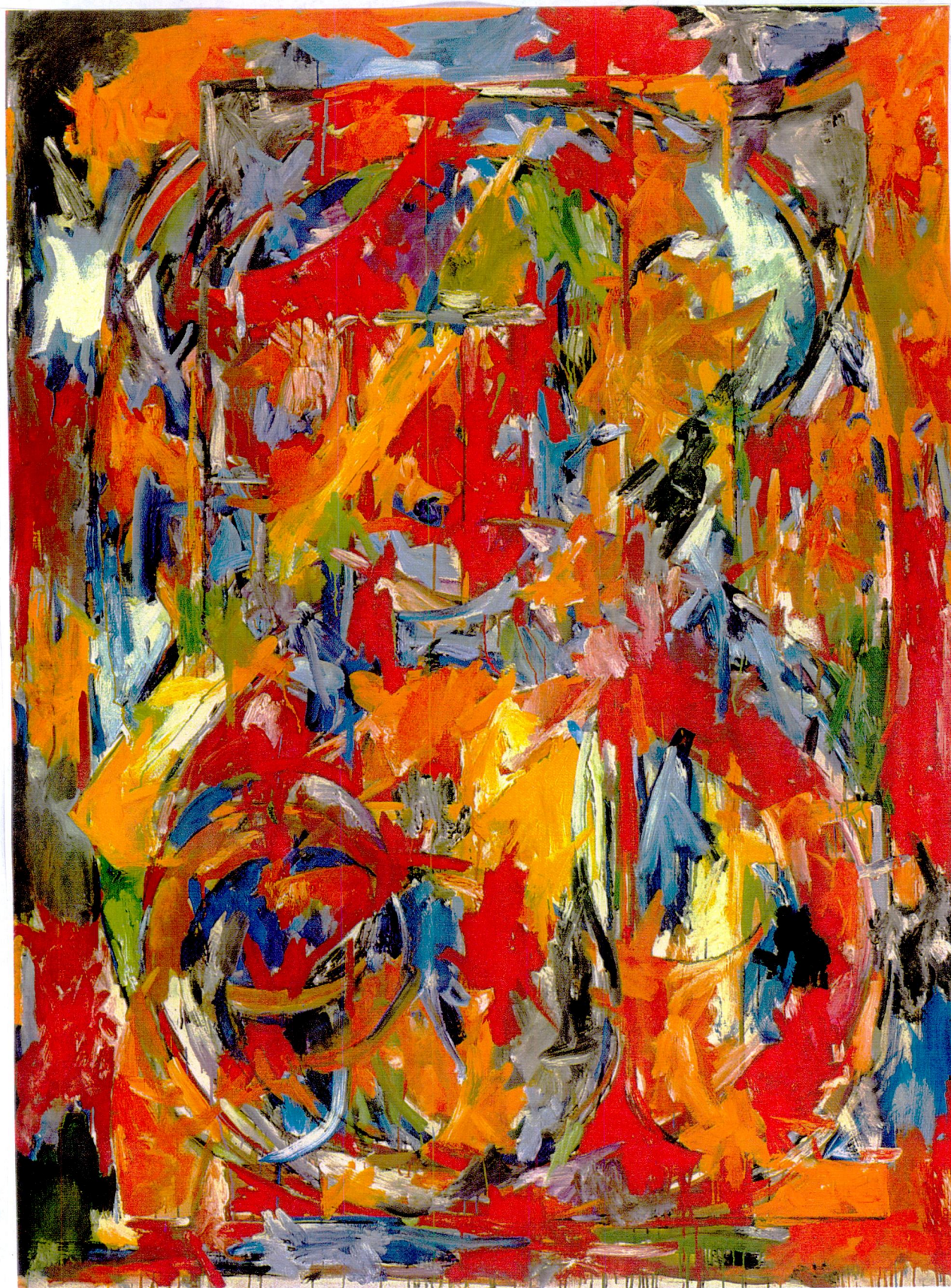
Access to contemporary and modern art is freely available in galleries throughout our towns and cities. It is there not only for the enjoyment and interaction of junior cycle students, but of everyone and would not exist without that interaction.

The education of people in their early teens which is of cultural and personal relevance to them is crucial to their development within their own environment and within a wider context in today's world. It is also important in helping to form strong self identity. The study of modern and contemporary art can open pupils up to alternative ideologies, different cultures and ways of looking at the world and it can validate views and answer questions which are not found in the academic study of pre-modern art.

In conclusion the case for a greater concentration on modern and contemporary art in the junior cycle is a strong one. There are many reasons why it is not only a good idea but also an important inclusion in the course.

