

The Language of the Visual Artist

Can painting be considered a language?

It is not seldom we hear painters say they do their talking on canvas with pigments and brush strokes. With colored images, they can externalize and communicate what they fail to do with words. Painting is their language and they think in terms of this language, just as musicians think in sound and rhythms, and mathematicians in constants and variables.

To deny this would be outright foolish since every painting is clearly an eloquent expression of something. All initial indications show painting is a language. But, is it really? Is it the same as any full-blown language like English, Dutch, or Greek? Is it adequately equipped to carry out all linguistic functions properly? In short, *does painting possess the basic structure and essential features of a functioning language?*

Notion of Language

Human language or speech is defined as a collection of sensible signs which express the acts of our intellect and will. Various aspects of language such as correct usage, internal structure, historical evolution, and relations with the reality signified and with human knowledge are studied by Grammar, Linguistics, and Logic. But, let us focus ourselves just on the definition.

Firstly, *language is a collection of sensible signs.* In their most basic meaningful form, these signs are called words. A group of words expressing a judgment is called a sentence. Sentences make up paragraphs and paragraphs can build up to a literary composition like a story, a poem, a thesis, an essay, a discourse, etc. *Materially, words are articulate sounds* but they also have a *visual form* called writing or a *tactile form* called braille. *Formally, words are signs or symbols.* As we already know, a sign or a symbol is a reality that points to another reality. Words are *pure or formal signs.* They are *conventional* in nature. They are not natural signs like smoke or facial expressions. They are not images which signify their objects by being a likeness of them. They are artificial signs created by men following certain naming conventions. *This conventional character of language has a very vital implication: it gives man the freedom to create a unique sign in the simplest possible way to designate a certain reality.* Why should linguistic signs be as simple as possible? Well, try



Spring on Marble

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

This is my interpretation of an interpretation by Carol Lee Thompson of a 17th century Dutch allegorical floral painting. The flowers symbolize the temporariness of life. The eggs allude to new life. I just don't know what the feather, fruits and fly stand for. At this stage, I worry more about making sure that my flowers look like flowers. The symbolic meanings can be added later.



Orchids

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

For this still life, I opted for a triangular arrangement and placed the center of interest on the apex. Three white-purple orchids, the topmost and the two on the table, determine the triangle. For unity, I enclosed all the objects within the purple blue linear design of the tablecloth.

imagining how interpersonal communication would be if the average length of words were one thousand syllables. Conventionality makes language manageable and learnable, thus ensuring its very existence.

Secondly, *language has a twofold purpose: expressive and communicative.* The expressive function consists in externalizing the internal acts of the human spirit (ideas, impressions, moods). It makes such acts sensible: visible, audible or tactile. The communicative function consists in making these acts known to others. Since man is by nature a political and social animal, everyone needs to share his or her thoughts to others. Language makes this possible. Through it, men interact with one another using meaningful expressions. This enables them to live together as a community, something difficult to achieve without language.

Lastly, *the scope of language is all encompassing.* Anything knowable and, therefore, namable can be designated by language. Principally, it signifies the intellectual concept that in turn signifies the external thing. It also signifies the acts of the senses, sensible appetites, and the will. Ideas, judgments, syllogisms, images, impressions, emotions, moods, resolutions, and commands are just some of the expressible. It can express the real and the unreal, the particular and the universal, the specific and the abstract. *The very structure of language supports this universal expressive capability.* The so-called *parts of speech* can reflect the whole world and all its aspects. For instance, nouns can designate the things in themselves. Verbs can represent their actions and passions. Prepositions can signify their relations with one another. Adjectives can express their modifying properties. Adverbs can indicate the manner and circumstances of their actions. Articles can accompany nouns. Interjections can externalize the affections and passions of the will. Conjunctions as such symbolize nothing but can be used to link words or group of words. Moreover, language has syntax or rules that ensure the correct combinations of words into meaningful sentences. All these allow for a thorough and accurate expression of all objective and subjective realities.

For any system of signs to be classified rigorously as a language, therefore, it should exhibit all these essential features: *it must be a set of sensible and conventional signs; it must possess expressive and communicative power; its domain must be universal or all encompassing.*

Tests for Language

Let us now examine painting against these three linguistic criteria.

Firstly, is painting a set of sensible signs? The answer is yes. Painting is a collection of images perceptible by the sense of sight. However, while ordinary language can realistically have three forms (phonetic, visual, and tactile), painting can only have one (visual). Is it essential for a language to have these three forms? As far as content is concerned, it is not necessary since anything that can be said can be written. But, as far as practicality and ease of use is concerned, having several forms is of absolute importance. The various kinds of social interactions require the flexibility to switch from one form of communication to another. Neighbors are normally greeted in the street orally and not in writing. And it is often more practical to write to friends overseas than to call. What's more, since statistically human beings communicate orally most of the time, it is highly imperative for a language to have a phonetic form. Constrained to a visual form, painting would therefore be a language with a serious disability.

