ON PERCEIVING PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE

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Abstract — The author states that descriptions of the perception of figurative paintings and sculptures traditionally have been confused by the intrusion of interpretive explanations. Phenomenological description—that is, description as determined as much as possible by the phenomena (paintings and sculptures) rather than by theoretical considerations—indicates that sculptures are perceived in significantly different ways from paintings. He finds that failure to be clear about these differences not only confuses an understanding of these two art forms but, in turn, tends to confuse the perception of them. If painting is classified as a visual art, then sculpture is a visual-tactual art. If painting is classified as a 'static' art, then sculpture is a 'dynamic' art. Painting arrests the spectacle of the world, for painting is primarily about the patina of things, the surfaces of shapes that have already emerged. Figurative sculpture is more about things as they are emerging.

I.

There are commonsense grounds for claiming that a sculpture is perceived as a many-sided painting. The differences between the ways paintings and sculptures are perceived seem trivial. Some sculptures cause one to move around more than most paintings, and often one has the desire to touch sculptures. But even with such sculptures, sight seems to be the dominant sense.

The following statement by Rhys Carpenter is representative of the long, almost unchallenged tradition that finds no basic differences between our perceptions of paintings and sculptures: 'It may be argued—and with entire warrant—that sculpture frequently involves an appeal to our sense of touch and physical contact; but so does painting. Such tactile sensations are, in either art, induced and secondary, being derivative of subjective mental association. In a painting by Titian or Bronzino, the representation of material textures such as fur and velvet may be so visually exact that it evokes in us a memory of how velvet and fur may feel when we stroke them. I do not think that sculpture's tactual appeal is very different or much stronger. Any dissenting opinion is probably inspired by the heightened physical actuality of sculptural presentation: we cannot directly sense a painted texture by touching the canvas, whereas we can actually explore with our fingers the solid sculptural shape. But the logic is faulty if it is hence inferred that sculpture is more immediately involved in the tactile sense; for, at best, we can only touch the material medium and not the artistic representation which is intended and calculated for the eye's contemplative vision' [1]. Bernard Berenson agrees with Carpenter [2].

Or consider what the sculptor Adolf von Hildenbrand has to say: 'If the figure offers more than one plane picture, there will, of course, be more than one position from which to view it. The number of satisfactory aspects a work may have depends on the artist's conception; it may be two, front and rear, as in statues of a relief-like character; it may be three, or four, etc. ... But among all the possible aspects there will always be one that dominates. This one is representative of the total plastic nature of the object, and, like a picture or relief, expresses it all in a single two-dimensional impression. It stands for the virtual visual idea underlying the plastic representation which dominated the artist's mind when he created the work ... The problem in a plastic ensemble consists in arranging a solid figure so that it can afford us such a picture' [3]. For Hildenbrand there is a disturbing quality about the 3-dimensional that can be overcome only by a relief-view. The 3-dimensional must be translated into the 2-dimensional, for otherwise the object remains 'real' and the artistic 'idea' is lost. Thus low-relief is held to be the basic sculptural form, and high-relief and sculpture in the round are simply ways for presenting a series of low-relief pictures.

There is a wide consensus among art critics, historians and aestheticians that paintings and sculptures are perceived mainly or solely by the eye, the visual sensory apparatus functioning in essentially the same way for both kinds of objects. Furthermore, the few who disagree, such as Herbert Read and Susanne Langer, fail to back up their arguments with accurate descriptions of how, in fact, these objects are differently perceived [4]. I maintain that the perception of paintings and of sculptures is significantly different. Moreover, the failure to be clear about this difference not only
confuses an understanding of these two art forms but, in turn, tends to muddy the perception of them.

The traditional ways of describing paintings and sculptures, as I have argued elsewhere [5], have been confused by the intrusion of explanatory interpretations. These descriptions have been determined less by the phenomena—i.e. the two kinds of objects—than by theoretical points of view that attempt to explain the phenomena rather than to describe them as they are actually experienced. Like a camera with set lens, such theoretical approaches frame only that which fits their focus. Often these theoretically-based descriptions have brought out facets of the phenomena that otherwise would have been overlooked. But, at the same time, this narrowness of focus has caused much to be missed.

