
Avant-Garde and Kitsch

Clement Greenberg

Summary of the Argument

Introduction

In "**Avant-Garde and Kitsch**", Greenberg defends the view that there is such a thing as "**high art**" distinct from "**low**" or **popular art**.

He makes his case based on **social**, **historical**, and **political** assumptions and **empirical** observations.

He takes a **formalist** point of view, but attempts to justify his position by appeal to a broader **social context** — broader than just the artworld or the technical achievements of individual artists.



Georges Braque, *Glass on a Table*, 1909-10.



Norman Rockwell, *Football Hero*, 1938

Initial Distinctions and Assumptions

Greenberg begins his essay with a fundamental distinction:

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a **poem by T. S. Eliot** and a **Tin Pan Alley song**, or a **painting by Braque** and a **Saturday Evening Post cover**.

All four are on the order of **culture**, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same **society**. Here, however, their connection seems to end.

A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest — what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in **an enlightening relation to each other?**

Does the fact that a disparity such as this within the frame of a **single cultural tradition**, which is and has been taken for granted — does this fact indicate that the disparity is a part of **the natural order of things?**

Or is it something entirely **new**, and **particular to our age?**

Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 3 (1).

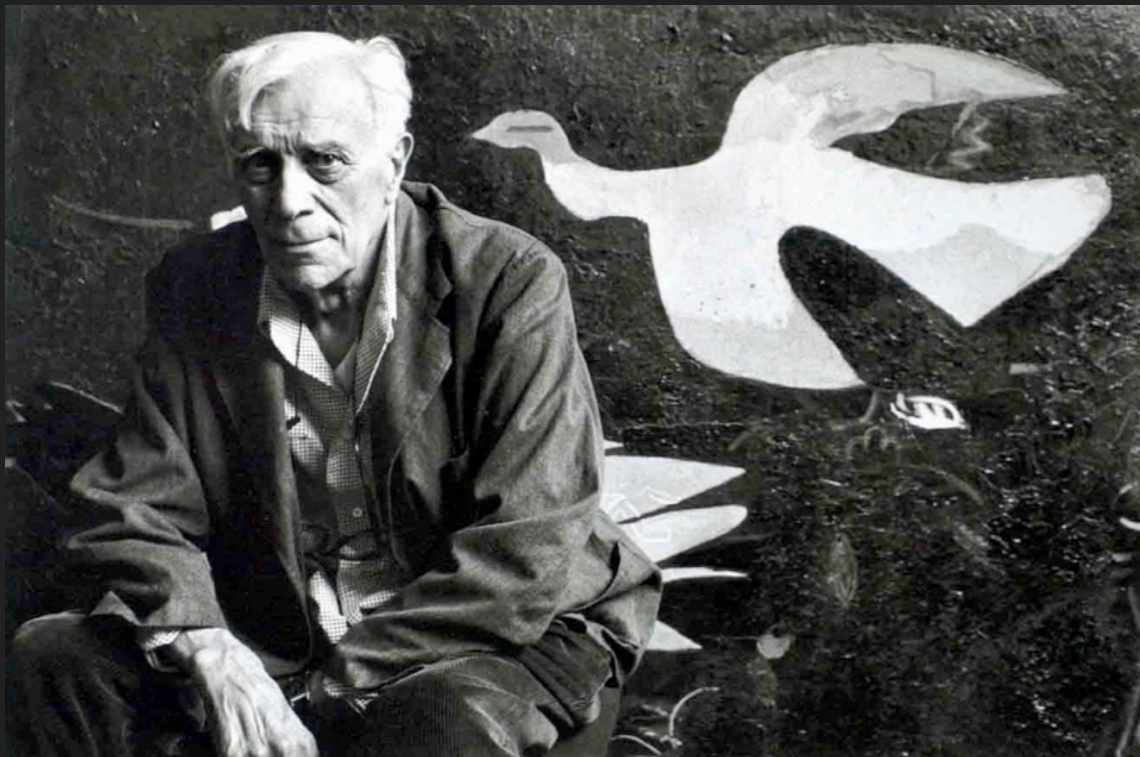
Initial Distinctions and Assumptions

Greenberg is urging us to distinguish between **musical works**, **literature**, and **visual images** that differ significantly in **quality**, **style**, and **appeal**.

The first group Greenberg refers to as **avant-garde**. He associates avant-garde works with art that

- **questions** boundaries,
- **challenges** the status quo, and
- **creates** something new.

His examples of avant-garde artists are taken from the first half of the 20th century — the painter **Georges Braque** (left) and the poet **T.S. Eliot** (right).



Initial Distinctions and Assumptions

The other, contrasting class of works and artists, according to Greenberg, belong in the realm of **popular culture** and **entertainment**.

They provide

- **comfort**,
- **diversion**, and
- are **enjoyed** without much effort by a large number of people.



Examples of popular artists are “the peoples’ poet” **Eddie Guest** (1881-1959), illustrators such as **Norman Rockwell** (1894-1978), whose work often appeared in posters and magazines, and songwriter **Irving Berlin** (1888-1989).



Alexander's Ragtime Band



THEY EARNED THE RIGHT

By **Edgar A. Guest**

I knew Ket and Knudsen, Zeller, Zeder and Breer.
I knew Henry Ford back yonder as a lightplant engineer.
I'm a knew-'em-when companion who frequently recalls
That none of the those big brothers were too proud for overalls.

