

Essential Role of Models in Painting

What is the exemplary cause of painting?

In any creative activity where a separate end product is formed, the agent or craftsman always acts in accordance with a certain preconceived model or pattern. For example, a potter molds his clay following the design of a vessel he has in his mind; an architect constructs a house guided by a previously drawn house plan; a car manufacturer assembles a vehicle according to a set of specifications contained in a blueprint; or, a cook creates a dish following a recipe. The pot design, house plan, blueprint, and recipe all fulfill the function of a model which directs the actions of the craftsman.

As an agent concerned with producing an artwork, a painter also endeavors to recreate the visual likeness of a predetermined model every time he spreads pigments on his canvas. Our task in this article is to study the peculiar characteristics of a model as used in painting and to discover its artistic significance or importance.

Models in General

In general, a model is anything which serves as a guiding pattern for an agent in the execution of his work. It could be real or imaginary things, people, animals, plants, etc. Or it could be aspects or properties of things such as shape, color, taste, smell, texture, functions, processes, etc. In technical jargon, a model is called an exemplary cause or an exemplar or an archetype or a prototype. In fact, every craft has a specific term for it. In ordinary language, though, it is simply called model. Incidentally, the term used in fashion has the same meaning and connotations.

A model is an essential condition for any productive activity to occur because every type of production consists precisely in replicating a model. Many may disagree with this but no matter how one looks at it, the craftsman always works by shaping or altering his materials in conformity with a predetermined plan. He will not begin to produce at all if he does not know what to produce.

As a consequence of the duplicative nature of any creative action, the finished product is always a replica or likeness of the model. The kind and characteristics of the effect is always determined by the nature of the working model.



Gizmo

(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Gizmo is the retriever of our landlady, Elvira Keur, whose family wanted a portrait of their ever reliable friend in their living room. Because of Gizmo's black hair, I decided he would stand out better like a silhouette against a bright sunny landscape, making sure the silhouette effect is at its maximum at the head, the natural focal point. The creek shows the pet's imagined favorite playground. The grass was painted in continuity with his wavy fur. The windmill indicates Gizmo is Dutch; but, together with the pinkish house, it serves primarily as a color balance to the dog's tongue.



Blond Model

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

Sometimes, the mailbox is a wonderful source of model materials. A cosmetic store sent this picture to Carol and I just found the calm facial expression of the blond lady ideal for my portraiture practice. I painted the background with the colors of her dress to achieve greater color unity and I added some gold laces to her gown to balance her golden hair.

A model could either be selected or invented. The agent can choose his model from any of the existing natural or artificial realities or elaborate it in his mind. Whatever the method he uses, the agent must first have a mental or intentional possession of the model before any causal process can begin. In short, whether a craftsman uses an external or internal model, it is essential that he must first internalize or form an idea or an image of his model. This is in keeping with the principle no one can give what he does not have. No agent can impart a perfection he does not possess.

Models in Painting

The model in painting is not only a person who poses before a portrait artist but anything that the painter attempts to replicate on his canvas. Some unwittingly call it design, composition, visual image, or conceptual framework. Unlike a cook who seeks to imitate the gustatory, tactile, olfactory, and visual characteristics of the model recipe, the painter focuses his attention only on the visual properties of the model like size, shape, color, position, extension, etc. The reason is that the tools and materials in painting allow only the duplication of visible aspects. This means that the other non-visual characteristics of things do not form part of the model *per se*. In short, **the model in a painting is an exemplary image.**

Any painting activity consists in replicating an exemplary image that pre-exists ultimately in the mind of the painter. The painter mixes his paints and manipulates his brushes with a view of making a copy of this model. It follows necessarily that the finished painting is always a likeness of the exemplary image. For instance, a painting will look like an apple if the model is an apple.

The painting model is either selected or created. In the first case, the painter discovers the model for his artwork in the outside world. It could be a natural scene an outdoor artist stumbles upon during his country side walk. It could be a jumble of objects a still life enthusiast considers easier to paint than to organize. It could be a face a portrait artist finds interesting enough to reproduce on canvas. He may modify the objects slightly by giving them a different arrangement or lighting or by looking at them from a different perspective but, in this case, the painter practically does

nothing in the elaboration of the model because the outside world gives it to him. ***In the second case, the painter constructs the model within himself either by retrieving images of real objects from his memory or by inventing new images.*** This internal process is often referred to as conceptualization, improvisation, or study. At times, painters have ***recourse to memory*** for convenience sake. Having the real object pose before them is often a luxury the painters cannot afford. At other times, painters ***create imaginary models by mentally modifying real objects or by concocting purely imaginary ones.*** Impressionist and expressionist painters often use the first method. The impressionist applies a certain degree of distortion on real objects with the hope that the eyes will reconstruct the original object for the viewer. The expressionist applies an even greater degree of distortion with the hope that viewers may see in them an expression of their feelings and emotions. In both, the model still retains a certain similarity with known objects. The pure abstract painter uses the second method with total disregard of any form of likeness. He elaborates his model by deforming reality beyond recognition or by inventing absolutely new shapes or forms with the hope that viewer would recognize in them some abstract ideas or realities.

