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## THE ART CRITIC, THE TINY BOY, AND THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

EARLY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, fraud cut a wide swath through the arts. Skeptical audiences, at times uncertainly musing, at other times letting fly with a grand *j'accuse*, doubted not just the quality, but the very validity of much modernist art, suspecting it of “charlatanry,” created by “the faker and poseur,” by artists whose “origins reek with charlatanry and shameless puffery.”<sup>1</sup> The rage was tangible; art critic Royal Cortissoz dismissed post-impressionism as “Barnumism,” “a gospel of stupid license and self-assertion which would have been swept into the rubbish-heap were it not for the timidity of our mental habit.”<sup>2</sup> Skeptics didn’t see modernism merely as bad art, they didn’t see it as art at all; it belonged to some other sphere of human activity, such as fashion, or P.T. Barnum’s sideshows, or the new mania for crossword puzzles, or—most tellingly—the timeless activity of fraud. However, accusing the modern arts of being fraudulent was more than a satisfying blood sport; the ritualistic invocation of fraud reveals much about how skeptics understood the place in art of sincerity, intent, and the incipient rise of modernism.

The career and thought of Kenyon Cox exemplifies fraud’s work. Early in the twentieth century Cox was at the top of his form, a painter who had studied with Gérôme and Cabanel, painted Augustus Saint-Gaudens, created murals for the new Library of Congress and other public buildings, and whose works (though mostly in off-site storage today) were acquired

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<sup>1</sup> See Louis Untermeyer, “Irony De Luxe,” *The Freeman* (30 June 1920), 381–82; Richard Burton, “Posing,” *Minneapolis Bellman* (17 October 1914): 163, in Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., “Newest Tendencies in Art,” *Independent* (6 March 1913): 63, reprinted in *The Armory Show; International Exhibition of Modern Art, 1913*, Volume 3, ed. Association of American Painters and Sculptors (New York: Arno Press, 1913), 504–12.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Cortissoz, “The Post-Impressionist Illusion,” *The Century Magazine* 85. 6 (1913): 815.

by major collections such as the Metropolitan and the National Gallery. A widely-read art critic, Cox and his 1907 *Painters and Sculptors* were much admired.<sup>3</sup> Cox's opinions about art were substantial, prestigious, and, in the unruffled American art community of 1907, a model of Olympian generosity. In the preface to *Painters and Sculptors*, Cox mildly chastised aesthetic partisanship, arguing that "For downright illiberality there is nothing like a writer who has picked up a few catchwords from a coterie of artists he specially admires, and who uses these as a yardstick for the measurement of all men, ignorant that there can be any other standards than those he has learned to apply."<sup>4</sup> Within a few years that largesse had withered, and by the second decade of the twentieth century Cox was eagerly sought out in the art world and the daily press because of his opposition to new modernist tendencies. In 1911, one year after Roger Fry's Post-impressionist exhibit, and two years before the Armory Show hit North America, Cox memorably struck out at these new tendencies with a speech he delivered as part of the Scammon Lectures at the Art Institute of Chicago. Speaking, then, from a position of power, Cox noted that he ordinarily "should not have felt it necessary to treat this, so-called, post-impressionist movement with any seriousness feeling sure that the mere flight of time must settle its business, and that without long delay."<sup>5</sup> But something troubled his confidence. Modernity's excesses destabilized the aesthetic landscape, with the result that the test of time could not be relied on to work very expediently. The works were so outrageous, that, according to Cox, those who saw merit in post-impressionism must be either deluded or dishonest. The business of serious aesthetic evaluation was in trouble. The work might, eventually, be consigned to the dustbin of history. But what do you do in the meantime?

In the meantime you nudge the process along. Sounding the alarm, Cox pointed to the worrisome influence of "a number of critics, some of whom have earned by intelligent work the right to be heard," critics whose work had become derailed and were now "trying to convince themselves and the public that it [post-impressionism] is vital and important." The instability had spread. According to Cox, other, lesser critics, more culpable because less sincere, were taking their lessons from history's ignoble list of critics, those

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<sup>3</sup> Kenyon Cox, *Painters and Sculptors: A Second Series of Old Masters and New* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1907).