All the Fishers, all the leaders, all the motion pioneers
Worked at molds or lathes or benches at the start of their careers.
Chrysler, Keller, Nash and others whom I could but now won't name
Had no high-falutin' notion ease and softness led to fame.

They had work to do and did it. Did it bravely, did it right,
Never thinking it important that their collars should be white.
Never counted hours of labor, never wished their tasks to cease,
And for years their two companions were those brothers, dirt and grease.

Boy, this verse is fact, not fiction, all the fellows I have named
Worked for years for wages and were never once ashamed.
Dirt and grease were their companions, better friends than linen white;
Better friends than ease and softness, golf or dancing every night.

Now in evening clothes you see them in the nation's banquet halls.
But they earned the right to be there, years ago, in overalls.



The Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Having drawn such a sharp distinction between “high and low” art, Greenberg’s task is to defend the **political** and **social** value of the so-called “high art” of the avant-garde.



Georges Braque, *Large Nude*, Paris, spring 1908



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, 1907

Greenberg claims that we need to go beyond mere **aesthetic** claims by examining the relationship between

- one's specific, individual, aesthetic **experience**, and
- the **social** and **historical contexts** in which such experiences take place.

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Greenberg claims that when **tradition** and the inevitable **value** associated with it is challenged in a society, the artistic response has historically been to ossify (by means of "**academicism**") the fine points of **style** and **form**, **theme** and **variation**.

A classic 19th century example of academicism is found in the work of Bouguereau.



Louis LeNain, Peasant Family, 1842 ("Juste Milieu")



William Adolphe Bouguereau, Rest, 1879

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

During the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, a critical response to the **crisis of tradition** gave birth to a new approach — the **avant-garde**.

This was made possible by a new type of **social** and **historical** criticism emerging among artists and critics in the late nineteenth century.

Painters such as **Gustav Courbet** defined themselves in **opposition** to the bourgeoisie by

- drawing on revolutionary **political ideas** and
- challenging the assumption that the existing social order was **natural** and **eternal**.



Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde



William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Birth of Venus, 1863

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde



Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

The emerging avant-garde eventually **disavowed** its ties with society, rejecting art's **political foundation** in favor of a **cultural** goal — to move art "forward" on its own terms, producing "art for art's sake".

This involved a "search for absolutes" **beyond content**.



Edouard Manet, *The Old Musician*, 1862

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

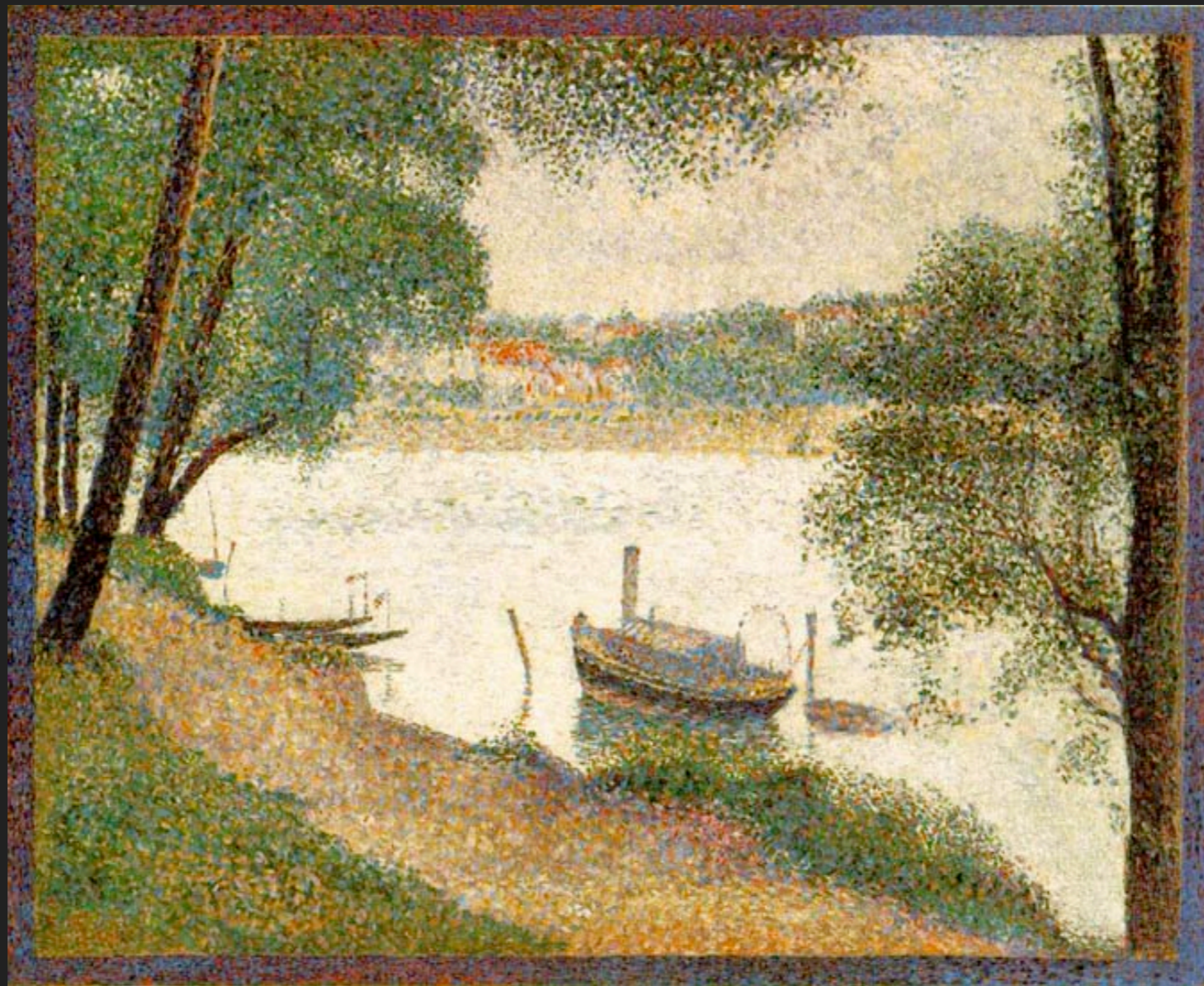
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Camille Pissarro, *The Factory at Pontoise*, 1873

