The Visual Intellect

Abraham Veinus

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol2/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
Figure 1. Giorgione, *Tempest* (Accademia, Venice).
The Visual Intellect

Abraham Veinus

There is such a thing as the visual intellect. It is a curiously nonverbal power of the mind to which literary idea and verbalization may append themselves sometimes appropriately and helpfully. We are aware of its functioning whenever we attend to sheer image without the need for translating it into words, without even any especial interest in whether a word to name the image exists. However, the visual image does not exist in a vacuum, nor does the visual intellect live apart from other activities of the human mind which inform it and which, in turn, it informs. The occasional purist who makes a small tease over the purity of his forms is welcome to whatever pride he may feel in his aesthetic virginity. Thin-blooded explications of narrowly formal relationships are as tedious and as short of the mark as are heavy-handed crudities about the moral purposes of art.

Notoriously on the artist’s part, there has been a persistent failure of interest in the presentations of art historians and aestheticians. It may be true, and probably is, that a thoughtful historian and a perceptive aesthetcian may speak to the ultimate concerns of an artist’s activity. But the sense that verbalization sometimes contrives a mausoleum, a monumental enshrinement of the irrelevant, derives from the fact that the urgent operations of the visual intellect are directed first and foremost below or beyond the level of language. Superb literary visualizations such as one finds in a great poet are not paintings except metaphorically. Nor can they guarantee the merit of an actual painting when translated into one. Interest in the literary program of a Renaissance painting must justify itself on grounds other than that herein one will locate the essential secret of the artist’s activity. What survives as still exciting in a Renaissance program painting is hardly the passage from Ovid which it may illustrate, but the qualities of visual logic and invention operating apart from, although in collaboration with, the presumed text. The literary text, when in fact it can be established, is surely worth knowing. But such information cannot strangle our perception of the far more vital matter, which is the artist’s power in visual invention.
The conditions of a commission, stipulations that are iconographic or commercial, the historical and social ambient, the fund of talk or writing available to him, autobiographical detail concerning murders, madness, numbers of children, love affairs and religious conversions—are all relevant in establishing the real pressures under which an artist may in fact work. But the painter, sculptor, or photographer knows he really is one when outside the reach of such pressures, a sharply and critically directed visualization brings to him the sense of having understood both interior and exterior of the object under examination, or of the new visual reality whose logic and eloquence he has just invented out of pigment or stone.

These are indeed images of understanding. The visual intellect of an El Greco, for example, betrays itself whatever the verbalizable nature of the subject (Pentecost or the portrait of a man whose biography we can annotate). Crudely we call this his "style"; more crudely we reduce it to technical mannerisms in the drawing of elongations or the rendition of light. Ambiguously, we speak of "how he sees things." (One wonders what this means.) Ambitiously, we refer to his "vision." None of these quite satisfies the first wonder; what a strange thing is art, is man, that through the one, the visual intellect can render a moving account of the other. What we recognize as El Greco is the special way in which a given mind makes images of its understanding.

This may be so dramatically with El Greco or with Paul Klee. But more quietly it holds also for Degas and Chardin. In each case, one recognizes a special bent of the mind in how each understands experience as visual. This special mind set is always part of the real content of the painting. It is at least possible, as with Paul Klee, for example, that sometimes it is the only real content. The poor angel, the letter Z, the little room in Venice are the exterior images that convey what they all have in common, a quality of mind difficult to define verbally but identifiable nonetheless. Perhaps there is no mystery in the Giorgione Tempest (Fig. 1), a title tacked on for identification only and justifiable as providing less of a disservice than any other. What his figures are doing in his landscape accords little with normative expectations. Perhaps some day a literary program for it will be discovered. But Vasari threw up his hands at the hope of ever finding meaning in much of Giorgione’s work: "And I for my part have never been able to understand his figures nor, for all my asking, have I ever found anyone who does." What one knows for a certainty, standing before this painting, is an entranced lyricism communicated through sheer visual sensibility, so powerful that one does not turn away from it unmoved or thereafter unmarked. Perhaps this is the content, the real subject matter of the painting. In any case, it is the only one we know for certain.

