

## Painting a Thousand Words

*How can one acquire the painting skill?*

**"Go and paint a thousand portraits and a thousand florals!"**

These are the final words of Patricia Moran to her readers in one of her books. For a while, I heeded her advice and concentrated mainly on *florals*. But when my flower expertise grew to such a degree that Carol herself began consulting me on how to arrange her bouquets, giving rise to unwanted doubts about my gender, I duly went back to Still Lifes and concentrated instead on *thousand*. But in spite of this paradigm shift, *thousand* has its own problems because at a production rate of one painting per week, I see no possibility of reaching this quota in the foreseeable future. Yet I have no choice but to head in this direction because the key to acquiring and improving any skill lies precisely in numbers and the higher the numbers the greater is the chance for success. Why? The answer is found within the very nature of skill itself. **A skill is a habit.** Habit entails repetition of action. Repetition means numbers.

### Concept of Habits

Some say a man spends the first half of his life learning habits that shorten the second half. Others contend that many girls are trying to break their boyfriends of a bad habit – eating alone. Still others think that when a habit begins to cost money, it becomes a hobby. I can go on and on enumerating the funny ideas people have of a habit. And if we limit ourselves to bad habits, I'm sure many more, especially the mothers and the wives, can easily and do in fact deliver impromptu speeches to unwilling audiences. Given their authority on the topic and given the necessity of those lectures, I will not in any way discourage them from doing so. I just want to state that my only purpose here is to dwell on the technical aspects of habits.

Philosophers define **habits as a stable disposition of our faculties whereby they are inclined to act easily and promptly in a certain way.** Aristotle calls it "a disposition whereby someone is disposed well or ill." Biking, swimming, driving, walking, typing, certain ways of thinking and reasoning, certain ways of behaving, etc. are some examples. Habits stand **midway between our faculties and their acts.** They are necessary where the faculty is in a **state of potency to various things**, that is, when a faculty is not predetermined to act in only one way but in many ways.

For example, our hands were not designed to act in only one way. One can use it to hold, to feel, to push to pull etc. And even in the case of holding, our hands were not determined to hold only one type of object in only one manner. There are so many ways we can grab a pencil, a paper, a knife, a neck, etc. Because of the infinite possible movements of our hands, they need to be trained in a certain way if ever they are to be adept at any type of job at all. These predeterminations are called habits or skills. They are like computer programs embedded in the hands that enable them to act in a definite manner efficiently and even gracefully.

Eating with spoon and fork is no longer a big deal for us



### The Winner Drinks It All

*(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)*

*I once saw on TV the awarding ceremony of a tennis championship match for women. The winner had a trophy on one hand and a teddy bear on another. On a side table were bottles of wine and champagne, flowers, medals and a mock-up check. That scene inspired this composition. Luckily, Carol has a teddy bear in her collection and the bottles of champagne were not at all difficult to get. The title suddenly crossed my mind while I was duly emptying the bottles and was reminded of the loser standing still.*



### Face with no Name

*(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)*

*Time to face the face, the subject matter I dreaded most. The trouble with faces is that spectators always ask "Who is that face?" Either show an existing face that exactly looks like it or risk being considered a failure. And this is the problem. In portraits, there is no room for error. But the contour of the face is so complicated that avoiding mistakes is next to impossible. That is why for a number of years I kept myself within the confines of mundane objects such as apples. Here, at least, viewers never ask, "Who is that apple?"*

grownups. We do so without any difficulty and even without our realization. But, at birth, we were not given a set of spoon and fork and told to go forth and eat everything to our heart's content. We had to learn how to use them and perhaps it was a struggle we had to go through up to our adult years. The reason is that our hands were not predisposed to use these utensils for eating. A habit had to be developed in our hands so that we can manipulate them with ease and promptness.

How do we acquire habits? **Habits are caused by acts, several acts.** The word *several* has to be emphasized. Facility with the spoon and fork does not result from a one-time encounter but from a daily use over a long period. Repetition of the same act is absolutely necessary. This is true for any type of habit or skill.

One very important tip I received in college when it came to preparing for math exams was to solve all the exercises in the book even if I already knew them. Understanding the professor and memorizing rules and formulas were not always sufficient. By doing all the exercises in the book, I started building up mini-habits that proved indispensable for correctly solving similar mathematical problems during the exams. The inevitable results, of course, were high grades. That must have been the reason why I stuck to Mathematics and Physics and never shifted to Mechanical Engineering as originally planned.

Moreover, **habits increase when the intensity of the act corresponds to the intensity of the habit.** Constancy with the use of spoon and fork could be a guarantee for obesity but not always for adroitness in their use. Intensity has to be present and it means a conscious effort to use them correctly each time, avoiding mistakes at all cost. A clearer example would be improving one's penmanship. An elegant penmanship results from a disciplined effort to be precise in every writing occasion.

The spoon and fork ideas just elaborated apply on brushes as well. Painting, just like any habit, is acquired and improved in the same way. Constant painting coupled with continuous care for quality will eventually strengthen the habit's adherence to our system.

### Bundle of Habits

However, the habit of painting has some peculiarities and complications. It is not just one habit, but a bundle of habits. This flows from our previous observation that painting involves not only

one faculty but several: intellect, will, memory, imagination, eyes, hands etc. All these faculties participate in a sense in the act of painting and it is logical to expect a separate habit to develop in each one of them. However, this should not be a source of discouragement for aspirants because this does not imply carrying out different habit-forming acts for each faculty. The very act of painting an apple in itself for example will simultaneously develop all those individual habits. All our awareness should be focused in forming the image of the apple and those component habits will grow automatically.

