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The legacy of John Dewey's *Art as experience*: Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock

Abstract

*This article begins with an overview of the contrasts between John Dewey's naturalistic aesthetics, primarily as presented in his classic work *Art as experience*, and the more formalist aesthetics of art collector, philanthropist and educator Albert Barnes. This contrast is then used to explore and explain their disparate compatibilities and relationships with the pioneering work of the iconic 20th century American artists Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock. This examination ultimately underscores both the genuine catholicity of Dewey's aesthetics and its deep roots in the endless meaning-making possibilities of everyday experience. The article then concludes with a brief discussion of the educational implications of these findings for our thinking about Dewey in the context of art and aesthetic education.*

Keywords

Dewey, Aesthetics, Art education

Dedicated to my father, E.G. Granger III

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the over thirty-year personal and professional relationship between John Dewey and the inimitable art collector, philanthropist and educator Albert Barnes. Their long and fruitful association marks a notable theme in Dewey's life. For it was not the only of his significant relationships with creative minds outside the academy. Dewey was routinely receptive to alternative ideas and perspectives, and this proved to be one of the most significant and profitable ways in which he remained faithful to the moral and intellectual imperatives of democratic openness and life-long learn-

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ing. Like Emerson before him, he routinely refused to segregate the personal from the professional.

While Dewey learned a great deal about the plastic arts from Barnes, and enjoyed unrestricted access to his friend's prodigious collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, it is clear that this relationship was mutually beneficial. There can be little doubt that the innovative art-education programs at the historic Barnes Foundation (originally located in Merion, Pennsylvania²) drew directly in places from Dewey's philosophical-psychology and theories regarding aesthetic expression and perception. Moreover, Barnes was admittedly strongly attracted to Dewey's egalitarian commitment to participatory democracy. That said, it has also been amply demonstrated that, on close examination, Dewey's aesthetics relies much less than Barnes' on formalistic precepts and protocols (e.g., concerning elements of color, light, line and space), while also being rooted more deeply and consistently in the generative conditions of everyday experience. Consequently, Dewey's principal work on art and aesthetics, *Art as experience* (LW 10)³, ultimately yields a broader, more naturalistic vision of art than one typically finds in Barnes. Indeed, due largely to its organic naturalism artists tended to find more of value in Dewey's *Art as experience* than either aestheticians or art critics, who typically considered it insufficiently rigorous and intellectually antiquated, while the obverse characterized Barnes' masterwork, *The art in painting* (Barnes 1937).

It should be no surprise, then, that the philosophical fault lines running beneath Dewey's and Barnes' aesthetics surface rather tellingly in their contrasting compatibilities with the pioneering work of two iconic 20th century American artists: Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock. As demonstrated in the discussion to follow, the increasingly disparate artistic sensibilities of Benton and Pollock – the former associated primarily with American Regionalism and the latter with Abstract Expressionism – ultimately underscore both the genuine catholicity of Dewey's aesthetics and its roots in the endless

² Now situated more prominently in Philadelphia's Logan Square, the Foundation remains an active center of the arts and art education today.

³ All future citations of Dewey's writings (The Southern Illinois University Press *Collected works* edition) are given in the text in this standard form, consisting of initials representing the set (*EW*, *MW* and *LW* for *Early works*, *Middle works*, and *Later works*, respectively), the volume number, and the page number.

meaning-making possibilities of everyday experience. It is also instructive to observe, in contrast, where and how these developments in American art exist in tension (if not outright contradiction) with Barnes' substantially formalist aesthetics. This, even as Dewey relied heavily on the paintings and sculpture in Barnes' collection to work out the relationship between the visual arts and his more consistently experiential or naturalistic aesthetics.

In exploring the above issues this article will seek to address the following questions: how and to what extent might Dewey's ideas on the experience of art (often in contrast with his friend and tutor Barnes) be relevant to significant trends in 20th century American art reflected in the work of Benton and Pollock? Further, how and to what extent might they have influenced or otherwise fortified these trends? And, finally, what might this mean for our thinking about Dewey in the context of art and aesthetic education?

2. *Thomas Hart Benton*

Thomas Hart Benton was born in 1889 in the little town of Neosho, Missouri on the edge of the Ozarks. The son of a popular congressman and politically inclined himself, young Benton accompanied his father and the rest of the family to Washington D.C. every year during the busy months while congress was in session. Such family travels aside, he always claimed the landscape of southwest Missouri to be the scene of his most enduring boyhood hopes and dreams (Benton 1939: 1-22). This was later borne out by his own restive sojourns as a young man. Having attempted but inevitably become dissatisfied with the conventional artist's life in cosmopolitan cities like Chicago, Paris, and New York, Benton subsequently spent many months traversing the country in search of the inspiration of local color and cultural resonances he had become so enamored with in rural Missouri. Returning finally to Kansas City in 1935, Benton eventually made his name as a tough-minded American Regionalist painter with a characteristic fondness for the frontier culture of wilderness and wheat fields. As a mature artist, he utilized a highly distinctive illustrative style deeply influenced by Renaissance forms and composition. This was typically manifested in burly figures created from energetic, curving brush-

strokes and conspicuously animistic overtones, with up-thrusting rhythmic undercurrents permeating the landscapes. Things were never static or without consequence in Benton's dynamic world of the "American scene".

