

Paweł Taranczewski\*

## Painterly Quest for Values

### Abstract

The painter is trying to realize a certain value in the canvas, the value which he feels, he is looking for and he can see in his imagination. Nevertheless, that value is not given to him, it is undefined and unclear. For this reason, painting a picture is both creating and looking for a fully perceptible value. The emerging image shows the painter the form of that value, it is controlled by the artist, but the artist is also controlled by the image which, in a way, leads him. The demanded and achieved value is not a label which appraises the image, stuck on it by the painter, but it is like a light that permeates and illuminates the painting.

### Key words

painter, value, hierarchy, aesthetic experience

Since at least the end of World War II there has been a debate on values going on among philosophers related to Roman Ingarden in Cracow. Although the issue was not new to Polish philosophy, in the Cracovian circle of Ingarden, thanks to the Master himself and his disciples, it has acquired a particular flavour. The question of the existence of values, their formal structure, their relativity versus absoluteness as well as distinguishing between the domains of values, or pointing to a possible hierarchy within and between them occupied Janina Makota, Władysław Stróżewski, Józef Tischner or Adam Węgrzecki; it still enlivens the thought of Stróżewski and Węgrzecki, despite the fact that “in the outside” the axiology itself is being contested by Heidegger and philosophical trends close to positivism.

---

\* Cracow University of Technology / Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow /  
Pontifical University of John Paul II / Ignatianum  
Email: zetaranc@cyf-kr.edu.pl

Regardless the philosophical stand, words describing values and evaluations, as well as those evaluating judgments or hierarchisation of works concerning their value, are present in the texts of critics, art historians and all those occupied with art. They are latently present in the purchase decisions made by particular museums, or decisions to exhibit some works in galleries while rejecting others. Having said that, while dealing with art, and particularly with painting, the terms indicating values cannot be rejected. Moreover, the values are given to the painters visually, and the terms describing values appear when they discuss the works of others or of their own, particularly as they struggle to explain what they really mean by a particular work of art, or what – as painters – they are searching for.

Considering the question of values, Władysław Stróżewski<sup>1</sup> mentions the concept of sought values. According to him, apart from other qualities, a value can also awake particular experiences (including aesthetic and creative experiences), becoming in itself a value for the artist, a value artists are searching for, or seek to express in their work. It is not my point now to establish whether it is a concrete value or an ideal one. I am interested in the process of a painter searching for values or valuable qualities and in the values being usually sought by painters.

## Sensitivity and searching

A subjective condition for the ability to search is the painter's sensitivity and its sophistication, which ensure that the artist's growing openness is selective, enabling choosing and hierarchising the values that emerge during the search. An insensitive painter, or one whose sensitivity lacks sophistication and development, chooses miasma of values and, as a result, not everything he creates can be called art. Consequently, to say: *art is what an artist does*, or more precisely: painting is what a painter paints, does not seem right. Not everything a painter paints is actually painting. A painter's painting flows out of and develops within sophisticated sensitivity and is regulated by it, as are the works which result from it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Particularly in his books regarding the issue of values: W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość*, Kraków 1981; idem, *W kręgu wartości*, Kraków 1992; idem, *Dialektyka twórczości*, Kraków 2007; idem, *Logos wartość, miłość*, Kraków 2013; idem, *Wokół piękna*, Kraków 2002.

Painting is searching, but the word “searching” has at least two meanings here. One is visualised by Rembrandt’s self-portrait from Boston. The artist is not painting. He is standing by the wall of his studio looking at a painting on an easel which is standing with its back to us. The self-portrait visualises the reflection, *inventio*, mentioned by Ernst Van de Wetering in his monumental work on Rembrandt’s painting<sup>2</sup>. Rembrandt, the painter, is seeking his painterly awareness, something that is called an idea, but what he finds is a value and he is being dazzled by it. The term *inventio* originates from *invenio* and suggests even that the value – like some Muse – comes to the painter and enters his spirit.

The other meaning of the word “searching” is visualised by Courbet’s *Painter’s studio*<sup>3</sup> as well as numerous self-portraits of artists holding a palette and the brushes, sitting or standing in front of canvas placed on an easel. Here, “searching” equals painting. The painter searches for values in different layers of the painting, also values related to the layer of colour patches. These can, for example, be colour compositions. I can still recall the words of my painting professor: “Please, search for compositions”. A composition in a painting is a valuable association between colours<sup>4</sup>.

