

On Being a Painter

At one time or the other I've had a thing for just about every painter (Matisse, Bonnard, Picasso, Mondrian, Pollack, deKoonig, Rosenquist, not to mention Chardin, Fra Angelica, Memling, Morisot, Vermeer, Hals, Rembrandt, Sargent, Kroyer, Zorn, Sorolla, Van der Weyden, Bosch, Massacio, Piero, Belini, Veronese, Giorgione, Kandinsky, Seurat, Manet, Caravaggio, Mantegna, Pozzi, Marquet, Cassatt, and Emanuel de Witte) but I suppose the artist I return to most often is the artist I discovered when I was not quite fifteen, Monet, the reason I became a painter in the first place.

My mother wanted to see the great paintings of Europe, especially Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, so in 1958 she took me to Europe from Teheran, where we were living, to see the World's Fair in Brussels and then on to Amsterdam, Paris and Rome. This was just like her: a generous appreciation for the arts (she had already given me Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Dos Pasos to read), combined with a kooky fixation on an iconic work. On our visit to the Jeu de Paume, I saw Monet's series of the Rouen cathedral, and I grasped on the spot that light, color, and objects were all separate entities, that seeing was something different than what I had been doing, and that painters taught one how to see. I decided to become a painter that day. Returning to Teheran, I began painting in my room and continued to do so through junior high, high school, college, (brief break during graduate school when I had a studio away from home,) and then again living with my painting every day since then, including today.

John Updike was a painter, as were Katherine Begilow and Robert Redford. Why mention it? There is something about loving painting so much that you want to do it yourself. Something about being willing to say that you have the same profession as Vermeer (who actually had a day job as a picture dealer). Something about being a painter that marks a person for life. Jim Sullivan, as talented as they come, gets down about the artworld, then goes to a museum to remember that "painting is a noble profession; it is a privilege to practice it; and there is a value to that practice."

The five years I spent studying improv and hanging around young actors taught me that they get something out of that discipline even though "they never work above 14th street," as one of them put it to me. These actors know that there are stories

everywhere: on TV, in the newspapers, in political speech, in what people casually report. They listen to what people say with their bodies and gestures; they see intention and character, when I am only half listening. Being a painter has analogous rewards.

When birders visit us upstate, the back field is a theater to them in which various teams of actors and singers perform a combination of opera and circus. To me at first, it was just a place I have to mow. Sometimes perception seems so arbitrary that I wonder if we all inhabit the same planet. My wife Rena is a music supervisor for film. When we leave the cinema, she complains about the phony music in the pool scene. Was there music in the pool scene? I only saw the actresses. My son Max comments about the way the camera moved from the POV of the person in the water to the person at the bar. Werner can repeat the witty repartee that the rest of us never seem to have heard. Gail says (joking) that the bathing suits are available at H & M.

Years ago when I taught drawing, I realized that people do not see so much as identify: one looks only until an object matches something in a catalog of known parts (a forearm, for example) that is brought out of memory. How that specific forearm looks in that setting – if for example, the outline of the forearm is lost in shadow and the crease between the hand and wrist makes an edge sharper than the lost outline – is just not seen by the novice, who “knows” that a wrist is attached to a forearm, and consequently that the outline of an arm must be continuous. Seeing can be learned and taught, some say best learned by teaching. (After years as a professor in the New Jersey state university system, however, I adopted a motto to live by: Neither an art student nor an art teacher be.)

Film directors used to come from painting. Now film directors come from film school. So it is informative when a painter makes a film: consider *Search and Destroy*, directed by David Salle in 1995. In this movie, a character gets off a plane and kills someone. The action seems arbitrary, without motivation. I think that a director who comes from acting or writing would be practiced in scene work, perhaps since high school, and consequently scenes from Shakespeare or Chekhov would resonate and enhance every other scene played or witnessed: it would be less likely that actions seemed arbitrary. A painter cannot recoup that deep acculturation just by wishing it. By the same token, Salle’s film has a visual alertness that comes from years and years of

looking at and making paintings. Shots are composed with a sensibility, a saturation of color and a sensitivity to composition, that likewise could not be had by merely wishing it. For all its dramatic failures, *Search and Destroy* is a visual delight. There is a value in being a visually trained person.

