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## From Impressionism to Post-Impressionism: Continuities in Roger Fry's Concept of Aesthetic Perception

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Abstract:

Roger Fry gained prominence in the early twentieth century with his advocacy of the Post-Impressionist artists and the "form" with which their work is imbued. It is important to recognize, however, that his writings from the late nineteenth century largely address the same aesthetic questions, albeit using different language. This article argues that the common element throughout Fry's critical writings, from the 1890s to the 1930s, is their emphasis on understanding the nature of aesthetic perception.

## From Impressionism to Post-Impressionism: Continuities in Roger Fry's Concept of Aesthetic Perception

by Adrianne Rubin

Roger Fry (1866–1934) squarely resides at the intersection of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art criticism in Britain. Although he is justifiably credited with introducing modern French painting to the London art world in and around 1910, Fry produced important writings before his seminal “An Essay in Aesthetics” of 1909. Early unpublished writings, including his 1891 fellowship dissertation on phenomenology submitted to King’s College, Cambridge, and an 1894 essay titled “The Philosophy of Impressionism,” demonstrate Fry’s pervasive and enduring interest in science, his original field of study.<sup>[1]</sup> During the course of his Cambridge education, Fry shifted his academic focus to art, yet he maintained an abiding interest in science and scientific inquiry that guided his explorations in the field of aesthetics over

the course of his decades-long career. Interestingly, it was the emerging field of psychology—with its roots in philosophy and physiology—that enabled Fry to bridge the apparent gaps between science and art, and indeed to span the gaps between nineteenth- and twentieth-century art-critical thinking.

Even in his earliest writings on art, Fry’s interest in psychology is evident. A case in point is his 1891 fellowship application to King’s College, Cambridge, for which he submitted a dissertation entitled “Some Problems of Phenomenology and Its Application to Greek Art.”<sup>[2]</sup> Fry viewed this treatise as an opportunity to explore the relationship between science and art, and he used psychology as the link between them. Like his interest in psychology generally, Fry’s attention to phenomenology can be traced back to his undergraduate days at Cambridge and his affiliation with the famed *Conversazione* Society, whose members (known as “Apostles”), including his friend the future philosopher J. E. McTaggart (1866–1925), are known to have discussed the distinction, central to Idealist philosophy, between “Reality” and “Phenomena.”<sup>[3]</sup> Perhaps as a result of this, Fry chose this dissertation as a vehicle through which to analyze the spectator’s responses to art, and it is this extended essay that marks his first in-depth exploration into the subject of perception, an abiding interest of Fry’s and an overarching focus throughout his writings.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenology, most notably as put forward by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), is based on the fundamental principles of British Empiricism.<sup>[4]</sup> Husserl was a student of Franz Brentano (1838–1917), who, informed by Empiricist philosophy, conceived of psychology as the science of mental phenomena. Brentano’s 1874 book, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*), helped to establish psychology as an independent discipline, and by the 1880s Brentano was interchanging the terms “phenomenology” and “descriptive psychology.”<sup>[5]</sup> Husserl, in turn, viewed consciousness as if it were itself an object, and he categorized phenomenology as a science that seeks “to clarify all species and forms of cognition.”<sup>[6]</sup> He further claimed that the phenomenology of cognition deals with cognitions as appearances.<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, late nineteenth-century art criticism was informed by phenomenological awareness, as Walter Pater (1839–1894) makes evident in his conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), where he observes:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects . . . but when reflexion [*sic*] begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence . . . each object is loosed [*sic*] into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer . . . the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind.[\[8\]](#)

More recently, the literary scholar S. P. Rosenbaum made the interesting claim that Fry “as an early Edwardian critic . . . was not content with the Paterian subjectivity of knowing one’s impression as it really is.” Rather, Fry “wanted painting to represent the reality behind the appearances of actuality.”[\[9\]](#)

