**Painting, Aesthetics of**

**Abstract**

‘Painting’ names both a practice and its products. Both practice and product can, but need not, be art. When painting is art, in what does its artistic interest lie? This is the question an aesthetics of painting seeks to answer. While that answer might be sought in features found in other arts, here we investigate whether painting is of distinctive interest, containing phenomena of artistic value not to be found in most, or perhaps any, other art forms.

As an art, the practice of painting forms a tradition, one finding its origin outside art, in the practice of making representational pictures by hand, in any of a wide range of media. To see if painting is distinctively interesting as art, we should begin with the distinguishing features of the mundane practice from which it emerges. One such feature is that the space within pictures shares the structure of space as we encounter it in vision. Perhaps this is what makes pictures distinctively visual representations, and what makes painting a visual art. And perhaps one source of painting’s interest, as art, is that it articulates visual phenomena for us: either the structure of seen space, or other aspects of our visual lives. A second feature of ordinary pictures is that, while they divide into meaningful parts, those parts mean what they do only because of the particular whole in which they figure: there is nothing like a vocabulary for picturing. The maker of handmade pictures must therefore each time make meaning anew, from the ground up. Carried over to art, this gives the painter an unusually broad domain in which to exercise technique and in which to manifest her individual style. In these respects she contrasts both with the literary artist, forced to begin from the conventionally fixed meanings of the dictionary; and with the photographer, whose technique and style are exercised solving problems a whole picture at a time. A third feature of representational pictures is that they exhibit duality: between vehicle and content, the marks and what is visible in them, syntax and semantics. While parallel dualities characterize all representational arts, another relatively distinctive feature of pictures is that both sides of this duality are grasped visually. This creates opportunities for interplay between the two facets of a particularly intimate kind, opportunities that the history of painting has explored in depth. Even so, perhaps the heart of an aesthetics of painting requires us to understand how this duality, though present in thought, is somehow transcended in experience. At least, that is the direction in which we are pushed by some of the most striking and fundamental pictorial effects: for instance, the beauty of a painted hand, or the horror of a depicted bombing.

Painting may begin in representational picturing, but it ends in abstraction. To accommodate abstract painting in our aesthetics, two strategies are available. One is to note that much abstract painting, though not figurative, nonetheless involves pictorial space; depictive content (albeit relatively thin in form); and duality between the marks and what is visible in them. To such painting the ideas above apply without strain. Some painting, however, eschews representation too thoroughly to permit handling this way. Those works count as painting at all only because they call into question the most basic assumptions around which the tradition of painting has been built. By omission, isolation or exaggeration, they thematize fundamental features of previous painting. There are limits to how far such critique can go, and this is one source of the not infrequent proclamations of the death of painting. However, painting’s death should be distinguished from its end, its ceasing to be from its ceasing to develop. Proclamations of either can easily be premature. And, whatever the future holds, painting’s past will remain, as will the need to reflect on its achievements, not just with the specificity appropriate to art criticism, but with the generality only philosophy can provide.

**1 Introduction**

An aesthetics of painting is an account of what, in the most general terms, painting offers us, considered as art. What artistic values does painting display, what phenomena of artistic interest can it contain? Much of the answer lies in features also found in other arts: representation, expression, allusion, narrative, emotional power, imaginative reach, the interplay of form and content, technical achievement, individual artistic style, and so on. This might tempt us to view developing an aesthetics of painting as little more than identifying within that art values offered by art more generally. What follows takes a different approach. Perhaps some of what painting offers us, other arts do not. Perhaps even those values that are found elsewhere are realized in painting in distinctive form. Indeed, it may be that the more general the perspective under which we consider a feature, the harder it is to explain its value. What, for instance, can be said about the value of representation *per se*, representation construed so broadly as to be common to painting, cinema, sculpture, theatre and the novel? (Though see Aristotle 2013: §4.)

Let us first clarify our terms and introduce some key notions. The term ‘painting’, like that for many arts, names both a practice and its products. (Compare ‘dance’, ‘sculpture’, ‘architecture’, ‘poetry’, ‘music’.) Again, like some of those other terms, ‘painting’ refers equally to practices and products that are art, and to practices and products that are not. Toddlers and hobbyists practice painting, as did Velasquez; and paintings are what they produce, no less than did Picasso in his pomp. To investigate what, if anything, is distinctive about the aesthetics of painting as an art, we should first consider its relations to the mundane practice from which it takes its name. But to do that, we need first to say a little more about what an art form involves.

