

## WHAT IS A PAINTING?

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The title of my talk is 'What is a Painting?' Let me begin by saying what psychoanalysis has to offer the artist. I am not an expert on the subject of art, but only an interested layman who would like to bring you the views of my much more informed colleagues on this subject. These views, I hope, will provoke further reflection. They may also be provocative, which I hope they are.

So what I want to do is to answer the question by the surrealist André Breton. Breton once said, 'to me, a picture is a window that looks out on something'. The question is, on what? Early psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud himself, were convinced that the window looks out on the painter's subconscious inner life. More concretely, the artist seeks to resolve important unconscious mental conflicts through his work. In other words, the core themes of the artist's inner theatre, his conflicts going back to his early childhood, appear and reappear in his work as the artist subconsciously tries to heal himself through his art. In this view, a work of art is the place where the artist has been successful in tapping and harnessing the full array of vital feelings having their source in his or her child. Art restores, however temporarily, his mental equilibrium and even helps him grow further.

Some of you may have been present long ago in Goa itself when I tried to demonstrate this in the case of Leonardo da Vinci. But there are other examples. The art of Matisse, for example, though generally not thought of primarily as erotic, seems to derive to some extent from his highly eroticized relationship to his mother. A persuasive argument has been made that he used idealization and abstraction to regulate his sense of being over-stimulated by a woman's flesh. Having discovered Oriental and Islamic art, he rediscovered for himself the shape of the arabesque. An arabesque, as you all know, is an ornament composed essentially of abstract elements. The field is geometrically parcelled out in circles or ovals, but pulled together for the eye by the interwoven linear tracings, bands, tendrils, ribbons, and repeated, they build up selective patterns and trace meaning to the eye. The pleasure is sensuous, the values melodious and harmonic. There is a subtle balance of mathematical and free elements. The geometric, repetitive plan controls, yet the free controls are virile and the rhythm marked. In its ultimate form, there is no beginning or end. There is no point at which the I comes first.

In the hands of Matisse, this abstract form became more openly sexualized, hence more energized. While he related it directly to the form of a woman's body, at the same time, he minimized and thus abstracted the representation of a woman. I'm thinking, of course, of those cutouts, the paper cutouts of the blue women, which are in her form. Through these various checks and balances, intensifying here and reducing tension there, the contradictory sensations he experienced as emanating from a woman's body became unified in a new equilibrium of fear. In effect, he first de-sexualized and idealized his mother into pure form and was then led to re-sexualize her in the form of the Arabesque.

Before over-subscribing to the view that a work of art is a restorer of psychological balance and helper in the personal growth of the artist, a cautionary note is indicated. Art, even in the presence of considerable talent, cannot always stabilize a disintegrating personality. Witness the tragic fate of Jackson Pollock. As you know, Pollock used arm motions to splatter, fling, and drip paint onto the canvas. He drew his inspiration from his feelings and emotions rather than from some tangible visual source, and in the process created abstract expressionist art. His gestural works may well reflect psychological attempts to take his insanity literally in his hand before it took *him* entirely in its hands. But his rapid gesturalism or action painting, stylistic advance though it may have been, only bespoke

his inability to regulate his over-stimulation as he strove to lyricize his uncontainable aggression. Rhythm stands out in most of his works, but the composite of rhythms are interrupted and broken fragments that trail off into inconsequence like shooting stars. His art thus appears to have mirrored his life and predicted its end by suicide.

In other cases, art may serve as substitute for somebody who cannot relate emotionally in general, whether heterosexual or homosexual, as in the case of Munch. Or it may serve to compensate for personal failures. For example, in order to compensate for his known tendency to lie, exploit, and deceive, Gauguin could point to his art technique that emphasized flat paints. He said he avoided staying out nights because they permitted, again, 'subterfuge and deceit'. Or Picasso, who treated living beings, especially women, as junk, but in his art gave junk life, made it into living beings.

So how would a modern psychoanalyst answer the question? The question being, is it fair to expect that a creative person's work might tell us something about the person? The answer would be yes and no. It would depend on the artist's intention, the tradition in which he or she works, and the individual's style. Expressionists emphasize emotional force, whether personal as in the case of Van Gogh, abstract rhythms as in Cezanne, or rich colour effects as in Gauguin. We have seen that many artists pour their personal lives into their work. Munch, Picasso, and others offer abundant material for responsible psychoanalytic exploration, when they're supported by supplementary documentation. In our country, of course, you can take examples, one who comes immediately to mind is Hussain in the mother theme – the dead mother and the living mother.

