

Learning Art, a journey

By

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"A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black, because all things in nature are dark except where exposed to the light." Leonardo Da Vinci once wrote.

Since my early childhood, I wanted to be a doctor! In college, I focused only on biology, chemistry and physics, completely neglecting liberal arts. I did not read Shakespeare, Keats or Kalidas. I did draw images of plants, animals and of fossils of long gone animals.

My interest in art came slowly but early. Instead of speaking in doctor language to my patients, I talked to them through my drawings and illustrations. It made doctoring easy. Many years ago, a fifty year old woman, Annie who suffered from stomach cancer, came to see me for treatment. I drew a diagram on a paper to explain about her medical problem. She watched my drawings closely, listening to every word I spoke. After I finished, she looked at me with watery eyes; drops of tears flowing gently over her cheeks. She took the piece of paper from me and looked intently at the drawings.

"This is the first time, I clearly understand my cancer!" She said.

This single experience taught me power of an image as another means of communication.

During my early training, drawing and sketching on medical records became my major means of communication with patients, nurses and colleagues. Years later, I was told that I had left behind a reputation for exceptional clinical descriptions on medical records which helped subsequent young doctors in their training. My

drawings gave them another way to describe precisely thus avoiding long cumbersome notes.

During first year in medical school, I went through a brief period of misgiving. I was worn down by intense pressure of medical school and wondered if I really wanted to be a doctor. In town, a cousin who taught Botany at a local college lived. I often visited him and his family. He was also an artist. He probably sensed my difficulties because one day, he took me to his small study, where he had a wall full of books and in a corner an easel for painting. He talked about his passion for teaching and painting. He gave me a book titled "Lust for Life" by Irving Stone. He told me that only a balanced life is a happy life. To be happy one must not focus only on limited goals. One must develop many interests outside of one's profession. I did not understand his advice then; now, I do. The book he gave me was biography of Vincent van Gogh by Irving Stone. Van Gogh as we know, was a great but mentally troubled artist of the nineteenth century. I became fascinated by his life, his paintings, his struggles of mind and his poverty. My interest in art probably started in around that time.

Many of us have heard the story of seven blind men who were individually asked to describe an elephant. Each man felt a different part of the animal and thus described his perspective accordingly. This is also true with an art. A number of years ago, I visited the famous Louvre Museum in Paris and stood in a long line to see the painting, Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci. The line was long and the sun was hot. When I finally reached the painting, I had to stand several feet away from it and was allowed only a few minutes to look at it. The woman painted on the canvass looked calm and very photo like; colors were perfect and face looked smooth but silent. If there was a mysterious smile on her lips, I completely missed it. Certainly, it was a striking work of art by a famous artist of many talents. To me, Mona Lisa depicted a handsome but an ordinary looking woman. It is said that the model was special to Leonardo and that he carried the painting with him everywhere he travelled. Suffice it to say, it did not speak to me. Yet, as my brother explained to me later; during Leonardo's time, there was no camera to capture an image of the moment. From that point of view, certainly, the painting

looked a masterpiece! Later, I looked at this painting in print and noticed the subtle and soft brush strokes and silky shading of the face. No wonder it's called a masterpiece!

Vincent van Gogh and his paintings captivate me. The colors are intense and vivid; his brush and palette strokes are short and interrupted, certain and purposeful. To make a point here, I would choose a painting titled "Agostina Segatori sitting in Café du Tambourin". Vincent painted it in 1887. I saw this painting on my visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. In the painting, a woman is sitting at a small round table, well dressed and relaxed; by her expression I could say that she is enjoying a cigarette. A beer mug is resting next to her on the table. She looks confident and quite comfortable sitting with folded arms resting on the table. She has a red long hat on her head. The name of the model was Agostina. She was a famous French model who also owned the Café' du Tambourine. Vincent visited the café often both socially and for his meals. He had a difficult relationship with her because he owed her money for his meals there. He was also in love with her. Unable to pay, he would exchange his paintings for his debt. This painting impressed me due to an overall expression of the subject. The colors are vibrant and details of brush strokes are clear. My overall impression is of a rich woman sitting comfortably in the bar with a confident look. Sitting by herself, she is enjoying a glass of beer and a smoke. The posture of the woman seems natural, yet anatomically, the figure is not perfect! This painting by Vincent van Gogh struck me as an opposite to Mona Lisa. These two examples are over 360 years apart and illustrate two different periods in history of art. The two painters also used two different techniques.