Every art form constitutes what we might call a *tradition*, a reflective activity with a history in which various themes become salient and recede, and in which later interventions are made, more or less consciously, in light of earlier ones. Those later interventions might stand in various relations to their precursors. They might, for instance, seek to learn from them, to reject them, to render them irrelevant to the overall arc of the tradition’s development, to cast them in a new light or otherwise to comment upon them. They might also be made with an eye on the practice’s future; though of course their relations to future works can only be a matter of aspiration, and those aspirations will usually be relatively unspecific. In sum, a tradition is like a conversation, a temporally extended set of developments in which past interventions do not merely precede current ones, but have to be grasped by anyone seeking a full understanding of what is currently being ‘said’.

What place is there in all this for the humbler practices from which some art forms take their names? Those non-art practices provide the resources from which an artistic tradition begins. The art form is the mundane practice elevated to a new level by being imbued with new ambitions and/or self-awareness (Wollheim 1987: ch.1; Nöe 2023). Those quotidian practices are, as it were, the pre-conversational interactions from which the conversation emerges. If a given art form is to exhibit distinctive artistic values, perhaps they can be revealed by examining features of the non-art practice out of which the art form grows. This, at any rate, is the strategy adopted below (§§2-3). But what exactly is the practice out of which the art of painting develops?

When ‘painting’ is used as the name of something other than art, it can mean simply the practice of colouring a surface by laying a film onto it (consider whitewashing a fence). But painting is a representational art. (Section 5 considers how to reconcile this with the fact that some paintings do not represent.) It is the elevation, not of mere colouring of a surface, but of marking it in such a way as to make something visible in it: painting *a picture*. Note this allows for any of a wide range of materials: as used here, ‘painting’ covers not only art practices that commonly bear that name, but also drawing and some kinds of printmaking. Note also that the marking in question has to be by hand: the photographer makes pictures, but she does not *paint* (or draw) them. Our investigation can usefully start, then, by considering some features of ‘paintings’ in the mundane sense, handmade representational pictures that are not art.

**2 Painting and vision**

We may begin with the familiar thought that painting is a visualart—perhaps the visual art *par excellence*. Its being so may be traced to a corresponding feature in the mundane practice that painting, as an art, elevates: pictures, be they art or not, are visual representations. But what does this visual character amount to? We engage with pictures by seeing them, but that is true of some other representations that are not especially visual, such as written descriptions. Of course, the description could also be read out, as the painting cannot be, but does the visual nature of painting really reduce to the fact that to understand paintings we have to see them?

One way to explicate pictures’ visual character appeals to the structure of the space they represent. Pictures represent things from a point: implicit in every picture is a point in relation to which everything it represents is shown. (We can think of this as the position in the depicted world the artist would have occupied, had the scene been drawn from life.) Locations in depicted space are first and foremost identified by their direction and distance from that point. Some are nearer, some farther away; some higher, some lower, to the right, or to the left; some lie behind others, so that depicting an object in the nearer location obscures those farther away. The apex of this system of spatial relations is not itself depicted. The picture shows everything it depicts as related to this point, but not the point itself. Perhaps some pictures contain more than one such point, and, whatever the number, the location of such points can be relatively indeterminate: the cruder the depiction of the spatial character of the represented scene, the less determinate the fulcrum around which that space turns. But in all these respects (bar the possibility of multiple points of view), pictorial space matches the space of ordinary vision. We see the objects around us as spatially related, by direction and distance, from the point from which we view them, a point itself merely implicit in the scene we see. That is why it is natural to call the fulcrum of pictorial space the picture’s *point of view*. One way in which pictures are visual representations is that the structure within which they represent things matches that of vision (Hopkins 2004).

If this is what makes pictures visual, perhaps what makes painting a visual art is that it does something with this visual character. That, at least, is [Susanne Langer](https://www-rep-routledge-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/articles/biographical/langer-susanne-katherina-knauth-1895-1985/v-1)’s proposal (Langer 1953: ch.VI). Painting, according to Langer, articulates for us the structure of seen space. It makes clear to us this abstract and pervasive feature of our conscious lives. And it does so, not by describing the phenomenon, but by exemplifying it. The world as we experience it in vision has a structure, and that very same structure is exhibited by the space found in painting. This, Langer thinks, is the distinctive role that painting plays for us. Other arts capture other large-scale aspects of consciousness. Sculpture, for instance, articulates the structure of the space in which, as embodied creatures, we move and act; architecture articulates the tenor and rhythms of the culture from which it comes; lyric poetry articulates the character of experiential memory. But painting alone has as its ‘first office’ elucidating for us the structure within which vision gives us the world.

