Marianne Moore and E. McKnight Kauffer: Two Characteristic Americans

GRACE SCHULMAN

Early in the nineteen-fifties, Marianne Moore wrote that "a few real artists are alive today," and listed among them E. McKnight Kauffer, the graphic designer, along with Casals, Soledad, Hans Marersteig, Alec Guinness and the Lippizan horsemen. In a catalogue note for an exhibit of Kauffer's drawings, the poet wrote: "Instinctiveness, imagination, and 'the sense of artistic difficulty' with him, have interacted till we have an objectified logic of sensibility as inescapable as the colors refracted from a prism."

In the preceding decade they had become close friends, supporting one another in personal crises that were also times of spiritual renewal and growth. Moore once wrote to Kauffer of their common belief, despite affliction and suffering, in "anastasis—the going forward," and in what John Fiske, the American philosopher, had called "the reasonableness of God's work." She wrote: "So let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

Meeting and corresponding frequently, the two artists found stimulation in each other's thoughts about books, events and mutual friends. Often they expressed deep concern about one another's well-being. For example, Moore was troubled about her slender colleague's tendency, like her own, to neglect meals when he was preoccupied. With characteristically serious, genuine affection, she mailed ten dollars to Kauffer with instructions to go to Miss Hettie Hamper's restaurant "for a meal (say once a day?) and you will like her food." Then, quoting Frances Steloff, of the Gotham Book Mart, Moore told Kauffer: "'Her
chef is the very best in New York. Nothing is greasy. Nothing is overcooked, nothing undercooked. Everything is tempting.”

Nor was their affinity limited to personal matters. In their work, they shared traits that were fundamental to their primary effects. Born in Middle America within three years of one another (Kauffer in Montana, 1890, and Moore in Missouri, 1887), they carried forward an American tradition in their eclecticism of subject matter. Creating art of common lives and of knowledge, both insisted on the artist’s freedom to contemplate any information without diminished energy. The two craftsmen extended the scope of art by transmuting material that was banal; “here if nowhere else in the world, ‘street art’ is art,” Moore wrote of Kauffer’s drawings, and the statement applies to her versified newspaper quotations and recorded telephone messages as well as to Kauffer’s advertising symbols. Furthermore, if they were influenced by foreign models, they shared an American quality of combined adventurousness and reserve. Their work is characterized by restrained passion, resulting from their simultaneous awareness and control of life’s terrors.

Both artists depicted living things with exactitude, building their art on a foundation of precise, factual information. In “Poetry,” Moore urges the concrete presentation of living things (“Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate”). In Kauffer’s posters, hands are indeed “hands that can grasp”: seamen’s hands grasping a rope (“Player’s Cigarettes”) and whittling wood (American Airlines “East Coast”); a hand lifting a telephone receiver (“Come on the Telephone”); a hand arresting traffic, its movement captured by the use of three colors (“Stop ‘Em to Sell ‘Em”). We find in his paintings “eyes / that can dilate,” bells than can ring, ships that can sail.

If precision was their common aim, however, it was counterbalanced by their faith in the imagination’s power to transform reality, for they distilled their art from the interaction of the mind with commonplace objects. One of the books Moore borrowed from Kauffer and discussed with him was the New Directions edition of Paul Valéry’s Selected Writings, containing an essay that Kauffer had marked: “Fragments from ‘Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci.’” In this piece, Valéry wrote that the mind of the artist, seeking exactitude, groups perceptions around an object and projects a structure of multiple properties. This kind of transmutation is at the heart of the work of Kauffer and Moore. “What is more precise than precision? Illusion,” the poet wrote, and the paradox illuminates their common tendency to depict real things under the changing, enchanted gaze of the mind’s
eye: Kauffer portrays “The Tower of London” as a structure that is half real and half allegorical; his country family in “Whitsuntide Holiday” are solid common people and angels.

Another of the artistic bonds between the two artists was their fascination with machines, and their mutual desire to know their engines, turbines, motors and recessed wheels. “I am interested in mechanisms, mechanics in general,” Moore told Donald Hall, describing her painstaking and aborted attempt to help the Ford Motor Company find a name for the Edsel. With the fastidiousness, and often the tone, of engineers, she and Kauffer explored these mechanisms: the poet investigated such instruments as “Four Quartz Crystal Clocks” (“There are four vibrators, the world’s exactest clocks”); the painter caught the essence of machines in designs such as the bale label illustration, “El Progreso,” in which he approximates the speed and power of a railway train.

Related to their interest in machines was their concentration on the mathematic regularities in man-made enterprises as well as in nature. Geometric shapes were organizing principles of Kauffer’s perceptions, and Moore, who shared this concern, quoted Kauffer’s observation about geometry in nature at the outset of “The Icosasphere,” a tribute to a twenty-faced structure built by an engineer. The poem opens:

“In Buckinghamshire hedgerows
the birds nesting in the merged green density
weave little bits of string and moths and feathers
and thistledown
in parabolic curves.”

