

# What Do I Do When I Paint?

by Tad Dunne, PhD

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In the fall of 1997, when the *New York Times* asked seventeen art-world experts the question "What is art?", they all answered that there is no answer. Art is whatever people say it is.<sup>1</sup> This hasn't put critics out of work, however. They still talk as if there is a difference between good and bad art, although their explanations of the difference can seem highly subjective. One critic may call a piece "extraordinary" or "exciting," but these terms say more about the critic than the art. Another critic may call a piece "marvelously structured" or "luminous" or "lacking coherence," which give us insight into the piece, but is it carved in stone that *structure*, *luminosity* and *coherence* make for a good picture? Might these criteria be just as much a matter of normless taste as preferences for the art pieces themselves? Is there such a thing as objectivity in art?

The first critics, of course, are the artists, as they erase a line here and glaze a too-bright section there. It is not clear how artists make these decisions. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, most European artists visited the Louvre to see what good painting looked like, and they followed the examples they saw there. But the painters of works hanging in the Louvre had no Louvre to visit. Where did they go for their examples? Or if it is not example but inspiration that counts, it does not seem enough to call great artists "inspired." Their greatness lies not in having inspirations, since there are a million bad ones for every good one, but in a discernment that recognizes which of the million and one inspirations to follow.

If any method exists for discernment among artistic inspirations, we should look at what happens when an artist makes a value judgment. This approach relies on an empirical method that expects to find norms in consciousness that shape all our judgments, and that such norms can be made explicit. So we can begin with the very question artists who are curious about how they make aesthetic decisions ask themselves: "What do I do when I paint?"

In general terms, the answer is simple. Speaking as a sometime artist, the first thing I do is see. Either in my mind's eye or in my

surroundings, I see something I judge is worth painting. The second thing I do is *express* my visual experience through thousands of choices about paint. In a third step I decide when the painting is finished. But even then, the critique goes on. I value my wife's fresh observations of a piece I think is finished. And whether or not my painting will end up as landfill depends on what people think of it for years after.

To account for this variety of value judgments, we need to look closer at each step, from artist to critic to public. Along the way, we will look at the evolution of ideals in art and make some observations on what an analysis of artistic judgments might hold for the future of art.<sup>2</sup>

## Seeing

"There are mighty few people who think what they *think* they think." So wrote Robert Henri (right), author of *The Art Spirit*,<sup>3</sup> speaking of the various answers to the question, What do I do when I paint? Beginners in art usually think of themselves as "painting *that*" – say, a landscape. So they include every visible cow, barn, tree, and cloud. In reality, their first artistic impulse sprung from a rather quick glance, which is something far different from a photographic visualization of everything stimulating their retinas. What attracted them to notice *this* landscape was the massive, quiet dignity of a weathered-red barn surrounded by wind-shook acres of grain. In their original glimpse, they never saw the cows, they didn't notice the clouds, and they barely registered the trees. Later, upon reflection, they *think* they did, and that mistake in thinking accounts for many an ineffective painting.



Accomplished artists do not think of themselves as painting the total landscape seen after inspection. Rather they feel moved by some image, and they lay paint on canvas in a way that they hope will create a similar reaction in a viewer. They will leave out the cows and rearrange the clouds to enhance the impression of the majesty of that barn rising from those fields. They often remind themselves, "I am not painting *that* – a visible figure over there. I am painting *this* – a melange of paint that expresses my disposition when I see *that* and promises to evoke the same disposition in someone else." This image may be something in nature, a sitting model, the memory of several experiences, or even the pure image of colors in a pattern.

## The Aesthetic Patterning of Experience

Obviously, the artist sees in a special way. To see with an artist's eye means recognizing which parts of a scene sparked the emotional response and which parts, noticed later, are irrelevant or distracting. This is no easy trick. Henri taught that it is harder to see a landscape than to paint it. Seeing artistically is not a matter of learning some technique. It is not an ocular skill. It doesn't require noting every hue, every texture, and every detail in our field of vision. It is not even learning to see in a *new* way. Bernard Lonergan (left) described it as



Ted Dunne, from photo by Dan O'Shea

learning to *exclude interference* with an aesthetic seeing that comes naturally.<sup>4</sup> Notice, for example, how ordinary knowledge can interfere with aesthetic seeing: Rarely do we see walls standing 90 degrees to floors, but knowing they are perpendicular can interfere with the aesthetic seeing where they slant off at odd angles. Or notice how didactic purpose can interfere: Some fine art pieces glorify historical persons, but it is not a didactic message that makes the picture "art." Paintings of John F. Kennedy on black velvet seldom rate a gallery show.

The interference most responsible for the slow growth of art over the ages, in Lonergan's view, comes from flawed ideas about what knowledge is and the role seeing plays in knowing. If, as Plato proposed, sight is deceptive and knowing is mediated by ideals, then art should represent ideal forms. But if, as Pope Gregory the Great proposed, sight is a component of knowledge but knowledge is devalued in favor of piety, then art should teach about divine reality. Or if, as today's deconstructionists propose, all categories are arbitrary and sight is a pleasure, then art should break the rules and indulge the senses.

Lonergan's tack is to suspend judgment on theoretical differences like these until we first understand what our intentionality does when we see. In his analysis, even though aesthetic seeing avoids interference from prior knowledge, from didactic purpose, and from theories about knowing, it is patterned nonetheless.<sup>5</sup> It has already selected some figures in the visual field and excluded others. I believe this is something every artist should know and every would-be artist should learn: It is part of human wonder to select, exclude, organize and

relate elements within the eye's total visual field, prior to any thought of ours.

We may think that the promising patterns around us are just "there" to be seen, like a stream of images projected through the lenses of our eyes onto our minds. But this actually compares quite badly with filmmaking. Many an amateur with a camcorder has recorded friends on videotape only to discover later that a tree seems to be growing out of someone's head. This aesthetic patterning of our visual experience spontaneously overlooks a thousand unrelated figures. The mind seeks order, or the possibility of order. It may be only upon reflection that these potentialities are noticed and conceptualized, but they are *felt* immediately. It is the nature of our attentive consciousness to be on the lookout for images with promise, even when we're not on the lookout for anything specific.

We should pause to note an amazing parallel here. The promising patterns in nature are matched within by a selective openness, a preliterate censor that channels the flow of our experience toward them.<sup>6</sup> Viewed from a cosmic perspective, nature itself encompasses a marvelous linking of seer and seen. The Milky Way, which has always had the potential for producing a lovely watercolor, realizes that potential in a Winslow Homer, as a pattern in his wonder resonated with a pattern he perceived in nature.

## **How Symbols Shape Seeing**

Lonergan referred to this natural sense of wonder that accompanies the purely visual experience as the "operator on the sensitive level."<sup>7</sup> It exists only minimally in animals. Beavers do not *admire* a wooded pond; they dam it and build a hutch. In humans, this operator turns our attention to images with promise. This focused attentiveness is our normal experience of that nearly irrepressible virtue, hope.

