



Aestheticism in

William Hogarth

Author:
William Hogarth

Layout:
Baseline Co. Ltd
61A-63A Vo Van Tan Street
4th Floor
District 3, Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

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William Hogarth

Aestheticism in Art

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Introduction

If a preface was ever necessary, it may very likely be thought so for the following work; the title of which (in the proposals published some time since) have greatly amused and raised expectations of the curious, though not without a mixture of doubt, that its purpose could ever be satisfactorily fulfilled. For, despite the fact that beauty is seen and confessed by all, from the many fruitless attempts to account for the cause of its being so, enquiries on this subject have almost been sacrificed; and the subject generally thought to be a matter of too high and too delicate a nature to admit of any true or intelligible discussion. Something, therefore, introductory ought to be offered upon the presenting of a work with a face so entirely new, especially as it will naturally encounter, and perhaps even overthrow, several long-received, thorough and established opinions. Since controversies may arise, how far, and after what manner, does this subject have to go to be considered and treated fairly? It will also be proper to lie before the reader what may be understood from the works of both ancient and modern writers and painters.

It is no wonder that this subject was considered inexplicable for so long, as the nature of many parts of it cannot possibly come within the reach of mere men with pens; otherwise those ingenious gentlemen who have published treatises about it (and who wrote much more learnedly than can be expected from one who never took up the pen before) would not so soon have been bewildered in their accounts of it and obliged so suddenly to turn into the broad and more beaten path of moral beauty, in order to extricate themselves from the difficulties they seem to have met with in this. What's more, they were forced for the same reasons to amuse their readers with amazing (but often misapplied) encomiums on deceased painters and their performances, wherein they continually discoursed effects instead of developing causes. After much flattery, in very pleasing language, one is fairly set down just from where they were picked up, honestly confessed to that in terms of grace, the main point in question, the men do not even pretend to know anything of the matter. And, indeed, how should they? A practical knowledge of the whole art of painting (sculpture alone not being sufficient) is required and, to some degree of eminence; it would be difficult for anyone to pursue the chain of this inquiry through all its parts offhand; however, it is my hope that all will be understood following this work.

Naturally one might wonder why the best painters within these two centuries, who, according to their works, appear to have excelled in grace and beauty, should have been so silent in an affair of such seeming importance to the imitative arts and their own honour. To this, I say, that it is probable that they arrived at that excellence in their works by the mere dint of imitating with great exactness the beauties of nature, and by often copying and retaining strong ideas of graceful antique statues which might sufficiently serve their purposes as painters without troubling themselves with a further inquiry into the particular causes of the effects before them. Is it not a little strange that the great Leonardo da Vinci (amongst the many philosophical precepts which he hath at random laid down in his treatise on painting) did not give the lead hint of anything tending to a system of this kind, especially as he was a contemporary of Michelangelo,

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as **Raphael**, *The Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, also known as *La Belle Jardinière*, 1505. Oil on wood, 122 x 80 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Guido di Pietro, known as **Guido**, *Christ Glorified in the Clouds* (predella of the altarpiece of the church of San Giovanni in Fiesole), c. 1423-1424. Tempera on panel, 31.7 x 21.7 cm. The National Gallery, London (pp. 8-9).





who is said to have discovered a certain principle in the trunk (which became well known from this circumstance by the name *Torso*, or *Back*), a principle which gave his works a grandeur of gesture highly acclaimed antiques. Relative to which tradition, Lomazzo's painting at the same time, has this remarkable passage (vol. I, book

And because in this place there falleth out a certain precept of Michelangelo, for our purpose, I will not concede it, leaving the further interpretation and application thereof to the judicious reader. It is reported, then, that Michelangelo gave this observation to painter Marcus di Siena his scholar: that he should make a figure pyramidal, serpent-like and multiplied by one, two, and three. This precept (in my opinion) the whole mystery of art consists. For the greatest life that a picture can have is that it express motion, which the painter expresses by the form of a picture. Now there is no form so fit to express this motion as the flame of fire, which, according to Aristotle and the other philosophers, is an element of all others because the form of the flame makes it most apt for motion, and a sharp point with which it seems to divide the air, so that it may ascend in a sphere. A picture having this form will be most beautiful.

Many writers since Lomazzo have, in the same words, recommended grace, but well without comprehending the meaning of it, for unless it were known, the whole business of grace could not be understood. Charles Alphonse de Lamoignon, in his *Art of Painting*, says: "large flowing, gliding outlines which are in waves, not to the part, but to the whole body; as we see in Antinous, and in many other figures. A fine figure and its parts ought always to have a serpentlike and flowing form. Those sort of lines have I know not what of life and seeming motion in them, which resembles the activity of the flame and the serpent." Now if he had understood what he said, he could not, speaking of grace, have expressed himself in the foregoing manner. "But to say the truth, this is a difficult undertaking, and a rare gift which rather receives from the hand of heaven than from his own industry." Charles de Piles, in his *Lives of Painters*, is still more contradictory, when he says that a painter only have [grace] from nature, and does not know that he has it, nor how exactly he communicates it to his works; and that grace and beauty are two different things. Beauty pleases by the rules, and grace gets by without them."