Cave paintings by early humans have been found in many parts of the world. We do not exactly know when these paintings were created. The oldest one is about 51000 years old, but that is only a guess. It seems that creating art has been a natural trait of humans. These paintings are found on the walls and roofs of many caves. They are suitable places to draw and paint because they are safer from ravages of nature and dangerous animals. It is possible that there were drawings outside of the caves but they probably did not survive earth's changing

environment. One needs a well developed brain with cognition and handiness to draw and paint. As of now, we have not found such skills in any other animal. Cave art consists of purposeful scratches and etchings, drawings and paintings, using color pigments and shapes which give images an expression. Most paintings are of animals of the time like bison and other creatures which resemble elephant, deer and many others. The interesting thing in these paintings is that although there are images of two legged beings most likely humans of that time. Yet, their faces have no details unlike images of other animals. I guess our ancestors were not as self-absorbed as we are; we are always taking 'selfies'!

As a child I wondered "How we draw a figure on a flat surface that appears three dimensional?" Just look at a photograph of an apple; it has a shape and body to it. If we draw its shape with a pencil, it looks like a flat round outline; now shade it in a certain way; it looks like an apple. Leonardo de Vinci at a very early age found it to be a 'miracle'; just as such a discovery filled me with joy! We take for granted, our three dimensional world. If we close one eye and see the difference! The world will look flat! The two eyes focused on an object make it look a table, for example, with a flat rectangular top and four legs attached to each corner. Each side of the top relates to the other, in an order which looks like a table top. Our eyes connected to our brain thus provide a 3D image. Each eye sees an object, sends its image separately to the brain which then puts them together by fusing them for us to see in three dimensions. I took such a vision for granted until I met Bobby, a nine year old who suffered from a tumor of his right eye. When he came to see me, he was completely blind on the affected eye. The child, who loved soccer and was a good dribbler, lost his ability to handle the ball. He was unable to see 3D images around him. The world to him looked flat. He had difficulty riding the stairs and tended to fall if in a hurry or not careful. In a three dimensional world, we see an object, can go near it, touch it without stumbling because we know its exact position. Bobby was unable to do so.

Creating perception in artwork is important; it represents a complex three dimensional relationship between our vision and object of interest. It includes various shapes, shades, patterns and balance. Bobby too one day, would overcome

his problem because his brain would adjust. We do not yet know how the brain relearns but it usually does.

I found drawing three dimensional images challenging. One spring morning, I walked to a shopping mall near my home. The place was relatively quiet with few shoppers. I bought a cup of coffee and sat down on a nearby stone bench. The warm seat by the morning sun felt great. While I was enjoying my coffee, a couple of house sparrows appeared suddenly and sat down near my feet. Not paying any attention to my presence, they got busy foraging on the ground. I had the paper receipt from the coffee shop in my hand. I quietly took out a pen from my pocket and drew rough images of the sparrows. Later at home, I tried to draw from the rough sketches of the birds. I found it challenging! Sketching the birds was not a problem; giving them a three dimensional looks with a focused and deliberate expression was hard. This early attempt at drawing, taught me that drawings on a flat surface, must convey a message and an intent called "expression". The two birds have their head down; their beaks are pointed towards the ground; their expression is of an extreme focus to forage. To give them a rounded shape required a skill to shade. I found it a challenge!

To add value to a drawing on a paper by graded-shading at certain part of an object creates an illusion which looks three dimensional to a viewer. Add to this, knowledge of the source and direction of light falling on it, gives an added effect to its value. Add also to it, a shadow at a proper place. It appears even more lifelike.

Derek, a lawyer, loved to do oil paintings. He visited me once a year for follow up of his "cured" brain cancer. He usually brought a few of his latest paintings to show me. His subjects were mostly still objects and scenes around Lake Michigan in Indiana Dunes, where he and his wife spent summers. He chose subtle colors and his lines had gentle and delicate curves. His skies were bright blue and the water of Lake Michigan, shiny blue-black with gentle ripples. Boats of all shapes and size appeared all over the place. I encouraged him to talk about his work. He would do it with great enthusiasm. After a few years, I noticed a change

in his paintings and possibly his personality. The colors became brighter, edges a little sharper and the sky bluer and the boats became larger, distorted and in bolder colors. His wife mentioned that his handwriting was getting shaky. She claimed that he was also getting forgetful. Within a year, he was diagnosed with dementia. One could see signs of his mental decline even before he was clinically diagnosed of dementia. The changes are usually subtle and occur over long time. It is easy to see the change in rapidly advancing mental status but not in a slow one.

"Fractals" are fingerprints of artists, unique and almost never duplicated by another person. A fractal is a stroke of one's brush, pen, pencil or any object used to draw or paint. It never changes with age, disease or experience. Even with mental decline one can still recognize artist's fractals, though its content might change. In case of Derek, his paintings became simpler, the curves became faltering and strokes of his brush and pencil, short and numerous. Still, the outcome was beautiful. In the end, he lost the deliberative and purposeful strokes!

