
Reviewed by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

IT IS OFTEN said that Roger Fry's legacy has been hampered by the characterisation of his writings as purely ‘formalist’. Until now, however, no detailed analysis of Fry’s writings has been undertaken to demonstrate the limitations of this view. Adrienne Rubin’s Roger Fry’s ‘Difficult and uncertain science’, based on the author’s doctoral thesis, sets out to do just this, and in particular to show how psychological theories were of importance for Fry.

Fry’s interest in psychological theories can be traced back to his fascination with phenomenology as a student at Cambridge, and to his training there as a scientist. It was, however, in his early writings on Italian art, his Giovanni Bellini (1890), and his two-part essay on Giotto, as well as his introduction to his edition of Reynolds’s Discourses, that he first began fully to develop his belief in the ‘logic of the sensations and emotions’ (p.35). Fry’s turn in about 1900 to an interest in formal qualities, expressed most fully in his later work on Cézanne, was not necessarily a turn away from an interest in perception, Rubin argues, but a shift of focus to the emotional and physiological relationship between work of art and viewer. Rubin admirably situates Fry in his contemporary context, showing a range of connections to writers such as Denham Ross, William Worrringer, Vernon Lee, William James, George Santayana, G.E. Moore and Tolstoi, whose What is Art? (1898) claimed as a direct, if provocative, influence.

Rubin’s helpful periodisation of Fry’s career leads up to the five years from 1910 to 1915, which she titles ‘The Perception of Significant Form’. That the notion of ‘pure painting’ he advocated depended on a direct emotional connection between painting and viewer would seem to lead naturally to displaying works of art, which of course in 1910 and 1912 it did, with the two Grafton Galleries’ exhibitions of Post-Impressionism. Quite what was meant by ‘significant form’ in the context of these two exhibitions was less clear; particularly in the writings of Clive Bell (the inventor of the phrase), who Rubin dismisses as an ‘awkward’ writer and as an ‘epigone of Fry’. Bell might have given ‘significant form’ more significance by capitalising it, but Fry gave a subtler description of how it incorporates underlying ideas as a way (as he put it in Vision and Design) ‘to bend to our emotional understanding by means of his [the artist’s] passionate conviction, some intractable material which is alien to our spirit’.

Although Fry, unlike Bell, never entirely dispensed with the idea that content was somehow important, he recoded it as ‘plasticity’, which might be understood as ‘significant volume’, in, for example, the 1911 essay ‘Plastic Design’, and then in 1926 with ‘Plastic Colours’. The debt to Berenson’s ‘idealised sensations’ comes in to play here, as does Fry’s admiration for Kandinsky’s work, which he considered a practical application of his theory of plasticity. Abstraction for Fry was always, however, grounded in reality, ‘the effect on the mind of flat forms is feeble’, he wrote in a 1921 article on Picasso. Fry not only rejected ‘flat’ abstraction but also the value of expressing emotion (rather than aesthetic) emotion, and that, for him, meant most German art. ‘My attention to German art has always been an uneasy one’, he wrote in an unpublished text from 1928, cited by Rubin. His position is clearer, perhaps, in recalling that Cézanne was for Fry the perfect embodiment of aesthetic emotion expressed through design. His distaste for German art was implicit in his admiration for Cézanne and France, rather than the expression of an explicit prejudice.

The last two decades of his life until his death in 1934 were years of ‘expansion and synthesis’, as Rubin puts it, but also marked by an increasing sense of ‘humility and diffidence’ (as Fry put it). His interest in psychology and psychoanalysis in these years, particularly that of the Gestalt school (to which Rubin provides a concise and lucid introduction) had limits – the Freudian unconscious, Rubin points out, was in direct conflict with Fry’s sense of formal order and design. Her subtle reading of a range of texts written in the years before ‘The Artist and Psycho-analysis’ of 1924 shows how Freudian theories entered his own writings, as it were, unconsciously. She cites the little-known influence of the Swiss lay psychoanalyst Oskar Pfister, whose 1913 The Psychoanalytic Method was prefaced by Freud, as well as that of Fry’s friend the translator and literary critic Charles Mauron. Both Mauron and Pfister emphasised the biological underpinning of art and psychoanalysis, an influence that appeared to the natural scientist in Fry.

Rubin discusses Fry’s influence and legacy, with reference to three figures, Kenneth Clark, Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg. Clark was a direct disciple, who identified with Fry’s belief in sharing rarefied emotion with a broad audience, and has suffered equally unfair charges of elitism. Rubin provides a subtle assessment of their critical relationship, characterised by Clark as the distinction between iconological criticism (him) and connoisseurial criticism (Fry, p.212). Form for Clark was always linked to subject-matter and to the ‘real world’, rather than to purely aesthetic emotion. Herbert Read is seen more as an opposing pole, ‘neither an original nor an intellectually coherent thinker’. Rubin holds (p.214). His adherence to a psychoanalytically based notion of Surrealism, and then to a symbolically grounded notion of abstraction, were both criticised by Fry. One of the last of Fry’s writings published in his lifetime was a highly critical review of Read’s Art Now, in this Magazine in May 1934. That the review was printed was testament to Read’s broadmindedness, for he was by that point the Editor of the Magazine. This in itself is testament to Fry’s broadmindedness, having recommended Read the previous year for the appointment. Rubin’s last epilogue is Clement Greenberg, who was clearly Fry’s successor as a ‘formalist’, yet Greenberg went further in his promotion of abstraction, in particular the ‘flatness’ of geometric abstraction which for Fry would have been barren plains, alongside its vital forms. Both critics, however, were joined in their view of the modernist avant-garde as being in continuity with the past, as well as in their partisan choice of examples to support their views.

The range of material Rubin deals with is vast, and her coverage often all too summary (and abstract), but her book remains an important addition to the critical literature on Fry. Her conclusion that Fry’s audience-focused focus on aesthetic perception as opposed to inward-looking formalism can be adduced as evidence of his essentially ‘democratising force’ is probably true. It is just that little bit harder for enthusiasts of German art to swallow.


Reviewed by AYLA LEPINE

THE VALE of the White Horse at Uffington in Berkshire captured the imaginations of numerous artists and writers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Along with G.K. Chesterton, Paul Nash and John Piper, Eric Ravilious was also drawn to its mysterious curving forms. Ravilious’s 1939 The Vale of the White Horse used the abstracted, sleek chalk markings of the animal’s body as a cue to initiate a pulse in the hills themselves, which, as Alan Powers writes in this new book, ‘write like a giant skin’. Under Ravilious’s brush, the English landscape takes on corporeal quality. And yet, his dry, crisp technique creates a sense of distance – both psychological and physical – from his diverse subjects. Following numerous displays and publications on the artist (including a major 2003 exhibition at the Imperial War Museum), Alan Powers focuses on contextual object-based analysis through a structure shaped by media. Murals undertaken with Edward Bawden for Morley College, London, set the stage, and war watercolours close the volume.

Ravilious’s investment in ornament and texture pervades his work, and there is a fresh playfulness in his designs that ensures his perennial popularity. If widely produced