

Depiction and Art

Discussion of expression and style has shown how expression broadens meaning and contributes to categories of style. Yet not all styles are of equal value, not all pictures have as much or as interesting meaning. Some are claimed as art, most are not. What further characteristic or condition of pictures qualifies as art? The traditional answer is beauty or excellence. The picture well made, or the perfect instance of its kind, squares with our everyday usage and intuitions. But since the preceding discussion of style assures that pictures come in kinds, there are then as many versions of beauty as there are styles for depiction. So beauty does not sufficiently qualify art. The question then becomes which styles are excellent or beautiful? Less traditionally, the answer is often that the property or predicate is irreducible to a single or stable essence without compromising its application and that beauty and excellence simply are what we make of the established collection in the name of art.⁸⁵ The question, more profitably, is how is art used? Or how are further pictures and styles added to it, and others ignored?

The answer here is sometimes given in terms of institutional influence, or according to the powers and politics of relevant institutions.⁸⁶ Additionally, other answers stress a vividness or impact upon underlying concerns, with visual perception for example, as in Gombrich's theory, or the psychology of personality, as in Wollheim,

⁸⁵ A key strand to this argument derives from Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of a family or network of resemblances determining 'essence' or defining a concept, rather than a single or unitary chain. See for example Morris Weitz, 'Wittgenstein's Aesthetics' in *Language and Aesthetics*, Benjamin R. Tilghman, (ed.) Lawrence, Kansas, 1973.

⁸⁶ Institutional theories strictly admit all answers that allow art to be derived from its history. The answer proposed here, takes institutions as those bodies constituting an 'Artworld' as variously proposed by Arthur Danto. See Danto, 'The Artworld' in *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 1964, p. 580, Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Cambridge, Mass./London, 1981, Danto, 'The Artworld Revisited: Comedies of Similarity' in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, New York, 1992. See also George Dickie, 'Defining Art', in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, July, 1969, p. 254, Dickie, *Aesthetics: an introduction*, Indianapolis, 1971, Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, Ithaca/New York, 1974.

or with effective understanding, as in Goodman. Art is thus tethered to wider issues, shapes and is shaped by them. We look back upon and organise the past with styles to strengthen our grasp of an issue, as much as we are guided by styles, and allow them to focus current issues. To say that we merely or meekly inherit styles is as misleading as to say we reinvent them just as we please. We do both in part, and art, excellence or beauty in depiction finally lies only in the persistence of the practice, in more art. Similarly, it is pointless to look to art beyond such issues or in ideal isolation. The point is rather to show in what ways art may be contrasted with or distinguished from them. Since this study pursues Goodman's theory, the aim is now to show how the proposed theory of depiction distinguishes a mode of understanding for art, how art maintains a dynamic or economy according to this understanding, and how, like Gombrich's theory, it accords a distinctive role to history.

To begin, it is useful to compare the function of a picture with that of a word, or between depiction and description. A picture in the proposed view exemplifies two dimensions, resembles those of objects and their spatial relations. But a picture is usually a freeze-frame, since schemes for establishing a passage of time within a single picture are rarely used. A description on the other hand derives from speech and retains a temporal dimension. Its reference to movement can even instantiate a causal direction. The apple fell to the ground, follows just such a course and cause. But this temporal structuring can also be over-selective and misleading. A picture is worth a thousand words according to some rates of exchange, simply because giving the right name to an object may in itself need a lot more explaining. For some people it is quicker to 'draw a picture'. A picture not only helps us to see a situation more clearly, by providing more information, but may also provide unexpected or overlooked aspects as well. In fact we can sometimes see things not only more fully or clearly, but also quite differently.

In the example (Figure C) the little girl may be described as pointing to a word, a sound, or a card, as being instructed or instructing. Her expression may be described as intent, or anxious or bored. She either looks away as she points, or after, or looks for direction before she points. She is an attentive six year old, the subject of an experiment in literacy, left handed, a product of the 1960s, of feminine



Fig. C

the word cat. But if we allow a description open contradiction, we also forfeit its coherence, and its point.⁸⁸ Instead multiple descriptions or

interpretations allow us to understand what the girl does in relation to the depiction. The fact that conflicting descriptions share the same picture points not so much to their inadequacy as descriptions – as not capturing the whole truth – but to a difference between pictures and words. No matter how elaborate a description becomes, how many ambiguities it can allow while still avoiding contradiction, it will still not amount to, or exhaust the meaning of the picture. Any description will simply make room for others. Quite simply a description cannot contain a depiction, nor can a depiction confine itself to a single description. This is not because the visual is non-verbal, on the contrary, as we have seen, the visual may contain any number of verbal labels, but rather because the visual belongs to a two-dimensional system, with four-directional extension but literally no time, and so no one place to start or stop a description. Like the earlier example of a map permitting endless routes between any two or more points, a picture's names and descriptions are no more than one route around the object. A depiction contains descriptions for

diligence, of English eccentricity, of winter gloom. All of these descriptions are supported by the depiction. What the little girl is doing is not something ineffable and beyond words, but rather is illuminated by them, even as they disagree⁸⁷.

