The dilemma of the twentieth century American artist

Silvio Carl Fracassini

University of Iowa

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THE DILEMMA OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ARTIST

by

S. Carl Fracassini

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, in the Department of Art in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa.

August, 1951
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Our age today is characterized by many complex conflicts and transitions; men's confusion and frustration are shown in their distrust of the traditional ways of life, while they are developing a conscious awareness of new dangers and potentialities in the world in which they live. In spite of these complexities and disorders as manifested in economics, religion, etc., there seem to be certain broad trends which are still evident in American art today. This thought has inspired me to undertake the task of investigating this problem with the hope that added information might help clarify a subject about which every serious person, in the field of art, is concerned.

In my twenty years experience as an artist-teacher I have noticed that some of these frustrations, uncertainties, and conflicts are continually reflected in the work and goals of some of our leading artists today. From these observations I concluded that today's artist is in a dilemma. I therefore have chosen for the topic of my dissertation "THE DILEMMA OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ARTIST."

After careful consideration and study I decided that the most valid solution to the problem could be found through a study of the personal opinions of the artists themselves. The first step, then,
was to carefully select the following list of names, which includes
110 of our outstanding artists who I thought would be a representa­tive cross-section of our Twentieth Century American Art.

Adams, Kenneth M.; Adams, Wayman; Albers, Josef*; Arma, John
Taylor*; Atherton, John*; Austin, Milton*; Barile, Xavier; Barnet,
Will*; Bel Geddes, Norman; Ben-Zion*; Berman, Eugene*; Biddle, George*;
Binford, Julian; Blanch, Arnold; Blume, Peter*; Bohrod, Aaron*;
Booth, Cameron*; Bosa, Louis; Botkin, Henry; Burchfield, Charles*;
Burlin, Paul; Calder, Alexander; Carroll, John; Chermayeff, Serge* (answered by Hugo Weber); Conway, Fred*; Cowles, Russell*; Cox,
Garnder; Crawford, Ralston*; Davis, Stuart; de Diego, Julio*;
De Martini, Joseph; di Gioia, Frank*; Dike, Phil*; Dodd, Lamar*;
Edwards, Emmet*; Evergood, Philip; Feininger, Lyonel*; Fiene, Ernest*;
Fine, Perle; Fossum, Sydney*; Gottlieb, Adolph*; Grant, Gordon*;
Greene, Balcomb*; Gropper, William*; Grosz, George*; Guglielmi,
Louis*; Guston, Philip; Gwathmey, Robert*; Heliker, John; Hirsch,
Joseph; Hofmann, Hans*; Holty, Carl Robert; Hopper, Edward*;
Hurd, Peter*; Kantor, Morris; Kaplan, Joseph*; Katz, Leo; Kent,
Rockwell*; Kester, Lenard; Kirsch, Frederick D.*; Kroll, Leon*;
Kuniyoshi, Yasuo; Laufman, Sidney; Levine, Jack; Levine, Saul;
Lockwood, Ward*; Lucioni, Luigi*; Mangravite, Peppino*; Margo, Boris*;
Marin, John; Marsh, Reginald*; Mattern, Karl*; Moerman, Paul*;

*acknowledged questionnaire
The most effective technique for obtaining first-hand information from these artists would of course be the personal interview. Under the circumstances, using this method was an impossibility. I therefore made a thorough study of the written questionnaire method and found it to be the next best method for getting the type of information I was seeking.¹

I was encouraged by the discovery that the written questionnaire had been used innumerable times by artists throughout the ages. In 1546 Benedetto Varchi designed a questionnaire which he sent to a group of the leading Florentine artists.²

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² Ibid., p. 88.
...Benedetto Varchi sent a questionnaire, probably the first of its kind in history, to a number of Florentine artists, to the sculptors Michelangelo, Tribolo, G. B. Tasso, Cellini, and to the painters Bronzino, Pontorma, Vasari, F. Sangello. In their replies dated 1546-9 each artist reveals his aims and methods while reflecting the views on art of the time.  

Varchi was motivated in this project by the rivalry among artists of the day concerning the validity of various art forms, especially those of painting and sculpture. This intense interest had been aroused by Leonardo Da Vinci's discussion on art in his *Paragone*.  

Leonardo's comparison of the two arts may be said to have started a debate which continued through centuries; and the questions of form, space, and colour which were involved still occupy artists of today.  

Twentieth century artists are confronted with a similar problem concerning the validity of various art forms and the part the artist plays in the society in which he lives. The purpose of my project is to reveal what our artists today are thinking in terms of the age in which they live. A questionnaire had to be prepared with a select group of questions that was primarily designed to give a cross-section of the existing schools of art in America today. Extreme care was exercised to select questions free from prejudice on my part and at the same time provocative.

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enough to elicit an answer. Despite my efforts to eliminate pre­judiced undertones in my questionnaire, a number of my corre­pondents indicate in their replies that my questions appear to them to be prejudiced.

Following is the form which I sent to the 100 artists listed above. The questions were selected on the basis of a study of the current problems of the artist as indicated in his painting, and in his comments in magazines, catalogues, lectures, and conversation.

Mr. Kenneth M. Adams
643 North Cedar Street
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dear Mr. Adams:

As head of the Art Department at Iowa Wesleyan College, and as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, I need your assistance in the clarification of a few matters of interest to all of us. I plan to use the material so obtained in a dissertation to be published in connection with an advanced degree.

During my associations with other painters for the past twenty years, I have seen repeated evidences of frustrations and uncertainties concerning the functions and goals of artists in our society. Consequently I have chosen for the subject of my dissertation "THE DILEMMA OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ARTIST."

I would therefore appreciate your personal opinions on such questions as these: Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age? It has been said that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion? Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live? Do you consider this approach valid? What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some
of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, are contributing toward the development of a lasting art? What, in your opinion, is the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages? Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art? What are your personal goals as an artist?

I sincerely hope that my making this request is not an imposition. I will do my best to use your impressions in a way which may shed some light on a problem about which I am sure every serious artist is concerned. Enclosed are materials for use in your reply, which I should very much appreciate receiving by April 25. I shall be very grateful for your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

S. Carl Fracassini

The response was much better than I had anticipated, with fifty-eight percent of the letters being answered. In one case, a letter was mailed to me by an artist who had heard of my project from a friend. Mr. Ralph Pearson was not included in my list, since I limited my selection to American painters, but, as he explains in his letter, he became interested in my project when he saw a copy of the questionnaire which I had sent to Peppino Mangravite and volunteered a reply.
Chapter II

LETTERS

Following, in alphabetical order, are the sixty-five replies I received from the one hundred and ten inquiries.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I regret that pressure of work has prevented my answering your letter of April 21st.

The questions you put to me — to satisfactorily answer, would require more time than I can give you and in the last analysis would amount to nothing more than one more opinion, subject to change over night.

Off hand I would say that the "formlessness and shapelessness in contemporary art" is not an inevitable reflection of our age. All "so-called" new art forms derive through tradition and become tradition. I am not sure that elimination of subject matter is indigenous to our period. All sincere effort—research and exploration seems to me valid even if it leads into a blind alley. I am not sufficiently informed on the artists of the Kootz Gallery to hazard an opinion.

Relative to my own work I have ever avoided being pinned to a statement of objectives. I paint anything and everything that interests me to the best of my ability. Whatever may be its merits or demerits, I am perfectly content to let time decide the significance of my work.

Sincerely,

Kenneth M. Adams
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I have received your letter of April 18. Though your confidence in my opinion appears encouraging, with my obligations here as teacher and administrator, I feel unable to spare the time to answer your questions satisfactorily.

Furthermore, I recently received three such inquiries each presenting a list of comprehensive questions and, through this, an invitation to write a long dissertation, if not a book. And in your particular case, such questions involve basic philosophical as well as very private reactions, the latter particularly in relationship to an evaluation of the artists you mention, who are now very much under discussion.

I could more easily talk about the problems you mention, but, as I have indicated, to formulate my ideas in writing requires quite some time for thinking, which is impossible for me to do right now for a definite date.

I am sorry that I am unable to be of more help to you.

Sincerely yours,

Josef Albers
Chairman
Department of Design
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I have been away and only just returned to my desk. I cannot get the answers to your questions to you by May 10th, but I can at least get this little note off acknowledging your letter. Your questions are important and require some thought. It may be some little time before I can write you, and although it may be too late to be of any particular use in your present case, I do want to think them through and put down on paper the results of my "pondering".

I do appreciate your letter and am only sorry not to be able to have answered promptly. Wanted you to know it was not for lack of desire to cooperate.

Yours very sincerely

John Taylor Arms
Dear Mr. Fracassini,

I reply to your letter asking for comment on various questions pertaining to contemporary painting. I would first say that I hesitate to make any definite statements knowing as I do that painters should paint and not try to compete with critics. I will try to put down briefly a few of my ideas, however, as long as you will treat them as having been quickly put down, with no particular planning beforehand, and no re-writing! This will be an informal talk—and no great shakes as literature.

I will take up your questions in order:

1. Re: glorification of shapelessness, etc.

The way this question is put shows a prejudice on your part. I do not believe formlessness and shapelessness are being "glorified," but simply shown and commented upon as interesting and possibly permanent directions in which painting may develop. These manifestations of a completely personal form, lacking any relationship with conventional form in painting as we have always understood it, is undoubtedly caused by the type of life experienced by the artists. As one, I feel strongly that established forms of any kind whatever are no guarantee of "security," "happiness," or any of the other results of a well directed life. By this I include our life as individuals, not only as artists.
2. The question — "works of the past denied" is naturally related to the above. In denying works of the past, again I feel a prejudice shown, whether or not you are quoting would depend on who received the blame! I am sure that most modern painters do not reject what has been done before, only that they profit by what they see. Every student studies the great artists of all ages and respects them. And he continues to go to see every important showing of the great masters that is available. He simply feels that when a certain form of painting—representational, realistic, naturalistic form—has been done as well as Giotto, Titian, van Eyck, etc. have done it, there's not much use in trying to carry it further. Why not develop the form which reflects his age; his environment and his very personal feeling for form through his own experience. If this takes the form of non-objectivity, well, that's the artists' way of saying what he has to say. At least, he's not competing with the camera, but trying to make his own kind of beauty.

3. "Subject Matter." I would not say that subject matter had been eliminated at all. Some good abstract painter, I forget whom, said that he "respected the integrity of the object." I agree with this, and even in the most abstract picture, the object is responsible for the basic emotion, whether recognizable or not. Of course, some painters refuse to be influenced at all by what the "subject" or "object" looks like. They try to capture the emotional experience,
in forms which are more purely from the heart, not the head. They try to just "let it come out."

Of course if the emotion is an extremely personal one, to the point of complete unintelligibility to the observer, the artist suffers for lack of contact, appreciation of the public. And I believe he is unhappy as a result of this lack of communication, at least I become so at times. But, unfortunately, if we are true to ourselves, we can't change. We simply have to go on, hoping that, in time people will speak our language. (I could say "change" here).

Is it not true that every advance in the whole of history, whether religious, philosophical, artistic, scientific or otherwise, was rejected at first, and only accepted after a long period of trying out—of understanding?

4. As to the artists at Parsons, Kootz, etc. I would not stick my neck out and say that any art will live or not live. These painters have great imagination—to me the first requirement of an artist. They are exploring entirely new forms of expression, and I believe the best of the avant guarde Americans are a lot more important than any European that I know of, outside of the half dozen "Old Masters." Whether one likes or "understands" their work, one cannot deny that it has considerable impact.

If I look at a picture and it moves me, it must have something. That's my final analysis. One can't "explain" these pictures.
Picasso said, and rightly, that, "One cannot explain the song of a bird."

5. The "Basic Common Denominator." I would put it in two words, "Significant form." Clive Bell, (wasn't it?) said this some many years back, and it still holds true for me at least. Regardless of what the form is, an object, recognizable or not—a mood, a deeply felt experience which is expressively recorded—all these can become significant as forms. There is no reason why the form must be three-dimensional. It might be as vague as a cloud, or as flat and thin as a sheet of paper. But if it has that "rightness," which one instinctively feels, when viewing it, it must be good.

6. "Propaganda"—as far as I've thought on this subject, I would say definitely that it could not be a valid art. It could be good for its purpose. I do commercial art for a living, and I must say that I am paid for it well enough to prove that it works. But it is not art in the finer sense to me. As long as one iota of influence has entered into that expression, it becomes watered, thinned out, and loses its real force—its real beauty.

7. "Personal Goals." Ah, me! My own philosophy has aimed at certain conclusions. One is that happiness is the capacity to accept and enjoy compromise. I'm trying to learn this, and am making headway. I have to, to exist!
Another is that life itself is more important than the pictures that come out of it. I feel that if my life is good, my pictures will be good. And by good, I don't mean lush, sybaritic, lazy, the flesh pots, etc., I mean good in the full sense of the word. A decent balance, plenty of work, some good friends—not too many—music, books.

I will dispense with the art that only comes out of physical suffering. God knows we all get enough suffering in trying to find out what we're here for, and how to best express ourselves. However, the reward, when we do make even a small bit of a picture in the right way, is magnificent. I'm content with that. And I hope, of course to sometime make not only the small bit right, but the whole thing.

This has been very rapidly written. I really haven't time at present to do a decent job of this, but I hope it will help you.

Sincerely yours,

John Atherton
Mr. Austin has asked me to say that he does not like to make written statements about art or artists. Sorry . . .

K. G. Perls
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Here are the answers to your questions.

Question 1 — I feel this question is ambiguous. Shape and form — rather the concept — vary with time. New forms may seem formless and strange to untutored eyes.

Question 2 — I do not believe this — Paintings done forty years ago which seemed to break entirely with tradition—now have taken their place as part of the great tradition. The same thing I believe will happen to a great many contemporary works if they are worthy.

Question 3 — I do not subscribe to this belief. A small group in this country is trying to ballyhoo the idea. But the great artists of the twentieth century — Miro—Picasso—Braque—Matisse—all use subject matter. Whether or not subject matter is used is a personal problem of the artist and certainly it seems to me any sort of taboo is a relic of barbarianism.

Question 4 — I feel this question a little too personal as most of these men are personal friends of mine.

Question 5 — Great art has always been the product of great artists with something profound to express. The manner in which they do this—abstract—surrealist—primitive—etc., is secondary.

Question 6 — Only if the art itself is the thing of primary importance. The propaganda must always be secondary.
Question 7 — I would like to paint good pictures. Pictures that reflect my personal reaction to the visible world—in a fresh new way—with an especially deep interest in the problems of space relationships on a flat plane—and the reduction to supreme simplicity by the elimination of all extraneous detail.

Hope the above will be of some help in your thesis.

Sincerely

Milton Avery
Dear Mr. Fracassini,

I received your letter of April 13. After thinking over the questions and looking at them in light of my own experiences I am submitting to you briefly my "personal" opinions.