Notes

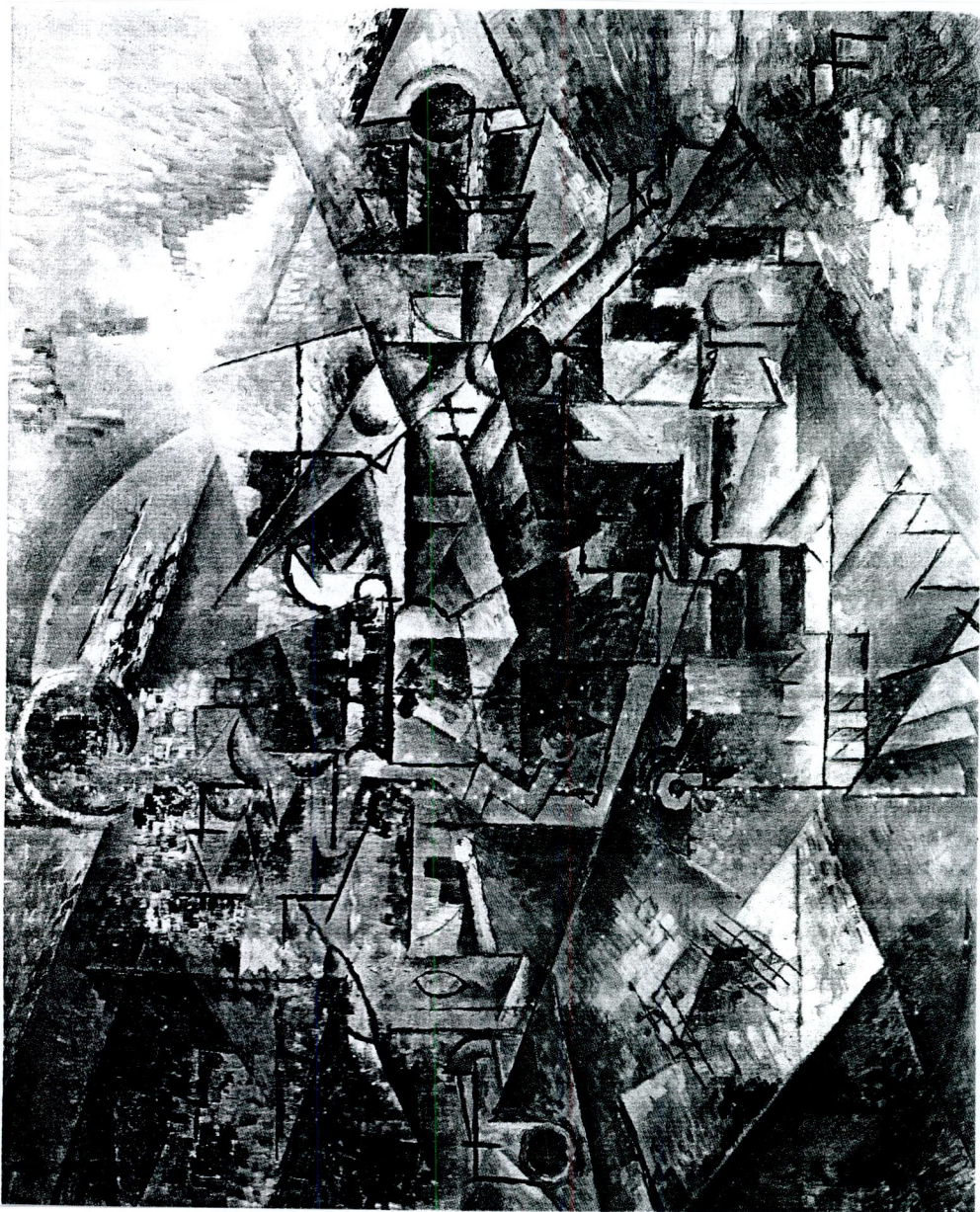
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- ¹ Eisner, Elliot W ed. Reading, the Arts and the Creation of Meaning
 - ² page 67
 - ³ Thistlewood, David, ed. Critical Studies in Art and Design Education. London, Longman, 1989. page 103
 - ⁴ Parsons, M.,M Johnston and R Durham. 1978 Developmental Stages in Children's Aesthetic Responses, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol.12, No. 1.
 - ⁵ Thistlewood, David, ed. Critical Studies in Art and Design Education. London, Longman, 1989. page 103
 - ⁶ Eisner, Elliot W ed. Reading, the Arts and the Creation of Meaning page 69
 - ⁷ *ibid*
 - ⁸ Children and their Art. page 292
 - ⁹ Prentice, Roy, ed. Teaching Art and Design. London, Cassel, 1995. page 96
 - ¹⁰ page 97
 - ¹¹ Engaging in Art Dialogue



57. 0 THROUGH 9. 1960. Oil on canvas, 182.9 x 137.2 cm (72 x 54"). Private collection

