Crowther, Paul


Aesthetics is a moving target. What is beauty? How does art elicit sublime experiences? And, on a more practical level, should aesthetics seek universals through general ideas or through the examination of specific works of art? Like many, Paul Crowther reviews historical examples of aesthetic thought, including Plato’s rejection of representational art in *The Republic* and Immanuel Kant’s definition of the sublime, but unlike other aesthetic studies, *How Pictures Complete Us* looks carefully at a range of specific artists. Crowther’s approach is most welcome because he focuses on what artists do.

At the outset, *How Pictures Complete Us* covers well-trodden terrain in regard to the classical view of art. Crowther restates traditional suspicion of images most notably made by Plato in *The Republic*. Another famous example from aesthetic thought is Plotinus’s attempt to create the most beautiful figure by combining the best parts of different models. Crowther recognizes something that artists know; such a task isn’t just a cut-and-paste exercise but is, instead, “The artist’s selective intervention [that] strives to remedy defects in appearance through being based on the artist’s idea of reality.” More importantly, Crowther points out how art directs the viewer to consider more important questions, “By making the appearance beautiful, [the artist] facilitates the soul’s contemplation of that which is higher than nature. The soul is helped to return to its metaphysical source.” Crowther uses Plotinus’s method of assembling parts to discuss how art invites the viewer to contemplate metaphysics and in so doing, demonstrates how specific examples can lead to universal ideals.

Later, he discusses Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy of Arts in England. Reynolds developed a theory of painting that ranked subject matter in order of importance and placed history painting at the top. History painting presents, “nobleness of conception, which goes beyond
any thing in the mere exhibition even of perfect form; there is an art of ani-
mating and dignifying the figures with intellectual grandeur, of impressing
the appearance of [philosophical] wisdom, or heroic virtue." Crowther gives
Reynolds's famous ideas a spiritual dimension. As the viewer looks at classi-
cal forms and history painting, in particular, “ideal beauty” becomes “ennobled
appearance—a reciprocity between the individual presentation and its defin-
ing universal.” Furthermore, “The transcendence becomes aesthetic as well as
logical; we have the feeling of both the Form and ourselves being here and else-
where simultaneously ... We are lifted by the particular's idealized appearance
to a more universal level ...”

As *How Pictures Complete Us* races toward contemporary art, the ideals
that artworks demonstrate change. Ideal beauty and nobility are replaced
by the inability to depict horrific historical events and “presentness” while
metaphysical experience remains. To help us understand how artworks call
to mind these themes, Crowther creates an invisible aesthetic Virgil, if you
will, who leads us into paintings. He calls this imagined person the “notional
internal viewer,” a figure who easily steps into a painting and walks around.
This is most easily imagined when looking at a landscape but is no less useful
“entering” a hazy color field painting. In other words, Crowther helps us to
understand what it would be like to be there.

Crowther stresses the magical quality of paintings through the eyes of his
aesthetic Virgil. For instance, once inside a painting, the notional viewer stands
in a time and place that does not change, a world created by an artist that “does
not have a past or future independent from the creator's or audience's will.”
Only through our “will” can the future of the world within the painting exist.
Crowther suggests that such a place, still and changeless, exists “in a relation of
idealized immobility,” or as the author prefers, ideal “presentness.”

Presentness, the perfected stillness and hyperawareness that the internal
viewer experiences, is an ideal condition. “In presentness ... a moment of
appearance is made visible as a permanent possibility of experience. This self-
contained character is matched by the comprehensiveness of presentness. It
makes its subject matter available to the viewer in a cognitively more enhanced
form than is allowed in ordinary vision.” What is this cognitively enhanced
perception like? It is akin to the way God sees the world: “God's thoughts will
penetrate their object and comprehend it exhaustively.” God's thoughts are
“self-contained individual acts,” but are also part of a “systematic, omniscient
consciousness.” In other words, God sees all and knows all possibilities. Our
notional internal viewer within the painting's ideal stillness might see all and
know all, as well. That viewer imagines numerous possible futures for what is
in the painting. We, the external viewers, can imagine a variety of different