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Photographs as a Source of Content in Figure Painting

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PHOTOGRAPHS AS A SOURCE OF CONTENT
IN FIGURE PAINTING

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Art has been accepted in the curriculum as both a skill-building subject and a pursuit through which aesthetic values and creative abilities can be developed. As an art teacher, the candidate attempted to design the content of the classes she taught to meet these goals. Evaluation of both content and technique brought about constant modification of these two aspects of her teaching.

Photographs were used in an attempt to provide stimulating sources of subject matter in the classroom. The aridity of the school environment and of traditional still lifes, and the opportunity provided for the selection of meaningful subjects from photographs seemed to justify their use. Student prints, paintings, and drawings developed from such sources had a surprising quality of conviction, the quality usually called message or content. While this characteristic seemed evident to fellow art teachers and to others trained in art, there remained the possibility that photographs might in fact be limiting possible results too stringently to involve more than the intellect of students, and that the apparent honesty of the results might just as likely be the product of poor coordination as it might be the product of creativity.

A return to painting as a means of personal expression led the candidate to question the content of her own work. The desire to communicate seemed to be frustrated by lack either of technical knowledge or of significant content. Considerable experience with the technical aspects of painting made a study of significant content seem the most promising area for investigation. A subsequent exploration of subject matter sources led to the same device used for teaching: the photograph.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of the study was (1) to explore the candidate's concepts of the relationships between form and content found in specific subject matter (photographs of the artist's family); (2) to apply these concepts to a series of oil paintings; and (3) to present conclusions that would suggest modifications of the candidate's painting techniques.

Importance of the Study. Art has been accepted in the curriculum both as a skill building subject and as a pursuit through which aesthetic and creative abilities could be developed. If the methods used in teaching art do not develop these qualities, they should be modified or discarded.

The importance of subject matter to the individual artist is recognized:

. . . We assert that the subject is crucial and that only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless (6:145-6).

A painting is not simply the expression of something, but the representation of something. It does not express spirit directly, but the spirit as manifested through an object (9:29).

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Abstract. Abstract art was interpreted in this paper as that art which is not clearly based on recognizable visual reality (3:5).

Content. Throughout this investigation, the terms meaning, message, and content were used interchangeably to indicate tangible or intangible expression conveyed either through subject matter or technique.

Realism. Subject matter which is clearly recognizable, though not necessarily photographically exact, was considered realistic.

Subject matter. Any source of content derived directly from nature or a visual reproduction of nature (in this case, photographs) was called subject matter.

III. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The source of data was a series of oil paintings developed from the subject matter of photographs chosen from the candidate's personal collection of candid family photographs. The paintings were produced between December, 1963 and April, 1964. No attempt was made to relate these paintings to present figurative developments, though some influence must be recognized, and each painting was considered to be independent of others in the series. Drawings made in preparation for painting were incidental to the study. No attempt was made to relate the conclusions of the study to classroom teaching; this aspect of the problem was regarded as a possible avenue of further study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The validity of contemporary directions in painting is open to controversy. Many people find it difficult to effect a reconciliation between form and content in modern painting. The difficulty of objective research in this area might seem overwhelming, but literature in the field suggests that the same values that have always been used as measuring devices in art can legitimately be applied to today's paintings. Research was limited to sources available in the Central Washington State College Library and my personal library, and the subject was limited to the relationship between observed reality and content in recent painting. Some references are made to earlier paintings when the source relates them to the present.

I. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OBSERVED REALITY AND CONTENT IN RECENT PAINTING

"Only equivalents of nature can reproduce nature." Ozenfant illustrated his remark by adding, "it is not by making volcanos that sulphur is produced," and "to imitate something is merely to stuff it." (14:57-8) These statements, according to Ozenfant, reflect the same

attitudes which have been held by artists such as Michelangelo, Delacroix, and Ingres, usually considered by the laymen to be "realists."

Abstract sculpture and painting were defined in Webster's New International Dictionary as "Characterized by little or no reference to the appearance of objects in nature (10:12)." The difference between little or no reference has become the point of controversy. If a painting has no reference to nature, asked Hess, can it have content, and without content, can it be art (10:12)?

Albert C. Barnes credited Dr. Buermeyer with the idea Barnes expressed so well:

Reference to the real world doesn't disappear from art as forms cease to be those of actual living things, any more than objectivity disappears from science when it ceases to talk in terms of earth, fire, air and water and substitutes the less recognizable 'hydrogen', 'oxygen', 'nitrogen', and 'carbon' (8:89).

