

Ernst Redl – What moves me

Thoughts of art



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As in the performing arts, the Impressionists initiated the release of form, which painters such as Braque, Picasso or Feiniger took to a higher level, culminating in pure abstraction with Kandinski and Melewitsch. A perpetual renunciation of the rules of art which had previously been deemed important had begun. Aesthetics, harmony and beauty, the criteria by which the maturity of an artist or his works had been measured previously, gradually became seemingly obsolete and were perceived as a remnant of romantically kitschy painting. Art had to stand out, it had to ruffle feathers and shock as a counterpart to the seemingly tranquil world of the German economic miracle after the Second World War.

Natural beauty hidden in its detail, peace, calm and tranquillity became lost in the Zeitgeist of unstoppable progress. Year after year, the din became increasingly louder, faster and evermore glaring. After virtually a half-century of relentless bustle, some of us gradually began our longing for more peace and harmony. Out of a growing need for more radical environmental protections, more and more people became romanticists. Nature for them was a much more important value than technological advancements and economic growth. The Zeitgeist changed quickly.

I believe I can say that I forged my path, for the most part, unflinchingly. Beauty, harmony and aesthetics were the most nourishing things for my soul, even as a young boy. Tranquillity has always been important to me. The first time I visited museums, I was fascinated by the paintings of the Old Masters and by their effect on me. As a teenager, I was often alone on hikes and on bicycle tours, slept in meadows

or forests in a sleeping bag and was receptive to the lure of unspoiled landscapes. Without me having to even make a conscious decision, I strove to combine the impressive paintings of the Old Masters with the beauty found in nature. This drive developed quickly and became a matter of course for me.

It was not all that long ago that nature was regarded merely as a basic commodity, barely a backdrop for ambitious plans. But even before then, there were many who thought differently and were receptive to the beauty of unspoiled nature. For them the restlessness of our time, the chase for the novel idea and progress did not appear desirable.

Modern art may not have much to offer such people, as a peaceful landscape, a quiet lake or a flowery meadow are not motifs generally found in modern art. Those who are so inclined search less for conformity to the events of the day, insomuch as a balance, an opposite pole far removed from our technologically rationalised world mapped out to its smallest detail.

The great polarization of art, the gap between the supporters of modern art and those who prefer traditional painting has little to do with the art itself. This polarization is more attributable to individual outlooks on life, to a mindset that decides what one regards as art and what one does not. By all appearances there are only a few who are free of such personal predisposition who can objectively regard modern as well as traditional art forms as expressions of human achievement without bias.

For me there is essentially no choice in the matter. I can paint only naturalistically, everything else would be counter to my nature and to my disposition. Only in this form of painting am I able to express what moves me. Indeed this form may be my measuring stick when confronted with hardships which require a lifetime to overcome.

Naturalistic-representational painting, without a doubt, requires the ability of a master to not succumb to kitsch, and for good reason: naturalistic painting is by far the most difficult form of painting. The question is though, what is so difficult when one simply copies something that one sees? What should art accomplish if its goal is only to copy? Why paint something that one today – in contrast to previous centuries – can just as well photograph? Though it is not as it appears.

Contrary to popular belief, a seemingly naturalistic-looking painting is not produced through copying. The more closely one adheres to nature, the more unnatural effect the painting has. This is a misnomer to which many “naturalists” fall prey. The photo realism of the 1970’s is a good example of this. Images created with minutiae appeared largely artificial. Even nudes by which a photo was projected onto a canvas so that it could be precisely traced, a technique some painters used at the time, appeared incorrect even though they were one hundred percent “correct”. It would be too easy and rather boring if one had simply “copied” suitable objects for the purpose of creating impressive works.

This phenomenon may be attributable to our collective notion of a kind of “overreaching ideal”. A figment of our imagination that exag-

gerates and elevates reality. A dark forest is darker and more mysterious in our consciousness than it actually is; a beautiful body is more perfect than it is in nature. The blue sky is even bluer, impending storms more ominous, mountains more jagged, valleys deeper, rivers wider and seas more turbulent. Our figment of imagination of reality differs often profoundly from what actually is (a phenomenon long known in the field of psychology and one that is not limited to visual impressions). In such a way a painted picture, and we know that we are looking at a painting that illustrates nature accurately, is deemed “wrong” and therefore does not correspond to our mental image.