On the other hand, many artists work in a tradition that emphasizes faithfulness to a well-defined iconography in technique. They have chosen to subordinate the personal as far as possible in the service of an aesthetic or a religious idea. And for artists of whatever stripe, a point that has been too often neglected in the past by psychoanalysts is the importance of the conversation through their work, whether through overt reference, repartee, or other means, with their art historical background, as it interacts in the development of their own style. The emphasis on realism and tradition will work against the artwork being a reflection or witness to the artist's experience.

Today, I would not only take up the traditional themes of the nature of the impersonal in art, but also its psychoanalytic take on why this resonates with the viewer who may not share the same personal conflicts and imaginings with the artist. I'm going to give you the views of two or three psychoanalysts, like Gilbert Rose, who have worked on these much more than I have.

Since case histories are the preferred way analysts like to talk about abstract matters, let us look at the case of Paul Gauguin. The themes of death and rebirth and of androgyny are characteristic both of Gauguin's life and of his work. Gauguin's work is so well known that I hope you will remember the paintings which I am going to be referring to. First, some biographical data. Paul Gauguin's grandmother was a fiery socialist who strove for the cause of the working people. The illegitimate daughter of a poor French woman and an aristocratic Spanish colonialist from Peru, she left her husband while pregnant with her second child and went to Peru seeking a share of her paternal inheritance. Her husband tried to kill her, and kidnapped their daughter Aline, the future mother of Paul Gauguin, and was imprisoned for 17 years. Aline, as gentle, sad and grieving at 19, as her mother was violent, married a newspaper man, Clovis Gauguin. The couple had a daughter and then a son, Paul. Unemployed at the time of Paul's birth, the father was absent from baptism. He died at sea in somewhat mysterious circumstances while en route with the family to Peru. Paul was just under 17 months of age.

We'll talk about the early loss of parents, which seems to be a very important theme in the lives of many artists, including Leonardo da Vinci. Sensitivity to the loss may not be actual loss. Gauguin's mother and the two children lived with a great uncle in Lima until Paul was six and then returned to France. When Paul was 17, his mother drew up a will in which he suggested to her son that he, 'get on with his career since he has made himself so distraught by all my friends that he will one day find himself alone'. For the next five years, Gauguin was in the merchant marine and in the military service. He then went to work as a stockbroker, married a Danish bourgeois and had four children. After the stock market crash of 1882, he hesitated between art and finance for two years. Finally, when his fifth child was born, he gave him his own name, Paul, and listed himself on his son's birth certificate. When his youngest child was one and a half years old, almost exactly his own age when his father died at sea, Paul suddenly took son Clovis and left his wife to support herself as best as she could by giving French lessons and doing translations. Not long afterwards, he left his son Clovis stranded in a boarding school in Paris and went to Brittany. This pattern suggests that the drama of his father's death was re-enacted and corrected in the form of successive departures. Re-enacted that baby Paul is left by father, painter Paul, at the same age that he had been left by his own father's death, corrected that at this time the father does not die but they pass together.

During the course of his life, the pattern was to be repeated. He had five more children, only to abandon these young mothers either when they were well along in pregnancy or had recently given birth. Gauguin was already in Tahiti around the 30th anniversary of his mother Aline's death when he was informed that his 20-year-old daughter, also Aline, had died on January 19, 1897. He suffered a major depression and that provoked the final end of correspondence with his wife and their children. Between October 10 and 12 of that year, he suffered a series of heart attacks. He decided to commit suicide, then opting for life, changed his mind on October 15, 1897. About six weeks later, Gauguin had another heart attack, but instead of entering the hospital, he began his large testament painting, 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' Apparently, either his work did not succeed or else it recurred because by the end of the month he was suicidal again. He went into the mountains and tried to kill himself with arsenic but only made himself ill.

Turning now to some of the death and rebirth symbolism in Gauguin's art, an 1889 painting entitled 'Life and Death' depicts forces of life and death in the form of two female groups. One derives from a Peruvian mummy that Gauguin had seen in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, in foetal position, feet crossed, legs and arms drawn inward. In the painting, the skeleton is replaced with a new image of the female nude, crouched in the mummy's position. She also appears in other paintings of the period, notably the 'Breton Eve'. The following year, the Eve theme is rearranged in 'Eve Exotique', the forerunner of many Tahitian themes to follow. The body of the female nude now comes from the temple reliefs of Borobudur in Java. Most importantly, her face comes from a photograph of the artist's mother. What began as death, the mummy, has been reversed, reborn in Polynesia as his own mother. That it had a special meaning for Gauguin is suggested by the fact that he did not sign or date this painting or even put it up for sale.