Such a reading accords with how the modern mind tends to approach art and would invite little reservation if the painting had been done at any time within the last hundred years. Yet the historian has understandable misgivings. He may argue that the notion that painting can restrict itself, like music, to the evocation of general states of feeling is plausible enough for much of Gauguin and
most of Kandinsky. But he may think it farfetched, at least at the outset of the investigation, to hold that it will apply back four hundred years to Giorgione. He would like a document either from Giorgione, or from someone close to him, saying explicitly that this is what the man was doing. Or he would like a prior model so at least an influence can be somewhere assumed. Or, perhaps, he might want to know if we can offer him a number of other examples, sufficient to show that a practice of this sort can be claimed as one of the historical perspectives of early sixteenth-century art.

It is commonly assumed of a Renaissance painting when figures are shown, as they here are, engaged in an activity of some kind, that the matter can be reduced to the visualization of a literary idea. It is customary to suppose, given Giorgione’s historical context, that the painting represents an episode in some narrative, or an allegory of some kind. If neither the narrative nor the allegory can be identified, one can suppose it is a private matter known to the painter and his circle. Vasari takes an even more simple view. He supposes that Giorgione wanted to show, in his Fondaco frescoes, how adept he was in drawing figures according to his own fancy. There is no word about the nature of this fancy other than the complaint that no one recognizable is represented. The high Renaissance seems for the historian an unlikely moment for the modern notion that figures engaged in an activity present nothing beyond a brooding lyrical sensibility.

Shall we then surrender our reading? There seems no reason to. For there is a distinction between making up something that does not exist (a fault not unknown in the history of history) and recognizing something that is in fact there. The historian does not—(or, at least, he should not)—deny the lyricism of this Giorgione painting nor the fact that, like music, it evokes a general state of feeling. He simply wants, in addition, a more normative historical reading that would make it, like other Renaissance paintings of its kind—narrative or allegorical or in some fashion founded on literary idea. We reach then to a clear demarcation of interest. The modern mind does not require of any painting, Renaissance or recent, that it transmit a literary idea. The historian, however, is not privileged to forego his search for it in a Renaissance painting. If he finds something illuminating, he will add to our modern understanding. But he cannot invalidate our modern understanding simply on the grounds of its modernity.

The argument here set forth is a general one. Its immediate focus is upon the separateness of two modes of reading: (1) reading out of the painting from its historical context and (2) reading into the painting from our modern approach to works of art. The claim, to begin with, is that the two need not be confused and that each has its validity. But clearly the matter does not end there; for the moment we formalize the two, implicitly there is the question of the relationship between them. If a modern reading has any power worth our attention (whether the modern reading is a formal ism like Freudianism or Marxism or structuralism, or a mute sense of expectation about what one is liable to think or feel before a work of art), then one has to suppose that it inheres in the art per se; that it has always been a perspective of the art; and that accidents of history have attuned our consciousness of it more sharply, more overtly now than in the past.
For our case in point, the Giorgione painting commonly known as the *Tempest*, we have to inquire then whether our modern nonverbal (or, at least, nonnarrative) view has not always been an important perspective of its meaning, perhaps even its only perspective. If we press this strongly, then we will come up with a far more subtle complex of aesthetic expectation for late Renaissance art than many had once thought historically licit. Confronted with a bewildering array of possible literary programs proposed for the painting, opinion has begun quietly to shift. It is no longer so very unconventional to suggest that Giorgione was dealing with mind states, with a nonnarrative figuring forth of images, with a sensibility that sought (and still seeks) to evade language, with the operations, in short, of what has been posited in this paper as the visual intellect.

