

# On the Philosophy of the Thing in Modern Paintings

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**Abstract:** In the history of modern painting, there has been a hidden thread revolving around the concept of the ‘thing’. The study attempts to explore this thread through Heidegger’s aesthetics of truth. In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger highlights the conflict between the earth and the world within a work of art, which is the basis for the emergence of truth in existence. He argues that the essence of a work of art lies in its ability to embody the truth of existence within itself. Starting from this point, this paper delves into the examination of objects in artworks, extending to an analysis of forms in modern painting history as well as objects as a key component of art. In the history of modern painting, the form construction direction initiated by Cezanne gradually took a leading role. However, with the advent of abstract art, the materiality of objects began to emerge and finally manifested itself. This development marked the end of the direction of form construction in modern painting and paved the way for the exploration of material research, thus opening up the history of contemporary art. Overall, Heidegger’s aesthetics of truth can be seen as a valuable tool for understanding the role of objects in art and their relationship to the truth of existence. By examining the evolution of form and materiality in modern painting, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity and richness of artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, The Thing, Object Things, The Earth, World, Modern Painting, Form, Spirit

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## 1. Introduction

Hidden in the history of modern painting is a thread which concerns the concept of the thing and has been neglected for long. The thread draws from Heidegger’s renowned work *The Origin of the Work of Art* and recurs throughout the course of modern painting history. It serves as a marker of the shift from formal construction to material exploration in modern painting, signaling the advent of contemporary art. [1]

However, this particular thread had always been shrouded in obscurity; in the historical narrative of modern painting, the term “form” is a symbolic concept, whereas the “thing” was once relatively peripheral. In the recent decade, there has been a scarcity of research on the philosophy of the thing.

The importance of this study lies in uncovering the essence of the thing through Heidegger’s philosophical investigations. This is crucial for gaining insights into the origins of contemporary art, revealing the transformative relationship between modern art and contemporary art, and for fostering

creativity in contemporary art.

## 2. Further Inquiry into the Thing

In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger made further inquiry into the concept of the thing, “What, in truth, is a thing insofar as it is a thing? When we ask this question, we wish to know the thing-being (the thingliness) of the thing. The point is to learn the thingliness of the thing.” He categorized things into three distinct types: the mere thing, the thing of tool, and the thing as artwork. [2]

According to him, all artworks have the thingly character, i.e., the thingness. For example, there is stone in the work of the architecture, wood in the carving, color in the painting, and sounding in the musical work. The thingness is extremely ‘irremovably’ in the artwork. In his opinion, “The artwork is something over and above its thingliness. This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature... The work makes publicly known something other than itself, it manifests something other...” [2]

Heidegger explains the thingness in artworks through analyzing the peasant shoes in van Gogh’s works:

“The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.” [2]

The thing, which serves in itself as an artwork, bears unique and different properties from the other two types of things. This means, only from the painted thing could we see all in it.

The equipmentality that the pair of shoes bears as a thing in van Gogh's work, has the reliability that the shoes should have. Such reliability opens up the world for a peasant woman, in which there exists the earth, as well as the argument between the earth and her world, as Heidegger put it, “Rather, the equipmental being of equipment was only discovered by bringing ourselves before the van Gogh painting.” [2]

Heidegger's inquiry into the thingliness of things led him to introduce the concepts of the earth and the world, culminating in the ultimate question of philosophy -- the pursuit of truth.

In the world that is opened up by the thing serving as a work of art, there exist the earth, the world and the argument between the two. This creates a macro primordial realm in which art occurs in the dispute between the earth and the world and through the dual movement between clarity and concealment. Art is the way in which the truth of existence is revealed, and the truth of existence is embedded in the work itself. [3]

Heidegger's aesthetics of truth began with questioning the thingliness of things, but the relationship between art and thing has been obscured in the history of modern painting.

### 3. The Construction of the Form

#### 3.1. The Thing and the Object

The work *Peasant Shoes* by van Gogh, which Heidegger chose to analyze in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, does not fall into the category of modern painting. What would better represent van Gogh's achievements in modern painting are his later works, as well as those created during the period of his graphic painting. Heidegger's choice, which is Van Gogh's early concrete and realistic work, raises questions about his somewhat negative attitude towards Van Gogh's later works. It is still unclear whether Heidegger believed that his later works lacked representativeness for his ontological philosophy and so we will not discuss it here. [4]

However, Heidegger's philosophy of examining the thing provides a new perspective for looking at the history of modern painting.

Heidegger's analysis of *Peasant Shoes* – functioning as “the thing in the artwork” – focuses primarily on the objects – the pair of peasant shoes in the work itself, as shown in Figure 1. He does not give attention to the canvas, pigments, or other physical components of the artwork. What he concerns is the image and the object of the peasant shoes presented on the canvas under the control of Van Gogh. That is to say, what Heidegger is concerned about is the object in a concrete

painting.



Figure 1. *Peasant Shoes* (painted by Van Gogh).

