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The real question posed by Steven Tavis' The Gift of Scroveni (1987) is "How does the symbolism in the background relate to the symbolism in the foreground?" First of all, two concepts take place here. The first concept is shown in the background. That concept is exhibited in the comedies such as Late Night with David Letterman -- an attitude that says "Who cares what the future is like? We only care about what happens now." The other concept is not shown in the painting, but is instead implied in the foreground. What is shown is the instability of society and lack of awareness of the public as to what is happening in this world.

The facts of The Gift of Scroveni are shown in two scenes. What we see in the foreground is a still life of a globe that has been knocked over, an open book turned to a page with no text, a plate of cookies that looks as if it was never touched, a plant that looks unhealthy, and a watermelon that just parted from its vine. In the background, we see two Japanese figures just having a good time. There is also a family peeking into the room wandering what is going on.

The background is not as well lit as the foreground. (apparently for contrast in this apparition) Yet, the two Japanese figures are as lit as the still life. All people in this work are shoved in the back while the still life has been pulled out front. The virtual space, as Langer terms

it, is apparent because of the scale of the figures and of the objects in the still life. Evidence of a large space is the size of the door. The distance between that door and the open book shows the amount of virtual space in this image.

The symbolism, according to Langer, in this work is emphasized more than the facts displayed. First of all, many important events took place during the time this painting was conceived. Langer's definition of symbolism, that is there is an implied meaning to the object(s) shown, very well fits the implications shown in this image.

We see a lot of an attitude in the comedies we see on television. (The attitude also shows up in the general public.) This attitude is a typical person or family that insists upon not looking into our past (as the Reagan Administration encouraged us to do) nor to look far into our future. That is, one ignores the fact that we are not people who should try to get everything to go one's way.

The Japanese figures show just that. Their actions show that we are not supposed to know what happened nor are we supposed to know what to expect. The Iran-Contra scandal broke out the year this was painted. To apply this concept, the figures represent Reagan's attempt to deny any wrong doing. What he really said was "There is no need to know what happened during the past two years, and therefore, you should not worry about this incident." This represents a form of ignorance Tavis shows in the figures.

The family peeking into the room is a symbol for the public's demand to know what our government is doing. Just as this family is interested in knowing what the Japanese figures are doing in the image, we want to know what the Reagan Administration is doing.

The symbolism of the overall background should make us wander about what kind of society we are living in. Simple reasoning should tell us this fact, but yet, the general public does not want to use Langer's **reasoned insight**, but instead take the image for what it is -- a family looking into the room to see what is going on. (An example of Langer's version of **intuition**.)

The foreground requires some reasoning to get the symbolism shown in this still life. The tipped globe is a symbol of world instability. During the Reagan Administration, (and Dukakis has blasted George Bush for this) We struck down on countries we should have stayed away from. We have sent arms to countries where there is political turmoil when we should have been more concerned about the welfare of our people (typical of the Republican Party)

The open book is supposed to represent knowledge. If the book is not read, it might as well be a closed book. Tavis shows this by showing a book open to a page with nothing but a picture. This really represents our implied ignorance and unawareness of what is going on.

The plant in the work looks very unhealthy. Plants are symbols of purity and that we should recognize that purity. Ignore a plant, and it will die. In a country whose people are provincialists, the public might as well ignore that plant. The public's awareness of themselves shows that ignorance.

The watermelon is a symbol of Reagan's dream, prosperity and peace. However, watermelons are deceptive. What may look like a large watermelon may well be full of seeds and not enough watermelon that is edible. If all the rind and seeds are extracted from the watermelon, there will not be much left. The size of the watermelon is nothing more than an illusion of prosperity and peace.

The other meaning of the watermelon is deception. As explained before, looks can be deceiving. There was much deception (and lying) during the past eight years. Yet, the public falls for this deception like the public desires that slice of watermelon. The position of the watermelon shows that we are supposed to remain ignorant of the implications of this symbol. The overall image shown represents the growth of an unstable environment. As symbols of our true environment, we can come up with a grand total. Judging by all the events that took place the year this work was painted, and by the symbols represented both in the foreground and in the background, we can say that we need to be more aware of what is happening.

Langer's vital import states that a feeling is transmitted from the image to the viewer. She also mentioned that "vital" is the sum total of all the symbols and that the removal, or addition of any part of that total destroys the life of the work.

In today's society, people do not want to deal with their problems. (This is strongly encouraged by people like Dan Quayle) To the public who believes everything Reagan says, The Gift of Scroveni has no meaning. But to those who look into what is really going on, the image shows what this country is really like. All the recent history is implied in this combination of still life and scene. The people who believe Reagan strongly are those who maintain a sense of materialism and are frivolous about their affairs. (This is what makes them so vulnerable.)

We as a general public should react to this by thinking about what our politicians are saying. The public reaction to this would be almost negligible since we rely on our emotions for who we elect to office rather than getting the facts and then making a decision. Emotions should be saved for works like these. Reaganites look at this for the facts rather than for the implications expressed here. Hence, no significant public reaction is expressed here.

Tavis wants us to see the truth about us. The symbols work together to express that we are people who are true individuals, who do not really care what our government does, who should know of our own fate. The symbols send a message to people that life is not full of pleasures that the Republicans want us to believe, that we must look into the past so we can learn for the future.

Overall, Tavis makes us think about ourselves, and for ourselves. We shouldn't think of ourselves as people who are 'superior', but as people who are just as vulnerable as the rest of society.

*I have neither given nor received, nor have I
tolerated other's use of unauthorized aid.*

Teddy P. Hamaker

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