

Problems of truth for the painter

Aphorisms, exhortations and prayers

From shadows and images into the truth
(Epitaph of John Henry Newman)

Foreword

Painting went into stylistic free-fall in the 20th century from which it has not recovered. Many artists have rejected painting in favour of some form of ‘conceptual’ endeavour and have pursued a course that can only be described as philosophical.

This essay studies the evolution of the painter’s predicament. It is a reflection on art and its relation to truth and to sensible reality. Any such consideration must take into account the gifts of the Greeks.

Plato’s concept of the physical world as a shadow of real truth has a direct appeal to the imagination of artists (it is the place where the philistines couldn’t go). But with Aristotle, the real world is evidenced by the senses.

This Greek division still divides the world. Modern concepts of truth residing in patterns of ideas, language, or text, in other words postmodernism, are just another annotation to Plato’s other world. It is the division between the shadow and science.

The following is a study of *the form of truth* with chapters on Prehistory (the origins of the fetish), the Old Testament (the prohibition of the image), the Greeks (the flower of truth), the Vulva (the mark of truth), the Camera (the murder of truth) and Philosophy (the triumph of language).

In an effort to impress the contemporary artist a study is included of the virtues of St. Thomas Aquinas.

By way of aphorisms and prayers this essay recalls the lost art of painting. It considers the notions of truth and beauty in history and exhorts the painter towards a consideration of the sensible world of turpentine and pigment. It is not the work of a scholar, but it is none the less dogmatic for all that.

This is not the age for painting. The painter searching for truth and casting his eye from the easel to the philosopher's desk is in for a bitter disappointment. Far from appearing as an evolution towards some understanding of truth, philosophy is more like the recent story of art; a series of conflicting systems and disputes, that are as subject as any other discipline to the vagaries of history, personality or fashion.

The key discipline in philosophy, for painters, aesthetics - the science of the beautiful- is simply a slave to the politics of post-modernism, where artists are said to be 'questioning' the very notions of art. Perhaps Socrates, for too long, has had a good press.

In former times the painter was expected to grind and mix his own colours, copy or better past masters and execute a good likeness. The artist today is a mix of many media (or none) and has lost the skills of the great painters, while portraiture has fallen into disrepute and disuse.

Having heroically overcome the concept of a hierarchy or a value system within art, the post-modern artist is now a licensed iconoclast and a champion of irony, although it may be a further subtlety of this irony, that any efforts to debunk his own status as an artist, have so far proved unsuccessful.

Yet he is seen to be investigating form and matter in some sort of essential way and this may be called (with some prejudice) the stuff of metaphysics. Let us look to the past to study the phenomenon of the humble artist turned ironic iconoclastic metaphysician.

Prehistory

Archaeologists tell us that *homo sapiens* (wise man) began to make images other than or independent from tools at least 30,000 years ago and that painting began or evolved at a time unfathomably distance from us. The earliest marks appear to be zigzags and waiving lines, crosses, swastikas and dot patterns that have survived on bones.

Art as play or as symbolism? Waiving lines could represent a serpent or a river. Crosses or swastikas might have stood for the four phases of the moon. It is a pleasing conceit; the artist with a few simple strokes, chipping, scraping and painting his way into consciousness.

A dominant image of prehistory appears to be the female idol. She is the goddess/mother/venus (depending on one's politics) of Laussel, Lespugue and Willendorf (circa 20,000BC); pregnant, full breasted, generous of thigh and buttock. It is tempting to imagine stone age people living in her womb, the caves, which they painted with images of her fecundity; bison, bulls, horses etc., animals of the hunt.

Whether one can accept this maternal metaphor, or not, early man must have lived in thrall to the forces of nature, ever sensitive to *her* moods.¹ Anthropomorphism runs in the blood and could be the key to our creative nature; to find meaning in pattern, to see by analogy. Metaphor may have given birth to culture. What is genius after all but a propensity for similes.

Considering the ubiquity of these figurines, which dwarfs the time scale of western art (that of early Greek to the present day; less than 3,000 years), this personification of nature as feminine could be *the* great act of art. The story could be over before we begin. It may well be that a heavyset woman with strong sexual markings is the defining image in the story of art.

Perhaps the early image-makers were shamen or priests who believed they were drawing spirit into shapes of bone or clay. Such figurines were originally considered by some archaeologists to be pornographic. But we do not know whether our ancestors had any separate concept of the sexual as opposed to the spiritual; we project back our romances to the 'noble savage'.

But history is the story of the time after writing began and this only happened when the Sumerians of Iraq (3500-2,000BC) began making clay pictographs (waiving lines can now be translated as 'water' and combined with a head means 'to drink'). From about 10,000 B.C. onwards, permanent settlements begin.

The irrigation of the Tigris and Euphrates ('the cradle of civilisation') allowed small settlements to grow into cities, built of baked mud-brick and wonderfully decorated. Human intelligence appears to have exploded. Extraordinary advances were made over a short period from the wheel to the astronomical calendar. Society became graded and specialised.²

Image-making must also have become a professional occupation. In the valleys from which Adam and Eve were expelled, perhaps the artist too lost his innocence and became a slave. Thus 'civilisation', so recently with us, marks the beginning of the decline of art as a spiritual pursuit and it's inevitable march towards profanity: from the fetish to aesthetics.