Coming to androgyny, a state of ambiguous gender, neither man nor woman, yet both. Between 1888 and 1889 in Brittany, he did four male nudes. 'Young Breton' is a side nude drawing of a young male his genitals clearly depicted in profile. The painting 'Breton Boys Bathing' depicts a pair of male nudes with their backs to each other, one standing and the other seated, his genitals concealed. In 'Children Wrestling', the boys are now in intimate contact but wearing shorts. The last one, 'Naked Breton Boy', shows a boy lying on his back in a position described as looking, I quote from him, 'both unwilling and uncomfortable'. Oddly, Gauguin has refused to paint the boy's genitals. Later that same year, Gauguin painted 'Yellow Christ', showing Christ as weak and unmasculine.

In Brittany, he had admired the women who were as robust and husky as men, carried heavy loads, and ran the farms. Arriving in Tahiti in 1891, he marvelled at, and I quote him, 'the difference between the sexes is less accentuated and there is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men'. He painted a man with an axe portraying a somewhat androgynous Tahitian and for a decade thereafter rarely depicted another Tahitian man. His artistic output in Tahiti concentrated on children, animals, and mythic women, sometimes monumental and threatening. Potiphar's wife, for example, done at the end of his career, portrays her grabbing a recoiling Joseph. Several female nudes have an ambiguous, almost androgynous quality. This is especially true for 'Pape Moe'. It is based on a photograph of a Tahitian woman drinking water from a waterfall in a grotto. The woman in the painting clearly retains the man's muscularity.

How would traditional psychoanalysis approach Gauguin's art? It would say that whatever conscious notions he may have about what he wishes would happen on the canvas, less conscious currents of feeling thought also influence what takes shape on the canvas. For Gauguin believed in what he called dreaming while fully awake before nature and now before the canvas, letting the dream suggest the feeling and translation of the feeling into visual terms. I quote him, 'art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it.' And these less conscious currents of feeling, the analyst would say, have their source in his life history. Forced to grow up without a father, Gauguin identified with his mother as well as with his dead father and connected both identifications in the form of repeated separation and reunions, symbolized as deaths and rebirths. As a result of the double identification, however, he had a weakly defined gender identity. His art was a creative outlet for the feminine aspect of his identification, a sublimation of the female reproductive capacity. However, he had to compensate for this repressed feminine aspect by setting himself many macho tasks, including the compulsion to consume young girls. Finally, weakened by disease, the homoerotic component emerged in the form of a pronounced androgynous theme in his late work and, by his own account, in a single outburst of homosexual infatuation which he succeeded in controlling.

Another formulation would base itself on the importance of the experience of parental deadness, either through actual death or the emotional deadness of depression. Gauguin's father died when Paul was an infant of 17 months. His mother was described at 19 as sad and grieving even before she was widowed at 22. The experience of such actual or emotional parental deadness can have a number of significant consequences. It can lead to premature disillusionment, unconscious identification with a dead or emotionally dead parent, and inner states of emptiness and loss. The sense of inner deadness may also lead to feeling full of hatred or needing to be compensated by so-called lust for life and search for excitement. One fills up the inner emptiness with drink, drugs, or sex. In terms of homosexual dynamics, it can lead to the wish to merge with a partner of the same sex, to refuse one's own gender identity with a sense of aliveness, or defend against such a homoerotic choice through compulsive heterosexuality.

This brings us to an alternative to the one-sided view that psychologically art is to be understood as a creative outlet for identification with female productivity. Creativity draws on the fullest possible sense of wholeness of the individual, including his or her maleness and humanness. Coleridge remarked that a great mind must be androgynous, something which apparently has been concluded since ancient times. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tse, for example, speaks of the importance of knowing the masculine yet keeping to the feminine in order to draw all the world towards you. We cannot know whether Gauguin's creative gift – dual identification with his depressed mother and the idea of his dead father – constituted a threat of inner deadness that forced him to fall back on these early resources within himself. Losing a parent early in life keeps the child's idealization of the parent intact. Normally, as we grow up, we lose this idealization as we gradually discover the

parent's imperfections and shortcomings. Identification with the early image of the parent who has and can do everything – you are great, but I am a part of you – in addition to being a source of activity and creativity for both sexes, may also be a source of very narcissistic feelings of omnipotence that carry its own neurotic potential. Gauguin could be his own father and mother, self-sufficient and invulnerable, needing no one and being able to do everything himself. He could boast of having run away as a child and having raped a little girl. He could be a noble savage without any need for a fatherland. He could claim credit for the ideas of others and for having been a teacher to Van Gogh. He could also flail against the current conventions, flaunt his appetite for young girls, exploit and fall out with male colleagues, and engage in polemics against the establishment. The anxious core of his sexual exhibitionism and pernicious autonomy could well elude conscious awareness. For example, it was only after he reached his mother's age at death, 46 years, that he turned from adult women to paedophilia, that is, having sex with very young girls.