Note that only the structure is common to depicted and seen space. Langer is not claiming any further similarities between the two. Indeed, were painting somehow to reproduce seeing more generally, it is not clear that it could play the role assigned it. As she puts the point, “…. it is the sameness of …. structure in experientially different loci that makes it apparent.” (Langer 1967:105). Articulation requires manifest difference, as well as commonality. Were painting not only to represent objects at varying depths and distances from an implicit point of view, but also to sustain the illusion of really seeing such things so arranged, it would not articulate visual experience, but simply offer us more of it. Genuinely *trompe l’œil* painting could not, therefore, play this role; and perhaps sculpture does not play it either. (Sculpture offers us a representation of the figure represented, not the illusion of its presence; but it nonetheless reproduces, rather than merely represents, the spatial relations between that figure’s parts; and with it the relations between them and any point (or points) of view the sculpture might be thought to contain.)

Now, it may seem that Langer’s account misses its target. The structure she identifies as common to both painted and seen space is present, not only in paintings that are art, but in every representational picture. Perhaps articulating that structure accounts for some of the epistemic or other value of the mundane practice, but, given its ubiquity, how can it form even part of an aesthetics of painting, considered as art?

Langer herself would answer that the virtual space she describes merely provides the arena within which the artist’s real work can be staged. Within the space structured around the pictorial point of view the artist can create specific forms that capture more fine-grained conscious phenomena. For example, in Poussin’s *Abduction of the Sabine Women* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) the virtual space is divided into three dominant planes, each bearing a distinctive organization. The foreground is organized in a triangle composed out of the tense struggles of figures locked in mortal combat; the middle ground makes a turbulent wedge thrusting rightwards, as the Sabine men are driven from the scene and out of history; and the backdrop resolves into an immense and stable set of verticals and orthogonals, symbolizing the durable inflexibility of the Roman civilization to which all this violence gives birth. Each of these forms articulates some atmosphere, feeling, emotion or other specific element in conscious life and thought. The forms are determinations of the pictorial space, a space they simultaneously depend on and sustain. All art, for Langer, is the creation of such ‘significant forms’ (compare Bell 1914), and every art requires a virtual realm which those forms inhabit and sustain. The structure of pictorial space may be present in all painting, but only when it is shaped into forms expressive of human feelings do those pictures attain the status of art.

Some will find the appeal to significant form unsatisfying. It is certainly possible to wonder how much painting involves expression, and how we would need to understand the notion of form for it to bear the weight of all the expression painting does involve. So it is fortunate that there are other ways to meet the worry raised above. Yes, all pictorial space shares the structure of seen space; but perhaps only some pictures draw attention to that structure in a way that makes it plain to us. Articulating a feature requires more than possessing it, it requires making it salient, or, as Goodman would say, *referring to* what is possessed. (See Goodman 1968 ch.2, §§III-IV.) Perhaps this self-consciousness is enough to raise the mere pictorial to the level of art. Alternatively, we might accept Langer’s thought that pictures share the structure of vision, and that painting’s value lies in articulating aspects of visual experience, but deny that the value lies in articulating that structure itself. Instead, the structure found in all paintings allows some to articulate more specific visual phenomena. Candidates include the way visual acuity varies over the visual field (Baxendall 1987), the many subtle variations in the phenomenology of shadows (Baxendall 1995: ch.V), perhaps even the way things appear to a viewer with a particular psychology (Wollheim 1987: ch.III), or to those with a particular ‘style’ of viewing the world (Wöllflin 1915/1950).

