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Spacing Expression

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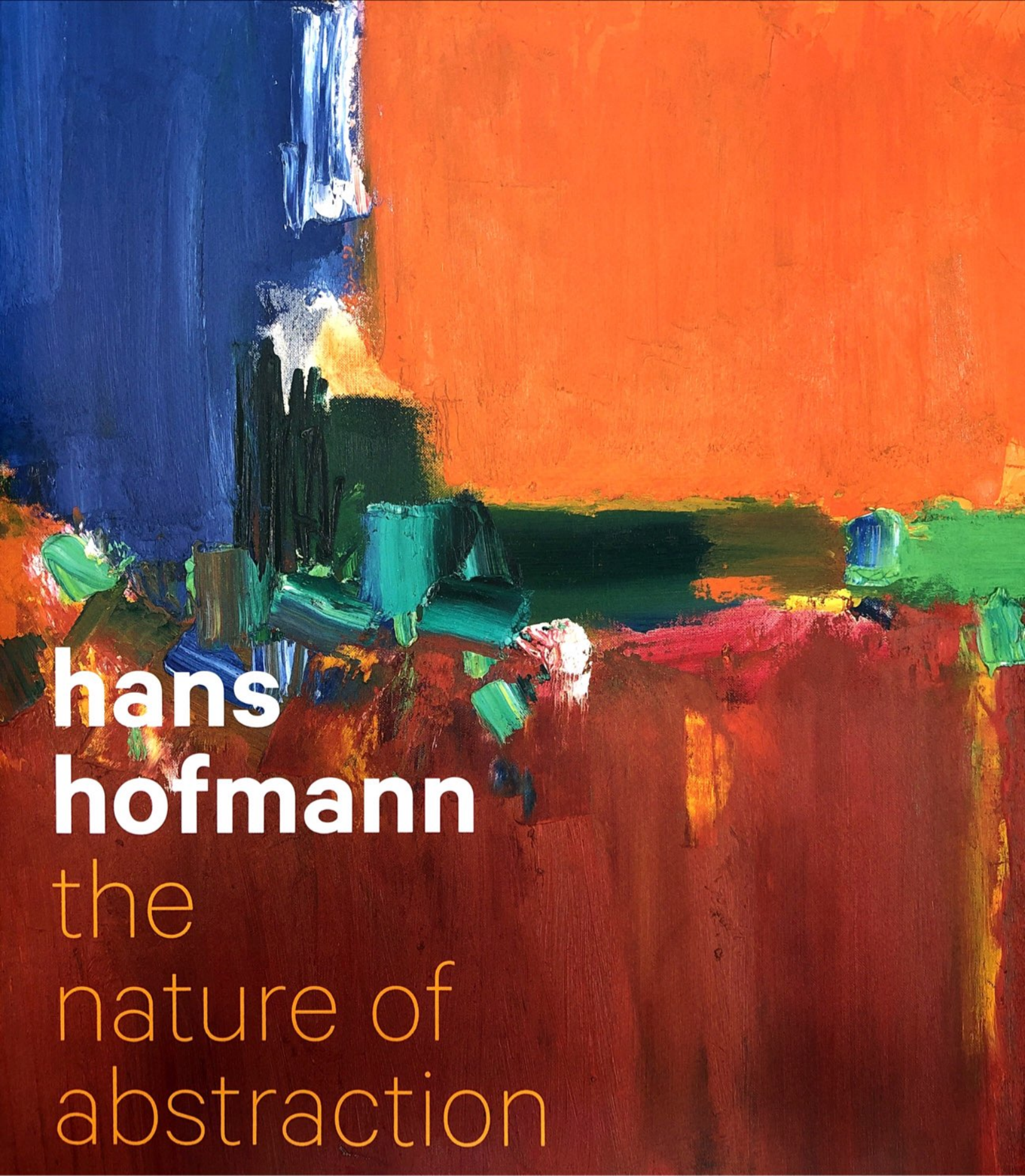


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**hans
hofmann**
the
nature of
abstraction



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Spacing Expression

“Every deep artistic expression is a product of a *conscious feeling* for reality.”

—Hans Hofmann, 1950¹

Expression and Touch *Plasticity* names a central quality of painting as a medium of expression: the seemingly infinite capacity of flat, marked surfaces not merely to register the physical traces of a painter’s activity but, more potently, to figure the vital responsiveness of what are actually inert materials (canvas, pigments, binders, diluents) to his or her animating touch. To achieve artistic expression is to transform *means* into *meaning*. In his statements, Hans Hofmann attempted to capture the essence of an artist’s power to give form to a fully expressive pictorial reality—one that exists in pointed contrast to everyday objective reality—by calling it “plastic *creation*.”² The stress indicates that, for Hofmann, painting originates or institutes a *world*, metaphysically distinct from the quotidian one we experience according to our habitual attitudes.

Writing on Hofmann commonly prefaces an analysis of his art with overviews of his aesthetics, teaching, or art-historical precedents, but overreliance on those frames of reference impedes more targeted assessments and interpretations of specific works.³ Although Hofmann’s significance as an educator and art theorist predates his best work, his writing and teaching derived from his practice as a painter—that is, from his technical investigations of the extent to which color, gesture, and format (plus conventions of composition, framing or delimitation, and point of view) could be coordinated to create plastic expression. The goal of this essay is to articulate what form Hofmann’s “expression” takes in particular works. In the instances I analyze, expression is best understood not as a demonstration of subjective impulses conveyed through abstract marks on a surface but rather as a dimension of pictorial space itself. Hofmann’s intuitive yet intentional control of key conventions of his medium (his “conscious feeling” toward their reality) allows him to objectify his “personal” expression, rendering it shareable pictorially.

Consider *Sparks* (1957; fig. 44). The painting comprises a dozen or so large, quasi-rectangular areas of mostly primary colors spread evenly onto the canvas surface with a wide, flat brush. Within the fluctuating boundaries of each patch, interior striations index the gestures of Hofmann’s hand and wrist as he applied the thinned pigment in regular vertical or horizontal strokes. The technique imparts to the forms a fine degree of internal modulation, and because they permit the painting’s white ground to show through, the gauzy shapes appear translucent, shining with variable intensities of light. The painting’s luminosity emanates from the brilliant white underpainting, in front of which the color areas seem almost to levitate (as if they had been freed from their physical adherence

Detail of *Sparks*, 1957 (pl. 40)



Fig. 44

Sparks, 1957.

