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## Introduction

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## Introduction

This special issue of *Criticism* brings together five essays on poetry and the visual arts from early to mid-twentieth-century France and America, reflecting the current high level of theoretical and practical interest in the relations between poetry and painting. Since Jean Hagstrum's classic study, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (1958) brought inter-arts comparisons into scholarly focus, a large and prestigious body of work has explored the territory forbidden by Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766). In addition to many books by literary and art scholars, and a plethora of special issues of journals such as *Critical Inquiry*, *NLH*, *Mosaic* and—most recently—*Poetics Today* and *Style*, the elegant new journal (since 1984) *Word & Image* has brought subtle and ambitious critical attention to bear on a field that comes increasingly to seem not just perverse or exceptional, as Lessing characterized it, but central to the concerns of many important poets and artists. In the spring of 1987, the First International Conference on Word and Image was held in Amsterdam and Utrecht. About two-hundred scholars attended; an association "for Word and Image Studies" was formed; and a second conference was planned for Zürich in 1990.

The five essays in this issue of *Criticism*, focussing on three high modernist poets and one post-modernist—two French, two American—interrogate a narrow but rich arena of interarts influences and problems. Rosanna Warren begins her essay on Apollinaire with homage to the great "father" of the modernist struggle to overcome the limits of genre, Mallarmé; his "Un coup de dés" is the ever-unfolding model and guidebook for modern poets' explorations of poetry's relations among the semantic, visual, and aural realms. Apollinaire's response to Delaunay's cubist experiments with space/place in a poem, "Les Fenêtres," whose sense and sound make a cubist simulacrum in words, and his patterned poems, the "Calligrammes," in which words are spatially arranged to "imitate" their statements but nevertheless retain vestiges of traditional poetic meters, delineate a "place" of poetic experimentation to be prospected by his successors in both France and America. At the other end of our time-line, Renée Hubert probes artists' responses to poems of Francis Ponge which use "natural" imagery as a point of departure for reflections in

sound and space of the artistic process. As three artists produce visual complementarities to Ponge poems—two after the fact, one in a collaboration—the self-conscious ironies and probings of the poems accrue additional and clarified meanings.

Ever more conservative in form than the French modernists, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams approach the boundaries between poetry and the visual arts more respectfully on the one hand, but also more possessively than do Apollinaire and Ponge's three illustrators. Betty Buchsbaum explores Wallace Stevens' interpretation and appropriation of Cézanne's artistic philosophy in "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain" and other late poems, while Michael North convincingly demonstrates the complexity of relationships between image and sign in William Carlos Williams' "The Great Figure," whose numeral 5 "makes the letters around it appear in their dual role of arbitrary signs with absent referent and as material signifiers that are actual enough to become referents themselves." By researching thoroughly the backgrounds of both the poem and Charles Demuth's painting in reaction to it, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, North is able properly to relate "figures" as signs and objects in the paintings/collages of the New York art scene following the Armory Show of 1913 to the "figures" Williams constructs in his early poems. Williams' continuing preoccupation with the signifying power of visual art in relation to poetry is followed up by Terence Diggory, who uses recent reader-response theory to find mutually illuminating meanings in the spatial/social arrangements of narrative paintings by Brueghel and the nineteenth-century American artist, Richard Caton Woodville. Diggory shows how the visual discourse created by Brueghel in the "London" *Adoration of the Kings* appealed to Williams' conception of familial and artistic relations and provided an explanatory text for his reading of life and love in old age.

In these five separate essays, one can see emerging an interpretive methodology, broadly based in semiotics, that illuminates the kinds of relationships prevalent among some major twentieth-century poets and various visual artists. A few key words and concepts surface repeatedly: "figure," comprehending image and multiple levels of signing; "place"/"lieu" as the locus of exchange/transfer of meaning; and "reading," as the unifying activity of poet, painter, and critic. Also apparent is the refusal of both poets and painters to accept boundary lines between art media: on the contrary, the creative artists seem continually to reassert the necessity of recuperating images and techniques from each other, so that nothing can be truthfully

said to "belong" to one exclusively. Lessing's space/time opposition, Stein's petulant rebuff of Picasso's poetry, turn out simply to be starting places for negotiation.

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