

## Arrangement of Images

*How is the concept of composition related to painting?*

A painting is by essence a manually crafted image. But a closer examination reveals that more often than not it is not just one but several images. An ordinary still life of apples, for instance, may not only show an apple but perhaps some grapes, oranges, other fruits, a table top, or some draperies. Similarly, a landscape does not only depict a solitary tree but also clouds, mountains, rivers, stones, or houses. A floral painting is sure to include a bunch of different flowers with a vase and some other collectibles as peripherals. Even a portrait, which is usually reserved for a single face, is often enhanced with jewelries, clothing, background furniture, etc. In other words, although in theory any one painting is considered a single image, in reality it is a multiplicity of images. It is a set or collection of images. Or, to be more precise, it is an **arrangement**. This peculiarity cannot be denied. It is an empirical certainty that can be verified by just opening our eyes. Therefore, any objective assessment of a painting cannot be thorough without a closer consideration of this distinctive characteristic.

Our present inquiry into the essentials of art criticism requires us, therefore, to delve into this vital dimension of painting. Arrangement is sometimes referred to by artists as composition or design. In this article, we will first try to clarify the concept of arrangement and then see how it is applied in painting.

### Notion of Arrangement

At first, it seems that looking at painting from the perspective of an arrangement does not sit well with this visual art. After all, the word, arrangement, has the connotation of being associated with certain activities characterized by anything but seriousness and importance. We arrange our desk after a day's work. We arrange our clothes in the closet and our shoes in the hallway during the weekend. We make sure order is restored in the dining room and in the kitchen after meals. Arrangement reminds us more of cleaning up mess, removing clutter, and other menial jobs. But, a deeper examination shows that it is not always a trivial



### Nautilus Cup

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

*This is another still life whose elements were "ripped off" from different paintings from the Dutch Masters. It's quite remarkable how these early artists had a strong fascination for various types of shells that they include them in their paintings at every opportunity.*

occupation. In reality, it is a key element ever present in many activities and things around us. Chemistry is concerned with the arrangement of atoms and molecules in substances. Literary compositions are nothing else but meaningful arrangement of words or concepts. Music cannot be understood if it is not viewed from the perspective of an arrangement. Victory in the battleground is possible only with the appropriate deployment of troops and armory prior to offense or defense. *Feng Shui* claims to be a science of arranging building components in harmony with nature. Astronomy is mainly interested with the local dispositions of stars and other heavenly bodies. The universe is teeming with



### Down by the River

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

*This is one of my early experimentations with night scenes and reflection of light on water. I modeled the windmill after the one in our neighborhood which can be seen from my attic studio. The stone houses were treated similarly for unity's sake. The cluster of houses and windmill on one side of the river is balanced by another on the opposite side.*

incidences of arrangement; in truth, the universe itself is one big arrangement. Going deeper into the notion of arrangement, therefore, cannot be considered as just one more mundane pursuit.

The first obvious characteristic of an arrangement is that it is a collection. As such, it has different components or members. This means any collection has at least more than one member. This multiplicity of members is an essential requirement for a collection. Even though in mathematics a collection with only one member could be possible by defining it to be possible, in ordinary language, a collection with only one component is simply a conceptual contradiction. One would certainly and justifiably cry in protest if the shipment of dinnerware collection purchased online contains only a single plate.

The second property is that its components must be things or items diverse from one another. Emphasis must be given on the distinctness and independence of each member of the arrangement. This highlights the fact that **an arrangement is not an individual subsistent being** like an elephant and a horse. Although it can be argued that an elephant is a collection of trunk, head, four legs, body and tail, no one really classifies it as an arrangement for the simple reason that these bodily parts are not independent subsistent beings. A trunk of an elephant is considered a trunk of an elephant only while it is connected to and derives its existence from the elephant. Certainly, the elephant can be dismembered into its parts; the trunk, head, body, and legs acquire then a separate existence of their own and, as a group, can be called an arrangement. In this case, the elephant indeed becomes an arrangement but at the same time ceases to be an elephant. An arrangement, therefore, is not a substance even though it is often times composed of substances.

The third and most important characteristic of an arrangement is that its components are so linked to one another that they form a unity. Every arrangement is one; it is a unity in multiplicity. What causes this unity? The different relations existing among its members! In short, an arrangement is one not because it has a subsistence of its own but because its diverse components are related to one another. Here, we encounter again the concept of relation. As we learned in the previous article, every relation has a basis. In this case, the basis of the relations is the common purpose which all the constituents strive to achieve. The members of an arrangement are all related to one another because they are all trying to reach a common goal. A certain order emanates from these relations giving rise to the unity. That is why **an arrangement is called a relational unity or a unity of order**. A family, a society, an army, a flower arrangement, and the like are some examples of relational unities. For instance, the relation of parenthood and filiation along with the relation of fraternity gives rise to the most basic unit of society which is the family. The end of the family, which is the propagation of the human race, causes such relations.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that **an arrangement is a collection whose constituent members are diverse from one another but are nevertheless joined together into a single unity by**

*the mutual relations arising from their commonality of purpose.*

### Aesthetic Unity in Diversity

A painter does not simply produce images on the canvas in a wild and random manner. Consciously or unconsciously, she strives to establish a certain order among these distinct and unlike images, making sure they are all linked into one by some kind of mutual relation. It is not enough for her to make the images visually alike their subjects; she must also try to create an arrangement or a composition out of them. Our question now is what is the nature of this arrangement in painting? Or more specifically, what is that common function the components try to accomplish? What kind of relations arises among the member images from such a pursuit of a common goal?

