

The Three Eyes and Modern Art

The perplexed prospective art student looks at a Picasso painting in which a woman has three eyes. Two questions spring to the student's lips: Why did he do that? Why does that enhance the painting? The problem with trying to answer those two apparently innocent questions is that in order to do so, one must first create a framework for understanding art and creativity. Only by putting the issue in a much wider context does one have a real chance to communicate meaningfully about it.

I can remember back to when I would have wondered about such questions. Actually, I would simply have dismissed the three eyes as pointless, walking away from the painting with the brash innocence of a historic youth. Were I to explain to that person of years ago how to deal with the three eyes, I would begin by discussing a basic concept of perception: the tension between seeing to master and seeing to experience.

What does this mean? When we encounter an object, we have a need to categorize it: we want a name for it so we can refer back to it and thus, in effect, control our world. We want to be able to answer "what is that?" in a definite and well-defined manner. The basic need behind such categorization is survival: it requires discipline and practice.

On the other hand, we also need to derive pleasure from our visual encounters. We need to be able to see beauty in the objects we categorize. In order to do so, we have to experience what we see without worrying about what the objects "are": we have to let them transform us, so that we feel enriched from having interacted with them. This requires openness and opportunity. When this happens, we often find connections between various objects across structural dimensions.

Managing this basic tension is something no person can avoid. Some choose to become strongly rooted in one camp rather than in the other. There are those who scorn the experiential side of life, deriving a certain satisfaction from their mastery of the world. Other individuals go the other route, possibly choosing to dismiss the need for precise speech and clear analysis, focusing instead on sensation and experience. In general, as a society, we tend to undervalue experience in favor of mastery. Our earliest training is geared toward categorization; we tend to leave experiential training to change, as survival needs dominate. When we encounter an object, we try to "understand" it (what is that, i.e., in which category does it fit?); once having done so, we often turn away from it, paying it no more heed. We effectively dismiss it once we've grasped it.

The artist is a person with a natural bent toward seeing as experience, resisting, in effect, the values of the society that overemphasizes survival needs and categorization. The artist is driven to express a vision of the world in which the

objects portrayed communicate more than the standard categories used to describe them. This constitutes his or her basic dilemma: how to use the media available to communicate in this manner and how to transform the viewer's experience. This definition does not focus on talent as setting artists apart; rather, it focuses on openness to seeing as experience and to internalization of life experiences, coupled with a need to share that with others.

The artist will engage the viewer in a battle. The fight is about how to look at the world. Many viewers rooted in the survival world of seeing as categorization will resist and try to grasp the painting as simply expressing a relationship between known objects in a visually pleasing manner. The artist wants more than that: he or she wants the viewer to let go of the categorization orientation and become more open to experiencing reality rather than simply mastering it. That is, the artist tries to be a transformational agent -- to help the viewer raise his or her consciousness.

How can the artist win the battle? What are the weapons that enable him or her to shift the viewer's goals away from mere survival? Within the confines of the canvas, there exists another basic tension, through which the artist can express the experiential orientation: between composition and subject. What do we mean here? The subject refers to the objects and the "idea" of the work (what are those people feeling or doing? what is the theme of the painting, what is it trying to express?). The composition refers to the shapes used to express the objects, and to the general sense of movement and balance between them. The artist's puzzle is to discover a relationship between the substantive and compositional levels that makes the subject come alive for the viewer, that helps the viewer see it fresh, and consequently shift gears from mastery to experience.

The "how" has occupied generations of painters. In pre-modern days, certain rules informed this tension: in particular, that the subject level have a dominant role, in that paintings were intended to depict, or copy, reality. So in a Rembrandt portrait, the face looks like a face, remaining faithful to the usual categorical imperative the viewer brings to the visual encounter. The composition becomes part of the background, in terms of the viewer's consciousness, although Rembrandt may, in fact, have been very focused on it. And that composition may indeed shape the viewer's experience, however tacitly. It is a large part of what makes the work so well received over so long a time.

The purpose of art in those days was survival as well as experience. The art was geared to capture an object, to master it in that sense. Art was preservative, as photography is today (or as that aspect of photography is). Before the camera, artistic renderings were the only way people could hold onto their visual memories. So, in that sense, survival became as important an artistic value as raising visual consciousness. Thus, art as preservation was inextricably linked with art as experience enhancement. The subject level dominated the

compositional level, or we might say, there was a fixed relationship between them, based on the need to preserve "reality."

