



Due Diligence for the untrained eye

It is indeed vital for us to find answers that help us determine the value of art in life, whether material or spiritual in origin. Deciphering meaning can also be valuable for many of us. Consider this: Why do people put up with long lines and hours standing outside the door of museums in order to see an exhibition or even a single canvas? Why do all major cities that regard themselves as such spend enormous sums on building big museums? Why do philosophers untiringly debate the nature of art? Does art perhaps serve us as therapy in developing mental gymnastics?

Understanding the art experience has always been an intriguing proposition. The intention that motivates the activity is not necessarily the same as the intention to produce it. There are many painters; there are even monkeys that paint. Children paint, and some do it quite well. Some people are Sunday painters, while others begin to paint after they retire to spend their time doing something they have always wanted to do. Some people paint as therapy; they depict landscapes, they assemble small boxes with found objects, they put together homemade video-art. None of these may be artistic per se, but all of these individuals enjoy the act of producing something appealing to them. Each one of them is far from being accepted universally as an artist, but what is it that sets them apart from true artists? What makes a painting a work of art? How must art be executed to be seen as true art? While representation has almost always played a dominant role, today subjectivity has completely taken control of art. Feelings are often materials for the construction of an art work. Its content depends on expressive and symbolic properties. If a canvas expresses what its pictorial signs indicate regardless of the artist's intention, then it denies that the work expresses what gave rise to it. The work on its own must serve as an expression of the artist's intent.

My painting is direct... The method of painting is a natural growth out of need.
I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them.
Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.
When I am painting I have a general notion as to what I am about.
I can control the flow of paint; there is no accident,
just as there is no beginning and no end.
JACKSON POLLOCK

Sometimes content is obvious; however, there is no reason for the subject matter to be the objective in itself, but rather the subjective aspect of the artist himself, the execution of his fantasy in the artwork stands out. Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti entitled one of his works *Black and White* to emphasize the true content was not simply the portrait of his mother, but rather something more intimate and mysterious that the artist captured in that way. Only profound observation, a thorough examination and familiarization with art in general can open one's eyes to pure contemplation. There are no techniques or tricks; the only key is time.

One of the most cynical, ignorant, and shallow opinions that is often heard when contemplating a complex or abstract artwork is "a child could have painted that" or "even a monkey could do that." Well, that is simply not true and it has been demonstrated empirically.

UNDERSTANDING THE AESTHETICS UNDERLYING AN ARTWORK

Comprehension of aesthetics —or sense perception— is supreme when one is acquiring a work in order to exhibit it in one's own home or in the work place. What sensory value does it have for us? Does it produce in us a feeling of warmth, of coldness, or perhaps of darkness? Do we smile when we see it? Does it remind us of some specific aspects of our childhood or perhaps of our marriage? Does it make us feel sadness, delight/elation, amazement, pain, grief/sorrow, vitality/energy, restlessness, etc.? As we gain experience in appreciating art we will be surprised at ourselves formulating these and other questions.



In a practical analysis we can regard color as the first point of attraction. Then we pay attention to the subject matter, since the principal objective of a painting is to represent something. Even an abstract or conceptual work has the ability to do this. Beauty, skill, and harmony are the foundations for judging it. Then we seek the work's expression; in other words, the intensity of the experience that the work can produce in us, what attracts us internally. The beauty of the subject matter is secondary to what is being expressed. Finally we analyze its style: this landscape is painted in the Impressionist style, or that Madonna in the Renaissance style. There are relationships between works and artists and a long history of interpretations. Knowledge deals not only with the aesthetic relations that construct the way in which the work fits into a tradition, but also the medium; in other words, the physical surface, the size, the texture, the technique, the difficulty, the coloring, the space, and the judgment. We will individually, objectively judge, providing reasons and experience; furthermore, we will do so on the basis of posing questions related to the shifts in values through history and to its ongoing adjustment to contemporary circumstances.