Just as philosophers travel down roads restricted to precise meanings, so artists carry out their apostolate of hope by exploring roads closed to words but crowded with images<sup>8</sup> This is the domain where images are united with affects to form "symbols" in our psyches. Here we should distinguish this elemental and empirical meaning of symbol from more derivative and normative meanings. Our elemental meaning differs from the sheerly conventional signs such as a green light on a boat that "symbolizes" starboard. Our meaning also differs from the physical images representing the appearance of something – icons on a computer screen, snapshots in an album, even the paint on canvas that "symbolizes" something recognizable. It differs, finally, from 19<sup>th</sup> century Symbolist use of images that represent established

concepts such as dove = peace, skull = death, and snake = temptation. In contrast, our elemental meaning refers to the pure experience of images that grab our attention prior to conceptualizing and naming. It includes the thousands of everyday glimpses that bear a world of meanings. As a compressed experience of an image and an affect, symbolic apprehension is the initial mode of any adult's experience, and is the dominant mode of preliterate societies, whether in Homer's Greece or in today's kindergarten. This is an important use of the term because no other term seems available to refer to the compact, richly associative experiences of life that occur prior to the more differentiating operations of logical deduction, sufficiency of evidence, measured deliberation, discerning evaluation, and picture painting.

If we imagine the mind as containing an immense store of concepts, each a result of an act of understanding, so we can imagine it containing an even larger store of symbols, each a result of undeliberate fusions of images and feelings. The task of understanding these symbols is impeded by the expectation that the images are essentially images for the eye. After all, in art, symbols draw their images from the data of sense and are eventually expressed as data of sense. However, if we want to understand how symbols are first formed and what actual meanings they may carry, we need to focus on the data of consciousness. So our first step is to look at how certain images link up with feelings in our psyches.<sup>9</sup>

Symbols in our consciousness can range from the pure to the complex. Pure symbols may carry no external reference whatsoever and still shape how we see. A good example is the doodles on the notepads of people stuck in boring meetings. They can express calm stability, disturbing explosions, off-balance tensions, suspense, rising anticipation or falling hope. They are patently escapist in the same way that all aesthetics is – a free-floating exploration of symbolic forms.

While these pure symbols are generic, the specific symbol most significant to us is the human face. Infants, in their earliest differentiations of consciousness, learn to notice faces. I am always amazed how they spontaneously look at our looking organs – not our ears extending out from the sides, not our noses sticking out in front, not our lips that sing them lullabies and smooch them with kisses -- but our eyes. They "read" a frown far earlier than they understand a word. This image of the face and eyes is loaded with feeling and remains at the core of their sensibilities for the rest of their lives.

Supporting these personal symbols, there are the complex symbols of things around us: the private and unique ways we picture a vegetable garden, a hardware store, a cemetery, a grade school desk, a gravel road, a back door, an introspective teen, a bowl of soup, hard manual labor – all the images that represent memorable and poignantly felt experiences.

The reason these symbols have such a pervasive effect on what we notice is that they represent our first take on things. They hold in image form what we have yet to dissect, conceptualize, formulate, name, relate to other things, verify, assess, approve or dismiss.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, they run along the speedier circuits that we need to keep our bodies, hearts and minds working together. They define whether our self-image is one of pride or shame. They keep us sane by holding our attention to experiences overladen with the heart's feeling yet needing the mind's understanding, for which we may need a therapist's help. And they focus our attention on all the practical problems that come with moving about physically and maintaining our health.

Symbols govern the flow of consciousness both in our dreams and in everyday awareness – a fertile field of study for psychologists, anthropologists and literary critics. More to the point about art, when we're contemplating the mysterious suchness of our lives, symbols invite us to revere the unknown in the familiar, drawing us to savor, in a sensual, particular way, the possibilities latent in the universe: The lovely intricacy of a single maple leaf. The bald fact that I am, and didn't have to be. The stunning immensity of a cloudless, moonless night sky.

So seeing is nothing like letting what's out there shine on some inner mental screen. Seeing is shaped by how we feel at the moment and by a legion of images stored from our past with unique conglomerations of harmonious and conflicting feelings. What we see around us is refracted by the very symbols that harmonize our instincts for dignity, sanity, safety and salvation. When we see with an artist's eye, we give these symbols the run of our psyches, while practical, dramatic and intellectual seeing await their turn. To sum up, aesthetic seeing is initially spontaneous yet selective, shaped by symbols, elicited by a natural process in which the world invites wonder, and requiring of the wonderer deliberate efforts to exclude other kinds of seeing.

## ***Painting***

Seeing is one thing, but painting is quite another. The artist's decision to paint is first a decision to share. No matter how secluded the artist,

painting is a way to be linked to other people. Whatever the artist's motives, whether money and fame or a desire to help others see with an aesthetic eye, the painting is a medium of communication.

The essence of this communication is less a "statement" and more an "invitation." A painting creates a virtual space – the space perceived in the viewer's symbolic sensorium – and invites viewers to enter, which means leaving behind the virtual space of everyday concerns.

Loneragan's description of art highlights this movement: "Art is a withdrawal from practical living to explore possibilities of fuller living in a richer world."<sup>11</sup> For a painting to be effective, viewers must first notice that part of their environment has been fenced-off from useful things and reserved for their entry. While the choice of an actual frame and setting for an art piece can influence whether viewers notice it, even more important is the artist's awareness from the beginning that this painting should frame an *experience*. Good paintings invite the viewer to go on an exploration. Paintings that fail to draw the viewer into another psychic space serve merely to signal that there's a wall here – don't bump into it.

## Presentation and Representation

If we think of art as an invitation, then the usual distinction between "representational" and "nonrepresentational" art obscures what goes on between artist and viewer. Viewers of Robert Delaunay's cubist "Window" series (1912-13) who are unaware that this represents a window in Paris will not experience what Delaunay experienced. (Picture on right)



Piet Mondrian's meant his famous "Composition 2" (1922) to *represent* an equilibrium that ought to characterize human consciousness, but few viewers get his point, let alone call it representational art. Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, pioneers in contemporary abstract art, noted how "representation" can and should include inner experience: "Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance."<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the artist intends to represent – a

real person, a typical scene, an allegory, an objectification of the visible world or of invisible psychic spaces – the significance of an art piece depends on how well it objectifies a purely experiential pattern.<sup>13</sup> It does not depend on how faithfully it represents the appearance of known objects or how well it diagrams conceptualized ideas. It seems to me that what is essential in all art, despite how the artists themselves may have understood it, is that the pure presentation be rich and attractive in its own right. It is the richness of presentation that opens the door to the viewer's warm sensorium of symbols. Without it, the viewer will move on to cool analysis. Some paintings clearly point to objects outside of themselves, but no one considers them art because, lacking a strong sensate design, they do not connect to symbolized experiences in the viewer. Other paintings have no specific reference, but everyone considers them art because they express a recognizable pattern of feelings and images without any discernible distracting elements, much as good instrumental music does.

## **Design and Technique**

Sensate elements are largely a matter of technique, but they need to be incorporated into the larger design of the painting. A good piece of art should grab viewers first from a distance, as they notice the overall design. Then, moving closer, viewers see the types of things portrayed, if any. Moving closer still, viewers may notice any recognizable figures that may be represented in the painting. Henri Matisse knew this: "A work of art must carry in itself its complete significance and impose it upon the beholder even before the beholder can identify the subject matter."<sup>14</sup>

We may define a design as an intelligible unity of different elements. But, to begin with the less familiar but more fundamental point, there is a difference between the design of the painting and the design of the virtual space it frames. The design of the painting includes shape, line, value, hue, texture and size. These can be measured with rulers, light meters and scanners. But the design of the virtual space may contain figures, gestures, attitudes, atmosphere, tone, pace, dominance and submission, the familiar and the strange, advancing and receding masses, radiance, shadows, threats, alarms, consolations, concepts, ideals and invitations. These elements are the real constituents of an art piece. Each one of them lies not on the canvas but in the *interaction* between the painted design and the symbolic world of the viewer. The "intelligible unity" that the artist envisions should be *an event in the viewer*, which the design of the painting should support. So, while every artist needs to submit



technical ability to the services of good design, the design of the painting should serve the artist's intention to share a visual experience connected to the viewer's feelings, ideas, passions, hopes, fears, loves and hates, faith and despair.

