

Ludwig Meidner, "Instructions for Painting Pictures of the Metropolis" (1914)

We must at last begin to paint the home where we live, the metropolis that we love without reserve. With feverish scrawling hands we must cover canvases without number, and large as frescoes, with everything that is strange and splendid, everything that is monstrous and striking, about our great avenues and railway stations, our towers and factories.

Of course we can all remember those paintings from the eighteen-seventies and eighties that also depicted the streets and alleys of the metropolis. Like those of Pissarro and Monet, lyrical artists both, who had started out by painting bushes, trees and meadows. These were landscape artists who carried the sweet haziness of their bucolic work over into their paintings of the city. But can one really paint the teeming confusion of houses and boulevards in the same transparent stippling style, as if they were brooks and flower-beds?

It is impossible to tackle our problems with the techniques of Impressionism. We must forget all these earlier knacks and methods, and develop entirely new modes of expression for ourselves.

The first task is this: that we learn to see, to see more intensely and more precisely than our predecessors have done. The hazy vagueness of the Impressionists is useless to us here. Traditional perspective has also lost its significance for us and merely impedes our creative impulse. Notions like "tonality," "plays of colored light," "iridescent shadow," "dissolution of contour," "complementary colors," and whatever else may be invoked here, have degenerated into academic concepts. In the second place—and this is no less crucial—we must become emphatically creative in our art. We cannot simply carry our easels out into the bustling streets and then try, blinking as we do so, to reproduce the "tonal values" they present. A street is not made up of tonal values, but is something which bombards us with sizzling rows of windows and humming beams of light dancing amidst vehicles of all kinds, a thousand undulating globes, the shreds and fragments of individuals, the signboards, the roaring tumult of amorphous masses of color.

The idea of painting in the open air is utterly mistaken. We cannot transfer the contingent and disorganized character of our motifs straight onto canvas and thereby produce a picture. On the contrary, we must boldly and deliberately transform the optical impressions we have thoroughly absorbed from the external world into a composition.

It should be said at once: there is no question of filling up the painted surface in the purely decorative or ornamental manner of Kandinsky or Matisse. We are concerned rather with the fullness of life itself: with space, with brightness and darkness, with weight and lightness, with the very movement of things—in short with a deeper and more thorough exploration of reality.

There are essentially three elements which we must employ in the production of the picture: 1 light, 2 focal point and 3 angularity of line.

Our initial problem is a problem of light, although not exclusively so since, unlike the Impressionists, we do not experience light as a ubiquitous presence. They saw light everywhere. They shed brightness over the entire surface of their pictures, even their shadows are bright and transparent. Cézanne had already advanced far beyond them in this respect. There is a kind of swaying strength and power in his work which lends great truth to his paintings.

For we do not actually perceive light everywhere in nature. Often enough we are presented right in the foreground with great planes which appear rigid and unilluminated. Here and there we can feel the weight, the obscurity, the motionlessness of matter. The light seems to flow in rivers. It cuts up the things it falls upon. We have a distinct feeling for strips, lines and bundles of light. Entire complexes of objects sway in the light and appear in turn as transparent but once again, we come upon intervening rigidity-, upon broad masses of opacity. We are blinded by a tumult of light and dark amidst the towering rows of houses. Strips of light are broadly spread across the walls. A rocket of light explodes amidst a turmoil of human heads. A sudden patch of light appears between the moving vehicles. The sky pours in upon us like a waterfall and its abundant illumination instantly

dissolves the darkness below. Sharp contours waver in the glare. A host of lines radiates outwards in dizzying rhythms.

Light brings everything that occupies space into movement. The towers, the houses, the lamps all seem to swim, to hang suspended up above.

The light may be white, or silvery, or violet or blue or whatever. But preferably take a white as pure as possible. Lay it down with broad strokes of the brush with some deep blue, or some ebony black, alongside it. Do not hesitate, but cover your canvas, this way and that, with the boldest of white. Take your blue—the thick, warm Paris blue or the cool but strong ultramarine—take umber and plenty of ochre, and scrawl away with speed and nervous excitement. You should be brutal and shameless, just as your motifs themselves are brutal and shameless. It is not enough to have the proper rhythm in your fingertips, you must turn and twist between madness and laughter!

