

## SUSANNE K. LANGER'S AESTHETICS OF PAINTING AND SOME INDIAN ART

This paper seeks to summarize Susanne K. Langer's aesthetics of painting and to see how, and to what extent it is applicable to a few select actual works of Indian art. I choose these paintings not with a view to assessing their merit generally, but only as illustrations of some points of theory.

### I. Langer's Theory

Langer defines art as "the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling."<sup>1</sup> The key ideas of this definition may be put as follows :

1. Art expresses *forms of feeling*. The term "feeling" here means not any particular feeling or designable emotion—such as joy and sorrow—but rather a general way of experiencing *any* content. The general form—say, the rise and fall of direct experience—cannot *by itself* be ever actually felt. But, it can be made an object of attention or contemplation, as distinguished from analysis.

2. A work of art or created form is symbolic and not symptomatic of human feeling. It is a symbol in the sense that it makes us think of the life of feeling as such. It is a "non-discursive symbol that articulates what is verbally ineffable".<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it is an "expressive form".

3. The third point that follows from the above is that a work of art is an object of direct apprehension or intuition, and that it cannot be understood in a discursive manner.

In addition to the formulation of a general theory of art, Langer turns to distinguish each art separately. And this is done by considering the question : what is the "primary creation" of each art ? In the case of painting, she answers, the primary creation is "virtual space".

#### (a) 'Virtual space' in painting :

"Virtual space", according to Langer, "is what is always created in a work of pictorial art".<sup>3</sup> This at once suggests a difference between the actual and "virtual" elements in a work.

A piece of flat canvas, pigments etc. are the actual elements provided before a painting is created. The space that is occupied by the flat surface of the canvas is also, no doubt, actual. *This* space cannot be created; it is just ever there. But as the painting emerges, the piece of canvas no longer appears a mere flat surface. What emerges is a new, dimensionless space which is created in and with the painting and is autonomous in nature. To put it in Langer's own words :

"The picture, in short, is an apparition. It is there for our eyes but not for our hands, nor does its visible space, however great, have any acoustical properties for our ears... The whole picture is a purely visual space. It is nothing but a vision."<sup>4</sup>

This directly suggests two distinct ideas. First, "virtual space" is to be found in the painting itself; and, secondly, 'seeing' the painting alone is the only act relevant and necessary for its aesthetic contemplation. The first idea requires us to attend to the nature of "virtual space" in relation to the work, and the second suggests that the concept be considered also from the viewpoint of the onlooker.

The nature of virtual space *in the work* may be considered by turning to Langer's following utterance :

"Virtual space, being entirely independent and not a local area in actual space, is a self-contained, total system. Whether it be two-dimensional or three, it is continuous in all its possible directions, and infinitely plastic. In any work of art, the dimensionality of its space and the continuous character of it are always implicitly assured. Perceptual forms are carved out of it and must appear to be still related to it despite their most definite boundaries."<sup>5</sup>

Three ideas are here suggested : first, that "virtual space" is autonomous in character; second, that it is infinitely plastic or admits of manipulation; and finally, that it is an organic whole.

The autonomous character of "virtual space" means that such space is an objective quality in a painting. It is independent of the fact whether the work is seen or not. Further, it has no relation to actual space. The actual space of the canvas is limited to its physical boundaries. But what is painted on the canvas

could be a mountain that seems vast, nay infinite. The vastness of the painting created has no direct relation to the size of the canvas.

The space that is created in a painting can be made to seem quite variously in different paintings. Space in one painting may seem recessive, while in another advancing. The truth indeed is that virtual space in one painting is in no way related to the virtual space in other paintings. Each painting has its own realm of virtual space which is neither connected with the actual space outside it nor with the virtual space in any other painting.

The third point viz., that virtual space is an organic whole, directly follows from the second one : what is infinite cannot be a mere aggregate. For, if it is an aggregate, its parts can be made out and numbered; which would mean it is finite, not infinite.

**( b ) ' Virtual space ' and the Onlooker :**

Let us now consider the concept of virtual space from the view point of the onlooker. The following words of Langer may here be quoted with advantage :

“ Everything that is relevant and artistically valid in a picture must be visual... Everything that is given at all is given to vision; therefore, we must have *visual substitutes* for the things that are normally known by touch, movement or inference.”<sup>6</sup>

The simple meaning we get here is this. A painting is to be regarded by the viewer only in terms of its visual impact. The import of a painting, as an art symbol, is to be had from ( or in ) what the painting itself seems and not from anything outside it.