I maintain that this is especially true of some of the most important differences between paintings and sculptures. I want to get back to these objects themselves in their splendid singularity. The aesthetic experience is my access. In the aesthetic experience my undivided attention is sustained on the work. There is no subject/object dichotomy. I lose explicit self-consciousness, my sense of being separate, of standing apart from the work. Nevertheless, the aesthetic experience is active. Concepts are initiated and controlled by my perceptions. These perceptions and conceptions are experienced as fused, as a unity with the work. Thus I allow the work to be a phenomenon, to unfold unto its fullness, its thingliness or individuality, as the later Heidegger urged. Then I want to describe what I find. And, when I do this, I do not find an external object—not forth and distanced from me in the mode of analytic thought—but a thing-as-felt-and-meant. But how can I describe this thing without objectifying it, without twisting it into the frame of some conceptual point of view? I can do this by allowing my aesthetic experience of the thing suggest the concepts to be used in my descriptions. I will allow the conceptuality that was already involved in my aesthetic experience to initiate and control the concepts used in my descriptions. I will ‘think from’ the aesthetic experiences of paintings and sculptures. Then my concepts will not be set presuppositions, but an emerging context that helps prevent the twisting of the perceptual evidence.

Phenomenological description unadulterated by conceptual biases is an ideal that can only be approached, of course, but it can be approached [6]. In any case, I will attempt in the following descriptions to follow Charles Sanders Peirce’s stricture regarding his own approach to phenomenology: ‘The student’s great effort is not to be influenced by any tradition, any authority, any reason for supposing that such and such ought to be the facts, or any fancies of any kind, and to confine himself to honest singleminded observation of appearances.’ In turn, as Peirce also says, ‘the reader, upon his side, must repeat the author’s observations for himself, and decide from his own observations whether the author’s account of the appearances is correct or not’ [7].
Rembrandt appears vacuous. The space around the Arp appears dense.

Concentrating first on the Rembrandt, I find an optimal viewing point (avoiding bumping into the Arp!) that eliminates the glare of its surface and allows it to be seen most clearly as a whole. From that point, awareness of the real space between the painting and me disappears, and I focus upon the imaginary space of the painting. I stand before the painting and my body comes to rest (if a chair were available I would surely sit down), and only slight movements of my eyes and head are necessary to perceive the details of the painting. My chosen viewing point becomes central and commanding—a privileged position [9]. Although I find myself shifting my viewing point occasionally in order to observe a color or shading or texture or line or shape from a slightly different angle, still I relate and subordinate these observations to my chosen viewing point, which generates that ‘luminous silent stasis’, as Joyce describes it in his book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In memory, I seem to be able to see the Rembrandt from only the privileged position. That position provides me with the essential relationships of parts of the painting—the ‘principle of constancy’ in Gestaltist terms—against which any other relationships from other positions are subordinated. Moreover, the depiction in perspective determines the location of each part of the portrait in space, and, as R. L. Gregory points out ‘paintings are generally more compelling in depth when viewed with ... the head held still’ [10].

Nevertheless, it takes considerable time to take in the Rembrandt. My eyes leisurely move from one region of it to another. ‘Paths are made’, as Paul Klee claimed, ‘for the eye of the beholder which moves along from patch to patch like an animal grazing’. There is a ‘rapt resting’ on each part, an unhurried series of one-after-the-other of ‘nows’, each of which has its own temporal spread. There is a sense of the ‘saddle-back present’, as William James called it, of riding the present with a piece of the past and a piece of the future. There is no long stretch into the past and future as in the perception of most music. Each part has its own center of gravity and thus is a place of rest—of arrest. Each part is a calculated trap for sensuous meditation and consummation. Each part fills my eyes so completely that there is no desire to move to the next part, at least for a while. Yet there is a feudal constitution in this organization of regions. Although each region maintains its personal rights and particularity, the totality of the regions—the painting as a whole as perceived from the privileged position—makes itself felt as my commanding and governing norm. The Rembrandt is like a face with one set expression [11].

