

AI on Art - Art and Baseball

We are all aware of the World Series this time of year. Sports have become so much a part of our culture that they announce the seasons: *Hm, its summer, water melon is in season and baseball must be in full swing.... Leaves are turning, football is around the corner.* With sports comes keeping “stats”, rating performance and creating imaginary “match-up” games whose objective is to compare the pure ability and talent of one athlete against another.

Match-ups can be either imaginary or real. An imaginary match-up involves wondering out loud how athletes from entirely different eras would fare competing against each other. *Ben Hogan and Tiger Woods. Babe Ruth and Sammy Sosa.* For these comparisons to be fair, and for us to have some real fun, we have to factor in the effect of the differences in materials, equipment and environment. What could Hogan have done with today’s clubs, balls and courses? The *Bambino* with today’s bats and balls? Certainly subjects worthy of some heated debate over some brewskies.

How about in the art world? How would you rate contemporary artists’ performances against those of artists of the past? What if we could arrange for a match-up between a respected contemporary painter such as *Robert E. Wood* and *Winslow Homer* (1830-1910)? *Dean Mitchell* and *Edward Hopper* (1882-1967)? Whose paintings would be rated as more painterly, better composed, more compelling? Who would have more “home runs”? Pull out more “saves”?

Well, for such match-ups to be of any significance, we would have to make allowances for artist materials and equipment. If you were a caveman drawing on walls by lamp light in Lascaux you would be using pigments which required no special technology in their preparation but were found ready-made in the earth in the form of white chalk, variously colored ochre, green and umber earths and black from the fireplace. Degas, working many years later on sized canvas with his hand rolled pastels, would be at a distinct advantage.

Let’s consider what materials would have been available to artists of the past. At any period prior to today, the artist’s palette was limited. In the Bronze Age (2000-1000BC), metal tools were used in Egypt to crush Azurite, Malachite, Orpiment and Cinnabar for use in painting. They also corroded metallic lead to produce White Lead which amazingly was the only white used in easel painting until the discovery of Zinc white in the 1830s and Titanium White in 1916. Indigo came from the dyeing industry, purple was obtained from a sea animal, the whelk and Verdi-gris was produced by the controlled corrosion of copper plates. Lead-tin yellow came from the glass-making industry.

Vermillion and **Ultramarine** were added with dazzling effects. Produced by subliming sulphur and mercury, **Vermillion** was thought to have been brought to Europe from China by the Arabs. Even then the world was a small place! Vermillion’s brightness, purity and opacity meant that it remained unrivalled as a pigment for centuries (until Cadmium Red appeared in 1910). **Ultramarine** was extracted from the semi-precious

stone lapis lazuli which was brought to Europe from mines in Afghanistan. From 1200 until 1704 (when Prussian Blue was discovered by a dyer in Berlin), Ultramarine Blue remained the blue of choice and artists anxiously monitored its use as they did gold. As new yellows and blues were introduced so did paintings begin to reflect a wider variety of greens. An analysis of Turner's palette shows that he experimented with all the paints and pigments available during his life.

To create paint, the pigment must be mixed with a medium which acts as a vehicle to convey the paint and bind it in place. During the Middle Ages by far the most common medium was egg, both white and yolk, which when mixed with water and pigments created egg tempera paints. So if you had been living in past ages, you might have had to run down to the chicken coop for fresh eggs every morning to mix yourself a new batch of paint. You would have had to develop your wooden panel with a thick ground of gesso and animal glue and have polished it down to an ivory-like finish so that you could add your gold leaf decorations.

Half a century later, artists were still struggling with carefully grinding their pigments to the right consistency and blending them with the correct combinations of oils which would then be stored in carefully wrapped in animal bladders. You would have found the oils dark and slow drying contributing to the achievement of an even glossy surface with no sign of brushwork.

Watercolors have actually undergone relatively small changes over the years. Consisting of pigments finely ground into gum Arabic which is obtained from acacia trees, watercolors were augmented with honey, glycerin and syrup to retard drying and aid transparency. The origins of watercolor seem to be traced to *Albrecht Durer* (1471-1528) who used them extensively long before they were used in eighteenth century England by the so-called "English Art" school. Today of course, watercolorists are in their heyday with a plethora of new synthesized pigments that claim to be extraordinarily stable.

To compare past artists with today's one might consider the artistic equivalent of the **RBI** (Runs Batted In) in Baseball. It would be the Vermillion-Ultramarine Blue-Index or the Red-Blue-Index, RBI for short. Who had a higher RBI, John Singer Sargent or Vincent Van Gogh? Of course no artist today is untainted by the art work of the past, making such comparisons pure fantasy. Nonetheless it is fun to dream them up.

By the way, how do you think your own work fare in such a match-up? What's your RBI?

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