Oil on canvas, 60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm).
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Bequest
 of Caroline Wiess Law, 2004.24.

to the surface itself). The visual effect is like a mirage. Set near and between the sweeping, diaphanous forms are smaller rectangular units of similar hues but more generous substance. The impasto elements crowd the larger floods of color, elbowing into interstitial spaces to compete for a place within this floating world. To the left of center, a weighty four-inch-long blue bar surrounded by titanium-white ridges squeezes forward to clip the lower edge of a brown-and-greenish patch, which—although spread literally underneath the blue bar—seems to hover in front of it. The dimensional effect is intensified by Hofmann's handling of local color relations: as a warm hue, the highly saturated three-inch-wide red strut below the blue slab advances, while its cooler neighbor recedes.⁴

Deposited in thick strokes with a flexible palette knife loaded with pigment, the relative opacity and diminutive size of the compact, jostling bodies—in comparison to the translucent and widely spread areas of their kin—render those shapes palpably felt as *touches*. The word captures the analogy between a painter's brush or knife stroke and his indexical act: touching makes a mark; by exchange, a mark becomes a touch. Yet while these touches register the act of mark making as such—and so might demonstrate Hofmann's gestural expressiveness—their compressed integrity also begins to suggest a geometry of depicted objects. From the color planes that face us, we might infer a compact mass. Indeed, especially in his later work, Hofmann conspicuously set off zones of visibly handled and thus generically

“expressive” incident against emphatically contained rectangles, the dense planes of which face the viewer with an intensity that materializes their presence as nearly solid objects.⁵ In *Sparks*, the relatively smaller set of marks, taken as shapes in themselves, evoke mass and the space of physical bodies. Hofmann’s touches, then, stage an encounter between a “space” that is proximate to the body of the artist and his physical gestures (here, we take his touches expressively) and a “space” that accommodates an independent reality presented to our view (here, we take his touches descriptively, as qualifying some aspect of the world of objects or phenomena virtually represented in the picture).

Still, certain long-standing beliefs about modern art encourage us to see Hofmann’s marks not as objectively descriptive but rather as subjectively expressive—as embodying his personal feelings. In 1957, the same year Hofmann painted *Sparks*, Meyer Schapiro published a now-classic defense of abstraction, “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art.”⁶ Writing as an art critic engaged with abstract expressionism, Schapiro occupied a position close to one established in the late nineteenth-century by critics of impressionism. Faced with the spread of techniques pioneered by such artists as Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, who rendered their motifs in visibly distinct, additive brushstrokes, writers asserted that the paint touches—indexes of the artist’s hand manipulating the surface—sensibly conveyed to a viewer the felt reciprocity of sensation and experience characteristic of any subject’s encounter with

the world.⁷ By symbolically linking marks to an individual’s authentic experience and self-expression, impressionist critics adduced touch to evidence an individual fully committed to self-directed activity and its personally expressive results. During a period of industrialization and the displacement of handicraft from modern production, that alignment was reassuring.

Although mentioning no abstract expressionist by name, Schapiro praised Hofmann and his contemporaries for exemplifying the impressionist ideal. “Paintings and sculptures,” he said, “are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture. Almost everything else is produced industrially, in mass, and through a high division of labor.”⁸ The critic lamented the situation: “Few people are fortunate enough to make something that represents themselves, that issues entirely from their hands and mind. . . . [The] rewards [of practical activity] do not compensate for the frustrations and emptiness that arise from the lack of spontaneity and personal identifications in work.”⁹

By contrast, an artist’s marks “manifest his liberty” within a world “increasingly organized through industry, economy and the state.”¹⁰ Since, in Schapiro’s view, representing oneself entails personal expression and spontaneity under inhibiting material and economic conditions, one suspects a political allegory underlying his claims. Culturally sponsored activities such as art conserve rapidly suffocating social values. Schapiro explained:

The object of art is, therefore, more passionately than ever before, the occasion of

spontaneity or intense feeling. The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work. It is addressed to others who . . . will recognize in it an irreplaceable quality and will be attentive to every mark of the maker's imagination and feeling. The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting and sculpture stimulates the artist to invent devices of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation—all signs of the artist's active presence.¹¹

Schapiro was clear: in an economic order increasingly oriented toward maximizing profit and regimented by automated production, the artist becomes an ideal that represents the possibilities of spontaneity (tellingly, the word derives from the Latin *sua sponta*, meaning “of one's own accord”). A painter's touch, which indexes fluctuations of the maker's feeling, expresses his Self: “the impulse becomes tangible and definite on the surface of a canvas through the painted mark. We see, as it were, the track of emotion, its obstruction, persistence or extinction.”¹² Abstract marks register the free actions of the artist who makes them, but they also embody his entire range of affective experience.¹³

Thus for Schapiro, “expression” in painting is tacitly linked to the artist's subjective experience, which is indexed by the free application

of characteristic marks. Despite its potential as a riposte to the limits placed on experience by impersonal modernization, the reduction of expression to the display of personal feeling has deleterious consequences. Resolutely identifying expression with the artist's “impulse,” Schapiro deflected attention from the wider social and aesthetic conditions under which the artist gives that impulse form, and against which it becomes available to interpretation: namely, the *suprapersonal* conventions of the medium of painting. Schapiro's alignment of a painter's feeling and emotion with the gestural marks characteristic of Hofmann's surfaces, in other words, treats expression as a purely individual possession, existing prior to any conventions or norms through which it might be expressed. But in Hofmann's case, expression is better understood by considering the way he represents the experience of making a painting in relation to conventions of framing a view. As we shall see, his delimitation of “space” reveals the pictorial conditions of “expression” itself.

To be sure, many abstract expressionists shared Schapiro's outlook. It matched any number of statements Hofmann made about his motivations. Like others of his cohort, the painter associated expression both with his feelings and with his activity of mark making as such. “Making a picture,” he declared in 1950, “is almost a *physical* struggle.”¹⁴ Although he stressed the importance of his actual performance, he nevertheless also emphasized the resulting pictorial effects, insisting that if a viewer “can't keep *looking* at a picture, it should be destroyed.”¹⁵

More than being a record of touches, then, a painting had to frame a view that convinced a beholder of the integrity and consistency of its fictional world (representational or otherwise). Schapiro, too, seemed for his part to have drawn an implicit distinction between actual experience and virtual effect, admitting that it was the *aspect* (literally, the *look*) of the “freely made” that the artist’s “invent[ive] devices of handling” were meant to confer upon his marks—even if an artist might labor on a canvas without in fact feeling liberated. After all, a painter might develop such a facility with expressionistic effects that his marks could deceive both artist and onlooker alike. That is why in 1952 the critic Harold Rosenberg famously insisted that an expressive mark, to qualify as such, must be the consequence of a “*genuine* act, associated with risk and will.”¹⁶

Expression and Affect What counts as a genuine act in painting, and how would a viewer discern the authenticity of the resulting mark? The comments by Hofmann I’ve been quoting introduced a 1950 article in *ARTNEWS* by Elaine de Kooning, “Hans Hofmann Paints a Picture.” The feature was part of a popular series dedicated to explaining the techniques of modern art. Reading his dialogue with de Kooning, it is difficult to surmise Hofmann’s answers to the questions I’ve posed. As usual, the artist’s explanations were complex enough to seem contradictory, even paradoxical, as he attempted to formulate his meaning.

