

On Quality, Art Historically Considered

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Judging contemporary art is a particularly tricky business. Ruskin, Diderot, and Goethe, all aesthetically aware men, were, however, particularly unreliable guides to the art of their own times. John Ruskin could unreservedly admire a meticulously illusionistic painting of a loyal dog. The sophisticated Denis Diderot was deeply touched by paintings of remorseful long-haired girls. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who opined that “visual art has the great advantage [over poetry] that it is objective and attracts us without exciting our feelings too violently,”¹ never really fathomed Romanticism in visual art. Their patterns of seeing remained distinctly literary, a bias that has long been ingrained in western criticism. As men of letters they either never fully learned to relish the pure sense of sight, or at least their acute verbal skill remained largely detached from the experience of looking at pictures. Even when Ruskin championed the work of Turner, he may have been admiring the artist more than the art, and within the oeuvre, he admired the more conservative work.

Nevertheless, Ruskin’s admiration for Tintoretto, Diderot’s for Barocci, and Goethe’s for Rogier van der Weyden (even if he thought he was looking at Jan van Eyck), remain persuasive and were not utterly commonplace opinions. In literature and music, too, time tends to sift out some of the chaff, to erase some of the favors worked by chance or idle fashion, the distortions of the period lens. In his 1528 book, *il Cortegiano*, Baldassare Castiglione already commented on how the passage of time serves to filter out poor judgment. He even suggests that the respect paid to the ancients is due to that very filtering process more than to the inherent excellence of ancient culture.

One of the pleasures of art history is discovering works which have long been overlooked, works worth special attention now even if they didn’t meet with particular acclaim in their own time or seal their bargain with posterity by operating as beacons for successive generations. They can be rescued now either by appearing unexpectedly to exemplify their time when we set about remolding our period concepts or, more intriguingly, by becoming visible to us as little islands of excellence off the mainland of period style, as verifications of how isolated individuals can accomplish extraordinary feats which their contemporaries fail to heed properly. Jean-Étienne Liotard belongs to his time without exemplifying it. Joseph Wright of Derby, Lorenzo Lotto, and Piero della Francesca likewise look more stellar now than they did to their contemporaries, and they do so because they have acquired legitimacy as outliers. On the other hand, many are the nameless craftsmen whose carvings and embroideries now look precious to our machine-age eyes, but were once taken utterly for granted as the chores expected of illiterate members of the working class. They made what was expected, and it has taken the passage of time for those old standards of expectation themselves to seem admirable. One of civilization’s best conversations is with its own past, registering the fading authority of what once seemed obviously deserving as well as the dawning prominence of what has long been slighted. Much of what is new lies in our varying approach to the past: the history of creativity teaches this lesson over and over.

In a kind of reverse-conservatism, the history of art has long tended to take the easy way out by acclaiming influential artists, rather than by grappling directly with the question of excellence. It seems that with fame as with wealth, unto him that hath shall be given: no one need be ashamed of admiring Raphael or Picasso. On the other hand, the task of judging quality in the history of art is shortchanged if we settle for counting influence as the only, or even the primary, measure of greatness. In politics such an approach might leave us admiring Napoleon, for instance. There has been some corrective in the form of a general search for works by female artists (almost all artists used to come from disadvantaged backgrounds). Sometimes this is complicated: Rachael Ruysch became wealthy by painting marvelous still lifes in the years directly after the aging Rembrandt had struggled in poverty. Now she is treated as an overlooked artist. Still, the question remains of assessing which works are the best in their respective categories, whether the category is determined by period or nationality, by genre or by the artist’s gender, sexual orientation, or race, or alternatively, simply by medium. The whole category of ‘art’ is too vast for ranking to be meaningful.

The question of quality, complicated before the twentieth century, became a conundrum afterwards. As defining the very category of art became a battleground, questions of judging quality came to seem unanswerable, possibly irrelevant. One objective of many twentieth-century artists was to make works incommensurate with that of the Old Masters and their predecessors, a tendency sometimes glossed

as a sort of neo-medievalism. Artists since the Renaissance deliberately strove to make commensurable works, to compete against the best previous works of art and to surpass them.

