13.

The Bicycle in Art and the Problem of Representation of the Moving Image

Scotford Lawrence

Before the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there had been little artistic exploration of the representation of the moving image. Even where dynamic action could be expected — the battle, the hunt, the dance — the more common image was of stasis — that moment before action commences, rather than of the dynamism of the action itself. Such movement was rarely attempted by the artist or, indeed, expected by the viewer.

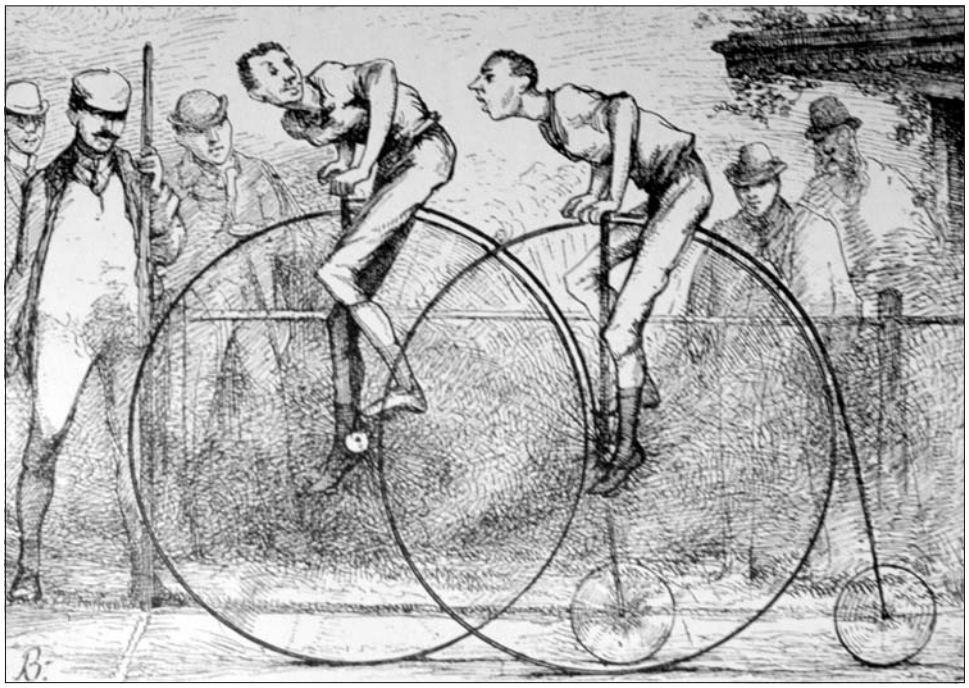
Before the nineteenth century most human experience was limited to walking, perhaps running or the ten kilometers per hour or so of a horse or carriage and little further was expected from the images offered by the artist.

Fig. 1301. Attr. George Cruikshank: Stop Him who can! Caricature of Denis Johnson. London, 1819.

With the advent of the bicycle and the contemporaneous development of the first forms of mechanically powered transport, demands were imposed upon the visual artist which had seldom been considered in earlier centuries. The few examples of the depiction of movement in the visual arts which exist from previous ages have to be considered and examined on a random basis, almost as artistic curiosities rather than as an artistic theme with any historical continuity.

Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (London, National Gallery), of 1523, represents Bacchus leaping from his chariot and suspended forever in space. The rest of the painting offers a swirling movement from the right hand side of the canvas countered by Ariadne's upright pose at the extreme left, but it is upon the central figure of Bacchus that we are drawn to concentrate. From the upward movement of his cloak, we can see that his leap has already become a fall. But the figure for all its foreshortening and forward thrust lacks muscular tension and speaks, appropriately, more of a floating god than of a leaping man. As a portrayal of movement, it must be regarded more as