We understand the picture as containing not only ambiguities, or differences of emphasis, but distinct and contradictory descriptions: the girl points to the word cat, or she does not point to

⁸⁷ Figure C is reproduced courtesy of The Hulton Getty Picture Collection Limited.

⁸⁸ This argument derives from Catherine Z. Elgin, 'What Goodman Leaves Out', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol 25 No 1 Spring 1991, pp. 89-96. The argument there is for multiple right interpretations against Wollheim's proposed one right and deeply ambiguous interpretation. See Wollheim, 'The Core of Aesthetics' in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol 25 No 1 Spring, 1991, pp. 37-45.

the same reason that one direction is contained in four. Whatever label a picture takes as a starting point, it can only make a map of it rather than a route. Description is necessarily selective, and to describe a depiction it must offer a sequence in place of contiguity or translate four directions into one. No matter how extensive, a route can only run in one direction at a time, and no amount of extension or detail, allow it to run in four directions at one time, or in one place.

This difference between depiction and description is not so much a source of antipathy as partnership. There is no point in seeking a rigid demarcation or pursuing a purely visual realm, in the interests of art or otherwise. Rather the task of depiction involves co-operation on larger projects, to mutual advantage. The overlapping and coincidence of description, as noted, are what give a picture its richness or density of meaning. In this, the study accepts the general drift of Goodman's notational formulations. The ease with which a depiction accommodates descriptions, also allows for the shift between literal and metaphorical, or expressive meaning. In contrast with any one description, a depiction offers a way to cluster descriptions, in a way that a simple compilation into a bigger description cannot. A depiction achieves a fuller, but less focussed meaning, more is said, but less is stressed. This allows a depiction to complement a description, by indicating surrounding and non-obvious matters and versions, and in turn allows a description to single out and give salience to a given depicted object. This is what pictures are for, and their role suggests a definition for their excellence, beauty or art.

Excellence lies in the development of more and other densities of meaning. This arises through the specialisation of uses or diversification of pictures. Greater degrees of density are achieved in pictures performing more open-ended tasks. The emergence of such tasks is by and large the history of art, and such tasks are defined in terms of our understanding or cognition. Here there is also agreement with Goodman.⁸⁹ But understanding in Goodman is taken to be as much sensory and emotive as considered and conceptual. Putting things into words is not always possible or necessary, and description is not the only means of interpretation. What is discovered through art is felt as much in nerves and muscles as minds. It

⁸⁹ Goodman, 1976, pp. 252-265. See also Goodman, 1984, pp. 135-138.

nonetheless urges and thrives on description, and its use through comparison and experiment with meanings furthers understanding. We have seen that pictures do this in relation to words, and now it is proposed that art does this in relation to understanding. The function has so far been identified in terms of the density of meaning. More particularly, it is achieved through a kind of scouting or exploring of a domain, a reconnaissance or circumspection.⁹⁰ When this function is given sufficient latitude it permits deeper more circumspect meaning, and may well become a thing of beauty and a joy forever. It need not be exclusively a matter of realism or idealism, fact or fiction, impression or expression, the literal or metaphorical. It is a function established in relation only to understanding and achieves this end through different means. In description for example, literature pursues fictive genres and poetic language as a way to expand upon the realms of description, but may equally augment this with pictures, calligraphic or other design aspects to text, music, performance, film or video.