Jasper Johns





Picasso

The Clarinet

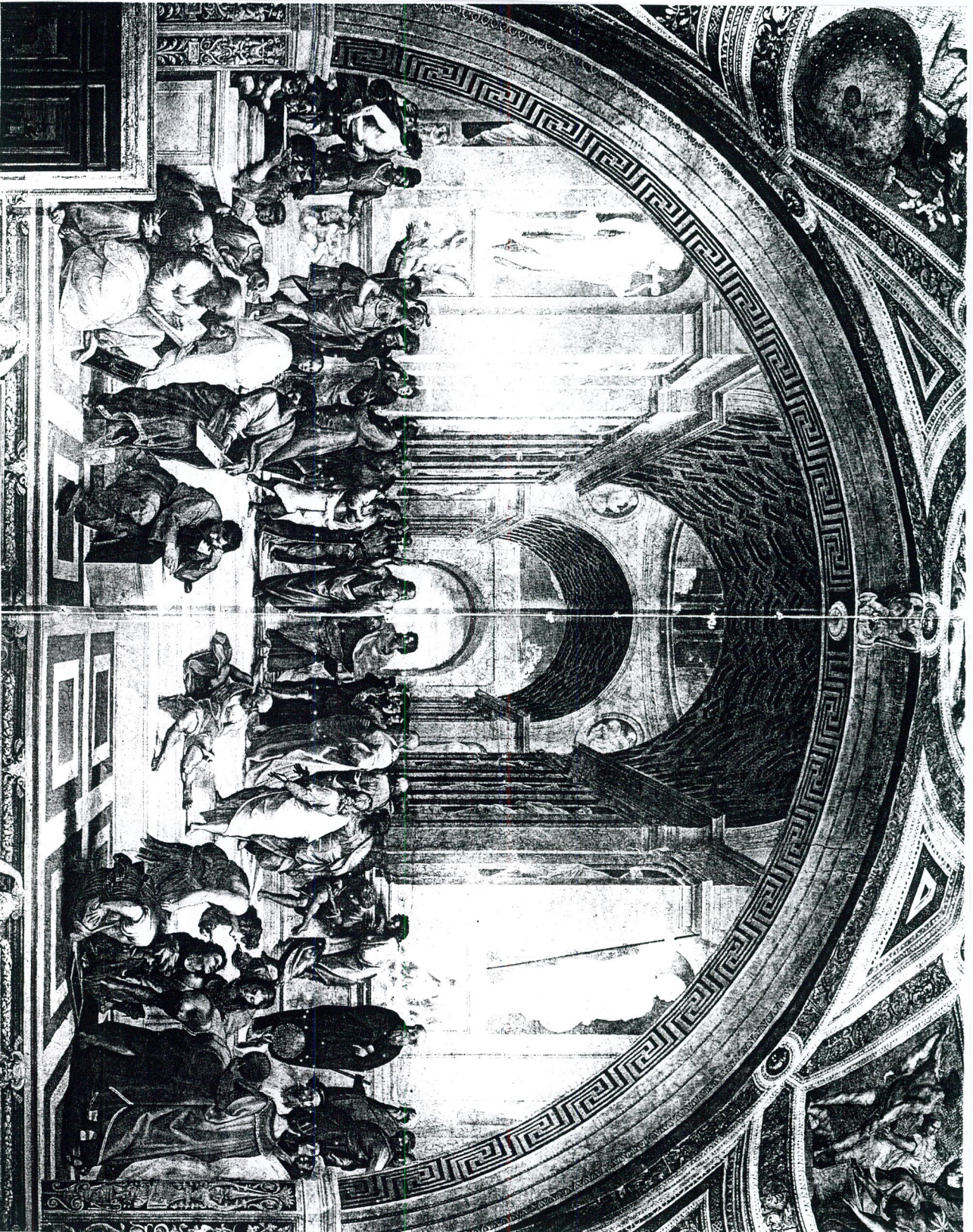
La clarinette

Céret, (August) 1911

Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm