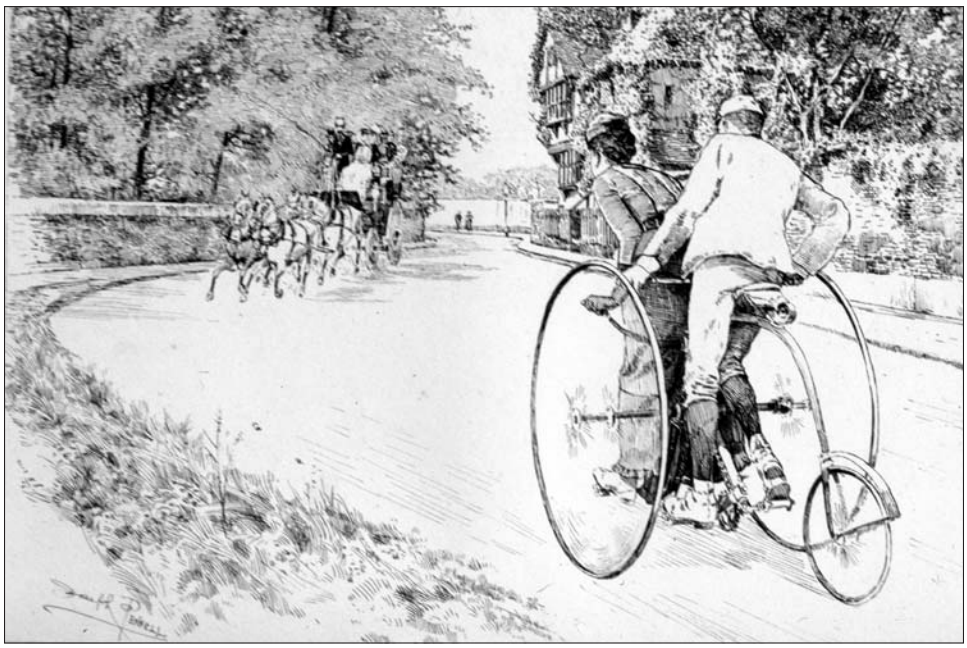
Above: Fig. 1302. Godefroi Durand: Ladies' Cycle Race, Bordeaux, 1 November 1868, **Le Monde Illustré**, 21.11.68



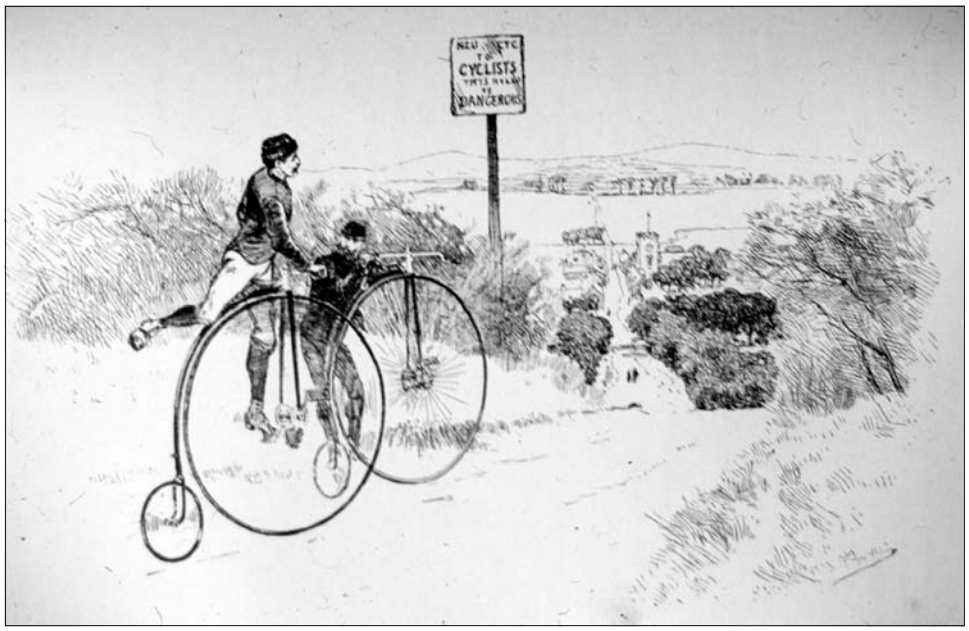
1303. Viscount Bury: A Close Finish. **Badminton Library, Cycling**, 1885, 2nd Edition, 1889.

an unusual experiment than as a successful achievement.

One of the very few examples of the representation of mechanical movement to be found in art prior to the industrial revolution is Diego Velasquez's *Las Hilanders* (Madrid, Prado) ca. 1657. The painting shows a scene in a textile workshop with, in the foreground, a girl working at a spinning wheel. What the artist has observed and depicted here is a phenomenon which does not appear to have been addressed again by artists for the next two hundred years — the stroboscopic effect caused by the high speed rotation of a spoked wheel. The spokes of the revolving wheel have been reduced to a blur through which the background can be clearly seen. Some years earlier Philip Angel writing in his *Lof der Schilder–Konst* (Leiden, 1642) wrote: "Whenever a cart wheel or a spinning wheel is turned with great force, you will notice that, because of the rapid turning, no spokes can be seen but only an uncertain glimpse of them, but though I have seen many cart wheels represented, I have never yet seen this as it should appear because every spoke is always drawn as if the carriage did not appear to move." In fact, the effect observed by a static observer of the wheels of a moving vehicle is different from that of a wheel rotation in a fixed position as in the



Above: Fig. 1304. Joseph Pennell (1860–1926): Right of Way. **Badminton Library, Cycling**, 1885.



Right: Fig. 1305. Joseph Pennell: This Hill is Dangerous. **Badminton Library, Cycling**, 1885.

case of the spinning wheel, the reasons for which will be referred to later in this paper.