<sup>4</sup> *Painters and Sculptors*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Kenyon Cox, *The Classic Point of View* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1911), 152.

who had initially reviled artists who later were seen as the embattled heroes of art history. (Cox typifies many critics of the time who asserted that the bad work of cultural history is always done by the “lesser followers”—critics, artists, writers.) Cox asserted of these critics that “one can only imagine that they are frightened by the long series of critical blunders that has marked the nineteenth century, and are determined, this time, not to be caught napping.”<sup>6</sup> Nobody wanted to end up as a couplet in a twentieth-century *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.

Unable to rely on external comments, and needing, as always when proving fraud, to imagine the psychological motivation of modernism's sometimes-culpable, sometimes-ignorant dupes, Cox then engaged in a sustained imaginative reconstruction of these critics' thought processes in the face of modernism's destabilizing, panic-inducing fraud. Cox speculated that the minimal aspects of this modernist art, amenable to theory but not to richness, created for these critics an anxiety in evaluation:

They imagine that Matisse and his followers have rediscovered the line because there is evidently nothing else in their work; forgetting that the great and really difficult task is to draw beautifully and expressively without drawing falsely, and that it is of no advantage to the abstract beauty of a figure that its joints should bend the wrong way, or that it should have no joints at all but resemble something between a block of wood and a jelly-fish.<sup>7</sup>

Cox argued that these critics were led to their conclusions by the extreme and unsettling qualities of these works, and their wobbly relationship to mimesis, characteristics which made the fraud more likely to succeed than less. Post-impressionism used the unstable exuberances of a fraud, not the rigors of a carefully-executed forgery. Driven to panic by how outside the pale these works were, Cox imagined that timid critics consequently reasoned that the post-impressionists were

a set of men whose art is so crazy that anything which formerly seemed eccentric pales to bourgeois commonplace in the comparison. What so natural as to assume that these,

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<sup>6</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 153.

<sup>7</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 152–53.

too, are great men, and to take the inevitable step at once, and as gracefully as possible? Their only answer to criticism is to assume an attitude of superiority and to say, smilingly and condescendingly, "Of course you could not be expected to understand."<sup>8</sup>

To this plausible social situation, Cox envisioned these critics had issued the following call: "Let us hasten to show that we are not so stupid as our brothers of the past."<sup>9</sup> Their imagined moment of panic led Cox to unveil his culminating argument and moral lesson, a paraphrase of Hans Christian Andersen. In a lengthy passage he was impressed enough by to read aloud as part of a newspaper interview two years later (in his highly publicized smackdown of the *Armory Show*), Cox argued:

In the tales of Hans Christian Andersen one may read how a certain monarch was supposed to be possessed of a suit of clothes of extraordinary richness and beauty but quite invisible to all unintelligent and stupid people. The King himself had never seen them, but as long as others believed in their existence he kept his mouth shut and received with complacency the glory which came to him as their possessor. The Prime Minister and the Lord Chamberlain and the members of the Privy Council were all equally blind to these wonderful garments, but each thought the others saw them, and so they joined in a chorus of praises, lauding the magnificence of the stuff, the splendor of the embroidery, and the perfection of the cut. Even the little page boys solemnly gathered up nothing, and pretended to carry the tails of the robe which they thought must certainly be there if only they were bright enough to see it. At last it was determined that his Majesty should walk in public procession through his capital, that every one might have an opportunity to behold the wonderful clothes. There were heralds and trumpeters, making a great noise with their trumpets, and knights and men at arms and judges and clergy, and, at last, under a canopy, the King himself, walking very grandly with his head in air and followed by the three pages that bore the invisible train. And the people all rubbed their eyes and each one said to himself, "Dear me! Am I so stupid?"

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<sup>8</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 153–54.

<sup>9</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 154.

I really can't see anything"; and then they all shouted, "Long live the King and his incomparable clothes!" But presently the procession passed by a place where there stood a tiny boy in the street; and the boy, not being old enough to know better and, perhaps, not having been well brought up, spoke right out in a loud voice, saying: "But he hasn't got anything on!" And then—well, then every one suddenly saw that his Majesty was walking through the streets in his shirt.<sup>10</sup>

Aided by its slightly varnished language, which gives Cox the sound of a Victorian curate translating Latin, Cox's retelling is meant as a timeless lesson, one whose application had no frayed edges. Obvious, commonsensical, the lessons reflect Cox's own understanding of art's status as an eternal and universal human activity—always opposed to the equally timeless and universal activity of fraud.