Turning to the Arp sculpture, I find it a warm and friendly presence. I find myself reaching toward the statue rather than keeping my distance (if a chair were available I would not use it). Whereas my perceptual relationship to the Rembrandt required my getting to and settling in a privileged position similar to choosing what I consider the best seat in a theater, my perceptual relationship to the Arp is much more mobile and flexible. I want to touch and caress the shining bronze, despite the ‘Do Not Touch’ signs. The smooth rounded shapes, which I imagine as swelling volumes beating with inner forces, seem to move gently out into space, causing my body to move around the figure and controlling the rhythm of my walking.

My perception of the Arp seems to take much more time than my perception of the Rembrandt. This is a ‘seeming’, for, in fact, I probably spent at least as much time perceiving the Rembrandt. But the dominance of the view of the Rembrandt from the privileged position makes it seem as if only the time spent at that point really counted, as if a single, timeless glance has sufficed. The power of that experience was so overwhelming that it made me forget ‘the spots of time’ (Wordsworth) spent in other views. Conversely, the Arp seems not only 3-dimensional but 4-dimensional, because it brings in the element of time so discernibly—a cumulative drama, a temporal Gestalt. Not only does each aspect of the sculpture make equal demands upon my contemplation but, at the same time, each aspect is incomplete, enticing me on to the next for fulfillment. As I move, masses change, and on their surfaces points become lines, lines become curves and curves become shapes. As each new aspect unrolls, there is a shearing of textures, especially at the lateral borders. The leading border opens a new aspect and the textures of the old aspect change. Curving surfaces continuously reveal the emergence of masses in front and behind. What may be hidden behind the surfaces is perceived in my imagination, an example of what James J. Gibson calls a ‘sensationless perception’ [12], for the surfaces indicate the depth characteristics of the bronze. Moreover, the surface shapes are in perspective, and as Merleau-Ponty points out, ‘perspective does not appear to me to be a subjective deformation of things but, on the contrary, to be one of their properties, perhaps their essential property. It is precisely because of it that the perceiving possesses in itself a hidden and inexhaustible richness, that it is a ‘thing’’ [13].

As I move, what I have perceived and what I shall perceive stand in a defined relationship with what I am presently perceiving. My moving body links these aspects. A continuous metamorphosis develops, as I remember the aspects that were and anticipate the aspects to come, the varying reflected light glancing off the surfaces helping to blend the changing forms. The remembered and anticipatory forms resonate in my present perception. My perception of the Arp is one of movement, even the sounds of the museum room are caught, more or less, in the rhythm of my movements. As I return to my starting point, I find the sculpture richer, as home seems after a journey. With the Rembrandt, on the other hand, there seemed to be no movement and thus no journey. And also no sound. In the inner intimacy of that experience there was, instead,
a ‘silence that rang’. ‘Give her a silence, that the soul may softly turn home into the flooding and fullness in which she lived’ (Rilke).

A photograph of the Arp is necessarily unsatisfactory, for it must isolate a single aspect, whereas a photograph of the Rembrandt taken from the privileged position may be satisfactory. The static camera cannot capture the 3-dimensional world, especially when, as with the Arp, the sculpture is not set up in a pictorial manner, for example, in front of a flat wall. Unlike my participation with the Rembrandt, there is no privileged position for responding to the Arp. I have no single memory image of the sculpture but a series of images, none of which is necessarily dominant, the shades of the various images passing into one another [14]. Moreover the movement of my body around the sculpture, following its concavities and convexities, had an ‘in and out’ quality, resembling breathing. Sometimes I wanted to touch its surfaces, and when I moved in, the textures, shapes and volumes appeared larger and the reflected light diffused. When I moved back, these aspects appeared smaller, and the reflected light sharpened. In close, the mass of ‘Growth’ seemed heavier. On the other hand, I had no desire to touch the Rembrandt or even to get closer than the privileged position. The Rembrandt depiction cannot be embraced. Nor can the painted nose be grasped. If I had walked closer, at a certain point the portrait would have ceased to be a portrait and would have become blurred blotches. Nor could I have walked into the depth of the depicted space. And, furthermore, as Rembrandt remonstrated: ‘Don’t poke your nose into my pictures, the smell of the paint will poison you’.

