

We might think back on our own encounters with specific paintings and ask ourselves how we looked at them. From a proper distance—as important, valuable objects, there to be properly named, recognized, admired? Do you look first for a resemblance (to a guitar or a tree or a table set for tea)? Do you focus, again from a distance, on color, line, brush strokes, form? Does the fame or familiarity of the artist affect your seeing? (Would you stop at a painting by Ruth or Harry Brown as readily as you would stop for Claude Monet?) We have often been told to take a disinterested stance (by Kant, for instance), to thrust away or put in parentheses your location and relations in the world. If you say that the houses in the Pissarro painting are just like the ones in Stockbridge where you spent a summer, you may well bypass an aesthetic experience. It takes, many of us say today, an act of imagination to enter into the painting. And to enter in is to engage with the painting, to participate in it, to bring it to life by means of our perceiving.

In *ART AS EXPERIENCE*, John Dewey wrote; “The idea that esthetic perception is an affair for odd moments is one reason for the backwardness of the arts among us. The eyes and the visual apparatus maybe intact; the object may be physically there: the cathedral of Notre Dame, or Rembrandt’s portrait of Hendrik Stouffer. In some bald sense, the latter may be ‘seen’. They may be looked at, possibly recognized and have their correct names attached. But for lack of continuous interaction between the total organism and the objects, they are not perceived, certainly not esthetically.” We have in mind an entering into the created work. Yes, it requires an act of the imagination, a capacity to bring (as Virginia wrote) the severed parts together. When we first look at a painting, we see particulars (the house on the road, the little figures, the trees); and, using the capacities noted above, we somehow “compose” the various parts. Participating in the work, we might imagine ourselves viewing it from the road or from the house or from the hill in the background. This is quite different from the distant, depersonalized view stemming from the Renaissance in Europe. We become able to see that space itself has different qualities, depending on the position we imagine ourselves taking. Distance, like space and time, is dependent on the perceiver.

All this has much to do with the way we interpret what we see. When we speak of hermeneutics, we have interpretation in mind, going beyond description of what we see. Even what we call “facts” are the results of interpretation. The point is often made that facts mean nothing if imagination does not open towards intellectual possibility. We as perceivers constitute or construct the meaning of, say, Picasso’s “Woman Ironing” or one of Picasso’s or Braque’s cubist creations. The same is true of the different paintings of flowers in vases. They mean differently, as we will see if we go beyond mere description to interpretation—of color, brush stroke, shape. Or think of Van Gogh’s hills that seem to move, to heave, perhaps due to the very obvious brush strokes that become more obvious if you imagine yourself standing at the foot of one hill, looking upwards.

In a sense I am calling attention to acts of consciousness, consciousness which is always of something. Merleau-Ponty spoke of the person being face to face with the world, of always being in a situation, of being in a distance rather than at a distance. When we perceive, we are in the world as a whole. It is thought or reflection that make us see perspective or the surrounding environment as objectively there, apart from our involvement. Instead of observing space from a distance, we are immersed in space; space is no longer to be contemplated as above a landscape; we are in the landscape. Some of us are familiar with paintings of Venice “experienced by everyone,” wrote Sartre, “seen by no one.” And Kandinsky; “In these wonderful houses I experienced something that has never repeated itself; they taught me to move in the picture, to live in the picture.” Even with the landscapes of Cezanne and Monet, if we stand far enough away from them, if we avoid looking at them and look into them, our perceptual field joins with pictorial space; we are participant, we are in the landscape. Our memories and moods play on what we see; the world is no longer an objective structure independent of our experience or our knowing. It is the world viewed, the world perceived. It is a reality made meaningful by acts of our imagination, intuition, emotion, belief, sensation and cognition, no longer an abstraction rationally or logically defined. For Nietzsche, “The aesthetic state possesses a superabundance of means of communication, together with an extreme receptivity for stimuli and signs. It constitutes the high point of communication and transmission between living creatures... Every enhancement of life enhances the human being’s power of communication as well as power of understanding.”