

WHAT IS QUALITY IN ART?

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ART?

*A Meditation Based
on European Paintings
From the 15th to the
18th Centuries*

HANNIBAL

*This book is dedicated to Cristina Caspueñas,
and to my mentor Jonathan Brown.*

“The first intention of the painter is to make a flat surface display a body as if modelled and separated from this plane, and he who surpasses others in this skill deserves most praise.”

Leonardo da Vinci, *On Painting*

“Interpretation is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed.”

T.S. Eliot, *The Function of Criticism*

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INTRODUCTION:

WHY WRITE ABOUT QUALITY IN ART?

When we talk about a work of art, it is common to say and to hear judgements such as “it is good” (“a good painting”) or “it is bad”. The same thing happens when we talk about food, wine, dance, perfume or other man-made creations. This is not new. Aristotle wrote that Homer “surpassed the rest”. What did he mean? Furthermore, what do we mean? One possible answer is that when we say something is “good”, we are asserting that we like it, that we hold it in high regard. If that is the case, then why not simply say, “I like it”, “I like that sculpture”, “I like those poems by Homer”? When we state that a work of art is “good”, we are really saying something more: that we recognise a value in it that transcends our personal taste, a value that others should also perceive. This may be attributed to the power of our own subjectivity, which convinces us of the truth of our judgements. But there is something else — a sense that we are referring to something objective. This we can call “quality”. It is a concept that is difficult to define, but key to under-

standing the artistic production of certain places and periods.

This book is divided into two sections. The first considers the notion of quality in art in general terms. The second explains how the concept was understood and applied to painting in Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. There is little use in searching for universal norms of quality because when we affirm that something possesses it, we do so comparatively. When trying to define quality, we need to confine ourselves to a given place, time, type of art, etc. I have chosen to focus on European painting from the Modern Era for two reasons. First, this is the period that I know best and to which I have devoted my professional life. Second, I have chosen this period because of my personal relationship with art. I was first conscious of the satisfaction and awe that sculptures, paintings, architecture and other artistic objects aroused in me in the early 1970s. I remember discovering the work of Michelangelo, Picasso and later of Titian, Velázquez, Mies van der Rohe, De Kooning and many others, and feeling a strong connection to it. At that time, it was widely accepted that the achievements of those artists (and others) formed the cornerstone of the grand and teleological

narrative that is Art History. That hierarchy has changed. In the 1980s, when I was working on my PhD at the Institute of Fine Arts (New York University), the focus was shifting towards contemporary art, but the Renaissance, the Baroque and art from the first half of the twentieth century still took pride of place. European art was still the most studied, followed by Asian art (though to a much lesser degree), as well as eastern Mediterranean archaeology. Since then, other periods and places, new artists and artistic languages and methods of analysis have captured the attention of scholars, and the predominance of European art from the Modern Era has been toned down. Today, the history of art looks infinitely more complex and fragmented than it did just 40 years ago.

The revision of a historic narrative does not necessarily imply a criticism of the art that is the object of its study. One fundamental fact remains unaltered if we look at the history of European art from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries: it is the story of enormous success. The value that was assigned to art in European society during that period was extraordinary, as was the level of technical and aesthetic excellence required of artists. The demand for these kinds of products

was also high, driven by a culture that regarded images as the means of representing political, religious or economic power. Never before were so many paintings made as in this period. What's more, the influence of the art and culture of those centuries has proven decisive. The "success" that I have referred to is a remarkable occurrence. For all who are interested in art, reflecting on this artistic period is a way of keeping relevant. It is the responsibility of the historian to look back in time and remember different ways of doing things and of being in the world.

Surprisingly little has been written on the concept of quality in art. Among the worthy exceptions are: *On Art and Connoisseurship* by Max J. Friedlander (1942); the essay 'Quality in Art' by Jeffrey Wieand (1981); the chapter 'Perspectives on the Quality of Rembrandt's Art' in the book *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* by Ernst van de Wetering (2000); and *The Eye of the Connoisseur: Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and His Contemporaries* by Anna Tummers (2011). Other related aesthetic concepts, such as taste and beauty, have received far more attention. Some of the most canonical texts on aesthetics explore these topics, from Plato to Hume and Kant. Why is it then that the concept

of quality has not interested thinkers to the same degree? Answers will undoubtedly vary depending on the period we are referring to. In past centuries, the idea of quality was entangled with that of beauty, and of art itself. Any ambitious artist trained and worked to try to create a work that was well done. Art that was worthy of study had quality. Otherwise, it was simply not considered art.

