



Aestheticism in Art

William Hogarth

Temporis

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William Hogarth wrote his Analysis of Beauty in 1753, during the Age of Enlightenment. Through this captivating text, he tends to define the notion of beauty in painting and states that it is linked, per se, to the use of the serpentine lines in pictorial compositions. He calls it the line of beauty . His essay is thus dedicated to the study of the composition of paintings, depending on the correct use of the pictorial lines, light, colour, and the figure's attitudes. These timeless concepts have been applied by several artists through the centuries. Paintings from every period have here been chosen to support this demonstration. They allow us to explore the various manners in which beauty can be expressed in painting.

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Introduction



Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as **Raphael**, *The Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, known as *La Belle Jardinière*, 1507–1508. Oil on wood, 122 × 80 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

If a preface was ever necessary, it may very likely be thought so for the following work; the title of which (in the proposals published some time since) have greatly amused and raised expectations of the curious, though not without a mixture of doubt, that its purpose could ever be satisfactorily fulfilled. For, despite the fact that beauty is seen and confessed by all, from the many fruitless attempts to account for the cause of its being so, enquiries on this subject have almost been sacrificed; and the subject generally thought to be a matter of too high and too delicate a nature to admit of any true or intelligible discussion. Something, therefore, introductory ought to be offered upon the presenting of a work with a face so entirely new, especially as it will naturally encounter, and perhaps even overthrow, several long-received, thorough and established opinions. Since controversies may arise, how far, and after what manner, does this subject have to go to be considered and treated fairly? It will also be proper to lie before the reader what may be understood from the works of both ancient and modern writers and painters.

It is no wonder that this subject was considered inexplicable for so long, as the nature of many parts of it cannot possibly come within the reach of mere men with pens; otherwise those ingenious gentlemen who have published treatises about it (and who wrote much more learnedly than can be expected from one who never took up the pen before) would not so soon have been bewildered in their accounts of it and obliged so suddenly to turn into the broad and more beaten path of moral beauty, in order to extricate themselves from the difficulties they seem to have met with in this. What's more, they were forced for the same reasons to amuse their readers with amazing (but often misapplied) encomiums on deceased painters and their performances, wherein they continually discoursed effects instead of developing causes. After much flattery, in very pleasing language, one is fairly set down just from where they were picked up, honestly confessed to that in terms of grace, the main point in question, the men do not even pretend to know anything of the matter. And, indeed, how should they? A practical knowledge of the whole art of painting (sculpture alone not being sufficient) is required and, to some degree of eminence; it would be difficult for anyone to pursue the chain of this inquiry through all its parts offhand; however, it is my hope that all will be understood following this work.



Guido di Pietro, known as **Fra Angelico**, *Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven* (predella of the altarpiece of San Domenico in Fiesole), c. 1423–1424. Tempera on panel, 31.7 × 73 cm. The National Gallery, London.

Naturally one might wonder why the best painters within these two centuries, who, according to their works, appear to have excelled in grace and beauty, should have been so silent in an affair of such seeming importance to the imitative arts and their own honour. To this, I say, that it is probable that they arrived at that excellence in their works by the mere dint of imitating with great

exactness the beauties of nature, and by often copying and retaining strong ideas of graceful antique statues which might sufficiently serve their purposes as painters without troubling themselves with a further inquiry into the particular causes of the effects before them. Is it not a little strange that the great Leonardo da Vinci (amongst the many philosophical precepts which he hath at random laid down in his treatise on painting) did not give the lead hint of anything tending to a system of this kind, especially as he was a contemporary of Michelangelo, who is said to have discovered a certain principle in the trunk of an antique statue (which became well known from this circumstance by the name of Michelangelo's *Torso*, or *Back*), a principle which gave his works a grandeur of gusto equal to the most highly acclaimed antiques. Relative to which tradition, Lomazzo, who wrote about painting at the same time, has this remarkable passage (vol. I, book I):

And because in this place there falleth out a certain precept of Michelangelo much for our purpose, I will not concede it, leaving the further interpretation and understanding thereof to the judicious reader. It is reported, then, that Michelangelo once upon a time gave this observation to painter Marcus di Siena his scholar: that he should always make a figure pyramidal, serpent-like and multiplied by one, two, and three. In which precept (in my opinion) the whole mystery of art consists. For the greatest grace and life that a picture can have is that it express motion, which the painters call the spirit of a picture. Now there is no form so fit to express this motion as that of the flame of fire, which, according to Aristotle and the other philosophers, is an element most active of all others because the form of the flame makes it most apt for motion. It has a conus or sharp point with which it seems to divide the air, so that it may ascend to its proper sphere. A picture having this form will be most beautiful.

Many writers since Lomazzo have, in the same words, recommended observing this rule as well without comprehending the meaning of it, for unless it were known systematically, the whole business of grace could not be understood. Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy, in his *Art of Painting*, says: "large flowing, gliding outlines which are in waves, give not only a grace to the part, but to the whole body; as we see in Antinous, and in many other antique figures: a fine figure and its parts ought always to have a serpent-like and flaming form. Naturally those sort of lines have I know not what of life and seeming motion in them, which very much resembles the activity of the flame and the serpent." Now if he had understood what he had said, he could not, speaking of grace, have expressed himself in the following contradictory manner. "But to say the truth, this is a difficult undertaking, and a rare gift, which the artist rather receives from the hand of heaven than from his own industry and studies." But Roger de Piles, in his *Lives of Painters*, is still more contradictory, when he says "that a painter can only have [grace] from nature, and does not know that he has it, nor in what degree, nor how exactly he communicates it to his works; and that grace and beauty are two different things. Beauty pleases by the rules, and grace gets by without them."

All the English writers on this subject have echoed these passages; hence *Je ne sais quoi* has become a fashionable phrase as a reference to grace. Due to this, it is plain that this precept which Michelangelo delivered so long ago in an oracle-like manner has remained mysterious down to this time, for anything that has appeared to the contrary. The wonder that it should do so will, to some degree, lessen when we come to consider that it must have appeared all along as full of contradiction as the most obscure quibble ever delivered at Delphos, because winding lines are as often the cause of deformity as of grace the solution of which, in this place, would be an anticipation of what the reader will find at large in the body of the work. There are also strong prejudices in favour of straight lines, as constituting true beauty in the human form, where they never should appear. A middling connoisseur thinks no profile has beauty without a very straight nose, and if the forehead be continued straight with it, he thinks it is still more sublime. I have seen miserable

scratches with the pen sell at a considerable rate for only having in them a side face or two. The common notion that a person should be straight as an arrow, and perfectly erect, is of this kind. If a dancing-master were to see his scholar in the easy and gracefully-turned attitude of the Antinous, he would cry shame on him, and tell him he looked as crooked as a ram's horn, and bid him hold up his head as he himself did.



