leading principles, analogous. If a work of art creates formal environments that impose themselves on any definition of human environments; if families of the mind have a historical and psychological reality that is fully as manifest as is that in linguistic and ethnic groups, then a work of art is an event. It is, in other words, a structure, a defining of time. All these families, environments and events that are called forth by the life of forms act in their turn on the life of forms itself, as well as on strictly historical life. There they collaborate with moments of civilization, with both natural and social environments, and with human races. This immense multiplicity of factors is in complete opposition to the harshness of determinism, into which, by breaking it down into endless action and reaction, it introduces cleavage and discord at every turn.

For, within this great imaginary world of forms, stand on the one hand the artist and on the other hand form itself. Even as the artist fulfills his function of geometrician and mechanic, of physicist and chemist, of psychologist and historian, so does form, guided by the play and interplay of metamorphoses, go forever forward, by its own necessity, toward its own liberty.

In Praise of Hands

I undertake this essay in praise of hands as if in fulfillment of a duty to a friend. Even as I begin to write, I see my own hands calling out to my mind and inciting it. Here, facing me, are these tireless companions who for so many years have served me well, one holding the paper steady, the other peopling the white page with hurried, dark, active little marks. Through his hands man establishes contact with the austerity of thought. They quarry its rough mass. Upon it they impose form, outline and, in the very act of writing, style.

Hands are almost living beings. Only servants? Possibly. Servants, then, endowed with a vigorous free spirit, with a physiognomy. Eyeless and voiceless faces that nonetheless see and speak. Some blind persons eventually acquire a touch so sensitive that they can identify playing cards by the infinitesimal thickness of the shapes printed on them. But those who can see also need their hands to see with, to complete the perception of appearances by touching and holding. The aptitudes of hands are written in their curves and structure. There are tapered slender hands, expert in analysis, with the long and mobile fingers of the logician; prophetic fluid hands; spiritual hands whose very inactivity has grace and character; and tender hands. Physiognomy, once diligently

practiced by those who were expert in it, would have benefited by a knowledge of hands. The human face is above all a composite of the receptive organs. The hand means action: it grasps, it creates, at times it would seem even to think. In repose, the hand is not a soulless tool lying on the table or hanging beside the body. Habit, instinct and the will to action all are stored in it, and no long practice is needed to learn what gesture it is about to make.

All great artists have paid close attention to the study of hands. Since more than other men they live by their hands, they have sensed the peculiar power that lies in them. Rembrandt shows hands to us in all the varied emotions, types, ages and conditions of life (Figure 21): the gaping astonished hand, thrust in shadow against the light, of a witness in the large *Raising of Lazarus*; the workmanlike and scholarly hand of Professor Tulp holding with a clamp a bundle of arteries in the *Anatomy Lesson*; the hand of Rembrandt himself in the act of drawing; the powerful hand of Saint Matthew writing at the angel's dictation; the hands of the aged paralytic in the *Hundred Guilder Print*, bent double by the coarse, inert mittens hanging at his waist. It is true that certain masters have painted hands by shop rule and with an unvarying sameness, and that this is an anthropometric index useful for the critic's classifications. Yet how many pages of drawings reveal an analytic concern for catching what is unique! Even by themselves, such hands are intensely alive.

What gives the hand this advantage? Why does this mute, blind organ speak to us so persuasively? Because it is, like the higher forms of life, highly original and highly differentiated. Jointed on its delicate hinges, the wrist has a structure of many small bones. From it five skeletal branches, each with its system of nerves and ligaments, run beneath the skin, thence they fan out into five separate fingers. Each of them, articulated on three knuckles, has its own aptitude and its own mind. A curved sur-

Figure 21A. Rembrandt: Detail from The Raising of Lazarus.

Figure 21B. Rembrandt: Detail from The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp.

face traced with veins and arteries, and rounded at the edges, links the wrist with the fingers, masking their hidden structure. The underside forms a receptacle. When the hand is active, it can stretch and stiffen. Quite as easily it can shape itself around an object. This activity has left marks in the hollow of the hand, and one can read there, if not the linear symbols of things past and things to come, at least the pattern and as it were the memories of our lives otherwise lost to us, and perhaps as well some even more distant inheritance. Observed closely, the palm is indeed a strange landscape with its hills, its main central depression, its narrow tributary valleys, now crinkled with incidental lines, links and interlaces, now clean and sharp like handwriting. Each configuration can evoke a daydream – I do not know whether anyone who earnestly consults his hand will be able to solve an enigma, but I like to think that he will study this proud servant of his with respect.

Watch your hands as they live their own free life. Forget for a moment their function, forget their mystery. Watch them in repose; the fingers are lightly drawn in, as if the hands were absorbed in a reverie. Watch them in the sprightly elegance of pure and useless gestures, when it seems that they are describing numberless possibilities gratuitously in the air and, playing with one another, preparing for some happy event to come. Although they can imitate the silhouettes and the behavior of animals by casting their shadow on a wall by candlelight, they are much more beautiful when they imitate nothing at all. Sometimes, left to themselves when the mind is active, they move ever so faintly. On an impulse they stir the air, or they stretch their tendons and crack their knuckles, or else they close tightly to form a compact mass that is truly a rock of bone. Sometimes it happens that, first raised, then lowered, one after the other in invented rhythms, the fingers trace, nimble as dancers, choreographic bouquets.