Is the contemporary artist then, attempting to realise a long lost sacerdotal function by investing even the most humble objects with some spiritual otherness? Is this why so many artists, lovingly arrange the common stuff of life to reveal anew the *quiddity* of things?

The Multitudes

*So many institutions and academies
So many philosophers, lecturers, curators and critics
So many teachers and graduates
So many, many artists
Generations of peasants stolen from the land
So much cannon fodder gone to waste.*

A few thousand years before Christ, art became the slave of kings, a tool for propaganda and aggrandizement. But the personification of nature continues and can be read in the myths of early cultures.

The marriage of seed and soil, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is told in the art and in the stories of the Mediterranean and the Near East. It is the story of Isis and Osiris in Egypt, Anath and Baal in Canann, Demeter and Persephone in Greece (mother and daughter), Cybele and Attis in Turkey and Venus and Adonis in Italy.

Inanna was the Sumerian goddess 'the queen of heaven and earth' who would die to be reborn. In her sacred marriage with her lover- king Dumuzi, the fields will again be fertile and there will be rich grain.³

Through the goddess Inanna the life cycle continues, world order and the laws of religion are restored. Besides 'truth', these are: 'descent into the underworld, ascent from the underworld, the art of lovemaking, the kissing of the phallus'.The Old Testament patriarchs had a lot of trouble divesting themselves of religion that is rooted in a response to nature and fertility.

Yet the intense character of human sexuality, this longing between humans, is not just the ultimate religious metaphor (as the Old Testament itself shows), but over the many millennia, it must have honed our response to shape and colour and touch and line and curve and symmetry, and in no small part *informs* our sense of beauty.

Art is amoral only if beauty has no truth

The Old Testament

‘In the beginning when god created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless void.’ Genesis 1.1

Alas for the goddess! How significant that Eve, ‘the mother of all living’ as Adam calls her, should see that the tree of knowledge was good for food and ... ‘*pleasant to the eyes*’? The Old Testament is a remarkable compendium of different voices over different periods in the thousand years before Christ.

As a historical document it tells of the travails of a particular Semitic group and is a justification for their invasion of the land of Canaan. As a religious document it holds the promise of salvation and is an invocation to a chosen people to maintain allegiance to one and only one God – ‘Thou shalt not have strange gods before me’.

But as a document seen from the easel, the Old Testament is an extraordinary example of visual censorship. A most potent edict was the prohibition of ‘the making of any graven image or likeness’.

While from Babylonia to Egypt, artists were making gods (especially of their kings), Isaiah was brilliantly ridiculing the image-maker. He says that ‘the artisans are too merely human....’

‘The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty to be set up in a shrine...

Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied.

He also warms himself and says, ” ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!”⁴

Isaiah 44,12-17

The Jewish people closed their eyes to the image so that they might forge in their souls an omnipresent singular and personal god. That is their legacy: the monotheism that our thinking process takes for granted.

Yet ironically the Old Testament records the names of two significant artists. The Arc of the Covenant was a gilded box that held the Ten Commandments and was the seat of the invisible unnameable god. On top of the Arc were to be two cherubim; angelic creatures with outstretched wings, virtually the only images that the Old Testament would allow.

Then Moses said to the Israelites:

‘See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft.’

Exodus 35.30

To assist Bezalel the Lord also called Oholiab who is described as ‘engraver, designer and embroiderer in blue, purple, in crimson yarns, and in fine linen’. Bezalel made the two cherubim of beaten gold. This imagery seems an Egyptian concept (see Tutankhamen’s sarcophagus) and the two artists may have been Egyptian born and trained (the period being shortly after the exodus from Egypt).

With so many great works of art from Egypt to Athens made by unknown hands, it is a poignant thing to have these names from an era centuries before Homer - *Bezalel* and *Oholiab*. Artistic immortality is a well-tended grave.

Do not believe in the justice of this world and that you will be rewarded if you give everything to your art. Look to our museums littered with anonymous masterpieces.

The Greeks

Greek culture a few centuries before Christ went through a period of creativity and excellence in the realms of art and thought that has never been equalled. No other age can compare with the breadth of its brilliance. It was and remains *the* flowering of the human spirit.

Postmodernism is only possible if we disinherit the Greeks.

It is difficult to make a case for evolution in art when confronted with the glory of Athens. Renaissance Italy, as the word implies, looked backwards. Michaelangelo at one stage was not above pretending that one of his sculptures belonged to the ancients.

Vasari thought that Michelangelo had excelled the Greeks, and when writing about his pictures, he maintained that: 'if it were possible to place them beside the paintings of those celebrated Greeks and Romans they would be even more highly valued and regarded as being as much superior to the antiques as is his sculpture'⁵

But Vasari was engaged in hagiography and was not in a position (just as we are not) to judge Greek painting. The 4th century BC was regarded as the golden age of classical painting.

Apelles, court painter to Alexander the Great (who had Aristotle as his teacher) was considered the master. Genre, still life, landscape, trompe-l'oeil, were all practiced as well as the great mythological and history paintings that one would expect.

