

Introduction

QUESTIONS

What is a painting? I am not posing a question of definition. Rather, I am interested in discovering what a painting means to us, why it can matter in our lives. Nor am I assuming that a particular painting has *a* meaning awaiting our discovery, for I know well that different people have different responses regarding the significance of the same painting and that people sometimes bring special agendas to an artwork, perhaps unconcerned with what “it means.”¹ Still, most of us do seek some sort of meaning or significance in viewing a painting; ordinarily, we do not simply stare at its colors or shapes and ask no more of it. No, I claim that we wish to feel its presence, to discover what it has to say to us and often what it has to say to other people as well. In short, we desire to make at least some sense of it.

Now if I am right that when contemplating a painting we normally care about its meaning, why do we engage in this activity? After all, a painting is, from one point of view, simply a created image, and what is so special about that? If one is inclined to reply that some images are “well executed” or “pleasing to the eye” or “beautiful,” this is certainly true, but the same can be said of many things, such as a superbly designed woodstove or an automobile fuel injector. Why is it that certain paintings fascinate millions of viewers and provoke them to return to and gaze at them again and again? The reason cannot simply be that they are “realistic” or “true to life,” for these labels apply to most photographs, yet photographs do not ordinarily generate the same kind of intense worldwide interest that many thousands of paintings do. Moreover, the “realistic” label is applicable only to relatively few acknowledged masterpieces in certain

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periods of the history of Western painting, not transhistorically or cross-culturally, and not, therefore, to innumerable other works – for example, to the animal depictions constructed by the ancient cave dwellers of Lascaux in what is now France or to the scroll paintings of landscapes rendered by the Chinese painter Hsü Tao-ning, who died around 1066.

Let us for a moment view and reflect on what many art lovers regard as a great painting, “Girl with a Pearl Earring,” by the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer (painted c. 1665–6; see Plate 1). This work happens to be “true to life” in certain respects, but I did not select it for that reason. I could in fact choose any work to illustrate the philosophical questions I am about to pose, but the Vermeer is beloved by millions of art lovers, and I happen to be one of them.

The young woman’s face depicted in the work is “attractive,” “pleasing.” Her body is turned away from us at about a ninety-degree angle, but her head is turned to her left, so that she seemingly looks directly at us, her viewers (or should we say, at the person who has painted her?). Her eyes are bright; her lips are parted, the lower one moist. She is not exactly smiling; her expression seems to be of mild pleasure and thoughtfulness, although it is not readily apparent whether this is due to the person in her gaze, what she happens to be thinking or feeling at this very moment, or both. The white dots of reflected light in her eyes and the corners of her mouth give further animation to an otherwise barely scrutable expression. She is wearing an unusual headpiece, a colorful turban of sorts. On her left ear dangles an earring, referred to by art historians as made of pearl, but more apparently to me of silver. What surrounds this young woman is utter darkness, so that this being before us seems apparitionlike.

We may ask all sorts of questions about her. Who is this woman? Is she Vermeer’s wife? His mistress? His model? Someone who serves as a maid in his home? Someone he fabricated out of his imagination? We do not know. Has she just turned toward the viewer? Or has she been looking at the viewer and is now about to turn away? Or are we seeing a last, lingering glance at the viewer? Why didn’t Vermeer portray her head on, instead of from an unusual angle? Why are her lips parted? Is she expressing surprise and innocence? Or instead a kind of erotic longing? What is she thinking and feeling? And why

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is this young European-looking woman wearing a turban that looks to be of North African origin?

We may pose an altogether different question, a philosophical one, about the figure. I referred earlier to Vermeer's depiction as a woman, but what he fabricated with oils on canvas is of course not a woman. It is merely colors and shapes that constitute a generically familiar image. As we view the reproduction, or if we have viewed the original painting, we couldn't possibly mistake its depiction for a real human being. Then again, it wouldn't be easy for us to look at the colors and shapes as merely physical features of the canvas, and not as features constituting the woman herself. (In trying to avoid seeing a woman, perhaps we would squint so as to blur our perception. It would be especially important to avoid looking at the figure's eyes, perhaps the mouth as well.) So there is apparently something about the painting that transports us, often even in spite of ourselves, to something real, or at least apparently real. Perhaps we could say, "Well, it is *about* something. It is a representation of a real person"; in that simple relational statement, it would seem that we capture both the physicality of the canvas and paint and the imagined reality of a person.

