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Lorena Morales Aparicio
 idsva/ Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts
 PO Box 320201
 Fairfield, CT 06825
LorenaMA@me.com / lmorales@idsva.org

Purism: Meta-Politicized Concrescence and Critique

Purism emerged between the World Wars in France as part of France's *rappel à l'ordre*. The art movement was designed to give an identity in a fractured Europe, not only to France, but inspirationally to all of Europe. This paper investigates the politicized artwork in Purism with respect to symbolism as process. Content and context in process is framed by Henri Bergson's duration, a conception of time and processes occurring in tensions and deferrals. From the Bergsonian perspective, the apparent frozen concrescence of form in the Purist artwork indicates the politicized desire to codify value. This is recuperated by the meta-political Bergsonian dynamic reassessment and crossing of plural realities evident in the *durée*. The Hegelian representation of the objective / subjective discourse will focus the examination of these politicizations as will Freud's assessment of totems in society. This paper culminates in an attempt to recuperate Purism from the traditional Modernist perspective according the subject an objective societal structure through the Post-Modernist critique of specialization asserted by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas refers to the dynamism of Henri Bergson's *durée*, a conception of time and processes, as apposite the Modernist "longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present" (Habermas 3) cursorily expressed in Purist painting.

This paper defines Purism as an art movement begun by Amédée Ozenfant and Le Corbusier to institute a utopian visual language accessible by basic, outlined form-- particularly the forms of still lifes. Sensuous vision is the immediate representation of the artwork to the mind through the eyes before its intellectual interpretation. The transcendental stands above and apart from the artwork and a moment in time in order to compare values. Process is understood as a dynamic continuum of thought and action. Concrescence is a coalescence of ideas and form. Intuition is an priori, processual, intellectual faculty that creatively negotiates between reality and surreality, citing reality as occurring first within the mind where relational connections are created and understood. This paper reassesses Purism utilizing the writings of Georg Hegel, Sigmund Freud, Benedetto Croce, Henri Bergson, Amédée Ozenfant, Le Corbusier, Georges Bataille, and Jürgen Habermas.

Georg Hegel, writing *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* in the early nineteenth century, asserts his theories of aesthetics, taking up the anvil of aesthetics forged nearly a century earlier by Immanuel Kant, overturning Kant's ideal of form in nature. Whereas for Kant objects (including nature) exist outside of cognition and remain things by (or in) themselves, Hegel asserts Kant is too general and thus deprives the subject of true, holistic cognition. Kant places independence in nature whereas Hegel sees nature as transient in comparison to the immutable ideals expressed in mutable materiality-- this includes nature and artworks.

For Hegel, it is only when the subject recognizes herself in the object through the mind that unity between the subject and the object occurs. This is Hegel's dialectic of content: the object is synthesized with the subject's sensuous vision (Kant's representation) and knowledge. Hegel's aesthetics asserts that the mind is most fulfilled when it engages in self-reflexion to undermine the alienation of its subjective feeling from a world (of objects) laden with relationships and unity in their synthesis of form and content. Hegel's subject determines a transcendental idea about herself and the world as represented to the mind by the object. For Hegel, the mind is truly creative (Kant's term is imaginative) when it constructs from ideals, from the spirit of the age, from a specific place, in the context of specific events, as embodied by the object. Hegel asserts the mind unifies the ideals suggested by the artwork, from its own universal and individual conrescences.

Hegel asserts "the sensuous in works of art is exalted to the rank of a mere semblance in comparison with the immediate existence of things in nature, and the work of art occupies the mean between what is immediately sensuous and ideal thought" (Hegel 43). For Hegel, the artwork is a process connecting objective nature with subjective thinking through eidetic vision. The artwork as in process, or processual, between our perception and our thinking of its content and context positions reality not in the artwork itself yet in the subject's mind. Symbolism, or the meaning of forms, is an ever becoming that shatters ideas of static conrescence. Amédée Ozenfant's *Guitar and Bottles*, 1920 (Figure 1) exemplifies the Hegelian dialectic between the subjective and the

objective universal. Purism's terse, silhouetted, geometric forms engagingly push and pull from foreground to background. Ozenfant does this within an ambivalent space that seems gravitationally anchored then deliberately challenges vision by anchoring the forms to the left side of the canvas at a ninety degree angle. Ozenfant again causes vertigo by plunging the forms through the top of the canvas using an ephemeral gray in contrast to the marbled whites of the foreground and left-ground. The mahogany guitar, for one, seems to alternately float in and come to bear on space--a liminal form ever becoming and in processual concrescence, or in the concrescence of process.