The bicycle and its representation raised new and unusual artistic problems. The interrelationship of propulsion, steering and balance in the bicycle makes unique demands upon the rider and this paper will examine how and to what extent the artist recognizes and represents this. The representation of forward movement is of the essence. The cyclist has to move forward but also, as the image is turned toward or away from the viewer, the alternative perspective comes to dominate, showing the rider in contact with the ground only through the most impossibly narrow strip of iron or rubber.

Above: Fig. 1306. Frank Patterson (1871–1952): Streatley, The Berkshire Downs. **Cycling**, 1930.

Few artists of the hobby-horse addressed the dynamism of the machine. In England, within weeks of its introduction and first appearance on the streets of London early in 1819, the first images were published in the form of a series of colored engravings produced by print makers whose work, at this time, was the most widely disseminated visual commentary on the fashionable and newsworthy activities of the capital.

During a period of only a few months in 1819, over ninety of these hobby-horse prints were produced, linking the machine with the fashionable "dandies" of the regency, with royal scandals, and with contemporary political instability. But in no case do we find machines which really appear to be moving. A hobby-horse could be propelled at ten to twelve kilometers an hour so that its wheels would appear exactly as Philip Angel accurately describes them, but in all the prints of this period, the wheels of the machine remain resolutely static, each spoke drawn in detail. More traditional indicators of movement are however included (Fig. 1301). The patentee, Mr. Denis Johnson, is seen losing his hat and with his umbrella blown inside out as he hurtles down Highgate Hill in North London, running over a dog and frightening a young lad — but the wheels of his hobby-horse do not revolve.

Even when speed is the theme of the print, as in *Match against Time* representing a contest of cyclist

Right: Fig. 1307. George Moore (1863–1914): Cutting it Fine. **Bicycling News**, 1890.

against horseman, of which a number took place during 1819, the wheels do not turn, even if small puffs of dust are raised to indicate motion (though these are in front of the wheels, not behind them!) The movement of the scene is indicated by the position and action of the riders rather than by accurate observation of the machine.

The hobby-horse craze was short-lived and by the end of the decade no more prints were produced, even if the machines themselves continued to be used by a few riders impervious to public ridicule. It was not until the development of the two-wheeled velocipede in the 1860s that the problem of the representation of the bicycle in motion were truly recognized by the artist.

The velocipede could be pedaled at speeds up to 12–15 kilometers an hour or more, so that its wheels revolved faster than the spinning wheel in Velasquez's painting. The rider no longer had direct contact with the ground so that the precarious image of a man balanced on a rim little broader than the width of his finger could readily be seen. Above all, the balance was achieved by steering and leaning into the direction of fall. The cyclist could be seen tilted an angle which was only maintained by the centrifugal force of his forward travel. The representation of the cyclist and his vehicle now demanded artistic recognition of that intimate relationship between motion, steering and balance which is at the heart of the use of the machine.

The velocipede or boneshaker was a short-lived machine and the quest for speed and lightness brought about extremely rapid technical development. The time between the advent of the first velocipedes and the emergence of the High Ordinary was little more than ten years. Prior to and during this period there had been a parallel growth in the availability of popular printed newspapers and magazines and, with them a demand for reproduced illustrations to enliven their texts and to communicate to the reader the novelty and excitement of new activities. The work of the graphic artist of this period is remarkable for its inherent quality and liveliness. The bicycle itself on of these novel subjects, was well represented.

Typical of the news illustration of the period is the drawing by Godefroi Durand which first appeared in *Le Monde Illustré* of 21 November, 1868 of the first ladies' cycle race held in Bordeaux three weeks earlier (Fig. 1302). Wheels are shown to rotate, clothing is disarrayed by the breeze and even and "end-on" view of one rider is included. The print also emphasizes that these female riders are strongly in charge of their machines and of the event, for these were "

Below: Fig. 1308. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901): La Chaine Simpson. Poster, 1896.
Right: Fig. 1309. Joseph Crawball: Girl on a Bicycle. Glasgow, Burrell Collection, 1895.

serious" riders (mostly professionals) who in the short period before the Franco-Prussian War followed the race circuit in France and Belgium and appear again and again in many of the events of the period.

But within a very few years, the technology of the boneshaker had been supersede by the high ordinary and the speeds of riders had almost doubled. By 1880, representation of the bicycle demanded a full recognition of the movement of rider and machine. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in the work of the illustrators of the Badminton Library *Cycling,* first published in 1885 and republished in a number of further editions and revisions until the end of the century. Viscount Bury's *A Close Finish* of 1885 (Fig. 1303) renders the spokes of the machines almost invisible, through which the background can be clearly seen. It is, however, to his fellow illustrator of the Badminton *Cycling* that we have to look to find some of the most perceptive representations of cycling and the bicycle at this period. The cycling work of the American artist Joseph Pennell (1860–1926) is among the best of the nineteenth century both in its portrayal of the wide range of machines which he and his fellow "cyclers" rode, but also of the movement of the rider's body in the effort of propelling these machines.

