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The Russian Bride’s Attire:
A Journey Through Art and Consciousness

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ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the triad of creativity, consciousness and culture. How the viewer “sees” the painting is influenced by consciousness and the surrounding culture – creativity is the creative process of the artist. Art is fluid in the sense that viewers see it differently at different times in their lives. The creative process experienced by the artist is the genesis of the painting. However, the art takes on a life of its own for every viewer. The definition of consciousness in this paper is based on the awareness and environment of the viewer.

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The Russian Bride’s Attire

Introduction

The Russian Bride’s Attire by, Konstantin Makovsky lives at the Palace of Legion of Honor in San Francisco it is a stunning 110 x 147 inches. It was completed in Russia around 1887. When M.H. de Young, founder of the museum died in 1926, his bequest included The Russian Bride’s Attire.

The following is a quote from Greg Stern :In an article from Zenergo.

This may very well be the most popular piece in the museum. This life-sized painting draws a viewer into the snapshot moment as a Russian bride is being prepared for her wedding and not looking terribly happy about it. Her sister is at her knees trying to console her while her father or the groom is trying to barge his way in but is stopped by one of the attending ladies. This was a historical painting when it was executed (1887), depicting a Romanoff wedding in the early part of their dynasty in the 1600s (Aleksey Mikhailovich to Maria Miloslavskaya). The painting is rich in color, detail and personalities. It is fun to just stare at it and imagine what each character in the ensemble is thinking. Step up to the painting so that it completely fills you visual field and you will find that you too become part of the painting.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE VIEWER

David Peat claims that the creative arts stimulate a level of consciousness that lies deep in the psyche of the viewer. It is embedded within the very physicality of the body. Peat says: When an artist paints he is projecting his consciousness, which arises from the personal, and the collective consciousness. I am suggesting that consciousness arises out of processes deep within the body, projected by creative acts, on to the external world where it can then be internalized into awareness. In other words, our awareness, our direct consciousness of rational thought, involves the purposeful manipulation of internalized mental states through the experiential process of viewing art. I am also putting forth the idea that the perspective of the viewer changes through time related to the life experiences and the development of a conscious awareness of the self as well as the awareness of the art (1987).

In Consciousness Explained Better Leslie Combs presents a list by Ken Wilber who suggests that there are many developmental lines when someone views a piece of art:

- The cognitive line (or awareness of what is).
- The moral line (awareness of what should be).
- The emotional or affective line (the full spectrum of emotions).
- The interpersonal line (how I socially relate to others).
- The needs line (such as Maslow’s needs hierarchy).
- The self-identity line (or “who am I? Such as Loevinger’s ego development).
- The aesthetic line (or the line of self-expression, beauty, art and felt meaning).
- The psychosexual line, which in its broadest sense meant the entire spectrum of Eros (gross to subtle to causal).
The spiritual line (where “spirit” is viewed not just as Ground, and not just as the highest stage, but as its own line of unfolding).

Wilber’s developmental lines were instrumental in how I viewed this painting (pg. 47-48).

To be perfectly honest I am not particularly a fan of Russian art. If I were to choose a Russian artist it would have probably been someone like Chagall, who was an early modernist. I have always thought of Chagall’s art as being brilliant and captivating. I am not even a fan of traditional art or realism as portrayed in this painting. I chose this painting because of the way it spoke to my senses. It is grounded in the physical world and I view the artist that created it as a craftsman more than an innovative painter.

As stated in the book Glittering Images, The most important question about art is: what lasts and why? Definitions of beauty and standards of taste are constantly changing, but persistent patterns remain (Paglia, 2012). I subscribe to a cyclic view of art and culture: styles grow, peak and decay only to flower again through periodic revival (Paglia, 2012). I have revived this painting from the perspective of one person in three different life periods.