Hegel and Ozenfant are further qualified by the parallel valency of Benedetto Croce's process of intuition. Intuition is "the lack of distinction between reality and unreality--to the image itself--with its purely ideal status as a mere image" (Croce 14). The traditional dialectic posits what an object (or subject) is vis-à-vis what it is not, thereby providing a sense of balanced unity. In terms of Croce a dialectic exists between reality and unreality. Intuition is the creation of opposition and an ever deferring tension in nuance demonstrated by Ozenfant's *Guitar and Bottles* (Figure 1). It is a double consciousness of becoming (Croce 7-12). There is the dialectic of thingness and its opposite of being, in which being imparts value to the thing by its very being which is a becoming. Thus the artwork in creative genesis is an interstice between reality and the yet-to-be. The artwork in creative genesis is an interstice between the symbolic concepts and their interpretation. Thus concrescence can take on a metaphysical interpretation as process itself: "For in the symbol the idea is no longer thinkable by itself, separable from the symbolizing representation, nor is the latter representable by itself effectively

without the idea symbolized" (Croce 23). This is eidetic vision as it relates to screened and authentic recapitulated memories, or experience, and interpretations in relation to the artwork.

Purism's founding colleague, Le Corbusier, paints counterpoint in *Still Life*, 1920 (Figure 2). Le Corbusier's forms are heavily delineated, redolent with chiaroscuro in contrast to Ozenfant's *Guitar and Bottles* (Figure 1) of the same year. Le Corbusier's mahogany guitar seems to encompass an internal middle ground while a nearby bottle emphasizes line and thus immediate, tactile form. Le Corbusier utilizes archaic overlapping perspective to indicate a hierarchy of forms and depth. His realization of space is a play of planes which includes a doorway to confirm his visual pun of the two dimensional table against the staggered, recessing planes of the wall in the background. Le Corbusier's *Still Life* (Figure 2) is an alliteration of the *rappel à l'ordre*. Croce would criticize this painting as allegory, "the conventional and arbitrary juxtaposition of two spiritual facts--a concept ... and an image--whereby it is posited that this image must represent that concept" (Croce 22). *Still Life* (Figure 2) represents an order that tries to qualify the republican ideals of equality, freedom and brotherhood.

I suggest that Le Corbusier's *Still Life* (Figure 2) functions as a coded message very much as Jacques-Louis David's NeoClassicist *The Death of Socrates* (Figure 3) subtly asked the people before the outbreak of the Revolution: "who will you be?" The cornice piece in the foreground reminds us that Le Corbusier is primarily an architect, interested in form as function. Utility behooves logic. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant assert that logic utilized "without intuition ... is a sterile device" (Le Corbusier and Ozenfant

53). Thus the rational, geometric forms of Purism can be understood as metaphoric of Croce's intuitive symbolism as ideal process. Purism can be interpreted as notational in the continuous process of interpretation which strives to deny absolute definition. Socrates dies for the subjective right to ceaselessly interrogate to achieve Truth, the negation of absolute concrescence instituted by secular government. In its geometry and ambivalent spatial relationships, Purism's notation impels a consideration of entropy, of chaos.

Yet the process of Purism remains provocatively political as "economy is the law of natural selection" (Jenneret and Ozenfant 56) and "the highest delectation of the human mind is the perception of order" (Jenneret and Ozenfant 64). This returns the artwork to the French Royal Academy's hierarchy of genres, established in the seventeenth century during the apogee of monarchical rule. Political authority is the spatialization of people according to class, race and gender. While Purism officially strived to provide a universal language of simplified, Purism can be meta-political and intuitive even as it is used to specifically institute French nationality. This is qualified by Henri Bergson's space as ever becoming. In 1922 Le Corbusier paints *Still Life* (Figure 4), reflecting a greater ambivalence of space. Space for Bergson is problematized when the intellect requires concrescent moments, thus politicizing representation as Le Corbusier's *Still Life* (Figure 2) seems to candidly portray (or document) reality in keeping with the canonical and conservative art historical traditions of the Royal Academy utilized to construct and interpolate identity in France between the two World Wars.

