

A Note On A Letter From Roger Hilton To Terry Frost

Jack Breckenridge

The accompanying letter is from the English painter Roger Hilton (1911-1975) written to his countryman and fellow painter Terry Frost who has kindly made this copy available.

Hilton was one of that generation of British painters whose development was delayed by the Second World War.¹ He, along with Frost, Peter Lanyon, Patrick Heron, Alan Davie, Adrian Heath, William Scott, and others, reached artistic maturity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The London gallery dealer, Leslie Waddington, called them the "Middle Generation," a name that stuck.² These painters participated in the international art scene in the two decades after the war to an extent unknown in British art heretofore.

Hilton was represented in the Thirty-second Venice Biennale and Documenta II in Kassel and numerous other international exhibitions from New York to Tokyo. So his recollections contained in this letter, written late in his life, represent the

views of one who had "been there."

Hilton was a student at the Académie Ranson in Paris before the war where he worked with Roger Bissière. His knowledge of modern French painting was equalled in his own generation probably only by William Scott who had also studied in France in the late 1930s. This experience gave Hilton a unique perspective on the European art scene in the years immediately after the war.

In looking at English, French, and American painting of this century, it is apparent that World War II produced a kind of "watershed" in art. There was an art before the war and a different art after the war. One gets the feeling that everything was open for the young British painter at this time. This generation rejected the Neo-Romanticism of war-time British painting; Sutherland and Vaughan are Hilton's examples. France, Hilton makes clear, was "stuck in the doldrums." The School of Paris no longer had the power to intimidate

British painting as had been the case in the pre-war years.

Hilton knew what was going on in Parisian studios in the first years after the war. Terry Frost has described to this writer his trips to Paris with Hilton where they visited artists like Soulages and Manessier.³

It is also clear that in those years Hilton knew nothing of the work of the Abstract Expressionists then painting in New York. As he points out: "At that time none of us had seen any American painting except Scott and Davie." This is perhaps the most important point in Hilton's letter. This fact, too often, has been overlooked by American and, surprisingly, British critics. For example, the American critic Gene Baro, in *Studio International* in October 1967, discussing American influence on some young British painters of the 1960s called them "less derivative and imitative" than their predecessors.⁴ Presumably, then, Baro means that the preceding generation, the "Middle Generation," was more derivative and imitative. Even an Englishman, Edward Lucie-Smith, in his book *Late Modern*, first published in 1969, has written: "An especially important event in the struggle for primacy between Paris and New York was the triumph of Abstract Expressionism in Europe during the late 1940s. . . ."⁵ The word "Europe," one supposes, includes England. He certainly does not make an exception of England. Both of these writers have contributed to the erroneous notion that British post-war art, "Middle Generation" art, was shaped by the influence of American Abstract Expressionism reaching out across the Atlantic.

Hilton's letter is clear evidence that Baro and Lucie-Smith are mistaken.

This has been confirmed to this writer in interviews with other "Middle Generation" artists.

The first exhibition of modern American art in post-war Britain, apart from some small Pollocks, was an exhibition entitled "Modern Art in the United States" shown at the Tate Gallery in 1956. This was a heterogeneous collection of paintings, both figurative and abstract. The New York Abstract Expressionists actually were only a small part of this exhibition; only one room of the five or six rooms allotted to the show in the Tate.⁶ It can be surmised that this is the exhibition to which Hilton refers in the first paragraph of his letter when he mentions how it was hung. William Scott remembers that at that exhibition, "Roger Hilton complained that I had misled him — I had given them [the American Abstract Expressionists] too high marks — they were not 'painters,' they were 'stainers.'"⁷ Abstract Expressionists from New York were also exhibited in a show circulated in Europe in 1958 and 1959 called "The New American Painting." Whichever exhibition Hilton is referring to, one must remember that by 1956 British painters of Hilton's generation had begun exhibiting in New York. Peter Lanyon exhibited at the Catherine Viviano gallery in New York, January 1956, with extremely favorable reviews in both *Art News* and *Arts* magazines.

The key to the myth of American influence on both British and French painting before 1956 may be in Hilton's statement in the letter: "One had perhaps arrived at similar conclusions to some of them [the Americans] by different routes (via Mondrian, for example)." Historians are going to have to learn that the years from 1945

to 1955 are not a time of American artistic colonization of Western Europe, but rather a time when artists were working in parallel directions with only fragmentary reports of what was being done elsewhere.

Hilton's description in this letter of the New York art scene is indicative of this. His remarks on New York artists also illuminate the decidedly outspoken personality that all who knew Roger Hilton remember. But the last part of the letter remains as rather poignant evidence of a commitment to his work by an artist who for the final eighteen months of his life was confined to his bed and yet continued to turn out an immense amount of work.

NOTES

¹Information on Roger Hilton's life is most readily available in the exhibition catalog, *Roger Hilton* (London, 1974).

²Unpublished taped interview with Patrick Heron at Zennor, Cornwall, England, March 1977.

³Unpublished taped interview with Terry Frost at Newlyn, Cornwall, England, April 1977.

