



## THE DOUBLE NATURE OF PAINTING



Reed, C, ed.. *The Double Nature of Painting*, in, *A Roger Fry Reader*. Univ Chicago Press, 1996. Pp. 380-392.

WHEN we take a general look at all the arts—poetry, music, painting, etc.,—we are immediately forced to the conclusion that they all fall clearly into two groups. In one group great use is made of the representation of objects, of people and situations and even of ideas such as are found in everyday life. In the other group representation of these things is often totally rejected or else of minor importance. Thus, music and architecture are able to create great formal constructions which satisfy our aesthetic faculties almost in the same manner as a mathematical proposition satisfies our intelligence, that is to say, without reference to anything outside the construction itself. The constructions contain all the data and all the solutions to the problems involved. These are self-sufficient and stand without external support. In contrast to this, poetry and painting force us to recognize references to such an external reality or we shall not understand the work itself. This is surely true for all poetical works and nearly all painting.

We have admittedly seen a heroic attempt on the part of painters of today to escape from this rule and to create a pictorial art almost entirely devoid of any natural representation. We call it abstract art. I think I was one of the first critics to come to the defence of this venture; I even hoped, more than twenty years ago, that it would lead to new artistic revelations, but in spite of the fact that a few most gifted artists, especially Picasso, succeeded in making skilful, well-balanced constructions, these lack the evocative power of appeal of the greatest representational works. I must confess that I find the appeal made by these visual constructions much less moving than those of similar constructions in sound forms that we find in music. This may well surprise us when we reflect that by the disposition of a few visual forms, cylinders, cubes, and spheres, etc., architecture produces effects which are as exciting to our emotions as music itself. One must, however, take into ac-

Reprinted from *Apollo*, May 1969, 362-71. Reproduced by kind permission of *Apollo Magazine* Ltd. A note on the original publication reads: This lecture, which is of considerable importance to the evolution of Fry's theories, has not hitherto been published. It was delivered in French in Brussels during the autumn of 1933. It has been translated from the French by Pamela Diamand, Roger Fry's daughter, and has been abridged. [Apollo ed.]

count the fact that architecture works in three dimensions while abstract painting possesses only two. Herein I think lies the real cause of the lack of emotional appeal of abstract painting, since it is evident that any suggestion of depth of space given by a flat canvas is due to an effect of perspective, that is to say to the representation of something outside the work of art. One cannot construct either volume or space on a canvas without having recourse to representation. So I revert to my idea that, in spite of these attempts at abstraction, painting has always been, and probably will remain, for the greater part a representational art.

Now, arts that do not reject representation run a risk which non-representational arts such as music avoid, for it may happen that the very accurate and life-like portrayal of a person or an object can suggest to us the idea that the object thus evoked is more real than its pictorial image. The object may thus compete with the image, as is sometimes the case with a photograph, which often makes us forget the image altogether and only think of the real thing it recalls. In this case the picture is reduced to an echo, a reflection of something more intensely real, so we are unable to concentrate our contemplation upon it.

Even poets acknowledge this danger and Mallarmé strongly advises the lyrical poet to exclude the real from his poetry "because its too precise meaning cancels your vague literary expression".<sup>1</sup>

But the danger is much greater for the artist than for the poet, for words only call up vague and generalized images, whereas the painter is forced to be more precise. Thus, the painter cannot say, as the poet might, dog, tree, man; he is forced to say dog of a certain breed, tree of a certain species, man of a certain age and in a certain posture.

Let us then summarize this question of representation in art; on one hand, it must be admitted that representation is almost essential to the art of painting, on the other hand that if in a picture something persists solely as representation this destroys the unity of the work of art; for we shall be ready to admit that each part of a work of art must play an effective part in the whole, and that if in a picture one part has no other justification than to represent something that exists outside it, then that part is pointless. This, then, is the real problem of painting—how is one to represent the outside world in such a way that it enters completely into the pictorial unity. And at this point another question arises: what sort of part is it to play?

1. Charles Mauron says in connexion with this in "Mallarmé l'obscur," 1968: "Les vocables directs sont éliminés; l'écrivain vise volontairement juste à côté du but; chaque terme frôle ce qu'il veut évoquer, et la phrase poursuit sa course, se dissout, sans que rien de précis ni de lourd soit venu l'entraver".