The position has ramifications beyond what seems, perhaps too readily, to have been disposed of. But before proceeding, it would be well to pause for another example. It is a truism that the Renaissance artist was engrossed in the conquest of reality, in the study of anatomy and perspective, in a struggle to master the real structure of an objectively existing world. Alfred North Whitehead justly accords to the Renaissance artist a position among the founders of the modern scientific mentality. Now a problem arises in Renaissance self-portraiture that has to do with the reversal of an image in a mirror. In particular, hands are a nuisance, not only because what one is doing with one's right hand will be seen as being done with the left, but because, when the hands are clasped together, for example, psychologically there still has to be the right sort of "feel" as to which hand is which. Albrecht Dürer was a Renaissance painter more particularly dedicated to the science of painting, to an orderly and meticulous study of "the real." In the Prado self-portrait (1498; Fig. 2), where he presents himself elegantly as a gentleman, a lack of ease still betrays itself in the drawing of the hands. No doubt there is strain there. One can suppose this a failure to develop an effective solution to a technical problem. The thumbs, in particular, may not convince as entirely naturalistic, and Dürer, it is supposed, was interested in getting things right.\(^1\)

However, there is a mode of aesthetic reconciliation, although it is doubtful that a blunt statement of it will satisfy an art historian or even that it would with certainty have satisfied Dürer. We can accept the hands and ask how they contribute, just as they are, to the visual reading of character (which is, after all, the essence of the question). The Dürer hands, by virtue of their tight, awkward strain, contribute for the modern observer not only an allowable but a most gratefully accepted contradiction to the elegance of the man. It is a dissonance, to be sure, but a well-placed one, and it has the look of truth about it. What comes readily to us is the supposition that "to draw well does not mean to draw correctly." This was said by Jawlensky, a German expressionist; but it could have been said by nearly any artist in the last hundred years, so common is this point of view. In the modern expectation, the strain of the hands, the distortion of the thumbs, speaks to an inner tension which we take as a natural truth rather than as a fault in naturalistic drawing. It is idle to ask whether Dürer had our reading

1. Twenty years later this Dürer-like clasp of the hands reappears most elegantly drawn in Pontormo's portrait of Cosimo the Elder. Here the issue is not a realistic rendition of an image reversal in mirror self-portraiture, but the making of a memorial icon of a man many years dead.
Figure 2. Düer: Self-Portrait (Prado, Madrid).
Figure 3. Donatello, *Lo Zuccone* (Museum of the Duomo, Florence).
in mind or whether he would have drawn the hands more gracefully had he been able. It is also idle to note that Dürer was not a member of the modern middle class with its theology of inner personal tension universalized into the ultimate and all-pervasive condition of man. The point is that the dissonance exists. We can look at the thumbs only (as sensible as an elbow or a left earlobe view) and decide that the drawing is infelicitous. Or we can look at the whole painting, at what the visual intellect tells us is the character of the man, and find that the hands are an inspired dissonance, humanizing and enriching the presentation.

Here and in many other examples it is possible, and sometimes it is certain, that we make a shift in historical perspective. The visual intellect does not exist apart from real people living, as all must, mainly in their own history. The signals sent and received across centuries can hardly be expected to remain constant in meaning. We observe the historian’s strictures and proceed with proper caution in legitimating shifts in modes of vision and hence in visual meaning. But we cannot countenance reading them out of the record as irrelevant and misleading.

The insistence that we understand the past only as the past understood itself is as much a modern mode of thought (or a modern mysticism) as is the eagerness to uncover a new psychology wherever one looks. The cult of authenticity in baroque musical practice is matched in simpleness only by the cult of correctness in seeking for iconographies in medieval and Renaissance art. Fact is one thing, interpretation another. The thumbs in the Dürer self-portrait are not gracefully drawn; the literary idea for the Giorgone Tempest, if it ever existed, is not now known and can only be conjectured. So far, so fair. But in what we are authorized to make of this, the living have privileges and responsibilities as well as the dead.

