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Writing about Art

WHY WRITE?

We write about art in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us. And so writing is a way of learning. The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings—and works of art, as well as responses to them, embody complex thoughts and feelings—but when we write we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about our responses. We learn, and then we hope to interest our reader because we are communicating our responses to material that for one reason or another is worth talking about.

But to respond sensitively to anything and then to communicate responses, we must have some understanding of the thing, and we must have some skill at converting responses into words. This book tries to help you to deepen your understanding of art—what art does and the ways in which it does it—and it also tries to help you transform your responses into words that will let your reader share your perceptions, your enthusiasms, and even your doubts. This sharing is, in effect, teaching. Students often think that they are writing for the teacher, but this is a misconception; when you write, *you* are the teacher. An essay on art is an attempt to help someone to see the work as you see it.

THE WRITER'S AUDIENCE

If you are not writing for the teacher, for whom are you writing? For yourself, of course, but also for an audience that you must imagine. All writers need to imagine some sort of audience—high school students or lawyers or readers of *Time* or professors of art history—and the needs of one imagined audience are not the same as the needs of another. That is, writers must imagine their audience so that they can decide how much information to give and how much can be taken for granted.

In general, think of your audience as your classmates. If you keep your classmates in mind as your audience, you will not write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a famous Italian painter,” because such a remark offensively implies that the reader does not know Leonardo’s nationality or trade. You might, however, write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a Florentine by birth,” because it’s your hunch that your classmates do *not* know that Leonardo was born in Florence, as opposed to Rome or Venice. And you *will* write, “John Butler Yeats, the expatriate Irish painter who lived in New York,” because you are pretty sure that only specialists know about Yeats. Similarly, you will not explain that the Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus, but you probably will explain that St. Anne was the mother of Mary.

THE FUNCTION OF CRITICAL WRITING

In everyday language the most common meaning of criticism is “finding fault,” and to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting matters going on in the work of art. In the following statement W. H. Auden suggests that criticism is most useful when it calls our attention to things worth attending to. He is talking about works of literature, but we can easily adapt his words to the visual arts.

What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:

1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
4. Give a “reading” of a work which increases my understanding of it.
5. Throw light upon the process of artistic “Making.”
6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.

The Dyer's Hand

(New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 8–9

The emphasis on observing, showing, illuminating suggests that the function of critical writing is not very different from the common view of the function of literature or art. The novelist Joseph Conrad said that his aim was “before all, to make you *see*,” and the painter Ben Shahn said that in his paintings he wanted to get right the difference between the way a cheap coat and an expensive coat hung.

Take Auden’s second point, that a good critic can convince us—show us—that we have undervalued a work. Most readers can probably draw on their own experiences for confirmation. Still, an example may be useful. Rembrandt’s self-portrait with his wife (p. 4), now in Dresden, strikes many viewers as one of his least attractive pictures: The gaiety seems forced, the presentation a bit coarse and silly. Paul Zucker, for example, in *Styles in Painting*, finds it “over-hearty,” and John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, says that “the painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter’s good fortune, prestige, and wealth. (In this case Rembrandt’s own.) And like all such advertisements it is heartless.” But some scholars have pointed out, first, that this picture may be a representation of the Prodigal Son, in Jesus’ parable, behaving riotously, and, second, that it may be a profound representation of one aspect of Rembrandt’s marriage. Here is Kenneth Clark on the subject:



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Saskia*, ca. 1635. Oil on canvas, 5'4" × 4'4". Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

The part of jolly toper was not in his nature, and I agree with the theory that this is not intended as a portrait group at all, but as a representation of the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance. A tally-board, faintly discernible on the left, shows that the scene is taking place in an inn. Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed, and Saskia is enduring her ordeal with complete detach-

ment—even a certain hauteur. But beyond the ostensible subject, the picture may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters, and if she was going to insist on her higher social status, he would discover within himself a certain convivial coarseness.

