



The Role of Interpretation in Art

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The Role of Interpretation in Art

The history of painting dates back to artefacts from pre-historic times across various cultures. It displays a vast array of creativity which has continued on into the 21st century. These pre-historic arts and paintings were mostly representational, religious or symbolic motifs. They mostly consisted of animistic and representations of nature. A fine example of pre-historic art can be that of the Nagas in India, elaborated further in the paper. In the 18th and 19th Century, the Romantic Movement in paintings turned its attention to landscape, nature and the human figure.

By the mid-19th century, painters began to portray scenes from religion, mythology or history. The idea "art for art's sake" began to find expression in their works. Post-Impressionism led to the art of Modernism. Modernism breaks away from the traditional but is a radical way of thinking with no boundaries. Impressionism strove to create an "impression" of nature.

Symbolists used mythology and dream imageries for a "visual language of the soul", seeking evocative paintings that reflected a "static world of silence". The symbols used in Symbolism are intensely personal, private, obscure and usually ambiguous references.

Cubism started with Pablo Picasso's use of the three solid forms – cube, sphere and cone – in his depiction of nature.

Expressionism and Symbolism dominated much of the avant-garde art. Expressionist works were painted largely between World War I and World War II. Expressionists are related to both Surrealism and Symbolism and somewhat "eccentrically personal".

Expressionism is closely related to the “emotions and feeling of the human heart”. Dadaism involved arts with its anti-war politic through a rejection of the predominant standards in art.

Surrealism is best known for their “realistic depictions of dream imagery and fantastic manifestations of the imagination”. Its method was to

expose psychological truth by stripping ordinary objects of their normal significance, in order to create a compelling image that was beyond ordinary formal organization, and perception, sometimes evoking empathy from the viewer, sometimes laughter and sometimes outrage and bewilderment.ⁱ

The above mentioned art movements, among the many others, have historical significance in its origin. Art works were mainly influenced by the ideas and the occurring events during their time. Wars and political instability were main factors which contributed to the emerging of the modern and contemporary art. Prior to this, art works dealt with religion, mythology, culture and social beliefs, as earlier mentioned.

It is hard to classify which art work brings out the best results, but they evidently aid in the advancement of art through the ages. Interpretations (or, misinterpretations as such) are plenteous. However, it is fallacy, to segregate and categorize good or bad artwork since they are a flow of the creative imagination or “poetic genius”. Art works portray and is the most powerful and accessible way of shaping social consciousness due to its power to shape ideas.

Picasso says, “If everyone would paint, political re-education would be unnecessary”. Politics, being a crucial part of society, directly or indirectly influence art and

thus, society itself. There are two ways of viewing artworks namely, isolationism and contextualism.

Isolationism is of the view that knowledge of the artist's biography, historical background, etc are irrelevant in appreciating a work of art. Constant "re-exposure" to an artwork permeates in the viewer a maximum sense of appreciation, if an artwork is not understood at first. However, contextualism holds the idea that an artwork should always be approached in its context. With this knowledge, an artwork can be appreciated in its fullness. Besides just Literature, art forms such as paintings and music should be apprehended in the same way.

It is crucial to have a well-balanced opinion of the two kinds of approach in dealing with various kinds of art forms. However, approaching with a contextualist method is both necessary and helpful towards appreciation of works of art, according to critics.

Terry Barrett suggests that "interpretations ought to present the work in its best rather than its weakest light".ⁱⁱ Interpretations of any kind are an absolute necessity to understand an artwork better. They reveal about the artwork, not necessarily the painter himself. According to Barrett, artworks have an "'aboutness' and demand interpretation".ⁱⁱⁱ It is the fundamental principle on which it depends.

Interpretations are necessary for understanding the message an artist tries to convey through their artwork. Interpretations, like the artwork itself, are often based on a world view, pertaining to a particular age. They are not an absolute truth or absolute wrong, but so-called good interpretations, because of their convincing and reasonable information about an art work. Such interpretations do not reflect the critic but more about the art itself. There is a danger in critiquing an artist instead of the artwork, which is actually the object of interpretation.

