

4. The Importance of Skill

The notion that quality in painting is principally dependent on the painter's skill (or talent, if it is considered innate) is the most widespread of all models in the past hundred years. It is a cliché in the popular press: "Imagination without skill gives us contemporary art," as Tom Stoppard put it.¹ The voices of academic art history are faint beside the many writers who base their sense of history and quality on the painter's technical ability. Few people outside academia could make much, I think, of T.J. Clark's rejoinder that "technique in modernism is a kind of shame: something that asserts itself as the truth of picturing, but always against picturing's best and most desperate efforts."²

The most visible spokesman for this theory in the United States is not even an art critic: he is Tom Wolfe, novelist and author of what he described as "the one sociological study" of the American art world, the book *The Painted Word*. In Wolfe's view the American art world is "scarcely a world": it amounts

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1. Tom Stoppard, "Artist Descending a Staircase," as quoted by Wolfe, "The Artist the Art World Couldn't See," *New York Times Magazine*, January 2, 2000, 16–19, quotation on p. 18.
 2. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 48.

to just three thousand “curators, dealers, collectors, scholars, critics, and artists in New York.” In January 2000, Wolfe wrote a sympathetic account of the American sculptor Frederick Hart (1945–1999), best known for *Three Soldiers*, a sculptural group that is positioned as a response to Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington, D.C. Wolfe compared Hart to Giotto and excoriated the snobbish art world for failing to recognize him. He described Hart’s “bafflement” on encountering the art world’s notion of skill. From the art world’s point of view, artists such as Hart “used a devious means — skill — to fool the eye into believing that bronze or stone had turned into human flesh. Therefore, they were artificial, false, meretricious. By 1982, no ambitious artist was going to display skill, even if he had it.” Wolfe said “art worldlings” disparage skill and look to works, such as Lin’s, that are “absolutely skillproof.”³

The defense of skill or technical ability often entails the defense of popular taste and of profit. Wolfe noted that Hart’s acrylic castings brought in more than \$100 million, but “none were ever reviewed,” except in “so-called civic reviews,” which he defined as “the sort of news or feature items or picture captions that say, in effect, ‘This thing is big, and it’s outdoors, and you may see it on the way to work, so we should probably tell you what it is.’ ” It is a pity that Wolfe’s rhetoric is so blustery, because it would be interesting to see what a defense of skill would look like if it did

3. Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975); quotation from Wolfe, “The Artist the Art World Couldn’t See,” 18–19.

not depend on appeals to popularity or market values. It might be difficult to defend skill in Wolfe's terms, because it would be clear that the modernist abandonment of skill grew organically out of the gradual erosion of realism. Sculptors such as Hart, whose work depends on Canova and Bernini, would then appear more clearly to have missed the point of realism's dead end. (It would also be difficult to defend popularity and profit without mentioning skill, because it would entail noticing other qualities of artworks that Hart shares with successful contemporaries such as Richard Serra and Anthony Caro, two sculptors Wolfe ridiculed.)

The defense of skill is also frequently millenarian. Wolfe praised Hart's "derrière-garde art" and saw signs of its resurgence in the emerging art of the third millennium. He cited the "sudden serious consideration" of Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), and he mentioned a sellout show of work mostly by graduates of the New York Academy of Art ("America's only Classical, derrière-garde art school"). Young collectors, he said, go for "‘pleasant’ and often figurative art instead of abstract, distorted, or ‘wounded’ art of the Modern tradition," as is proved by the "soaring interest" in French *fin de siècle* academic artists such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905; see Figure 4.1), Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonnier (1815–1891), and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904).⁴

4. Wolfe, "The Artist the Art World Couldn't See," 19. The sellout show was Norman Rockwell (New York: Hirsch and Adler Gallery [c. 1999]), and another popular show in the same year was Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson, eds., *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 1999).

