

Imaginative seeing is one thing, but painting is quite another. People skilled in aural and visual imagination can be handless when it comes to painting. And even those who practice often, also fail often. They assume that practice makes perfect. But practice only makes permanent, and bad practice ensures makes art permanently bad. So it's important to spot bad practice as soon as possible. Again, just as naïve assumptions about imagination impede our aesthetic imagination, so naïve assumptions about painting can impede good practice. It can help greatly to ask ourselves, "What do I do when I paint?"<sup>1</sup>

## What Are You Painting?

"There are mighty few people who think what they *think* they think." So wrote Robert Henri (pictured), author of *The Art Spirit*,<sup>2</sup> speaking of the various answers to the question, What do I do when I paint? Beginners in art usually think of themselves as "painting *that*"—say, a landscape. So they include every visible cow, barn, tree, and cloud. In reality, their first artistic impulse sprung from a rather quick glance, which is something far different from a photographic visualization of everything stimulating their retinas. What attracted them to notice *this* landscape was the massive, quiet dignity of a weathered-red barn surrounded by wind-shook acres of grain. In their original glimpse, they never saw the cows, they didn't notice the clouds, and they barely registered the trees. Later, upon reflection, they *think* they did, and that mistake in thinking accounts for many an ineffective painting.



Artists whose paintings endure do not think of themselves as painting the total landscape seen after inspection. They are allergic to inspection. Rather

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<sup>1</sup> My personal discoveries of what I do when I paint has been guided mainly by a lecture on art by Bernard Lonergan, which he delivered in 1959 at Xavier University, Cincinnati. Typescript of this lecture appears in Lonergan's *Topics in Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 208-232. It has also been guided by René Huyghe's *Art and the Spirit of Man* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1962). Lonergan referred to the original 1960 French version in "The Analogy of Meaning" (1963). See R.C. Croken and F.E.Crowe, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1958-1964*, volume 6 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1931), 63

they feel moved by some image, and they lay paint on canvas in a way they hope will create a similar reaction in a viewer. They will leave out the cows and rearrange the clouds to enhance the *impression* of the majesty of that barn rising from those fields. They often remind themselves, "I am not painting *that*—a visible figure over there. I am painting *this*—a mélange of paint that expresses my disposition when I see *that* and promises to evoke the same disposition in someone else." This image may be quiet glen, a standing nude, the memory of several campfires, or even the pure image of colors in a pattern.

## **Why Are You Painting?**

Notice that I just mentioned "someone else." No doubt some people paint with a determination never to show their stuff to anyone, but most artists cannot avoid wondering what others think. Some like to imagine a critic over their shoulder who might say things like, "Oh that color is awful there." Overly melancholy types hide their stuff hoping that these treasures will be discovered and universally acclaimed after they're dead. (Being dead has the advantage of never hearing anybody say your stuff is awful.) Overly private types will use the arts to express their personal feelings, knowing that, as in writing and poetry, to express one's concerns in the arts tend to clarify them for oneself. But any artist who genuinely cares for others will not hide themselves. No matter how secluded the artist, painting is a way to connect to them. Whatever the artist's motives, whether money or fame or a desire to share an aesthetic experience, the event that prompted the painting is not meant to stay with the painter. It is a natural human act of communication.

## **A Virtual Space**

However, when the artist aims to share an aesthetic experience, the essence of this communication is less a "statement" and more an "invitation." A painting creates a virtual space—the space perceived in the viewer's imagination—and invites viewers to enter, which means leaving behind the virtual space of everyday concerns. Lonergan's description of art highlights this movement: "Art is a withdrawal from practical living to explore possibilities of fuller living in a richer world."<sup>3</sup> For a painting to be effective, viewers must first notice that part of their environment has been fenced-off from useful things and reserved for their entry. While the choice of a physical frame and its physical placement influences whether viewers notice

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<sup>3</sup> *Topics in Education*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 217. See also page 211, and *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) p. 61) where Lonergan reflects on what he names as Langer's definition of art as the "objectification of a purely experiential pattern." Oddly, neither Lonergan nor Langer explicitly defines art in these exact terms.

it, even more important is the artist's awareness from the beginning that this painting should frame *an experience* (in Dewey's sense of *an experience* as something that remains in memory) by taking viewers to a different *place*. Good paintings invite the viewer to an exploration. Paintings that fail to draw the viewer into another psychic space serve merely to signal that there's a wall here—don't bump into it.

