

## BIRTH OF A CONCEPT

*Can ideas as such be the appropriate objects of painting?*

Let us now turn our attention to the modern day generic notion of painting as an expression of ideas. Like emotions, ideas are used and abused by painters and art curators as a universal cloak to shroud an artwork in mystery. Mystery attracts attention and curiosity, which in turn jack up market prices. That is why extra effort is always made to overload art pieces with ideas and other intellectual luggage. Ideas have become the secret ingredients for a successful painting.

Not that there is anything wrong with that; after all, painters also need to eat and watch football. Our concern here is purely speculative. What do we really understand by *painting as an expression of ideas*? The possible meanings could be countless but for our purposes they can be reduced to two: literal or figurative. Literally, the phrase means that ideas are the proper objects of painting, directly formed with pigments on canvas. Figuratively, it could mean a thousand things depending on how prolific people could be at generating sophisticated comparisons or striking figures of speech. The most obvious figurative sense is that even though a painting does not directly depict ideas, it serves as a bridge for the viewer to gain access to the ideas the artist wants to communicate.

I would not even want to consider the thought of beginning to analyze the figurative meaning because, given the myriad of opinions on it, I would have to write a book to analyze every single one of them. All I can say is that, unless you are trying to write a poem, you never define things in terms of similes or metaphors.

This leaves us the literal meaning as the object of our analysis for this article. Can ideas be appropriate subject matters of painting? To answer the question, we need to study the meaning of ideas and see if they exhibit paintable characteristics. But, in doing so, we have to bear in mind that ideas are synonymous to concepts, notions, and intellectual or interior words.

### Origin of Ideas

Man naturally seeks to know. Knowing consists in immaterially apprehending realities outside of him without himself becoming those realities. When he knows a horse, the horse somehow becomes present in him with a presence, which is not physical but intentional.

Knowing takes place at two levels: sensible and intellectual. **Sensible knowledge** occurs at the level of the senses, both internal



### Parrot Tulips

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

*To draw the viewers' attention to the focus, the parrot tulips on the vase, I used the most intense orange and yellow. I then repeated this color combination all over the painting for unity and harmony. The bird was added as a conceptual counterbalance to the tulips, if there is such a thing.*



### Golden Smile

*(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)*

*This portrait came about as a request of Carol, a former fan of Manchester United and now of Real Madrid. An important rule in portraits is to paint the model with the mouth closed. The reason is that, unless one is extremely careful, the teeth have the tendency to grab the limelight. To be sure, there is more to a face than the teeth. Unfortunately, the best picture available for this portrait happened to include them. So, what else could I do? Let teeth be.*

and external. This is possible because outside objects are sensible (knowable by the senses). They have certain characteristics (colors, dimensions, texture, smell, etc.) which can be grasped directly by the senses. The ultimate result elaborated from all the data of the senses is called **image** or phantasm. An image is what is imagined by the imagination or remembered by the memory.

Knowledge does not end with the production of the image. It progresses to a higher operation called **intellectual knowledge** or act of understanding, which is carried out by the intellect and which consists in capturing what is intelligible in things. This is possible because things are not only sensible but also intelligible (knowable by the intellect). The intelligible part of a thing is called its essence. The essence makes a thing to be what it is; it gives a thing its manner of being. The essence of a horse makes a horse to be a horse and not a cow or any other thing else. Essences are real and they are the most basic constitutive elements of all things. But essences cannot be perceived by the senses; they can only be grasped by the intellect. With a process called abstraction, the intellect extracts the intelligible essence embedded, so to speak, in the image, separating it from the sensible characteristics of the thing. Once the intellect abstracts the essence, it forms a concept or idea of it. At that moment, intellectual knowledge or understanding is said to take place. **The idea then is the essence insofar as it is present in the mind or insofar as it is actually understood. It is a mental sign, a natural symbol, of the essence. It is a likeness of the essence. It signifies what is understood by the mind insofar as it is in the mind.** The idea of a horse, for example, is found in the intellect of one who understands the real essence of a horse. Concepts are only found in the mind and not in things. Real essences exist only in things.

**Concepts are abstract.** This is the first characteristic worth noting. Broadly speaking, to abstract means to consider one particular aspect of something, prescinding from or cutting off the other aspects, which in reality also belong to it. When we abstract, we mentally **separate** what is actually united. Every concept is abstract because it focuses only on the essence it signifies and **leaves aside the sensible and concrete** individual subject of that essence. For example, the concept of a horse **prescinds** from the

sensible individual characteristics of a stallion, a mare, or a pony. Or, the idea of a man *excludes* the specific features of John, Peter, and Paul.

Also, as a result of abstraction, *concepts are universal*. As such, a concept signifies an intelligible essence that is *common* to many individual beings. For this reason, ideas can be *predicated* or attributed to *all individuals*, which possess that common essence. For example, the concept of a woman signifies that common essence called womanhood which is shared by all women and which makes them women and not men. Because it is universal, the concept of a woman can be predicated to Erika, Gwyneth, Carol, and all women. This means it is possible to say: *Erika is a woman; Gwyneth is a woman; or, Carol is a woman*. The concept of a woman does not refer to only one woman but to every human being that has the essence of a woman.

