Just A Pot Of Basil Essay, Research Paper

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At the age of eight one of my favorite things to do was dream about living in a time where gigantic beasts loomed over the earth. Form the gigantasaurus to the brontosaurus I enjoyed anything from the Precambrian period. I grew to appreciate the monstrous creatures even more after I took my first trip to the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh. I had never seen such elaborate displays of marvelous full-scale dinosaurs, since I was accustomed to seeing them no larger than the height of a book or television screen. I recall roaming through the many displays pretending that I was one of them. Usually, I pretended to be the Troodon, a species that is thought to have the largest brain in proportion to the rest of its body. Even though I was smaller than the rest of the dinosaurs, I always knew that I could outsmart them if I was a clever Troodon. Of course I would forget that they had been extinct for millions of years, as the plaques in front of the enormous exhibits reminded those who were tall enough to read them. But I carried on in my world of dinosaurs while I was in the museum, free to dream as I cared to. The distance and time between the real dinosaurs and I disappeared when I was in the museum, in my little world.

Therein lies the significant difference between seeing and imagining, and being told or influenced, that is, being mystified. Mystification, as the art critic John Berger in Ways of Seeing explains, is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident (Berger 112). I was instantly captivated from the moment I saw the tied-together skeletons stretching as high as my own house; should I have cared about the petty details that would have distracted me from my own imagination?

Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is (Berger 125). The skeletal remains of ancient beasts strung up give only a portion of what such creatures really were millions of years ago. The color of their skin, the texture of their bodies, or even the size of their internal organs are just a few of the endless questions that remain unanswered, lost over time. But museums give something more than any book could ever tell, and that is the real life experience of seeing what could never be perceived otherwise. When life breathed through the dinosaurs they were never frozen into a perfect stance like they are portrayed in museums. Our imagination allows us to fathom what it really may have been like, but the past remains where it is, and can only at its best be relived in movies or museums or our imagination.

Museums have never made me feel awkward or uneasy, they come as second nature to me. I enjoy being enveloped by a different emotion each time I look at the skeleton of a dinosaur, or see a mummified pharaoh, or even a beautiful painting of a landscape. I have always been able to let everything go, and be consumed by a striking or stunning image. The wonderful thing about museums is that every few feet there lies an artist waiting to draw you into their world. Artists and their works contained within a single building span over centuries and continents. All contain different points of view and expresses it to the best of their abilities. Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way (Berger 112). History meets in a museum, and constantly forms new accounts through time. Each day that passes we have gained something which may add to our overall perception of the world around us. This is why Berger claims that we see things differently and therefore there exists no definitive account of exactly the way things were at any specific moment in time. It is lost forever, and at best, can only be saved in an altered form.

There is something magical about the power of the atmosphere of a museum. The silence is filled with a sea of thoughts running through viewers minds . When I first saw John White Alexander s painting Isabella and the Pot of Basil I was immediately captivated. Even my first glance told me that there was something more to the large pot in the painting than meets the eye. In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously (Berger 121). What the eye can perceive in an instant may take pages to explain. There lies the beauty of art. One glance at Alexander s work captivated me instantly.

There lives some hidden secret inside the woman s soul that lay next to the pot. And sure enough, the small plaque beside the painting described a story that told me that my assumptions were correct. The painting was written as a reflection of a poem written by John Keats. Here, briefly, is the story of Isabella and the Pot of Basil.

Isabella had two brothers that expected her to marry a well-endowed man so they could collect a significant dowry from her marriage. But Isabella never married, and fell in love with a carpenter named Lorenzo, who was working for brothers. The two were madly in love, and visited each other frequently whenever they were certain that no one could find them together. Soon though, a brother learned of their secret, and the two brothers took Lorenzo into the woods, killed him, and buried him in a shallow grave. One night while Isabella was wailing in bed over the mysterious disappearance of her supposed runaway love, Lorenzo’s ghost came to her and described the occurrences and location of Lorenzo s body. Isabella went to Lorenzo s grave, cut off his head, and took it back home with her where she put it in a big basil pot and covered it with moss, soil, and basil seeds. She watered the seeds with rose water and her own tears and talked to her basil until it grew incredibly lush. After her brothers stole her basil pot, Isabella died of misery and heartbreak, singing a song about the loss of her basil and love.