Picasso redefined the basic project of art while retaining the idea of genius as developed during Romanticism; Duchamp challenged even the idea of genius, substituting pure intellect. Now the art museum has become a primary field of competition for contemporary work. It sells to the ticket-buying public works whose significance often includes their unsuitability for the traditional art market. Yet even Banksy manages to make appearances at auctions. In general the value of contemporary art is assessed by the reputation of the artist, as measured by exhibitions, auction records, and prestigious grants and residencies. Instead of quality we speak of price or reputation (the mask behind which lies price). It is all a bit like real estate, where bathrooms and fireplaces are counted rather than design.

Over the centuries, our vocabulary has hemmed us in. Classical and anti-classical, Realist, Mannerist, and, within recent memory, absorptive—how unwieldy these verbal tools have proven! The complex stuff of creativity resists being neatly sorted. When we speak of the value of a work of art, how do we distinguish between current market value and something less tangible but arguably more reliable? We need a verbal nuance analogous to the *sapere/conoscere, wissen/kennen* distinction: real value/market value. But what is “real” value? It cannot be found in the estimate provided by the auction house. The “real” or inherent value, the excellence, the many-people-thick judgment of a work of art (of which Kenneth Clark used to speak) ought to supersede the vagaries of the market, as well as personal taste, popular taste, period taste, and cultural biases. The skeptic will tell us that no such purity of apprehension is achievable, that there is no metre to measure the visual power of works of art apart from the social, economic, or intellectual power of those who notice and praise the work. When we speak of some criterion other than our personal taste, it is merely this that we salute, or so the argument goes. Either we defer to authority and adhere to a community of taste, or we stick to what we know we like, even if we recognize that our personal preferences need have no validity for others. The compromise position is to accept popular taste and tinge it with some slight personal twist—a practice most of us follow in our mass-market, off-the-rack clothing, and which is easily adapted for the museum-attendance which constitutes the standard vehicle for the expression of one’s personal artistic taste. If we want to avoid herd behavior without turning our backs on sharing cultural values, a better strategy is needed.

Romantic artists first toyed with our expectation that art ought to be beautiful by making, on occasion, ghastly or sublime works. By then, ‘beautiful’ had become a limiting word. Chafing under the constraining goal of beauty produced wonders such as Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanopolis* (1827), gloriously, ravishingly decadent and luxurious, though scarcely beautiful. Similarly, revulsion against the criterion of “valuable” eventually inspired the conceptual parts of twentieth-century art. If the mid-nineteenth century taught us not to expect art to be beautiful, and the twentieth to associate the experience of art with incongruousness rather than *concininitas*, or with quirkiness in place of genius, the twenty-first century has required us to ask about the value of art as a whole, rather than of particular artworks.

The meta-question of the value of art wasn’t asked until art became, in many instances, unsaleable, deliberately beyond the clutches of commerce, and, with paradoxical concurrence, super-saleable, astronomical in cost. We have seen a room in lower Manhattan filled—rather marvelously, if temporarily—with dirt, and a single drawing sold for \$48 million. The Renaissance public was impressed with a colossal statue; we are impressed with colossal auction results. Yet our being impressed raises at the same time the suspicion that we are acting like the Dutch with their tulips, that we lie in the grip of a mania. When Pliny wrote about works that were beyond price, he could not have imagined anything like a price in excess of \$90 million dollars for a work by a living and, moreover, a prolific artist. That is the consequence of a socio-economic structure that is out of whack. The middle class disappeared as a political force at roughly the same time as it stopped supporting artists and switched to supporting museums, the clubs of the super-rich. Art reflects society, regardless of whether it also comments on it.

One way to evaluate the relative success of works of visual art is to compare them to what they were at least indirectly modeled on: historically speaking, to nature, poetry, or to music. The prolonged dominance of classicizing style can be explained by its appealing to all three criteria. The Greeks weren’t bothered about issues of aesthetic judgment: proportionality and symmetry were the principles derived from the human body, understood as the essence of nature, which yielded harmony and completeness, or what the Romans would term *concininitas*. Music, poetry, visual art, and architecture were all compatible with the beauty of the human body which, at its most ideal, was divine, for the gods were simply taller and more beautiful. The column, in its various orders, abstractly represented the human body, male for Doric and female for Ionic and Corinthian. The proportions underlying musical tonality similarly accorded with the idea of a finite and regular cosmos. The Greeks already intuited, as Goethe would later claim, that architecture was frozen music. The stage was set for a society that valued art without requiring its creation by geniuses.