It is possible for us to dissect the very act of painting and identify all those essential habits or skills needed by each faculty. But that would be impractical and time consuming. Let us just cite the major skills involved which correspond to the three basic steps of painting.

The first is the skill of *careful observation*. By careful, I don't mean scrutinizing your subject matter with a magnifying lens,

something you would not want to do if the specimen is a human being. It means looking at things in terms of the five basic tones. Whatever you are looking at, you should be able to indicate its shadow areas, highlights, body colors, and reflected lights. It is quite a funny occurrence that with only one painting to her name, Carol at times tries to impress me by pointing at the highlights or at the body tones of merchandizes in department stores. She used to think of them in terms of *Euros*.

The second is the skill of *color identification*. This does not consist in coming up with a long list of vocabulary of colors like fuchsia, turquoise, tangerine or peach cream for labeling every color you encounter. It means knowing what pigments from your palette and in what proportion should you mix to be able to produce the color you see. This skill can be acquired through instinctive trial-and-error mixing or you can buy a book that details how to mix the distinctive colors of different types of objects.

The third is the skill of *manipulating brushes*. Some people are so adept and agile they convert everything they touch into gold. Others are so clumsy they are said to be left-handed in both hands. But, whatever type you fall under, applying color with the brush should not be something to be feared. If you can spread butter into your bread, you need to know nothing more to be able to spread color on the canvas. Women who regularly apply makeup on their faces with a brush certainly do have an advantage, but Bob Ross said if you are painting a seascape and you have a nervous tick you are ahead of the game. Dexterity is seldom needed.

Two other major skills are involved namely composition and drawing. Though they are very important, they do not belong to the notion of painting *per se*.

**Composition** is the ability to arrange various and diverse objects in a painting in such a way that a harmoniously unified and aesthetically balanced whole is achieved. But initially this should be the least of worries since composing becomes relevant

only if there are things to compose. In other words, ensure first that the three basic skills are firmly rooted before looking for ways to refine your composition. Only after you know how to paint a single apple convincingly can you start thinking about forming a delightful combination of apples other than an apple pie. Something similar happens in literary composition. Priority has to be given to writing correct and complete sentences before considering how to compose paragraphs, let alone essays.

**Drawing** is another debatable issue. Basically, it is a skill of measuring. There is no doubt a strong and solid proficiency in it is a huge advantage. Some say drawing is the foundation of a good painting. Others even go to the extent of condemning people who use high-tech mechanical aids as cheaters. They would indeed be right if the sole objective is just to produce a drawing or to highlight the artist's extreme pulse control. But, as Helen van Wyk said, painting is not drawing. It is a totally different activity. Drawing is delineating, forming lines whereas painting is covering areas or patches. With respect to painting, drawing is a means to an end and means are quite often optional. It would indeed be ideal if a painter were a good drawer. But bear in mind that drawing requires a lot of time and in the end all those lines will have to be covered with pigments anyway. What I am saying is, if you can ask your neighbor to draw the initial sketch for you then do so, so that you can concentrate on your real task of painting. Just don't forget to credit your neighbor.

However, rather than engaging in polemics, a more practical and productive approach would be to learn how to draw once and for all. One book I have for this purpose says that drawing is an

activity of the seldom-used right side of the brain. This cerebral resource needs to be tapped and exploited if we are to grow in this expertise. You bet all these years I've been trying to do that and I must say my drawing had improved significantly. But, only God knows if I ever managed to connect with my right cerebrum or if it ever responded. I just concentrated on producing sketches, completely ignoring all those brain activities. My goal was to make a few hundreds but I stopped when I discovered painting automatically developed my drawing. Somehow, I have acquired a modest degree of it. For basic shapes like fruits, flowers, vases, trees, etc. I no longer have any problem. But for more complicated shapes like animals or people, I have no choice but to use pantographs, an artist tool for reproducing shapes. And my conscience does not bother me for that. Even professional painters with years of formal education in art don't draw freely. They make use of gridlines or tracing papers to replicate images. If you are to resort to a drawing tool anyway, it would be impractical, if not lack of common sense, not to use the most efficient and most advanced state-of-the-art gadgets that years of research in science and



**Mother and Child**

(Oil on Canvas, 70 cm x 80 cm)

*I started this painting in the Philippines and finished it here in Netherlands. Since the postcard I based it from gave no details, I never knew who was the original painter of this famous mother and child masterpiece.*

technology have ever produced.

**Quality through quantity**

Painting belongs to that category of being called habit. A habit, whether good or bad, requires acts, several acts for its existence and growth. Repeating the same painting act is therefore an indispensable prerequisite for any aspiring painter. A good-quality painting can never be the result of one attempt, not even of a few. It is the result of countless attempts. Numbers is a vital springboard for any artistic quantum leap. *Thousands* might sound like an exaggeration, and most probably, it is, but sometimes exaggerations are needed to make a point. And the point is **qualified quantity** (number plus constant search for excellence) **is the key to quality**. In other words, if you keep on painting, paying attention always to little details, then perfection will necessarily follow. You will be surprised to discover that the best painting you have ever painted will always be the one you just did.

My calculation revealed that at my current speed I would finish my thousandth portrait after twenty years. Not even in my wildest dream can I envision myself reaching that moment. But, as the saying goes, dream and you will fall short. Therefore, Pat Moran's admonition remains as a guiding principle and as an ultimate goal. To end let me rephrase her words: **Go and paint a thousand faces. One of them might just launch a thousand ships.**

Email: [creations@artvince.com](mailto:creations@artvince.com)  
 Site: [www.artvince.com](http://www.artvince.com)