## **The Artistic Process**

The artistic process involves insights, though not in the manner that answers questions for intelligence. First, there's the aesthetic experience, some experience that our consciousness alerts us to because it has to do with this beauty. It already is patterned or, as in tragic works, clearly lacks a pattern that we long for. And it already involves a heuristic anticipation of a value judgment. It's Robert Frost hearing someone say, "I have promises to keep" and feeling moved to convey that experience to others. In *Topics in Education*, Lonergan has a nice description of "aesthetic value":

Aesthetic value is the realization of the intelligible in the sensible; when the good of order of a society is transparent, when it shines through the products of that society, the actions of its members, its structure of interdependence, the status and personality of the persons participating in the order. You can recognize a happy home or a happy community. The good of order can be transparent in all the things made, all the actions performed, in the habits and the institutions. It strikes the eye.... It is aesthetic value, then, that enables people to apprehend the human good on its profoundest level or, on the contrary, to sense something wrong, in a very immediate fashion, an immediate apprehension ...<sup>15</sup>

Following this initial inspiration, there are the provisional objectifications of that pattern -- the "fiddling," the playing with media until it falls into a pattern that seems likely to alert others to the same aesthetic experience. In this fiddling phase, the artist is getting insights, but not yet making a value judgment. The artist has the eraser and the poet the delete key. The process here, again, is analogous to the hundreds of insights that we get when we're solving a puzzle. Most of them are wrong.

But unlike puzzle-solving, emerging patterns can themselves become an aesthetic experience when the artwork takes on an unexpectedly arresting form and the artist follows the emerging pattern, leaving behind the original experience. I imagine that among artists it is the sculptors who are most often forced this way because chisels have no erasers. The discovery of new images during the fiddling process is analogous to what Lonergan called "ecstasy."<sup>16</sup> This occurs in the intellectual pattern when the pursuit springing from an originating set of questions leads to new questions and new avenues of exploration.

Then there's the final objectification. During the provisional objectifications, the artist may decide to scrap everything and start over, because the emerging pattern is ugly. But when beauty is emerging, there's a point where the artist clearly envisions the final objectified pattern. All that's left are the adjustments that eliminate distracting elements and strengthen important forms and relationships. Gradually, the questions diminish. The artist stands back, dabs a little here and there until it comes clear that any more dabs will diminish the beauty of it all.

This final objectification involves the value judgment, "This is good." It's not a judgment made by rational consciousness – the third level that Lonergan speaks of -- because the artwork isn't about truth or the correctness of an explanation or a syllogistic deduction or the mere possibility of making something. Like the judgment that it is good if I do X, the judgment that this art piece is good includes a sense of authorship, attaching my name to the judgment, claiming it as my own. Facts stay true whether or not I judge so, but the value of this art piece isn't realized unless I judge it to be worth something. After all, I might throw it away. Structurally, all artists work under a single condition: If the pattern of the painting is isomorphic to the pattern of an arresting aesthetic experience, then it's a good art piece. The operator at the sensitive level that responds to beauty determines whether the art piece meets the conditions. It's Robert Frost realizing that he could write no better ending to his poem than to say "And miles to go before I sleep" -- and then say it again. But I think it's important to notice how naturally this happens, so naturally, in fact, that artists cannot recall any point where they made such a value judgment. Unlike getting insights, which seem to strike like lightning at a specific time and place, the value judgments that involve commitment often seem to just grow on us. The reason we often can't recall them is that it emerged -- from poor to good, from good to better, and from better to best available, as relevant questions were met and put to rest.

This process doesn't occur in everyone. There has to be some habitual respect for the transcendental notion of beauty, the total orientation of our consciousness toward what will be glorious because it is intelligible, it is real, and it is good. While everyone experiences this, not everyone realizes they experience it, let alone works with it. I think this is what art schools should teach rather than just some multiplicity of techniques. Even when students are told to copy some masterpiece, they do it like robots, without paying attention to the possible aesthetic experience that the master consulted when making the masterpiece.

## ***The Artist's Critique***

There is no need for artists to put these ideas into words. They may explore the pure potentials of paints and stave off practical concerns without ever having said to themselves, "There's a difference between artistic attention and practical attention." On the other hand, some of the great artists wrote reams on artistic standards and the elements of design. Just as a mature musician carries questions from music theory about harmony, progression, theme, melody, and resolution, so the mature artist supports the artistic pattern of experience by trips to and from an intellectual pattern, answering in words the question "What do I do when I paint?"

### **The Acceptable Result.**

The artist solves design problems through a critique that begins long before the brush is loaded and continues after every brushstroke. Before beginning, there are choices to be made about the theme, the design and the medium. During the painting, it is difficult to predict exactly what the paint will do. It depends on how wet the surface is, how thick the pigment is, how pointed the brush tip is, and so on. So the artist lays down a pigment with more or less expectation of the result, but blotters, erasers and scrapers are on hand in case the results are not acceptable.

An acceptable result is not always the planned result. Sometimes the paint lies better than expected, and the artist changes direction, following possibilities emerging from the painting itself. (It is no small achievement to watch the painting's development with an artistic eye and to follow its leads. Many an artist begins with a well-conceived vision of what a painting should look like, but then slavishly subjects the work to this vision and suppresses insights into more promising forms accidentally emerging from the brush. Individual paintings may be impressive, but the artist's oeuvre will show little spontaneity. So it is that even the best artists tend to copy themselves.<sup>17</sup> )

Nor will an artist be satisfied with seizing the attention of viewers. What's in the frame can so violate the viewers' moral sensibilities that they easily quit the virtual space and return to their everyday world.



We sometimes call a portrayal of violence “gratuitous,” meaning it makes no sense. And this is the point. When the results are to the artist’s liking, images make sense; even violence can make sense, as in Picasso’s “Guernica” (above).

The act of painting is, itself, an exploration. What artists want to discover, the “sense” that images must make, is a specific virtual space in their psyches which expresses an emotional viewpoint that cannot be put into words. They want to objectify, in paint, that particular compacted vision, overcast with an attitude, which calls for attention. Painting is an artist’s exploration of the psyche’s elusive penchants and passions by using symbols to find associations where concepts can only find differences. The result will make sense when the painting captures how the artist feels about an intriguing image and does so in a way that viewers will likely recognize. Artists want to help people experience what they, the artists, have experienced when confronted with a particularly poignant manifestation of nature’s mystery. They seek to convey their feelings about an original aesthetic glimpse straight to the psyches of their viewers through a visible pattern in a frame. They say to themselves, “Is my arrangement of painted elements likely to convey the same emotional response in you as it does in me?”

## Beauty

If the artist’s criterion of acceptability is the discovery of an image that speaks both to the artist and to the viewer, then is the criterion of



beauty irrelevant? Beauty appears to be a transcendental notion – a psychic driver – because of the sensitive operator propelling consciousness to explore the harmonious.<sup>18</sup> But take, for example, Goya’s “Third of May, 1808.” It’s a terrifying depiction of innocent civilians being shot by Napoleon’s soldiers. Even at the level of the purely sensate representation, Goya deliberately disturbs the viewer

through the tensions in its painted design. Is this a “beautiful” painting?