Being a painter may mean forming a long relationship with a painting that becomes a player in the painter's life. My all-time, bar-none favorite painting is the *Three Philosophers* by Giorgione (1477 -1510), completed about 1508. I've seen it three times: once in my twenties with my first wife, Lynn, in Vienna where the painting lives, again in Vienna in my forties with Rena and Max and a third time in Washington DC in my sixties, alone. As in some other of Giorgione's paintings, a small, quiet group could, or could not, be figures from Christian mythology. Here three figures might be the three kings on pilgrimage to Bethlehem, or they might be the same man at different stages of life, or figures representing Ancient Greek, Arabic, and Renaissance philosophy.



I married Lynn, who was my student at Silvermine College of Art, just as the school was collapsing, and I was leaving New Haven for the rigors of New York. Our honeymoon was a grand tour of Paris, Bruges, Amsterdam, Florence, Venice, and Vienna. The marriage ended six months later. The stress of building a loft and breaking into the artworld was more than she bargained for. But we both loved the honeymoon tour. In Vienna, I focused on the youngest philosopher in Giorgione's masterpiece, a man of great beauty, dressed in green, gazing out into the landscape and holding what I took to be a mandolin or other stringed instrument – the young man's pose allowing only the tip of the neck of the instrument to be visible. Giorgione was reported to be just such a man, a charmer and an accomplished musician. This figure's philosophy was one of love. It is a philosophy identified with the distant landscape of which he alone is part, due to the composition of the painting that fuses his cloak of bright green with the green of the landscape. Giorgione, or perhaps his teacher, fellow Venetian Giovanni Bellini, was the first landscape painter, in that the light on the fields and hills is specific to a time of day and atmospheric condition, and in that the specificity of the moment carries the emotional content of the painting. In general, the figures retreat in Giorgione's paintings to make room for the true emotive element, the landscape.

My second viewing of the Giorgione masterpiece was in 1989, when Max was eleven, and Rena and I had already been together for eighteen years. I was invited to participate in my first mathematics conference, the inaugural meeting of the International Symmetry Society in Budapest, then under the auspices of the Hungarian Academy of Science. I was recommended by Donald Coxeter, with whom I'd been in correspondence. A few years earlier, in August 1984, I wrote to Coxeter at the University of Toronto; he was the greatest living geometer and a specialist in four-dimensional geometry. His book *Regular Polytopes* is classic and is in continuous publication since it was written in 1948. I had been trying to visualize a tessellation of hypercubes – what Coxeter called a honeycomb- and understand how eight hypercubes could pack around a central hypercube. I wanted to write a computer program, probably the first such program, to rotate the packing, draw it in perspective, and view it with anaglyphic (red and blue 3D) glasses. Coxeter sent me a hand-written, half-page explanation and the problem dissolved in his lucid reasoning. A few weeks later I sent him slides taken from the computer

visualization. He must have been impressed as he enthusiastically gave my name to the organizers in Budapest.

I was the only American invited to this conference in Budapest, and so I figured I could be supported by the American government. (Almost everyone else was coming with support from their governments.) Thus began my education into the strange logic of grants. The National Endowment for the Arts refused to give me money because, although I was an artist, I was going to a math conference; the National Science Foundation refused because what with so many mathematicians begging for money for research, how could they give money to an artist. The National Endowment for the Humanities was firm: neither art nor mathematics was a Humanity. What was? I asked. French literature. In the end, NSF relented and gave \$2,000 to math professor Tom Banchoff to give to me. Rena, Max and I then embarked on a trip to Florence, Sienna, Venice, and the Orient Express to Budapest.