As its principal subject-matter, Benton's Regionalism depicted life in small-town rural America in intensely dramatic fashion. Given this content the inevitable, and frequently volatile, dialectic of labor and leisure was a recurring theme. Building, digging, driving cattle, breaking horses, plowing, sowing, reaping, and on numerous occasions, battling the elements often dominate his canvasses, along with swimming, dancing, fishing, fiddling, card-playing, and drinking. So predominant are these activities that it is sometimes forgotten that Benton often explored this dialectical theme in the urban experience as well, most famously, perhaps, in a controversial mural entitled *America today*, which consisted of ten wall-sized panels and was originally commissioned for the progressive New School for Social Research in 1929⁴. Embracing the democratic impulses of turn-of-the-century populism and progressivism, Benton here as elsewhere conceived of art as a medium of social communication (including social criticism), a kind of narrative history in pictorial form or "enlivened space". As he explained in an illuminating passage from his "professional autobiography", *An American in art*,

My original purpose was to present a peoples' [*sic*] history in contrast to the conventional histories which generally spotlighted great men, political and military events, and successions of ideas. I wanted to show that the peoples' [*sic*] behaviors, their *action* on the opening land, was the primary reality of American life. Of course this was a form of Turnerism, but it was first suggested to me by Marxist-Socialist theory which [...] was very much in my mind when I turned from French-inspired studio art to one of the American environment. This socialist theory treated "operations" and "processes" as more fundamental than "ideas". It also maintained the theoretical supremacy of the "people". I had in mind, following this theory, to show that America had been made by the "operations of people" who as civilization and technology advanced became increasingly separated from the benefits thereof. I would go in my history from the frontiers, where the people controlled op-

⁴ Interestingly, Benton was not paid for the mural, which is now housed in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but it did much in some quarters to enhance his reputation.

erations, to the labor lines of the machine age, where they decidedly did not. (Benton 1969: 149)⁵

These revealing lines suggest that the label “Regionalism” only captures part of what Benton had originally set out to achieve, which also had palpable national-historical dimensions. The label was doubly unfortunate, as Benton was quick to point out, since “regional” became synonymous with “provincial”, such that he was openly shunned by those urbanites (among them artists and art critics) who believed “genuine art” more emphatically intellectual and cosmopolitan. Looking to rebut this dismissive judgment, Benton aggressively maintained that his work “came in the popular mind to represent a home-grown, grass-roots artistry which damned ‘furrin’ influence and which knew nothing about and cared nothing for the traditions of art as cultivated city snobs, dudes, and *assthetes* knew them” (Benton 1969: 151). The heady blend of populism and reverse snobbery evident here ran very deep in Benton and eventually became emblematic of his *raison d’être* as an artist⁶.

This outlook also clearly positioned Benton against the presiding currents of the artworld imprimatur⁷. Through the filter of his Whitmanesque sensibilities, the prominent realist element of this “grass-roots artistry” necessitated a substantial break with the contemporary “French scene” and, in sense as well as substance, the formalist art and artists that Barnes and his adherents so admired. For Benton believed that the “turmoil of America” he wished to capture required

⁵ The Turner referenced here is not the celebrated English painter but rather the popular historian of frontier America Fredrick J. Turner. Benton eventually came to share Dewey’s misgivings concerning this sweeping Marxist view of history (Benton 1969: 168-70).

⁶ Unfortunately, it’s also undeniable that Benton openly embraced the masculinist ideology and arrant homophobia that often accompanied populism, especially in its portrayal of culture in the Northeast as mired in effete degeneracy.

⁷ The term “artworld” refers to that contingent of institutionally enfranchised persons (e.g., museum curators, art critics, aestheticians) whose status has historically provided the authority to regulate the criteria used to decide if a given object should be conferred the status of art. Moreover, it does so independently of questions of the object’s actual value or significance to the wider public. “Artworld art”, then, refers to art that is largely created to respond, either positively or negatively, to the particular concerns, values, and practices established and regulated by the artworld. For more on this and related issues, see Dreon 2013 and Grieve 2009.

a “turmoil of rhythmic sequences” that belied “geometrical solids”, as well as the “subtleties of texture, natural color, or atmospheric light” (Benton 1939: 152). This alternative means was very much in evidence throughout the creative process. As a former student of Dewey’s, Thomas Munro, explains, Benton began each piece “by sketching an abstract pattern of rhythmic lines and masses within the given area; then [turned] these into human figures and landscape details, so as to build up a scene and tell a story”. In this way fluid, non-representational forms were purposively applied and developed along distinctly representational lines (see Munro 1969: 389-90)⁸.

The basic tenets of modern aesthetic formalism clashed even more forcibly with Benton’s views on the subject-matter and overt social purpose of art. “*What was painted*”, as he saw it, “should determine, as far as possible, the *how* of its painting and the ultimate form that ensued”. In a bold move away from Barnesian aesthetics and other more rigid formalisms, illustrative or pictorial content was in no sense subservient to form aesthetically but absolutely imperative, conveying expressive meanings indispensable to the experience of the viewer. Form, on the other hand, was considered largely insignificant apart from the chosen subject-matter. An exercise in Deweyan naturalism, its possibilities were a function of the particular meanings to be expressed, not of timeless, universal principles to be adhered to independent of content. And tradition would be granted no special privilege as an arbiter of present and future endeavors – the only pertinent concern was the means that expressed the intended meanings most effectively. Against popular critics of the day, writes Benton, the “American realists” (which included Grant Wood and John Curry),

redefined the word *significant* and returned it from the technical field [i.e., as significant form], where it had come to indicate a functional relationship between the parts of a design, back into a public field where it meant meaning for the spectator. Otherwise put, we were bent on returning painting to its historic representational purpose and, further, in the interests of American art, to making it represent matter drawn from American life and meaningful to those living that life [...]. If subject matter determined *form* and the subject matter was distinctly American, then we believed an American form,

⁸ Munro taught for a time at the Barnes Foundation before becoming curator of education at The Cleveland Museum of Art.

no matter what the source of technical means, would eventually ensue. If this form had public significance, and we felt from our own experience that it must, then a public demand for it would grow. (Benton 1969: 155)