Cox's is a tale of power, social coercion, and a heroic yet simple response. The power in the Emperor's kingdom seems self-appointed, bogus, and like much within this story, a little decadent (this is an emperor, after all). Not a place of strenuous self-examination, in this kingdom the Emperor receives his "glory" with "complacency." No surprise, then, that when the time comes for the procession the King walks "very grandly with his head in air." He does not perform this deception on his own. Those who have something to gain, the powerful, enable this situation; in fact, the complicity of the Prime Minister, Lord Chamberlain, and Privy Council make this a tale of social coercion. The conditions at the court are propitious for fraud, and the assent falls like dominoes, beginning with the King, who "himself had never seen them [the clothes], but as long as others believed in their existence he kept his mouth shut." And so on down the line: "each thought the others saw them, and so they joined in a chorus of praises." Everyone clambers onto the bandwagon in the same way. Again and again, the story describes a moment of individual uncertainty, then anxiety, followed by panicked praise: "And the people all rubbed their eyes and each one said to himself, "Dear me! Am I so stupid? I really can't see anything"; and then they all shouted, "Long live the King and his incomparable clothes!" (The simple way causality and motivation are expressed in fables, here with a word as

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<sup>10</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 154–56.

simple as “then,” encourages the moral lessons to be understood as both timeless and unambiguous.) This social pattern, for Cox, demonstrates that the Emperor’s kingdom is not just the land of a natty despot; it is the land of mass culture and its abuses.

This pattern also reveals the Emperor’s new clothes to be ephemeral, stitched together not by their own virtues but by the excesses of the court, cowardice, and unstated social coercion. That fragility inherently structures the nature of this and of frauds in general, something which is quite telling for Cox in its application to post-impressionism. It can’t just be that these clothes are pretty good, with the people politely exaggerating their praise—the disjunction between clothes and praise has to be a chasm. The clothes are invisible, but they are described as “incomparable,” and people shout their praises. This fraud is not an issue of forgery, based on close resemblance; it is outrageous (an outrageousness which in a non-corrupt society would have immediately been pointed out). Like the Emperor’s invisible clothes, post-impressionism is a spectacular violation, one so spectacular that, in interacting with it, traditional evaluative criteria are blown away, leaving in their place a set of aesthetic principles that are celebrated but unexamined, and, once the fraud has been exposed, do not bear scrutiny.

What did this unstable fragility imply for Cox, or, more particularly, what did it call for? Nothing with as many moving and unstable parts as the fraud had. Something this insidious but fragile just needed a push from common sense to send it over the edge to oblivion. His gloss on the fable tells much not just about Cox but about the typical positions taken by those who cried fraud during modernism:

Now it may be my own lack of intelligence that prevents my seeing the wonderful garment of art worn by some of the latest exponents of modernism. The rich stuff and the splendid embroidery, which others assure me they see, may really be there and I may be too blind or too stupid to perceive it. But if the gods made me stupid it rests with myself to be honest; and so I can only cry, with the little boy in the street: “They have nothing on! They have nothing on!”<sup>11</sup>

Cox, at the height of his powers, in solidarity with the little boy who cried fraud: something seems odd here. What possible advantages are there to the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Classic Point of View*, 156–57.

fraud being dismantled by a boy? Couldn't a wise courtier have done the job just as well? According to the terms of the fable, the boy is uniquely positioned to pull the plug: he isn't old enough to know better, and perhaps wasn't well brought up—details that place the boy outside the complicities of power and professional knowledge. The boy isn't socially constrained (whatever ideas he has are clearly his own), and, not being an aspirant to the economy of power, he has nothing to lose or gain by speaking his mind. In other words, the boy shows that you need someone from *outside* the system to denounce it. (The boy, then, stands in for the common reader and common sense.) Modern culture didn't need professionals to denounce spectacular transgressions of fraudulent modernism—as would be necessary were modern art's sins the nuanced deceptions of forgery—and many non-professionals and critics dressed up as non-professionals raised the cry of fraud during modernism, from this, the only position (that of common sense) that they could wield with authority. In exposing a real-world fraud, then, you have to create the illusion, at least, of disinterested powerlessness. Cox does this in two ways. Disingenuously, he posits his own “lack of intelligence,” and then asserts his own disinterestedness as the only thing he has left: “But if the gods made me stupid it rests with myself to be honest.” In order to dismantle the fraud, one needs a little bit of self-reliance, and the inner light that can only be obscured by power. Concomitantly, Cox asserts that post-impressionism is a fake kingdom, with bogus kings, ersatz splendor.