Giorgio Vasari, *Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, 1533. Oil on canvas, 90 × 72 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Guido di Pietro, known as **Fra Angelico**, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1420. Tempera and gold on panel, 27 × 37.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.



Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, c. 1480. Tempera on canvas, 255 × 140 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The painters, in a similar manner, by their works, seem to be no less divided upon the subject than the authors. The French, except such as have imitated the antique, or the Italian school, seem to have studiously avoided the serpentine line in all their pictures, especially Anthony Coypel, historical painter, and Hyacinthe Rigaud, principal portrait painter to Louis XIV. Rubens, whose manner of designing was quite original, made use of a large flowing line as a principle, which runs through all his works, and gives a noble spirit to them; but he did not seem to be acquainted with what we call the precise line; which from now on we will be very particular about, and which gives the delicacy we see in the best Italian masters; rather he charged his contours in general with too bold and S-like swellings. Raphael, from a straight and stiff manner, suddenly changed his taste of lines at the sight of Michelangelo's works and antique statues; and he was so fond of the serpentine line that he carried it into a ridiculous excess, particularly in his draperies. However, his great observance of nature ensured that he did not continue this mistake for very long. Peter de Cortone formed a fine manner in his draperies of this line. We see this principle best understood in some pictures of Correggio, particularly his *Juno and Ixion*, yet the proportions of his figures are sometimes such as might be corrected by a common sign painter. Whilst Albert Dürer, who drew mathematically, never so much as deviated into grace, which he must sometimes have done in copying from life, if he had not been fettered with his own impracticable rules of proportion. But that which may have puzzled this matter most may be that Anthony van Dyck, one of the best portrait painters in most respects ever known, plainly appears not to have had a thought of this kind. For there seems not to be the least grace in his pictures more than what life chanced to bring before him. There is a print of the Duchess of Wharton engraved by Van Gunft, from a true picture by him, which is thoroughly diverted of every elegance. Now, had he known this line as a principle, he could no more have drawn all the parts of this picture so contrary to it, than Mr Addison could have written a whole spectator in false grammar; unless it were done on purpose. However, on account of his other great excellencies, painters chose to stifle this want of grace in his attitudes, simplicity, etc., and they often, very justly, merit that epithet.



Guido di Pietro, known as **Fra Angelico**, *Saint Peter Preaching in the Presence of Saint Mark*, c. 1433. Tempera on panel, 39 × 56 cm. Museo di San Marco, Florence.

Nor were the painters of these times less uncertain and contradictory to each other, than the masters already mentioned, whatever they may pretend to the contrary. Of this I felt certain, and therefore, in the year 1745, published a frontispiece to my engraved works, in which I drew a serpentine line laying on a painter's palette, with these words under it, the line of beauty. The bait soon took; and no Egyptian hieroglyphic was ever amused over more than they were after this time, painters and sculptors came to me to know the meaning of it, equally puzzled about it as other people, until it came to have some explanation. At that time, and no sooner, some found it to be an old acquaintance of theirs, though the account they could give of its properties was as very near to satisfactory as that which a day-labourer who constantly uses the lever, could give of that machine as a mechanical power. Others, such as common face-painters and copiers of pictures, denied that there could be such a rule either in art or nature, and asserted it was all fluff and madness; but no wonder that these gentlemen should not be ready in comprehending a thing they have little or no business with. For though the picture-copier may sometimes to a common eye seem to vie with the original he copies, the artist himself requires no more ability, genius, or knowledge of nature than a journeyman-weaver at the goblins, who in working after a piece of painting, bit by bit, scarcely knows what he is about, whether he is weaving a man or a horse, yet at last almost insensibly turns out of his loom a fine piece of tapestry, representing, perhaps, one of Alexander's battles painted by Le Brun.

As the above-mentioned print thus involved me in frequent disputes by explaining the qualities of the line, I was extremely glad to find it (which I had conceived as only part of a system in my mind) so well supported by the above precept of Michelangelo, which was first pointed out to me by Dr Kennedy, learned antiquarian and connoisseur from whom I afterwards purchased the translation, from which I have taken several passages for my purpose. Let us now endeavour to discover what light antiquity throws upon the subject in question.

Egypt first, later followed by Greece, manifested their great skill in arts and sciences through their works, and among the rest, painting and sculpture, all of which are thought to have been issued from their great schools of philosophy. Pythagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle seem to have pointed out the right road in nature for the study of the painters and sculptors of those times (which they, in all probability, afterwards followed the nicer paths that their particular professions required them to pursue) as may be reasonably collected from the answers given by Socrates to Aristotle his disciple, and Parrhasius the painter, concerning fitness, the first fundamental law in nature with regard to beauty. I am in some measure saved the trouble of collecting a historical account of these arts among the ancients, by accidentally meeting with a preface to a tract called the *Beau Ideal*: this treatise was written by Lambert Hermanson Ten Kate, in French, and translated into English by James Christopher Leblon, who in that preface says, speaking of the author:

His superior knowledge, that I am now publishing, is the product of the analogy of the ancient Greeks or the true key for finding all harmonious proportions in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, etc. brought home to Greece by Pythagoras. After this great philosopher travelled into Phoenicia, Egypt, and Chaldea, where he conversed with the learned, he returned to Greece around *Anno Mundi* 3484, before 52 °CE, and brought with him many excellent discoveries and improvements for the good of his countrymen, among which the analogy was one of the most considerable and useful.

After him, the Grecians, with the help of this analogy, began (and not before) to surpass other nations in sciences and arts; for whereas before this time they represented their Divinities in plain human figures, the Grecians now began to

enter into the Beau Ideal; and Pamphilus, (who flourished in AM 3641, before 363 CE, who taught that no man could excel in painting without mathematics) the scholar of Pausias and master of Apelles, was the first who artfully applied the said analogy to the art of painting; at about the same time as the sculptors, the architects, etc. began to apply it to their several arts, without which science the Grecians remained as ignorant as their forefathers. They carried on their improvements in drawing, painting, architecture, sculpture, etc. until they became the wonders of the world; especially after the Asians and Egyptians (who were formerly the teachers of the Grecians) had, in process of time and by the havoc of war, lost all the excellency in the sciences and arts. Due to this, all other nations were afterwards obliged to the Grecians without being able to so much as imitate them.