## Presentation and Representation

If we think of art as an invitation, then the usual distinction between "representational" and "nonrepresentational" art becomes useless. It suggests that we must see what "representational" art depicts and *intuit* what "nonrepresentational" art might mean. This obscures the underlying aesthetic experience on which both types are based.

Whatever the artist intends to represent—a real person, a typical scene, an allegory, a depiction of scenes in the visible world or of invisible psychic spaces—the significance of an art piece depends on how well it objectifies a purely experiential pattern.<sup>4</sup> It does not depend on how faithfully it represents the appearance of known objects or how fully it diagrams conceptualized ideas. Here are a few examples:



Viewers of Robert Delaunay's cubist *Window* series (1912-13) who are aware that this *represents* a window in Paris will be in a better position to experience what Delaunay experienced.

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<sup>4</sup> Lonergan (*Topics in Education*, 211) credits Langer here (*Feeling and Form*). Langer, following Cassirer, distinguishes symbols and signals to make the same point. She defines art as the "creation of forms symbolic of human feeling" (40). The purpose of art, she says, "is to objectify the life of feeling" (374). "That life of feeling is a stream of tensions and resolutions. Probably all emotion, all feeling tone, mood, even personal 'sense of life' or 'sense of identity' is a specialized and intricate, but definite interplay of tensions – actual, nervous and muscular tensions taking place in a human organism" (372).



Piet Mondrian's meant his famous *Composition 2* (1922) to *represent* an equilibrium that ought to characterize human consciousness, but viewers who are unaware of his intention will likely miss his point. Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, pioneers in contemporary abstract art, noted that "representation" can and should include inner experience: "Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance."<sup>5</sup>



In 1871, James McNeill Whistler painted *Arrangement in Gray and Black: The Artist's Mother*. His intent was to imitate the effect that musical *arrangements* have on him. It is an orderly composition of parts that appeals to our aesthetic thirst for order.

I show it here sideways, stretched, and smudged to help you see this *arrangement* of grays and blacks and not just his mother.

It seems to me that what is essential in all art, despite how the artists themselves may have understood it, is that the pure presentation be rich and attractive in its own right. It is the richness of presentation that opens the door to the viewer's imagination—that emotionally rich inner sensorium of symbols. Without it, the viewer will move on to cool analysis: "What was this artist trying to say?" Some paintings clearly point to objects outside of themselves, but no one considers them art because, lacking a strong sensate design, they do not connect to felt experiences in the viewers' imaginations. Other paintings have no specific reference, but everyone considers them art because they express a recognizable pattern of feelings and images without any discernible distracting elements, much as good instrumental music does.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Roger Lipsey, *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 310.

## Technique, Design and Virtual Space

In all the arts, sensate elements are largely a matter of the techniques for using physical materials and arranging them according to a design. But what is a design? Generally, a design as an intelligible unity of different elements. But, to begin with the less familiar but more fundamental point, there is a difference between the design of the materials and the design of the virtual space it frames.

In painting, the design of the materials comprises five distinct elements: shapes, values (dark/light), lines, hues, and textures.<sup>6</sup> These are *material* elements; they can be measured with rulers, light meters and scanners. But the design of the virtual space may contain figures, gestures, attitudes, atmosphere, tone, pace, dominance and submission, the familiar and the strange, advancing and receding masses, avenues to explore, walls that hinder, radiance, shadows, threats, alarms, consolations, concepts, ideals and invitations—all the ways we apprehend a *situation*. These are the *formal* elements of an art piece—what makes it engage the imagination and emotions of viewers. Each element of the virtual space lies not on the canvas but in the *interaction* between the painted design and the inner symbolic world of the viewer. If the study of the arts is the study of events and not "artworks," the "intelligible unity" that the artist envisions should be *an event in the viewer*, which the design of the paint should support. So, while every artist needs to submit technical ability to the services of good design, the design of the paint should serve the artist's intention to share a visual experience connected to the design of an *attitude*—the viewer's feelings, ideas, passions, hopes, fears, loves and hates, faith and despair.

Practically speaking, artists need to so master the techniques of their materials as to free them to concentrate on the virtual space. Such mastery is the point of practice, practice, practice. It is what allows players of musical instruments to move beyond concerns about fingering, embouchure, attacks, etc., to making the music. It becomes music when it evokes aesthetic experiences in listeners; allows painters to rise above concerns about fugitive, staining, or transparent watercolor paints to envisioning the effects on the psyches of viewers; allows writers of poetry or fiction to follow the advice of Cato the Wise: "Cling to the thing; the words will emerge."