What happens in the case of literature? Obviously it does not act through the physical forms of the object since the object is only evoked in words and so in a vague and comparatively inexact way. To some extent the poet uses the sound form of the object's name; he may mention names like hippocrigh or minotaur that are endowed with an immediate evocative power, but the poetic representation of Nature works chiefly through the mental associations to which the object alluded to gives rise in our consciousness. In painting, on the contrary, the object represented by the painter may function very well by its forms and its colours, which imprint themselves clearly on the consciousness of the spectator, but it must be pointed out that the same object can also function through the associated ideas it suggests.

There are, then, two roads open to the painter. He can consider the objects he represents as volumes developing in an ideated space—and thus he places himself alongside the architect who also disposes volumes in a given space but with the difference that in architecture the space is real and in painting only imagined. Or else the painter can consider the objects he represents chiefly from the point of view of their associated ideas, and in this case he is much closer to the poet. This ambiguous situation of pictorial art is, I think, the source of many of the misunderstandings which exist in aesthetics.

From the earliest periods onwards art criticism has been the work of men of letters, and these men have naturally made the literary point of view prevail. This is already noticeable among the Greeks, especially in Lucian, and the story of the painter Timanthes became a commonplace of all art criticism. The story goes that Timanthes, being required to paint the subject of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, had exhausted all the resources of his genius in depicting the grief of the spectators as they watched Iphigenia approach the altar, so that when he came to describe the emotion of Agamemnon, her father, his means failed him and he painted him with his head covered by a veil.

Cicero, Quintilian, Eustathius and, in fact, all the art critics of antiquity repeat this story as being the most conclusive evidence of the nature of pictorial art; and it was taken up again by almost all writers on art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A hundred years ago it had become so threadbare that I should never have dared to relate it. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the subject of the sacrifice of Iphigenia was naturally not to the students of the Royal Academy and poor Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his commentary on the sketches, remarked plaintively that not one student had forgotten conscientiously to veil Agamemnon's head.

*Ut pictura poesis*—painting must be like poetry, said Horace. This

phrase has become a catchword, but even two thousand years ago it lacked originality.

The eighteenth-century English critic, Jonathan Richardson, is most illuminating in this respect. He undertakes to instruct the artist on a manner of treating such and such a subject. Should he portray the woman taken in adultery, the artist must not select the beginning of the action, the accusation by the scribes and Pharisees, because at that moment they play the major part; he must not paint Christ writing on the ground because then His posture would lack dignity; he should even avoid the final scene—"go and sin no more"—because only two figures would not suffice to fill a canvas. There remains only the moment when Christ turns on His accusers—no other will do.

It is in the writings of Diderot, above all, that we find the most instructive judgments. He begins his reflections on painting by these words "One finds poets among painters and painters among poets," and he exhausts all his richness of invention, all the seduction of his style, to make us feel the dramatic and poetic power of the paintings he admired. His predilection for Greuze can be largely explained by the irreproachable morality that his pictures displayed. Referring to the picture *L'accordée du Village* by Greuze, representing the betrothal of a farmer's daughter, he tells us what the venerable father is supposed to be saying in such a situation, what each of the guests, according to him, might be feeling, but at the end he takes the artist rather severely to task because he leaves us in doubt as to whether one of the party is the sister of the betrothed or merely an obscure servant, which, he says, would embarrass many of the spectators and so would mar an otherwise worthy work of art.

Elsewhere Diderot tells us one cannot find a good painting without moral significance; yet when he criticizes Chardin's still-lifes he forgets this principle and fortunately does not try to extract a moral from them; with no apology he falls back on another aesthetic principle—resemblance to Nature. This inconsistency does not appear to disturb him in the least. It was natural that men of letters should be pleased that artists accepted their poetical theory, for this procedure allowed them to elaborate effortlessly upon all the literary implications which the picture could only suggest. What may surprise us more is the docility of the painters under this literary tutelage.

I think the first artist who attempted to rebel against the dominance of literature was Courbet. Doubtless there were always many artists like Chardin who plied their trade without bothering about theories of art, but they did not claim to stand up against the big wigs of the Academy. But modesty was not Courbet's weakness: on the contrary he had the self-assurance of a rather uneducated mind. He added to his remarkable gifts as an artist vigour

and stubbornness which he drew from his rustic origins. Thus, it was Courbet who launched a vigorous attack on the literary tyranny. True, he put forward nothing new; he relied on that other principle—*verisimilitude*—which, as we saw, Diderot himself accepted without much heed, slipping it surreptitiously into his aesthetic theory. For Courbet, fidelity to Nature was the only principle of good painting. He condemned wholesale all ideal or imaginative constructions as being essentially false; the painter can only render what he sees under his eyes, his only duty being to do this task well. This was an oversimplification and a too rudimentary theory to satisfy superior minds, but, as a symbol of the painter's rebellion against literature, it marks a stage—and, as a matter of fact, we notice that after this date it became very rare for one of the better artists of the nineteenth century to attempt an imaginary composition.