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

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Georges Seurat, *Gray Weather, Grande Jatte*, 1888

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

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Claude Monet, *Water Lilies 1*, 1908

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

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Edouard Manet, *The Old Musician*, 1862

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Greenberg also argues that artistic practice in the modern world inevitably became **reflexive**—focused on the **medium** itself.



Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass (Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe)*, 1863



Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, c. 1517-20



Marcantonio Raimondi, *The Judgment of Paris* (detail)

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Cutoff from the **social** world, art is — and ought to be — **justified** in its own terms. (Kant)

Thus, in the mid-19th century, **art** became the **subject matter** of art.

Greenberg then draws the conclusion that, since art and literature are **imitations** (Aristotle), avant-garde art is an **imitation of an imitation** (Plato). [AGK, 3]



Paul Cezanne, *Mont Sainte Victoire*, 1904-6

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

[O]nce the avant-garde had succeeded in "detaching" itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate **revolutionary** as well as **bourgeois** politics.... Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both **narrowing** and **raising** it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and **subject matter** or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague. [2]

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way **nature** itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is **aesthetically valid**; something given...independent of meanings.... **Content** is to be dissolved so completely into **form** that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. [2f]

In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the **medium** of his own craft. The nonrepresentational or "**abstract**," if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very **processes** or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former [that is, the external world]. These [artistic processes] themselves become the **subject matter** of art and literature. [3]

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors. [3]



Pablo Picasso, Still Life, 1925

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

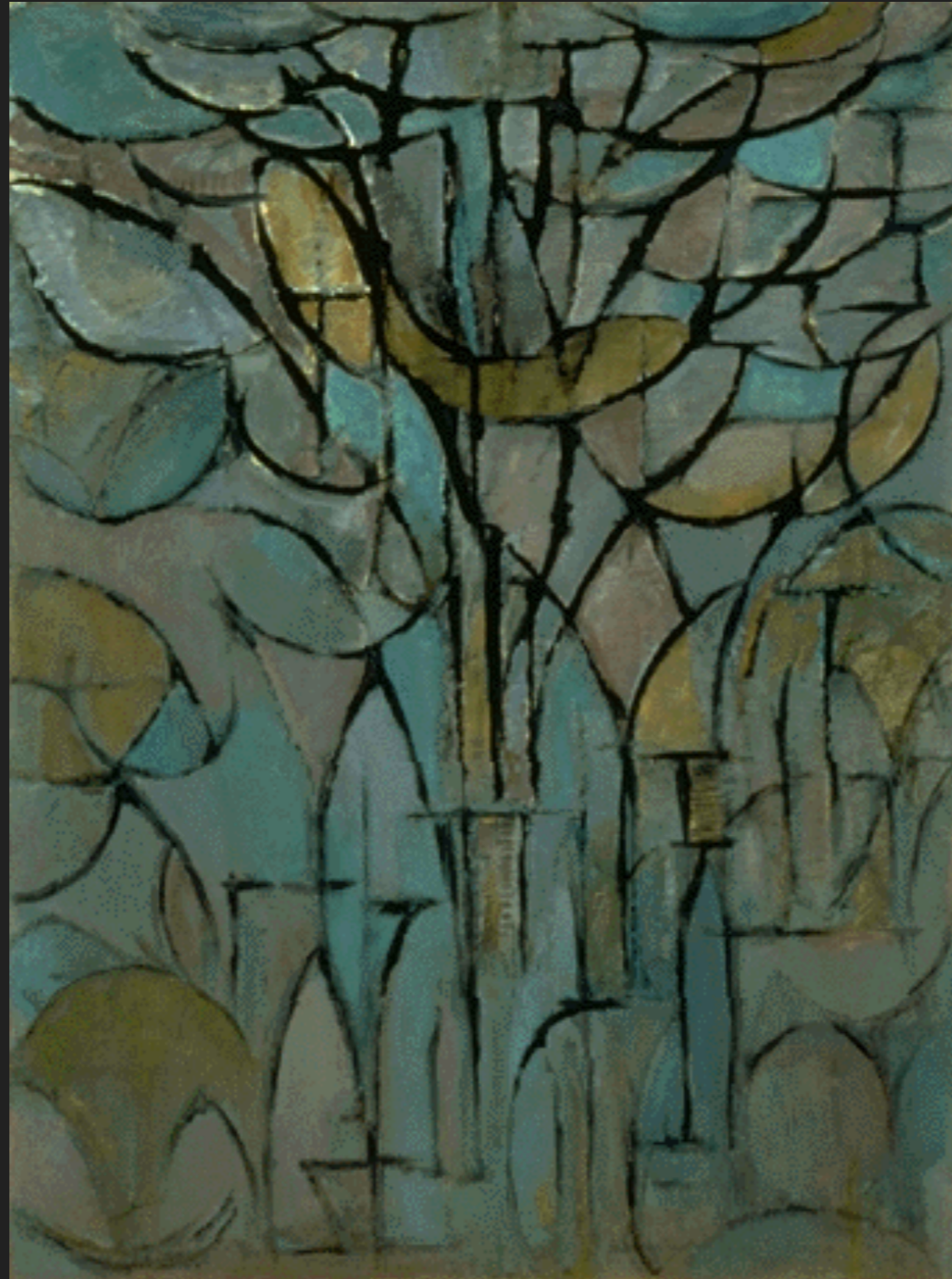
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Georges Braque, Fruit Dish, Paris, 1908-09

