

## Painting Narcissus' Portrait (with or without a mirror)

Art becomes self-expression through the process of learning the craft of painting, carving, and other ways of creating. Throughout time the value of art has shifted from one extreme to the other with respect to self-expression. When doing portraits for a client or religious art for the church, the less self-expression and the more concrete reality generated in the work the better. The artist was acting in the professional capacity to paint the client's image to their satisfaction and often times this included painting the person better than they actually appeared in real life. This is something that the camera and photography can't do today. A commission from the church required that the artist paint a work that illustrated the concepts offered by the church leaders. There was limited opportunity for self-expression in either of these professional opportunities.

When economic situations allowed the artist to sell their work to patrons that were able to support more self-expression, artists were able to paint subjects that allowed their abilities and interests to expand. The craft of painting would allow the artist to explore ways to create works that would appear to be almost real. When painting one species of flowers, the artist would start at the end of the petal and paint to the middle, while going in the opposite direction with another species. Over the years there have been a number of tricks developed so the artist could create acceptable works in a very short period of time. An artist developed a process of painting landscapes in less than thirty minutes and produced a television series based on his concepts. Art became a gimmick that was more an expression of the tools of the trade than the results of the artist observing the world around them and using these images as a form of self-expression from within. Art becomes almost as good as a photograph in this process.

The self-indulgent artist would create works that would impose their view of the world upon their clients through the craft of painting. The ultimate Narcissistic act would be to paint their self-portrait. There are a number interesting examples of this in art history. Rembrandt painted his own image at various times throughout his life. One reason an artist might paint a self-portrait was because the artist wanted to work on some ideas for portraiture but couldn't afford a model and didn't want to use these ideas on a portrait for a client until they had been tried out first. As history recedes into the past these works offer us a timeless view of how the artist saw their own image in the mirror. Very few artists ever sit for another artist so they can paint their portrait.

In the process of learning to create works of art the art student must learn to observe qualities of the subject that we don't consider in everyday life. The tone of the light coming in from the window or the type of artificial light affects the objects that are part of a still life. The landscape on a cloudy day offers challenges that a clear day doesn't. The artist might observe a beautiful sunset and automatically consider how to paint the image. Others might observe the same scene and be able to indulge in the moment without generating a job assignment from the experience. Each experience an artist has becomes potential subject matter for a future work of art. Art becomes an expression of their life and experiences. We view the world through the artist's eyes from their work. Narcissus has expanded self-image to include the world around him as well as his own image. *"I love this world I have created that I leave as my life work for you to appreciate and enter."*

The artist enjoys the ego gratification of creating works of art that are easily accepted and appreciated. A painting of a flower that almost lifts off the canvas and enters the room is viewed with sounds of awe and admiration. The same happens with a lovely sunset or portrait. We are looking at images we have viewed in our every day world and they validate our reality for us. There is no conflict of meaning in these images. They are images of beauty that we can view many times and always see the same thing, no matter how the light changes or our lives may be affected by outside concerns. These are wells of natural beauty to be returned to again and again where we can drink deeply and be renewed.

The artist finds inspiration for the natural world around them and is motivated to create works that reflect this observation. The natural world has many complex twists and turns because as humans we have experiences that extend beyond the five senses into an array of emotions and interactions. Instead of painting a still life that would rival the results of a photograph, the artist might want to exaggerate aspects of the subject matter that would convey an emotional quality to the work. Variations in color could do this. An interior view of the artist's bedroom where the walls appear to be closing in would offer a psychological feeling that normal perspective isn't going to provide. A camera isn't going to show this distortion the same way a painting might do. The artist starts to explore other views and expressions of subject matter other than the pure optical image that is being observed, which are still part of the natural world around the artist.

As the artist starts to move away from an effort to create images that are accurate renderings of observations and allow more freedom of expression to enter into the work, new sources of inspiration starts to unfold. The artist experiences many visual elements in daily life that aren't "camera-ready" subjects. The blurred visual of waking up with the sun streaming into the window leaves an impression that is inspiring. "How can I paint what I experience when I first wake up in the morning?" We experience abstractions from reality every day. Mathematics is an abstraction of reality. We buy food at the grocery store and receive a list of items and their cost at the check out line. We understand that this piece of paper is an abstraction of reality that refers to the food we purchased and the funds provided in order to complete the transaction. We function in a world of abstract concepts that provide us with information regarding the status of our lives. We are familiar with this process and understand its meaning. We look at a painting of pigment swirling across the canvas and think the artist has gone mad. Two plus two equals four. We understand this. Painting a visual impression of the light streaming into one's eyes when first waking in the morning doesn't provide a familiar image, although we have experienced this many times in our lives.

The artist goes back further. It wasn't just the light streaming in as sleep receded that captures the imagination. There was a dream that provided a different way of seeing things. Dream imagery is part of the natural world and within the experiential knowledge that we glean from reality throughout life. Daily meditations also create visual experiences within the mind that seem to come from an external source beyond the limitations of one's life. These sleeping and waking sources of inspiration go beyond what one can view in everyday life in the natural world, but are still experiential in nature. The artist works to draw from this inspiration and finds that a dialogue of sorts is created that deepens the more the artist utilizes this source for inspiration. The Greeks referred to this source as the Muse. The relationship between the artist and the Muse is a

personal one that very few artists discuss. One of the teachings that the Greeks offer as an explanation is the old adage: *Don't look under the dress of the Muse. She will become embarrassed and leave.* As soon as I heard this as a young art student I understood what it meant. Don't try to analyze the source of inspiration too far or the analytical process will destroy the creative process. I do the work and then analyze it later; a week or so after it has been completed.

