Faces of Time

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WHY ART?

For a sometime philosopher to be a collector of art is actually rather anomalous. As far back as Plato philosophers have been very skeptical about what artists do. Plato devoted parts of three books (II, III, and X) of his great classic, *The Republic*, to an attack on artists because they are deceptive—they make us see things that aren't real. They contrive illusions by manipulating our senses and feelings rather than appealing to reason. At best artists are frivolous, at worst they are liars!

Nevertheless when I first learned about old master prints I was intrigued and I willfully disregarded Plato's strictures. I found that many great artists of the Renaissance and afterwards made engravings and etchings in addition to their paintings. That is, they deliberately chose printmaking—pressing lines of ink on paper—as a medium of expression. These prints weren't copies or reproductions but original works of art—yet in multiple versions, sometimes only a few, and sometimes several hundred.

Artists rode the wave of the new technology of printing inaugurated by Gutenberg in the Fifteenth century, partly to make their works more widely accessible and partly to get the special effects that only ink on paper could achieve. This meant that ordinary people could own a work of art by Albrecht Dürer or Rembrandt or Peter Paul Rubens, not just the well-to-do. This included me —and seemed to be an opportunity I couldn't pass up. Initially the antique subject matter was enough to capture my interest. Later I became fascinated by the nuances of printmaking techniques. Was that bit of shadowing done by etching alone or did the artist use drypoint to get that velvety effect? My appetite was whetted even further when I discovered that original drawings by these same artists could also be found on the market—even more desirable, I thought, because they were one of-a-kind and more lively and spontaneous. Little by little I found myself charmed by the very things Plato warned against—the illusions of the senses—but I was also learning to discriminate among them. Some were better than others and I had to learn to tell the difference.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Old Bearded Man in a High Fur Cap, ca. 1635

My first acquisitions were prints that I could afford—that is, cheap. But it didn't take long for me to realize that this was a poor criterion for selection. If they were inexpensive there was usually a good reason. I had to become more discriminating and more selective. I had to learn differences in quality of technique as well as quality of artistic vision. I came to see that there is a big difference between walking through a museum or a gallery and saying, "I like this" or "I don't like that" and actually putting my own hard-earned money on the line. Initially I was intimidated by the atmosphere of wealth and affluence one encounters in galleries and auction houses. But I realized after a while that not having a lot of money wasn't necessarily a liability. I was forced to be very selective about things that I tried to get because I simply could not afford to squander my meager resources on a mistake. I had to be sure that I was getting something of enduring quality and not just a whim of personal fancy. The fact that I had limited means actually sharpened my perceptions and judgment. I learned to be wary of conventional sentimentality and visual clichés and to look for originality and aesthetic power.

WHY PRINTS AND DRAWINGS?

