

Artists Almanac – August 2019

What did you see on the wall the last time you visited your doctor or lawyer's office? Depending on the decorator, it may have been a large unframed oil painting or print. What did it represent?



What did *you* want it to be; what did it mean to *you*?



Over the last century, art has slowly evolved from realism to abstraction. There are several reasons for this. Dealers in New York, London and Paris who make the art market, unless they specialize in old masters, impressionists or another recognized historical genre, have sought living artists whose works have become puzzling to most of us, and have run prices of such work to astronomical levels. Monet and Titian are not producing any new works for their auctions; modern artists are. This Rothko sold to an anonymous buyer in 2014 for \$60 million.



This trend towards abstraction is found today not just in painting, but in advertising, psychology, philosophy, music, and education. Art moves away from reality and natural law towards subjectivism and experiment.

Many of those style setters in the realm of modern art tell us that beauty is no longer a necessary ingredient of art, and that the '*b*' word is no longer to be used or sought in art. By this standard the maker of modern art is free to use whatever colors he will in describing the glow of human flesh or whatever distortions he wishes to in depicting a human in movement and life, even to putting heads backwards on shoulders. Any color or shape may be used to suggest a billowing summer forest of green trees, and shadows or clouds may be hard-edged or soft. Subtlety of color is no longer a necessity. Beauty once so vital to a painting is no longer regarded by them as necessary. Much modern art seems to lack any commitment or even a theme.

Greek and Roman art honored beauty and even valued it as divine, as in effigies of their gods or emperors. Perhaps even the word itself is an abstraction, for how indeed do we define it? Is it truly only *in the eye of the beholder*, as we say, and totally subjective, or are there some objective truths or natural laws that apply? If only a realistic image has beauty, why won't the camera alone do the job?

To say a painting 'looks like a photograph', is not a compliment, however intended, for only the most banal prefer a snapshot of trees to Van Gogh's writhing cypresses. The painter adds something, and that something is *beauty* – beauty found in the artist's mind, his spirit, imagination, or passion. Otherwise it is only design, or mere illustration.

I once had an art teacher – a Russian immigrant – who laughed aloud as we, his middle-aged art students, tried to draw people. "Too late," he laughed aloud "for there is no way a person may start this late and practice long enough to succeed at drawing people. You'd better stick to buildings, trees, and landscapes."

In his background, he told us, young people aspiring to art were trained under demanding teachers for years, sketching in pencil, pen, or charcoal, learning composition, perspective and values before they were allowed to even open a tube of color. He would not allow us to begin a painting until we submitted a small black and white sketch to him for approval. Today the rankest amateur can use a palette knife to slather a paints across a canvas, however he will, call it art, and he or she is celebrated and sells work.

That not withal, there are yet some generalizations that may be made about beauty, for if the judgement of the eye is intuitive, it also tends to follow certain natural laws, which experience will prove. Adherence to these principles will not of itself yield a good painting, but disregarding them will lead to a mediocre one. Here are but a few. There are many, many more - our eye already knows them:

- Warm colors advance; cool colors recede.
- Lights are opaque; shadows are transparent.
- Some foreground detail is necessary; detail in distances detracts.
- A painting that is too richly representative or detailed shuts the viewer out of the creative process, and asks no help of him in realizing the painting.

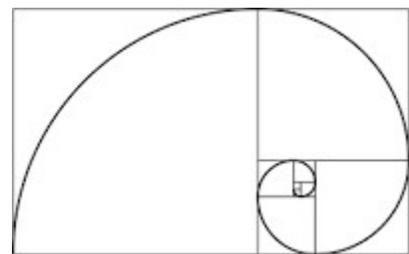
Rather, the viewer should be invited in and his imagination should be allowed to participate in its realization. He must pay some dues.

- Music has intensity; art has duration.
- An honest painter is the best critic of his own work; he should back away to survey it from time to time, and better, come back to it the next day.

Composition, though intuitive, is also subject to certain principles as well.

- A diagonal line is more dynamic than a horizontal line.
- Equals are to be avoided; one twin must dominate; avoid equal numbers, three flowers are better than two.
- A curving line is better than a straight one.
- The golden section is a mathematical relationship of segments pleasing to the eye. Simply stated it is that ratio that exists when a line is divided into two parts and the longer part (a) divided by the smaller part (b) is equal to the sum of (a) + (b) divided by (a), which equals

1.618. Just why it is so, we cannot explain, any more than we can any proven geometric theorem, except that it is a law of nature, found in the interval of branches on trees, leaf patterns or countless other instances. Perhaps



that is why it is also called *the divine proportion*. In practical terms this means the horizon in a landscape does not neatly divide a painting in half – either earth or sky should dominate.

There are many, many such natural laws of painting. These are but the smallest fraction. The rest will be learned by study, and by experience – paint- paint -paint.

One final one: use of symbols in a painting is permissible, even desirable, so long as the viewer is able to see and interpret them. In fact, he will think both he and the artist are brilliant if he is able to find and interpret such clues, whether you put them there or not. When the Bible or classical literature were read commonly by all, certain symbols were universal, as in the paintings below. See if you can detect them yourself.

The first one is filled with movement and action – the most important action in the world, in fact, from which all time is dated - B.C. or A.D. While we no longer feature wings on angels, we have yet to come up with a better symbol for a sudden brilliant idea from heaven than the wings Gabriel wears as he descends to announce to Mary that she is to bear the child of God. A modern light bulb somehow lacks the import of an angel.



Movement is inherent in the strong diagonal lines, from the angel's hand pointing skyward, down through his head to hers, through her left arm pulling her royal blue cloak around herself, continuing through the draperies circling around behind and below her, circling the picture and leading us to her foot, back up to his foot, then up his body to his hand

pointing to the heavens. Even the heavy drapery, blown back by the wind that brought the angel, contributes to the diagonal emphasis that reflects the activity.

An opposing diagonal is created by Mary's right arm, gown, and cape. Perhaps her outstretched hesitant right hand represents her momentary question: what's the meaning of this? But after some questioning of the angel, her answer makes the most important commitment in the world – a commitment that leads her to say yes to the salvation of the world - *"Be it done to me according to thy will"*.



In this painting we once more sense the diagonal - and the action of angels. Whatever your belief about angels, you may enjoy these for their beauty and gesture, with or without their wings, and appreciate them as symbols of the beauty and harmony of all the music written during three millennia in honor of this very child. The wood bow crossing the wood of the violin's wooden neck and body and the crossed legs of the Christ child's body may even forecast his passion and death on the cross for our salvation.



Finally, in another strongly diagonal painting, the older Christ child looks with adoration upon his mother Mary, even as she redirects his attention towards someone outside the picture frame, represented only by the praying hands – our hands, if you will.

When next then you are waiting in your doctor's office, looking at worn old out-of-date magazines or a television quiz show, look instead at the painting on the wall, participate in its creation, and see what beauty you find in it.