For when the Romans conquered Greece and Asia, and brought the best paintings and the finest artists to Rome, we don't find they discovered the great key of knowledge, the analogy I speak of now; but their best performances were conducted by Grecian artists, who it seems cared not to communicate their secret of the analogy because they either intended to be necessary in Rome by keeping the secret amongst themselves, or else the Romans, who principally affected universal dominion, were not curious enough to search after the secret, not knowing its importance, nor understanding that, without it, they could never attain the excellency of the Grecians. Nevertheless, it must be known that the Romans used well the proportions, which the Grecians long before had reduced to certain fixed rules according to their ancient analogy; and the Romans were able to successfully use the proportions without comprehending the analogy itself.



Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as **Raphael**, *Sistine Madonna*, 1512–1513. Oil on canvas, 269.5 × 201 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.



Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus or The Rokeby Venus*, c. 1647–1651. Oil on canvas, 122.5 × 177 cm. The National Gallery, London.



Diego Velázquez, *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback*, c. 1635. Oil on canvas, 211.5 × 177 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

This account agrees with what is constantly observed in Italy, where the Greek and Roman works, both in medals and statues, are as distinguishable as the characters of the two languages.

As the preface had thus been of service to me, I was in hopes from the title of the book (and the assurance of the translator, that the author had by his great learning discovered the secret of the ancients,) to have met with something there that might have assisted, or confirmed, the scheme I had in hand; but was much disappointed in finding nothing of the sort and no explanation, or even after-mention of what at first agreeably alarmed me, the word analogy. I have given the reader a specimen, in his own words, how far the author has discovered this grand secret of the ancients, or great key of knowledge, as the translator calls it:

The sublime part that I so greatly esteem, and of which I have begun to speak, is a real *Je ne sais quoi*, or an unaccountable something to most people, and it is the most important part to all the connoisseurs. I shall call it a harmonious propriety, which is a touching or moving unity, or a pathetic agreement or concord, not only of each member to its body, but also of each part to which the member belongs. It is also an infinite variety of parts; however conformable, with respect to each different subject so that all the attitude and all the adjustment of the draperies of each figure ought to answer or correspond to the subject chosen. Briefly, it is a true decorum, a bienséance or a congruent disposition of ideas, as much for the face and stature as for the attitudes. A bright genius, in my opinion, who aspires to excel in the ideal, should propose this to himself, such has been the principal study of the most famous artists. It is in this part that the great masters cannot be imitated or copied except by themselves, or by those that are advanced in the knowledge of the ideal, and who are as knowing as those masters in the rules or laws of the picturesque and poetical nature, although inferior to the masters in the high spirit of invention.



William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 2, The Tête a Tête*, c. 1743. Oil on canvas, 69.9 × 90.8 cm. The National Gallery, London.

The words in this quotation, “It is also an infinite variety of parts”, seem at first to have some meaning in them, but it is entirely destroyed by the rest of the paragraph, and all the other pages are filled, according to custom, with descriptions of pictures.

Now, as everyone has a right to conjecture what this discovery of the ancients might be, it will be my business to show it was a key to the thorough knowledge of variety both in form

and movement. Shakespeare, who had the deepest penetration into nature, has summed up all the charms of beauty in two words, 'infinite variety'; where, speaking of Cleopatra's power over Anthony, he says, "Nor custom stale / Her infinite variety" (Act 2, Scene 3). It has been ever observed that the ancients made their doctrines mysterious to the vulgar, and kept them secret from those who were not of their particular sects and societies by means of symbols and hieroglyphics. Lomazzo says: "The Grecians, in imitation of antiquity, searched out the truly renowned proportion wherein the exact perfection of most exquisite beauty and sweetness appeared; dedicating the fame in a triangular glass unto Venus the goddess of divine beauty, from whence all the beauty of inferior things is derived." (chap. 29, book. 1). If we suppose this passage to be authentic, may we not also imagine it probable that the symbol in the triangular glass might be similar to the line Michelangelo recommended? Thus especially, if it can be proved, that the triangular form of the glass and the serpentine line itself are the two most expressive figures that can be thought of to signify not only beauty and grace, but the whole order of form.

There is a circumstance in the account Pliny gives of Apelles' visit to Protogenes, which strengthens this supposition. I hope I may have leave to repeat the story. Apelles, having heard of the fame of Protogenes, went to Rhodes to pay him a visit. However, upon not finding him at home, Apelles asked for a board on which he drew a line, thus telling the maid servant that the line would signify to her master who had been to see him. We are not clearly told what sort of a line it was that could so particularly signify one of the first of his profession: if it was only a stroke (though as fine as a hair, as Pliny seems to think) it could not possibly, by any means, denote the abilities of a great painter. However, if we suppose it to be a line of some extraordinary quality, such as the serpentine line will appear to be, Apelles could not have left a more satisfactory signature of the compliment he had paid him. Protogenes, upon coming home, took the hint and drew a finer or rather more expressive line within it, to show Apelles, if he came again, that he understood his meaning. Apelles, soon returning, was well pleased with the answer Protogenes had left for him, by which he was convinced that fame had done him justice, and so correcting the line again, perhaps, by making it more precisely elegant, he took his leave. The story thus may be reconciled to common sense, which, as it has been generally received could never be understood but as a ridiculous tale.

Let us add to this that there is scarce an Egyptian, Greek, or Roman deity that does not have a twisted serpent, cornucopia, or some other symbol winding in this manner to accompany it. The two small heads over the bust of the Hercules, of the goddess Isis, one crowned with a globe between two horns, the other with a lily, are of this kind. Harpocrates, the god of silence, is still more remarkably so, having a large twisted horn growing out of the side of his head, a cornucopia in his hand, and another at his feet, with his finger placed on his lips indicating secrecy. It is equally remarkable that the deities of barbarous and gothic nations never had, even to this day, any of these elegant forms of their own.



Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1526–1530. Fresco, 1093 cm × 1195 cm. Parma Cathedral, Parma.



Antonio Allegri, known as **Correggio**, *Saint John's Vision in Patmos*, c. 1520–1522. Fresco, 969 cm × 889 cm. San Giovanni Evangelista, Parma.



Jean-Marc Nattier, *Marie Leszcinska, Queen of France*, 1748. Oil on canvas, 139 × 107.1 cm. Musée national du château de Versailles, Versailles.

How absolutely void of these turns are the pagodas of China, and what a mean taste runs through most of their attempts at painting and sculpture, despite finishing with such excessive neatness! The whole nation in these matters seems to have but one eye; this mischief naturally follows from the prejudices they imbibe by copying one another's works, which the ancients seem seldom to have done.