With the birth of the camera, though, this survival motivation became less important. The link between art as preservation and art as experience enhancement was effectively broken. But like prisoners who had been liberated after years of captivity, artists and viewers moved cautiously into the light of a new day. Some clung to the old values, perhaps out of fear (where do we go from here, if we are not confined by the need to capture reality?). Just as individuals persist in focusing on survival when they are free to experience, categorizing when they are in a position to simply enjoy, so many artists persisted in working within the constraint with which they had been trained. In fact, the artistic community itself became a battleground, as the new freedom brought out old fears and defensive entrenchments on the one hand and bursts of ground-breaking experiments on the other. In time, some artists became abstract expressionists, leaving out the subject altogether, as they experimented with the no-longer fixed relationship between subject level and compositional level.

Taking this to its logical extreme, one might wonder why such painters as Jackson Pollack, one of the original abstract expressionists, wouldn't be the most powerful in influencing viewer's perceptions. After all, they used the ultimate weapon against categorization, nuking the subject totally out of existence. Or have they? The problem is that just as with any other psychological mechanism, we viewers can adjust quickly and regroup our defenses. We can simply dismiss these paintings. But even if we stay in the field and engage them, we can categorize the shapes -- we become geometers, noting circles and lines, reveling in the world of form. Pretty soon, we turn off our perceptions just as quickly as we did in viewing George Washington crossing the Delaware.

So what's the answer to this puzzle? That's where Picasso comes in with a different strategy for dealing with the viewer's natural resistance to seeing as experience. Understanding that people cling to their categories, even unnecessarily and often rigidly -- and often in spite of their intentions to do otherwise -- we can appreciate that a frontal assault like the abstract expressionists' may drive these walls up even higher. Most successful change efforts involve incremental shifts, which retain connection to the old way of doing things and somehow communicate within themselves the reason for the shift. With this focus, we would expect a successful artistic experiment in consciousness raising to keep some semblance of a subject matter, and work on changing its relationship to the composition, so that ultimately the viewer sees what has happened, in addition to having a more powerful experience. That shift in the relationship, possible now that art does not have to preserve reality, needs to be expressed; viewers need to sense that reality as well as to experience the visual encounter.

This in effect is what Picasso did so well. He still has subjects, of course, but he communicates through a renewed emphasis on composition, a different way of looking at those subjects. He also challenges the viewer and does so openly, making a statement about the purpose of painting as well as trying to strike the experiential chord in the viewer. This takes him beyond the English painter Turner, whose compositional values definitely help viewers come out of their categorization mode (he finds the "edge of ambiguity" as boats and other objects become shapes through various devices, such as soft mists). It is important to note that Picasso does not simply change the relationship between subject and composition. He effectively makes a statement about that relationship within each painting! He metacommunicates, that is, he makes a statement about the way in which he is communicating. This is part of what separates him from the rest. The metacommunication raises the viewer's consciousness on a cognitive as well as on a perceptual level.

But what specifically does Picasso do to make that statement, to change that relationship? And what does all of this have to do with the three eyes? Picasso is a master at transitions within the painting itself. He expresses the relationship between subject and composition through fluid shifts in focus: it's a face, now it's a set of shapes. He works on a micro rather than on a macro level, shifting gears within the object, so that one sees it dually as subject and also as shape -- that is, one moves from a substantive focus to a compositional one so fluidly that the two merge. The third eye fits because it enhances the composition; there is still a connection with the subject (the woman is still recognizable as such, even if "distorted.")

This is also why Picasso's later paintings are even more effective than his earlier ones, in which he worked on a more macro plane. For example, in his cubist works, he also makes strong statements about the changing relationship between subject and composition, shifting the compositional level into the foreground. These paintings communicate how subjects flow from shapes (rather than have us note the shapes of subjects): the shapes come first in that sense, and in that sense, the relationship between the two levels shift. Also, the subjects are more impressionistically realized, as part of the expression of that relationship of shapes becoming objects. In the cubist paintings, there is effectively one macro transition -- the shift of composition from background to foreground; but in the later Picassos, multiple micro transitions take place. Many twists and turns abound in a single painting, underscoring the overall issue of balance between them. Having the third eye makes the statement, does so incrementally, and also helps the viewer become more visually experiential. The viewer not only sees the subjects in a fresh way, but gains a new way of viewing. He or she begins to feel that there is an ongoing relationship between subject and compositional levels, however tacitly. That makes it more likely that he or she will see to experience rather than to categorize.

So, there it is. The student with this framework can begin to grapple with that persistent issue of distortion in general and three eyes in particular. It may not be the kind of answer I would have expected when I asked that question a few years back, but hopefully it helps.