

PAINTING WHAT EYES CAN SEE

What is the proper object of painting?

Every field of study has a predefined scope where all its tools and methods of inquiry are focused. Zoology, for instance, limits itself to animals while Botany concentrates on plants. Medicine is concerned with human health while Archeology studies fossilized rocks. What about painting? *What is its scope or proper object?*

At first, this seems to be an inane question fit for discussion only among highly spirited individuals in a pub. After all, you can paint a stick, a stone, a bird, a horse, a corn, a unicorn, anything under the sun, including the sun! Problems arise when indeterminate shapes or forms splashed on canvas are claimed to be images of ancestral spirits or of inner thoughts and emotions. Such may be acceptable to people who have already imbibed a certain amount of spirit. But people still in possession of their faculties can not but wonder if such is possible. Hence, this question can not be ignored. In fact, its significance becomes clearer when it is pointed out that previous attempts to answer it led to various revolutionary trends in art.

What entities properly qualify as subject of painting? Or to invent a new word, *what is paintable?*

AND ONLY WHAT EYES CAN SEE

One approach to the problem is to list down all the objects that have been painted so far and then determine their common characteristics. Luckily for us we do not have to deal with an unending list because, based on subject matter, painting has already been classified into *landscape, figurative, portraits, floral, animal, still life, wild life, genre, etc.* All that is left to us then is to find out what they share in common. Certainly, a landscape



Fading Sunlight

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

Painting sunsets and sea waves has always been my favorite. Though breaking waves appear to be chaotic and random jumbles of colors and shades, they do possess a certain degree of internal order. It is this order that I tried to capture here using autumn colors.



Girl with Necklace

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

When I finally stepped back to assess this painting, I smiled not only because the girl was smiling at me but because for the first time I did not have to ask "Who is that face?"

differs from a portrait or a still life. More concretely, a corn bears no resemblance with a horse but both are said to be the same in the sense that both are paintable. Is it because both are real? Can we paint real objects only? Initially, this appears to be the case until we bump into paintings of unicorns, mermaids, or vampires. Undeniably, even though they portray purely imaginary beings, they are still paintings in their own rights. And so, back to square one: what similarities do a real corn and an unreal unicorn have that make them paintable objects?

With no obvious solution in sight, let us try another approach this time from the point of view of the painting itself, the final product or the *operatum*. Two fundamental questions have to be answered. What is a painting? What does it do?

What is a painting? If we do some reverse engineering, we will see that, materially speaking, a painting is always a *surface with pigments* applied on it. The surface could be a stretched piece of cloth or canvas, a wood panel, a stone slab or a piece of paper. The pigments could be oil, acrylic, watercolor, pastel etc. But no matter what materials are used and no matter how delicately or forcefully the pigments are applied and no matter how much or how little emotion was put in the process, the finished product will always be a flat surface with coloring substance on it.

What do these elements do? The surface serves as a rigid support for pigments. In turn, the pigments have only one *basic*

function: interact with light. The interaction consists in reflecting a component wavelength of light or a so-called band of spectrum and in absorbing the others. For example, a red pigment bounces back the red wavelength and absorbs the blue, yellow, green, orange, violet and other wavelengths, thus making an observer see only the color red. Of course, in a painting, not one but several pigments are present, each reflecting light in its own way. They are calculatingly applied and arranged on the canvas so that collectively they reflect light in the same way the object being painted would.

Let us try to clarify this with an example. In the material world, everything reacts with light according to this phenomenon described by **Physics**: reflecting some wavelengths and absorbing the rest. A real corn for instance when hit by light will reflect a set of wavelengths (perhaps, different shades of yellow or orange) depending on the color of its various parts. If we want to paint the same corn, we must try to recreate with the use of pigments that same phenomenon. The pigments must be applied on canvas in a

light in a manner described above only if it has **colors** and **dimensions**, or, as far as it relates to an external observer, if it is **visible**. **Visible** means it can be seen by the eyes and this can happen in two ways: **actually** or **potentially**. Something is **actually visible** if it exists now and if it has colors and dimensions. Something is **potentially visible** if it is not existing at the moment but can **possibly** exist and having colors and dimensions is included in its very concept or essence. Potentially visible objects could be: *beings of the past* like Napoleon and his horse; *beings of the future* like next year's corn harvest; or *beings of reasons* like unicorns, mermaids, and vampires.

Therefore, **the proper object of painting is the visible**. This conclusion appears to be in keeping with our intuitive knowledge of painting, which, by its nature, always tries **to show or to visually display** something. And a thing can be depicted visually only if it is **visible** either **actually** or **potentially**.

AND NOT WHAT EYES CAN NOT SEE

By elimination, anything not perceptible to the eyes can not be a

suitable object of painting. These are usually colorless and dimensionless realities.

Sound, smell, taste, and the tactile - the proper objects of the other external senses - can not be painted, strictly speaking. One of my favorite Dutch paintings from the Golden Age is a figurative piece entitled "Children Making Music" which depicts young happy boys playing some improvised musical instruments. But from the painting there is no way to tell whether they were playing pop, rock, or hip hop. Also, painting a bouquet of *Sampaguita*, the national flower of the Philippines, is an easy task but its fragrance can never be obtained from its image on a canvas. Similarly, vanilla can never be tasted from a *Still Life* of vanilla ice cream, and the softness of a baby skin can never be felt from a portrait of a baby. Sound, taste, smell, and the tactile can not be captured directly by the eyes. Therefore, pigments can not simulate their appearance for the simple reason that they have no appearance.

Contrary to popular beliefs, **feelings, thoughts, and emotions** as such can not be painted either. But this is such a volatile issue that a more extensive and technical analysis is required to obtain greater clarification. So we better leave it for later. Meanwhile, let us just ask ourselves these questions: Do they have colors? Do they have dimensions? Are they visible?

RESPECTING LIMITS

A unicorn is not a horse that has eaten a lot



Medieval Lobster

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

This crustacean must have met its end as dinner for Willem Kalf one night 350 years ago. But Kalf's masterful depiction of it had somehow immortalized it. Obtaining a lobster and setting it up in a Still Life composition is both hard and messy. To avoid making my studio smell like the sea I just used Kalf's appetizer as model and added some of Carol's wine glasses as peripherals.

manner that when light hits them the effect is the same as when light hits the real corn. In other words, the set of wavelengths reflected by the pigments should match the set of wavelengths reflected by the real corn. This is what painting in its crudest form is all about. **Painting any object consists in simulating with pigments the interaction of such object with light.**

From this perspective, the solution to our problem naturally follows. **Something can be painted only if its interaction with light can be reproduced on canvas by the interaction of pigments with light.** And, corollary to this, **something can not be painted if its interaction with light can not be reproduced on canvas by the interaction of pigments with light.**

Expressed in technical terms, something can interact with

of corn. They are two different beings from two different worlds with no chance of ever getting close to each other. But pigments can put them together on the same canvas because both have visual characteristics. One is visible in act while the other is visible in potency.

Strictly speaking, **we can only paint what is visible**. This restriction is imposed on us not by our limited mind and skills but by the very nature of pigments themselves. As visual media, paints or pigments, whether we like it or not, can only reach up to a certain point. To force them to reach higher would be to exhibit little understanding of them, to say the least.

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