The imaginary space of the portrait and the real space of the museum room have clearly different properties. Thus, touching the Rembrandt was of no help in my perception of that painting. Touching the Arp, on the other hand, helped my perception of that sculpture by informing me about its surface [15]. Grasping the Arp—impossible with the Rembrandt—informed me about its shape, size, weight and the relationships between its parts. With the Rembrandt my hands were usually clasped behind my back, whereas with the Arp my hands were usually moving, even when I was not touching it. Unlike my perception of the Rembrandt, continual bodily adjustments were necessary in my perception of the Arp. Consequently, with the Arp—unlike with the Rembrandt—there was considerable co-perception of my body. In this respect the Rembrandt made me a passive perceiver, whereas the Arp made me an active one.

The space between the Rembrandt and myself ideally would be transparent. Awareness of the space between—such as glare coming off the surface of the painting or of cigar smoke coming from a neighboring viewer or of any sounds and smells—distracted me from my appreciation of the painting. The space between the painting and me was necessary, of course, but only as an unfelt access. With the Arp, the space between was furrowed with forces, the shadows, for example, intruded into that space, stretching, shrinking, warping and twisting, while the reflected light from the bronze seemed to warm its surrounds. The smoke of the neighboring viewer and the sounds and smells of the museum room were not nearly so distracting as with the Rembrandt, to some extent being absorbed into the space between the Arp and me as if they belonged there.

The Rembrandt had a light of its own, generated within its frame, simultaneously illuminating and dissolving the man and the table within a rich engulfing darkness. My seeing was emphasized by being made difficult by the flickering inadequacy of the light rendered in chiaroscuro. This depicted light appeared to be entirely distinct from the light in the museum room. The man and the table of the painting seemed to struggle with the painting’s light, oblique and falling in shafts, in order to capture its moving nature and make it static, and they seemed to have nothing to do with the light in the museum room. Conversely, Arp’s ‘Growth’ seemed to have no light of its own, and its material body seemed to reach out for the light of the museum room. I felt that the bronze dramatically enhanced that light by reflection, even seeming to make the light move. With the Rembrandt, awareness of real space and light and of other viewers were disturbances. I wanted to feel entirely alone with the portrait, conscious only of its imaginary world. With the Arp, awareness of space and light were not disturbances but welcome necessities, and even the awareness of other people in the room was not necessarily distracting.

The swelling shapes of ‘Growth’ interact with their surrounding space. If ‘Growth’ were crowded into a corner, its vitality would be weakened, for it needs space to penetrate with its ‘forces’ [16]. ‘Growth’, unlike the Rembrandt, seems to me to breath in its surrounding atmosphere. Its concavities seem to inhale; its convexities exhale. The surrounding space of a statue is a perceptible part of it. As Henry Moore points out, sculpture needs ‘more care in its placing than paintings do. With a picture, the frame keeps you at a distance and the picture goes on living in its own world. But if a sculpture is placed against the light, if you come into a room for instance and see it against the window, you just see a silhouette with a glare around it. It can’t mean anything. If a thing is three-dimensional and meant to have a sense of complete existence it won’t do to back it up against a wall like a child that’s been put in the corner’ [17].

I find that like a magnet, Arp’s bronze sends out vectors that fill its surrounding space with directed paths. If an object had entered that space, I would have felt certain that it would have been drawn at once into some orbit around the bronze. And, indeed, I was pulled around the bronze as determined by these vectors. A sense of gravity united the sculpture and myself in a common space. ‘Growth’ articulated the emptiness around it.
making what otherwise would be a void both visible and tactile. The surrounding space has a 'curious curvature', seemingly a moving volume filled with currents. To fail to feel these currents I believe is to fail to perceive the sculpture's totality.