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<sup>6</sup> When I don't like how my own painting is going, I often check each of these five elements separately, asking myself, Is this element patterned or not?

## *The Artistic Process*

### **An Exploration and Enrichment**

The act of painting is an exploration. In music and graphics, what artists want to discover is a specific virtual space in their psyches that expresses an emotional viewpoint that cannot be put into words. They want to objectify, in paint, the particular compacted vision, overcast with an attitude, which calls for attention. Painting is an artist's effort to make sense out of an aesthetic experience. It is an exploration of the elusive penchants and passions in one's psyche by using symbols to find associations where concepts can only find differences. The result is enriching because it leaves out distracting elements, just as gold is extracted from gold ores. The result will make sense when the purified painting captures how the artist feels about an intriguing image and does so in a way that viewers will likely recognize. Artists want to help people experience what they, the artists, have experienced when confronted with a particularly poignant manifestation of nature's mystery. They seek to convey their feelings about an original aesthetic glimpse straight to the psyches of their viewers through a visible pattern in a frame. They say to themselves, "Is my arrangement of painted elements likely to convey the same emotional response in you as it does in me?"

### **From Experience to Painting to Viewing**

The process of producing a painting begins with aesthetic experiences in the artist. Such experiences are always an awareness of the presence or absence of something we call beautiful, prior to any questions about why or how or what for. Human consciousness, driven by its exigence for beauty, spontaneously appreciates where order exists and is bothered where it doesn't. It's our familiar experience of an immediate sense of something deeply good or deeply bad about a family, a religious congregation, a neighborhood, a culture.

Following these initial inspirations arising from aesthetic experience, the artist starts "fiddling"—playing with the paint in a provisional manner until it falls into a pattern that seems likely to evoke a similar aesthetic experience in viewers. In this fiddling phase, the artist is getting insights and asking questions about their adequacy. The artist has the eraser and the poet the delete key. The process here, again, is analogous to the hundreds of insights that we get when we're solving a puzzle. Most of them are wrong, but unless we notice what bothers us and deal with unanswered questions, we will not succeed.

But unlike puzzle-solving, emerging patterns can themselves become an aesthetic experience. During the fiddling process, the discovery of new images occurs when the pursuit springing from an original inspiration opens

on to new images, new avenues of exploration, and new questions of adequacy. When the artwork takes on an unexpectedly arresting form and the artist follows the emerging pattern, the original aesthetic experience is absorbed into one that is more rich, more clear, more compelling.<sup>7</sup> It is no small achievement to watch the painting's development with an artistic eye and to follow its leads. Many an artist begins with a well-conceived vision of what a painting should look like, but then slavishly subjects the work to this vision and suppresses insights into more promising forms accidentally emerging from the brush. Individual paintings may be impressive, but the artist's oeuvre will show little spontaneity. So it is that even the best artists tend to copy themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Then there's the final painting, the final objectification of the aesthetic experience. During the provisional objectifications, the artist may decide to scrap everything and start over because the emerging pattern, having strayed too far from the originating aesthetic experience or lacking an overall design, is unlikely to arouse an aesthetic experience in viewers. Or the artist may try to resolve these problems, shepherding the artwork from poor to good, from good to better, and from better to best available, as relevant questions are met and put to rest. What remains are the adjustments that eliminate distracting elements and strengthen important forms and relationships. Gradually, the questions diminish. The artist stands back, dabs a little here and there until it comes clear that any more dabs will diminish the desired effect on viewers.

Then the artist shows the painting. He or she may have been committed to this all along, but we should notice that this involves more than a judgment about the adequacy of the piece. It involves a decision to take responsibility for it by putting it out there. The process doesn't end here. It ends only when a viewer sees the painting. And it ends successfully only to the extent that aesthetic experiences occur in viewers that are similar to the originating experience of the artist that guided the brush.

This process doesn't occur in everyone. There has to be some habitual respect for the transcendental notion of beauty, the total orientation of our consciousness toward what will be splendid because it is intelligible, it is real, and it is good. While everyone experiences this, not everyone realizes they experience it, let alone works with it. In my limited experience, art schools tend to teach techniques and either promote unreserved expression

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<sup>7</sup> The discovery of new images during the fiddling process is analogous to what happens to historians as they fiddle with explanations of what was going forward in a certain period. See Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, pp 185-196

<sup>8</sup> In a legendary story about Picasso, he told some collectors that certain works attributed to him were not "originals." It was only after they sold these works at some financial loss that they discovered that he did paint them, but that he felt he was copying himself.

or encourage imitating "masterpieces." What they ought to teach is the process of how aesthetic experience is "imaged" in artwork for the sake of evoking a similar experience in viewers, all driven by a shared desire to relish beauty. In this perspective, students do well to give spontaneous expression to their moods at the time, provided that they aim to invite viewers to recognize the same moods in their own lives. Similarly, students do well to copy the masters, as long as they pay attention to the possible aesthetic experiences that the master kept foremost in mind when making the masterpiece.

