

# Plato: No Hope for Painting?

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In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato takes a firmly belittling attitude toward painting, holding it to be an imitative craft. In light of the goals, qualities, and powers often attributed to painting, Plato's view on painting seems wrong and cannot but provoke a response in defense of painting. In challenging Plato's view of painting, the following will be done: Plato's position on painting and the reasons he gives for it will be stated; some of the oversights in Plato's view will be noted; R.G. Collingwood's critique of Plato's view of painting as an imitative craft having deleterious effects on the soul will be summarized; Kandinsky's theory of painting will be summarized in order to show that the idea of the spiritual in painting can be compatible with Plato's basic tenets concerning the nature of truth; attention will be given to some of the goals and accomplishments of ancient Greek artists which seem in keeping with Plato's values, thereby contradicting Plato's seeming view of the limits inherent to painting; and finally, Plato's views will be looked at briefly in terms of their historical context in an effort to shed some charitable light on why Plato held the views of painting that he did, and to suggest that he might not have really believed the hard-line view on painting that he indicates in the *Republic*.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Republic*, Plato excoriates painting for what he sees as its negative relation to truth and the soul based upon what he thinks painting is and does. Basically, Plato thinks painting is merely imitative of physical appearance, is thereby removed from an understanding of the workings of the objects it depicts, and is thereby, in the most crucial consideration, still

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<sup>1</sup>Although Plato discusses imitation in both Books III and X of the *Republic*, he specifically discusses painting in the *Republic* only in Book X. Since this paper's focus is Plato's views on painting as voiced in the *Republic*, I have chosen to concentrate on those statements of Plato that bear directly on this topic. This happens to involve me in limiting my sights to portions of Book X. True, the curious difference of tone between Books III and X may seem necessary of heeding for worthwhile discussion of Plato's views on any form of imitation, including painting. However, the decision to slight consideration of Book III in this instance may seem pardonable if one considers that 1) Plato takes the harder line against imitation in Book X, and 2) I have tried to show how, by some consideration of historical context, this harder line may be read in a softer way, making it more compatible with Plato's ability to set forth the ideas that he did in Book III. In this way, the efforts of this paper are not impervious to, nor neglectful of, the difference in tone between the two books concerning imitation.

further removed from intellection of the forms or essences underlying the sensible realm (and thus, one might extrapolate, even further removed from the Good, source of all life, which is yet beyond the forms). Paintings are thus, as Plato says, "at a third generation from nature" (597e), "third from what is" (599a), "third from the truth" (602c). In other words, provided by Plato himself, the painter creates but mere phantoms of no more value than mirror images, for the painter not only draws upon no functional understanding of the objects he depicts, but consequently shows no understanding of the way in which each thing is good or bad. Having unequivocally asserted painting as imitation, Plato emphatically states: "the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning about what he imitates; imitation is a kind of play and not serious" (602b). But the ramifications do not rest there, as Plato hastens to note. In not concerning themselves with the working of the objects they depict, painters do not use measuring, counting, or weighing as they relate to nature. As a result, painting is not the work of the calculating part of the soul. Rather, it appeals to "the part in us that is far from prudence, and is not comrade and friend for any healthy or true purpose" (603b). Thus, ironically, for Plato, painting is bad both because it is imitative and because it is not imitative enough to be the object it depicts. The upshot of Plato's discussion of painting is that painting is doomed to be superficial; it cannot rise to the level of abiding truth, let alone to the level of functional understanding.

Even accepting Plato's position on the nature of truth and knowledge, there remain oversights in Plato's description of painting. For instance, and most obviously, Plato's assumptions ignore the possibility that painting may not be limited to imitation of physical appearance. Plato does not consider, nor seemingly even conceive, the possibility of non-objective painting. Further, even if, by some stretching of the imagination and the facts, painting could only be seen to be limited to imitation of how things look, that still in no way means that painting is necessarily superficial, incapable of penetrating to and evoking deep insight. Such are the issues raised and defended by Collingwood and Kandinsky. Further discussion of these issues will be saved until presentation of the respective views of Collingwood and Kandinsky.

Another point of contention which can be raised concerns Plato's comparison of painters to deceptive wizards (598d). Plato implies that painters and other imitators attempt to conceal through illusion that their works are three places removed from the truth. Granted, during Plato's time there lived and worked the virtuosic Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios. These two tried to outwit each other with *trompe l'oeil* painting: Zeuxis painted grapes that looked so real that birds came to peck at them. But when Parrhasios painted a tablecloth that deceived Zeuxis into trying to lift it, Parrhasios was agreed by both to have created the better illusion. For while Zeuxis had only fooled birds, Parrhasios had tricked another human being. Even this story, however, involves