Now, how does the beholder apprehend the various elements or “ visual substitutes ” in a painting ? The following remark of Langer provides the clue :

“ ...for the beholder the work of art must be not only a shape in space, but a shaping of space --of all the space that he is given.”<sup>7</sup>

The different elements in a painting are not merely in virtual space. For, were they mere included in the latter, one could *point to* them apart from virtual space. But such abstraction is not here possible. For, a painting is an organic whole whose very

existence is spatial in character. The various lines or forms (say, human) in a painting have no independent existence apart from and without any relation to the whole painting. A natural corollary to this is that the viewer must see a painting *as a whole* and perceive the *total* import that results from the interplay of the various related elements in the painting.

(c) 'Virtual space' and expressiveness :

"Virtual space" distinguishes painting from other forms of art, say music, dance etc. Expressiveness, on the other hand, distinguishes what is art from what is not art. Now, all paintings are not expressive, though Langer seems to claim that the concept of virtual space is relevant to all paintings;

"Even *bad* pictures create a picture space".<sup>8</sup>

We may therefore consider how the two terms, "virtual space" and "expressiveness", are related to each other.

I would like to maintain that Langer uses the term "virtual space" in at least two different senses :—

- (i) In one sense, it just seeks to mark off actual space from the kind of space that is created and treated in a painting. It is in this sense that Langer interchanges "virtual space" with "picture space".
- (ii) In its other sense, "virtual space" at places signifies that picture's space which is *also* expressive.

To my view, the second sense is more important and relevant to the full meaning of "virtual space".

(d) 'Virtual space' and its Creation :

The artist's ideas—whatever they be—have to be translated into visual form. And, what is visual must be seen in space. The artist creates virtual space (as opposed to actual space); but "without the organising shapes it is simply not there".<sup>9</sup> The point we need stress here is this. The creation of "virtual space" and the making or organising of the forms in a painting are not two independent activities, although they can certainly be distinguished. From the artist's point of view, the two go together; for the "forms" just cannot emerge as "living form" unless they are created in virtual space. And, as for "making space visible, the artist has to employ forms." In point of fact, therefore,

“organisation of forms” is at once “organisation of space”. Thus, as there are numberless ways of organising forms or shaping them, there are also “numberless ways to making space visible”.

The crux of the argument is that in any kind of painting the artist has to employ “visual substitute” for whatever he wants to express. It follows that the expressive character of a work of art results from so organising virtual space as to charge it with expressiveness.

(e) ‘Form of feeling’ and Painting as ‘art symbol’ :

Painting as an “art symbol” must be expressive of the life of feeling or the general “form of feeling”. And painting *qua* painting creates “virtual space”. What now remains to be seen is, how this “form of feeling” is found in painting, i.e. in virtual space. The way be set out to answer this question is as follows :

The general form of any feeling is characterized by “tensions and resolutions”.<sup>10</sup> In painting, “form” is created “through the illusion of ‘space-tensions’ and ‘space-resolutions’”.<sup>11</sup> So, virtual space is created by building up areas of “space tension” and resolving them by the arrangement or total composition of these areas.

To sum up, “virtual space” in painting is the total form created by binding into a harmonious whole the “space-tensions” on the picture plane; that is, by creating a “semblance of functional unity”<sup>12</sup> among the elements of painting. How this is actually done may now be brought out by considering some paintings.

## II. Some Indian Arts

Let us choose the following six paintings :

- (1) The Magician (Gaganendranath Tagore)
- (2) Pranam (Nandalal Bose)
- (3) Three Pujarinis (Jamini Roy)
- (4) The Marriage Ceremony (Krishna Hebbar)
- (5) The Family (Soiloz Mookerjea)
- (6) Viswamitra (M. F. Hussain)

### 1. The Magician :

This painting creates a three-dimensional space. Here the monotony of the foreground is broken by a flight of stairs going

up in the right corner and a flight of stairs going down in the left corner. The use of geometric perspective creates a recessive space of unusual depth which is suggestive of a haunting mystery. Here, the concept of virtual space is easily intelligible. A three-dimensional space is created on the flat surface of paper. It is quite clear that (1) the space we are attributing to this painting is not actual, but only seems to be there—a semblance of space created for the eye alone; and (2) that the “virtual space” in this painting is a totality of depth which is assignable only to the *total form*.