However, meanings of artworks have altered due to its many representations and reproductions over time. By isolating and ignoring a detail, an artwork completely transforms from an intended original meaning, if there is any. Environment, situations and world views impact and influence a viewer's opinion of an artwork. Therefore, knowledge of its contextual background comes into play and is crucial in interpreting an artwork.

Seeing an animal in a zoo produces a different reaction and stirs excitement than seeing this same animal in a book or on the internet. Similarly, seeing an original painting will have a different impact on the viewer than seeing reproductions of it elsewhere. The way we see things are “affected by what we know or what we believe”.^{iv}

The setting of the place and time influence our perception and thus impact our attitude towards an artwork. The original intended meaning gets corrupted over time and adulteration through the environment, social beliefs and construct become prevalent. An artwork may mean something different to a viewer and the opposite to another. This also depends on the background of the artwork. Therefore, captions or stories behind the creation of a work of art produce a different effect on the way it is perceived. Examples of such interpretations are given in the following. One of the famous artists, Van Gogh, displays through his works a certain limitation to interpretations when the background of an art work comes into play.

1. Post-Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh

One of the most iconic tortured artists, his paintings conveyed his emotional and spiritual state. His mental instability was reflected in his works, through his surroundings and each image was imbued with deep psychological portrayal and resonance.

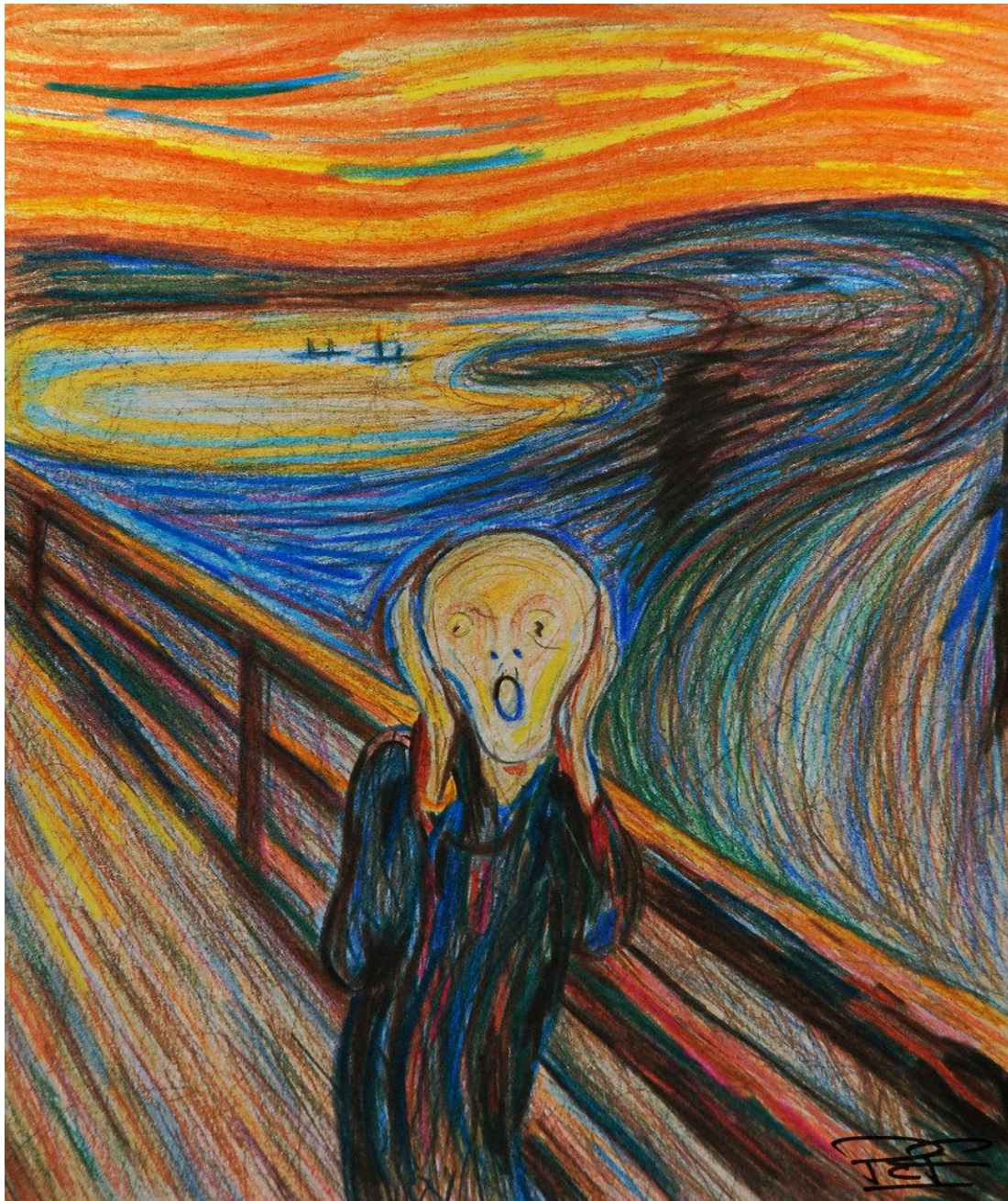
In his final days, his paintings included vast cornfields under clouded skies and crows. These reflect his tortured state of unrest and mental instability towards the end of his days. Knowledge of the background of these artworks now produces a different meaning. Therefore, captions and contextual background of the artist himself play a very crucial part in understanding an artwork and what it tries to convey. His *Wheatfield with Crows* serves as a “compelling and poignant expression” of his mind which Hulsker associates with “melancholy and extreme loneliness”, one with a “sombre and threatening aspect” – a “doom-filled painting with threatening skies and ill-omened crows”.^v