Zervos II*, 265; DR 415

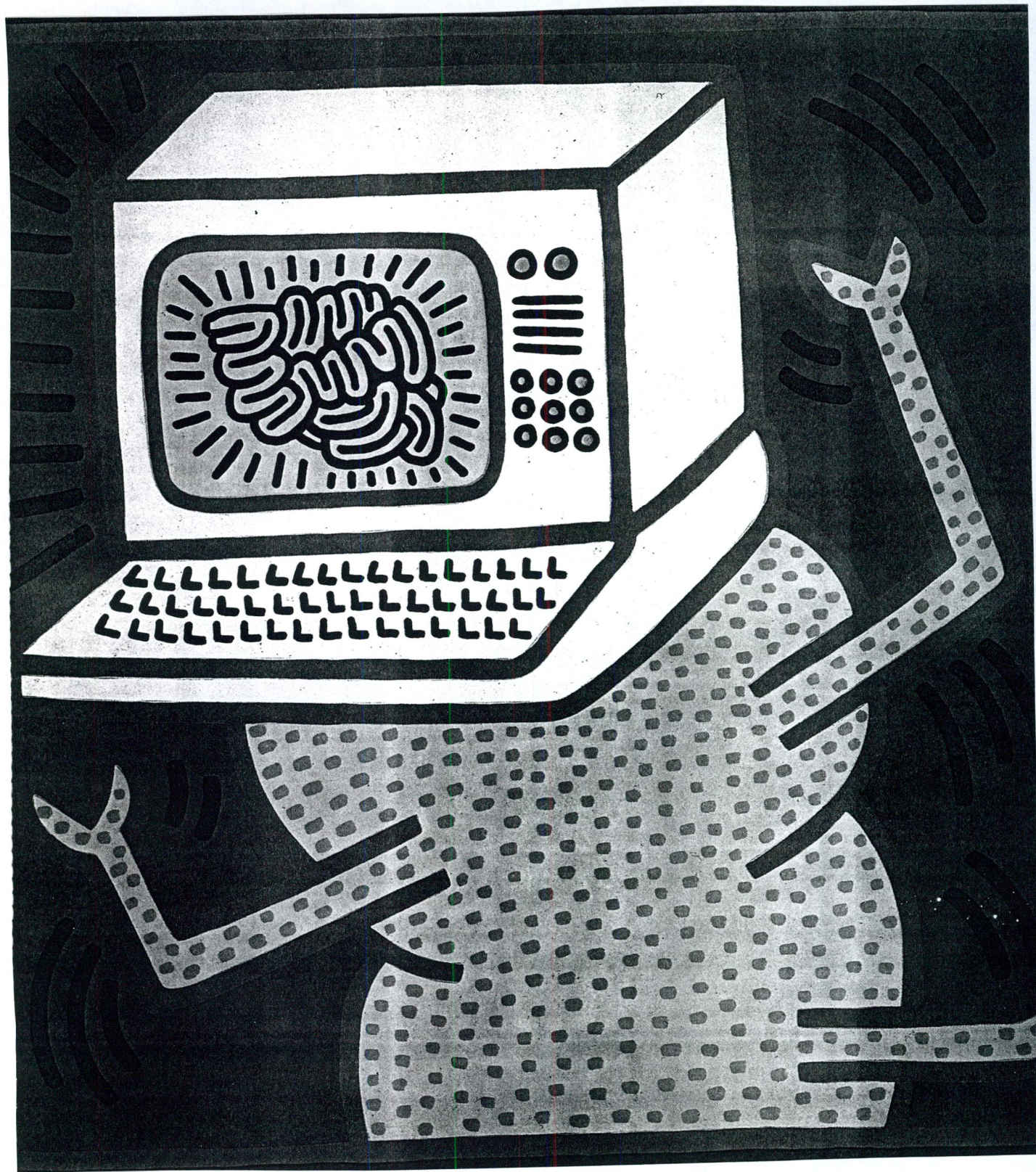
Prague, Národní Gallery



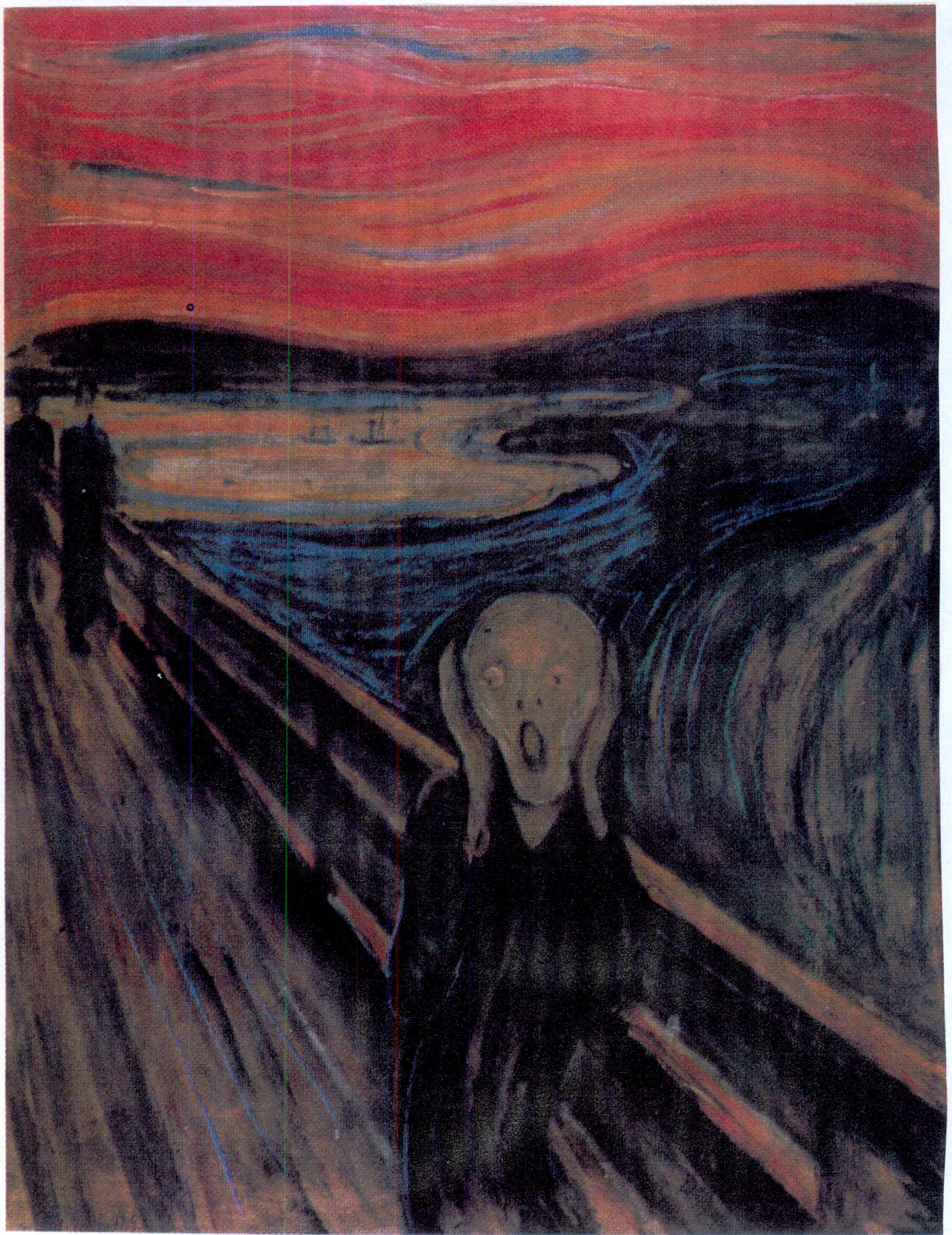
Raphael

The School of Athens, Vatican.