Searching in the latter sense happens on canvas, but it is not disconnected from “*inventio*”. Quite the opposite, they interweave and intermingle to the extent that however “*inventio*” can be distinguished in the process of painting, it cannot be separated from it.

As a matter of fact, the word “searching”, indicates two different moments of the creative process whose course is not entirely random.

Searching for values induces *experiencing them*. Disclosing, or displaying values, experience is at the same time a dialogue or a dramatic **encounter** with these values. It seems to me that such experience has been described – after George Bataille – by Barbara Skarga. It is “of no rule, no purpose and lacking any prestige, still powerful enough to shake and give birth...”<sup>5</sup>. And further – this time after Michel Henry – “this experience gives something, something is revealed in it, manifested, displayed. [...] This experience could in this way be [...] a gift, or a vision, or a dis-

<sup>2</sup> E. van de Wetering, *Rembrandt, the Painter at Work*, Amsterdam 1997.

<sup>3</sup> G. Courbet, *L’Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale*, 1855, oil on canvas, 361 x 598 cm; Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

<sup>4</sup> I wrote on it more extensively in: P. Taranczewski, *Kolor i relacja*, “Kwartalnik Filozoficzny”, T. XL, Z. 2, 2012, s. 5–23.

<sup>5</sup> B. Skarga, *Kwintet metafizyczny*, Kraków 2005, p. 127 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].

closure, a discovery, an opening, a sensation, a revelation, a quest [...], or perhaps an awakening too”<sup>6</sup>.

Searching is not random. Depending on the philosophy prevailing in the given times, both searching and its results are regulated, forming the so called canons<sup>7</sup>. They cannot be merely ascribed to epochs like antiquity, the Middle Ages or the Renaissance – to use those conventional names. Every style of painting has its particular canon, which needs to be respected, if the work’s coherence is to be preserved. Even in the deliberately incoherent works, such incoherence itself becomes a particular canon that must be rigorously observed. Leonardo da Vinci – being ahead of conceptualism – claimed that painting is a *cosa mentale* and that this *mens* is regulated by geometry, but also by mood, particular emotion outstanding among others thanks to the famous *sfumato*. In my opinion, also expressionism is a *cosa mentale*; it is not, however, related to geometry, but to the state of mind animated with violent emotions, I seems that – in the end – every painting is a *cosa mentale*, because a painting – before it appears on canvas – already exists in the painter, altering his or her awareness. Painting as a *cosa mentale* has been brought to extreme by conceptualism...

Searching is a dialogue of a painter with himself, with other painters or with the spirit of the times – not necessarily his own. It does happen, too that a painter reaches to the spirit of another period.

Searching is a journey, in which some values are chosen and others rejected, there is a constant hierarchisation happening. A painter makes intuitive judgments about the value, meaning – according to Stróżewski – making descriptive judgments telling something about the sought value, subsequently making evaluating judgments which assume the judgments about the value. Finally, the painter evaluates, trying to reach the individual essence of the value as seen in the light of the ideal value which defines it. According to Stróżewski, the evaluating judgements can be either true or false! Sometimes painters search for values they misunderstood, for example taking so called *sauce*<sup>8</sup> for depth, or a fake pose for a dramatic gesture... And not only individual painters would do so, but even whole shallow trends in painting would try to im-

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Vide: E. Panofsky, *Rozwój teorii proporcji jako odzwierciedlenie rozwoju stylu*, in: idem, *Średniowiecze*, tłum. G. Jurkowlaniec, A. Kozak, T. Dobrzeńiecki, Warszawa 2001, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Speaking about the so called *Munich sauce*.

itate great trends, preferring shallow values put on a show of great ones. For example, the time of Van Megeren was blind to his forgery of Ver Meer, because it misunderstood the value of Ver Meer's painting, taking secondary qualities for essential ones – impossible to achieve in a painting for the second time. Paintings of Josefa Israëls were at one point thought equal to those of Rembrandt, taking their *gallery form* as a repetition of Rembrandt's artistry.

## The poles of oppositions governing creative activity

A painter – as well as any artist – searches for his own way within the field of energy, in between the poles of oppositions described in the *Dialectics of Creative Activity* by Władysław Stróżewski<sup>9</sup>. Painters operate within the area demarcated by dialectical poles of oppositions that *govern* creative activity. Aiming at completing their work within the field of tensions created by the poles, they search for and fulfil a particular value. The dialectical poles should not be understood as points; in their clear form they create centres of energy whose radiation intermingles and mixes, subjecting the painter to their interweaving influence.