Figurative painting, also known as realistic painting, is a longstanding tradition in European art that emphasizes the use of perspective and anatomy as its foundational disciplines. To be precise, the work *Peasant Shoes* is a visually realistic representation that he obtained on-site by Van Gogh in a specific field, using a specific perspective and lighting conditions. [5]

#### 3.2. The Construction of the Form

But this tradition of imitating visual reality images was brought to an end due to Cezanne.

In the letter of April 15, 1904 to Emile Bernal, Cezanne wrote, “Nature must be treated with cylinders, spheres, cones. Everything is in a certain perspective. So, each side of an object or plane tends towards a center. The lines parallel to the horizon give rise to breadth, which is part of the wonders of nature that the Almighty God presents before our eyes. Lines perpendicular to the horizon give a certain depth.” [6]

Cezanne's works, as well as his few discussions on art, reveal his definite attitude towards the subjectivity of nature. He viewed his own body as the subject, which carried the transformation of nature and the historical mission of the reconstruction of painting language. Cezanne broke away from the traditional approach of imitating nature in Western figurative painting, and instead approached objective objects through their geometric forms. The geometric form, being the foundation of traditional concrete representation painting, is no longer hidden; instead, it comes to the forefront of painting through handling the objects in geometric forms. [7]

Cezanne's painting experiments have a certain duality -- they not only feature the definite representation of objects but also the distinct representation of geometric forms. He stripped away the impressionist colors that permeated around the objects, allowing the clear forms of the objects to gain substantial existence within a solid painting relationship.

After constructing the form of objects, Cezanne went on to transform and reconfigure the form, resulting in a new form of painting that diverged from imitation. This shift towards form marked a significant transition for European painting, which had previously been rooted in the tradition of imitation. From

that point on, form became a prominent theme in European painting. [8]

## 4. The Disappearance of the Object

### 4.1. The Transformation of the Form

The object in Cezanne's paintings also functions as the form. However, in the subsequent development of modern painting, the object gradually weakened and became hidden whereas the form gradually became dominant.

A number of influential artists, such as Matisse, Braque, Picasso, Modigliani, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klee, Morandi, Baldus, Pollock, and de Kooning, followed the path opened up by Cezanne and persistently explored the form in painting. This exploration laid the foundation for the history of modern Western painting, which became centered around form.

Following Cezanne's formal construction, Matisse pursued the planarization of world images, while Picasso explored the geometrization of world images. Realism of objects became less important, as emphasis shifted to the form and position of objects within the painting. As abstract painting emerged, the relationship between objects and form became less important. Painting moved directly towards the relationship between forms themselves, with objects becoming completely obscured.

In the history of modern painting, the focus of artists' creations has shifted away from the imitation of objective objects, towards transforming those objects into a certain form and expressing emotions through formal relations. The imitation relationship between painting and objects has become increasingly weaker, allowing for new freedoms in subjectivity and individuality in modern painting.

However, this "metaphysical" freedom exhibited in modern painting was criticized by Heidegger in his work *The Origin of the Work of Art*. He argued that "modern subjectivism, of course, misinterprets creation as the product of the genius of the self-sovereign subject." [2]

There is an inherent conflict between the formalism tendency of modern Western painting and Heidegger's phenomenological pursuit of understanding the essence of things. This conflict has not been extensively explored by academia, and the philosophical perspective on things has been largely overlooked in the history of modern painting.

### 4.2. The Mere Thing

Heidegger's perspective on things suggests that the history of modern Western painting seems like a gradual unfolding a process around the relationship between the form and the "mere things" that are detached from the existence of objects.

"In immediate perception, we never really perceive a throng of sensations, e.g. tones and noises. Rather, we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, the three-motored plane, the Mercedes which is immediately different from the Adler. Much closer to us than any sensation are the things themselves. In the house we hear the door slam – never acoustic sensations or mere noises. To hear a bare sound we must listen away from

the things, direct our ears from them, listen abstractly." [2]

In this way, we can understand modern Western painting from a visual perspective. Modern Western painting seems to deviate from the traditional representation of objects, enabling our eyes to shift away from the objects themselves and focus solely on the formal relationships between them; that is, observe formally.

Heidegger's analysis reveals his grievances with the modern art. He argues that modern art places too much emphasis on the form, disregards the essence of the thing, and distances itself from it.

### 4.3. Observation of the Form

According to Heidegger, when we observe an apple, our first focus should be on the apple itself, rather than its visual form. However, for painting artists, the form of the apple as a mere thing is crucial. They strive to examine the shape and color of the apple as a whole, as well as its true visual formal relationship with the background. This formal way of observing is the inherent content of painting. Even in figurative and impressionist painting, imitation is based on this holistic form of observation. [9]

Modern Western painting has gone beyond mere imitation. Following such a way of observing, it has emerged from a history of autonomy of form, which is typically reflected in the works of Mondrian and Kandinsky. Kandinsky's theory of abstract painting systematically reveals this history. The development of Mondrian's work *Tree* (see Figure 2) illustrates how a real-life tree is transformed into form, step by step. [10]



Figure 2. *Tree* (painted by Piet Mondrian).