The hazards of cycling are well represented by Pennell's illustration *The Right of Way* (Fig. 1304.) His drawing of the two figures (himself and his wife, Elizabeth) speaks eloquently of the emergency of finding your side of the road occupied by a fast approaching coach and four — and this on a machine with only the most rudimentary and ineffectual braking. Pennell most frequently sought to portray the

Fig. 1310. Jacques Villon (Gaston Duchamp-Villon) 1875–1963): Un Début, 1906. Musée d'Art Moderne de St. Brienne.

Fig. 1311. André Gill: Napoléon III, Balancing Act. Cartoon, ca. 1869.

English countryside as well as his cyclists and in *This Hill is Dangerous* (Fig. 1305) we have both movement in the cyclists and a view out over the countryside which precedes the later work of that most English of cycling topographical artists, Frank Patterson (1871–1952), (Fig. 1306).

In Patterson's illustration of the Berkshire Downs to the west of London, movement is given, not by the retreating cyclists, but by the sweep of the downland itself and the echoing movement of the clouded sky above. There is little requirement for the representation of dynamic movement in these illustrations, but more for a communication of the freedom from urban constraints available to the cyclotourist.

Less well known is the work of Patterson's near contemporary, George Moore (1863–1914), who produced a large volume of work for a number of cycling and other magazines from the 1880s until his early death. Since my topic is the portrayal of movement in cycling art, I include a single example to show the quality of his work (Fig. 1307). I would suggest that had the horse in this print, *Cutting it Fine* from *Bicycle News* of 1890, been drawn by one of the leading animal artists of the day, Edward Landseer, say, or Rosa Bonheur, it would be regarded as a masterpiece instead of a mere illustration by a commercial artist.

Perhaps the best known artist of the bicycle from the mainstream of art is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), who during a single week in June 1896 paid his only visit to England, where he made a number of sketches at the Catford track in London which he used as the basis of his lithographed poster, *La Chaîne Simpson* (Fig. 1308). While this is hardly the most successful of Lautrec's poster works, his need to make the figures move does include one interesting detail. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the viewer's perception of the wheels of a moving vehicle is different from that of a rotating wheel in a fixed position. If we look closely at the wheels of Constant Huret's

Fig. 1312. Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916): Dynamism of a Cyclist, 1913. Milano, Castello Sforzesco.

Fig. 1313. Francis Bacon (1909–1992): George Dyer on a Bicycle, 1967. Private Collection, New York.

bicycle, we can see that Lautrec has accurately observed that part of the wheel rim which is in contact with the track is, in fact, static to the viewer while the hub is moving at the speed of the machine (probably about 50 km/hr in this case) and the top of the rim at twice that speed. In fact, Lautrec has shown just a few of the spokes at the base of the wheel, while the rest of the wheel is left entirely "open" with the track clearly showing through. This is an acuity of perception which I have found nowhere else in cycling art.

When we consider the graphic representation of balance, the "end on" view of the cyclist becomes more important. We are no longer looking for speed but a recognition of that precariousness which is more apparent to the viewer than it is to the cyclist himself. This was a particular theme of those artists of the last decade of the nineteenth century who saw, for the first time, large numbers of women cyclists on the recently introduced safety bicycle (Fig. 1309). These were no longer daring young men on their high wheelers but were fashionable and often aristocratic ladies who took up cycling as a leisure activity and were quickly joined by larger numbers of young women who appreciated the liberty afforded by the newly available machine (Fig. 1310). Drawings, sketches, and cartoons abound of the new lady riders and these are more likely to emphasize the precarious balance of the rider and machine than its speed and forward movement. It is hardly necessary to add that the artists were all men.

The theme of balancing the machine had been used as a paradigm for political instability ever since the first appearance of the hobby-horse in 1818 and this continued in political cartoons throughout the

Above: Fig. 1315. Claude le Boul: The Champion Eddy Merckx, Madison, 1987.

Left: Fig. 1314. Claude le Boul (born 1947): The Champion Eddy Merckx, Time Trialling, 1987.