All the English writers on this subject have echoed these passages; and the phrase has become a fashionable phrase as a reference to grace. Due to the fact that this precept which Michelangelo delivered so long ago in an obscure manner, remained mysterious down to this time, for anything that has appeared in art. The wonder that it should do so will, to some degree, lessen when we consider that it must have appeared all along as full of contradiction as the oracle ever delivered at Delphos, because winding lines are as often the enemy of grace the solution of which, in this place, would be an anticipation of what will find at large in the body of the work. There are also strong passages in favor of straight lines, as constituting true beauty in the human form, when they appear. A middling connoisseur thinks no profile has beauty without

Giorgio Vasari, *Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, 1533.

Oil on canvas, 90 x 72 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.





Guido di Pietro, known as **Fra Angelico**,
Coronation of the Virgin, c. 1420.

Tempera and gold on panel, 27 x 37.2 cm.
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.





and if the forehead be continued straight with it, he thinks it is still more sublime. I have seen miserable scratches with the pen sell at a considerable rate for only having in them a side face or two. The common notion that a person should be straight as an arrow, and perfectly erect, is of this kind. If a dancing-master were to see his scholar in the easy and gracefully-turned attitude of the Antinous, he would cry shame on him, and tell him he looked as crooked as a ram's horn, and bid him hold up his head as he himself did.

The painters, in a similar manner, by their works, seem to be no less divided upon the subject than the authors. The French, except such as have imitated the antique, or the Italian school, seem to have studiously avoided the serpentine line in all their pictures, especially Anthony Coypel, historical painter, and Hyacinthe Rigaud, principal portrait painter to Louis XIV. Rubens, whose manner of designing was quite original, made use of a large flowing line as a principle, which runs through all his works, and gives a noble spirit to them; but he did not seem to be acquainted with what we call the precise line; which from now on we will be very particular about, and which gives the delicacy we see in the best Italian masters; rather he charged his contours in general with too bold and S-like swellings. Raphael, from a straight and stiff manner, suddenly changed his taste of lines at the sight of Michelangelo's works and antique statues; and he was so fond of the serpentine line that he carried it into a ridiculous excess, particularly in his draperies. However, his great observance of nature ensured that he did not continue this mistake for very long. Peter de Cortone formed a fine manner in his draperies of this line. We see this principle best understood in some pictures of Correggio, particularly his Juno and Ixion, yet the proportions of his figures are sometimes such as might be corrected by a common sign painter. Whilst Albert Dürer, who drew mathematically, never so much as deviated into grace, which he must sometimes have done in copying from life, if he had not been fettered with his own impracticable rules of proportion. But that which may have puzzled this matter most may be that Anthony van Dyck, one of the best portrait painters in most respects ever known, plainly appears not to have had a thought of this kind. For there seems not to be the least grace in his pictures more than what life chanced to bring before him. There is a print of the Duchess of Wharton engraved by Van Gunft, from a true picture by him, which is thoroughly diverted of every elegance. Now, had he known this line as a principle, he could no more have drawn all the parts of this picture so contrary to it, than Mr Addison could have written a whole spectator in false grammar; unless it were done on purpose. However, on account of his other great excellencies, painters chose to stile this want of grace in his attitudes, simplicity, etc., and they often, very justly, merit that epithet.

Nor were the painters of these times less uncertain and contradictory to each other, than the masters already mentioned, whatever they may pretend to the contrary. Of this I felt certain, and therefore, in the year 1745, published a frontispiece to my engraved works, in which I drew a serpentine line laying on a painter's palette, with these words under it, the line of beauty. The bait soon took; and no Egyptian hieroglyphic was ever amused over more than they were after this time, painters and sculptors came to me to know the meaning of it, equally puzzled about it as other people, until it came to have some explanation. At that time, and no sooner, some found it to be an old acquaintance of theirs, though the account they could give of its properties was as very near to satisfactory as that which a day-labourer who constantly uses the lever, could give of that machine as a mechanical power.

Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Peter Preaching in the Desert*, c. 1460. Tempera on canvas, 25 x 33 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Guido di Pietro, *Saint Peter Preaching in the Desert*, c. 1433. Tempera on panel, 39 x 54 cm. Museo di San Marco, Venice (pp. 16-17)





Others, such as common face-painters and copiers of pictures, de-
be such a rule either in art or nature, and asserted it was all fluff and
wonder that these gentlemen should not be ready in comprehending
little or no business with. For though the picture-copier may sometimes
seem to vie with the original he copies, the artist himself requires not
or knowledge of nature than a journeyman-weaver at the goblins,
a piece of painting, bit by bit, scarcely knows what he is about, with
a man or a horse, yet at last almost insensibly turns out of his
tapestry, representing, perhaps, one of Alexander's battles painted

As the above-mentioned print thus involved me in frequent disputes
qualities of the line, I was extremely glad to find it (which I had collected
of a system in my mind) so well supported by the above preface
which was first pointed out to me by Dr Kennedy, learned antiquary
from whom I afterwards purchased the translation, from which I
passages for my purpose. Let us now endeavour to discover what
upon the subject in question.

