

Beauty of a Painting

(Concept of Beauty Applied to Painting)

The contemplation of the beautiful should cause an emotion of joy in our appetites. This is one of the solid conclusions we drew from our previous analyses on beauty. However, we immediately run into trouble if we apply this idea into painting because this implies that a painting depicting an ugly-looking being, which understandably creates disgust and not pleasure, should necessarily be ugly. Furthermore, only paintings of attractive objects would then be considered beautiful. These implications certainly sound valid, but I am sure not a few would readily and justifiably reject them. It is this kind of complications and other tricky problems that prevented us last time from attributing the formal notion of beauty directly into the art of painting. The process would have been pretty straightforward but then the needed clarifications would have required more space and time we did not have. The dual if not complex nature of painting demands that the general aesthetic principles we have been studying should be predicated to it in a more cautious and methodical manner. Hence, we have decided to dedicate a separate article to this topic.

Obviously, the application of the concept of beauty into painting should read like this: *“A painting is beautiful if it is pleasing to behold or if it is characterized by harmony, integrity and clarity or if it has all the properties essential to its nature.”* What exactly do the three ideas contained in this proposition mean?

Pleasing to Behold

Since painting is an image, a sign that visually imitates another, looking at it means looking at two things simultaneously: the artwork itself and its subject matter. This experience is essentially identical, although with a few distinctions, as looking at a car’s rearview mirror where one sees with the same glance other vehicles trailing behind and the mirror itself. Similarly, by the same act of seeing, one perceives the subject and the painted surface. The visual apprehension of the subject is direct and spontaneous; that of the painting is reflexive, a sort of simultaneous realization that one is really looking at a flat surface with pigments rather than at the represented object. Subsequent viewings, however, can be adjusted and directed principally at the artwork itself.

The involvement of two realities in a painting means that two types of knowledge also take place when viewing it: knowledge of the painting *per se* and knowledge of its subject matter. Naturally, these two cognitive acts also elicit two separate reactions from the appetites: one for the painting and another for the represented object. These two emotional responses are not always the same since their objects are different. The will and the sensible appetite may feel delight over a skillfully made painting and at the same time feel disgust over the represented object if this happens

to be ugly. Or, the appetites may feel revulsion over a sloppily done painting while enjoying the subject matter. Or, the same emotion may be felt for both. Whether these two feelings are in consonance or in conflict with each other, or whether one is more overpowering than the other, it is of vital importance to distinguish them from each other and to identify which corresponds to the painting as a work product and which corresponds to the subject.

In judging whether a painting is beautiful or not, *one should focus only at the aesthetic joy provoked by the artwork and not by its subject matter.* If the painting in itself is pleasing to behold, then it is beautiful even if its object is ugly. The joy must originate from the contemplation of the painting as a work product. Whatever joy may arise from the contemplation of the represented object as a reality extrinsic to the painting is purely incidental and never a factor in defining the beauty of the painting.

This leads us to a peculiar somewhat paradoxical property of painting: *a painting that can depict the real ugliness of its object is*



Irises in a White Vase
(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

The model for this floral painting was set up by digitally cutting and pasting flowers from scanned works of the old masters. I was too lazy to be buying and arranging flowers; besides, I only wanted to make a study so I settled for a computer model. I don't remember anymore the artists from whose works I cut these irises and roses.

actually beautiful. For instance, a well-composed portrait that realistically captures all the ugly features of the hunchback of Notre Dame is a beautiful painting even if the hunchback himself will forever remain ugly both in person and in canvas. Of course, the ideal thing would be to paint skillfully using only attractive models. But this would be restricting the art of painting whose domain includes all visibles even the ugly.

Viewers seldom make a distinction between their feelings towards the subject matter and their feelings towards the painting itself. Sometimes, their reaction towards the former is so strong that it drowns whatever reaction they have towards the latter. Thus, for example, it is not surprising to have people who dislike certain works of Rembrandt simply because they have nocturnal settings and dark backgrounds or who hate the paintings of Michelangelo simply because they are religious.



A Castle at Sunset
(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

It was already a couple of weeks after I signed this landscape when I realized my blatant mistake. I had used two different perspectives for the castle and the bridge. Not that I really mind; modern paintings normally have a dozen perspectives in them. And if I try hard enough I can even convince you that the builders constructed them at an angle with each other, but I am sure you'll say "Yeah, right!" So, I am just logging this down as an error, something bound to happen when working purely from imagination. As usual, my attention to my two babies, Josemarie and Carol, had prevented me from doing any retouch work.

But the most important idea to understand here is that *a painting is beautiful if as a painting it is pleasing to behold.*

Harmony, Integrity and Clarity

The fact that two visual experiences are involved in viewing a painting also plays a key role in judging the beauty of a painting from the point of view of harmony, integrity and clarity. It is easy to think that the painting of any chaotic scene such as a garbage dump, a hamper of unwashed clothes or a cluttered living room

could be anything but harmonious and orderly. It is likewise easy to conclude that the painting of an unfinished house or of a three-legged horse is incomplete. Easier still is to consider that a landscape depicting a distant or hazy scenery lacks clarity. While these may be true on some occasions, it is not always the case.