Since purpose is ontologically prior to relation, we will do



### Toilet of Venus

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

Also known as *The Rokeby Venus*, the original of this painting by Velazquez now hangs in the National Gallery of London, something Carol and I had the fortune of seeing five years ago. This is a favorite "target practice" for art aspirants and I did not want to make myself an exception.

well to determine first the purpose and then examine the resulting relations. But we have to be clear that we are not trying to determine the purpose of the painting nor of the images as images but rather of the arrangement insofar as it is an arrangement and of the images insofar as they are member of such arrangement.

Different arrangements have different ends. Some have very practical ones. An army -- an arrangement of soldiers and weapons -- has the purpose of defending the country. A car -- an arrangement of wheels, engines, carriage, and other mechanical parts -- has the purpose of transporting people. Now, it is obvious that an arrangement in a painting has no practical purpose at all. So, why on earth does a painter need to arrange the images on a canvas? I think the answer to this is the same as that to "Why does anyone want to arrange the clothes in his closets or the office items on his work desk when no incremental benefit is attained at all?" **There are certain types of arrangements that have no purpose other than to look arranged.** Such is the case of books on a shelf placed side by side according to height, or of coins grouped according to sizes in a coin box, or of a dish nicely presented on a serving plate. The information contained in the books will not change if they are messed up; the total value of the coins will not increase by shaking the coin box; the food will taste the same in whatever manner they are presented. Any arrangement made on them has the sole purpose of making them look pleasant and nothing more. Similarly, the arrangement made on the images in a painting fulfills no other function other than to achieve greater elegance and beauty. And this is absolutely necessary for an artwork one primary purpose of which is to decorate or beautify.

For sharing the same goal, all the images in a painting arrangement are linked to each other by a kind of relation. I don't have a name for this relation. Neither do other artists have; I have heard a lot of them talk about establishing relationship of objects in their compositions but they never managed to describe, let alone give a name, to such a relationship. Maybe, it is not necessary to put a label to it. What we can say is that because the images are placed beside each other they are at least linked by a relation of neighborhood. But, then, even the components in a clutter can be said to be neighbors to each other so this type of relation does not

really add much information. What is sure, however, is that all the images in an arrangement *participate* or *cooperate* in the beautification process. They are like lawyers in a firm or member companies in a business conglomerate or worker ants in a colony; they are partners to each other. Hence, provisionally, we can call the relation among member images in a painting arrangement an *aesthetic partnership*.

How is this *aesthetic cooperation* carried out? In any team effort or partnership the contributions of the members are not always the same. Each cooperates not equally but proportionately. Some pitch in more than the others according to their respective capacities. The same proportional participation takes place also in a painting arrangement. **The biggest burden falls on the artistic element called focus or focal point.** Every painting must have a focal point, only one focal point. This may be an image or an area on the canvas with several images in it. Without necessarily being

situated in the center of the canvas, it serves as the center around which the other images rotate. It is analogous to that part of a short story or novel called climax which serves as the culminating point of all the other scenes and episodes. **The other images, on the other hand, have a supporting role, like the minor characters in a movie.** They reinforce the focal point in different degrees by leading the viewers' eyes to it. Even though they themselves should be perfect images and thus could be objects of interest, they should not keep the viewers' attention to themselves but should deflect it to the focal point. Working together this way, the focal point and the supporting images cooperate to produce the appearance of a harmonious whole, a beautiful unity in diversity.

Throughout the centuries, artists have devised various ways to embody this aesthetic partnership among the various elements of their paintings. This effort gave rise to different types of compositions -- triangular, tubular, L-shape, S-shape -- we are now familiar with nowadays. These types of composition are nothing else but different ways of creating a focal point and of making the remaining elements harmonize with it. For instance, they

have discovered that certain spots on the canvas are natural place for the focal point and that altering the color, value, intensity, tone, weight, and other properties of the supporting images help them fulfill better their supportive role. This stage requires a lot of decision making, at times, draining the painter of his mental energy.

I can go into more details but it is certainly not my intention to come up here with a comprehensive explanation of the concept of arrangement. Maybe, in the future, when there is time and there is a need we can come back to this with a more detailed analysis. But, various artists have already written books on the theory of composition or on the principles of design and they are readily accessible to anyone who wants to go deeper into the topic. It is enough for us to have called attention to this frequently ignored but important truth that a painting is a kind of arrangement. Through the relational cooperation of its focus and supporting images, the arrangement can succeed in elevating the whole painting to a higher aesthetic level.

### Another Solid Basis for Judgment

An arrangement could be good or bad. It could range from one bordering on chaos to another representing the pinnacle of harmony and order. On the basis of arrangement alone, therefore, a painting could be considered to be good or bad. Thus, if we ever want to judge a painting, we should also judge it from this perspective.

We just discovered another essential property of painting, another solid basis for objective judgment. **A painting is good not only if the images in it are good but also if the arrangement of said images is good.** Every image in the arrangement must maintain that relation of likeness with its respective terminus or subject matter. For its part, the arrangement must project, through an aesthetic unification and harmonization of its diverse elements, an overall sense of beauty and elegance.

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