

## PSYCHOLOGICAL STRIPTEASE ON CANVAS

*Can emotions be proper objects of painting?*

Nowadays, **emotion** is a hot commodity within the world of painting. Almost everything is defined in terms of it. An artwork acquires popular acceptance only if it is presented as an expression of the internal dynamic tensions taking place within the artist. Books have been written about how to add emotional contents to one's paintings. And almost every painter finds it an obligation to declare his finished work as an expression of his inner feelings and emotions in order to give it a stamp of authenticity and value. To top it all, Encyclopaedia Britannica defines painting as *the expression of ideas and emotions, with the creation of certain aesthetic qualities, in a two-dimensional visual language.*

And yet, when one attempts to identify exactly where in a painting such emotions are shown not even with the aid of a microscope can one arrive at a clear answer. Nowhere in a painting can those emotions be found or at least their presence is not obvious. And to attribute such failure to the viewer's pedestrian outlook or lack of artistic discernment would be an insult that is hard to tolerate.

Can emotions really be the object of painting? Should the expression of emotions be made as the defining element of painting? To answer these questions, we first need to understand the concept of emotions and then examine if they are expressible in paintings.

### Acts of the Appetites

**Emotions are acts of the appetites.** Man possesses certain faculties called appetites whose purpose is to react to the object apprehended by the senses. The reaction could either be a movement towards the perceived object if it is considered pleasant or a movement away from it if judged unpleasant. This motion of the appetite is called emotion. It is also known as **passion** but people generally refer to it as **feelings**. Animals also have them because they too have senses and appetites. Emotions, in fact, are the intrinsic motor principle of animal behavior. However, in humans, emotions are governed and controlled by reason and free will. Emotions merely accompany human actions and affect them by increasing or decreasing their intensity.



### Nautilus Beaker

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

*The instant I saw this Nautilus Beaker from a famous still life by Willem Kalf, I decided I should learn how to paint it, although within my own setting. The secret to painting transmitted light like that of the beaker is to surround it with dark values, making sure it is not brighter than the highlight.*

Man has two appetites: **concupiscible** and **irascible**. The concupiscible appetite reacts to objects insofar as they are **enjoyable** or not. It has six emotions: **like, dislike, desire, hatred, joy, and sorrow**. For example, when the senses perceive an apple, the appetite could **like** it. This liking could give rise to another emotion which is the **desire** to possess the apple. **Joy** results from its actual possession. But, the concupiscible appetite could **dislike** the apple. To stay away from it, the appetite could feel **hatred** or **aversion**. If, despite such dislike and hatred, the apple is possessed, then **sadness** or **sorrow** follows. By contrast, the irascible appetite reacts to the



### Still Life with Water Jug and Lobster

*(Oil on Canvas, 60cm x 80cm)*

*The focal point of this still life is the circular area formed by the base of the beige water jug, yellow pomelo, red lobster, and brown pineapple. To achieve balance, I replicated the same color scheme of the focal point although in a smaller scale on the other side of the canvas. Thus, the flower vase, orange, lemon, and chicos somehow echo the main center of interest.*

perceived object insofar as it is **difficult** or **arduous** to attain. It has five emotions: **hope, despair, courage, fear, and anger**. For example, the Big Apple is generally hard to reach. But if deemed attainable, the irascible appetite could feel **hope** of one day getting there and even generate **courage** to overcome possible obstacles. Or the irascible appetite could feel **despair** if it appears to be unattainable. **Fear** could arise if faced with difficulties. And **anger** could follow as a result of failure.

There are only eleven emotions: **like, dislike, desire, hatred, joy, sorrow, hope, despair, courage, fear, and anger**. When painters talk about their emotions they can only refer to anyone of these.

Can any of these eleven be painted directly? The answer is no. To paint something is to give it colors, shape, and dimensions on canvas; this is possible only if the thing itself has colors, shape and dimensions. But, real as they may be, emotions are colorless, shapeless, and dimensionless. They are not visible, they have no appearance, and they have no image of their own. It is impossible to know, for instance, how **desire** looks like or how **like** looks like. Therefore, painting emotions on a

canvas is not possible and any attempt to do so can be nothing else but an exercise in futility.

What is possible is to paint *natural symbols* of emotions. Even though emotions have no existence outside of the emotional person or animal, they do have natural external manifestations. A smiling face stands for joy; an angry face represents anger; and a long face signifies sadness. These facial or bodily gestures are natural symbols of emotions much like smoke is a natural symbol of fire. Therefore, if a painter wants his painting to be an expression of his emotions, he can only do so *indirectly* by painting himself in an emotional pose. But, it has to be made clear that this is not painting emotions *per se* or in the strict sense because just as smoke is not fire itself an angry face is not anger itself and a smiling face is not joy itself.