If the seeds of aesthetic debate were there, they lay in issues such as the degree of ornament suitable for a people who disdained Persian levels of opulence. Aristotle had already squelched Plato's attempt to raise qualms about imitations of imitations by asserting that to imitate was essential to being human. And centuries before that, the Greeks had earned the admiration of future generations for the unpretentious beauty of their functional pots, glorying in their shapes no less than their decoration. The technical innovation of the potter's wheel had been put to judicious use.

Imitating nature—more precisely, the most beautiful aspects of nature—seemed for centuries to offer a permanent solution to the basic problem of art theory, until practice was sufficiently perfected that the theory buckled. When Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo were working simultaneously, no one could say which artist's work was most like nature; each seemed astonishingly so, in its own way. And so the idea of artistic genius began to take form, reaching its apogee during Romanticism (an apogee that coincided with the theme of the artist as a figure of suicidal despair — as Oscar Wilde would have Basil declare in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "It is better not to be different from one's fellows. The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play... we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly.")

The problem of individual style was born from success in imitating nature in the sixteenth century; mere technical prowess became a matter for disdain ever after, long before photography reduced the value of recording appearances. The artist became poet rather than craftsman, and poets are often melancholy. Craftsmen succeed, slowly and painstakingly; artists take risks and fail spectacularly. Their defeat became part of the story of creativity, particularly when the defeat was twisted into triumph by a subsequent generation's recognition that the failure was valiant and offered new possibilities. Rodin died in 1917; Henry Moore started studying art two years later. Both artists contributed to the process by which Michelangelo came to be revered as a figure who signified both defeat and triumph. The *Rondanini Pietà* on which he was working when he died, aged 89, was seen in the twentieth century as poignant, as re-defining the parameters of what could be considered as like the beautiful, its imperfection the apogee of a tormented genius's life.

Nineteenth-century realists used their perception of blemished nature as their norm, having been discouraged from their traditional rivalry with poetry, most notably by G.E. Lessing. In the sixteenth century, the artist's relationship to nature had been described like a goldsmith's to a gem, as the agent who framed nature flatteringly. Baroque artists raised questions about whether regularity was really the object of art at all. Modernists (Whistler, but more influentially Kandinsky) increasingly turned to music for a model. Tonality in music, as in painting, ultimately depended on sensory judgment rather than pure measurement. Aldous Huxley was prompted to think of music rather than the Bible when he looked at Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* in 1925 and deemed it "the best picture in the world: It is as though Bach had written the 1812 Overture." Huxley supposed that artistic quality lay in genuineness, in the maker's honesty toward himself, and he mistrusted public opinion except as sifted over the long run.

One of the oldest and most recalcitrant confusions in evaluating art has to do with the inference that the art expresses the artist's self and therefore if we admire the art we must admire the artist (though the converse holds no water at all). Always a fallacy, it nevertheless cloaked a truth: namely, that it can be easier to form an opinion about excellence in art than it is in life. When we meet someone we seldom trust our first impressions, strong as they may be. We hold that first impression in escrow while we wait for more evidence. Even the clever among us can overlook the worthiness of people around us, who may only shine in extremity. But meeting a great work of art for the first time, under conditions that do not undermine concentration, is likely to elicit a respectful response. Although not backed by experimental data, this premise nevertheless underlies our culture's devotion to fine art, i.e., the idea that fine art provides something deeply wide-ranging, deeply universal, provided that popular taste has not been utterly debased and that a basic open-mindedness prevails. Many aristocrats or well-born democrats of Enlightenment training have given generously to public collections in the belief that the art they loved would also benefit and be loved by their less-educated social underlings. Sometimes they stipulated free admission; they did not think of art as a leisure activity. In the words of Henry James in his essay, *The Art of Fiction*: "As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it." As in literature, sometimes with art. We may not all be in touch with reality, but we are all immersed in life. Like religion, art has been thought to reach across class lines, and indeed, to be justified partly because of that power. The problem is that works that are less than great may also elicit feelings of respect upon first meeting. That first reaction requires some tempering, whether by learning more about the work's art historical context or by letting gel some aggregate response from repeated viewings and by auxiliary viewers, a variety of people, spanning more than any one time and place. Fashions come and go, popular opinion may decry what later seems to have been worth revering; it takes more than one set of aesthetic approvals to validate excellence. Even dismissal of a work of art is more reliable if it is a judgment that can be repeated, both by ourselves and others. In this, art is like experimental science; the results should be repeatable.