Once again, we have to state that the harmony, integrity and clarity of the painting should be assessed separately from those of the subject matter. They are clearly two different sets of qualities inhering in two different realities. A painting and its subject matter may or may not possess these aesthetic qualities at the same time. The *harmony of a painting* consists in a unified and orderly placement of the different visual elements. The scene of devastation left behind by a tsunami or a storm may be lacking order and harmony but a painting that depicts convincingly such chaos may be said to exude unity and order. The *completeness of a painting*

ultimately depends on whether it is able to achieve its end as an image which is to be a visual likeness of its object. Thus, a still life that shows compellingly a pile of broken plates, glasses and other incomplete items may be said to be an integral painting. The *clarity of a painting* consists in capturing as much visual information from its object as possible. Nowadays, the clarity of an image is expressed in terms of mega pixels; the higher this number is the clearer the image. The obscurity that characterizes every misty and foggy day may render everything unclear but the painting that faithfully depicts such obscurity is said to have clarity.

From all these, we can conclude that *for a painting to be beautiful it is enough that, as a painting, it possesses harmony, completeness and clarity; it is not compulsory for its subject matter to also exhibit the same characteristics.*

Possession of Essential Perfections

From a formal perspective, a painting is beautiful if it possesses all the perfections corresponding to its nature.

But a painting is by nature both an image and a composition (see *Art Creations* articles from MN 176 to MN 179). Therefore, a painting is beautiful if it has the entire perfections essential to an image and to a composition. This simple syllogism should provide the clearest guideline in the aesthetic evaluation of a painting. But, let us try to elaborate.

What are the essential perfections of an image? An image is a sign whose distinctive characteristic is to represent another object by maintaining a relation of visual likeness with it. Therefore, *the main perfection of an image consists in looking exactly like its model.* With its two dimensions, an image must be capable of reproducing the same phenomenon that occurs when light strikes the three-dimensional object it seeks to represent. The degree of fidelity of the reproduction determines the degree of perfection of the image. The more faithful an image is to its terminus, the more perfect it is. Indeed, a silhouette, a caricature, a photograph and a realistic portrait of Shania Twain are all images of the singer but the last two are certainly more perfect images than the



One More Lobster

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

There was a time when the original of this still life by W Kalf represented for me the pinnacle of artistry. I am sure you wouldn't blame me because each time I looked at his painting I felt hungry and ended up raiding the refrigerator. This must be the reason I painted five versions and this is one of them. Of course, it was a difficult task because it was a time when painting for me was still a matter of trial and error. I would need dozens of brushstrokes before I could get the right color and form. I had absolutely no idea then about tonal and value analyses which could have made life a lot easier and could have reduced the completion time to a mere fraction of what it really took me.

first two. It stands to reason, therefore, that ***a painting is beautiful if first of all it is a perfect visual likeness of its terminus or of the visible object it tries to imitate.***

What are the essential perfections of a composition? In a painting, composition refers primarily to the pleasing arrangement of the images and other visual elements in the canvas. Arrangement not only refers to their correct placement or positioning but also to an agreeable coordination of their colors, tones, intensities, values temperatures and others. There could be several ways of making all these diverse elements work as one. But, historically, the method proven most effective has been to tie them up to a focal point, an object or an area on the canvas which serves as a principle of unity. Every element in the painting should maintain a relationship – spatial, chromatic, conceptual, thermal or whatever -- with this focus because every composition is essentially a relational not a substantial unity. The stronger this relational unity is, the better the composition. From here, it is obvious that the most important perfection of a composition is to create and maintain the strongest bond possible among its components. The beauty of a painting necessarily depends on the intensity of this relational unity. The stronger the unity of the composition, the more beautiful the painting is. In clearer terms, ***a painting is beautiful if, in addition to being a perfect visual likeness of its model, it is also a perfect composition, a delightful arrangement achieved primarily by the creation of a focal point that should successfully link all the diverse elements into a compact unity and harmony.***

The subject matter is not required to also possess all the perfections proper to its nature. The beauty of a painting does not depend on this eventuality. A painting of a fresh flower and that of a wilted one could both be beautiful if both paintings possess all the perfections proper to a painting. And, formally speaking, these perfections are identical with those corresponding to an image and to a composition.

You may notice that we are merely repeating here the same criteria we used when determining what a ***good*** painting is. The reason for this is that ***good*** and ***beauty*** are transcendental properties of being that are convertible with each other. Beauty is nothing else but a type of good. A good painting is nothing else but a beautiful painting. Notionally, however, they are different. Something is ***good*** insofar as it is ***desirable*** whereas something is ***beautiful*** insofar as it is ***pleasing to behold***. Strictly speaking, ***good*** relates only to the appetitive faculties while ***beauty*** relates both to the cognitive and appetitive faculties.

The Image not the Imaged

The beauty of a painting is not the beauty of its subject matter. It is rather the set of aesthetic properties that belongs to it insofar as it is an image and a composition; this set is not identical with the visual qualities of the object it is trying to represent.

Or, in more concrete terms, what makes a painting of a rose beautiful are distinct and diverse from what makes the rose beautiful. Similarly, the joy caused in the appetitive faculties by the painting is distinct from the joy caused by its object. In judging the beauty of a painting, therefore, one must focus their attention on its aesthetic properties as an artwork and not on those of its object. For a painting to be beautiful, it is enough that the contemplation of its artistic properties produces satisfaction in the sensible appetites and the will. One can dispense with the subject matter doing the same. Thus, it is possible for a painting to be beautiful even if its object is ugly.

This paradoxical character of painting arises from its nature as a sign which necessarily involves two, oftentimes aesthetically conflicting, realities. And the fact that a painting is not just any kind of sign but an image at that makes any form of evaluation doubly difficult. For this reason, delicate care in observation has to be exercised for any ensuing judgment to be truly objective, rational and devoid of any ambiguity. An important guiding point to remember is what counts is the beauty of the image not of the imaged.

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