Impressionists proclaimed no philosophy of painting but only a method, but this method did not fail to have serious repercussions on the theory of art. Their fundamental idea was that the painter should express his visual experiences by means of touches of colour juxtaposed on a flat canvas. Our surroundings, as perceived by our consciousness, on the contrary, consist in a system of solid objects existing in a space of a certain depth; only we know that these objects and this space are not given directly by our vision. What we really see is likewise a flat mosaic of coloured blobs; however, from our infancy the necessities of life have taught us to interpret these blobs in terms of objects situated nearer to or farther from our eyes. And we have learnt this lesson so well that it is very difficult for us to recover the innocent and inexperienced eye of a new-born child.

This, however, was actually the task undertaken by the Impressionists. They refused to go beyond such purely visual impressions, or to be influenced by knowledge otherwise acquired, by the sense of touch, for instance. They concentrated all their attention on appearances without defining them in terms of the object.

This method undermined the whole edifice of literary art, for it denied the validity of all the concepts of everyday life. The object was reduced to its constituent sensations and consequently could no longer act as a nucleus for associated ideas. No doubt it was permissible for the spectator to reconstruct an object from the coloured spots on the canvas but, as the artist had deliberately painted from the standpoint of not recognizing the object, there was little chance that he should have imparted to it the accents and character that literary art demands. In general, the great concern of the Impressionists was the new colour harmonies which their method had revealed to them. Until

their time, what are called atmospheric colours had remained unperceived, masked as they were by local colour—the specific colour of the object.

With Cézanne, who rubbed shoulders for a long time with the Impressionists, the harmonious *ordonnance* of volumes in space was an ever-growing passion. He noticed how nebulous and vague the compositions of his contemporaries appeared beside the solid and imposing structures of Poussin and the great Italians; and he sought to give a similar architecture to the Impressionist idiom. For him, therefore, the object was at least partly reintegrated, but it should be noted that it was not the object as a vehicle of associated ideas but as a plastic volume. He thus remained as far as possible from all literary notions of art. Thus, the influence of Cézanne has been of great importance in modern aesthetics and it is from the study of his work that what I call the architectural theory of painting, as opposed to the old poetic theory, has little by little been built up. Here it is no longer the men of letters, but artists with an inclination to speculation, who have undertaken the creation of an aesthetic theory of painting. Maurice Denis, as evidenced in his article on Cézanne,<sup>2</sup> is one of the precursors in this field, and I have devoted many of my studies to the elaboration of its principles, being helped above all by discussions with artists.

This theory seeks to explain painting rather by its analogies with non-representational arts, such as music and architecture, and stresses the difference between painting and literature. It does not aim at absolute principles or at a metaphysical basis. It accepts as data the fact that our aesthetic sense finds satisfaction in music through a series of rhythmic and harmonious relations of notes and in architecture in the rhythmic and harmonious relations of volumes in space and it states that what is essential in painting is to be found also in systems of relations of volumes and spaces in a two-dimensional visual context and that, compared with this aspect of painting, any appeal to the associated ideas of the objects represented is negligible. Here then is the confrontation of the two theories of painting, each claiming for itself the entire territory of painting.

One, the literary theory (*ut pictura poesis*), is, as we have seen, of a respectable antiquity with more than two thousand years to its credit; the other, the architectural theory, is of quite recent formation; foreshadowed in the nineteenth century, it has only taken shape in the last twenty years, and here am I already starting to modify it.

As I said, each of the adversaries laid claim to the whole of painting, but

2. Denis's essay, translated by Fry, was published in *The Burlington Magazine* in January and February 1910.

perhaps each claims too much. Maybe painting is not an integral and indissoluble entity. Are we not perhaps like chemists trying to determine the atomic weight of an element, who find a slight deviation at each endeavour, until they suspect that they are dealing with two very similar elements of differing atomic weights. Such things have happened, you know.

