

Painting is a Talent

Conclusions

Scientific method is an orderly way of arriving at truths in a given scientific discipline. Principles are first drawn from sensible experience, the foundation of all valid human knowledge, and then, through a reasoning process called demonstration, a number of conclusions are deduced from such principles. These conclusions constitute the substance of scientific knowledge. Science is, therefore, the systematic and mediate knowledge of beings and their properties, by means of causes or principles.

Since a year and a half ago, though it was not obvious, we have tried to apply the same scientific method in our inquiry into the specific nature of painting. The sequence of our articles somehow reflected this method. Making as our point of departure the data gathered by our senses, we searched for the intrinsic as well as extrinsic principles that constitute any given painting. Specifically, we employed the same approach science uses in investigating its proper object by identifying its four causes -- material, formal, efficient and final. Causes are principles on which the being of anything really and positively depends.

The end of the year is a fitting opportunity to come up with a summary not only to refresh our mind of our various conclusions but also to prepare ourselves for a more challenging task ahead.

Intrinsic Principles: Matter and Form

Material Cause is anything out of which and of which something is made. A chair is made out of wood and a statue is made of marble; wood and marble are their respective material causes. This cause is an indeterminate, passive potential principle remaining within any corporeal being. **The material cause of any painting is the layer of pigments applied on a solid surface.** The surface is part of the material cause since it is hard to imagine a

painting with pigments as sole components, although it only plays a secondary role since it remains totally invisible underneath. Pigments and surfaces could be of different kinds. Oil, acrylic and water color are the most commonly used pigments. Stretched canvas, panels and pressed paper are the usual supports. But we spent little time in discussing the specific features of these various materials because they can be interesting only to painting aspirants and it appears that Filipinos here are too busy to have sufficient leisure for the actual pursuit of this hobby. Hence, it is enough just to emphasize that, like any material cause, pigments are initially indeterminate and are open to any kind of visual determination the

artist wants to give it. It is a purely passive principle capable of receiving any visual form or image. After the painting process, the modified pigments remain as one of the elements *out of which* the painting is made.

Formal Cause is an intrinsic act or perfection by which a thing is whatever it is. It gives the matter the actuality of a determinate manner of being. A block of marble, for instance, becomes a statue only once the sculptor had educed out of it the figure of a man, its formal cause. Similarly, pigments become a painting only after the artist has manipulated them so that they assume a particular form. This final appearance of the pigments on canvas is called the formal cause of that painting. Technically speaking, **the formal cause of a painting is an image.** It is the likeness of the subject matter which is visually imitated on canvas.



Tropical Fruits

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

This may seem similar to a Still Life featured last year because the same characters are involved but it is totally different. This painting actually gave me a lot of headaches some months ago when Carol was still infanticipating because each time she came across it in our hallway she would crave for the fruits depicted here. Where in Holland could I find lanzones or santol? Her cravings only stopped when I took it down from the wall and replaced it with a Landscape. Of course, once Josemarie was born, I put it back.

Since an image formally constitutes a painting, we dedicated a great part of our investigation in determining its nature.

An image belongs to the general category of symbols or signs. The essence of a sign is to represent or refer to other beings. It stands in place of another thing. A sign can represent another in several ways. The first is in a natural way. Thus, a smoke is a natural sign for fire, a smile for joy, or tears for sadness. The sign and what it signifies are naturally related either as cause or effect of each other. The second is in a conventional way. Thus, traffic signs represent the courses of action drivers should take and words stand

for the concepts in our mind. Here, the meaning of the sign is determined not by nature but by human convention. The third is by way of image. Thus, one is represented by his reflection on the mirror or a king is signified by his image on a coin. Here, the meaning of the sign is not determined by human consensus but is contained in the sign itself by virtue of it being a visual likeness its object. In this sense, the image in a painting is considered a special type of natural sign. At the same time, the painted image is similar to conventional signs because it is man made. However, unlike conventional signs whose meanings could be known only by prior study, images reveal the things they signify directly and immediately without the need of learning and can be understood universally by all. An image is therefore a special kind of sign having both natural and artificial elements and *it represents another by being a visual imitation of it.*

