

John Bartlett: Thoughts on Art

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Conditioning commences too soon. At a certain individual age we begin to understand and strive to undo that conditioning, and regain individual originality of thought and expression to be able again to create freely, naturally. That striving continues until one can think and live independently, not overly concerned for the opinions of others. It is not essential that the artist be an intellectual, insight and intuition rather than reason and logic give birth to asymmetry and the unpretentious.

*Austere sublimity* reduces imagery to the essential, introspection, practice and observation enable work that is direct, honest, convincing; paintings that show the human hand at work, that transcend mere technique penetrating to something more fundamental, also displaying the delight of using the brush and the burden of making art.

The act of painting is exploration of the *unexplorable*, getting to know the *unknowable* as well as developing variations on what is known, imagined and seen and is then passed to the viewer through reflection and contemplation. It is in the act of creation, in the solitary wee hours of the mind when the only sound is *no-sound -working in isolation not waiting for inspiration-* the artist gives generously of herself/himself, plumbing the depths and scaling the heights of reality and the spiritual.

Within the painting, where nothing is stable, everything is constantly changing; even the beautiful red flowers will soon fall; the artist works in isolation obedient to the prompts of the work, for intentions rarely equal the result, the artist having plans, soon comes to understand the painting has a mind of its own, has thoughts that it soon begins to suggest; such suggestions the sensitive artist heeds.

Accidents and the random, happen to introduce disharmony and imbalance requiring of the artist flexibility, an ability to improvise, be nimble and turn the unexpected to advantage.

One does not have to think about what one knows so the mature artist, having assiduously worked at his/her practice and having acquired knowledge of composition, perspective, proportion, colour and so on, operates freely from the conscious and subconscious untrammelled by rules and conventions, at times creating a painting that unwittingly conforms to other principles. And so it is with Wabi and Sabi and the 9 principles; principles that are a development of centuries of practice in the East and can now be a working reference; principles that I accept and will use as unwittingly I have in the past.

A conundrum of art practice is the tension between the planned and the spontaneous. Considerations of an intellectual, art-education nature vie with direct intuition, impulse, immediate and direct mark-making similar to *sumi-e*; I spontaneously brush in an image and when the dust has settled I ignore changes prompted by rules and conventions, changes that will tidy the work, polish it, give it finish, make it contrived; how much can/should one tidy the untidy, tame the primitive in search for polish and refinement, when should the artist intrude into a stream of consciousness? Only the artist guided by intuition can make those decisions. The artist should be true to principles, have an open mind, be resolute while ready for the long haul prepared to swim against the current seeking beauty and truth in the mundane, the imperfect and ordinary; as a self-taught artist I wonder whether an art-education would have extended my reach as it can deepen and expand knowledge, broaden and elevate horizons.

In art as in life, beauty and truth are to be found in nature and the natural, in the deformed and ungraceful; when searching for wisdom it is better to gaze within oneself; if however one feels compelled to stare outwards; simplify, and look into a grain of sand for in there is all that is.