Let us at least ask the question whether there are not two categories of painting. One can be called pure painting, appealing to our emotions through plastic harmonies, as in architecture, and chromatic harmonies, as in music. The other category would contain pictures which make their appeal by the associated ideas and emotions called up by the representation of objects in a manner corresponding to literature.

On reflection we should not be too shocked by this hypothesis, for we are quite accustomed to this situation in music, where we find, on the one hand, what musicians call absolute music and, on the other, the opera and song where literature combines with music.

Having reached this point you will ask me, no doubt, for some examples. (1) of a pure painting, (2) of an entirely literary painting, (3) of a painting which combines the two characteristics. That is not as easy as it might seem, for, on the whole, we have to deal with a mixture of both systems, but we shall see as we go along what to make of it.

*Le verre d'absinthe* by Picasso at least is a more or less pure painting in the sense that as there is no recognizable object we cannot look for associated ideas. We have here a system of more or less geometric forms arranged in a very complicated manner. I venture to add very skilfully arranged, suggesting an idea of reciprocal movements as if the planes were interlocking. The space suggested is necessarily very limited, for a flat canvas cannot give the idea of volume and space without the representation of more or less natural objects.

On the other hand, Poynter's picture *Faithful unto Death* is devoid as far as I can see of any architectural value. One may search in vain for a balance in the composition, for significant relationships between the volumes and the space or for harmonies between the forms.

I come now to the most difficult consideration, that of works in which we find both elements that we have been trying to contrast, works which appeal to us by a plastic harmony on one side and move us by the associated ideas of the objects represented on the other.

Do such works exist? The supporters of both theories, in fact, admit it, although grudgingly. On this point Diderot is very explicit. In speaking of a picture by Greuze he observes, in parenthesis, that the figures compose a group which is most pleasing to the eye, adding, however, that it is of no importance so long as these figures express by the gestures the emotions required by the

situation, but if, by sheer luck and without thinking about it, the artist achieves a harmonious arrangement of forms it gives him a personal pleasure.

On the other hand, those who enthusiastically uphold the theory of pure painting, whose mouth-piece I have sometimes been, assert that the only value of painting is inherent in plastic, spatial and chromatic harmonies. However, we admitted that we discerned a tendency in certain pictures to suggest psychological situations by the gestures or expressions of the faces, adding that this does not concern us or even that it rather spoilt our contemplation of visual harmonies.

When I discovered that our attitude corresponded so exactly with Diderot's, only seen from the opposite point of view, I suspected that we were reasoning as badly as Diderot and it is hard to reason worse than Diderot when he sets about it.

Such grudging testimony from both those who favoured a moral interpretation of art and from those who support pure painting seemed to me to prove that there exist works in which both elements would be found, plastic and literary.

But we should inquire what is the nature of such works. It seems to me that they result in fact from the co-operation of two distinct arts; that they are therefore analogous to dancing or drama and, above all, the opera. Furthermore, I believe that this double nature of most paintings only eludes us because the same man conceives and creates these two elements and uses the same media in both arts.

To acquire a better understanding of how this happens, let us examine briefly the familiar case of the combination of music and words. Here, too, a single person expresses both the musical harmonies and the poem through one medium—the voice.

Here we discover mixtures of the two elements in varying proportions. At one end we have what the Greeks called melodrama, where the words were spoken against a vague musical accompaniment, as happens sometimes with recitative. Then it is evident that the words play the major part, while the music is reduced to a kind of emotional stimulant. At the other end of the scale we find vocal trios and quartets in which the various voices sing different words at the same time; in this case we hear but odd snatches of verbal lines now and then and concentrate all our attention on the musical element.

I have said nothing about the nature of such composite works. Are they simply mixtures, or can they be compared with chemical compounds? I can say nothing categorical about this: it is a matter which still requires much research. I have often asked musicians whether true songs exist; by "true song" I mean a song in which the specific effect of the poem is enhanced by

the music and the effect of the music enhanced by the words. If you consider how irresponsibly different words are set to the same tune or divers melodies to the same words one is very doubtful, but most of the musicians I have consulted are of the opinion that true songs do exist, but that they are very rare. For my part, I also believe that there do exist paintings in which the literary element and the plastic element enter into a very intimate combination, so to speak, a sort of chemical combination. However, I also think that this is a comparatively rare occurrence.