Bergson interrogates the politicized practicality of order and disorder (Bergson 1784-1806) as demonstrated by Ozenfant and Le Corbusier regarding France's *rappel à l'ordre*:

an intelligence which aims at fabricating is an intelligence which never stops at the actual form of things nor regards it as final, but, on the contrary, looks upon all matter as if it were carve-able at will ... action, in particular fabrication, requires the opposite mental tendency: it makes us consider every actual form of things ... as artificial and provisional .. it makes us regard its matter as indifferent to its form (Bergson 1816).

Thus Purist forms are “indifferent” to their meta-politicization, in other words not opposed to their meta-politicization. Purism can be reinterpreted as provisional, presenting both order and disorder to suppress hierarchical order (Bergson 1813-1823). Presence is as justified by absence and disorder as the desired potentiality for other presences and order(s). Ozenfant's *Grande Composition Puriste*, 1926 (Figure 6) illustrates this. A near symmetrical, vertical bifurcation of the picture plane holds a wine glass and a chalice in opposition to each other and to their shadows with a vase and an architectonic bottle in the center foreground. This essentially pared down canvas exhibits duality (secular - spiritual) and alterity in shadow, thus the plurality of realities that both Croce and Bergson agree must be negotiated through intuition as “our eye perceives the features of the living being, merely as assembled, not as mutually organized” (Bergson 2051). Mutual organization, or parity, implies the cognizance of what is, what is not, and what is becoming.

“The whole of matter is made to appear to our thought as an immense piece of cloth in which we can cut out what we will and sew it together as we please ... a space ...

is never perceived: it is conceived ... space is therefore, pre-eminently, the plan of our possible action on things" (Bergson 1829). Howard Caygill, a Bergsonian scholar, writes, "Bergson concluded that freedom was allied to mobility and life, and thus with intuition against the spatial immobility and death of conceptuality (Caygill 18)." The cursory spatial immobility of Purist compositions offer a radical reinterpretation by intuitively deferring content in opposition to static concrescence. The cursory spatial immobility of Purist compositions offer a radical reinterpretation by intuitively deferring content in opposition to static concrescence. Thus the Purist artwork offers unification, or the unequivocal social reconciliation of freedom, in the republican values of freedom, equality and brotherhood in the tapestry implicating the perception of essential form.

Bergson continues, "in placing himself back within the object by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts up between him and his model ... is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation" (Bergson 2062). Caygill adds, "In Bergson, the immediate intuitive relation of consciousness to its object is contrasted with the mediated relation of consciousness to its concepts" (Caygill 19). The artwork is made real in its processual, relational quality with subjectivity. This mediation is non-hierarchical as one cannot have one process relate meaning and generate it without the other. This is exemplified by dreamwork in which images are made real in the individual, intuitive interpretation of eidetic visions pertaining to a unifying impulse interpreting the uncontainable unconscious, a priori processes of elision (condensation), experiential memory, transference and the irruption of Freud's Eros and Thanatos. Sigmund Freud provides an bold methodology for inter-

rogating the artwork as comparable to dreamwork. Additionally, Freud assesses how the values structuring society emerge from the instinctual drives of Eros and Thanatos interpolated by the intellect into intuition. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud asserts that the inception of all neurosis is the Oedipus complex. Further, that it is “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art” (Freud 510). Freud cites the field work of prominent cultural anthropologists to confirm his theory of intent and actuality in producing neurosis vis-à-vis the SuperEgo.

The totem, or the patriarchal spiritual embodiment (of government and nationality), has impunity against the taboos of murder and incest. The totem displaces the actual patriarch who has been subsumed by the brotherhood to fulfill the ambivalent wish for the patriarch’s power and women. The totem is recreated in the patriarch’s essential characteristics from remorse and a remembered love for the father, who now becomes the God head. It is an apt metaphor for the castigated child and the wish to overpower the father to fulfill a wish. Thus, the difference between the actuality of *Urzeit* and the intent replicated in quotidian relations. The kinship of the brotherhood in ritual is metaphoric of the community under the rule of a state, a religion, or cultural norm. This is the identity of the Id, or of the structured and unstructured subconscious common to all.

