

Reasons behind the Obsession

Why the insistence on ideas and emotions as object of painting?

Painting cannot be considered as an expression of ideas and emotions not only because these are not *paintable per se* but because painting as a system of signs and symbols fails to measure up as an adequate linguistic vehicle for expression and communication. This is the clear and necessary conclusion we reached after carrying out slow and methodical analyses in our last three articles.

However, reasonable and sound as this conclusion may seem, it is not shared by many. All one has to do is grab and read any of the present day art magazines in order to realize that the prevailing conception among artists is the opposite. There is a widespread insistence bordering almost on the obstinate on looking at painting exclusively as an essential function of these internal operations of the human spirit.

What could be the reasons behind such obsession for ideas and emotions?

Imprecise Use of Words

The first and most obvious reason is failure to fully understand these concepts. Many times we use words or concepts in our daily communications without ever stopping to examine whether we are using them correctly or not. We assume we know their meanings just because we encounter them regularly in our ordinary conversations or in our daily readings. But words could have several meanings and failure to distinguish their nuances often leads to imprecision if not error in our judgments and reasoning. Countless discussions, arguments, and debates arise precisely from understanding the same word or concept in different ways.



White Variety

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

It was my birthday and so I treated myself by making a copy of my favorite among Pat Moran's floral paintings. The mass of light colored flowers on top is balanced by the white table napkin and vases. The dark background sets off the whole composition and the draperies lead the eyes to the main center of interest.

Ideas and emotions are no exceptions. Things going on inside our hearts and minds are the hardest to describe. Even though a proper word or term exists for every phenomenon that takes place inside the soul, not everyone is familiar with them. What is more, for the majority of us, we couldn't care less if technical terms exist for certain events or not. No catastrophe really happens if we label every occurrence inside the human soul as emotion or as idea or as expression. I think this is the same type of imprecision artists fall into when they try to explain their works in terms of these concepts. The only difference is that, coming from someone with an expertise or skill, such imprecision could acquire the appearance and impact of a scientific proposition or principle and could even sound credible to an indiscriminating mind.

Confusing Ideas with Images

The second reason has something to do with the fact that every human action always starts with an idea. Every act is always the execution of something the intellect proposes to the will. In the case of painting, such proposal is almost always about what subject matter to paint. For example, it could consist in the idea of painting a still life or a wild life. Once the idea is decided then the next process takes place which consists basically in transforming that idea into an image or a working model. For example, once you have decided to paint a tiger, you have to start drawing up the specifics about that tiger. You need to give it a specific color, position, setting, etc. You need to transform the general idea of tiger into a specific image of a tiger. This transformation coincides with what is often referred to in painting as *making a study*. It is this particular image resulting from the study and not the original idea that gets to be expressed strictly speaking on the canvas. Although it can be said that the idea also gets expressed in the canvas because after all the painting originates ultimately from it, it has to be made clear that this is true only in the broad sense and not in the strict sense. Strictly speaking, the painting is the expression of the model image of a tiger; loosely speaking, the painting is the expression of the idea of a tiger. Failure to distinguish between the two is one of the root causes of the current confusion.

Undue Emphasis on Inspirations

The third reason lies in the fact that artists almost always work



Rape of Proserpine

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

*Because of the heat wave that restricted our mobility, Carol and I failed to see this stoneware during our visit to Rome two years ago. So, I decided to paint it from a postcard. The statues and columns behind were added as supporting figures. I limited my palette to earth colors, in keeping with the color of the artifact. I only gave it hint of a foreground for a *trompe l'oeil* effect.*

from inspiration. In an artist's life, periods of inactivity generally coincide with moments of inspirational drought while periods of heightened production coincide with instances of inspirational high. An inspiration could either be a brilliant idea or a wonderful emotion. When this inspiration crops up out of the blue, painting becomes a breeze and there is the feeling that such inspiration is literally flowing out of the artist's soul, through his hands and brushes, into the canvas. At this stage of emotional euphoria, it is easy to fall into the mistake of labeling the finished artwork as strictly the expression of an inspirational idea or emotion. But as we have already shown before, to be moved to paint by an inspiration is not the same as to paint that inspiration any more than to be moved to cook by an inspiration is to cook that inspiration. Inspiration can only start and accompany the creative process but can never form part of the end result.

