

The Coming and Going of Images

Let me begin with a few definitions. By “images” I mean two different but intimately related things. We have images when we use our sense of vision. We see physical objects, such as art objects, sculpture or paintings. But we speak of images also in a more universal sense. Our thoughts, inventions, and fantasies are sensory images not produced by the presence of physical objects. Furthermore images may be immobile like rocks or full of action like living bodies.

Both of them, however, are subject to “coming and going.” Physical objects suffer from the fragility of matter. They are exposed to the destructive forces of nature and human neglect and brutal vandalism, which keep them from being what they were before. What also changes is our conception of things. Our image of the *Mona Lisa* is not what it was when it was painted.

In the more active media of communication there is a difference in the degree to which the audience communicates. In the theater it is mostly limited to applause. But take for example the liturgy of the churches with its prescribed responses. Through the ages and through different cultures there is an endless variety of response, to the degree of total involvement of all participants.

The technology of the modern media has produced new possibilities of interaction. Here is an example from the field of education: in a class on architecture the instructor presents on the computer screen images of a building. As he discusses various aspects and perspectives on the building or its size relative to its distance from observers, he varies the image accordingly. This enables him to illustrate his theoretical points concretely, not only by static examples like slides in the conventional lecture room, but as a dynamic counterpart, as actively alive as the instructor’s performance; and the students react with their own requests. The object discussed need not be immobile like a building. It can be an action evolving in time.

To return to the fine arts, I will illustrate theory with an obvious example taken from the work of this journal’s figurehead, Leonardo da Vinci. His *Last Supper* may be called the most famous painting of the Western world. It exemplifies the various aspects of imagery here under discussion. What makes for the unusual attention and adoration this painting has received?

The Last Supper was designed around 1495, for its place and its “audience” in the refectory of the Dominican monks of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Ever since then, it has attracted attention. We owe to Goethe a masterly description of the painting, written in 1810. At that time the painting was already in the miserable state in which we know it today, thereby exemplifying the physical fragility of images. *The Last Supper* received its share of mistreatment via restoration, vandalism and neglect. Yet the uniqueness of the work has survived. Its subject has been treated by many other artists, among them quite excellent ones, but none has equaled Leonardo’s fame. To a large extent, this is due to the power of its composition, the elements of which survive even the worst reproductions.

The composition of *The Last Supper* is held together by its balancing symmetry and the horizontal base formed by the table and its parallel, the line of heads. This stability is dynamized by the way the perspective draws the viewer into the center and the varying gestures of the disciples, which swing toward or away from their master in their varying responses to his revelation. He, in his contrasting quietness, establishes the center of the room but is also kept in the world outside by the light of the landscape surrounding him.

The image of Jesus presents the viewer with the embodiment of humanness at its highest to serve both as a model of charity and as a leader raised to the level of the divine. But this model also embodies human suffering, the victimized martyr. We are therefore accorded an image of the epitome of human nature. This quality is needed by every good work of art, although to varying degrees of perfection. It applies as well to other fields of character and behavior. As a single example, I mention the Venus of Melos, standing for femininity.

In the flow of coming and going, these significant images provide an indispensable counterweight. They offer a store of lasting meaning, without which we would be helplessly exposed to the flight of transitory happenings. This sharpens the keypoint of the present paper. The awareness and understanding of our experience depends on the interaction of stable, lasting images and the coming and going of happenings in time. The stationary images allow us to explore the world in its being, while the transitory ones let us follow what takes place in sequence.

This would seem to be relevant at the present time, as the millennium makes the calendar impose on us an arbitrary interruption in the continuity of time. In pondering the future we are tempted to limit our attention to the curiosity about the inventions and discoveries awaiting us. This, however, would be narrow-minded. What is needed is a wider view encompassing the coming rewards in the context of the treasures left us by past experiences, possessions and insights.

RUDOLF ARNHEIM
Leonardo Honorary Editor