

# Chapter 4

## Modern Painting and Morality

Paul Macneill

### 4.1 Introduction

The relation between painting and morality was relatively straightforward up to the mid-nineteenth century. In the European world, painters represented the world-view of their patrons: whether that patronage came from the Church or wealthy aristocrats. There were qualitative differences in the depth of moral richness between paintings and not all paintings could usefully be considered from a moral perspective. Nevertheless, for most painters and their patrons, there was a coherent and shared moral universe.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, these relationships had changed dramatically. There were few patrons, and painters were dependent on attracting buyers for their work. Artists, who had previously worked within traditional schools and supported conventional values, were now associated with the avant-garde as heralds of the new in opposition to tradition and conventional culture. There was a renewed vitality in painting, new movements, and widely varying styles of expression. Modern painting became characterised by a shift away from representation and toward the abstract, which left little opportunity for paintings to deal with moral issues or express moral concern. For a while abstract painting was in the ascendancy, then abstract painting gave way to minimalism and to Pop-art, with a return to expressionism and figurative work in art in the late 1970s. In this century we have seen a return to prominence of painters working figuratively, and some of them paint morally related subjects.

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P. Macneill (✉)  
Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, Sydney Medical School,  
The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia  
e-mail: [paul.macneill@sydney.edu.au](mailto:paul.macneill@sydney.edu.au)

## 4.2 Morality in ‘Early Modern’ Painting

Moral themes in ‘Early Modern’ painting (1500–1800 C.E.) were most evident in ‘narrative’ paintings such as those illustrating stories from the Bible, Roman antiquity and Greek mythology. During this time painting fulfilled a didactic role as public art [14, pp. 366–367]. In this section, I consider two reviews, by Armstrong and Gaut, each of which draws attention to an artist whose painterly skill gave greater moral depth to stories the artists took as their subjects. Although it was not their primary purpose, both reviewers also draw attention to the moral universe of painters of the mid-seventeenth century.

### 4.2.1 *The Moral Universe: Gathering of the Ashes*

John Armstrong, in ‘Moral depth and pictorial art,’ compares two paintings: one by Sassetta showing St Francis giving away his clothes (1440), and the other by Nicholas Poussin (1648) entitled ‘Landscape with the Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion.’ By comparison with Sassetta’s painting Armstrong regards Poussin’s work as morally rich and substantive and he draws out the close relationship between the aesthetic and moral qualities of the painting. It depicts a scene from the story of the Athenian General Phocion from the fourth century CE who was falsely condemned as a traitor and forced to drink hemlock. His body was not allowed to be buried within Athens, and was taken to a nearby city-state where it was burned beyond the walls of the city. Poussin’s painting shows ‘the widow’ collecting ashes from the pyre. Armstrong invites us to see both the widow as central and her “loyalty to a good man, and refusal to bow to an unjust proscription” as “the moral foundation of the city.” What gives this painting moral depth, for Armstrong, is the manner in which the “the visually eminent features of the work” support the painting’s moral significance and content, as well as its aesthetic composition, in giving “grandeur” to the woman’s action [1, pp. 178–180]. Morality for Armstrong is to do with moral values and a morally worthy painting conveys those “values we espouse” as attractive [1, p. 175]. A painting’s moral worth is a measure of the extent to which it serves to reinforce those values by making them compelling in experience and understandable, not just as concepts, but also in an emotional register.

However, with modern eyes, this is a story of a moral wrong and an unjust civic administration, not one of harmony between city-state and individual virtue as represented by Poussin. Nor could it be said of a modern painting, that a measure of its aesthetic worth is the extent to which it reinforces conventional values. This reads as anachronistic.

### 4.2.2 *Two Bathshebas*

In a similar manner to Armstrong, Berys Gaut compares two paintings and finds one of them to have greater moral depth and understanding. His comparison is all the

more compelling because both paintings are of the same subject ‘Bathsheba with King David’s Letter’ and painted in the same year (1654). One is by Rembrandt and the other by his pupil Willem Drost [9, pp. 14–25].