On the one hand, Hofmann seemed to suggest that authentic expression results from subordinating deliberation to affect: “At the time of making a picture, I want *not* to know what I’m doing; a picture should be made with *feeling*, not knowing.”¹⁷ The remark is typical of abstract expressionist rhetoric, which often denounced conscious planning as impeding pictorial directness or immediacy. (The irony, of course, is that Hofmann spoke and wrote incessantly about his thoughts on art, and his sophistication in matters of aesthetic theory, technique, and pedagogy decisively impacted New York School painters and critics.) On the other hand, Hofmann deliberately used his means to achieve what he intended: “Technique is always the consequence of the dominating concept; with the change of concept, technique will change.”¹⁸ The apparent conflict—between a standard version of automatism (“feeling” instead of “knowing”) and a standard version of intention (realizing a “dominant concept”)—is not so polarizing and paralyzing as it might seem: any division of the categories is useful for heuristic purposes only, as the conceptual and embodied dimensions of experience form an integral whole. Still, in his conversation with de Kooning, Hofmann seemed to stake out—but not consistently—yet a third position. At points, Hofmann conferred upon *form itself* the power to signify, independent of any intent, conscious or not. In doing so, he not only controverted his theoretical acceptance of automatism (a process that motivates acts as if they deployed themselves beyond an agent’s conscious control), but also contradicted his



Fig. 45

Fruit Bowl No. II, 1950 (see p. 43, n. 52).

Oil on canvas, 30 × 38 in. (76.2 × 96.5 cm).

Private collection.

professed commitment to controlling technique (directing his means to realize an intent).

Hofmann anticipated Schapiro in attributing to marks the formal power to directly convey a “track of emotion” to a viewer: “A shape,” the painter told de Kooning, “can be sad or gay; a line, delirious.”¹⁹ Hofmann suggested an almost literal transfer of content (“feelings”) from painting to beholder through the actual effect (“sad,” “gay,” “delirious,” or otherwise) that a shape, line, or touch elicits.²⁰ The picture becomes a stimulus for an automatic affective response. But that presents an intractable problem that Hofmann did not acknowledge. If a shape or a line is inherently “sad” or transmits sadness, then it must be sad whether or not the artist wants or intends

it to be understood as sad.²¹ The mark would produce that effect even if the artist had been happy when he made it or even if he had made it accidentally or incompletely. (Imagine a situation in which Hofmann intended to make a “happy” mark but did so clumsily, producing a “sad” mark instead. How are we meant to understand what the mark signifies?) That is to say: if a mark is a “tangible and definite” index of an artist’s affective experience (Schapiro), and if a mark is either “sad or gay” (Hofmann), then the choice of what marks best convey any given mood would seem to be settled in advance. An artist would merely need to select a formal element that matches his feeling and use it to transfer “content” to a more or less passive viewer. On the model of affective formalism, the role that norms or conventions play in facilitating one’s creative expression is abandoned for a “meaning” that is produced automatically.

Of course, that is to state the logical consequences of Hofmann’s off-the-cuff position in extreme form. Elsewhere he clearly recognized that a shape or line can’t be (or feel) anything. Only an agent can be (or feel) sad, gay, or delirious—and use shapes and lines to express those dispositions. Perhaps just as obviously, *expressing* emotion, pictorially speaking, is not identical to transferring or transmitting it. Correlatively, the meaning of a finished painting is not contingent on an artist’s actually having been sad, gay, or delirious while working on his canvas, nor does a viewer’s actually feeling sad, gay, or delirious when looking at the picture bear upon her ability to interpret and understand it. A painting

by Hofmann is not simply an object that stimulates an automatic reaction but a complex proposition about the pictorial conditions for (as he put it) the “creation of [his] own inner world.”²²

Expression and Flatness Examining particular works of art will help us make sense of Hofmann’s expressive project. For de Kooning’s article, he produced the still life now known as *Fruit Bowl No. II* (1950; fig. 45).²³ Although the image appears abstract, Hofmann’s model was an arrangement of items on a flat surface,

backdropped by a loose cylinder of patterned cellophane and a broadly crumpled sheet of silver wrapping paper. (A photograph by Rudy Burckhardt reproduced in the article documents the makeshift, cantilevered tabletop; fig. 46). Certainly, it is possible to discover traces of depicted things. The left part of a vase, for instance, peeks through a green trapezoid at the center of the composition. Near the lower edge, orthogonal lines suggest the perspectival recession of the tabletop into space. Even where identifications are less secure, the impression of a real model underpinning the abstract array persists.

Still, in *Fruit Bowl No. II*, Hofmann diminished our capacity to take the image as a typical *picture*, representing objects at a distance and framed for our viewing—to take it, in other words, as a window onto the world. It is as if he wanted to give the whole array—the tableau itself as a totality—an autonomous presence independent of the “objects” that the view “contains.” Hence, Hofmann’s decision to back-drop the arrangement with crumpled paper, a strategy to activate the “empty” space around objects. The effect is carried out in other parts of the painting. At the lower right corner, thin red lines describe a number of dynamically balanced, overlaid planes that seem to pivot into space from the relatively steady tabletop. Those lines and others like them geometrically partition areas of the flattened background to materialize the “space” between “things,” without describing either sufficiently for us to determine their relationships in coordinate space. That

Fig. 46

Hofmann and still life. From “Hofmann Paints a Picture,” *ARTnews* 48, no. 10 (February 1950). Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt.



failure seems somewhat ironic, since the compositional framework appears plotted along x, y, and z axes. (Perceptively, de Kooning employed metaphors of building and grids to describe the picture, attending to the “architecture” of the painting’s “blueprint” and highlighting the “tick-tack-toe” effect of its “basic geometric structure.”)²⁴

The inadequacy of descriptions based on coordinate geometry (*this-next-to-that, this-behind-that*) to capture the world of Hofmann’s composition is instructive. The difficulty of verbalizing the oscillation between depiction—pictorial reference to real objects in space—and the actual flat surface that is the condition for their virtual appearance reveals one of Hofmann’s major concerns: namely, the dynamics of adjusting a model in nature to the picture plane. As he averred in his important lectures of 1938–39, Hofmann believed there were two kinds of “flatness,” each categorically distinct: “There is a fundamental difference between flatness and flatness. There can be a flatness that is meaningless and there can be a flatness that is the highest expression of life—from infinity depth up to the surface: an ultimately restor[ed] two-dimensionality. [Restoring flatness] is what plastic creation means. Otherwise it is decoration.”²⁵

Hofmann’s distinction between literal flatness (“meaningless”) and pictorial flatness (“the highest expression of life”) lies at the root of his account of how an artist transforms *means* into *meaning*. Of course, the distinction is closely associated with the issue of autonomy, insofar as a painting—which frames and delimits the

artist’s expressive pictorial reality—declares its independence from the world at large. Viewers commonly see Hofmann’s works as complicating their capacity to coordinate the presumed model “outside” the picture with the image “inside” the limited area of the canvas surface. The discrepancy calls attention to the work’s “plastic creation.” In a revealing moment, de Kooning observed that “the paper behind the still-life collapsed and knocked the objects out of position so that the artist had to work only by the logic of the picture itself.”²⁶ Said another way, Hofmann subordinated the model to the autonomous logic of the abstract array and so instituted the particular world the painting expresses.