Upon the whole, it is evident that the ancients studied these arts very differently from the moderns. Lomazzo seems to be partly aware of this based on the division of his work: "There is a two-fold proceeding in all arts and sciences: the one is called the order of nature, and the other of teaching. Nature proceeds ordinarily, beginning with the imperfect, as the particulars, and ending with the perfect, as the universals. Now, if in searching out the nature of things, our understanding shall proceed after that order, by which they are brought forth by nature, undoubtedly, it will be the most absolute and ready method that can be imagined. For we begin to know things by their first and immediate principles, etc. and this is not only my opinion, but Aristotle's also;" yet, mistaking Aristotle's meaning and clearly deviating from his advice, he afterwards says, "all which if we could comprehend within our understanding, we should be most wise; however, it is impossible and after giving some dark reasons as to why he thinks so, he tells you he resolves to follow the order of teaching," which all the writers on painting have done in a similar manner since.

Had I observed the foregoing passage, before I undertook this essay, it probably would have put me to a stand and deterred me from venturing upon what Lomazzo calls an impossible task. However, upon observing in the aforementioned controversies that the torrent generally ran against me and that several of my opponents had turned my arguments into ridicule (yet were availing themselves daily of their use and venting them even to my face as their own), I began with the publication of something on this subject and accordingly applied myself to several of my friends, whom I thought capable of taking up the pen for me, offering to furnish them with materials by word of mouth. After finding this method impracticable, from the difficulty of one man's expressing the ideas of another especially on a subject which he was either unacquainted with, or was new in its kind, I was therefore reduced to an attempt of finding such words as would best answer my own ideas, being now too far engaged to drop the design. Hereupon, having digested the matter as well as I could and thrown it into the form of a book, I submitted it to the judgement of such friends whose sincerity and abilities I could best rely on, determining on their approbation or dislike to publish or destroy it. Their favourable opinion of the manuscript eventually becoming publicly known, it gave such a credit to the undertaking, thus soon changing the countenances of those who had a better opinion of my pencil than my pen, and turned their sneers into expectation especially when the same friends had kindly made me an offer of conducting the work through the press. Here I must acknowledge myself particularly indebted to one gentleman for his corrections and amendment of at least a third part of the wording. Through his absence and avocations, several meets went to the press without any assistance while the rest had the occasional inspection of one or two other friends. If any inaccuracies are to be found in the writing, I will readily acknowledge them all as my own, and am, I confess, under no great concern about them, provided the matter in general may be found useful and answerable in the application of it to truth and nature in which material points, if the reader thinks it fit to rectify any mistakes, it will give me a sensible pleasure and do great honour to the work.



Giovanni Antonio Canal, known as **Canaletto**, *The Canale di Santa Chiara looking north towards the Lagoon*, c. 1723–1724. Oil on canvas, 46.7 × 77.9 cm. The Royal Collection, London.

I now offer to the public a short essay in which I will endeavour to show what the principles are in nature by which we are directed to call the forms of some bodies beautiful, others ugly; some graceful, and others the reverse; by considering more minutely than has been done until now the nature of those lines and their different combinations, which serve to raise the ideas of all the variety of forms imaginable in the mind. At first, perhaps, the whole design, as well as the prints, may seem rather intended to trifle and confound, than to entertain and inform; however, I am persuaded that when the examples in nature, referred to in this essay, are duly considered and examined upon the principles laid down in it, it will be thought worthy of careful and attentive perusal. The prints themselves, too, will, I make no doubt, be examined as attentively, when it is found that almost every figure in them (how oddly so ever they may seem to be grouped together) is referred to singly in the essay, in order to assist the reader's imagination when the original examples in art or nature are not themselves before him.

It may be unnecessary to observe that some of the aforementioned are not only the dependents on, but often the only instructors and leaders of the former. In what light, however, they are so considered abroad, may be partly seen by a burlesque representation of them, taken from a print published by Mr Pond and designed by Cav. Ghezzi in Rome. To those, then, whose judgements are unprejudiced, this little work is submitted with most pleasure, because it is from such that I have hitherto received the most obligations and now have reason to express the most candour.

Therefore I would that my readers be assured, that however they may have been awed and over-born by pompous terms of art, hard names, and the parade of seemingly magnificent collections of pictures and statues, they are in a much fairer way, ladies, as well as gentlemen, of gaining a perfect knowledge of the elegant and beautiful in artificial, as well as natural forms, by considering them in a systematic, but at the same time and familiar way as those who have been prepossessed by dogmatic rules taken from the performances of art only. Nay, I will venture to say, sooner, and more rationally, than even a tolerable painter, who has imbibed the same prejudices.

The more prevailing the notion may be, that painters and connoisseurs are the only competent judges of things of this sort; the more it becomes necessary to clear up and confirm, as much as possible, what has only been asserted in the foregoing paragraph: that no-one may be deterred, by

the want of such previous knowledge, from entering into this inquiry. The reason why gentlemen, who have been inquisitive after knowledge in pictures, are less qualified for our purpose than others, is because their thoughts have been entirely and continually employed and encumbered with considering and retaining the various manners in which pictures are painted, the histories, names, and characters of the masters, together with many other little circumstances belonging to the mechanical part of the art. Little or no time has been allotted for perfecting the ideas they ought to have in their minds, of the objects themselves in nature, for by having thus espoused and adopted their first notions from nothing but imitations, and becoming too often as bigoted to their faults as their beauties, they at length, in a manner, totally neglect, or at least disregard, the works of nature merely because they do not tally with that which their minds are already so strongly prepossessed.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1808. Oil on canvas, 189 × 144 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People (28th July 1830)*, 1830. Oil on canvas, 260 × 325 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Saint-Bernard Pass*, 1800. Oil on canvas, 260 × 221 cm. Musée national du château de Malmaison, Rueil-Malmaison.

Were not this a true state of the case, many a reputed capital picture that adorn the cabinets of the curious in all countries would long ago have been committed to the flames. This considered, nor would it have been possible for the Venus and Cupid to have made its way into the principal apartment of a palace.

It is also evident that the painter's eye may not be a bit better fitted to receive these new impressions, as he is in like manner too captivated with the works of art for he also is apt to pursue the shadow and drop the substance. This mistake happens chiefly to those who go to Rome to complete their studies; as they naturally will, without the utmost care, take the infectious turn of the connoisseur instead of the painter, and in proportion as they turn by those means bad proficient in their own arts, they become more considerable in that of a connoisseur. As a confirmation of this

apparent paradox, it has been observed at all auctions of pictures that the very worst painters fit as the most profound judges and are trusted only, I suppose, on account of their disinterest.