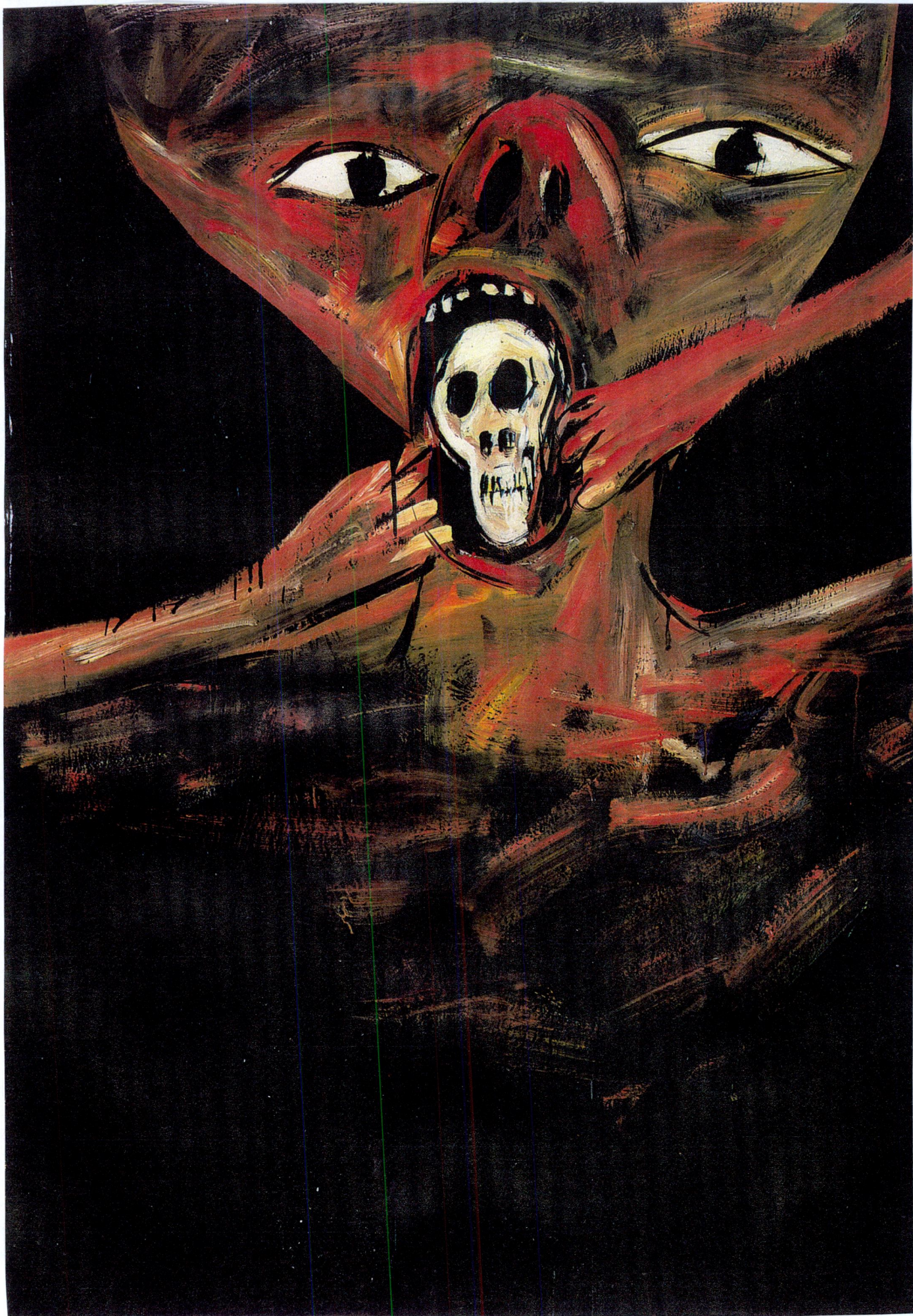


Keith Haring:
Untitled, 12th April 1984
Acrylic on muslin, 59¼ × 59¼ in.
(152 × 152 cm)
Galerie Kaess-Weiss, Stuttgart