Egypt first, later followed by Greece, manifested their great skill
through their works, and among the rest, painting and sculpture, all
to have been issued from their great schools of philosophy. Pythagoras
Aristotle seem to have pointed out the right road in nature for the
and sculptors of those times (which they, in all probability, afterwards
paths that their particular professions required them to pursue) as
collected from the answers given by Socrates to Aristotle his discip
painter, concerning fitness, the first fundamental law in nature with re
in some measure saved the trouble of collecting a historical account
the ancients, by accidentally meeting with a preface to a tract called
treatise was written by Lambert Hermanson Ten Kate, in French
English by James Christopher Leblon, who in that preface says, spe

His superior knowledge, that I am now publishing, is the product of the
ancient Greeks or the true key for finding all harmonious proportions
sculpture, architecture, music, etc. brought home to Greece by Pythagoras
philosopher travelled into Phoenicia, Egypt, and Chaldea, where he col
learned, he returned to Greece around *Anno Mundi* 3484, before 520
with him many excellent discoveries and improvements for the good of
among which the analogy was one of the most considerable and usef

After him, the Grecians, with the help of this analogy, began (and not
other nations in sciences and arts; for whereas before this time they
Divinities in plain human figures, the Grecians now began to enter into
and Pamphilus, (who flourished in AM 3641, before 363 CE, who to
could excel in painting without mathematics) the scholar of Pausias and
was the first who artfully applied the said analogy to the art of painting
same time as the sculptors, the architects, etc. began to apply it to

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as
Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1512-1513.
Oil on canvas, 269.5 x 201 cm.
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus* or
The Rokeby Venus, c. 1647-1651.
Oil on canvas, 122.5 x 177 cm.
The National Gallery, London.
(pp. 20-21)









without which science the Grecians remained as ignorant as their forefathers. They carried on their improvements in drawing, painting, architecture, sculpture, etc. until they became the wonders of the world; especially after the Asians and Egyptians (who were formerly the teachers of the Grecians) had, in process of time and by the havoc of war, lost all the excellency in the sciences and arts. Due to this, all other nations were afterwards obliged to the Grecians without being able to so much as imitate them.

For when the Romans conquered Greece and Asia, and brought the best paintings and the finest artists to Rome, we don't find they discovered the great key of knowledge, the analogy I speak of now; but their best performances were conducted by Grecian artists, who it seems cared not to communicate their secret of the analogy because they either intended to be necessary in Rome by keeping the secret amongst themselves, or else the Romans, who principally affected universal dominion, were not curious enough to search after the secret, not knowing its importance, nor understanding that, without it, they could never attain the excellency of the Grecians. Nevertheless, it must be known that the Romans used well the proportions, which the Grecians long before had reduced to certain fixed rules according to their ancient analogy; and the Romans were able to successfully use the proportions without comprehending the analogy itself.

This account agrees with what is constantly observed in Italy, where the Greek and Roman works, both in medals and statues, are as distinguishable as the characters of the two languages.

As the preface had thus been of service to me, I was in hopes from the title of the book (and the assurance of the translator, that the author had by his great learning discovered the secret of the ancients,) to have met with something there that might have assisted, or confirmed, the scheme I had in hand; but was much disappointed in finding nothing of the sort and no explanation, or even after-mention of what at first agreeably alarmed me, the word analogy. I have given the reader a specimen, in his own words, how far the author has discovered this grand secret of the ancients, or great key of knowledge, as the translator calls it:

The sublime part that I so greatly esteem, and of which I have begun to speak, is a real *Je ne sais quoi*, or an unaccountable something to most people, and it is the most important part to all the connoisseurs. I shall call it a harmonious propriety, which is a touching or moving unity, or a pathetic agreement or concord, not only of each member to its body, but also of each part to which the member belongs. It is also an infinite variety of parts; however conformable, with respect to each different subject so that all the attitude and all the adjustment of the draperies of each figure ought to answer or correspond to the subject chosen. Briefly, it is a true decorum, a bienseance or a congruent disposition of ideas, as much for the face and stature as for the attitudes. A bright genius, in my opinion, who aspires to excel in the ideal, should propose this to himself, such has been the principal study of the most famous artists. It is in this part that the great masters cannot be imitated or copied except by themselves, or by those that are advanced in the knowledge of the ideal, and who are as knowing as those masters in the rules or laws of the picturesque and poetical nature, although inferior to the masters in the high spirit of invention.

Diego Velázquez, *Prin*
Horseback, c. 1635.
Oil on canvas, 211.5 x
Museo Nacional del Pra

William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 2, The Tête a Tête*, c. 1743.
Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 90.8 cm.
The National Gallery, London.



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