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**Paradoxes of Art, Science, and Photography**

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## PARADOXES OF ART, SCIENCE, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

“Stick to nature, my boy!” is an admonition often heard among artists, yet it is most true that, beyond a certain point, the closer the imitation is to nature the further it is from art.

Art is not so much a matter of fact as of impression; even realists admit this. Their objections to what is called impressionism is that the impressionists seldom say anything worth saying, and sometimes nothing at all, leaving a shrewd suspicion that they have nothing to say, and glory in having no mission except to upset the experience and practice of centuries.

No possible amount of scientific truth will in itself make a picture. Something more is required. The truth that is wanted is artistic truth—quite a different thing. Artistic truth is a conventional representation that looks like truth. The North American Indian did not understand a portrait less than life size or a profile with one eye only; he was not educated up to the conventional.

Of late years there has been a great demand for truth in art, whatever that dark saying may mean. We have been impressed by literalists to be faithful to nature. To quote Mr. Oscar Wilde, “They call upon Shakespeare—they always do—and quote that hackneyed passage about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity on all art matters ...”, reducing genius to the position of a looking-glass. On the other hand, it is sometimes said, perhaps jokingly—for we should not take Mr. Brett or Mr. Pennell too seriously—that photography cannot be art because it has no capacity for lying. Although the saying is wrong as regards our art, this is putting the semblance of a great truth in a coarse way. In other and more polite words, no method can be adequate means to an artistic end that will not adapt itself to the will of the artist. The reason is this, if it can be reduced to reason: admit that all art must be based on nature; but nature is not art, and art, not being nature, cannot fail to be more or less conventional. This is one of those delightful contradictions that make the study of art an intellectual occupation. Men naturally turn to nature. We have evidence of this from prehistoric times. The ornament of all time, of all nations, with scarcely an exception, has been based on nature—the Greeks and Moors are the important exceptions—yet the ornament that approached nearest to exact imitation of nature has always been the most debased and worst. It is the lowest intellects that take the most delight in deceptive imitation. Mr. Lewis F. Day puts this very admirably in one of his recent publications: “Those who profess to follow Nature,” he says, “seem sometimes to be rather dragging her in the dust. There is a wider view of nature, which includes human nature, and that selective and idealizing instinct which is nature to man. It is a long way from being yet proved that the naturalistic designer is more ‘true to nature’ than another. It is one thing to study nature, and another to pretend that studies are works of art. In no branch of design has it ever been held by the masters that nature was enough. It is only the very callow student who opens his mouth to swallow all nature, whole; the older bird knows better.”

It is clear, then, that a method that will not admit of the modifications of the artist cannot be an art, and therefore is photography in a perilous state if we cannot prove that it is endowed with

possibilities of untruth. But they who, looking perhaps only at their own limited experiments, say photography cannot lie, take a very narrow view and greatly underrate the capabilities of the art. All arts have their limits, and I admit that the limits of photography are rather narrow, but in good hands it can be made to lie like a Trojan. However much truth may be desirable in the abstract, to the artist there is no merit in a process that cannot be made to say the thing that is not.

Here I am bound to admit a considerable weakness in my argument. We are told by a writer in a popular new magazine, edited by a member of our Club, that it is "always the best policy to tell the truth-unless, of course, you are an exceptionally good liar!" This is, indeed, a misfortune, for there is not, I am ashamed to say, very great scope for sparkling untruth in our art. That is to say, we cannot produce brilliant falsifications such as the painter may indulge in. One man may steal a horse, while another may not look over a hedge. A painter may unblushingly present us with an angel with wings that won't work, while a photographer is laughed at, very properly, if he gives us anything nearer an angelic form than that of a spook raised by a medium.

It must be confessed that it takes considerable skill to produce the best kind of lies. It is in the hands of first-class photographers only-and perhaps the indifferent ones-that photography can lie. With the first, possibly, graciously; with the latter, brutally. The photographers of only average attainments, and such as we should get turned out in quantities by an art-less Institute, seldom get beyond the plain, naked, uninteresting truth. Yet I think that many will agree with me that the very good and the very bad are much more interesting than the mediocre. That the best are interesting is clear; that the worst are often the cause of a good laugh is the experience of all; it is only the middling good that induce indifference.