Is painting a set of conventional signs? No, or, at least, not yet. In a representational painting, the image is a *natural sign* that points to its object by visually resembling it. Though a painted image is also *artificial* in the sense that it is produced manually, its artificiality does not make it conventional. Conventionality allows signs to be interchangeable. For instance, the five-letter English word *horse* can be replaced with the Dutch word *paard* or with the Tagalog word *kabayo* without any change in meaning. But, the image of a horse cannot be arbitrarily exchanged with another image and still look like the same horse. However, when it comes to learnability, this lack of conventionality is actually an

figures remain not as conventional symbols but as **private signs** whose meanings or significations are whimsically determined by the painters. Viewers are supposed to guess what those signs stand for. Interpreting traffic signs is hard enough; deciphering painters' eccentric codes would be a sure path to insanity.

Secondly, does painting have expressive and communicative qualities? Obviously, it has. Every painting is always an expression of some sort. It is an externalization of an internal image previously formed by the painter that serves as his model during the painting process. This is true for both representational and non-representational paintings. Likewise, every painting is a communication waiting to happen. Every time a painting is seen by a viewer transfer of knowledge or communication necessarily takes place. Therefore, painting fulfills this second requirement of language.

Lastly, is the scope of painting all encompassing? No, it is limited only to the visible. Painting can only express and communicate images modeled by the painter in his imagination. It cannot externalize and transmit abstract and universal concepts, decisions, syllogisms, resolutions, emotions, and other internal acts of our knowing and appetitive faculties. Anything that falls outside the range of the visible is outside the competence of painting. And this is a lot.

This limitation is mainly due to the fact that while language has the structure or tools – nouns, verbs, pronouns, prepositions,

adjectives, adverbs, articles, interjections, conjunctions, and syntax – needed for a precise and comprehensive expression, painting does not. Some claim that the basic visual vocabulary of painting consists in the so-called formal elements of style, which include line, shape, color, light, and dark. But, it is not hard to see that such elements do not and cannot fulfill adequately the functions of the different parts of speech. For example, if I want to translate this article into painting what formal elements of style should I use and how should I use them in order to visually represent these same ideas I am trying to convey? In other words, to say that lines, shapes, colors, and lights are expressive and communicative is not to say much. At best, it is to be vague and to communicate vaguely is not to communicate at all.

A Quasi Language

A working comprehensive system of communication based exclusively on painted images is not feasible, not even among painters. As a collection of purely visual signs, painting lacks the practicality and versatility of a real language whose multi sensible forms and conventionality give it the necessary convenience of use

and manageability. And because of its inherent structural deficiency and limited scope of signification, painting lacks the universal reach of an ordinary language that can adequately express not only the visible but also the audible, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory worlds not to mention the unfathomable world of ideas and emotions. Therefore, since it does not meet the basic linguistic requirements, painting is **not a language in the strict sense of the word**.

But, since it has expressive and communicative power, albeit limited, **painting is a language to certain degree**. It is a **quasi language**. It is a small subset of human language that can express a small subset of reality. And this is not little. Painting can express and communicate the visible world more superbly than all the languages in the world combined. *Within its own realm and as long as it stays within its own realm, painting is the king or queen of expression.*

In *Paintlandia*, a hypothetical world where the visible are the only things real, painting would be the national language and “*The brush is mightier than the sword!*” would be the most favorite saying. But such a world is a pure utopia. The world we live in is totally different. So, for the time being, to get your messages across stick to words not to brushes and much less to swords.

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Keepers of the Promise

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

The pair seems to be guarding a land full of promise. The jagged mountain on the left background, the bodies and paws of the lions, and the rocks on the right foreground form a diagonal. I situated the focal point – the two heads – on what is considered to be the golden mean of this diagonal. That is why I made sure all items in this imaginary line had the same color scheme.

advantage of painting over language because an image is recognizable universally while a word is not. Everyone can understand a painting of a horse; only Dutch-knowing people can understand the word *paard*. But, when it comes to convenience of use, which seems to be essential to language, painting would be handicapped. Imagine a TV talk show where people can only debate with one another by painting images. It is possible but I wouldn't want to watch it, let alone join it.

Or, at least, not yet. In non-representational paintings, which have no recognizable subject matters, there is room for conventionality. For instance, all the painters in the world could get together and agree to create unique but simple shapes or figures that would henceforth serve as exclusive signs for certain realities. To cover up the whole of reality, they would need to produce as many visual signs as there are words in an unabridged dictionary. The result would be similar to a huge Rosetta Stone containing hieroglyphics. In such a scenario, painting would indeed be a fully developed visual language wherein every abstract idea or every fleeting emotion would have its corresponding conventional image, a dream-come-true for many painters. But, except for traffic signs and some naval flag signals, no such *dictionary* of conventional figures exists. And the history of painting shows that the only thing painters can agree upon is that they disagree with one another on almost everything. So, at the present moment, in non-representational painting, the painted