In regards to the "Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist":
I question the assumption that all twentieth century artists are in a dilemma. My answer is; which contemporaries are in a dilemma? In my view, only those artists are in a quandry that lack historical perspective and have failed to absorb the examples of great cultural traditions.

With respect to the so called shapelessness and formlessness in present day art; these allegations are spurious. Again; what contemporary art? Picasso? Klee? Kandinsky? Miro? etc. Certainly anyone truly acquainted with these painters and the profound implications of their work would never suggest that their work is shapeless. Besides, they have never eliminated subject matter, nor have those who with them continue to explore and strengthen the tradition in art. The basic denominator of art throughout the ages has been its ability to keep the flame of human aspiration alive and inspire each generation of artists afresh. A work of art, whether painting, literature, or music, must have an image expressed through an objective formal system. Only in this sense can art be considered propagandistic. Not in any narrow, sectarian way.
I have only one goal in art and that is to keep alive the great formal values in painting to refresh them in terms of human experience and add something of the present to them, hoping in this way to continue the cultural traditions of the human race. I know that this is a broad and generalized reply but details change and any attempt at a cut and dried declaration is at best only provisional. Thank you for your interest in my opinions.

I am, Sincerely yours,

Will Barnet
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Because your questions interested me I am glad to answer them. I am answering in the order in which they were put.

Question 1 — Although our age is indeed shapeless and formless nevertheless I don't believe that the art of an age is just the reflection of its shapelessness and formlessness for, as we look back to ages past, they were not less shapeless and formless than our own time, yet they left us such marvelous treasures in shape and in form. For that is indeed the task of art—to bring forth form and shape out of the chaos of its age.

Question 2 — Answer: The work of the past cannot be denied—for they are. And they are a part of our vision willingly or unwillingly. They help toward a finer conception and refinement of taste. Those that think that by denying the works of art of the past they will create something new—are just like the branches of a tree denying its trunk and roots.

Question 3 — Answer: Elimination of subject matter is not indigenous to the period in which we live, nor is its approach valid with any of the outstanding artists of modern art. Elimination of subject matter tho' prevailed in the Mohammedan countries, eastern countries and in all primitive art, adhering strictly to a code of symbols accepted in the given society, while contemporary, so called
non-objective art is floating in a chaos of private little symbols and petty little obscurities with no significance to the given society.

Question 4 — Answer: Confusion

Question 5 — Answer: The common denominator of art throughout the ages is unity. It brings together continents, milleniums, different civilizations, races and nations under one deep appreciation which is art. In other words, it brings people near each other and creates a deeper understanding.

Question 6 — Answer: Anything propagandistic is temporary and is therefore just the opposite of art which is ageless and eternal in its timeliness. Art doesn't need to advocate something for it is the thing in itself.

Question 7 — Answer: The less an artist talks about his goals the more I believe he will reach them and it is not really goals which the artist is after. For, each work of art has its own goal and the goal is achieved when the artist succeeds in communicating with beholder.

Ben-Zion
Sorry—it is absolutely impossible for me to answer your letter—am swamped with too much work and too much urgent correspondence. Yet to the answers on many (if not most) of your questions, you have only to look at my work. I am not dead set against experiments or directions which are not my own (I am always rather for the talented exception in every direction than for the "man" movement behind it)—but the answer to what I think of such matters as the past, as propaganda as art and what my goals are is too obvious.

Besides, all these quests are so unnecessary, because the answer would be so perfectly clear if people knew better how to look at art, instead of reading all about and trying to make out mentally what's "modern and significant" and what is bad ("reactionary") etc. (all beside the point).

E. Berman
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Thanks for your letter of April 17.

I agree with you that many artists—but even more so the general public—have a feeling of frustration and disassociation from the artists' normal audience.

I enclose you under separate cover two articles of mine which appeared in Harpers and the Atlantic Monthly and an introduction in a recent catalog which states my present philosophy about many of the questions you raise.

I believe this material will answer at length and as objectively as I can almost all your questions. I will, however, very briefly recapitulate them here.

(1) Do I believe that the glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

This is a hard question to answer categorically yes or no. I should say to some degree the tendency toward abstraction and away from representationalism reflects certain intellectual and emotional qualities in our times. To a great degree it is the result of snobbism, escapism and world weariness. See my Atlantic article.

(2) Should the past be denied?

Never. I insist on the need of tradition and the continuity of all art. See my introduction to catalog.

(3) Why is the elimination of subject matter indigenous to our
period? See my Harper's article. I believe that the dilemma of Modernism was that in its preoccupation with design and consequently in its attack on realism, it gradually grew further and further from a healthy preoccupation with life.

(4) The Parsons and Kootz artists?

I believe there are good and bad artists of every idiom or school. I do not happen to recall the name of any artist in these two galleries that interests me. But I think that certain of the non-objective and abstract artists show great talent.

(5) The basic common denominator of art through the ages?

See my philosophy as expressed in my catalog "A reaction to life, expressed in a certain form or rhythm."

(6) In one sense all art is propaganda. But it is "intuitive creative approach" which is the propaganda; not what is said as propaganda. See my introduction.

(7) My own personal goal. See also my introduction.

If this material which I enclose you does not answer your questions as clearly as you would wish I should be happy to answer as well as I can any further questions.

Ever faithfully

George Biddle
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

1. Modern art has concentrated on the subject of form and pattern. This bears no relation to the age we live in.

2. Modern art has been very much pre-occupied with the art of the past, particularly ancient, primitive art, as a chief source of inspiration.

3. Subject matter is either used as a starting point, or subject matter is suggested by free juxtaposition of forms and colors. Often, of course, it's entirely absent. This bears no relation to the age we live in, except where the lack of it becomes a virtue.

4. They are concerned with "special" problems out of which many interesting works of art may develop. No one can be sure that any of it will be "lasting".

5. Where beauty and humanity meet.

6. That is what it has mainly been for 5,000 years.

7. To bring together most of these points and to give them life and real meaning. Artists must record their experiences. The quantity and quality of these experiences vary greatly. The "type" variation is enormous. Whatever he does springs from this source. Most other interests are academic.

I hope this will be of some use to you.

Sincerely yours,

Pete Blume
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

The questions you propound would require another dissertation for full answer. I'll try to telescope my thoughts on them in handleable form.

Many artists today have become convinced that because of the camera's existence they must pursue non-representational or at least semi-abstract forms of expression. Because an adherence to the appearances of nature brands the artist as a mere living camera, they deliberately remove themselves from that "stigma" by greater and greater departure from natural appearance. In this way it is thought that the greater the departure from nature the greater is the originality involved. I think that the camera's challenge is not answered adequately by avoiding issue with it. The camera is a cold mechanical instrument and it cannot possibly do with natural appearance what the talented artist can do by imagination, arrangement, interpretation and color use. In any case our best art of tradition never was a camera lens copy of nature.

Rationalizers say that the confusion of the age is well reflected by the confusion of our painting. I think a powerful artist might well stand aside and above the age's confusion and make his own positive contributions.

It is even possible to comment on confusion, I think, in a reasonably clear way. If the artist has anything to say it is
incumbent on him to say it clearly and so that (radical notion) most intelligent people may understand what he is about. I am not sympathetic to the idea that because an artist is not understood by the many it follows that he must be profound or that he should be especially cherished.

While it is true that traditionally the artist has been ahead of the public there never before was a fifty year lag. If the Armory exhibition could be shown again today it would be apparent that today's manifestations are really very little different from our first look at so-called "modern art." The intelligent public has no hesitation in finding its way with a new good book, play, or motion picture and even (to a lesser extent) with good new music. There is no special reason why a painting cannot be good and understood at the same time.

There is the argument that we are using "modern art" in textile design, rugs and for other every day decorative purposes which has been inspired by today's painting. By avoiding the representational painting is fast dwindling to mere decoration—and decorating ideas belong in decoration.

I believe there is a certain technical value in the work of some of the artists (Parsons, Kootz groups) you mention. As exercise, the abstract and paint drip methods might be valuable for art students to make them conscious of picture structure. But this has merit as only a tool for the artist to make his communicative statements
function in paint. Understandable communication with the spectator would be pursued to a greater extent by the younger artist if he wasn't told so often by the art press, museum people and the example of most of the day's prize winners that it was unfashionable and abhorrent.

My personal goal is to try to get the man who looks at my paintings to share with me, in part at least, my reactions of interest, new discovery, eerieness, mystery, or what have you in the things of nature that have affected me.

This rambles and I don't know whether all your questions are answered. But three sheets are enough . . .

Sincerely

Aaron Bohrod
Artist-in-Residence
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I'll do the best I can to answer your questions. I only hope your article will be sympathetic to the present day advanced artist rather than critical.

First your title infers that the artist is in a dilemma. I think not. In some ways he is for the first time free from the confusing limitations imposed by a patron and is in a position to operate as a free individual exploring and opening new aesthetic boundaries. No I do not think the artist is frustrated. This is not the first time the artist has been compelled to work at some other occupation to support himself to make it possible to carry on his work.

The uncertainties you mention, should be defined. Naturally there are the usual uncertainties of life economics, social, etc. We can dismiss them as all people have these—perhaps the artist is a little more pressed because his occupation is unwanted. So long as he maintains his work on a high level of expression he need hardly expect it to support him. If he lowers the ideal to meet a popular demand and popular taste the economic problem no longer exists. This is the temptation held before the artist and only those with courage can make the decision in favor of "art for my own kicks."

"Our society," as you call it, has no love for art of any kind, unless it can be put to use—some utilitarian use—especially the field of advertising, packaging, industrial designing, and illustration.
This is true of all the arts, music, dance, stage, etc. Our society is based on the dollar, as you well know, and to find any relation between art and society one must recognize this fact. The artists, or at least the artists I know and respect, accept this fact and somehow find a way to earn a living and the time and energy to create. I wish I could meet you and talk about all this, for it is so hard to write and be explicit on two sheets of paper.

All this so far on your second paragraph. Now your questions in order:

"Do you believe that the so-called glorification and shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?" How very damning: First I don't know what you refer to as "formlessness and shapelessness." Shape and form are two inherent qualities of art and no work of art can be without them whether contemporary, ancient, academic, or what not. I'm afraid your question shows some reaction or repulsion against some of the emotional expressionist painters. The question is more in the form of an assertion than a question. Frankly it seems too involved in personal feelings. Give the artist a chance!

Second question — "—in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied." How absurd! Only the expression changes. The constant laws and principles remain unchanged. If it were not so we today could not delight in archaic art, primitive peoples art, and modern art. The success of any work of art lies in its abstract
relationships, whether representational or non-objective. These abstract relationships are the only valid qualities. They are the expressive means of the artist. You will find in Roget's Thesaurus six classes of words. (1) abstract relations (2) space (3) matter (4) intellect (5) volition (6) affections. These classifications of words are parallel to categories in art. The artist aware of the abstract relations and spacial relations is superior to the one who only sees the affections (the sentimental) without the other qualities.

"—exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Sam Kootz. Are they contributing toward the development of a lasting art?" Two questions.

I was until recently a member of Betty Parsons Gallery and I know most of the artists. There as well as in the Kootz Gallery. These two galleries are among the most vital ones in New York. Both dealers and their artists have integrity and direction. They are intelligent people and beyond question in sincerity. As for their contributing to a lasting art. Who knows? What is lasting? How long is it last? Art is never static and we may be sure that there will be many changes—continuously.

If there is any common denominator of art throughout the ages it is the plastic values. By this I mean the constant principles used at all times by all artists. The expressive means, line, color, space, etc. used plastically. Webster's definition: Plastic —
"combining form signifying developing, forming, growing."

The plastic sense is the common denominator. All art stands or falls by this alone. The plasticity of a work in its broad sense is the answer for the artist.

No, I don't think propaganda nor any other application can be art. Remember that art applied to any utilitarian purpose loses its effectiveness as an aesthetic experience.

I hope I have made my ideas somewhat clear in this short space. You have a big subject. And may I be so bold as to remark that the new things being done in N.Y. are very exciting and worth while. It would be wrong to condemn it even though one were completely familiar with all its ramifications. So often prejudices are written—sort of justifications for prejudices. What is going on is not too easy to understand particularly in relation to Renaissance art. It is a violation of Renaissance but not Pre-Columbian, Northwest Indian, Oceanic, and Children's work, and archaic.

The dilemma of which you speak is for the artist who has not been fortunate enough to have become a part of this new tradition (if we can call it a tradition) that is so clearly based on the aesthetic constant principles.

Sincerely

Cameron Booth
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I have numbered your questions, and have them listed in order below.

1. Q. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?
   A. No. It's the easy way out. The period 1800-1850 or later was just as chaotic or more so than ours. The artists of that age rose superior to their times. If we want to endure we must do likewise.

2. Q. It has been said that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion?
   A. No—answered above.

3. Q. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live?
   A. Who can say? I cannot.

4. Q. Do you consider this approach valid?
   A. No!

5. Q. What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, are contributing toward the development of a lasting art?
   A. It's hard to say—freedom to experiment of course must never be discouraged.

6. Q. What, in your opinion, is the basic common denominator
of art throughout the ages?

A. Too big a subject to answer properly in my limited time.

7. Q. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?

A. It may be more difficult, but it has been done and notably, witness Goya and Daumier.

8. Q. What are your personal goals as an artist?

A. To express my emotional reactions to life and nature in a manner readable by "willing to learn" laymen without sacrifice of my personal vision.

Sincerely yours,

Charles Burchfield

April 22, 1951
These are my timid and humble thoughts — Fred Conway.

Painting is a disheartening, disagreeable, profession, sooner or later if a painter works at it hard enough, he becomes alone, this can be very unpleasant—to avoid this, consciously or unconsciously, it is highly possible to seek—substitutes, for the actual work of painting—of which there are many—I feel that any painter who, feels "frustrated" — does not paint enough.

In the main, the ideas, which one reads, or hears about, are from the side of the profession which does not paint—in short, from the "fight manager" not the fighter—what the painter would say, would not be so good in print, or fit the "status quo"— all that really matters in painting—takes place six or seven inches from the surface of the canvas. I also feel, that the best way to have a vital "art" is to create the most opposition and confusion possible for the artist—this would kill off the untalented. All the artist needs, is a way to make a living—good health—friends—

1. Shapelessness and formlessness—etc.—if it exists, as part of our age—it is not for the producing artist to worry about, it's like "old age" takes care of itself—cure—paint longer hours—.

2. Create new art form—ignore works of past. Artists get together, a few beers, concoct all kinds of ideas, (lots of fun) (There is not answer to that one.)