Dewey (8:87-89) said that representation would not be of objects as such if the vision has been creative, since everything else becomes subordinated to the evocation of what is implied in the relationships of the art elements. However, the artist can never approach nature and see only lines and colors as such; the painter does not approach her with an empty mind and he will tend to avoid material already aesthetically exploited to the full. Dewey concluded that, "the conception that

objects have fixed and unalterable values is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us. " He believed that the intrinsic qualities of things come out with startling vigor and freshness just because conventional associations have been removed (8:95).

John Bauer asked fifty-five prominent American abstract painters to define the relationship between American abstract art and one aspect of nature (3:125-132). Most of the statements were too long or too vague to quote. However, thirty-five artists stated flatly that in their own work there was a conscious reference to nature; two expressed a relationship with nature through the "unconscious"; one cited both the conscious and unconscious effects of nature. Among the other twelve, eight made no statement, and four statements could not be interpreted objectively. While these statements could not satisfy everyone, they did suggest a direction of intent.

Art, said Chiari, is determined by the artist's attitude toward the phenomenal world and the use he makes of it in his artistic creations. Neither the degree of communication nor the abstruse quality of the artist's symbols is an index of a painting's worth (7:99). Shahn believed that such considerations were merely formal and that "the most backward" of the public would catch up finally. Such values, to Shahn, are

passing vagaries in taste, not innate qualities in art, and he considers each serious work of art to contain innate values (16:107).

Rothko and Gottlieb believed that one function of painting is to lead the spectator to see the world in the painter's way, not the viewer's way (9:146). When the work of so many abstract painters seems so accidental, there must be a reluctance on the part of the viewer to abandon his own brand of reason for that which seems merely fortuitous. "Chance," said Chiari, "has a role in art, but it does require organization if it is to be more than an exhilarating exercise (7:89)."

Shahn recognized the importance of both the unconscious ("accident") and reason, but since he believed that man's most able self is his intending self, he saw the challenge of uniting the subjective and objective into expression. "Form," he summarized, "is the visible shape of content (16:61)."

Saarinen also saw form as having a message, relative in expression, depending on the instinctive potencies of the creator of the form. Form, however, has its origin in nature, he said, and when man loses his spiritual communication with nature, form becomes merely decorative, imitative, or dryly practical. This happens when the artist leans on intellect alone. Increasing sensitivity in the areas of

intuition, instinct, and imagination is the essential thing in the search for form (15:9-18).

Maritain thought it important that the artist avoid a search for creativity by escaping from nature through new external approaches. He should look, Maritain believed, for freedom to achieve in his work a "more and more general revelation of both Things and Self, to obey creative forces in a manner truer and truer to a deeper and deeper poetic intuition (12:223)." He felt that modern art is aware of the importance of metaphorical inference. Every great painter creates a block for others by exhausting certain metaphors, but artists shouldn't copy each other any more than they copy nature; each artist must become free. Not by technical tricks, but by poetic intuition will the artist find the road to transfiguration of natural appearances (12:226).

Ortega y Gasset also cited the metaphor as one of man's most fruitful potentialities, "Metaphor alone can offer escape (13:33)."

CHAPTER III

THE INVESTIGATION AND RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

I. MATERIALS USED IN THE INVESTIGATION

Oil base paints, and canvasses stretched and primed with gesso were used, along with a variety of standard brushes. Neither color limitations nor size limitations entered into the investigation; both were arbitrary. Titles were given to completed paintings for ease in identification; each painting, finished or not, had a consecutive number.

II. THE RECORD OF THE INVESTIGATION

The first painting, "Summer, 1934", was developed throughout one day of intermittent painting (about four studio hours) from a photograph of the candidate and her mother and sister. During the following week, minor revisions were made. The painting seemed to balance two aspects of expression: content and form. Simplicity of color (a limited palette of cadmium-barium orange, white, burnt umber, and black), the unambiguous and pleasant connotations of the subject matter, elimination of detail and superfluous subject-matter, and speed of execution seemed to be factors in reaching a satisfactory conclusion.



SUMMER, 1934

A second painting was started by using the palette and technique of the previous work, but it was not completed. The photograph from which the proposed painting was derived was discarded as a source of further paintings in this study.

Three figures were used in the next completed painting, (number three in the series, "Fourth of July"). It, like the first painting, reached a state of near completion in one day. A period of indecision followed, in which the background was elaborated and then simplified. Next, a sky was added, but was painted out about two months later. Final modifications were made four months later.



