THE VISUAL IMAGE: SILENCE AND SLOW TIME

Le réaliste s'il est un artiste, cherchera, non pas à nous montrer la photographie banale de la vie, mais à nous en donner la vision plus complète, plus saisissante, plus probante que la réalité elle-même.

Guy de Maupassant, *Le Roman*

The realist, if he is an artist, will seek not to show us a banal photograph of life, but to give us a vision more complete, more seizing, more probing than reality itself.

"Silence and slow time," evoked by Keats in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, are qualities of the visual image that have moved artists since antiquity. Both the Grecian urn and Keats' ode have endured and shall, defying time. This is the property of art, if not of human life. The visual or poetic image outlives that which gave it birth. Keats lived only twenty-five years. His poem has existed nearly two centuries; the Grecian urn, millennia. Yet the visual image even more than the poetic has the capacity to still the passing moment and make it immortal. Keats recognized this and wrote, "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought as doth eternity." Its sublime manifestation is to be seen in the Panathenaic relief spanning the length of the Parthenon frieze - a moment in Greek life caught forever, time slowed despite the effects of age, action dignified in quietness. What Shakespeare has said of the written word is no less true of visual art: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

The survival of Greek sculpture, in the few originals and many copies, gave Renaissance artists the prototypes for their rediscovery of natural form. A fragmentary torso, the *Belvedere*, inspired Michelangelo to the highest mastery of the figure since Hellenistic times. When the *Laocoön* was unearthed in the Domus Aurea in 1506, Michelangelo was among the first to admire and identify the work. His devotion to the antique, however, would have come to nothing without his knowledge of anatomy. Leonardo da Vinci had initiated this research and most fully embodied his own concept of the painter as natural philosopher. To Leonardo, nature was an absolute, an image of the eternal, a child of God. In a very significant passage of his notebooks, Leonardo defined the relation of art to nature and its process of evolution:

> The painter will produce pictures of little merit if he takes as his standard the pictures of others; but if he will learn from the objects of nature he will bear good fruit. Thus we have seen with the painters after the Romans who always imitated each other, and from age to age their art always declined. After these came Giotto the Florentine who…turning from nature to his art…surpassed not only the masters of his age but all those of many past centuries. Then art again declined, because everyone imitated pictures that had been done, and so it continued for generations until Tomaso the Florentine, known as Masaccio, showed by his perfect works that those who have taken as their standard any other than nature – mistress of masters – have labored in vain. (C.A. 141)

Leonardo, in turn, through his study of nature lifted art to an unparalleled level. Whereas the Florentines painted primarily from drawings, Giorgione according to Vasari painted directly from life. Titian perfected this approach in his portraiture and imaginative painting, a practice that culminated in the art of Caravaggio, Velázquez, Van Dyck and Rembrandt. The eighteenth century was a period of variant styles and conventions. Reynolds, a convinced advocate of truth to nature, recorded in *Discourse XII* his surprise upon

learning that Boucher had not worked from the model for many years; the still lifes of Chardin, on the contrary, reveal a naturalism unique to the Rococo age. By the time of the French Revolution, David had brought about a renewal in figurative art conditioned by the antique. His atelier was to set the precedent for training painters throughout the nineteenth century.

The irony of this development is that the art of the modern era, in terms of Leonardo's criterion, would be called a decline, while its apologists claim an evolution. But as Nietzsche states, "What is the point of extending the means of expression, if that which expresses, art itself, has lost the law of its being!"[1] The lost law of the art of painting is nature. Not only has abstract art lost this law, but so has its complement, photo-derivative realism. Drawing and painting from photographs is the same kind of operation as working from other artists' styles, the same process that leads to repetition and decline. Like abstract art, realism owing to the camera fabricates another *maniera*; it is an imitation of an imitation. Photography may have its own premise, but its use in painting deadens the artist's perception of nature. It subordinates painting to a stereotype and makes it appear to be that which it is not.

Realism versus abstraction has been debated for decades, but it is time for cultural critics to evaluate realism itself. Some realists copy the photograph with the aim of imitating its finish in paint, while others copy nature and pride themselves on achieving a photographic look. Still others interpret the photograph freely, disguising it in painterly effects. The practitioners of this kind are innumerable and overlap into commercial art and illustration; they produce images that lead to little beyond the ephemeral. Opposed to this are painters who have neither a photographic method nor ideal, who look to nature and seek values that transcend a particular time. Theirs is a tradition that has evolved over centuries and is rooted in a humanistic viewpoint. The Renaissance origins of their art are the animating force of its being. Oil painting was created as a vehicle to perceive the visual world, and this is basic to the art today. It gives each age a perspective, conveying to it a larger vision of nature and of man.

The fine arts are something other than the applied or commercial arts. In Italian, they are called *Le Belle Arti*; in French, *Les Beaux Arts*. The Beautiful Arts. Beauty is the raison d'être of fine art. It is not conceived as a commodity to be bought and sold, but as an act of philosophy. Beauty reflects a universal harmony, as in it opposites are reconciled and particulars unified. Through beauty art achieves its catharsis; it puts order on the chaos of quotidian existence. We see through familiar objects to the idea of the whole, which expresses the greater reality of light, color and form that is ever present. Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja* yet breathes, and when the portrait of *Pope Innocent X* was first displayed, R. A. M. Stevenson in his excellent critique notes that "Velasquez, by the admission of all the artists in Rome, alone painted reality, the others, some decorative convention."[2]

Velázquez's depiction of reality is so enduring that it has inspired successive generations of painters in their pursuit of nature. A key concept of painting from life is *sight-size*, whereby the subject and image are compared side by side at a distance in order to perceive the whole. This practice, cited by Roger de Piles in his *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), became part of the acquired knowledge of the painter's craft. Reynolds developed its use as a portrait technique that would prove fundamental to the procedure of Raeburn, Lawrence and, ultimately, Sargent**.** The sight-size tradition has survived to this day through the teaching of R. H. Ives Gammell of Boston. There are now underway attempts to reconstruct academic methods out of a medley of source material and current realist trends; however, the visual language of picturemaking cannot be revived in

such a way. From master to pupil this language will live and evolve to fashion new images - not fleeting like film, but silent and slow - to eternalize that which must pass in the great arc of time.

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, Random House, 1968, p. 441.

[2] R. A. M. Stevenson, *Velasquez*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1902, p. 107.