

# Art effect analysis leads to the discovery of the depiction of a human figure in the abstract painting "For M." by Philip Guston

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**With the help of the art effect analysis, it was possible to find presumed references to the depiction of a shocking event in the abstract painting "For M." by the well-known painter Philip Guston, as well as to discover a previously overlooked concrete depiction of a human figure. This surprising discovery in a painting known for decades could be considered a sensation in the art world.**

## **Introduction**

Typical questions arise in a classic image analysis. For example, general considerations such as, what title is the work of art, how was it made, what painting style is it to be attributed, or who created it when? Of course, one will also look at what is depicted in a painting, how it is composed and which design rules are implemented. Finally, the question arises as to how the painting is to be interpreted. In doing so, reference is made to the previous findings and, in addition, also considers aspects such as the personal and historical background of the work and which particular pictorial elements such as symbols were used in order to understand the work better.<sup>1</sup> This analysis of the image may already lead to something like a mental immersion in what is depicted. Although it is precisely this individual resonance with the work of art that can develop an immediate and extraordinary magic, it tends to be neglected in a typical classic image analysis.

It is therefore worthwhile to deal systematically with this subjective effect of a work of art on the viewer. Thus, the APHIN (Arbeitskreis philosophierender Ingenieure und Naturwissenschaftler, Enkirch, Germany) working group Philosophy and Art was able to detect an affective web of perceptions in the positions of influential thinkers on art – compiled in the book “Was ist Kunst? – Positionen der Ästhetik von Platon bis Danto” by Michael Hauskeller.<sup>2</sup> For example, for the philosopher and literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, art can be an incomprehensible and even shocking miracle. For him, perfect art seems to be like a window – a hole in a uniform wall that allows a sudden unprepared look at reality. He describes such a view as overwhelming and disturbing, because it conveys not only an idea of the real world,

but also of human being in the otherwise uniform and uneventful passing time. For Walter Benjamin, philosopher and art critic, the original and the classic work of art can even have a sacred meaning and radiate a distant aura. For Benjamin, progressive art, such as film, with the modern achievement of camera technology, not only allows “a deep and precise penetration into the visible world”, but even brings “the optical unconscious to light”.<sup>2,3</sup>

The working group Philosophy and Art first tried to trace this network of affective perceptions with a few brief questions. Such questions were directed, for example, to the object’s own influences on the viewer’s resonance with the work or to influences emanating from the environment of the work of art. The first list of questions has been further developed in the course by the viewing of a figurative painting by a member of the working group.<sup>4</sup> The aim was to make the subjective effect of a work of art comprehensible by means of a systematic self-questioning and to give this self-examination a curious, open and profound dynamic.

### **Art Effects Analysis of the Painting “For M.” by Philip Guston**

In order to test this further developed APHIN art effect analysis on an abstract painting, I had chosen the work “For M.” by Philip Guston as an example. I noticed a reproduction of the picture in the book “Let’s talk abstract”.<sup>5</sup> The original is executed with oil on canvas in the format of 194 x 183.5 cm and dates from 1955. In this book published a few years ago in 2018, the editor interviews various personalities of the international art scene, each commenting on a selected painting. In the case of the painting by Philip Guston, the interlocutor is Christiane Lange, director of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany.

The painting “For M.” emotional appealed to me because of its strong and impulsive brushstrokes in the middle of the picture. The central red was reminiscent of blood, which in itself caught my attention. The presentation also generated an ambivalent perception between discomfort and warmth. Similar experiences were generally heard in the working group. In her characterization of the painting, Christiane Lange had similarly spoken of a “sore red” and a “painful pink.” The abstract way of painting was also surprising for me. It seemed non-representational, but in a rather unusual way, which is why it challenged my previous viewing habits.

Of the twenty questions of the art effect analysis, two were of particular relevance. First of all, it was impossible for me to see an obvious, concrete event. Everything seemed abstract, but at the same time veiled, whereby the narrow upper and lower ribbon of the painting were in my perception rather impressionistic, which in my opinion was another attraction of the painting. On the other hand, it was also impossible for me to immerse myself emotionally in the painting. At first, the work

seemed rather bulky. Nevertheless, it had an appealing and challenging charisma, which is why I looked at the painting in bigger depiction on the website of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in order to be able to scanning it by eye-sight in detail. This gave the impression of being more and more absorbed by the events depicted. The work had apparently been painted in several layers and had probably gone through a successive process. It felt as if the colors in the centre of the picture were condensing, only to suddenly tear them open and thus let us feel something “indeterminate inside.” I answered the question of the self-questioning what hidden events might be depicted with the concrete formulation of “sudden break-up of something alive in an otherwise quiet background scene.” And so I had the first suspicion that the impulsive, eruption-like red brushstrokes might be part of the depiction of a concrete event.

Immediately I thought to recognize signs of a building, a chapel or a small church. In the lower left quadrant of the picture, the left rear corner of a grey side wall of the building seemed to be indicated. Also a bright gutter and rows of roof tiles. The alleged red eruption apparently took place right in the gable of the alleged chapel, with a grey narrow spire appearing to have bent due to the red eruption. In the middle of the eruption, an oval was weakly visible, then a church window or the front of the chapel. This element had obviously been painted with narrow parallel and – unusual for the general way of painting – vertical lines. It was right where I thought I was feeling the “breakup of something alive.” All in all, there was a supposed scene in which a chapel was depicted on an impressionistic forecourt in front of an impressionistic sky with bad weather clouds coming up. The initially only abstract painting now got a completely different sensory perception for me. The red changed to a threatening blood red. Something terrible seemed to have been portrayed, which the artist apparently did not want to put on display immediately.