This dynamic readjustment of the model to the constraints of both the medium and the painting’s self-regulating pictorial order is a central modernist problem.²⁷ Modernism inaugurated an ongoing tension, we might say, between depicting recognizable objects and indicating their spatial relations on the one hand, and on the other developing an internal pictorial logic independent of the external model toward which painting traditionally oriented its illusionism. The second project tends toward abstraction, since any departure from the typical norms of mimetic representation (delineation of contour, volumetric shading, descriptive coloration) will seem—by comparison to those accepted or proper norms—deviant, aberrant, or figured. “Plastic creation” and “re-created flatness” are two of Hofmann’s special terms for resolving the dialectical tension of this project, and through



Fig. 47

Still Life—Round Table on Red with Palette and Painting [Red Table], 1938.

Oil on panel, 60¼ × 48 in. (153 × 121.9 cm).
Collection of Cornelia and Meredith Long,
Houston.

them we can begin to understand his concept of expression as a function of a particular approach to, or departure from, various norms of pictorial space and not as a private experience encoded in gestural shorthand.

Expression and Standpoint *Still Life—Round Table on Red with Palette and Painting* (1938; fig. 47) exhibits both naturalistic and abstract features: we recognize a room and various objects, but relationships of size, scale, and color stray considerably from a presumed model. Given the familiar motif—the interior of an artist’s studio—and the art-historical weight of the mimetic tradition against which Hofmann worked, it seems fitting to describe *Round Table on Red* in terms of its deviation from norms of naturalism or illusionism. Aside from the painting’s vivid, nondescriptive color, perhaps the most conspicuous departure from the model is the assertive frontality of the tabletop itself, which tilts upward so that the objects on it seem in danger of sliding off. Upon that surface, a large hydra-shaped vase balances precariously. Poised in front of it is another slim-necked vessel. One or the other holds flowers with yellow buds. Stacks of paintings and a musical instrument lean against the studio’s green far wall. To the right of the vases, a pair of apothecary bottles are suggested by black outlines; below them, a teacup or egg dish is diagrammed in orange. Between all the vessels rises a conspicuous red triangle, like a sail, with no discernable referent. The other objects on the table—mostly

confined to the area of a quasi-rectangular red cloth or mat laid upon its surface—are too abstract or summary to identify securely. Yet near the left edge, a blue-handled paintbrush lines up with four or five others lying on a blue-and-white plane underlying the red tablemat. The plane, rendered in rudimentary perspective, floats above the studio floor, like a tabletop with no legs. It manages, by virtue of its angle into space, to brace the cascading abstraction at the center of the composition against imminent collapse.

Following the hint of the painting's title, I consider it likely that the strange, levitating shape represents Hofmann's palette and painting tools—even though their size, relative to the table itself, is unrealistically large. Of course, given that still-life painters need a flat work surface and brushes near the arrangements they set up as models, the inference is hardly surprising. But considering the spatial anomalies that the forms introduce—a plane that appears to float free of any physical support and the oversize scale of the tools—the possible motivations for the artist's formal choices demand our attention and interpretation. If it is a palette, why is it there? And what is its role in Hofmann's expressive pictorial reality?

Round Table on Red is meant to sustain the fiction that we are looking at a still life arranged in an artist's studio. But it is also a literal canvas that Hofmann painted while manipulating his palette and brushes, tools that were close at hand and that impinged on his surroundings as much as, if not more than,

the objects he surveyed at a distance (and that served as the putative subject of his composition). Yet because he chose to represent tokens of his palette and brushes within the picture, a viewer who ponders the painting's logic, I would guess, will eventually consider the implicit distinction between actual tools and the virtual space Hofmann used his tools to render. Thus, although it is not immediately obvious, the inclusion of tools in the image draws attention to the difference between the material conditions of the *canvas* and the content of the *work of art*. The structure of Hofmann's expression in *Round Table on Red* takes the form of thematizing the distinction between a work's actual limits and its virtual autonomy, between *means* and *meaning*.

The painter pursued this motif in a series of canvases, all of which have the same basic structure or point of view. Of course, the table and its still life are central to Hofmann's immediate artistic heritage, from Cézanne through Picasso, Braque, and Matisse. (The metaphor that sponsors the connection between a tabletop and a canvas is captured by the French word *tableau*, which designates both a table and a painting.) But the table does more than rehearse Hofmann's modernist genealogy. Typically, when it is central to the composition of a painting, the space that the surface area of a table isolates within the representation is designed to hold the viewer's interest. That is, it makes a space-within-a-space that contains certain objects in a way that corresponds to how the framed picture itself contains a piece of the world.²⁸ The flatness of an actual table's surface (which supports

the objects the artist uses as his model) almost begs to be compared with the flat, stretched canvas upon which the artist works (and which will become the still-life painting itself). When a table is depicted on a canvas, then, it offers the beholder an analogy between the role of the table in framing an aspect of the fictional world of the work of art and the artist's capacity—through the norms of painting—to delimit the world.

Within the setting of a painter's studio, the tools of the trade—easels, palettes, brushes, rags, cans—are continually in view. But when an artist paints a still life he has arranged there, he typically omits from the image depictions of those instruments. Consider, though, a work surface positioned in front of the easel and canvas upon which the artist will make his marks—as it seems to have been Hofmann's practice to contrive.²⁹ The horizontal palette would have stood in a special relationship to the image as it was being created. That surface would have been seen and encountered, bodily, whenever the artist turned his attention from viewing the model to rendering it. The relationship of one (image-in-form) to the other (materials-as-means) is figured in *Round Table on Red* through the strange visual conjunction of both: first, the objects Hofmann viewed from a distance (the items on the table); second, the objects he must have viewed and literally manipulated at close hand (his palette and brushes). It stands to reason that a painter as sensitive as Hofmann was to the problem of flatness and depth would not only have encountered

this dynamic of vision and touch as a matter of course, but also pondered its implications for the presentation of dimensional "space" in its expressive, not just illusionistic, sense.

Expression and Space Consider three variations of the same still life under discussion. Although they are given divergent dates in his catalogue raisonné, their familial similarities suggest that Hofmann produced them around the same time as *Round Table on Red*. They are: *Untitled (Yellow Table on Green)* (1936; fig. 48), *Still Life—Table on Red Background* (1936–38; fig. 49), and *Atelier (Still Life, Table with White Vase)* (1938; fig. 50).³⁰ All feature Hofmann's three-legged pillar-and-scroll table, upon which sit the vases I pointed out before, along with other objects. They seem relatively standard from picture to picture with minor exclusions and additions. At least three show paintings stacked against the back wall of the studio (*Yellow Table on Green*, *Atelier*, and *Round Table on Red*), and two include a guitar propped in the corner (*Yellow Table on Green* and *Round Table on Red*). Excepting *Yellow Table on Green*, each picture contains along its right side a standing folding screen with fabric draped over the top (most obviously in *Round Table on Red*). Importantly, all the paintings contain a floating or cantilevered palette whose position and angle invites viewers to imagine seeing the plane from slightly above as it recedes into space, in contrast to the circular plane of the tabletop, which tilts more extremely



Fig. 48

Untitled (Yellow Table on Green), 1936.

