

JUDGING A PAINTING

Is objective judgment possible?

A painting is probably the only being in the world that gets hanged before it is judged. And yet the entire existence of a painting consists more essentially in being judged than in being hanged. A painting's pretty insignificant life becomes exciting and meaningful only when it gets noticed, admired, and accepted, or when it gets ignored, maligned, and rejected. Art exhibits, museum tours, art reviews, and other similar activities are precisely occasions when artworks come face to face with their ultimate destiny -- judgment.

There is really nothing special about this since any work product undergoes the same ordeal of being subjected to scrutiny and evaluation. The excitement lies in that while unified criteria for judgment clearly exists for non-art products the same uniformity of norms appears to be totally non-existent for artworks. It seems that in art the overriding principle is any opinion is as good as the other. Indeed, some regard Rembrandt as the supreme master of virtuosity while others see him as a dull artisan who churned out gloomy and uninspiring derivatives. Some view Picasso as the ultimate genius of the 20th century while others consider him as the consummate con artist of all times. And tons of literature can be produced at a moment's notice in support of these diverging views. In short, judging an artwork nowadays becomes extremely complicated because any perception could easily be repudiated by a diametrically opposed belief. There ensues necessarily the problem of determining who is right and who is wrong. In the face of this chaos, a standard for judgment would indeed be desirable. But, during this present era of artistic relativism where individual taste or personal opinion is absolute, is this just wishful thinking? Is objective judgment possible at all? Or, does it even matter?

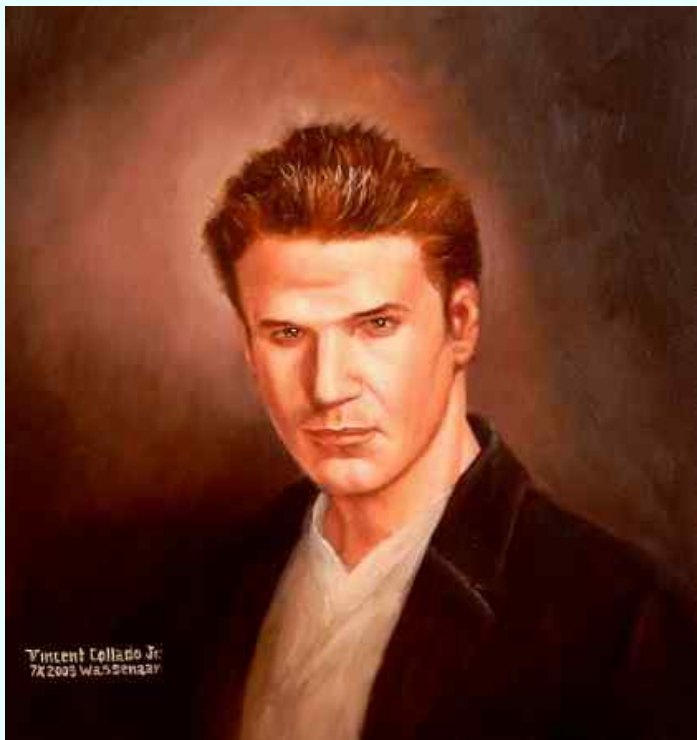


Flowers and Embroideries

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm) after Alexander Selytin

I was more interested here in studying the embroideries than the flowers. A similar painting featured in a floral book gave me the opportunity to practice since I couldn't find any piece of embroidered textile at home.

originality, creativity, and expressivity as the most important criteria for judgment. Let us try to examine each one of them.



Angel

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm)

The model for this painting was taken from the front cover of a pocket book of Carol. I liked how the single source of light revealed the facial form of Angel, a fictional character in a television series, and how his eyes seem to follow the viewer all around the room.

This problem is too complex to be solved in one article. That is why, here, we will just try to explore and analyze the different ways of art evaluation and draw whatever logical conclusions there are available.

Usual Suspects

Modern artists have their own ways of assessing artworks. They give extraordinary if not exaggerated emphasis on

Originality means a painting should not be a repetition of a previous work, style, technique, subject matter, etc. The artwork must be totally different otherwise it is considered a clone, a derivative, or a cheap knock-off. The trouble with originality is that it itself is no longer an original idea. It is a concept that has been overused and recycled *ad nauseam* by these modern artists in order to justify their refusal if not inability to paint things the right way. In addition, if ever originality is made an absolute norm for evaluating a painting, then only a few paintings in the world could really be classified as real paintings. Producing a completely original painting totally unique at this point in time when every conceivable type of painting has already been done is not only absurd but simply impossible. The truth is even the works of painters universally accepted as great masters can hardly be called original. In one way or another they included in their works elements directly lifted from other artists. For instance, Fred Ross, an art authority, thinks that Michelangelo can easily be labeled as a derivative of Donatello. Leonardo and Raphael were heavily influenced by Giotto and Roger Vander Weyden. All of 17th century Dutch art depended heavily on the breakthroughs of the High Renaissance, which itself evolved from the endeavors of the early renaissance. And others are of the opinion that even the style popularized by Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky and other modern painters was actually pioneered by the prehistoric cavemen.

Creativity is another modern invention. Interestingly enough, it has never been successfully defined with precision. Some identify it with the spirit of attempting the bold, the risky, and the impossible or with an inner force that propels the artist to make leaps of imagination in his works. It is easy to add a dozen more definitions that will sound and mean exactly the same – nothing. We all know that creativity is reserved, properly speaking, for the active power of the Almighty who can produce something out of nothing. Certainly, the word creativity cannot be applied to artworks in the same sense since no artwork can be created from nothing. The activity proper to created beings is called *making* or producing something out of existing materials. But, in order to sound more sophisticated artists sometimes apply this concept to their works. There is no problem with this as long as it is clear that it is used in an improper way for linguistic effect. But, if it is turned into a standard against which the goodness or badness of a work of art is measured, then we have an

issue. When applied to art, creativity becomes a vague **univocal concept**. Every painting activity is a creative process which means that creativity can be predicated to all finished paintings in the same degree and with the same meaning. To use *being creative* as criteria for judging a painting would therefore be the same as using *being an animal* as criteria for determining the differences among horses.