Benton then concludes his remarks with a patently Emersonian decree: "Let your American environment [...] be your source of inspiration, American public meaning your purpose, and an art will come which will represent America before the world and be acclaimed and supported by Americans as a proof at last that they are culturally on their own" (Benton 1939: 156). Sometime in the mid-1930s, Benton's reciprocal interests in politics and the arts led him to begin reading Dewey's recently published works in these areas. He was duly impressed with both the scope and substance of what he found. Before long, Benton was convinced that the philosopher's capacious view of the arts and their social import, conjoined as they were with his critique of modern work environments and the compartmentalization of labor and leisure, could be used to support his populist brand of American realism. The overtly democratic prospect it offered was just what the embattled artist needed to rebuff his artworld critics and lend credence to his firm belief that the artist should "paint the world he knows". In his frequent commentaries on the arts, Benton thus began borrowing liberally from the Deweyan idiom, and "grass-roots artistry" claimed a scholarly advocate in publications like *Art as experience* and a brief essay that preceded it, *Americanism and localism* (I will say more on this essay below). On the other hand, the more stringent formalism of Barnes' so-called "scientific aesthetic method" made him a natural adversary. Indeed, Benton and Barnes, who upon first meeting seemed very compatible intellectually, inevitably had a fatal falling out over the matter.

Barnes was first drawn to Benton's work at an exhibit of contemporary American artists at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1921. Then and there he purchased at least one of Benton's canvases⁹. Shortly thereafter he was sufficiently inspired to show Ben-

⁹ In *An American in art* Benton claims that Barnes only bought one painting at the time, while other sources claim that as many as three paintings were purchased by Barnes or his Foundation colleague, Violette de Mazia (Benton 1969: 54). Henry Adams' *Thomas Hart Benton. An American original* simply mentions that Barnes was one of the purchasers of three paintings sold by Benton through the exhibition (Adams 1989: 106).

ton's work at the Academy and praised him effusively in the exhibition catalog. As Barnes' formalist eye saw it at the time, "[Jean-Baptist-Camille] Corot has never revealed to me a composition as satisfying to a critical analysis as is the composition in a painting by a young American, Thomas Benton. But to compare Corot at his best with Benton would be a great offense to the exquisite sense of values, the fine intelligence which created the forms in Benton's picture" (Schack 1960: 138).

Not long after the initial 1921 exhibition Barnes invited Benton, along with his friend Thomas Craven of the "Dial" (publisher of Dewey's *Americanism and localism*), to his home in Merion to discuss art. He did so purportedly with the idea of perhaps asking one of these very capable writers to help him with the book that would become *The art in painting*. Craven soon realized that his historical-developmental approach to art did not sit well with Barnes' more limited attention to pictorial qualities. Yet Barnes recognized Benton's intelligence almost instantly and was greatly impressed with his technical facility and originality in analyzing paintings, something that Barnes, to be sure, valued very highly. So pleased was Barnes, in fact, that, as a trial run of sorts, he asked Benton to pen several commentaries for paintings in his rapidly expanding collection, an offer that was apparently accepted. Thus began a rich and lively correspondence that lasted for over a year. It seemed that Barnes had found his author in Benton. Benton, on the other hand, believed that he had won a wealthy and enlightened patron in Barnes – an all-too-rare combination, in his experience.

Alas, things soured rather quickly. As Craven had rightly detected, Barnes' theorizing was now increasingly privileging formal aesthetic values over illustrative and social content in art. On the other hand, Benton's unabashedly realist work was, if anything, moving in the opposite direction. Consequently, it was not difficult for some of Barnes' critic-friends immersed in the "French scene" (people he then greatly admired, Roger Fry chief among them) to convince him that Benton's work was, from a formalist standpoint, distinctly second-rate. In a word, Benton was judged to be overly academic and artistically vulgar in his use of form. Though considered avant-garde by some in America for his colloquial subject-matter and the dynamism of his forms, from the voguish Left Bank he looked like a boorish neo-Renaissance illustrator. Taken aback by this deeply-troubling realization, and presumably embarrassed that he had been so wrong in his evaluation of

Benton, Barnes felt that he must have somehow been taken in by the Missourian. Seemingly without warning, he wrote Benton an angry letter from Paris impugning his character and effectively dissolving the once-promising relationship (Schack 1960: 136-40). Years later, Barnes purportedly gave at least one of the Benton's to his Foundation colleague and successor, Violette de Mazia, who, ever faithful to Barnes' formalist method of interpretation (known by adherents as "the way"), used it at the Foundation to "illustrate the deficits of sensuous appeal" in painting (Meyers 2004: 315).

Not surprisingly, Benton recalls a rather different sequence of events. As he tells it, there was a time during their *tête-à-têtes* when it became clear (at least to him) that he and Barnes did not see completely eye-to-eye. The point of conflict he had identified was, predictably enough, aesthetic formalism and the "French scene":

After a few visits, trying to clinch my employment, I brought some of the cubist drawings I had made for my sculptures and told Barnes that similar diagrams might serve to explain the designs of many works of art. Barnes asked how I would handle the Impressionists with such drawings. I was impolitic enough to say that the Impressionists were not notable in matters of compositional form and that it would be useless to approach their work with that in mind. Barnes, who was then avidly collecting Impressionists, unfortunately took what I said to be a slur on the school, and a few days later wrote me one of his famous letters, which broke off all relations between us. (Benton 1969: 55)

Benton's understanding of form and its significance were informed by, and adapted to, his particular aims and aspirations as an artist of the "American scene". This entailed representational content associated with a specific time and place, and he ultimately realized as much. Thus his treatment of form was (*à la* Dewey) more a function of context and purpose than of strict theoretical doctrine. Counter to Barnes' unsparing take on his "impolitic" remarks, Benton had thus averred that he was not rejecting Impressionism outright.