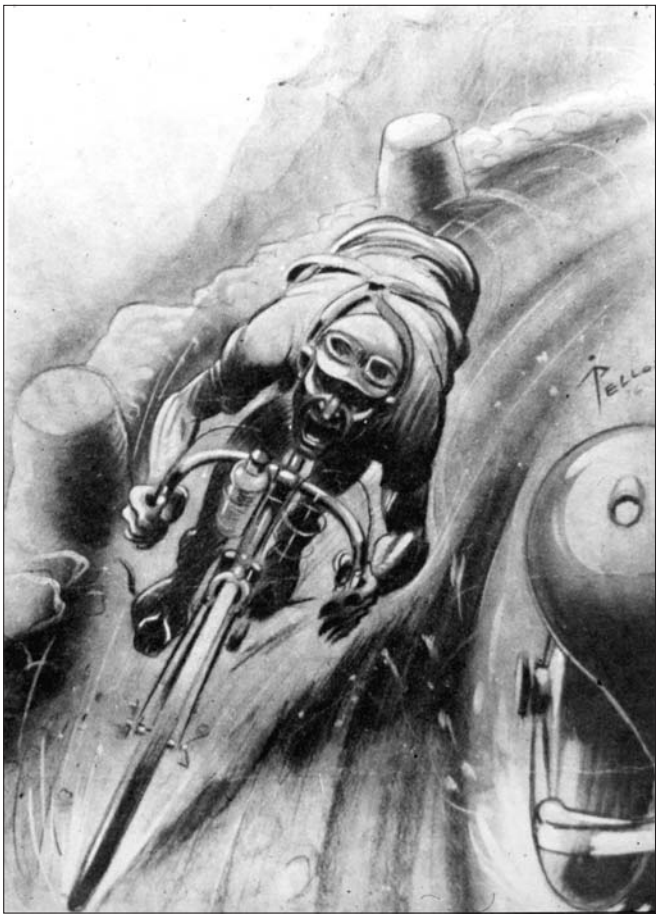
century and, indeed up to the present day. This example (Fig. 1311) by the French cartoonist André Gill dates from 1869 and shows Napoléon III riding a velocipede on a high wire above the raging revolution below. It was drawn just after the famous French tightrope walker Charles Blondin (1824–1897) had crossed above the Niagara Falls on a velocipede. Napoléon was not so fortunate in maintaining his political balance but survived to end his life in exile in England.

We have so far looked at the portrayal of the cycling image in a realist manner rather than in a way that acknowledges the fact that the perception by the viewer of the moving object modifies what is seen because of that movement. In our approximately chronological progression through cycling art, we must not overlook the fact that the mainstream of art had itself undergone enormous change throughout the period of the development of the bicycle. As early as 1843 the precursor of impressionism, J.W.M. Turner (1755–1851), had recognized that what we see of a speeding object is not a detailed and precise image but a fragmented perception, as seen in his image of a speeding railway train, *Rain, Steam, Speed* (London, Tate Gallery) of 1843; "… the suggestion of a form of motion that appears for an instant and then loses itself in the infinite succession of its changing varieties".

That quotation, while appropriate, is not from Turner himself but from a later artist who briefly explored images of the cyclist in movements before going on to faster, noisier and more brutal subjects. Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916), a leader of the futurist movement, in 1912–13 made a series of sketches and a final painting representing *The Dynamism of a Cyclist* (Fig. 1312). In this fragmented image, however, we can also read the influence of the work of those photographers who had used the camera to examine the nature of movement and superimpose the images to show not only a single vision of the rider, but also a series of references to his immediate previous positions. This technique was not unique to the work of Boccioni but had already been exploited to the most remarkable effect by Marcel Duchamp

Right: Fig. 1317. René Pellarin (Pellos) (1900–1986): Climber, **Match**, Front Cover, 2 July 1935.

Below: Fig. 1316. Wolf Reuther: La Montée de la Rue Pavée, 1971. Paris, Musée du Sport.