Yes and no. Yes, because when the purely sensate elements are harmoniously integrated into a unity, there will always be “beauty” at this level. Even elements of high tension will be perceived as beautiful as long as they are intelligibly related to other elements. But no, it is

not beautiful, because the painting shows the murder of astonished and helpless people. And not just any people, but those Spanish women and men whom faceless French soldiers killed on the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1808. Yet such a painting is beauty-alerting because aesthetics sometimes uses the beautiful to convey feelings about the awful. It is the very contrast between a beautiful rendering and an awful scene that fixes our attention on the gap between what is and what could be. All tragic operas rely on this contrast. This is the “broken” virtual space that does violence to our sensibilities in a way that heightens our *sehnsucht* – our insatiable longing that all things be well. It is an inverse stimulant of hope. A criterion, then, for the kind of image that speaks both to the artist and to the viewer might be the following: A beautiful sensate *presentation* combined with at least a beauty-alerting *representation*.

### ***The Ongoing Critical Process***

The artist is painfully aware that the critical process is not finished when the paint dries. Critics, the public, and eventually historians will take their turn. Their critiques will be based on their personal experiences of ordinary life, on their unique clusters of desires to transcend themselves, and on other artworks whose virtual spaces have already left an affective stamp on their psyches. But these factors are only the beginning of the larger process of criticism that artworks undergo.

### **The Progress of Art**

As artworks enter a culture, the value judgments of critics may seem extrinsic to the artistic process. After all, we usually think of a great painting as a finished piece hanging in a museum somewhere, with critics standing around passing judgment on what they see, completely barred from making alterations to the painting itself. But compare this to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Where is that located? It’s not in the original manuscript: notes there are only coded instructions to musicians. It’s not the ideas in Beethoven’s head: Beethoven is dead and ideas are inaudible anyway. If the music is anywhere, it’s in the hearing of playing, and not only by one performer, but by many. Without numerous renditions of the same score adding to the rich affective associations of the music in the listeners, there is no classic. Likewise, art is the seeing of virtual realities. There is no great painting without people viewing it, expressing their opinion, each interpreting it, each translating affective associations into words, each describing the many overlapping and mutually reinforcing virtual realities available to other viewers. Critics play an integral part in the artistic

process not only because they influence what their readers see but because their seeing is already conditioned by previous artworks, personal experience, and theories of criticism. So while the critical process in art begins with the artist, it never really ends. The philosopher Margaret Macdonald nicely sums it up, "In art, the dead are never finally buried."<sup>19</sup>

Critics contribute to the artistic process by helping viewers see the richness of a virtual space. If others fail to see it all, or if they see it and think little of it, so be it. They too contribute to the public's appreciation of a painting. The professionals know this. It is because they know how easily public tastes can degenerate that most of their work is "criticism" of bad art. Unfortunately, many critics specialize in this guardian role and neglect their essential vocation of assisting the artist in helping people to see the world with fresh eyes.

As the men and women of each generation discover what speaks to their hearts, the meanings attached to great works will accumulate progressively, although more like historiography than science. Scientists look at phenomena that recur, seeking general rules that explain what goes on and will continue to go on under the same circumstances while historians look at unique phenomena to understand what went on then and what can never occur in the same manner again. In this perspective, historians look to art for clues on what a culture was concerned about but was at a loss for words commensurate to experience.

Also, science progresses by replacing earlier hypotheses while art progresses by enlarging and transforming earlier symbols. The meaning of good art quite literally grows. And herein lies the problem of how to track what progress may mean in art. At best, the verbalizations of critics only approximate certain aspects of an artist's vision; at worst they misrepresent the artist's meaning altogether. At the same time, the psychic symbols of later generations will resonate quite differently than those of the artist's contemporaries. In any case, because art reaches deep into the symbolic layers of consciousness, bypassing ordinary conceptualizations, it shapes the very questions that later generations can ask about the worth of an art piece. We can measure progress in art only if we have grounds for objectivity in this entire, complex and open-ended chain of assessments.

## **The Idea of Ideals**

Our realization of what's involved in this critical process has been long delayed, a delay resulting, to a great extent, to confusion over what it means to have an "ideal." The emergence of the beautiful body as art's

ideal came with 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greek sculptures of men and women alive with intention. The Greeks were first because no one discovered the body before they did, according to the philosophical historian Bruno Snell. He proposed that when the Greeks discovered the mind as a unifying center of activity governing speech, they simultaneously discovered the body as a unifying center governing our limbs. Prior to Heraclitus<sup>20</sup>, both art and words concerning the body depicted hands, feet, legs, heads and arms as separate entities. Paintings show them connected, but in a way where each organ was shown in profile according to a set of stock images.<sup>21</sup> The Greek cultural standards of beauty resulted from the combination of their discovery of the human body as a unity and Plato's views on both epistemology and politics. From then on, sculpture, and by association, painting, should show "ideal" bodies in all their beauty as standards for the Republic.



This standard, based on this particular notion of an ideal, reigned over Hellenized and Romanized cultures for the next 1,000 years, usually in the hardened fashion that copies products rather than follows a vision. Artists, or better, "artisans," shared the low status of manual laborers<sup>22</sup> as they reproduced Greek and Roman prototypes, often in the service of political or religious ends. With Christianity, art at first gradually distanced itself from the Jewish prohibition of images of the divine, no doubt under the revolutionary doctrine of the Incarnation. By the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, without challenge to Greco-Roman standards of beauty, Pope Gregory the Great proposed a higher purpose for art, namely, that it should teach people about divine realities. This program, in conjunction with the neoplatonic vision of ideal forms above material appearances, governed Christian art up to the Reformation. The "symbols" of the divine were the material art pieces, the visible sculptures and stained glass that represented the invisible world of grace and sin.



Gradually and haltingly, there appeared works that strayed from both the Greek ideals of citizens in the Republic and the Christian ideals of divine and saintly figures in the City of God. St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1286) turned the attention of devout Christians to the beauties of the



natural world. Giotto di Bondone (d. 1337) painted realistic sacred scenes so that the faithful could contemplate the actual events.



The sculptures in the cathedral at Prague (1380s) showed people as observed, with all their non-ideal characteristics. (At left is Peter Parler the Younger). The paintings of Donatello (d. 1446) depicted landscapes and still lifes that revealed beauty in non-personal nature. (Right) By the middle of the

15<sup>th</sup> century, these artistic explorations found an audience that accepted actual bodies and in actual settings, without any expectation that they “stand for” a higher, more spiritual or more ideal order.



This shift in the meaning of “ideal” from civic beauty and pious learning to observable matter would never have affected artists were it not for the work of philosophers and theologians. Scholarly academies, particularly the University of Paris, had recovered the Aristotelian doctrines that reality is informed matter and that knowledge begins with experience.<sup>23</sup> Then Aquinas’ doctrine that the universe is an “intelligible unity mirroring forth the glory of God”<sup>24</sup> enthroned a theological ideal with an inescapable impact on art: Anything observable held the potential to depict the transcendent. Material reality, hitherto a distraction from the divine, now reveals it. So earthly images of the divine need not be restricted to human bodies unified by a soul (which is why earlier works look like paintings of statues against a nondescript background). The divine can also be seen in a group of real people, unified with all of nature as they lounge in a real garden. Thus was developed an ideal regarding *how* a painting works, not merely what it should depict. Specifically, a painting should present a virtual space that unifies all the material elements it depicts, an ideal eventually achieved by Jan van Eyck in his “Bethrothal of the Arnolfini (1434).<sup>25</sup> For artists, this switch from Platonic idealism to Aristotelian realism meant switching how to begin a painting. Before, you painted what you *think* persons would ideally look like. Now you paint what you actually see, more or less, but the persons must blend with their environments as an intelligible whole.