Subject matter—painting is a way of somehow, ordering, thru painters means, a great many, complicated ideas. This mass of ideas, is only stirred to "stick its head up" while in the actual heat of
painting—at that moment, subject matter or lack of it is important, and may carry over to the next painting, and sooner or later become a fixed form—"The point, and only point of confusion—is that—ideas about art which come from sources, other than the heat of painting, are "chit-chat" or busy work. The critic, teacher, or person who does not paint or paints a little, can be very valuable, if he has enough human warmth to "sense" this "creative process" and talk about it with a healthy respect, and not ask for rational or logical answers—. On the other hand the person who insists that the artist explain himself—etc.—is somewhat of a bore, however it makes little difference, the painter will keep painting.

Parsons or Kootz—who knows? Certainly there is something to be said for "making" the "Creative process" once more a "wild, untamed" thing—just saw a Hoffman in the Illinois show—best in show—.

Common denominator—a kind of "wildness" which is condemned or liked for wrong reason by layman—which the same layman 100 years later may like very well.

Propagandistic art—I believe that only a great patriot — can get by with propagandistic art—any nation has only one or two in a generation, and rarely are they of the arts—we have none—Mexico had Orozco. "Pointing the way" thru art or words—by the average man, is too dull to inflict on the poor public——.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Your letter of April 8 has been referred to me by Mr. Chermayeff for reply. Your project is not definite enough with your thesis title for a specific answer; I can only answer your questions with immediate reactions.

I enclose your letter with questions numbered for the sake of brevity; replies follow:

1. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

   Must be.

2. It has been said that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion.

   No.

3. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live?

   It is not.

4. Do you consider this approach valid?

   What approach?

5. What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, are contributing toward the development of a lasting art?

   Time will show.
6. What, in your opinion, is the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages?
   That is a controversial subject by its very nature.
7. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?
   Eventually; it has been in recent and past history.
8. What are your personal goals as an artist?
   See work first, verbal statements second; attached a recent statement of personal character.
   I trust this may prove of some use to you.

Sincerely yours,

Hugo Weber, Head
Foundation Course
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I regret that due to my absence from the city I was unable to answer earlier your letter of April 11th.

I also regret to say that your questions seem loaded. For instance, I do not consider good modern art to be shapeless and formless. Among bad art there was as much shapeless and formlessness in academic painting of the past century as in bad modern art. Perhaps even more—the modern boys are really tackling the problems of form, and in this connection are reflecting their age. For it is in form, not in content, that you get the true reflection of the age.

As the great French critic, Henri Focillon, said: The function of form is to give definition to the psychological landscape. And nobody is denying the validity of the great works of the past, not even the painters at the Kootz and Parsons Galleries.

Subject matter in painting is not the same as content. Form and content are both equally essential. Subject matter is incidental. You can say the common denominator throughout the ages is good design. You can also say it is the Space-Form problem. The only true function and goal of any artist is to paint exactly as his spirit moves him to express himself. Anything else is a betrayal of his spiritual birthright. While it would be nice if the public was more interested in art than it is, I see no "Dilemma of the 20th Century Artist."

Best of luck with your dissertation.

Sincerely,

Russell Cowles
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Thank you for your very interesting letter of the 21st. Making statements that would be appropriately considered in general, and related to your particular needs would call for expenditure of more time than I could possibly devote to this project. I therefore regret very much that I am unable to cooperate with you in this research.

Yours sincerely,

Ralston Crawford
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Please excuse the delay in answering your letter of April 8th. I was taken to Doctor's Hospital with an acute attack of ulcers, and at my doctor's advice, I was not allowed to receive any telephone messages or mail. When I came home and went through my correspondence, I found that it was way past your deadline.

Your questionnaire is rather challenging and interesting, and I wish I had more time to do a little essay on and around your questions. However, I am going to limit myself briefly and answer them one by one, for your dissertation.

1. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

No. Because we can find these forms, after analysis, in the art of the so-called primitive people. There are excellent examples of this in the graphic representations of the Southwest Indians. For the artist artician who created this work, it has a very intense meaning.

2. It has been said that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion?

I don't agree. Plastic art has to be based on experience which is itself fundamentally based on nature.

3. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live? Do you consider this
approach valid?

We cannot eliminate subject matter for the same reason that everything has to be based on experience. A painting tells a story even in its more abstract plastic form.

4. What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, are contributing toward the development of a lasting art?

There are just two types of art—the good and the bad. That includes not just the people represented by Betty Parsons and Kootz, but by any other gallery in New York—and the lasting paintings will be the good paintings.

5. What, in your opinion, is the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages?

Your questionnaire is a little ambiguous. By the common denominator as I understand it, it is working 18 hours a day. Besides the intense work, not just to see paintings with our eyes, but to feel them with our hearts.

6. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?

Yes. It may happen that the propaganda is good, or, on the other hand, it may propagate a bad ideal, but the only thing that I regret is that American industry is not using more creative artists to propagate their products. That goes also for religion, politics, commerce, etc. The religious art of Europe has put the masses in contact with the great masters. That is not so in the United States.
People depend upon museums and cultural centers to get in touch with the arts in general. But as I said before, industry which is the religion of our times, has not made use of better art in propaganda, so that everybody could be more stimulated, and more ready to appreciate beauty.

7. What are your personal goals as an artist?

If I had a final goal I wouldn't be an artist because the enchantment of being an artist is the impact that the outside world produces in ourselves. Then we express that plastically in whatever media we use. After I have exhausted an impact, a new one arises. Today I may be intrigued with animal life; tomorrow with the construction of ships. I hope this interest never ends.

This is briefly and without much elaboration, in answer to your questions. I may go on a lecture tour this summer to speak on the subject of painting with casein and the mix technique of casein and oils, with demonstrations. I did this last winter, and very successfully, at several universities in Florida. If you continue your classes during the summer, and if you are interested in hearing and seeing one of my demonstrations, I would appreciate it very much if you would let me know.

Sincerely yours,

Julio de Diego
Dear Carl:

Your letter was quite a surprise to me. First I wondered if this was the Fracassini I knew, then how can I ever answer all these high-class questions (64 questions) you ask me? I don't know yet if I can, but for your sake I shall try.

1. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

   Answer: It must be since it came out of our age,—but it does not mean it's good nor the only reflection of our age. It's surely one of them, and it expresses the careless, undisciplined, and get-there-quick attitude of pseudo intellectuals.

2. Is it true that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied?

   Answer: No. But at the same time one cannot be bound to the past to the extent that no departure is permitted.

3. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period of which we live? Do I consider this approach valid?

   Answer: I do not consider this approach valid. The reason for the elimination of subject matter—in other words abstractions—is that it is easier to get something down that does not look like anything. (No responsibility). However, the true artist does not copy subject matter—he only makes use of it to bring out some thought.
4. What do I think the artists of the Betty Parsons - Kootz type? Are they contributing toward the development of a lasting art?

   Answer: I don't know. They may be contributing if they provoke thought in the beholder and are making him a better thinker for or against such art expressions.

5. What in my opinion, is the basic common denominator of art throughout the age?

   Answer: The communication of things felt by one individual to another.

6. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?

   Answer: Yes—all art is propagandistic. It propagandises for the things expressed.

7. What are my personal goals as an artist?

   Answer: To paint a good picture!

             Very friendly

             Frank di Gioia
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am not the right person to answer your questions. First of all I'm not at all sure that the artist is in any more of a Dilemma than he has ever been. Being tempestuous of nature it is certain that he would not be nor thrive under peaceful well ordered conditions if they ever or will ever exist.

My own paintings are illustrations, impressions with contemporary overtones, gathering influences from those about me as well as those who have gone before me. There is no acid bath of validity. I do not decry non-objective work, neither do I feel insecure if I do not understand it. One does not refuse research or experimentation whatever medium of expression it may take. Certainly it does not offend the well balanced individual and the others do not have to look at it unless they choose to do so.

Fortunately many artists of this area have found that industry needs their skill and ideas, making of them practical essential 'factors' in a community, as well as exhibiting painters.

I feel that the opportunity for creative skill was never better. That there is no substitute for fine draftsmanship and painting skill. Would that I had more of it.

This does not answer your questions directly but in a general way gives you the information you desire—I hope.

Best to you,

Phil Dike
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Allow me to acknowledge your letter of April 6 in regard to collecting material for your dissertation, but before getting into this matter, let me state that I think a title such as this, when satisfactorily completed, deserves all of the advanced degrees that will be offered by any institution.

Seriously, I wish that I had time to give sufficient thought to all of the questions you have asked, but unfortunately, I will be away from my office—travelling—until after April 25, except for a few engagements that I must keep here. Such questions as you propose naturally demand a clear definition of terms before any intelligible response can be made. (Then, too, I think there are too many words spoken and written by present-day painters—rather empty words, too). Hoping that I may be of some help, I am sending you a copy of a talk which I made last fall. Certainly in this talk you will find the answer to several of the questions you propose—for example, "The basic common denominator of art throughout the ages", "personal goals as an artist", and so forth.

And who made the statement that in order to create a new art form, the works of the past must be denied? Could he have meant, "defined?" And if he meant "denied", define "denied."

Your question about the elimination of subject matter relating to the period in which we live actually presents the theme for another
dissertation, does it not?

Believe me when I say that I wish I had time to sit down and discuss this matter with you, and I fear that is the only way that you will be able to receive concrete material for such a dissertation. No doubt you will be interested to learn that James Johnson Sweeney is giving a course at the University of Georgia, entitled "Objectives of 20th Century Painting." These lectures have been recorded, but as yet have not been transcribed.

Best wishes,

Lamar Dodd, Head
Department of Art

P.S. I am sure that you have seen the University of Illinois' catalog, where you might find some excellent quotations by our present-day painters.

L. D.
The topic of your dissertation, concerning the frustrations and uncertainties of the artist, is of a particular interest, if not to the general public certainly to the artist himself. A portion of his dilemma is because of that very lack of concern on the part of the public. Always, the necessity to carry on in any creative task, in spite of, and not because of an audience is more than disconcerting. If when we consider this position of the artist in society, we consider as well his situation in Society we then comprehend his immediate dilemma, which surely is economic. On this our civilization could, and should, come to his aid; unless it would fade away into history via an unmarked tomb. The other, which I believe could be called his psychological dilemma, the artist is more or less on his own, certainly so, in so far as his immediate creativity is involved.

This last may be self-containing, so to speak—for instance, a painter, unless he were excessively neurotic, would not likely deplore his inability to create the greatest picture since the death of Christ, or since any other arbitrary date. For we may be sure that shortly after his self-election as an Artist, he begins to correlate some of the esthetic problems and consciously analyze his equipment to proceed with them. He will not worry unnaturally over what he cannot do, but will spend his energies on what he understands he can carry through in relation to his esthetic equipment. Thus,
to an artist burdened with no more than the average inhibitions, a psychological dilemma is not very likely to be more than a temporary one, effecting him particularly and not generally in his esthetic attitudes. In this sense, this dilemma may not exist at all or at best as an unreal one. We do recall that Cezanne was troubled by an inability to "realize", however had he been a poor man we might then recall that he could not "eat". Possibly his inability to realize was to him, a substitute for his ability to "eat".

Broadly speaking, the basic dilemma to all true artists is the fear of being restrained, from creating works of art in the manner and with the attitudes of their own choosing.

In this, consideration has been for the so-called "natural" artist, for the artist whose esthetic has been damaged greatly by neurotic emotionalism, steps out of the field of Art, where he is joined by many other individuals. The economic causation of much mental illness goes without saying.

The glorification of shapelessness in Contemporary Art is not necessarily an inevitable reflection of this age, representative shapes have become a commonplace. The artist is reaching out for new experiences and so should the laiety! There is no safety in banalities.

In interpreting the term "new Art form" in the broadest sense, it would seem that there is no break with the past. Present art is
still painting. There is an introduction of a kind of new subject and nothing more.

The elimination of "subject matter" is an attempt to eliminate literary subject matter—to particularize a particular work, to give it a life independent and intrinsic. Such attempts are indigenous to us in the proportion that our contemporary art is serious, and valid to the extent of our belief that in esthetic expression all is allowed.

The contribution of the Parsons and Kootz group will be lasting to the point that they comply with the statements of the paragraph above.

As to the basic common denominator of art through the Ages an attempt was made to give an answer above. In all great art there has been a desire to create particular works and to give them intrinsic values with, and of the age.

According to my belief, art cannot be propagandistic.

My personal goals as an artist consists of a series of single goals, one for each problem, that is one for each painting. I hope that I will in a measure comply with the prerequisites mentioned.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

In reply to your kind letter of April 5, 1951, I am sending the following "Statement", hoping that it may be of some assistance to you. To commence, it seems to me that my answers to your questions might more properly be headed: "The dilemma of the 20th century gallery visitor" than the dilemma of the artist.

As I see it, contemporary artists have found, for the first time in the history of painting, ways of expression which liberate them from the trammels of traditional representation, opening up the vast new realm of pictorial imagery. There can be no doubt that today, more than ever before, modern artists are working exactly in the ways dictated by their individual formal needs. This, at the end of more than sixty years of continuous art work, is my own, hard-won conviction.

The formlessness and disorder, of which you speak, seems due, in large part, to the experimentation and uninhibited over-production by a number of prominent artists; much of such work, while valid to the artist in his search for more definitive forms, should probably never be made accessible to the public, let alone the unguided collector, as it so very obviously and painfully adds to the existing confusion.

My more personal goals concern themselves with the problem of achieving order of my world-picture. Avoiding contact with the
restlessness of today as much as possible, I am very loth to pass judgment on others. However, in answer to your question relative to artists represented by the Betty Parsons Gallery, I should like to mention two painters of outstanding originality, whose work I have seen there recently: Marie Mencken, with her exquisite "string and stone" paintings; and Bill Congdon, whose concepts, chiefly after motifs from Venice, are abstract, yet extremely close to life in expression and with a beauty beyond mere "representation." Work, such as produced by these two young artists, seems to me advanced far beyond pure experimentation or "exhibitionism" — i.e. of merely personal complexes—. I should like also to mention the work of the sculptor, Helen Wilson, who lately exhibited at the Argent Gallery. She has achieved a similar mastery of abstract plastic form and plastic space without being in any way "representational"; achieving to be all the more expressive for this very reason.

I also want to mention the many notable artists working in non-objective disciplines. In this field, Josef Albers and Piet Mondrian are two of the outstanding figures to me. If, and when, we get back to more tranquil epochs, the visual training which these artists have documented, will be of lasting service to succeeding generations of painters and sculptors. I do not wish unduly to stress the importance of non-objective work as compared to other approaches, but I do believe that it can develop, and
reveal, the potentialities of formal search as no other form can. However, much of work currently to be seen, remains, in my opinion, on the level of glorified interior decoration.

The answer to your question relative to propaganda in art is: NO.

In conclusion: if there is a common denominator of all art throughout the ages, it can only be an ethical, not a formal, one: Sincerity of the aims—whatever they may happen to be. Today's aims are obviously more formal than they have ever been before, even though we can see how the religious aims—for instance—of other periods have produced, in the best cases, extremely strong and significant forms. If shapelessness is the result of formal searching, an analysis of the causes leads into the borderland of psycho-neurotic motivations—into which I do not consider myself competent to delve.