Oil on board, 60 × 48 in. (152.4 cm × 121.92 cm). Dallas Museum of Art, fractional gift of The Rachofsky Collection in honor of Dr. Dorothy Kosinski, the Barbara Thomas Lemmon Curator of European Art, 2001.344.



Fig. 49

Still Life—Table on Red Background
[Untitled #4—Pink Table with Still Life and Palette], 1936–38 (see p. 41, n. 15).

Oil on panel, 52½ × 38 in. (133.4 × 86.5 cm). Private collection.

toward us. The exception is *Atelier*, where the palette and tabletop seem closely matched in angle and aspect.

The four works share an arresting feature. In each, the upper left corner of the cantilevered palette touches, or nearly touches, the left edge of the canvas itself. And where that contact occurs, it impinges decisively on the quality of pictorial space represented in the surrounding area. Look, for instance, at *Round Table on Red*. The abutment of the palette's blue border with the room's red floor creates an emphatic line, like a hinge or a fold, between the two color planes. Directly below, a parallel line divides an irregular area at the picture's bottom left corner from the scene itself, as if that corner should somehow be felt as not part of the room. Both lines

compromise the illusion of distance between the ground plane and Hofmann's tools, compressing pictorial space and holding it in a narrow register close to the picture plane. At the same time, the effect of a deviant spatial dimension intensifies when the viewer draws an imaginary line between the lower left corner of the palette and the upper right corner of the trapezoid below it. This optical connect-the-dots exercise produces something like a hallucinated cube whose top is defined by the blue edge of the palette, with the color of the floor defining one of its sides. The "face" of that mirage-like cube, then, can be seen to open out and flood the expansive zone beneath the table, and the space between the palette and the standing screen, with a power of volumetric fullness.



Fig. 50

Atelier (Still Life, Table with White Vase),
1938.

Oil on panel, 60 × 48½ in. (152.4 × 123.2 cm).
Collection of Mrs. Edith H. Fisher, Pittsburgh.

By managing the beholder's visual passage into *Round Table on Red* through the figure of the cantilevered palette and the unique dimensionality it produces, Hofmann's expression takes the form of an inquiry into the character of embodied space and its pictorial projection. The image challenges us, as viewers, to maintain our natural attitude toward depicted "space" and the objects we expect it to "contain." Putatively empty areas of the painted surface are embodied in our visual perception as full in their own right. Their fullness, in other words, is not quantified by the number of objects we see situated within space-as-a-container but, rather, is a fullness whose pictorial quality is felt to exist independently of any objects that would define it by comparison as empty (that is, *negatively*).

In *Atelier*, the collision of the palette's corner with the framing edge shows us how pictorial space can be defined *positively*. The orthogonal line that indicates the perspectival recession of the room from right to left has been bent at a twenty-degree angle, as if the coincidence of palette and edge has pinched space so tightly that it begins to buckle. Rather than obey the rules of verisimilitude, the entire room strains under the grip of the palette, the corner of which serves as the beginning and end point for diagrammatic lines that indicate objects and define planes around the perimeter of the table. Note also that while the paintings stacked against the back wall in *Round Table on Red* accord, in their overlapping, with the general perspective of the room, those in *Atelier* do not. They violate the perspective suggested by the orthogonal plane of the palette (that is, they

seem to recede from left to right, disappearing behind what I take to be a wall-like partition in the room). The consequence is an interior space at odds with itself. *Atelier's* diagonal lines do not, as in a conventional depiction of a room, converge on a distant point in the background to yield the impression that we are outside looking in. Rather, they suggest a divergent standpoint, somewhere and somehow *within* the room itself—a standpoint that we are solicited to occupy, at least imaginatively. Our projection of that point of view yields the impression that Hofmann's space is available to us not because we are bodies in space (as if we, too, were "objects" placed in a container) but rather because we ourselves are the corporeal presence from which the space creatively radiates. Once we are attuned to that expressive effect, we can discern it in *Round Table on Red*, too.

Round Table on Red and *Atelier* express Hofmann's embodied situation in relation to his artistic tools (at hand) and his subject (at a distance). Furthermore, each work represents that relation to a viewer who imaginatively occupies the standpoint to which the painting's structure of beholding is oriented. As we have seen, the achievement depends on Hofmann's manner of handling key conventions that govern the easel form: especially, the *genre* within which he chose to work (the still life); the *motif* itself (a studio interior); aspects of *framing* (including the play of actual vs. depicted frames); and *point of view* (insofar as Hofmann's scenes are recognizable yet challenge our expectations for verism). Thus, the works demonstrate a mode of expression that transcends the naïve formula according to



Fig. 51

Still Life—Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases, 1937.

Oil on panel, 52 × 42 in. (132.1 × 106.7 cm).
Present whereabouts unknown.

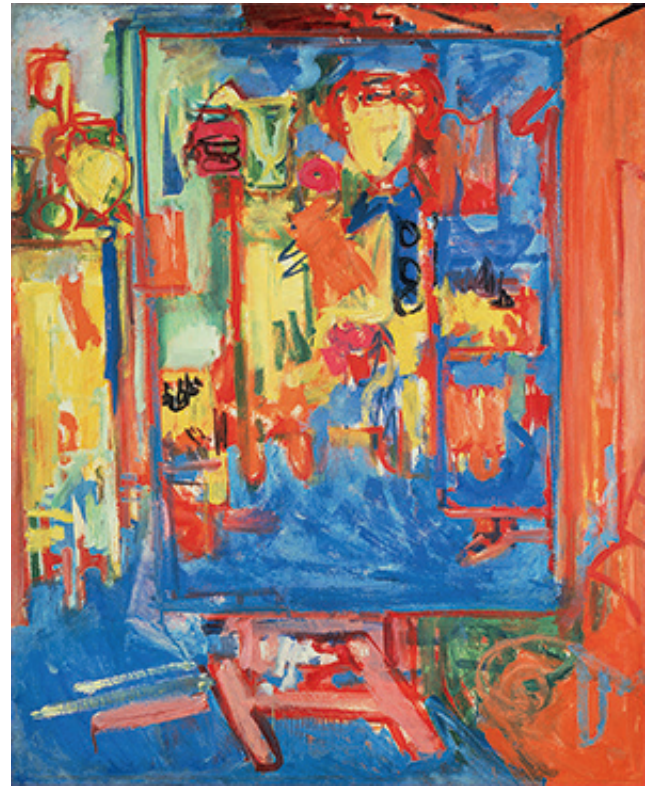


Fig. 52

Untitled (Interior Composition), 1935.

Oil and casein on plywood, 43³/₈ × 35³/₈ in.
(110.2 × 89.9 cm) University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film
Archive; Gift of Hans Hofmann (1965.24.2).

which a certain type of mark indexes a specific individual feeling. Instead, Hofmann's paintings prove that *pictorial* expression depends upon keyed responses to certain conventions. His awareness of the determinate relation of "expression" to "space" is a hallmark of his still lifes.