Every type of painting that the Renaissance recreated, the Greeks practiced (with the possible exception of a formal linear perspective). Painters and sculptors wrote treatises on art –now gone without trace. If the painting was comparable to sculpture (and for the Greeks it was of no less importance, being much praised by classical writers) then its loss cannot be estimated.

It is a curious thought that the history of western painting is without that period which could be considered its greatest era. Perhaps genius is a word that should be reserved for the Greeks. The gods have punished them severely by allowing their paintings to be lost to mankind.

It is also sobering to note that Athens at this period is estimated to have had a population of only about 230,000. This number included slaves, an integral part of Greek society. One could perhaps forgive Plato and Aristotle for believing that refinements of the mind are only for the elite (philosophers that is, not painters).

Philosophers pride themselves on being professionals of incredulity. The Greek thinkers believed that by asking questions, discovering contradictions and ascertaining generalizations, they could discern the truth. A famous example is the riddle of movement put forward by Zeno. An arrow in motion is at any given instant stopped in space, therefore motion is a series of 'rests', and therefore motion as such is a contradiction.

The real world is an illusion, according to Plato, only an ideal heavenly world of perfect forms exists. The physical world is only a shadow of these true forms. Of beautiful things, like a particular picture, one can only have an opinion, because one cannot have true knowledge of something derived from the senses, which are by nature contradictory. However, the philosopher is capable of having a vision of truth which is not a particular beauty, but beauty itself.

Fortunately Aristotle disagreed with Plato, knowledge has to do with forms, but these exist in the real world and have specific properties that the mind can abstract. Thus a table has properties which are similar to another table and all tables. The characteristics that together make a thing belong to a particular group or class is its *form*.

Painters and sculptors should attend to this idea of *form*. It is a concept that the philosophers gave us, now lost to our art schools. Just as a statue made of a particular material has form impressed on it by a sculptor, it may go through different transitions of form; without form material cannot exist.

But this form is not simply a shape; it is for Aristotle '*a Universal Idea*' inherent in the object. Seeing the beautiful in an object is to perceive something good; because all that is real, that has form, is good.

Neoclassicism is what the Greeks did after Homer.

'Fine Art' did not exist as a concept for the Ancients. Painting and sculpture belonged to the servile arts of work to be done, and not the liberal arts of the spirit, like music or logic. When either Plato or Aristotle spoke of art they did not differentiate the art of the blacksmith from that of the sculptor.

Beauty was not exalted to the effete spiritualism of the 19th century Romantics. It was an ideal of harmony and symmetry that reflected Greek confidence in the world and in themselves.

Christ

When approaching the life of Christ be not tempted by the humanity of Judas.

Incidental to the Old Testament's prohibition of the graven image, we are left without any record of what Jesus Christ looked like. Yet his image still dominates the west (Buddha has more monuments worldwide⁶).

Christ inherited the anti-image asceticism of the Old Testament. He did not use the concept of image making in his stories, nor is he recorded as ever using the word *beautiful*. He mentions the lilies of the fields only to show how precious man is above nature.

He speaks with absolute conviction of God as his Father, whose loving paternity he emphasizes with parables of nature and husbandry. Yet his message is inextricably centered on his belief of who he (Christ) himself *is*.

Of course the Jews were right; if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was the greatest of blasphemers - '*before Abraham was I am*' - no human being ever had such arrogance.

Christ did not scruple over social mores, nor did he discriminate in the sex or class of his friends. He saw himself as the antidote to the age of death '*I am the water of life. If you drink of me you will live forever*'. In preaching a philosophy of *love* he could hardly have chosen a worse time, for the descendants of Abraham were an angry people, frustrated and humiliated by a foreign oppressor.

Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment too vulgar and terrible for Rome to allow its own citizens. It took several centuries before Christians could accept the curious image of the cross. It was an extraordinary start for a religion, having a central image that is shameful and repugnant to human nature.

But the radicalism of Christ's message of *love* which is only approximated in the great world religions, and which is not so much revolutionary as awful, has proved too difficult for his followers (approximately 1 billion today), though it has been attempted by a few, whom we have come to know as saints.

If Christ returned today and walked among the posturing painters and sculptors, he might enter the galleries of the new Pharisees, their 'whited sepulchres' and preach thus:

The Beatitudes

*Blessed be the poor in art
For they shall be recognised*

*Blessed be the critic
For he shall lie with the father of lies*

*Blessed be the patron
For he has found mammon*

*Blessed be they who hunger and thirst
For self-advertisement sake
For theirs is the kingdom of the earth.*

*Blessed be they who seek after truth
For they are pure fools*

In the few centuries that it took to consolidate the Christian religion, as in Sumeria, new temples were built on the foundations of old. The Church overcame the various god and goddess cultures with what one 2nd century writer called a 'fantastic and blasphemous cult of an only God'.⁷

Aquinas

What has the sensual painter to do with Aquinas (1225-74), that odd combination of saint and intellectual giant, the donkey who bayed all over Europe? Everything that is in the intellect has been in the senses St. Thomas says, and truth can be ascertained with reason; but as only very few could achieve this ('and with much errors'), divine revelation is necessary.

St. Thomas' Aristotelian defence of the real world and especially of human nature as good, became the accepted doctrine of the Christian west. This has to be seen in opposition to the many heresies and sects (often neo-platonic), which held that the world is illusory (as Buddhism also does) and that human nature (after the fall of the Roman Empire and the disorder of the Dark Ages) is irredeemably evil.