The Russian Bride’s Attire, it is only a painting, a vision of the artist, but it addresses the universal concept of the wedding day: A day that is filled with anticipation and a day that is often filled with doubt. When I interviewed the docent at the Palace of Legion of Honor they claimed that people are brought to tears when they view this art. You can feel it welling up deep within the subconsciousness and the emotions overflow. This mystifying response to the painting is much like crying in the theater or during a great symphony; we are in touch with our deepest feelings transferring our deepest feelings to our thoughts when we view art. When you step up to this painting it fills your visual field and you too become part of this experience. Makovsky probably did not know at the time he was creating this work that it would evoke such emotion in the viewer many years later. One docent stated, “This is a painting that must be viewed at a slow pace”. The Russian Bride’s Attire is a life size painting that portrays a snapshot moment as a bride is being prepared for her wedding.

THE BRIDE

In 1648 Tsar Alexis of Russia reached the age of marriage. The Tsar was to choose his bride from among hundreds of noble girls. Boris Morozov, the Tsar’s tutor arranged the marriage to Maria Miloslavskaya the youngest daughter of the noble Ilya Danilovich Miloslavsky. Morozov later married Maria’s younger sister Anna.
CHOOSING THE BRIDE

If quantity of children was the measure of a successful marriage this union was quite a success. Maria bore 13 children, five sons and eight daughters during the twenty years of marriage to Alexis. Only two sons survived infancy and Maria died weeks after the birth of her thirteenth child. Alexis remarried on February 1st 1671 and had three more children. Did Maria know that she would experience such tragedy during her childbearing years? Is that what prompted her sad expression in the snapshot of the marriage preparation? Was Makovsky aware of this sad history when he painted the picture? All the proceeding questions are rhetorical and we will probably never really know the answer.

THE ARTIST

Many of Makovsky’s paintings depict an idealized view of Russian life in the past. He was considered a Salon artist. Born in Moscow, Makovsky was the older son of a Russian art connoisseur and amateur painter. His mother was a composer and hoped that her son would one day become a composer. Being a good son, he considered what his mother wanted him to do
and went to France searching for composers that could inspire him. However, Makovsky found that his true calling was art and in 1851 he entered the Moscow School of painting. He became a top student and was awarded many prestigious awards. In 1858 Makovsky entered the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. In 1862 at the height of his work at the Academy he refused to paint on the set topic (Scandinavian Mythology) and left along with 13 other rebellious students before he was awarded a formal diploma. This tells me that Makovsky was not simply a painter that would allow the Academy to dictate his subject matter.

Art has many levels of meaning and can be viewed and interpreted in many ways. The Russian Bride’s Attire possesses many levels of meaning. On one hand the painting is a representation of wealthy aristocrats and attendants, mostly women. On the other hand Makovsky presents a melancholy bride approaching the time of her marriage. The time in which this painting is situated was the 1600’s and the Tsar was an absolute ruler. When the Russian Bride’s Attire was painted Makovsky and many of his colleagues wanted to end poverty and wanted political liberties and representation for the average man. There is some debate as to whether this painting was created for public or private view. The consensus is that it was created for public viewing and Makovsky wanted to communicate a picture of better times.

Makovsky made an important transition to a group of artists that called themselves the Wanders. They were a group of Russian realist artists’ lead by Ivan Kramskoi who protested the academic restrictions of the Academy and formed a group that evolved into the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions. This was the time that Pissarro also rebelled against the Salon in Paris. Pissarro began his career within the confines of the academic traditions of the Academy, much like Makovsky.

Of course we have to consider all of the external cultural processes that contribute to this transformation, such as how is the artist situated in the environment and the culture. There was a sense of transition and a struggle for freedom going on all over the world; the subject was now the noble peasant or the common man. Makovsky’s work was a product of the same era of Russian patriotism that produced novels such as Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov. (In 1849 Dostoevsky was jailed for subversive activities.) During this time, 1895 Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) is arrested for revolutionary activities. Just a little over 10 years later Marxists groups unite in the Social Democratic Labor Party while strikes and student riots spread throughout Russia. The vision of the artist is part of the process of transformation; it is the alchemy of transformation of the artist and the culture.