So are we implying that the depicted woman is only imagined and therefore not real? Are we transported to something in our imaginations? Is she in our heads? In our minds? Do we really know this? If we insist that we do, then what makes us so certain of this view? How do we know that it is true? When we look at the painting, are we simultaneously able to look into our minds to ascertain that we are merely imagining something? Obviously not literally, we concede. Metaphorically then? Do we introspect and assure ourselves that she is, in some sense, in our minds? But then can we clarify the phrase "in some sense"?

When I view the reproduction, I look at the figure and see her in front of me, "out there," and thus not in my mind. I simultaneously know that the painting is before me and that I am confronting a person. A *real* one? Well, I'm not only confronting mere oils and a canvas or simply a manikin, but of course I don't talk to the woman, smile at her, or assume that she will begin to do something. Nevertheless, I would say – ambiguously at this point, to be sure – that the woman,

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as I dwell with her, is in a sense not simply imagined by me, but real to me. And real to you, too, as you dwell with her. What do I mean by “in a sense, real”? For me to explicate such a claim properly, I must provide an account of how the woman is to be understood in relation to the “truly real” people whom we know and with whom we have contact on a daily basis because I just conceded that I do not have the same kinds of sensory expectations about the woman with the earring that I have about a real human being – for example, my colleague, who happens to be in his office next to me at the moment.

Yet, answering the question I have posed requires me to challenge a way of thinking that Western philosophers have accepted as dogma for centuries. It will emerge in this work that the distinction between *what* a thing is and *that* a thing is, between “essence” and “existence” and, by extension, the distinction between what is “merely fictional” and what is “actually real,” are not so sharp as virtually all Western philosophers have unquestioningly assumed, especially since, and in part because of, the work of Immanuel Kant. Chapter 1 of this book responds explicitly, and the subsequent three chapters respond implicitly, to the difficult philosophical question that I have posed.²

Here is another related question that may also be asked about the quasi-reality that I seem to be attributing to depictions: because many paintings do not represent people, but things – tables and bowls of fruit or landscapes, even geometric forms (abstractions), and so on – am I claiming that such representations, too, are taken to be in a sense real? Well, yes, I reply. Not only that, but we experience the depicted things to be – besides their appearances as, for example, bowls of fruit or trees or mountains – *peoplelike* beings, with personalities that “speak” to us. Thus, as I see it, depicted things, too, are not only “real to us” but are so in a way that is very similar to the way in which depicted people are “real to us.” I attempt to justify this position, counterintuitive and strange though it may seem, in Chapter 2.

If depicted things are to be understood as having a status in being very much like that of depicted people, and if the latter in turn are best understood as “real,” such a position, even if acceptable, still leaves unanswered the question of why and how the others – “real” people themselves – at the deepest level matter to us in the first place. If we can answer that fundamental and difficult question, we

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will, I believe, be able to comprehend the principal reason why and how, at the deepest level, paintings have the effect of mattering to us in the way that they often do. In short, how I am affected in my being by a “real other” will importantly explain how I am affected by others depicted in artworks. Chapter 3 responds to the expositoryly necessary question of why and how “the others” matter.

The order of the book’s chapters implies that several basic philosophical questions need to be addressed before we are in a proper position to achieve a comprehension of “why and how painting matters,” the subject of Chapter 4. The reader may well wonder what all of my demonstration and argumentation in the first three chapters has to do with the subject of experiencing artworks, and thus my thematic deferral may seem like an unnecessary circumlocution. It is not. If the principal philosophical points of this book about “the matter” of painting itself prove on the whole to be persuasive, then this will occur because I have challenged and redefined beforehand, both systematically and at some length, many beliefs – about our relationship to things generally, to “the others,” and to fictional beings – that most educated people would be inclined to presuppose “as commonsensically obvious” or “self-evident.” Thus, perhaps frustrating as it may be to some readers eager to “get to the point,” we must first contemplate and survey the philosophical environment that shapes our experiencing paintings, an environment consisting of forms that are typically hidden from our aesthetic vision by virtue of the fact that they inform that vision. We must then try to apprehend, freshly and right at the outset, certain features of what “to know” means and what “to be” means; we are obligated, in a word, to investigate both epistemological and ontological entities (relations). Chapter 4 attempts to show how distinctions and arguments of the preceding chapters’ conclusions can be applied concretely, phenomenologically, to our reception of a painting, how we may enter into and be transformed by it – this is to say, by what I shall call the “subworld” that it depicts.