We then tried to determine the kind of beings an image can signify or the proper object of painting. To answer this question, we had to look at two elements always involved in painting:



Copper Objects

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

This is my first attempt to paint copper. A horse statue, an ashtray and a pencil sharpener in the shape of a musical instrument all made of copper proved to be very helpful. I gave them a triangular arrangement and placed them all on the same Oriental rug for unity.

pigments and light. The painter transforms the pigment in such a way that light hitting it would be visually equivalent to the light hitting the external thing signified in the pigment. Light then is the key factor here. Only entities that can interact with light can be represented properly speaking by an image because it is precisely the phenomenon of light hitting those entities that the painter simulates on canvas using pigments. Things that can interact with light either actually or potentially are called *visibles*. **The proper object of painting is therefore the visibles and only the visibles.** Other realities like sound, smell, taste, and the tactile – *the proper sensibles* – as well as ideas and emotions have no way of interacting with light and therefore fall outside the domain of pigments.

We made further analysis on ideas and emotions which Modern Painting claims to be its proper objects. Emotions, otherwise known as passions, are acts of the appetites. They are the movements of the concupiscible and irascible appetites either

towards or away from the objects apprehended by the senses or by the intellect. There are only eleven distinct emotions: *like, dislike, desire, hatred, joy, sorrow, hope, despair, courage, fear, and anger*. Strictly speaking, emotions are not visible because they have no color, dimension or shape. They may have external visible signs but these external signs are not emotions *per se*. Emotions can inspire the painter during the creation process or can even overwhelm the viewers of the finished painting, but **emotions do not form part of the material cause or the formal cause of painting.**

Similarly, we showed that it is impossible for ideas to be the object of visual rendering by pigments. Because they are abstract and universal, **ideas do not have the visible properties of the concrete and the singular which are necessary for any visual representation to take place.** Hence, it is inaccurate to say in the strict sense of the words that a painting is an expression of ideas. Ideas are properly expressed with conventional signs called words which taken together form a communication system called language. But we likewise rejected the notion that a painting is a language *per se*. An image may be able to express and communicate anything visible but it certainly fails to do the same with respect to non-visible things which constitute the major part of reality. A real language can.

An image is not only found giving form to the pigments in a painting as its formal cause. It is also present in the mind and imagination of the painter as an exemplar from which the image is copied. In this state, the formal cause is called **exemplary cause**. Every work product has an exemplary form because no one can give what he does not have. In ordinary terms, it is called the proximate model derived in turn from an arrangement of external real objects called remote model. Painters do not really base their works entirely on the remote model no matter how elaborate and painstakingly it might have been set up. They always mentally modify the remote model and it is this altered mental version, the proximate model, that they really imitate. Hence, the image on the canvas is always an exact copy of the proximate model and sometimes of the remote model when there is identity between the two. The concept of exemplary cause is important in order to understand the different historical developments in painting. Realism arises when the proximate model used is the same or an improved version of the remote model. Abstract painting, expressionism, impressionism or what are called modern paintings results when the proximate model used is a deformation or impoverishment of the remote model.

Extrinsic Principles: Agent and Purpose

An image does not emerge on its own from a formless blob of pigments in a canvas. An agent, a painter, is needed. Even then, the three elements are not a guarantee for the creation of a painting. The agent is moved to action only by an end or a purpose. The agent is called the efficient cause while the purpose is called the final cause.

Efficient Cause is that primary principle or origin of any act which makes a thing to be or to be in a certain way. In corporeal beings, the efficient cause always acts by altering some matter so as to educe a new form from it. The efficient cause is a principle extrinsic to the effect. It imparts to the raw material a perfection it did not have before. It possesses this perfection as an exemplary cause for the effect.

The efficient cause of a painting is the painter. Unlike the pigments and the image, the painter is an extrinsic principle. He acts

by imparting a perfection (the exemplary image in his mind) to the pigments which is capable of receiving it. His task is to make the pigments receive the image and to make the image inhere in the pigments. With brushes he actualizes something that was previously a mere potentiality in the pigments.