Sincerely,

Lyonel Feininger

235 East 22nd St.
New York 10
April 21st, 1951
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I have your letter of April 6th and as I am terribly busy as chairman of Artists Equity Association, New York Chapter it is hard for me to find enough time to go into the questions you ask. I think however, the chisms in art are so great and so destructive that I must give you a moment.

Sunday April 8 the New York Times book section had a quotation from Goethe which sums up my feeling regarding these matters. You may not have seen this so I quote it to you.

"The deepest the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of skepticism with faith. All epochs that are ruled by faith, in whatever form, are glorious, elevating and fruitful in themselves and for posterity. All epochs, on the other hand, in which skepticism in whatever form maintains a precarious triumph, even should they boast for a moment of a borrowed splendor, lose their meaning for posterity, because no one can take pleasure in wrestling with the study of what is essentially sterile."

(Goethe, Wisdom of Experience.)

Now it seems to me that most of the present research and experimentation in art, abstract and non-objective art, is a wrestling with that study which is essentially sterile.

It is a denial of humanity and of the ground on which we walk. It is true science has made great strides and it has, and perhaps should, influence art. But is the art concept based on microscopic vision or on shapes produced by the splitting of the atom a more spiritual artistic concept than an art based on illustrating the
working of the stomach or of anatomical dissection.

Form color and design are the brick and mortar of art. When works are created by these means, without human ideology or breath, they cannot move or stir. The germ of life has to be planted in the beginning—time will only add crumbling and decay.

Sincerely

Ernest Fiene
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Your letter of April 13 was forwarded to me here in St. Louis, where I have been teaching at Washington University since last September.

I am glad to comment, as best I can, on the questions you pose.

It seems to me, today we are living in the midst of conflict between the old and the new, in regard to political-social-economic relations. The conflict is complex and embraces a wide variety of opinion, but essentially, it is between the exponents of change in the direction of social ownership or a co-operative system and the defenders of the status quo of private profit, private ownership of natural resources, means of production, etc. Political-social-economic relations today, throughout the world, are increasingly fluid. However, they seem to be shaping, at an accelerated pace, toward a culmination of the conflict.

All of this makes for the spread of fear, uncertainty, insecurity and a tremendous variation of standards, among people. Artists are especially affected. Besides being subjected to the above conditions, as are the rest of the people, artists are additionally exposed, through the peripheral status of art today. Art is not an integral profession in our economic system. (I should explain that my remarks are primarily concerned with art in the United States.)
I think, then, that the great variation of standards in political-social-economic relations is reflected in a similar wide variation of standards in art, and in addition, the fact that art is not accepted by most people today (contemporary art) has been an important element in turning many artists within themselves and toward a preoccupation with experiment. The constant experiment of this century has helped produce the bewildering variety of aesthetic trends that exist today. A complex network of conflict is present in the contemporary art field. It seems to cover all phases. It is between art and society, between fine art and commercial art, between modern and traditional forms and concepts. And the polemics are not well defined, generally. Most often, they are intangible and expressed in vague terminology.

The questions you project, Mr. Fracassini, cover various aspects of the present state of flux of contemporary art.

The shapelessness and formlessness in some contemporary art, about which you speak, I don't think is an inevitable reflection of our age, but is one of the many directions of experiment. Experimentation in form and content has produced much that I believe is valid and will be incorporated in our art expression. And, on the other hand, I think much of it leads simply to dead ends.

I don't believe that the works of the past must be denied in order to create new art forms. Of course, sometimes, seemingly sharp mutations may occur, as in the case of the Impressionists, for
instance. New developments in technocracy, social environment, etc. provide the conditions for the development of new art forms. This does not deny the validity of earlier forms, based on different conditions.

Much of contemporary experimentation in art has apparently led to the elimination of subject matter. The development of form for form's sake has certainly increased the depth and range of plastic expression. It may well be that these new developments will be incorporated with new concepts of subject—that the language of visual expression will convey content with means other than representational ones. This question involves audiences as well as artists and can only be solved in a broader arena than the art world.

The artists whose works are exhibited in the Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz Gallery have been highly publicized by art writers and museum directors. They've had the backing of money and sharp business acumen. My opinion of them, varies from artist to artist. I think some of their work is contributing much to contemporary American art. And much is crap. Generally, I consider they're much too highly rated.

I couldn't even say if there has been a basic common denominator of art throughout the ages, let alone what it is. It seems to be over-simplification to look for one.

Art has had and does have many functions. To propagandize has been and is one. Certainly, plastic expression is capable of
projecting propaganda on its own terms, organic to the medium.

As for myself, I wish to continue to explore the contemporary plastic idiom and to try to incorporate it in an expression of my personal position in today's environment. As I mentioned above, this is not my own private problem, to be expressed in a personal language of symbolism or form. As far as I am concerned, I will probably arrive at some form of compromise, if I arrive anywhere. The problem can be ultimately solved, only in conjunction with, not merely other artists, but in conjunction with all sections of the people.

I hope this can be of some use to you.

Sincerely,

Syd Fossum

5280 Washington Blvd.
St. Louis 8, Missouri
April 21, 1951
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

The questions you requested me to answer are very interesting. I hope the following brief answers can be of some use.

1. I do not agree that shapelessness and formlessness are glorified today. Much that is accused of being formless merely looks formless to those who recognize only traditional form. Impressionism and cubism seemed very formless at one time, but now are held up as models of form.

2. In the sense that past values must be rejected, it is necessary to deny past works in order to create a new art form. Of course, one must admit that in terms of their own values, works of the past can be wonderful.

3. Subject matter in the sense of nudes, apples, trees, etc. seem so trivial and trite that it cannot be painted today with conviction or honesty. Painters who perceive this either eliminate the subject entirely, or, as in my own case, simply reject the external world of appearances as a source of inspiration and turn inward to a subjective world for images that seem fresh and meaningful. The latter seems more valid to me and does not exclude figurative images which have a subjective character.

4. The artists you refer to are producing some very fine painting and sculpture. Also they are perhaps the first American artists to whose work is part of an international culture. These
artists do not suffer from the sense of inferiority caused by provincialism. They neither look objectively to Europe for guidance, nor do they arrogantly reject European achievement, as was done in the 1920's. They have developed a cultural atmosphere that permits American artists to function freely on the highest levels in terms of an international culture. This is without precedent. As for the future, by the time our work is accepted by the general public there will arise new artists, searching new art forms, who will deny our work in order to be free to express themselves.

5. This question can only be answered in such a general way that it does not mean much to me. However, I am inclined to agree with those who say expressionism is the common denominator of art.

6. Art and propaganda are mutually exclusive.

7. My goal—Excelsior.

Sincerely yours,

Adolph Gottlieb

130 State Street
Brooklyn 2, New York
April 17, 1951
Dear Sir:

I have your letter on the subject of your projected dissertation on the dilemma of the artist today.

I avoid, where possible, any discussion on the controversial issues of the so-called modern movement in the arts, as I have found it leads to no conclusions, and results only in high blood pressure and ill feeling.

The movement, with its elimination of all standards has thrown open the door to countless incompetents, whose only aim is the shortest cut into the spotlight of vulgar publicity.

I have not answered your questions: I'll leave that to more analytical minds than mine.

There is no time element in Art. It is as old as man's ability to see, and to express his reactions to the gifts of a generous Creator.

Very truly yours,

Gordon Grant
Dear Sir:

Your questions are not easy to answer.

I am not aware of any great amount of "glorification of shapelessness and formlessness" in modern art. The "modern art" of Picasso, Leger, and Matisse does not deny, but is planted firmly upon the past.

Subject matter has been eliminated in modern art generally only in its literary and non-painterly aspects.

Your references to Kootz and Parsons painters is ambiguous. Their artists are not all of one kind. Motherwell at Kootz is good, so are a few at Parsons.

It is true that several shown in these galleries tend to the all-over and decorative sort of abstraction, without decisive composition. This is probably a momentary tendency, and will pass. I refer to Pollock, Brooks (at Peridot) and even Gottlieb.

Very truly yours,

Balcomb Greene
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I wish to express my deep respect for your undertaking a project of clarification of the Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist, which I think is vital to the growth and health of American culture. It seems to me the reason why a thorough study of this condition has not been attempted before by either artists, critics, or museum curators is not only that it is controversial, but it would expose the invested interests of certain wealthy art patrons, the inability of museum curators to guess which contemporary painting would survive, the politics and corruption of the art business, juried exhibitions, competitions, prizes, awards, etc. that the public would be shocked to learn that our most precious aesthetic dreams is nothing but a racket and that the people have been taken for suckers. I put this in the most brutal raw language only to impress you the seriousness of your undertaking if you intend to go into this subject thoroughly.

However, I will attempt to answer your questions as briefly as possible...

1) - The Dilemma of the twentieth century artist is the logical conclusion, it has reached it's dead-end. When art divorces itself from life, or denies any phase of human qualities, it destroys not only all that which is living and its growth, but it also commits suicide. It is an escape from reality. The artist alone is not to
be blamed for this, the environment of insecurity, fear, war, hysteria, disallusionment, lack of faith, and the economic factors helps to create this confusion.

2) - The glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in art only reflects the sterility of those who cannot face life and what it has to offer. Here again our environment is the cause, the intellectuals are living in a cynical era, there seems to be no faith or belief in anything in our society today, all around us are hollow people in quest for money...henceforth formless images is taken in place for glorification (prayer), an escape into the unknown and un-touchable, into a rarefied atmosphere that precious few could attain. From hereon evolves an intellectual snob appeal and a safe distance of any responsibility.

3) - The elimination of subject matter in art is not only an evasion of reality and truth, but a lack of concept of any form related to humanism. Painting is a visual language that embraces a variety of horizons that the eye can read, if you eliminate any one of them, you limit art and its development. To make a virtue of saying nothing in an interesting way and placing more emphasis in the way that nothing had been said, seems to me that "nothing" has any chance of lasting. The elimination of subject matter was a convenient device established when the artists painted aspects of social life that was speaking the truth and somewhat embarassing.
It was a form of censorship against one school of painting in favor of the non-objective. From there-on developed politics, deals and intrigue between the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum, the galleries of abstract painting, the critics art circle, and the production of modern curators that were shipped from Mass, almost to every little museum throughout the United States.

4) - The notion that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied is as ridiculous as anyone trying to reject the existence of one's mother. Art, in order to survive must get its nourishment from the roots of its environment, a fertile environment is enriched by tradition, culture, civilization. The test of the great works of art that has survived throughout the ages had a human quality that remained deep within all us, it was universal and direct, these paintings still retain their creative sparks of brushstrokes by masters who were sincere, and sincere, and did not try to pan off any bag of tricks.

The question, can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art. Let's take some names, Leonardo da Vinci, Giotto, Fra Angelico, El Greco, Durer, Cranach, Cellini, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Murillo, Velasquez, Masaccio, these men were propagandists for the church, now have they produced art? Here are a few more propagandists who had something to say, Daumier, Goya, Van Gogh,
The works of these men will remain as part of the world's treasures long after the non-objective artists are gone and forgotten, along with their sponsors.

I have never been moved to write so long a letter, but if this will help you in your dissertation to clear the air and awaken artists and the public, I feel it would have been worth my time. The reason that I feel so strongly against this non-objective art movement, beside the fact that it is neither experimental, or has it contributed anything of any value to the art world, it is deceptive and irresponsible. What is most shocking, is the way it is organized by a combine of museums and gallery dealers to sell this type of art to the American people and rejecting any other school of painting that does not please their fancy. This repressive action is not generally known, the artists who feel strongly about this, and there are a great many, fear to speak out or protest, the threat of being labeled and blacklisted is very serious, this too exists.

You will notice that even paintings with social content have not been exhibited in the past few years, freedom of expression for art is in reality a myth.

In closing, I wish to say that people are not accepting the phony formless scribbles and smears as art, and they never will. Having spent the past three years in Europe, I found a great reaction
against abstract art had set in and where a number of famous abstract artists have returned to painting realism. It won't be long before we in the United States will start copying Europe again.

With my best wishes to you for your undertaking, I am

Sincerely yours,

William Gropper
Dear Sir:

My reaction is in general a 'tolerant' one. I do not condemn easily, my attitude is more like being a "naturalist." I am not a crusader with a moral hatchet.

It is indeed an interesting question. I am sorry not to be able to answer more in full as I am about leaving for Europe this coming Wednesday. Maybe I will learn a little more what is going on there in the old country . . . in that old worn-out tired brain of Europe. . . I dunno. . . really I don't know. . . haven't been abroad since 1935.

A man who is able to answer your questions more perfectly as I can do (with certain Katholic convictions) is the great critic Hans Sedlmayer in Vienna in his book; Verlust der Mitte. . .

Sincerely yours,

George Grosz
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I shall try to answer your questions without attempt at a formal order as I sometimes do in class.

1. Shapelessness inevitable reflection etc.

Not at all. The creative artist does not and cannot escape the very real present. Unless he is emotionally ill he does not attempt an escape to the past. It is his artistic responsibility to discover new forms, new shapes, new awareness adjusted to his time. He respects the past, at times rediscovers certain ideas that interest him that find an echo in time. The past to the present—continuity.

2. Subject matter.

Subject matter was inevitable to the ancients. The traditional artist with some minor instances created in the image of the Diety. His studio, a workshop using an assembly belt line of works of art. The social changes of the nineteenth century created a world of multiplicity rather than the oneness of the church. So it was logical to discard accepted classical themes for the discovery of natural observation: light of a landscape, the common shape denominator of a common apple, the necessary destruction of the rules Uccello's perspective, and in so doing the popular visual conception of naturalism. The picture space of two dimensions, space itself, shapes moving in space because shapes are space. The awareness of the individual as a human being and a creative force
who possesses a core of unlimited fancy to be disciplined with form and tempered with a new sensibility. Is it lasting—modern art is here to stay.

3. Can art be propaganda?
If it is created in the spirit of freedom.

4. What are your goals?
Works that contain the exuberance and the organic essence and the unity of life itself not merely a representation. Free from restraint, a shape imagery determined by my inner life and moving in space. I cannot deny my antecedents and in my newer pictures because of the purity of means, shapes are beginning to appear that bear kinship to my Italian forbears. I wish to paint with my own sense of order, my own logic, my own autobiography. Does this make sense? I hope it does!

