

Principle Fifteen  
Finding Poetry in the Everyday

What we need is more sense of the wonder of life, and less of this business of making a picture.—Robert Henri

Each year that I teach workshops I have become more aware of the necessity of emphasizing our intimate personal voice, to address our personal poetry. I've come to discover that the importance of this isn't obvious to a lot of painters.

Art is all about poetry, about vision, about seeing the ordinary as poetic, and then communicating that vision. That's the job.

When you respond to something "out there". it must be resonating with something "in here". Then you must focus it, edit it, craft it, so the poetry resurfaces after having passed through the material and process of your artistic fire. "There is no art without poetic aim," said Vuillard.

The essence of this whole artistic enterprise is to focus your attention on what caught your attention in the first place. You respond to what is yours. Your truth. It doesn't matter the subject matter, or the style. You must strip the thing back to the basics of what you feel about your response. What is the kernel here that you must say? Get to the foundation and build it back up. If you're wanting to paint for the rest of your life, if you know it's your chosen means to express yourself, then take the time and strip your vision back until you find your foundation.

If you take a more derivative route, copying, appropriating someone else's means of expression, you will sooner or later come up against the emptiness of it. You may need those influences for now in order to have any idea of how to proceed. But at least be searingly honest with yourself about where you're taking things that are clearly not yours.

The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson said, "What counts is your eye, your sensitivity, and the strength of the shapes you make." Finding poetry is about condensing input, reducing it, firing it in the crucible of your attention. It means subordinating the subject to a composition of abstract shapes. Paint compositions, not subjects. The picturesque detracts from meaning. Affectations of beauty and showiness will only distract from the power of the poetry.

The power of a painting rests on the power of its transcendence, the power of its painted surface and the power of abstract shapes used to convey the subject.

We cannot appropriate the power of past images by using them today. We can't assume that because they had a primal aboriginal and elemental power when they were created that they will, if we use them today, convey that power to a viewer now. Such a work would become an art work "about" a symbol. We aren't making art about someone else's symbol nor can we invest it with original power. That's why so much post-Modernist art was so detached.

To find power we must delve into being, into Self. The depth of your painting will equal the depth of your contact with being.

If you read accounts of enlightened people, you will notice that because they are so open, with so few filters on perception, everything for them is poetry. Everything is alive, asking for attention.

Attention to what? To the divine that hovers beneath the surface of all life. What we respond to in the great paintings of history is the depth of attention the artist had focused on the project. We could even use the word prayer—not in a religious sense, although for some artists that might be accurate. But prayer in the sense of communion with the stuff of creation.

This is the sublime, the experience of awe in its original sense. It is not the experience of a heavenly host of angels with trumpets blaring, but something simple, humble even. Something that quietly lets the sublime slide in. But our experience of the sublime, even when sparked by the most humble circumstance, holds us speechless before it. Then, as artists, we must engage whatever we can to extract it and give it form. We must try and isolate what it is that gives us this experience of connection. This is divine work.

Our response to art comes from the power of the prayer in its making. It lives. We respond. We can be more moved by a small intimate landscape or a still life of two cherries than by a huge painting of the Grand Canyon. Look at Chardin or Corot for instance.

The subject matter, a painting of Christ, for example, is not what gives a painting its spiritual substance. The painting's authenticity comes from how deeply it is felt.

We may be moved by a painting's subject matter. But this might be an emotional response. Someone might be moved by a painting of a small child crying, for example. But that isn't what I'm referring to as a poetic response.

In responding to a deep divine connection we respond to honesty, integrity, and vulnerability. The artist may not be able to live that connection in his daily life. But in front of the easel some openness of being becomes present and gets imbedded in the work and we feel it.

When looking at paintings, most people are distracted by subject matter. But subject matter is really just an armature to hang the blue and the green on to, to place the abstract shapes on, like notes of music.

The famous art historian Walter Pater said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. . . . For while in other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form [painted surface from subject matter] and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it."

Vuillard, in the same vein, said, "There is a species of emotion particular to painting. There is an effect that results from a certain arrangement of colors, of lights, of shadows, etc. It is this that one calls the music of painting."

One painter may use the armature of portraiture, another religious subjects and another landscape. Someone else may use abstraction itself. Each is just a means for the elements of the painting to sing with one another. Each of us will be attracted to some armature because it resonates with us. There will be certain shapes and colors and surfaces all our own. Our choice of subjects will be what allows this abstract language of paint to express itself.

In some paintings, say a Titian, the subject, the form, is so compelling, so good, that we have trouble separating subject from the notes, the abstract response. That is part of their genius. But the same principle holds true.

I once glanced at a book about screenplay writing. The author's contention, and he was a well-known scriptwriter, was that there are only seven story lines in all

scriptwriting. Every movie you see will fall into one of these seven. Unfortunately I didn't make a note of those seven storylines at the time. The idea seems intriguing to me now. But the point is that you don't need a lot of ideas to work with. If you have a few armatures that resonate with you, you can rework them many times so you can go deep into the poetry of the idea and surface.

But you also need enough for your spirit to connect with. The area of interest that some painters engage in, say painting stripes in a limited palette, would bore me to tears before lunch. You need depth, but not at the expense of a range that keeps you engaged. There needs to be a richness of consideration.

In a painter like Diebenkorn, his *Ocean Park* series is clearly about the response to his color notes. There is for the artist a wonderful alchemy that happens between the poetic response to an idea and the poetic response to materials. Each artist has as different a relationship to the use of materials as to subject. Some hide the process, leaving no trace—Raphael, for instance, or Richard Estes. Others create a wonderful interplay of idea and surface, the poetry of subject mingled with its expression as paint. Think of Rembrandt or the late landscapes of Abbott Thayer. Or where the surface of the canvas itself becomes the potential for poetic expression. The *Ocean Park* series seems to have come from one idea: Matisse's *Open Window, Collioure* of 1914 melded with the southern California landscape. That one idea as the armature was reworked over two hundred times over the years by Diebenkorn. Some were far more successful than others. But the one idea, the one armature, was enough so the poetry sang, the divine shone through.

I've mentioned that Kenneth Clark, the British art historian, said you could take the four best paintings of any artist in history and destroy the rest and the artist's reputation would still stand intact. This is because in any artist's life there are moments when everything goes right. The artist is so in tune with his or her inner vision that there is no restriction. The divine is being expressed. Each mark becomes like a note of music in a divine order.

That experience, that prayer of expression, transcends its material and becomes spiritual. The experience is overwhelming, the joys it communicates explosive.

When on another occasion we can't find that spiritual level of experience, and so can't repeat it, the frustration can be cruel and the separation painful. Here lies the myth of the suffering artist. It isn't the art making when it goes well that has any suffering in it. That is the union with the beloved. It's the loss that causes the suffering. And the problem isn't something we can necessarily control. We are instruments, conduits for that expression. It comes through us by grace.

The idea that we "make" art is perhaps a bit misleading. The final product is at its best the result of a collaboration with spirit. We may be separated from a flow within our spirit for weeks. We continue to paint because there is no knowing at what precise moment it will return. And when it does we need our faculties alert and our skills honed. Then the poetry is everywhere.

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