In Chapter 5, I reflect on still another difficult and vexatious issue – what I broadly call the question of interpretation. For even if by the end of Chapter 4 I have satisfactorily demonstrated that the depictions of paintings are best understood as I have characterized them – that is, as “real” – we still need to deal with the huge and

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complex issue of what might be called “artistic ambiguity,” with the various – indeed, multitudinous – meaning possibilities latent in our experience of the people or the things represented in paintings. It can be asked, for example, what kind of sense I should make of my initial responses to Vermeer’s depicted woman with an earring. Should I simply enjoy the beauty of her face and expression, think that it is of a lovely Dutch woman of the seventeenth century, and leave my overall reaction to that? Or am I in a way obligated (to myself, to Vermeer) to consider more critically such first impressions of her to appreciate what the painter has taken such care to represent? Indeed, some people may assert that I am ethically required to be more searching still and critically examine the very lens of “naïve” and “personal” experience through which I view the painting. Although there may have been epochs, such as the fifteenth century in northern Italy, when virtually any educated European viewer could easily say what a particular depiction signified overall, with no interpretive reassessment even capable of being entertained (e.g., what a figure of Mary cradling the body of her beloved son Jesus meant), today, however, a feminist, Marxist, or cultural critic (to mention only a few variant representative theorists of our own time) would understand the painting very differently from the way in which a person of the earlier era would or from the way in which his or her theory-minded opponents would. Precisely because throughout this book I give great weight and credit to our direct encounter with the figures of paintings and argue that they are for us “real” beings, I risk committing myself, even granting the realist thesis that I put forth, to a methodologically simplistic position that does not do justice to the many and important developments in art theory that have occurred over the past forty or fifty years in Europe and North America. Chapter 5, titled “For and Against Interpretation,” concerns itself with and responds to a whole bevy of methodological challenges to my own realist stance.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Issues in the philosophy of art were written about at least as early as the time of Plato (c. 428–348 B.C.E.). For at least two millennia and in

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the Western tradition at any rate, Beauty, including its representation in artworks, was held to be “objective,” something in the world that cultivated people could see and appreciate. Because of developments in modern science, however, and the ontologically confirming philosophical tradition that accompanied them, beginning roughly in the eighteenth century, there developed a way of theorizing that regarded Beauty not as something objective, but rather as something subjective, as a matter of taste. Now one might expect that if beauty is viewed in this way (i.e., as a matter expressive of an individual’s personal sensibility), then beauty would only be “in the eye of the beholder.” Each individual, according to this way of thinking (so one might anticipate), would have his or her own idiosyncratic and thus ungeneralizable responses to an artwork or to a lovely natural scene. In fact, this was not how eighteenth-century Western philosophers saw the matter, for they declared that experienced, knowledgeable, and unprejudiced people with “delicacy of taste” or “sensibility” would have, by virtue of their common humanity, nearly identical pleasures in the face of beautiful objects or beautiful natural scenes. Taste was therefore regarded as existing in the subject, yet manifesting itself in “the same way” in countless individual experiences, thus as something felt in common, both describable and discussable. A person’s taste was also viewed by many with great social and philosophical interest, for the degree to which one possessed it was the indicator par excellence of one’s good judgment, sophistication, and overall cultivation, of, in short, his or her *Bildung*, the favored term of educated Germans of the period.

It was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who developed the most complete theory of taste in eighteenth-century Europe, although he had important Anglo-Saxon and German predecessors (e.g., in England, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Edmund Burke;³ in Germany, Alexander Baumgarten and Georg Meier). In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant developed not simply a theory of taste, but a systematic position on a whole cluster of related issues constituting the problematic for the fledgling philosophical domain that had only recently come to be known as “aesthetics,” a term coined by Baumgarten around 1750. Kant’s work has been enormously influential, both directly and indirectly, on Western aestheticians ever since

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he published the *Critique of Judgment*. “We are all philosophizing under Kant’s shadow,” the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger asserted frequently. It can be said with equal accuracy that all Western aestheticians – English and North American on the one hand and continental European on the other – are theorizing under Kant’s shadow as well. So if such claims about Kant’s influence are correct, then this book, too, must be Kantian in spirit. And it is.