After a trip to Egypt and Serbia in 1889 Makovsky’s interest shifted from social and psychological subjects to the concept of colors and shape. Some consider him to be a forerunner of Russian Impressionism. The Russian Impressionism movement lasted for approximately fifty years between the dates of 1930-1980. This art form celebrated the common people depicting their lives in an intimate manner. The Russian Bride’s Attire was painted in 1887, not exactly a scene of the common people, however, it did depict an intimate moment in the life of a bride. I think this “intimate moment” of reflection and change can be applied to the transition Russia was experiencing at this time.
The painting depicts a group of 15 women and a boy. There is also another male figure standing at the door. The composition of the painting puts the bride at the center, with an older woman combing her hair. There are three woman standing in a line near the bride and three women standing near the wall having a conversation. All of the women are dressed in what appears to be heavy clothing with only their faces revealed. They are all wearing elaborate headpieces that would indicate their aristocratic position in society. There is another elaborate headpiece in the painting. It is situated on the dresser in front of the bride. This is the mantle of the bride when this is placed on her head she is no longer a girl, she is now the property of her husband, with enormous responsibilities. The bride is placed in the center of the painting with six people on either side. The bride seems to be rather unhappy and appears to be consoling the girl at her feet. Perhaps this is Anna the sister of the bride who later married Morozov the noble that arranged the marriage.

The style of the painting is historical realism. The colors are mostly reds and blues, apart from the walls and furniture with accents of black and white. The jewel tones of the magnificent carpet on the floor are particularly enticing to the viewer. The light source seems realistic coming for the most part from the window. There is an interesting play of light that is twinkling about the heads of the three women standing near the wall in the back. The light is almost depicted in the manner of impressionism as being fluid and transparent. When I viewed this painting, at this time in my life, the play of light above the heads of the attendants stands out too me more than anything else in the painting.

As stated earlier, the composition of the painting places the bride at the center of the picture, with almost the same number of figures at either side. Ones eye is drawn to the bride because she is the only person illuminated in white. The eye of the viewer then follows the diagonal line created by the attendants that form a line on the left of the bride. The viewer is aware of the wealth portrayed in this painting due to the elaborate clothing of the women. The background reveals vertical and horizontal lines that stabilize the painting for the possible disorder that could result from the number of people situated in the painting.

The face of the bride creates a second major level of meaning. When one sees the face of the bride it has a gloomy reluctant quality. The industrial revolution was just beginning in Russia. The serfs were emancipated and forced to work expanding railroads; they had no other choice but to work in these conditions to survive. Perhaps they could identify with the bride’s feelings. Some believe that Makovsky was advocating for revolution in a very subtle way. He painted the faces and the headdresses with precise craftsmanship to indicate social class.

PERSONAL VIEW OF THE PAINTING

Consciousness takes the form of its container. As the mind grows so does consciousness- Dr. Leslie Combs

The first memories I have of this piece were embedded in the consciousness of a five-year-old child. One day my mother and I went to the museum with my Tia Bella, who always
encouraged our exposure to art. According to family myth I caused quite a scene at the museum because I wanted to climb into the painting. My mother and aunt had to drag me away kicking and screaming from the painting, I would not listen to them when they told me it was only a piece of art hanging on a wall. For me it was a window and if I could climb through it I could be a part of the festivities. I caused such a scene at the museum that I was not allowed to see this painting again until I was about seven or eight. Enough time had passed so I did not think I could climb into the painting when I saw it. I was past the stage of Piaget’s preoperational magical thinking between the ages of 2 and 7, (although I think magical thinking lasted a bit longer in my case). According to Dr. Combs in his book Consciousness Explained Better, during this stage children are prone to magical thought. Objects such as dolls and toys can have lives of their own, in my case it was the painting that had a life of it’s own (2009).