consciousness of artistic fiction. As Sandstrom notes, the triumph of Parrhasios "came not of the deception itself but of its unmasking" (Sandstrom, p.16). Besides, such extreme cases of utmost illusionism as the goal are the exception rather than the rule throughout the history of art. As the art historian Leo Steinberg has noted, paintings typically call attention to their artifice, to the physical facts of the medium. As Steinberg puts it, "Old Masters always took pains to neutralize the effects of reality. . . the more realistic the art of the Old Masters became, the more they raised internal safeguards against illusion, ensuring at every point that attention would remain forever focused on the art" (Steinberg, pp.40-41). They did this by such means as radical color economies, preternatural beauty, quotations and references to other art, abrupt internal changes of scale, and flat patterns as borders. True, such attention-calling to artifice may not have been typical of the painters of Plato's day, explaining Plato's quickness to conceive of painting in terms of imitation. But even with Greek illusionism, appreciation of the illusion involved recognition of the work as a painting, first and foremost. Further, regardless of the degree of illusionism sought in ancient Greek painting, not all painters have sought to fool the eye into believing their works to be "reality" rather than painting. Plato's indictment of painters as deceptive wizards is not universally applicable because it ignores the side of painting that seeks awareness of its medium.

Other oversights in Plato's remarks on painting are detected by Collingwood, who critiques four assumptions at work in Plato's view of art: 1) that art is a craft; 2) that art operates as a stimulus to evoke certain responses; 3) that some art is representative, and 4) that the nature of representation is imitation or literal rendering of surface detail. Concerning the first point, Collingwood observes that Plato was operating out of the Greek notion that artists are but craftsmen (Collingwood, pp.5-6, 17). Naming six significant reasons why art is not reducible to craft, Collingwood indicates how the confusion of art and craft leads to serious misunderstanding on Plato's part of what painting is and does, how it works on the viewer, and to what standards it should really be held if Plato believes that truth and goodness are achieved through proper functioning. The most pertinent of the points raised by Collingwood in terms of Plato's statements on painting has to do with means and ends (Collingwood, p.5). Collingwood notes that an artwork is not a means to a certain use by and satisfaction of the audience as a crafted object or tool would be. Nor is art a quantifiable tool for crafting certain emotional responses. To believe that it is, as Plato does, is to subscribe to what Collingwood calls the stimulus-and-reaction theory of art, which is but a subset of the means-and-ends approach (Collingwood, pp.30-34). Art is not correctly read by those approaches because the effects of art are not predictable in that way. Nor is the artwork indicated to be wrong or bad as a result. To Collingwood, this means that what makes something art is not a function

of means, and that whatever means it does serve are *fringe effects* which are not direct, quantifiable, or consistent. Plato, however, insists on reading painting as a tool to certain ends, which he feels to be inevitably bad ones. Plato judges painting by its educational value and resultingly deems it derelict (600a, 605b). In reading painting in those terms, Collingwood indicates, Plato misunderstands how painting really works, and where its essence and value truly lie. He thereby unduly condemns it, and throws the baby out with the bathwater.

In like manner, Collingwood shows how Plato's way of associating representation with art contains a similar flaw. In attacking some poetry as representative, and seemingly all painting as so, Plato, says Collingwood, "was using the wrong means . . . . He did not apply the Socratic method with enough vigor; had he done so, he would have pulled himself up by the question, 'How can I discuss representative poetry before I have made up my mind what poetry is in itself?'" (Collingwood, p.49). Rather, says Collingwood, *no art is representative*. That is to say, "A representation may be a work of art; but what makes it a representation is one thing, what makes it a work of art another" (Collingwood, p.43). Further, representation in painting is not limited to, does not solely involve, imitation of physical surface, as Plato seems to think. Different levels of representation are possible, including emotional representation achieved through selective and seemingly symbolic, though still literal, representation. Another level of emotional representation contains no literal imitation at all and is abstract, but still aims at capturing emotional qualities. Therefore, information deeper than surface facts is possible in painting, contrary to Plato's implications. Once again, by Collingwood's point of view, Plato mistakenly denigrates painting for qualities which are not of its essence.

Collingwood provides a way to see how painting may go beyond the superficial and indicates how the nature of painting is too elusive to be adequately judged by the reductive standards applicable to craft. Judging painting as a craft, one misses the way in which painting really functions. On the other hand, one may not wish to go so far as Collingwood does in dismissing as irrelevant the emotional and intellectual effects evoked by painting. Kandinsky's theory of the spiritual in painting provides for such an interest in painting as stimulus. Kandinsky shares with Collingwood a respect for painting, but unlike him places the value of painting in the effects it has on people (Kandinsky, pp.25-26, 45). Kandinsky's further value in this context is that he has roughly similar attitudes toward truth, knowledge, and the soul as Plato, and yet at the same time he credits painting with more potential for contact with truth and the soul than does Plato (Kandinsky, p.39). Kandinsky indicates a path for people who would wish to reconcile Plato's epistemology with a more beneficent regard of painting.