Drost’s painting displays a centrally lit Bathsheba against a dark background, with her chemise down from her left shoulder and her breasts exposed. She appears to be in her early twenties and, in Gaut’s view at least, “available, ready and willing for sexual adventure.” By contrast, Rembrandt’s version of Bathsheba is a woman “perhaps in her thirties,” fully naked and being attended to by a servant manicuring her feet. It is a domestic scene, not overtly sexual. Bathsheba’s gaze in Rembrandt’s painting is down and pensive; the letter from King David is prominent in her right hand. Both paintings relate to a story from the Bible in which King David, having seen Bathsheba bathing from the roof of his palace, sent messengers to bring her to him and he slept with her. When she became pregnant to him he arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed, by having him stationed in the thick of a battle and withdrawing supporters.<sup>1</sup> This is a moral tale of David’s usurping an innocent woman, and betraying her husband, a loyal warrior. Yet the traditional depiction of Bathsheba was (up to that point) as a seductress. Drost’s painting follows that convention, whereas Rembrandt’s painting broke away in “conveying a sense of [her] inner life... lost somewhere in the interior space of her own thoughts and feelings as she contemplates what the letter has told her.” Gaut acknowledges that both are great paintings, but he makes a convincing case for why Rembrandt’s is the more morally insightful of the two and how this moral quality adds to the work’s aesthetic value [9, pp. 22–23].

Gaut’s larger point, in critiquing these two paintings, is that treatment of morally relevant issues in works of art may contribute or detract from the work’s aesthetic value.<sup>2</sup> The moral tale, relating to the abuse of power, is one that we can readily identify with today. What is different however is that a painting of this kind—which offers moral insight into a Biblical story—is anachronistic. Painters might wish to illustrate and enlarge on a moral narrative, but it is unlikely that the work would be accepted as great art in our time.

### 4.3 Modern Painting to 1980

In this section, I discuss modern art from the end of the nineteenth century up to 1980. An overview of modern painting from the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, is followed by a discussion of two painters: Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol. These two painters illustrate some of the movements in art following World War II, particularly in the United States. The aim of this section is to highlight major preoccupations of modern painting during this period. While moral and political concerns were represented, they were not a central focus for most of the prominent painters—with some notable exceptions.

<sup>1</sup> *Bible*, New International Version, 2 Samuel 11:2–16.

<sup>2</sup> See Chap. 15 for a discussion of Berys Gaut’s moral theory ‘ethicism.’

The choice of 1980 is because, around the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a move back to figurative representation and expressionism in painting, which is a relevant factor in allowing for a return of moral themes in painting (as is discussed in Sect. 4.4). Also Robert Hughes' book *The Shock of the New* was published in 1980. It is a book that provides an overview of modern art (and includes copies of significant paintings of the period). I have drawn on Hughes' book in this section and Sect. 4.4 of this chapter as he brings a moral and political awareness to much of his discussion of modern art [14].

### 4.3.1 *The Beginnings of Modern Painting*

Dramatic changes in styles of painting are evident from the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. One of the most clearly identifiable shifts was away from the realism of pre-modern painting, in which the world was presented as 'out there' and in three-dimensional perspective. By the twentieth century, the 'point of view' had changed radically to include the artist's "process of seeing" as an essential element in the work of art [14, pp. 17–18]. One of the first movements of modern art to gain prominence, from the 1870s, was Impressionism, which focussed on the play of light as perceived by the painter.<sup>3</sup> A further significant step was taken by Paul Cézanne, at the end of the nineteenth century, in capturing within painting his own feeling and changing relationship with the objects in his perceptual field. His paintings portray trees, rocks and houses as soft and tentative—as do his portraits (for example, of his gardener). He is quoted as saying, "Painting from Nature is not copying the object; it is realizing one's sensations." His impact was far reaching as "one of those rare artists who influenced almost everyone" [14, pp. 124–125]. This included Henri Matisse—who echoed Cézanne in declaring, "My purpose is to render my emotion" [14, p. 141]. Matisse's colour-saturated interiors and portraits display such emotional intensity that Matisse and his co-exhibitors were described as "*fauves*" (wild beasts) [14, p. 132]. This term stuck and became the epithet for a loose grouping of artists including Matisse, André Derain, Raoul Dufy, Georges Rouault, Vlaminck, Braque—all of whom were influential in the development of modern painting.

