

1 Introductory

Not every picture tells a story, but some stories tell a picture - a mental mosaic of the characters, plot and outcomes that captures the essence of the tale. The picture does not have a fixed shape - it is an archetype, able to support innumerable artistic expressions, an idea evoking layered possibilities. An artist may display some or none of these, but they are always implicit, inherent in the central idea, and they affect any rendering. Powerful and simple stories - from religion, mythology, history - have their high concepts re-represented in literature, painting, music, dance, drama, and every instance pulls along the silent implications of the ideal. Here is an ancient example, expressed in a single sentence: Paris, a mortal, is called on by Zeus to judge the naked beauty of goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. The story, the picture, the idea, has a surface of beauty, but beneath run currents of power, sexuality, risk and reward. Under all are the consequences: conflict, slavery and death - Paris' choice led to the Trojan War. Sometimes a writer or a painter will make one or more of these possibilities explicit. But rendered or not, their undertow affects every expression of *The Judgment of Paris*.

In this essay, I explore written, carved, engraved and painted expressions of *The Judgment of Paris*. There have also been musical and choreographed versions, and, before any of these, there must have been streams of oral folklore in which the audacious idea of divinity subjected to human taste was fused with the male will to judge female appearance. My purpose is to talk about individual works of art, recognizing that, as renderings of a single story, they are all infused with its implications. I will present and comment on some important examples from the tradition.

Because the judgment of Paris is a judgment of corporeal beauty, it raises, in the context of art, the question of what makes people (specifically women) beautiful. The answer given within the story is ambiguous - Paris' aesthetic sensibility is complicated by bribery and lust. He decides that Aphrodite is more beautiful than her rivals because she promises Helen (a prize he's never seen, but is already in love with, at Aphrodite's prompting). In paintings, where the bribery is rarely shown, Paris' judgment is motivated by a sexual interest (as, for example, in the Rubens painting in the Prado), or, in allegorized interpretations, by a noble preference for love over sovereignty and victory. Paris' choice is therefore not a disinterested Kantian appreciation of the beautiful. Rather, as a recent book, *The Judgment of Paris*, by the French art critic Hubert Damisch¹, claims, his choice epitomizes the cross-currents between judgments of taste, desire, affection and love.

Damisch's first chapter's title, "This Nothing the Psychoanalysis has had to say about Beauty" nicely sets up Freud's claim to have little to offer in aesthetics, in order to contradict it with a resolutely Freudian analysis of the Paris story. My aim is different. I do not see all beauty as being derived "from the field of sexual feeling". Nor that the love of beauty is "a perfect example of an impulse inhibited in its aim"². However, I do think that

¹ Hubert Damisch, "The Judgment of Paris", tr John Goodman, Univ Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.

² Sigmund Freud, tr. James Strachey, *Civilisation and its Discontents in Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Hogarth Press, 1953-73, vol 21, p 83.

questions of sexuality are important both in understanding how we (women and men) appreciate visual art, and in our attitudes to beauty and ugliness in other people.

A preliminary comment on the view of art that underlies my commentary on particular works later. Reflecting, of course, personal tastes and biases, my view is nonetheless informed by the reading of critics, and in particular by Frederic Taubes³. Interestingly, although I have learned from and agree with many of his criteria of judgment, I often find my taste opposed to his⁴. My understanding has also been significantly shaped by Gombrich's famous *The Story of Art*⁵. But as I have reviewed mainstream modern criticism, I find that there are delicacies in art appreciation that I simply cannot swallow⁶. So the set of ideas I lay out briefly now is intended to justify *my* judgments and, in Kantian fashion, I present it with the implicit idea that you ought to have this theory too. But I recognize that you may disagree, particularly if you're a professional art critic.

First, artists are people who are able to work in their medium with very high competence, according to the standards of tradition⁷. Next, their created works contain touches of originality which are both subtle and numerous. An expert forger, then, is an artist, though her ability to produce works of art depends on the subtlety and degree of her originality. By subtlety I do not imply smallness, but the ability to extend the tradition without calling attention to the artifice of extension. So lurches in the definition of painting, music, or other practice do not necessarily constitute art, just because of their originality. On the contrary, a great artist is likely to develop from an excellence close to the tradition, to a personal, original creativity that progressively enriches the tradition and enlarges the medium. Bold innovation is not a necessary requirement for greatness in art, and it is often possible to find more originality in a secondary artist than in a master. For example, C. P. E. Bach was much more daring in his originality than J. S. Bach, yet there is no doubt J. S. was the greater composer. Indeed, I would suggest that there have been few great artists who not only produced a corpus of the highest quality but also redefined their medium. I would include Shakespeare, Beethoven, Leonardo and even Manet, though there's much room for disagreement. This view of art as skilled, subtle, enlargement of tradition may be rather conservative - even reactionary - yet it provides a statement of what to look for in art:

³ Frederic Taubes, "A Judgement of Art", North Light Publishers, Westport, Conn, 1981.

⁴ While I'm happy to agree with Taube's judgment on much modern art – Matisse, THE DANCE, "Schematized, perfunctory design, trivial color, inept handling of the paint material"; Matisse, BLUE NUDE, "Sour kitsch"; Picasso, LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON, "A ludicrous pastiche of African art", I find he has the same prejudices as many other art critics when discussing the French Academians. Taube is not the first critic to display a large picture of a beautiful painting by Bouguereau (in his case, BRETON BROTHER AND SISTER) and then damn it as "insipid". Nor does he like Rodin. And, like every art critic I've read, he thinks Rembrandt is some kind of god, or, at least, some kind of Beethoven. Despite the repetitive clamour about insight, brushwork, chiaroscuro and transcendence, I have never understood why Rembrandt isn't more obviously categorized as "grim".

⁵ Ernest H Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon Press, 16 ed., 1995. Gombrich's enthusiasm for art permeates his book. He is, perhaps, unwilling to criticise, but his advice to an impetuous critic is very worthwhile: ensure you have understood what the artist was trying to do.

⁶ Kenneth Clark, for example, believes that Mondrian "is the direct inheritor of Vermeer van Delft's system of aesthetics". I wonder if we are in the same universe. I will have more to say about John Berger later.

⁷ "Tradition" includes, and gives proper emphasis to, recent and current practice.

precision, detail, imagination, channelled exuberance. By contrast, the utterly new, the bold and the shocking have a fairly low place in my view of art.

In the course of the essay my commentaries on works of art will be informed by the writings of critics, but my own judgment is given free rein. I hope that judgment will prove coherent with the limited definition of art that I have given.