To answer André Breton's question, which is also the title of my talk, paintings are shapes of early feelings sought in the outside world, recaptured in the present through art.

But is that all there is to art? Is that what we should be looking for? And here we need a quote from another artist, René Magritte – 'If one looks at a thing, trying to discover what it means, one ends up no longer seeing the thing itself.' Turning from the commonality shared by Gauguin's mind with that of many others and turning to his special genius, what might be said of his art as art? In a notebook written for his daughter, Gauguin offered two levels of explanation of his paintings. For those who always have to know the whys and the befores, he said. These are the levels of narrative content which he referred to as the literary part, and the formal aspects, which he sometimes referred to as the poem, or more usually, the musical part. Regarding the 'Manau Tupapau' painting, for example, on a narrative level, it is simply a study of a Polynesian route, with some kind of a story behind it. Whereas in its purely visual, plastic, or formal aspects, it is like gold, harmony, sounding on the eye, unmuted horizontal lines, harmonies in orange and blue linked by yellows and violets from which they derive, the light and the greenish sparks. In terms of a possible story for the painting, he had wondered, what would a young native girl be doing in that daring and naked position? Preparing for love or sleeping after the act of love? He had evicted such a content for his picture as indecent and he did not want that. The only possible thing was fear. Of what? According to Tahitian beliefs, either she thinks of the ghost or the ghost thinks of her. Again, the linking of the living girl with the spirit of death. The musical or formal aspects of painting seem clearly to be of greater importance for Gauguin and he kept alluding to music as the standard to strive for. Thus 'painting should seek suggestion more than description, as indeed music does'. Read abstract for musical. This is the insight that illuminated Gauguin's career, anticipating much that is basic to all modern art.

All art is an abstraction. The sense of a picture lies not in its title or its subject, but in its visual elements. Its lasting value is related only indirectly to representation or content. The arrangement of its lines, shapes, and colours are abstract forms that, like a material being, yet have the power to evoke feelings. Where does this power come from?

Tolstoy tells an anecdote about how the Russian painter Bryullov showed better than anyone else what can and what cannot be taught at school. As he was correcting the sketch of a pupil, Bryullov gave it a few touches here and there and the dull, rough sketch suddenly came to life. 'You have scarcely touched it and yet everything has changed,' said one of the pupils. 'Art begins where scarcely starts,' replied Bryullov, expressing the most characteristic trait of all arts. Art occurs to the degree and extent in which the artist finds those smallest, minutest elements, those musical suggestions, which turns a painting into a work of art. That's why all painters are not artists, just as all writers are not poets. There is no way to teach how to discover these elements. This can be achieved only by feeling.

The Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky comments on this to say that 'art begins where form begins'. The starting point without which the understanding of art is impossible is then the emotion of form. It is this emotion of form which turns the emotion of content in a painting into a work of art, which transforms the common everyday perception and an emotional dulling of an aesthetically sensitive audience into a greater appreciation of reality. Thus various artists celebrating the infinite qualities of light rescue them from our habitual inattention and restore them to what can only be called feelingful awareness.

Another way of looking at the question is to take the analogy of literature. How does some writing manage to rise above the meaning of words to become art? How does a literary artist transform feelings so that they transcend the author's personal private domain? Let us first listen to one writer, famous for her books for children, 'I shut my eyes for a few minutes with my portable typewriter on my knee. I make my mind blank and wait. And then, characters appear, clearly, with hair, eyes, feet, clothes, and expression. And I always know their Christian names but never their surnames. I don't know what anyone is going to say or do. I don't know what is going to happen. I am in the happy position of being able to write a story and read it for the first time at one and the same moment. Sometimes a character makes a joke, a really funny one, that makes me laugh as I type it on my paper and I think, well, I wouldn't have thought of that myself in a hundred years. And I think, well, who thought of it then?' This is the literary equivalent of Gauguin's 'dreaming before the canvas'.