Wheatfield with crows, painted in his final days.

2. Expressionist Edvard Munch

The Scream painting is said to represent the “universal anxiety of modern man”. Munch stated that the goal of this painting *The Scream* is “the study of the soul, that is to say the study of my own self”.^{vi}



3. Cubist Pablo Picasso

Picasso abandons the idea of the picture as a “window on objects in the world” and began to see it merely as an “arrangement of signs that used different, sometimes metaphorical means, to refer to those objects”.^{vii} His works were also influenced by archaic

and tribal arts. In his works, he goes on to deconstruct the conventions of “perspectival space” that dominated in paintings. These innovations have influenced all of modern art in one way or the other, opening up a revolutionised world of a new depiction of form in space.

Picasso famously quotes that

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.



The Old Guitarist, painted on the death of a friend who committed suicide.

4. Symbolism in ancient Naga art

The Nagas use many natural objects consisting of feathers, teeth, horns, cowries, tusks, red-dyed goats' hair, etc. These are used to identify people and units to each other. Most of their ornaments have “powerful” meanings attributed to them. A particular

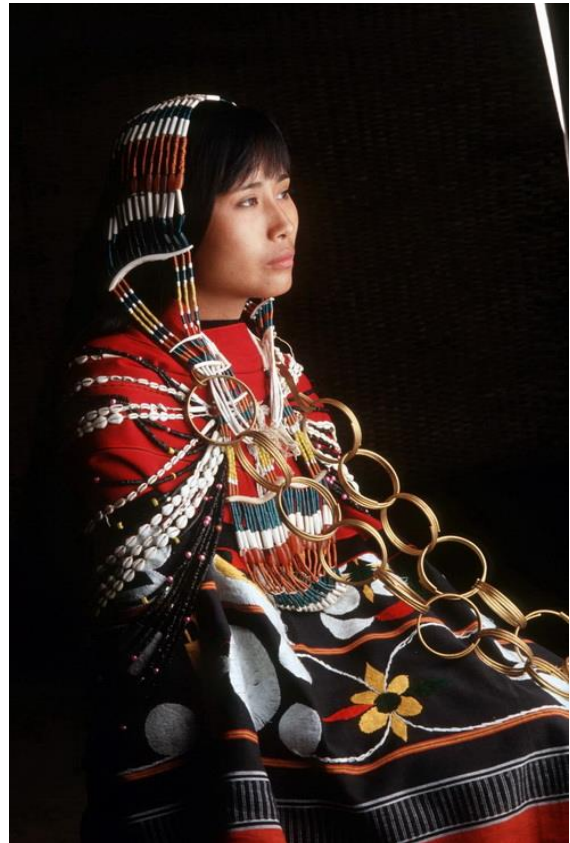
object often has a dominant meaning, but also a complementary one. Feathers for men indicate the warrior status while for women, feasts of merit. Men achieved status by head-taking and thus signified through their ornaments – including tattoos, weapons and clothes. Tattoos for women indicated a kind of “rite of passage” while for men, a symbolic part of their status in head-taking.



