

Abigail Readinger

Dr. Ryan McBride

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### Brush Strokes from Emotion and Experience

*Burnt umber. Rust. Brown. As I respectively open each tube of oil paint and dab a small amount onto the palette next to me, I glance at the photograph taped to my easel. The faces of my twin sister, Emily, and my best friend, Heather, laugh back at me, captured forever on a beach in Ocean City in the split second it took to push the button on the camera. I grin back at the photograph, remembering tiny details from the day it was taken: the watery crash of the waves on the shore, the cool ocean breeze forever blowing sand in our eyes, the bright beach towels we laid in the warm sand, and the constant laughter radiating from the three of us. I giggle to myself as I remember the three of us standing at the edge of the cold water, then sprinting into it when Emily gave the signal. Glancing back at my palette, I pick up my brush, gently mix the colors, and begin.*

Creating a work of art involves more than the straightforward, mind-numbing movement of the brush from palette to canvas and back, adding layer upon layer of paint. It involves the actual experience of the creation and the experience of what lead to the creation, the emotions brought forward from the process, as well as the end product. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey states that “to see, to perceive, is more than to recognize. It does not identify something present in terms of a past disconnected from it. The past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter” (Dewey

303). While painting a picture of friends from a photograph, the distant memories of the day it was taken leap into the present, as if they occurred recently. Adding brush stroke after brush stroke to the canvas is not merely a repetitive action, but each is a memory in itself. They bring the past back to the present, and allow the painter or creator to experience the emotions of the memory, and to truly take a step back and see it. In order to understand how, exactly, experience adds to and sculpts a work of art, one must define what an experience is. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey states “In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains directness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors” (Dewey 305). In other words, an experience grows and transforms as it continues, adding color and distinction to the experience as a whole. The experience, with its vibrancy, adds to the creation, or work of art, by bestowing the vitality into the work of art itself. He elaborates, “There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation” (Dewey 305). The pauses, therefore, do even more to define a memory, and keep that memory from slipping away. Art represents the experience that occurred, or the experience the artist had. The finished product is a constant reminder of the experience, and is therefore more vibrant and significant because of it. This is shown when Dewey, in *Art as Experience* states, “Art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey 311).

*I pick up my brush and lightly dip it into the pinkish-red color I just finished mixing, and as I carefully add it across the bridge of Emily's nose on the canvas, I*

*remember. I remember how strong the sun was that day, giving all of us a stinging sunburn we did not notice until the next day. When I pick up a new brush and boldly add a streak of blue to the volleyball in the right-hand corner of the canvas, I remember the feeling of the rough sand as I dove for a pass, and Heather's loud, clear voice as she called for the ball.*

The experiences that take place and are captured in the painting are what add life to the canvas. The experience defines what the painting will eventually become, and executes this by way of the memory. This is explained when Dewey states, "We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. [...] Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience" (Dewey 305). Furthermore, the experience extends and adds to the work of art, and brings out and highlights the significance of the experience. This is illustrated in *Art as Experience* when Dewey states "we can discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment. The art product will then be seen to issue from the latter, when the full meaning of ordinary experience is expressed" (Dewey 300). Furthermore, it is important to note that experience is relative. What is significant to one may be inconsequential to another, while an experience that is trivial to one may be momentous to another. This is illustrated in *Air Guitar*, when Hickey states "I would be forced to admit that all the volumes of Proust were nothing, quantitatively, compared to the twenty-minute experience of eating breakfast on a spring morning at a Denny's in Mobile" (Hickey 164). With that said, an experience, however insignificant or meaningful, sculpts a work of art in a way that is varied for each artist and experience.

The experience of what lead to the creation of a work of art, in my case a day trip to the beach and a chance snapshot, add life and vitality to the painting itself.

It is now necessary to define emotion, for emotion adds to, and shapes, a work of art as well. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey defines emotion when he writes, “Joy, sorrow, hope, fear, anger, curiosity, are treated as if each in itself were a sort of entity that enters full made upon the scene, an entity that may last a long time or a short time, but whose duration [...] is irrelevant to its nature. In fact emotions are qualities, when they are significant, of a complex experience that moves and changes” (Dewey 308).

Emotions define an experience, adding important aspects to the experience as a whole. These emotions can change and evolve as the experience continues, and this further develops and adds life to the work of art. Examples of the emotions that occur during a positive experience, such as my day on the beach, are both calm and friendship. Aristotle, in *Aristotle on Rhetoric* defines calm as “the opposite of being angry, [...] in play, in laughter, [...] in fulfillment, generally in the absence of pain and in reasonable expectation of the future”, and friendship as an experience where “one [...] loves and is loved in return” (Aristotle 122, 124). These positive emotions shape and define the experience, and therefore add this positive sense of emotions to the work of art. The emotions of the experience connect the parts of the entire experience, allowing the artist to produce a complete, full-bodied, and alive representation of the experience. This is illustrated when Dewey states, “[Emotion] thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of the experience” (Dewey 308).

*As I once again glance momentarily from the canvas back to the photograph, I note shadows in the laugh lines around Emily and Heather’s eyes, and I remember the*

*collection of emotions from the day. I dip my brush in the bluish-black I am using for the shadows and add depth to the crinkled lines around Emily's eyes, remembering the laughter emanating from the three of us, captured in the painting. I can still feel the ache in my stomach and cheeks that only comes from intense, prolonged laughter, and the feeling of immense joy and delight. A wave of light-heartedness washes through me as I recall the emotions of freedom and carelessness that were woven through the day, and I add a quick, short stroke to the dark blue of the waves.*

In a work of art, the end product is important, but the entire process- the experience and emotions- are just as, if not more, essential. Without the sense of experience and emotions felt, the end product will not have the same vigor and liveliness it has when these two points are an integral part of the process. This important journey is perfectly illustrated in *Art as Experience* when Dewey states one “should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, not by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the journey itself” (Dewey 297). The entire experience and emotions are imperative in the successful representation of the final product. This final product will then effectively embody the experience and emotions of the artist. “In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so” (Dewey 305). *As I finally put my brush down and take a step back, I look at my finished oil painting. I see Emily and Heather laughing back at me, with huge smiles, a light sunburn, and wind-blown, wet hair. The experiences and emotions of my day on the beach also gaze back at me, in the laugh lines around their eyes, the relaxed, careless look of the two, and the sense of freedom I am reminded of*

*when I look at them.* These tiny details add life and vitality to the work of art, and shape and sculpt it into more than a flat, lifeless portrait.

Experience and emotions significantly add to a work of art. Art cannot be, and never will be, successful without the sense of experience and emotions, such as calm and friendship, that add to every brush stroke. These give the painting life and energy, and a purpose that cannot be accomplished without these important factors. This is effectively illustrated when Dewey states, “Art is thus prefigured in the very process of living” (Dewey 303). *Now, as I pack up my brushes, I gaze at the painting that is not merely a painting, but a work of art full of emotion, experience, and life, and I smile.*

Works Cited

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