The hands are not a pair of passively identical twins. Nor are they to be distinguished like younger and older children, or like two girls with unequal talents, one trained in all skills, the other a serf dulled by the monotony of hard work. I do not believe altogether in the eminent dignity of the right hand. Deprived of the left, it withdraws into a painful, almost sterile solitude. The left hand, which signifies unjustly the evil side of life, the "sinister" portion of space, the side from which one must not come upon a corpse or enemy, or a bird – the left hand can be made to perform all the duties of the right. Fashioned like it, it has the same aptitudes, which it renounces in order to assist its partner. Does it clasp any less vigorously the tree trunk or the handle of an axe? Does it clutch an adversary's body with less force? Has it less power when it strikes? Does not the left hand form the notes on a violin, attacking the strings directly, while the right hand merely projects the melody with the bow? We are fortunate in not having two right hands. How else would the diversity of tasks be apportioned? Whatever is "gauche" about the left hand is indispensable to an advanced culture; it keeps us in touch with man's venerable past, with a time when he was not over-skillful, and still far removed from being able to create; with a time when he was, as the popular phrase goes, "all thumbs." Had it been otherwise, we should have been overwhelmed by too much virtuosity. No doubt we should have forced the juggler's art to its farthest limits – and probably have accomplished little else.

Such as it is, this pair of hands has not only served man's purposes, but has helped to create them, define them and give them form and shape. Man has created his own hands – by which I mean that he has gradually freed them from the animal world, released them from an ancient and innate servitude. But hands have also created man. They have permitted him certain contacts with the world which his other organs and the other parts of his

body could not vouchsafe. Held against the wind, spread out and separated like a frond, they urged him on to an understanding of fluids. They provided him with numerous and delicately sensitive surfaces for his knowledge of atmosphere and of water. Pollaiuolo, a master in whom a somewhat troubled and wild sense of the mysteries of Fable persists with considerable grace under a very thin veneer of humanism – Pollaiuolo painted a pretty Daphne overtaken by metamorphosis at the very moment Apollo is about to reach her. Her arms are becoming tree limbs; already the extremities are leafy branches stirred by gentle breezes. I seem to see primitive man inhaling the world through his hands, stretching his fingers into a web to catch the imponderable. "My hands," said the Centaur, "have felt rocks, waters, plants without number and the subtlest impressions of atmosphere, for I lift up my hands on dark, still nights to detect the breezes and so discover signs to make sure of my way." The Centaur and Daphne, both favorites of the gods, had, in metamorphosis or not, no weapons other than those of our race to feel out the universe, to experience even those translucent currents which have no substance and which the eye does not see.

Yet, whatever weighs upon us with a vague heaviness or with the warm palpitation of life, whatever has a bark, a covering, a fur or even stone, though it be shaped by blows or rounded by the flow of waters or left intact in texture – all these things are but occasions for the work of hands. They are the goal of an experiment that neither sight nor mind can conduct alone. Knowledge of the world demands a kind of tactile flair. Sight slips over the surface of the universe. The hand knows that an object has physical bulk, that it is smooth or rough, that it is not soldered to heaven or earth from which it appears to be inseparable. The hand's action defines the cavity of space and the fullness of the objects that occupy it. Surface, volume, density and weight are not optical

phenomena. Man first learned about them between his fingers and in the hollow of his palm. He does not measure space with his eyes, but with his hands and feet. The sense of touch fills nature with mysterious forces. Without it, nature is like the pleasant landscapes of the magic lantern, slight, flat and chimerical.

Thus did gestures multiply man's knowledge with a variety of touch and contour whose inventive power is now hidden to us by centuries of practice. Without hands there is no geometry, for we need straight lines and circles to speculate on the properties of extension. Before he could recognize pyramids, cones and spirals in shells and crystals, was it not essential that man should first "play with" regular forms in the air and on the sand? Man's hands set before his eyes the evidence of variable numbers, greater or smaller, according to the folding and unfolding of his fingers. For a long time the art of calculation had no other formula; and it was by this method that the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to Pharaoh's men, an episode shown in the Romanesque fresco of St. Savin, where the eloquence of the hands is extraordinary. Language, first experienced by the whole body and mimed in the dance, was also formed by the hands. In everyday use, movements of the hands gave zest to the language, helped articulate it, separate its elements, isolate them from a vast sonorous syncretism and helped to give rhythm to language, even to color it with subtle inflections. From this mimicking of the spoken word, from these exchanges between voice and hands, some trace remains in what the ancients called oratorical gesture. Physiological differentiation has further specialized our organs and functions, which scarcely collaborate any more. Speaking with our mouths, we remain silent with our hands, and in some parts of the world it is bad taste to express oneself both by voice and gesture. Elsewhere, however, this dual and poetic manner of expression has been preserved with the most affectionate ardor. Even when its

effects are a little vulgar, it expresses accurately an early state of man, the memory of his efforts to invent a new language. There is no need to choose between the two formulae over which Faust hesitates: in the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was Action; because Action and the Word, the hands and the voice, are united in the same beginnings.