Numerous “errors” are found in the paintings of the Old Masters; disproportions on bodies are the most obvious, though they are correct and appear true to nature. As strange as this is, for a painting that is to appear “true” and “correct” is abstracted both in its shape and colour. And it must be artificial. If this is not the case and there is evidence of insufficient ability in addition to this, kitsch will almost certainly be the final result.

The common opinion espoused by those opposed to naturalistic painting, who purport that this work requires no sort of innovation that it is merely an illustration of a model, is utterly wrong. None of the great painters of the past, with perhaps a few exceptions, painted what they saw. The paintings of the Old Masters, as far as I know, are compositions. Even Canaletto, famous for his extremely accurate depictions of city scapes, did not illustrate. This is not even possible. In keeping with the Canaletto example, escape and perspective are extremely meticulously in line with the display detail and are fanciful to the highest degree.

With regard to successful naturalistic work, the composition of the painting, the way it is divided into shapes and surfaces, colours and light/dark contrasts are miles apart from any form of copying. The same applies to portraits, since compartmentalisations and possible decorative formations have to be devised. Only the face is portrayed. Such “distribution” elements essential to the picture correspond to an abstract composition, though it is a composition nonetheless. It must adhere to the most highly indefinable rules of suspense and harmony, which require an incomparable higher amount of creativity than is the case with an abstract painting that has not adhered to similar conventions, for example.

It is therefore undoubtedly more contrary than previously thought. Non-representational painting generally requires far less artistic creativity than representational-naturalistic painting. This however assumes that one is referring to the great works of art by the masters and not to the weak creations of amateurs. It is not the dizzying array of picture elements of a Hieronymous Bosch that require great creativity, but rather the seemingly simple appearing compartmentalisation of shapes and colour we find in Rembrandt’s “Night Watch” or in Reubens’ “The Damned Descent into Hell” which distinguish themselves by their true creative genius. Paradoxically, it is these seemingly effortlessly produced works that contain the highest degree of imaginativeness.

In addition to the absolute imperative to not “copy”, there is a second equally essential criteria crucial for the perfect rendering of a true masterpiece: colour. Without colour, as I mentioned earlier, no attractive naturalistic image can come to fruition. A series of great mi-

sunderstandings surrounding colour quality persist through which many of the great (old) Masters distinguish themselves. In terms of colour quality, some of these are attributable to ignorance and others to a general disregard of widely accepted painting principles in the twentieth century.

In the interest of painting appreciation, I would like to briefly comment on this important complex of problems, if for no other reason that colour beauty is extremely important to me. Chromacity is, to a large extent, what makes people find my paintings attractive, successful or perhaps even extraordinary.

The colour or chromaticity of a painting is of course one of the most essential characteristics of a masterpiece. An amateur or one who never formally learned how to paint is easily recognizable by ill-conceived or dirty colour. Such a “dead” colour is dull and blunt, one that has lost its luminance and beauty. The very first thing a painter should learn is how to work with paint.

Colour is not just a colour. Red is not automatically just red. There are exceptionally attractive shades of red such as one found in some roses and a relatively “plain” ugly red as in the red of a rose hip. The dazzling blue of a butterfly is incomparably more beautiful than a polluted summer sky, and the camouflage green of a tank is much different than that of an emerald. A flesh-coloured stocking is a colour disaster when compared to an array of colour nuances that show our skin. Even black is not merely black. A plain dead black, unknowingly and unnecessarily painted from the tube onto the canvas has an extremely

miserable effect when compared to the velvet depth of a Rembrandt black.

Even though we might not be conscious of this, the beauty of and our attraction to a work of art is to a large extent attributable to the quality of its chromaticity. This is of course of utmost importance for paintings, and is not without its problems. It is extremely difficult to paint “good” colour with oil paints, a fact to which someone without extensive experience in painting cannot relate. A layperson, an art expert or a painter, whoever has attempted to copy the colour (not the image!) of a Vermeer, Rembrandt or Ingres can attest to the enormous painting skill needed to achieve such colour quality. (“High-quality” paint has pictorially little to do with the quality of the individual pigments or the hues used for each. It is achieved mainly via painting technique and is described more in detail in the section on “multi-layered painting technique”.)