A motion of form then consists of two phases which may be sharply demarcated from each other, may merge into each other, may follow each other in that way for slow succession, or may be interwoven in various ways. The two phases have various names, inspiration and elaboration, imagination and knowledge, knowledge of the iconography of one's artistic school or culture, wide and narrow focus, and so on. The first – imagination or inspiration – has many features in common with unconscious processes. The subjective experience here is that of a flow of thought and images driving towards expression. The second has many features in common with what characterizes work – high energy, alertness, and concentration. The oscillation of contrary motions between imaginative perception and knowledgeable perception generates a flux of tension and release in the painting. Tension is associated with focused attention and perception, release of tension with a flow in the opposite direction. Subjectively in the viewer, the release of tension gives rise to the feeling of pleasure. This is where art connects to biology. A painting may then be viewed as an energy system involving tension and release. A painter must discover how the patterns of attraction and repulsion among the various visual elements here selected can be intensified so that the audience can resonate with these patterns with heightened pleasure. When an artist builds virtual tension and release into his painting, he or she is not necessarily communicating his or her own feelings. Nor is the viewer who is responding with actual tension and release necessarily reading the artist's own emotions. What the painting does is to invite interplay between the tension and release patterns in a structure.

Just as a good painter knows how to enhance the emotional qualities inherent in ordinary visual perception, a musical composer or a classical singer does the same with auditory perception. For example, simple repetition, delaying a closure, ornamentation, and so on. Art literature is full of allusions to this dynamic of tension and release. As the American philosopher Dewey noted long ago, any artist selects, intensifies, and composes the quality of experience in such a way as to express it more energetically and clearly than the original from which it was extracted. This then is the emotion of form, more vital to a painting than the emotion of content. It arises from an interplay of the artist's imagination and knowledge where the former cannot be learned but is a gift which we can describe, which may in part be biological.

I will just take a few minutes to talk of what is biological in the art world. For instance, artists have eight times as much synesthesia as normal people. Synesthesia means the blending of senses. There are people who, when they hear a musical note, start seeing it in colour. For instance, Sa is red, Re is blue, and so on. Artists have eight times more synesthesia, so it is a part of the brain. Synesthesia increases the skill in forming metaphors, which means linking seemingly unrelated concepts in the brain. So when Shakespeare lets Macbeth say, 'Out, out, brief candle!' he is linking life with a candle, with a very different kind of thing. Or Romeo says 'Juliet is the sun', not that 'Juliet is warm and radiant'. So most great works of art are pregnant with metaphor. To use a metaphor myself – 'pregnant'.

Professor V. S. Ramachandran, who worked on the mapping of the brain in California, has written a very interesting article called 'The Artful Brain'. He suggests that there may be a gene which if expressed in one part of the brain, results in lower synesthesia, and if expressed in another part, results in higher synesthesia. And if expressed all over the brain, you get the artist's type. Also, that artists are supposed to have thinner boundaries of the mind than other people. Thinner boundaries means boundary between sleep and wakefulness, between dark and light, between outside and inside, between human and animal, that these boundaries are thinner, not as thick and keeping apart as in other people, which may also have some part in the brain.

This is not just Ramachandran, there are many other things. There is vision. If you look at evolutionary theory, there are two parts to vision. One is looking for objects and the other to detect camouflage, because it was very important. If you saw a lion in a green jungle or a tiger, it was very important to distinguish green and yellow, because yellow is going to be very, very dangerous. So these are lots of things in the brain which respond to art. One can give many examples. One, the laws of the visual, one is elementary, not yet developed, that many responses to art may be wider than that. So, although ninety percent of art may be individual and natural, there may be ten percent which everyone responds to.

Chicks are programmed to come to their mother. The mothers have beaks with red spots on them, yellow beaks with red spots. The chicks come and ask for food, and the mother gives them food. Then they are sold, they don't see the mother bird. So if you bring a beak with only a red spot, they will come to it. But then they found out that if you just put three strips of wood, and paint them red, they react even more. Now that is the interesting part. They don't keep the mother at all, yet the chicks react more to the art part, those red things have been so intensified that their reaction in the brain is even stronger.

If there is a tiger hiding in green leaves etc. you want to see that full tiger. You are trying to prove all the spots together. Of course in fashion design, if you have red spots on a kurta, you are also looking at how to find red in the pants to kind of group together. So these are the kind of responses which are in the brain, and we can talk about more of them. There are laws in the brain which make you respond to art. Some are developed much more, some are very simple primitive ones. For instance, it's also important that our vision is so built that when we start looking for things, we keep on getting some rewards, otherwise we don't keep on looking for it. So in very evolutionary terms, if a game manager is chasing a game through a forest, he has to keep on having small kills, otherwise he gives up the chase. So he may do it. So in artwork, they keep on giving you more ahas! ahas!, so that you keep on looking at it. But this is, as I said, this we cannot talk about.

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