According to Kandinsky's abstract painting theory, points, lines, surfaces, and colors are all related to a certain spiritual direction, and painting creation can express emotions solely through the relationship between forms. In traditional painting, the bridge between form and spirit, i.e., the object, holds an insignificant position. Modern painting has developed to the abstract stage, its mature stage, where the form becomes the protagonist of painting and the object disappear. Artists no longer need to face nature, and sketching in person loses its meaning. The world between artists and canvases is no longer visible, and the direct correspondence between form and spirit, as explained by Kandinsky in his work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, has become a theoretical achievement of

modern painting in its mature stage. This theoretical achievement completely excludes the thing from modern painting. [11]

## 5. The Appearance of the Thing

### 5.1. The Thing in Abstract Painting

Heidegger's phenomenology, which is based on the philosophy of the thing and the search for the relationship between man and things, provides a certain perspective of the thing for the history of modern painting. This perspective seems to be calling for the reappearance of the thing.

Things, or the concrete objects, never truly leave us, but their significance and position within the context of painting has changed throughout different stages of painting development.

In abstract painting, traditional objects no longer exist, but the painting itself, including the pigments and canvas, is revealed as the object in abstract painting, and these things become the noumenon of the abstract painting. In other words, texture plays a crucial role in abstract painting, where the relationship between pigments and canvas, and the accidental combinations that arise during the creative process, become important factors. The artist's subjectivity is not arbitrary, but is instead created through their experience of the world, their use of pigments and canvas, and their contact and interaction with each other. [12]

### 5.2. The Thing in Collage Painting

Since the thingness of the pigments and canvas becomes important factors, why cannot the ready-made materials be used like the use of pigments? Thus the thing in collage painting emerges during the Cubism period of modern painting. In many still life works by Picasso and Braque, ready-made products become an inseparable part of the painting.

As abstract painting continued to develop in the 20th century, the thing in collage painting became essential materials in the creation of collage paintings.

In the case of Neo-Figurative artist Kiefer's paintings, he often incorporates ready-made objects as an essential component of his work. Objects serve both as materials and forms in his paintings, and their identities in the real world provide corresponding symbolic, historical, and social allegories, greatly enhancing the dimension of the painting. The intervention of numerous objects, the large size of the paintings, and the dramatic exaggeration of the "factory" operation have expanded the boundaries of painting. The reemergence of things and their application have led to a new breakthrough in contemporary figurative painting. [13]

Take the paintings of the abstract artist Tapiés as another example. His creations are characterized by the utilization of direct materials and simplified symbols, which generate a unique and indescribable image that perfectly embodies the contemporary spirit. The artist's process involves a sense of randomness and freedom in working with materials,

showcasing his ability to turn stones into gold. Tapiés magically reveals the mysterious nature of the objects he uses, creating a sense of intrigue and wonder in the viewer. [14]

In traditional European painting, the artist's objective is to create realistic representations of objects using pigments. However, as Heidegger points out in his analysis of Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*, the act of imitation opens up a human world through the things. Unfortunately, the thingness of pigments is often obscured by the technique of imitating objective things. With the advent of abstract art, the form has been brought to the forefront as a formal language of painting in and of itself. The thingness of the thing has become the foundation of abstract painting, imbuing it with a mysterious and unique language within the realm of abstraction.

### 5.3. The Reappearance of the Thing

Throughout the history of artistic development, irrationalities have been commonplace. Even in the realm of abstract painting, the summoning of objects remains incomplete and insufficient.

In 1917, Duchamp famously placed a urinal in an exhibition hall (see figure 3), which elevated the ordinary object to the status of a work of art as a ready-made product. This event marked the emergence of ready-made art as a significant category in contemporary art. As a result, not only did objects in figurative paintings come to life outside of the canvas, but objects used in paintings as collages also became independent of the paintings themselves, allowing objects to enter the world of art directly.



Figure 3. The Urinal (placed in an exhibition hall by Marcel Duchamp).

Examining this artistic case from the perspective of the object, we can observe the object's transformation into a ready-made product. The object is removed from its previous context and placed in a new one, causing it to become unfamiliar and acquire a new assignment of meaning. The unfamiliarity of the thing makes it a ready-made work of art. [15].

Therefore, the history of modern painting has turned from the study of the form to the study of the thing. Things, the

concept of things, and the events they cause can all become art in this way, thus greatly expanding the boundaries of what is considered art.

## 6. Conclusion

Heidegger, from a unique philosophical perspective, understood works of art as the thing between natural objects and instruments. The thing, as the object of Heidegger's art research, hides, recedes, appears and reappears in the history of modern painting. That is, in the history of modern painting, object things, painting forms, things used in collages, and made things construct the hidden thread revolving around the concept of the thing, and also constitute the philosophical logic of the thing.

After the completion of its formal logic, modern painting returns to the thing and to the earth. Heidegger's philosophy of things and the history of modern painting form a certain echo and connection, emphasizing the significance of the thing in the development of art.

The clarification of the thread regarding the thing in the history of modern painting reveals that things have always played a significant role in the evolution of modern art. The relationship between form and spirit advocated in modern painting still revolves around the thing and the world in which they reside. The spirit of artists comes from their connection with things and the world they coexist with. And this connection is the root cause of the shift from modern painting to contemporary art.

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