Before leaving painting’s relations to vision, note one moral of Langer’s discussion. Her thought was that articulating a feature requires exhibiting it, but in a different context. There must be an ‘experiential difference’ between the space painting puts before us and that we ordinarily see. She herself locates that difference in the ‘virtual’ character of the former. The space in a painting is not only not really present, it does not look to be either. It is *manifest* mere appearance (Langer 1953: ch.IV). More recent literature has sought to capture the contrast, not by characterizing the objects of our mental state when looking at a picture, but by describing the state itself. [Richard Wollheim](https://www-rep-routledge-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/articles/thematic/the-aesthetics-of-richard-wollheim-1923-2003/v-1), for instance, theorizes it as ‘seeing-in’: an experience with two ‘aspects’ or ‘folds’. In one fold, we are presented with a flat surface; in the other, a scene varying in depth. Neither fold is assimilable to the more straightforward experience that provides its nearest analogue: respectively, seeing the marks without making out anything in them, and seeing the depicted scene face-to-face. The two folds are integrated into a single, unified experience of a present surface and an absent scene (Wollheim 1987: ch.II). However, whether we follow Langer in focussing on *noema*, or Wollheim in investigating *noesis*, we should take to heart Langer’s emphasis on the importance of differences between painting and vision. Any account that assimilates them too far will struggle to ground an adequate aesthetics of painting. As Langer saw, this will be true for views on which the heart of that aesthetics is articulation of some feature or other. But the point generalizes to other possible sources of painting’s value. Whatever the source, if painting’s value is not to reduce to that of just another object of vision, painting cannot simply reproduce the effects of seeing what it represents. This proves fatal to all attempts to make *illusion* the ideal for painting (e.g. Lessing 1766/1962). And it significantly complicates any attempt to use that notion as part of an analysis of how we in fact experience paintings (e.g. Lopes 2005: ch.1).

**3 Making pictorial meaning**

There is a second feature of ordinary pictures which might be taken to bear on the value of painting as an art. It is, to introduce the idea in somewhat metaphorical terms, that pictorial meaning must be invented afresh, each time a picture is made.

Representational pictures have content, or meaning. At the most basic level, that meaning is a matter of what they depict, i.e. the way they show the world within them to be. Where there is content, there is also a symbol, the vehicle that bears that meaning. In the case of a picture, it is natural to think that the vehicle is the marked surface. (Natural, but not compulsory: on Langer’s view, like those taking inspiration from Husserl, the vehicle is a virtual ‘object’ which the marked surface makes visible to us.) Much philosophical discussion of picturing has attempted to say what relation must obtain between the vehicle and the content, in order for the former to bear the latter. (See [Depiction](https://www-rep-routledge-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/articles/thematic/depiction/v-3).) But whatever the answer to that vexed question, a more basic point should be uncontroversial. This is that pictorial meaning is not governed by convention in the way in which meaning in language is. No doubt conventions play some role in picturing. But in language, convention’s most important role is in establishing the meaning of the basic semantic units, individual words. A sentence means what it does in virtue of what the component words mean and how they are combined. Convention governs the former: individual words mean what they do because we have a convention for using those marks (or sounds) a certain way. Like sentences, pictures have compositional structure: a picture also means what it does because of what its parts mean and how they are combined. But, unlike sentences, pictures are not composed out of parts that mean what they do by convention. It is not clear there are any atoms of pictorial meaning; but, if there are, they mean what they do only in virtue of the meaning of the particular wholes they combine to compose. In consequence, making a picture is not a matter of putting together units that are independently meaningful. The language user begins with words already freighted with meaning. The picture maker makes marks the meaning of which is fixed at all only by the other marks with which she surrounds them. A dot, dash or patch may become an eye, a shadow, a hole, a star or a head, depending on what comes next.

Pictorial meaning lacks conventional grounding. This feature of mundane pictures carries over to painting as an art. There too, insofar as she is making a representational picture, the artist must at once make meaningful wholes and parts: she cannot build her image out of units that have meaning independently of the use she makes of them. (For this in action, see the documentary film *Le mystère Picasso* (Henri-Georges Cluzot, 1956), which shows the great artist repeatedly making and remaking the meaning of his marks.) And this feature of all picture making has two consequences for the art of painting. We can best approach them by comparing it with literature.

The first consequence is that, while technique is central to both forms of art, in painting it enters at a more basic level. The writer must find the words with which to describe some scene, to convey some thought or capture some atmosphere; more generally, to achieve her representational goals, whatever they may be. But, except in very rare circumstances, she need not create the words themselves. They are there waiting for her, already imbued with conventional meaning. She may combine them so as to stretch, exploit or transform that meaning. Perhaps whenever she makes metaphors she does just this. Even then, she exploits a pre-existing meaning: metaphorical usage is possible only against a backdrop of using terms literally. There is ample room here for creativity, but it comes in deploying words by exploiting their conventional meaning, not in bestowing meaning on words that would otherwise have none.