Sincerely

Louis Guglielmi
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

First there are two things on which the artist draws, his own experiences and his patronage. Should patronage become demanding to the point of compromise, the art suffers. Should experiences be thwarted and perverted by the persuasiveness of the avant-garde a band wagon psychology permeates the field. In our industrial age the artist, more than anyone else, works as an individual, which allows for the greatest degree of withdrawal. We live in troubled and frustrating times, where security seems so tenuous that people are afraid to freely express themselves. This is not a climate of affirmation and I personally feel non-representative painting is a negative expression of this period. I think it is an anti-humanist approach and I hasten to add that humanism includes everything that helps man to better understand his world in order that it might flower. In this context: should non-representative art have heightened our interest and understanding of any of the formal aspects alone, I'd grant it that degree of validity. But despite claims to the contrary, it does appear to be a fragment of art and it is accordingly limited. Established works of the past can never be denied. One is inexorably bound to tradition and this fused with an understanding of present day experiences must necessarily suggest the future. When individualism pretends to utterly transcend the past it is indeed rampant. Giotto was given the job of painting the life of St. Francis by a church which was making a direct appeal
to the people. The people were illiterate farmers whose greatest possessions were their flocks and whose common circumstance was poverty. St. Francis, the son of wealth forsook his worldly goods and took the vows of poverty—becoming the patron saint of the birds and beasts or if you will, the domestic animals. An incomparable work of art and propagandistic from its very inception. All works of art have to be considered within their context, time, place, etc. Thus they are implicitly contemporary, projecting and refining attitudes and experiences of their day. Art is order, truth, and conviction, forever fused with all of the heightened formal aspects of the craft. It is basically a people's culture rather than an individual cult. It has to do with communication and knowledge rather than obscurantism, the instinctive, the automatic. From my point of view, non-representative art seems accordingly to be a fragment of art, a great display of the inherent possibilities of the media alone. It is often exquisite, delightful and attractive within its limitations. The sheer phenomena of materials is exploited with pretentious abandon and in many cases with absolute disregard of craft. Without any exaggerated sense of dedication, I would hope that my painting might, within the limited audience of painting, help man better understand his piece of the world. That the liberating factors involved in painting might reach others and add that extra dimension to every day living.
By the way Motherwell is to a great extent the theorist of the non-representative school and has done an amount of writing involving this point of view. Wittenbaun has published some of this. The Modern Museum has just issued a pamphlet of the symposium on abstract art with the talks of several leading exponents. Also, Harvard has just held an affair and is in process of publishing a piece in which Oliver Larkin and Meyer Shapiro, Ben Shahn and Robert Motherwell took part.

Best wishes for your big job which I think is most important.

Cordially,

Robert Gwathmey
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Being myself one of the artists of your concern which you consider as exemplified by some of the members of the Betty Parsons Gallery and the Kootz Gallery, I can only advise you to reconsider the terms "Form" and "Shape" as applied to "an object" or to the "art form" of a work.

The first cannot create a work of art without the art form, which through itself can exist without an object. There is no such thing as "The Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist." The Twentieth Century Artist has only used the broom of good reasoning to throw out all the coagulated wisdom of the Academy. The Twentieth Century Artist uses the warmth and the fire of his blood and the sensitivity incorporated in every string of his nerves to inflame his message into the reality of a work of art. Its reality is its Form.

I hope I have made the issue clear.

Sincerely yours,

Hans Hofmann
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am sorry that I can not answer your questions in detail, as I am very slow of thought and in the expression of the thought, and I can not give the necessary time to it just now.

You will find enclosed however, a carbon copy of a foreword that I wrote for the current Corcoran Biennial Exhibition at Washington.

It may give you an inkling of what I think, about contemporary painting in general.

I hope it will help you, but please be careful not to misquote me, or to quote me out of the context, without so explaining.

Sincerely yours,

Edward Hopper

P.S. Will you please return the carbon copy when you have finished with it.
Dear Mr. Fracassini,

I found your letter of April 12th touched on pertinent questions, to which many of us today seek an answer, for it is quite difficult to be objective with such super-subjectivity with which many of our present day artists are concerned. At no other time has there been such a concerted attempt for artists to crawl into themselves, so to speak, to delve into their subconscious (popularized by psychiatry), depend upon "automatism" to create mystic symbols—to purge themselves completely, as they claim, of all outside and material influences. Aided and abetted by the trade press, whether for fear of being accused as being considered "old hat" or hypnotizing themselves into reading meanings where none were intended. The following answers constitute my opinions:

First, as to the "glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art", I believe this is very much a product of our present day insecurity and disturbed society. It is not so much that this art has no shape or form (one cannot conceive art without shape or form any more than one can conceive nothingness), but the obliteration of any resemblance to recognizable objects is a denial of the harsh realities surrounding us, escaping into a pretty little world of sweetness and light, and taking refuge in mysticism and complicated ratiocination. I think it is no accident that immediately after World War I, Dadaism took root, nor is it accidental that a state of anarchy and chaos exists in art today.
As to "denying the art of the past", it is nonsense to think that one can deny it. One does not create out of nothingness. Our entire known history (in art as in anything else) proves that. One may as well try to conceive a physics or a chemistry denying the past! Such a denial would inevitably lead us right back to cave-dwelling—and even worse, ultimate extinction.

That does not mean there is no danger in taking an art form, which was appropriate in a given time, bodily out of its context, so to speak, and dragging it in and making it suit our contemporary conditions (incidentally as attempted by the imagists, pictographists, symbolists, etc. at the Kootz and Parsons galleries, who shamelessly and deliberately appropriate Egyptian hieroglyphics and symbols) as the so-called traditional painters or, more bluntly, the sterile academicians are doing today. Regarding "elimination of subject matter as indigenous to our present time," I think to answer that above.

As to some of the artists as exemplified by the Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, I feel that their art cannot be lasting because they are out of step, or rather try to deny the dynamics of our social direction. I think it is an axiom—"reject life and it will soon reject you."

Art throughout the ages served the needs of man, not through negation, but toward a greater understanding of life around them. In painting and sculpture, the plastic means used are not contra-
dictory to any age or place (the flat forms of Persia and Japan, the expressionism of the Coptic and the so-called Primitives and African sculptures, the calm convention of the Egyptians and Archaic— from the simplest elemental forms of the most primitive tribes to the grandiose designs of the Renaissance)—it never outraged the laws of balance or space, nor did it ignore the technological advances of a given time.

Is art propagandistic? I believe that from what I've said above, one may conclude that art is always propagandistic. As in all propaganda, sides are taken, and the philosophy of escape and mysticism is no less propaganda than the frankly propagandistic religious paintings, depicting the joys of heaven and the terrors of hell. I believe the non-objectivists are engaging in a propaganda to aid (consciously or not) those interests which benefit by a condition of confusion and obscurantism.

As to my personal goals, that is a very difficult question to answer. I'm not without contradictions—I am subject to the same confusions existing around me and to the many extraneous influences. One cannot escape it, but only try to clarify one's position and choose sides. You might have seen my statement in the University of Illinois catalogue of Contemporary American Paintings. I've had no reason up to now to change or alter my opinion: which is that while one should not be literal in the rendition of any given subject, yet the reality of the subject is of the utmost importance—
at the same time trying to understand and utilize the plastic conclusions drawn from abstraction—but without falling prey to the theory that abstraction (that is space, volume, color, mass etc.) for its own sake is sufficient in itself.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph Kaplan
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

They are vital questions you have asked me about art, and a proper reply to them would require just such a book as Professor Robert D. Field, of the Tulane University Art Department, and I have under consideration. I will try to answer your questions in the space of a page.

I do believe that "the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age." But I would qualify this by stating that, more accurately, it is a reflection of the limited class patronage upon which the commercialism of our age has made the artist dependent. Our art, like the class to which it of necessity panders, exhibits all the signs of decadence of a moribund social, political, and cultural era.

The elimination of subject matter is consistent with the escape from reality that modern art affords. This elimination is no more valid to art than it would be to literature or to speech. In fact, the utter discredit into which "story-telling" has fallen deprives the artist of that motive for his eloquence without which literature, for example, could not exist.

I know neither the Betty Parsons Gallery nor Kootz; but I know too much about schools of art that I assume to be comparable.

The basic common denominator of art, as of all means of communication, is intelligibility. "To whom?", one is prompted to ask. And the answer is, "To all people." For we know all people to be
potentially of the same common humanity. The common denominator of art throughout the ages is that humanity and all that it concerns. It follows, therefore, that all true art is propaganda for life. It is a great awakener of mankind to the values and the vast potentialities of life. And such an awakening, if it be real, is translated into action.

To return to the subject of your dissertation, "The Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist," and translating "dilemma" into "problem", I would say that his problem is survival. And those who, consciously or unconsciously, have capitulated to the conditions of contemporary patronage have not survived. And of the rest, God only knows how many mute inglorious Miltons will have lived and died before this rotten era comes to its inevitable conclusion.

As to my personal goals as an artist, they are just to try, through earning my living at whatever means presents itself, to keep on functioning as the realist that I am, a propagandist for the beauty of the world in which we live.

When you complete the text of your dissertation, I would be deeply appreciative of having a copy, or at least being permitted to read it.

Good luck to you!

Faithfully yours,

Rockwell Kent
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

The questions you put in your recent letter would require a rather lengthy monograph for complete answers; however, since your subject interests me I can answer briefly, as time allows:

1. "Glorification of shapelessness and formlessness" is only a small and minor part of contemporary art, in my opinion. In fact, the outstanding character of experiments in 20th century art is that the search for form in all its aspects and meanings, is of prime importance.

2. I do not believe that all works of the past must be denied to create a new art: a search for art qualities of all times and ages is essential to the complete creative approach to art today by the thorough and serious artist.

3. I would not attempt to comment on the group of artists represented at any one or two dealers' galleries; some are more important than others, and each artist has done both good and inferior work. I would say, however, that there have been several instances of excessive or extravagant "build-up" in the promotion of artists' work that supposedly represents the "avant garde". Concerning this, only time will tell which is worth—or "advanced".

4. An important basic common denominator in art throughout the ages is good design: but the vision of the artist must also be in
evidence. See enclosed catalogue of a recent show: the introduction and other comments refer to this element in art works.

5. Art may at times be propagandistic and also valid art,—providing the art qualities are present and predominate. The best illustrations of this which occur to me are in some of the works of Goya and Daumier. However, even some of the works of older civilizations have strong elements of propaganda (for example, in ancient Egypt).

6. My personal goals as an artist would not necessarily typify all artists' goals: at present the work I do with art media is either for the purpose of lecture-demonstrations; or for my own relaxation and enjoyment. I have no great ambitions to make a name for myself by doing art work; but I am concentrating, in my present position, on presenting and interpreting art to the community.

Sincerely yours,

Dwight Kirsch
Director
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Quite a long paper could be written if I were to answer your questions as thoroughly as I would like to.

I will say briefly that when expression in art departs from its ever-recurrent source of inspiration, which is life and nature, it becomes academic. That includes all theories, formulas and thoughtless attempts to merely copy nature without design. Today a large number of people are painting empty things which they confuse with simplicity. In many, a lack of integrity and an eagerness to be considered "avant-garde" results in dull aridity. This academic trend is no better than the older one of sentimental representation, or pompous heroics. To quote Goethe "All theories are gray; for greenery and golden fruit, one must go to the tree of life." It is also a bit ridiculous to assume that to create a "new art form" (whatever that is), the works of the past must be denied. The writer of that idea may as well claim that he didn't come out of his mother's womb. As to "subject matter" even the so-called non-objective artists inevitably use subject matter. I find their subject matter uninteresting and limited. Without copying nature, which is impossible anyway, selection can be made for emotional or any other expression out of the infinite variety provided by life and nature. I prefer human motifs and forms and the marvel of them. The artist makes his selection through a warm awareness, a sensitive
choice of forms and colors which, combined with his sense of design, makes possible the creation of a beautiful order, which is a work of art. His mind and heart with deep humility, guide a practiced hand which, without timidity, uses all of the technical faculties in the creation of a work of art.

The Twentieth Century artist, if he is a real artist feels no "dilemma" nor propaganda, nor any extraneous, irrelevant element, when he is absorbed in feeling what he sees and expressing the wonder of his vision in his work.

Very truly yours,

Leon Kroll
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Your letter of April 8 was mailed to Austin, Texas, and was forwarded to me here, where I am teaching in the Department of Art of the University of California, having severed my relations with the University of Texas. I submit the following in response to your questions.

I believe the present emphasis upon purely abstract art has its roots in our contemporary life and draws nourishment from a variety of human thoughts and actions throughout our world. That ours is a period of great transition seems a certainty. That individual customs, habits, beliefs must therefore undergo great change is axiomatic. Therefore, it would be surprising indeed if contemporary art followed old patterns at all. The search for new and expressive forms is always valid and provides the very breath of life to art itself.

Whether it be purely abstract or not, art has been and will be an organic, unified, and meaningful expression of what the artist feels, sees, and knows. As in the past, these qualities will be found in the best of all contemporary manifestations, despite many verbalized creeds and explanations which may seem contradictory. Any new tributary to the great stream of art must in essence be of similar substance to blend with it and flow on into the future—the sediment sinks to oblivion.
Art is a small word but a large world which embraces a great variety of visual expressions, the validity of each being commensurate with the sincerity and skills of the creator.

The "dilemma" of the Twentieth Century Art is, then, simply the dilemma of the world. Its art will reflect its condition.

Sincerely yours,

Ward Lockwood
Professor of Art
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Your letter has reached me during a very busy and upset period, so my reply will have to be somewhat brief and I will try to make my point in as simple a manner as possible, so please don't think that I am not interested in your project if I seem brief, for as a matter of fact I feel very keenly all that you seek for in your questions.

If you know my work at all you will then know that I cannot possibly believe in the so-called glorification of shapelessness as an inevitable reflection of our age. That seems to me an excuse for ineptness and lack of technique and basic training, which is only the result of hard work, and hard work is often not to the liking of many self styled artists. I do believe that new forms in art can be created, but to deny the past is also to deny the present. I will not say the future because the future is something that does not exist. To blame the age we live in for a great deal of the art output seems to me rather childish and somewhat unintelligent. It is a very well known fact, and we have history that proves it, that both the 14th and 15th centuries were in many ways barbaric. Murder was not feared in those days and a great many kinds of social revolutions took place during Michelangelo and Leonardo's days. We know that Savonarola was burned in the Piazza della Signoria to the delight of many onlookers, so we can believe that
the age was in its own way a brutal and a chaotic one, but does the work of Art of those centuries reflect that? A student of the Italian renaissance knows better. Nothing more constructive and more beautiful in art has yet appeared. So it seems rather flippant to me to say that the age dictates the art. Of course I admit that the age influences the art, but I also do believe that an artist should be able to rise above his age and not be weighed down by its ugliness and sordidness, unless of course one believes that one must necessarily photograph the age, which is not my own personal belief.

It's hard to say what I think is the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages. That is a pretty profound and almost prophetic question and I will not venture to answer. My own philosophy is that art is a necessary emotional outlet, and it seems to me that human emotions have not varied very drastically over many centuries. There are a great many basic emotions that do not change.

It is possible for a work of art to be propagandistic and still be valid art, but only when the approach to the subject has been an aesthetic one and not merely a chronicle one.