A rainbow in the sky is beautiful! We are not the only species that can see color; there are many. However, we are the only ones who can identify and describe colors. This is due to the sensors called cones, embedded in retina of the eye. There are three types of cones to perceive three different colors of red, blue and green. Each is affected by certain wavelength of light, thus stimulating the appropriate cone so that our brain can interpret various colors. We assume that one sees exactly same color as the other. This is not true! There are many among us who are "color blind". How it is that a person who is color blind, partially blind or completely blind, views the world? A color blind person has problem with perception of certain or all colors. Can such people paint? Certainly they can and they do. Does the world look to a color blind, all black, gray, and white or a mixture of several colors? Does one see only a certain colors and not the others? I put these questions to my friends and patients who claimed to be color blind. There were many opinions, none satisfactory to me. Each answer was different because each person's perception of his disability was unique and probably varied with his persona. To explain it better, here is a firsthand experience of color blindness by

Tim Masters, an English artist who spoke to the BBC about his color blindness. He gives a very vivid description of his disability.

"The earliest sign that I was colour-blind was, according to my parents, when I drew a picture of Doctor Who's Tardis and made it shocking pink. When I tell people I'm colour-blind some assume I see the world in black and white. That's far from truth. I can see rainbows; I just don't see them in the same way as most people. Walking around the Making Colour exhibition, I was dazzled by the ultramarine blues and daffodil yellows. But was that a big patch of green in Degas's *La Coiffure*? The sign said it was red, but my eyes said something different.....Just don't ask me for sartorial advice or repaint a police box."

According to NIH, 5-10 percent of US population is color blind. Boys are mostly affected by mothers who carry the recessive genes and are the carrier of this affection. Appreciation of art by a color blind person then becomes a personal experience. For a colorblind beauty is in his eyes!

For most of us, blindness means only a few things; either one is totally blind, partially blind or near blind. In normal circumstances, a visual awareness of a person's surroundings means a normal vision. Our eyes are like a camera fully equipped for the light to enter through a transparent cornea on the lens. It is then refracted on a screen called retina. The image received by the retina is then transmitted to our brain by the optic nerve, it is there that the mind perceives it as an image of the object and we then react to our world outside as vision. Can a blind with zero or very little vision draw and color? It is a puzzling question. I have never met or known a blind artist or seen an artwork by a blind. Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas in the classic story of Mahabharata, was born blind. During the Great War, god gave special power to his charioteer, Sanjaya, an ability to see without being at the site of the war. The live war images would be transmitted in real time to the king's brain; thus he could see the war in real time. A kind of wireless distant transmission like ZOOM today! Thus, Sanjay became his master's vision.

In reality though, a completely blind person by birth has never seen his surroundings. How then, he forms an image less alone learns the various colors? If we believe Leonardo de Vinci who once wrote "our eyes are the window of the soul", a person born blind should not have any image of the world. I believed this, until I read about Asref Armagan who was born totally blind. Yet, today at the age of sixty, he is a well known artist. Born in poverty to a Turkish couple, he taught himself to write and paint. He fascinated scientists at Harvard which invited him in 2004 to test his visual cortex, a part of his brain, which ordinarily is completely dark in a blind person. However, in Asref's case it lit up when he picked an object. We are told that he selects the colors of paint by Braille and consistency by touch. He also uses one color at a time. An important question is how as a blind from birth, did he acquire knowledge of an object or scene, its color and structure without ever seeing it?" We can only guess that he must have developed visual sense through spoken language and conversations with those around him and relating them to touch.

Like anyone else, artists too can have serious mental problems; most famous artist was Vincent van Gogh. He was mentally ill and he knew it too. It is thought that he suffered from schizophrenia with periods of intense activity followed by deep maniac depression. He might have had a bipolar personality also. It's important to ask how mental illness affects creativity such as in art. Vincent's illness gives us some insight. I came across an article by Dr. Dietrich Blumer titled, "Illness of Vincent van Gogh" published in 2002 in Psychiatry online. My own reading of Vincent's letters to his brother Theo leaves me with no doubt that he was mentally ill. Yet he produced an enormous body of artwork. His famous painting of "starry night" is a good example to explore his mental status. He painted this in 1887 during his stay in an asylum in Saint-Remy, where he admitted himself and was beginning to heal. In a letter dated May 1889 from Saint Remy he wrote to Theo,

"I think I have done well to come here, for by seeing the actual truth about the life of various madmen and lunatics in menagerie, I am losing the vague dread, the fear of the thing.... ". Reading his letters, one can sympathize with his

suffering and yet, he is also "serene" and productive. He tells Theo about his muse for the famous painting of the "starry night".

