

Objective Judgment is Possible

Can a universal standard in painting exist?

Art criticism has plunged the modern art world into utter confusion and chaos because of the lack of unified criteria for evaluation. Every art critic seems to have their own idea of what art should be, giving rise not only to a staggering amount of literature in defense of their theories but also to a huge number of aspiring artists failing to acquire even the most basic skills. Three articles ago we started a thorough research and analysis with a view of answering this one nagging question plaguing the modern art world: "Is objective judgment in art possible?" With our findings and conclusions, I think we are now in a position to give a definitive answer. But before we do that we need to answer two more basic questions. What exactly is a *judgment*? What is meant by *objective*?

Nature of Judgment

The mind has three basic operations: simple apprehension, judgment, and reasoning. **Simple apprehension** abstracts universal concepts or ideas from the essences of external objects. With this operation we form the basic units of intellections like "horse", "man", "apple", "tall", "red", etc. **Judgment** combines these ideas into propositions. Statements like "The man is tall." or "The apple is red." are examples of judgments. **Reasoning** infers a new judgment from several preceding propositions. "All men are mortal. Peter is a man. Peter is mortal." is a typical reasoning process. Naturally, our focus will be on judgment.

Concepts are insufficient sources of knowledge because they do not include all the perfections of a subject. "Apple" and "red", for instance, are concepts that on their own really give us very little information. A further step needs to be taken which is to combine them into the proposition "The apple is red." With this, we now know that a thing outside called apple possesses a



Still Life with Silverware

(Oil on Canvas, 50 cm x 60 cm)

While drinking coffee one morning, I noticed all these silvers and ceramics Carol placed on the breakfast table as decor. I immediately realized I had some still life materials in hand. A couple of throw pillows lying nearby came in handy as background. But I must have given the painting very little thought then because now that I look at it I desperately want to give it a facelift. Unfortunately, my newborn, Josemarie, never gives me the chance.

perfection called red. The union of these two concepts reflects the real unity within the fruit. This statement into which these ideas are combined is called judgment.

A judgment is, therefore, the operation of the mind whereby we compose concepts by attributing a property to a subject through the verb "to be". At least two terms are either united ("This apple is red.") or separated ("This apple is not red.") in order to express the actual possession of a property (red) by a subject (apple) or to positively deny such possession. In language, a judgment always has the form of a complete declarative sentence.

It is important to emphasize that *a judgment expresses the real possession of an act or perfection by a subject.* It grasps the actual composition whereby the subject really possesses the attribute. This composition does not only occur in the mind in an



Girl with a Smile

(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)

I was certain I knew how this girl should look like after the painting was finished. Unfortunately, small errors I made along the way transformed her face into someone slightly different and no amount of revision could produce the result I really wanted. Rather than wallow in my frustration, I gave up the effort and decided it was time to live with my mistakes and to give myself a smile.

abstract way but in reality, in the thing being judged.

An essential characteristic of every judgment is **truth** and **falsehood**. When the judgment conforms to reality, it is true; when it does not conform to reality, it is false. For instance, the judgment "The apple is red" is true if the external apple is really red and false if the apple is not really red. In other words, a judgment is true when it affirms that *what is* is and *what is not* is not; it is false when it affirms that *what is* is not and *what is not* is. Since judgment is an operation performed by the mind, truth and falsehood are said to be found only in the mind. That is why, **truth is often defined as the conformity of the mind with reality: adaequatio rei et intellectus.** We are talking here, of course, about *logical truth* which is not the same as *ontological truth*, a transcendental present in all beings. But, this is not the place to study their distinction.

What is Objective?

Having made some clarifications on the nature of judgment, we now turn our attention to the notion of "**objective**". The truth is there is really no problem with objectivity or, at least, there should be nothing in it that entails special difficulty. It is in fact a very simple matter. An **objective judgment** is called **objective** precisely because it is made on the **object** being judged. This means that **as long as a judgment is made on its object and all the components of the judgment are drawn from its object then it is objective.** However, if the mind actually judges something else while pretending to judge its object, its judgment could be anything else but objective. Objectivity, therefore, presupposes two things: **recognizing the presence of an object and directing the act of judgment at it.** For instance, an objective evaluation of an apple requires recognizing the reality of the apple and then attributing to it actual perfections or imperfections really present in the apple.

In principle, **every judgment is inherently objective because it necessarily refers to the real being of things.** However, this objectivity may be lost if the mind is forced by the will to disregard the reality of the outside object or to reduce it to a mere mental category or figment of the imagination. If the object is denied, then the ideas, the raw materials for an objective judgment, will be drawn necessarily from the judging mind itself. The resulting judgments will necessarily bear all the marks of subjectivity. Likewise, objectivity may be lost if, while accepting the reality of the object, the mind focuses itself not on the object but on its own

psychological attitude towards it. Then, the object becomes a mere occasion for judging his subjective feelings or reactions, and the outside thing with all its properties is totally ignored. No objective judgment can possibly come out from such an approach.

If the mind is honest and sincere, objective judgment is always possible. In reality, not only is it possible but, in its normal state, a judgment is spontaneously objective. This is true for ordinary people whose ordinary actuations are determined primarily by an objective perception of reality. This is true for scientists who refrain from making any scientific pronouncement about something without a careful and objective examination and experimentation. This is even true for “intellectuals” steeped in idealism and subjectivism who in their non-intellectual activities contradict themselves by inadvertently accepting reality as given and act in accordance with it. Denying the possibility of objective judgment can never be the result of a serious and truthful reasoning process but only of a tyrannical mandate by the will.