⁴Gene Baro, "British Painting: The Post-War Generation," *Studio International*, CLXXIV, No. 893 (October, 1967), 133.

⁵Edward Lucie-Smith, *Late Modern: The Visual Arts Since 1945* (New York, 1969), p. 18.

⁶Patrick Heron, untitled article, *The Guardian* (London, October 11, 1974), p. 10.

⁷Alan Bowness, *William Scott: Paintings Drawings and Gouaches, 1938-1971* (London, 1972), p. 72.

TRANSCRIPTION
OF ROGER HILTON'S LETTER
TO TERRY FROST
FROM A XEROX OF THE ORIGINAL

Les Masseries, July 24 [, 1963]⁸

I have never taken any notice of composition. I don't quite know what you mean by a "sense of scale". Do you mean the painting looking right for the size of canvas, or a sense of bigness or that the painting at least shouldn't make the canvas look smaller or what? American pictures tend to be and look big because things are on a bigger scale there. Everything is small in England, fields, trains etc. The American spirit way of life etc comes through their painting & the French through theirs & one hopes something comes through ours. If you don't like it painting wise that's just too bad. You can't turn yourself into an American overnight. If the American show had been hung like ours with the paintings practically touching each other, I think you'd have received a very different impression.

We as Britishers were at the outset I suppose trying to do something different to the accepted British painters such as Keith Vaughan Sutherland Merlyn Evans & so on. At the same time French painting got stuck in the doldrums so we appeared to be a bit more exciting. (page two) At that time none of us had seen any American painting except Scott & Davie. One had perhaps arrived at similar conclusions to some of them by different routes (via Mondrian for example)]. It still strikes me that most Americans are amateur & inexpert blunderers. They

are riddled with idealism & philosophical ideas rather than starting with the paint. Even then as you say the scale was different. A man like Still had the courage of his ignorance. But I think he certainly exploits one idea. So did Pollock and Tomlin. When Pollock tried desperately to move on he killed himself. Tomlin died anyway before he got around to trying. As for old Mr pure souled bloody Newman he has kept on harping on his one string for around 80 years. As I say we had our sights directed on the established British art of the time & in our vague way and with little knowledge of what was done in America but with some knowledge of French painting, we were trying to make a sort of painting which hadn't been seen in Britain. The younger boys are taking direct from America & I don't know that that's so marvellous [sic]. Americans got a lot from some very bad European established artists who happened to go over during the war & mostly from a hysterical German called Hoffman [presumably Hans Hofmann] who had picked up a few superficial ideas a la Andre Lhote about painting (page three) during his unsuccessful journey across Europe. The Americans are very gullible culture wise & when Hoffman [sic] spoke they thought they were getting the real thing straight from the fount. Likewise they swallowed Mas-

son & Matta. And of course they were all helped periodically by our old friend Bill Hayter on his trips to New York with some of the smell of Picasso & Braque still clinging to him. Our artists are just as good as the French or American[.] What is missing is the build up & the money & the critics. You feel insecure & unsure of yourself because you haven't got the build up. You haven't got the booklets on you that in your position you'd have had automatically in Paris. In New York you'd be in the museum with your biggest & best picture. In general there is not enough intellectual ferment in London. Nobody cares really & nobody is really going to stick his neck out. Critics don't meet critics & painters rarely meet painters. The strength of the so called St Ives school was that for the first time there were a few painters with similar outlook who actually met each other & there is no doubt that Patrick [Heron] played a great role in this. Whatever else he was a critic with some fervour & integrity. All this had gone now. That is natural. In Paris groups are constantly forming & then reforming. In England it only happens very rarely. (page four) There are not enough of us & there isn't the intensive art industry around us. Perhaps it's just as well.

Still as for exploring, of course one has to explore. At the moment I am not so concerned with the physical aspects of painting as the the [sic] moral ones. What are we supposed to be doing. The mechanism of painting has to be harnessed to some idea. You have to be in other words representing something. Now we can expose a totally blank canvas & hardly an eyebrow will be raised. You can't go further than that. So we have to start again & paint something. What? It is the old question

that led to nonrepresentational painting in the first instance. What a relief one didn't have to paint anything. The main stumbling block was got over. Well we have had a lovely splash with it. But can we go on splashing blithely for ever. Some time there must be a meaning or a message. Greenberg in a letter to me said Rothko kept on talking about a message and how this irritated him, Greenberg. You've got to have something to hang your hat on. We have leaned heavily on various things but it doesn't seem adequate. It's the old story. Once you have learned to paint you've got to find something to paint about. On the contrary the pure abstraction I can do, that is why I seldom do it any more. One can't spend one's days turning out things like Ellsworth Kelly, or if you like 1955 Roger Hiltons. One hopes eventually to make a synthesis between the pure abstract & the personal quality of my drawing show for instance, but this will take time.

R.

⁸ In a letter to Jack Breckenridge, received January 1978, as this went to publication, Terry Frost wrote that though Roger Hilton went to Les Masseries on more than one occasion, he believed this letter was written in 1963.

Les Messures. July 24.

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