Also, there is no need for artists to keep these concepts uppermost in mind at all times. They may explore the aesthetic potentials of their experience and of paint without ever saying to themselves, "There's a difference between artistic attention and intellectual reflection." On the other hand, some of the great artists wrote reams expressing their intellectual reflections on artistic standards and the elements of design. Just as a mature musician carries questions from music theory about rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, themes, progression, tension and resolution, so the mature artist supports his or her aesthetic awareness by carrying questions from a philosophical analysis about aesthetic experience, aesthetic imagination, aesthetic value, inner symbols, virtual space, and the self-transcending desire for beauty.

## *Tragic Art*

What about tragic works? If beauty is the driver behind the artistic impulse, how does it relate to paintings of horror? Take, for example, Goya's "Third of May, 1808."



It's a terrifying depiction of innocent civilians being shot by Napoleon's soldiers. Even at the level of the purely sensate representation, Goya deliberately disturbs the viewer through the tensions in the design of the paint. Is this a "beautiful" painting?

Yes and no. Yes, because when the purely sensate elements are harmoniously integrated into a unity, there will always be "beauty" at this level. Even elements of high tension

will be perceived as beautiful as long as they are intelligibly related to other elements. These same shapes, values, lines, hues and textures could equally depict a joyful birth.



But no, it is not beautiful, because the painting shows the murder of astonished and helpless people. And not just any people, but those Spanish women and men whom faceless French soldiers killed on the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1808.

Yet such a painting is beauty-alerting because aesthetics sometimes uses the beautiful to convey feelings about the awful. It is the very contrast between a beautiful rendering and an awful scene that fixes our attention on the gap between what is and what could be. All tragic operas rely on this contrast. This is the "broken" virtual space that does violence to our sensibilities in a way that heightens our *sehnsucht*—our insatiable longing that all things be well. It is an inverse stimulant of hope. Or better, it is a symbol of a tragic or ironic hope that leaves us awed and numb. A criterion, then, for the kind of image that speaks both to the artist and to the viewer might be the following: A beautiful sensate *presentation* combined with at least a beauty-alerting *representation*.

## Photography

All the observations above apply to photography. Compelling photographs originate in our *aesthetic attention, exploration* and *enrichment* of a virtual space in our psyches and terminate in a similar aesthetic experience in those who see the photos.

There is another often overlooked similarity between painting and photography. Even though I say I "take" a picture, I actually "make" a picture, just as a painter makes a painting. And if I want to evoke an aesthetic experience my viewers, I will make the picture in six distinct actions in my psyche.

First, I notice something that stops me. I am arrested

Then I decide whether or not to make a picture.

Then I compose what will be in the frame of my picture. I do this by positioning myself, aiming the camera, and using the zoom.

Then I edit. This has two stages. I first edit what I see in the viewfinder by changing the speed to fix moving elements and/or by changing the aperture to soften elements in the foreground or background. Later, I further edit the image the cropping, burning, or dodging, either in a darkroom or at the computer.

Then I decide check to trash the image or show it to others. It all depends on whether my image will likely evoke an aesthetic experience my viewers.

Then I seek to validate the worth of my photo by showing it to others. Their response determines whether or not I will show it to still others or let it die a natural death by a resigned neglect.

These six actions are part of a single process of making a picture. Throughout, the photo is a medium, an instrument, by which we hope to evoke in others something like the experience we had that first prompted us to start making a picture.

I make a fuss about this by way of invitation. If you use a camera, no matter for what purpose, do not imagine yourself as "taking" anything. You are making something for a social purpose. You want to share your experience. But to ensure that your photo carries it off, do not imagine that the making ends when you press the shutter button. It doesn't end until a few people have seen what you have made public. Often, your photo has an obvious value as a memory-keeper, even when its aesthetic value is poor. But if you want your photo to evoke an aesthetic experience, it is essential to have done the careful noticing, deciding, composing, editing, deciding again, and validating. It ends well when you validate that they experienced something like your original aesthetic experience.

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