But what can Aquinas offer the artist? His synthesis of faith and reason, the cornerstone of Christianity, is difficult because of our distance from medieval language and from subtlety. (The often intricate word patterns of postmodern language, should not be confused with subtlety). Underpinning his philosophy though, which is fundamentally optimistic, is an edifice on which one might identify and grasp at concepts such as *form* and *beauty* and *truth*. Perhaps for the painter, a structure like this might save his soul.

Everything that exists has being. There are two constituents to existence: matter and form. As everything that exists is in motion or undergoing continual change, matter is said to have *potency*. But the defining principle that confers on matter its being is *form*.

This *form* is said to be in *act*. God is said to be *pure act*, that is - total reality. All beings then tend towards God, to the perfection of their existence. Matter and form are therefore indissolubly linked. In the words of the thomist scholar Etienne Gilson:

'This radical metaphysical optimism leaves nothing out which in any manner whatever deserves to have the name of being, the corporeal world no more than the rest: matter exists for the sake of form, inferior forms for the sake of the higher forms, the higher forms with the view to God. Therefore, everything that is, is good and, consequently, also everything has God for its cause....'⁸

St. Thomas defines beauty by its effect: 'what gives pleasure on sight'. As all that is real tends towards the good, which is the same as the beautiful 'differing only conceptually'. That which is good allays our natural appetite for knowledge of it:

'but the beautiful adds over and above the good a certain order to the force of knowledge. So let it be termed the good that which simply gratifies the appetite: but let it be termed beautiful the mere apprehension of which gives pleasure.'

Sum. Theol ^{9a}

Ultimately knowledge is of God, who is absolute truth and beauty and good in the sense that these terms are synonymous - in God there are no divisions. So beauty, giving pleasure on sight is a kind of radiance of divine beauty, however diminished by our corporal perception. The three things that St. Thomas assigned to beauty are:

integrity (or perfection), . . . proportion (or order), ... and brightness (or clarity)

The natural inclination of man is to be pleased by what tends to perfection, that which has *form*; and by what is harmonious because it reflects order; and by clarity because it brings to light that knowledge which is an intimation of the divine. (James Joyce did his own bit of dancing to this tune, oft quoted but insufferably auto-hagiographical). Aquinas develops this idea of beauty in relation to form:

'The beautiful and the good are the same as regards the subject they have the same foundation, namely form, and the good is therefore commended as beautiful. But they differ in concept. For the good, strictly speaking regards the appetite, that being good which all things desire; and therefore it partakes of the nature of an end, for the appetite is as it were a sort of movement to the thing.

The beautiful, however, concerns the force of knowledge, for things are said to be beautiful when they give pleasure at sight. Therefore beauty consists in proper proportion, because the sense derives pleasure from things properly proportioned, as being similar to itself for sense also is a kind of reason like every cognitive virtue: and as knowledge comes about through assimilation, and similitude is concerned with form, the beautiful strictly pertains to the concept of a formal cause.'

Sum. Theol ^{9b}

‘A formal cause is the intrinsic active principle whereby a thing is of a certain definite nature’ (Gilson). When St. Thomas follows Aristotle in calling the soul ‘the *form* of man’ - his formal cause, he is not referring to a body’s accidents such as shape, colour or texture but to a much deeper concept: an essential quality defining a being. The scholars understood *forms* as the *Ideas* of God, the pattern of creation, and beauty as such was said to have, in a wonderful phrase: ‘*splendor of form*’.

If ‘the soul is the form of man’ then the artist working with matter, whether paint or clay or stone, is not attempting to raise matter to *form*, but to realise the *form* in matter.

When the artist creates he does not do so out of nothing, this is impossible for a created being. He attempts to apprehend form. Man perceives form in relation to himself and the natural world, the things of the senses (i.e. ‘similar to itself’). How could he do otherwise?

This is his limitation. Man experiences in *form* an intimation or resemblance of the divine *Idea*, and in doing so, he participates in beauty. Because man in his nature is ordained (or as the modern mind see it, has genetically evolved) to this kinship with beauty, self identification is central to the creative and artistic experience:

‘The mind rejoices in the beautiful because in the beautiful it finds itself again: recognizes itself and comes into contact with its very own light’

Jacques Maritain¹⁰

Vulva

Beauty is form contemplated without desire

Why was it that in the glory of Greek sculpture, the genital area of the goddesses goes unmarked? On this subject Aquinas is silent. Yet in the history of the great maternal metaphor, the vulva could be said to be the mark of truth. In his study of Hellenistic sculpture R.R.R Smith writes:

‘An erotic response to naked Aphrodites, then, was appropriate... It is possible that on marble statues Aphrodite had painted pubic hair, but it is strange then that it has no three-dimensional value. Male pubic hair on statues was no doubt painted but is always carved in its full natural volume. Although female genital depilation seems to have been a common practice in ancient Greece, it is not clear a priori what practice would be appropriate for Aphrodite. The Knidia and Hellenistic Aphrodites represented the goddess of sexual love as such, but for whatever psychological reasons, she was at the same time, in this crucial detail, “under-represented” by art.’¹¹

But if we compare the Greek goddess with its equivalent in pre-history - the heavysset figure with strong sexual markings - we find the act of censorship more revealing. From this point of view Greek sophistication (at least among the intellectual elite), seems to have lost contact with the spirituality of the image. In their scepticism they could no longer believe in the incarnation of the gods.

