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On Indifference in Art

Learning to experience art involves training one's sensitivity, empathy, tolerance and interpretation.

ADAM GUT

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I am writing here about visual arts. By their very definition, they are perceived primarily, although not exclusively, through our sense of sight (although artists do employ cunning techniques to make their work accessible to visually-impaired individuals, many of whom are of course artists themselves).

Perhaps starting a discussion of "indifference" by considering vision might seem out of place, it will nevertheless serve as a certain key here. Vision is important, because indifference must be noticed – visualized – to be criticized. This particularly applies to negative indifference, which is how we usually perceive it anyway. But let us not get too bogged down with definitions; I think we have a range of degrees of indifference starting with the absolute, and I will attempt to examine them all briefly through a selection of artworks.

The act of communication

To begin with, note that one cannot gain insight into another's soul without making eye coantact. Two people will never fall in love unless they gaze at one another. No real conversation can take place, especially one focused on truth and aiming to reach accord, unless you and your interlocutor look directly into one another's eyes. In any case, misunderstanding and disagreement are also accompanied by crossed looks. There is no trust, culture of interaction and continuation of interpersonal relationships without eye contact. It is an indispensable element of communication, be it as pure fact, powerful image or metaphor. Art is a medium of the senses and a model of communication; interacting with a particular artwork is always an act of communication. But what am I getting at?

A portrait of indifference

Let's consider portraiture. Whenever we pause in front of an effigy of a famous or anonymous individual in a museum or gallery, we send a signal representing a natural desire to engage. We do this because we project real life onto our relationship with a figurative work and reject the convention of a relation which is neutral, cognitively objective and emotionally suspended. We know that the portrait is simply a more or less accurate depiction of its subject. The more realistic it is, the more it encourages us to bring the image to life, even if it's as artificial as art which remains beyond the order of life – neither alive nor dead. And yet some artists are so skillful, their artworks create the illusion of life. This is especially apt for paintings: by using color, light and shadows, they can evoke the warmth of the human body, accentuate smooth or wrinkled skin, emphasize facial features and simulate a dazzling gaze or the subtle vibration of voice. Although a typical (or even stereotypical) portrait pose is static, motionless – and as such neutral (indifferent) – we seek out any illusions of movement, since the subject is briefly taken out of context; we imagine that they were doing something before and after posing. Even when the subject isn't breaking the fourth wall by gazing directly at the viewer, we expect this and ask ourselves why they are looking elsewhere. The viewer and subject looking straight at one another seems to be the ultimate goal, and any deviation makes us wonder why this is or consider what's so interesting instead. We aren't simply examining what they look like; we are trying to read them mentally and in the

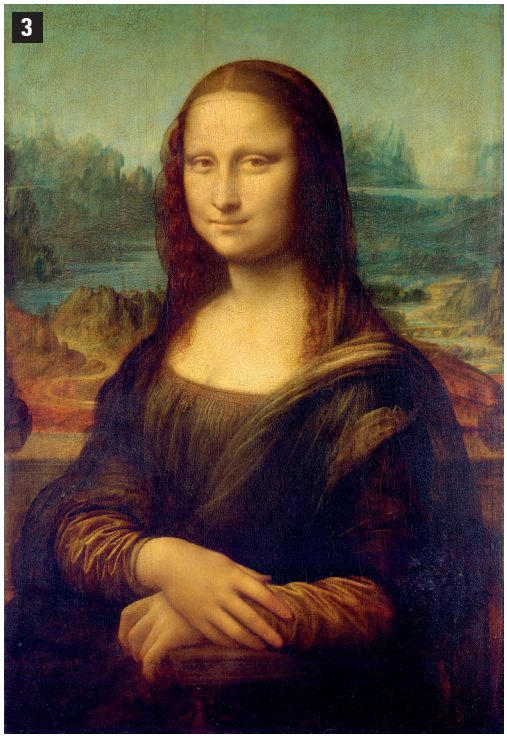

Fig. 1
Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man in a Turban*, National Gallery, London, The Yorck Project (2002), public domain

Fig. 2
Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Google Art Project, public domain

Fig. 3
Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, Louvre Museum, public domain

context of their relationship with others and with the world at large; we are reading their attitude and readiness to communicate.

There are myriad facets to indifference that are expressed in portraits (including self-portraits). Below I will consider several examples of European art which are a good illustration of how we can interpret such indifference.