There can be little doubt that, in this respect, and looking at it from this point of view, painting is a much greater art than photography; but what I am concerned to prove is that, although photography is only a humble liar, yet it is not the guileless innocent that some people suppose, and has a capacity for lying sufficient to enable it to worthily enroll its name among the noble arts. Nay, is it not the greater for its humility? Photography gives us the means of a nearer imitation of nature than any other art, yet has sufficient elasticity to show the directing mind, and therefore is the most perfect art of all. If we must have paradoxes, let us carry them to the bitter end.

"Let us have truth," says the conscientious writer who knows not what truth is. What should we get in art if we could capture it? We should have a representation of nature as we see it in a mirror, colors and all, and should tire of it as soon as the novelty wore off. The worst thing that could happen to photography as an art would be the discovery of a process giving the colors of nature-the one impossible thing in nature, I hope and believe. Its one great deviation from faultless virtue is, as I have endeavored to show, that it is more truthful than painting.

A writer, innocent of the resources of the art, and wishing to depreciate it, makes a point of the photographer having no control over the action of the developer so as to produce the variation from nature he desires. I can only reply that among my own pictures there is scarcely one that does not owe a good deal of any merit it may have to control of the developer. The possibilities of control were greater, perhaps, in the collodion process than the gelatin, but we are speaking of the capabilities of photography, not of any particular process. The scientist may prove, beyond any possibility of doubt, that the relative values cannot be altered in development, but the photographer knows that variation in development varies the appearance of his results, and that should be quite enough for him. It is so difficult, and yet so tempting, to "find out what cannot be done, and then to go and do it!"

I feel serious promptings here to have a fling at science that will surely bring down the wrath of our President on my unfortunate head. I will try to ameliorate him by saying that science demands our greatest respect. No one can have more reverence for science than I have myself-

when it keeps its place. But we are suffering from science, and fancy is dying out of the land. It is doing serious harm to photography as a picture-producing art. When a student ought to be studying the construction of a picture, and developing in his soul the art of lying, he is led away by the flickering *ignis fatuus* of science, and goes mad over developers. "Another new developer" has more effect on the tender feelings of the brethren of the camera than would the advent of a poet-photographer. This suggests a variation on Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life*. One youth travels along the pleasant and virtuous walks of art, not listening to the Sirens of Fact; but dozens of others are decoyed to the worsen way, and are soon lost in the seductive vanities and subtleties of science. They last long enough, perhaps, to modify a developer-with which science, however, tells them they can do little or nothing-and are heard of no more, except in the multitudinous platitudes used in the endless discussions of abstractions in society papers; and the scientific dream of the future is an Institute of Photography from which art is to be excluded. Art will be very glad to part company.

Let us be generous and admit that science has its good points, but it is doing a good deal of harm in the world. It is robbing us of our illusions. The science of history has defrauded Richard III of his hump, made Henry VIII a moral character, and gone audaciously night to proving that Jack the Giant Killer never existed. We are bored by the tedious papers of those who "have not the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance," and a synonym for dullness is a lecture at the Royal Society. But scientists are not without their hilarious moments. In our own art I cannot help thinking that scientists are trifling with a serious subject when they tell us that we cannot do as we like with our developers or when they bring logarithms to bear on picture-making. But the humor is not all on one side, and we not unfrequently enjoy a smile at the prodigious engines they sometimes use to crack our poor little nuts.