Yet a circumspective function for depiction might seem to make classification of style difficult, if not counter-productive; to only thin the desired density by thus locating meaning more precisely. Circumspection obviously functions within constraints in this respect, while at the same time stylistic identities are notoriously labile and while style tethers meaning to a source, what is thus attributed is far less clear than to where it is attributed. Meaning remains controversial even where agreement exists about identity of source, for example to a Michelangelo or the Italian Renaissance, to a Manet or French Impressionism. But circumspection functions not only within stylistic constraints but also phases. Even the rough and ready sortings of style at a certain point, and for some at least, are settled enough to allow greater circumspection to others. Mostly, new or recent works receive the bulk of criticism and rely upon older and traditional styles for reference, if not conformity. Such attention reflects the attraction for beauty renewed or the challenge of further circumspection. In fact criticism reinforces and to some extent settles older styles in this way, by ostensibly forging new styles. Revision of older styles also occurs however, in the recognition of a Vermeer for example in the

⁹⁰ The term circumspection appeals in part for the role it plays in George A. Kelly's theory of psychology. See Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Vol 1. New York, 1955, pp. 514-517.

nineteenth century, revising in a small way ideas about seventeenth century Dutch genre painting, or again, in the introduction of Mannerism, revising the transition from the Renaissance to Baroque. The point is simply that circumspection is variously maintained by a cycle of focus and dilation, by shifting attention from some styles or works to others and rebuilding them accordingly.

This is really only to amplify the position taken by Goodman in certain respects. Goodman advocates cognitive efficiency as a distinctive feature of art, although supplies only a list of typical symptoms for the requisite density or complexity of denotation.⁹¹ He also allows that works and styles enjoy a fluctuating standard of beauty or excellence, or status within art. If cognitive efficiency no longer sounds much like beauty, it is partly because Goodman applies cognition to far more than thoughts and conceptual analysis, as indicated, and partly because beauty here is not always distinct from the flavour of the month or a passing fancy. Goodman takes an expanded view of cognition, if a somewhat deflated view of beauty. This reflects his priorities. The emphasis in this aesthetic is less upon canons or rankings, than their propagation, upon the wider process, and ‘beauty’ in all its phases. Where a work offers fresh insight into the object and mode of reference used, we experience its beauty, its tempting challenge to stylistic and other constructs. The challenge allows us to sense value or potential in the whole of the work. We sense it is full of sense for us. It is a bit like falling in love. But we tend to get over it. The more we learn from or use the work, the more we take it for granted, apply it elsewhere and discover shortcomings.

Goodman acknowledges just this dynamic, ‘A work may be successively offensive, fascinating, comfortable and boring. These are the vicissitudes of the vehicles and instruments of knowledge.’⁹² But the lessons learned are not entirely forgotten with newer interests; rather the interests further the lessons. There is in this respect a history or tradition to beauty and its persistence fuses the issues of canons and cognition. In this Goodman perhaps underestimates the problem, when he argues:

To say that a work of art is good or even to say how good it is does not after all provide much information, does not tell us whether the work is

⁹¹ Goodman, 1976, pp. 252-265. See also Goodman, 1984, pp. 135-138.

⁹² Goodman, 1976, pp. 259.

evocative, robust, vibrant, or exquisitely designed, still less what are its salient specific qualities of colour, shape or sound, moreover, works of art are not race-horses, and picking a winner is not the primary goal.⁹³

Granted, picking a winner is not the end of the matter, but picking a winner is surely a step in the process. To rank a work thus is better seen as an exercise that singles out the work initially, alerts us to issues or features that now tantalise in some way. It is to respond to just the dense or circumspective nature of the work that resists other than a crude pre-emptive judgement. It is quite simply the experience of beauty at first sight. Yet to say what is good, typically involves pointing to features in which the work excels. It is to be drawn gradually into saying how it is good, to further comparisons and tests. It is perhaps to revise the judgement in disappointment. But either way, what starts out as blind ranking, ends up as a standard and style, just as what starts out as beauty ends up as a norm. In short, how good a work is, is part of what the work is, and as such ranking cannot be divorced from revelation. Yet ranking is plainly not enough, and to be fully effective as an understanding it must be transformed with time and care into a broader construction, applied to more works and styles, and assume a place in the canon.

In characterising art as a mode of understanding or knowledge, Goodman also undertakes a revision of the distinction between art and science. Both in *Languages of Art* and *Ways of Worldmaking* he argues against the traditional distinctions – between feeling and fact, intuition and inference, subjectivity and objectivity, truth and beauty. None are found adequate as a demarcation, science guesses, fancies and fudges the truth, finds the best fit by adjusting facts as well as framework. Art arrives at its best fits in matters of composition and resolution through similar trial and error and both appeal to broader, global considerations of ‘rightness’.⁹⁴ The difference Goodman proposes is between domains of reference. Since circumspection is here offered as characteristic of art, some further brief characterisation for science is perhaps appropriate. The function identified here is one of narrowed focus and sharpened frameworks. Let it be called concentration. If art wanders and wonders, science seizes and settles. As with art, reference may by a

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 261-262.