One of those Cézanne influenced was Georges Braque who "identified with Cézanne almost to the point of obsession." He stood where Cézanne had stood in the south of France and painted some of the same scenes—although in his own way—turning houses and rocks into "prisms and triangles" displaying the beginnings of "Cubist... forms stacked up the canvas in a pile" [14, p. 27]. Cubism emerged fully in a collaboration between Braque and Pablo Picasso as a style of painting that broke subjects apart and reassembled them in an abstract form to represent multiple perspectives—both visually and as the artist's projection. It took painting a long

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<sup>3</sup> Impressionism was more than "merely retinal" however and was "an art grounded in working-class or populist ideology that nonetheless appeals largely to the bourgeoisie" [18, pp. 48 and 50].

way from its ‘realist’ origins and was a major influence on art in the twentieth century, paving the way for Surrealism with its focus on dream images as a means for revealing the unconscious. The artist’s psyche was now centre stage. It was but a short step to abstract art with images having fewer, if any, references to the visual world. Greenberg highlights this last factor—this “turning [of the artist’s] attention away from the subject matter of common experience” as definitive of modern art. The important point for Greenberg was that in shifting attention toward the “nonrepresentational or ‘abstract’,” the “artist turns it in on the medium of his own craft” [11, 12, pp. 8–9].

Even this barest outline of the genesis of modern art is sufficient to illustrate a significant shift from away from the ‘realism’ of previous eras and toward a focus on artists’ perceptual processes as well as to the craft of painting itself. Relative to these concerns, which were more to do with an artist’s vision and the nature of painting, moral concerns were not a major preoccupation. There were some painters who continued to represent moral and political issues (as is discussed in Sect. 4.4) although there was no longer a moral consensus however, and it was no longer the role of a painter to enlarge on moral tales of the world.

Another reason for a diminishing focus on moral issues was the impact of the momentous events of the times. World War II—and the horrors from the Nazi death camps revealed at the end of the war—was a factor in shifting away from the early expressionism of modern painting. As Hughes points out, any further distortion of the human body by painters risked comparison with what was revealed in gruesome photographs from Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Added to this, the illustrative role artists previously had as war correspondents was supplanted by television and news media [14, p. 111]. By the end of the War, a number of prominent artists were working predominantly on abstract works.

In the following two sections I take two artists—Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol—as examples of shifting positions in modern painting following World War II. Rothko represents many features of ‘modernism’ within modern painting and Warhol represents the Pop-art that followed American Expressionism.

### 4.3.2 *Rothko*

Mark Rothko’s output was prolific and spans 46 years up to his death in 1970. During this time he experimented with many different styles ranging from German Expressionism, Surrealism, interiors, urban scenes, and primitivism. From the end of World War II however his work became more abstract, evolving from paintings with ‘multiforms’ to ‘floating rectangular fields of colour’: which Hughes describes as “colour rectangles, soft-edged and palpitant of surface, stacked vertically up the canvas.” He adds that Rothko eliminated “nearly everything from his work except the spatial suggestions and emotive power of his colour and breathing intensity of the surfaces” and gave a luminous quality to these paintings by “staining the canvas like watercolour paper and then scumbling it with repeated skins of

overpainting” [14, p. 320]. From 1964 to 1968 Rothko explored painting in dark magenta, purple, burnt sienna, dark browns and blacks (especially in working on paintings for the ‘Rothko chapel’ in Houston). There was a subsequent lightening in his ‘black-on-grey’ acrylics, and a return to oils and to full colour “for the last three canvasses of his lifetime” [23, p. 98].