Inner poise

I have always admired the wise, self-aware gaze in Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban* (1433), widely believed to be the artist's self-portrait. Working at the threshold of the modern age, van Eyck was one of the founders of the concept of the direct gaze in portraiture. The interplay between the man's eyes introduces ambiguity; they are not quite in the same focus, giving each a different expression. This achieves the appearance of cunning: the right eye, slightly blurry around the edges, is clearly passive (indifferent), while the sharper left is active, even confrontational. The man's eyes serve different interests; they are indifferent relative to one another. The pupils drift slightly upwards, making the gaze even more indifferent. The subject appears to be focused on a nearby detail while taking in the whole – not just visually but philosophically. This duality is a synthesis of opposed models of viewing and expresses a kind of indecision or a declaration of possibility; it also gives the subject a highly distanced and impassionate, passive expression – an indifferent look. If the painting really is a self-portrait created with a mirror, the gaze would look back at itself giving it even more indifference. What would that say about the artist? That he is far from being mysterious; instead, his tight lips indicate he is immersed in his work. Or, perhaps, van Eyck – or his model – had actually reached a state of poise, rendering him immune to emotions and approaching indifference?

Haughty and merciless

In Leonardo da Vinci's portrait (1474–1478), Ginevra de' Benci looks towards the viewer but her gaze almost stops halfway; the more we examine her, the more indifferent she appears. Her head is framed by branches of a juniper bush; once seen as a panacea for all evil, the shrub also symbolized female virtue. Her facial expression is rather inscrutable: is she drowsy or bored? Withdrawn or perhaps a little sullen? Impassionate and insensitive, merciless and haughty? She is difficult to read, unwilling to communicate, indifferent. Her porcelain skin makes her appear as impassive as a doll, rather than a 16-year-old young woman. The reverse bears the inscription "Virtue adorns beauty", while

Fig. 4
Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe*, Alte Pinakothek, The Yorck Project (2002), public domain

Fig. 5
Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of Madeleine*, Louvre Museum, Web Gallery of Art, public domain

infrared examination reveals the motto "Virtue and honor". Appointed with talent and surrounded by noble maxims, she represents pure potential, untouched by merit or guilt and free from good or wicked intentions. She is indifferent in a way which bears no positive or negative implications; it's an indifference expressing an emptiness of one so young. Aged just 21 himself,] da Vinci depicted the virginity of her body and spirit shrouded in indifference. Is Ginevra so perfect and so aware of it that she is simply indifferent to everything around her? She has won at life at its very threshold. On the flip side, perhaps she feels she has already lost and grown indifferent with helplessness or humility. The secret remains hers forever.

Flirtatious indifference

Perhaps the most famous portrait of all time is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (La Gioconda) (1503–1519). It expresses an eternal idea of femininity and symbolizes happiness; some have even described the model as the archetypal femme fatale. It's no wonder that we want her gaze to follow us, for her to look deep into our eyes. Although there are myriad other portraits which achieve this effect, going all the way back to the antiquity, the optical illusion is now widely known as the Mona Lisa effect. According to scholars at the Cluster of Excellence Cognitive Interaction Technology (CITEC) in Bielefeld, Germany, rather than looking us straight in the eye, Mona Lisa's gaze is directed towards our right shoulder, at an angle of 15.4 degrees. To obtain the Mona Lisa effect, the subject's gaze should be at an angle between 0 and 5 degrees. This dispels a popular myth about the portrait. The truth is that Mona Lisa is mocking us slightly by playing up her indifference. Is this indifference actually rooted in coquetry? Mona Lisa's world-famous, enigmatic, slightly melancholic smile seems neutral; it appears fleetingly and vanishes instantly. The artist's use of shadow play accentuates its ambiguity, which can result from the indifference and has the potential of indifference. The subject is painted from a different perspective than the landscape: the woman is placed in a central perspective, with the backdrop shown from bird's eye view. The two styles are separate and indifferent to one another, yet they come together to create a perfect composition.

