

## Essence of an Image

*What are the intrinsic perfections of an image?*

A horse born with two legs is judged to be a freak of nature because the essence of a horse requires the mammal to have four. But a chicken hatched with a pair of feet is not considered an inferior citizen of the animal kingdom because, leg-wise, this is in keeping with the essence of a chicken. This, in an illustrated way, is what we meant in our last article when we concluded that any objective judgment must be founded on the basic intrinsic perfections emanating from the essence or specific nature of the object. In plain language, things are evaluated by comparing what they are with what they are supposed to be.

What is a painting supposed to be? What is the essence of a painting? What are the basic perfections intrinsic to a painting as such? We have previously answered these questions albeit only in a partial and general manner. In this issue, we will try to be more specific and concrete.

### Qualities of the Visible

Since the perfections we are looking for flow from the essence, it is logical to start our analysis from it. As we already know, the essence of anything is a basic constitutive element that determines the kind of being it is. It is also called *nature* insofar as it is the principle of operation and it is expressed ordinarily by a thing's *definition*. What is proper to the essence is to give rise in the substance a series of perfections or characteristics which serve as its distinguishing features. Although there could be countless of them, these perfections can be classified into nine types otherwise known as supreme categories: **quantity**, **quality**, **relation**, **ubi** or being in a place, **position**, **possession**, **quando** or being in time, **action**, and **passion**. Quantity, quality, and relation affect the substance intrinsically; action and passion affect the substance



### Shells and Fruits

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

*One art hypothesis states that only the focal point of a painting should be rendered with accuracy and precision and all the other supporting elements should be left in the blur. This is in keeping with the way our eyes work which can see with sharpness only those objects they are directly concentrated on. But the faithful rendition of the peripheral elements by the Old Masters showed they certainly were not aware of this modern idea or perhaps they totally ignored it. In this painting, I took the pleasure of gathering such peripherals from different classic painters and put them into one classic composition.*

both intrinsically and extrinsically; and, the rest determine the substance extrinsically. It stands to reason, therefore, that any serious evaluation of a thing should take into account all these constitutive perfections especially **quantity** and **quality** which affect the thing in an absolute manner and **relation** which determines it in reference to another.

A painting, being an ordinary thing, also possesses the same types of perfections. But since a painting is in essence a hand-made image which, in turn, is a special symbol signifying another, much of our attention should be focused primarily on two



### Jose, Maria, y Jesus

*(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 40 cm) after Jacob Jordaens*

*Art education during the times of the Dutch Masters required, among others, spending two years learning drawing and five years copying masterpieces in museums. Only after going through such a long period of arduous training were art students given the freedom to paint something of their own. When Carol and I moved to Netherlands, I thought I had the opportunity to enroll in a similar academy and undergo the same program of apprenticeship even if only in an abridged or accelerated manner. Unfortunately, the tradition of classical excellence in Holland seems to have perished a long time ago supplanted by a modernistic school where personal interpretation reigns supreme and where skill and perfection have very little importance. Given this scenario, I had no choice but to take care of my own artistic improvement by simulating the same learning environment and methodology classic art students had.*

perfections closely related to the visible: **quality** and **relation**. Of course, the size (quantity) of the canvas where the image is painted, or the place (ubi) where it is hanged, or the frame (possession) that embellish it are also worth considering but they are not included *per se* in the essence of an image.

**Qualities** are perfections which intrinsically affect the substance in itself, making it to be in one way or another. Examples are shape, color, hardness, temperature, energy, intelligence, will, memory, habits, character traits, virtues, etc. It is obvious that our interest should lie only on visible qualities being the only perfections an image can represent. There are three of them: **figure**, **shape**, and **color**.

**Shape** and **figure** are qualities of bodies which define the limits of quantity and give it contours and dimensions. By dimensions, we mean three dimensions because anything with quantity always has volume. Shape and figure are commonly used synonymously but they have distinct meaning. Figure usually designates the natural contours of bodily substances, without adding any special connotation (e.g. the figure of a horse, of a man, of a bird). Shape or form, in contrast, has a certain connotation of proportion among the parts of a thing, which makes it pleasing; hence the term is often applied to the contours of artificial beings with well proportioned parts.

**Color** is a quality responsible for revealing shape and figure. Color reacts with light by reflecting only a certain wavelength perceivable by the eyes. Every corporeal body has color. Our knowledge of the things of this world would be difficult without color because then we would have to rely solely on the other senses.

For all intent and purposes, we would be blind even if our eyes were in perfect health.

In general then, *shape*, *figure*, and *color* are three basic intrinsic perfections any painted image possesses by virtue of its essence. *Judging a painting, therefore, must in some way include determining whether the image had successfully acquired the shape, figure, and color of its subject matter or not.* A painting getting these elements wrong can only mean it has failed as a painting while a painting faithfully capturing these qualities has the potential of being a good painting. In concrete terms, a painted image of a horse is good only to the extent that it captures the shape, figure, and color of a horse.