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Piet Mondrian, *Trees*, c. 1912

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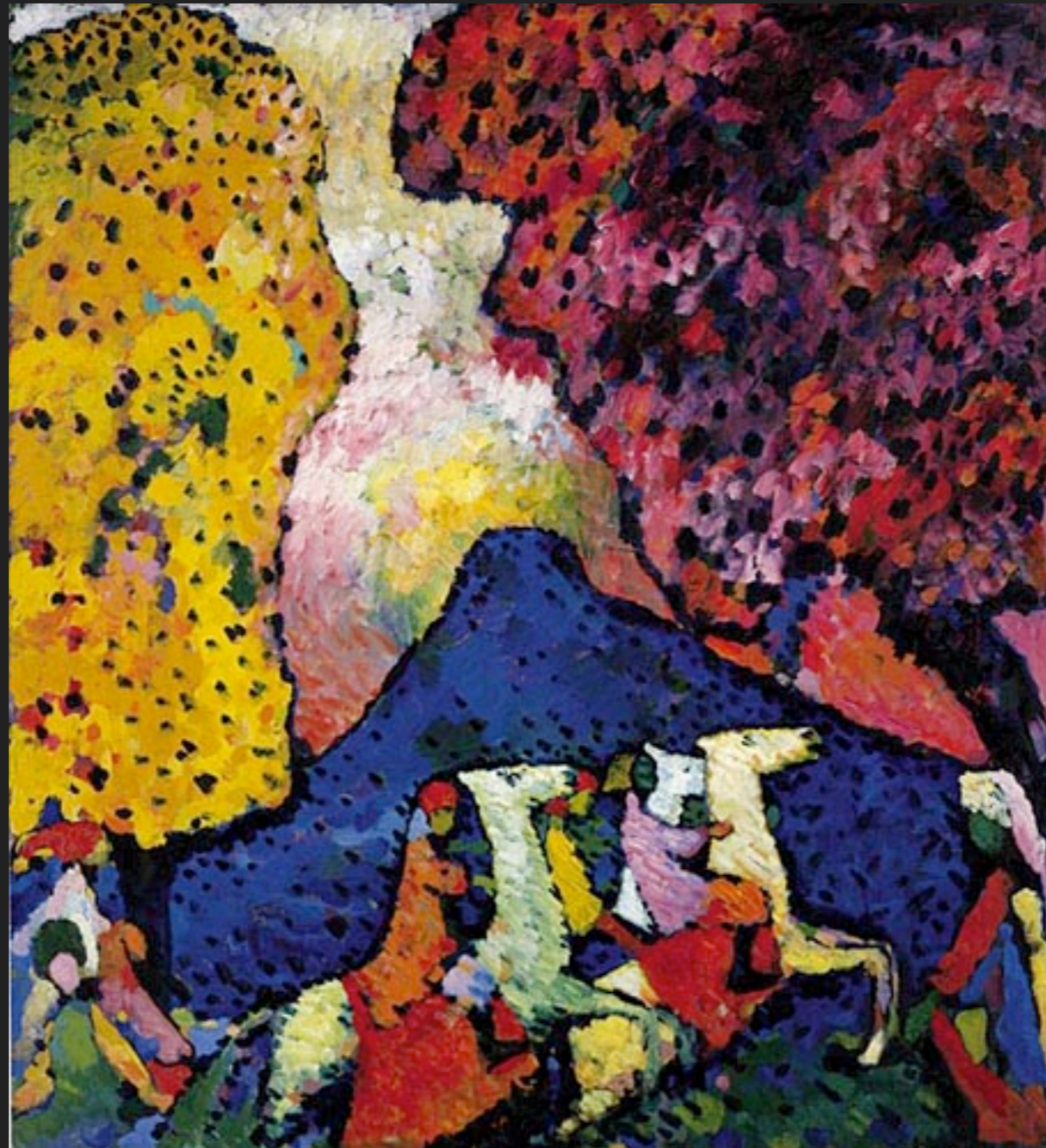
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Joan Miro, *Catalan Landscape (The Hunter)*, 1923-24