I apprehend a good deal of this will look more like resentment and a design to invalidate the objections of such as are not likely to set the faults of this work in the most favourable light; than merely for the encouragement, as was said above, of such of my readers, as are neither painters nor connoisseurs and I will be ingenuous enough to confess something of this may be true. However, at the same time, I cannot allow that this alone would have been a sufficient motive to have made me risk giving offence to any, unless another consideration, besides that already alleged, of more consequence to the purpose in hand made it necessary. I mean setting forth, in the strongest colours, the surprising alterations objects seemingly undergo through the prepossessions and prejudices contracted by the mind; fallacies strongly to be guarded against by those who would learn to see objects truly! Although the instances already given are pretty flagrant, though certainly true (as a further confirmation of this and for the consolation of those who may be a little piqued at what has been said), that painters of every condition are stronger instances of the almost unavoidable power of prejudice than any other people.

What are all the manners, as they are called, of even the greatest masters which are known to differ so much from one another, and all of them from nature, but so many strong proofs of their inviolable attachment to falsehood, converted into established truth in their own eyes by self-opinion? Rubens would, in all probability, have been as much disgusted at the dry manner of Poussin, as Poussin was at the extravagance of Rubens. The prejudices of inferior proficient in favour of the imperfections of their own performances are still more amazing. Their eyes are so quick in discerning the faults of others, while at the same time they are so totally blind to their own! Indeed it would be well for us all if one of Gulliver's flappers could be placed at our elbows to remind us at every stroke how much prejudice and self-opinion perverts our sight.



Claude Monet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*), 1866. Oil on canvas, 130 × 181 cm. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

From what has been said, I hope it appears that those who have no bias of any kind, either from their own practice or the lessons of others, are fittest to examine the truth of the principles laid down in the following pages. However, as everyone may not have had an opportunity of being sufficiently acquainted with the influences that were given, I will offer one of a familiar kind, which may be a hint for their observing a thousand more. How gradually does the eye grow reconciled even to a disagreeable dress as it becomes more and more the fashion, and how quickly to return to the dislike of it once it is left off and a new one has taken possession of the mind? So vague is taste when it has no solid principles for its foundation. Notwithstanding, I have told you my design of considering minutely the variety of lines which serve to raise the ideas of bodies in the mind and are undoubtedly to be considered as drawn on the surfaces only of solid or opaque bodies. However, the endeavouring to conceive as accurate an idea as is possible of the inside of those surfaces, if I may be allowed the expression, will be a great assistance to us in the pursuit of our present inquiry. In order for me to be well understood, let every object under our consideration be imagined to have its inward contents scooped out so nicely as to have nothing of it left but a thin shell; exactly corresponding, both in its inner and outer surface, to the shape of the object itself. And let us likewise suppose this thin shell to be made up of very fine threads, closely connected together, and equally perceptible, whether the eye is supposed to observe them from without, or within; and we shall find the ideas of the two surfaces of this shell will naturally coincide. The very word, shell, makes us seem to see both surfaces alike.

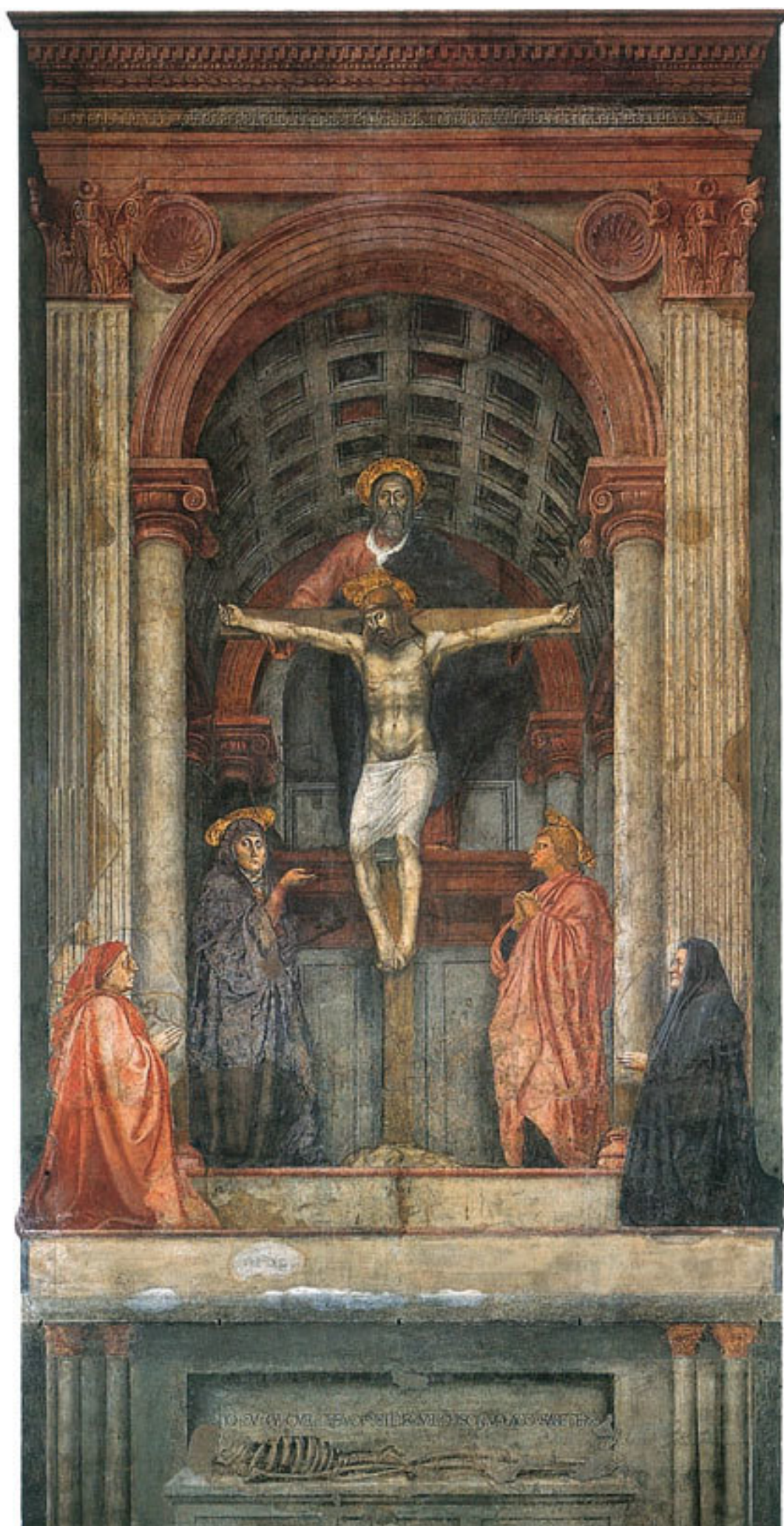
Another advantage of considering objects thus merely as shells composed of lines is that by these means we obtain the true and full idea of what is called the outlines of a figure, which has been confined within limits which are too narrow, by taking it only from drawings on paper. Such as in the example of the sphere given above, every one of the imaginary circular threads has a right to be considered as an outline of the sphere, as well as those which divide the half that is seen, from that which is not seen; and if the eye is supposed to move regularly round it, each of these threads will succeed as equally as any another in the office of outlines in the narrow and limited sense of the word – and the instant any one of these threads, during this motion of the eye, comes into sight on one side, its opposite thread is lost and disappears on the other. He who will thus go to the trouble of acquiring perfect ideas of the distances, bearings, and oppositions of several material points and lines in the surfaces of even the most irregular figures will gradually arrive at the knack of recalling them into his mind when the objects themselves are not before him, and they will be as strong and perfect as those of the most plain and regular forms, such as cubes and spheres. They will be of infinite service to those who invent and draw from fancy, as well as enable those who draw from the life to be more correct. In this manner, therefore, I would request the reader to assist his imagination as much as possible, in considering every object, as if his eye were placed within it. As straight lines are easily conceived, the difficulty of following this method in the most simple and regular forms will be less than that which may first be imagined; and its use in the more compounded figure will be greater.