Rothko’s abstract works made no direct allusion to moral concerns, although his paintings (from 1949) are often taken as religious,<sup>4</sup> spiritual or transcendental. Rothko’s own statements on the transcendental quality of his paintings are ambiguous however.<sup>5</sup> Even the critics are divided.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless Rothko maintained a broad concern for humanity. He said, in 1958, that “My current pictures are involved with the *scale* of human feelings the human drama, as much of it as I can express” [24, p. 126].

Rothko however had strong moral views about the power of the rich and the injustices of poverty in society. He was antagonistic toward the bourgeoisie and the impact of commercialism on art. This is well illustrated by the story told by John Fischer of ‘the artist as an angry man.’ Rothko had accepted a commission for paintings to be mounted in the new ‘Four Seasons’ restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York. He revealed that he originally accepted the commission out of “malicious intent” toward the “richest bastards in New York” who were the only people who could afford to dine there. He intended to paint something that would “ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room.” He wanted an “oppressive effect” to make “the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up.” However, after working for some time on a number of paintings, he withdrew from the commission. As Fischer puts it, “the murals... were never hung in the dining room which he so despised” [7]. Jones commented that, “Rothko was trying to revive the idea central to modernism—that art can shatter our assumptions” but he must have come to the realisation, “That art could not change anything. That his paintings would just be decoration after all” [16, reprinted in 24].<sup>7</sup>

This story captures two characteristics of American Expressive painters like Rothko and Clyfford Stills, who retained ‘modernist’ beliefs in a capacity of art to

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<sup>4</sup>Hughes describes Rothko as “theological” and “obsessed with... religious meanings” [14, pp. 314 and 320].

<sup>5</sup>For example, in 1947 Rothko wrote of “transcendental experiences” for the artist [22, 24, p. 58]. In the 1950s, he wrote: “there is no yearning in these paintings for Paradise, or divination” [24, p. 143]. Fischer, noting Rothko’s “contradictions” wrote that “in spite of his denial” he saw in Rothko’s paintings “an almost religious mysticism” [7].

<sup>6</sup>Hughes is acerbic toward those who find the sublime and the ineffable in Rothko’s work [15, pp. 233–243]. Fellow critic Peter Schjeldahl differs from Hughes in finding an “almost preternatural beauty” in Rothko’s paintings, experiencing them as both ‘ineffable’ and ‘sublime’ [25, pp. 9–18].

<sup>7</sup>Rothko regarded a critic’s comment that his paintings were “primarily decorations” as “the ultimate insult.” Fischer notes: “Rothko... deeply resented being forced into the role of a supplier of ‘material’ either for investment trusts or for [the critic’s] aesthetic exercises” [7, 24, pp. 130–138]. See Schjeldahl on Rothko as *not* decorative [25, p. 16].

affect the viewer (in a visceral and a transcendent sense<sup>8</sup>). They also maintained a rage against the wealthy. One way of reading the Seagram story is that Rothko was typical of the avant-garde artist in opposing the bourgeoisie—the property owning, monied-class. He wanted, “to bite the hands of those who had made him rich” [16]. The obvious paradox is that he needed them to survive (and he was on the verge of becoming wealthy himself). He, like the avant-garde in general, betrays an ambiguous relationship to the bourgeoisie. However it is ambiguous on the side of the bourgeoisie also. The relationship is reciprocal, as Mann points out: “Modern culture can only sustain itself by a kind of internalized violence; it must continually attack itself in order to survive and prosper. Hence the peculiar duplicity of the avant-garde [it] is first of all an attack on a tradition, but an attack mandated by the tradition itself” [18, p. 11].