Early on in his dissertation, Fry states that he is attempting to add to existing works on phenomenology and “colour vision.”[\[10\]](#) Specifically, he mentions a work of the same year, *Principes Scientifiques des Beaux Arts* (1891), co-authored by two leading nineteenth-century physiologists, Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) and Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke (1819–1892).[\[11\]](#) Helmholtz himself highlighted the subjective nature of perception through his extensive study of optics, and he was instrumental in the late nineteenth-century shift in science towards empiricism. Although no documentary evidence has yet come to light, it seems almost certain that Fry’s fellowship dissertation was influenced by Helmholtz’s lecture “On the Relation of Optics to Painting” (1871).[\[12\]](#) Helmholtz begins this lecture with the claim that art is a means to greater understanding of perceptual processes in general. He states:

The physiological study of the manner in which the perceptions of our senses originate, how impressions from without pass into our nerves, and how the condition of the latter is thereby altered, presents many points of contact with the theory of the fine arts. . . . The study of works of art will throw great light on the question as to which elements and relations of our visual impressions are most predominant in determining our conception of what is seen.[\[13\]](#)

Helmholtz goes on to present scientific analysis of form, shade, and color, and discusses the ways in which binocular vision inherently challenges the representation of objects on a canvas:

We however see the world with *two* eyes, which occupy somewhat different positions in space, and which therefore show two different perspective views of objects before us. This difference of the images of the two eyes forms one of the most important means of estimating depth, and this is what is wanting to the painter, or even turns against him; since in binocular vision the picture distinctly forces itself on our perception as a plane surface.[\[14\]](#)

In the section of his dissertation devoted to “Tone and Colour Perspective,” itself derivative from Helmholtz’s subjects of analysis, Fry observes “how different are the conditions of the perception of a natural object & its representation on a flat surface.”[\[15\]](#) While Helmholtz refers to “the series of subjective phenomena, which artists are compelled to represent objectively in their pictures,”[\[16\]](#) he acknowledges that only inexperienced observers require mere resemblance to nature to be satisfied with a picture.[\[17\]](#) Similarly, Fry believes that “the intellectual, spiritual, imaginative part(s) of a picture” must be overlooked if the picture is to be regarded “merely as a representation of natural objects.”[\[18\]](#)

Like Helmholtz, Fry argues that phenomenology and art assessed through its lens do not attempt to eliminate, but rather highlight, the subjective nature of perception.<sup>[19]</sup> Fry describes the human inclination evident in artistic practice “to tend to represent things as we know them to be rather than as they appear.”<sup>[20]</sup> In his dissertation, he writes of Greek paintings’ “power . . . of reproducing the effect on the eye of external objects.”<sup>[21]</sup> He also states: “Naturally there is a science of Phenomenology corresponding to each of the senses but our judgements of the external world are so much more influenced by the sense of sight.”<sup>[22]</sup> Fry believes that two of the key elements of a work of art that elicit distinct physiological sensations through vision are color and tone, and similar to Helmholtz, he devotes much space to dissecting how these traits function. For the purposes of the present examination, it is more relevant to look at Fry’s explanation of tone, by which he means “the amount of light actually received by the eye from any surface.”<sup>[23]</sup> He elaborates on the perception of tone by claiming: “It is not . . . the amount of light given off from a surface, but the amount of light received from the direction in which that surface is perceived.”<sup>[24]</sup> Fry’s analysis seems indebted to Helmholtz for its awareness of factors such as scales of brightness, effects of shadows, and variability of distance between the object and the perceiving subject. Crucial to Fry’s theory of art is the idea that perception is not based on elements being emitted from the work of art to a passive recipient; instead, the spectator plays an active role in seeking sensations from the composition.

### Impressionism

Helmholtz’s hypotheses about spatial perception as well as his experiments in tone and color theory provided a framework for understanding the Impressionist art that was contemporary to his day. Moreover, his theories offered instructions for the artists themselves. Georges Seurat, for one, learned of Helmholtz’s work through the writings of Ogden Rood, a physicist and amateur painter, whose book *Modern Chromatics* (1879) detailed Helmholtz’s theories.<sup>[25]</sup> Aware of the role focal length plays in relation to color and luminosity, Seurat sought to treat his canvases according to “a consistent set of optics and physics,” along the lines of those proposed by Helmholtz (fig. 1).<sup>[26]</sup>