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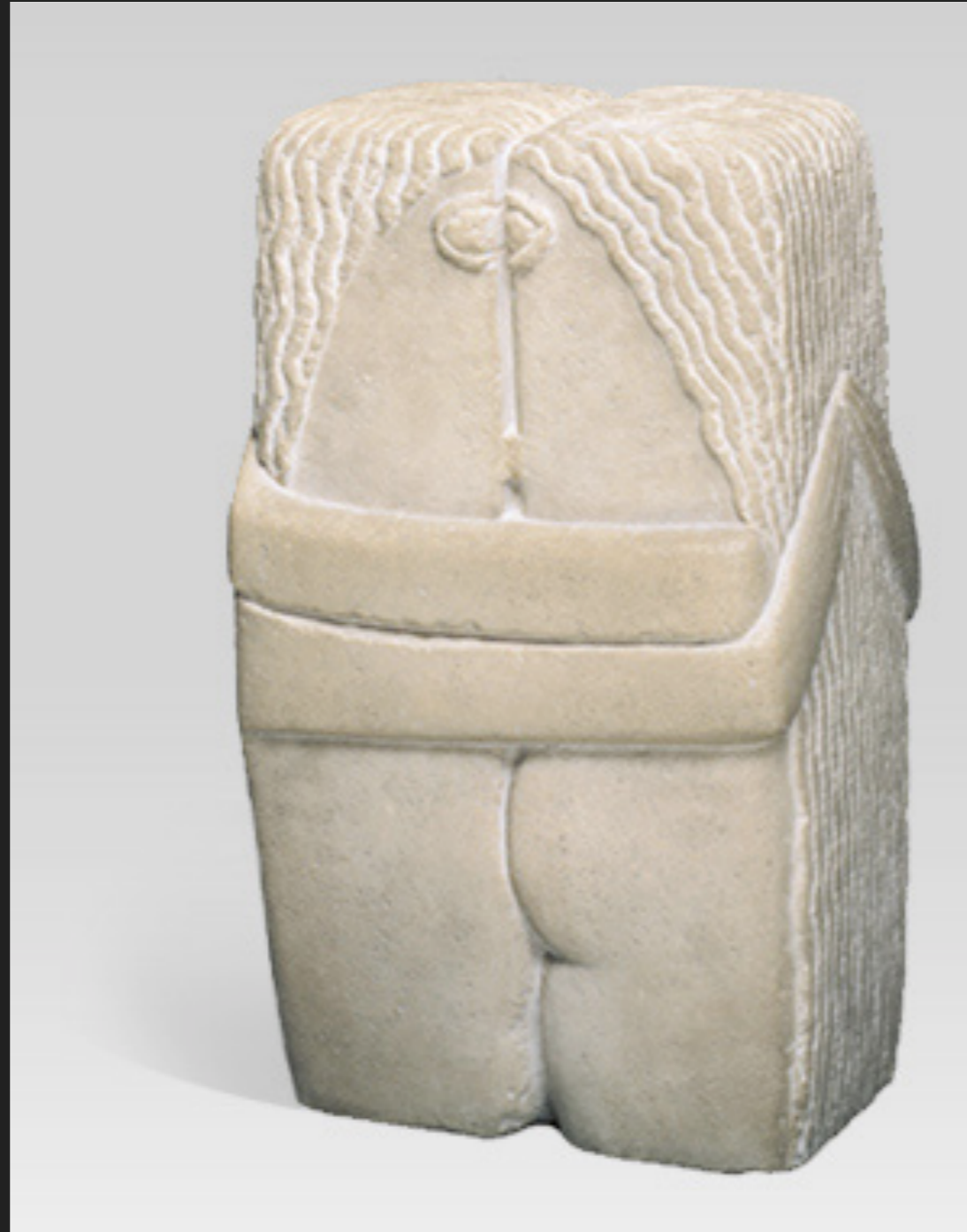
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Wassily Kandinsky, *Blue Mountain*, 1908–09

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Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss*, 1916

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Paul Klee, *Temple Gardens*, 1920

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Henri Matisse, *Piano Lesson*, 1916