Whilst there may be moral issues surrounding painting—such as the power of money to influence art—non-figurative abstract painting is *not* a medium for conveying moral views or attitudes. Nevertheless, Berys Gaut claims that ethical assessment can be extended to abstract painting and he takes Rothko’s abstracts as his example. In his *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, Gaut discusses the trajectory of Rothko’s paintings from the “glowing early abstract works” to the “literally black works” near the end of Rothko’s life. He sees in these ‘black works’ a despair that he links to Rothko’s suicide in 1970. Whilst he is not alone in this reaction to Rothko’s later works, this interpretation is disputed, for example by Kate Rothko Prizel, Rothko’s daughter, who presents this “late work as just that—late work” which we might “relish it for its own sake, the way we might the distinctive late bloom of any other artist.” She does admit that, “Even I have to step back from the biography at times... From my father as I knew him. Because, sometimes, that leads to misinterpretation” [3]. What is disturbing about Gaut’s position however, is that he conflates a psychological assessment of Rothko’s darkening mood, with a *moral judgment* (an “ethical assessment” in his words) of an “attitude toward life in general” that he finds expressed in Rothko’s paintings. On his theory, this is to take an attitude of despair—apparent, on his view, within the paintings—as a moral flaw that may be taken into account in determining the aesthetic worth of these abstract works of art [9, p. 229].<sup>9</sup> There are two mistakes in his argument. The first is to ascribe “responsibility for the ‘Black on Greys’” to “Rothko’s worsening circumstances”—an attribution that Anfam warns against [23, p. 97]. The second is to regard depression or despair as a moral flaw. This is not to say that Rothko’s depression and suicide are not relevant to understanding his late work, but even if they are, they provide no ground for a moral judgment of Rothko’s attitude unless one is to judge depression and suicide as morally wrong. This brings me back to my claim that non-figurative abstract

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<sup>8</sup> Rothko said that, “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on—and the fact that lots of people weep and cry when confronted by one of my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them” [24, p. 119].

<sup>9</sup> Gaut’s theory is outlined more fully in Chap. 15.

painting is *not* a medium for conveying moral views or attitudes. Gaut, in his analysis of Rothko's late paintings, is pushing too hard to find a basis for extending "ethical assessment... to abstract works" [9, pp. 68–69].

### 4.3.3 *Andy Warhol*

What is significant about Andy Warhol is that his art represents a complete shift away from the idea that art should resist the power of commerce to dominate. He is quoted as saying "Business art is the step that comes after Art" [2, p. 468]. Warhol was a commercial artist with apparent style. He brought a canny understanding of modern art and the avant-garde to his commercial work.<sup>10</sup> Similarly he brought commercialism to 'high art' (which he succeeded in breaking into in the 1960s). Nor is he without admirers among 'high art' critics [21, 27]. He is known for his "trade mark registered" Coca-Cola bottle, his repeated images of Campbell's soup cans, and various screen prints of Marilyn Monroe [2, p. 474; 31]. He openly embraced commercialism with no concern for the influence of money on art. He flouted conventions including the notion of creative originality, much as Dada artists—including Marcel Duchamp—had before him.

Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series—featuring an airplane crash, car crash scenes, suicides, and the electric chair—are repetitive images that mirror the daily repetition of images in the media. However Walter Hopps suggest that one can also read into these images "an underlying human compassion that transcends Warhol's public affect of studied neutrality." Whether or not there was "empathy underlying his transformation of these commonplace catastrophes," the impact was to bring images of moral concern back into prominence within art [19] (quoting from [30, p. 9]).

Although Warhol has been seen as neo-Dadaist, Paul Mann is sceptical. He describes Warhol as occupying "a key position" in the avant-garde but "hardly a surrealist and only vaguely dada" [18]. Hughes saw him as (at best) slightly subversive, and credited Warhol's success to the market and its inflated projections on to a "bland translucency" [15, pp. 244, 248]. Mann similarly describes Warhol as a "blank slate." He could "not have cared less about his ideological entanglements with the institution of art, except in respect to their glamour." In Mann's estimation however, "Warhol cannot be rejected on the basis of his personal banality or venality: what must be comprehended is the banality and venality of the culture he transparently represents" [18, p. 138].