The denunciation needs no complications, no theoretical sophistication; it just needs common sense, and its accompanying moral imperatives: “But he hasn't got anything on!” Cox believes denouncing post-impressionism need be no more involved than that, and he wants his cry, like that of the little boy, to have the same instant consequences—not just to persuade, but to be in a sense performative. In the fable of the Emperor, once honesty (in the form of a simple statement of fact) kicks in and the disquiet everyone feels is merely verbalized, the fraud collapses. Immediately after the boy utters his cry, everything falls apart: “And then—well, then every one suddenly saw that his Majesty was walking through the streets in his shirt.” The boy's words just blow the fraud away. Cox expresses the causality simply, with the temporal/causal indicator “then;” post-impressionism deserves the stark causality of a fable, not the nuanced motivations of a realistic novel. Dismantling an egregious fraud should be effortless; one simply needs the right person, speaking aloud the disquiet everyone feels. Cox's cry against post-impressionism is

intended to be similarly performative, with the same consequences as those that followed the little boy. And the people's response to realizing they had been duped? Immediately, the clothes are no longer taken seriously (in most versions of the tale the people respond with laughter). Serious and unserious, then, exist in tension here: Cox takes the threat seriously, but not the art. These aren't *clothes*, and modernism isn't *art*.

Cox's accounts of late-nineteenth-century art and of modernism aren't turned to today in order to understand the development of American art, and his paintings and murals are interesting not so much in their own right, but as examples of a particular genre of academic American art. And yet, despite Cox's elision from art history, the story of the Emperor's new clothes echoes throughout the twentieth century in the typical structures and activities his argument deploys and unleashes. Leaving to the side, then, the question of whether or not post-impressionism actually was a fraud, Cox's fable is part of a larger fraud discourse, and it does the usual, complex work of assertions of this kind. Indeed, despite the idiosyncrasies of the local contexts which spawn them, individual assertions of fraud are not *sui generis*; they always participate in a larger pattern, a pattern that extends beyond the social boundaries of art and the chronological boundaries of the early twentieth century, and that made it easy for writers to put ideas of fraud to work in predictable ways. Fraud and its enabling social conditions in modernity had a stable meaning in the public consciousness, allowing Cox to exploit awareness of this pattern in his story.

Frauds occur so often, and the behaviour surrounding them is so predictable, that throughout the twentieth century audiences presented modernism's frauds as ritualized, patterned behaviour that, despite these works' surface appearance and claims as advances in art, really presented nothing new. Modernism's fraud may be dressed up in new clothes, but it grinds out the same predictable work that all frauds do. As well, the public perception of fraud as a ritual made invocation of fraud discourse socially useful, and allowed the logic of those invocations to happen in shorthand, without needing extensive articulation. For example, fraud's denouncers needed only to gesture towards their own implied innocence, or declare the culpability of an elite in perpetrating the fraud; they did not need to *argue* for these points, or articulate its concurrent nuances.



They used the shorthand language of fraud in many contexts. In the twentieth century fraud had complex and varied presences, ranging from common and straightforward accusations of fraud, to actual hoaxes put into play by skeptics (such as the Spectra and Disumbrationist hoaxes, which were designed to unmask the fraudulent nature of much modernist art and criticism), to assertions that a given work or movement was so shoddy that the mere act of attempting to pass itself off as real art constituted fraud, to a paralyzing uncertainty about the sincerity of a work's intentions. But in all of these diverse situations they put into play a recognizable discourse, a discourse that proceeded by recognizable moves, performing a theory about modernity, artistic skill, sincerity, intent, and trust.