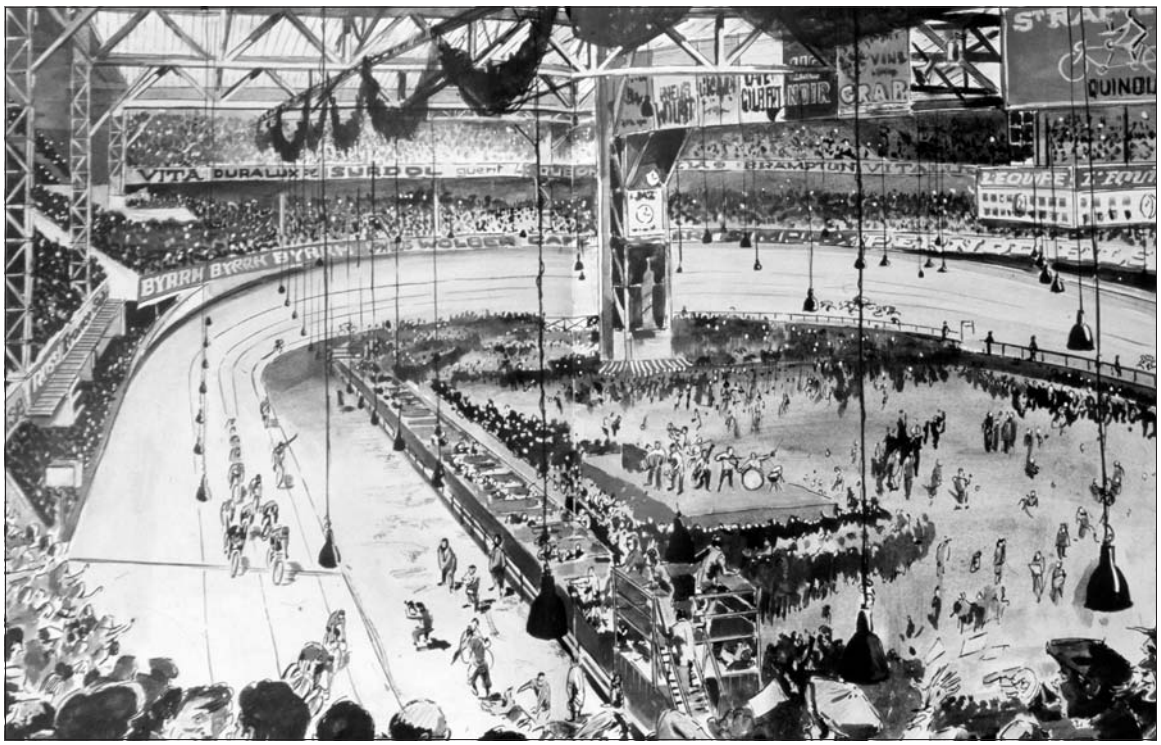


Above: Fig. 1318. René Pellarin (Pellos): La Descreute du Galibier, **Match**, ca. 1935.

(1887–1968) in his cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* of 1911–1912.

A similar multiple image of the cyclist, used for very different reasons and much nearer to our own time, was produced by Francis Bacon (1909–1992) of *George Dyer on a Bicycle* of 1967 (private collection, New York) (Fig. 1313) — a painting which particularly interests me because of the various interpretations of it by art historians.

Dyer was Bacon's homosexual lover and partner in a stormy relationship during their time in Paris in the 1960s. What we have is a strange, anomalous painting of Dyer on his bicycle apparently riding around a track (observe the curved lines along the foreground with the crossing finish line and a chair for a spectator at the bottom edge of the painting). But Dyer's machine has brake levers. The only place in Paris where you would see a braked machine ridden round a track was at the Parc des Princes at the end of the Tour de France or the track finish of other road races. The Tour did not move to its present city centre road finish until 1973, six years after the date of this painting. Bacon and Dyer were great followers of spectator sporting events, boxing matches, night clubs and so on, and would certainly have attended this most famous of Parisian sporting occasions. What the artist has done is to put Dyer on his bicycle going around a track (the Parc des Princes) so as figuratively to confine him within a repeated space — in much



Right: Fig. 1319. Jacques Lemaire: Vélodrome d'Hiver, Les Six Jours de Grenelle à Berry, 1984 (1954).

the same way as he painted his screaming figures within a notional glass cage on the canvas. In this case it is the artist confining the unruly Dyer within the circular cage of the track. Dyer broke out of that cage definitively by committing suicide on the evening of Bacon's first major Paris exhibition.

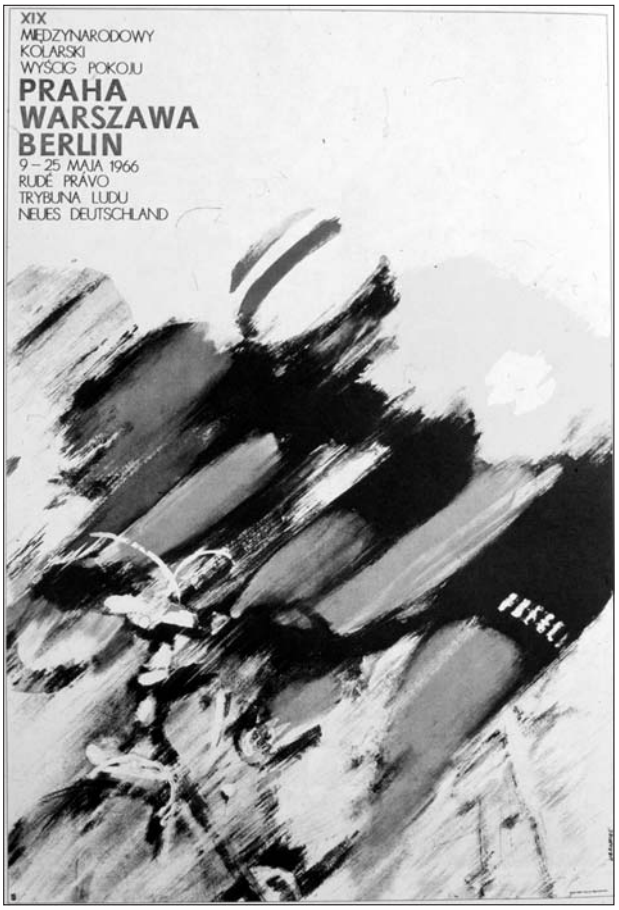
The fragmentation of the perceived image has been used more recently to great effect by the young French artist Claude la Boul in his series *The Champion Eddy Merckx* (1987) (Figs. 1314 and 1315) to impart movement to pictures of the racing cyclist. Two examples suffice to show the multiple image of Merckx riding solo and in a Madison — apparently with himself! The effect of these images is indeed dynamic but also by multiplying the image of the rider, implies Merckx's domination and ubiquity in the races which he rode. The whole series of lithographs and watercolours is a rare example of a modern artist who has successfully addressed the movement, power and dynamism of the racing cyclist.