Expression and View As evidence of Hofmann's pictorial concern with instituting expression as a dimension of the medium's conventions (chief among them, framing and point of view), consider another series of paintings:

Still Life—Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases (1937; fig. 51), *Untitled (Interior Composition)* (1935; fig. 52), *Studio Unfinished* (1936; fig. 53), and *Vases on Yellow Cupboard* ([1934]; fig. 54). Despite again being assigned divergent dates in his catalogue raisonné, there is good reason to conclude—based on rigorous formal analysis—that they constitute an integrated set produced around the same time.

First, study *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*, a picture I am convinced is the inaugural canvas of the series (its ur-image, as it were). From straight on, we see a plain cupboard or



Fig. 53

Studio Unfinished, 1936.

Oil on panel, 54 × 42 in. (137.6 × 106.7 cm).
Private collection.



Fig. 54

Vases on Yellow Cupboard, [1934].

Oil on panel, 51½ × 38 in. (130.8 × 96.5 cm).
Collection Sandy Tytel, New York.

cabinet whose shape is outlined in red and umber and filled in by mottled yellows. Set prominently on top of it are a green wide-mouthed monarch vase and a bulbous yellow amphora. Hofmann crowded them with additional items, including rounded forms (jars?) and draped cloth (a piece of red-orange fabric partly covers the cabinet's door, and a dark blue-green table runner hangs over its stacked drawers). A pair of rectangles appear at the left edge of the canvas: the one above, an unmodulated block of orange; the one below, a quadrangle featuring a pattern of lines and arcs (note for future reference the

scalloped peak of red against a yellow ground at the center of the area). The broad application of ultramarine that defines the floor yields little sense of the room's spatial recession, but Hofmann indicated its far wall and corner with two light blue highlights: a short horizontal and a tall vertical line (both just to the right of the cabinet). The volume of the room is indicated further by what is the most perplexing—and, it will turn out, the most significant—element in this studio arrangement: a large easel, set at an angle to the painting's right side. On the canvas it holds, Hofmann depicted an image that appears

to share key features with the painting we are actually beholding. Like *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases* itself, this picture-within-the-picture also features a blue background, and although it does not obviously contain a yellow cupboard, it does include two rectangles pinned to its left edge. Those quadrangles, moreover, seem to mirror either the color or the internal pattern of the pair to the left of the cupboard. Could the painting depicted on the easel *within* the scene be a summary sketch of the very canvas Hofmann was painting—namely *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*? Does the painting include a token of itself in order to show itself?

The proposal is both thought and vision twisting. If Hofmann wanted to map the imagery of his actual canvas (the object on which he labored) onto the virtual world of the painting (the depiction we behold in *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*), that complex endeavor might be characterized as one that folds, or perhaps reflects, pictorial space into itself. With this in mind, regard *Interior Composition*. Although it is not obvious, what we are looking at is a painting of a painting: the image shows *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases* displayed frontally on an easel. It fills a large area of the canvas. (The foot of the mount recedes into space to create a backward-slanted capital H.) To the left of the painting on the easel is the yellow cupboard and its still-life arrangement: the amphora outlined in red; the green monarch vase sliced in half by the frame's left side. Below the vases, the red-orange cloth and the blue-green table runner are each reduced to summary strokes of pure orange

and blue. As we are now prepared to expect, we can also make out the same yellow cupboard inside the painting on the easel. There, too, we see the monarch vase, the amphora, the orange cloth, and the blue runner (now decorated with a pattern of circles). Crucially, we can also see—within the painting on the easel—yet *another* painting on an easel. At the lower right corner of the *first* picture-within-the-picture (that is, *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*), observe the foot of that easel. Above it, locate a stack of three rectangles or quasi-rectangles: they define the left side of what we grasp, perplexingly, as a *second* picture-within-a-picture (that is, another *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*).

In short, within one painting (*Interior Composition*) we see a representation of another painting (*Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*) that shows a reduced or diagrammatic version of itself. That hall-of-mirrors effect can be pursued with more specificity by attending to the final pair of paintings in the series, *Studio Unfinished* and *Vases on Yellow Cupboard*. The former shows the cabinet in rudimentary perspective, angling into the room; the latter illustrates the piece of furniture head-on yet seemingly compressed. In both works, however, the familiar objects on the cupboard appear to project themselves into a picture-within-the-picture that is set upon an easel (the stands of each device are rendered by red braces squared around blue negative spaces). In *Studio Unfinished*, the image of the cupboard and its objects appears in surrogate, transposed into a picture-within-the-picture. The move creates

the illusion that some kind of reflection is taking place. That impression is corrected only when one identifies, again, the presence of a second picture-within-a-picture—when one detects the almost totally eclipsed easel foot at the first internal picture's lower right corner, surmounted by the ladder of three rectangles.

In *Vases on Yellow Cupboard*, plain juxtaposition supplants mirroring. To the right of the yellow cabinet stands the easel with *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases* on it, reduced nearly to a diagram. But enough detail remains in the schema to secure the identification of a second painting-within-a-painting. An easel foot can be seen at its lower right corner and is surmounted by three rectangles—and even though they are just runny splotches of orange, we know what to expect.³¹ Curiously, the shared iconography of these paintings, as far as I know, has gone totally unremarked in the scholarship on Hofmann's art.

Hofmann's complex presentation of views framed within frames can't be seen in terms of a record of purely individual feeling. Instead, expression must be grasped through our reflection on the way he adjusted and manipulated his scenes in relation to the convention of delimiting a view. Thus, his formal procedure lends his expression a certain objectivity or anonymity and points to the self-sustaining logic of plastic creation itself. To be sure, his personal expression is fathomed as a dimension of the strange but entrancing spaces that multiply in his paintings. By doubling (and tripling) *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*, he instituted in them a self-referential, insular pictorial reality. While

that expression of course remains "his," it nonetheless is controlled and channeled through formal issues and problems of a suprapersonal dimension.

In the 1930s Hofmann investigated the conventions of framing and point of view within the still-life genre with remarkable consistency. A final series of four paintings demonstrates even better how he correlated his embodied proximity to the tools of his trade (and thus his immersion within the scene) with a standpoint required to survey the scene (and thus marking to some extent his specular distance from it).³² Here, the correlation is again accomplished through the cantilevered work surface that mediates the viewer's visual passage into the scene. But in addition, each member of the series also includes *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases* as a painting-within-the-painting.

Still Life—Table with Vases and Cupboard (1935; fig. 55), *Table with Teakettle, Green Vase and Red Flowers (Still Life—Two Green Vases)* (1936; fig. 56), *Still Life with Fruit and Coffeepot* (1940; fig. 57), and *Green Table* (1937; fig. 58) all frame a view of Hofmann's studio. The foreground of each painting contains a table with slender legs (or a makeshift work surface on a stool). In each, a still-life arrangement with a percolator, bottles, fruit, and other items (brushes or palette knives in at least two of the pictures) crowds the tabletop. In *Table with Teakettle*, the tabletop parallels the picture plane instead of receding into space. Considered abstractly, the square shape compromises the visual projection into depth that the objects on the table



Fig. 55

Still Life—Table with Vases and Cupboard, 1935.