Along with the ideal of a unified virtual space, there emerged the ideal of the spirit of the individual. The seeds of this individualism had been



sown by the Aristotelian turn to personal experience and by the highly personal mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila and (d. 1582) John of the Cross (d. 1591) – the same individualism that supported not only the Protestant rejection of Roman dominance in religion but also the artists' rejection of ancient, formulaic standards. Protestants and artists alike were now paying more attention to the inner mystery of the person. At first, a few brilliant artists discovered the depths of that mystery in the persons they painted.

Leonardo Da Vinci (d. 1519) had pioneered the use of dark and shadow to depict a world of mystery, anticipation and hope. Rembrandt (d. 1669) and Vermeer (d. 1675) painted not just persons but *personalities*, rich in dignity and full of quiet depth. (Left to right, below.)



Eventually, according to art historian René Huyghe, it was Eugène Delacroix (below, d. 1863) and Charles Baudelaire (d. 1867) who discovered the depth of the mystery of person in the artists themselves. They made the "incalculable discovery of themselves and were the first to formulate consciously what they had done . . . that it is not what a sensation refers to in the outside world that matters but



what it evokes in the self."<sup>26</sup> In other words, it makes no difference *what* the painting depicts. As Delacroix put it, "Art is a bridge between souls."<sup>27</sup> With this insight, the entire structure of art theory based on conceptual understanding, ideal forms, and rules for composition became exposed to winds of doubt that blow still today. It appeared that the real bedrock had always been at the experiential level in the artist, where we find the data of pure sensation, free imagination and spontaneous

emotion. Conceptual and moral norms for art would have to find their justification here, where artists explore the depths of their own preconceptual experience.

While this shift to the individual was taking place, there was also a shift in the art market. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the spirit leading to the

French Revolution (1789) threw off one inherited standard after another, artists were no longer sought after by a public with traditional, predictable tastes. (See "Liberty" by Delacroix on the right.) Public tastes diversified, with the result that artists vied for income-producing work by each developing a unique style. Their subject matters were no longer limited to religious, mythical and allegorical themes. They now included recent historical events and scenes from nature. Individual style itself became the norm.<sup>28</sup>



Finally, there was a third shift going on in epistemology. The scientific revolution dismantled the ideal that knowledge should be the attainment of universally valid truths and erected in its place the ideal of progressive understanding of particular realities. Many scholars and artists who formerly looked to inherited teachings and traditions for knowledge now turned their attention to personal, verifiable experience. As a result, just as "culture" no longer carried a single, normative meaning based on some classical model, so "art" no longer could sustain a single, normative definition based on Greco-Roman works. Where earlier art was conceived sometimes as the imitation of nature and sometimes as the idealization of nature, now art was conceived as the "illusion of experience." Lacking any technical definition of experience, however, artists developed this standard in widely different directions. Goya, Blake, and Ensor (left to right, below) tapped their private dreams for material, with little regard for common norms.



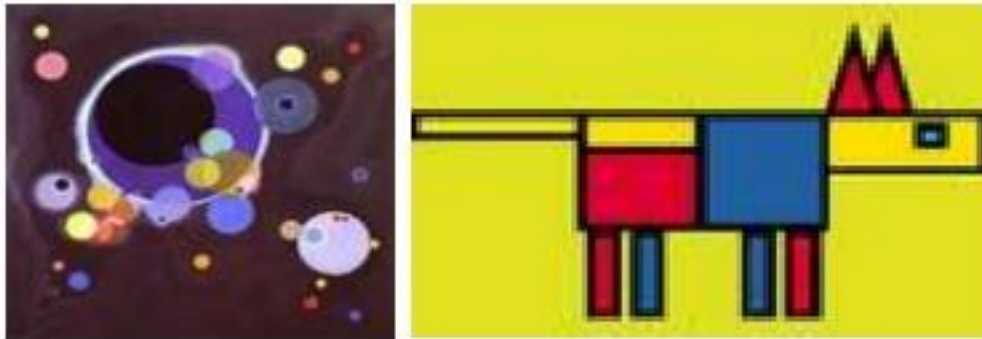
Manet, Monet and Renoir (left to right, below) stuck to sensible impressions, where the norm was the purely visual experience, the fresh look that classical norms had stifled for centuries.



Cézanne and Van Gogh (left to right, below), influenced by Romantic ideas of the expanded self, deliberately imagined themselves as *being* the still lifes or landscapes before them in an effort to express an introjected experience on canvas.



Kandinsky and Mondrian (left to right, below), reacting to the abuses of the Industrial Revolution, revived the neoplatonic vision of ideal forms suffusing both the material universe and our experience of it.<sup>29</sup>



Intellectuals today question the very idea of an ideal. Critiques of style based on normative definitions of art have diminishing effect because each artist lays claim to a "style" based on personal experience or on one of many proliferating theories of art. As a result, where critics traditionally had been the guardians of consistent and common ideals in art, they currently are just promoters of individual artists or movements. Disagreements among these critic-promoters cannot be resolved until they agree on what artistic norms really are. But if they are not going to find norms in classical examples, and if a norm of purely personal experience exposes art criticism to an anarchy of styles, where should they look? The 20<sup>th</sup> century may well be characterized as the unsuccessful search for the nature and function of artistic norms.

### **Objectivity**

Lonergan finds those norms through an analysis of how we make judgments. Just as factual judgments of reasonable persons will be provisional as long as there remain the possibility of further relevant questions, so too the value judgments of a responsible person will be provisional. Although this seems to preclude the possibility of final, unrevisable judgments in most areas of our lives, the values of a culture can develop progressively anyway if we pay attention to the integrity of the process. In the symbol-laden world of art, where meanings and values are continuously developing, being objective cannot mean reaching unrevisable certitudes; but it can mean reaching probable judgments based on available evidence. In this perspective, objectivity would not be exercised by comparing an artwork to some conceptualized or painted standard. Nor would it lie in some imagined correspondence between our judgment and the reality in question. It lies rather in how faithfully we notice a correspondence



between a conditional judgment and the evidence that would meet our judgment's conditions. Being objective, in other words, is a way of being a subject, not a way of being right. It requires that we abandon certitude as an ideal and remain open to any new evidence that might change our mind.

In painting, the new evidence is not simply a new painting. It includes what happens in us as we enter the virtual space evoked by the painting. Since this space is partly unique for every viewer, and since the different meanings of this space for many viewers usually reinforce rather than cancel each other, the objectivity of artists and critics lies in how attuned they are to inner experience, both their own and others'. Their objectivity depends partly on how well they know the old clichés, the allusions to other artworks, the classical motifs, and the many ways painted forms can create virtual worlds. It also depends on whether or not they suppress new questions about their visual experiences. So the norm for an individual's artistic judgment is quite simple: "Does this painting leave me bothered by unanswered questions about the feelings this picture evokes?" Both those who ignore questions and those who wait for absolute certainty will be "unobjective"—not because their opinions fail to match some conceptualized standard but because their opinions do not meet all their questions about how they feel and what they imagine. How successfully artists and critics deal with these questions about feelings and imagination will depend on what questions they let themselves recognize.

### ***Critical-Practical Method***

Lonergan's understanding of objectivity as an ongoing process of dealing with questions could trigger a revolution in aesthetics. His critical-practical method<sup>30</sup> helps explain not only "what I do when I paint," but also "what I do when I paint badly." By spelling out how the norms of consciousness reject and approve, it clarifies how to make the sound artistic judgments that Classicism seeks in rules, that Idealism seeks in various conceptualized standards such as Theosophy, and that Expressionism seeks in an uncritical, individual frankness. By making the norms of consciousness explicit, the method envisions the critical enterprise as a collaboration to develop evaluative categories that really explain and in terms that everyone understands. Two critical-practical categories seem particularly fruitful: "horizon" and "the unwanted image."