Fig. 1, Georges Seurat, *La Luzerne, Saint-Denis (Alfafa, Saint-Denis)*, 1885. Oil on canvas. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. [\[larger image\]](#)

Like Helmholtz, Fry was greatly interested in Impressionist painting, and in one of his most important early essays, “The Philosophy of Impressionism” (1894), Fry praises the school for its “analysis not of the objects of sight but of the nature of visual sensation.”<sup>[27]</sup> Undoubtedly, the complex perceptual, philosophical, and scientific issues that surround Impressionism account for the attention Fry devotes to this school, a degree of focus out of proportion to that which he pays to any other artistic movement, with the exception of Post-Impressionism (as will be discussed shortly). Fry’s philosophical inquiries into the nature of Impressionism are coupled throughout his writings with his interest in the scientific aspects of the school, and he draws attention to the direct bearing of science upon art in “The Philosophy of Impressionism,” where, within the first few paragraphs, he declares: “If, as some hold, the word Impressionism is really a useful one . . . it may be worthwhile to investigate it from a scientific standpoint in order to redeem it from a misuse which would render it valueless.”<sup>[28]</sup> For Fry, it is the scientific advances made manifest by the technique of certain works, and the universal truth of which such individual advances bespeak, which define the bounds of Impressionism. This valuation contributed to his sustained interest in the school, yet it was the lack of ability to use scientific gains for the enhancement of formal relations that he found wanting in the English art of this period. This perceived shortcoming led to Fry’s dismissal of English Impressionism, a view he would never fully take *vis á vis* French Impressionism, even after his total absorption in Post-Impressionist art.<sup>[29]</sup>

It is also in “The Philosophy of Impressionism” that Fry links physiology to psychology in assessing how Impressionist art functions. He writes: “Of the infinite number of sensations falling on the retina only those that training or habit has prepared us for, stir up any response in consciousness.”<sup>[30]</sup> In other words, human beings have a tendency to focus upon and react to that which they recognize.<sup>[31]</sup> Fry’s interest in retinal sensations harks back to Helmholtz’s work;<sup>[32]</sup> it also seems to foretell his affiliation with the renowned art connoisseur Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), whose theories and interests greatly influenced Fry around the turn-of-the-century.<sup>[33]</sup> Berenson was a predominant figure in international connoisseurship at this time, and for a period in the late 1890s and early 1900s, he acted as a mentor to Fry, training him in the connoisseurial methods of attribution espoused by Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), a nineteenth-century doctor and anatomist.<sup>[34]</sup> Through the close and comparative scrutiny of discrete anatomical features of figures within compositions, Morelli believed that artistic attribution could be accurately discerned. Both Berenson and Morelli saw this morphology-based connoisseurship as a way of elevating the history of art to a “science of art,” and they stressed the importance of “visual acuity” in this process.<sup>[35]</sup> This emphasis undoubtedly resonated with Fry, as did Morelli’s medical training and orientation towards physiology, which appealed to Fry’s scientific background.

Though Fry wholeheartedly embraced the Morellian method of attribution for a time, and naturally retained an abiding fascination with vision, he was aware of the inherently multi-sensory nature of perception. In his fellowship dissertation, he acknowledges the existing “discrepancy between our judgement by the sense of sight and our judgement by measurement or by the sense of touch.”<sup>[36]</sup> The tactility to which Fry alludes is discussed by Helmholtz, and would be central to Berenson, from whom Fry would learn the importance of “tactile values.”<sup>[37]</sup> Unlike Fry’s belief in the distinction between the visual and the tactile, however, Berenson underscores the complementary nature of these modes of perception. In “The Florentine Painters” (1896), Berenson claims: “We must remember that to realize form we must give

tactile values to retinal sensations.”[\[38\]](#) In other words, our appreciation of a work of art is enhanced by our ability to translate two-dimensional visual impressions into an illusory perception of depth. This, Berenson believes, is accomplished by awakening the beholder’s sense of touch. Berenson’s ideas impacted Fry’s formalist theories, particularly Fry’s notion of “plasticity,” for it is through the depiction of implied depth on the canvas that the spectator most readily sees volumes, lines, and colors in relation to one another—in other words, perceives form.

