

# Spirit and the perception of art

## El Espíritu y la percepción del arte

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**A**LTHOUGH IMMANUEL KANT'S CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT is incontestably the great Enlightenment text on the aesthetic values of that era, dealing as it does with taste and the judgment of beauty, it for the most part has little to do with artistic beauty, or with art as such. It is somewhat strange, accordingly, that the modernist critic, Clement Greenberg, should claim that the first part of that book – *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* – «is the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have». He used it as his text in teaching aesthetics at Black Mountain College in the 1940s, and he praised Kant as the first modernist, in his widely discussed article of 1960, *Modernist Painting*. Greenberg paid little attention, so far as one can tell, to the second part of Kant's book – *The Critique of Teleological Judgment*, though the message of the former is internally connected with the message of the latter. Crudely speaking, Kant wants to connect natural beauty with the assurance that nature is not indifferent to our fundamental hopes – an assurance to which artistic beauty would be largely irrelevant.

Greenberg admired Kant's effort to prove that the judgment of (natural) beauty is universal, and is accordingly objective. It is objective in the sense that in judging something beautiful, we are in effect claiming that everyone should find it beautiful. So it is not, or not merely, «in the mind of the beholder». We are judging for everyone in judging for ourselves. That could not conceivably be true for artistic beauty, though Kant dealt with the relativity of artistic tastes in an interesting way, as I shall explain. He did introduce his philosophy of art late in *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* – by introducing a new concept – the concept of *spirit*, which has nothing to do with taste. Taste, he writes, «is merely a judging and not a productive faculty». When we speak of spirit, on the other hand, we are speaking of the *creative power* of the artist. Asked what we think of a painting, we might say that it lacks

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*spirit* – «though we find nothing to blame on the score of taste». Hence the painting can even be beautiful, as far as taste is concerned, but defective through lacking spirit. Put next to Rembrandt, almost any Dutch painting will seem without spirit, however tasteful.

In his book, *Italian Hours*, Henry James writes of the Baroque painter, Domenichino, as «an example of effort detached from inspiration and school merit divorced from spontaneity» [Fig.1]. That made him, James goes on to say, «an interesting case in default of being an interesting painter». There was nothing wrong in his work. He had mastered the curriculum of the art school. But spirit is not something learned, and there is no remedy for its lack. Saying that Domenichino's work lacked spirit, accordingly, is criticism of an entirely different order from the usual art school crit. It is not Domenichino's fault, merely his tragedy, that he does not possess what Kant calls «genius» – «the exemplary originality of the natural gifts of a subject in the *free* employment of his cognitive faculties».

As it turns out, more or less all that Kant really has to say about art in his book is packed into the few pages given over to spirit, and its presence in perhaps the greatest Enlightenment text on aesthetics is itself a sign that Enlightenment values were beginning to give way, and a new era was making itself felt. It is a tribute to Kant's cultural sensitivity that he realized that he had to deal with Romantic values, and a whole new way to think about art. It is striking that in a very different part of Europe, the same line was being argued by the artist Francisco Goya. In writing out the program for the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid, Goya wrote that there are no rules in art: *No hay reglas en la pintura*. That explains, according to Goya, why we may be less happy with a highly finished work than one in which less care has been taken. It is the spirit in art – the presence of genius - that is really important. Like Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* was published in 1790, Goya considered himself an Enlightenment figure – *un Ilustrado*- so it is striking that both the philosopher and the painter felt that they must deal with Post-Enlightenment views of art. But people were beginning to appreciate that something more was being promised by art than that it be in good taste. It was something that could transform viewers, opening them up to whole new systems of ideas. But there were no rules for achieving that, as there are for making something tasteful.

What then is spirit?

