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Artist and beauty

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The University of Montana

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THE ARTIST AND BEAUTY


A Master's Essay
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Montana


In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

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1970

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MASTER'S ESSAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A MASTER'S ESSAY: THE ARTIST AND BEAUTY

Since art is a facet of every phase of living, there are many definitions. The definition that is a summation could be: art, be it religion, livelihood or a haven, contributes at all times to happiness, progress and culture. The subject, therefore, is a huge one. To treat it adequately would require a range of knowledge difficult to possess.

In this essay discussion will be from the viewpoint of a painter on two points. First, that art is essentially the making of things rather than the imitation of the already existent. Second, that beauty is not transferable.

Wherever art is found, some action or operation is evident. Every conceivable kind of thing, other than the totally natural, is the product of some making. Things are being made all day long: crops are cared for; meals are prepared; sentences, theories, games are constantly made. All men are makers, not just the artists. But the one designated an artist is the one who makes things well and is willing to make them well. His intelligence and his good will are requisites.

The artist must be intelligent as well as skillful. He must know a great deal about the realities of his business. He must know the purpose of the picture he is painting: some one needs that picture, himself or some other; and that need is bringing that picture into existence. He proceeds with his skill because he knows what the good is. He must next know much about his materials: the
pigments, the brushes, the canvas. The interrelationship of tools and materials is technique. No painter is a true artist unless he is a good technician in addition to his other abilities.

The painter must also be intelligent about his own mind. The value of his work depends largely upon the fact that it is a product of human imagination, the faculty that produces the images. The picture must be a product of imagination and not an exact representation of some other object, either of nature or of an existing picture. A true object of art must be, to a certain extent, original. By this originality is meant the product of a fresh mental image in its producer's creative imagination. Buddha sitting on a lotus has been painted many times and any of these pictures can be considered original if painted with imagination. Purely mechanical representation means that the mind is partially working. Most naturalistic art is mechanical. So is derivative art. Painting as someone else does, or in the manner of some school means only that the technician is at work. But original painting, if there is question that the painter be copying at all, is the copying neither the already existent objects of nature nor of art, but the copying of his own original and creative images, the using of his own imagination.

The painter is thus intelligent about the realities of his constructive problems, but no matter how intelligent, he must be willing to use his intelligence to the fullest possible extent for the perfection of the painting. He will put considerations governing the good of the painting first when other interests come into
conflict. He will consider himself an instrument for getting the necessary done. It is obvious that the painter cannot look in two directions at once. Thinking of reputation, posterity, or how this or that critic will like his work lures the painter from what should be uppermost in his mind, the well-doing of his work. The many unsigned pictures of the early ages demonstrate the artists were content with anonymity. But this is not so in later times. The names of the artists are known and in many cases good care was taken that they should be. Too, the true artist will not put money matters first. Money is necessary and the laborer is worthy of his hire but the artist must be disinterested like the surgeon who will not perform a careless operation merely because the patient can pay little.

In the matter of criticism, men have multiple problems. If there is more interest in self than in the good of the work, adverse cannot be accepted. But all artists can learn much from criticism and are more truly artists for the acceptance. The hours spent in accomplishment are, again, of no importance to the true artist. His interest is centered in the picture and its proper completion.

To sum up the first point: art is not the making of some particular kind of thing, but it is the making of any kind of thing provided it is done with human intelligence. This means skill, imagination, and the ability to pursue the art even when in conflict with immediate interests.

The second point concerns beauty. Beauty is essentially the object of intelligence. It is judged directly and intuitively because a picture or object of art is sensed to be exactly what it
should be. Perfection and beauty may be considered interchangeably: beauty is quickly and instinctively realized; the sense of perfection can be arrived at in other ways. Since beauty is an aspect of being, an object can be less beautiful if there is some change caused in what it should be. A very unbeautiful picture can be painted, but one with no beauty at all cannot be painted because the ugly things are merely portraying less beauty than they should have. The completely ugly is impossible as that would mean no being.

Beauty shares positive quality with goodness and truth. What is called goodness in things is their quality of being desirable. To the extent that a thing is what it should be from the point of view that it is wanted or loved, it is good. The quality of truth is that of being intelligible. To the extent that a thing is what it ought to be from an act of rationalization, it is said to be true. Like beauty, goodness and truth can not be non-existent. A thing without goodness, truth, or beauty simply would not be.

What is the practical value of this theorizing? It is that beauty is not transferable from one object to another. The beauty of one thing cannot be applied to another; all that is accomplished is the destruction of one thing and the creation of a vulgarity. Beauty is very fragile; the addition or subtraction of a small percentage destroys its perfection.

There are an infinity of beautiful things in the world, almost all of them objects of nature. It is upon nature, therefore, that the artist depends. But the problem of the artist is the production of his own creation of beauty, a thing of paint, brushwork,
and imagination. If these three are in harmony, a beautiful picture will result. The painter realizes that it is impossible to transfer beauty from one thing to another by means of his medium, partly because he knows few look at things for their own sake but through them seek self-identification. There is consequently the use of pictures, not so much for their aesthetic value, but to arouse emotions, to recall pleasant memories, to excite other imaginative pictures. Many are prevented from seeing the beauty in certain things by mental states of their own. These are distractions of the judgment, defects of the judging mind. To one a spider will be a symbol of cruelty, which he properly hates. This hatred will prevent him from seeing the great beauty of the spider in itself and on its own merits which is apparent to another.

In summary of the second point, beauty being a very subtle quality is not transferable from one thing to another. It will not be seen in copies. This truth is disguised at times by the fact that many habitually look through things imagining what they suggest rather than at things and understanding what they are.

In summing up what has been said in this essay: art is the making of things by disinterested and skillful persons. Things made by such persons will be well done, perfectly made. Perfect things are beautiful things. Art, therefore, is the making of beautiful things. This does not mean that art is restricted to making objects intended to be beautiful and nothing else. Things are often beautiful because they are well made, when the production of beauty was not the aim of the artist. If a thing both deserves making
and is perfectly made, it fulfills all the requirements, and it is worthy of respect and admiration.

The essay just completed, although based on the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas, is my own explanation of two of the problems of the artist. I have attempted indirectly to demonstrate that an artist can in no way be a weakling. He must be in possession of an art strong enough and direct enough to be always master of its subject and at the same time to respect its purity in the act of working.

My own work for this degree has been done with the intent to obtain all the possible knowledge and skill during the short time allotted. The examples of my work show rather clearly what I have accomplished.
ILLUSTRATIONS
MOUNTAIN JEWEL, oil, 21" x 31"
RHYTHMS IN ROCK, oil, 21"x31½"
TIME TRACKS, oil, 20"x31\(\frac{1}{2}\)"
HAPPINESS HILLS, oil, 20½"x31"
PLOVERS X, oil, 27"x35"
COMPOSITION WITH PURPLE, oil, 20"x30½"
MARCHING MOUNTAINS, oil, 20"x30"