What it comes to is that the modern imagination has its rights. We have no intention of bowing before historical fact and putting arms back on the Venus de Milo merely because we know that the Greeks, whatever their sexual proclivities, hardly imagined the goddess of love without them. (The case is no better if we suppose her not a goddess but a handsome woman dropping her clothes and about to enter a bath.) Nor would the Greeks have insulted Athena by maintaining a ruin in her honor. Her temple, the Parthenon in Athens, has been eroded by wind, stained by splotches that time has worked out of the stone, and once, when used as an ammunition dump in a war between the Venetians and the Turks, it was blown up. Some of its appeal surely derives from the modern and romantic awe before so noble a wonder that has withstood both the enmity of time and the idiocy of man. We do not raze the ruin of the Parthenon to replace it correctly with a clean architectural perfection and one, moreover, with painted statues.

Donatello’s Lo Zuccone (so-called) has been removed from its perch some sixty to seventy feet above street level and placed in the Museum of the Duomo in Florence, secure against further deterioration (Figs. 3 and 4). We now meet it as a work by Donatello and two other unacknowledged artists—time and resetting. For as we now must see
it, time-beaten and at eye level, the distortions introduced by both have turned it into what might at first glance pass for a powerful example of early twentieth-century expressionism. It is not only that it makes no sense to put it back where it belongs, on a perch where it can scarcely be seen and where it will surely perish. The more pertinent fact is that it looks good to us in the falsified way in which we now see it—harsh, angular, distorted. We are used to seeing sculpture of this sort; the visual intellect now accepts this readily and without overmuch curiosity as to what still frustrates the scholar—namely whom Donatello had intended to represent when he carved his “pumpkin head.”

The scholar knows that from a Renaissance sculptor he has reason to expect a definite answer (e.g., a person then living, or a figure out of history, or out of the Testaments or pagan myth, or some specific allegorical conception). But in the modern way of seeing, it is sufficient to say that it is a man.

A final example and, indeed, a critical one: the bias of a modern mind as it affects the restorer, to whom, after all, is entrusted the work of maintaining the art object in its despairing battle

Figure 4. Donatello, Lo Zuccone (detail).

2. This figure was already known in the Renaissance as “pumpkin head,” and one suspects that much of what looks good to us in its expressionistic stance may well have looked good also to Donatello’s contemporaries. While I mean to stress the very real difference between Renaissance attitudes and our own, in some particulars the matter can be overstated.
3. I am, of course, prepared to defend this procedure. To recover whatever one can of the original, however incomplete, must be at least the first step. One can then argue about whether it ought to be the last.

against time. What are the criteria of authenticity in determining how one restores a painting? In fact, there are several and they conflict. The choice that seems so reasonable is simply the one that happens to accord with the mode of thought current when the restoration is made, and not necessarily the mode of thought that prevailed when the work was originally done. The Giotto frescoes in Santa Croce in Florence are a case in point (Figs. 5 and 6). One can restore by repainting damaged areas to show the original condition of the work, or one can restore by cleaning and allowing whatever has been lost to remain lost. The nineteenth-century restorer chose the first option (Fig. 5): for the taste of the time, worshipping works of art as elegant and perfect productions, would scarcely tolerate empty patches of fresh plaster in the middle of a fresco. Even sculpture was so treated, and the Praxiteles Hermes and the Infant Dionysus was provided with a new left foot and two new legs that had been lost in the original.

The modern restorer finds this obnoxious. He cleans back to the point where only the hand of the master remains, and in the name of authenticity he, and we, are ready to accept whatever strangeness this procedure produces. The Giotto frescoes in Santa Croce can now be seen rid of all corrective painting added by previous restorers (Fig. 6). Strips of empty wall replace the original wherever it has been lost; and this entirely unauthentic emptiness winding through the fresco, intersecting figures and leaving bodies dismembered, now stands as security that what remains is authentic. Two things can be said about this. First, it is an excellent instance of fact worship to which the modern mind is so prone. Completeness, perfection, elegance, have no case before a hard-headed restorer asserting that what is, is. Even the tourist nods approvingly. There is no put-on here. He is shown plainly the facts of the case. Secondly, though we may regret that a wall cannot withstand time, it causes little discomfort to our postrealist, postabstractionist sensibility to accept from Giotto something so unlikely as sections of bodies subsisting unjoined, imperviously tolerating the arbitrary, irrelevant, and unnatural dematerializations of vital parts of themselves into emptiness. The contemporary visual intellect adjusts quite readily. A hundred years ago such an "authenticity" would have been sheer outrage and anguish.