### Post-Impressionism

Accounts vary as to whether it was a Chardin still life shown in 1902, or a Cézanne still life displayed at the International Society Exhibition in London in 1906 (fig. 2) that inspired Fry to recognize the centrality of form to the artwork.[\[39\]](#) Given the shift in Fry’s writing that occurred around 1906, it was likely Cézanne’s painting that served as the catalyst for him to begin seeing art with this new emphasis on form that, interestingly, squared nicely with the kind of perceptual analysis he had begun to undertake in the 1890s. Fry’s evolving sense of aesthetic perception now centered on the idea that the formal attributes of a visual composition—line, mass, color, and the relations between these features—are the most expressive and the most universal, and therefore the most meaningful. Ancillary to this view, Fry discounted subject matter, mimesis of nature, and symbolic representation for running counter to form. The ultimate exemplar of formalist principles for Fry was Cézanne, whom he viewed as classical in his sensibilities and whose work he touted for decades to come. Through his paintings, Cézanne made manifest the shift from Impressionist to Post-Impressionist art, a move not merely stylistic in nature, but one which represented changing modes of perception. No longer was vision centered on the sometimes-passive physiological reception of retinal sensations; it now incorporated active psychological aspects of visual apprehension and interpretation. Cézanne himself spoke to this important perceptual duality when he recognized: “Within the painter, there are two things: the eye and the brain; they must serve each other. The artist must work at developing them mutually: the eye for the vision of nature and the brain for the logic of organized sensations, which provides the means of expression.”[\[40\]](#) In essence, perception must comprise both vision and design.[\[41\]](#)



Fig. 2, Paul Cézanne, *Pot Vert et Bouilloire d'Étain* (Still Life with Green Pot and Pewter Jug), ca. 1869. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

In an expansion of ideas set forth in his 1891 fellowship dissertation, Fry's writings from the height of his formalist period (ca. 1906–15) focus on perceptual analysis with an ever-deepening exploration of how these complex processes function. He began applying his theories to artists like Cézanne, Matisse, and Gauguin, whom he would come to label "Post-Impressionists." Nowhere is Fry's desire to explicate aesthetic perception more apparent than in "An Essay in Aesthetics" (1909), which, in hindsight, can be seen as a pre-emptive justification for his unwavering support of Post-Impressionism which would begin the following year with his organization of *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* at the Grafton Galleries in London. In "An Essay in Aesthetics," Fry posits that formal compositional attributes mirror aspects of our physical existence. This is quickly followed by the conclusion that such echoes are what make these qualities compelling to the spectator. He coins the phrase "the emotional elements of design" to refer to these characteristics which, individually and collectively, arouse physiological sensations and emotional reactions in the viewer.<sup>[42]</sup> He enumerates the "emotional elements of design" and hypothesizes about how they affect the beholder when he details:

The first element is that of the rhythm of the line with which the forms are delineated. . . . The second element is mass. . . . The third element is space. . . . The fourth element is that of light and shade. . . . A fifth element is that of colour. . . . Now it will be noticed that nearly all these emotional elements of design are connected with essential conditions of our physical existence: rhythm appeals to all the sensations which accompany muscular activity, mass to all the infinite adaptations to the force of gravity which we are forced to make, the spatial judgment is equally profound and universal in its application to life; . . . Light again is so necessary a condition of our existence that we become intensely sensitive to changes in its intensity. Colour is the only one of our elements which is not of critical or universal importance to life, and its emotional effect is neither so deep nor so clearly determined as the others. It will be seen, then, that the graphic arts arouse emotions in us by playing upon what one may call the *overtones* of some of our primary physical needs.<sup>[43]</sup>

This exposition highlights the degree to which Fry's ideas on aesthetics in 1909 remained grounded in physiological concepts, as they were in the 1890s. However, this analysis includes an affective component, and it is this awareness of the emotional aspects of perception that illustrates the evolution of his thinking from that of his earlier writings. Moreover, his connection of sensory perception to emotional response coincides with, and indicates an understanding of, principles of physiological psychology, which proposes that physical reactions lead, if not directly equate, to psychological responses, or emotions. Though it has gone unacknowledged, it is this relationship between corporeal and affective reaction that fascinates Fry, who repeatedly explores the interplay between the two from this point onward in his career. Specifically, he claims it is the emotions aroused by implied rhythmic movement and spatial depth (i.e., plasticity) that tap into aspects of our basic physical existence. While he recognizes that changes in color intensity are also rousing, he deems color less important, perhaps because it is both less visceral physiologically and less culturally universal.<sup>[44]</sup>