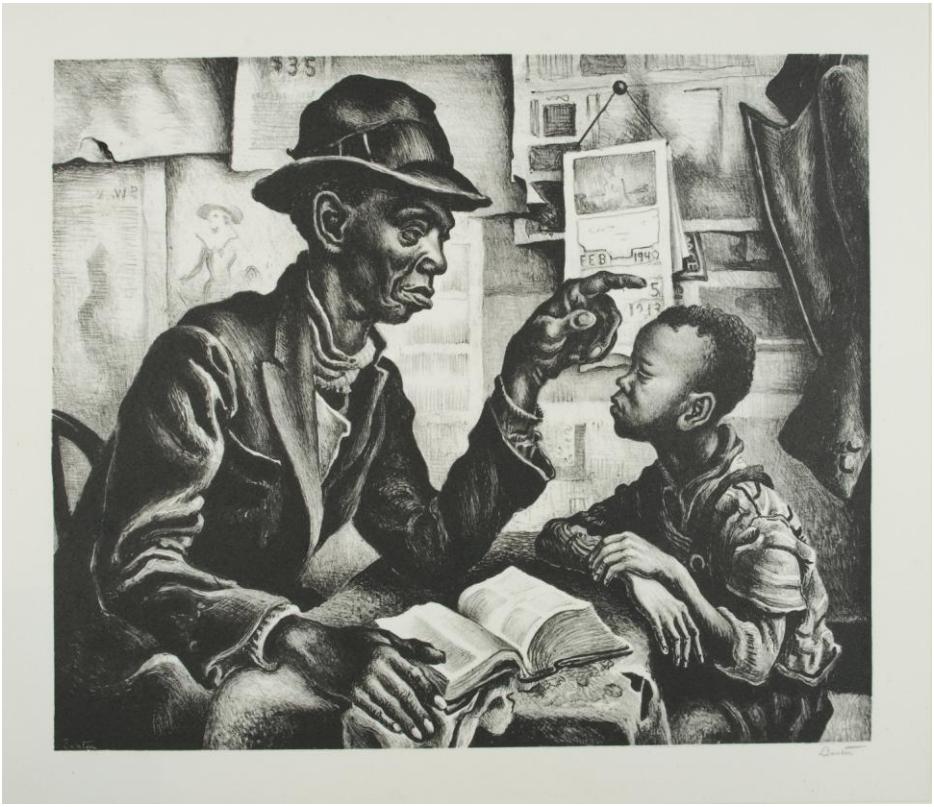
The next surprise for me was the realization that these works of art on paper had an effect on me. They actually changed the way I saw the world. My perceptions were altered. I began to see people and landscapes in linear terms. I had lines in my head! How could a few simple lines on a piece of paper make me see something that really wasn't there? This amazed me. It seemed like magic. Plato was right to fear the artists—they can and do mess with our heads. What I realized was that art works actually worked—they seriously affected my sensibilities, and this happened whether or not I happened to like the particular artwork. In fact, sometimes things that I didn't like actually affected me more than things I did like. In other words I began to see that art is not just a matter of personal taste. Art is power. Plato's fear and distrust of the artists was actually a back-handed compliment to them. He attacked poets and graphic artists because they spoke to actual human sensibilities and not to the ideal world of reason. Yes!--that's why it is a work of art and not an argument! This realization changed the sorts of things I looked for. I turned Plato upside down. I started looking for things that were not just pretty or pleasing but works that had aesthetic power—works that grabbed the senses and affirmed life in all its contradictoriness, rather than surpassing it with visions of the Ideal.

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, “Head of a Young Woman” 1916

WHY FACES?

I saw after a while that I needed to specialize. It didn't make sense for me to pick up pieces merely because of their random appeal. I needed a focus in order to build an interesting collection. When I thought about the different subject matters in art—landscapes, still lifes, figure studies, abstractions—it seemed that more than anything else, representations of the human face were most likely to demonstrate the power of grabbing and holding my attention. Other subject matters could be pleasing or problematic

but only images of the human face could carry the promise of meaning. That's what I was after. Not portraits necessarily—they are often too formal and stiff to be interesting—but characterizations of human beings in their momentariness, when we are most engaged, showed the kind of intensity I was after. What we look for in another's face are not only unique features and expressions but also aspects in which we recognize ourselves. We cannot see the meaning of our own faces; we are opaque to ourselves. Paradoxically, only in the eyes of others do we find ourselves. We look to others to find the affirmation of who we are. Even representations of others' faces can do this. That's why they are endlessly interesting—they give us glimpses of ourselves.



Thomas Hart Benton, “Instruction” 1940

WHY TIME?

Human beings are temporal creatures. Each of us has a birth date and each of us will have a death date. We are only here temporarily. We identify ourselves by the number of years we have lived. We are not the same persons at sixty as we were at six, or even at sixteen. That is why time is never neutral. Time always means something or we wouldn't bother counting it. Time makes a big difference to us because time is what we are. Time and life are virtually equivalent.

The measurement of time is a peculiarly human trait. Whether centuries or nanoseconds— what is significant is that *we* are always the ones doing the counting. The hours and days that we count are in one way or another the hours and days of human life. If you want to know what time looks like, look in the mirror. We are what time looks like. Our faces are the faces of time. Who we are is inseparable from the times of our lives.

Every artist seeks to make something timely that transcends time. He uses the materials and subject matter of his own time to fashion an artifact that will reach beyond his own time and speak to all times. They are rarely successful at this, I think, but it is nonetheless an effective criterion to evaluate a work of art. Despite the historical particularity and limitations of any given work of art, does it continue to speak to us? Does it manage—somehow—to translate its bit of temporality into something eternal?

Francis Bacon, Study For Portrait II (After Life mask of William Blake), 1955

The drawings and prints in this show have been selected with this theme in mind. Most of them were acquired almost by chance—the chance that they were on sale and the chance that I saw them. But something more than chance took place when these images impelled me to desire them—to want them as

a part of my world. The magic of lines on paper worked on me--as well as on the people who helped prepare this show. I am happy to share them with you in hopes that their magic will also work on you!

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