We need to retain some doubt, some degree of discretion, about excellence only recently apprehended. That first flush of aesthetic enthusiasm has value, more so if the viewer has wide experience of looking at art. But even then it is a beginning rather than an end to the assessment of real value. The greatness of a work of art is paradoxically both obvious and easy to be mistaken about. No one should spend \$90 million dollars on a work of contemporary art, or \$450 million dollars on a work only recently hailed as important. As a child, my daughter had a strong preference for portraits that included small white dogs, and adults can be equally over-enthusiastic and in need of a cooling-down time. Although we are unlikely to fail to admire a great work of art to which we give our attention, we are likely to admire at first blush works that won't wear well. It takes time to be sure.

Not every significant work will affect every viewer, but the works of what we might call mighty or even majestic achievement will tend to command admiration from a great variety of viewers – whether chronologically, ethnically, or geopolitically various. One reason it is easier to recognize excellence in art is precisely because we do have the opportunity to expose the work to differing viewers, to read what people long dead had to say, whereas we often have to make up our minds about people much more abruptly – as is also the case with contemporary art. In both cases we have no more than a lifetime and often considerably less. The otium prized in antiquity is related to the breathing time we need for aesthetic judgment; Kant's theory of disinterest similarly implies a certain unrushed quality to the thought associated with judging works of art. Aesthetic judgment, being a kind of judgment that operates somewhere in the lee behind language, is particularly strained in a culture that never has the time to value time.

Does the work help us to think more clearly or more generously, or with more compassion and less sentimentality? Does it do so by freeing our minds rather than restricting them? Therein lies the value, rather than on the auction block. During the Middle Ages, art was treasure and was supposed to gleam; now our art need not gleam (popular as Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* is), but it should offer serious play for adults. As in the case of children and their toys, the slightest materials can yield most impressive results; complex works constructed by teams of laborers can be stiflingly overbearing. Whether the work does free our minds will depend in part on the significance assigned to it by the viewer. Because they were allied with various smallmindednesses which once passed for truth, some works lose value as the decades and centuries pass. Our history is littered with these. We need, both individually and collectively, to give ourselves time to become tired of a work, and then ask ourselves whether that tiredness derives from our own limitations, the work's, or possibly from the bloodletting of aesthetic experience in the modern world caused by reproductions. Josiah Wedgwood's mass-reproduced *Am I not a man and a brother?* medallion, praised for its political efficacy by Benjamin Franklin, was admirable when made and continues to be an image that evokes sympathy and sorrow – perhaps slightly complicated by the supplicant pose of the chained man. We would make it differently today, but it is those very differences that make history palpable to us. Although judgments about the quality of a work of art may prove mercurial, the work itself persists and its real value does too, if only we can manage to ascertain it. Some works of art offer as close as we can get to a steady beacon of something that is like our best experiences of nature, call it beauty or pure beingness; it is something that makes us content with our existence.