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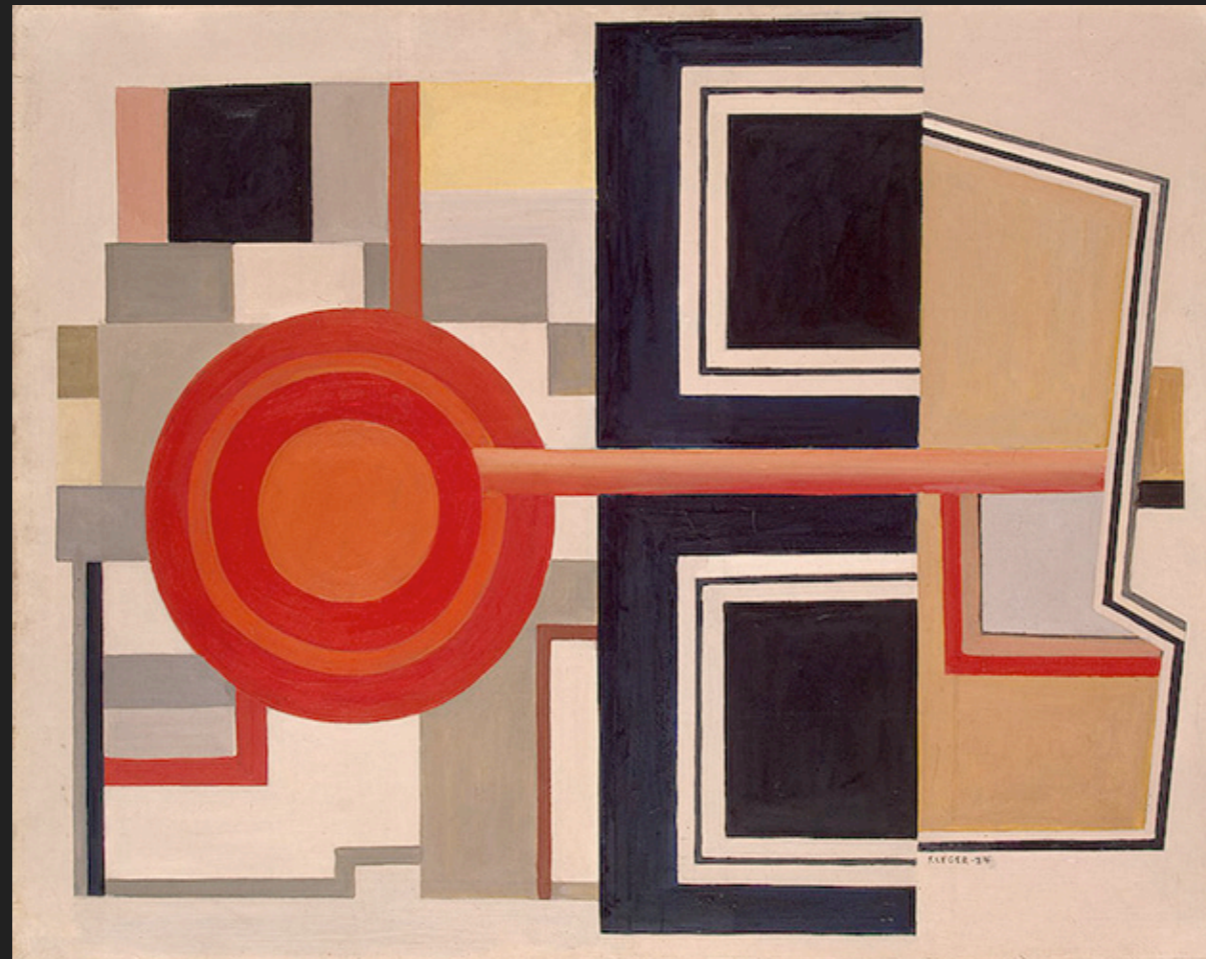
Paul Cezanne, *Mont Sainte Victoire*, 1904-6

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Ironically, according to Greenberg, the practice of "**imitating an imitation**" often contains its own form of "**Alexandrianism**" [or excessive refinement].

But the difference between the **avant-garde** and the **degenerate** Alexandrian forms of art is that the avant-garde "**moves**" [progresses?] while the Alexandrian **stands still**.

In this sense, avant-garde method is **vindicated**. The movement and method is apparently **necessary** in order to create "high art" of **enduring value**.