Let us now look at some pictures from this point of view. We will begin with a few still-lifes, for still-life raises the question of literary values in a very definite way. We have already seen that Diderot, the enthusiast for moral and psychological values in painting, was somewhat puzzled to account for the still-lifes of Chardin. In dealing with a bowl of fruit, he comments on how ripe and juicy the peaches are and explains the value of the picture by the longing it stirs in us to eat those very peaches. What would he have said if he had looked at this *Still-life*? Perhaps he would have demonstrated to us how good a meal would prove made from the chicken and onion that he has selected so carefully. But really this pleasure is too illusory for us, and above all the state of mind to which this composition gives rise is altogether different. There is in it something very sober, almost solemn. It would seem that these common-place familiar objects have an extraordinary significance simply through their positions in space and the way they receive the light. Of course, this feeling is very vague and we can never really find words to define it, but the same applies to the emotions aroused by music and architecture. The point is that these plastic harmonies arouse movements in our subconscious being.

Cézanne, too, speaks in this plastic idiom in the *Still-life with a basket* with an accent that is perhaps even graver and more austere. By what magic does he give to these elementary forms such an effect of importance and grandeur. Cézanne goes even further than Chardin in his scorn for the imitation of sensuous objects. No one, I think, would feel like eating his apples; they function only as volumes receiving the light in a particular way, becoming the occasion for particular plastic harmonies. Cézanne removes these objects from our world; they are transposed into a purely spiritual world in which by means of their harmonies and contrasts they achieve a visual symphony endowed with a deep and inexpressible eloquence. So we wonder if all still-lifes may not be purely plastic works. In answer we have this rather curious case of a *Still-life* by Goya, who was above all a master of psychological values. And, in fact, it seems to me that the inspiration behind this work of Goya was the tragic, almost macabre, impression produced on him by the



Fig. 1: *Martyrdom of Saint Flavia and Saint Placid* by Antonio Correggio (1489/94–1534). Oil on canvas, 160 × 185 cm. Pinacoteca, Parma

fowl on the kitchen table. He has underlined this effect and the turkey plays a dual part, firstly as an illuminated volume in a certain environment and secondly as a creature brutally deprived of life. Goya painted a series, *Desastres de la Guerra*; here he shows us a disaster of everyday life.

Now let us go on to compositions where the artist has more opportunities for expressing psychological values.

Correggio's *Martyrdom of St. Flavia and St. Placid* (Fig. 1) is one of the most interesting examples in support of my contention, for it seems to me that here the two elements pull in opposite directions. It is a scene of extreme violence and brutality, but it is expressed in forms that compose a harmony which is not only melodious but voluptuous. It is as if one were to play *Othello* to the music of *Cosi fan tutte*. What an admirable ballet scene; you would think the executioners have just come on stage performing a gay and elegant *pas de deux*. The fact is that Correggio's habitual plastic rhythms were incapable of adaptation to the psychological and dramatic expression of

such a scene; he allowed himself to be carried away by his tendency towards the voluptuous and exuberant.

For my part I take it as proof of the double nature of pictorial art when we find both elements, literary and plastic, as clearly opposed to each other as they are in this instance where I disregard the dramatic expression to delight in the marvellous plastic melodies rather as when one listens to an opera in which the words are altogether silly. Ostade's *Peasants in a tavern* is a work in which the two elements contradict each other but in quite another way. The scene itself is utterly vulgar and trivial, a group of peasants in a tavern; but to express this idea Ostade has found a most impressive disposition of volumes and play of light. There are here an amplitude and a plastic harmony which are strangely elevating. It makes us think rather of the great events or heroic situations that Giotto or Masaccio would have imagined. Here the plastic expression rises well above the psychological data. But most people are so much more accessible to psychological appeal that they speak of Ostade as a very minor painter of trivialities. In this there is a rather pleasing irony: among those great painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who imagined themselves to be great masters because they painted great historic events—the Lebruns, the Pierres, the Deshays, the Lagrenées and many others whose names we no longer remember—not one was able to hit upon such a discovery in composition and in chiaroscuro as that of this poor haunter of taverns whom they would so surely have despised.

From our point of view Poussin is very odd. We know from his letters that he believed himself to be a painter of moral values and that he boasted of finding not only the poses expressive of all the sentiments that the characters in his story ought to experience, but also poses suitable for expressing the nobility and greatness of soul of beings distinctly superior to our contemporaries; for like all men of his period he believed in the superhuman virtue of the ancient Romans.