FOURTH OF JULY

The very small fourth canvas was completed in about two hours, from a photograph of the candidate and her mother. It was expected that the results might be satisfying, since this photograph had always been a personal favorite. However, the completed painting had qualities that were not appealing. Underlying the approach to this series of paintings was the recognition that many paintings of children are sentimental in concept and in execution. The experimenter hoped to avoid simple nostalgia; the substitution of respect for sentimentality was the goal. In the small painting referred to earlier, the two figures seemed stereotyped; neither is individualistic nor universal enough to convey the content.

The terms "produced" and "developed" may imply that there was a steady stream of paintings being completed. There was no deliberate effort to complete one canvas at a time, and, as the study continued, increasing problems with form created a situation in which as many as four uncompleted canvasses were in process simultaneously. This second and puzzling stage of the experiment continued for about two months.

The next completed painting (number four, "A Winter Walk") began in much the same way as had the others, except for the use of

a much wider range of colors. In handling this added factor, the subject matter became more and more abstract until little or no relationship with the photograph (or visual reality) remained.



A WINTER WALK

There were several different stages, during the three weeks it took to complete this composition, when the subject matter was reinstated and then again allowed to disappear. While the earlier works (paintings one, two, and three) had almost seemed to "paint themselves," the quarrel between subject-matter dominated form, and form derived from paint application, became manifest here. While the problem was

resolved in the case of this painting, the general confusion as to intent remained in the next three canvasses; two were considered merely decorative, (one is included here; number six, Trike & Buggy), and one was completely painted out.



TRIKE & BUGGY

While attempting to solve these three compositions, the candidate completed two small canvasses which returned to a more realistic handling of subject-matter and to a limited range of colors. One (number eight, "Wading") was quickly completed and was handled in a broad style, and the other (number nine, "In the Park"), while changing



WADING



IN THE PARK

in color throughout its development, never completely changed its character. In fact, its "character" or content seemed to be intensified by the changes that were made in it in the course of painting.

Several conclusions to the experiment seemed possible: (1) the study might end when a painting "better" than the rest was completed, (2) photographs might prove an inadequate source for subject matter and be discarded as a source for further paintings, (3) one of the various approaches might seem so satisfactory that the set of photographs, or even a single photograph, might provide a seemingly limitless source for further paintings, or (4) the photographs could lead to another source of subject matter that seemed more useful.



THE HUNTERS

While completing (number 10) "The Hunters", a chance conversation, and ideas rising from it, impelled the undertaking of two memory portraits, both of the same subject. The substitution of a new source of subject matter seemed to signify the end of the study, but this diversion was momentary, and the two final paintings (number 11, "Red Picnic", and number 12, "Detail of Summer, 1934") were superimposed on the memory compositions. Time limitations forced the close of the experiment, but the subject matter source still seemed fruitful.



RED PICNIC



DETAIL OF SUMMER, 1934

CHAPTER IV

I. SUMMARY

While the hypothesis of the study was affirmed, other results of experimentation had not been anticipated. This "new" information seemed completely original, created from the restrictions of the study, but influenced by unexpected factors as well.

The following factors seemed to influence success in each painting (Success or lack of success was partially a subjective judgment; one only partly based on formal considerations.):

A. Controlled

1. Limitations of the study.
2. Elimination of superfluous subject matter and detail.
3. Speed of execution.
4. Balance between a completely rigid preconception of the finished painting and trust in intuition.

B. Uncontrolled

1. Comments from observers.
2. Reading, conversations, visual experiences.
3. Intense concentration.
4. Previous paintings within the series.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Photographs seemed to have enough value as a source of subject matter for personal expression to warrant further investigation. In the classroom, the subject matter of such photographs might have to be controlled to study their effectiveness, but traditional objections to their use (the composition is already set, and copying is not creative) seemed easily overcome. An investigation of an intensive use of photographs as a source of subject matter in the secondary school art program would test the conclusions of this experiment.

However, much modification of classroom motivation may be necessary, it would be equally rewarding to study the effect on artists of concentrated attention on any one source of subject matter. Landscapes and still lifes had been the prime source of subject for the candidate. Landscapes, particularly, had seemed to embody satisfying content. Changing the subject to people forced the question, "What human condition should I try to make people reveal?" At first, many techniques were tried; anything that would clarify the content I wished to expose seemed valid. Later, form and content ceased to be separate considerations. Experiencing the unification of these two elements was one of the pleasures of the experiment.

Another significant experience was the revelation of content by the product itself; the paintings had become an independent source of information about human life, and the interaction between painter and painting began to be like a stimulating conversation rather than the imposition of will on lifeless paint. This phenomenon seemed to be more the by-product of intense concentration than the direct result of the use of certain subject matter. The painter apparently gambles as heavily on his own creative abilities as on the use of any superficial discipline.

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