It seems to me that in this brief summary I have stated my own personal goals. I believe that art should be a genuine outpouring of a human being, but that the same human being should have learned his craft with the same painstaking way that any other craftsman has. Merely to feel something and a desire to say something vital
is not enough. One must be in complete possession of his tools and not allow his clumsy lack of craftsmanship to stand in the way of a clarified expression of his personal beliefs.

Thanking you for asking me for my opinions, which I hope can be of some help to you, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Lg. Lucioni
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

The questions you ask in your letter of April 21 are most interesting, but not too easy to answer. The following is the best I can do, hoping that it may help towards your needs.

**Answer to Question 1:** I do not believe that what you call "shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art" are shapes and forms that are not necessarily shapeless and formless. They are not that, even if by implication you relate them to the known, accepted and repeated forms of the past. They are indeed an attempt towards new shapes and new forms, so that contemporaneous man can reinstate his creative ability, and assert them as best he can with pride and dignity, and without the shameful sense of guilt that he is an artisan continuing to make carbon copies of wornout shapes and embalmed forms.

**Answer to Question 2:** I do not believe that what you call shapelessness and formlessness is being glorified. Glorification is reserved only for the dead. I believe that creative efforts towards new shapes and new forms are being extolled, and rightfully so, as heralds of fresher visions and new meanings.

**Answer to Question 3:** I do not share the opinion that in order to create a new art form the work of the past must be denied. A new form is not an invention. It is the result of the re-examination and re-evaluation of an established, but at times moribund, one.

**Answer to Question 4:** In essence, no intelligent person would say, without putting a lie on his own lips, that the "elimination of
subject matter seems to be indigenous to the period we live in". It
depends, however, on what is meant by "subject matter." The Puritanic
sacredness of woman, for instance, or the affinity between love and
understanding are subject matter, too. The definition depends on
the vision of man's contemplative preoccupations; in the recent past
he was preoccupied with interpreting the universe around him, but
modern man seems to be feverishly preoccupied in expressing the uni­
verse within him.

Answer to Question 5. None of the artists associated with the
galleries you mention are criteria for the present discussion. I
thought you were interested in giants!

I shall attempt to answer your last questions in one: Before
the printing press, the camera, the cinema, the radio and television,
the graphic and pictorial arts were representative, didatic, exemplary,
anecdotal, etc. They were the only and most impressive means of
communication of symbols, dogmas, facts, ideas, and feelings. Came
a day when these were communicated better, faster, and more concisely
through the means of the printing press, the camera, the cinema,
the radio and television. They represent the magic which once was
the domain of the artist in revealing the mysteries and realities
of the visible universe. These new instruments of communication
have not proven, however, that they can well express the mysteries
and the realities of the visible universe within man. I believe that contemporaneous directions in art can well express that reality. I believe that art must not try to repeat what mechanical instruments can do better. I believe that the goal of all art has been to try to communicate what other means cannot communicate.

With best wishes for your thesis,

Very sincerely yours,

Peppino Mangravite,
Departmental Representative,
School of Painting and Sculpture
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

In answer to your letter of April eighth: The statement on my art convictions which most completely answers your questions was published in the Magazine of Art in November, 1947. I'm sure you have a copy available. The article is titled, "My Theories and Techniques". I enclose, as well, two recent statements which also bear on the questions you wish answered. Sorry that I can't go into further elaboration at this time—I find your project a very provocative one, and if I had the time, would be glad to answer you at length.

Please credit me as the source if you use any direct quotations!

Best wishes to you in the preparation of your dissertation—I'd like to see it when it is published.

Sincerely,

Boris Margo
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

In response to your letter of the 7th of May I offer the following thoughts.

The Dilemma of the 20th Century Artist.
1. The decline and loss of The TRADITION.
2. A new tradition founded on Picassoism
3. A. - incompetent rendering of every form
   B. - a Parody of the older art.
   C. - The breaking up of the older forms produces, new, unrecognizable forms.
   D. - The breakdown is hailed as the New Art, and the more incomprehensible the more it is hailed.
   E. - Perversion of traditional media accompanied the breakdown—(painting with swizzle etc.)

The worshippers of this new art are either—

A. Ignorant "intellectuals"
B. People who are aware of the Great Art, but hate it.
C. The Beholder is flattered by being able to bring something to the picture whereas He can bring nothing to a great picture.

I have known Betty Parsons well for years. She draws herself charmingly and childishy. Her knowledge of the Louvre in spite of long residence in Paris, is very poor. She is perfectly sincere, in her point of view, for she is ignorant.
The critics and the backers (collectors) of this art are ignorant. The technique of smart advertising is used, effectively and the only virtue of the school is that it has destroyed light and shadow painting. It may have returned respect for the picture plane—but on the plane sits nothing, or damned little.

Our age of course and its many conflicts confuses. For instance I am an American and am warned that I should not paint like an American but like a Frenchman, or a cave man or a Negro. Kootz and Parsons are destructive enough and what they are giving to us is no improvement on the failures of yesterday. The Great Tradition is sculptural, not flat, representational, not unrepresentational, substantive not substanceless. I teach the Renaissance tradition and anatomy.

Sincerely,

Reginald Marsh
Your first question —

Regarding the shapelessness in certain contemporary works—
There have always been painters whose works had a certain shock value and little else.

What it has to do with our age I've no idea.

I've read and heard it has to do with scientific discovery, atom age, general confusion and a host of chaotic ideas.

As for the works of the past being denied one may paint without reference to past, I think it doubtful that anything great would develop that way, unless a new genius of tremendous stature came in to being.

I've no idea what works Betty Parsons and Kootz Gallery sponsor at this time.

A basic common denominator for works of paintings has been a form of ecstasy that communicates itself to the receptive spectator.

Works of art may be propaganda if the painter is good enough.

My goal—I want to paint good pictures.

Karl Mattern
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

In answer to your letter I will gladly give you my opinion relating to your various questions and hope that they may be of use to you.

1. I would say "yes" to your first question, but only in the minds of those who are swayed easily, of whom there are many. This applies to the glorifiers as well as to the art practitioners whose works are formless and shapeless. Any work of art must have shape and form, and the form and shape must have definite relation to life as we see it, know it, and as we respond to it.

2. The past cannot be denied, it is the foundation on which progress is built. The manner or form of expression is conditioned by many factors—religious thought, scientific discoveries, such as the laws of perspective, the knowledge of anatomy, the discovery of the color combinations of the spectru, etc.

3. The elimination of subject matter is symbolic of a loss of faith in the validity of the past and an admission of spiritual impotence. This is a defeatist attitude. Physical exuberance is mistaken for spiritual vitality. The members of the Galleries you mention cannot contribute anything to the development of a lasting art because of the reasons mentioned above. When the novelty of their expression wears off, we are left empty, both in spirit and in mind. Not so with the masters of the past, not so with the primitive cave
dwellers. We know what they looked at, we know what they felt. We recognize ourselves in their art. They did not mystify their contemporaries, they do not mystify us. Their expression was a natural one.

4. The basic denominator of art in its highest form throughout the ages has been the use of color, form, and related space in reference to the subject matter or the incident portrayed (with its involvement with subject matter). The personality of the individual artist gives life and vitality to his work. When form and color are not related to the subject matter or to an incident, then the result is at best mere decoration, depending for its existence on a changing taste, but in itself devoid of any spiritual life or content. To this level much of modern art has degenerated, but it is publicized by interested persons as "art in its purest and highest form".

The irrational and confused outpourings of the subconscious are considered the last word by many of today's so-called authorities on art.

5. As to art in propaganda, "yes" fine art can be used, but its quality would depend on the character and personality of the artist.

6. My personal goal as an artist? That, for me, is difficult to explain—art is intuitive, the emotion finds its balance in the mind, and quality is not confined to any particular form of expression.

Sincerely yours and with best wishes,

Paul Mommer
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Answering all your queries is a large order. I'll do my best. A person senses things that are hard to put into words. That is especially true, I feel, of one engaged in creative work.

In answer to your first question concerning "the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness of contemporary art," I'd have to take issue with the premise itself, and contend that there is as much form and shape as ever, but because it is not always used with the object, it tends to confuse and mystify.

One may speak of denying the art of the past, but one cannot ignore it. Like it or not, we cannot deny experiences, and for the artist, works of art are ineradicable experiences. To paraphrase, your "new art" is poured from an old vessel.

Perhaps subject matter has been eliminated so that the "pure essence" of art can be captured; line, form, shape, and color; and these be made to function independent of any tie to physical reality. One hears talk of "a painting existing on its own terms." Why this approach seems to be indigenous to this period, I'll have to leave to abler minds than mine. I do consider this approach valid, in that I do not believe we can confine the limits of art. Perhaps this seeking to portray "inner states", "the inner core of reality", this rejection of the surface aspect of reality, will lead to something important. I do believe we owe these seekings our interested
and unprejudiced attention. And that is what I am according the Parsons-Kootz artists. What they are contributing to the development of a lasting art, I cannot evaluate at the present time.

As to what is the basic common denominator of art through the ages—that's a tough one. I would say it hinges on the artists' aesthetic and plastic insight into the nature of his subject, and his ability to push it past school and style into the realm of timelessness. I certainly do believe art can be propagandistic and still be valid. I would apply to it, the criteria listed above; and off hand, I would like to list Goya and Daumier (and there would be others) whose work very often contained effective propaganda and a valid art expression.

In trying to state my personal goals as an artist, may I borrow a phrase from Papa Cezanne, because it seems to describe best what I am after. I am, in short, trying "to realize my sensations" and those sensations have in the main concerned themselves with the effect a urban-industrial city like New York has on me—on my painterly sensibilities. The structures that man puts up excite me. There are formal elements of form, line and color, and psychological overtones of function and portent in the buildings, bridges, tanks, chimneys, elevated structures, etc., that I daily see about me, which have furnished and continue to furnish themes for my work. Although I take liberties with my
subject, I try in the main to let the subject indicate the means and manner of expression. When my work falls short, I believe it does so from failure to understand the possibilities of that which I paint.

I do not consider myself the most articulate of painters, but I do hope that this all proves useful to you. May I wish you the best of luck!

Sincerely yours,

Arthur Osver
He who denies modern value of good art of the past is just insensible to art.

Very many reject the existence of any normality of reaction before art. Their reasons: many are insensible to masterpieces. The trouble with those theorists is that truth is not a social, statistical, phenomenon. When everybody is wrong—nobody is right: that's all! When the universal consent was that Sun revolves around Earth, were they right?

If we wish to seriously talk aesthetics, we must, by force, admit the necessity of a decent amount of normality in visual, psychological, mental reaction before art: in the author-emitter and in the receiver.

Very few receivers are entirely normal, many are partially normal, (many are distorted by distorting education, conditioning propaganda, etc...) Today, "distorted emitters" find audience amongst the similarly distorted receivers. But it is only chapelle, tribal or fashion art. Top art is based on normal reactions—which are universal and perennial.

There is a basic common denominator of art through the ages: the universality and perenity of great art of any countries or times: because a work of art, to be great, has to be based on basic, lasting needs. The rest is fashion or...sickness.

Sorry, Mr. Fracassini, I have to be so short.

Sincerely

Ozenfant
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am afraid that I cannot be of very much help to you in sending you replies to your questions contained in your letter of April 7th. I feel that to adequately reply to your request for information which you will use in writing your dissertation "THE DILEMMA OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ARTIST" I would have to give a great deal more time to the answers than I have at the moment. However, I would like to suggest that you contact Mr. Allen S. Weller, of the University of Illinois, who has written a very excellent summary as an introduction to the catalogue, "American Painting, University of Illinois, 1951" which has been published in relation to the University's exhibition of contemporary American painting. Perhaps you have already received this catalogue or information about it, but in it a great many artists have stated their attitude toward painting and Mr. Weller has written a magnificent article on "What the Painter Thinks."

Briefly, however, I might say that I find the work in America today alive and interesting. I feel that painters such as Baziotes, Motherwell, Pollock and Stamos are all men of creative imagination and are contributing stimulating and provocative ideas for consideration. It has been my experience that it is almost impossible to judge work of the present and that time alone proves the validity of creative work. What interests me particularly in American
painting today is that it is not the content in the work which makes it successful or unsuccessful, but it is judged primarily on the art of painting alone. Certainly art today is not limited and because of our democratic ideals will continue to be unfettered by any one school or group.

I send you best wishes for the success of your project.

Sincerely,

William Palmer
Director
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

During a long talk with Mr. Mangravite a few days ago he showed me your letter about the State of Confusion in contemporary art—and read me his answer, a copy of which he promised to send me. Because I have written a great deal on this same situation, he suggested I send you some data. So, here it is. Note especially page twenty of the reprints. This is from the new CRITICAL COURSE on THE MODERN RENAISSANCE IN THE U. S. A.—which features artists who are not "emotional inebriates" or "pre-Stone-Age beginners" or ABC boys.

Your letter, to both of us, is significant as showing the doubts and confusions which result from the incredible honoring of this Cult of the Beginner. It is fine that you did something about it.

I am writing an article about Mangravite for this Course; that is why I was having the conference with him.

Cordially,

Ralph M. Pearson

See my article in April 15th Art Digest and one in this month's Progressive Education. Also have one in April and May Design.
Dear Mr. Fracassini, the older I get the bigger the question mark etc.,

I'm tempted to duck the whole issue with Montaigne's "Quién sabe?" Who knows...don't know why as a Frenchman he put it in Spanish? unless for emphasis..or an old Spanish saw...I numbered your questions to have a little order if less sense.

1. It seems to me our age has more definite shapes than ever...autos, airplanes, blgs., etc. at least the Victorian jigsaw etc. out for the nonce...therefore the more shapeless the more out of tune with our times.

2. Courbet was credited with "Brulez le Louvre"...he meant the copyists etc. all great has been a sort of bucket brigade tempered by national tradition etc...

3. No.

4. It seems to me there's a pendulum in art, music, literature, etc., and sometimes the clock runs down... Every little while an artist writer or musician neglected for a century or so is exhumed as really contemporary in spite of the march of time...this also true for "way of life"...licentious to prudish...slack.

We have had so many realistic chromos etc. mementos et al the swing is to the abstract or steel girder or checker board design not to mention the subconscious expression etc.

5. The most valid approach for a painter I suppose is to know what he has in him if anything instead of just keeping up with
the Joneses...I remember filling out a blank "what is your approach etc"? I approach the canvas on the hoof holding the brush lightly but firmly in right hand etc...a lot of people like to climb on the band wagon of anything...politics, paint, literature.

6. Betty Parsons is a friend of mine mais les amis de nos amis ne sont pas toujours de nos amis...i e friendly to our optic nerves...everyone has a right to exude his own lava in his own way or even someone else's if he wants to...(Painting doesn't make any noise like playing the trombone) and no one (this side a dictatorship) is forced to look and praise...Time usually winnows out the chaff from the grain or the chafe from the groin...

7. Living art versus dead art...can be almost anything from a spool to (with the Modern Museums blessing) a pearl handled shoe shining chair etc.