Headgears, cowries, feathers and tattoos used indicate their warrior status.

Ornaments also constitute a common language. What they mean depends on the “limited set of possible contexts in which they are found”.^{viii} Therefore, they both reflect a particular community’s identity and also act as a means to change it. However their particular meaning (head-taking or feasting) and the particular arrangement (in the shield or on a hat) varies between the tribes. Objects were both used for identification within a tribe itself and

also among the tribes. Thus, the meanings of a particular object can differ in each tribe and community, as seen in this ancient Naga art form. Symbolism in this ancient art form is portrayed in these various art forms through ornaments, attires, weaponry and body art, besides paintings.



Ornaments and attires represent different symbols in different Naga tribes.

John Berger ^{ix} in his essay suggests that our ways of perception are not more spontaneous than generally assumed since they are manipulated by external factors and extensively depend on cultural conventions.

Seeing establishes our place in the surrounding world – with words, the world can be explained but it cannot undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between

what is seen and the knowledge of it is never stable. The idea of Mystification in art has become prevalent and thus Berger cautions his readers against its influence in the way things are perceived. Mystification is

The process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident...today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way.

The “experience” of an artwork also depends on the physical. For example, an artwork originally placed in a particular place, held a certain “power” of its own. Unfortunately, its “power” is now stripped off its significance due to its numerous reproductions. It has now become valueless, available, insubstantial and free. Berger says that the authority an artwork once had has now been lost as it gradually becomes “free” to the common masses.

The universal quote, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” as we can see, is a relative one. Its perception of beauty is defined by the changes around the viewer himself. What is beauty to one may differ to another. Art, being largely interpretive and conceptual, it is difficult to categorise what is precisely “beauty”. Art is more than the mere “perception of beauty”, its “interpretation of the creator” but about interpretation itself. ^x

Russian Art Critic, Leo Steinberg ^{xi} famously quotes that “anything anybody can do, painting does better”, conveys his love and reverence for the visual arts’ “ability to not just reflect life, but to become life itself”. He believed that the difference between the modern artwork and the ancient was mostly to do with the viewer’s “subjective experience of the artwork”.

Jacques Derrida in his essay launches an inquiry into the phrase “without any context” since it produces an “endless sequence of possible interpretations that never comes to any definite end”.^{xii}

There are four interpretations in the phrase “the truth in painting” which are as follows

1. The thing itself (truth as “unhiddenness, disclosure, presentation).
2. A precise and accurate “representation” of the thing itself.
3. The truth in the sense “proper to a picture” as opposed to the truth, for example, in the sense “proper to an essay” (which opens up to a play of possibilities in this case).
4. The truth about painting.

Literature can be representational but not exactly in the same way as visual art. In Literature, it is through language. However, both painting and writing can depict the same action. For example, a sonnet may express only the feelings of an anonymous speaker. Unlike in a painting, dramas and films can depict such representations with sole action through characters.

Art becomes a “transformation of reality”, not just mere “reproduction of reality”.^{xiii} Reality is the common denominator but every artist deals with it in different ways.

As evident in the essay, it is important to be aware of those which pose great threat in limiting room for interpretation of artworks. References to its contexts and historical significance becomes a crucial factor in interpreting a work since without it, there is danger in belittling an artwork which may otherwise be of great significance. A sound understanding of a piece of artwork is important before critically analyzing it.

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