In her use of this quotation, Moore captured Kauffer’s joyful curiosity about geometric harmony in common things. Once he jotted in a notebook: “Designing is order—the cube—the circle—the triangle all parts of equipment—and symbols of order.” In a poster of 1933, “You Can Be Sure of Shell,” he conveys the certainty of Shell by presenting an unbreakable chain of elongated links. His use of the triangle and the circle serve the precision and naturalness of “The Early Bird” poster for The Daily Herald of 1920.

However curious they were about technology, though, their delight in machines had the converse expression of horror. “People’s Surroundings,” first published in 1922, is Moore’s infernal urban vision of a “vast indigestible necropolis,” whose residents are similar to Eliot’s wretched crowds in The Waste Land and to the human automatons in Paterson, by William Carlos Williams. Analogous to all of these poems is Kauffer’s “Metropolis” (1926), a painting that embodies a “waste land” of skyscrapers and industrial wheels. Partially obscured by the wheels, pitifully subjugated men walk like robots, their heads bowed.

Horror, yes; but if technology repelled Kauffer, why would he depict the metropolis with such care and tough-minded accuracy? There is no simple answer, for it was, I believe, the multiple view of the mind that was central to the achievements of both artists. Besides adhering to the many-sided internal vision, they pursued the truths of their respective crafts rather than propagating any belief or attitude. But Kauffer and Moore criticized mechanical enterprises that employed the distortion of scientific measurement to destroy or diminish living things. Resembling Kauffer’s “Metropolis,” Moore’s poem, “To a Steam Roller,” embodies an extended metaphor of a destructive mechanism. In it, the poet addresses a devastating machine that is flattening the landscape: “You crush all the particles down / into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.” The poet and the poster designer admired geometric precision for its similarity to exactitude in the mind of the artist as it comes to terms with things of the world. Both artists, though, were horrified that science should be abused to enslave people. Both found impact in the accuracy of human perception, but danger in man’s misuse of that faculty.
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

In the best work of both Americans, life's terrifying mysteries are only partially contained by structural devices that hold reality at a remove from perception. The ways in which they achieve this constitute their most powerful effects. In Moore's poem, "A Grave," the poet partially conceals the terror of death by her conversational tone and by her presentation of images that challenge perception. The sea is "beautiful under networks of foam," but it is frightening, for it has "nothing to give but a well-excavated grave." And in "Marriage," she contrasts whimsical, witty phrases with language that captures an irrational current of the mind in passages that convey the destruction of reason by passion.

These contrasts of harmony and chaos are found in Kauffer's greatest work. In "Route 160, Reigate," Kauffer presents a row of black gnarled trees backed by straight trees in a brilliant, unearthly red color. The gnarled and the straight, the black and the red, combine to give an effect that is all the more strange for its partial adherence to naturalness. In his book-jacket illustration for Winds, by St.-John Perse, Kauffer employs geometrically neat lettering, but places near the title a jagged line that extends off the page. It is the precision and, conversely, the deceptively unruly view of life, both coexistent in the mind, that the two artists confronted in their greatest achievements. Theirs was a kind of American adventurousness and control that brought curiosity to its furthest reaches and most staggering dangers and risks. It was a quality they shared with their countryman, Henry James, who had, Moore wrote, a "mind incapable of the shut door in any direction."

The Model Stanza: The Organic Origin of Moore's Syllabic Verse

MARGARET HOLLEY

In the poems that she published between 1932 and 1936, Marianne Moore revived the syllabically based stanza form that she had developed in many of her earlier "observations." During the early Twenties she had begun experimenting with free verse by rearranging, for example, the long twenty-two and thirty-two syllable lines of 1918's "A Graveyard in the Middle of the Sea" (which became "A Grave") and 1920's "England" into the irregular lines of the free form. The great 1923–24 trio of longer poems—"Marriage," "An Octopus," and "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns"—was also published in free verse. Why then did she return in the early Thirties to the syllable mode?

The five-year foray (1920–25) into free forms made virtually no difference in the sound, the spoken dimension, of Moore's verse, since the natural rhythms of speech and written prose had already been accommodated by her avoidance of regular metrics and her preference for the inaudible syllabic measure. But what free verse did override was one important element of her poetry's textual dimension, the stanza form visibly repeated on the printed page. In the Thirties, when Moore returned from editing The Dial to her own poetry, she turned neither to her early meters nor to free verse but to the syllabically measured stanza. What follows here is an exploration of the nature of that syllabic form, its origin, its role as a textual format, and its implications within the larger context of modernism.

We know that in Moore's process of composing her verse syllabic design was a secondary consideration. The stanza form for any one