The painter, in contrast, must at every step make the meaning, along with the marks that bear them. She may set out to create marks with that content, or she may, like a doodler, discover the content only as she paints. She will likely not be working in a complete vacuum. She may have devised rules of thumb for depicting certain kinds of thing; and the history of painting offers a host of resources for her to tap, an inherited knowledge both of solutions to depictive problems and of culs-de-sac to avoid. But none of this is like having a dictionary, a matrix correlating marks to meanings, that she might consult in order to build up a complex meaningful whole from parts that contribute to it in predetermined ways. For every part of the work, from the finished whole down to the smallest unit we can identify as meaningful at all, the painter gave that part the meaning it has. In doing so, she solved, over and over, a problem facing anyone making a representational picture. Her capacity to find solutions—that is, her technique—shapes the work throughout, from the smallest meaningful element to the whole. Sometimes what she does will be brought about, not by skill, but by happy accident. But at every moment she faces problems which technique could enable her to solve. Painting is a field of artistic activity entirely permeated by technique.

This brings us to the second consequence. If an artist’s technique is a matter of what she is able to do, her style is more a matter of *how* she does it—that is, of the manner in which it is done. (See [Artistic style](https://www-rep-routledge-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/articles/thematic/artistic-style/v-2).) Of course, not all style is artistic; and perhaps not all artistic style is matter of how, rather than what, is done. It is certainly not all a matter of the manner in which things are *depicted*. Even so, the way in which someone depicts can at least be an important strand in her individual style as a painter. Since painting offers a realm permeated by technique, as poetry or prose does not, the painter has opportunities for developing and manifesting an individual style that are denied the literary artist. How the former paints can include how she makes even the smallest elements of meaning, whereas, as we have seen, the latter has no parallel opportunity to leave her stamp. The style of the individual artist may be every bit as important in literature as in painting, but it does not pervade the work to the same degree.

Painting may contrast with literature in lacking conventional grounding, but does that lack render it unique? Some have claimed the same holds of every art, literature included. (See Langer’s claim that every work of art is a symbol of a ‘non-associative’ kind— Langer 1953: ch.III.) This does not contradict the contrast drawn above, provided the claim is made for literature’s further meaning, rather than its linguistic content. Painting and literature are both representational arts, the former in virtue of depicting, the latter in virtue of describing. In neither case, however, does that exhaust their meaning. A painting can symbolize, say, the birth of civilization out of violence, in virtue of depicting a mythical event; and a novella can capture the absurdity of our embodied existence, in virtue of describing a man who wakes up to find he has turned into an insect. In both arts, representational content provides the bedrock on which other sorts of meaning may be built. Of the two, only painting lacks conventional grounding even with respect to its bedrock meaning, the kind which makes it representational in the first place. The question, then, is whether it is unique among the arts in *that* respect.

Perhaps it is not: perhaps the feature that distinguishes painting from literature is one other arts also display. Certainly, if painting is built on a bedrock of meaning not grounded in convention, the same will be true of its closest cousin, photography. After all, that feature comes from the fact that paintings are representational pictures; and photographs are pictures too. Even so, contrasts remain. In painting, the lack of a conventional ground has consequences: the pervasiveness of technique and individual style described above. In photography, though the lack is present, those consequences go missing. The fact that photographs do not break down into parts meaning what they do by convention does not pose the same problem for the photographer as it does for the painter. The photographer, at least if working within traditional limits, doesn’t mark the surface bit by bit; and so faces no question how to make particular marks harmonize with the whole so that both bear some content or other. Her meaning-making acts generate content-bearing pictures all at once, as it were. Not facing the problem of how to give meaning to individual marks, there is no technique she need, or can, exercise to solve such problems; and no opportunity to express her individual style in the way she solves them. It is not, of course, that there is no room in her work for technique, or for style: quite the reverse. The point is that technique, and the style it enables, is exercised on the picture as a whole. (And this constrains even photographers who work outside traditional limits, adding marks to the surface one at a time, e.g. by digital manipulation. If their work is to *look* photographic, the marks they make cannot look to have been laid down that way, and so cannot individually manifest their technique or style.)