## Horizon

By "horizon," Lonergan means everything a person knows or can question. Realities outside a person's horizon are not simply "unknown." The person cannot even raise a question about them. The most "objective" assessments, then, will come from the artists and critics who have the least limited horizons. Artist aware of a broader range of questions will explore a broader range of images until they find an appropriately representative virtual space. Likewise, critics aware of the history of aesthetic questions will more frequently grasp the sense of great artists and what's missing in the mediocre.

To objectify the norms of good art, then, is not just professing your standards; it also includes revealing your limits. It requires the sometimes embarrassing work of an ongoing mutual exposure of horizons carried out in time like a conversation. Artists who live in a narrow horizon will misunderstand the work of fellow artists, while artists who live in broad horizons will allow unusual works to speak to their souls. Similarly, critics living in a narrow horizon will snub unusual works just for being unusual, while critics living in broad horizons will let unusual works affect them and will suggest to their readers how to let the works affect them as well. This dialectic already goes on, of course, but usually without the more fully explanatory terms that would be developed were artists and critics to recognize the process as a matter of limited and unlimited horizons.

As a beginning toward developing these terms, we can look at several ways that horizons may be limited.<sup>31</sup> We find the usual limitation in people who have only partially developed their artistic sensibilities. Vincent Price<sup>32</sup> made the point that while everyone claims, "I know what I like," the truth is, "I like what I know." So, for example, if Andy Warhol's work makes no sense to me, it may be because I have not yet developed an understanding of the sheer superficiality of the virtual space he aims to create. But I can develop such an understanding and maybe come to like what I know.

Another limitation results from the different personal experiences and interests different people bring. I may already understand that Warhol is exploring the two-dimensional personages on posters, but if I happen to love folk dancing, I may prefer Breugel's more lusty crowds in a marketplace. I do not deny all sense in Warhol's work, but Breugel has the key to my soul because of similarities in how we experience people in public places.

### **Intellectual Horizon**

The most limited horizon would be an apriori exclusion of certain realities.<sup>33</sup> Completely ignorant of a particular world of questions, I would be blind to what the artist sees very well. That is, I can be ignorant of entire realms of meaning, particularly the realms of aesthetic theories, of the history of art, and of epistemology (understood as the study of objectivity).

Artists who are completely unaware of theoretical, historical, and epistemological questions never wonder what art should do or has done. Some presume all art is instrumental. The question of objectivity has not occurred to them because they are intent on teaching some moral lesson or boosting their reputation. They have yet to catch up with the ancient Greek discovery of the beauty of a body for its own sake. Others may appreciate beauty where they see it, but because they have not advanced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century discovery of Style, they are blind to beauty that fails to conform to their visualized ideals about what beauty ought to be. They realize that some viewers dislike their "beautiful" paintings, but they resign themselves to being unable to teach cretins how to see.

Artists who have kept up to date with intellectual advances, however, particularly advances in cognitional theory and epistemology, are more likely aware that the data of consciousness are centrally important to any study of art. They more likely understand that art occurs in a world that we experience through a prepatterned attention and in which we are motivated by the perception of forms that carry an affective significance. They more likely think of their paintings as expressions of their visual experiences and as invitations to the viewer, where both the artist's expression and the viewer's impression are patterned by symbols in their respective psyches. They typically will try to objectify a visual experience laced with feeling through a strong design at the purely sensate level, knowing that any painting that fails to meet this sensate requirement will fail to cross Delacroix's Bridge from their souls to the souls of their viewers. These artists know what they do when they paint.

The advantages are similar for broad-horizoned critics. But in addition they will be able to identify any idealist or materialist views entertained by artists (and other critics). This puts them in the advantageous position of understanding artists better than artists understand themselves about what they're doing and what their contribution to history may be.

## Transcendental Horizon

We also can be blind to the realm of "transcendence." I'm not speaking of religious art. Much of "religious art" is so poorly rendered that no sensitive viewer resonates with it. In any case, the transcendent significance of a good piece of art lies not what it represents; even atheists admire Raphael's madonnas. It lies rather in the communication of a virtual space in a way that draws the viewer to a beyond, to an anticipated yet unrealized meaning, to the shadow of "almost" that falls on even our highest achievements. There is nothing strange about this transcendence. Wherever we expect to extend human achievements, we transcend our present state of affairs while, in that same reach, we transcend the selves that we are by amplifying our personal meaning and worth. Artists who ignore questions about these ultimate extensions of life live within self-imposed confinements to their hopes and paint virtual spaces that reveal their self-confinement to others. On the other hand, to live with unanswered questions about our origins, our present meanings and our final destinies opens artists' eyes to the potentials around and within them. These potentials suggest that the universe may be ultimately a matter of self-transcending love and of hope for human history. These are the potentials that words dissect but paint arouses – potentials of a universe understood as the totality of all things real, ranging from the concrete and familiar to the immaterial and strange.

Typically we discover the realm of transcendence in any of three ways: through an upbringing by parents who believe in God, through an idealist belief in Absolute Spirit, or through an intellectual assent to being as horizon. Belief in God already carries the implicit belief that the real includes the transcendent. Belief in Absolute Spirit breaks from the materialism that infects common sense, although it tends to devalue the material for the sake of an imagined ideal. Assent to being as horizon amounts to a realization that reality is what it is, that reality may prove to be quite other than what I think it must be, and therefore that the best attitude in an open universe is an open mind.

We have evidence of transcendent meaning in easy reach. Recall that the operator at the sensitive level is an awareness of the possibility of meaning, and even when that and other transcendental operators in us do their best, we are aware of the possibility of more meaning yet. Art, Lonergan says, "presents the beauty, the splendor, the glory, the majesty, the 'plus' that is in things." The "splendor of the world," he adds, "is a cipher, a revelation, an unveiling, the presence of one who is not seen, touched, grasped, put in a genus, distinguished by a difference, yet is present."<sup>34</sup> It is what we feel is missing when scientists say "the moon is just earth and clouds are just water." He



also observed that while the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has grown familiar with the horizon of intellectual theory, both the East and the Christian West in prior centuries have been familiar with the horizon of transcendence.<sup>35</sup> Still, an artist does not have to believe in God to believe in the *question* about such ultimates. Lonergan regards art as an element of meaning, but only on the potential level. It is open to a variety of interpretations, capable of shaping new realities, suggestive of good things and worthy enterprises, and available as an instrument for other ends.<sup>36</sup> But these are expansions of the potentials first felt directly as symbols in consciousness. As potential meaning, then, art's essential function is to pose questions, not fix answers.

Painting is not a satisfying experience. Artists are typically a frustrated lot. The temptation is to push for perfection past the point of a transcendent suggestiveness – the point where you don't know what to do next because every stroke you consider imposes a literalness, a knowing certainty about an experience that eludes understanding. So there is always a gap between the virtual space in the painting and the aesthetic pattern of experience on which the painting is based. Some artists will read this as the absence of desirable qualities and press on to gild the lily, usually relying on unnoticed criteria. Others will see a virtual space whose incompleteness points to the 'plus' in things and stirs up a thirst for this 'plus' in their viewers. Artists who are familiar with the realm of transcendence recognize this gap in themselves and aim to alert their viewers to it.

### **The unwanted image**

A critical-practical method among artists and critics would also recognize the phenomenon of the unwanted image. When artists lay down their brushes, step back, and ask themselves "Is this any *good*?" they are not asking the typical moral question. Plenty of artworks carry a moral message, but ordinary ethics can be called upon to judge these messages.