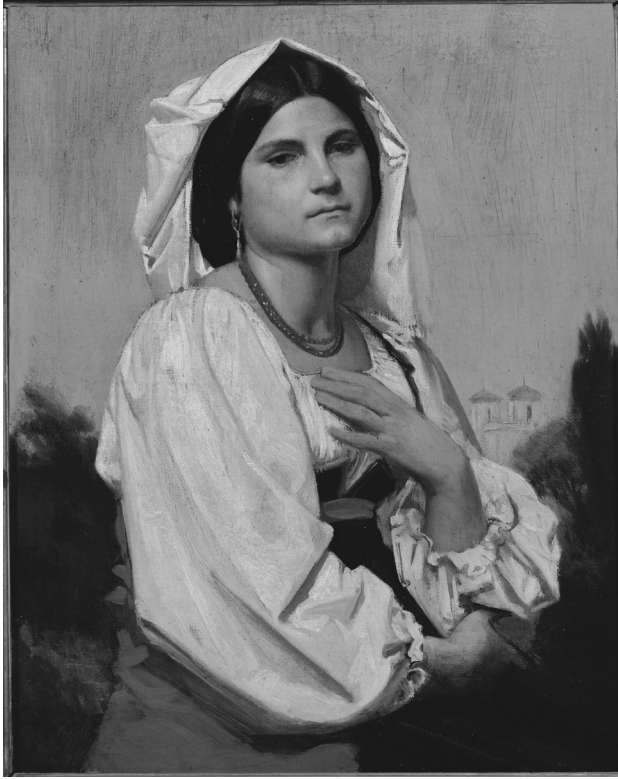


Figure 4.1

In the *New York Times* there is a distinction to be made between the Friday arts section, which is under the direction of Michael Kimmelman, and the various arts features that run on other weekdays or in the *Sunday Magazine*, which are less aligned with the art world and more likely to be conservative and antimodernist. Earlier in 1999 the *New York Times* had run a piece written by the journalist Deborah Solomon called “How to Succeed in Art,” chronicling careerism among students in several Los Angeles art schools. The essay made fun of students who

refused to be interviewed by the *New York Times* because it would hurt their fledgling reputations if their gallerists found out they were still students.⁵ Solomon interviewed several of the “power art faculty” at the University of California at Los Angeles, including Chris Burden (b. 1946), whom she reported as making \$102,000 per year, and Mary Kelly (b. 1941), whom she quoted as saying “theory can make you a better artist.” “One wonders,” Solomon wrote, “whether the new-genre art favored in the 90’s, the videos and installations, will ever be able to compete with the epic achievements of this century, the oil-on-canvas masterpieces done by modernists who may have mocked academic values but who made sure they knew how to draw.”⁶ The pattern, even in the *New York Times*, is consistent. According to another article by Solomon, Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said that one of Kiki Smith’s (b. 1954) sculptures was “disgusting and devoid of any craft or aesthetic merit.”⁷ (The word craft was chosen perhaps because it sounds like it’s a bit lower than technical skill.)

It is a sign of just how deeply academia and the art world are divided from the rest of the public that it has been necessary for me to cite newspaper articles as the principal theoretical sources for the defense of skill. Commercial art magazines such as *American Artist*,

5. Deborah Solomon, “How to Succeed in Art,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, June 27, 1999, 38–41.

6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. Deborah Solomon, “Is the Met Phobic about Contemporary Art?” *New York Times*, January 9, 2000, 47.

The Artist's Magazine, *TIEM Design* (which gives Photoshop tutorials in a relentlessly commercial naturalistic style), and *Airbrush Technique* focus on technical advances and tips for naturalistic painting but are less likely to contain polemics and apologies for artistic skill.⁸ Some artists' organizations have charters and position papers; the Art Renewal Center announces itself as an organization dedicated to the renewal of skill along with "training, standards, and excellence" in the arts. Their Web site features mainly nineteenth-century-style paintings, but it also offers "responsible views opposing those of the current art establishment" and a list of forty-odd approved schools and teachers.⁹ (Tom Wolfe should see this list: it gives the impression that half the world paints in an academic figurative style.)

Even farther afield are the "starving artist" sales that take place in suburban Hiltons and Holiday Inns. I have had some contact with the people who are the intended market for those venues. When I was a graduate student, I supported myself in part by teaching introductory art history in small colleges. That is where I first encountered people who are impatient with modernist painting because it seems to lack skill. Students majoring in business, telecommunication, premed, prenursing, and economics — in other words, people not in the humanities or the sciences — asked me to defend the art I was discussing by describing the skill that

8. <http://www.tiemdesign.com/HOWTO/Photoshop.htm>, accessed March 8, 2005.