Stróżewski discussed the activity of poles in such detail that I will content myself with a few remarks only. Stróżewski distinguishes a few pairs of oppositions, of which some are particularly interesting to me because of the painterly quest. First of all, it is **determinism and necessity**. This pair of oppositions plays an important role in the painterly quest. However, at the starting point every painter is more or less determined by the rules which he is aware of, and which bind him and can be subject to interpretation<sup>10</sup>, still *in the very beginning* these very rules were also searched for: e.g. the history of Greek sculptural canon, Greek architectural canons or icon writing canon in the Eastern Church. The new canon was searched for through constructing, sculpting, painting and writing icons... Once found, it was not applied conventionally, and whenever it was, the works produced were dead. Robert Musil writes about it: "Es kann deshalb nützen, sich daran erinnern zu lassen, dass in schlechten Zeiten die schrecklichsten Häuser und Gedichte nach genau ebenso schönen Gr-

---

<sup>9</sup> W. Stróżewski, *Dialektyka twórczości*, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 336.

undsätzen gemacht werden wie in den besten..."<sup>11</sup>. It applies to writing icons as well. The rules are established, but every real icon displays new, unexpected values. The potential to reveal new modalities of icons can be seen in the schools of icon writing and in the deep difference between the icons of Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublev, which – however different – are both icons! Such new values were revealed through the icons written by Jerzy Nowosielski, who pointed to the unexpected potential hidden in the iconography of the Eastern Church. New modalities of values, by necessitating their realisation, liberated the iconographer from the determinism of rules. However, many icons are not *written*, but remain dead, despite having been created in full accordance with the canon. A similar regularity can be noted in the works of architecture or sculpture completed most strictly according to the rules, yet dead. I am not a musician myself, but I trust the words of professionals that also here one can find such works. In this way, a painter establishes certain rules, which then form a canon and are inherited by the successors creating a school. The school – having exhausted the potential of the canon – fossilises and the need for further quest occurs.

Further on, Stróżewski mentions such poles of oppositions as: spontaneity and control; freedom and rigour or improvisation and calculation. In the *Gementemuseum* near the Hague<sup>12</sup> we can see an unfinished painting of Piet Mondrian. I do not remember now, whether it is one of the few paintings entitled "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" or "Victory Boogie Woogie", a precise indication of the work is not crucial here. It is important, however, that the painting is unfinished and that thanks to it we can learn about the painterly procedure of Mondrian, who – contrary to what one could imagine looking at the completed works – did not outline the pattern of squares and rectangles first to then fill them with colours. Mondrian searched for a pattern when sketching on canvas, and then searched for the colour by sticking pieces of colourful paper in a desired format. The colour of the papers was supposed to prompt him with a colour solution and point to the right direction of the final colour arrangement on canvas. In this unfinished painting we can see an interaction of spontaneity and control; freedom and rigour; improvisation and calculation. Spontaneous and free but at the same time rigorously controlled drawing of lines of the developing

<sup>11</sup> R. Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg 1978, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Stadhouderslaan 41, 2517 HV Den Haag.

composition; improvisation in putting forward possible colour solutions of which eventually only one will prove right – in accordance with the inner necessity to regulate the painting.

### **Logos of the epoch: from vision to composition**

A painter following a route pervaded by the energies emanating from the opposite poles, searches for values *led* – so to say – by painting itself. His quest depends on his artistic stance. For example, every painter will search for different values and in a different way – an impressionist, a cubist, an abstractionist (this too depending on the trend of abstractionism), an expressionist, etc. The spectrum will broaden endlessly, if we take into account all the past and future trends and painterly stances...

Strózewski's texts are interspersed with an idea of a logos particular for each epoch and central for all the arts of its time. In every epoch, every art – including painting – spurts from a central logos, which it then explains using its own particular ratio. In their quest of values, painters follow their path, directed by the central logos of the epoch encompassing them, the logos of painting and ultimately of their own. Some values are definitely suggested by the spirit of the times – these, of course, fade the fastest. There exist, however, so called *eternal* values, which remain even after the qualities related to the epoch are no longer there in the work – these are works pervaded by the values – such as the masterpieces of various epochs... – times changed, the worlds in which the masterpieces were created are no longer there, but we still admire them, even though in this way we participate in another epoch...