Today, a possible explanation is that quality is uncomfortably associated with power. The ability to recognise quality in art — to know about art or to have good taste in art — has been part of the identity of the elite classes for centuries, a trait that distinguished them from others in such a way as to seem part of the natural order of things. In any event, the fact that quality is difficult to define, or that it has been employed with self-interest by a certain social class, does not mean that we should ignore it. It is a notion that is present in our relationship with art and the way we value it whether we are fully conscious of it or not, and the same has been true for artists and art-lovers for centuries. When we turn our backs on the concept of quality, we are, quite simply, misunderstanding the nature of artistic creation during a key period of our history.

My relationship with art in general, and with the concept of quality in particular, is fundamentally empirical. I am interested in explaining a sensation that I perceive, or believe to perceive, when I contemplate certain objects. With the term “contemplation”, I don’t want to suggest a passive attitude. It is an active state that inspires me to question, to discern, to relate. Since the second half of the twentieth century, and in large part due to the influence of Wittgenstein’s aesthetics (as expressed in his posthumous publications *Philosophical Investigations* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*), many philosophers and critics have concluded that the experience of art is too subjective to allow for a useful analysis. They have focused instead on the social institutions that art inhabits, the system of museums, galleries and public institutions that define its value and even its nature. In my view, however, a deep understanding of the history of art allows us to make judgements that are not simply subjective. If we want to understand art, we should ask ourselves questions such as: what are artists trying to do? What do they value? What tools do they have at their disposal to achieve their goals? Some answers can be found in the opinions of painters, writers about art and

the art world in general that have come down to us in historic texts. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche reproached philosophers, quite rightly, for only thinking of art in terms of the spectator. We need to compare what these opinions tell us with what we see in paintings. When we focus on the notion of quality, we can appreciate more fully that art is an ambitious project that requires effort, and that it is a craft with a long tradition and its own set of norms. The concept of quality is elusive. It is unlikely that these pages will succeed in fully defining it. Nevertheless, the effort to understand it is worthwhile, as it entails travelling the luminous path of art.

PART ONE

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY

The concept of quality is easy to understand when associated with measurable and objective matters, but difficult to pin down when dealing with topics that involve some degree of subjectivity, such as art. Let's take a knife as an example. The better it cuts, the more quality it has — if we consider its most obvious function or use. We can call this functional or practical quality. If we think of this same type of quality in a bottle, we could define it by its capacity to contain liquid; or, in the case of a ship, by its suitability to float and navigate, and so on. Returning to the knife, let's think of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when people from the upper classes brought their own knives when invited to a meal (forks were barely used at the time). In this context, knives took on an additional function as signifiers of their owners' social status. Silver knives with handles made of carved coral or ivory became fashionable, and the cost of these materials became an objective way of defining their quality. The use of the word quality here is the same as when used for its cutting ability, since it refers to something that can be demonstrated.

However, in the handles of upmarket knives, the way the ivory or coral was carved was also valued, as was the delicacy, realism or expressiveness of the craftsmanship. In other words, its artistic qualities were appreciated. If we judge the knife based on the carving of its handle, the judgement refers to its artistic quality.

After a few months of thinking and reading about the concept of quality, both in general terms and as applied to art, my partner Cristina and I travelled by car from Madrid to the Alentejo region of southern Portugal. I decide to use the time on the road to reflect on what I have read and organise my thoughts. I want them to make sense not only to myself, but also to her, to others. The immensity of the spaces that surround us and the landscapes that I see from the car help me to concentrate.