Stylization

In his *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe* (1500), Albrecht Dürer sits in a symmetrical and disciplined pose, following the canon of medieval images of Christ the Savior; he looks directly out of the canvas with his gaze piercing the viewer. The gaze is perfectly indifferent, and there is clearly no question of engaging with the viewer. The artist's main goal is to discover and reveal the truth. Some of what he's interested in can be regarded with great indifference while seeking other subjects far more worthy of our attention… Dürer's gaze is entirely preoccupied with his own thoughts. Perhaps he illustrates ambition verging on suffering, as indicated by his drooping lower lids. But by setting this suffering in a majestic, theatrical format it becomes neutral and highly stylized. The painting's spiritual message becomes muddled and indifferent. One might be tempted to sympathize with the quasi-Christlike suffering, but even the inscription "I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg, portrayed myself in appropriate colors, aged twenty-eight years", minds

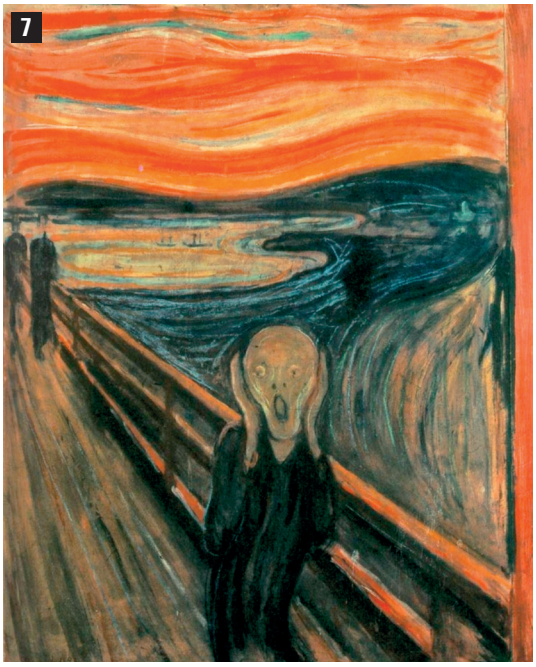

Fig. 6
Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, Kunsthalle Hamburg, public domain

Fig. 7
Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, National Gallery of Norway, Oslo, WebMuseum at ibiblio, public domain

us to keep our distance rather than feeling sympathy. The self-portrait is captivating with its aesthetic and craftsmanship and it is conceptually bold; however, in psychological terms it remains unconvincing. In this respect it is indifferent.

Dignity and distance

In William Hoare's portrait (1733) of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, a prominent freed Muslim African slave, the subject appears out-of-sorts and displayed like an exotic trophy. It is the earliest known British portrait to honor an African subject, bearing clear visual signs of ethnocentrism.

In turn, Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800), previously known as *Portrait of a Negress*, becomes a symbol of women's emancipation and serves as an allegory of the French Revolution. Madeleine presents a distinguished indifference which acts as a protective mechanism, allowing her to maintain dignity and cultural identity; she escapes the circus of juxtaposing "better" European values with negative traits of exoticism and foreignness. Her indifference serves as a kind of a humanitarian mask.

Freedom from indifference

Alongside the Mona Lisa, Edvard Munch's Expressionist *The Scream* (1893) is one of the most famous paintings in the world. Perhaps like no other the portrait crosses the boundaries of the frame and spills beyond it. The subject's eye sockets reach for and seek out contact with the viewer. We are not seeing a mimetic depiction but a play of colors and a humanoid deformation. The agonized figure in the foreground hears an infinite scream and tries to escape it, even though the scream likely originates from his own torn soul. The painting is widely interpreted as representing the universal anxiety of modern humanity. It calls us to reject indifference to loneliness, alienation and pain – an indifference ubiquitous in our individual and social lives and serving as a foundation of the relationship between humankind and nature. The protagonist of the painting is a utopia of emancipation from indifference, while the antagonist is the very indifference inherent in the world around us. Munch's painting also seems to anticipate the dramas and turmoil of the 20th century.

There are several more important paintings which should be considered when discussing the topic of indifference. One is *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* ascribed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1558); it clearly depicts the world's indifference to individual events, dramas and death as Icarus's fall goes unnoticed (see p. 3). Another is Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1817). The man stands on a rocky precipice with his back to the viewer, with a sea of fog extending over the bleak landscape rolling in front of him. Alienation and indifference are a key element of looking into ourselves and the overwhelming power of nature. The viewer may wish to assume the wanderer is looking upon something but also knows that he is in no way interested in communicating; he remains passive and entirely indifferent. Contemporary viewers are engaged and don't want to be ignored so blatantly. The wanderer remains outside the spectacle of reality in which the modern viewer is a willing participant. The setting of the painting and its interaction with the viewer accumulate indifference. ■