The power to create a concrete universe distinct from nature is, however, the kingly gift of the human race. The industry wrought by a beast without hands, even though he be among the highest products of evolution, is dull and monotonous and remains at the threshold of art. He can build for himself neither a magical world nor even a useless one. He can mimic a religion of his own species by a love dance, or even suggest certain funerary rites; but he could never "charm" by the power of images nor produce disinterested forms. But what of the bird? Its most delightful song is only an arabesque around which we compose a symphony of our own, as we do with the murmur of the waves or the wind. Perhaps confused dreams of beauty stir sumptuously adorned beasts; perhaps they are dimly conscious of the magnificence of their own dress. Certain nameless relationships which we cannot decipher may even explain a superior harmony in the magnetic field of animal instincts. These waves of attraction escape our senses, but nothing prevents us from thinking that their coincidence resounds strikingly and profoundly in the life of insects and of birds. Such music is shrouded in total mystery. Even the most surprising accounts of beavers, ants and bees demonstrate the limits of cultures that have for equipment only paws, antennae and mandibles. But man, taking into his hands a few shreds of the world, has been able to contrive another world that is altogether his own.

As soon as man tries to intervene in the natural order to which he is subject, from the moment he begins to push a pointed

instrument or a sharp edge into some hard material in order to split it and give it form, his primitive labor contains in itself its whole future development. The caveman carefully chipping the flint and fashioning needles out of bone astonishes me much more than the clever builder of machines. He is no longer activated by unknown forces; he can work on his own. Formerly, even in the recesses of the deepest cave, he remained on the surface of things; even when he broke up animal vertebrae or tree limbs, he did not penetrate, he had no access to their meaning. The implement itself is no less remarkable than the use to which it is put. It is both a value and a result in itself. There it is, set off from the rest of the world, something new. Though a stone knife may have a cutting edge no sharper than that of a thin shell, it was not picked up by chance on some beach. It can be called the work of a new god, the product, indeed the extension, of his hands. Between hand and implement begins an association that will endure forever. One communicates to the other its living warmth, and continually affects it. The new implement is never "finished." A harmony must be established between it and the fingers that hold it, an accord born of gradual possession, of delicate and complicated gestures, of reciprocal habits and even of a certain wear and tear. Now the inert instrument comes alive. To this association no material lends itself better than wood, which, even when mutilated by and shaped to the arts of man, maintains in another form the original suppleness and flexibility that characterized it when growing in the forest. One might even say that the hardness of stone and iron, when repeatedly touched and handled, becomes warm and pliable. Thus, we should correct the rule of classification, which tends to standardize, and which has influenced toolmaking from earliest times because the amount of exchange was facilitated by the constancy in the types produced. Contact and usage humanized the inert object and more or less set it apart

from its classification as something unique. Anyone who has not known men who live by their hands cannot understand the strength of these hidden relationships, the positive effects of this association in which are found friendship, respect, the daily communion of work, the instinct and pride of ownership and, on the highest plane, the concern for experimentation. I do not know whether there is a break between the manual and the mechanical orders – I am not very sure of it – but the implement at the end of his arm does not refute man's existence. It is not like an iron hook screwed into a stump. Between them comes that god in five persons who runs the gamut of all dimensions, from the hand of the cathedral mason to the hand of the painter of manuscripts.

Though in one of his aspects the artist is perhaps the most highly evolved of all types, prehistoric man nonetheless continues to persist in him. To the artist, the world is ever fresh and new. He examines it, he enjoys it with senses sharper than those of a civilized man, and he keeps alive the sense of magic in the unknown and, above all, the sense that his hands are instruments both of poetry and of industry. Whatever the receptive and inventive powers of the mind may be, they produce only internal chaos if deprived of the hand's assistance. The dreamer may entertain visions of unimaginable landscapes and of ideally beautiful faces, but he has no means for fixing fast these tenuous, insubstantial visions; and memory hardly retains them, except as the recollection of a recollection. What distinguishes dream from reality is that the dreamer cannot engender art, for his hands are asleep. Art is made by the hands. They are the instrument of creation, but even before that they are an organ of knowledge. I have shown how this is so for everyone; for the artist it is even truer, and in very particular ways. The artist must live all the primitive experiments over again; like the Centaur he must feel out the wellsprings and the winds. While our contact is a passive one, his is

something sought after and worked over. We are content with an age-old acquisition, with an automatic, perhaps worn-out knowledge buried inside ourselves. This the artist exposes to fresh air and brings to life again; he starts from the very beginning. Is it not more or less the same with a child? Adult man, however, loses this attitude of trial and error, and because he has grown up, he stops growing. The artist prolongs the child's curiosity far beyond the limits of childhood. He touches, he feels, he reckons weight, he measures space, he molds the fluidity of atmosphere to prefigure form in it, he caresses the skin of all things. With the language of Touch he composes the language of Sight – a "warm" tone, a "cool" tone, a "heavy" tone, a "hollow" tone, a "hard" line, a "soft" line. But the language of speech is not so rich as the impressions conveyed by the hands, and we need more than one language to translate their quantity, their diversity and their fullness. We must therefore somewhat extend the idea of "tactile value" as it was formulated by Bernard Berenson. In painting it is not simply a matter of achieving the living illusion of relief and volume by inviting us to exercise our muscles in mimicry of the painted movement through inner impulse – with whatever is suggested of substance, weight and animation. For touch is at the very beginning of Creation. Adam was molded of clay, like a statue. In Romanesque iconography, God does not breathe on the globe of the world to send it off into the ether. He sets it in place by laying his hand upon it. And the hand that Rodin used to represent the six days of creation is, as it starts up from the block in which the forces of chaos lie dormant, a most formidable one. What is the meaning of the myth of Amphion, who by the song of his lyre moved stones so potently that they rolled themselves to Thebes of their own accord to construct its walls? Doubtless it means nothing more than the ease of working to a proper musical accompaniment, especially with men who use their hands,