**4 Overcoming duality**

Each of the two preceding sections concentrates on one side of paintings’ nature: their content (§2) versus the symbol that bears it (§3). That duality, between symbol and meaning, between the representation and what it represents, between the marks and the scene they put before us, has struck almost everyone who has written on the aesthetics of painting. Even those hostile to the idea that paintings are representations of a distinctively visual kind have conceded that pictorial symbols have both a ‘syntax’ and a ‘semantics’ (Goodman 1968). Even those to whom talk of representation was quite alien have explored the consequences, for what pictures can and should take as their subject matter, of the nature of the representations themselves. (See, for instance, Lessing’s reflections (1766/1962) on the implications for ‘painting’ and ‘poetry’ of the fact (as he saw it) that the former exists primarily in space, the latter in time.)

This duality can itself be exploited to artistic effect. The fluid movement of a cartoonist’s pen can reinforce the flowing gesture of the dancer his marks depict; the jagged character of the blocks of paint can add to the violence of the bombings they show us; the impenetrability of the thickly encrusted blobs of paint can allude to the remoteness of the figure we eventually make out in them. Such features of the marks alter what we see in them, but influence can also flow in the other direction. The marks themselves acquire a distinctive organization when we make out in them what they represent. Such interactions need not even be limited to depictive content and the marks that sustain it: quite generally, pictorial meaning can interact in interesting ways with features of the painting that bears it, whatever the kind of content in question, and whether or not the features are those responsible for it.

This should surprise no one, since thus far all we have is the application to painting of the general truth that in art ‘form’ (in some sense) and ‘content’ (in some sense) are liable to interrelate in fruitful and interesting ways. However, in painting, along with some other visual arts, these relations can perhaps be especially intimate. For there both vehicle and content are grasped *visually*. We see the marks, their organization, their facture; but we also ‘see’, in at least some sense, the scene they put before us: not just the dancer, but her movement; not just the bombing, but its violence; not just the sitter, but his remote manner. Both content and the features sustaining it are presented in a single sensory mode, thus facilitating, and intensifying, interactions between them. Even contents not presented visually, such as the allegorical significance of some depicted scene, are grasped throughmore basic contents that are given that way. The former may not be as directly exposed to interactions with the appearance of the vehicle itself, but their dependence on other contents that are so exposed draws them too into the circle of seen symbol and seen meaning.

Some of these interactions can seem heavy-handed. In one of his paintings of Susanna under the prying (here off-stage) eyes of the elders (the 1636 version in the Mauritshuis), Rembrandt portrays the young woman in thickly applied, almost sludgy, oils. This feature of the vehicle contaminates the woman visible in it, so that her skin appears to wrinkle and crawl. The effect is visible only up close—farther out, the image is of the nubile maiden who so drew the elders’ prurient attention. The curious viewer is thus tempted down an affective path that parallels the moral journey of the elders themselves: from innocent initial encounter to uncomfortable closer inspection. The result is striking, but perhaps too much in the service of an idea to be truly satisfying.

In other cases, however, interaction is both more basic to the very character of the work, and much less easily described. At the heart of David’s *Death of Socrates* (Metropolitan Museum of New York) lies the philosopher’s hand, reaching for the cup of hemlock by which he is condemned to die. The beauty of that hand is striking, yet it is neither beauty a real hand could exhibit, nor the beauty of the painted marks themselves. Instead, what compels our attention involves both paint and hand, inextricably bound. We might make parallel points for the terrifying character of the horse that screams in Picasso’s *Guernica* (Reina Sofía, Madrid), or the uncanny quality of Paula Rego’s unsettling figures. In each case, the object of our response is neither merely what is depicted, nor the marks that do the depicting, but somehow combines the two.

Understanding how the two sides of a picture’s nature combine so as to offer these distinctive objects for aesthetic engagement is perhaps the hardest challenge in the aesthetics of painting. Various strategies have been explored. Some have proposed that what we engage with is, not the depicted scene, nor the marks that sustain it, but the way in which the one is sustained by, or emerges from, the other (Wollheim 1987). Some have suggested that the two ‘folds’ of Wollheim’s seeing-in (see §2) causally interact, so that each is altered by the presence of the other (Kulvicki 2010). Others have taken that idea further, proposing that the upshot of such ‘inflection’ is that what we see in the picture is not the kind of thing that even in principle could be seen in the flesh. (See Podro 1998; Lopes 2005 ch.1.) Finally, in somewhat similar vein, some have proposed a special kind of object that paintings put before us: a ‘real likeness’ of, say, a horse: something that is made of paint and that, while counting as a horse, does not, of course, count as a real horse (Morris 2020). Each proposal merits serious consideration, though it is easy to be left with the feeling that none quite attacks the problem at its root. Perhaps real progress lies, not in reconciling or relating the two sides of paintings’ nature, but in making sense of our experience of pictures in such a way that the divide between those two sides, however necessary when theorizing, does not open up in experience in the first place.

