

## The Purpose of Painting

*What is the final cause of painting?*

If we were to travel to the time of Julius Caesar and present him a computer, one question he would inevitably ask is “What is it for?” In fact, he might ask this even before bothering to know its name, operations, components, and assembly methods. Why? Because, in its search for knowledge, the human mind does not rest until it grasps the purpose of something. Everything has a purpose. It causes a thing to come to be by moving the producer to make it. Thus, to comprehend any product of human workmanship, it is not enough to know the materials it is made of or the kind of changes these materials underwent before assuming their final form or the type of skills required for its production. One also needs to know the reason why it was made. The positive influence of the purpose on the act of being of a thing makes the purpose belong to the very essence of the thing itself, and getting to know it means getting to know everything that pertains to its essence. That is why, in the study of any artifact, the purpose – known also as aim, goal, end, final cause, motive, objective, etc. – should occupy a special place.

It follows that our present inquiry into painting would be incomplete without an in depth look at its purpose. What is a painting for? What moves the painter to paint?

### Objective and Subjective Ends

Things can be done for a multitude of reasons. But, common experience tells us that in any action there are always *two kinds of purposes*: the *purpose of the agent* or doer of the action and the *purpose of the action* itself. The former is the intention of the person carrying out the action. It is a consequence of his free choice. This motive is often known as extrinsic or *subjective end*. The latter is the goal the action tends to by its very nature. It is the natural result of the action. Inherent to the action itself, it is commonly called intrinsic or *objective end*.

Some examples can make the distinction clearer. In cooking, the objective purpose is obviously the preparation of a particular dish; the subjective purpose is the cook’s intention for cooking which could be to appease his hunger, to engage in business, to impress others, etc. In carpentry, the intrinsic end is the creation of furniture; the extrinsic end is the carpenter’s aims which could be to generate income, to furnish his house, etc. In football, the intrinsic purpose is to make as many goals as possible; the subjective purpose is the motives of the coach or players which could be to exercise a profession, to gain honor and glory, to inflict damage on the opponents’ legs, etc. In marriage, the objective purpose is the procreation and education of children



### Summer Sunset

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

According to a friend of mine from Chicago, Thomas Kinkadee, the world famous Painter of Light, is a basic commodity in USA. His works are reproduced in almost any kind of American merchandise. How to make a light source appear to glow in a painting had always been a mystery to me. Copying this calendar sample forced me to make color and tonal analyses of every square centimeter of it which somehow shed light on the dark secrets of light.



### Summer Sunrise

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

According to artistic tradition, painting the human body requires knowledge of anatomy. But, in the absence of medical books or willing models, I settled with a painting of Sanden as a starting point for my “forensic” studies. I liked the backlit treatment of the subject so I decided to have my own version.

and the mutual love and support of the spouses; the subjective purpose is the personal reasons each spouse has for entering into an indissoluble contract which could be to acquire the other partner’s wealth and properties, to satisfy libidinous impulses, to climb the social ladder, etc. More examples can be cited but these adequately clarify the difference. Suffice it to say that every productive activity always has clear and identifiable objective and subjective ends.

Before applying these concepts to painting, it is important to note that sometimes the subjective purpose coincides with the objective purpose. The agent may have no personal reason for acting other than to carry out the action for its own sake. The rest of the time, however, the agent’s personal goals are the overriding motives for acting and the objective end is merely secondary. But, no matter how he prioritizes his own motives he cannot but fulfill the intrinsic end of the action. A cook cannot dream of impressing others with his culinary talents without first producing a specific dish. The fulfillment of the objective end is a prerequisite for the achievement of the subjective end.

### Capturing the Likeness of the Model

*What is the objective purpose of painting?* What does painting by its very nature hope to accomplish? At first sight, it seems that the objective end of painting is to represent external reality. After all, *plein air* painters work outdoors while looking at scenes of nature; still life specialists pattern their work after previously arranged set of objects; and, portraitists need a real face before they can ever begin to pick up their brush. But then to say that painting’s intrinsic end is the faithful replication of reality would be to imply that realism is the only valid form of painting. This would indeed give reasons for Monet and Picasso to rise from their graves and join ranks with their faithful in violent protest. Hence, there is a need to find a more diplomatic solution to the problem.

*The objective purpose must be that which is accomplished always by any type of painting.* We have already established that, since it is a sign or a symbol, a painting *always represents something* different from itself. By its very nature, it always imitates or copies another. We have further established that *every painting is always a likeness of its immediate or proximate model*, which is the exemplary image present in the mind of the artist. From the combination of the two, it follows necessarily that *the objective purpose of any painting is to represent on a two-dimensional*

*surface the proximate model contained immaterially in the imagination of the painter.*

When a painter paints he forces the pigments to assume the appearance of something. That something is not entirely an external object; neither is it totally an internal emotion nor an abstract idea. It is rather an image formed in the imagination of the painter which serves as his working model and which is ultimately mirrored by the painting. For a realist, the model greatly resembles an outside reality; for an impressionist, the model is a low-resolution image of an external reality; for an expressionist, the model is an image which he has defined as the appearance of his ideas and emotions. For an abstract painter, the model is an unrecognizable image that he deems representative of a universal concept. What is common in all types of painting is the imitation of a working model. This further solidifies our conclusion that ***the intrinsic end of painting is to capture on a flat surface the likeness of its exemplary image.***

