

Once more with feeling

Subtext is spoiling the picture

by Joan Altabe



Blame it on Freud. He loaded everything down with sub-text. One look at Picasso's *Guernica* – at the women, children and animals with heads flung back, eyes rolled back, mouths open in howls as bombs fall on their town – and you don't need to know that he offered the painting "as an instrument of war against brutality and darkness."

The eyes have it, but subtext keeps blurring the view. When Edvard Munch's *The Scream* was stolen from Norway's national art museum in 1994, the Associated Press report noted the painting's "garish colors" and "a figure on a bridge screaming for no discernible reason."

Calling Munch's palette garish implies randomness and confusion. So does the description that the figure is irrationally screaming. AP probably translated the painting this way because of the way many art experts who have. Explaining the work with its throbbing shades and spinning lines building to a high water mark of hysteria, British art critic Sir Herbert Read said the painter was

"impressed by the brilliant colors of Neo-Impressionism.

Did you get that? Here's this figure shrieking, surrounded by the color of inflamed nerves, and Sir Herbert attributes it to Impressionist color schemes.

As presumptuous are art historians who decode Munch's picture as pathology in paint. Sir David Piper has written that the picture parts are like "recurrent nightmares, which Munch attempted to exorcise." Ditto H.W. Janson who said that "the painting is an image of fear, the terrifying unreasoned fear we feel in a nightmare."

Likely, these historians knew that the painter had a nervous breakdown when he was 46. But if they knew that, they should also have known that Munch painted *The Scream* 16 years before his breakdown? And if they knew the painter's personal story at all, they'd also know that a sunset inspired the image, not an emotional crisis.

Munch described the experience this way: "I stood out across the fjord – the sun was setting – the clouds were colored red – like blood – I



The Scream by Edvard Munch, 1893
The National Gallery, Oslo, Norway

felt as though a scream went through nature – I thought I heard a scream – I painted the picture – painted the clouds like red blood. The colors were screaming.”

See? Mother Nature was having a fit, not Munch.

But even a painter’s declaration of intent shouldn’t matter. Art, like any sensory encounter, shouldn’t need a libretto to experience it. No one should have to see a work in a certain way. Otherwise art would be

nothing more than an illustration of a thesis, and interpretation of art would end up a substitute for it.

Consider the case of Georgia O’Keeffe’s New York flower paintings, which are constantly interpreted as icons of female genitalia. “Everything was going so fast,” she said when painting the flowers in Manhattan. “Nobody has time to reflect....There was a flower. It was perfectly beautiful, but it was so small, you really could not appreciate it. So I thought to make it like a huge building going up. If I could paint that flower on a huge scale, then you could not ignore its beauty. People would be startled. They’d have to look at it.”

Yeah, they looked, Georgia, and saw vulvas. Lost is the scale, the brushwork, the sensual construct of the flower. Narrowing the view with sub-text is a step removed from it. 📌