

COMMENTARY ON SOME OF THE WORKS

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QUOD LIBET

The intention of “*Quod libet*” (1988) was to integrate an indoor scene with a figure within a landscape, since that background was interesting because of its possibilities and risks. A uniform background, neutral and, if possible, dark, has the double virtue of being effective pictorially, by focusing the viewer's attention on the figure without scattering it in alternative spotlights, and also being very economical in terms of time, effort and resources required for its execution. Thus, throughout the history of art, a landscape sharing the limelight with a figure has been a joyful source of problems. Therefore, on the whole, it's hard for this option, from the point of view of pictorial efficiency, to be preferable to a flat background. When using it, rather than hoping for a successful result, it's more sensible to just hope that it's not a failure. For better or for worse, only the artistic culture and habits of the spectator as painting's viewer saves the landscape located at the background of a painting with a portrait in the foreground from being taken for what it is: a poster or tapestry placed behind the figure, parallel to the Plane of the Painting. The famous landscape at the back of *La Gioconda* confirms this risk.

The visual experience of the viewer, forged in everyday vision, says at first glance that the pair figure-background represented in the painting behaves entirely different than in Nature: the distance that invariably separates these two terms in real life is such that we can only see both with a similar focus if we stand away from the foreground, reducing the size and sharpness of the picture. And along with this problem, another overlaps it: if the object is portrayed in the traditional neutral and descriptive way, ie, with the level of his eyes more or less at the height of the painter's, and therefore, of the future spectator that contemplates the result once painted, the line of the horizon should intercept the character's head at the level of the eyes, which means that any element of the landscape that is higher than the horizon will surround the head of the portrayed figure, reducing its prominence. If, despite these objections, it is still worthwhile to include a landscape as the background of a figure, the reason is aesthetic and symbolic, not practical.

Naturally, the composition of the painting-within-the-painting made up by the window must first be subordinate to the whole and only afterwards be of interest in itself. According to this premise, these problems are lessened by two means: that the area adjacent to the head be an uncomplicated landscape (a line of a distant hill, with a simple silhouette, soft colors and details muffled by the distance), and that the sharpness of the background landscape be also lower (a good excuse for this is for the background to have some fog), intensifying the effects of aerial perspective. Parallel to the latter, it is convenient that the landscape close to the head has little pictorial material, so that it recedes (the abundance of paint frequently involves rims of sharp strokes, and that sharpness is read by the viewer's eye as closeness) so you could say that the more sharpness in the landscape and volume of the paint layer, the more perception of painting and less of window. The landscape incorporated behind the young woman is a detail of the view from the dam of Santillana from atop the walls of the castle of Manzanares El Real.

The "frame" of the window involves an intermediate problem of sharpness: it must be behind the figure, but in front of the landscape. In addition, it involves a big headache in terms of composition: there might be too many lines of the edge of the window that are redundant with the edge of the painting. The painter has tried to reduce this risk by hiding the top edge of the window, by which, incidentally, the viewer loses the information of its complete format, which might be too similar to that of the painting. Thus, we have only a fragment of it, of a slightly oblong rectangular format where the horizontal line prevails, which is an advantage from the point of view of variety.

Moreover, the fact that the inner frame has less presence helps to bring closer or to confuse some parts of the tone of the window frame with that of the clouds, contributing also to reduce the evidence of frame-window parallelism the small rope at the top left, which turns this section, visually, from vertical into tilted. Finally, most of the lower section of the window disappears covered by the jagged silhouette formed by the head of the lynx, the edge of the winding ground line entering the dam, the head of the girl and the stretch of land behind her on the right side.

At the lower side of the wood that holds the ledge where the lynx "*Quod libet*" rests, worn-out by its nails, we can see a half-torn paper with the end of a fragment of the long Latin poem "*Africa*" by Petrarch, who, at the dawn of the Renaissance, speaks about the hope of recovering a lost past:

*At tibi fortassis, si - quod mens sperat et optat-
Es post me victura diu, meliora supersunt
Secula: non omnes veniet Letheus in annos
Iste sopor!. Poterunt discussis forte tenebris,
Ad purum priscumque iubar remeare nepotes.*

((To you, if - as my soul hopes and wishes- you survive me many years once I'm gone, perhaps better times await you; this slumber of oblivion must not last forever. Once the darkness is dispelled, our grandchildren will walk once more on the clarity of the past.))¹

Finally, let us note that the irregular line drawn by the wood on which the lynx rests and that surrounds the girl, is a "framework" that "separates" a thistle held in one of her hands. Following the model of the self-portrait by Albrecht Dürer in the Louvre Museum, painted in 1493 (probably dedicated to Agnes Frey, who Dürer would marry a year later, where the painter presents himself holding a thistle, usually interpreted as a symbol of faithfulness), the portrayed woman, also close to being married, appears with a thistle in her hand. Also, underlying the prominence of the thistle, there is an intention of paying tribute and even obeisance to the great German artist and printmaker.

¹ Petrarca, *Africa*, IX, line 453 ff.