What concerns the artist – as artist – is not primarily the painting's message or its use, but whether it actually draws viewers to explore their purely experiential patterns. Since these are the patterns borne by symbols in consciousness, the worth of a piece of art will depend on the integrity of the symbol: How clear is it that *these* feelings go with *those* images? Suzanne Langer puts it like this: If "art is the envisagement of feeling," then this envisagement "may be interfered with by emotions which are not formed and recognized, but affect the imagination of other subjective experience." She agrees with R. G. Collingwood: "A bad work of art is an activity in which the agent tries to express a given emotion, but fails."<sup>37</sup> Both focus on the "candor" of

the symbol, which I take to mean how effectively the image on the canvas conveys a specific, distinguishable cluster of emotions in the viewer.

But neither philosopher explores, as Lonergan has, the several ways that an art piece can be wrecked because the artist refused to explore a prior image in consciousness. Artists often spend months waiting for the muse to conjure up an arresting image, so it may come as a surprise to learn that there are appropriate images available that they scorn for no good reason. Lonergan has analyzed this phenomenon under the rubric of "the unwanted insight"<sup>38</sup> and has explained the workings of four different biases – neurosis, egotism, group-centered bias, and a bias against the thorough explanation. But since insights pivot on images, for our purposes we can extend his analysis to reveal four ways in which we really do not want an image.

1. Neurosis works by repressing an original image and replacing it with a counterfeit.<sup>39</sup> A virtual space may convey an artist's frank feelings effectively, but it may still be "dishonest" in the sense that the image in the artist's original glimpse remains a secret. Masochistic and sentimental works often present just such masquerading images. Since the discovery of Style and, following on its heels, the discovery of the unconscious, many artists mined their personal dreams and fantasies without any concern that a neurosis may be fooling them. The Expressionist James Ensor (d. 1949) and the Surrealist Salvadore Dali (d. 1989) laid bare their souls as if self-transcendence should be equated with frank revelation of every image, no matter how weird.



2. The egotist-artist knowingly favors images that might enhance a reputation or income and shrewdly turns a blind eye to less advantageous inspirations. True, most artists appreciate the gentle erosion of the ego that comes with maintaining friendships, but they also feel the baser human desires to have clout in the lives of others and to maximize their standard of living – desires symbolized by blatant images that can overpower the subtler images of using the mind and heart in self-transcending ways.

3. One's community allegiances will not only suppress sympathetic images of some other community whose well-being is alien to one's own; it can surreptitiously promote those handed-down images that reinforce a community's irrational attitudes. Discernment of images is more difficult here than in egotism because of an interesting reversal of the role of affection: Where affections and camaraderie tend to starve egotism, they feed group loyalty. An individual's grudges need "nursing," we say, to withstand the weaning effect of fellowship, but the grudges of a fellowship are badges of honor.

4. The bias against complete explorations always threatens to cut short the tedious work of artistic exploring in favor of some easier diversion. Artists trying to explore uncharted spiritual waters constantly hear the Sirens' call to pull ashore and relax. Why ply the turbulent river of self-transcendence when self-contentment is so pleasant?

### ***Critical-Practical Method Today***

Our concern about narrow horizons and unwanted images applies to the string of critics as well as to the artist. Voyeur critics will praise the fantasies of exhibitionist artists, both of them oblivious of the heart's transcendent impulses. Even highly ethical critics may have the benefit of the viewer in mind, but to the degree that they are unfamiliar with the compromises that love demands and the joys that love delivers, they have no store of the psychic symbols of the fruits of love – being patient and kind, etc.<sup>40</sup> They will regard the artist's emotions as idiosyncrasies rather than noble achievements available to all. The virtual space they see is nothing like what the critic in love sees.

On the other hand, critics who know what it means to discern among inspirations<sup>41</sup> will carefully savor how they experience the works they review. In a painting designed merely to sell, they will see not a beauty-alerting virtual space but just evidence of a psyche that lacks this discernment. In a painting that portrays a fresh attitude toward a familiar subject, they will experience the birth of a new symbol that will shape how they see the world. In both cases, they will help their readers see the difference.

Today's critics note how 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists have explored the unconscious, the grotesque, the abstract structures of reality, the superficiality of posters, and the hardware of a technological age. Many of these artists were educated through textbooks that trace the development of art as a succession of new art forms, and, as a result, they tend to imagine themselves as latter-day inventors hoping to discover some newer form yet. But art is not about discovering new

and exciting ways to paint. Art expresses the attitudes of men and women who experience inner invitations to deal with their present worlds in a real and caring manner. Artists face the moral work of discriminating among inspirations in order to become more authentic persons – just like everyone else.

So what is needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a theory of aesthetics that envisions the artist's work as the honest exploration of the soul for the sake of sharing. Artists should abandon hope of discovering new forms. Let new forms appear as happy by-products of expressing symbols that reveal dimensions of present experience that cannot be put into words. The main critical task will be to develop an ordinary way of talking about each other's horizons that doesn't belittle but rather assists. If we are going to promote an environment in which artists welcome negative judgments and critics "criticize" in constructive terms, we need to get beyond the 20th-century competitive assumptions about unique styles and talk as though art were an exploration we carry out together.

Because we viewers are part of this joint exploration of soul, we should allow the same room for new symbols in our consciousness as the artist and critic do. After all, everyone carries a baggage of repression, suppression, and lopsided development. But if the willingness to explore is there, good art can be a lamp unto our eyes.



First-hand experience of this illumination is available at our local art museum. If we stop at a painting that grabs our attention, we might notice the difference between the design of the painting and the design of the virtual space it creates. We might notice how the virtual space completely dominates our sense of what we're looking at, so that it's impossible to think of the painting as just paint. We might notice how unified everything is in that virtual image. No

details distract us from the whole, and our many feelings about the image are all of a piece. As we stand there in that virtual space, we might contemplate this: An artist is talking to us, talking about extending our spirits in a realm where speech fails. At the same time, our admiration doesn't want to stop. The symbolic operator has planted in our hearts a question about the 'plus' of reality. Our feelings of hope and transcendence are the reason for this art. We are being addressed, and not only by the artist. We are experiencing, first-hand, without insight or judgment, nature's potential in us for its furthest

reach. Then, if we go outside and look around, we may realize, as if for the first time, that the world itself is an invitation.<sup>42</sup>

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- 1 Reported in *The New Yorker*, February 9, 1998, p. 40.
- 2 My personal discoveries of what I do when I paint has been guided mainly by a lecture on art by Bernard Lonergan, which he delivered in 1959 at Xavier University, Cincinnati. Typescript of this lecture appears in Lonergan's *Topics in Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 208-232. It has also been guided by René Huyghe's *Art and the Spirit of Man* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1962). Lonergan referred to the original 1960 French version in "The Analogy of Meaning" (1963). See R.C. Croken and F.E. Crowe, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1958-1964*, volume 6 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 191.
- 3 Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1931), 63
- 4 *Topics in Education*, 214.
- 5 See *Topics in Education*, 188; *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 29; *Insight*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1957) 181 ff.
- 6 Here I am developing Lonergan's point: "According to the Aristotelian axiom, sense in act is the sensible in act." *Topics in Education*, 215-216.
- 7 *Topics in Education*, 214. See also, *Insight*, 546. Lonergan also referred to a "symbolic operator that correlates neural potentialities and needs with higher goals through its control over the emergence of images and affects." See "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 12 (1994), 134. Curiously, Lonergan refers to this as a "quasi-operator" in *Mission and the Spirit*. See Frederick Crowe, ed., *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 29.
- 8 Betty Edwards, in her *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (New York: J.P. Tarcher / St. Martin's Press, 1979), draws on the bicameral theory of brain activity and her own teaching experience to propose that the right side of the brain specializes in symbolic and imaginal apprehension while the left side specializes in conceptual and logical apprehension.
- 9 Here I am at variance with the philosopher Susanne Langer and, I believe, in line with Lonergan. Langer takes the art piece to be the symbol, with feelings being the data of consciousness represented by it. Lonergan distinguishes between the art piece (an objectification of a purely experiential pattern of both feelings and images) and the affect-laden images ("symbols") it reflects. For Lonergan, the meaning of a symbol "has its proper context in the process of internal communication in which it occurs, and it is to that context with its associated images and feelings, memories and tendencies that the interpreter has to appeal if he would explain the symbol." (*Method in Theology*, 67) See Langer's *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1953), 40.
- 10 For Lonergan's explanation of how symbols function in consciousness, see *Method in Theology*, 64-69.
- 11 *Topics in Education*, 217. See also page 211 (and *Method in Theology*, p. 61) where Lonergan reflects on what he names as Langer's definition of art as the