Subject Matter

Obviously the easiest and most typical way of looking at an artwork begins with the subject it represents. Then we will highlight its form, the composition, and the concepts it deals with. The major themes are landscapes and portraits—it is very important that a portrait communicate something about the person; genre subjects and still lifes; works with moral content that represent everyday life or objects, history and mythology, spectacular themes worthy of representation by artists in many different ways; religious subject matter, an aspect in which the Catholic Church played a leading role in view of their need to create works that told the New Testament to an illiterate population; plain or decorative, those that bring out relief from a flat surface filled with details or else simple blocks of color, such as some works by Joseph Albers, Robert Mangold, or Mark Rothko. At times, to get an impression of a work, it is enough to see it once; at others, it is useful to ignore the subject matter and focus on the shapes, colors, elements, size, and structure.

Technique

The technique used in the creation of an artwork and the materials of which it is made require objective appreciation. The techniques and materials are so varied that one could write a whole book about them. Some require more craftsmanship than others, but it is not a determinant factor for judging aesthetic value.

Formal Aesthetic Analysis

Heinrich Wölfflin in his book *Principles of Art History* studied formal concepts instead of analyzing paintings from the perspective of subject matter or even technique. In the first of these concepts, this brilliant scholar contrasts the linear to the painterly; in other words, a linear painting is a work clearly drawn and outlined, while a painterly work possessed figures that are not rendered or outlined in the same way, but rather give the impression of being blurred. The next concept focuses on a vision of the surface (planes parallel to the plane of the canvas) and another in which the elements recede in depth. After that, the concept of open form versus closed form creates a sensation of dynamic space beyond the canvas. Open form is an illuminated, dynamic, expansive space, while closed form tends to be symmetric, based on horizontal and vertical lines, balanced in a painting—as if held down by the frame—that transmit an impression of stability. Finally, plurality opposed to unity; in the first case colors, shapes, and well-defined individual elements are maintained; in the second, one would say that

they work simultaneously, forming a thematic, coherent and complete unity.

In a painting, there tends to be much more than meets the eye; for example, in small details or in its symbolism we can find each element has a meaning. In a religious work, a lit candle can symbolize Christ; a bubbling fountain, spiritual life and salvation; a horse, intelligence; a bull, an attribute of Europe personified; a dog, fidelity; a lion, power, a mirror, purity; flowers, spring; fruit, innocence; a cornucopia, the idea of possessing many virtues. All masterpieces are full of meaning.

Representation and Content

Let's use our imagination. I promise that after using it, you will never again let a portrait go unnoticed. You will see it as if its sitters were to free themselves from the canvas that holds them and step out from the frame; indeed, they will chase you in your dreams. The next time your eyes fall on Benjamin Franklin on a hundred dollar bill —the original painted by Joseph Duplessis, a French portrait painter born near Avignon— don't think only about the dollars represented by the bill, but also of the experiences of the subject represented, in the artist as an internal and external viewer.



I propose the example of a nineteenth-century portrait in the shape of an oval. Representation is an innate capacity: I see a person; I recognize a face and a surface in the painting. Turning to content, the background is gray; the sitter's suit is black; the lines are straight. It presents a serious man, a banker, some thirty-five years of age. There is content represented. This shows us there are works that have a representation for the viewer, those which have something that cannot be seen with a superficial glance, but rather that are "behind" the representation itself; nevertheless, that something is an intrinsic part of the content represented. Now then, if I tell you that the man in the portrait is my great-great grandfather, who was also an art collector, now we have the experience of the subject represented.