## 2. The Marriage Ceremony :

In the painting just referred to, space or distance is an obvious factor because of the use of perspectival space. But what does virtual space mean in a painting like ‘The Marriage Ceremony’ in which, instead of a three-dimensional space, an anti-perspectival space is created? The two figures in the foreground seem almost to pop out of the picture plane. Thus a tension field is created which is countered by a slightly recessive space produced by the figures standing on top of the right corner. The virtual space in this painting can only be felt by attending to the total form which binds the ‘space tensions’ into a harmonious whole.

## 3, 4. Pranam and Three Pujarinis :

These two paintings are different. They do not at all feature the suggestion of depth or recessive space. The figures here seem to be pasted on to the flat surface of paper, thus heightening the effect of flatness in these two works. Now in what manner could these two paintings be said to have created virtual space? Here, I suggest, virtual space should be taken in the sense of a *created autonomous space*. Generally speaking, both the paintings create an atmosphere of unruffled serenity—a felt quality of space which was not there on the plane flat surface before creation.

In *Three Pujarinis*, the sweeping flow of well-defined lines and their rhythmic grace so organise the total form as to be suggestive of a general feeling of other worldliness. Here, the shaping of forms is done in such a manner that the three figures seem closer to one another than they would be in actual space,

and the total form by its close proximity to the eye is able to create a new autonomous space in which the spectator himself feels a participant.

In *Pranam* the rhythmic lines, employed decoratively, create a world of their own. The profile of the figure bowing in reverence and the arch atop hold each other in a relationship that is purely *visual*, and not a matter of everyday fact. The "virtual space" in this painting is not to be taken in the sense of a recessive space; instead, it is here felt as a harmonious whole—an organic structure, created by the ornamental use of lines.

### 5, 6. The Family and Viswamitra :

In these two paintings what at once attracts attention is the composite character of the total form. Here, too, the "virtual space" can be felt as we apprehend the *visual* inter-relatedness of the various parts in the painting.

In *The Family*, the spontaneous and lyrical lines and the use of an unrestricted palette create an unusual *movement*.

In *Viswamitra*, the picture plane *becomes* alive as the forms drawn with jerky lines and masses of colour cohere into an organic *total form*.

### Conclusion :

The concept of "virtual space" in painting, to my view, cannot be severed from Langer's general theory of art as expressive form. In all the six paintings discussed, "virtual space" becomes intelligible as we apprehend the total form or rather the *felt* import of the work.

## NOTES

1. Feeling and Form, p. 40.
2. Problems of Art, p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. Feeling and Form, p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
8. Problems of Art, p. 35.
9. Feeling and Form, p. 72.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 373.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 373.



**TAOIST PHILOSOPHY**  
**AND**  
**HEIDEGGER'S POETIC THINKING**

In one of his recent works Heidegger explains the meaning of *Tao* in the *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient Chinese Taoist canon :

“ The word ‘ Way ’ ( Tao ) probably is an ancient primary word that speaks to the reflective mind of man. Lao Tzu’s poetic thinking is ‘ Tao ’, which properly speaking means the Way.” ( p. 92 : *On the Way to Language* )

Thus we know that Heidegger identifies *Tao* as poetic thinking. When poetic thinking takes place, Being and thinking are one and the same. As Heidegger puts it :

“ We might perhaps prepare a little for change in our relations to words. Perhaps this experience might awaken : all reflective thinking is poetic and all poetry in turn is a kind of thinking.” ( pp. 136 )

The identity of reflective thinking and poetry is what the Taoists called non-differentiation or “ huan chen ”. The greatest achievement of poetic thinking is the self-awakening of the poet from this aesthetic non-differentiation at the absolute moment. The following Chinese Taoist poem is illustrative of this thought :

“ When the moon rises in the heart of Heaven  
And a light breeze touches the mirror like surface of the lake  
That is indeed a moment of pure joy  
But few are they who are aware of it.”

Purity and Joy are the fruits of meditation and for the Chinese poets they are fundamental to poetic thinking. The more they are cultivated the better the poetry. However, the self-awakening of the poet cannot take place until the poet completely identifies himself with the objective reality of things. This identity is not