What values deserve this admiration? What values immanent to the logos of painting were sought by the painters of all times? The answer is risky, but I will not try to avoid it. I emphasise that I am interested in painting, because in the present state of art my exposition could prompt a question why I omit numerous phenomena which are not painting, but which these days are also – or perhaps first of all – considered art. I confine myself to painting, believing that through it – thanks to the analogy of arts, sometimes called *correspondance des arts* – I will also get an insight into other arts.

In my opinion, the following values sought by painters are immanent to the logos of painting:

One is for sure a *vision*. It is about directing the spiritual gaze towards the ideas of certain principal values, more precisely towards the

constants of these values, whose variables facilitate various concretisations of the vision until its potential is exhausted. New possibilities can also arise later – the phenomena of renaissances support this notion. The constant data in the romantic and classical vision have been described by Władysław Tatarkiewicz<sup>13</sup>.

A painter searches for a language, not necessarily a new one. In many epochs it was enough to learn the given language, which was, however, modified by each artist independently. The language of painting is a language of silence and it cannot be replaced by any other. It is untranslatable. “But just as in the written language we have words and phrases, also painting has its words, its syntax, its style”<sup>14</sup>.

A painter searches for a technique, for technical values: a line drawn with a piece of coal, a brush, a pencil – of different thickness... each has a particular value in the painting. One can insist that these are elongated patches, but their painterly effect, their valuable painterly quality is very different. The choice of material determinates the style of the painting. Depending on what technique, what kind of paint we choose (oil, tempera, acrylic...), the value of the painting and its style will differ. The way of concretising these values in a work of art is the painterly technique. Balthus writes on it:

[...] painting is a handicraft in the fullest, most “handicraft” meaning of the word. It implies such a high degree of mastery that the painter’s life is not enough for it<sup>15</sup>.

[...] handicraft is a consequence of a moral stance, which requires intelligence of the mind and of the hand, as well as high discipline of the spirit<sup>16</sup>.

[...] the division between art and painterly handicraft is the sanctification of the split between art and the work of an artisan. [...] handicraft, craftsmanship [...] was art’s compost, it provided food for it, its substance.

For the master values his profession so highly that he does not let anyone look at his works until they are finished. For him incompleteness – the trademark of our times – is merely a sign of negligence or perhaps even inability to complete one’s work [...] an indication of a loss of professional dignity<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 207, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Balthus, *Samotny wędrowiec w krainie malarstwa, Rozmowy z Françoise Jaunin*, Warszawa 2004, p. 22 [trans. M. Bręgiel-Benedyk].

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 76–77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 65-66.

Throwing academism aside, also the concepts of technique and handicraft have been cast away. But at the same time [...] technique and handicraft are essential to art<sup>18</sup>.

A painter always searches for the formal values, which make the work a work of art. It happens also when the formal values are not themed.

A painter searches for colour: it carries qualities of value and provides a foundation for the painting in its qualitative endowment. It is about the whole canvas to be filled with one kind of colour, so that the position is not differentiated depending on the object. In this way, all the elements of the painting should be homogeneous. Every colourist would for sure say: I search for colour. In every painting there are colourful patches, and in each case they are treated differently (in terms of size, shape, position and technique), depending on the style: we will see different patches in the paintings of van Eyck, Titian, Rembrandt, Turner, Monet, Braque, Matisse, Balthus, Bacon, Freud... The list of names could be much longer. The way a painter treats the colourful patches determines the ultimate character of the painting. The patches interact with each other in various ways, creating so called combinations. A combination is a valuable state of affairs, in which more than one colourful patch participates, especially because of a particular trait of the patch. I characterised the combinations using the theory of relations by Roman Ingarden<sup>19</sup>. I would like to include also a few remarks on the experience of colour made by Balthus:

There is a certain kind of colour memory – thanks to it I recognise them, react to them, feel them vibrating. I apply them next to each other – and they interact. They are like waves which need to be matched.

[...] colours are an expression of what I call their «body». Every colour emits its particular light.

A precisely rendered colour in a way approximates the absolute.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 69. I remembered a missed statement of Jan Cybis, which sounded more or less like this: “a colour aptly applied is thereby applied technically correctly”.

<sup>19</sup> In his work on the structure of paintings, Ingarden distinguished a layer of colourful patches. This structure – beside the semantic and axiological side of a painting – belongs to technical aspect of a painterly work. The content of this layer is very important for the painting. It constitutes the material side of the layer of colourful patches, in which valuable relations of patches occur.