There are simply no unequivocal and indisputable criteria for asserting on basic ground, aesthetic or historical, that one mode of authenticity is utterly true and the other utterly false. What is acceptable as the "past" depends much upon what is found natural or agreeable or at least tolerable in the present. It is surely necessary to know the past "in its own terms" to whatever degree this is possible. It is equally necessary to know our own mind about it. These are separate, though related, matters with far-reaching implications for how we read a work of art.

It is surely not licit to invent out of the heart of darkness whatever we fancy as the meaning of a painting. But the stain of a living mind is inevitably upon whatever it touches. It is equally impermissible, on evidence necessarily incomplete and often ambiguous, to limit the angle of vision from which "the historical facts" dictate that a painting be read. (Masaccio's Tribute Money, for example, can-
not be reduced to the issue of tax collecting.) A responsible scholarship cautions us to live with a work of art within the limits of plausibility, and to transgress, if we must, through the temptations of an informed intellect rather than through an arrogance founded in ignorance.

Moreover, it is not evident that the present always understands itself better than the future will. This holds for any moment once present and now past. It is fair to say of a Renaissance painter that his interests in some respects are very different from our own. To insist on reading only out of our own perspectives is to insist upon a reading of ourselves rather than of the work of art. It is true that an encounter with a work of art becomes especially moving when it entails a moment of self-understanding. In the privacy of our affections we retain a special place for a few works that have meant much to us. But the functions of a work of art cannot be reduced solely to self-analysis, nor can its meaning be restricted to true confessions from a chance observer. In so doing we may neglect something from the past that falls outside the immediacies of a modern interest, an otherness no longer in the foreground of our attention. Upon occasion, it is an otherness in which we discover value, a richness of a special kind no longer to be found commonly in our own culture.

Somewhere we must find the balance between our regard for what the past has to offer and our regard for our own interest in the offering. We cannot be put off with the admonition that the artist is expressing his own time and not ours. Nor need we genuflect before the recently descended who carry tablets which tell them what, at any given moment in history, an artist is restricted to expressing. It is a truism that an artist’s mind is formed within the context of his own culture. It is also axiomatic that inspiration and insight work in their own mysterious ways and that, of all people, an artist in particular is liable to say, eloquently and clearly, more than he consciously may

Figure 5. Giotto, Funeral of St. Francis (Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence). Nineteenth-century restoration.
know.
In any case, we cannot be driven back to that aberration of the first-year graduate student—an appeal to the artist’s intention. Intention is a concept extraordinary in its complexity and hardly one that is always firmly and thoroughly understood, either by those who do the intending or by those who construe the intention. Where we can say something definite and understandable about it, it may turn out to be significant for an understanding of a painting; or it may turn out to be interesting, but only incidentally so; or it may turn out to be downright worthless. In and of itself, intention provides neither the necessary nor the sufficient condition for meaning. Moreover, since it is a composite of motivations, overt and covert, the significant level of intention may well evade what explicit documentation can record or preserve.

Ultimately, the notion that Dürer or Michelangelo or Titian can fully and unequivocally explicate to us the depth and range of their intent is a belief in a kind of mental telepathy that transcends time and mortality. The marvel in receiving as much as we do from a great work of art is a marvel that sustains itself and does not require a mysticism of absolute documentation to legitimate it. This is a hard lesson to learn, for it marks the point of transition out of the safe refuge of information on to wild seas in search of understanding. However we come by it, understanding of great works of art is an adventure as arduous as it is worth undertaking; for it still remains one of the few means at our disposal for sensitizing human beings and for humanizing the world.