**5 Abstraction and beyond**

The discussion above suffers a serious limitation. It may be true of *representational* painting that it articulates the structure of seen space, involves the permanent creation of depictive meaning, or exhibits a duality between vehicle and content that can be exploited to artistic effect, but what of painting in its abstract variety? From relatively early in the twentieth century, some of the most important works in the art form apparently turned their backs on representation. (See [Art, abstract](https://www-rep-routledge-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/articles/thematic/art-abstract/v-1).) How can any of the above be extended to cover these works?

For many works of abstract pictorial art, the challenge turns out to be superficial. An abstract work such as a typical Kandinsky may not portray the kinds of thing we encounter in everyday life, but in it we see geometrical figures arrayed in depth. We see, for instance, a yellow rectangle, lying at a somewhat oblique angle, behind a black bar. These are not descriptions of the marks themselves. The patch of paint that contributes the rectangle may itself be trapezoidal. It lies on the surface of the canvas just as surely as does the dark area in which the black bar is found. And the yellow patch is orthogonal to our line of sight on the canvas. Instead, what is captured by talk of the rectangle, its oblique orientation and its occlusion by the bar is a separate spatial arrangement, one present only virtually (as Langer would say), or given (though not as really present) in the second of Wollheim’s two ‘folds’. There is here, then, a space distinct from that in which we really see the canvas, but that nonetheless shares that space’s structure. There is also a duality between features the vehicle really possesses and properties it merely represents. And with that last we must acknowledge that the work has a content, albeit somewhat minimal content, that Kandinsky had to mark the surface to create. Furthermore, what is plainly true of the Kandinsky is also true, though perhaps less obviously, of a great deal of abstract work. For such works, as Wollheim noted (1987: 62), their abstract character amounts to forgoing, not representation per se, but *figuration*: the representation of the sorts of thing we encounter in the world of everyday life, and imaginative elaborations thereon. All this was accepted, if not quite in these terms, by no less a figure than Clement Greenberg, the great propagandist for abstract painting. Greenberg even goes so far as to say that avoiding representation altogether is more or less impossible: “the first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness”, and even works as flat-looking as classic Mondrians suggest a “kind of illusion suggestive of the third dimension” (Greenberg 1992: 9).

However, in suggesting that every painting exhibits depth, Greenberg surely exaggerates. Where is the depth in the monochrome canvasses of Ad Reinhardt or Yves Klein, in Jasper Johns’s flags, or in Robert Ryman’s swarms of brushstrokes? These works may be about something, but it is quite unclear there is anything, even something non-figurative, they depict. What could the monochromes and Rymans represent, given that they seem so focused on their own materiality? And while the Johns certainly bear some relation to flags, do they depict them? A decal Stars and Stripes on the side of a fighter jet might be thought to *be* the flag, not to represent it; and if so, why not likewise for the flags Johns painted in oils?

To handle these cases, we must return to the idea that painting, like other art practices, forms a tradition (see §1). Traditions evolve, they develop over time. The forces for change are varied: developments in the technologies the art forms exploit (the rediscovery of linear perspective, the invention of lithography); wider societal forces (the mercantile egalitarianism that shaped Dutch painting in the Golden Age); accidents of history or of individual genius (Caravaggio’s love of chiaroscuro). But the most important evolutionary mechanism is self-reflection: the capacity of those at work in the tradition to consider its development and character up to that point, and to respond by perpetuating, refining, rejecting or revising its key features. For it is in virtue of the fact that their work is made in response to that of their predecessors that it belongs to the tradition at all. (This is why most decorative art, such as that of the great Islamic traditions, though often non-figurative, does not count as abstract *painting*, even setting aside any question of the medium in which it is made.) The most striking expression of such reflection is *thematization* (Wollheim 1987: 20): taking some widespread but largely overlooked feature of previous work and, by exaggeration, isolation, variation or omission, giving it a new salience in the work now being produced.