All other attempts to understand the outlines of the presumed chapel more clearly failed. For example, at the positions where the missing outline of the chapel roof could be assumed, beige brush strokes were carefully placed and seemed to obscure the complete form of the chapel. Finally, I took a closer look at the felt central element on the “chapel front window.” I noticed that so far, I had only captured one half of this element visually. There had to be a second half right next to it. In fact, this missing half was also visible, although less clear, because some red color had been added here. Between these two elements there was a dark “opening” that seemed to have been broken out. In this opening, to my great surprise, there was a human figure painted in the dark, with a terrified expression on his face. This unprepared discovery had shocked me greatly. The initially pleasantly abstract painting turned into a concrete representation of an apparently terrible, bloody event.

Edith Eberz-Mertens, whom I asked to analyze the painting further, also recognized the human figure in the painting. She was also able to confirm to me

that this figure apparently wears a black robe with a pleat pattern resembling that of a clergyman. At the height of the middle of the garment, a thin, vertical and bright line appears to have a thickening at the upper end (E.-M., insignia?). On both sides of this stroke are shorter light strokes, partly bent, to be noticed (E.-M., hands?). The supposed opening, from which the depicted figure looks out, is rough estimated to be 22.8 cm tall, the face possibly about 4.4 cm long. It is located about in the middle of the painting, slightly shifted to the upper right. Since the discovery published here was made on the basis of a presentation of a painting on a website, it would be useful to conduct further analysis of the original painting, which is housed in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

### **Biographical background and painting style in the work “For M.”**

Because of this presumed spectacular discovery, it was of great interest to learn more about the painter’s biography. Philip Guston was an American painter. He was born in 1913 as Phillip Goldstein in Montreal, Canada, to a Russian immigrant family and died in June 1980 in Woodstock, New York. He spent his youth in Los Angeles, California where his family had moved. Artistically, Guston developed essentially as an autodidact. At a young age he was concerned with cartoons and later with European art history. He was particularly impressed by works by Giorgio de Chirico. From 1931 he became increasingly interested in political and social issues. He created murals about the Ku Klux Klan involvement in the so-called Scottsboro Tragedy. In 1935, he changed his last name to Guston.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1940s, he developed his own style of painting, often referred to as Abstract Impressionism, as it is reminiscent of the impressionist paintings of Claude Monet.<sup>7</sup> In the 1950s he established himself in the New York art scene and was one of the most important exponents of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>8</sup> The abstract style of painting, however, was only a temporary phase of his artistic development. In the course of the 1960s he was able to discern a break with this painting. Against the backdrop of personal and socio-political crises, he created paintings with everyday objects and images that are shaped by allegories and symbols. He used large formats that allowed him to express fears and doubts. He was “. . . fed up with all this purity [of abstract painting]!” He “wanted to tell stories”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Discussion**

After several decades in secret, it was only through the APHIN art effect analyses that attention was drawn to the depiction of a presumed veiled terrible event in a chapel and a human figure in the painting “For M.” by Philip Guston. Although this painting was created by him 67 years ago and is one of his well-known works, so far, according to my research, no such discovery has been published. Also, in the book

“Let’s talk abstract” published a few years ago<sup>5</sup>, “For M.” is treated as a purely abstract painting. Nothing is written about the representation of building elements or a human figure. Once discovered, the depiction of a human figure catches the eye visually. The perceptible horrified facial expression of the figure, which looks like a clergyman, conveys a powerful and sacred charisma. So, their unprepared discovery was extremely shocking to me.

Looking at the painterly style in the work “For M.”, Christiane Lange states in the book “Let’s talk abstract” that she thinks Philip Guston has constructed this painting very carefully.<sup>5</sup> He probably worked it out and fought for it, scratched down paint and reapplied it. For example, she sees in “For M.” a very strongly composed painting that was not created impulsively and intuitively, but rationally and deliberately. This assessment does not speak for an accidental development of a human figure in the painting. In that case, Guston would have masterfully concealed the event depicted. It is now necessary to examine the original painting further in order to shed more light on the published finding from different perspectives.

Against the backdrop of this discovery, the work title “For M.” also comes into focus. Questions arise as to how has a person “M.” been inaugurated in the disclosed depiction or is this person even depicted itself? Is this person referred to in any other way in the sense of what has been discovered?

In the discovery presented here, the art effects analysis was of great importance. Because the persistent and detailed visual examination of the painting and the systematic answer to questions of the art effect analysis have dynamically strengthened each other and successfully advanced the analysis of the painting. It was important not only to go through the steps of this self-questioning mentally, but to write down as accurately as possible the answers given to me. Because this made it necessary to become aware of my own feelings as precisely as possible and link them with formulations and terms. This allowed me to systematically track and concretize perceived sensations, which allowed me to finally track down the presumed hidden events.

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English translation of the corresponding German communication from 28. December 2022, 4. February 2024

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the APHIN-Arbeitsgruppe Philosophie und Kunst, in particular Jürgen Franz and Julia Fuchte for their continuous and helpful group work and Edith Eberz-Mertens, Cologne, Germany, for her fruitful suggestions. I thank Tim Townsend, Sacramento, CA, USA for his helpful commentary on the English translation.

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