How does one know the painting really imitates its model? Only the painter knows how the model in his imagination looks like. Indeed, there is no way for a viewer to independently verify the visual likeness between the painting and its model other than to trust the artist words. But, there is a means of knowing. ***A clear indication that a painting has finally reached complete likeness of its model is when the painter says it is finished.*** After all, a painting is never considered finished as long as it does not look exactly like its model. Of course, it is possible that a painter

can declare a painting finished even when likeness with the intended model is not yet reached. In this case, what happens is that instead of adapting the painting to the model he adapts the model to the painting. He modifies his own mental model to look like the actual painting. There is nothing wrong with this because at any stage of the painting one can always think of a model that corresponds exactly to what is already painted. Relative to this model, the painting is already finished; relative to the original model it is still unfinished. Whatever the case, when the painter declares the painting finished the painting has become visually identical with its model. At that point, the painting has achieved its objective end.

One may argue that all artifacts are also likenesses of their own models. Shouldn't their intrinsic purposes be the same as that of painting? The objective purposes of other artifacts go beyond the mere representation of their models because their essential makeup enables them to fulfill other intrinsic non-representing functions. For example, even though a knife is a likeness of its model, it is essentially a sharp edge and so it can fulfill an end proper to all sharp edges which is to cut objects, its intrinsic end. On the other hand, a painting is essentially a sign and its act of being is exhausted by its being a sign; hence, its objective purpose must be limited to only what a sign can do which is to

represent or be a likeness of something.

### Painting after One's Own Heart

***What is the subjective purpose of painting?*** Since this is the personal goal of the painter, only he can give the proper answer. This purpose is a personal decision, a consequence of his freedom of choice. Unless the painter reveals it, there is no way a viewer can know with absolute certainty. His painting alone will not tell whether he is aiming to gain honor and fortune or to honor his father and mother. One can only make an educated guess or an interpretation based perhaps on his personality, character, lifestyle, education, family background, social contacts, residence, etc.

Some paint to decorate. Inner walls of buildings need something to hang on them to avoid the illusion of an empty space. Although one can hang an umbrella, a coat, a cooking pan, or even a dried pig's leg on them, a painting is normally the most suitable because of its aesthetic value and slim profile.

Some paint to keep themselves busy. Painting is a wonderful cure for idleness and boredom. It is a great way to rest and relax. Elderly workers often include painting in their retirement agenda. Many office employees find messing up with pigments a rewarding way to spend the weekend.

Some paint to improve their skill. As an operative habit, painting grows and improves by constant practice. Many are never satisfied with their current level of painting skill. They want to

progress and, often, they paint simply for this reason.

Some paint for fame and fortune. Honor and glory comes with being considered by others as a talented painter even though painting is not a talent. Fortune comes with exceptionally good or revolutionary paintings even if at times it comes too late.

Some paint to communicate. Many regard painting as a language whereby they can express and communicate their ideas, feelings, emotions, true personality, ambitions, etc.

***The reason for painting can be as unique as the painter himself.*** Hence, the list can go on endlessly. But, there is one subjective purpose common to every painter and this is identical with the objective purpose. This means that one of the painter's goals must be to replicate the model image in his mind or, in plain language, to finish his work.

***The purely subjective ends are not necessarily achieved with the completion of the painting.*** They may be achieved afterwards or they may never be achieved depending on the degree of difficulty their attainment entails. A finished painting is never a guarantee for sales, fame, relaxation, successful expression and communication, etc.

### Final Thoughts

A comprehensive knowledge of painting necessarily requires understanding of its purpose. This purpose is twofold: objective and subjective. The objective purpose, which is



**The Anger of Achilles**  
(Oil on Canvas, 80 cm x 100 cm)

Greek mythology was a favorite theme among classical painters. J. L. David painted the original of this in 1819 as his own version of the **Agamemnon and Achilles** of Rubens. It shows the opposition between a woman's world steeped in suffering (the central Iphigenia and Clytemnestra) and the continued stoicism of men (Achilles and Agamemnon). This is my own interpretation done five years ago during my intrepid plunge into figurative painting. Because of my lack of technical know-how then, the faces came out entirely different from the original. Agamemnon, for instance, ended up appearing as if he needed an urgent appointment with Team Kapsalon. The exact story of these four characters is still a subject of my research.

accomplished in every painting, consists in replicating the proximate exemplary image. The subjective purpose, which may or may not be achieved, is the painter's personal intention which depends entirely on his free choice.

Understanding the objective and subjective ends is often a handy tool to clarify some obscure but fashionable statements in contemporary art. When a painter claims that his work is a manifestation of his true personality or his brewing subconscious, he is clearly referring to his subjective purpose. In this case, we nod in agreement; after all, every personal motive is always valid and true. But, if by this he means that the painting is an image of his personality or his subconscious then he is already trying to make his subjective purpose usurp the role of the objective purpose. Not even for the sake of diplomacy would this be tolerable for the simple reason that it would not true.

Converting one's subjective purpose into the objective purpose is a favorite hobby of many artists nowadays. Some do it unknowingly; others do it deliberately. At best, this only creates confusions or conflicts of opinions. At worst, it causes untold damages to art itself, just like using a computer to stop Julius Caesar's speeding chariot may wreck the electronic machine beyond repair.

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