As noted above, Fry came to devalue representational accuracy and subject matter, along with the symbolic and literary associations that typically accompany them. The narrative aspects of a work of art are of secondary importance, he believed, for in most cases they are culturally or temporally contextual, and therefore limited or transitory in their appeal. Form, on the other



hand, is universal, for it is not reliant upon any external context for appreciation, according to him. In this way, the formally rich composition possesses what Fry terms “unity,” or self-contained coherence. Fry’s core belief that form transcends verisimilitude to nature is made clear in his introduction to “The French Group” section of the *Catalogue of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (1912). Here he explains the difficulty that arises from the “deep-rooted conviction, due to long-established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms.”<sup>[45]</sup> Rather, he believes artists generally, and the Post-Impressionists specifically, seek “to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.”<sup>[46]</sup> By this Fry means that the artist interprets rather than copies nature; in so doing, he creates a world equal and parallel to the natural world. As Fry writes in the same decade, the artist must study nature, not to learn how to imitate it, but to learn “what in nature has the power of affecting him.”<sup>[47]</sup> While Fry did not appreciate the formal qualities of Impressionist art in the 1890s, he did acknowledge in relation to this school of painting, that “every great artistic advance is preceded by an advance in the knowledge of the appearance of nature—by a scientific discovery in fact.”<sup>[48]</sup> In so stating, he links his admiration for the Impressionists to some of the qualities he values most about the Post-Impressionists: the artists’ ability to intermingle the objective and subjective components of experience into works of art universal in their appeal. Further, despite his lack of regard for verisimilitude, he understands that both schools of painting produced compositions rooted, however broadly, in nature.

Though at the height of his formalist period Fry’s advocacy of the Post-Impressionists supplanted his interest in Impressionism, he actually revisited Impressionism in the 1920s, the same decade in which he wrote his monograph *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (1927).<sup>[49]</sup> In notes from his 1920s lecture series “The Principles of Design” he returns to issues of sensation. Fry lauds Velázquez, whom he considers an Impressionist, by stating that he “did not construct, he observed and was moved by the relations of one visual sensation to another.”<sup>[50]</sup> In the lecture that immediately followed this one, Fry states that Impressionism “in its completest form denotes the acceptance without distortion or bias of all the visual impressions of a scene. Such an unqualified impersonal acceptance has of course never taken place.”<sup>[51]</sup> This acknowledgement of the subjective nature of impressions harks back to 1891, when he declared the subjective and objective aspects of impressions inseparable from one another in phenomenological terms.

Interestingly, impressions figure heavily into Fry’s meta-critical analysis of his career up to that point, “Retrospect,” written in 1920 as the concluding essay of *Vision and Design*:

A certain scientific curiosity and a desire for comprehension have impelled me at every stage to make generalisations, to attempt some kind of logical co-ordination of my impressions. But, on the other hand, I have never worked out for myself a complete system such as the meta-physicians [*sic*] deduce from *a priori* principles. I have never believed that I knew what was the ultimate nature of art. My aesthetic has been a purely practical one, a tentative expedient, an attempt to reduce to some kind of order my impressions up to date.<sup>[52]</sup>

Fry’s critical method, therefore, mirrors his analyses of individual artistic compositions, whether Impressionist or Post-Impressionist, nineteenth century or twentieth century; rooted in science—that is, the objective—his writings convey inevitably subjective impressions that are widely comprehensible, if not altogether universal. As Fry himself realized toward the end of



his career, his critical mission essentially remained constant from the 1890s to the 1930s: to make art accessible to as broad an audience as possible through his interpretation of aesthetic perception. In this way, Fry's body of written work epitomizes continuity in English art writing around the turn of the twentieth century.

