Commentaries

An Example for Art-Critical Instruction: Roger De Piles

Some persons mistakenly think that the history of art criticism is composed exclusively of the works of professional art critics. Usually one thinks of art criticism as consisting of critiques of current art exhibitions. Actually, this conception of art criticism started in France in the eighteenth century with reviews of the Royal Academy art shows. Another view of art criticism holds that it began with the critical writings of individual authors who commented on the art of their time, or of a previous period, and who offered reasons for art's being excellent or for its having failed in the attempt. These writers were not professional art critics; they were scholars, historians, humanists, amateurs, painters, poets, and collectors. What they shared was an involvement in and love for art and a concern for what they believed to be artistic excellence. One such individual was Roger De Piles.

Roger De Piles (1635-1709) was a French diplomat, tutor, art theorist, amateur, and art critic. His first work on the arts was his translation of Du Fresnoy’s poem “De Arte Graphica,” which expressed the ideals of classicism in verse form. Later, in 1709, he published his most important and original theoretical work, Cour de Peinture par Principes avec une Balance des Peintres (The Principles of Painting with a Balance of Painters). This book contained the essence of his theory: his assertion that color, light, and shade had an equal value with drawing and his ideas on the uniqueness of the visual qualities of painting. It is in the work of De Piles that the “je ne sais quoi” quality of the visual arts—referred to by Pascal and others—and its effect on the perceiver receive more mature consideration and further development. In many ways, De Piles’s insistence on the separation of visual and literary criticism made him the forerunner of modern art criticism.

His aesthetic theory has three purposes: to liberate the theory of painting from literary theory; to emphasize that visual interest in a painting or artwork is independent of an intellectual, moral, or religious interest in the picture’s subject matter; and to change our way of looking at pictures to one more closely associated with the way we look at nature.1

This last point makes an important break with the manner in which in the seventeenth century the French Academy had proposed that a work of art should be viewed. According to Poussin and later André Félibien, a picture should be “read.” This means that the viewer should look at it in stages, concentrating on groupings of figures that would describe episodes of a story. De Piles disagreed with this episodic way of looking at art. He
believed that a visual work of art should be perceived immediately and spontaneously as a physical unity.

It was De Piles's interest in the shapes and colors of artistic artifacts that separated him from classical theorists like Félibien, Poussin, and Charles Lebrun who considered painting to be similar to poetry in serving the primary purpose of narrating a story. Ignoring the differences between the two media, these academic theorists emphasized the artist's concern with the unity of a painting's subject rather than the unity of its objects, forms, and colors. Those formal aspects of painting were of course acknowledged, but they were deemed merely part of the artist's craft and less important than the appropriateness and clarity of the subject being represented. Before beginning to paint, the properly trained artist should concentrate on the suitability of the subject. De Piles, by contrast, believed that this was only one side of an artist's preparation and that thought should also be given to the painting as a visual image, a pleasing illusion of nature. De Piles expressed this emphasis on the visual when he said that the end of painting "is not so much to convince the understanding, but to deceive the eye." De Piles agreed with Pascal's idea that the experience of aesthetic pleasure could not be defined; but, unlike Pascal and others, he believed that the elements of immediacy, surprise, and effectiveness could help explain the experience. In his Principles of Painting, he defines enthusiasm as an elevated state of mind that spectators achieve when they appreciate the artist's invention and feel the sublime effects of the work's subject matter. For this author, De Piles's notion of enthusiasm serves him as an explanation of aesthetic experience. It is important to note that, according to De Piles, the spectator is able to receive the full effect of the subject matter only because of a painting's sensuous appeal.

De Piles's writings on art are characterized by his respect for the uniqueness of painting as an art form. Believing painting to be an imitation of nature and, as such, a combination of artificial conventions for the purpose of deceiving the viewer, he states, "Painting, in general, is but daubing; its essence lies in deceiving, and the greatest deceiver is the best painter." De Piles's interpretation of the classical ideal was more realistic than that of many others because it most frequently stressed the criterion of convincing realism. Since color is an essential aspect of visual reality, it is also an essential part of painting. For De Piles, color is the soul of painting and drawing its body. He states, "As an artist, I would prefer Raphael, but as a painter, Titian is greater." In particular, he defended Rubens's art and use of color against those conservative members of the Academy who valued drawing exclusively. His description of Rubens's Fall of the Damned is glowing in its admiration for the skillful drawing, the color, and the use of masses of lights and shadows. In his Abridgement of the Lives of Painters...
(1699) he is critical even of Poussin, stating that because the painter had "looked too much at the antique his paintings often looked like stone themselves and lacked something human."8