9. <http://www.artrenewal.org>, accessed April 18, 2003.

went into it or, failing that, by citing its market value. In the art world the complaint “My six-year-old could paint that!” is a part of the history of modernism, and it is taken as an index to a certain kind of public incomprehension. But outside the art world it is a common complaint, and it is taken to be a sufficient rejoinder to the insult of what is taken to be intentionally incomprehensible art. Even so, the anonymous artworks featured in actual starving artist venues are not tremendously skilled by academic standards, and defending them would also require an appeal to their sentimentality. Mass-production oil painting companies such as Art Liquidation also feature modern paintings that are not so much skilled as sweet or inoffensive (see Figure 4.2). It also matters that the paintings are not expensive: their cheapness is a signal that the makers are not part of the art world. Skill is the central criterion, but it is linked to sentiment, nostalgia, and conservatism.

I also encounter that larger public in the galleries of the Art Institute in Chicago, where I teach a class in which students set up easels and copy paintings. Visitors naturally listen in, and some mistake me for a public demonstrator and ask questions. From those conversations I have become aware of a point of view in which all old masters are more or less interchangeable, and all of modern art is considered a lesser achievement. I have seen people literally rushing to get through the modern galleries, and I have been asked if modern painting is not really all about money or greed. One notion that seems to be widely held is that good painting basically ended with Rembrandt. (I suspect the



"Modern Paintings" from the Art-Liquidation.com website (April 2003):

Test at the side:
 "The following paintings are in stock.
 These are the actual photos of the paintings."

Top left:
 Modern Oil painting on canvas
 Item # 391
 Size: 8x10 inches
 Price: \$19.
 Condition: New
 Signed: No
 Stretched: Yes

Above:
 Modern Oil painting on canvas
 Item # 390
 Size: 8x10 inches
 Price: \$19.
 Condition: New
 Signed: No
 Stretched: Yes

Left:
 Modern Oil painting on canvas
 Item # 389
 Size: 8x10 inches
 Price: \$19.
 Condition: New
 Signed: No
 Stretched: Yes

Figure 4.2

reason people think so is that Rembrandt is the most recent old master whose name is widely known.)

In my experience a person who judges painting primarily by skill is not just saying that an artist should be able to render convincing fabrics or faces. Rather the judgment means that painting should be a fully immersive experience: it should let us forget ourselves for a while, and wander, in imagination, through

the painted scenes. A lack of skill means that the painter is not able to capture viewers in that way. There are a number of contemporary painting practices that can be fully immersive: fantasy art, painted backdrops in Hollywood films and in Universal Studio-type theme rides, digital video games, commercial portraiture, and landscape painting. Modernism, with its references to itself and its physical materials, fails to immerse its viewers in that way.¹⁰

The mix of skill, immersive experience, and sentiment is exemplified in another essay by Solomon, called “In Praise of Bad Art”; it concerns the *fin de siècle* revival of interest in Norman Rockwell, Victorian fairy painting, Walt Disney cartoons, N.C. Wyeth (1882–1945), and nineteenth-century painters including Bouguereau and Moreau.¹¹ Solomon said the distinction between high art and low art is entirely gone, and viewers are now free to openly enjoy what had been only guilty pleasures. The situation has changed, she claimed, since Susan Sontag wrote her “Notes on ‘Camp’ ” in 1964. Rockwell’s fans no longer think of him as campy; they “see him as a gifted artist snubbed by modernist taste.” Now that the “once-forbidden line separating high and low culture” has been erased, it is not necessary to look

10. I use the word immersion to avoid implying that Fried’s sense of absorption can be unproblematically extended to this kind of experience. The thematic is related, but the kind of immersion I am describing here requires a different sense of what painting is, and a widely divergent understanding of how the history of painting might be relevant to its current practice.

11. Deborah Solomon, “In Praise of Bad Art,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 24, 1999, 32–35.

at Rockwell with irony or knowing detachment. Rockwell, “Mr. Sentimentality, is the perfect symbol of our times.” There is a bit of irony in that sentence, but most of Solomon’s essay is against irony, and also against the “snobbery of the past,” when high-art priests oppressed people with their “aridness and pretense.” Now, at last, mass culture has become culture, and the levitical caste has been expelled. The avant-garde has ceased to exist, or has changed its name and gone underground, masquerading as the new populism.

