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Feature

The Stillness of Painting

By

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We live in a fast world. The race to perfect technological tools obeys a dictum promising greater productivity, more efficiency. Some worry that we are borrowing against thoughtfulness. Beyond anxiety about irreversible changes in the way we process information, there is a sad longing for the quiet found in backwater swamps; woods during a freeze; church pews sans services, or the yoga mat.

Rich as the information our senses supply is, many people have discovered that a wider and deeper experience arises from synthesizing what our senses tell us. This higher order of thought is essentially a cre-

ative response to our world. As an internal response, it arrests the motion of the world allowing us to be responsive, to synthesize on a variety of levels and across the time plane of our experiences. This stilled thought creates access to contemplative space.

I find paintings to be a natural container for contemplative space. Their stillness makes room for deep reflection. Unlike verbal conversation, film or theater, paintings do not actively engage with time as a dimension of the work. They silence its passage and provide us with many timeless moments. Paintings do not count down or count up. They invite viewers to step outside of the wild river of information and it's processing. Over and over again, paintings say: This is now.

Two paintings supply this experience for me repeatedly. Every time I visit them, I experience a profound stillness and a resultant shift in my consciousness. Both are Italian works, residing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Robert Lehman wing. The first, Botticelli's *The Annunciation* is a modest panel – just 71/2" x 12 3/8". It depicts the Angel Gabriel arriving in Mary's quarters to give the news of her impending motherhood. He carries a stalk of white lilies, symbolizing her purity. Each of the figures bends, bowing to the other. The viewer sees a row of columns on end, plunging away, yet effectively creating a division between the earthly world and that of the Angel's realm. Again and again I am struck by the graceful tenderness of this image. What happens as I stand in front of it and take in the careful details is always the same. My internal clock stops. This simple act of reverent greeting amidst an abode - not unlike what we could find somewhere on the current earth – breathes on its own. Usually we experience tenderness as a passing gesture – a momentary scene we witness or better yet, are blessed with. Botticelli has managed to distill the essence of tenderness. In doing so, a great stillness is opened up within the painting.

The second work, *The Creation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise*, also modest in size, is by Giovanni di Paolo. A depiction of two biblical events, it packs a great deal into 18.3" x 20.5". On the left, God activates a round form ringed with the zodiac and symbols of the planets of our solar system. Earth, large, at the center, contains a map with the four major rivers of the cradle of civilization. Archangel Michael ushers Adam and Eve out of paradise on the right. The great stillness within this work has to do with the combination of representational systems. During the

1400's, our world learned a great deal about place – and our ideas of who we are changed because of the understanding that we live on a ball flying through space around another huge, flaming ball. Time stops for me in this work because di Paolo wasn't intimidated in presenting all this information. Like a child, he simply put it together. Somehow it works. As a small object, it is interesting to look at the color, the cracking, the gold still glinting after almost 600 years. As a painting, it astonishes me to traverse the astronomical space embedded in the image.

The sweet now of a painting's space is present not only in the act of looking. The process of making a painting also produces quiet and focus. The creative act is a full manifestation of the now; a deep, wide, breathing space that ignores the passage of time. The stillness within the creative act summons a conversation that spans time – our time, ancestor time, civilization time, Atlantis time. I work with gilding and thinned paint. The paint is runny; capable of settling in plumes that mimic a photograph's capability to capture the evanescence of rising smoke. When I am handling this medium, I lose my ability to talk. Words are slow, massive blocks when I am painting. It is a divine experience to shape and form material. The act of painting is similar to a singer or master musician shaping sound in the service of communicating what's in the mind and heart outside of verbal language.

Whether you inhabit the stillness of a painting by looking or creating, one thing is certain: time will stop. In this territory, you can access an enlarged imagination, enriched understanding, admitted emotion, acknowledged transgression; a deeper connection to your place in the world. Processing information can never provide this experience, nor can greater efficiency and productivity. You can find paintings almost anywhere: true gifts as islands of stillness in the wild rivers of information surging all around us.

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