

PRINTMAKING AESTHETIC -NOTES

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Everything counts.

It seems likely that embedded in everything that is print or printing are components that are inherent and significant in the perception of the aesthetic of that material. It may be that the role of these components is either minor or major in this perception at different times and with different usage, but being inherent, they are always there.

William Ivins, in his 1953 book, Prints and Visual Communication, examined how various printmaking techniques shaped or defined the ideas that were communicated, apparently advancing the idea that the use of those techniques in themselves had a role to play.

Ernst Gombrich, in his 1960 Art and Illusion, advanced the opinion that the content and emotional nature of any work might well be as defined by materials and processes used as by the artist's psyche. The mass-produced, mechanical imagery of the Pop artist's work and the importance of identifying those characteristics as part of the idea communicated certainly added strength to the theory. This of course was a contradiction to most of a more Formalist view being held at that time, but it was clearly much more consistent with the ever evolving pluralistic pattern that had been established for some time in all of art.

Of course, long has been the debate relative to the imitative nature of art in general, defining it as falling short of the ideal as Plato does in Republic X. The advent of Photography in the 19th century freed much of art from its major role of imitation, of documentation. Everything became possible. Innovation through impressionism, expressionism, etc., etc. emerged and let us look inside as well as outside. Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" of 1917 (and signed with the pseudonym "R.MUTT") created significant controversy, but it certainly relied on imitation in its highest form with the use of the "Ready-made". Perhaps it is uniquely an example of how the specific identifying characteristics of the "thing" presented are again very much a part of what it has to say as we perceive or read the total of what is in front of us. Significant arguments have been advanced relative to the "what is" or "what isn't" art in this and many other examples, but that is not the point here. What is in front of us, directly or with subtle indirectness, is the first question; value judgements can and likely should come later.

Everything Counts.

Aesthetics is basically defined as a branch of philosophy that provides a theory of the beautiful and of the fine arts. Fundamental is that it relies on perception and the senses that allow perception to take form. Art and artists are to be free of any obligation or responsibility other than that of striving for beauty. That which is beautiful is that which stirs a heightened response of the senses and of the mind on its highest level, perception being the means.

Sometimes it seems to take a long time to understand and embrace the obvious. That is likely to be as it should be so that we can be sure that what is a new idea is a better solution than the old. But at the same time we seem to embrace the "new" just because it is "new" on occasion. We do have to be careful!

From Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in the 1980 edition of What is Modern Painting, the Museum of Modern Art :

"...just as in politics, revolutionary ideas in art, after they are generally accepted, become a part of conservative opinion which in turn tries to defend itself against a new revolution."

From the Colonial governor of Virginia in 1671 came the following statement:

"But I thank God we have not free schools nor printing; and I hope that we shall not have these in 300 years. For learning has brought disobedience and heresy and sects unto the world, and printing has divulged them and libels against the government."

Of course, he did not get his wish; we do have schools and we do have printing and prints. However, as the revolution in this country asserted the libel against the government to gain its freedom, the presence of art in this new country also fell victim to that challenge. Art was seen as too strongly connected to those who were being repelled; very little art, except prints, existed in the new, more Puritan, culture. And prints were used to communicate, to declare. One of the first prints in this new world was by Paul Revere and pictured the horrible oppression by the government. Later, the mass production

of prints as a part of the popular culture presented by Currier and Ives pictured those things that were comfortable, often also advancing negative stereotypes of women and other cultures.

Printing (the print) tells us the truth, defines what we should know and offers the opportunity to pass it on to many.

Almost everyone has a lifelong experience with print. Newspapers, magazines, books, posters, the brochure defining a conference, the paper money in our pockets (value, worth?) are all experiences with print (printing), what it looks like and what it does. Our enormous experience with print (printing) shapes inherent components of its unique aesthetic and is very much a part of its message to us. Again, Gombrich's message is manifest.

Louis XIV, in May of 1660, proclaimed prints as a fine art:

"...which depend upon the imagination of their authors and cannot be subjected to any laws other than those of genius; this art has nothing in common with the crafts and manufacturers, none of its products being among the necessities which serve the subsistence of civil society, but only among those which minister to delight , or pleasure or curiosity."

Often, we seem to spend a substantial amount of time defending prints as a valid form of artmaking: Painting vs. Print, Sculpture vs. Print and which one is really art. Multiples must mean that originality is lost; the reproduction nature of the Print must have something to do with its devaluation. But, the fact is that being multiple can and is also an inherent part of the perception and the aesthetic of the print, of printing. Upon viewing, if we, even with subtle understanding, perceive the multiple potential, it becomes an integrated part of the concept. It plays a role, major or minor, that cannot be denied.

Everything Counts!

It is important to understand that things relative to art and artmaking have changed rather radically in this century. We have had some difficulty in realizing the obvious. When collage was introduced in the early part of this century, much became blurred in the distinctions between painting and sculpture. Printed and often 3D material were added to what had normally been only 2D images developed totally as illusion. Some still debate the label: is it painting, is it sculpture? Pluralism was born in another form, much as photography gave birth to another freedom for artmaking. The difficulties may well be that changing from safe traditional views is not easy.

Painting may indeed be dead as may be printmaking without a broader understanding that inherent attributes exist in each, singularly and also with integrated, comprehensive and pluralistic wholeness, clearly understanding that everything does count.

Digital and computer based imagery and processes are overwhelming us today. Much of it has the normal appeal of the "new"; add the spectacular "wow!" factor of this electronic, speedy material (rapid reaction seems to be a part of the formula for making art in this part of late 20th century) and we are overwhelmed. Care is needed so we don't just deal with the "picture" without involving the much more exciting sophisticated whole. There is emerging an aesthetic from the process and look of the digital/ computer image, often combined with other ways of visualizing. Primary may be its link to printmaking and most certainly photography and all components of electronic mass communication. The "light in the box" of television and video, of performance (and theatre, of movies), of selling and commercial role, of reproduction appears as inherent in this medium.

Everything Counts, again, as we go forward, always relying on experiences to define perceptions, our reference library to enable innovative and creative vision. The means or the medium do not define value; they add to the potential and the truthful realization of that vision.