Nipa Hut

(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

Don't try guessing where in the Philippines this scenery may be located because this is a pure fabrication of mine. I was inspired by a similar European landscape and I just replaced an old barn in it with a Nipa hut. I painted the rocks in the foreground with the same color of the hut for equilibrium.

Objective Evaluation of a Painting

The act of judgment presupposes a prior examination of the object to be judged and identifying both the essential and inessential perfections proper to it. At the very instant of judgment, the intellect attributes at least one of these perfections to the object. The weight or importance of the judgment will depend on whether the perfection attributed to the subject is essential or not. In our effort to come up with an objective evaluation of a painting, we have tried precisely in our previous three articles to look closely into the nature of painting and to identify its essential as well as the inessential perfections. We have found that a painting is by essence both an image and an arrangement. As an image a painting must necessarily hold a relation of likeness with its terminus. As an arrangement, it is essential for a painting to have a focal point that organizes and harmonizes all the other elements into one beautiful unity. *Having a relation of likeness with its subject matter and having a good composition anchored on the unifying and harmonizing effect of a focal point are two essential perfections that every painting must have if it is to be considered a painting. Therefore, a judgment made on a painting can be objective only if it affirms or denies that these two perfections are possessed by the said artwork. A painting is said to be good if it possesses both perfections. A painting is said to be bad if it lacks one or both of these perfections.*

We have to note that a painting must possess both perfections for it to be good. It is not enough for it to be a perfect visual image of its subject matter; it must also be a good composition. Conversely, it is not enough for the painting to be a good composition; every item in that composition must also be a perfect visual image of its respective subject matter. The reason for this is that the notion of good entails the idea of completeness. Something is good if it possesses all the perfections proper to its nature. That is why when a painting is missing a perfection essential to a painting as such it cannot be considered a good painting.

If we try to apply these newly-formulated criteria for objective judgment, we immediately see that only paintings falling

under the style called *realism* have the potential of being considered good. They possess the first basic perfection of likeness. However, being realistic is not a guarantee for being a good painting. All the images in a still life, for example, could be perfect but if their placement in the canvas is pure chaos the painting simply cannot be completely good. To be good and beautiful, realistic paintings must also be good compositions. On the other hand, *non-representational paintings* (abstract, expressionist, cubist, etc.) can never be classified as good paintings in the strict sense of the word. By choice, these paintings do not produce images, let alone perfect images, of their subject matters. The essential relation of likeness with their subject matter is deliberately removed. No painting can be considered painting *per se* without this likeness. Of course, painters of this style will vehemently claim that their paintings are likenesses of abstract ideas or dynamic emotions. But, as we have demonstrated before, it is impossible for these intra-personal entities to have visual likenesses, which means that their claim is either an attempt at deception or a sign of ignorance about the true nature of

ideas and emotions. It is possible though for these non-representational paintings to have a good composition. Certain combinations of colored formless patches on a canvas could be pleasing to the eyes. But, this does not make them good paintings *per se* just like the pleasing patterns on curtains or gift wrappers are not paintings *per se*. *A painting can only be beautiful if it is both a good image and a good composition.*

Finally, anyone, including ordinary people, can make an objective judgment on a painting. Since judgment is an act of the intellect and ordinary people also have intellect then they too can make a legitimate evaluation of what they see. *Objective judgment is not something reserved for the experts.* When a housewife honestly says that a painting is beautiful or that a painting by a famous artist is something her seven year old son can do, there is usually truth in her affirmations and no amount of artistic theory can demolish that truth. The reason is that beauty and ugliness are not captured by the mind after a long deliberation process involving syllogisms and other complex operations. Rather, they are the result of simple apprehension, grasped simultaneously at the moment the painting is perceived. And, hence,

the mind can immediately attribute them to the painting when it makes a judgment. This phenomenon takes place similarly in the artist and in the housewife. Of course, later on, by a reflexive act of the intellect, both can analyze the painting and examine the reasons why it is beautiful or ugly. The housewife may only come up with a few if any while the artist can produce volumes of technical explanations. But, an artist's judgment, if it is honest, never ends up contradicting a housewife's judgment; the former will rather serve as an in-depth explanation and confirmation of the latter. Expert knowledge is not a contradiction but rather a continuity of spontaneous knowledge.

Wrapping Up

Making objective judgments about the world around us is a natural activity for the human mind. Hence, coming up with an unbiased evaluation of an artwork should not really be a problem of grand magnitude. We have just shown how it should be done and how simple it is done, at least in the art of painting. All that is needed is an open mind that recognizes the reality of things outside and that has the disposition of wanting to discover the intrinsic perfections of such things. Complications only arise when the mind, deformed by prejudice or by *a priori* categories, denies the knowableness of outside realities and reduces their being into mere mental states. Judgments then are no longer about how the things are in themselves but about how they appear in the consciousness. Under this kind of situation, everything formed by the mind is necessarily subjective and any chances for objectivity are lost forever. Such is the mindset of the majority of modern artists.

Beauty is a perfection that can be captured directly and immediately by all. If a painting has it, then anyone can affirm correctly and objectively that it is beautiful. No expert opinion is needed. That is why even if your knowledge in art is minimal, you should still trust in the validity and objectivity of your judgments and you should never be intimidated by any “sophisticated art theory” or “expert authority” to the point of affirming the contrary to what your eyes really see.

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