In the last century, in an effort to savor a richer marrow of meaning, one often worried a peculiar kind of bone known as “the moral pur-
poses of art." In this century we have been chewing perhaps higher, perhaps lower, on the hog, and the name of the grinding and gnawing is psychoanalysis. Art historians have not always taken kindly to Freud’s Leonardo or Ernest Jones’s Andrea del Sarto. In fairness, it does not suffice to show that a given psychiatrist is merely mistaken as to the facts. The hard case will come—and it is not beyond the human potential—with the psychiatrist who is sensitive to a work of art and sufficiently knowledgeable in its history to know what he is talking about. In this event, we will have to ask whether a painting can be psychoanalyzed and whether the result, if persuasive, is something other than autonomous poetry.

If the person only can be psychoanalyzed through what he has left behind him, then the question is: how relevant is a detail about a dead man’s psyche to the work before us? It is one more instance of the general question: what is the significance of a biographical datum to a work of art? Suppose a psychiatrist does establish that an artist long dead was homosexual; or an astrologer that he was born when Sagittarius wept in the horned corner of a cold house; or a marriage counselor that the artist’s themes are such as men are prone to who have been married three times and not twice. It is important that we not haggle over the facts, for the issue in every case, and in any case, is the same. In the work of art directly before us, what appreciates or deteriorates in value now that we have this information? This question must be spoken to directly, before we can be distracted from the complex and exhausting claims that the work already makes upon our attention. "An artist’s work and his private life," writes Vincent Van Gogh, "are like a woman in childbirth and her baby. You may look at her child, but you may not lift her chemise to see if it is bloodstained."

No doubt a psychiatrist is wise who looks to Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Mozart for guidance through the intricacies and the depths of the human psyche. He could hardly choose wiser mentors. A sensitive psychiatry should have much to learn from art. But that studies in psychoanalysis yield something fundamental to the comprehension of a given work of art is still a consummation to be wished for. The realization of this hope, one suspects, will have to be built on fundamental grounds, on the disciplines of an epistemology encompassing wider terrain than psychoanalysis, anthropology, and art history—separately or in conjunction—now seem able to offer.

As for the older mode of authority that stresses moral purpose, one is bound to observe that the visual intellect satisfies itself shamelessly and with little regard for how the moral intelligence reflects upon the worthiness of what is visually presented. (Visual intellect and moral intelligence have been at variance often enough in the history of art.) Ideally, both are satisfied in the best of all possible minds concerned with the best of all possible experience. Yet a visual intellect that capitulates too readily to moral stricture is simply not strong enough to sustain its own gratifications. Moreover, granted the relevance of the one to the other, to confuse the two is a naked madness. One’s erotic experience, such as it may be—actual or fantasized, sordid or ideal—is involved relevantly in a confrontation.
with a Titian, a Courbet, or a Rubens nude. But to confuse a painted nude with a real one calls for compassion and immediate professional care.

That painted nudes in remarkably provocative postures are displayed with equanimity in museums where it would be unseemly for real ones so to behave is only trivially explained by statements about double standards of decency in life and art, or about the history of what is or is not acceptable in institutional custom. At the heart of the matter is the singular yet reasonable autonomy of the visual intellect. If the observer indulges, as perhaps he will, other gratifications as well, this is very much his own affair. (And one hopes that he will keep it so, at least until he is sure that he can speak of it with sensitivity and without circumlocution.) Obviously, as distinct from one another as life and art may be, the experience from the one spills over to the other. But it should also be obvious that, however closely related, the two are not to be confused. If life and art are identical, one of them is unnecessary.

It remains to add one last, and harshly realistic, caution. Intuitively, we impose a law of significance, holding that ideas and emotions are being expressed whose meaning and momentousness we proceed to debate. But thought and emotion are characteristics unique to biologically living things. There is still no locatable meaning in asking of a mountain or a molecule what it thinks or feels. A painting or a piece of sculpture is a thing, an inanimate object. Literally it can express nothing at all.

Our hope is that as something a human once made, it may constitute a record, a vehicle, a code, a configuration, a means of some kind for evoking or provoking out of another human a complex of worthwhile ideas and emotions. The language to be employed without apology is the language of metaphor and reification. It seems better to recognize the barriers of language and to challenge them than to persist in the delusion that there are infallible formulas on hand for humanizing objects or for verbalizing what is visual. Indeterminacy has its disciplines. A controlled inaccuracy implicit in metaphor and reification is sufficient offset, one can hope, by the insights which such devices of language can display. The inanimate thing, the living human passion, the visual presence, the verbal translation—one does the best one can in bringing them together.

