

Ways of Seeing Art

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When we consider a work of art, we must realize that many factors come together to create the final experience that we have when viewing it. Initially, the ideas and concept of the artist shape the creation, and in conjunction with the original vision, the prior experiences of the viewer form the reaction to the work presented. The paintings of Impressionists, such as Renoir, represent one method of expressing and seeing, while Cubists, such as Picasso, present an entirely different way of communicating the same subjects. Such vast differences in expression can be accounted for in the way we individually see, experience, and process those experiences. As John Berger notes in *Ways of Seeing*:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing that establishes our place in the surrounding world...The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.¹

The notion of plural consideration allows the doors to be opened to the exploration of perspective, color, and form. When evaluating the various ways of seeing, both Impressionism and Cubism offer very different representations of perspective, color, and form, compared to traditional artistic expression.

When viewers are confronted with Impressionist and Cubist paintings, the learned assumptions that Berger addresses in his writings are brought into play. Beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form, status, and taste, all affect the final experience of the viewer when examining

¹ Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, 1983. 8-11, 16-20, 26-33

these works of art. The obvious difference in expression of form between the two schools is key to the emotional reaction of the viewer. While Cubists and Impressionists both eschew an exact structure for more expressive representations of form, each style approaches the path of expression very differently. Impressionism explores the process of expression in a form that allows the viewer to see the entire subject as an impression that one might get from a quick glance. With this method, the viewer is restrained from becoming overly involved in any specific facet of the work, but rather is engulfed in the whole image itself.

In contrast, Cubists choose to represent form in flat, planar sections. This method allows the viewer to see the subject from all angles at once rather than from the traditional singular perspective. The flatness and random perspective confuses the figure/ground relationship for the viewer and creates more ambiguity in the painting, encouraging the viewer to have a more active role in assigning importance to the areas of the painting that speak to him/her, rather than following a specified hierarchy dictated by the artist.

In *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907), Picasso considers distinctive ways of seeing perspective and opens the possibility of multiple vantage points as he begins to explore planar surfaces instead of modeled form. In this work, the viewer is exposed to flattened surfaces of the women, and while these are not as radical a detour from reality as the form found in his *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910), oil on canvas, by 1907 Picasso has already begun to move away from the conventional depiction of the human form, especially the female form. The women in this work are menacing and aggressively portrayed, in contrast to the traditionally demure and sedate females depicted in the Renaissance era. The sharp angular planes of the women in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907) begin to partially deconstruct the

elements of perspective, but do not abandon them completely. Arnason and Mansfield note the calculated composition and perspective that allows the viewer to experience this sense of multiple perspectives:

The composition is riddled with deliberately disorienting and contradictory points of view. The viewer looks down on the table at the bottom of the canvas, but encounters the nudes head-on. Eyes are presented full face, while noses are in profile. The seated figure at the lower right faces her cohorts but manages to turn her head 180 degrees to address the viewer.²

The women are in conflict with the viewer's perception of truth in perspective within the painting. However, truth is based on our experiences, and as such, we do not experience multiple perspectives when we are in a fixed location. Nevertheless, the different perspectives do exist concurrently, regardless of one's inability to see them at once.

Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910) is an example of the Cubist idea that objects are not fixed in space. This painting speaks to several of the assumptions Berger refers to in his writings, specifically, form, beauty and truth. As Picasso explores the form of his subject, he deconstructs the actual form and opts for shape without regard for fixed perspective. The work is represented by mere pieces and geometric shapes as Picasso abandons the idea of fixed perspective. The viewer must then decide if this representation is, in fact, truth. As Berger notes, part of the process of observation is the idea that "when we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it."³ Thus, with the deconstruction of the figure/ground

² H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 165

³ Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, 1983. 8-11, 16-20, 26-33

relationship and perspective, viewers are forced to situate themselves in unfamiliar territory. Finally, the question of defining beauty in art must be addressed. Obviously, the answer to this question is the most subjective and varied because the answer differs with each viewer and is dependent on the experiences and biases of each person.