What has science to do with art, except to provide materials for its use? It is only of late that art has, on the one hand, been made to depend on absolute scientific truth; and, on the other, by the same writers, been proved, in the case of photography, not to be an art because it cannot deviate from truth. It is merely an incident, an accident, a detail-call it what you will-that science, sometimes of the highest and most distracting kind, is connected with picture-making photography. The science that deals with the nature of the image or the calculation of the curve of a lens is a very distant cousin, indeed, to picture-making by the use of photographic materials. The use of materials invented by others for a definite purpose can scarcely be called science. No scientific theory should be allowed to have weight with an artist who has practiced his art successfully for years and knows what he wants and how to get it. If, for instance, I was told that it was proved by science that the negative would not yield all the tones of nature, I should reply that many years' practice had convinced me of that well-known fact, but the mere fact of it being proved scientifically did not alter the facts or further limit the tones. When it was proved scientifically to Diogenes that he could not walk round his tub, that humorous philosopher settled the matter by walking round that desirable residence. I am afraid I have used this illustration somewhere before, but let it pass. In art the artist sees his results, and it is for him to judge, from his knowledge of art and nature, *not science*, whether his results are true, or, at any rate, if they lie properly and are what he wants. The artist has to do with appearances, the scientist with facts. It is not enough to say, This is not true. The question is, Is it true enough for artistic purpose? I have alluded to development once or twice. Two very clever scientists, whom I much respect, Dr. Hurter and Mr. Driffeld, have proved to everybody's unsatisfaction that photographers have no control over the gradations; but this does not alter the fact that-to put the simplest case-he knows when a negative is over- or underexposed or developed too dense or too thin to properly represent his *idea of nature as far as in him lies and his art will allow*. Then there has been another great attempt made to show that the perspective of photography is not scientifically true.

If the attempt was successful, which is very doubtful, *who cares?* It has been true enough not to be found out for fifty years, and that is good enough for photography. Can it have been the want of truth that has unconsciously compelled artists since the beginning to admire the truth of photographic perspective and rely on its veracity? Here is another paradoxical nut to crack. But my business is not to make a feature of the truth of any part of photography. On the contrary, I want to clear its character of the un-artistic virtue of being nothing but a truthful, inevitable, stupid purveyor of prosaic fact.

Painters sometimes trust to us for truth; the law courts are becoming more wary, and appreciate our deviations. I was once found fault with by an artist for “altering” a photograph, on the plea that it would mislead a painter if he wanted to copy it. I found he *had* copied it before he saw the scene, and when he afterward compared his picture with it, he found a clump of trees that should have appeared on the left transferred to the right. I had made the alteration by double printing, and improved the composition. *I did not* want a mere local view. I don’t know that there is anything more exasperating than for a painter to take it for granted that it is a photographer’s business to play jackal to his lion, and hunt up food for him; but it is a blessed truth that we can deceive him if we like. *Painters ought to* be more grateful to us than they are. Besides providing some of them with subjects, we have taught them what to avoid—educated them on the Spartan and Helot principle—and art has vastly improved during the half-century of our existence. We have made the column and curtain background absurd. When our art was born painters thought nothing of violating perspective by placing the horizon as low as the feet of their portraits, and made no difficulties about hanging heavy curtains from the sky, and we are still fulfilling our useful mission of showing artists the ridiculous things they ought not to do, but it is asking too much to provide subjects for them—idea, composition, and detail. A painter should never use photography until he is capable of getting on without it, and then he should make his own photographs. To copy another man’s work is not honest, and is a lazy and mischievous method of attempting to make a living.

I am afraid I have filled my space without giving as many specimens as I could wish of the possible delinquencies and untruthfulness that art requires and photography can accomplish, but I hope I have shown that if it cannot lie like paint, it has the merit of approaching it in mendacity. I will conclude with another illustration of the capabilities of our art for useful falsification. I once knew a photographer (it sounds better to put it that way) who was employed, for the purposes of a parliamentary committee, to make a series of photographs showing that one place was much more picturesque than another. Some ugly gas-works were to be erected, and it was desirable to place them on the least beautiful of two spots. It may be also mentioned that it was likewise necessary that they should be placed on the site that best suited the promoters. Both places were very picturesque, but in the photographs it was easy to see the one site was a little rustic paradise (with suitable figures and fine skies) and the other a dreary desert, all foreground of the plainest! Yet both were true to fact, and they had the intended effect.

In conclusion, let me express the pleasure I feel in being afforded the fascinating opportunity of saying a few humble words in praise of lying in a room which has been saturated with truth and fact for more than a hundred years—ever since, indeed, Barry “restored the antique spirit in art” by painting his anachronisms on the walls, and from which building emanates the prospectus of the Chicago Exhibition, which honors our art with the crowning paradox of classing photography with Instruments of Precision.