⁹⁴ Goodman, 1976, pp. 261-262. See also Goodman, 1978, pp. 106-7, pp. 138-140.

variety of modes. Science too has its samples, imaging, jargon and journals. The difference is the greater degree and integration of the system. Goodman identifies digital, articulate and attenuated characteristics in his analysis of denotation, and his discussion draws heavily upon notions of precision and measurement, and it is not surprising and wholly convincing that descriptive notation in these terms is strongly aligned with science.⁹⁵

Defining art in contrast with science leads Goodman to briefly reflect on the historical dimension to art's cognitive function.⁹⁶ Science is no more objective than art since controversies and arguments rage within each; the prestige of science theories is subject to fluctuations just as evaluations of art works are. Yet earlier scientific theories may be rendered obsolete by later ones, and in so far as true, are recoverable in reverse derivation. Older works of art on the other hand are not, and are threatened by indifference rather than obsolescence. They continue to function as art even if unpopular or overlooked, as such are sometimes the source of inspiration for new works or unexpected departures. The reason for this difference Goodman can find no space for, but it can be supplied partly in an appeal to the nature of circumspection and the aim of dense meaning, which permits endless interpretation, and partly in an appeal to the nature of concentration, and the function of truth within science systems. Strict derivation itself requires a rigour of system more available to scientific practice. Art has neither need nor means for it.

The historical dimension introduces a further issue. On the one hand beauty is seen as transitory, the enthusiasm of the moment, subject to fashion and taste, while on the other it persists in all works, is in a sense a joy forever. The problem is not just a work's shift in ranking, but more interestingly, that a work may shift in rank, but retain its status as a work of art. A lowered ranking cannot be an expulsion. This is more a matter of logic than legislation. A ranking is based upon a body of works, or a canon, and to reduce this body would be to alter the basis upon which the ranking is made. It would be like sawing off the branch on which one is sitting. So acceptance as a work of art or inclusion in the canon is a one-way ticket, although

⁹⁵ Goodman, 1976, pp. 148-164. See also Catherine Z. Elgin, *With Reference to Reference*, Indianapolis, 1983, p 120, and Elgin, 'Relocating Aesthetics: Goodman's Epistemic Turn', (pp 180-181), *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 47, 1993, pp. 171-186.

⁹⁶ Goodman, 1978, pp. 138 – 140. See especially footnote on page 140.

seat allocation may vary from time to time. Then again new works are recognised not only on the strength of novel rankings, but as often according to older ones, and for this reason art unlike science does not get just better and better, only bigger and bigger. Similarly, works rejected in such rankings hardly fail as pictures because of it; rather function within narrower circumspective constraints. Yet rejections may be reversed in a way acceptances cannot, as where a revision in ranking may allow a new density to a hitherto rejected work, for example in the appreciation of non-western works at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All this is only to say that art digresses while science progresses. This difference serves to explain not only the lack of obsolescence in art, and the transient nature of its beauties, but its deep affiliation with history.

So far Goodman's theory of depiction has been traced, amended and pursued to his view of art. Art is taken as a function of cognitive effectiveness and amended here with a circumspective role in depiction. The very general terms of cognitive effectiveness also allow Goodman to consider the function apart from the standard objects and institutions of art. This is captured in his framing of the question *When Is Art?*⁹⁷ He resists an exclusively institutional view, and in fact proposes what he terms the implementation of this cognitive function, above and beyond institutional practices.⁹⁸ Yet as we have seen in matters of style and expression, and now concerning ranking and canons, the weight of tradition is considerable upon interpretation and understanding in depiction and art. Whether art's density or circumspective meaning is wholly a matter of history or vice versa need detain us no further than questions of nature versus convention. The point is that this deepening reliance upon history and its institutions now raises the question of just how this is undertaken.⁹⁹ How is an historical perspective maintained, and what is entailed in a history of art? The following chapter takes up this issue looking firstly to the popular model provided by Gombrich.

⁹⁷ Goodman, 1978, pp. 57-70.

⁹⁸ Goodman, 1983, p. 145.

⁹⁹ The question is pursued in Stephanie Ross, 'On Goodman's Query' *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 19, 1981, pp. 375-87. She concludes Goodman's theory needs an institutional basis, although does not follow this to an historical method.