In stark contrast, Barnes took the Impressionists' and Post-impressionists' sense of form to be absolutely essential. What is more, he believed it unrivaled in the artworld. For him, the novel forms of artists like Renoir, Cézanne, and Matisse evolved naturally (or logically) from the rich well of tradition and exemplified universal standards of aesthetic value and worth. They also rightly deemphasized the aesthetically marginal thematics of society and history. In

his only reference to Benton in *The art in painting*, Barnes was consequently led to rescind his original endorsement and, like his Parisian counterparts, denounce the then-popular painter as a mere illustrator: “Unfortunately for the intelligent appreciation of art in America [...] one looks in vain for a form that is genuinely creative or that furnishes anything more moving esthetically than does illustration, flagrant sentimentalism, photographic literalism, or the specious use of facile rhythms imposed upon subject-matter to effect symmetry and balance of composition” (Barnes 1937: 347)¹⁰. While Benton saw himself as a populist chronicler of the trial and turmoil of the “American scene”, Barnes’ formalist eye found no aesthetic merit in the conveyance of such avowedly public meanings. This, for Barnes, was to be the final word on Benton.

The story of Dewey and Benton’s affiliation reads quite differently. The two first met through their respective links to the New School in New York City. Dewey and a number of prominent intellectuals had founded the school in 1919 on the principle of complete academic freedom. As muralist for the New School and a proponent of its mission (as was Barnes), Benton was certainly not the only artist at the time appreciative of Dewey’s social consciousness and commitment to public affairs, including, most notably, his willingness to lend his voice in support of American artists during the Great Depression through vehicles like the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (1935-43), or FAP, directed by his former student and long-time friend, Holger Cahill¹¹. Following Dewey, Cahill believed strongly that artists should work *with* the government, rather than *for* it, and in a manner that raised artistic standards and increased cultural awareness. As Jane De Hart Mathews writes, in describing Cahill’s progressive ideal of “cultural democracy”,

¹⁰ Citing Benton specifically, Barnes and de Mazia render a similar critique in the essay *Expression and form* (1929: 171): “The stock-in-trade characteristic of all such specious effects consists mainly of rhythms mechanically imposed upon subject-matter, and distributed throughout the composition in accordance with shopworn formulas, to obtain balance”. Barnes was somewhat more positively disposed to the more Parisian influenced work of American artists John Marin, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O’Keeffe, who belonged to the so-called Stieglitz circle.

¹¹ At Dewey’s Eightieth Birthday Celebration, Cahill spoke glowingly of his mentor’s support for the Federal Art Project (see Westbrook 1991: 400). Cahill took classes with Dewey at both Columbia University and the New School.

For Cahill, an ardent follower of John Dewey, the key was primarily “process” and only secondarily “product”. “Art”, wrote the director of the federal art project, “is not a matter of rare occasional masterpieces [...] [G]reat art arises only in situations where there is a great deal of art activity, and where the general level of artistic expression is high”. To produce such a climate and, more important, to create the “free and enriching communion” of which Dewey spoke, Cahill, like his former professor, believed in the primacy and pervasiveness of experience. Real understanding of art, he insisted, came not from passive observation but from intense participation in the creative process. The task of the federal art project, therefore, was to make possible “democracy in the arts through community participation”. (see De Hart Mathews 1975: 322-3)¹²

This meant moving towards greater “integration of the arts with the daily life of the community”, putting art where it could reach the people, while seeking to erode the cultural division between “folk art” and “fine art”. As another commentator thus explains, Dewey’s explicit interest in the relationship between art and life, and his strong democratic sentiments, loomed large, “bringing into focus many ideas that were already in the air and articulating thoughts that artists were already thinking” (Tilghman 1989: 167). Thus did many reform-minded thinkers embrace the emerging *Zeitgeist* as critical to the health and future of the arts in the age of industrial capitalism.

Interestingly, other significant government art programs created during the Depression, including the Public Works of Art Project, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, and the Treasury Relief Art Project, were more conventional aesthetically. Unlike the FAP, which, under Cahill’s leadership, served to nurture avant-garde leaders of the future (among them Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko), these other projects tended to limit subject-matter more explicitly to the “American scene” and resisted the aesthetically experimental or unconventional. Though himself an artist of the “American scene”, this was of great concern to Benton, who wrote to the Section’s administration, “If you ever give me a contract in which all responsibility is mine, in which I am completely trusted to

¹² Note that Dewey would likely demur at the process/product dichotomy presupposed here. Victoria Grieve makes a similar claim in *The Federal Art Project and the creation of middlebrow culture* and adds to it the parallel child-centered/curriculum-centered dichotomy in pedagogy, identifying Dewey with the former (2009: 30, 34).

do a good job and over which no one but myself has effective rights of approval or disapproval I'll work. Otherwise, I can't be sure I'll do a real piece of work" (O'Connor 1969: 62-3). Though Benton's own paintings might today be considered rather conventional, and he certainly maintained his personal aesthetic likes and dislikes, he apparently saw the value of artistic freedom within this new *Zeitgeist*, even (or perhaps especially) with the supports offered by these government art programs. Indeed, Benton eventually abandoned a federal mural for the Postal Department on the grounds that the "governments restrictions on subject matter [were] too confining" (Adams 1989: 231).