Painting attractive “beautiful” colour is not a matter of talent. The skill needed for this has to be acquired. A novice painter will paint mostly ugly colours as talented as he may be. It takes a high degree of practice and experience to master a colour. Even the great Masters had difficulty with colour and did not achieve a high quality of colour until later in their careers. Besides, each colour, such as blue, yellow, red, green, orange etc. colour has to be learned individually because basic painting principles which dictate which colour is the easiest to represent vary from colour to colour.

Since the challenges of painting present varying degrees of difficulty

from colour to colour, colours that are too difficult to paint are often avoided. Brilliant orange hues and a clear, cold green, which are the most difficult colours to paint are seldom used and are hardly seen on large surfaces in the works of the great Old Masters. Even red can be extremely problematic since it becomes (much too easily) dead and blunt. This is why there are not too many (old) paintings whose dominant colour is red. Hard to paint colours such as these did not appear on large surfaces until the Impressionists, when the quality of colour appeared in the background in favour of the pictorial expression.

One needs a high degree of skill and years of practice to represent the naturally correct shape of an object without overcompensating its colour to the point of “killing” it. This is extremely difficult, and only a few of the Old Masters were able to accomplish this, Rembrandt being the most notable of these. The most striking characteristic of an artist’s competence beyond light, depth and shape are most easily recognizable in naturalistic painting and are in most other types of painting only incidental. The knowledge of painting “good” colour, of painting light and depth has, to a great extent, become lost today, so much so that even experts have a wrong impression of the problems painters must or should encounter.

There is still much to be said about painting, art and other matters, which, from the painter’s perspective seem completely different to the expert. A painter who, like me, learned how to paint has enforcedly a completely different perspective than an art expert who does not paint and knows a painting only from an observer’s perspective. I know very well how the great works of the Old Masters came into being.

I can relate well to the constraints painters had to endure, especially to those of the Old Masters. Even though they lived in a completely different time, they had to overcome technical problems, indeed the same ones I had to (such as the difficulties of painting “good” colour, as I have previously described).

In closing, I would like to address what is certainly the most basic question in the world of art: Is art the product of ability or not? This question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. It depends too much on what we regard as art. It would therefore be absolutely wrong to regard art only as something that sets itself apart through its artistic merit.

Previously defined and distinguishable by convention, “art” has today become very much a “catch all” term. What is presently marketed under this term no longer has anything to do with the concept of art from centuries past. In terms of painting, art has evolved from a strong technically driven tradition of the twentieth century to a nontechnical form of expression in which creativity and imagination are at its forefront. The term “art” can be defined today mostly by its uniqueness and novelty. Originality and innovation, as with technical products, are the maxims of contemporary art. It has therefore become irrelevant whether one is able to paint in any “technical” sense.

Whether ability is necessary to create works of art depends therefore, as I have alluded here earlier, on the particular artistic style to which we are referring. Different forms of art require varying degrees

of mastery. Ability is indispensable to paint in the style of the great Masters. Today, the high degree of ability these Masters possessed is unfathomable, particularly in terms of their extremely lofty place in society. This fueled their recognition all the more.

Naturalistic representational painting requires, as I mentioned earlier, the greatest degree of ability and the greatest experience in painting. Impressionistic painting is less complicated and therefore requires somewhat less expertise, but still a high degree of practice and ability. As alienation increases, abstraction lessens the ability needed for it, to the extent that only a bare minimum of painting ability is needed for abstract painting in its purest sense.

Contemporary art therefore has little to do with manual-technical ability. It allows the artist to create freely and to unselfconsciously forge new paths. A lot of kitsch comes out of this on the one hand, though on the other, a lot of great works of modern art would not have been otherwise possible without the liberation from technical constraints. To qualify as art, all forms of painting require a great degree of creativity and imagination. Art therefore cannot be merely a technical ability without creativity, though only creativity without any kind of technique is equally one-sided and empty. The painter is therefore the composer, the conductor and the musician all at once. In the same way, the mastery of a musical instrument means nothing if the melody or composition is not well conceived, or if the musicians do not master their instruments.

As with music, painting requires a well formed triad of expression:

the notion that arrangement, composition and learned painting ability, enable the "musician" and a controlling spirit, the "conductor" or the "arranger" to fuse these aspects together to a cohesive whole. If one of these components is missing, or if it is substandard, the end result is not worthy of the designation "art". One could also purport that art does not ensue from mere ability alone, even though a certain degree of ability is necessary to create a true work of art.

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