For Freud, conscious order and presence revolve around the artwork (the totem) and its ritualization in space and time. Subjects partake of the Purist artwork in a systemic and sited observation in the attempt mandated by the government to reconstitute modern France as hereditary to the legacies of the monarchy and Classicism. This en-

tails repetitive, “objective” social concrescences (events) to restate the integrity of the totem (the artwork representative of France) within each temporally finite subject. A reconstitution of Purism through Croce and Bergson transgresses any such absolute concrescence of the artwork for political gain to socially integrate every person everywhere in intuitive and un-politicized Hegelian holistic cognition without performing the ritual. Within intuition, neurosis does not exist yet an equitable exchange of deferral pronounces perception, interpretation and consequential action as free and equal and valid to all. Arguably, Purism’s modeling of intuition as process attempts to foment change but is foreclosed by the overdetermination of Enlightenment classification and specialization disguising “deep-seated reactions against the process of societal modernization” (Habermas 6) in favor of the structured, technological generation of capital.

Georges Bataille’s Surrealism, a Freudian critique of the rational, capitalism and concrete identity in nationality, challenges the elegant simplicity of Purism. Bataille is parallel to Croce and Bergson as “great constructions of the intelligence are by definition prisons. That is why they are persistently overthrown” (Bataille). The natural irruption of the Thanatopic drive is destined to overturn delineated concrescence to return to the natal *Urzeit*, a time before the rule of the Godhead (the government), where consciousness is not divided, remaining in holistic concrescence as process. Salvatore Dalí paints in *The Lugubrious Game (Dismal Sport)*, 1929 (Figure 6) a sickly marble figure atop a pedestal reaching out from great attrition with an abnormally large hand towards an effervescence of life in explosive heteronomy of color and form in which its

shadow is inconsequential to its spiraling vivacity. The figure covers its visage as if perception were already false, falsified and stultified, as his body emerges from the marble pedestal labeled in increasing diminution with “Gramme, centigramme, milligramme.” Dalí critiques the prison of thought, specifically thought since the Enlightenment and the codification of Classicism and the classification of people, the natural world, and the inanimate world.

Confirming this is the lion, an attribute of royalty, with its paw atop the globe of the world. A second lion willfully exits the canvas to the left. However the spiraling jetty encloses a womb-like form with small rocks, hats, visages and eidetic imagery contained in round stone-like forms. It is the contiguity of thought as process bounded by process as concrescence. In other words, it is the Thanatopic drive to parity in stasis and “space [as] pre-eminently, the plan of our possible action on things” (Bergson 1829), in other words, unsuppressed and genitive freedom. Caygill writes, “Bergson’s notion of freedom [is] as creative spontaneity” (Caygill 32). Further, there is “the importance of creative action in resistance” (Caygill, *On Resistance* 3024). Bergson asserts “we are immersed in realities and cannot pass out of them; only, if the present reality is not the one we are seeking, we speak of the absence of this sought-for reality wherever we find the presence of another. We thus express what we have as a function of what we want” (Bergson 3127). This is radical in its proposal of fomenting change.

While Bataille’s anarchy undermines France’s institutional identity in favor of subjective creation, Jürgen Habermas offers a neo-*rappel à l’ordre*, one that addresses society in toto. Habermas asserts confidence in the unfulfilled Modernist project as

science and morality were actually kept separate from aesthetics. Thus, Purism's coded proposal of intuition as revolutionary was not only suppressed, it was ineffectual as it did not penetrate every aspect of society: religion, politics, ethnicity, socio-economics and so on. According to Habermas, the Surrealists

waged the most extreme warfare, but two mistakes in particular destroyed their revolt. First, when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow In everyday communication ... evaluations must relate to one another .. A rationalized everyday life .. could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere--art--and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes (Habermas 10-11).