An Introduction to Rembrandt

(New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 73

After reading these words we may find that the appeal of the picture grows. Clark does not, of course, present an airtight case—one rarely can present such a case when writing about art—but notice that he does more than merely express an opinion or report a feeling. He offers evidence (the tally-board, and the observation that no other picture shows Rembrandt so “deboshed”), and the evidence is sufficiently strong to make us take another look at the picture. After looking again, we may come to feel that we have undervalued the picture.

A SAMPLE ESSAY

Kenneth Clark’s paragraph, quoted a moment ago, comes from one of his two books on Rembrandt. Clark’s audience was not limited to art historians, but it was, of course, limited to the sort of person who might read a book about Rembrandt. The following essay on Jean-François Millet’s *The Gleaners*, written by Robert Herbert, was originally a note in the catalog issued in conjunction with the art exposition at the Canadian World’s Fair, Expo 67. Herbert’s audience thus is somewhat wider and more general than Clark’s. Given his audience, Herbert reasonably offers not a detailed study of one aspect of the painting, say, its composition; rather, he performs most of the services that on page 3 Auden says a critic can perform. In this brief essay, in fact, Herbert skillfully sets forth material that might have made half a dozen essays: Millet’s life, the background of Millet’s thought, Millet’s political and social views, the composition of *The Gleaners*, Millet’s depiction of peasants, Millet’s connection with later painters. But the aim is always to make us see. In *The Gleaners* Millet tried to show us certain things, and now Robert Herbert tries to show us—tries to make us see—what Millet was doing and how he did it.

Millet's *The Gleaners*

Robert Herbert

Jean-François Millet, born of well-to-do Norman peasants, began his artistic training in Cherbourg. In 1837 he moved to Paris where he lived until 1849, except for a few extended visits to Normandy. With the sounds of the Revolution of 1848 still rumbling, he moved to Barbizon on the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau, already noted as a resort of landscape painters, and there he spent the rest of his life. One of the major painters of what came to be called the Barbizon School, Millet began to celebrate the labors of the peasant, granting him a heroic dignity which expressed the aspirations of 1848. Millet's identification with the new social ideals was a result not of overtly radical views, but of his instinctive humanitarianism and his rediscovery in actual peasant life of the eternal rural world of the Bible and of Virgil, his favorite reading since youth. By elevating to a new prominence the life of the common people, the revolutionary era released the stimulus which enabled him to continue this essential pursuit of his art and of his life.

The Gleaners, exhibited in the Salon of 1857, presents the very poorest of the peasants who are fated to bend their backs to gather with clubbed fingers the wisps of overlooked grain. That they seem so entirely wedded to the soil results from the perfect harmony of Millet's fatalistic view of man with the images which he created by a careful disposition of lines, colors, and shapes. The three women are alone in the bronzed stubble of the foreground, far removed from the bustling activity of the harvesters in the distance, the riches of whose labors have left behind a few gleanings. Millet has weighted his figures ponderously downward, the busy harvest scene is literally above them, and the high horizon line which the taller woman's cap just touches emphasizes their earth-bound role, suggesting that the sky is a barrier which presses down upon them, and not a source of release.

The humility of primeval labor is shown, too, in the creation of primitive archetypes rather than of individuals. Introspection such as that seen in Velázquez' *Water Carrier of Seville*, in which the three men are distinct individuals, is denied by suppressing the gleaners' features, and where the precise, fingered gestures of La Tour's *Saint Jerome* bring his intellectual work toward his sensate mind, Millet gives his women clublike hands which reach away from their bent bodies toward the earth.



Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 32⁷/₈" × 43¹/₄". The Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

It was, paradoxically, the urban-industrial revolution in the nineteenth century which prompted a return to images of the pre-industrial, ageless labors of man. For all their differences, both Degas and Van Gogh were to share these concerns later, and even Gauguin was to find in the fishermen of the South Seas that humble being, untainted by the modern city, who is given such memorable form in Millet's *Gleaners*.