But now it is time to be finished with the introduction and I shall proceed to consider the fundamental principles, which are generally allowed to give elegance and beauty, when duly blended together, to compositions of all and varying kinds. I will also point out to my readers, the particular force of each, in those compositions in nature and art, which seem to most please and entertain the eye, and give said grace and beauty, which is the subject of this inquiry. The principles I mean are fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity – all of which cooperate in the production of beauty, occasionally mutually correcting and restraining one another.



Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol – Madame Monet and Her Son*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

General Rules of Composition



Tommaso Casai, known as **Masaccio**, *The Holy Trinity*, c. 1428. Fresco, 667 × 317 cm. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Of Fitness

Fitness of the parts of the design for which every individual thing is formed, either by art or nature, is first to be considered, as it is of the greatest consequence to the beauty of the whole. This is so evident that even the sense of seeing the great inlet of beauty is itself so strongly biased by it, that if the mind, on account of this kind of value in a form, esteems it beautiful, though on all other considerations it be not so, the eye grows insensible of its want of beauty, and even begins to be pleased, especially after it has had a considerable amount of time to become acquainted with it.

It is well known, on the other hand, that forms of great elegance often disgust the eye by being improperly applied. Thus, twisted columns are undoubtedly ornamental; but as they convey an idea of weakness, they always displease when they are improperly used as supports to anything that is bulky or appears heavy.

The bulks and proportions of objects are governed by fitness and propriety. It is this that has established the size and proportion of chairs, tables, and all sorts of utensils and furniture. It is this that has fixed the dimensions of pillars, arches, etc. for the support of great weight, and so regulated all the orders in architecture, as well as the sizes of windows and doors, etc.

Thus, regardless of the size of a building, the steps of the stairs, the seats in the windows, all must be continued of their usual heights or they would lose their beauty with their fitness. For example, in ship-building the dimensions of every part are confined and regulated by fitness for sailing. When a vessel sails well, the sailors always call her a beauty. The two ideas have such a connection!

The general dimensions of the parts of the human body are adapted thus to the uses for which they are designed. The trunk is the most capacious, on account of the quantity of its contents, and the thigh is larger than the lower leg, because it has both the lower leg and foot to move, while the lower leg has only the foot, etc.

Fitness of parts also constitutes and distinguishes, in great measure, the characteristics of objects; as, for example, the race-horse differs as much in quality, character, and its figure from the war-horse, like the *Hercules* from the *Mercury*.

The race-horse, having all its parts of such dimensions as best fit the purposes of speed, acquires, on that account, a consistent character of one sort of beauty. To illustrate this, suppose the beautiful head and gracefully-turned neck of the war-horse were placed on the shoulders of the race-horse, instead of his own awkward straight one. It would disgust and deform rather than add beauty because the judgement would condemn it as unfit.

The *Hercules* by Glicon has all its parts finely fitted for the purposes of the utmost strength, the texture of the human form will bear. The back, breast, and shoulders have huge bones and muscles adequate to the supposed active strength of its upper parts; but as less strength was required for the lower parts, the judicious sculptor, contrary to all modern rule of enlarging every part in proportion, lessened the size of the muscles gradually down towards the feet. For the same reason, Glicon made the neck larger in circumference than any part of the head, otherwise the figure would have been burdened with an unnecessary weight, which would have been a drawback from his strength, and in consequence of that, from its characteristic beauty.

These seeming faults, which show the superior anatomical knowledge, as well as judgement of the ancients, are not to be found in its leaden imitations near London's Hyde Park. These saturnine geniuses imagined they knew how to correct such apparent disproportions.

These few examples may be sufficient to give an idea of what I mean, and would have understood, by the beauty of fitness, or propriety.

Of Variety

How great a share variety has in producing beauty may be seen in the ornamental part of nature. The shapes and colours of plants, flowers, leaves, the paintings in butterflies' wings, shells, etc. seem to be of little other intended use than that of entertaining the eye with the pleasure of variety.

All the senses delight in it and are equally averse to sameness. The ear is as much offended with one even continued note, as the eye is with being fixed to a point, or to the view of an empty wall. Yet when the eye is glutted with a succession of variety, it finds relief in a certain degree of sameness, and even plain space becomes agreeable when properly introduced and contrasted with variety, thus adding to it even more variety.

I mean here, and everywhere indeed, a composed variety; for variety uncomposed and without design is confusion and deformity.

Observe that a gradual lessening is a kind of varying that provides beauty. The pyramid diminishing from its basis to its point, and the scroll or volute, gradually lessening to its centre, are beautiful forms. So, also, objects that only seem to do so, though in fact they do not, have equal beauty, and thus perspective views, those of buildings are always particularly, pleasing to the eye.



Giotto Di Bondone (attributed to), *The Expulsion of the Demons from Arezzo*, 1297–1299. Fresco, 270 × 230 cm. Upper Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi.



School of Piero della Francesca (Luciano Laurana or Giuliano da Sangallo?), *Ideal City*, c. 1470. Oil on wood panel, 60 × 200 cm. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.



Andrea Mantegna, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c. 1490. Tempera on canvas, 68 × 81 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

Of Uniformity, Regularity or Symmetry

It may be imagined that the greatest part of the effects of beauty results from the symmetry of the beautiful parts in the object, but I am very well persuaded that this prevailing notion will soon appear to have little or no foundation.