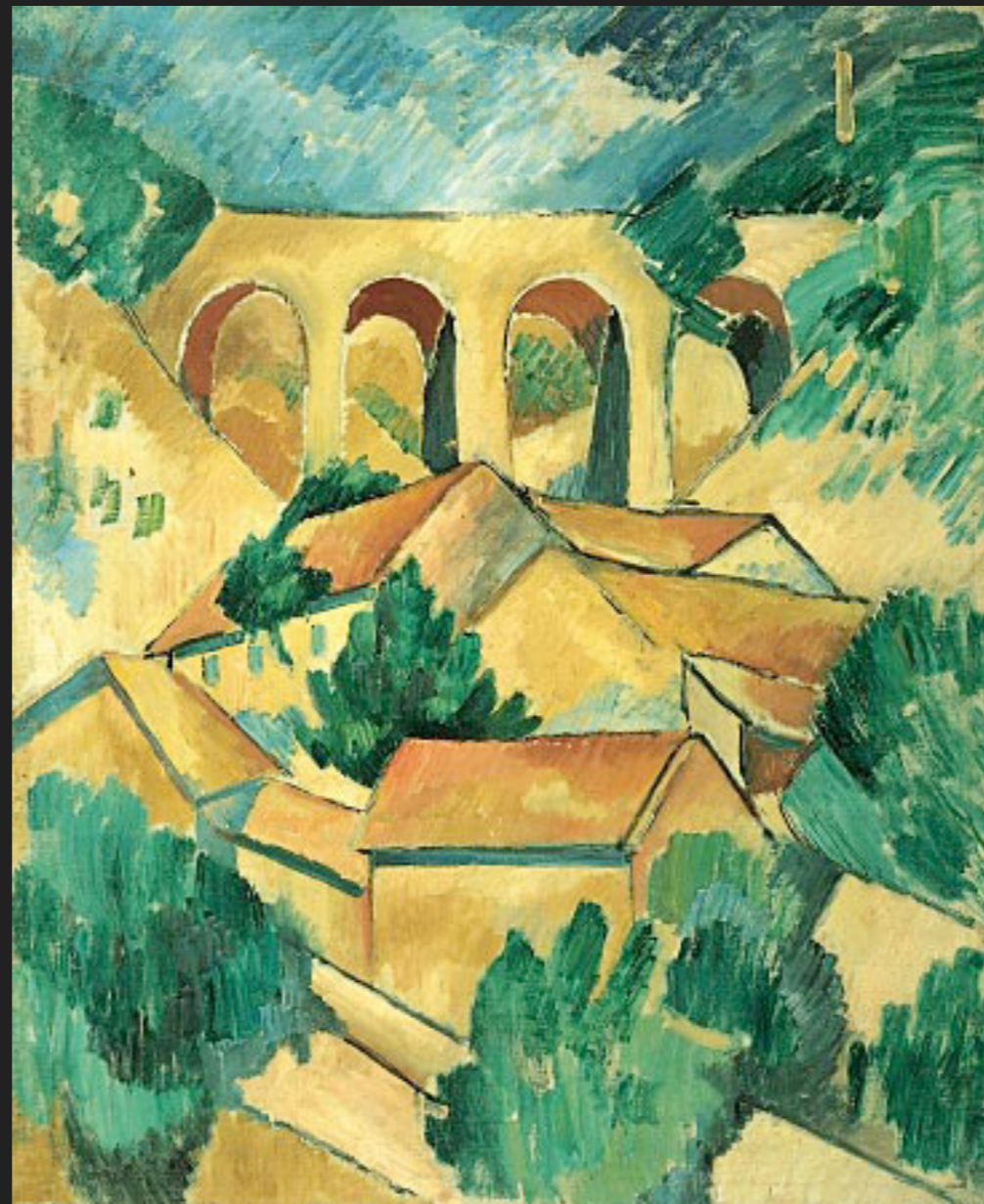


Fernand Leger, Composition, 1924

Historical Emergence of the Avant-Garde

Also, paradoxically, culture requires **support** and the avant-garde "**belongs**" to the **dominant culture**. To survive, the avant-garde must maintain its "**umbilical cord of gold**" — its **connection** to the ruling class.

And given that this "elite" ruling class audience is **shrinking** in modern societies, the future of the avant-garde is in **danger**.



Georges Braque, *Viaduct at L'Estaque*, 1908

Folk Art, Formal Culture, and Kitsch

In the next stage of the argument, Greenberg attempts to show how **kitsch**, as a product of the urban, industrial revolution, arose in conjunction with

- the **avant-garde**, and
- an **increase in literacy**.

He argues that **urbanization** and **literacy** made **authentic folk culture** increasingly less relevant (see below), and **popular culture** took its place.



Henry Darger, *Hands of Fire*, n.d.

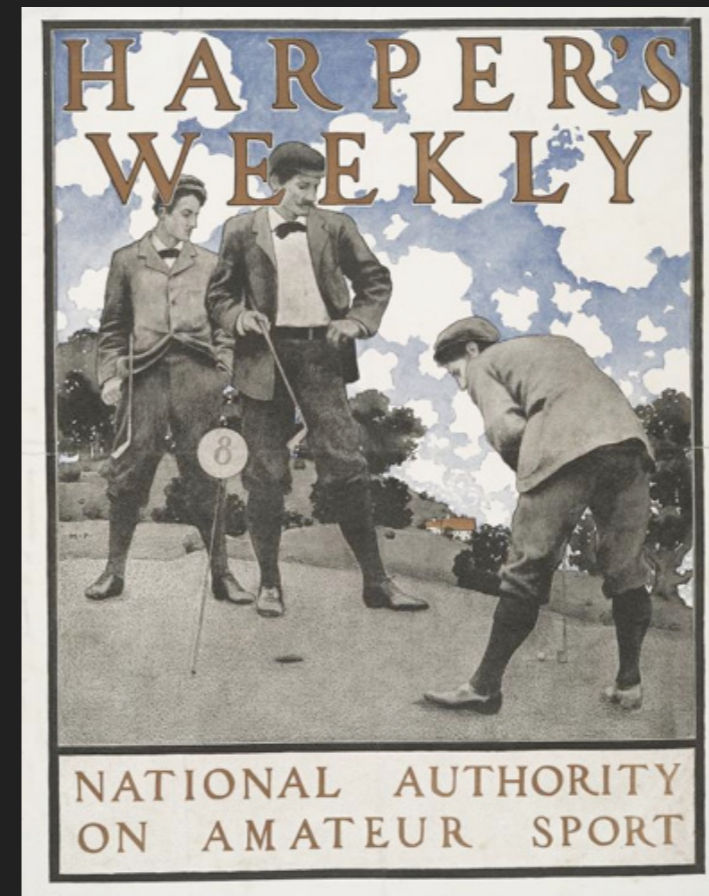
Popular culture is characterized by Greenberg as **insensitive** to "the values of **genuine** culture". [5]

It is a simulation—**mechanical**, **formulaic**, and **spurious**. It makes **no demands** on its consumers, and is **parasitic** on high culture for its forms and themes.

The influence of popular culture is reinforced by **market values** due to its **mechanicalness** and **reproducibility**. Thus, it is enormously **profitable**.



Ilonka Karasz, *The New Yorker*, Cover, Aug. 31, 1940



Maxfield Parish, *Harper's Weekly*, n.d.

In **kitsch**, according to Greenberg, nothing is left to the viewer — everything is **given** and **obvious**. The work requires no **distancing** and presents no **difficulties**.



Jules Lefebvre, Autumn, 1883

Greenberg contrasts the easy assimilation of the kitsch consumer to the higher level of appreciation of a "cultivated spectator" of a **Picasso**.