In the vulva-less idol, Hellenistic art helped create a curious aesthetic for the west. Bronzino’s brilliant (16th century) *allegory* comes to mind with its absurdly bereft Venus, also Ingres and the French academic nude. It is to an artist as late as Goya(1746-1828) that Robert Hughes credits with painting ‘what are certainly the first curls of female pubic hair in western art.’¹²

The lost treatises of the Greeks might have contained an apology (perhaps the statues were understood as a Platonic ideal without 'defect') but the vulva-less female is an utterly powerless creature and does not fulfil Aquinas's first requirement for beauty – integrity (perfection).

Interestingly the Irish elite, monks who kept classical learning alive when the rest of Europe disintegrated, also had an inverse relation with the female icon: they turned her into a hag and placed her on their church walls, genitals exposed to ward off evil - the so-called *Sheela na gig*. 'Wo-wombed' in their sanctuaries they studied their manuscripts, which were bejewelled with painted animals, especially the entangled serpent, and sang praises of the Father God; while outside the rejected Mother, in much reduced circumstances, protected them from harm.

This is what the old philosophers called 'antinomy': 'the contradiction, which arises when we carry the categories of the understanding above experience, and apply them to the sphere of the absolute'¹³

Consider also the prevalence of pornography over the last century, especially of magazines where the *raison d'être* is vulvic display. Surely, the dominant visual image that pervades the consciousness of our age is neither Matisse's odalisques (eastern slave girls) nor Picasso's gratuitous contortions, but of the feminine in pornographic repose.

The scale of the market for such imagery shows that in the west, it is now our predominant cultural icon - the goddess profaned. It is perhaps a consequence of our loss of innocence and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But the pornographic divorces the spiritual from the image. There is a threshold beyond the erotic where art cannot go, and this attests, with Aquinas, to the inherent goodness of form.

Art and Artists

Originality is not achieved by striving for individuality but for perfection

Does the contemplation of art then make one moral? Joseph Campbell in his study of Egyptian culture notes the changing image of the Pharaoh (c 2480 BC onwards) from being an absolute and ruthless god, to becoming his representative on earth, though still divine. A humanizing process seems to have occurred, and inscriptions relate the Pharaoh's just behaviour in loving his wife, not stealing from his servants, or abusing his power.

Campbell believes this was achieved through their extraordinary art works; one thinks of the husband and wife statues marching serenely into the next world, half embraced. He suggests that it could be 'through the magic of it's wonderful art that the cure of Egypt from its seizure was affected, without breaking the bond of wonder and yet humanizing its face.'¹⁴

The Greeks were also surrounded by astounding art, but their ethics do not seem especially superior. Perhaps some residue of the beauty persists which associates with goodness. St. Thomas, quoting Aristotle, goes further:

'For this reason the Philosopher says "that bodily sight is the beginning of sensitive love" and in like manner the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love.'¹⁵

Artists are not normally known for their exemplary morals. The professionals at contemplating the beautiful however are art critics, but one hears few tales of their being conspicuous for any acts of mercy. (This is surely a commentary on post-modernism). Perhaps civilisation is too short a time for the moral gene to be affected.

When Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) wished to ridicule a fellow sculptor he said:

‘Baccio Bandinotto is made of everything bad and thus has he ever been, therefore whatever he looks at, be the things superlatively excellent, becomes in his ungracious eyes as bad as can be. I who incline to the good only discern the truth with purer senses.’¹⁶

Cellini probably overstates his case (being an imprisoned sodomite and double murderer). Yet in the case of Michaelangelo, his friend Vasari claimed that the great artist’s saintliness was directly related to his genius.

The Renaissance, which revived the idealism of Plato, recalled the harmonies of the figures of ancient Greece, but introduced a new emphasis in the story of image making: the artist as genius or as Vasari would describe him - ‘a mortal god’. In old age Michaelangelo would deny his early tuition as being inappropriate to this notion of genius, which his own brilliance had done so much to foster.

This coincides with the beginning of the study of the nature of man in a human not a religious context. The Renaissance instituted the era of the self-consciousness of the artist and progressed so that an artwork today is seen, not only as an object of intrinsic value, it is more wonderful still: it is the ‘markings’ or the relic of a special individual. Nobody believes this more than the artists themselves.

Philosophy

An academic is someone who explains a joke

From the Renaissance onwards one notes the decline of religion and the rise of empirical science: philosophers become self-absorbed and artists become temperamental. Philosophy achieves subjectivity with Descartes's (17th century) reduction of the certitude of existence to self-awareness, thus confirming his status as the father of modern philosophy.

The notion of the special nature of the artist is confirmed by a newfound spirituality, which grew in no small part in opposition to the industrial revolution, but this spirituality is a rather melancholy romance. Whereas the spiritual is concerned with some sense of *the within - great presence*, (Teilhard de Chardin), romantic spirituality looks to itself. The 19th century Romantics looked within but found a fragile god: the angst of the artist.