Those are pearls that were his shoes...

8. The renaissance boys were both illustrators and propagandists for the illiterate of the church...which produced plenty of fine art...our "regional" art as limited as the precinct it was painted in...if that's all there is to it...

9. Desire doth often outstrip performance...we'd all like to paint something worthwhile be it archaic abstract realistic sentimental austere etc, etc. call it anything you like, and let the paint fall where it may—
Well I've covered the page,

1' art d'ecrire
enriu dire-

Yours sincerely,

Waldo Pierce

Painters should paint and let the writers write.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am enclosing data you requested in recent letter to me. I would thank you to acknowledge receipt of same and inform me where same may be published.

Thanking you, I remain

Sincerely yours

Leo Quanchi

Q. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

You do not qualify shapelessness nor formlessness. No such category is prevalent in contemporary art except where the specific individual is concerned. He may bring about through ignorance a doctrine of sophistry, or through incompetence a doctrine of terms, and through a miscarriage of the function of creation, a spurious school of painting. It is singular how this meaningless state can reiterate itself. In the final analysis, there is no school, no sophistry, no doctrine of terms—only good and bad art.

Q. It has been said that in order to create a new art form, the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion?

The works of the past can be denied only in the sense that to readjust their metaphor to contemporary expression would be but a
futile and abortive repetition akin to the use of buggy wheels on the automobile of today, or as though we had remained in a static state for several generations. True, we must be cognizant of their valued aesthetic contributions but in the same sense as those made by Cezanne to the inception of Cubism, Neo-Plasticism, etc. The artist of today can be authentic only when he creates new modes of seeing, only when he is original.

Q. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live? Do you consider this approach valid?

Varied civilizations, varied cultures. These are the terms of life which have existed for many centuries. Within the domain of contemporary life, the particular form in art is approaching its end and that of the new metaphor has arrived. The particular form as a requirement of past generations less scientific than ours was quite acceptable, but in this day of relentless scientific experimentation and development, it is not only incompatible but serves no purpose in the analogous evolution of aesthetics, hence the search for, and in some cases the discovery of the new image.

Q. What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz are contributing toward the development of a lasting art?

I do not feel qualified to determine whether any artist or group of artists are contributing toward the development of a lasting art. Only time has the key to this riddle.

Q. What, in your opinion, is the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages?
Form. Balzac said, "Everything is form and life itself is form."

Every natural function assumes form or it could not describe itself in the microcosmic realm of natural phenomena, all fixed in time-space relation. It has been the language of form that has come down to us throughout the ages. Let us take the application of the balance of masses identifying Chinese art, and place it beside that of Western culture, and the variance of language is evident. Chinese architecture is purely a Chinese form, hence an Oriental culture. The same can be said of their sculpture, block printing, food, clime, and the people themselves, with their modes and codes. This is also true of their calligraphy. No one could successfully adopt these values and systems without retaining an alien quality and a poor one at that, since they will have failed to speak in their own individual metaphor.

Q. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?

The progress and complete understanding of art itself, by the masses, is the best form of propaganda for the eventual elimination of oppression, not the endless pictorial sermons which may have but a fleeting psychological effect upon their thinking, nor does it contribute to ethnological advancement in appreciation of art and the mind.

Q. What are your personal goals as an artist?

I feel that an artist in order to create a work of art must speak in new metaphor towards the organization of line, color, and space, not reproduction of natural phenomena. He must see that the language
of painting does not remain static and present an entirely new configuration based upon the existing relationships in nature. I would also like to live to a ripe old age, and see the effects of present day art upon future society.

Yours very sincerely,

Leo Quanchi
The answers to your questions are in the following facts:
That a work of art never can contain more than three primary experiences regardless of the equally interesting fact that pictorial fantasy is infinite.

The three primary experiences are: experience with nature, social experience, experience with one's self. All fantasy is related to one, two or all three of these basic areas. A work of art can result from sound experiencing in any two areas but never in one area alone. Monumental art always synthesizes all three, as in Cezanne, but lesser art is unable to do so—ex.—Impressionism which left out social dynamic; Kathe Kollowitz — Daumier — etc.—where the dynamic of the unconscious mind (nature) was left out (or was inert) to stress a social dynamic.

The Pollack idea is a spiritual extension of Impressionism in which the unconscious mind is freed from physical nature and social responsibility, hence it is incapable of using subject matter. That is its weakness, yet it is also its very life, i.e. resistance to Puritan dogma. However, its basic error is the assumption that untrammeled freedom from puritanism is the equivalent of possessing psychological knowledge. Actually the idea is as far from psychological truths as it is from social dynamics and it is not durable. The art form is equal with our middle class, which as it gradually turns away from faith in materialism to spiritual values (always contrast) is reaching a point of faith in the unconscious mind but
has not as yet become conversant with its principles. In other words—the Pollack—de Kooning kind of thing is a form of illiteracy—somewhat analogous to the social illiteracy Wood and Curry used to impose.

Kootz, in my opinion, is a dishonest dealer.

The only legitimate propaganda art may indulge in is faith in life. The basic common denominator in art is nature—biological nature. This is a constant around which revolves in his fantasy as he is driven by social variables of his own making. In a sense, man's social ambitions drive him to feel he can free himself from total nature through his own efforts, and his dream is that in time he will do so. Hence the dichotomy or split in his interests; his willingness to suffer social hardships, to change and destroy social patterns; to risk his very life. The history of art is interlocked with this unconscious drive, which sometimes seems to seek support with nature but actually is seeking freedom. Western art in general is simply a more conscious realization of this unconscious drive than the—except Greeks—reached. Right now the Western world is retreating from the idea after having discovered and experienced the fact that total nature is too complex to conquer in terms of present knowledge. Thus the search is slowly turning toward a scientific understanding of the creative process and its principles, and at some future time the challenge to nature will be thrown once again. Thus art pulsates between challenge to and rapport with
nature—we are in the 1st phase of the rapport action.

My personal goal is to synthesize all three forms of experience in terms of our age.

I'm sorry this is hasty but hope you can read into this skeleton idea other ideas. I've written this at 6 a.m. owing to a shortage of time. I'm showing in N. Y. next year for the 1st time in seven years and hope to demonstrate that modern art does not have to lack subject matter.

Sincerely yours,

Quirt
My dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am very sorry that Mr. Roszak is unable to answer your questions, directly, at this time. He is committed to an unusually heavy schedule for the remainder of the year.

However, you may find the enclosed Magazine of Art article of some assistance to you.

I wish you every success in your forthcoming project.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Theodore J. Roszak
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am writing the answers to your questions in the same rotation as you asked them—so please follow with the copy of the original letter you sent me.

1. Art is always a reflection of our age but not necessarily the glorification of shapelessness and formlessness. If anyone wants to create a new Art form and the works of the past are to be denied they will have to create a new man who has never seen this universe and who has never contacted it—for there is nothing in this world that a human being can think of that nature has not given to us the material for use at one time or another including atomic energy.

2. As to the elimination of subject matter, the painter has the same right as the composer to eliminate certain types of subject matter when necessary. When a painter paints an abstract composition he too uses certain forms for his subject matter just as a composer uses when he writes a symphony (which is purely abstract) where he has all the freedom of imagination and then in comparison when he writes an opera he is limited to create the music toward another man's words and ideas which holds him within certain boundaries, just as when a painter paints a realistic subject.

3. The artists promoted in various galleries are experimenting and whether they are contributing toward the development of a lasting art—is a question which none can answer at the time of the artist experimenting. A very close fact to all of us is the
works of van Gogh and even he could be forgotten in a single century. Of course we all agree that experimenting must go on otherwise there would be no progress.

4. To me art can be propagandistic and still be valid art but it happens so seldom and so rare that I think the artist should stick to his art and the propagandist to his propaganda.

5. My personal goals as an artist are as follows.

"All my life I have been a musician as well as a painter. (In) both music and art, I believe that the great thing is the creation, in an individual way, of harmony. In art, among the old masters as well as among the contemporary artists, the harmony may be of three sorts—of color, of form, and of line. In looking at nature, therefore, I search for materials which may be interpreted and manipulated until they become unified wholes and reveal the sorts of harmony which are representative of my own personality—my thoughts and my feelings. I feel that the mastery of only one of these elements color, form, or line—is unsatisfactory. Difficult though it may be, I strive for the simultaneous mastery of all three." You will find that the above quotation has been published in the 1950 catalog of Contemporary American Painting—University of Illinois under William S. Schwartz.

I want you to know that now as well as the last twenty-five years or more I have been painting realistic and abstract.

Hoping these answers may help you. 

Sincerely yours,

William S. Schwartz
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

To answer your questions adequately would require something of a dissertation on my part. I have touched upon all the points about which you enquire from time to time. May I refer you to a few pieces which you ought to be able to secure by writing for them? I think that these particular talks ought to cover the points.


"Just What is Realism in Art?" Journal of the National Art Education Association. (Publ. Kutztown, Penna.)

"An Artist's Credo"—College Art Journal, Autumn, '49.

"Focus for World Unity"—Magazine of Art, Nov. '49.

"What Can the Artist Contribute to an Industrial and Scientific Age?" — talk at Ohio State Univ. April 25th, '51.


"Art as Positive Value", talk before Cleveland Society of Artists during the past April. Refer to Mr. Schmeckebier, ed. of College Art Journal.

I hope that you will find your answers there. I am interested in the questions that you ask, and would be pleased to read your conclusions whenever you complete them.

Yours very truly,

Ben Shahn
Dear Mr. Fracassini,

I fail to see the difference in the dilemma of the artist in the 20th century and that of any other century. It is true that my personal experience is in the 20th but with some reference to history a comparison may be made. Within my span in this century I have seen what I consider marked improvements in the relation of the artist to society. In the first place the artist has, in the past considerable number of years, had increasing opportunities of presenting his mark to the public. That is certainly one of his principle objectives rather than accumulating it in his studio with a few personal friends for an audience.

With the increased publicizing of his mark, there has also been increased distribution of his work, also a principle objective since no one so far has found a way of subsisting on a diet of pictures.

That art will never be a competitor of TV and baseball in public interest should be readily realized. That which is designated as shapeless and formless by some today may, if history is to repeat itself, become the Classic of tomorrow. This you must have witnessed as well as I. My personal goal is very simple—to continue painting.

Good luck.

Sincerely,

Charles Sheeler
Dear Carl,

I am interested in the paper you are preparing titled "The Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist". When it is finished I would like to see a copy, if it is available. Are you working for your Master's Degree?

I will try to comment upon your questions, however it would be easier if we could discuss them together. Some of them I am not sure that I understand, and others I just don't have an answer for at this time.

Your first question, "Do you believe that the so-called glorifications of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?". In answer, I would say no, that is, in the sense that the world's political or economic conditions have caused it. It is simply the outgrowth of natural experimentation which could happen at any time.

Question, "It has been said that in order to create a new art form, the works of the past must be denied (ignored)". I would have to give more thought to this question in order to answer it seriously. However, I might say that we look to the past for material and technical assistance and to the present and future for expression. We cannot deny either.

Question, "Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live?" I would say that it isn't in the sense that it has been influenced by political or
economic conditions, but rather it has been influenced by our machine age. We have cameras, printing presses, television and the like to adequately take care of reproducing subject matter. This leaves the artist free to be concerned with the more creative interpretations resulting in abstractions, or forms thereof. I consider this approach valid.

The next question concerning the Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz I am not prepared to answer.

In answer to your question about the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages is that the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages would be applied intelligence, based upon an understanding of materials and subject. We could say invention.

"Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?" I truly do not believe that the form art takes makes it valid or invalid, but rather the way in which it is painted or rendered. To understand or judge a painting as a work of art it must be undressed, whether it be objective or non-objective has nothing to do with it. I suppose that in a sense all objective painting is propagandistic in so far as it tells a literal story about something as someone wants it told. My complaint here is that often the story becomes more than the painting and often interferes with the judging of its true values.

I am not certain at the present of my personal goals as an artist.
I hope that my answers have not sounded too confused, and I would be interested in hearing your views upon the subject.

Give my regards to family,

Sincerely,

Bill Smythe
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am very glad to have received your letter because I am very much interested in these questions as are many other artists. I would suggest, if you have not yet done so that you write also to Ben Shahn, Evergood Guathmey, M. Soyer, Kunyoshi, Joseph Flock, Hopper, Bill Gropper, etc.

Besides the answers to your questions, I am sending you some additional material that has bearing on your study.

I) Glorification of shapelessness and formlessness...

Although there is a theory that all this chaos expresses the confusion of our times—I am of the opinion that there are many ways to express our times—that there is a groping for order in our time and we should try to find order in this confusion. Confusion is only one of the manifestations of our transitional era, but life in all other periods there is a human desire to create order and a better life. And I believe that the greater art of our time should be an art directed to the people, reflecting this tendency of humanism and of the constructive side of man.

II) ... works of the past must be denied. To create absolute new art forms is impossible. In no other field of human activity today (it seems to me) is there a thought of altogether denying the past. Art forms are modified and adopted to each particular period, but a new art form can never be created, basically it is a continuation of the past—a continuous change.
III) ... Elimination of subject matter

I don't believe in elimination of subject matter. This controversy of elimination of subject matter, in other words non-objectivism versus realism took place several decades ago in Europe, where now it is about resolved, and a tendency toward basic humanism and realism is coming to the fore. Only in this country at this late moment, non-objectivism seems to have assumed a temporary importance.

IV) ... basic common denominator throughout the ages...

humanism—realism.

V) Can art be propagandistic...

All great art can be called propagandistic, propaganda is teaching in the broad sense, as in the case of the work of Giotto, Goya, Daumier, etc.

Raphael Soyer
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I will try to answer your questions as precisely as possible.

May I say that your dissertation title "The Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist" is inappropriate: because personally I don't think we are in a dilemma. The critics may be, the public at large may be, but not the artists who are creating a tradition in painting today in America.

It all depends what you mean by the "formlessness and shapelessness". To me and my painting such things do not exist. The forms and shapes caught in that split-second of animation with their staticness floating or anchored can never be formless. You cannot deny that a picture that is plastic is at the same time shapeless and plasticity is above all one of the objectives in art today.

No, it is not so! One must understand the art of the past and once understood, one may reject it but not deny it. Certainly the archaic Greek, and Cycladic Island sculpture: or Egyptian, Etruscan, etc., played a great part in Brancusi's sculpture with the use of the monolith in creating the things he has.

How can we deny the value of the Chinese calligraphy in shaping some of the art of today in this country. So, I don't think one can deny the past.

I do not think, and I speak personally, that subject matter is denied. Since I do not believe in the existence of a non-objective
art. It is impossible. Art is either reportorial or abstract, or naturalistic or semi-abstract, but not non-objective. The subject in an abstract painting may be easily understandable or it may not be. It may be inspired directly from nature or it may not be, or it may be an emotional thing that deals with a man's ancestry, but I will say that I don't deny matter nor do I deny my Byzantine Heritage in the churches at Mistra, Greece.