Kant speaks of spirit as «the animating principle of mind» which consists in «the faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*». This does not mean: ideas about aesthetics. It means an idea presented to and through the senses, hence an idea not abstractly grasped, but experienced through and by means of the senses. This would have been an audacious and almost contradictory formulation in the classical philosophical tradition, in which the senses were regarded as hopelessly confused. Ideas were grasped by the mind alone, and knowledge was attained by turning away from the senses. To today's reader, «aesthetical idea» sounds



**Figura 1** Domenichino: *Last Communion of St. Jerome*. 1614. Vatican Museums – Pinacoteca Vaticana

exceedingly bland. To Kant's readers, it had instead to have been an exciting composite of contraries. At the very least, it suggests that art is cognitive, since it presents us with ideas, and that the genius has the ability is able to find sensory arrays through which these ideas are conveyed to the mind of the viewer. We can put this another way. The artist finds ways to embody the idea in a sensory medium. That doesn't exactly translate into slathering paint all over a surface. It requires first that there be an idea, and secondly that slathering constitutes an embodiment of that idea. A considerable amount of interpretation is involved, as we shall see.



**Figura 2** *Zeus and Eagle with Arrows*

Kant was never generous with examples, but I think if we can get what he is attempting to tell us by considering the somewhat impoverished example he does offer us. Imagine that an artist is asked to convey through an image the idea of the great power of the god Jupiter. The artist presents us with the image of an eagle with bolts of lightning in its claws. » [Fig.2] The eagle was Jupiter's bird, as the peacock was the bird of his wife, Juno, and the owl of his daughter Athena. So the artist represents Jupiter through his attribute, the way another artist represents Christ as a lamb (*Agnus Dei*)» [Fig.3]. The idea of being able to hold bolts of lightning conveys an idea of superhuman strength. It is an «aesthetical idea» because it makes vivid the order of strength possessed by Jupiter, since being able to hold bolts of lightning is far, far beyond our capacities. Only a supremely powerful god is able to do something like that. The image does something the mere words, «Jupiter is mighty» is incapable of. Kant speaks of ideas «partly because they at least strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience» – but they are *aesthetical* ideas because we have to use what does lie within experience to in order to present them. Art, on his view, uses experience in this way to carry us beyond experience.