In a sense, the continuing confusion of life and art arise naturally, so strong and urgent is the relationship between the two. The temptation is deep and ever present to maintain expectations from the one which only the other can reasonably satisfy. Nevertheless it is an error to prejudge a son on the accomplishments of his father, to subsume the meaning of a poem within the confines of the alchemical text that helped sire some of its imagery, to value a fresco for the religious belief that may have led an artist to undertake it, or to suppose that the true meaning of the work of art has been found when we acquire information about the secret places in the artist’s psyche where presumably the work was conceived. In such an interpretation, Genesis becomes not simply the first, but the only book in the Bible. The generic fallacy seems a conditioned reflex of the mind, an aberra-
tion incident upon the human search for causes.

It is one thing to insist upon the relevance of life to art. But it is quite another to legislate that art obey the conventions and conveniences of life. Grand pianos do not have to be comfortable to sleep in. Yet a painting or a piece of sculpture sometimes still arouses a certain subcutaneous irritation, the suspicion of a put-on mainly because one does not instantly find in it what, in reference to common experience, one would call a real and recognizable object. On this criterion, two hundred cans of Campbell’s soup ought to satisfy; they are objects of common experience, real and recognizable. Uncritical applications to art from morality, sociology, or psychoanalysis involve what Whitehead calls a “discrepancy of perspective.” The cure for it—and he is no doubt right about this—is recourse to “practical good sense.” But unfortunately common sense is one of the more uncommon of commodities. Ultimately, despite error and confusion growing out of uncritical and simple-minded transferences from one to the other, life and human experience remain unavoidable reference points for an understanding of art.

Where else is one to look? The notion that the meaning of a work of art can be located totally within itself is unfortunately trivial. If it leads anywhere it is usually to a sterile hang-up over form. The work of art within itself, and in its own terms, can yield data—invaluable data, to be sure. But data as such, whether the field be sociology, physics or art, cannot constitute the criteria for self-evaluation. The word sign is the first part of the word significance. A datum derived through form analysis acquires significance as a sign for something other than itself. The work of art, as a thing in itself, can only be. But it too acquires significance when it serves as a sign for what lies beyond it. (This is the basis for the search for its symbol power, for its symbolic function.) What lies outside its objective self, its “thingness,” is life experience from which it emanates, to which it refers itself back for the acquisition of meaning, and within which it must function in its effort to achieve and sustain importance.

In brief, we assume a vital connection between art and human experience. We deny, however, any simple-minded correspondence between art on the one hand, and history, morals, or psychoanalysis on the other. We assume that the role of form analysis is critical in locating data essential in a search for meaning. We deny, however, that such data are, or can be, in themselves the meaning.

Art provides us with visual images. So does nature. The difference is that art, as the word itself says, is artificial. It purveys manmade and, thus far, handmade images. A sunset is often beautiful, moving, an event rich and complex in the feelings and ideas that it may arouse in a sensitive observer. Yet the bedrock reason why the sunset is not a work of art is that it is not a manmade contrivance. It is a form of bad poetry (fortunately now firmly out of fashion) as well as a downright foolishness to speak of nature as a great artist and to point to a sunset as confirmation. It is more true and more humanly consoling to recognize that much that is not art is fortunately still beautiful.

What, then, is the relationship between the meanings of images given in nature, or in the conventions of social life, and the meanings of such images in man-made representa-
tions? It is tempting to say that one carries over to the other, for so often this is true. On the face of it, there is nothing improbable in the notion that the experience of sunsets, of long shadows in late afternoon, of gray mornings, may form for an artist the meanings he seems intuitively to associate with color, with light and shade. But the meanings of a natural image are complex and by no means constant, although some meanings are surprisingly widespread.

