

# AESTHETIC MEDITATIONS

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## On Painting

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### I

The plastic virtues, purity, unity and truth, hold nature subjugated at their feet.

In vain the rainbow is curved into shape, the seasons tremor, crowds rush towards death, science unmakes and remakes what already exists, worlds fade forever from our minds, our moving images keep recurring or reawaken their thoughtlessness, and the parades of colours, smells and sounds astonish us, before disappearing from nature.

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This monster of beauty is not eternal.

We know that the breath of our life and creativity had no beginning and will have no end, yet we conceive before all else the creation and the end of the world.

Meanwhile, too many painters still worship plants, stones, rivers and oceans, or mankind.

People quickly grow accustomed to being the slaves of mystery. And servitude eventually engenders gentle pastimes.

We let workers control the universe and gardeners show less deference to nature than artists do.

It is time for us to be the masters. Good intentions are no guarantee of victory.

On this side of eternity dance the mortal forms of love, and nature is the name that encapsulates their accursed discipline.

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The flame symbolises painting, and the three plastic virtues blaze radiantly.

The flame has a purity which brooks nothing foreign, and whatever it touches it cruelly turns into itself.

It has a magical unity which ensures that if ever it is divided, each new flame resembles the single original flame.

And it possesses the sublime, irrefutable truth of its light.

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Virtuous painters in this Western age contemplate their own purity in spite of natural forces.

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It is to forget everything after a period of study. And, for a pure artist to die, all his predecessors over the centuries would have had never to exist.

Painting, in the West, is becoming purer, with the ideal logic that the old masters have handed down to the new generations like the gift of life.

And that is all.

One lives in joy, another in suffering, some squander their inheritance, some grow rich, while still others have nothing but life.

And that is all.

You cannot carry your father's corpse around everywhere you go. You leave it behind, with all the other dead. And you remember him, you miss him, you speak of him admiringly. And, if you become a father, you cannot expect one of your children to carry your corpse around with him all his life.

But in vain do our feet leave the ground in which the dead repose.

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To contemplate purity is to baptise instinct, humanise art and deify the personality.

The root, stem and bloom of the lily show how purity rises to its symbolic flowering.

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All bodies are equal before light, and changes in them result from that luminous power which constructs as it pleases.

We do not know every colour, and each man invents new ones.

But a painter must first and foremost afford himself the sight of his own divinity, and the paintings he gives men to admire will allow them too, for a glorious moment, to exercise their own divinity.

To do this we must encompass past, present and future in a single glance.

The canvas must exhibit that essential unity which alone induces ecstasy.

No transient detail will then randomly lead us astray. We will not suddenly turn back. Free to watch as we please, we will not let our lives fall victim to curiosity. We will not let false appearances smuggle our statues of salt past the customs post of reason.

We will not wander into the unknown future which, separated from eternity, is no more than a word for leading man into temptation.

We will not waste our energy trying to capture the fleeting present moment which, for an artist, can only be the mask of death, known as fashion.

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The painting will have an incontrovertible existence. Its vision will be totally complete and the infinity it contains will not

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reveal imperfection, but only highlight the relationship between a new creature and a new creator and nothing more. Without that, there will be no unity and the relationships between different points on the canvas and various spirits, objects and kinds of light will reveal only a mass of disparate and discordant elements.

For while there may be an infinite number of creatures, each attesting the existence of its creator, and none encroaching on the others' space, it is impossible to conceive of them all at the same time, and death results from their being allowed to meet, mix and couple.

Every divinity creates in its own image; so it is with painters. Only photographers make copies from nature.

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Purity and unity count for nothing without truth; it cannot be compared to reality because it is the same thing, beyond all the natural forces which try to condemn us to being just animals.

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Above all, artists are men who wish to become inhuman.

They painstakingly search for traces of inhumanity, traces which are nowhere encountered in nature.

Such traces are the truth, and beyond them we know no reality.

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But reality can never be discovered once and for all. Truth will always be new.

Otherwise it would just be a sorrier system than nature.

If that were the case, poor truth, ever further away, ever less clear and less real, would reduce painting to a plastic script intended simply to allow people of the same race to communicate.

Nowadays we could soon find a machine able mindlessly to copy such signs.

## II

Many of the new painters only paint pictures which have no real subject. And the titles in catalogues are like names which designate individuals without describing them.

Just as there are very thin people called Legros and very dark people called Leblond, so I have seen canvases entitled *Solitude* featuring several human figures.

In such cases, painters still deign sometimes to use vaguely explanatory words like *Portrait*, *Landscape*, or *Still-Life*; but many young painters use only the general term *Painting*.

These painters still observe nature, but they no longer copy it, and they take care not to depict scenes studiously observed and reconstituted from nature.

Resemblance no longer has the slightest importance, for the artist sacrifices everything to the truths and imperatives of a higher nature which he can envisage without ever having

encountered it. Subject-matter now counts for little or nothing at all.

Modern art broadly rejects most of the means that great artists of the past used in order to give pleasure.

Though the aim of painting is still, as always, to please the eye, the art-lover is now expected to seek a different pleasure from one that can just as well be derived from viewing natural phenomena.

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So we are moving towards an entirely new art which will be to painting, as hitherto understood, what music is to literature.

It will be pure painting, as music is pure literature.

When he listens to a concert, the music-lover experiences joyful feelings which are different from the joy experienced when he hears natural sounds like the murmur of a stream, the roar of a waterfall, the wind sighing through a forest, or the harmonies of human speech, based on reason and not on aesthetics.