The space between myself and the Arp was not a mere adjunct, as in the case of the Rembrandt, but integral. Whereas the forces of the Rembrandt—determined by the relationship of lines, colors, shapes, light, shadings and textures—stay within the frame, the forces of the Arp—determined by the relationships of its several parts—thrust out into its surrounding space and explicitly push or pull into my perceptions. The frame of the Rembrandt helps to contain the forces of the painting within a make-believe space, helping to bracket them, as it were, between quotation marks [18].

Claims, such as Dewitt Parker's, that 'by placing the statue on a pedestal, we indicate its isolation from the space of the room, as by putting a frame around a picture we isolate it, too, from everything else in the world' [19] fail to recognize the impact of a sculpture on its surrounding space. It is true that large pedestals may make the surfaces of supported sculptures inaccessible to touch, and pedestals usually give the impression that their sculptures are separated from the ground. But to the degree that a pedestal needlessly interferes with the perception of the impact of the material body of a sculpture into its surrounding space, the sculptural qualities are weakened. With the Arp, in contrast, the pedestal, like a stem of a plant leading to its flower, is continuous with and prepares for the spiraling form above. Thus the pedestal helps that form push out spiraling lines of force into its environment. The pedestal adds, moreover, to my sense of the pull of gravity, which I share with the sculpture [20]. The pedestal works as an entering rather than as a distancing device. Whereas the Arp possesses its environment (with or without a pedestal), the Rembrandt dispossesses itself of its environment (with or without a frame). Consequently, the Rembrandt has a 'non-impacting between', for the space between the painting and myself has no significant perceptible forces; the Arp, conversely, has an 'impacting between', for the space between the material body of the sculpture and myself has significant perceptible forces [21]. Or, to put it another way, the space in front of the Rembrandt seems inert; the space around the Arp seems enlivened.

III.

If these perceptions of mine are not idiosyncratic and my descriptions are accurate, then these descriptions are compelling primary evidence for clearly distinguishing the perception of sculpture from the perception of paintings. As with the perception of paintings, sight is also fundamental in the perception of sculptures. With sculpture, however, tactual and kinaesthetic sensations come into play in much more important ways than with painting. Even if a sculpture is not touched, it is a much more touch-determined art object than a painting. If painting is classified as a visual art, then sculpture is a visual-tactual art. If painting is classified as a 'static' art, then sculpture is a 'dynamic' art. Sculptures are not just art objects based on things but an entrance to and communion with things. Because sculpture influences how its surrounding space is perceived, sculpture possesses a charged, out-going quality: sculpture presents. Sculpture 'insists' on its own presence and acknowledgement as a thing in the space all things occupy. Representational paintings arrest the spectacle of the world, for they are primarily about the patina of things, the surfaces of shapes that have already emerged. Painting reflects the real world from outside, not from within that world. Sculpture, on the other hand, is the artistic presentation of existents within the world, for it is more about things as they emerge. Understanding these differences between painting and sculpture should help to clarify and enrich one's perceptions of them, for conceptual confusion leads to perceptual obscurity and poverty.

REFERENCES

1. R. Carpenter, Greek Sculpture (Chicago: The Univ. Chicago Press, 1960) p. 34.
6. If successful, this kind of phenomenological description should provide better initial evidence for the explanatory interpretations of paintings and sculptures. Then these hypotheses can be tested with some assurance that they are being referred to 'what really is'. When that assurance is lacking, the various explanations and debates, despite their insights, lack a common focus and rarely lead to consensus. See, for example, J. J. Gibson, The Information Available in Pictures, Leonardo 4, 27 (1971); and the letters of E. H. Gombrich and R. Arnheim concerning that article along with Gibson's replies in Leonardo 4, 195 (1971); N. Goodman's note in Leonardo 4, 359 (1971); the exchange of letters between M. H. Pirenne and J. M. Kennedy in Leonardo 5, 285 (1972); W. A. Adams, Problems of Pictorial Perception in Leonardo 10, 107 (1977) and D. R. Topper's discussion of Adams' article in Leonardo 11, 55 (1978) and R. Topper, On Interpreting Pictorial Art: Reflections on J. J. Gibson's Invariants Hypothesis, in Leonardo 10, 295 (1977).
7. Philosophical Writings of Pierce, J. Buchler, ed. (New York: Dover, 1955) p. 75.
8. This Rembrandt is no longer in the Philadelphia Museum. However, the Rembrandt reproduced in Fig. 1 is very similar.
9. E. Fry correctly observes that 'if the total perception of... a work may be accomplished from a frontal vantage point, and this perception leads to the comprehension of the work as a two-dimensional pattern underlying and controlling any projections into space, the work is in the domain of painting' [Sculpture from Twenty Nations (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967) p. 12]. That is not to deny that a narrative series of paintings, such as the Vatican Logge, designed by Raphael, require our movement, much of it
continuous. One follows those frescoes like a camera on
wheels. Nevertheless, one inevitably comes to rest at certain
points and focuses in from a privileged position.