The question of focal point is also important for the act of composition. For this is the most intense part of the picture and the central focus of the entire composition. You can situate it anywhere, whether in the centre, or right or left of the centre, but for compositional reasons it is good to place it somewhat beneath the centre of the picture. It is also important to ensure that everything at this point is clear, sharply distinguished, with not a trace of mysticism. In the central focus of the picture the straight lines appear in perpendicular. The further we move from the central focus the more the lines begin to bend. If we stand, for example, looking straight ahead into the middle of the street, then the houses are all seen in perpendicular, and their rows of windows seem to accord with standard perspective in so far as they taper away towards the horizon. But the houses immediately next to us—whose presence we only sense with half an eye as it were—appear to sway and collapse. For here the lines which in reality run parallel with one another suddenly shoot up and intersect with one another. The gables, the chimneys, the windows have now become obscure and chaotic masses, fantastically foreshortened and essentially ambiguous.

You should use a small brush for the central focus and make your lines short and vigorously felt just as they make their immediate appearance. And make sure you paint here in an extremely nervous fashion. But as you move towards the edges of the picture, you can afford to become broader and more indefinite in your approach.

In the past people used to say: there are no straight lines in nature, and open nature itself is not mathematical. No one loved angular lines, and even Whistler resolved them into a multitude of tiny sections. Ever since the days of Ruisdael the angular line has been utterly condemned in landscape painting, and artists have always taken great pains not to include buildings, new churches or castles, into their pictures. They preferred picturesque objects precisely because they were so irregular and abundantly shaped: ruins, derelict houses, luxuriously foliated trees.

But we who live today, we contemporaries of the engineer, we know how to experience the beauty of angular lines, the beauty of geometrical forms. We may remark in passing that the modern movement of Cubism also displays an enormous sympathy for geometrical forms, that such forms indeed possess an even greater significance here than they do for us.

The angular lines of which we are speaking—principally applied as they are in graphic art should not be confused with the lines traced upon a building plan with the aid of a mason's triangle. Never believe that the straight line is something cold and rigid! You must simply draw it with enough excitement and properly observe its flow. It should be now thin, now thick, trembling gently with nervous excitement.

When we look upon our cities, what do we see but battles of mathematics? See what triangles and circles and polygons assault us in the street. Rulers are flying off in all directions. We are pierced on every side by angularities. Even the moving people and animals appear like geometrical constructions.

Take up a broad brush and draw your own angular lines with force upon the paper. If you can use real art to organize such tumult, it will appear more vital and vivid than all the pretentious brushwork of our academic teachers.

There is little that needs to be said about color. Employ all the colors on your palette—but if you should undertake to paint Berlin, be sure simply to use black and white, just a little ochre and ultramarine, and plenty of deep brown. Do not worry about “cold” or “warm” tones, about “complementary colors” or any of that nonsense—you are not “Divisionists!” Express yourself spontaneously in a liberated and uninhibited way. What matters is simply for hundreds of young painters to plunge into this new field with unfettered enthusiasm as soon as possible. Here I have merely provided some useful hints and suggestions in this direction. There may well be other, perhaps better and more convincing ways of doing what I propose. But the metropolis must nonetheless be painted!

The manifestos of the Futurists—though not their actual foolish creations—have shown us where the problems are, while Robert Delaunay inaugurated our movement only three years ago with his grand conception of the Eiffel Tower. In this very year I have myself provided a practical example, in certain paintings and successful drawings, of the theoretical views defended here. All younger artists of ability should now set about the work without delay and flood our exhibitions with depictions of the city.

Unfortunately minds today are still confused with all manner of regressive ideas. The stammering art of primitive peoples also fascinates some of our younger German artists and nothing seems more important than Bushman painting and Aztec sculpture. And the self-important clamor of sterile Frenchmen on behalf of the “image,” of “absolute painting” and suchlike things has also had a considerable effect amongst us. But let us be honest! Let us simply confess that we are not Negroes, that we are not Christians of the early Middle Ages! That we are inhabitants of Berlin, in the year 1913, that we sit and argue in coffee-shops, that we read a great deal and are highly knowledgeable about the history of art, that we have all been mightily influenced by Impressionism! Why on earth should we imitate the manners and outlooks of earlier ages, or champion artistic incapacity as the proper path to follow? Are the crude and meanly depicted figures which are now to be seen in every exhibition an appropriate expression for the complexities of our own soul?

Let us paint what is right in front of us, our own world of cities! - their tumultuous streets, the elegance of their iron suspension bridges, the gasometers hanging in mountains of whitish cloud, the roaring colors of the buses and the railway trains, the surging telephone wires (do they not sing too?), the buffoonery of advertising columns, and the night ... The night of the metropolis ... And would not the drama of a well-painted factory chimney then move us more deeply than any *Fire in the Borgo* or *Battle of Constantine*, more than any number of Raphaels?