Similarly, the new painters will provide their admirers with artistic sensations created only by the harmony of contrasting hues of light.

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There is a well-known story in Pliny about Apelles and Protogenes.



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It is a good example of the aesthetic pleasure produced by the contrasting construction I have just referred to.

Apelles arrived one day on the island of Rhodes to see the works of Protogenes, who lived there. Protogenes was not in his studio, but an old woman was there, looking after a large panel which was ready for painting. Apelles, instead of leaving his name, painted a line onto the panel which was so finely drawn that it looked as though it could never be bettered.

On his return, when he saw the line, Protogenes recognised Apelles' hand and drew on his line another still finer one, in a different colour, so that there appeared to be three lines.

Apelles returned the next day without finding the man he was hoping to meet, and the line he drew that day was so fine that it drove Protogenes to despair. This picture was long admired by connoisseurs, who gazed on it with as much pleasure as if, instead of showing almost invisible lines, it depicted gods and goddesses.

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The young painters of the most radical movements are secretly aiming to create pure painting. It is an entirely new type of art. It has only just begun and is not yet as abstract as it would like. Most of the new painters are mathematicians without knowing it, but they have not yet abandoned nature, which they patiently question so that it will teach them the road of life.

Picasso studies an object like a surgeon dissecting a corpse.

If the art of pure painting manages to free itself entirely from the old style of painting, this will not necessarily mean the disappearance of that type of art, just as the development of music did not lead to the disappearance of the various literary genres, or the bitterness of tobacco replace the flavours of food.

## III

The new painters have been roundly criticised for their interest in geometry. And yet geometry is the essence of drawing. Geometry, the science of space, its measurement and relationships, has always been the basic rule of painting.

Until now, the three dimensions of Euclidian geometry were enough to answer the disquiet that a sense of infinity instils in the soul of great artists.

The new painters do not claim to be geometricians any more than painters of the past did. But it is true that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer. Nowadays, scientists have gone beyond the three dimensions of Euclidian geometry. Painters have been led, quite naturally and one might say intuitively, to take an interest in the new possibilities for measuring space which in the modern artist's studio were simply and collectively referred to as the *fourth dimension*.

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As it appears to the human mind, from the artistic point of view, the fourth dimension is supposedly engendered by the three known dimensions. It thus represents the vastness of space stretching eternally in all directions at any given moment. It is space itself, the dimension of infinity; it is what endows objects with plasticity. It gives them the proportions appropriate to their place in the work, whereas in Greek art, for example, proportions are consistently destroyed by a kind of mechanical rhythm.

Greek art had a purely human conception of beauty. It took man as its measure of perfection. The art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as its ideal, and it is thanks to that ideal that the painter has a new measure of perfection which allows him to give the object proportions appropriate to the degree of plasticity he desires.

Nietzsche foresaw that such an art was possible when he wrote, "Oh divine Dionysus, why are you pulling my ears?", as Ariadne asks her philosophical lover in one of the celebrated dialogues in the *Island of Naxos*.

"There is something very charming and amusing about your ears, Ariadne. Why aren't they longer still?"

Nietzsche, when he tells this story is, through the words of Dionysus, making a case against Greek art.

It should be added that the imaginative use of the term *fourth*

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*dimension* was just a way of expressing the aspirations and concerns of many young artists who were looking at sculptures from Egypt, Africa and the Pacific islands, thinking about scientific works and seeking a sublime form of art. This utopian turn of phrase is now really only of historical interest, but did merit a note of explanation here.

## IV

Setting their sights on the proportions of the ideal, looking beyond humanity, these young painters are giving us works which are more cerebral than sensual. They are moving further and further away from the old art of optical illusion and local proportions in order to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms. That is why today's art, while not flowing directly from particular religious beliefs, does nevertheless present several characteristics of great art, in other words religious Art.

## V

The social role of great poets and artists is constantly to renew the way nature appears in the eyes of man.

Without poets and without artists, people would soon grow bored with the monotony of nature. Their sublime idea of the universe would collapse with vertiginous speed. The order we see in nature, and which is actually no more than an artistic illusion, would immediately vanish. Everything would be reduced to chaos. There would be no more seasons, no more civilisation, no more thought, no more humanity, no more life even, and impotent obscurity would reign for evermore.

Poets and artists together determine the shape of their time and the future submissively falls into line.

The overall structure of an Egyptian mummy matches the shapes painted by Egyptian artists even though ancient Egyptians were very different from each other. They grew to resemble the art of their time.

It is the social role of Art to create the illusion known as the type. God knows, people laughed at the paintings of Manet and Renoir! And yet you only have to cast an eye over photographs from that time to see how people and things resemble the way they were painted in the pictures of those great artists.

Such an illusion appears completely natural to me, as works of art are, plastically speaking, the most powerful product of their age. That energy is absorbed by people and defines for them the shape and proportions of an age. So those who laugh at the new painters are in fact laughing at their own faces, for future generations will see today's humanity according to the images that the creators of the most vigorous — in other words newest — art will have left them. Do not tell me that there are other painters painting today in such a way that humanity can recognise itself, painted in its own image. All works of art in any period end up resembling the most powerful, expressive and typical works of the time. Dolls are a type of popular art; they seem always to be inspired by examples of high art from the same period. This is easily verified. And yet who would dare claim that the dolls on sale in the shops around 1880 were made with emotions similar to Renoir's when he was painting his portraits? In those days, nobody noticed the connection. It shows, however, that Renoir's art was powerful and vigorous enough to shape our perceptions, even though in his early days the general public considered his ideas to be quite mad and absurd.