The perspective of Impressionist works, such as Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* (1873), is relatively conventional, and in comparison with Picasso's work, Monet's figure/ground relationship is easily distinguishable. While the work is typically abstracted as far as well-defined lines, the images in the background lose clarity and precision compared with the elements in the foreground. Unlike viewers' response to Picasso's portrait, viewers of *Impression: Sunrise* (1873) should have no difficulty situating themselves in the composition. In this painting, the haziness in the background recedes in a way that mimics atmospheric perspective and that gives the viewer a sense of place in relation to the fore, middle, and background. Berger's same ideas of beauty, truth, and form can be applied to Monet's work in a similar manner to Picasso's, and depending on the viewer's own thoughts, the results can vary.

Color is another critical element in the process of "seeing" artwork from Berger's point of view. The Cubists, in an attempt at further dissection of form, mostly reject color, opting for a muted palette of browns and grays with limited amounts of color. Again, this rejection of the representational depiction of subject enhances the figure/ground abstraction and limits the viewer's ability to focus on any single element of the composition. The Impressionists, in contrast, embraced color and incorporated it as a key element in the viewer's reaction to a piece. The Impressionists' use of a large variety of hues draws the viewer into their landscapes and gives a sense not only of place, but of time as well. The red hues express warmth in

Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* (1873), and without benefit of reading the title, the viewer is still able to recognize a time of day based on the colors in the painting. Berger's claim that "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe"⁴ lends credibility to the idea that, based on conventional notions of what a color represents, such as the orange glow of a sunrise, individuals then draw on memories of their own experiences to place themselves mentally in the picture. The observer can surmise, to an extent, what the temperature might be, what sounds accompany an early morning by the water, according to his or her own experiences. Then the red and orange colors of the painting become a salient part of the viewer's process of recalling that experience.

Monet's *The Bridge at Argenteuil* (1874), oil on canvas, is also a study in color. Instead of the warm early morning glow depicted in *Impression: Sunrise*, the intensity of color in *The Bridge at Argenteuil* (1874) gives the viewer an impression of a bright, sunny day. Arnason and Mansfield state, "The painting glistens and vibrates, giving the effect of brilliant hot sunlight shimmering on the water in a scene of contemplative stillness."⁵ The clearness of the reflection of both the boat and sky could imply a calm, windless day. Again, this perception is heavily dependent on the experience of a person who has witnessed in reality the same the colors and reflections.

As noted, the Cubists tended to forgo color in pursuit of figure/ground ambiguity. While not all Cubist paintings adhere to this pattern, Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910) is devoid of any vibrant color and relies heavily on the planar flatness of the shapes

⁴ Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, 1983. 8-11, 16-20, 26-33

⁵ H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 34

within the composition for movement and interest. With only the smallest amount of browns and creams to break the monotony of grays, this painting exemplifies the Cubist attempts to decrease dependence on colors.

In fact, the execution of form is the greatest contrast between the two movements. While both Impressionists and Cubists attempt to express form in new ways, the similarities end there. Impressionistic paintings hold the form in relation to space and perspective although the modeling and line are reduced to a minimum. The viewer can still very easily discern forms in Impressionistic paintings, while Cubist paintings are often so abstracted that the title is the best clue to the identity of the form. Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910) scarcely has enough representational form that, without the title, it would be difficult to realize that it is a painting of a man, especially a specific man named Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. However, with recognition of the basic elements of facial structure, one can distinguish the vague hints of facial features. In comparison, in both *The Bridge at Argenteuil* and *Impression: Sunrise*, the forms of each element are clear. The impressions of boats, water, and trees in both of Monet's paintings are still discernible and maintain appropriate placement in relation to the fore, middle, and background.

Berger states, "Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before."⁶ This fact holds true because today we view the works of art in a way that would not have been possible for the spectators of the early days of Impressionism and Cubism. Similarly, future generations will view art differently from the way that we do. More importantly, as individuals, we see and experience art differently. Cultural bias, war, religion, education, and economic status, all affect

⁶ Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin, 1983. 8-11, 16-20, 26-33

our understanding, and our past experiences can lead to both positive and negative responses. Because of these differences, there is no right or wrong in creation and appreciation of art; there are only different ways of seeing.

Bibliography

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