The value of a work lies in its shared intensity and its profundity. When the Ghost intones to Hamlet, "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/ Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,/ Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres..." he speaks to his son, to the theater audience, and to myriad future audiences and readers. He speaks to us all concerning the horrors we imagine lie ahead as we head toward death. The commonality of the experience correlated with the singularity of the stimulus makes for artistic excellence. An excellent work of art unites us as humans and makes us aware of our individuality, both; it helps us to feel kinship with the past and with the future, both, rather than marooned on the island of the present. A good critic is not one with better taste, but one whose balance of the communal to the personal is tipped slightly in favor of the communal, so that many people can agree with what that critic sees, and yet still see for themselves. A collector is one whose bent is in the opposite direction, stronger on the personal component. And a connoisseur is anyone who has a zeal for attentive looking. As another might have a sensitivity to words, so the connoisseur relishes and analyzes images. And what verbal memory is to the person of letters, so is visual memory to the connoisseur – necessary but not sufficient. The zest is primary.

Alberti analyzed a painting in terms of the drawn outline, the overall arrangement of parts or composition, and the reception of light, i.e., formally. William Morris thought mostly about the quality of life the maker had while working, i.e., efficiently. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued, materially, that our post-War culture was warped by the intervention of mass media. Already, though, Aristotle had understood that sharing deeply-felt emotion with a community of others was a basic human desideratum, and that doing so together, including under artificial or virtual conditions, was purifying.

Ever since we defined an artist as someone who works outside of norms, i.e., since Michelangelo, it has been difficult to agree on how to judge works of art. For centuries, academies of art held Raphael up as the paragon rather than Michelangelo, precisely because Raphael's

art told expressive stories according to widely recognized narrative criteria (e.g., variety, decorousness, naturalism, beauty, clarity). He satisfied critics of a literary bent. Didn't they try to improve their style as Raphael had his, by studying the best preceding works and assimilating lessons from those examples? When Joshua Reynolds announced his preference for Michelangelo, and Beethoven became the contemporary model of artistic genius, wildness became the new norm; we might even say anormality became the new norm. The cult of the avant-garde had its origins there, and it ended in the '60s, by which time the Establishment didn't command enough respect to make defying it worthwhile.

Popular theory now tells us that artists succeed when they develop a style to express their unique selves. Yet self often seems to morph into a shared identity, and pursuing one's own style can become a species of conformity over time. We grant celebrity status to just a few artists and then expect that they perform consistently, according to their branding. We then spread their works widely and thinly with the help of giclées and jpegs. The descendants of Pop Art supply our taste for conformity, an opposite to the sentimentality of the basically Romantic notion of autographic self-expression. We are trying both to have our cake and eat it. The mass media conditions a mass public to accept what the public institutions provide, and then measures in unassailable statistics the reactions of that public. This turns the art world into what is effectively a corporation, selling us a product approved by its board of trustees, themselves no doubt elite collectors.

We have made artists into the saints of secularism, and their works serve as relics. The point, however, is not to worship, nor to feel awe at prices, but thoroughly to feel (this may include laughter, of the wild kind). We must have emotions, not mere sniggers or adulation. We must have art that we don't merely walk by as the public files past the bier of an admired ruler, for the sake of having been there; an art before which we commune like Quakers, after which we are different, having been for a brief respite outside of our own little minds with their tried and true synapse habits.

The ultimate test of a good art is the people who have benefitted from living with it, and given the state of our society, we might well wonder whether we are not now badly in need of a better art tonic. Works of art, old and new, act as our spiritual parents and although our faults cannot all be laid at their feet, some of our dignity, as well as some of our modesty (provided we have either), can probably depend on our having some sense about art. We shape the world of art in which we live and it, in turn, molds us. The art need not be itself idealizing for its effect on us to be salubrious; merely reaching outside of ourselves in trying to grasp what works of art offer (for they should be challenging even if they are not meant to be confrontational) is to achieve a kind of ideal – the ideal of superseding one's own personal and cultural limitations.

If we succeed in adopting suitable art-parents, we can, like Socrates pursuing Beauty and Truth, recognize the result in our happiness. For good art has the potential to make us better people—more curious, thoughtful, observant, imaginative, knowledgeable, more conscious of our own limitations, or simply happier to be human. Judging art objectively requires not a set of rules but considerable forbearance. It requires exploring outside of our sticky selves, beyond the web of habitude. It is vital that we do so. Like nature, art now crucially needs our help.

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1 Goethe on Art, ed. John Gage (Berkeley, 1980), 74, letter of 1827.