I do not know whether we are contributing to the development of a lasting art. Only time can tell us that. I. Kant will also tell you the same. But I'm sure that we are contributing something today, and now that will have its place in the history of art as something original and controversial. It may and will be developed further by the artists who are doing it and from the artists who will use it in their own way and develop it further, but today is for us, tomorrow for the historians.

I think that the basic common denominator of art throughout the ages has been one of eternal truth and honesty in art. One in which we and the past have tried to express the situation of the world and our reactions to it in a simple and sincere way. Where the apples I paint and eat are the apples that forfeited Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

It can only be a personal kind of propaganda with its roots in the universe. Art cannot be regimented and militarized as in Russia and be called art.
My personal goals are something that is hard to write about. All I can tell you is that when I see the sun rise and set and rise I'm in awe. I hope that I have helped you in understanding what I am trying to do and show you that your "Dilemma" is only yours,

Hoping to be of assistance to you again I am sincerely yours,

Stamos

80 West 82 St.
N. Y. C. #24

These statements are firm beliefs and go beyond abstraction.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Were we to sit together over a bottle of whiskey—with the night before us for talk—I would answer the questions you raise. These are the basic questions today. A yes or no answer—or a two line statement would be completely inadequate—and stupid.

In courtesy I will—despite the above—give you a set of yes and no answers. These—I am sure—will give you a perverted picture of my position. The answers are noted alongside your questions.

Should you come to N.Y. —let us have a date to talk this out.

Sincerely,

Harry Sternberg
1. Do you believe that the so-called glorification of shapelessness and formlessness in contemporary art is an inevitable reflection of our age?

Not inevitable!

2. It has been said that in order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied. Do you share this opinion?

I believe the reverse to be true.

3. Why does the elimination of subject matter seem to be indigenous to the period in which we live?

Escapism leading to absolute vacuum.

4. What do you think the artists, as exemplified by some of the members of Betty Parsons Gallery and Kootz, are contributing toward the development of a lasting art?

No!!

5...basic common denominator of art throughout the ages?

Unity between form and content.

6. Can art be propagandistic and still be a valid art?

Except in decorative arts there was no art in all cultural history which was not propaganda art!

7. What are your personal goals as an artist?

This is answered above. It is a search for the richest content and the form that best can express it.
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

I am glad to answer briefly the questions you raised in your letter of April 17th, although I cannot guarantee that my opinions are going to be personal as you suggest. It is very difficult to find the dividing line between personal and impersonal in a discussion of art unless one deals in historical bookkeeping which I find boring.

It so happens that for years I have been working on the same subject matter that interests you, having had a paper recently published on the creative process in the Italian Art magazine, the November issue, called Numero. For years I have been interested in the creative process having undergone many years of psychoanalytic work, both with my own personal analysis as well as working in a seminar, and intensely studying various aspects of the creative problem. I have written many papers on the subject and only two have been published, one in an unimportant Art Students League magazine, and the other in an important art journal in Italy. Because of the rigid, extroverted thinking of the art educator and the professorial mind, the Anglo-Saxonized squeamishness, and the fact that I have openly criticized practicing analysts in their misinterpretation of symptoms appearing of neurotic origins, although with the creative person they are not symptoms of neurosis, my papers have not been particularly favored by various art magazines
and journals. I am now arranging to have several of these articles published in a small booklet. I think the issues I raise should be further developed in order to renovate the system of art education which is still in the throws of Nineteenth Century thinking.

Your first question about shapelessness is a leading one. I consider contemporary art dealing specifically with form to the exclusion of contradictory elements of a picture making. Whether it reflects our age goes without saying that it does, but the correlation between the art and society in rational terms is very difficult to establish. The irrational nature of modern art, and the fact that the artist has broken through the bonds of the Rennaissance and has identified himself with the primitive is an indication that he is quite willing to find his spiritual sustenance from the archaic reservoir of man rather than his competitive contributions of western civilization. The modern artist has found his inner reality, certainly validated by although not the result of the teachings of Freud, Jung, and Adler.

"In order to create a new art form the works of the past must be denied"...Nothing other than rigid authoritative principles from the past can be denied. Repressive authority is the only issue in the artist's rebellion, not the discarding of his past. Although his conscious attempt to surpass antiquity has been the issue, he is caught in his own instinctual web that man as artist cannot express forms without the connection to past culture. Even his unconscious memory or his collective past will frustrate him in this attempt.
"Elimination of subject matter..." Subject matter cannot be eliminated unless the artist uses basic geometric shapes as Mondrian. Most often abstract art has unconscious fantasy substance akin to the Rorschach test, and the only way subject matter can be eliminated is by "purification", denying the observer all elements of association to concrete reality. Subject matter to the Renaissance painter was symptomatic of the drive to understand nature, and on a deeper level to come out of his introverted society thereby protesting against the social repression which drove man inward against his will. The modern artist has introverted himself through his own free will, by his advanced knowledge that man as individual is not dependent upon complying with concepts of nature which at best is a form of naturalism which philosophically cannot allow for change.

Artists as represented by Betty Parsons Gallery, Kootz, Pollock, Baziotes and others are contributing to disorder and not to a lasting art. They are the choice of officialdom who have given them recognition because these artists express for the hierarchy of authority such as dealership, curatorship and critics the contempt these gentry have for art as a whole. While their contempt is unconscious, underlying this drive is a system which intends to create in artists as a whole the feeling of defeatism and inferiority. While Pollock is the chosen hero of this sinister gang, he is essentially a scapegoat to be replaced by a new one already on the horizon in
Lebrun. The most bankrupt in the creative sense are these individuals who through their omnipotence can give scope to an artist, but as omnipotence is capable of issuing death to its creation also, this instrument always destroys the props from under the object they erect which is indicative of their own hostility. I believe psychologically that when an authoritative figure, such as critic or curator, with encyclopaedic knowledge is frustrated emotionally or creatively, he must erect symbolically in an artist his own dwarfed image magnified by recognition, sowing the seeds of his own impotency by destroying the very god he creates ultimately.

Your last question about "propaganda" is a moral issue. How an artist chooses to direct his art and for what purpose is entirely a matter of individual or collective conduct and has nothing to do with art as such.

My personal goal as artist is a question which you would like to have answered I am sure. My goal exists in the fact that I have none, although something must motivate my work from within and something must repel it from without. Since reality is stronger than the individual, no artist can have a goal which is suspended as a blueprint for a geographical, artistic travelogue. A goal as such always exists in the present and any verbal assurance of its future shaping is a day dream and sometimes a sick fantasy. Reality is neither static nor a pantry shelf stocked up with supplies. It is instantaneous and simultaneous.

Very truly yours,

Nahum Tschacbasov
Dear Sir:

Your questions seem to me to be rather in the nature of statements and thereby have answered themselves. However, I shall try to give you some idea of my own attitude towards the question of contemporary art as prevails in our country at this moment. I purposely accent "our country" because nothing like this is taking place anywhere else on the same scale.

I shall not speak of the two gallery groups you have mentioned since they are only a piece of the whole cloth and I am more interested in the whole picture than its parts.

One reason for such an avalanche of non-objectivism and formalism in art is the tremendous influence the Museum of Modern Art in New York has over those who have the "say" in the art field: museums, colleges, universities, art schools, etc., who with some exceptions, feel (they) cannot afford to "lag behind the times" and, of course, publicity, reclame. Another reason is that artists are very much like human beings and will gravitate towards success. There is a glamour created about non-objective art as well as financial encouragement supplied by a very wealthy group.

There is also the element of "mystification" in this art form. People love to be mystified and could be mesmerized into accepting a great many things. Ultimately time will have its say. Another reason is that a large group of artists who are intelligent and vocal are practicing non-objectivism because they want to be of "our time."
Now what is "our time?" Mechanization? Atomism? Standardization? If so, it is difficult to discern these trends in the non-objective creations. Or, is "our time" expressed in a trend towards more individualism? Then why do the works of the non-objectivists look like peas in a pod? Some of their large group exhibitions look like a one-man or two-man shows. I believe "our time" are only words which hide a lack of something vastly more important to art. Great artists of the past have never consciously thought of and still gave great expression to their times.

The great catch-word among the non-objective artists is experimentation. It has become a fetish, an end unto itself. Now what is experimentation? We know what it is in science: it is an effort to prove the validity, the workability of a given hypothesis, a theory. Experiments are means of finding a way towards a certain goal, only then are experiments justified. The artists of the Pre-Renaissance era have directed their efforts towards a goal: to give expression to Religion and Church. The Renaissance—towards a more human approach, away from religion; the 19th century toward democracy, towards greater humanism; impressionism—to reflect the then developing middle class. Cezanne's goal was to extricate art from the amorphousness of the impressionism towards the more solid, the three-dimensional quality.

Now towards what are the so-called experiments of the non-objectivists directed? What goal do they have except finding more
ways of using their materials? Or towards the futile attempt of being very different than any one else by using the "shock" method? Admittedly a great deal has been achieved by them in discovering varieties of design and in the sensuousness of material. But is this enough? Is this all art consists of? What about the human being? Doesn't he deserve a place in art? What, let us say about this country? From Maine to Texas, from the East to the West coasts there is a surging, moving, working great people. A people that has and is being written about, talked about, music has been created by them and about them. Dances indigenous to this people are being performed. What is the modern non-objectivist doing about his people? Is it being of "our time" to forget all this? To depict fantastic submarine forms? To go back to stone-age fragments? To paint a white line on white ground or a red line on a red ground? Is it being creative to—at best—make decorations and forget about human beings?

All this, I hope, will serve as answers to your questions. At any rate these are my answers and ideas. If I was too long, too verbose, please forgive. I was trying to be brief but these are questions to which "yes" or "no" answers will not do.

With best wishes for success, I am,  

Sincerely yours,

Sol Wilson
Dear Mr. Fracassini:

Please excuse my delay in answering your fine and interesting letter of April 12th. Modern painting is one of the most difficult subjects to explain in words. Often we are led into confusion and make mistakes by trying to give explanations as to its definite purpose. What we call "contemporary art" today in all its phases is an expression of our time. And, as in former periods, we have good paintings and bad paintings, and there are great artists and mediocre artists.

The so-called glorification of "formlessness" and "shapelessness" in contemporary art does reflect our age. This accidental grouping of different art elements, subconsciously put together in a haphazard emotional manner to create an overwhelming impression when looked on is an art expression of the same spirit that inspires some of the most modem painters today.

Theoretically, a work of art can consist of a single point placed on the canvas or a single line drawn in any part of a square area, as long as the objective in the form is set aside to free the space for the purpose of constructing the composition of the conceived art form. This kind of painting, since it has no potentialities for the future, is of short duration and cannot survive the passing of its period nor the atmosphere which made it possible.

To deny the past in order to create new art forms is like striving to achieve freedom by force and devoting our feelings for
expressing ourselves exclusively to any color combinations which would produce works of equal artistic value as ornamentation and decorative design. Pure and eternal creation still remains forever. The Egyptian art and the Greek sculpture still shed their rays of glory.

Subject matter could be used in abstract form whether you paint a geometrical shape or an apple, and the artist is justified in using it for a specified purpose only when nothing can be changed without destroying the essential inner life of the picture. The highlight of the painting is not what it represents, but the way things on the canvas are put together. In non-objective painting we must not expect to see any natural objects such as we are accustomed to seeing in figurative painting.

As to the contribution toward the development of a lasting art as exemplified by some artists today — anything called new in painting at first seems to dominating, so strong, that sometimes we are apt to say "that is it!" This is noticed especially in contemporary painting, which embraces practically every aesthetic aspiration imaginable. For instance, at the beginning of impressionism when artists began to paint in the open directly from nature, and attempted to record faithfully the visual impressions of objects and light effects, they had monopolized all the art world, and their work had lasting value. They soon began to see that architectonic form
in painting was of the utmost importance, and the lack of it caused the reaction of post-impressionism and cubism which occupied the center of the stage for a long time.

Whatever new may be in prospect in art, whether it is objective or non-objective, one thing is certain. Great painting will be creative and not the product of a formula. If there are to be any new forms the true artist will see them and he will always be moved by them.

Sincerely yours,

Jean Xceron
Chapter III

CONCLUSION

The foregoing letters have in a general way given me a broad cross-section of what the Twentieth Century American Artist is thinking about in terms of the current problems as set forth in my questionnaire.

These letters have reassured me that the artist today is as sure of his attitudes, philosophies, and goals as any artist in any period of history. The ideas purported by these artists have strengthened my confidence in my own convictions that the dilemma of which I write is not of the artist, but of the society which he serves. It is also very encouraging to note the high degree of professional integrity and idealism exhibited in some of the statements regarding the artist's craft. Everyone who reads these letters should be aware that here may be hidden the answers which might give him the clue to a better understanding of American art of the twentieth century. I sincerely believe that every student, teacher, and artist should make a concerted effort to read and study these letters. He will not only find them informative, amusing, and delightful, but also an invaluable source of inspiration.

One of the most encouraging aspects of this project was the interest and cooperation shown by the artists. This response
is indicative that every artist today is deeply concerned and disturbed about the part he plays in the complex and confused world. Another interesting phenomenon existing in American art world today as shown by these letters is that the artist displays a very healthy, constructive, and humanistic attitude toward life.

In comparing the attitude of the traditional artist with that of the experimenting artist, as shown in these letters, an interesting contrast seems to exist. Although the more conservative painter shows signs of frustration in his inability to cope with our more progressive movements, he displays a commendable degree of tolerance toward experimentation; however, his more progressive colleague is more inclined to be bigoted about concepts and intolerant of the traditional methods of art expression, and in many cases, completely refuses to accept any standards as valid except his own. This comparison of course cannot be taken as conclusive, since it is based on the responses of only sixty-four artists from the thousands painting in the United States today.

I have also detected in the foregoing material certain tendencies which I consider to be the basis of a new aesthetic. The artist is constructing for us new metaphores that are meaningful in exemplifying the relationship between a true piety and our customary rational interpretation of life. Since it is possible for a rational order of meaning to establish a congruity completely foreign to a basic
emotional order, it is not strange that in these letters we see
evidences that the artists are seeking new pieties and interpreting
for us new meanings with which to build a better world.
Chapter IV

NOTES ON THESIS PAINTINGS

Following are the illustrations of four paintings submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts. I shall not attempt to explain my work, because I do not believe that words should be used to explain something that has already been said in paint. However, I should like to make the following comment about my philosophy of art: I believe that for any art form to be valid the artist must synthesize all of his past experiences and interpret them in terms of the age in which he lives, if he is sincere in doing this his work will stand the test of time, which after all, is the only criterion.
Plate I .................................Still Life with Vase
Plate III ...................................... Still Life with Bottles
Plate IV .................................. Landscape
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