Colour exists exclusively in relation to other colours, it is like a tone of music, whose ultimate sound depends on the context. Only after the work is complete [...] it becomes clear what it is the real colour of the painting<sup>20</sup>.

It is in connection to colour that painters search for the painterly matter, the painterly substance.

They also search for composition. A valuable quality of composition is the unity of composition, achieved through composing in accordance with the laws of logic of composing and composition. The logic of composing and composition is not simply invented and does not result from *a priori* assumptions. To all painterly work an assumption-less stance applies. The logic of composing is immanent to the emerging painting, therefore it should be thoroughly understood and fully developed while work is in progress. However, the work is still governed by the general rules described by the formal aesthetics, the establishments of which as well as his own suggestions were presented recently by Lambert Wiesing<sup>21</sup>.

What is more, the logic here enters the open plane of the painting, which is also governed by its own rules. These rules were described by Kandinsky in his two studies on the foundations of painting<sup>22</sup>.

## Beauty and the aesthetically valuable moments

Apart from these values sought by the majority, many painters – more or less consciously – searched for more detailed values. In various ways, they searched for beauty. It is beauty and the related values to which Władysław Stróżewski's book *Wokół piękna*<sup>23</sup> is dedicated. Sublime [Loftiness] was sought after too, but not only that! Roman Ingarden put the aesthetically valuable moments together<sup>24</sup> forming groups of material moments – including emotional, intellectual, formal – within them also

<sup>20</sup> Balthus, *Samotny wędrowiec w krainie malarstwa...*, op. cit., pp. 81–82.

<sup>21</sup> L. Wiesing, *Widzialność obrazu. Historia i perspektywy estetyki formalnej*, tłum. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 2008.

<sup>22</sup> W. Kandinsky, *Punkt i linia a płaszczyzna. Przyczynek do analizy elementów malarzkich*, tłum. S. Fijałkowski, Warszawa 1986; idem *O duchowości w sztuce*, tłum. S. Fijałkowski, Łódź 1996.

<sup>23</sup> W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> R. Ingarden, *Zagadnienie systemu jakości estetycznie doniosłych*, in: idem, *Przeżycie, dzieło, wartość*, Kraków 1966, p. 162.

purely objective moments, derivatives for the perceptor... He also pointed to the ways (modi) in which the qualities exist...

These valuable qualities were explored differently by different painters, depending on the epoch. At one time, painters looked for symmetry and harmony, as well as ideal proportions, at another, their very oppositions: asymmetry, dissonance, proportions not ideal, but this time, say, full of emotional expression.

But what does it mean to search for symmetry or proportion? Is it only about composing the painting along the axis of symmetry? The word *symmetry* means *commensurateness*. It is about all parts and moments of a painting being mutually commensurate, and the axial symmetry is one case of commensurateness. Whenever everything in the painting is mutually commensurate, it can be said (after Stróżewski) that the painting – as a painting – exist commensurately. The same applies to all other values. A painting exists in the way that the values penetrate the entire work, all its layers and their content.

*Translated by Marta Bregiel-Benedyk*

## Bibliography

1. Balthus, *Samotny wędrowiec w krainie malarstwa, Rozmowy z Françoise Jaunin*, Warszawa 2004.
2. Ingarden R., *Zagadnienie systemu jakości estetycznie doniosłych*, in: idem, *Przeżycie, dzieło, wartość*, Kraków 1966.
3. Kandinsky W., *O duchowości w sztuce*, tłum. S. Fijałkowski, Łódź 1996.
4. Kandinsky W., *Punkt i linia a płaszczyzna. Przyczynek do analizy elementów malarских*, tłum. S. Fijałkowski, Warszawa 1986.
5. Panofsky E., *Średniowiecze*, tłum. G. Jurkowlaniec, A. Kozak, T. Dobrzeński, Warszawa 2001.
6. Skarga B., *Kwintet metafizyczny*, Kraków 2005.
7. Stróżewski W., *Dialektyka twórczości*, Kraków 2007.
8. Stróżewski W., *Wokół piękna*, Kraków 2002.
9. Tatarkiewicz W., *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Warszawa 1975.
10. van de Weternig E., *Rembrandt, the Painter at Work*, Amsterdam 1997.
11. Wiesing L., *Widzialność obrazu. Historia i perspektywy estetyki formalnej*, tłum. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 2008.