But not in ways that Kant would wholly approve of, I feel certain. For although I agree with him that what one calls beautiful is based on a feeling of there being a “purpose-seeming” quality, a purposiveness (*Zweckmässigkeit*), when one is in the presence of certain natural phenomena or (derivatively for Kant) of artworks, and, further, that one cannot ever know that one’s feeling truly pertains to a real cosmic purpose, I believe that he makes a profound error in asserting “through this [aesthetic] pleasure or displeasure I do not cognize anything [i.e., beauty] *in the object* of the [sensory] presentation.”⁴ Later Kant states: “Yet beauty is not a property of [e.g.,] the flower itself. For a judgment of taste consists precisely in this, that it calls a thing beautiful only by virtue of that characteristic in which it adapts itself *to the way we apprehend it*.”⁵ The object itself is thus, according to Kant, value neutral. It just is. So “beauty” is a term that we use to denominate what we may be privately undergoing (analogous to a physical pleasure) in a particular situation, nothing more (from a cognitive point of view). Yet, we do not say that “my feeling is beautiful”; we say, for example, the *flower* is beautiful. Thus, although our finding something beautiful clearly has something to do with our feelings, in our thought and speech we make reference to something that is not merely “subjective.” In fact, I would go even further and assert that certain dimensions of our feelings should be understood as underlying and allowing for the possibility of our having *a world* in the first place, and thus to label feelings as simply “subjective” already profoundly disorients us philosophically. (This dark claim will be “enlightened” in several places throughout this book, especially in Chapters 2 and 3.)

Moreover, I do not agree with Kant that a genuine aesthetic judgment is *disinterested* (which for him does not mean wholly *uninterested*), that it is based on the contemplation for its own sake of a pure semblance or appearance that makes no implicit claim to being

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actual or real and that it is therefore uncorrupted by any emotional involvement with the semblance on our part. As Kant says, "Interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's existence . . . [I]f the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it."⁶ He continues, "Everyone has to admit that if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence, but must be wholly indifferent about it."⁷

On the contrary, I would argue that precisely because we do take aesthetic objects to be more than mere appearances of our own subjectivity and thus as in some way "real," and because they often "speak to" us as individuals, to the very significance and direction of our lives, to refer to our ideal responses as "disinterested" is altogether mistaken. We are, it seems to me, highly interested in them and not simply – perhaps never – "for their own sake," although, as Kant would say (and here I agree with him), obviously not for some scientific or utilitarian feature, as we might be affected by a thoughtfully designed and well-made chair or table.⁸ I also find unpersuasive Kant's assertion that an aesthetic judgment must be based solely on an object's (or natural scene's) "form," the structure of the elements of what is observed – their complexity, order, unity, or overall balance. I believe, on the contrary, that it is especially the content, as well as the form, of an artwork that affects us and, also contra Kant, that our individual histories ineluctably bear on the kinds of pleasure and meaning we derive from our viewings of artworks. For example, it is the precise details of the woman's face in the Vermeer painting (e.g., her brown eyes, her orange-red parted lips, her silver reflecting ear-ring) and their overall structure and color balance that enable many of us to appreciate the work in the way we do. Moreover, the precise nature of our appreciations of her face is, I feel, shaped and given particularity because of the kinds of psychological and cultural experiences that we have had as individuals. Thus, not all (properly cultivated) people will aesthetically experience the form of a flower exactly as I do, nor do I expect them to, as Kant argues I must.

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Kant's views on the nature of aesthetic experience and judgment had a subsequent expression in much Anglo-American analytic aesthetics of the twentieth century. In part, this expression was due to Kant's own systematic, persuasive thinking in the *Critique of Judgment* that there was such a thing as "the aesthetic experience" in the first place, that it could and should be conceptually isolated from "mere gratification" (e.g., something like the pleasure of eating something delicious) or from the positive feelings of esteem that we undergo in the face of another's exemplary moral behavior, and that its nature and mental causes could be rigorously analyzed and comprehended. In part, twentieth-century developments in the discipline of analytic aesthetics were also brought about by larger cultural movements and ways of thinking: a reaction to nineteenth-century European Romanticism (also influenced by Kant) and its quasi-deification of natural Beauty, Art, and Genius and, especially, the general and increasing inclination in the Western world's educated public to accept the methodological orientation and practices of natural science as *the* path of access to the realm of what is truly real. (Bertrand Russell early in the twentieth century stated more than once that he was extremely impressed by the progress of modern science but depressed by its lack in philosophy. It was time, he asserted, for philosophy to become methodologically rigorous, as was true of the natural sciences, so that it, too, could point to and be proud of lasting achievements.⁹)

Such objectivistic thinking in twentieth-century philosophy has in many respects been unfortunate: scientific rigor has its price, especially when it comes to the most interesting issues concerning the description and significance of human experience. For it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide precise and justified accounts of our emotional responses to objects (such as artworks) both because we are dealing with qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, phenomena and because we must make more than passing reference to first-person events and statements – that is, to what I feel and say (so-called first-person avowals) from my standpoint or what you feel and say from your standpoint. So, too, is it difficult to define what it means for me "to have a world" at the outset.¹⁰ In contrast, to be allegedly scientifically rigorous, we are obligated to investigate human emotions by attending exclusively or at least primarily to third-person