That a concept is difficult to define does not imply that it doesn't exist, I tell Cristina. I recall an idea learned from the history of philosophy. I cannot doubt the existence of something just because I cannot quite grasp it, or fully understand it; morality and aesthetics are two areas where this is particularly clear. I tell her that when I look at a painting in the Prado Museum (or elsewhere), I see that it works, or that it works partially, in

some areas and not in others, perhaps in a figure, or in part of a figure. As we speak, I have in mind a large-scale scene painted in Rome in the mid-1630s by Nicolas Poussin: *The Hunt of Meleager* (FIG. 1). The rider and the white horse occupying the central position in the scene are a compendium of beauty in the sense that this term was understood in the classical world and as it was interpreted in Europe from the fifteenth century. The choreography and the representation of the human figure and the animals that is both idealistic and lifelike stem from that concept. The way the painter treats the relationship between the protagonists, Meleager and Atalanta, is unusual and that in itself is therefore worthy of praise: they are not placed in the centre of the scene but off to the right. The attraction the prince feels for the huntress is expressed by his horse, rather than himself and is emphasised by the presence of a statue of the hypersexual god Pan just behind them. One feature of the painting particularly grabs my attention: the spear the rider is carrying. Its linear simplicity, diagonal position and the central place it occupies in the scene make it stand out. As I contemplate it, the weapon transforms my mode of perception, shifting away from the narrative into the purely aesthetic. When I

Another example of *trompe-l'oeil* are paintings that appear partially covered by curtains. Rembrandt, Vermeer and other artists used this technique. By adding an object to a painted scene that appears to belong to the real world, it becomes difficult to distinguish reality from illusion. Many authors have used these curtains and other similar devices to write about the phenomenon of self-reflection known as meta-painting. But the primary purpose of this type of curtain was simply to increase the illusion of reality, to “deceive” those who saw the paintings. (The term “deception” was often used in texts on illusionism, such as Piero Accolti’s *L’Inganno degli occhi*, or *The Deception of the Eyes*, published in 1625.) This effect was enhanced by the fact that collectors at the time covered some of their paintings with a curtain, either for protection or to single them out. When someone saw a painting presented this way, it could look like the display was real. The use of a curtain also added ancient pedigree to paintings. In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny wrote about a painting by Zeuxis showing a bunch of grapes that Parrhasius covered with a painted curtain. He did so with such skill that his colleague tried to draw it aside.

ILLUSTRATIONS





Fig.1 Nicolas Poussin,
The Hunt of Meleager, c. 1634–39



Fig.2 Anonymous,
The Construction of the Tower of Babel, c. 1595



Fig.3 Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
The Tower of Babel, c. 1568



Fig.11 Facade of Santa Maria dell'Orto Church, Rome



Fig.12 Rubens, *Portrait of Clara Rubens*, c. 1616

OTHER PROPERTIES OF THE ART OF PAINTING

The illusion of reality and idealism are just some of the qualities valued by artists and art enthusiasts in the centuries we are discussing. The easiest way to learn about their opinions is through texts. The most ambitious of critics attempting to define the qualities of painting was Roger de Piles. In his 1708 book *Cours de peinture par principes avec un balance de peintres (Principles of Painting with a Scale of Painters)*, he compiled a list of about 57 painters, scoring and classifying them as if it were a competition (the total number is uncertain because the Carracci are grouped together and it is unclear if he is referring only to the brothers Annibale and Agostino, or also their cousin Ludovico). For each painter, he judged four properties: composition, drawing, colour and expression. He allotted a maximum of 18 points and a minimum of zero per category, and explained that the value of perfection is 20 points, and 19 the best an artist could achieve; 18 points represented the closest to perfection he had seen. In a few introductory lines, De Piles explained each of these concepts in somewhat imprecise language, reminding us of the difficulty

COLOPHON

Text: © Alejandro Vergara-Sharp, 2024

Translation: Whitney Dennis

Copy-editing: Cath Phillips

Design: Dooreman

Project management: Hadewych Van den Bossche
Printing & binding: Wilco, Amersfoort, The Netherlands

Original Spanish edition: © Tres Hermanas, March 2022
Publisher of the English edition: Gautier Platteau

ISBN 978 94 6494 119 7

D/2024/11922/29

NUR 654

HANNIBAL

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www.hannibalbooks.be

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