Solomon’s essay speaks for a large public of museum visitors and collectors, and also for a significant portion of the art community, where high art and low art are considered a thing of the past, and where a velvet painting of Elvis might command as much attention as the latest Sherrie Levine. It is a stance made possible by a carelessness about the ways that historical judgments might continue to bear on the present. And indeed history came creeping back in, when Solomon touched on the problem of distinguishing good bad art, the kind she said is celebrated, from bad bad art. She quoted Robert Rosenblum, who told her that he agrees with something once said by François Cachin, former director of the Musée d’Orsay (a museum devoted in large part to “bad” academic nineteenth-century painting, including Bouguereau and Moreau). Cachin said “Oh, but I only like the best bad art!”¹² What would that be, exactly? At first Solomon

12. *Ibid.*, 32.

said it is “not amateur painting” but “technically skillful” art. It is also painting that is openly sentimental, with “no angst, no alienation” — painting infused with nostalgia, even “supercornball” painting such as Rockwell’s. I wonder where the line might be drawn on sentimentality. Would Solomon accept Joseph Csatari (b. 1926), whose paintings make Rockwell’s look sour? Csatari was a friend of Rockwell’s, and he inherited his position as official painter for the Boy Scouts of America in 1977.¹³ His work is as skillful as Rockwell’s, but his sentiment is stronger: is that on the edge of bad bad painting? (The ironies of the situation are somewhat alarming: in Solomon’s expression “bad bad painting,” the second “bad” is in invisible scare quotes, because the art is not bad now that the revaluation of values has put it on a par with all painting. But what is to prevent the first “bad” from having its own set of invisible scare quotes? Would Solomon want to defend “bad” “bad” art?)

The sequence of twentieth-century painting implied by the valuation of skill and immersive experience does not include cubism, which might be considered skilled (although I am not aware of any such claim) but rejects an immersive encounter. The sequence includes, nominally, *fin de siècle* work such as Franz von Stuck’s (1862–1928); photograph-like surrealism, including the works of René Magritte (1898–1967), Paul Delvaux (1897–1994), Max Ernst (1891–1976), Leonora Carrington

13. <http://www.csatari.com/index.html>.

(b. 1917), Leonor Fini (1908–1996), and Dorothea Tanning (b. 1910); social realist and even socialist realist painting from around the world, but especially including the works of Rockwell Kent (1882–1971) and Norman Rockwell; and a miscellany of contemporaries who exhibit painterly skill, such as Lucian Freud (b. 1922), Odd Nerdrum, Komar and Melamid, and John Currin (b. 1962). Some op art is also included, especially in South America where Victor Vasarely (1908–1997) is considered an important painter. Most of the painters who have been praised for their skill are not known in the art world but represented by commercial galleries in places such as West Hollywood and Beverly Hills, Sausalito, the Île de France, Naples and Boca Raton in Florida, Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and Michigan Avenue in Chicago.¹⁴ It is an odd canon, omitting as it does so much of the century, from international abstraction to abstract expressionism, art informe, most of pop, color field, minimalism, and postminimalism.

It can seem that in the context of modernism or postmodernism, judging a painting by its maker's skill is ideologically overdetermined and therefore necessarily irrelevant. On the other hand, it can be argued that a lack of specific kinds of technical skill affected the work of some major twentieth-century painters, and that argument can open the way to a reintroduction of the question of skill. I agree with John Golding's argument that Duchamp's helplessness in the face of ordinary life drawing prompted him to find the mechanical shapes he ended

up using in the *Large Glass*.¹⁵ In Duchamp's case a lack of control over the painted body was a cause not of failure but of success; the brittleness and unsteady articulation of his mechanomorphic figures after 1912 correspond exactly to the weaknesses of his earlier postimpressionist figures. Before and after the change, his figures are spindly and ill proportioned, with a tendency to tilt or slide instead of standing in proper *contrapposto*. They are unevenly executed, without an eye to the whole figure. It did not matter after the *Bride*, but there are marked weaknesses before: *Apropos of Little Sister* (1911); for instance, is a frail picture in which the weakness and hesitancy known to any beginning student are camouflaged — as any beginning student does — by atmosphere (see Figure 4.3). How to get that knee to wrap around the other, how to do a slumping back and neck, how to manage lips in profile; the problem points are disguised by the kinds of gaps permitted by cubism. Duchamp's lack of competence at academic figure painting has no bearing that I can see on his place in twentieth-century painting, but it does have specific effects on his mature manner.

