

## Chapter 1

# KNOWING CONTENT IN THE VISUAL ARTS

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My objective is to explain how we know what a painting, or any work of visual art, is like. This knowledge of what the work of art is like is knowledge of the content of the work of art. I use the concept of content in a way similar to the use of the concept of meaning, and construe content as having a functional role, though not merely a functional role, in the mentality of the viewer. When we know what the work of art is like, we know its content in a special way, by incorporating the experience of the work of art into a state of understanding and knowledge. We cannot know the content of the work of art without experiencing the work, because the experience is used to represent the content of the work and is part of the content. The representation of the content incorporates the experience, including the phenomenology of the work of art, into the representational understanding of its content. My project is to explain how we can know the content of the work of art.

## REPRESENTATION BY EXEMPLARIZATION

My explanation is that the experience of the work of art results in representation of what the work of art is like in a way that uses the experience of the work of art as an exemplar to stand for a class of experiences of which it is a member. This process I have called ‘exemplarization’ (Lehrer, 1997). Exemplarization yields a representation of content in terms of an experienced particular that stands for other particulars. Exemplarization involves generalization of a particular. The notion of exemplarization stems from the empiricist tradition, most closely from Hume (1739–40/2000) and Reid (1785/2002).

Exemplarization, this special form of representation yielding knowledge of what the work of art is like, explains some of the most puzzling features of representation of a work of art. A linguistic description of the content of a work, though providing useful information for many purposes, seems to leave out something essential to what a work of art is like. This leads philosophers to say that the content of a work of art, even a representational painting, is ultimately ineffable. There is a point to speaking about the ineffability of the content of a painting, but it leads to paradox when one adds that the ineffable content can be known to an observer and appreciated many times over. How can the content be known and recognized repeatedly if it is ineffable?

## THE PARTICULARITY OF CONTENT

A related issue concerns the particularity of the content. There are many paintings of Olympia, and someone may observe that the Titian painting of Olympia is a member of the class of Olympia paintings. But one is also inclined to say that to know what the Titian painting is like is not just to know that it is an Olympia painting. One must know what the particular content of the painting is like if one is to appreciate it aesthetically or even to know exactly what it is like. Knowing what this painting is like, in the full particularity of experiencing it, is what is required for aesthetic appreciation. This appreciation rests on a special, particularized knowledge of what this Olympia painting is like. Moreover, the particularity of the content is not captured by distinguishing between digital and analogue representations (as Goodman, 1968, proposed). Digital and analogue representations, however detailed they may be, still fail to explain the particularity of the content of the work of art. The distinction between digital and analogue representation can mark the distinction between a representation of a species and that of an *infima* species, but an *infima* species, even if it has only one member, is still different from that one member. The member is a particular, and the species is general no matter how determinate it might be. If the content is particular, then knowledge of what the content is like must also be knowledge of a particular.

Knowledge of the particular content must involve a representation that gives the particular a semantic role in the representation of the content. This observation, however natural and plausible, also leads to a paradox or, at least, a puzzle. After all, the content of the painting is something that can be experienced repeatedly. The repetition involves different particular experiences, however similar and even indistinguishable the experiences