Oil on plywood, 57 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 43 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (147.3 × 113 cm). New Mexico Museum of Art; gift of Bob Nurock, 2016 (2016.11).



Fig. 56

Table with Teakettle, Green Vase and Red Flowers (Still Life—Two Green Vases), 1936.

Oil on panel, 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (138.4 × 101.9 cm). University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Gift of the artist, 1965 (1965.1).

otherwise solicit. By overlapping and partly occluding one another, they suggest (but just barely) a sequence of coordinate positions in space. To the right of the tabletop, the predominantly blue rectangle contains a narrow piece of yellow furniture on three legs. It should be obvious: this, again, is a picture-within-the-picture of *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*. Not only will a viewer discern the green monarch vase and the yellow amphora on top of the cabinet, but—looking closely—she will see at the rectangle's bottom right corner a red diagram of the foot of an easel, upon which must be imagined a second painting-within-a-painting (yet another *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*).

The composition is common to each of the other three paintings. In *Table with Vases*

and *Cupboard*, the distinction between the “space” of the studio interior and the “space” of the surrogate *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases* is harder to see, since both are painted in blue. Moreover, some of the objects in the picture-within-the-picture migrate into the still-life proper—notably, the green monarch vase—confusing our sense of what is an object *in the room* and what is an object *in the picture in the room*. (It doesn't help that we are, after all, looking at a picture.) The monarch vase rests on some kind of stand or box that—judging by the curvilinear strokes surrounding its base—appears to be draped with a piece of fabric (the receptacle is not green but yellow in *Table with Vases and Cupboard*). The staging holds for *Still Life with Fruit and Coffeepot*



Fig. 57

Still Life with Fruit and Coffeepot, 1940.

Oil on panel, 60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm).

Private collection.



Fig. 58

Green Table, [1937].

Casein on panel, 60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm).

Private collection.

and *Green Table*. While in those pictures the table or work surface features a conspicuous angle along its right edge (perhaps an indication of folding leaves), many of the same items are present—especially the representation of *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*. Its slender presence is indicated in a sidelong view by the giveaway easel's foot in the lower right corner of the blue plane in each work.

Expression and Medium There is an important feature of *Sparks* that I did not mention earlier: its color-shapes are more or less trued to the shape of the quadrangle itself, with many of them approximating the frame's aspect ratio (see fig. 44). The forms seem to

pointedly acknowledge the material limits of the format. For instance, near the bottom of the picture, a graded blue passage to the left of Hofmann's signature stops just short of the lower framing edge. The incipient abutment yields to the negative space between color and edge—to what might have counted simply as neutral white ground: a palpable presence, like a girder or beam. Elsewhere, edges brace themselves against expanding colors, but it is the colors that paradoxically establish and reinforce the edges' capacity to contain the array. The impression of a self-regulating order both is internally generated yet responsive to the external, objective limits of the format and mitigates one's sense that Hofmann's marks are meant to be taken, or taken primarily, as signs of his



Fig. 59

Fiat Lux (Let There Be Light), 1963.

Oil on canvas, 72 × 60 in. (182.9 × 152.4 cm).
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum
purchase funded by Mrs. William Stamps
Farish, Sr., by exchange, 81.30.

individual, personal “expressiveness.” Indeed, Hofmann’s compositional logic—organizing the plane through interacting color areas of similar shapes but variable sizes, hues, and densities—helps convey the sense that the elements of the array have both individually and collectively internalized, as they simultaneously activate, the potential of the actual limits of the canvas to frame a view. Consequently, their appearance—separately and together—seems less a result of Hofmann’s inspired spontaneity and more like a response to impersonal conditions of the medium.

In fact, the more that Hofmann’s paintings seem explicitly to acknowledge and then internalize the conditions of their creation—their constraints or limits, both physical and conventional—the more his imagery gains the power to hold its surface and convince the viewer of the validity of its expression. *Fiat Lux (Let There Be Light)* (1963; fig. 59) appears, at first, typically “expressionist”: the whole area of a large canvas is covered with nearly pure hues generously applied in free gestures with wide brushes. Variations in patterning and density let the composition breathe. (Compare the substance of the deep, reddish-brown strokes encroaching on the bright red circle with the almost dematerialized halation of pink at lower center.) But what is most significant about the painting, as I see it, is how the material object’s support (the canvas stretched over the frame that holds it) bears upon the virtual array. Hofmann calls our attention to the literal limits of his surface—its real physical area—by indicating its boundaries with

emphatic horizontal or vertical passages placed just within the framing edges. (Note in particular the blue bar at the top edge.) The wide channel of yellow that divides the upper and lower halves of the painting suggests the horizontal axis of a cruciform whose vertical is indicated by a deep purple-red strut at the center of the bottom framing edge and by the dark brown rod at the top. Further, Hofmann exposed the vertical strut of the stretcher beneath the canvas by pressing the fabric against it, creating a physical impression of the wood below on the surface itself. In other words, the material cross braced behind the canvas works out of sight both to partition the image and to declare the painting's surface area as a totality—to *re-create* its flatness.

Thus, *Fiat Lux* announces a discrepancy between the object's actual materials and the virtual image or fictional world the painting projects. Perhaps "discrepancy" is excessively categorical, too polarizing a characterization of the relation between the actual and the virtual in Hofmann's work (between flatness and re-created flatness). It might be better to say that the taut suspension of the image (a visual projection) on its primary and secondary supports (canvas and wood stretcher) exposes something like the dependence or reliance of the image—and the artist's expression it embodies—on its physical foundation as the condition of meaning's possibility. That helps explain the poignancy in *Fiat Lux* of the sweeping gesture of sun yellow at the very center of the canvas. Its autonomy emanates in contrast to the coordinates mapped by the painting's axes. That radiant stroke not

only figures Hofmann's metaphor of eternal light, it also illuminates the interdependence of expression and pictorial delimitation.

Coming to understand, through patient analysis, the specific ways Hofmann technically and formally addresses the norms and conventions of the easel form is fundamental to interpreting his expression. It is only within and against the background of these conventions that an artist's meaning can be articulated pictorially. And *that* is tantamount to insisting that conventions open a space within which individual expression can be offered as communication, as a proposition available to interpretation and (possible) understanding by an audience. In the paintings I've discussed, impersonality of expression neither disclaims the agency of the artist nor denies him the power to determine his meaning as he works in relation to the conventions of a medium. Rather, impersonality is a pictorial effect that—paradoxically—renders expression shareable and thus binds the viewer to the artist in a communicative relationship.

Ironically, perhaps, the implications of this tacitly "anti-expressive" argument are best voiced in the essay I discussed at the beginning of my account: Schapiro's "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art." Recall that Schapiro held industrialization responsible for eroding personal liberty by eliminating self-expression from making. Modern artists, he insisted, fulfilled themselves by cultivating signs of the spontaneous and unconstrained: they mapped their personal feelings onto marks. As I've been laboring to point out, however, Hofmann willingly accepted

the constraints of suprapersonal conventions in order to realize expression through his presentation of pictorial space. Hence the importance to him of the history of the medium and its traditional limits. Those are social facts of painting, to be worked within and against in the expression of meaning that—because it is addressed to, and conditioned by, an audience participating in the

norms of pictorial representation—is not simply one’s own but rather is communally distributed. Schapiro supplies the ideal phrasing for my conclusion: Hofmann’s expression “achieves stability, and even impersonality, through the power of painting to universalize itself in the perfection of its form and to reach out into common life. It becomes then a possession of everyone.”³³

¹ Elaine de Kooning, “Hans Hofmann Paints a Picture,” *ARTNEWS* 48, no. 10 (February 1950): 59; emphasis added.