There are moral and cultural issues captured here: both in the contrasts between Rothko and Warhol, and in what these stories reveal about money and art in the United States and beyond. Hughes expressed considerable concern about the extent to which painting is corrupted by its relation to money and power [15, pp. 235–237]. Despite Warhol's nonchalance, the power of capital to overwhelm art remains an issue. This issue was of on-going importance to the avant-garde, at least up to

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<sup>10</sup>This is apparent from his advertisements "for elegant shoes by I. Miller" [2, pp. 477–478; 31].



Warhol's time. The issue is also played out strikingly in Indigenous communities with the sudden rise (for example) in popularity and value of Aboriginal paintings in Australia. This was a major factor in a resurgence of Indigenous art, and has brought much needed money into Indigenous communities—but not without untoward effects [25, pp. 303–306]. While it may not be possible to reverse the effect of capital, there is an increasing divide between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'—equivalent terms to the 'proletariat' and the 'bourgeoisie'—that concerned the early avant-garde. This concern extends beyond art, and of course includes art. In the sphere of art, we can at least be aware how money can “distort the way we experience painting” [15, p. 236]. Mann however, draws attention to the contradictory role of avant-garde discourse in this struggle, in both opposing the status quo and serving its needs—thus providing the means “by which it can be captured and cancelled by such double binds” [18, p. 46].

#### 4.4 Modern Painting from a Moral Perspective

Given the ascendancy of the American Expressionist painters, and the Pop-artists who followed them, moral issues had been side-lined. As discussed above, abstract art is not a medium conducive to raising moral concern. Regarding Pop-art, one could justifiably read an empathic disquiet into Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series (see Walter Hopps above), but it was the *de*-moralising effect of the repetition of “gruesome” images, rather than their confronting subject matter, that was important to Warhol [19].

Nevertheless there have been paintings, from the early 1900s, by predominant painters concerned with moral and political issues. The best known work of this kind by a major artist, is Picasso's 'Guernica,' which Hughes discusses along with moral-political paintings by other well-known artists such as Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Picasso's 'Guernica' (1937) was widely taken as “the most powerful invective against violence in modern art.” It takes its name from a city, then capital of the independent Basque Republic, that was destroyed in 1937—at the request of Spanish Nationalist forces—by bombs from German Luftwaffe aircraft and from airplanes supplied by Mussolini. The painting depicts a fallen soldier with a broken sword; a “shrieking” woman with a dead child in her arms; a horse, seemingly stabbed with a sword that protrudes from its mouth; and the image of a bull (perhaps symbolic of General Franco) unmoved by such suffering. Hughes is sceptical however that the images in 'Guernica' were prompted by the war as they include motifs that “had been running through Picasso's work for years before Guernica.” Nevertheless Guernica is taken as an anti-war painting and, for Hughes, it “was the last modern painting of major importance that took its subject from politics with the intention of changing the way large numbers of people thought and felt about power” [14, p. 110].

Prior to this, many paintings presented moral and political themes. Paul Gauguin's (1897) 'Where do we come from? What are We? Where are we going?' was plainly moral in its intent [14, pp. 129–131]. Max Ernst's 'Murdering Airplane' (1920) shows a bi-plane in mid-air with human hands emerging from the fuselage and, on

the ground, two soldiers assisting a wounded comrade [14, p. 72]. Otto Dix's 'Cardplaying War-heros' (1920) is a macabre depiction of the effects of war on three card players who have lost limbs, sight and hearing: one has an iron cross on his uniform. Dix himself had won an iron cross in 1918 but his experiences of World War I led him to represent the brutality—not the heroism—of war. He also rendered in paint, harsh depictions of Weimar society. George Grosz's many images of the same era satirise capitalism, women, politics and the church [14, pp. 73–78]. German artist John Heartfield (1891–1968) used photomontage as political ridicule. 'Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spout's Junk' (1932) is typical of his anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist statements [14, p. 72]. However modern artists "could serve almost any ideological interest," as Hughes points out, and he presents political paintings supportive of the revolution in Russia (from the early 1920s); propaganda works by major Russian artists [14, pp. 93–97]; and leading artists in Italy and Germany who, in the 1930s, supported (respectively) Mussolini's and Hitler's fascism [14, p. 99].