The same type of argument can be made, I think, about a number of artists, including Robert Delaunay (1885–1941), Francis Picabia (1879–1953), Mark Rothko (1903–1970), and

14. See, for example, the list of Hollywood galleries at <http://artscenecal.com/Listings/WestHwd/WestHwd.html>; Sausalito art galleries at <http://www.sausalitoartgalleries.com/>; Naples art galleries at <http://www.explorenaples.com/results.phtml?categories=ART%20GALLERIES>; and Boca Raton art galleries at <http://www.worldartantiques.com/FloridaBocaRaton.htm>.

15. John Golding, Marcel Duchamp: *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).



Figure 4.3

Jasper Johns (b. 1930). In each case the artist's development from academic figural work to the signature style closely follows flaws in his naturalism. Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), for example, was at times incapable of rendering figural proportions and architectural perspective so that they were adequate to the level of naturalism the paintings otherwise posit. When his perspectival

lines do not converge well enough to present themselves as naturalistic, they give the paintings a kind of wavering flatness that can be understood only as a mismatch between the absorptive naturalism posited by the remainder of the painting and the inadequate support for that naturalism given by the perspective. (I have to put this in a roundabout way because the failures of his naturalistic skills only matter when they are balanced against what happens elsewhere in the paintings.) His figures sometimes combine well-rounded limbs with flattened ones, so that they seem unsure whether they should occupy the picture's volume or keep subservient to the painted surface. In a generous reading, the mismatch between naturalistic intimism and unnaturalistic depiction is an expressive trait, not a distraction and certainly not a problem. But the paintings continuously raise the question of the harmony between the different tools of naturalism.

Bonnard was aware of these issues, and he especially agonized over what he thought of as his deficient drawing. The relevance of his concerns can be gauged by comparing his naturalistic skills with those of followers who are less skilled in the same kinds of depictive problems; for example, Ettore Fico (b. 1917), an Italian painter who closely emulated Bonnard in the 1970s.¹⁶ Fico's *Porta rossa: Omaggio a Reycend* (1977) is nearly a copy of the kitchen letting onto the garden in Bonnard's *Dining Room in the Country* (1913): same open door, oblique view, flattened

16. Ettore Fico, opere 1964–1989 (Torino: Fabbri, 1989).



Figure 4.4

Cézanne-style kitchen table, phosphorescently tinted garden (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5). Fico was more constrained than Bonnard by a lack of skill. Here, he keeps his vertical lines strictly vertical, giving his painting a schematic look but avoiding the uncertainties of Bonnard's lines. Aside from such points of stability, Fico is hopeless, and his weakly imagined garden shows how Bonnard's organic shapes are woven into his architectural forms. Fico can barely paint his way from the step out to the shrubbery, mainly because he seems to be thinking of real, Euclidean space and not letting Bonnard's organic, wavering sense of space help his painting's architecture cohere with its organic forms. The place



Figure 4.5

of Bonnard in twentieth-century painting is a fascinating question, shared by a number of art historians who find themselves attracted to his work.¹⁷ I do not pursue it here except to say that Bonnard's control and his level of academic skill — in particular his sense of drawing — have to figure in any answer.

Another example of a painter who can be considered in terms of deficient technique is René Magritte. In the 1920s he was painting figures in a style reminiscent of contemporary advertising and movies. The men in *The Menaced Assassin* (1926) wear eyeliner, adopt blank expressions, and strike mannequin poses (see Figure 4.6). His technique here is only a half step behind his chosen style. He had trouble with three-dimensional objects: the trumpet of the Victrola looks a bit soft; he was not sure how to cast oblique light onto a face (the shadows are weak and formulaic, like a beginning student's would be); he diffused one shadow as it moves across the floor (another student's trick to ensure the floor seems flat); and he made the receding walls get suddenly darker at the back (a simple trick that keeps a room in perspective when it would otherwise look collapsed). In later paintings it can appear as if Magritte had only recently discovered how to represent the objects and that his criterion of naturalism is just that the objects should permit a viewer to

17. Timothy Hyman, author of *Bonnard* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), told me that "part of the reason for my feeling impelled to write about Bonnard, was ... the failure, among the people I knew, from my years at the Slade in the mid-sixties right through to the eighties, to place Bonnard within the canon"; letter to the author, January 5, 2000.