It is not known specifically what Dewey thought of Benton's work or whether Barnes influenced his opinions on the subject (if such existed) in any way (Benton once remarked that, in his experience, Dewey never made judgments of his own about specific works and actually seemed incapable of doing so; Schack 1960: 106). However, as noted Jewish-American painter Jacob Burck rightly observed in a 1935 article for "Art Front", Benton and others were clearly following Dewey's lead in emphasizing, as never before, and against most critics of the day, "the social function of the mural" (qtd. in Buettner 1975: 390). So conceived, art was for the enrichment and edification of everyone, not just aesthetic or intellectual elites, and it was necessarily rooted in the artist's experiences as a social being (Benton went so far as to use Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters in his mural *The arts of life in America*, commissioned in 1932 by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York). As noted above, what made art significant for Benton was the intensity of life experience that precipitated it and that it, in turn, was capable of eliciting in others. What both the artist and beholder brought to the encounter, the "human contribution" of the "feeling intellect" (in Dewey's idiom: chapter 11 of *Art as experience* is entitled *The human contribution*), including both its intellectual and emotional dimensions, was essential to the character and quality of that experience. Hence Benton concurred with Dewey that what art did *with* and *in* experience was ultimately more important than the formal properties of the object. Furthermore, he believed this aesthetic experience was most directly meaningful when situated within specific social and cultural contexts. "Life [is] not logical", Benton wrote, following Dewey. "Reality, in its totality, [is] too varied to be formally contained", be it the logical forms of Marxism or the prescriptions of formalist aesthetics; and if

this meant conceiving and displaying art in saloons or bawdy-houses rather than art museums, then so be it (Benton 1969: 168). “Very provincial?”, Dewey asked of such thinking in 1920. “No, not at all. Just local, just human, just at home, just where [we] live”. Indeed, he added – and again we hear overtones of Emerson –

We are discovering that the locality is the only universal. Even the sun and stars have their own times as well as their own places [...]. We have been too anxious to get away from home. Naturally that took us to Europe even though we fancied we were going around America. When we explore our neighborhood, its forces and not just its characters and color, we shall find [the new art] we sought. (*MW 12: 12, 15-6*)¹³

It is difficult to imagine Barnes ever voicing such sentiments.

As a further point of comparison, it is useful to examine the different positions of this triumvirate with respect to the more abstract art that came into prominence in the 1930s and 40s. I have already noted Benton's recognition (his incendiary polemics aside) that the pictorial brand of social realism he espoused was not the only legitimate aesthetic. He was fully aware that it stemmed in significant part from his upbringing in the environs of rural Missouri and express purposes as an artist of the “American scene”. Given this broadly pragmatic outlook, which accepted, if at times begrudgingly, the legitimacy of other artists' styles and subject-matter, he did not completely oppose the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, de Chirico, or even Duchamp. Rather, he objected “only to the idea that it could enclose all with which the aesthetic spirit should concern itself” (Benton 1969: 189)¹⁴. Nor did Benton disapprove of abstraction in art on philosophical or ideological grounds. As he explicitly argued, “Contrary to general belief, the ‘Regionalist’ movement did not in any way oppose abstract form. It simply wished to put meanings, recognizable American meanings, into some of it” (Benton 1969: 77). Benton in fact claimed to find much abstract art interesting, even pleasurable, aesthetically. And the criticisms of abstraction he did voice

¹³ In the original context (Dewey's article *Americanism and localism* was originally published in “Dial”, n. 68 (1920), pp. 684-8), these comments were directed towards the literary arts.

¹⁴ An exception is Benton's 1924 article *Form and the subject* from “The Arts”, which was likely written in part to retaliate against Barnes for his harsh rebuff of Benton (see Schack 1960: 139-40 and Benton 1969: 57, 151).

appear to be based firmly on his own firsthand encounters with abstract art. These had mostly to do with his appreciation for “memorable forms”, which he commonly found lacking in abstract art but believed necessary for art to function effectively at the social level (Benton 1969: 78). Yet many Abstract Expressionists, including professed Deweyans Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, remained concerned with the social efficacy of their work and valued public engagement. They viewed abstraction as an expression of democratic freedom, a reaction against the restrictions of increasing fascism in Europe, whereas “representational art often required the viewer to accept the ideological premises of the artist” (see Grieve 2009: 176-7). Then, too, Benton’s most original and most recognized student was the leading Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock.

3. *Jackson Pollock*

The famously iconoclastic Pollock was born in 1912 to a family of hardscrabble farmers in Cody, Wyoming. Moving east to New York City when the opportunity presented itself, he studied intensively with Benton, his only formal teacher, for several years beginning at age seventeen, initially through the Art Students’ League (Buettner 1975: 389). By all accounts the young Pollock had immense respect for Benton, whose family soon came to treat him as one of its own. In fact, Pollock lived with the Bentons for a short time, becoming deeply depressed and drinking heavily after they left New York for Kansas City in 1935 (Adams 1989: 332). It was then, too, that he began his six-year tenure with Cahill’s Federal Art Project. Like Benton, Pollock retained a strong affinity for the West, where his identity and artistic roots ultimately originated, and his mature work was strongly influenced by the mystic symbolism and imagery of American Indian art. Still, he generally found life more intellectually stimulating in New York and came to believe that the “problems of modern painting”, particularly regarding the meaning and function of the unconscious mind (as in the work of Carl Jung), were “independent of any one country” and could be addressed there as well as anywhere. Pollock also roundly rejected the nativist idea that there could ever be an uncontrived, purely American form of painting: “An American is an American and his painting would naturally be qualified by that fact, whether he wills it or not”, he once remarked (see Harrison, Wood

1992: 560-1). Ironically, however, it was Pollock, not Benton, who was credited with finally bringing the center of the artworld to the U.S.