Finally, paintings are supposed to be assessed based on their **expressivity** – they should have meaning and must be capable of conveying a particular message. An artwork without meaning is considered shallow and mediocre. This, of course, is premised on the erroneous conception of painting as a language. But, we have demonstrated before that painting is not a language; it is not a system of signs for expressing and communicating thoughts or messages even though it may appear to be. Therefore, expressivity cannot be used as criteria for judging a painting for the simple



Rough Waters

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x60 cm)

Art books often talk about L-type, U-type, and S-type of landscape compositions. As you can guess, they are so called because the important elements of the paintings are arranged in the shape of these letters. I never really understood why they are considered good compositions or why no other letters are used. Here, I created my own O-type composition – O as in originality, although it is just a modification of an instructional painting from a book. If you look closely, you will find the O.

reason that paintings are by their very nature not expressive. Any meaning or message accompanying a finished painting is not intrinsic to it. It is rather a postproduction addition from outside made by the artist or curator -- and hence purely subjective and arbitrary -- much in the same way as a jar is added to cookies after baking. Under no circumstances do we ever evaluate the cookies on the basis of the jar.

Judgment Based on Basic Intrinsic Perfections

Basically, a painting belongs to the general category of work products, just like a house, a car, a dish, etc. Work products are the ultimate results of transitive human activities wherein man transforms pre-existing materials by giving them a new form or perfections they never had before. How are such objects judged?

Let us take the example of a house. A house is a building with a roof, ceilings, walls, floors, windows, doors, kitchen, living room, bedrooms, bathrooms, toilet, storage cabinets, etc. It should have functioning electrical, water, and sewerage systems. To have a roof, to have walls, and to have all the other essential parts are considered basic intrinsic perfections belonging to the specific nature of a house. In choosing a house, therefore, any potential buyer focuses his attention mainly on whether it has all these parts and has them in good condition. He assesses the house based on the actual perfections the builders had managed to give to the building. External factors like location or add-ons like furniture and decorations are normally considered after. Originality, creativity, and expressivity seldom cross his mind.

Let us take another example, a car. It belongs to the specific nature of a car to have a functioning engine, comfortable carriage and seats, doors, windows, steering and braking mechanisms, wheels, lights, airbags, etc. A necessary condition for a sale to

push through is if the car buyer is satisfied that all these basic intrinsic perfections proper to a car are present. Later on he may consider the extras like air-conditioning system, satellite navigational system, surround sound system, and hands-free telephony but under no circumstances is he going to buy the vehicle if the wheels have been made square for originality's sake or if the engines have been placed beside the driver's seat for creativity's sake.

We humans do a great deal of judging work products during our waking hours. When we buy our groceries, shop for clothes, dine in restaurants, etc., we always carry out a considerable amount of critical judgment. And **our choices are always made on the basis of whether the objects actually possess the perfections proper to their specific nature or not**. For instance, before we buy a pair of pants, we make sure that it has all the basic parts and requirements necessary for a pair of pants to be truly a pair of pants. It becomes

obvious, therefore, that a painting, an ordinary work product, should be judged in the same way.

What are the basic intrinsic perfections proper to the specific nature of a painting? A painting is basically an image, thus, its perfections are the same as those of an image. An image is a special symbol which on its own represents another by being a likeness of it. This means that its perfection should be further identified with those of its object. What is its object? We concluded in our last article that an image represents its mental model proximately and the thing outside remotely. Whose visual perfections should the image pick up? It depends on which of the two has more perfection. If the subject matter is a horse and the artist's mental model of it is a colorless two dimensional figure of a horse, then, obviously, the real horse is better. If, on the contrary, the imaginary model includes not only the real horse but also other perfections like a beautiful background, proper lighting, unified arrangement, or good composition, then obviously, the mental model is better than the outside one. The important thing is that the image should incorporate as many visual perfections of its object as possible for it to merit a positive assessment. For instance, a painting of a horse will be judged to be better if

the head, neck, body, tail, and other visual perfections proper to a horse are fully integrated into the painting. On the other hand, the assessment will be negative if less horse perfections are included. Certainly, an image of a two dimensional horse is less perfect than an image of a three-dimensional horse. Similarly, a portrait of a person will be considered good or bad depending on whether the eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, and other unique facial features of the person are faithfully imitated in the painting or not. In other words, **a valid and objective evaluation of a painting should always take into account the real nature of painting whose basic intrinsic perfection consists in capturing as many visual perfections of its object as possible**.

Final Verdict

Common sense tells us that judging something means determining how intensely that thing possesses the perfections proper to it by nature. **Evaluating a painting, therefore, consists in measuring to what degree the painter had managed to impart to the image the basic intrinsic perfections required by the specific nature of an image**. As a special symbol signifying another by being a visual likeness of it, the image is judged to be more perfect if it incorporates as many visual perfections of its object, this object being the better between its immediate mental model and its ultimate real model. **Originality, creativity, and expressivity are not inherent perfections of images**. They are extrinsic qualities arbitrarily added by artists or by others who want to misrepresent their artworks. They cannot, therefore, be given a major role in the assessment of paintings in general. To do otherwise at the expense of relegating to the background the real solid foundations for judgment would be the greatest misjudgment of all times.

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