Figure 4.6

suspend disbelief — provided the viewer does not start looking too closely and actually enjoying the illusion, as viewers tend to do with naturalistic paintings. Magritte learned to paint birds through a series of discrete stages, and it seems he put each new skill to work as soon as he found it: the dead bird, painted as a lump or with wings outspread in the curled “V” ubiquitous in children’s drawings; then later, birds in sitting poses; and finally birds whose feathers have visible shanks and quills. He found a rudimentary way to paint steam and smoke, and used it without change in works leading up to *Time Transfixed* (1938), in which a steam locomotive comes out of a fireplace. His faux-wood grains and faux marble in that painting are poor by the standards

of professional faux-texture painters, but they do what Magritte wanted them to: they signal a willing observer not to look more closely than necessary. None of this, I repeat, argues against Magritte's place in histories of twentieth-century painting, but I think that attending to skill in this very straightforward manner — not as an ideology but as a technical matter — makes it difficult to think of Magritte's paintings as they are presented in the academic literature; that is, as primarily conceptual exercises that put *trompe l'oeil* to unexpected uses.

There are many other possible examples. André Masson (1896–1987) is an artist whose work was hobbled at times by his inability to connect the limbs of a figure, to attach a hip to a torso, or to see how to create the roundness of a cheek. Even within the boundaries of the outline manner he adopted in the mid-1920s, it is possible to locate choices forced on him by limitations in his ability to negotiate the outlines of three-dimensional forms. *Battle of Fishes* (1926) has gaps and infelicities that could have been patched without undermining the sense of automatism. Gaston Chaissac (1904–1964), once called “Picasso with wooden shoes,” made works that I find impossible to see without wondering what they might have been if he had been able to draw competently by academic standards.¹⁸ The German artist Ernst Matthes (1878–1918), who lived in Paris, pointed up how Toulouse-Lautrec depended on his own

18. Barbara Nathan-Neher, *Gaston Chaissac* (Stuttgart: Klett-Kotta, 1987); Angelika Affentranger-Kirchath et al., eds., *Gaston Chaissac 1910–1964* (Stuttgart: G. Hatje, 1996).



Figure 4.7

facility (see Figure 4.7). Some of Matthes's paintings took the same subjects as Toulouse-Lautrec's, but Matthes presented them without any flair — his lines do not swirl from one figure to another as Toulouse-Lautrec's do, and his figures seem heavy and motionless. When the representational going got tough, Matthes let his outlines fade into a fog, and he was content to depict bodies as ovals and limbs as sticks. It is as if his figures were tamped down, or rounded off, by his encounter with Munch.¹⁹

And last, although I have been talking about limitations of skills, modernism also involves academic representational skill

19. Maurice Denis was another influence. See Ernst Pöppel, ed., *Ernst Matthes 1878–1918* (Bremen: Kunsthalle, 1972), 12.

and the immersive experiences that they have been taken to enable. This is a subject too large to be usefully summarized, but instances of it include De Kooning's problematic facility and his laying down of skill in drawings done with his eyes closed; Mondrian's flower paintings and their relation to his signature technique; Nolde's early architectural watercolors and their role in his antiacademic style; Rothko's wavering figural style and its relation to the indistinct boundaries of the mature paintings; and even Kosuth's skills at lettering, wall paintings, and stenciling. These are just tokens of arguments that might be joined without leaving either the discourse of modernism or the nonacademic discourse of traditional painterly technique. Each of them has been hinted at in the scholarly literature: what is missing, from the point of view of a person for whom painting aims at an immersive experience enabled by the painter's academic abilities, is a detailed consideration of specific talents and abilities, and the specific expressive reasons artists had for trying to put them aside. Exactly how is Nolde's wildness — his sense of what is expressive — a product of his particular skills at rendering the linear forms of furniture with nearly myopic precision? A question such as that asks for an inch-by-inch understanding of skill, one that would be recognizable to viewers for whom realism counts as more than a convention among many — and at the same time the question is open to the historical study of expressionism because it can be answered using historically specific senses of terms such as expression, skill, rendering, and realism.

I mention these examples not to defend the sense of skill advocated by Wolfe or Solomon but to suggest that their position and the academic disregard of skill are partial accounts. Serious discussions of the place of academic rendering are absent in the popular press, where the defense of skill is done without taking modernism into account, and also in academic art history, where the embargo on the discussion of skill as anything except a historically delimited practice prevents certain questions from being asked about figurative and nonfigurative art. Skill can often be a matter of shame in modernist theory, but it is also shamed by modernist theory: and accounts that privilege skill tend to feel modernist criteria, if they feel them at all, as a kind of shame. The mutual misunderstanding is a deep and interesting challenge for accounts that would speak about painting more widely.