² The term appears throughout Hofmann’s writings and is the title of one of his best-known essays: “Plastic Creation” (1932–33), in *Hans Hofmann*, ed. Sam Hunter (New York: Abrams, 1964), 35–38. The most readily accessible anthology of Hofmann’s writing is *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, ed. Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes Jr. (1948; Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1967). On the complex lineage of Hofmann’s written works, see Michael Schreyach, “Re-created Flatness: Hans Hofmann’s Concept of the Picture Plane as a Medium of Expression,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 44–67.

³ The scholarly literature on Hofmann is sizeable; a useful guide is Suzi Villiger, ed., *Hans Hofmann: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings* (London: Lund Humphries, 2014); hereafter cited as *HHCRP*. The best overview of Hofmann’s life and work is Tina Dickey, *Color Creates Light: Studies with Hans Hofmann* (Salt Spring Island, BC: Trillistar, 2011).

⁴ Going forward, I will refer to Hofmann’s “dimensional effects” or “pictorial dimensionality” to evoke the complex spatial and optical effects of his paintings; on such effects, see Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1966), esp. 120–25.

⁵ Walter Darby Bannard called attention to such effects in *Hans Hofmann: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1976), 19.

⁶ Meyer Schapiro, “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” *ARTNEWS* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957): 36–42.

⁷ On these points, see Richard Shiff, “Cézanne’s Physicality: The Politics of Touch,” in *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129–80, esp. 135–37.

⁸ Schapiro, “Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ For an analysis of Schapiro’s concept of freedom within the sociopolitical context of the Cold War, see C. Oliver O’Donnell, “Meyer Schapiro, Abstract Expressionism, and the Paradox of Freedom in Art Historical Description,” *Tate Papers*, no. 26 (Autumn 2016): n.p.

¹⁴ De Kooning, “Hofmann Paints a Picture,” 38; emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *ARTNEWS* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 49; emphasis added.

17 De Kooning, “Hofmann Paints a Picture,” 40; emphasis added.

18 Ibid., 38.

19 Ibid.

20 The rhetoric is typical of early modernists and bears a striking similarity (in translation) to Wassily Kandinsky’s claim that the shapes of letters consist of a “principal form” that appears “gay, sad, striving, striking, defiant, ostentatious, etcetera”; see Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form” (1912), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C Lindsay and Peter Vergo (1982; New York: Da Capo, 2004), 46. Furthermore, in his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (written in 1910 and published in 1912), Kandinsky wrote (of color, but his points hold for shape as well) that “colored light can exercise very definite influences on the whole body. . . . [R]ed light stimulates and excites the heart, while blue light can cause temporary paralysis. . . . [C]olor can exercise enormous influence over the body as a physical organism”; see Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977), 25. On Kandinsky and Hofmann, see Gail Levin, “Kandinsky and Abstract Expressionism,” in *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. G. Levin and M. Lorenz (Dayton, OH: Dayton Art Institute, 1992), 192–221.

21 See Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3–10.

22 Hans Hofmann, “Statement” (1931), in *Hans Hofmann*, by Cynthia Goodman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1990), 163–64.

23 De Kooning labeled the work *Fruit Bowl: Transubstantiation No. I* and dates it to 1950 (since, according to her, Hofmann painted it during the first days of January that year). However, she also claimed that Hofmann had mistakenly dated the painting 1949 when he signed it. If de Kooning was correct, then *HHCRP* vol. 2, pl. 711—which lists the canvas as *Fruit Bowl No. II* and dates it to 1949—seems to replicate the error.

24 De Kooning, “Hofmann Paints a Picture,” 58–59.

25 Hans Hofmann, “Lecture I,” 5, typescript of six unpublished lectures delivered in New York City, winter 1938–39, Clement Greenberg Papers, 1928–1995, accession no. 950085, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Los Angeles.

26 De Kooning, “Hofmann Paints a Picture,” 59.

27 In Hofmann’s milieu, Clement Greenberg did most to articulate the imbrication of expression and meaning with limits and constraints: “[T]he making of pictures means, among other things, the deliberate creating or choosing of a flat surface, and the deliberate circumscribing and limiting of it. This deliberateness is precisely what Modernist painting harps on: the fact, that is, that the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions.” See “Modernist Painting” [1960], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brien, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.

28 Charles Palermo pursues the tactic in “A Project for Wholeness,” in *Picasso and Braque: The Cubist Experiment 1910–1912*, ed. E. Kahng (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2011), 15–38.

29 Numerous photographs taken in Hofmann’s studios over the years document the artist’s habit of creating horizontal work surfaces by balancing wood panels atop tall four-legged stools. The practice is indicated by a photograph of Lee Krasner at Hofmann’s school in 1938 that shows her posing in front of two stool-palettes. Such instances of makeshift or cantilevered work surfaces within Hofmann’s studio help make sense of the visual anomaly I’ve pointed out in *Round Table on Red*.

30 For a proposed sequencing and redating of these paintings, see Lucinda Barnes’s essay in this volume, pp. 14–43.

31 Near the lower left corner of each picture (as was the case in *Yellow Cupboard with Two Vases*) a viewer will discern a rectangle containing abbreviated lines and arcs, some of them meeting at an angle or forming a peak. I propose that these pictures-within-pictures

have their origin in the seascapes Hofmann painted in Provincetown during the mid-1930s. In fact, the particular model might be *Untitled* (c. 1937; *HHCRP* 2:100), which contains an emphatic line angling into the picture space from the lower right corner at forty-five degrees—a conspicuous feature shared by every small tableau depicted across the paintings I’ve been discussing.

32 On this issue, see Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

33 Schapiro, “Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries—Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 19–20. Here I rely on the reprint of the essay, in which the phrase “achieves stability” was added to clarify a semantic confusion in the original publication. See also n. 6 above.





Plate 4 *Table with Teakettle, Green Vase and Red Flowers (Still Life—Two Green Vases)*, 1936.
Oil on panel, 54½ × 40⅞ in. (138.4 × 101.9 cm)



Plate 5 *Studio Unfinished*, 1936. Oil on panel, 54 × 42 in. (137.2 × 106.7 cm)





Plate 8 *Atelier (Still Life, Table with White Vase)*, 1938. Oil on panel, 60 × 48½ in. (152.4 × 123.2 cm)



Plate 9 *Still Life—Round Table on Red with Palette and Painting [Red Table]*, 1938.
Oil on panel, 60¼ × 48 in. (153 × 121.9 cm)



Plate 10 *Landscape No. 83*, [1935]. Casein on panel, 25 × 30 in. (63.5 × 76.2 cm)