In this essay there is, of course, **evaluation**, or judgment, as well as analysis of what is going on in the painting. First, the writer judged Millet's picture to be worth talking about. Second, in his essay he explicitly praises some of its qualities ("perfect harmony," "memorable form"); but note that most of the evaluation is implicit in and subordinate to the **analysis** of what the writer sees. (For the moment we can define analysis as the separation of the whole into its

parts; the second chapter of this book is devoted to the topic.) The essayist sees things and calls them to our attention as worthy of note. He points out the earthbound nature of the women, the difference between their hands and those of Saint Jerome (in another picture that was in the exhibition), the influence of the Bible and of Virgil, and so forth. It is clear that he values the picture, and he states some of the reasons he values it; but he is not worried about whether Millet is a better artist than Velázquez, or whether this is Millet's best painting. He is content to help us see what is going on in the picture.

Or at least he seems to be content to help us see. In fact, of course, Herbert is advancing a **thesis**, an argument—in this case, that the picture celebrates the heroic dignity of the peasant. He tries to *persuade* us that what he sees is what is going on. And he sees with more than his eyes: Memories, emotions, and value systems help him to see, and his skill as a writer helps him to persuade us of the accuracy of his report. If he wants to convince us and to hold our interest, he has to do more than offer random perceptions; he has to present his perceptions coherently.

It is not enough for writers to see things and to report to readers what they have seen. Writers have to present their material in an orderly fashion, so that readers can take it in, and can follow a developing argument. In short, writers must organize their material. Let's look for a moment at the **organization**, or plan, of this essay. In his effort to help us see what is going on, the author keeps his eye on his subject.

1. The opening paragraph includes a few details (e.g., the fact that Millet was trained in Cherbourg) that are not strictly relevant to his main point (the vision embodied in the picture), but that must be included because the essay is not only a critical analysis of the picture but an informative headnote in a catalog of an exhibition of works by more than a hundred artists. Even in this preliminary biographical paragraph the writer moves quickly to the details closely related to the main business: Millet's peasant origin, his early association with landscape painters, his humanitarianism, and his reading of the Bible and Virgil.

2. The second paragraph takes a close look at some aspects of the picture (the women's hands, their position in the foreground, the harvesters above and behind them, the oppressive sky), and the third paragraph makes illuminating comparisons with two other

paintings in the exhibition. (A good description—one that catches the individuality of a particular work—almost always makes use of comparisons.)

3. The last paragraph, like most good concluding paragraphs, while recapitulating the main point (the depiction of ageless labors), enlarges the vision by including references to Millet's younger contemporaries who shared his vision. Notice that this new material does not leave us looking forward to another paragraph but neatly opens up, or enriches, the matter and then turns it back to Millet. (For additional remarks on introductory and concluding paragraphs, see pp. 136–138)

SOME KINDS OF ESSAYS

Most of this book will be devoted to writing about what we perceive when we look closely at a work of art, but it is worth noting that other kinds of writing can also help a reader to see (and therefore to understand better) a work of art. For example, one might discuss not a single picture but, say, a motif: Why does the laborer become a prominent subject in nineteenth-century European painting? Or how does the theme of leisure differ between eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century painting; that is, what classes are depicted, how aware of each other are the figures in a painting, what are the differences in the settings and activities—and why?

Such discussions of subject matter may be largely **social history**, and the esthetic qualities of the works of art may be of minor importance. Thus, a social historian's analysis of French "Orientalist" paintings—pictures of the Middle East by such artists as Delacroix and Gérôme—might concentrate on the ways in which these paintings depict not simply the Middle East, but also the European colonialist's view that the Middle East is a place of barbarism and corruption that is badly in need of European law and order and decency. (Marxist scholars especially see works of art as products that themselves do some sort of work. This work usually is the reinforcement of the ideology of the class that produced the works. In reading a discussion of this sort, one sometimes has the uneasy feeling that the writer began with a political thesis about society, and