Purism's comparative simple elegance was not forceful enough either. Yet Habermas refers to the dynamism of Bergson's duration, a conception of time and processes, as the apposite Modernist "longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present" (Habermas 3) which is quite boldly expressed in Purist artworks. For Bergson, "Matter or mind, reality has appeared to us as a perpetual becoming. It makes itself or it unmakes itself" (Bergson 3113) yet "of becoming we perceive only states, of duration only instants" (Bergson 3120). Caygill contributes,

our perception of spatial objects confronting us in the world depended on the prior experience of time, or *durée*. Even the most solid of objects viewed within an expanded time frame will reveal itself as a process, inviting the hypotheses that (a) the world is made up of processes and not things, and (b) such processes only appear thing-like because of the different speeds at which they move relative to each other and to observers. Thus the state appears in one time frame as a thing and in another as a process. An important consequence of this view is that resistance can be understood as an intervention in a process rather than the confrontation with a thing (Caygill, *On Resistance* 3055-3059).

Thus Purist forms are metaphoric of static thingness and dynamic process when reassessed with perspective and interpretation(s). Bergson and Habermas advocate for a resistance occurring as plural processes beyond the cursory concrescence of the artwork as an allegory for the merely political. The meta-political occurs in the transcendence of concrescent moments that seem to symbolize a Platonic, absolute Ideal. In reality, these are moments that merely stand out in relation to the momentary bias. For Habermas, the separation of disciplines emphasizes a limited specificity of the artwork rather than an applicable, transformative process that would revolutionize society.

One could argue that the Purist artwork retains its canonical interpretation as decidedly Poussiniste. A reinterpretation of solid form as processual is not only counterintuitive, but visually lacking concrete viability. The evidence of established art historical scholarship points to tangible concrescence and not to the meta-politicization of resistance through Croce's symbolism as process with Bergson's own processual duration. Further, the physical artwork exists autonomously in space and time. Yet its reality occurs in the intellect of the viewing subject. Intuition, interpretation and relationships exist in the mind and are impelled to action based on the choice of free will.

Another contention is the emphasis on philosophical texts to interpret artworks and artist statements remaining under the purview of painters, sculptors, art historians and critics. However the search for *episteme* is central to artistic production and its analysis. Whereas some may view philosophy as a history of thought, philosophy is a methodology for interpreting Truth in its specificity in the subjective, in relation to the universal objective. Artists, critics and historians aim to glean formal Truths, content

and contextual Truths from the artwork in order to understand man's role as a reflexive genitor of culture. The further distinctions of culture (high, popular, low, subversive, political) indicate that thought must be interrogated by texts devoted to promoting ethical culture from subjective and objective thought processes. The artist also claims a genius for interpretation. The systematic study of universal and unique processes of interpretation is greater than medium and style.

The inclusive, architectural compounds built by Le Corbusier would support the argument of this paper. However, for limits of space these architectural works have not been included. This is intended for a future project. Additionally, a study of Purist murals would add insight into the complex machinations of French governmental and cultural institutions that position and reposition artworks in terms of siting, content and context. This paper's assessment of Purism as provocative in its symbolic process undermines the prescribed and proscribed corrupt governmental ineptitude that has been entrenched in France since the seventeenth century.

This paper reinterprets Purism insisting upon process as a negotiation of plural realities. The stark forms of Purism invert the cursory reception of its forms as absolute, into a reinstatement of politically oriented and utilized concrescence. This paper considers Purism as an admonition of the simple, the effortless, and the static. Purism stands in contradistinction to the universalizing language of basic, recognizable form to foment spontaneous, intuitive responses. Purism calls attention that the world not be rewritten in terms of a Classical and monarchical heritage yet through its inverse, the continuous creation of the world anew through Croce's symbolism as process and Berg-

son's duration of time. Purism is an admonition to the superficial, cursory acceptance of Platonic Ideals as these have been politicized to organize society into a non-egalitarian form. Purism threatened to revolutionize society hence the deliberate lacuna of scholarship in both art history and art theory in contrast to the systematic study of the Western canon emerging from the Classical moments.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Amédée Ozenfant, Guitar and Bottles, 1920