Kandinsky would agree with Plato that there are universal truths, that each thing has an abiding principle that is not of matter, and that people can penetrate beyond the physical to know the truth. Kandinsky would also agree with Plato that painting has an effect on the soul. But unlike Plato, Kandinsky believes that painting is one of the best means for penetrating to truth and providing knowledge of it to the soul (Kandinsky, p.29). True, painting concerned only with technique and the material realm will leave the soul hungry. But painting can tap into the spiritual kernel of things, and then it will lift the soul above and beyond the physical trappings to the inner spirit of nature (Kandinsky, pp. 25-26). It can do this through non-objective painting. That is, it can use the vibrations of pure color, form, and composition unfettered by representation of material shells. Pure color and form can directly affect the soul to communicate the inner spirit of things (Kandinsky, pp.39, 40, 44, 47). As Kandinsky says, "shades of color . . . awaken in the soul emotions too fine to be expressed in prose. . . . there will always be something left over which the word fails to express and which yet is not supererogatory but the very kernel of its existence" (Kandinsky, p.50). The artist knows the kernel and how to convey it through color and form due to inner necessity. Further, the vibrations of color and form are so certain, Kandinsky feels, that they can be expressed mathematically. He states, "The final abstract expression of every art is number" (Kandinsky, p.73). Overall, like Plato, Kandinsky believes in absolutes; unlike Plato, Kandinsky believes painting can achieve them and that painting can be purely spiritual but never purely material.

Kandinsky's theory goes against Plato's not only in positing non-objective painting and its effects. It also goes against Plato's assessment of imitation and its effects. Kandinsky would disagree with Plato's view that representative or imitative painting is necessarily shallow. Rather, one type of imitation is a naive realism that escapes contrived or academic rules of formal beauty. This "great realism" penetrates through to and brings forth the content or inner spirit of the things depicted. Whether through the "great abstraction" or the "great realism," painting can arrive at full spiritual content (Selz, p.125).

If Kandinsky seems too mystical for comparison to Plato, at least the ancient Greek artists do not. Perhaps the clincher against Plato's stated attitude toward painting is that some of the ancient Greek artists had goals and achievements in line with Plato's high ideals. One of the best examples of "Platonic" art would be the work of the sculptor Polykleitos, who worked in the mid-fifth century B.C., shortly before Plato's birth. Polykleitos remained so famous that, a century later, "Aristotle used 'sculptor' and 'Polykleitos' interchangeably" (Gardner, p.161). True, Polykleitos was a sculptor, not a painter. But if Plato railed against painting as too imitative and materialistic, sculpture could not have been seen but as even more inherently imitative and materialistic. Since sculpture broke

through such constraints to convey ideals, then the possibility of the same for painting ought to have been seen by Plato.

At any rate, Polykleitos is considered one of the best examples of the mid-fifth-century emphasis by Greek artists on proportion and rationality. Polykleitos worked according to a canon of proportions of his own devising which related the parts of the body to every other part. The extant Roman copy of Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* shows how he used proportion and complex, subtle organization to make his work conform to a preconceived ideal. It also shows these things: through his emphasis on proportion, Polykleitos is close to Plato's concern for proper measure. Through his emphasis on relations of proportions, i.e., ratios, i.e., rationality, Polykleitos is close to Plato's concern that rationality rule. In his use of an ideal form into which he fitted the human body, he is close to Plato's belief in universal, ideal forms to which all things adhere.

Given that there were examples of artists who created rational, intellectual, idealistic, albeit material, forms, why was Plato so harsh on painting? He seems to have been responding to a change in his culture and its arts. About the time of Plato's birth, Greece was passing its cultural zenith with the defeat of Athens by Sparta. At the same time, majestic, grand themes in sculpture were replaced by softer, more sensuous, images. Painting became increasingly given over to naturalism and illusionism, valuing those qualities to the exclusion of others. As Gardner says, in Greek art at this time, "majestic strength and rationalizing design are replaced by sensuous languor and an order of beauty that appeals more to the eye than to the mind" (Gardner, p.163). Collingwood openly connects this development with Plato's attitude toward art: "What Plato wanted to do . . . was to put the clock back and revert from the amusement art of the Greek decadence to the magical art of the archaic period and the fifth century. . . . Plato's discussion of poetry is rooted in a lively sense of realities: he knows the difference between the old art and the new--the kind of difference that there is between the Olympia pediments and Praxiteles--and he is trying to analyze it" (Collingwood, pp. 49, 52).

Still, if Plato knew the difference between the old and the new art and wanted to return to the values of the old, why did he exhibit no tolerance for painting? Why did he allow that poetry could be either good or bad, non-representative or representative, but indicate that painting was only bad and imitative? Maybe he had no experience with Greek painting but what seemed trivial and decadent. But why did he not extrapolate from the "good" examples in sculpture to see good possibilities in painting? In all fairness to Plato, the answer may be that he was not treating painting as a separate topic for analysis in the *Republic*. He brought in painting more as an off-handed way to elaborate his criticisms of imitative poetry. Given what painters actually were doing at that time and place, and given how their paintings were probably typically read, Plato could casually refer to them to show what he meant by imitation and what he despised in it, and

be able to assume that people would know what he was talking about. If Plato had devoted a full, separate analysis to painting, surely his insightful and searching mind would not have maintained the indefensibly hard-line description of painting in the *Republic* as a universal truth. Perhaps Plato's comments in the *Republic* were intended to be taken more as references to the state of painting as it was, rather than as final judgments on the incontrovertible nature of painting.

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