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Until recently, Adrienne Rubin was Director of Exhibitions at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) in New York, where she began in 2009 as Assistant Curator and Registrar. Previously, she taught and administrated at Hofstra University, where she earned a BA in Liberal Arts and an MA in Humanities. Rubin holds a Master of Studies and a D.Phil. in the History of Art from the University of Oxford. Her monograph, *Roger Fry's 'Difficult and Uncertain Science': The Interpretation of Aesthetic Perception*, was published by Peter Lang in 2013. Her research continues to focus on the intersection of art and psychology.

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## Notes

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[1] This essay was unpublished during Fry's lifetime but was included in Christopher Reed, ed., *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[2] Roger Fry, "Some Problems of Phenomenology and Its Application to Greek Art: A Dissertation," (1891), REF/1/13, Roger Fry Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge. The sections of the dissertation are separately numbered.

[3] W. C. Lubenow, *The Cambridge Apostles, 1820–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

[4] It should be noted that Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), in which he distinguishes between phenomena, things as they appear to the observer, and noumena, things as they actually are (i.e., things-in-themselves), bridges the intellectual-historical gap between late seventeenth- early eighteenth-century Empiricism and late nineteenth- early twentieth-century Phenomenology. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Geyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A235–A260/B294–B315, at 338–65.

[5] Thomas Hardy Leahey, *A History of Modern Psychology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 91.

[6] Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1913), trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), 4.

[7] *Ibid.*, 11.

[8] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; repr., London: Macmillan, 1961), 221. Reference is to the reprint edition.

[9] S. P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 205.

[10] Fry, "Introductory Section," in "Some Problems of Phenomenology," 3–4.

[11] *Ibid.*, 3. Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke, whom Fry merely names as "Brücke," was professor of physiology at the University of Vienna, according to Helmholtz's note on him in the latter's essay "The Recent Progress of the Theory of Vision" (1868). Helmholtz also mentions Brücke in a note in his essay "On the Relation of Optics to Painting" (1871). See Hermann von Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, trans. E. Atkinson, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1893), 1:255 and 2:132. Anna Gruetzner Robins has referred to the influence of Helmholtz's theories on Fry's early

writings in Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Fathers and Sons: Walter Sickert and Roger Fry," in *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Merrell Holberton in association with the Courtauld Gallery, 1999), 50.

[12] In his dissertation, Fry mentions studies conducted by Professor Tyndall, to whom Helmholtz refers in "On the Relation of Optics to Painting." Fry, "Tone and Colour Perspective" in "Some Problems of Phenomenology," 11; and Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures*, 2:88, 92. The "Tyndall" in question is scientist John Tyndall, who conducted studies on light reflection and wrote in the late nineteenth century about the relevance of the imagination to scientific inquiry.

[13] Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures*, 2:74, 76.

[14] *Ibid.*, 80.

[15] Fry, "Tone and Colour Perspective," 7. Fry deems tone and color perspective as important to a composition as linear perspective. *Ibid.*, 27.

[16] Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures*, 2:119.

[17] *Ibid.*, 78. Helmholtz also refers to "the more poetical and psychological elements of the representation." *Ibid.*, 133.

[18] Fry, "Phenomenology in Greek Painting," in "Some Problems of Phenomenology," 44.

[19] Fry, "Introductory Section," 2.

[20] Fry, "Phenomenology in Greek Painting," 51. Emphasis in original.

[21] Fry, "Introductory Section," 5–6.

[22] *Ibid.*, 3.

[23] Fry "Tone and Colour Perspective," 1.

[24] Fry, "Phenomenology in Greek Painting," 1. Emphases are Fry's.

[25] William Innes Homer, *Georges Seurat and the Science of Painting* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1964), 131.

[26] *Ibid.*, 112–14.

[27] Roger Fry, "The Philosophy of Impressionism" (1894), p. 3, REF/1/58, Roger Fry Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge.

[28] *Ibid.*, 1. In using science as a means of assessing, and ultimately, legitimizing art, Fry is echoing the tendency that began in his 1891 fellowship dissertation.

[29] In a 1908 letter to the editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, Fry compares modern English art to French, favoring the latter for its grasp of the principles of design. Roger Fry, "The Last Phase of Impressionism," *Burlington Magazine* 12 (March 1908): 375.