Therefore, *ideas are the intelligible essences of things abstracted by the intellect during the act of understanding*. They exist and *can only exist in the intellect*. Insofar as they are *separated* from the *individuating sensible characteristics* of the subject, they are called *abstract*. Insofar as they can be *predicated* to many individuals, they are called *universal*.



### Sea Encounter

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

A miniature painting from a now unknown source inspired this seascape. I was interested in studying the structure of the ships, more than anything else.

### Painting the Abstract and the Universal

Can ideas be painted? In other words, is it possible to paint certain figures or shapes on the canvas and say they are ideas or concepts?

We already answered this question before with a *no*, saying that ideas are not visible. Unlike images, ideas as such do not have colors and dimensions; they have no visual appearances; they cannot be imagined and only that which can be imagined can be painted; they can only be understood. But it is worth examining this negative answer under the light of our analysis above.

In the first place, to paint the idea of something would mean to make that idea exist on canvas just like to paint the image of something consists in making that image exist on canvas. But ideas exist and can only exist in the intellect, and they exist in the intellect only during the act of understanding. Unlike images which can exist on surfaces like mirrors, walls, papers, canvas, films, retinas, etc., ideas have no existence outside the mind. Therefore, ideas cannot be painted directly.

In the second place, concepts are abstract. Their abstractness consists in being *separated* from individuating *sensible* notes. Now, is it possible to paint something that excludes the *sensible* or, to be more precise, the *visible* characteristics of the object? In other words, is it possible to paint on a canvas something that cannot be seen by the eyes, let alone perceived by the other senses? Stated this way, the challenge of painting ideas becomes obviously impossible. Every brush stroke is precisely an addition and not a separation of a sensible characteristic of the object. *The very act of painting necessarily unites the object with its sensible characteristics and simultaneously destroys the very nature of concepts whose essential property is to be separate from such sensible features*. Painting cannot make visible something that is

abstracted from all visibility.

One may ask: if ideas are abstract, can't they be the proper objects of abstract painting? This appears to be a valid question. But it is not. And the answer is *no* because the word *abstract* in abstract painting has a different meaning from the abstractness of concepts. But a full explanation is rather lengthy and exhaustive so we better leave this for the future.

Lastly, ideas are universal. This property enables them to be *predicated to all* individuals having the same essence. Is it possible to paint a universal image that can be said to be the image of every individual possessing the same nature? More concretely, is it possible to paint a portrait that can be said to be the portrait of all human beings? Or is it possible to paint an orange that will look like all the oranges in the world? Is not the painting of a circle attributable to all the circles in the world? Again the answers are obvious. *A painting can only be attributed to its model, which is always unique and singular*. The portrait of Shania cannot be said to be the portrait of Gwyneth or of Carol or of any other woman. Once an orange is painted with the color orange, it can no longer be attributed to green Cuban oranges. Besides, since no two similarly colored oranges are alike, a painting of an orange can only be predicated to one and only one orange. A circle should be painted with only one color for it to have a reasonable chance of being predicable to many circles of the same size. But this still leaves out an almost infinite number of other circles that exist in different colors and sizes. Therefore, since the image in a painting is always concrete and individual, it can only be predicated or attributed to one and only one object. *This singularizing or individuating effect of painting necessarily destroys the universal character of ideas, thereby excluding them as its proper object*.

Ideas are not paintable. Strictly speaking, painting cannot be an expression of ideas. But this does not mean that ideas cannot be obtained from paintings at all. As a matter of fact, paintings are indirect sources of ideas. From a painting of a horse, for example, the intellect can abstract the universal concept of a horse in the same way it would when confronted by a real horse. From a still life of oranges, the mind may not be able to extract a glass of juice but it can squeeze out the abstract idea of an orange. This can be as long as the image in the painting resembles the external object. In this case, the represented object somehow appears before the senses and the intellect. Hence, abstraction and understanding, which result in an idea, can take place again. But this does not mean that the figure in the painting is the idea itself. It is an image and images are not ideas. Our images refer to the sensible aspects of reality, whereas our concepts refer to the intelligible aspects. The painting of a horse is never the painting of an idea of a horse.

### Conclusions

Our intellect *gives birth* to our concepts when it apprehends the intelligible essences of external realities at the moment of intellectual knowledge. Concepts are natural symbols and likenesses of such essences. They exist and can only exist in the mind. Devoid of all sensible and individual characteristics, concepts are abstract and universal. Such abstractness and universality prevent ideas from being suitable objects of painting. The very act of adding pigments on a canvas in order to form the image of an object automatically makes such image sensible and singular thereby eliminating any possibility of abstractness and universality. *The very act of painting obliterates the very idea it seeks to portray*.

Anyone who claims that ideas are proper objects of painting is therefore faced with the unenviable task of creating something abstract and universal with a process that can only produce something specific and individual – the exact opposite. A painting of an abstract and universal face that looks exactly like all the faces in the world is a contradiction and contradictions do not exist.

Ideas and emotions, together with the other acts of the intellect and the will, are more aptly expressed by a collection of sensible signs which altogether make up what is called human language. Isn't painting, perhaps, a language? At this very moment, I would not have the slightest idea.

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