Misrepresentations by Titles

The problem with painting or with any other form of art is that the artist is obliged to come up with a title for his artwork. Like a name to an individual person, a title is necessary to a painting for identification purposes. However, titles tend to misrepresent. And therein lies the problem. A title that literally describes the subject

and reality itself. For modernism, man would have to find the whole truth *out of himself* and *by himself*; neither history, nor religion, nor the outside world should teach him. Methodical doubt is cast over every piece of knowledge received from the past, from the Church, and from the things themselves. Nothing is certain except thought or reason. Hence, the famous saying by Rene Descartes, one of the principal proponents of the modernity movement: *I think, therefore, I am*. The only things one could be sure of are those one could find within oneself which happened to be ideas and emotions

Our task here is not to point out and refute the errors of Modernism but to show its influence on the current artistic trend of thought. And its effects on art are not hard to see. Rejecting the past means rejecting the reservoir of practical and speculative knowledge accumulated all throughout the centuries by the old masters like Rembrandt, Vermeer, etc. Rejecting religion means rejecting vital tips and information obtainable from church-commissioned artworks done by artists like Michael Angelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, etc. Rejecting the outside world means rejecting the only one true source of *paintables* which give the art of painting the reason for being. If one eliminates history, religion, and the external sensible world, what else is there left to paint, assuming, of course, painting itself has not been methodically doubted and discarded? What else if not ideas and emotions!



Basking in the Sun
(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

These days, I am in the mood for wild life, influenced perhaps by a Dutch art magazine that features such things. The cool background was placed to complement the warm color of the tiger. For a while, I didn't know what to put in the foreground until the inspiration hit me: replicate the tiger's stripe patterns in the grass.

With the influence of modernism, it becomes perfectly logical, therefore, to define not only painting but every form of art, as an expression of ideas and emotions.

To end this section, let me just express some brief considerations. Any school of thought that rejects the past simply because it is past is doomed to be rejected in the future by its very own method when it too shall have become past. Painting is not religion even though it had been used at the service of religion. One's disagreement with religion, therefore, should not spill over into painting which has a separate entity of its own. The existence of things outside the mind is self evident and needs no mathematical demonstration. We live in accordance with it. In fact, the very act of painting requires the tacit acceptance if not affirmation of the very existence of at least a few extra mental realities such as canvas, brushes,

matter of a painting is ideally the most appropriate title but this is often considered boring and unimaginative. Thus, every artist opts for more sophisticated sounding titles for greater impact. Unfortunately, the more sophisticated titles are words that signify abstract ideas or intense emotions. So, for instance, instead of labeling a painting of a bottle of beer as *Still Life with a Bottle of Beer* one can choose a better sounding phrase like *Bottled Delight* or *Fermented Beauty*. A landscape painting hangs better with a title like *Greenness* or *Playground of the Soul* or *Peace and Harmony* instead of plain and simple *A Green Meadow*. There is no problem with this as long as one is aware that titles are often times exaggerated and should not therefore be taken as exact representations or descriptions of the content of the painting. But not everyone is conscious of this peculiarity and the result is that abstract or emotion-laden titles are commonly mistaken for the subject matters actually depicted in paintings.

Influence of Modernism

The fifth and perhaps most important reason could be traced to the influence of Modernism on art. Still in vogue today, modernism is a school of thought which started in the 14th century and whose defining feature is its rejection of the past, the faith,

knives, easel, pigments, palettes, walls, models, critics, etc. Otherwise, if one is really consistent with one's modernistic beliefs, one should not even paint at all.

And So Forth

Imprecision with words, confusing ideas with images, undue importance given to inspirations, misrepresentations by titles, and influence by modernism are just a few factors that contribute to the current artistic obsession over ideas and emotions. Maybe, some other reasons exist but the above- mentioned are more than enough to help us understand the whole picture.

And so, with the prevailing atmosphere of confusion, it is good to remember that an artist's words about his work may not necessarily mean what he wants them to mean or what he thinks they mean.

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