A mountain, for example, may represent a haven to an outlaw, the drift of continents to a geologist, and a challenge to an inveterate climber. In a myth, it may be where a dark god sits and considers modes of mysterious mischief. But in common experience, bounded as we are by the measure of our own mortality, a mountain serves us as a simple and triumphant symbol, if not of immortality, at least of the imperviously enduring. It is the undefeated. This connotation, which it has pervasively in life, is often the one that it evidently has in a painting.

One of the links, then, between life and art is that often the common meaning of an image in human experience is also its evident meaning in a work of art. Eyes and fingers are sensitive and exposed parts of the human anatomy. Common experience testifies that they are critical centers of human pain. In his Guernica, Picasso relies upon the immediate transference of such knowledge from life to art. What it means for a city to be destroyed in an air raid is plain enough from the disjunct, unfocused eyes, from the distended, stuffed fingers.

In the case of the mountain, or of dislocations of certain parts of the human anatomy, the transference of connotation from life to art simply occurs. That humans are prone to make such obvious transferences is a fact that does not bear arguing about. (I have encountered the cheerful soul who sees the Guernica as a well-designed wall decoration. Some tolerate well the air raids that happen in other places.) Yet many things commonly encountered in life do not so readily and unequivocally declare themselves. The color red, for example, has too wide-ranging and dissimilar a set of meanings in common life for us to predict the meaning of its appearance in a painting. Moreover, unlike shattered eyes, the color red in a painting has no necessary and inevitable connection with some of its common connotations in life (a traffic signal, a red-light district, a political ideology, a state of embarrassment). Sometimes a signal given in a work of art will trigger off in an observer the same reaction (in essence) that such a signal would set off in life. But sometimes, plainly, this is not expected to happen. The representation of a red stoplight in a painting, for example, cannot be counted on to stop a motorist who has already gotten his car that far into a museum.

Since we live commonly and continually with images in our contacts with nature, in our social life, in our daily obligation to communicate by sign or by sentence, we come to the images of art with an accrual of meaning already accomplished and conditioned. We cannot impugn manifest transferences of meaning when the images of art resemble images imprinted upon us both by the exceptional and by the routinely repeated occasions of existence. Yet the relationship between art and human experience cannot be reduced to a single direction, without loss of significant enrichment. For art is itself a human experience. And to those to whom it is each day necessary, the imagery of art becomes eventually in itself a special reserve of human
knowledge. From it we draw a subtlety of nuance and intonation to bestow upon the images that surround us.

To render an exterior seeming, that which impinges literally upon the senses, is an early stage in the apprenticeship to art. Increasingly one learns to see what one paints or carves, to understand what one writes, to hear what one composes. A distortion that one learns to see as one acquires mastery over the making of it becomes an image of understanding which the visual intellect, turning away from the canvas, is now trained to detect in the appearance of real things. The faces, the hands, the human bodies everywhere around us, betray nuances of character and of human condition which a Giotto, a Rembrandt, or a Picasso have taught us to perceive. A mind touched by Cézanne, Constable, Monet, Corot, sees trees and rain and rock in a special syntax which the grammar of no other kind of experience can entirely convey.

It is a pity that this must sound so precious, so much a stance of sensibility. But a mind governed solely by the formal mechanisms of meaning is simply shut out from the rich potentials that lie within the images of common experience.

Mary Beth Ross received her Ph.D. from Syracuse University and currently teaches in the S.U. English Department. She has published poetry, fiction, criticism, and a variety of other articles. In 1977 Dr. Ross was listed in "Outstanding Young Women in America."

A Demanding Grace

It winds up being almost effortless
But not easy. The avid clench of bud
Might be a balance of petals we should
See as the rose's highest happiness;
Perhaps that discipline's its fondest care,
And it's with resignation, not relief,
It finally surrenders a single leaf
Upon the savage fecklessness of air.
But flower it must, and you and I too,
At high, sheer places in our clumsy hearts:
The brink and the breach where poise seems mere chance,
And there's absolutely nothing to do
But scramble up from our crouch and then start
To reel arrogant and headlong into dance.

—Mary Beth Ross