What did he feel in 1881 while he was posing? Was the artist an acquaintance of the sitter or an artist whose works he collected? Was my great-great grandmother close by, observing them? This is something we assume to be true (since my great-great grandmother posed for another portrait), so we now have two experiences that together with that of the artist make three. Of course, the experience obtained by seeing the work is not above the artist, but certainly the artist is part of the experience and the emotion provoked by his work: Where did he live? What did he do? What was he thinking as he painted the portrait of the sitter? As an outside spectator, I am confined to the experience that the painting produces in me from my current perspective, its oval form hanging in my grandmother's house in the middle of her living room, and not above the headboard of a bed or in an office. How do I feel as a distant yet familiar viewer of the sitter? What's more, the internal viewer, that is to say my great-great grandmother or any other member of the family or of society, did not perceive these limitations in nineteenth century Valladolid, Spain. Imagine the entire family in front of the photograph looking at my great-great grandfather (the second from the left). How much of the scene can they see and from what perspective? Now then,



think again about the oval portrait of Benjamin Franklin. I took the bill and recreated in your imagination the prior and other experiences that might arise.

GOOD AND BAD TASTE

What is beautiful is ugly and what is ugly is beautiful, that's an idea Shakespeare referred to; however, what makes an art object beautiful and what makes it ugly? Taste. This delicate, elevated faculty, which according to Edmund Burke, seems too volatile to resist the restrictive bonds of a definition; nevertheless, I will give it a try, no matter how extraneous this might turn out to be. Rather than as a conclusion, I will use it as a starting point: taste is perhaps the faculty of the mind that is influenced or that forms an opinion concerning artworks. How long these assessments may last depends on a number of factors, although there is one that remains: relativity.

Taste changes with time, in other words, it has a historical character. Its preferences were not the same. For instance, Baroque classicists regarded works in good taste as those that fit a notion of the ideal and those in bad taste were restricted to copying reality without improving it. However, it was different for the Romantics, such as Goya, who in the eighteenth century questioned what was understood as good taste and offered, with his dark paintings, disasters and folly, pleasure produced by objects that in themselves were not pleasant. The credibility of taste always remains debatable, and there resides its greatest appeal. Taste is subjective and individual, because it arises from the function of pleasure sparked by an artwork. On the other hand, it is shaped by interaction with the social milieu, culture, aesthetic, moral and ideological values; above all, "good" taste is the result of decisive factors such as education and learning. Only in this way is it objective, and therefore, it has a more universal character. The subtle palate of a gourmet or a wine connoisseur is not the same as that of an Eskimo whose diet is restricted by the supply and needs imposed by his environment. Good taste is admirable; bad taste should be punishable. But how can taste be learned? It would be much easier to say that it cannot; or else, that it would be a most costly endeavor, and that the work of art should speak for itself. The public is less interested in visual arts and more in music or literature, which are more accessible; and for their nature, we are more open to them. The arts of drawing are less instinctive and immediate. However, in the end it should be said: taste can indeed be learned, but it requires greater effort. In fact, the secret is to look, look, and look again, not only with your eyes, but also with your soul.



Peter Paul Rubens
La masacre de los inocentes
1609-11

Oil on canvas, 206cm x 345cm

This painting turned out to be the third most expensive artwork sold in history, at the impressive amount of 76,700,000.00 USD in a Sotheby's auction held in New York.



Mark Rothko

White center

1950

Oil on canvas, 205.7cm x 141cm

Mark Rothko is one of the most popular and expensive artists in modern history. This painting was sold to an anonymous buyer in an auction held in Sotheby's at the incredible amount of 72,800,000.00 USD, making of this artwork the most expensive abstract painting ever sold.

I will end this art series with this concept, only to enhance on it at a later time: A masterpiece is not a work that employs perfect technique and control of all pictorial categories, because each element tends to exclude the other. There are masterpieces of abstract art, others figurative and in drawings or monochromatic works to which a drop of color would make it commonplace and vulgar. I can assure you, without fear of error, that a masterpiece has nothing to do with technical difficulty and this has been a widespread misunderstanding.

If the artist only copies nature
The best artist would be the mirror.
ANONYMOUS

If I paint my dog exactly as he is, naturally I would have two dogs,
but not a work of art.
JOHANN W. GOETHE