To the very limited number of artists who have truly understood the movement of the competitive cyclist I would add a work by Wolf Reuther, *La Monté de la Rue Pavée* of 1971 (Fig. 1316). In this painting the cubist technique is used to produce a fragmented image of riders climbing on pavée with the juxtaposition of strong colors and the broken images of the cyclists communicating very clearly the disruption to the smooth flow of riding caused by the sort of abrupt climbs and jarring road surfaces which are to be found in the Belgian Classics.

In any review of the bicycle in art, we must acknowledge one artist whose work became in his lifetime not only a continuing commentary on the Tour de France but also an element of the race itself — an icon of French cycle racing throughout the first half of the present century. René Pellarin, known as Pellos, was most active in the inter-war years when his work included strip cartoons, caricatures and those unforgettable images of courageous lone riders which characterized the Tour at that time (Figs. 1317 and 1318). The pose is simple and the drawing has little detail. The use of heavy shadow gives strength to the rider's forward movement and emphasizes the

Right: Fig. 1321. O. Mancioli: Track Rider, Sketch, 1968
#22 Majiec Urbaniec: Warsaw–Berlin–Prague. Poster, 1966.

Below: Fig. 1320. Jacques Lemaire (born 1954): Vélodrome d'Hiver, Aux Balustrades, 1984.



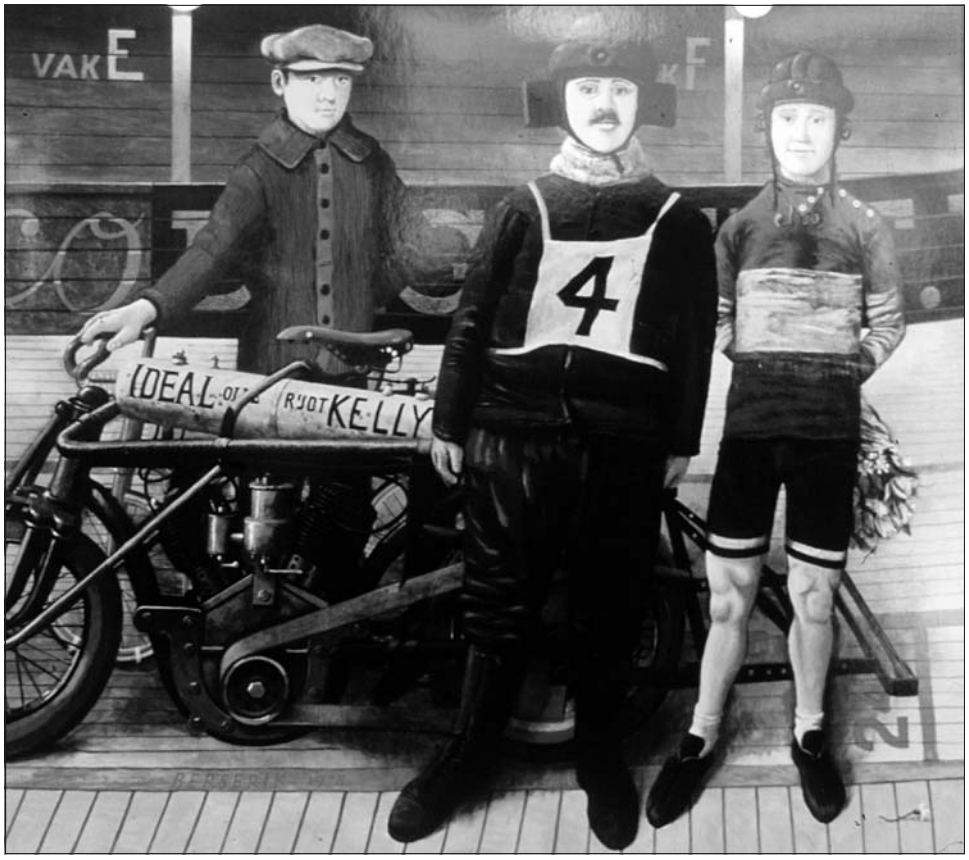
Above. Fig. 1322. Urbaniec: Poster for Warsaw–Berlin–Prague road race.

sheer hard work and danger of these climbers on their ungeared machines.

We have so far considered forward movement and balance as elements in the portrayal of the cyclist. Historically, the art image has nearly always been "posed" — that is, shown in a fixed position which can be held. Indeed, when discussing this phenomenon recently with a painter friend, he commented that pictures in which the image is unstable are disconcerting to the viewer — that the falling or leaping figure is not a "comfortable" image to have in continuous contemplation. However, this very fact has been exploited by some artists of the bicycle to emphasize its movement.