Art became a search for the self, as though this was some discovered entity requiring expression. There is a sensual vanity behind this ideal of self-expression and philosophy in its progress inwards has been no friend to art. After Cartesian scepticism, philosophers have progressively reduced the knowledge of reality to a linguistic function.

Consider the painter, painting a picture of a table. Now the philosopher, because he perceives different shapes from different angles (a fact which causes difficulties for the painter but apparently insurmountable problems for the philosopher), begins to question the table's existence. George Berkeley (1685-1753) proved that the table cannot be shown to exist. But surely the painter at least can rely on his own existence thanks to Descartes? Regrettably, this is not the case; David Hume (1711-76) proved that the even the painter's perception of own existence is a falsehood.

So what is the truth, the painter asks today's philosopher: 'Am I not here painting this picture of this table'?(here in deference to Dr. Johnson he kicks the table).

The philosopher reluctantly places his glass of claret (full-bodied) on the offending article (the table) and with hardly a trace of condescension nonchalantly replies:

'I'm afraid the truth is that reality is a bundle of events (you, the painter), and another bundle of events (this table). These may have some relation that can be expressed linguistically (or preferably mathematically) and this relation may be seen to be true, or can be shown to be logically possible, that is, it is true as a statement, though not however, as a statement of fact.'

Bertrand Russell consoles the artist with this indispensable conclusion: 'Thus it is quite gratuitous to suppose that physical objects have colors, and therefore there is no justification for making such a supposition'.¹⁷ Except that painters do not squeeze out tubes of different light wave vibrations.

Perhaps the painter should look on philosophy as an art form. The philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had an unfortunate association with a chicken; stuffing it with snow in an experiment on refrigeration, he (Bacon) died from the resultant cold: one of the few occasions of performance art having a moral.

Performance art could well look to the 4th century BC. When the philosopher Diogenes took such a poor view of culture that he decided to emulate a dog's life: he gave up all vanities, begged for his food and lived in a tub (This he achieved without arts council funding and bestowed on us the Greek word for canine - 'cynic').

***What is the ultimate aesthetic oxymoron?
An installation artist***

Earlier in the last century Kandinsky saw truth, not through an inclination to good (though he piously recommends it) but through an inward looking faculty, peculiar to the artist unfortunately, who was by then carrying a full bohemian license:

‘To those who are not accustomed to it, the inner beauty appears as ugliness because humanity in general inclines to the outer and knows nothing of the inner.’¹⁸

Without contact with a *common* sense of reality aestheticism travels the path of elitism which Kandinsky (a pleasing abstract painter) here espouses in his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This form of elitism would eventually reach its apotheosis in the quasi-spiritual auto-absorption of minimalism.

Abstract painting is an atheism of form. It is play without responsibility (other than compositional attractiveness), and as such, is very seductive for the painter. There is indeed a therapy in special ‘markings’ by special individuals. Although abstract painting offers the comfort of elitism, and the luxury of colour for its own sake (because for the painter, colour is a kind of emotion), the artist should remember that colour comes out of a tube.

***Do not confuse emotion with spirituality in art
Emotion is to spirituality what sex is to love***

The Camera

To draw is to know

The 19th Century invention of the camera forever alters the relationship between artist and object. Rarely given the attention it warrants by art historians, it is a more awful tool for the painter than for the Aborigine who feared it could steal his soul (his *form*). Delacroix called it 'the palpable demonstration of nature's real design'. But it is much more than a demonstration; it is a kind of murder machine definitively executing the innocence of the image for the artist

The photograph has become the most significant instrument of self-awareness since the mirror. Without the mirror the self-portrait would not have existed. How would we remember Rembrandt? With the cinematic camera, Titian would have laid aside his brushes and arranged his studio with voluptuous Madonnas who could walk *and* talk, colourful bacchanals and decorous rapes, or home movies of the Dodge out praying with his patron saints. The cinema is now *the* pre-eminent visual art form of our time.

Painting has not faced up to the questions raised by photography, and painters have used the photograph, often surreptitiously, to make bad paintings. Just as it was impossible for someone to consider his or her image without the mirror, now it is no longer possible for us to see ourselves, or even look back at the old masters, with camera free eyes.

But a response or an adherence to nature, to the human form, to the natural world, is intrinsic to the production of art and acts as a regenerating influence; it is an anchor forming the alphabet of the painter's language. Yet the painter, now no longer in thrall to the labors of verisimilitude, thinking himself free to pursue truth, is set adrift.

***Painter, look to the past and find a master.
But if you really wish to be self-taught, attend an art school.***

Critics

*Aesthetics is an arrangement of words in a pattern
that may or may not be pleasing.*

Clive Bell in 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' writes about looking at pictures and of 'people who feel little or no emotion for pure form':

'When confronted with a picture, instinctively they refer back its forms to the world from which they came. They treat created form as though it were imitated form, a picture as though it were a photograph instead of going out on the stream of art into a new world of aesthetic experience, they turn a sharper corner and come straight home to the world of human interests'.¹⁹

It is not advisable to attempt to divorce oneself from the conditioning of 'imitated' or of natural form, nor is it possible (at least not for the human). Bell's hypothesis comes from the pursuit of art via what he termed 'aesthetic ecstasy'; two words which are of little use in the painter's handbook.