like the oarsmen of ancient galleys, their stroke sustained and cadenced by the air of a flute. We know even the name of the man who strove hardest in building the walls of Thebes. He was Zethos, brother of the lyre player. Zethos is seldom spoken of. Perhaps a time will come when a melodic phrase will be enough to make the flowers bloom, and whole sceneries unfold. But suspended in empty space as if on the screen of a dream, will they have any more substance than the image in a dream? The myth of Amphion, which originated in the land of marble cutters and bronze founders, would disconcert me if I did not remember that Thebes never shone as a great center of sculpture. Perhaps this myth is a compensation, a consolation invented by some musician. But we woodcutters, modelers, masons, painters of the shape of man and the face of the earth, we still retain a wholesome respect for the noble weightiness of matter. For us it is the hand, not the voice or song, that struggles in emulation with it.

Did not the hand, moreover, set number in order, being a number itself and thus an instrument for counting and a master of rhythm? Above all, the hand touches the world itself, feels it, lays hold of it and transforms it. The hand contrives astonishing adventures in matter. It not only grasps what exists, but it has to work in what does not exist; it adds yet another realm to the realms of nature. For long ages the hand was content to set up unpolished tree trunks, still adorned with their bark, to bear the roof of a house or a temple. For long ages it piled unhewn boulders one upon the other to commemorate the dead and to honor the gods. Using vegetable juices to brighten the monotony of such objects, the hand deferred once again to Earth's gifts. Yet, from the day it first stripped the tree of its rugged mantle to reveal the body beneath, from the day it polished the surfaces until they became smooth and perfect, on that day the hand invented an epidermis agreeable both to look upon and to touch. The grain, once

destined to remain deeply covered, now presented mysterious formations to the light. When the shapeless masses of marble buried in the mountain wildernesses were cut into blocks, slabs and effigies of man, they seemed to change both in essence and in substance, as if the new shape they received transformed them to the very depths of their inanimate being, even to all their elemental particles. The same for minerals extracted from their ore, alloyed, amalgamated, fused to form unknown combinations of metals. The same also with clay, hardened in fire and gleaming with enameled surfaces. From the fluid and obscure dust that we call sand, fire extracted a solid transparency. Art begins with transmutation and continues with metamorphosis. It is not man's language for communicating with God; it is the perpetual renewal of Creation. Art is the invention of materials as well as the invention of forms. It develops its own physical laws and its own mineralogy. It plunges its hands into the entrails of things to shape them to its own pleasure. First of all, art is both artisan and alchemist. It works in a leather apron, like a smith. Its hands are black and torn in the struggle of contending with things that weigh and burn. In both the shrewd and the violent actions of his mind, man is preceded by his powerful hands.

The artist, carving wood, hammering metal, kneading clay, chiseling a block of stone, keeps alive for us man's own dim past, something without which we could not exist. Is it not admirable to find living among us in the machine age this determined survivor of the "hand age"? Centuries have passed over man without changing his inner life, without making him renounce his old ways of discovering and creating the world. For him, nature continues to be a repository of secrets and marvels. Always with his bare hands – frail weapons – he seeks to carry them off in order to make them serve him. Thus, a potent yesterday perpetually renews itself; thus, the discovery of fire, the axe, the cart wheel

and the potter's wheel all constantly recur, but without repetition. In the artist's studio are to be found the hand's trials, experiments and divinations, the age-old memories of the human race which has not forgotten the privilege of working with its hands.

Is not Gauguin an example of those ancients who live among us, dress like us, and speak our own language? When we read about the life of the man whom I once called the Peruvian bourgeois, we first discover a bold and clever stockbroker, punctual, contented, enclosed by his Danish wife in a comfortable existence, looking at other people's paintings more with pleasure than with any personal concern. Very gradually, perhaps in response to one of those mutations that spring from the depths and split apart the surface of time, he grows disgusted with the abstractions of money and figures. It is not enough for him to plot the curves of chance with the mere resources of his mind, to speculate on the graphs of the Exchange, to play with the void of numbers. He has to paint, because painting is one way, among others, of reconquering that eternal antiquity, at once far-off and urgent, which possesses and yet escapes him. Not only painting, but all sorts of hand work draw him, as if he were avenging the long inactivity of his own hands which civilization had enforced. He works in pottery, in sculpture and even in the decoration of fabrics. Through his hands, destiny draws him toward wild and savage regions, to Brittany and to Oceania, where the immobile strata of the centuries still endure. He was not content with painting man and woman, vegetation and the four elements. He adorned himself like the savage who decorates his noble body and wears on his person the luxuriance of his art. When Gauguin was in the Islands – and he always sought out the remotest and most primitive of all – he carved idols in tree trunks, not like the copyist of an ethnographic expedition, but with an authentic hand finding out the lost secrets again (Figure 22). He built a carved hut and