It may indeed have properties of greater consequence, such as propriety, fitness, and use; and yet but hardly serve the purposes of pleasing the eye, merely on the score of beauty.

We have, indeed, in our nature, a love of imitation from infancy, and the eye is often entertained, as well as surprised, with mimicry, and delighted with the exactness of counterparts. However, this always gives way to the superior love of variety, and soon grows tiresome.

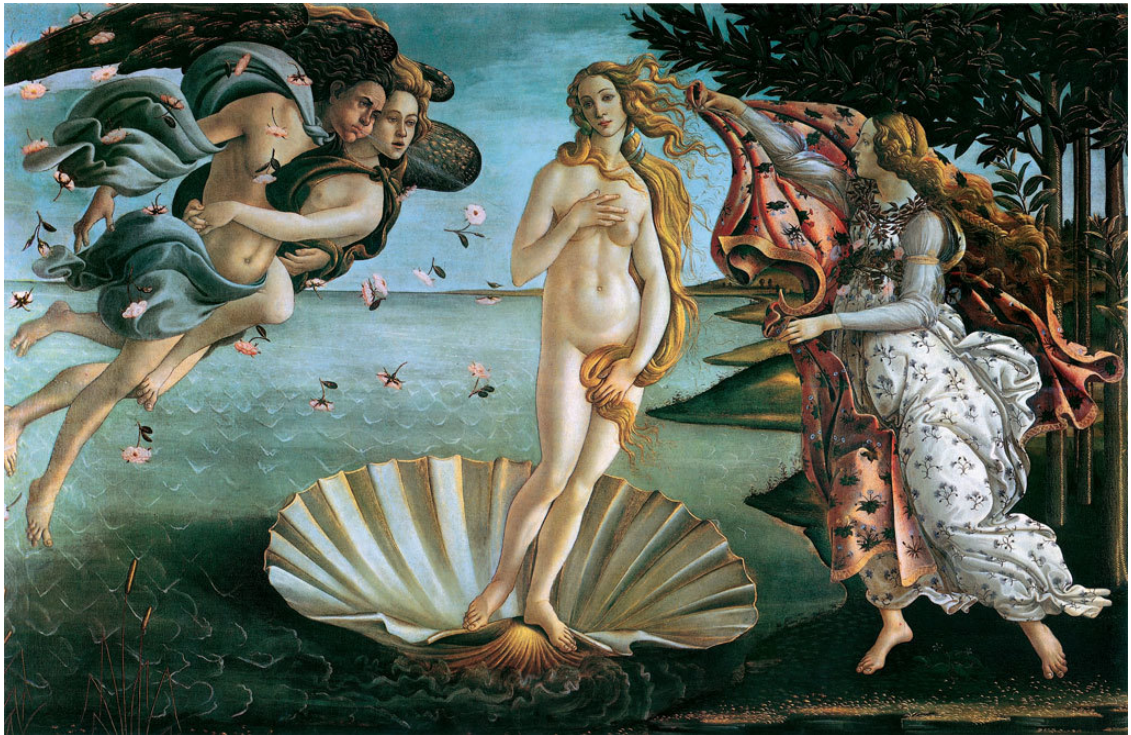
If the uniformity of figures, parts, or lines were truly the chief cause of beauty, the more uniformly their appearances were kept, the more pleasure the eye would receive; but this is so far from being the case that when the mind has been satisfied once all of the parts are similar to one another with so exact a uniformity, so as to preserve to the whole the character of fitness to stand, to move, to sink, to swim, to fly, etc. without losing the balance, the eye is rejoiced to see the object turned and shifted so as to vary these uniform appearances. Thus the profile of most objects, including faces, is rather more pleasing than their full fronts.

Whence it is clear, the pleasure does not arise from seeing the exact resemblance which one side bears the other, but from the knowledge that they do so on account of fitness, with design, and for use. For when the head of a beautiful woman is turned a little to one side, which takes away from the exact similarity of the two halves of the face, and is somewhat reclining, so varying still more from the straight and parallel lines of a formal front face, it is always looked upon as most pleasing angle of her face. This is accordingly said to be a graceful air of the head.

It is a constant rule in composition in painting to avoid regularity. When we view a building or any other object in reality, we have it in our power, by shifting the ground, to take that view of it which pleases us best. In consequence of this, the painter, if he is left to his own choice, takes the subject on an angle, rather than focusing on its front, as is most agreeable to the eye. The regularity of the lines is taken away by their running into perspective, without losing the idea of fitness. When the artist is obliged to give the front of a building, with all its equalities and parallelisms, he generally breaks, as it is termed, such disagreeable appearances, by throwing a tree before it, or the shadow of an imaginary cloud, or some other object that may answer the same purpose of adding variety, which is the same as taking away uniformity.

If uniform objects were agreeable, why is there such care taken to contrast and vary all the limbs of a statue? In short, whatever appears to be fit and proper to answer great purposes, greatly satisfies the mind and pleases on that account. Uniformity is of this kind. We find it necessary, to some degree, to give the idea of rest and motion without the possibility of falling. But when any such purposes can be as well-effected by more irregular parts, the eye is always better pleased on the account of variety.

How pleasing is the idea of firmness in standing conveyed to the eye by the three elegant claws of a table, the three feet of a tea-lamp, or the celebrated tripod of the ancients! Thus you see regularity, uniformity, and symmetry please only as they serve to give the idea of fitness.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484–1485. Tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Of Simplicity, or Distinctness

Simplicity, without variety is wholly insipid and, at best, does only not displease; but when variety is joined to it, then it pleases, because it enhances the pleasure of variety, by giving the eye the power of enjoying it with ease.

There is no object composed of straight lines which offers very much variety having so few parts. Take a pyramid, for example; it is constantly varying from its base gradually upwards in every angle of the eye, never giving the idea of sameness as the eye moves round it. This fact has allowed it to continue to be esteemed throughout all ages in preference to the cone, which from all views appears nearly the same, being varied only by light and shade.

Steeple, monuments, and most compositions in painting and sculpture are kept within the form of the cone or pyramid as the most eligible boundary on account of their simplicity and variety. For the same reason, equestrian statues are more pleasing than single figures.

The artists – for there were three involved in the work – of as fine a group of figures in sculpture as was ever made, by either ancients or moderns alike, *Laocoön and his Sons*, willingly chose to commit the guilty and absurd crime of making the sons half the father's size, even though they have every other mark of manhood, rather than not bring their composition within the boundary of a pyramid. Thus, if a judicious workman were employed to make a case of wood, to preserve it from weather damage or for the convenience of carriage, his eye would soon find that the whole composition would readily fit and be easily packed up in one pyramidal form.