However, in 1980 Hughes claimed that all the "calls to revolutionary action and moral renewal" through the period of modern art were "ultimately futile" and that there was "very little" left of the "art of dissent" [14, p. 371 and p. 108]. He was concerned about the failure of the avant-garde project to morally improve the world, and he was sceptical that—following *Guernica* (1937)—"an artist... could insert images into the stream of public speech and thus change political discourse." His reason was that, "Mass media took away the political speech of art," a thesis that also explained why Mexican artist Rivera's murals, featuring images of the revolution, were effective in a subsequent era. As he put it, "Mexican masses... were pre-electronic, low in literacy, and used to consulting popular devotional art as a prime source of moral instruction" [14, p. 111 and p. 108]. The same circumstances could explain the impact of Columbia's Pedro Nel Gómez's murals. Gómez had been strongly influenced by Rivera and the Mexican mural movement, and he painted murals depicting the struggles of Columbian peasants at a time when few could read in Columbia.

However, Hughes' focus on art that could "change political discourse" set the bar very high if this was to be the standard for defining what is political or moral in art. There have been many paintings with "political references" since the late 1930s as Hughes notes [14, p. 111]. Robert Motherwell's 'Elegy to the Spanish Republic' from the 1950s is an example he provides, and through into the 1960s "Not all artists... shrank from polemic" [14, p. 162 and p. 375]. Edward Kienholz's (1966) painting 'The State Hospital' shows two, almost identical, naked figures strapped to their bunk beds in the squalor of a bare hospital room: a powerful critique of psychiatric hospitals of the time. The sculptural work of George Segal's displays "an unremitting earnestness" and "a moral concern with the voids between people" [14, pp. 376–377]. Also, in a reverse way, Francis Bacon's paintings concern morality—or at least *a*-morality. Hughes writes that "all moral relationships are erased from the world" of Bacon's paintings, although Andrew Graham-Dixon takes a more sympathetic view and sees Bacon as finding "a way of painting a human being as a malleable, immensely vulnerable creature—full of pathos and... full of the capacity for affection" [14, p. 296; 10]. Another artist not included in Hughes *Shock of the*

*New*—who nevertheless fits the genre of a figurative painter who was concerned with moral issues—is Ben Shahn (1898–1969). Much of Shahn’s work portrayed socially disadvantaged people in the USA. His ‘Thou shalt not idly stand by’ (1965) makes this point succinctly with the image of a white hand extended to clasp a black hand [28]. Listed in this way, it is apparent that there continued to be paintings through the 50s and 60s that were concerned with moral issues. Although this was not the pre-occupation of prominent artists of the time, moral themes continued to be the subject of paintings—and all of them are figurative works.

Since the 1980s there has been a “revival of realist painting” [14, p. 402], a “resurgence” of neo expressionism [26], and a return to moral themes in some painting. Botero for example has, in this century, painted a series on the violence of drug cartels in Colombia, and a further series on the torture of prisoners in Abu Graib [20]. Paintings by Belgian artist Luc Tuymans refer to the Holocaust and to atrocities in the Belgian Congo but in a detached way. His painting ‘Maypole’ for example, could be suggestive of Hitler Youth, but it “is strangely empty: void of sympathy or moral... the viewer is left to engage with the painting on a purely instinctive level; being drawn into the evils of history, he adopts his own role as a silent and willing observer” [29].