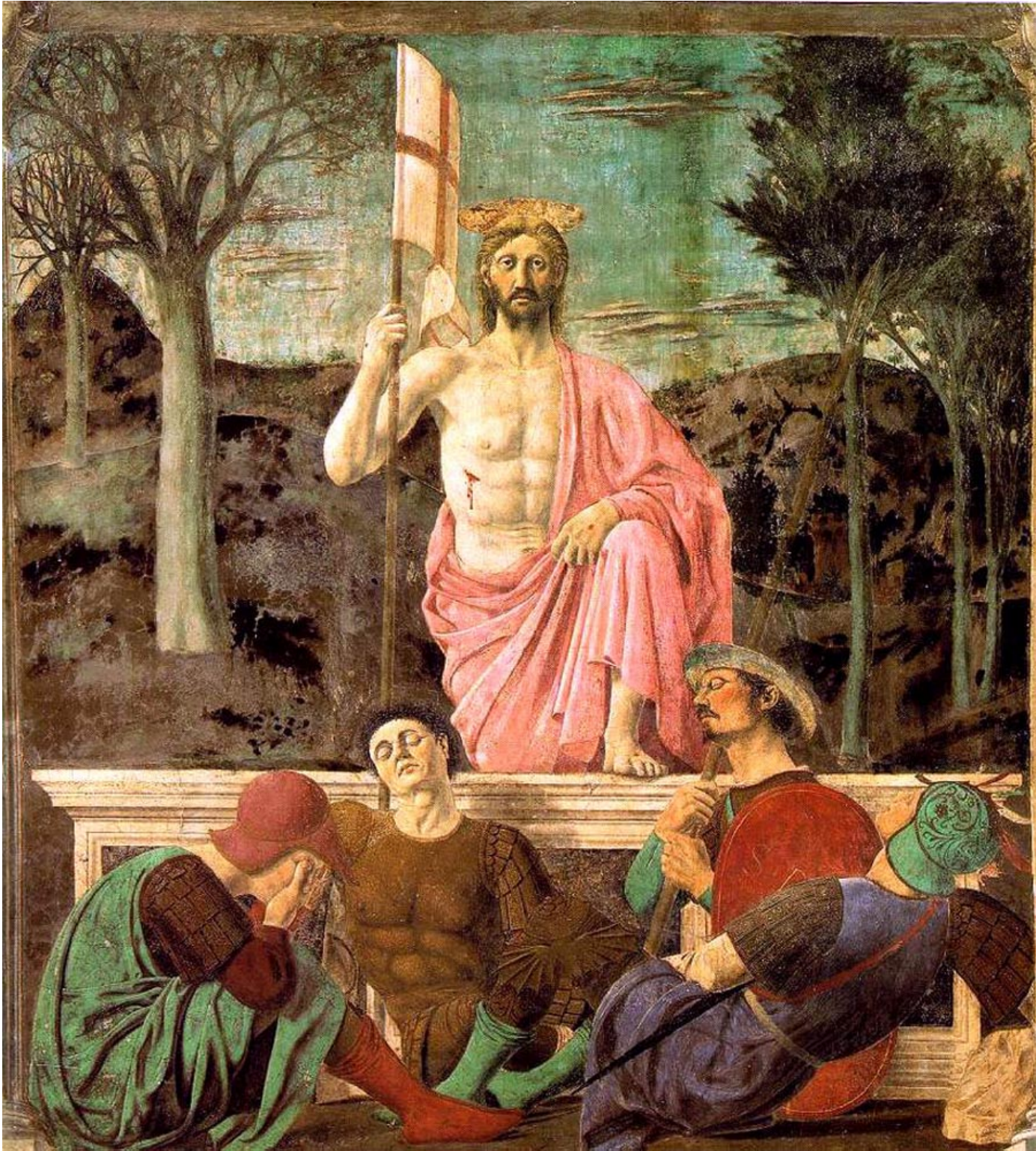




**Figura 3** Zurbarán: *Agnus Dei*. 1635-40. Museo del Prado

Lets consider a work of art like Piero della Francesca's great *Resurrection* [Fig.4]. There are in this tremendous painting two registers, in effect: a lower register, in which a group of soldiers, heavily armed, sleep beside Christ's sepulcher; and an upper register, in which Christ is shown climbing out of his tomb, holding his banner, with what I feel is a look of dazed triumph on his face. He and the soldiers belong to different perspectival systems: one has to raise ones eyes to see Christ. The resurrection takes place in the «dawn's early light». It is, literally and symbolically, a new day. At the same time, it is also literally and symbolically a new era , for it is a chill day on the cusp between winter and spring. The soldiers were posted there to see to it that no one succeed in removing the dead body of Christ. The soldiers form a living wall, so to speak, and though asleep, they would awake soon enough if disturbed by grave robbers. Little matter – Christ returns to life without their being aware of it. He does not even disturb the lid of the sepulcher. Though Christ is still incarnate – we can see his wounds - it is as if he were pure spirit. The whole complex idea of death and resurrection, flesh and spirit, a new beginning for humankind is embodied in a single compelling image. We can see the mystery enacted before our eyes. Piero has given the central doctrine of faith a local habitation. Of course, it requires interpretation to understand what we are looking at. But as the interpretation advances, different pieces of the scene fall into place, until we recognize that we are looking at something astonishing and miraculous. The gap between eye and mind has been bridged.





**Figura 4** Piero della Francesca: *The Resurrection*. 1463. Museo Civico. Sansepolchro

Of course, Kant and Goya were writing for audiences that had little if any knowledge of art outside the West. Presumably based on anthropological illustrations he must have seen, Kant was aware that there are parts of the world in which men are covered with a kind of spiral tattoo: «We could adorn a figure with all kinds of spirals and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not the figure of a human being»





**Figura 5** Carl Brodtmann: *Tattooed Man of Nukahiwa*. 1827. Litografía

[Fig.5], he writes in the *Critique of Judgment*, obviously thinking of tattooing as a form of decoration or ornamentation, as if the human body, made in the image of God, were not beautiful enough in its own right. It would have required considerable reeducation for Kant to have been able to think of the tattoo as art, and hence as an aesthetic idea, connecting the person so adorned to invisible forces in the universe.