As is well-known to any student of 20th century American art, the contrasting styles of Benton and Pollock could scarcely be more conspicuous. While Pollock's early work resembles Benton's a great deal, his revolutionary "action painting", where the paint is literally dripped or sprayed onto the canvas in layers utilizing "chance effects", seems to have little or nothing in common with Benton's carefully composed neo-Renaissance tableaux (for observable commonalities between Benton's work and Pollock's early landscape painting, see Neff 2006: 238-9). Further examination nonetheless suggests that Benton's influence on Pollock's mature work was considerable, perhaps in ways even decisive. It has been noted, for instance, that an early version of Pollock's signature "drip technique" was used in pouring glaze on ceramics, a process he learned originally from the Bentons as a way to secure extra work to supplement his meager income as a painter. And even mature forms of the drip technique were not as random or haphazard as they may appear at first blush, but in fact methodically quite distinctive and refined. In a nutshell, they allowed Pollock to determine the basic structure of his compositions where chance effects could still freely occur. Absolute freedom, as Dewey stresses, is meaningless. Art, in contrast, "is the fusion in one experience of the pressure upon the self of objective conditions and the spontaneity and novelty of individuality" (*LW 10*: 286).

In addition, several ingredients of the inspiration for the drip paintings were drawn from Navajo sand painting. This again is something Pollock became familiar with and learned to appreciate through his association with Benton. As Henry Adams reports, Pollock was inspired by the Navajo to "employ sand as a material" and he regularly "executed his paintings flat on the ground, rather than tipped up on an easel" (Adams 1989: 262, 335). The drip paintings also utilized a dynamic convergence of rhythmic sequences that functioned similarly in perception to the more orderly rhythmic forces that predominate in Benton's more realist canvasses. In both instances, compositional organization and bodily movement were intimately connected: whether through the gestural movements embodied in Pollock's drip paintings or the swirling motions that lend an almost sculptural quality to Benton's bustling forms and figures (Adams 1989: 117). In his own way, each artist managed in the end to achieve an overall bal-

ance of active forces by attending assiduously to the aesthetic possibilities and attributes of the human body. According to historian Pepe Karmel, the underlying structures of Pollock's abstractions show clear traces of his teacher's compositional diagrams: the revolutionary drip paintings effectively transformed the graphic flatness of Benton's diagrams into a kind of optical flatness through incessant layering¹⁵. Many of these diagrams were also abstract in nature and evidenced the "all-over" compositional approach favored by Pollock (Adams 1989: 110)¹⁶.

These continuities between Benton and Pollock are all the more intriguing in that they very much correspond with the ways Dewey has been substantively linked to the ascendance of Abstract Expressionism¹⁷ and the revolutionary art forms (including painting, dance, music and poetry) of what became known as the New York School (for more on the relationship between Dewey and the New York School, see Saltonstall Mattison 1986 and Ashton 1992). Stewart Buettner, for example, has argued that Dewey's sustained rejection of the dualistic conventions of Western aesthetics helped to break ground for the more organic, wholistically-experiential techniques and procedures utilized by artists like Pollock. As such it played a discernible role in preparing the soil for the novel aesthetic forms successfully seeded and harvested by the American avant-garde.

This philosophical groundwork is particularly evident in the pragmatic naturalism of Dewey's organicism: his dismissal of fixed unities

¹⁵ The argument that Benton's theorizing had a considerable influence on Pollock's work is made in detail by Karmel 2002; it also appears in Krauss 1994.

¹⁶ Benton also experimented with some success with a form of abstraction called Synchronism, which emphasized color while suppressing line, in addition to Impressionism, Pointillism, Cubism, Constructivism, and Futurism. Pollock was certainly aware of these phases in his mentor's development. In fact, Benton continued to paint abstractions concurrently with his popular Regionalist canvasses. See Rose 1967: 90-5, Neff 2006: 216 and Adams 1989: 110.

¹⁷ A notable dissenting voice here is Lean Jacobson (1960: 117-26), who argues on rather narrow grounds that there is little in common between Dewey's aesthetics and Abstract Expressionism. It is true that Dewey never discusses Jackson Pollock or Abstract Expressionism in any of his writings. However, Dewey does argue strongly for the ongoing need to cultivate new experiences through new artistic forms and materials, making room for both representational and abstract art. He also asserts that "There is no *a priori* rule to decide how far abstraction [from physical existence] may be carried" (*LW 10*: 100).

and final closures – their devaluation of temporality and particularity in making part subservient to whole – in lieu of aesthetic forms and wholes that are moving, flexible, always tentative. From this perspective, writes Buettner, it was “the pragmatic nature of [Dewey’s] aesthetic – tension, seizure, conflict, energy, diffusion, the strength of individual moments – that best reveals his contribution to innovations in form” characteristic of Abstract Expressionism and the avant-garde (Buettner 1975: 384). Though they tended to eschew pictorial realism and traditional forms, these innovations were yet another manifestation of the desire of many progressives to merge (or re-merge) the meaning-making possibilities of art and everyday life. Against the European ideal of the intellectual and spiritual purity of art, its objectification through some form of Kantian “disinterested interest”, Pollock and his cohorts (e.g., Willem De Kooning and Deweyan devotees Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko) pursued creative forms that laid bare and embraced artistic activity itself and the inexorable human conditions behind it¹⁸. Here the creative process is treated in Deweyan terms as fundamentally inseparable from the culminating product. While the art object is the potential means of aesthetic experience, “the actual art work is what the [object] does with and in experience” (*LW 10: 9*). That is to say, the art work is never “that” painting or sculpture “out there” in its sheer immediacy. Objects only have their aesthetic value as a result of the “work” they do in and with experience. Moreover, form becomes inclusive of and operant in all aspects of artistic activity, human and material. And this is true for the experienced meaning potentially available to both the artist and the appreciative perceiver. Not surprisingly, however, such thinking often led to open hostility with the conservative culture of most art museums, which initially ignored the new “living art” of the Abstract Expressionists.