10. R. L. Gregory, Eye and Brain (New York: McGraw-Hill,

11. The restraint of the privileged position from which one
perceives paintings can be irritating to some people. For
example Joseph Addison notes, although his reference is to
the English Garden of the 18th century: 'The mind of man
naturally hates everything that looks like a restraint upon
it, and it is apt to fancy itself under a sort of confinement,
when the sight is pent up in a narrow compass. . . . There is
nothing so distasteful to the Eye as a confined Prospect . . .
The Eye naturally loves Liberty, and . . . will not rest
content with the most beautiful dispositions of Art, confined
within a narrow compass' [Spectator, No. 412, p. 54].

12. J. J. Gibson, The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems


14. Often with low relief and even sometimes with sculpture in
the round, such as Michelangelo's 'David', there may be a
dominant memory image. But, unlike one's memory image
of paintings, that image usually will be accompanied with
subordinate images.

15. There is a variance, however, between the temperature as
given to touch, which is cold, and the temperature as given
to sight, which is hot. This can be somewhat disconcerting.
With the marble version of 'Growth' in the Guggenheim
Museum, New York City, the sight perception is as cool as
the touch perception, and in this respect I find the marble
version aesthetically more effective. Whereas the bronze
appears to heat up the light with flame-like shapes, the
marble appears to cool the light with soft shadows.

16. Recently, the viewing of 'Growth' has been handicapped in
the Philadelphia Museum by being placed on a new and
very high pedestal close to a wall. Like a picture frame, that
wall flattens and sharpens the forms in 'Growth'. The
sculptural has become pictorial. Compare the remark of
Isamu Noguchi's: 'The base 'frames and creates an object of
importance. And yet I am bothered by it. It tends to remove
sculpture from a man's own proportion and contact. It
supplies a fictional horizon. This is the chief reason why I
have attempted an integration of sculpture and base: bases
that bite into sculpture, sculpture that rises from the Earth'
[L. Noguchi, Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World (New

17. J. Russell, Henry Moore (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons,
1968) p. 156.

18. The larger the frame around a painting, generally, the more
it helps separate the imaginary space of the painting from
the real space outside it. The large frame of Correggio's
'Four Saints: Peter, Martha, Mary Magdalen, and
Leonardo' in the Metropolitan Museum of Art at New
York City even introduces a transition space, like the
proscenium arch of the theater, to prepare us for another
world. Yet even paintings without a frame, for example
practically all of the paintings of Mark Rothko, 'frame'
themselves only with the edges of their canvases.

Press, 1926) p. 36. cf. E. Bullough's claim: 'The circum-
stances that the space of a statuary is the same space as ours
(in distinction to relief sculpture or painting, for instance)
renders a distancing of pedestals, that is, a removal from
our spatial context, imperative.' [Psychical Distance, in A
Modern Book of Aesthetics, Melvin Rader, ed. (New York:

20. David Smith once remarked that 'gravitation is the only
logical factor a sculptor has to contend with. The parts can't
float, as in painting, but must be tied together'. [S. Rodman,
 Conversations with Artists (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957)
pp. 127].

21. For a detailed analysis of the 'impacting between', see F. D.
Martin, The 'Between': Brancusi, Moore, and Giacometti,
Dialectics and Humanism 2, 25 (Spring 1975) and The Arts