Figure 22. Gauguin: Eve and the Serpent.

filled it with gods. The very materials he used, pirogue wood, the coarse and knotty cloth on which he painted as if he were using vegetable dyes and earth colors of rich low tone, these also linked him with the past, plunging him into the golden shadows of a time that has no end. This man of subtle sensibility combats that very subtlety in order to restore to the arts an intensity long submerged in too much refinement. At the same time, his right hand forgets all its skill, to learn from the left an innocence that never outstrips form. For the left hand, less "broken in" than the other, not so expert in automatic virtuosities, travels slowly and respectfully along the contours of objects. With a religious charm blending the sensual and the spiritual, the lost song of the primitive man now breaks forth.

All men, however, are not like Gauguin. Some do not take their stand on beaches, grasping a stone tool or some divinity carved from hard wood. Gauguin himself is both at the beginning of the world and at the end of a civilization. The others stay among us, even when a noble impulsion turns them into fierce prisoners, like Degas, in some lonely part of Paris. But whether they stand aloof or seek the society of men, Jansenists and sensualists alike are fundamentally beings supplied with hands; and thoughtful minds will never cease to marvel at this fact. The most delicate harmonies, evoking the secret springs of our imagination and sensibility, take form by the hand's action as it works with matter; they become inscribed in space, and they take possession of us. The imprint of this manual process is profoundly marked, even when it covers its own tracks, according to Whistler, to push the finished work back into transcendental worlds by eliminating every evidence of the artist's headlong and feverish attack. "Give me a square inch of painting," Gustave Moreau used to say, "and I will know whether it is the work of a true painter." Even the most moderated and uniform execution betrays the artist's

touch – that decisive contact between man and object, that grasping of the world we believe we can see emerging gently or impetuously under our very eyes. His touch never deceives us, whether it be in bronze, in clay, even in stone, in wood or in the plastic and fluid texture of painting. It enlivens the surfaces even of infinitely small-scale work, paradoxical as it may seem, in the old masters whose substances are polished like agate. The followers of David, who presumed to dictate their work to docile assistants, could not censor absolutely all these individual personalities. These pumiced skins, these marble-like draperies, these chill architectures, all taken in the bleak season of doctrinaire idealism – these betray variations under apparent bareness. An art from which these variations were completely banished would be a triumph of inhumanity. Let him try who will.

A young painter shows me a small, well-ordered, perhaps overarranged landscape that, despite its diminutive size, is not lacking in grandeur. "Isn't it true that you don't find my hand any more in this work?" he says. I gather that his taste is for stable things under a changeless sky in a timeless continuum, and that he wishes to avoid all "manner," that is, all manual virtuosity in baroque fancies, in tactile gracenotes, in spattering of impasto. I understand his austere desire to eliminate his own personality and to plunge with all modesty into a great contemplative wisdom, an ascetic frugality. I admire this severe prim youthfulness, this truly French renunciation. He must not try to please or be prodigal with things charming to the sight; he must grow hard in order to endure; he must use the strong accents of intelligibility. Nevertheless, the artist's hand is felt even in the effort that it makes to be docile, in its very circumspection and modesty. It bears down on the ground, it circles around the tops of trees, it skims lightly across the sky. The artist's eye, which has followed the shapes of things and has judged their relative density, performed

the same gesture as his hand. Thus it was with the walls on which are spread, peacefully, the old frescoes of Italy. It is still the same, for whatever it is worth, even in our modern geometrical reconstructions of the universe, in those compositions which contain no recognizable objects but which combine objects broken apart. Sometimes, as if inadvertently, so great is the hand's domination even in servitude, that it gives our senses the tonic note, and we are rewarded by discovering man once more in the arid magnificence of a desert. When one realizes that the quality of a tone or of a value depends not only on the way in which it is made, but also on the way in which it is set down, then one understands that the god in five persons manifests himself everywhere. Such will be the future of the hand, until the day when artists paint by machine, as with an airbrush. Then at last the cruel inertia of the photograph will be attained by a handless eye, repelling our sympathy even while attracting it, a marvel of light, but a passive monster. Photography is like the art of another planet, where music might be a mere graph of sonorities, and ideas might be exchanged without words, by wavelengths. Even when the photograph represents crowds of people, it is the image of solitude, because the hand never intervenes to spread over it the warmth and flow of human life.

Let us go to the opposite extreme and think of works of art which above all breathe life and action. Let us consider drawings, which give us the joyful sense of fullness with the greatest economy of means – little substance, almost imponderable. None of the resources of underpainting are here, no glazes or impasto, none of the rich variations of brushwork that give brilliance, depth and movement to painting. A line, a spot on the emptiness of a white sheet flooded by light; no yielding to technical artifice, no dawdling over a complicated alchemy. One might say that spirit is speaking to spirit. And yet, the full weight of the human