Edvard Munch *The Scream* 1893





Asthma I, 1982, Walter Dahn





Enzo Cucchi *Painting of the Precious Fires* 1983

Oil on canvas $117\frac{3}{8} \times 153\frac{1}{2}$ ins

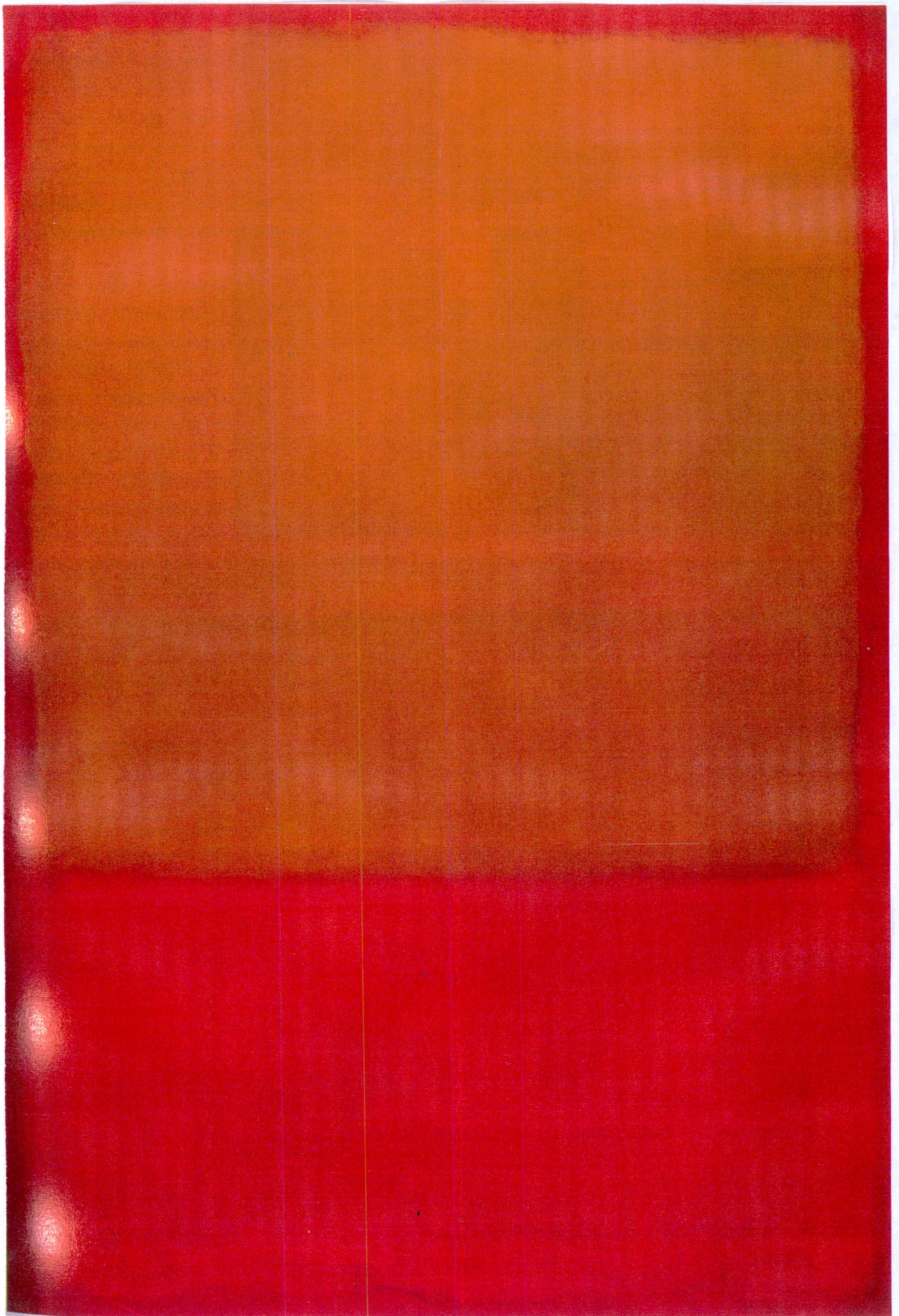
Collection of Gerald S. Elliott, Chicago





Carlo Maria Mariani. *April*. 1988. Oil on canvas, 230 × 190 cm
(90¹/₂ × 74³/₄ in). Courtesy Studio d'arte Cannaviello, Milan





Ochre and Red on Red, 1954
Mark Rothko





COLORPLATE 114. *Gabrielle and Jean*. c. 1900. $25\frac{1}{2} \times 21\frac{1}{4}$ " (65 × 54 cm).
Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (Collection Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume).