This same disregard is evident in Barnes’ customarily negative reaction to Abstract Expressionism. Given his repeated rejection of pictorial realism and diminution of illustrative content in art, one would

¹⁸ Author Maurice Berube communicated directly with several first generation Abstract Expressionists to confirm Dewey’s influence. He relays that Robert Motherwell, who studied at Columbia with Dewey’s colleague and friend, Meyer Schapiro, proclaimed *Art as experience* “one of my early bibles” and even considered his painting a form of “radical empiricism”. Mark Rothko clearly drew heavily on Dewey as well. See Berube 1998: 220, 223.

think, as Schack observes, that Barnes would “welcome [...] a wholly abstract art in which there is no apparent subject but the plastic means”. And in fact it appears that Barnes tried to do so at points, for example in consenting to the attempts of his private tutor in aesthetics, Laurence Buermeyer, to “reconcile abstract and realistic art” (see Buermeyer 1924)¹⁹. Still, “in the end he declared that at best abstract art could only be a lower order of creation – essentially, mere decoration” (Schack 1960: 202). Plastic form, he asserted, “is present only in a relatively degraded state in [...] abstract painting” (Barnes 1929: 108). This judgment surely issued in no small part from the seeming resistance of abstraction to the intellectual analysis and explication of Barnes’ object-centered “scientific aesthetic method”. This is an elemental concern that he shared with aesthetic formalists like Fry. Similar to Barnes, laments Munro, Fry

thought of form in terms of universal, classical principles [...] but Fry’s limited conception of form is not true of all form analysis [...] In the broader sense of “mode of arrangement”, form in art includes all the irregular, irrational, and chaotic aspects of Expressionism, Tachism, and Action Painting. It is not limited to classical styles and principles. Intellectual analysis and explication are not limited to such styles or to works of art governed by reason and order. The artistic expression of a passionate, impulsive, Dionysian personality, or one pervaded by internal conflict, is quite as susceptible to intellectual description as the opposite type. (Munro 1970: 259)

Once again it appears that Barnes was more conservative in outlook than he liked to admit, and certainly more so than Dewey. His sanitized view of the embodied “human contribution” to art, and its prescribed relation to form in particular, inevitably constrained his aesthetic sensibilities. The striking originality of Abstract Expressionism was arguably due in large part to its highly organic approach to artistic expression. More specifically, its practitioners held that tension and struggle in experience were not to be avoided or deftly discarded, but instead accepted and utilized as active forces in the creative process. As Maurice Berube notes in linking Deweyan aesthetics to Abstract Expressionism, these ingredients were considered pivotal

¹⁹ Buermeyer came to teach at the Barnes Foundation from a Visiting Lecturer position at Princeton University. He also served as Barnes’ private tutor, instructing his future employer in the “psychology of aesthetics and the practical application of those principles to paintings”.

to the intense drama of the artistic encounter as realized on the canvass (Berube 1998: 216-8). Thus conceived, the creative process is not a function of pure, unadulterated mind. Nor is creativity effectuated simply in the conveyance of raw emotion (the signal figure here is probably Leo Tolstoy's classic *What is art?* [1960]). Rather, the tension and struggle that generates emotion subsumes the entire organism and must eventuate in thoughtful activity for artistic expression to occur. In Dewey's terms, emotion, the "inner" raw material of expression, becomes distinctively aesthetic and funded with meaning only as it is organically connected with some "outer" raw material, namely, a medium such as paint, sand, or clay. This requires that the artist consciously gather the material and make it articulate in a way that fuses emotion, action, and meaning into one. When successful, this fusion process adds meaning to the initiating idea or emotion and is fundamentally imaginative in nature: It epitomizes the "feeling intellect" at work while fulfilling the broadly educational purpose of awakening "new perceptions of the meanings of the common world" (*LW 10*: 88). It is, in a word, transformational. Ideally, for Dewey, it also eventuates in a unified experience with a distinctive aesthetic quality – an emotionally and intellectually satisfying event containing a balance of active forces and its own sustaining purpose and momentum²⁰.

Compare this with Pollock's description of his experience while successfully executing a painting. Note especially the transactional doing and undergoing in his embodied relationship with the canvass: "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it [...]. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (qtd. in Neff 2006: 271). Pollock's relationship with the canvass here is profoundly temporal. Meaning gradually accrues as each successive layer of paint is added to the increasingly energized space. When "the painting comes out well", as Pollock puts it, the height-

²⁰ There is a necessary qualification here. As Philip W. Jackson, among others, points out, the unity of aesthetic experience, whether on the part of the artist or perceiver, can vary considerably and more so than Dewey generally acknowledge. Nor does a lack of unity necessarily reflect negatively on the art object (see Jackson 1998: 112).

ened perceptual acuity and receptiveness obtaining between the artist and his work is then effectively recapitulated in the relationship between the appreciative perceiver and the painting. Either way, the final product is ultimately emergent; no fixed forms or meanings are directly imposed on the canvass: "When I am *in my painting*, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own" (qtd. in Buettner 1975: 387). As Pollock's wife, artist Lee Krasner, remarks, the drip painting "breaks once and for all the concept [...] that one sits and observes nature that is 'out there'. Rather, it claims a oneness" (qtd. in Neff 2006: 272).

While recognizing the Deweyan themes exhibited here, many commentators nonetheless in some degree also fall prey to conventional either/or dualisms in their analyses. For example, Buettner says of Dewey that, like Pollock, "contemplation was only a small factor" in aesthetic perception, that "feeling, not intellect, established order among the various parts of experience", and that the goal of art was "to express emotion" (Buettner 1975: 386, 388). On the other hand, Tracie Constantino, echoing Barnesian aesthetics, speaks conversely of "Dewey's emphasis on art as a cognitive activity equivalent to the practice of science" (Constantino 2004: 417; Jacobson 1960 takes the cognitivist perspective even further). Both interpretations arguably resonate with a latent reason/emotion dualism that is deeply antithetical to Dewey. As discussed earlier, full appreciation of the contribution of the "feeling intellect" in Deweyan aesthetics points to the genuine catholicity of his theorizing on the arts, its ultimate capacity to accommodate the experiential dimensions of both representational and abstract art, and its divergence from the more rigid formalisms of Barnes and Fry.