The contemporary sports illustrator, Jacques Lemaire, has produced a volume of work from drawings made at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris before its closure in 1957 (Fig. 1319). In these drawings, the strange images afforded by the steep curvature of the track are fully exploited to make the rider move within the scene (Fig. 1320).

If the movement which we attempt to see is too fast, we do not see it clearly at all. What Philip Angel described as "only an uncertain glimpse" is, in the words of the art historian Ernst Gombrich, "so much



Right: Fig. 1323. Hermanus Berserik (born 1921): Rolrijder, 1968. Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem.

more easily obtained by a few energetic strokes than through elaboration of detail". Finally, the moving figure of the cyclist becomes a few strokes on the paper (Fig. 1321) or a blur on the canvas. Here the image is not fragmented after the manner of the cubists or repeated in the manner of Boccioni or le Boul but is blurred by its speed in a manner which we have been taught to recognize by the impact on our visual vocabulary of photography and the cinema and television screens (Fig. 1322). Urbaniec's poster image for the Warsaw–Berlin–Prague road race exploits our experience of photography to move his riders across the paper in a way which would probably not have been understood by our ancestors of a couple of centuries ago. We have become used to movement and its representation both through our direct experience and through those electronic images which now dominate our lives.

But the cyclist does not have to move in order for us to appreciate his effort, his skill or (and this is particularly relevant in today's cycling conditions) his vulnerability.

Movement can be subsumed in the examination of the situation of the rider himself. Nowhere is this better seen than in Hermanus Berserik's *Rolrijder* of 1968 (Fig. 1323). The whole visual emphasis of this painting is on the mechanical power of the pacing motorcycle and its rider while the cyclist and his machine is pushed to one side of the canvas and his success (he is holding the winner's bouquet behind his back) is rendered transitory by the symbolism of the single fallen flower at his feet. His bland, simple face and diffident stance communicate clearly the rider's situation as an element in the visual entertainment of track racing and motor-paced riding in the inter-war years.

Finally, if movement, the technology of the bicycle, the machinery and even the clothing are stripped away, we are left only with the motive power of the rider. Nothing is more ephemeral, nor more vulnerable (Fig. 1324). The sculptor Aristide Maillol, best known for his massive female nudes, was commissioned in 1908 to produce a male nude, the model for which was the motor-paced rider Gaston Collin. While it was not the prime purpose of the work, there is no better communication of the fragility and vulnerability of the cyclist and the transitoriness of the human condition than this single, unmoving figure.

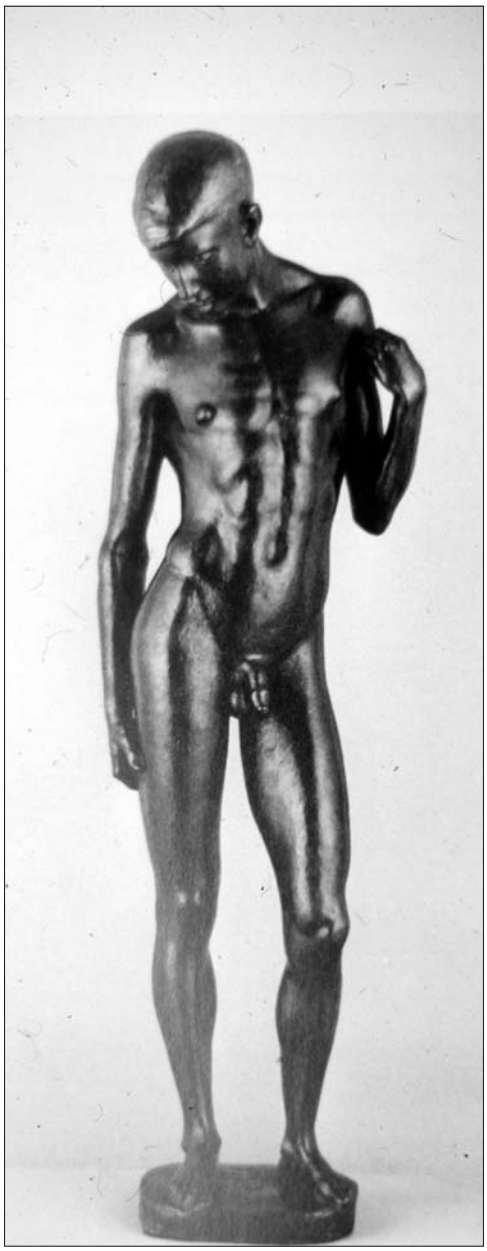


Fig. 1324. Aristide Maillol (1861–1944): Coureur Cycliste Gaston Collin, 1907–1908. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.