Well, we do see the figures in his *Baptism* making emphatic gestures; but these gestures are too conventional, too formal to convince us of the reality of such over-theatrical beings. He hardly arouses in us the idea of the inner life of his characters, but on the other hand what deep feeling emanates from the general *ordonnance* of his forms, what equipoise there is between the two sides of his composition, how well all the directions of the limbs balance and echo one another. What unshakable unity results from this diversity! And how greatly this boldly conceived landscape, so harsh in its great lines and arid wastes, adds to the significance of the figures. No, Poussin never moves us by his frigid demonstrations of antique virtue, but he is one of the great composers of plastic and spatial harmonies.



Fig. 2: *The Three Philosophers* by Giorgione (c.1476/78–1510). Oil on canvas, 123.8 × 144.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum

We are justified in saying that he is the inventor of a kind of visual counterpoint, a counterpoint for which he discovered the most rigid principles, almost unique in their precision.

We must proceed at once to search, if possible, for works in which the psychological and plastic values act together harmoniously; we must in fact find the pictorial analogue of the song or the true opera.

Among the great masters there are two that come to my mind in this connexion: Giorgione and Rembrandt.

It was when looking at *The Three Philosophers* (Fig. 2) in Vienna that for the first time I became sharply aware of how much it is necessary to invoke the double function of art in order to explain all that I experienced.

First of all we are struck with the amplitude of these forms, by the disposition of these figures both so unexpected and so inevitable in so strange a space. This very disposition induces in us a heightened frame of mind, a state in which we expect some mysterious revelation. This effect, produced by the

disposition of forms, prepares us to meet beings far removed from our everyday life, to hope for something unknown and fateful, and Giorgione does not disappoint us. He has created people that appear to come from far away, from out of another world, men who proclaim by their looks and the sweep of their gestures which have an imposing gravity that they are the repositories of an almost divine wisdom.

So it is through his psychological imagination, akin to that of great poets, that Giorgione was enabled to create these strange characters. And such psychological values only serve to complete and enrich the emotion already produced by the arrangement of the volumes in space. Here then, as I see it, is a picture in which the two elements combine and enrich each other. One might call it a true operatic picture (not of course in the ordinary sense of the word, but simply to indicate its double nature). One must therefore acknowledge in Giorgione both a great master of plastic harmonies and a great romantic poet.

Rembrandt<sup>3</sup> shows such a deep understanding of human nature that we can assert that if he had not been a painter he would have been one of the greatest dramatic poets of the world.

I have shown only two examples of an artist simultaneously attaining to an extreme poetic exaltation and achieving a great plastic construction and bringing about, moreover, a complete fusion of the two. Surely there exist many others, but we must not be astonished if in all the history of art it should only very seldom happen that one and the same man should thus be doubly a genius.

3. Fry summarized, at this juncture, the points made in his lecture on Rembrandt. See *Apollo*, March 1962, LXXVI, pp. 42-55. [This essay appears in this anthology, pp. 366-79]

## THE MEANING OF PICTURES

### I—TELLING A STORY

THE wireless has done so much to help people to a fuller appreciation of music that it has been thought desirable that some attempt should be made to do the same for art. It is obvious, however, that until television becomes general, art must be badly handicapped. Still, with the assistance of *The Listener* we are going to see what can be done by putting before you reproductions of the pictures about which I shall be talking. But with all the help that can be given I am aghast at the difficulty of the task before me. We have to work with small reproductions which at best must give a very imperfect idea of the original pictures, and which leave out altogether the important element of colour. But even if we could stand together before the original pictures, and I could point out one thing after another so that it would be easy to follow my indications, even then what I want to do would be very difficult, because although we should all be looking at the same picture no two people would see the same picture. This sounds absurd, but it is not so if you reflect that seeing is not merely a question of what sensations may occur, but of what the mind makes of those sensations. Even if there were no individual differences in people's eyes, the differences in their minds, their characters, and their past life would all affect what they would see. Each one of us has his own private personal way of dealing with what is before his eyes, and this largely determines what he sees, making one man blind to one whole set of visible signs, another man blind to another.

Now, the artist actually spends more of his time in looking at things than anybody, and he looks more intently and more attentively, but he does not look at the same kind of things as other people, and this is one of the reasons why it is so hard for people who are not artists to know what artists mean by their pictures.

Now, if you will reflect upon it you will at once recognise that you very rarely look for the mere pleasure of looking. Almost always we look in order to find out some fact which is of interest or importance to us. We want to

This lecture, originally broadcast 25 September 1929, is reprinted from the BBC guide, *The Listener*, 2 October 1929, 429-31.