De Piles was the first Frenchman to purchase and exhibit a painting by Rembrandt whom he admired for his naturalism despite his lack of classical decorum and idealization. (De Piles held that painters must observe nature but seek a union of two truths: the simple truth of everyday nature and that of ideal nature. This combination will result in perfect truth.)9 De Piles was also the first classical theorist to consider landscape an important subject matter, historical painting having previously been held to be most important.

De Piles's Balance of Painters contains a sampling of his critical judgments of prominent painters as well as his advice to critics. "But I must give notice," he states, "that in order to criticize judiciously, one must have a perfect knowledge of all the parts of a piece of painting, and of the reasons which make the whole good; for many judge a picture only by the part they like, and make no account of these other parts which either they do not understand, or do not relish."10 Critics must be open to an unprejudiced impression of the painting. They should search for the reasons for the effect (of enthusiasm), and only then should they consider whether or not the rules have been observed.11 (This sounds quite similar to Jerome Stolnitz's description of intentionalist art criticism, the approach preferred by the author.) Critics are also encouraged to present good arguments for their judgments, whether positive or negative. De Piles further agrees that we need to study as many great masters as possible to derive all the standards of art and that we should evaluate art by comparisons among artists.12

In Balance De Piles compiled, "to please himself alone," a list of major contemporary and past artists whose work he analyzed according to four components of painting: composition, drawing, color, and expression. On this scheme, an artist could receive a score of 0 to 19 on each of these components, with 20 being perfection. He gives high scores to baroque masters of his century. Rubens receives a 65, Van Dyck 55, and even Rembrandt scores a 50, despite a score of only 6 in drawing. Although De Piles collected Rembrandt's drawings, he could not score him higher in this category because of the absence of ideal truth in his figures. Even an artist like Lebrun scores a surprisingly high 65, with a 16 in expression (of classical ideals). It is clear that history did not confirm that last evaluation, nor the low rating of fifteenth-century masters like Bellini (27). Caravaggio scores only 28, with a 0 in expression and a 6 in drawing. Thus De Piles concurred with the academicians in their preference for the Carracci over Caravaggio and their devaluation of Michelangelo as compared to Raphael. His only clear difference with them lies in his favoring color and artists that emphasized color in their work, for example, Rubens and Titian.

What are we to make of this seeming contradiction in a man who collected Rembrandt's drawings but evaluated them poorly? We must consider De Piles within his historical setting, his period and place. He was still a classical theorist living at a time when individual experimentation and
originality as we know it today were largely denigrated. Instead, the emphasis was on ethical reasoning, on classical standards of perfection and idealized nature as means to gaining insight into God and the ideal. De Piles would not have been able to break completely with the pervasive norms of his time.

In spite of this, he became the major influence on modern art criticism because he had initiated the separation of the art object from the art subject. He also described the proper manner of evaluating art as consisting of looking at art with an open mind, having an aesthetic experience with it, and then explaining the nature of that experience. De Piles's acceptance of the greatness of artists from countries other than France and Italy, as well as his collecting and exhibiting Rembrandt's work, is evidence of less dogmatic thinking and a broader range of taste and appreciation than were displayed by his contemporaries and lays the groundwork for the directions that modern critics would follow.

I do not wish to suggest that De Piles is the perfect model for students to use in shaping their own strategies for judging art; however, his writings do reveal some of the characteristics of and prescriptions for intentionalist art criticism. As a critic he stood out from his peers. His ideas on criticism stress the visual and the aesthetic and can be used as an exemplar for the study and development of art-critical thought.

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NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 45.
3. Ibid., p. 70.
4. Ibid., p. 111.
12. Ibid., p. 47.

Music and Empathy

One of the puzzles about instrumental music is why lovers of music consider certain pieces great and worthy of attention, yet no one seems able to explain the reasons for that. As Peter Kivy recently noted in this journal,