One's disinterested **reflection on form** gives rise to an **aesthetic distance** that permits the spectator's contribution ["**projection**"] to the experience of viewing.



Pablo Picasso, Girl before a Mirror, March 1932

In the end, the **avant-garde** work imitates the **causes**, while **kitsch** imitates the **effects**, of art.



Jules Lefebvre, Autumn, 1883



Pablo Picasso, Girl before a Mirror, March 1932

Given the necessity of **education** and **leisure** required for appreciating "high art", and recognizing that only a privileged few have the **means** and the **time** for such contemplation, the **disparity** between avant-garde art and kitsch is clearly underwritten by **class distinction** and **power**.

Kitsch, on the other hand, is easily employed by the **powerful** for their own purposes.

When this happens, it functions as **a tool of fascism**, conceding to the masses its form of entertainment while imbuing the entertainment with emotionally manipulative content or **propaganda**.



Nazi Recruiting Ad, n.d., "We build body and soul."

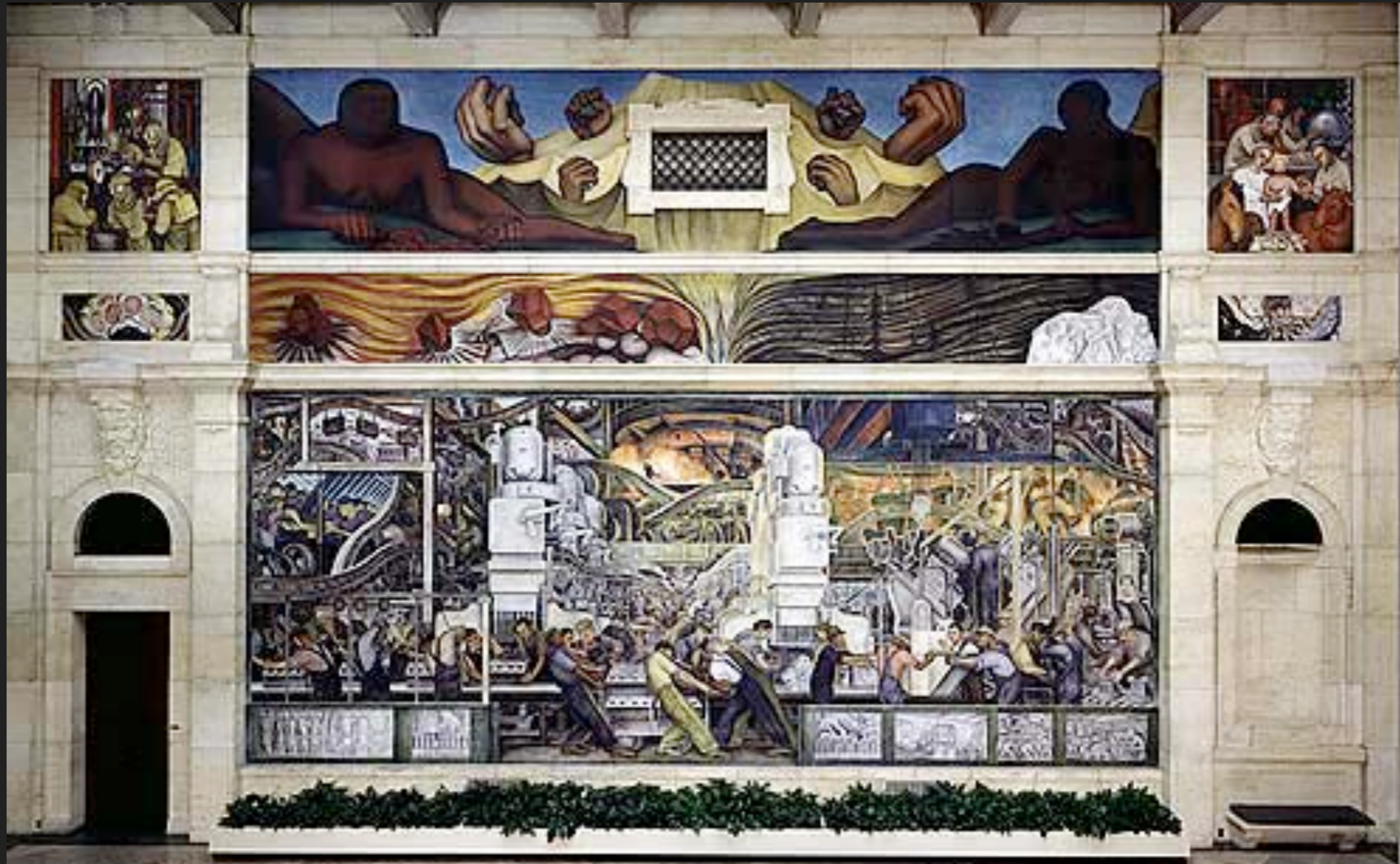
This is not possible with avant-garde art due to its "**difficulty**" and **critical nature**.



Pablo Picasso, The Three Dancers, 1925

Avant-garde culture requires **leisure**, **energy**, and **comfort**.

This is possible only under democratic socialism where **quality**, **cooperation**, **freedom** of thought and action, and **social criticism** can flourish.



Diego Rivera, Detroit Industry, North Wall, 1932-33

Timothy Quigley
Revised 26 Feb 2012