When Leonardo saw figures in the cracks in walls and Michaelangelo sensed he was releasing figures from stone, they were doing what everyone does when looking at form, they were relating it to the world from which they came, they were identifying with it in an act of empathy. Bell invented the term 'significant form', however as the scholars have shown, matter cannot exist without form - all form is significant.

It also shows the difficulty of writing about painting as though there was some aesthetic further shore (some Platonic ideal) not inherent in the work itself – a writing tool too finely and inwardly tuned that confuses the critic's inner organs with the great beyond.

*It is not wrong to look for glory in art. Great art is often made by artists
with a hunger for fame, wealth or glory.
Bad art is made for the same reason.*

Clement Greenberg speaks of an 'abstract expressionist' failing to reach his true potential:

[this painter] 'will juxtapose high shrill colours whose uniform warmth and brightness do not so much observe value contrasts as render them dissonant or when they are made more obvious, it will be by jarring colour contrasts that are equally dissonant. It is much the same with his design and drawing a sudden razor edged line will upset all our notions of the permissible, or else thick gobs of paint, without support of edge or shape will cry out against pictorial sense'.²⁰

However, when reacquainted with this work Greenberg changes his mind, discovering a certain 'sprightliness': 'Looked at longer, however, the sprightliness gives way to a noble and passive intensity'.

Greenberg's absurd turnaround from 'crying out against pictorial sense' to 'a noble and passive intensity' has less to do with the pictures themselves than with the effect of prolonged looking. It is an aesthetic of self-hypnosis and it leaves the critic free from the constraints of coherence.

Bell and Greenberg were influential critics, yet the pattern of words and ideas with which they surrounded the artwork was superior to the pattern of the artwork itself. Their response is a not a criticism but a creative fabrication.

Such fabrications are more obvious in relation to the kind of spatial void created by minimalism. An artist who arranges human hair in circular shapes is said by a critic to work:

'with a personal conviction that insists on viewer response. Embracing all these concerns and subverting any thought of comfort-[this artist's] dressage tests of art history, memory and the canons of perception ignite realms from the vernacular through to medievalism and mythology, her wormhole-type use of possibilities and dimensions'... etc²¹

There is no object, no thing or stuff (with or without human intervention) that is so humble that it cannot hold some significance or interest for us. But criticism as a verbal-pattern should do more than circumnavigate, or work off a tangent to the artwork. It should, if it wishes to be true, create a pattern that *corresponds* (and not just responds) to the art pattern.

***There is nothing more injurious to the artist
than seeing mediocrity rewarded.***

An Irish curator/critic devoted to installation art recently came up with the following postmodern pearl:

‘Writing about art is still the key mechanism for the creation of memory and the historicisation of meaning and value in time.’²²

Now this statement makes the kind of sense that minimalism does but in an opposite kind of way (the context is equally ethereal). It is typical of minimal apologetics, which has thrown up such a queasy body of quasi-scholastic verbiage. The statement means, as far as it can be deciphered... everything.

The problem for the painter is that installation art is seen as a usurpation of the validity of painting, having grown out of the artists needs to go further than the previous fashion. Art students, as an alternative to the difficulties of painting, often opt for installation (compounded by the fact that there are virtually no teachers left who can draw or paint). But installation art is better described as a kind of hybrid of the theater, as set design with pretensions, though usually without the skill.

The prevalent doctrine which claims that the *raison d’être* of installation or performance or conceptual art is that it is ‘stimulating’ or ‘thought provoking’ or a ‘challenge to our perceptions’ or that ‘it questions the nature... etc.’, is proof enough of its philosophical domain. It is no less than art degenerating into philosophy.

The history of art in the last century has been described as one of increasing ‘self criticism’ and painting has proved too brittle a vehicle for the piling on of continuous reactionism. The painter who abandons his art for conceptualism and performance indicates not the poverty of painting but the folly of the philosophical burden.

A display of organic or inert material on a gallery floor, some arrangement (or disarray) of human detritus, some nice order (or incongruous juxtaposition) of objects or artefacts, pretentiously lit and portentously laden, is simply materialism trussed up as aesthetics, irrespective of the art-babble that disguises itself as criticism. This is the tyranny of mediocrity: ‘the cutting edge’ of the new academy.

The Painters Prayer

*From the tyranny of fashion
From the cutting edge
Lord save us*

*From social irony
From artist's statements
Lord spare us*

*From a thousand post graduate theses on aesthetics
Lord castrate them without anaesthetic*

*From art schools and academies
From the legions of instillationists
On a treadmill ever fatuous
Christ, you have suffered enough
Boil them in extreme unction*

*From the sycophants and explainers
The philosopher-critics and purveyors of novelty
Lord do not listen to the revisionists, let the fires of hell be
real
Open the bowels of the earth and keep their anuses warm
With hot poker over many centuries*

*Only grant this to me O lord
And I will endeavor to follow the truth.*

Truth

***Great artists are not ahead of their time
They have merely assimilated the past.***

An artist is someone with intense materialist feelings. All material, all form is bound by some force or energy that for the scientist requires an equation and that the artist knows as spirit. But the scientist of the spirit, the mystic, knows that truth is found not by denying the world but in the fullness of living. Likewise the artist must, in the fullness of the mundane skills of his craft, inspire or rather discover form through his own spirit, or as the thomist philosopher Maritain says: '*to divine matter*'.