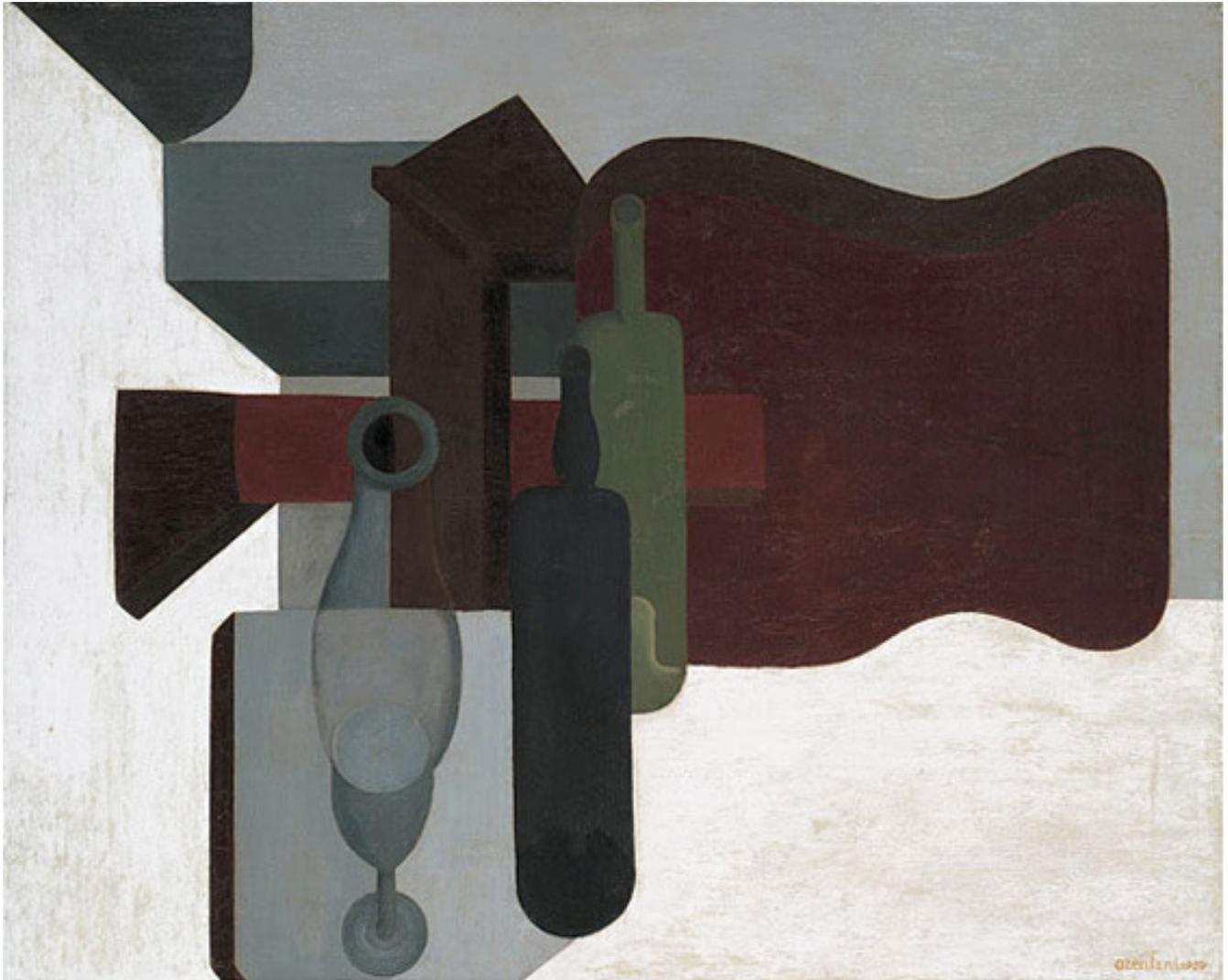


Figure 2. Le Corbusier, Still Life, 1920





Figure 3. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787

Figure 4. Le Corbusier, Still Life, 1922



Figure 5. Amédée Ozenfant, Grande Composition puriste, 1926





Press, 1981. Print

Figure 6.
Salvatore
Dalí, The
Lugubrious
Game
(Dismal
Sport), 1929

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