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### The Issue of Abstraction – Some Things to Consider

*"Reality has always been far too small for the human imagination."* - Jacqueline Ford Morie

Throughout history around the world most artwork has freely expressed the wonderful potential of human imagination, using abstraction and symbolism to empower specific narratives. All children start out as abstract artists, altering and interpreting their surroundings intuitively and spontaneously. This inclination will always continue naturally unless it is subverted or discouraged.

In our Western culture the Classical humanism of ancient Greece and Rome celebrated the idealized perfection of the human form, and encouraged pictorial realism in all art. The emergence of Christian humanism of the late middle ages led to the revival of Classical humanism and pictorial realism during the Italian Renaissance, supercharged by the full power of the Catholic Church. With these two pinnacles of Western civilization setting such powerful precedent, it is little wonder that so many people assume that pictorial realism is the logical objective of fine art, and that abstraction is some sort of aberration appearing only in modern art. This perception seems to exist in much of the general public.

Abstraction in art can simply be defined as the alteration or interpretation of a subject to suit the artists needs or intent, and under that definition almost all art is abstracted from reality to some extent. The copying of reality without interpretation or abstraction is a matter of pure rendering skill and involves little creativity or imagination.

Nonobjective abstraction refers to completely abstract artworks with no overall objective or recognizable pictorial content. This type of artwork demands a lot from the viewer. When we view pictorial realism in art our response can be completely passive. All we have to do is stand there and let the imagery deliver its message, which doesn't require much imagination or initiative on our part. This is not to malign realistic pictorial art, but our enjoyment and understanding depends on the artist's rendering skill and our familiarity with the subject matter, rather than our willingness to proactively use our intellect and imagination. Abstract art is appreciated on a different level, and places much more responsibility on the viewer in order to fully experience the work. The appreciation of abstract art can increase with education and experience, but neither are necessary. The minimum requirement is a keen eye and an open mind.

A comparison with music helps to clarify this. Non-objective abstraction in visual art is like music that is purely instrumental with no lyrics. To say that realistic pictorial art is somehow more valid or acceptable than abstract art is no different than saying that music that tells a story with lyrics is more acceptable than instrumental music. A piece of instrumental music is an abstract composition of musical form: pitch, tone, volume, duration, repetition, rhythm, unity and variety experienced through sound. A nonobjective artwork is an abstract composition of visual form: line, shape, volume, space, value, color, pattern, texture, repetition, rhythm, unity and variety experienced through sight.