A notable figurative painter to come to the fore is Marlene Dumas: a South African-born painter who lives and works in Amsterdam.<sup>11</sup> She expresses moral concern: in part, by her choice of subjects, but also in her portrayal of her themes. Yablonsky described her subjects (in a 2008 retrospective) as, “The dead, the dying and the grieving... though her portraits give equal time to newborns, strippers, prisoners, prostitutes and herself” [32]. Schjeldahl’s review of the same exhibition, notes that “almost all” of her work is “based on photographs of corpses, torture victims, terrorists (Osama bin Laden looking crafty and sensual), pornographically posed nudes, gawky children, and endless anonymous, discontented faces” [26]. An essay, by art historian Richard Shiff in the Exhibition Catalogue for the retrospective, begins by addressing Dumas’s “moral insecurity” and the difficulty for her of knowing “if one has done the ‘right’ thing”—especially knowing that rational demands can be swayed by one’s desire, and that images can mean whatever anyone wants them to mean. In an interview she gave at the time of her retrospective, she said that, “all aesthetic judgments are culturally biased and context-sensitive” [4]. Shiff claims that, for Dumas, “painting is a decisive moral act” in the sense that “decisions made in a painting” are “concrete” and one must take responsibility for one’s choices [6, p. 145]. To put it more simply, as Dumas does, “All choices lead to ethics” [6, p. 158].

Dumas brings a post-modern, or post-structuralist, sensibility to her images. As Shiff says of her approach, “all media are unstable, unreliable, subject to manipulation and simple error, but... a medium can [also] be used to control and limit meaning” [6, p. 146]. It is apparent, from her paintings and her discussion of her own work, that she deliberately plays with images. White can mean black, and black

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<sup>11</sup> Although I do not accept that auction values for paintings are definitive of a painter’s standing or worth, it is nevertheless of interest that Dumas was ranked in the top 20 ‘living artists’ in 2005 on this measure [8].

white, and by disturbing these attributions one is opened (in Dumas's words) to "broaden one's ways of looking at all the easy type of things that a certain culture has taught you" [5]. Shiff writes that, "Her images shock viewers out of the customary intellectual and emotional abstractions that would shield them from the problematic features of ordinary life, its sexuality, social contracts, and political conflict" [6, p. 154]. At the very least, Dumas demonstrates that there has been a return to prominence of paintings expressing moral concern, although with respect for the enigmatic nature of images.

## 4.5 Conclusion

Robert Hughes died in August 2012 just as I began work on this chapter [17]. Following news of his death, I was prompted to view on line the video series of his BBC documentary *The Shock of the New* [13] and to subsequently read the book of the same title that came from the series [14]. As was indicated (above), his book provided a platform for much of the discussion in Sects. 4.3 and 4.4 of this chapter. Hughes was passionate about modern art, and also about the role of art in dealing with moral and political issues. He was concerned about the influence of money on art as has been discussed. He set a high standard for a moral role that art could play in society, although he expresses regret that art was unable to fulfil that role. For example, he wrote that, "It is hard to think of any work of art of which one can say, *This* saved the life of one Jew, one Vietnamese, one Cambodian. Specific books perhaps; but as far as one can tell, no paintings or sculptures," and he adds that, "it is certainly our loss that we cannot" [14, p. 111]. This was a high hope, and—from hindsight—too much to expect. More than 30 years on from his documentary series, and the publication of *The Shock of the New*, the story looks different. There are many more sources of media available and no one source of influence. Whilst it may still be possible for a single work of art—a movie or a documentary perhaps—to have a major impact, it is too much to expect that a painting, or any piece of artwork could—or even should—bring about "revolutionary action" or "moral renewal" [14, p. 371]. Furthermore, in a postmodern world, with increased suspicion and awareness of the multiplicity of meanings of images, the most that we can expect is that moral issues may be raised by a painting and portrayed in a different light, as for example in Dumas's work. We might be challenged without being offered any one definitive meaning.

Just as in early modern art, when some paintings dealt with moral issues, it is true again of painting in these modern or postmodern times. There was a lacuna—when abstract painting, minimalism and Pop-art were in the ascendancy—but even during that time there were artists who painted figuratively and conveyed moral concern. What is different about the treatment of moral subjects by current artists, if we take Tuymans and Dumas as examples, is that there is no longer one unambiguous moral story to be told. Painters may allude to moral themes, but it is up to the viewer to provide a perspective and give them meaning. Whilst the story

of morality and modern painting has its particular features, the broader outline is true of all the arts and their relation to morality. It is no longer the artist's role to offer moral instruction, and we can no longer assume a single cultural context of moral interpretation.

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