being is here in all its impulsive vivacity, and with it is the magic power of the hand that henceforth nothing can impede or delay even when it proceeds slowly in anxious study. The hand finds every instrument useful for writing down its signs. It fashions strange and hazardous ones; it borrows them from nature – a twig, a bird's feather. Hokusai drew with the end of an egg, and even with his fingertip, ceaselessly seeking novel diversities of form and new varieties of life. How could one ever tire of contemplating his albums and those of his contemporaries, which I should willingly call the *Diary of a Human Hand*? You can see the hand move about in them, nervous and rapid, with a surprising economy of gesture. The violent mark it deposits on this delicate substance, this paper made of scraps of silk, so fragile in appearance and yet almost indestructible – dots, blots, accents and those long crisp lines that so well express the curvature of a plant or of a body, those brusque and crushing strokes in which the very depths of shadow are looming – all convey to us the world's delights and something not of this world but of man himself: a manual sorcery not to be compared to anything else. The hand seems to gambol in utter freedom and to delight in its own skill. With unheard-of assurance it exploits the resources of an age-old science; but it exploits also an unpredictable element beyond the realm of spirit, that is to say, accident.

Many years ago when I was studying the painting of Asia, I considered writing an essay on accident, which I shall doubtless never compose. The old story of the Greek artist who threw a sponge loaded with color at the head of a painted horse whose lather he despaired of rendering, is full of meaning. It not only teaches us that in spite of ourselves everything can be saved at the very moment when all seems lost, but it also makes us reflect on the resources of pure chance. Here, we are at the antipodes of automatism and mechanism, and no less distant from the cunning ways

of reason. In the action of a machine in which everything is repeated and predetermined, accident is an abrupt negation. In the hand of Hokusai, accident is an unknown form of life, the meeting of obscure forces and clairvoyant design (Figure 23). Sometimes one might say that he has provoked accident with an impatient finger in order to see what it would do. That is because Hokusai belongs to a country where, far from concealing the cracks in a broken pot by deceptive restoration, artisans underline this elegant tracery with a network of gold. Thus does the artist gratefully receive what chance gives him and place it respectfully in evidence. It is the gift of a god and the gift of chance latent in his own handiwork. He speedily lays hold of it to fashion from it some new dream. He is a prestidigitator (I like this long, old word) who takes advantage of his own errors and of his faulty strokes to perform tricks with them; he never has more grace than when he makes a virtue out of his own clumsiness. This excess of ink flowing capriciously in thin black rivulets, this insect's promenade across a brand-new sketch, this line deflected by a sudden jar, this drop of water diluting a contour – all these are the sudden invasion of the unexpected in a world where it has a right to its proper place, and where everything seems to be busy welcoming it. For it must be captured on the fly if all its hidden power is to be extracted. Woe to the slow gesture, and to stiff fingers! The involuntary blot with its enigmatic grimace enters, however, into the world of free will. It is a meteor, a root twisted by time; its inhuman countenance fixes the decisive note where it had to be, and where it was not sought for.

Nevertheless, a story, doubtless true in the life of such a man, tells us how Hokusai tried to paint without the use of his hands. It is said that one day, having unrolled his scroll of paper on the floor before the Shogun, he poured over it a pot of blue paint; then, dipping the claws of a rooster in a pot of red paint, he

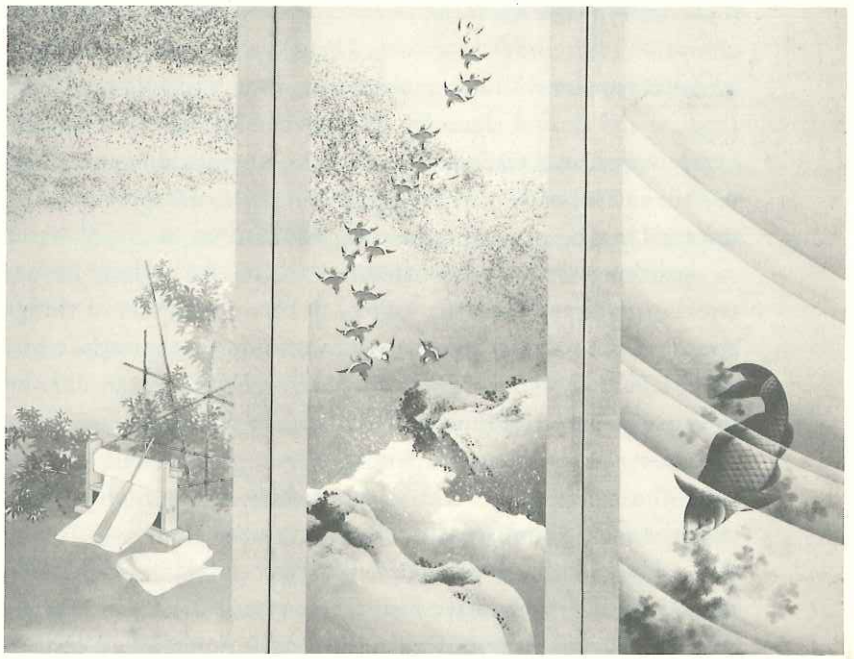

Figure 23. Hokusai: Three Views of the Tama River.

made the bird run across the scroll and leave its tracks on it. Everyone present recognized in them the waters of the stream called Tatsouta carrying along maple leaves reddened by autumn. A charming piece of sorcery, in which nature seems to work unaccompanied to reproduce nature. The spreading blue color flows into divided streams like a real wave, and the bird's claw, with its separate and united elements, is like the structure of a leaf. Its nearly weightless trace makes accents unequaled in force and purity; and its path respects, but with the nuances of life, the intervals setting apart the delicate flotsam that the rapid water sweeps along. Can any hand translate the regular and the irregular, the accidental and the logical in this procession of things almost without body, but not without form, on the surface of a mountain stream? Very much so: the hand of Hokusai. For the memory of long experiment with his hands on the different ways of evoking life brought him, magician as he was, to attempt even this. The hands are present without showing themselves, and, though touching nothing, they order everything.

