The Trapped Thief Vs. Ethiopia Essay, Research Paper

It is apparent that art changes or varies with time, style, economy of the time, as well as individual artists. Works of art may differ as well as be similar in composition, painting style, subject matter, and what the artist is trying to communicate. I will be using these criteria to analyze and compare two works of art, in particular: The Trapped Thief by Nicholaes van Galen (1650) and Ethiopia by David Park (1959). Both of these works can be found on display at the University of Miami Lowe Art Museum; The Trapped Thief in the Sheldon and Myrna Palley Gallery, and Ehiopia in the Ben Tobin Gallery. I chose these two paintings out of the entire collection of works because I found that they shared various elements as well as contrasted with each other immensely.

The composition, the way the objects are arranged in the work area, in these two pieces was handled in similar fashion. The Trapped Thief contained a thief getting caught in the middle of his heist by a nun. The figures are approximately life-size and practically fill up the entire canvas. The positioning of their arms, legs, and bodies express a sense of movement as we are looking at a brief moment in the midst of the action. They are placed over a plain dark background in order to lay emphasize on the actual figures and the action, not what’s going on around them. In Ethiopia, the composition of the figures in relation to the rest of the painting is treated in a similar yet very different fashion. The figures are also life-size and take up almost the entire canvas; however, there is little movement expressed through their posture and stance. A simple background that is comprised of colors to compliment the rest of the image surrounds them. I found that this was a more effective compositional element because it made efficient use of the entire workspace without drawing attention from the main figures of the work. Both paintings handled the arrangement of it’s elements in their own effective way; whether it was leave the emphasis on the main figures or to compliment them.

In discussing the painting style, we find that these two works were treated very differently in this aspect. Let us begin by comparing the brush techniques used in composing each painting. With minimal effort, one could easily see that The Trapped Thief was done with very soft and careful brush strokes in order to capture as much detail as possible. This can be seen in the sharp and clear eyes of the thief as well as in every crevice and wrinkle in the clothing. In Ethiopia, the brushwork is quite the opposite with very rash and expressionistic strokes used lay the paint over the canvas. The figures’ faces are implied with single brush strokes rather than several carefully painted features. It seems that the artist, David Park, has left it to the imaginations of the viewer to see the figures and fill in the details in their own eyes. Both brush techniques proved to be very effective and aesthetically pleasing in my opinion. With these differences between the two works, we can also find some noticeable similarities. Nicholaes van Galen (The Trapped Thief) chose to create delicate and gradual blends of shadow and light while maintaining a strong contrast in lighting. The lighting in both paintings was treated similarly as they both had a strong light source shining on the figures and creating very solid shadows in their midst. This strong contrast of darks and lights creates a sense of space and dimension which proved effective in grabbing this art admirer’s attention. Although both artists used oil paints as their medium for these particular works yet they achieved very different results. In examining these aspects, we begin to see that using different techniques in painting can bring about different results even when using the same medium.

The subject matter in these two paintings also varies between the two. The Trapped Thief focuses on a scene in which the thief is being apprehended by one of the nun that he is stealing from.– The thief and the nun are made to be the centerpiece of the work and there is little or no attention paid to the surroundings. I don’t believe the artist is trying to say anything or make a comment with this particular work, rather he has attempted to capture a moment and properly represent what is going on. In my opinion, he was successfully achieved this goal. When I look at this painting, I envision this scene happening before my eyes in full motion and in living color. In Ethiopia, the subject matter is the nude figures standing facing outwards towards the viewer. The scene is unclear as it is painted in a very expressionistic manner, which makes it difficult to distinguish anything other than the standing figures. Unlike in The Trapped Thief, I think the artist here is trying to paint a scene that is more subtle and without movement. The figures all stand in almost the same position insinuating that they are not moving around, rather they are posing. Perhaps the artist felt it was more important to emphasize the forms and colors rather than an action sequence. Both artists seem to express their vision and ideas about what is important in their work differently.

In reviewing what we have discussed, it is apparent that works of art are open to interpretation both from the viewer’s standpoint as well as the artist who is creating it. The artist will always express him or herself artistically in the manner that they deem to be most appropriate for the idea they wish to illustrate. Nicholaes van Galen (The Trapped Thief) and David Park (Ethiopia) chose various similar techniques and ideas in creating these artworks while maintaining their distinct ideas and techniques. I found that both paintings were successful in achieving their goals in their own way, whether it was to be aesthetically pleasing or to express what the artist was trying to capture in his work.

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