Alexander was able to condense this entire love story into a single painting. Without having read the 500-line poem or at least having some knowledge of the story, the average viewer would never have guessed that her lover s head was contained in the pot. The emotions contained within Isabella and her sacred pot reach beyond words. The pain that she felt consumed her to the point of her own death, where no words can exist. Depicted in the painting is not just a sad woman, but a woman who is about to die, sick and miserable with heartbreak, love, and loneliness. The meaning of an image is changed according to what one seen immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. [It] is distributed over the whole context on which it appears (Berger 123). Only after reading the small plaque beside the work and continued research after visiting completed my perception on the almost life sized piece of art. These important clues added to what I could deduce from the painting. Without them I would merely have seen just a pot of basil and a woman lying next to it. History is a mystery that is continually being investigated. Without knowing the past no deductions can be made of the present.

Alexander captures Isabella in a moment of perfect stillness. Perhaps she is already dead in the artist s eyes, lying beside her love, their souls reunited. The barren space below the pot could contain the spiritual body of Lorenzo. Alexander seems to have purposefully left the open space on the right side of the painting for his spirit next to her. Isabella has her eyes closed and her hand is gingerly extended. Her two fingertips brush against the side of the pot, as if she s imagining the pot to be his face. Her neck appears slightly extended as if she were giving the curved pot a gentle kiss. The stench that must have emanated from the pot would have been almost unbearable to others, yet somehow the power of love caused Isabella to ignore all reason and sanity as her soul sought for her love and mercy.

White flowers contrast with the overall melancholy of the image yet also add just the right touch of beauty, innocence, and peace. There are several of these flowers directly under the pot and another at the base of Isabella s feet. This white represents the purity of their love that was so terribly destroyed by her evil brothers. The tear of her garment on her right shoulder shows her distress and her apathy towards her self-appearance. Isabella s soul can be at ease once she is reunited with her beloved Lorenzo; her physical condition no longer matters.

There are of course many other paintings depicting Isabella and the Pot of Basil, but none seemed to capture the emotion as well as Alexander does. His art is powerful, captivating, and entices the viewer to look deeper, to learn more, and to almost feel the emotions raging through the canvas. The moment I saw the painting, I knew that there was more to it. The stillness that Alexander recreates reaches beyond words, and required only the same silence in return.

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe When in love, the sight of the beloved has a completeness which no words and no embrace can match (Berger 106). Perhaps my heart goes out to Isabella, for I myself am in love and can reconcile with what she may have felt. Even if Isabella was just a fictional character for both Keats and Alexander the emotional consequence of such a painting is undeniable. The love between a man and a woman knows no end, and its eternity continues through people of all time and nations. Of course we are all granted different perspectives, but there lies a central burning passion about love which can only be depicted as a fraction of its entirety. Thus, love in fact, [closes] the distance between the painting of the picture and one s own looking at it (Berger 125).

The research that I completed on Isabella and the Pot of Basil introduced a different and more in depth perspective on the work. Without reading the corresponding poem, I would perhaps have seen only a woman standing next to her favorite pot, and be left to imagine what more was involved. My intuition told me that there was more to the painting than what first met my eye. The observations and assumptions that I made based on the picture and poem are based completely my own deductions and learned assumptions that I have acquired throughout my life. Therefore, if John Berger had looked at this image in the same atmosphere as I did, he could have seen something completely different. Therein lies the truest beauty of art, for art is capable of capturing and recreating a moment lost in time without regard to the opinions of those who will see it. Art is beautiful often because we make it beautiful. Big ugly dinosaurs are certainly not beautiful to most, but to me as an eight-year-old, they most definitely were.

Being told what is beautiful and what meaning lies behind a painting is the epitome of mystification. According to Berger this lends [undeserved] authority (121) to the artist. The image now illustrates the sentence (Berger 122). And thus, whatever thoughts a viewer has conjured about a painting or work of art are lost, negated, or skewed, yet it provides a strong basis for interpretation.

The painting by Alexander exemplifies the poem by Keats. In many instances, poetry is associated with a visual image, but provides only the framework from which a perception of an image can be formulated. Words help set the tone, yet can never deter from the heart of work. I prefer to say that sentences help to illustrate an image. And John Berger would most certainly agree that there is much more to Alexander s work than just Isabella and a pot of basil.