

## Impatient Eye

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Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts, edited by Harriet Zinnes. New Directions, 1980, \$25.95 (cloth).

"FOR EVERY reader of books on art," wrote Ezra Pound in 1951, "1,000 people go to LOOK at the paintings. Thank heaven!" If he were right, then the whole business of art criticism would have little significance. Pound himself, however, despite this judgment, expended considerable energy writing about art.

Ezra Pound's reviews, essays, letters, and manifestos on the visual arts, as collected by Harriet Zinnes, form a document whose value is not limited to scholars of the poet, or of the comparatively few artists he discussed in detail. These writings show us modernism in its impatient, rough-and-tumble days, often recording the early excitement of possibilities which lost out in the later development of formalist principles.

By 1914, when Pound first wrote our sculpture for *The Egoist*, the English public was more bewildered than outraged by the work of avant-garde artists. In just four years they had been offered Roger Fry's two post-impressionist shows, Picasso's cubism, Russian constructivism, and Italian futurism.

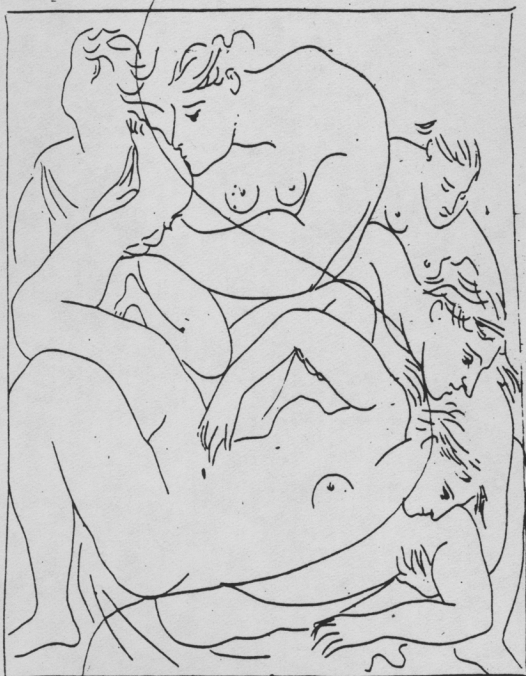
"Advanced taste" had, since 1910, been asked to go from Cezanne and Manet to pure abstraction. For late Edwardian London, that was a tall order.

Those London-based artists who identified with modern movements thus found their audience limited and their financial support unreliable. This frustrated Pound, who held a lifelong belief that society should have faith in its gifted individuals and support them with public commissions and private patronage. While he believed that artists should create for the standards of a circle of "harsh friends," he determined to become interlocutor between the artistic vanguard and a backward, but to his mind redeemable, public.

In a series of articles (which helped pay his own rent), Pound set out to promote such artists as Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Wyndham Lewis and in Paris, Constantin Brancusi, by trying to articulate their aims and by denigrating the run of academic painting which dominated the gallery space of London. Writing for *The New Age* under the pseudonym B.H. Dias, he disputed with himself (via letters to the editor signed Ezra Pound) on the worth of these "vorticist" artists, playing his forum for all it was worth. Elsewhere he advocated the hiring of struggling sculptors to carve "honest"



Henri Matisse, *Face With A Turban*. Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Purchase. (Reproduced by permission of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.)



Pablo Picasso, *Eurydice Piquée Par Un Serpent*, 1931. Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection. (Reproduced by permission of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.)

architectural ornament in place of cheap cement castings, and called for Epstein to receive commissions for war memorials. (It was this same spirit which later motivated Pound in the ill-starred *Bel Esprit* project to get T.S. Eliot out of the banking business.)

As a poet reviewing the visual arts, Pound was following a literary tradition as least as old as Diderot and Stendhal. He was doubtless familiar with the art writing of Baudelaire, who in his *Salon de 1846* applauded a criticism that was "partiale, passionnée, politique." Pound as champion of Lewis and Gaudier was certainly no less partisan than was Baudelaire on behalf of Delacroix and Courbet. He was passionate in his own work and in favor of artists he believed in—his sheer energy, in fact, may have been his greatest contribution to culture.

Today, however, the elements of Pound's visual aesthetic, as they appear in his early writings, may be of greater interest than his work as artistic publicist. Despite, or perhaps because of, the "death of modernism," many of his concerns have a peculiar timeliness. Underpinning all his more technical thought was Pound's sense of the incompatibility of art and commerce: that mercantile society was not making proper use of the works of genius. His feelings about the world of collectors and dealers, for example, were nicely articulated by an analogy to the plumage trade, which he characterized as "a degradation of the sense of beauty into a sense of luxury."

Of artists, Pound saw two types: the passive reflector of external circumstance (or the impressionist) and the active director of circumstance (which he called the vorticist). Pound's creative

individual was a vortex of energy, in which the best thought of the past, the spirit of his own time, and the artist's personal vision came together in artistic production. He had little faith in mass-produced culture; "found" art, or "readymades." For instance, he scathingly recorded an attempt to create a non-utile machine, an assemblage of machine-parts, which proved aesthetically inferior to real machines designed honestly to do a job.

In his assertion that "every concept, every emotion presents itself to the vivid consciousness in some primary form" and "belongs to the art of that form," Pound came down squarely on the side of formalism. He often quoted Whistler: "You are interested in a picture because it is an arrangement of lines and colors." Even his opinion of Picasso declined as that artist retreated from pure abstraction. Pound was thus, along with men like Fry, engaged early in the struggle to develop a critical vocabulary for modern art, a vocabulary which would later be wielded dextrously by such critics as Clement Greenberg.

It is ironic that the triumph and exhaustion of formalism have led to many of the conditions that Pound criticized most harshly in the art world of 1914. Serious art since the 1950s has frequently been attacked as being created for museums, which Pound called "the pests of our age." Many contemporary works are less visual experiences than elaborations of theory and, like the literary painting of the nineteenth century, violate Pound's doctrine of the "primary pigment." And surely, perhaps on a wider scale than ever before, speculation in art has today degraded the sense of beauty into a sense of luxury. □