Hence, from the perspective of portraits, the definition of painting as an expression of emotions could be tolerated. However, trouble immediately arises: portraits constitute only a miniscule portion of the totality of paintings. To define the whole of painting in terms of what portraits can do would, therefore, be like defining man in terms of what his foot can do. ***The whole is never defined in terms of the functions of a part.*** This would be a tremendous injustice to the other types of paintings like still lifes, landscapes, flowers, etc. which have as much right to be called

Undeniably, a painting can excite emotions. In fact, all paintings provoke emotions. But, then, what is so special about it? Every single object perceived by our senses necessarily causes emotions in us whether we like it or not. One does not need to go to a museum to have an emotional high. A football game on TV coupled with cold bottles of beer can do the job just as well if not better. In other words, ***triggering emotions is not a monopoly of paintings*** and to use it as a defining element of paintings is to usurp a characteristic also essential to other objects.

**Expression of Emotions**

But this is not to say that paintings only involve minimal symbolic emotions. On the contrary, a lot of real emotions go into them especially if the painter is a highly emotional person who can only act from emotions. Emotions are expressed externally not only through facial expressions but above all through actions. In fact, every action of ours is either a conscious or unconscious expression of our emotions. This means that in those stages of painting where there is action, there can be torrents of emotions. Planning the composition can be done with great desire or hope. Priming the canvas can be done with prime love and affection. Mixing the paints can be done with a mixture of sadness and joy. Applying paint with the brush can be carried out with a smile in one's face or with anger in one's blood or with any emotion helpful to the completion of the

job. In reality, the whole process of painting could be one continuous outpouring of intense emotions. But, and this is a big but, these ***emotions do not form part of the finished painting.***

And this is always the case with any human activity where there is an end product: ***emotions form part of the production but not of the product.*** Cooking, baking, carving, shoemaking, and paintings are some examples of such human activities. A baker may be drowning in joy or sorrow while preparing a cake but such joy or sorrow will not form part of the cake itself. A cook may prepare a dish while in a state of fear or despair, but the diners will taste nothing of them. The same is true with painting. Emotions are not pigments that are mixed with linseed oil and turpentine and then applied on the canvas. Rather, ***they play a role similar to that of the brushes, knives, easel, palette, and rags. They are indispensable tools for the creation of the painting.*** But, just as you don't go searching for the strainer, chopping board, or stove in a bowl of soup, neither do you go looking for the brush, palette, easel, or emotions in the final painting. They just don't belong there.



**A New Day**  
(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 80 cm)

*Picking up the brushes once more after a long Christmas vacation was like going to work on a Monday. Reflexes were slow, emotions were dry, and ideas were non-existent. All I wanted was look at the sky and wait for some uplifting inspirations. But, when nothing came, I decided to paint the sky instead and other things requiring little effort, following the style of my favorite landscape painter, T. Kinkade. Anything just to start the juices flowing!*

paintings.

Still lifes or landscapes themselves can not possibly be an expression of the painter's emotions, not even indirectly. A still life of apples will only be just that: a still life of apples. And a landscape can only be a depiction of mountains, clouds, or trees. Nowhere in a still life or in a landscape can one find the painter's anger, hope, courage, or despair. Some, of course, would insist on establishing a link. According to them, using light colors to paint the objects or arranging the objects in an upward direction would indicate joy. Dark colors would stand for sadness and red would stand for anger. But, such approach of giving color equivalence to the different emotions can only lead to absurdities. Following such logic, a painting of a white hearse or coffin would be an expression of joy; a dimly lighted dance floor, an expression of sorrow; and a red heart, an expression of anger. And, certainly, an upward direction can not possibly stand for joy always especially if it reminds the viewer of rising amortization rates. These contradictions simply mean that, in a painting, ***colors and spatial orientations of objects have no natural connection with emotions.*** This is understandable because long before man began to roam this earth with his emotions colors already existed complete with their meaning and purposes, and expressing emotions was not one of them.

Still others claim paintings can act as a trigger for emotions and, in this sense, can be viewed as an expression of emotions.

**Emotional Exhibit**

Having no visible qualities, emotions can not possibly be contained in a finished painting. They may be indirectly expressed in portraits but painting is not only portraits. They may be directly expressed during the act of painting, but painting is essentially the product not the process. Therefore, ***emotional expression can not be made the essence of painting.*** Otherwise, one would have to start defining every human activity in terms of it; cooking thus would be the expression of emotions by combining food ingredients on a heated pan.

Painting is not a psychological striptease on canvas. In a static setting where the language of expression is determined by the nature and limitations of pigments, baring one's soul is not possible, not even theoretically. Emotions are better expressed and understood through speaking, writing, crying, singing, laughing, dancing, or through anything where action is involved including the very act of painting during which the painter can intoxicate himself with a cocktail of emotions. But since it is the finished painting and not the painting process that is exhibited then why bother with emotional expression at all? As Helen van Wyk said, ***"The art of painting is how easy you do it. Nobody cares how much you suffer."***

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