Rena refused to spend the night in Vienna, refused to spend even a dollar in Austria, a country that in her mind had never come to grips with its anti-Semitism and complicity in World War II. I prevailed to the extent that we left the train in the morning, checked our bags, took a cab to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, had only a pastry at the museum, took a cab back to the train station in time to catch the next scheduled, afternoon train to Budapest.

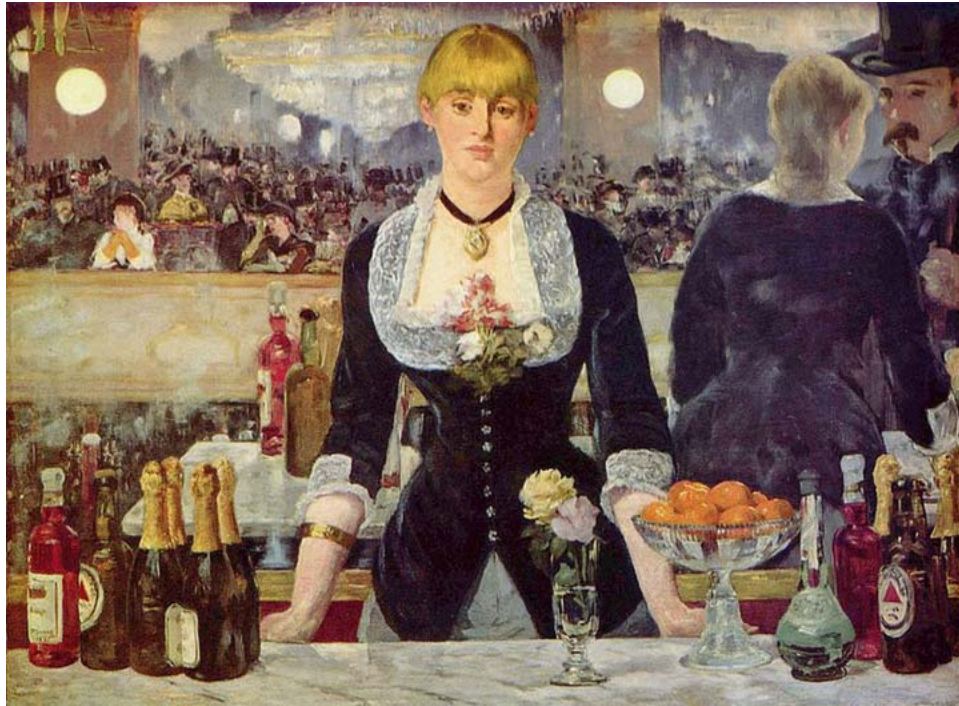
The middle figure in the painting is caught taking a step towards the viewer. He is middle aged, dressed in red robes and a turban. With what I took at the time to be a weighty money bag hanging from his sash, he could well be an Arabic business man, perhaps a manufacturer of mosaics whose factory in Venice is doing business throughout the Levant. His white turban blends with the sky-colored negative shape between two dark trees, giving his headdress a majesty that engenders our respect. I saw myself in him: several sold out shows at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, with collectors all over the east coast, throughout Europe, even in the Middle East. With a family to finance, two houses to manage, a stock portfolio, I too am a man of action and respect. Later scholarship concluded that the painting is an allegory of philosophy and the middle figure is the Arabic philosopher and physician Avicennes (980-1037) who is known for work in logic, but this was not known to me until much later.

The conference in Budapest was crucial for my development as an artist. It was my first math conference, the first time I had presented quasicrystal geometry and my idea of how it could be applied to large-scale sculpture and architecture. I was understood and wonderfully received by Hungarian and Russian mathematicians, Danish, French, and Dutch engineers, and Japanese computer and origami experts.