Steeple and the like have generally been varied from the cone, to distract from their too great simplicity. Additionally, instead of their usual circular bases, polygons of different, but even numbers of sides, have been substituted, I suppose, for the sake of uniformity. These forms, however, may be said to have been chosen by the architect with a view to the cone, as the whole compositions might be bounded by it.

Yet, in my mind, odd numbers have the advantage over the even ones, as variety is more pleasing than uniformity, where the same end is answered by both. As in this case, where both polygons may be circumscribed by the same circle, or, in other words, both compositions bounded by the same cone.

And I cannot help observing that nature, in all her works of fancy, if I may be allowed the expression, where it seems immaterial whether even or odd numbers of divisions were preferred, most frequently employs the odd, as, for example, in the indenting of leaves, flowers, blossoms, etc.

The oval also, on account of its variety with simplicity, is as much to be preferred to the circle as the triangle to the square, or the pyramid to the cube. This figure lessened at one end, like the egg, thereby being more varied, is singled out by the author of all variety to bound the features of a beautiful face.



Tiziano Vecellio, known as **Titian**, *Flora*, 1515–1517. Oil on canvas, 79.7 × 63.5 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Diego Velázquez, *The Surrender of Breda (Las Lanzas)*, 1635. Oil on canvas, 307 × 367 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Tiziano Vecellio, known as **Titian**, *Portrait of Gerolamo (?) Barbarigo*, c. 1509. Oil on canvas, 81.2 × 66.3 cm. The National Gallery, London.

When the oval has a little more of the cone added to it than the egg, it becomes more distinctly a compound of those two most simple and varied figures. Take, for example, the shape of the pineapple, which nature has particularly distinguished by bestowing rich Mosaic-like ornaments upon it, composed of contrasted serpentine lines and the pips, as the gardeners call them, which are still varied by two cavities and one round eminence in each.

Could a more elegant and simple form than this have been found, it is probable that the judicious architect, Sir Christopher Wren, would not have chosen pineapples for the two terminations of the sides of the front of St Paul's. Furthermore, perhaps the globe and cross, though

a finely varied figure, which terminates the dome, would not have had the preference of situation if a religious motive had not been the occasion.

Thus we see simplicity gives beauty even to variety, as it makes it more easily understood. It should be ever studied in all works of art, as it serves to prevent perplexity in forms of elegance.

Of Intricacy

The active mind is ever bent to be employed. Pursuing is the business of our lives, and even abstracted from any other view, gives pleasure. Every arising difficulty, that for a while attends and interrupts the pursuit, gives a sort of spring to the mind, enhances the pleasure and turns what would otherwise be toil and labour into sport and recreation.

Wherein would consist the joys of hunting, shooting, fishing, and many other favourite diversions, without the frequent turns, difficulties, and disappointments that are daily met with in the pursuit? How joyless does the sportsman return when the hare has not had fair play! How lively and in high spirits he is, even when an old cunning one has baffled and out-run the dogs!

This love of pursuit, merely as pursuit, is implanted in our nature and designed, no doubt, for necessary and useful purposes. Animals evidently have it by instinct. The hound dislikes the game he so eagerly pursues and even cats will risk losing their prey for the opportunity to chase it over again. It is a pleasing labour of the mind to solve the most difficult problems; allegories and riddles, trifling as they are, afford the mind amusement. With what delight follows the well-connected thread of a play or novel which ever increases as the plot thickens and ends, most pleasingly, when said plot is most distinctly unravelled!

The eye has this sort of enjoyment in winding walks, serpentine rivers, and all sorts of objects whose forms are composed principally of what I call the waving and serpentine lines.

Intricacy in form, therefore, I shall define to be that peculiarity in the lines which compose it, which leads the eye on a wanton kind of chase, and from the pleasure given to the mind, entitling it to be called beautiful. It may be justly said that the cause of the idea of grace more immediately resides in this particular principle than in any of the other five, with the exception of variety, which indeed includes this and all the others.



Tiziano Vecellio, known as **Titian**, *The Three Ages of Man*, c. 1512–1514. Oil on canvas, 90 × 150.7 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

That this observation may appear to have a real foundation in nature, every assistance will be required, which the reader himself can call to his aid in addition to what will here be suggested to him.

To set this matter in a somewhat clearer light, the familiar instance of a common jack with a circular fly may serve our purpose better than a more elegant form.

Now as we read, a ray may be imagined to be drawn from the centre of the eye to the letter it looks at first and to move successively with it from letter to letter, the whole length of the line. However, if the eye stops at any particular letter A, to observe it more than the rest, these other letters will grow more and more imperfect to the sight, the further they are situated on either side of A, as is expressed in the figure. When we endeavour to see all the letters in a line equally perfect at one view, as it were, this imaginary ray must course it to and fro with great celerity. Thus, though the eye, strictly speaking, can only pay due attention to these letters in succession, there is an amazing ease and swiftness with which it performs this task, enabling us to see considerable spaces with sufficient satisfaction at one sudden view.

Hence, we shall always suppose some such principal ray moving along with the eye, and tracing out the parts of every form we mean to examine in the most perfect manner. And if we follow the course anybody in motion takes with exactness, this ray is always meant to move with the body.

That it is accounted so, when it is at rest, appears by the ribbon, twisted round a stick, represented on one side of this figure, which has been a long established ornament in the carvings of frames, chimney-pieces, and door cases. The carvers called the stick and ribbon an ornament, and when the stick through the middle is omitted it is called the ribbon edge. Both can be seen in almost every house of fashion.

But the pleasure it gives the eye is even livelier when in motion. I can never forget the frequent and strong attention I paid to it when I was very young, and that its beguiling movement gave me the same kind of sensation that I have since felt at seeing a country-dance. It is probable, though, that perhaps the latter might be somewhat more engaging, particularly when my eye eagerly pursued a favourite dancer, through all the windings of the figure, who at the time was as bewitching to the sight as the imaginary ray we were speaking of, dancing with her all the time.

This single example might be sufficient to explain what I mean by the beauty of a composed intricacy of form and how it may be said with propriety to lead the eye on a kind of chase.

But the hair of the head is another very obvious example, which, being designed chiefly as an ornament, proves more or less so according to the form it naturally takes or is put into by art. The most amiable in itself is the flowing curl. The many waving and contrasted turns of naturally intermingling locks ravish the eye with the pleasure of the pursuit, especially when they are put in motion by a gentle breeze. The poet knows it, as well as the painter, and both have described the wanton ringlets waving in the wind.



Anton Raphael Mengs, *Portrait of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (?)*, 1774. Oil on wood, 67 × 53 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

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