But no matter how the model is elaborated and no matter what appearance it takes, one thing is sure: ***in painting, a model always exists and the task of the painter is to create a visual likeness of it.***



Blue Daisies

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

This is one of my early paintings requested by Carol and inspired by Lola Ada, a master floral painter. This would have been long consigned to the storage room if not because a lot of people like it. Maybe they find the dominant pale blue contrasted with a hint of light orange in an overall high key composition quite soothing to the eyes. As for me, I can already imagine a long list of the painting's imperfections.

Importance and Significance

No painting activity can take place without a model. At the very least, this exemplary image is an essential requirement or a ***conditio sine qua non*** of any painting process. It is obvious that a painter is not going to act at all without a model as guide or goal. Thus, to say that it is important is a bit of an overstatement. But, maybe, its significance can be further appreciated from the following three considerations.

First, ***judging alone from the amount of time and effort spent by painters in trying to find or create a model, it must have a considerable weight.*** Though it is routinely ignored in the theoretical level, it is nevertheless heavily taken into account in the practical level. Painters, for instance, brave any inclement weather just to paint outdoors. Painting workshops are often organized in distant places just to find ***new ideas***. Portrait artists readily pay handsome prices for human models to work with them.

Huge investments are made on high quality photographic equipments, scanners, computers, graphic software, collectibles, etc., all for the sake of producing a clearer and better guiding picture. Studio based painters come up with their own models by making studies which usually means discarding one thumbnail painting after another to the point of frustration or until a desired model image is reached. The truth is the actual painting process itself on some instances requires less time and effort than the elaboration of the model. All these show the exemplary image cannot be taken for granted.

Second, ***the use of models is what makes human paintings distinctly human and different from animal paintings.*** Sometimes, the TV features some gorillas or elephants splattering paints on canvas with paws or trunks. Of course, the final painting is no where close to being a likeness of any known reality but it cannot be distinguished from a typical abstract painting either. And when the zookeepers declare such painting to be the gorilla's exploration of his basic emotions or the elephant's expression of his bountiful true self and should therefore sell like a Matisse or a Picasso, then how is one to dispute them? There is no way unless the concept of an exemplary model is introduced. ***An animal painting is different from its human counterpart precisely because the animal makes use of no model and does not know how to use one.*** The animal brushstrokes are not conscious efforts to imitate an exemplary image but are random and arbitrary movements motivated perhaps by expectations of some comestible rewards. In brief, an animal painting is a product of pure chance. Proof of this is that the same animal would be incapable of painting the same painting again if prodded to. Animals do not know the notion of copying, let alone the notion of a model. Hence, they would not be able to duplicate whatever model is placed before them, not even by chance. For example, the chances that a gorilla with painting materials would repaint Rembrandt's Night Watch are the same as the chances that a monkey with a typewriter would retype Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The odds against him are staggeringly so immense that the possibility is simply not real.

Lastly, ***since every painting involves making a replica of a model, every painting activity is a copying process.*** It is important to emphasize this because there is a modern day mentality that frowns at any type of copying as an assault against creativity, expressiveness, originality, authenticity, or intellectual maturity. Copying is considered a sign of amateurism if not mediocrity. As a result, every form of realism is condemned because this style is regarded as essentially copying. Proponents of this doctrine say one should interpret and not copy the subject matter. By interpretation they mean deforming or distorting the subject matter so that its appearance incorporates how they feel or think about it. In other words, one's painting of a horse should not look like a real horse but as a horse already transformed or modified by one's true feelings or thoughts for the horse. But, those who adopt this position do not seem to realize that ***copying is not only unavoidable but also necessary in painting.*** No matter how abstract one interprets his subject matter one inevitably needs to make a mental model of such interpretation and then transfer that mental model into the canvas. That transfer is pure and simple copying, no matter how one calls it. ***The painting may not be a copy of any external reality but it is always a copy of its model, be this model a distorted reality or a pure invention.*** Therefore, to denounce every form of copying as a humiliating malpractice that should be avoided at all cost is not only to demonstrate a shallow understanding of the true nature of the art of painting but, more humiliatingly, to shoot oneself at the foot.

A Major Key

Shapeless blobs of pigments do not become a painting on their own unless a painter gives them some form or perfection. The painter gets that form or perfection from a previously chosen or created exemplary image called model. Without this model no painting process can take place because the painting process is nothing else but a conscious effort to copy or duplicate such model. Consequently, the finished painting is never the result of pure contingency or of a happy accident.

Nowadays, the true significance of an exemplary image may not be clearly reflected in the speech or thought processes of many painters but it is nevertheless unconsciously acknowledged in their behavior. Models are of paramount importance in painting. In fact, as we shall see later, the key to the clarification of many vague and sticky issues in painting or even in art in general lies in a better understanding of this frequently overlooked element of painting.

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