"This morning I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big....." . We can interpret his statement in any way we like. Soon after this he went into depression and committed suicide while working on several paintings. The most famous of these is the Wheatfield with crows. Many experts have tried to interpret this one as his last work. That may not be true; one doesn't really know. The one with a broken path and flying black crows does seem as if he was mentally in trouble. The strokes are short, rapid and seem in a hurry with no end of the yellow sea of wheat plants under a deep blue sky with black clouds and an intense sun.

I started doodling and drawing scenes from my neighborhood and images of gods and goddesses at an early age, mostly after watching my mother do the same. Line drawings and coloring them interested me. My paintings were more of an extension of my main hobby, photography. Being short sighted, my visual world was fuzzy and indistinct, yet my prints from snapshots were distinctively sharp. An eye examination during my army draft the examining sergeant diagnosed me with strong myopia. Until then I was completely unaware of my short sightedness. The US Army gave me corrective glasses to wear and that completely changed my world. The world then looked clear, bright and colorful. This also increased my interest in visual arts.

I first met Leon, a South African, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We both worked in the same department. His hobby was oil painting. He painted irregular shapes of abstract images in bold colors of bright red, yellow, blue and black on very large white canvas. He spoke of colors, balance, bodies and depth! His main tools were a large palette knife and wide camel hair brush. He took me to his favorite art shop and helped me buy art supplies. Thus began my own serious journey in art.

My early attempt to paint a landscape was a failure, at least in Leon's eyes. Leon took one look at it and gave out a loud sound of between horror and pity! To him, my work lacked sense of color, proper strokes, balance and perspective. I did not understand his criticism and he never explained it. Though he encouraged me; he never wished to see my work. I was also shy of my own artwork. I struggled but continued without formal training; I was convinced that persistence would make me a better artist. I would not show my work even to my family and friends. I believe that it was a combination of shyness and my fear of facing criticism. It did prevent me from asking for help. I also had an inbuilt bias against "copying" scenes from picture postcard or from snapshots taken by my camera. I considered copying as a kind of "cheating". One day, I took my daughter to home of an art teacher for a private lesson. I stayed in her studio while she taught her.

"The first thing about art", she explained to my daughter, "is to understand that a painting is not a photograph".

"An artwork is nothing more than an impression of reality. It's also an expression of the artist's view." She said. I listened to her intently. She continued,

"When you look at a tree, your eyes do not count each and every leaf separately; we look at it as a total sum of various shades of color, which changes constantly with ever changing amount and direction of light falling on it."

I looked up at the teacher; a light bulb lit up in my mind. Instantly, I understood the value factor of a painting; it's how we perceive an image or a painting. It's a play of light and dark and of differing shades of white, gray, and black or of various colors! When we look at a painting, we focus at only a part of it to form a quick impression which then stays with us. Each observer forms his own perspective. It truly about the blind men and an elephant! Each one described the part of elephant he touched.

I once painted my bedroom scene with two beds and a table between the two. I also drew a bed lamp on the table and a small alarm clock. I took great pains

to make it look realistic. After I finished and on an impulse, I added a chair in one corner too. Later, I realized that the chair looked out of place and robbed my idea of the painting. Disappointed, with my reckless mistake, I was about to tear the painting, when a friend walked in the room. She took the painting from my hand, looked at it and exclaimed,

"That's a great painting! Look at the beautiful chair in the corner. I love it!" She showed it to others and all agreed that the best part of the painting was the "large out of place twisted" chair in a corner, not the beds, nor the lamp, or the clock; just the chair! Most people focus at only a part of a painting and get an immediate impression of it. Since I have not shared my paintings beyond a very close family and friends, I am not concerned about criticism or comments of others. I continue to be shy of sharing or showing my paintings to others. I probably have developed my own style. In general, I must confess that the hobby has given me great pleasure and peace of mind, especially during my retired life and helped me escape from loneliness during my recent illness and now in the time of Corona.

I am convinced that my hobby made me a better doctor and benefited my patients. I was better able to communicate with them through art. I also believe that art heals and restores both body and soul. Recent studies have confirmed benefit of 'Art Therapy' in patients with cancer undergoing treatment. They have also shown that patients getting chemotherapy and who participated in art did better in most quality-of- life measures.

I think that empathy and compassion are key assets of a physician. There is an impression that people who are naturally kind, tend to enter medical profession. It may be true, yet empathy is not inborn and can be learnt and taught. Can art make one a better doctor, a nurse or a caregiver? It is true that medicine requires precision of facts and a cogitative mind to make decisions of life and death. I call them acquiring empathetic and analytical skills. A physician should be exposed to art during his education and even during his professional life. A sixth sense or a clinical sense does not come easily to a doctor but it helps if exposed to

art. Learning such skill comes in starts and spurts, some call the process "punctuated balance or ability". In my view, use of art is crucial in learning empathy and a sound clinical judgment.

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