In addition, we saw appeal to a process/product dualism (vs. process as product), and a privileging of the former over the latter, in De Hart Mathews' account of the democratization of art and creative activity pursued by Cahill's FAP. And counter to the Deweyan interpretation of Pollock's Abstract Expressionism offered above, characterizations of Abstract Expressionism, and Pollock's "action painting" in particular, also commonly assert the prioritizing of process over product. While one might say that aesthetic experience is the hoped-for product of the artistic encounter for Dewey, this experience re-

quires the purposive, reciprocal continuity of the human organism in its relations with world.

It must be conceded, too, that Pollock's commitment to Jungian tropes and shared archetypes embedded in the human psyche (e.g., as expressed in American Indian symbolism and imagery or the mythology of Romulus and Remus: for more on Pollock's prolific use of mythological content and totemic figures, see O'Hara 1959) marks an important divergence from Dewey's pragmatic naturalism. Pollock looked to the mythic imagery of the "collective unconscious" as the wellspring of creative insight, the inexhaustible reservoir of meanings awaiting expression through arduous self-disclosure. Dewey, however, believed that Jungian (like Freudian) psychology remained committed to the Cartesian notion of an original individual consciousness and therein failed to appreciate adequately the inherently social nature of the self. For Dewey, the archetypal meanings that constituted Jung's "collective unconscious" were not ancestral values and predilections buried deeply within. They were instead traceable to what he called "mind in individual": "[the] system of belief, recognitions and ignorances, of acceptances and rejections, of expectations and appraisals of meanings which have been instituted [empirically] under the influence of custom and tradition" (*LW 1*: 170). One thus finds Dewey (and Benton) placing great emphasis on accessibility – the experiential potency of shared meanings and values artistically represented within social life, while often deemphasizing the personal "inner landscape" – the subjective interiority of the artistic genius exalted by Abstract Expressionism and, increasingly in the 1950s, many sympathetic adjudicators within the artworld (*LW 1*: 290). This is especially true where this personal exploration was said to provide a path to a transcendental realm or higher reality of some kind beyond the common world and things of everyday. Nor did evolving mid-century class structures make this any easier. As Motherwell explained at the time, "The artist's problem is with what to identify himself. The middle-class is decaying, and as a conscious entity the working class does not exist. Hence the tendency of modern painters is to paint for each other" (qtd. in Grieve 2009: 176-7)²¹.

²¹ In an article to appear in a future issue of this journal, I will examine the legacy of Dewey's *Art as experience* with respect to Black Mountain College and its affiliations with Josef Albers, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Allan Kaprow. As a

4. Conclusion

At this point it seems abundantly clear that Dewey's thinking about the experience of art is both directly and indirectly relevant to some very significant developments in 20th century American art. While the preponderance of aestheticians and art critics during the century ignored *Art as experience* or rejected it as insufficiently rigorous and intellectually antiquated, many artists continued to find it an invaluable source of inspiration and edification, even if they (like other readers) at times failed to grasp the full sense and scope of Dewey's organic naturalism.

So what might this mean for our thinking about Dewey in the context of art and aesthetic education? We know that he learned a significant amount – perhaps most of what he knew – about the plastic arts from Albert Barnes, whose aesthetic formalism has proven very useful as a means of understanding and evaluating the formal properties of certain styles and genres within the plastic arts. Yet we have seen that Barnes' method is less than adequate for perceiving the aesthetic meaning and value of art beyond these formal properties, especially with art movements that began emerging in the US in the 1930s. Here Dewey's aesthetics is arguably more helpful and therein a better ally from an educational standpoint.

For example, we have seen the following in exploring elements of the work of Benton and Pollock that resonate with Dewey's thinking about the arts: 1) that the value of art is ultimately diminished when its illustrative or pictorial content is made subordinate to the dictates of pre-existing aesthetic forms, 2) that, instead, form might be more fruitfully conceived as a function of context and purpose, as well as the specific meanings to be expressed, 3) that the particular thematics of society and history can substantially enhance (rather than detract from) the aesthetic meaning and value of art in demonstrating the continuity of art and (everyday) life, 4) that the significance of an art object cannot be determined independently of what it does *with* and *in* the experience of the perceiver (e.g., abstraction in art is not in

means of distancing themselves from the subjective interiority and "heroic genius" persona of Abstract Expressionism, while engaging purposefully with the people and things of everyday, these artists took on the task of helping people to see and appreciate the extra-ordinary in the ordinary.

and of itself either an asset or a liability), 5) that art necessarily has an embodied dimension that can contribute to its meaning and value for both the creator and perceiver, 6) that freedom in the artistic process and “chance effects” are not antithetical to refined technique and the judicious use of structural elements in art, 7) that the creative process cannot be completely separated from the resultant product (i.e., the process is always to some extent present in the product and can add significantly to it aesthetically), and 8) that the expressive dimension of art fuses emotion, action and meaning only when organically connected with a medium of some kind (i.e., art is not simply the externalization of the personal “inner landscape” of the artist).

Given the above, it would I think behoove readers of *Art as experience* not to ground their understanding of Dewey's aesthetics in the brief commentaries he provides on specific artists and their pieces, where Barnes' formalism is arguably most prominent and pronounced. The more they do so the less well prepared they will be to make sense of and acknowledge the full scope of Dewey's relationship to important and influential American artists like Benton and Pollock. That said, we have seen ample evidence that, when read in a spirit of impartiality and open-mindedness, *Art as experience* can be a valuable resource for exploring and discussing numerous dimensions of art handled very deftly by Dewey's organic naturalism. In this way new light might be shed both on Dewey and on those artists who read and found value in his work.

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