### Relation of Visual Likeness

*Relation* is another perfection arising from the essence, totally different from the visible qualities. *Relation* is a perfection whose nature is a *reference* or order of one substance towards another. The universe is a dense network of relations existing among individual beings; no being is isolated, completely



**Umaga Na Sa Aming Nayon**  
(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

*Repetition of a certain shape is one way to achieve unity in a composition. In this landscape, the triangular form embodied in the roofs of the houses, the sails of the boat, the slope of the hill, and the majestic Mayon Volcano helps create that unity and also serves as a fitting backdrop for a community that seems to be waking up to the promise of a new day and to the expectation of an abundant catch.*

independent from the others. Examples of relation are friendship, fatherhood, dependence, cooperation, similarity, causality, equality, and so forth. Essentially, a relation has four components: a) the *subject*, which is the person or thing in which the relation resides; b) the *terminus* to which the subject is related -- both subject and terminus are also known as *terms of the relation*; c) *basis* of the order between the terms of the relation; d) the *relation* itself or the bond that links one thing to another. To illustrate, *sonship* is the name of the *relation* a boy (*subject*) has with respect to his parents (*terminus*) because he was engendered by them (*basis*.)

Similarly, a painted image is also the *subject* of a relation. Its *terminus* is the object or model it seeks to imitate. The *basis* is the painting process that gives rise to it. The *relation* is called a *relation of visual likeness*. Ordinarily, a relation is not a major perfection that determines its subject. For instance, a boy is primarily judged on the basis of his qualities and actions. His relation of sonship towards his father is hardly an influencing factor except maybe in the rare case that his father is a prime minister or a rock star. But in the case of an image, this relation is of paramount importance. In fact, *the relation of visual likeness with respect to another constitutes the very essence of an image.* An image is an image precisely because it is a faithful visual representation of another. Such likeness cannot be dissociated from the concept of image (as what most modern painters do) without the image ceasing to be an image.

An image must necessarily possess the shape, figure, and color of its object in such a way that a *relation of visual likeness* is established between them. By way of example, the image of

Napoleon must look like the real Napoleon and the image of the Eiffel Tower must resemble exactly the Eiffel tower for them to be called real images. Likeness is distinctive of image. Of course, other types of relation can exist between an image and its terminus like when the image is used as pure symbol. For instance, the painting of an eagle may be used to signify freedom. In this case, the image refers to two different termini, one with relation of likeness (real eagle) and the other with relation of symbolism (freedom). Having a symbolic meaning is undeniably a big advantage for a painting, but it is not included in the essence of an image, and, for being the result of a purely subjective decision (convention), it cannot possibly play a major role in the objective evaluation of a painting as a painting.

The image on a mirror necessarily has the likeness of the person standing before it because of the mirror's reflective capacity. But, such visual likeness may not necessarily exist between the same person and his painted image. The image in a painting is hand made, a method susceptible to failure. The imitative relation may not be established. In short, a painted image may or may not look as its object or it may look like it only partially depending on the skill

of the painter. An image is a good image if the relation of likeness is perfect; it is an average image if the likeness is partial; it is a bad image if no form of likeness exists at all. *Therefore, the relation of visual likeness is the measuring rod for all images insofar as they are images.*

Likeness is an essential perfection of an image. It cannot be discarded or relegated to the background at whim as what modernists do. They say that what is important is to interpret not to imitate; if one wants likeness, then what one needs is a digital camera not a brush. But, this opinion totally misses the point. The problem is not whether a digital photo is a better likeness than a painted image. The problem is if one wants to make hand-made image of a thing then by what criteria should such an image be judged? Obviously, an image can be validly judged only in accordance with the essence and intrinsic perfections of an image. In other words, as long as one claims his painting to be the image of another then the truth of such a claim must necessarily be measured against the criteria of judgment proper for all images. Now, if he claims it is not an image but only a symbol or a reminder of another, then the painting ceases to be a painting *per se* and consequently any evaluation that follows becomes an evaluation not of a painting but of something else.

### Last Judgment

Any objective judgment on a painting should therefore pay major attention on the relation of visual likeness an image establishes through its shape, figure, and color with respect to its subject matter. *A painted image is a good image to the degree that this unique relation of visual likeness is maintained.* The moment this relation disappears, the image ceases to be an image and the blob of paint on the canvas becomes just like another blob of paint on a surface, something similar to the paint that protects a wall.

Some consider this manner of judging art as fit only for the uninitiated or uneducated, since it is based on street logic. This view, however, ignores the fact that, though spontaneous, this method of evaluation is also the most scientific. The Newtonian Universal Law of Gravitation and Einstein's Theory of Relativity are nothing else but scientific judgments derived from a systematic observation of the essential physical properties of matter. Biology draws its conclusions from a study of the essential perfections of living beings. In fact, all sciences arrive at their universal findings by means of a thorough and methodical investigation and evaluation of the basic intrinsic perfections of their proper object. How then could an art evaluation following this same scientific method be considered trivial or insignificant? At times, judgments people make border on intellectual dishonesty if not naiveté.

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