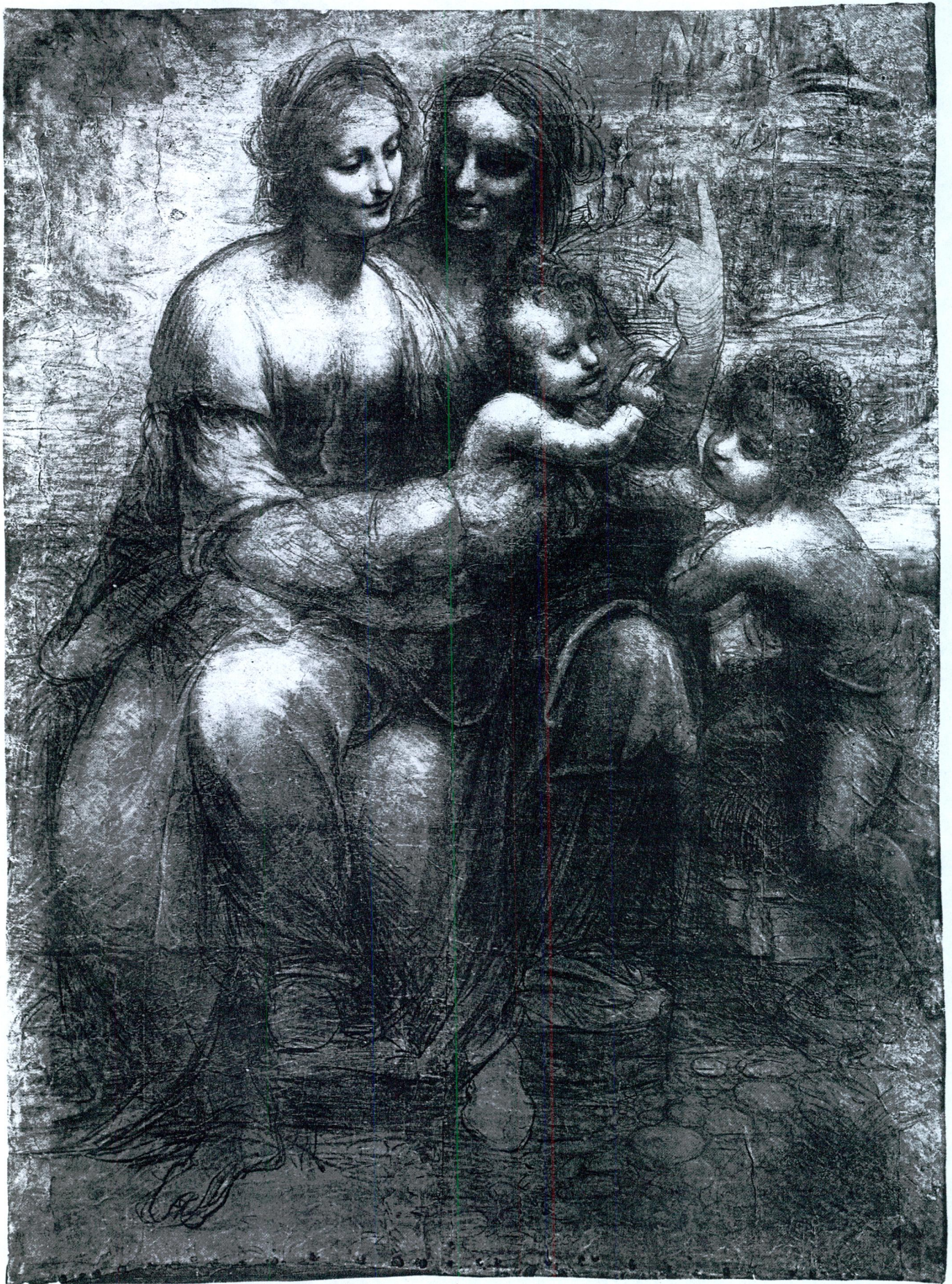
Renoir





Excavation, 1950, Willem de Kooning



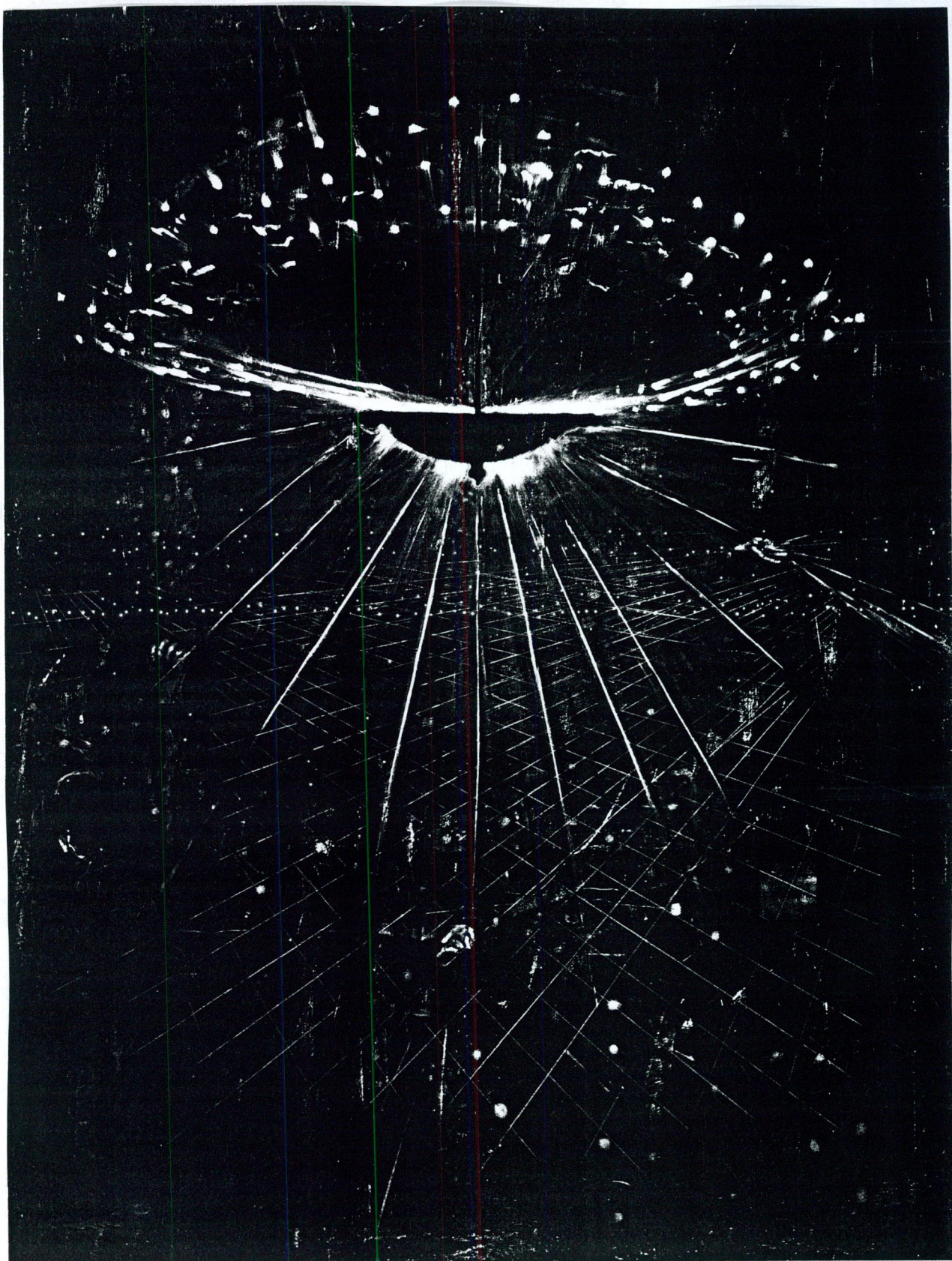


Cartoon of Virgin and Child, c. 1501, Leonardo da Vinci



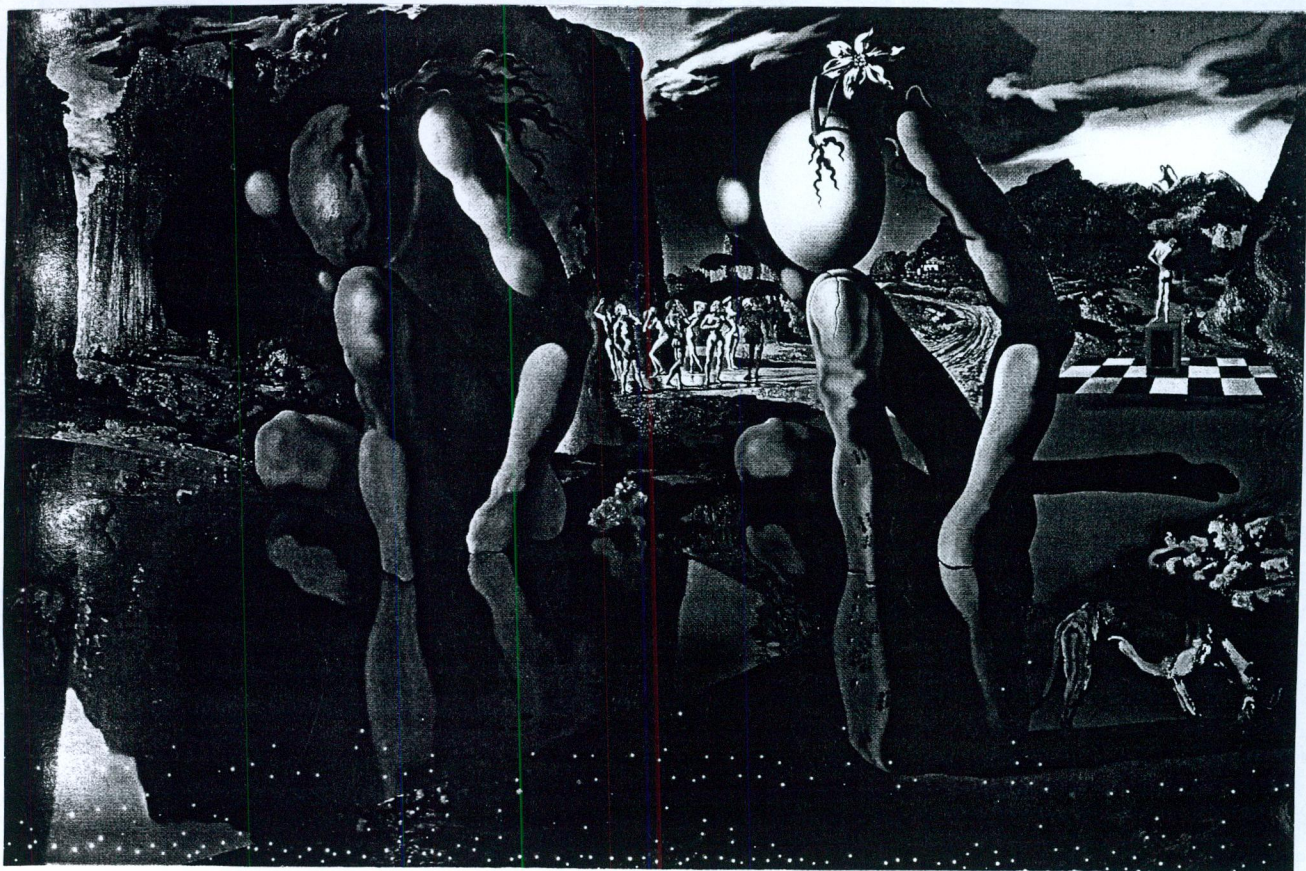
47 Marc Chagall *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* 1913
Oil on canvas 50 × 42 ins: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam





Ross Bleckner. *Examined Life*. 1988. Oil on canvas,
243.8 × 182.9 cm (96 × 72 in). Saatchi Collection, London





62 Salvador Dalí *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* 1937
Oil on canvas 20 × 30 ins: Tate Gallery, London



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