

Art Investor by D. Stephen Pepper

No comparison

The distance between a Degas and a Picasso is as unbridgeable as the distance between reason and modernism.

In my last column I reported on the extravagant price of \$5.3 million that a collector paid for Pablo Picasso's early *Self-Portrait*. The "worth" of this painting, as I reported there, does not arise from its internal merit, but is conferred on it by the cult of modernism.

During the same sale I mentioned Degas' portrait of Manet sold for more than \$2 million. Does this mean that Degas, too, benefits from the cult of modernism? The answer is a qualified no. The excessive price is the result of the speculative craze now raging in the world that seeks investment outlets; modern art is one of its prime targets. But Degas is not Picasso. He is the last significant artist who was thoroughly trained in the Academy tradition, and who, therefore, represents a tradition of real merit in contrast to the synthetic cult character of Picasso's modernism.

The Academy tradition is the tradition of artistic training based on the principle that laws of composition exist to govern the creation of fine arts. For nearly seven centuries—from the time of Dante to Degas—this tradition in Western art had unparalleled success in generating geniuses, with the laws of composition taught through mastery of draftsmanship.

Although throughout this long history genius was always considered to be more important than skill, it was also believed that genius could never exist independent of

skill. Then in the 19th century, with the emergence of John Ruskin in England and Baudelaire in France, the thesis was that skill was an impediment to genius. Instead, genius was now considered to be the expression of the Bohemian, who acted out his irrational impulses through his art. One such example was Van Gogh, who cut off his ear and eventually shot himself.

The triumph of irrationality, however, took place in the early 20th century with the successful manipulation of Picasso by the American lesbian Gertrude Stein, the "salon-keeper" of modernism. Picasso was a conflict-ridden individual who was easily provoked to attack his own previous training under his father, who had been head of the Academy in Barcelona.

At the same time, history was rewritten by Aby Warburg, the son of Hamburg's leading banker who sponsored the Warburg Institute, which still operates in London. Warburg stated that the function of art is to give names to our fantasies, and he proceeded to slander the Renaissance by presenting it as an epoch of superstition.

In fact, the Academy tradition is that fine art through knowable laws of composition can actually express the unfolding of the universe more truthfully than mere appearance. This kind of composition was called by Leon Battista Alberti, the leading Renaissance writer on art, *istoria*. In his time, it was generally

recognized that the Florentine poet and political leader Dante Alighieri inspired, even founded, modern Western art. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy* had illustrated for the first time the progress of the soul from beast to blessedness through the experience of concrete human episodes.

Dante influenced the workshops of such artists as Duccio and Giotto. There the youthful apprentices were introduced to such laws of composition as the golden section and the perfect triangle. One such example is the architect Brunelleschi's training of the sculptor Donatello and the painter Masaccio in the 1420s in Florence.

The influence of René Descartes in France in the mid-17th century stultified the Academy movement by reducing the laws of composition to mere rules. Descartes' outlook has been perpetuated to our own day through the Royal Academy of England. It is only flip-side "modernism," which has made "academic" a derogatory term, implying that any one with compositional skills is dry and uncreative.

The real tradition of the Academy was carried on by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the opponent of Descartes and Newton. Leibniz inspired the great Academy tradition of the first half of the 19th century, Semper in Dresden, the von Humboldts and Schinkel in Berlin, and Samuel F. B. Morse in America. Morse founded the National Academy of Design in New York, which is still going strong.

While Degas' many defects can be held against him, he provides access to the art of the Academy for us today. In contrast to Picasso, his art serves to demonstrate that the laws of reason apply to art.