My third viewing of the Giorgione was in the spring of 2006. My book *Shadows of Reality* was just published and I was calling every friend, going to every conference, showing in any venue: shaking every tree to get the book noticed. At 63, I was too old to play hard-to-get, and at every venue I tried to be friendly and connect with whomever I was supposed to. But frankly, I always have to play hooky sometime during shows and conferences, and go to the nearest museum by myself. As it happened, *The Three Philosophers* was on a rare loan from Vienna to the National Gallery when I was uninstalling at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington D.C. I got there at the opening bell, and raced to the last room of the exhibition to have the painting to myself until the meandering crowd caught up. This time, I noticed that the figures, and we the viewers, are in a cave, underground, as the Magi were on their journey, and as we all will soon be after we are as old as the third figure dressed in golden earth colors. The greybeard's posture protects his scroll of mathematical and astrological figures, a pair of dividers in his hand. His is a philosophy of the mind - not of the body, nor of society. The beautiful landscape now seems far away. The dirt floor of the cave is rough, and in the dirt is a large stone whose dents and hollows make it almost a skull. At that moment, neither I nor Max was sick; things seemed to be working out. Yet perhaps we know more than we are willing to be conscious of. Perhaps the painting knew. The painting changed before my eyes from my memory of it to its appropriate current state. (Max died of his congenital heart disease later that year, and six months after that my incipient Hodgkin's lymphoma was full blown.)

Three stages of life, present to me when I was ready to see them, waiting patiently for me to be ready. All this from a painter who died of the plague at age thirty-three, five hundred years ago.

A painting by Edouard Manet has long spoken to me about vulnerability, morbidity, and death: his painting *A Bar at the Foles-Bergère*, 1881-2. More words have been written about this mysterious painting than perhaps any other. It has supported discussions of feminism, formalism, post-structuralism, even pre-post-structuralism. For me, however, the roots of the painting are in Manet's biography: the painting is his sad adieu to the nightlife he so loved, at the end of his life, debilitated by syphilis. Manet accepts that he is done. The sad expression on the barmaids face, I imagine, results from Manet's confession and farewell. It is he, then, who is in the mirror with mustache and top hat.



Much has been made of the strange space of the painting: the atrium, obviously much higher than shown because of the girl on the trapeze whose lower legs and feet dangle top left. She is flying up, perhaps out, of the domed room. At the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian war, Manet stayed in Paris to participate in the defense of the city. During the siege, the only way in or out of the city was by hot air balloon. Mail was transferred and a few people escaped what became a dreadful privation. Those hanging baskets of the hot air balloons, and perhaps the trapeze too, represented escape and freedom to Manet. The trapeze must have also been associated with the escaping spirits

of the recently dead in the Spanish paintings that Manet admired on his trip to Madrid. The *Bar* was Manet's last major work, made only a year before he died.

Manet was not quite done, though. Otto Friedrich recounts that his long-term pal, sister-in-law, and fellow painter, Berthe Morisot, brought Manet a nosegay of flowers each day during his last months. Too ill to stand, with a foot gangrened (and amputated eleven days before his death,) Manet painted the vases and flowers quickly. In my mind, these last, small paintings, especially the ones in the Quai D'Orsey, pay a debt and seal a bargain. Manet taught the Impressionists to see, and these younger painters taught Manet to paint – a fact he acknowledges in these last few paintings. He does not paint objects, but rather the light from objects. No light reflected from the clear glass vase, then no vase. Gone is the black outline of the object. Further, Manet lets paint stand for light. It is wonderful to see a man in a state of release and realization, as he is succumbing to a painful, humiliating death.



Being a painter lets you own this tradition. These great artists are not from on high; they are men and women walking the earth. Being a painter lets you know the feeling of each brushstroke. You have an intimacy with the tradition of painting, and a right to it that being an art buyer, or an art seller, or an art curator, or an art critic, or an art historian, or an art conservator, or an art know-it-all does not confer.

I find it threatening to look: to be so lost in looking that I loose identity, goals, and social ties. Being a painter makes it easier to do this, to see what I am looking at, because I can format my vision through painting. It is not that I see Tiepolo's or Corregio's clouds instead of the clouds that I am looking at; but having practiced with those clouds, it is easier to let myself go. Shakiamuni says that we sleepwalk through life. Wouldn't it be great to be awake to the world!

Tony Robbin, Gilboa, 2010