Such concord between accident, study and dexterity is often found in masters who have kept their sense of daring and the art of discerning what is unusual in the most commonplace appearances. The spiritual family of visionary artists offers us a great many examples of this. At first one imagines that they are carried away by their visions suddenly, utterly and despotically, and that they transfer them intact to any medium whatever by a hand guided from within, like those automatic artists who can draw in reverse. Nothing is less certain, however, if one examines one of the greatest of these visionaries, Victor Hugo. No mind is richer in inner spectacles, in flamboyant contrasts, in verbal surprises that depict the object with an enthralling exactness. One would willingly believe, as he did, that he was inspired like a magician and possessed by presences impatient to become appa-

ritions, complete and already three dimensional in a world at once solid and convulsive. Nonetheless, here is the very type of a man with hands, who makes use of them, not to effect miraculous cures nor to call into being the waves of the sea, but to attack matter and work in it. Hugo carries the passion for this to the very heart of some of those strange novels of his, for example in *The Toilers of the Sea*, where, with all the poetry of the struggle against elemental forces, there breathes an insatiable curiosity as to how things are made, how implements are handled, as to their possibilities, their behavior and even their archaic and disconcerting names. It is a book written by the hand of a sailor, a carpenter and a blacksmith, a hand that has a rough hold on the form of an object and models it by taking its very shape. In this novel, everything has material substance, even the waves and the wind. And it is because Hugo's remarkable sensibility has struggled with the hardness of things, with the evil waywardness of inertia, that it is so responsive to the epic character of water, and to the dramas of light, and has painted them with an almost massive power. The same man, in exile at Guernsey, made furniture and picture frames for himself, built wooden chests and, not content to set down his visions in his verses, poured off the overabundance of them in his astonishing drawings.

One may well ask whether works of this sort, which stand at the limits of some internal strife, are not at the same time a point of departure. Such minds require landmarks. To interpret the configuration of the future, a fortune-teller must seek its first lineaments in dim stains and meanders deposited by dregs in the bottom of a cup. As accident defines its own shape in the chances of matter, and as the hand exploits this disaster, the mind in its own turn awakens. This reordering of a chaotic world achieves its most surprising effects in media apparently unsuited to art, in improvised implements, debris and rubbish whose deteriora-

tion and breakage offer curious possibilities. The broken pen that spits out ink, the shredded stick, the rumpled paintbrush, are all struggling in troubled worlds; the sponge sets free moist passages of light, and granulations of the wash sparkle where it is spread. Such an alchemy does not, as is commonly supposed, merely develop the stereotyped form of an inner vision; it constructs the vision itself, gives it body and enlarges its perspectives. The hand is not the mind's docile slave. It searches and experiments for its master's benefit; it has all sorts of adventures; it tries its chance.

At this very point, a visionary like Hugo parts company from a visionary like Blake. Yet, the latter is also a great poet and a man who could use his hands. His very energy is like a laborer's. Blake is a painstaking worker, a craftsman or, rather, he is an artist of the Middle Ages whom a sudden mutation brought forth in England at the threshold of the Machine Age. He does not entrust his poems to the printer, but he writes them out and etches them, ornamenting them with floral motifs, like a master illuminator of long ago. He retraces the blinding visions that haunt him, his Stone Age Bible, his age-old spiritual antiquities of man, for the most part in a ready-made form, in the debased style of his own day – sad athletes with kneecaps and pectorals carefully drawn, heavy devices, Hell as found in Gavin Hamilton and in the studio of David. A vulgar respect for Ideal Form and for the aristocratic manner neutralizes his own profound idealism. Thus, we find spiritualists and amateur Sunday-painters both full of deference for the most worn-out academicism. All this is what we should expect: in them the soul kills the mind and paralyzes the hand.

We take refuge in Rembrandt. Is not his story one of a progressive liberation? His hand was first a slave to pleasing baroque festoons and mordents, then to a finely lacquered execution, but at length, toward the end of his life, his hand became master not

of an unconditioned freedom, nor of a greater virtuosity, but of the necessary daring to take new risks. Simultaneously it takes hold of form, tone and light. It brings the eternal hosts of shadow into the daylight of living men. It piles up centuries in the passing of an instant. It evokes the grandeur of the unique in ordinary men. To familiar things and to everyday dress it imparts the poetry of the exceptional. It extracts fabulous riches from the filth and weariness of poverty. How? Rembrandt's hand plunges to the heart of matter to force it to undergo metamorphosis; one might say that he submits it to the smelting action of a furnace, and that the flame, lapping at these rocky plains, now calcines them, now gilds them. It is not that the painter multiplies caprice and experiment. He rejects curious procedures in order to travel boldly along his way. But the hand is present. It does not indulge in mesmerism. What it creates is not a flat apparition in empty space, but a substance, a body and an organized structure.