Greenberg took the turn to abstraction to thematize *flatness*: the fact that all painting is made by marking a flat surface. In this, he suggested, it merely made more salient, by isolating it, a feature present in all painting, one some figurative painting had already emphasized to a lesser degree (Greenberg 1992). This strategy can accommodate all abstract works, whether they merely eschew figuration or (contrary to Greenberg’s own sense of what is possible) they avoid depth altogether. But we make better sense of these paintings if we treat them as thematizing, not flatness, but other aspects of the tradition. Each draws attention to some feature of previous painting, a feature so ubiquitous as almost to escape notice. The monochromes thematize the fact that painting involves marking the surface so as to divide it into visually differentiated parts. Ryman’s empty brushstrokes thematize the fact that the practice of painting (here, in the narrow sense of painting in oils and related media), has at its heart the act of laying a viscous medium onto a surface with a brush. The Johns thematize the fact that other paintings, whatever their subject matter, are not identical to, or instantiations of, that subject matter. In the case of the monochromes and the Johns, the feature is made salient by its absence. In the Rymans, it is given prominence by isolation: the works have comparatively few other features to engage our interest.

Approaching these works in this way allows us to see how even truly abstract works might count as painting, to make sense of how they are connected to the tradition in such a way as to belong to it. Of course, this does not show that these works fit the ideas developed in sections 2 and 3. Those proposals about painting’s distinctive aesthetic offering cannot be applied to works that altogether eschew depth, or painterly space, or depictive content. But in making sense of why these works count as paintings by appeal to features they thematize, we also begin to understand why they might be interesting. True, there is no general account on offer here. Since the different works thematize different features, there is nothing common to them more specific than thematization itself. At this point the task of devising an aesthetics can perhaps only proceed piecemeal, work by work. As a result, that task perhaps falls more properly to the critic than to the philosopher. None of this should prove cause for concern, however. For what of a general nature would we expect to be able to say about the artistic interest of works united only by their complete refusal of depth and depictive content, even in non-figurative form?

**6 The end of painting?**

By the time paintings are thematizing features as fundamental as flatness, differentiation, marking with a viscous medium and the non-identity of painting and painted, one might reasonably wonder where else there is for the tradition to go. The reservoir of basic features to bring to salience has been drained, or soon will be. Of course, the vast array of paintings that the tradition has produced exhibits myriad other features, none nearly so ubiquitous and all far more contingent. Nothing prevents new works from reflecting on those. But insofar as painting has taken a turn towards the philosophical, to exploring the conditions on which its very existence depends, its search for new materials to reflect upon may be nearing exhaustion. This is perhaps one reason why the last century saw various proclamations of the death of painting. (See Crimp 1981.) Certainly, if we take its mission to be to explore its own nature, the point at which painting itself could no longer advance that investigation may well have been reached.

The idea that painting might die is not new. It dates at least to the invention of photography, which in 1840 purportedly prompted Paul Delaroche to proclaim “From today painting is dead”. But Delaroche’s thought was presumably that photography, with its capacity to capture so rapidly and effortlessly the finest details of the visual world, rendered painting redundant. The idea that it might end by exhausting its resources for continuing to develop as a tradition is rather different. (Compare Arthur Danto on the end, as opposed to the death, of art more generally. “End of Art” 1986.)

Delaroche’s pessimism proved premature. Painting found ways to respond to the existence of photography, enjoying a century and a half or more of continued development. Some of that development involved reflection on the character of photography itself, with photorealist painting scrutinizing the distinctive look of photographic images, and the idiosyncracies of the way in which they present the world. Later pronouncements of the end of painting’s evolution may prove equally ill-founded. Certainly, an artistic tradition need not trace an arc that ends in reflection on its own most basic nature. And who is to say that future developments in picture making, such as the capacity to generate images using Artificial Intelligence, will not similarly stimulate painting to new life, as readily as paralyze or kill it?

Speculation aside, whether painting comes to an end or not, the works of the past remain with us and continue to demand our attention. Those works can hardly be understood at all except under the concept *painting*, or its close relatives; and cannot be understood to any great degree unless they are placed in the tradition organized around that concept, to which they contribute. That tradition has its own preoccupations, *idées fixes* and ambitions. It is the job of art history to explore all that material in depth. An aesthetics of painting operates at a higher level of abstraction, making connections between the resources the art form exploits (such as depiction, the structure of vehicle and content that supports it, and other forms of content that depiction may ground) and the artistic values those resources may be used to promote. But even though an aesthetics of painting need not be integral to the practice of the art, without such an aesthetics, an understanding of the practice, even in all the contingency of its concrete historical realization, cannot be complete.

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