According to family myth I was an extraordinarily eccentric child, I would sit in the tree in the back yard reading fairy tales and talking to my dolls for hours. My sisters would entice me to join in the group play, but for the most part I simply refused to join in. It was not because I did not like them or that they were particularly unkind; I was simply not interested in playing House or Cowboys and Indians. I could not generate an interest in their board games or playing jacks with the rest of the children my age. At that time in my life I can remember seeing mermaids on the horizon when I went to the beach. I also thought I could breathe underwater if someone would just reveal the secret of how to do it. I thought my Tia Bella knew the trick and would not reveal the secret because she did not want me to join the mermaids and leave my family. In retrospect I think one of the reasons that I was so attracted to this painting is because I spent so much time reading fairy tales as a child. This Russian Bride’s Attire had a “fairy tale” quality about it.

When I was about seven or eight my father would take me on an excursion once a month to any location I wanted to visit. I would always choose the same two destinations, the deYoung Museum or the Palace of Legion of Honor. My father was not particularly a connoisseur of art; he would have preferred to go to a baseball game. Father would bring his newspaper and sit and read when ever we came across a bench, while I wandered around the museum. The first thing I would do when we went to the Palace of Legion of Honor was to rush to the room where The Russian Bride’s Attire was displayed and simply sit and observe this life-sized scene of the bride’s preparation for her wedding.

My family consisted of my father and mother, three sisters and my aunt, so I was extremely comfortable with this female dominated scene. Perhaps that is why I was so attracted to this painting. There are only two males in the painting; one is the boy sitting on a bench in the foreground. I always wondered about the boy sitting next to the woman on the bench. It looked to me as if he was having a snack while holding a toy boat in his lap. I wondered if he felt out of place in a room filled with women. It seemed that he was extremely focused on the bride and what she was saying to the girl sitting on the floor next to her. It was a mysterious scene filled with the opulence and excitement of a wedding. I wondered what jewels would be chosen from the boxes on the table. I wondered how the hair of the bride would look after it was completed by the woman who was styling it. The women standing closest to the bride were paying particularly close attention to how the hair was styled, while the bride was having a conversation with the girl sitting at her feet.
The Russian Bride’s Attire

The other male figure in the painting is the man standing at the door; he was rather disturbing to me at that time. Was he the groom trying to enter the room on the wedding day? It was my understanding that it was a bad omen for a groom to see his bride on the wedding day. (It was probably not the groom due to the age of the figure; the groom was only in his late teens at that time.) After looking carefully at him, I thought he could have been the father of the bride or perhaps the tutor that arranged the marriage. In any case it did not appear to me as if he was welcomed into this sacred chamber of the bride and her attendants. At that time I did not understand that these women were probably attendants to the royal family. I thought of them as aunties caught up in the excitement of the wedding.

The gold box in the right hand lower corner was the container of the special jewels that would adorn the bride along with the garments placed on the chair next to the box. I wondered if the white dress she wore was an undergarment or was it the wedding dress. Would the attendants cover the dress with the opulent robes draped on the chair? Why did everyone look so solemn? The only characters in the painting that seemed to be having a jolly time were the women at the door shooing the man out of the room. Were the attendants giving the bride advice, or were they simply grooming her for the ritual?

This was a rather simplistic evaluation due to my age and lack of understanding of the culture and the social milieu of Russia at that time. My childhood memories are still quite clear when I consider this painting; it is as if they are living in my body and interactive with all of the many significant childhood memories. The Russian Bride’s Attire was so alive and vibrant for me as a child; I can still recall most of my thoughts about it.