What impresses me is that Kant's highly compressed discussion of spirit is capable of addressing the logic of artworks invariantly as to time, place, and culture, and of explaining why formalism is so impoverished a philosophy of art. The irony is that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is so often cited as the foundational text for formalistic analysis, by Clement Greenberg among others, though in truth, the book that Greenberg must have had in mind, in praising Kant as the «first Modernist» would have to have been, not the *Critique of Judgment*, but the earlier *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is there, if anywhere, that Kant was «the first to criticize the means itself of criticism». In «Modernist Painting», where this compliment is paid, modernism consists in general in using criticism to criticize the means of criticism. It is in his application of the principles of art criticism that a given medium discovers what belongs essentially to it, namely, in the case of painting, *flatness*. Wrong answer if Greenberg had in mind the artists most closely associated with him: Rothko, certainly Pollock, Newman, Kline, de Kooning, Still, even his mentor Hoffman - for all of whom «flat» would have been a critical insult and «spirit» cheerfully accepted as spot on.



**Figura 6** *African mask TK*

What Modernist Formalism did achieve, on the other hand – and Greenberg recognizes this - was the enfranchisement of a great deal of art that the Victorians, say, would have found, well, «primitive», meaning that the artists who made it would have carved or painted like nineteenth century Europeans if they only know how. African sculpture came to be appreciated for its «expressive form», by Roger Fry and the American collector Alfred Barnes. That meant that it was ornamentalized, in effect, like the tattoo, according to Kant. I often wonder if those who celebrated Kant aesthetics read as far as §49 of his book, where he introduces his exceedingly condensed view of what makes art humanly important. One would have had not so much to widen ones taste, as Greenberg expresses it, but come to recognize that African or Oceanic art is composed around aesthetic ideas specific to the those cultures. When Virginia Woolf visited the exhibition of Negro Sculpture» [Fig.6]. that her cousin, Roger Fry, discussed with such enthusiasm, she wrote her sister Vanessa that «I dimly see . . . that if I had one on the mantelpiece I should be a different sort of character – less adorable, as far as I can make out, but somebody you wouldn't forget in a hurry». She meant, I suppose, that if she accepted the aesthetic ideas embodied in African figures,





**Figura 7** Chris Ofili. *Holy Virgin Mary*. 1996. Saatchi Collection.

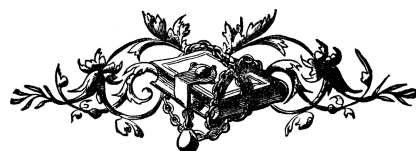
she wouldn't quite be the brittle Bloomsbury personage we believe her to have been, but instead someone responsive to the ideas of a culture very distant from that. Incidentally, it is said that Josette Coatsmellac, Fry's mistress, was so agitated by an African mask that Fry purchased in 1924, that she committed suicide!

Part of the pluralism of our culture has been the widening of means available to artists to embody aesthetic ideas – to convey meanings – not easily expressed by means of Renaissance-style tableaux, which were ideal for the brilliant embodiment of ideas central to Christianity. Spirit drives them to find forms and materials quite alien to that tradition – to use, just to cite a material hardly to be found in art supply stores, that became controversial a few years ago, namely elephant dung, used by Chris Ofili [Fig.7]. In that same show that Ofili's work made controversial, another artist had sculpted a self-portrait in his own frozen blood. (It was important that it be his own blood). Some years earlier than that Josef Beuys began using almost as a signature material, animal fat, emblemizing nourishment and



**Figura 8** David and Chie Hammons, *Installation view*, 2007. L&M Arts.

healing, as he used felt to emblemize warmth. Today art can be made of anything, put together with anything, in the service of presenting any ideas whatever. That puts great interpretative pressures on viewers to grasp the way the spirit of the artist undertook to present the ideas that concerned her or him. The embodiment of ideas or meanings is perhaps all we require as a philosophical theory of what art is. But doing the criticism that consists in finding the way the idea is embodied varies from work to work. *No hay reglas en las artes.*



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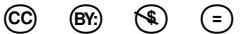
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