Skill is needed to educe the image out of the passivity of the pigments. But we argued that this ability to paint is not a talent in the sense that it is something inborn or connatural with a particular person. **It is rather a skill that can be acquired by anyone** by first thoroughly understanding the mechanics of how to represent a given object with its colors, shapes and dimensions and then developing the manual dexterity needed to do it. This is because painting is primarily an act of the intellect and secondarily an act of the eyes and hands. As a consequence, the art of painting can be learned very fast especially by people with greater intellectual capacity like adults. I concluded then that young minds would encounter greater difficulty in obtaining



A Trophy and a Lobster
(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

My uncle requested a European-style painting for his newly renovated house in the Philippines. What he didn't expect was items in his living room including his collection of drinks which I saw from his photo would be the protagonists. Of course, he liked it.

good results. This, of course, was a purely speculative opinion of mine that was never validated with any empirical data because I didn't have children to work with.

Skill belongs to the general category of habit. More specifically, **the painting skill is an operative habit**, as opposed to an entitative habit like health in relation to the body. An operative habit is a quality that inclines one to perform a certain action easily and gracefully. Like any habit, the painting skill is acquired with the repetition of action and it improves when the intensity of the action is increased.

Final Cause is that for the sake of which something is made. It moves the agent to act and it is the goal of his actions. It has a positive influence on the being of the effect because without it, the effect wouldn't exist. We distinguished two types of final ends: objective and subjective. Objective end is the goal towards which by its very nature the act tends. Subjective end is the personal purpose of the agent which may or may not coincide with the objective end. We discovered that **the objective end of painting is,**

strictly speaking, to imitate the exemplary cause formed by the painter in his imagination from an external model. The very act of painting on its own tends towards the formation of an image of this proximate model. Meanwhile, the subjective end of painting could be as varied as the painter desires. Some paint to express their ideas and emotions, to decorate their houses, to earn a living, etc. Whether a painting meets its objective end is one of the bases for judging a painting.

Objective Standard

The search for objective criteria in the evaluation of any artwork is the main concern of contemporary art world. Artists following the realist tradition are especially upset over the absence of such a standard. Artists of the modern school, however, are not particularly interested and even deny its possibility saying that the value of an artwork is dependent exclusively on the subjective judgment of each individual. Common sense, of course, dictates that if objective judgment is possible in our daily behavior then it is also possible in art. Drawing parallelism from ordinary experience, we formulated the criteria that **any artwork should be judged on whether it possesses or not the basic intrinsic perfections proper to it by virtue of its specific nature.** Specifically, the basic intrinsic perfections flowing from the essence of a painting is to be an image and to be a composition of images. Therefore, **a painting must be evaluated on the basis of whether it is both a good image and a good composition at the same time.** Certainly, this is not the final word on this topic. We yet have to study other aspects of paintings using other perspectives. Hence, our formulation here is still susceptible to modifications based on our future findings. But, it is safe to assume right now that whatever forms the objective standard will eventually take our present criterion will always be an essential part of it.

Art of Painting

Our first article was entitled *Painting is Not a Talent*. And we went to such length to prove it. Now that we are ending the series we seem to be contradicting ourselves with the title, *Painting is a Talent*. And I even add there is no need to prove it because it is self-evident. The contradiction is only apparent, however. I have long wanted to come up with this sequel if only to restore whatever loss of confidence or doubt in the special nature of their skill the first article might have caused on professional painters. But, I never thought covering the different aspects of painting would take so much time. So, it is only now that we can explain the paradox. When we said that a painting is not a talent we were referring to its origin; it is not inborn. Since to be a painter is not an essential part of human nature, painting is thus not a natural ability. It is rather acquired through constant practice. But practice makes perfect; it can make a skill so deeply ingrained that it becomes second nature. And herein lies the paradox: at such an intense state any ability becomes natural. Unfortunately, the term used to refer to this kind of highly-developed acquired ability is, guess what, also talent. **Hence, painting is both not a talent and a talent. By origin, it is not a talent; by essence, it is.**

To end this series, let us define painting once more. Painting is the **art** of manually creating the image of the visible on a two-dimensional surface using pigments. Now, you may ask: **"What is art?"**

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