[30] Fry, "Philosophy of Impressionism," 6.

[31] This view may have been formed, in part, by Fry's appreciation for William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) in which James writes of "attention": "Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no interest for me. My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind." William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (1890; repr., New York: Dover, 1950), 1:402. Emphasis in the original. Reference is to the reprint edition.

[32] Helmholtz believed that we only regard sensations insofar as they enable us to recognize external objects. This is stated in Helmholtz's "Concerning the Perceptions in General" (1866) in his *Treatise on Physiological Optics*. "Concerning the Perceptions in General" was reprinted in Richard M. Warren and Roslyn P. Warren, eds., *Helmholtz on Perception: Its Physiology and Development* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 175–76.

[33] According to Ernest Samuels, Berenson and Fry probably met for the first time in 1897. Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1979), 316. It is likely through Berenson that Fry became better acquainted with the teachings of William James, since Berenson took a course with James while at Harvard (ca. 1885) and the two forged a friendship. *Ibid.*, 31.

[34] Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980; repr., Norwich, UK: Black Dog Books, 1999), 58–60. Reference is to the reprint edition.

[35] Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 86, 104. This is presumably an outgrowth of the late nineteenth-century German concept of *Kunstwissenschaft*.

[36] Fry, "Introductory Section," 2.

[37] In “The Recent Progress of the Theory of Vision,” Helmholtz claims: “The sense of touch is sufficient . . . to develop complete notions of space.” Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures*, 1:238. Ernest Samuels claims that Berenson’s theory was inspired by William James. Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 229. Samuels is likely referring to James’s discussion of tactile images in volume 2 of *The Principles of Psychology*, in the chapter entitled “Imagination.”

[38] Reprinted in Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1967), 43. Berenson’s phrase “retinal sensations” echoes Fry’s allusion of two years earlier to the same phenomenon.

[39] Differing accounts can be found in Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, 104–5 and Green, *Art Made Modern*, 19.

[40] Cézanne wrote these lines to Émile Bernard in May 1904 and they were included in Bernard’s article “Paul Cézanne,” in the July 1904 issue of *L’Occident*. Reprinted in Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 38.

[41] To borrow from the title of Fry’s best-known anthology of essays.

[42] Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” *New Quarterly* 2 (April 1909), 186.

[43] *Ibid.*, 186–87.

[44] The biological and cultural determinants of color perception are well discussed by John Gage, who also explains that phenomenological studies of color often intertwine the role of light and shade and the role of chromatic elements, as Fry seems to do in the above passage. John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 21–23, 37.

[45] Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Boris von Anrep, *Catalogue of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (London: Grafton Galleries, 1912), 26.

[46] *Ibid.*, 26.

[47] Roger Fry, “The Function and Scope of Representation in the Graphic Arts,” (1910s), p. 8, REF/1/99, Roger Fry Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. In a 1904 letter to Louis Aurenche, Cézanne suggests that “the strong feeling for nature . . . is the necessary basis for all artistic conception.” Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, ed. John Rewald, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1944), 299.

[48] Roger Fry, “Modern Painting by George Moore,” *Cambridge Review* 14 (June 22, 1893), 418.

[49] Fry wrote in praise of Edgar Degas in the 1920s. See Denys Sutton, ed., *Letters of Roger Fry*, 2 vols. (New York: Chatto & Windus, 1972), 2:550.

[50] Roger Fry, “Principles of Design” “IV Change from High Renaissance to Baroque” (1920s), p. 1, REF/1/90/4, Roger Fry Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. Underscores are Fry’s.

[51] Roger Fry, “Principles of Design” “V Modern Art,” (1920s), p. 1, REF/1/90/5, Roger Fry Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. Fry concludes that while no artist actually achieves this feat, Monet came closest to being “the perfect Impressionist.” *Ibid.*, 4.

[52] Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 199.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Georges Seurat, *La Luzerne, Saint-Denis (Alfafa, Saint-Denis)*, 1885. Oil on canvas. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Paul Cézanne, *Pot Vert et Bouilloire d'Étain* (Still Life with Green Pot and Pewter Jug), ca. 1869. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)