

Hans Hofmann's *The Golden Wall* Formal Analysis

Hans Hofmann's *The Golden Wall* (1961) is an Abstract Expressionist painting that is oil on canvas and is 152.4 x 183.5 cm (60 x 72 ¼ in) large. The canvas is scattered with different sized rectangles painted in lime green, bright yellow, pastel pink, royal blue, and baby blue that are positioned either horizontally or vertically. There is a concentration of rectangles stacked upon one another in the lower left-hand corner. It looks as though a burnt orange rectangle is located in the center of the canvas and stacked atop another burnt orange rectangle with visible light orange brushstrokes moving vertically from the bottom. A white, zig-zag smear hovers above the central rectangles. The negative space merges this burnt orange color with the brighter orange which creates an optical play and illusion of depth. Hofmann uses impasto, applying thick smears of paint that appear raised in certain areas like the lime green rectangle and the seven yellow dots in the top right corner. In this paper, I argue that shape, color, and surface quality are the three most important formal elements in understanding Hofmann's *The Golden Wall* because each element encompasses contrasting qualities that altogether create illusionistic depth and a discordant tension throughout the painting.

The Golden Wall uses a combination of geometric and natural shapes. Some shapes appear as a hybrid of the two such as the quick brushstrokes of yellow paint on the right side of the canvas that give the impression of a rectangle but are not quite a geometric shape. The strip of pastel pink starts off looking like a geometric form but does not quite finish off as one since the bottom is ambiguous. The sharp, precise lines of the geometric shapes are contrasted with the hurried and impulsive strokes of the natural shapes. The way the shapes are painted creates a tension between the slow and fast movements of Hofmann's brush and is suggestive of plastic automatism, or the unmediated creation of lines and shapes. The tension between strong

geometric shapes and undefined natural shapes juxtaposed, and in some cases overlaid on top of one another like the royal blue rectangle on top of the yellow paint on the right, produces the illusion of depth even though all of the shapes are flat. The stacked shapes on the left create a sense of gravity that weighs the canvas down while the two suspended royal blue rectangles create a sense of weightlessness.

The contained and loose swabs of color are what create these geometric and natural forms. Hofmann juxtaposes cool colors such as blue and green with warm colors such as red/orange and yellow. The cool colors stand out more since the canvas is overwhelmingly warm colors, thereby creating a sharp and jarring contrast between the two. This also creates an illusionistic depth because the blue and green rectangles are pushed to the foreground as the red/orange shapes recede into the background. The yellow serves to create a sort of middle-ground since it is a bright contrast with the red/orange which pushes it forward but is also a warm color which pushes it back because of the concentration of warm colors in the background. The bright colors emphasize the materiality of the painting since they look pure as if they were used straight from the paint tube. Sometimes color also creates shadows like with the red around the royal blue rectangle in the upper left which gives subtle dimensionality to the flat shapes.

Hofmann plays with surface quality by creating a combination of smooth and rough textures across the canvas. These various textures appear to be determined by the speed and length of his brushstroke—the short staccato strokes of yellow in the upper right create an haute pâte, or raised, relief-like surface, while the longer, drawn out brushstrokes of the light orange on the right create a smooth and flat surface. Paint is therefore used to create a physical and materialistic depth to the painting. The different surfaces also underscore Hofmann's materialistic exploration of paint by shifting between a thin and thick paint application. The

surface quality is also an indication of time and movement—roughness suggests hasty and rapid strokes while smoothness suggests a slow thoughtfulness. Implying a sense of time and gestures through surface quality makes it suggestive of an “action painting” that values the event and experimental process of producing the work of art over its content. Brushstrokes are infused with emotion in which the quick ones evoke a sense of anxiety whereas the slow strokes have a calm quality. The tension between fast and slow time is both temporally and emotionally destabilizing.