Self-discipline is the unifying factor among the mystics. Dripping and falling over a canvas, simple or complex 'markings', variable partitioning of the picture plane, wishing and washing, this (as amply confirmed by artists statements) is the search for the accidental, the discipline of the arbitrary. But its unwritten credo is 'the least that I do is good' and even more so 'my accidents are the intentions of the almighty (i.e. myself)'. Such is the spirit of the contemporary artist - the apotheosis of the ego.

There is something morbid and infantile in this behaviour, like a child playing with his own excreta, but without the innocence, and in a spirit that is spoilt and desultory. The artist believes that the negation of skills will loosen the doors of inspiration. This was the false shamanship of the 20th century and it has led to the mediocritisation of art. This is a philosophy that would transform emotion into spirituality, therapy into metaphysics.

The Romans had bread and circuses - we have art therapy.

The issue concerning conceptual or installation type art is not that it is a refuge for those who cannot draw or paint, nor that the 'concepts' are generally of bulldozing subtlety, but that such work lacks an essential feature for the production of art - a coherent medium.

Now one can accept in theory, that all concepts and all objects, all actions, the universe itself can be a medium - if one were God that is. But a medium is by nature a limitation, and great art is the triumph of form *over* a medium. Therefore, limitations without boundaries are a contradiction that dissolves the other crucial ingredient for making art - a value system.

This formal anarchy of recent art is the product of a self-induced evolution, where art has become such a prisoner of concentrated change, that it is now a captive to fashion. One can no more argue against post modernism than one can argue against bell-bottom trousers. How craven and enslaved are our artists to a false idea of progress, or of originality, which they confuse with novelty. How ironic that painting, so noted for its *timeless* quality should now be corrupted by such passing fancies.

***What notion do humans have that make the gods laugh out loud?
Self- expression.***

By confronting the past in a reactionary spirit, the artist is forced to suffer over style like a prisoner enduring false imprisonment. But finding a style that might emancipate is a hard-won *choice*.

The problems of truth for the painter are practical: what to paint and in what way. The *way* must grow out of a respect for craft, a nervous balance between the struggle for facility or skill and the constraints of the medium. The *what* to paint must come from the artist's sense of kinship to the *within* of things, to form. That is the truth for the artist: to realize the immanence of *form* whose symbol is *beauty*.

But beauty seems such an arcane pursuit in the contemporary world. The old technology of painting is no longer the arbiter of visual culture, television and the cinema hold the stage. When the great masterpieces were made, the duty of the artist was to please the king. Now 'history painting' is done with computer generated images. We don't have to go to Pergamum to see the gods locked in immortal combat.

Yet we fail to notice how our imagination is so curiously limited. If for a moment the ant could see his own culture with human eyes, he would instantly be destroyed in a paroxysm of intelligence and despair. The Greek philosopher Xenophanes noted that different peoples make their gods as images of themselves. He scoffed that if oxen or horses could paint, they would do likewise.

Humans also have no imagination beyond themselves. The creatures of our fantasy, our gods and demons, are always either human or non-human, never other than non-human. That is why, in painting, God always seems such a pallid creature.

We are simply driven by our own survival and reproduction. Our response to person and place is what the scientist would explain as a genetic imperative. Culture is a dance with ourselves to deny death. Babies within 10 minutes of birth, 'will fixate more on normal facial designs drawn on posters than on abnormal designs.'²³

Art is self-affirmation. This is so much more than self-expression (the recent legacy of the Romantic Movement). Can this old technology of painting ever regain its pre-eminence in culture? (There is a danger in intelligence that sees beyond hope). Never, is the prudent answer. Yet some individuals will always crave this visual affirmation.

Moreover the artifices of new technologies cannot replace the creative integrity (the limiting medium) of the drawing hand. The symbols and patterns made by the artist partake in the spirit sustained by atoms and cells: the created imitates the creator. It is in painting's response to form that *the* great extravagance of abstraction, the human form, may be turned into a symbol of the spirit.

‘And is this not sufficient indication that a body of this kind was designed as an adjunct to the soul? And does it not show the character of the soul it serves? And even if we take out of the account the necessary functions of the parts, there is a harmonious congruence between them, a beauty in their equality and correspondence, so much so that one would be at a loss to say whether utility or beauty is the major consideration.’

St. Augustine²⁴

What W.B. Yeats said of the art of ‘good writing’, we might also say of our own craft: good painting *is the way art has of being moral, the only way*. ‘Now I know it was a fantasy’ wrote Michaelangelo ‘that made me think art could be made into an idol or a king, though all men do this they do half-unwillingly’.

‘at all events it clearly indicates that it is folly to try to find in art the words of eternal life and rest for the human heart: and that the artist, if he is not to shatter his art or his soul, must simply be, as artist, what art would have him be - a good workman’.

Jacques Maritain

In the end, there is only great painting, and in that obscure mediumistic process, it is when the hard labour of facility tries not to fail intention, that the artist proves his fidelity to truth. Art does not offer us any salvation; creativity simply marks us out. It may be all that there is to recommend us - or excuse us.

Eoin de Leastar 2004

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