Enter the Muse. She is a merciless taskmaster that drives the artist to the edge of human capability. She doesn't concern herself with trivial issues like cash flow problems or patronage. The artist goes without food and lets the rent fall behind in order to buy paint to do the next piece that she has shown them. The artist pulls back just short of low blood sugar blackouts and seeks nourishment. A patron shows up just before the eviction notice, or not. The artist is mad now. Never mind light streaming in from the window in the morning. This is divine inspiration and the more the artist can draw from this well the more contribution to humanity they will provide. The transpersonal experience has become the primary source of inspiration in an artist's life. The craft of art is no longer providing us with recorded images of Narcissistic views of reality. Art is bigger than our personal ego and view of reality. Somewhere between 1871, when James Whistler painted "Arrangement in Black and Gray" and 1918, when Kasimir Malevich painted "White on White", the Muse exploded reality into abstract images less familiar to us than the grocery store receipt we accepted as a statement associated with food, even though we couldn't eat it.

Should Malevich step forward to defend the Muse and explain that he is seeking to depict Truth in his work, as an endeavor of Suprematism, wouldn't the same argument also apply to Whistler's painting of his mother? Within forty seven years the Muse has pushed the work of the artist from a comfortable rendering of a person sitting in front of the artist to that of a depiction of a Supreme Being in non-representational imagery. Narcissus muses, "*Can't we have Gods that resemble man, as found in the Sistine Chapel?*" We understand the value of numbers depicted on paper as we leave the food market, but art is something we should be able to associate with the rest of our reality. We might not want to eat the fruit in a Cézanne still life, but at least we know it was once actual fruit on the table by the easel. We appreciate the tricks of the trade that creates images of normal everyday life like a magician's sleight of hand card trick, but a flight of fancy into the super-natural realm is more than we can endure. Truth, no matter how pure the white pigment on the canvas, is still relative to the fallible reasoning of a human. The transpersonal endeavors of an artist inspired by the Muse are not only unquestionable, but are also unthinkable.

The trick of essay writing to generate a foregone conclusion is self-evident in this use of several artists to illustrate a point. We can easily move from the work cited by Whistler to that of Malevich and see how the Muse has taken the artist beyond the imagery of every day life to that of an abstraction from reality. We learn to understand the meaning of a grocery store receipt that is an abstraction of value between product and currency, but society hasn't always endeavored to guide us through an understanding of the spiritual journey from realism to (spiritual, thus) abstract art. Whistler painted many important works and was controversial in his life time because of his effort to please his Muse. He considers his works to be analogous to pieces of music. "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" (1874) narrows the transition of realism to transpersonal

abstraction in a much shorter period of time than related in the previous passage. When criticized for the frivolous nature of this painting, Whistler responded with these words. "I have perhaps meant rather to indicate an artistic interest alone in my work, divesting the picture from any outside sort of interest. It is an arrangement of line, form, and color, first, and I make use of any incident of it which shall bring about a symmetrical result." Rather than seek a resemblance to the world around him he has sought to create a work that depicts a purely formal harmony. His Muse and that of Malevich were truly sisters in the realm of creative inspiration.

Fear of the unfamiliar pulls us away from the works of artists who go beyond the natural world into realms of pure form and harmony. Distrust in anything new suggests that the artist has engaged in a con game to trick us into believing that something of value has been created. The inspiration of the Muse compels us to journey beyond concrete reality into the world of the spiritual. Symbols suggest layers of information in the simplest form. She was there in Greece guiding the hands of the potter, painter, sculptor, musician, and playwright. She found expression through poetry and dance. She ventured out of ritual and entered the secular realm of every day life. She brought food for the soul when we hungered for spiritual nourishment. She journeyed wherever humanity sought to further the effort to respond to a sense of knowing that there was a force at play in this world that remained unseen. She gave us the melody to express our gratitude in song for the creation of the world we lived in. When we sought to create Gods in our own image for self-gratification, she gave us Narcissus. When we sought to depict the presence of spirit without reducing this to the lesser image of self, she gave us symbols and images found in cave art and petroglyphs throughout the world, the Mandala in Tibet, or the geometric shapes of Islamic decoration in architecture and fabric, to name just a few examples of transcendence imagery. Narcissus is still present in the image, but is no longer the dominant subject. Love of self is transcended into love of Creator of All Things.

In some subversive plot to destroy the world as we know it, the artist depicts Narcissus on a journey to seek guidance from the Wisdom Keepers of the World. He enters the space and approaches the spiritual master of things unseen. He poses his question. "Master, how may I create a better life for myself?" Even before the answer springs forth into the air we have already glanced into the mirror and know we have been tricked. "By giving up the idea of a better life, and only through this process, will you find a better life beyond your miserable existence." Narcissus returns home, failing to understand that it is the idea of a better life that distracts him from a true value assessment of his current situation. He is challenged to understand that love is universal and self is part of a greater whole that reflects the value he imparts upon it. Our efforts at self-portraiture are only as accurate as the mirror we view our image from.