I did not see the painting again for many years because my family moved to the suburbs where I grew up. The next time I saw The Russian Bride’s Attire I was a young woman and I had a different perspective of the painting. I saw the look on the brides face as being profoundly sad and the women around her looking a bit solemn and focused on the task of preparing the bride for her wedding. The days of fairytales, breathing under water and mermaids were long gone. (Not really gone but pushed way back in the container of consciousness.) I was not familiar with the artist, but I was aware of the stratification of the society in Russia. I learned that she was the bride of the tsar and it was most likely an arranged marriage, perhaps that is why the bride did not seem happy. What seemed like magical opulence when I was a child translated to aristocratic over indulgence and lack of concern for the plight of the average man in Russia. I also saw this painting as being oppressive in the case of the arranged marriage of the bride. It was no longer a fairy tale scene and I had no desire to climb inside the painting.

The perspective of the viewer is changed by time and information. The question I ponder is; it is the same painting, the same viewer, in the same place. Life experience prompts the viewer to “see” the painting differently, in this case more critically and more attuned with the social milieu. I was seeing this painting through the eyes of an activist during the time of Angela Davis, the Vietnam War, and the birth of the woman’s movement. The information I brought to this painting as the viewer in the latter years was much different from the fairy tale perspective of a small child. A radical left wing activist was now viewing the Russian Bride’s Attire.
This magical, mystical painting had transformed into a dark scene of oppression. Of course the painting had not transformed, only the political and sociological perspective of the viewer. I now saw the man at the door as being the oppressor, not only of the bride but a symbol of repression that was rampant during this time in Russia. The entire room was filled with mindless women chatting in the background about trivial matters. The little boy sitting quietly observing the scene was the hope of the future and the revolution. The opulent attire of the women was a representation of the wealth and power of the ruling class. The light filtering through the window was, in my mind, the hope of the future.

When I reviewed the painting last week, the mystical beauty of the painting once again captivated me. After many more years and many art history classes I had a completely altered perspective of this painting. At this point in time my point of view was much more analytical focusing on style, light and form. The perception of the viewer is a working revolving reality. The image of the world is constantly created and constantly changing due to the influence of the culture and the social system of the time. The colors of the reds and blues in the carpet were so vibrant; I wondered if it was from the Ottoman Empire? For some reason the carpet was not of primary importance to me when I saw this painting many years ago. I found this carpet comforting and familiar, it stood out to me more than when I viewed it in the past. I realized that in my world there had always been a carpet much like this one in my life. There was one in my home as a little girl and there is one in my home now. The light in the painting always fascinated me and it still does. The source is a window and it also looks as if there is a window behind the boy. It cannot be seen, but the way he is illuminated indicates that there may be a window behind him. I appreciated the gentle shadows found in the painting much more than I did when I viewed this painting as a little girl and as a young woman.

I noticed that the painting’s historical realism is aided by the illusion of three dimensionality. The artist creates this effect in several ways. Overlapping is used, since the bride is in front of the other women. Shading is used in the faces and the folds and creases of the clothing. The lines of the ceiling highlight linear perspective. I also noted how atmospheric perspective was used since the clothing of the women in back was much less clear than the women in the foreground. Now I see The Russian Bride’s Attire as a marvelous exercise of light and form, yes also content but less judgment of the content.

When I viewed the painting recently for this paper I felt more as if I was viewing it as a young child rather than as a young revolutionary adult. I could appreciate it for its beauty and composition. I was a viewer that was aware of the cognitive line or awareness of what is. The magic was still there but in another form, because although I am the same person, I was seeing this art from the esthetic line of perception. There was no judgment about the people represented in the painting, I saw it as a fine piece of art that was so realistic a little girl wanted to climb into it many years ago.
The Russian Bride’s Attire

References


Elizabeth A. Luce is currently a second year PhD student at the Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco CA. She received her Masters Degree in Education and a Bachelors’ Degree in Anthropology. Elizabeth lived in Montego Bay, Jamaica for nine years; during that time she managed several art galleries in Montego Bay area. She also lived on Kauai Hawaii and taught art at Kamehameha Schools.