By contrast, what an extraordinary proof of all this I once discovered in some marvellous photographs which a friend brought me from Suez! A clever and sensitive man in those parts had posed some local rabbis before his camera. He cast about them effects of light worthy of an old master. One would think that light emanates from them, from their secular meditation in a shadowed ghetto of Egypt. The foreheads bent over the wide-opened Talmud, the noses of noble oriental curvature, the patriarchal beards, the priestly cloaks with their fine folds – everything about them suggests and affirms Rembrandt. Here indeed are his prophetic old men, enthroned beyond time in the misery and splendor of Israel. What discomfort, however, seized me in looking at these incredibly perfect images! Here is Rembrandt minus Rembrandt. Here is pure perception robbed of substance and density, or rather, here is a dazzling optical souvenir, fixed in that crystalline memory which retains everything, the darkroom. Matter,

hand, man himself, are all absent. Such an absolute void in the totality of presence is a very strange thing. Perhaps I have before my very eyes an example of a future poetic expression; but as yet I cannot people this silence and this waste land.

In considering masters who are full of warmth and freedom, do we not, however, limit ourselves to a type, a group? Have we banished from our reflections, as we might banish artisans with a purely mechanical skill, those masters who with exquisite and faultless patience have evoked more concentrated dreams from choice materials and in refined forms? Is the hand of the engraver, the goldsmith, the illuminator and the lacquerer merely an adroit and complacent servant broken into the practice of fine work? Is what we call perfection, then, the virtue of a slave? Working in the smallest scope, sure of itself and of its direction, such a hand has already become a prodigy, because it subjects the enormous scale of man and of the world to the dimensions of the microcosm. It is no mere device for reducing something. The discipline of restricted size is less important to it than its own capacity for action and truth. At first sight, the festivals and battles of Callot appear to be plates from a book on entomology, migrations of insects in a landscape of molehills. In the *Siege of La Rochelle*, are not the forts and the ships like toys? Numerous, packed together, precise, complete in every detail, do they not appear as if seen from the large end of an opera glass? Is it not the marvel of this handmade thing that everything is understood and ordered within the limits of a stage that is not only diminutive but immense? Isolate any figure or any ship, examine it under a magnifying glass and it appears not only in its simple grandeur, its viability – while having lost nothing if brought up to normal scale – but it is authentic. By this I mean that it resembles nothing else, that it has the accent of Callot's own handwriting, the inimitable line of his nervous elasticity, of that art of his which

is so attentive to the suppleness of clowns and tightrope walkers, so like elegant fencing, so like the greatest violin playing. Callot writes "with a clerk's hand," as was once said of calligraphers; he writes with the hand of a master – but this hand, so proudly clever, never loses its sympathy for life or its ability to evoke movement. In the ritual of perfection it preserves the sense and practice of freedom.

Let us bend down over another enchanted world. Let us examine at length, holding our breath, Fouquet's *Hours of Etienne Chevalier* (Figure 24). Do we find here, caught beneath the frost of a miraculous execution, absurdly perfect figurines rendered with minute strokes according to workshop rules by an exceptionally acute observer? Far from it. Here is one of the highest expressions of that sense of monumental form which is the characteristic trait of the French Middle Ages. One can enlarge these figurines a hundredfold without their losing in power of projection or in fundamental unity. They are like church statues, whose sisters or descendants they might well be called. The hand that drew them belongs to a dynasty formed by centuries of sculpture. It retains, if one may say so, the bent and the force of sculpture even in the tiniest bas-reliefs, dark and gilded, and painted like optical illusions, which sometimes accompany the manuscript illumination and which are likewise treated with exquisite breadth. Thus do two worlds come together, as in the circular mirror that Van Eyck hung at the back of the Arnolfini portrait: the world of living giants, cathedral builders and image carvers, and the magical world of the infinitely small. In one world, the hand works with mallet and chisel on a block of stone propped up on a trestle; in the other, it works over a square of parchment in which fine instruments fashion the most precious rarities of the design. I do not know whether one senses it, or if everything is done to make us forget it; but the hand is there, making its presence known in

the joining of the limbs, in the energetic calligraphy of a face, in the profile of a walled city blue in the atmosphere, and even in the gold cross-hatchings that model the light.

Nerval relates the story of a hand laid under a curse and which, severed from its body, journeys over the world to do a work of its own. As for me, I separate hands neither from the body nor from the mind. But the relationships between mind and hand are not, however, so simple as those between a chief accustomed to obedience and a docile slave. The mind rules over the hand; hand rules over mind. The gesture that makes nothing, the gesture with no tomorrow, provokes and defines only the state of consciousness. The creative gesture exercises a continuous influence over the inner life. The hand wrenches the sense of touch away from its merely receptive passivity and organizes it for experiment and action. It teaches man to conquer space, weight, density and quantity. Because it fashions a new world, it leaves its imprint everywhere upon it. It struggles with the very substance it metamorphoses and with the very form it transfigures.

Trainer of man, the hand multiplies him in space and in time.

Figure 24. Fouquet: Detail from St. Paul on the Chemin de Damas.

The Life of Forms in Art (1934)

Henri Focillon

ZONE BOOKS · NEW YORK

1992