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- “objectification of a purely experiential pattern.” Oddly, neither Lonergan nor Langer explicitly defines art in these exact terms.
- 12 Cited by Roger Lipsey, *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 310.
- 13 Lonergan (*Topics in Education*, 211) credits Langer here (*Feeling and Form*). Langer, following Cassirer, distinguishes symbols and signals to make the same point. She defines art as the “creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (40). The purpose of art, she says, “is to objectify the life of feeling ” (374). “That life of feeling is a stream of tensions and resolutions. Probably all emotion, all feeling tone, mood, even personal ‘sense of life’ or ‘sense of identity’ is a specialized and intricate, but definite interplay of tensions – actual, nervous and muscular tensions taking place in a human organism” (372).
- 14 Langer, 83.
- 15 Page 37
- 16 *Method in Theology*, pp 185-196
- 17 In a legendary story about Picasso, he told some collectors that certain works attributed to him were not “originals.” It was only after they sold these works at some financial loss that they discovered that he did paint them, but that he felt he was copying himself.
- 18 Notice that Lonergan seems to locate the transcendental notion of beauty at the first level of consciousness: “Indeed, so intimate is the relationship between the successive transcendental notions, that it is only by a specialized differentiation of consciousness that we withdraw from more ordinary ways of living to devote ourselves to a moral pursuit of goodness, a philosophical pursuit of truth, a scientific pursuit of understanding, an artistic pursuit of beauty.” *Method in Theology*, 13.
- 19 “Some Distinctive Features of Arguments Used in Criticism,” in Morris Weitz, ed., *Problems in Aesthetics*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 850-863, at 860.
- 20 Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 17. Also: “With the discovery of this hidden unity, of course, it is at once appreciated as an immediate and self-explanatory truth. This objective truth, . . . does not exist for man until it is seen and known and designated by a word; . . . Of course the Homeric man had a body exactly like the later Greeks, but he did not know it *qua* body, but merely as the sum total of his limbs.” 8
- 21 Egyptian wall paintings, for a good example, never show feet from the front, always the side. While it is true that sculpture forces an artist to see a limb from all sides, it is quite another achievement to portray these limbs are governed by a body headed somewhere.
- 22 See Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” in Morris Weitz, ed., *op. cit.* (note 19) 110-118.
- 23 Well-preserved evidence of how purposefully this shift was implemented can be found in the foundational texts of the Society of Jesus, founded in 1556 by Ignatius Loyola, who studied at the University of Paris. To this day, Jesuit novices are taught to “see God in all things.” They must undergo

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- "experiments" – learning the meaning of charity and poverty through doing. They are taught a method of prayer called "application of the senses" whose aim is to gain a real assent to the historical events of Christ's life. The uniquely Ignatian definition of "contemplation" means to visualize a historical event for the sake of seeing God at work on earth – the same exercise that Giotto aimed to facilitate.
- 24 This is Lonergan's interpretation of the Thomistic synthesis. See "The Natural Desire to See God" (1949) in F.E. Crowe, *Collection* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967), 88 and 84.
- 25 The ideal of a unified virtual space could not have been achieved without Giotto's (d. 1337) discovery of how volumes can be represented, Brunelleschi's (d.1446) discovery of perspective, and van Eyck's (d.1444) own development of painting with oil to depict the gradual shading of something round – all of which make the illusion of figures at different depths possible.
- 26 *Art and the Spirit of Man*, 438
- 27 Ibid. 424
- 28 For this history, see E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (New York: Phaidon, 12<sup>th</sup> edition, 1972) 375-394.
- 29 Roger Lipsey, in his *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, (*op. cit.*) finds high spiritual intentions among 20<sup>th</sup> century "abstract" artists. While their intentions may be lofty, their philosophical idealism has led many of them to reject recognizable material realities as capable of conveying transcendent meaning.
- 30 Lonergan also calls this method of scrutinizing consciousness for limited horizons, *praxis*. It "starts from the assumption that authenticity cannot be taken for granted." See his "The Ongoing Genesis of Methods" in *A Third Collection*, p. 164 et passim.
- 31 I rely here on Lonergan's distinction between three kinds of differences – genetic, complementary and dialectical. See *Method in Theology*, 236.
- 32 *I Like What I Know* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
- 33 I realize that Lonergan discusses dialectically different horizons in terms of conversion, but I feel that the term too easily connotes a sudden, transforming event, particularly to readers less familiar with Lonergan. I prefer to pursue the question of dialectical differences as a matter of available questions. That being said, to my mind, a critical-practical method is essential for any artist or critic, which requires an intellectual conversion. Also, because the meaning of art is mainly potential, I currently find it difficult to distinguish between moral, religious and affective conversions and so have thought it better to cast the issue in terms of a more undifferentiated "transcendent" meaning.
- 34 *Topics in Education*, 222.
- 35 See *Method in Theology*, 266
- 36 Here I am spelling out Lonergan's view that potential meaning is open to formal meaning, to actual meaning, to effective meaning and to instrumental



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meaning, and that these are expansions of the potentials directly felt as symbols in consciousness. See *Method in Theology*, index, "Elements of meaning."

37 Quotes from Langer's *Feeling and Form* in this paragraph are taken from pp 380-381.

38 See *Insight*, 193.

39 Note that what is inhibited in a neurosis is the image, not the affect. Therapists who have this backward encourage their patients to "be uninhibited" with their feelings, without ever identifying the inhibited image which, linked to an inappropriate affect, can easily switch to a different and more socially acceptable affect and just give the old neurosis a face-lift.

40 1 Corinthians 13. Van Gogh's "plus," for example, was entirely misunderstood by several of his major critics, according to Clifford Edwards. See his *Van Gogh and God* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1989).

41 I have retrieved guidelines for this practice from the works of Ignatius Loyola. See my *Spiritual Exercises for Today*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 161-175.

42 I have conceived of this article as a contribution to the functional speciality, Foundations, inasmuch as I propose an intentionality analysis of the aesthetic pattern of experience and an account of the objectivity of artistic value judgments. My sketch of how the idea of ideals in art has evolved represents a brief venture into the specialty, History. My hope is that anyone offering guidelines on art and art criticism (Principles/Doctrines) and suggesting proposals for ongoing development of good art (Policies/Systematics) would rely on these foundational elements. Likewise, these reflections may promote an understanding of particular art pieces (Interpretation), a reasonable location of their place within a school or movement (History), and a responsible assessment of their value (Dialectics).