Not Against Interpretation

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Not Against Interpretation:

Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince

"It is the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content,' and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory."

Susan Sontag in "Against Interpretation."

In "Against Interpretation," published in 1966, Susan Sontag argues against specific approaches to interpreting an artwork that reduces it to an exploration of its content. Sontag claims that an interpretation tries to squeeze more meaning into the content than is already there in the form of the artwork. Hence, Sontag claims, an interpretation of content devalues the sense of form. Sontag asserts that the content consists of the "prescriptive" (12) ideas of an artwork that enable a viewer to arrive at an artist's "picture of reality" or "statement" (4) through an interpretation of its form. In turn, form is the "descriptive" (12) elements of the painting - such as figures, colors, and lines - that should be, in and of themselves, enough to evoke a response in the viewer. Sontag considers this response to the form of the artwork the evocation of its "thing" - the experience of the artwork as it is. It is this individual and unmediated experience of art she considers the stuff of magic, claiming that an interpretation transforms a possibly "incantatory, magical" (3) experience of the artwork into a "portentous" interpretive one. Therefore, Sontag urges viewers to curtail the inclination to interpret the "content" of an artwork so that they can experience its magic - such that it provokes a magical experience (14).

However, because Sontag considers the distinction between content and form "an illusion" (11), she employs a theory against the interpretation that denies the existence of content that invites interpretation. In her own words, "it is the habit of approaching artworks
in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy... there really is such a thing as the content of an artwork” (5). Considering content as a fanciful idea, Sontag disregards the role of content in an artwork. Sontag’s theory against such interpretation then denies a viewer's inclination to want to know more about the relationships in the content and form of an artwork. However, it is not enough to experience the formal elements without interpretation because they may fail to express the magic of the artwork. For example, by engaging in an interpretation of *Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince*,¹ the magic of this painting manifest from its elements of form; it is not by resisting an interpretation of its content through its form that viewers may experience the magic of this painting.

At first glance, the viewer finds *Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince* puzzling: its bright colors pull the eyes into an unfamiliar scene. Though small, about 8x7 in., the image is bright with life within the confines of its canvas. Seven figures stand in a line: two males and five females. All the Gopis (damsels) dress alike: fabric wraps their bodies but does not altogether cover them. Their faces, abdomens, and feet are bare. Delicate floor-length veils cover their foreheads. Jewels and dangles decorate the figures. Krishna has deep blue skin and stands with his right arm encircling his beloved Radha's right shoulder. Radha's left arm encircles Krishna's. A young prince is offering Radha and Krishna a fan and a leaf. Radha, Krishna, the Gopis, and the Prince stand within a great red circle. Two tall, lean trees of bright green stand on either side. Two more gopis, barefoot on gray sand and playing instruments, stand close to the bottom. The whole scene juxtaposes against a pale-yellow background. A stripe of red color that matches the red circle in which Radha and Krishna, the Prince, and the Gopis stand frames the entire image.

¹ 1650 by an unknown artist. See last page.
Despite Sontag’s theory that urges viewers to cut back on the interpretation of content, the formal elements of *Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince* are not enough to evoke its magical experience. Sontag desires that viewers focus only on the form of this painting, what it does, and even what it evokes - as long as it does not lead them to interpretation. If one follows her lead, however, one views the artwork only as a blank canvas: the texture of its fabric is a little coarse; the color is harsh in red, pale in yellow, varied in tones of green, with some white, grey, and blue; the shapes are round in the circle and square in the rectangle; the lines are sharp in the upper trees - except the middle tree - and round in the lowers trees - not symmetrical. In sum, the above is the bare description of the formal elements of this painting. Although Sontag claims that form only can evoke feelings, it is by interpreting the content and form of *Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince* that its formal elements can bestow the magical experience upon the viewer Sontag expects. The experience of the formal elements only may be "accurate, sharp," but it is far from a "loving description of the appearance of [this] artwork," as she claims (13). Therefore, the effect of these formal elements on a viewer is counterintuitive to Sontag’s theory because the elements themselves invite interpretation.

An example of such interpretation follows. The figures at the center of the painting seem to be in love. Closer examination of the positions of the hands of Radha and Krishna on each other and of how their bodies stand so closely reveal them to be lovers. The title reveals that the only male character in the painting is "a young prince." Because he is not vain by royalty, he offers a leaf and a fan to Radha and Krishna in a devotional attitude. The four Gopis who stand in the same line within the circle resemble Radha and possibly embody further manifestations of her love for Krishna. The Gopis, in and out of the circle, seem to be celebrating: in the circle, the arms of the Gopis, bedecked with bracelets and bangles, move
rhythmically in dance; out of the circle, two Gopis play musical instruments. An interpretation of this painting limited to its form could not evoke such relations experienced by a viewer. Upon an interpretation, an enhanced experience of the "thing" of this painting unfolds its magic.

The use of colors in the painting hints at an emotional intensity. Interpreting them, the love between Radha and Krishna shows in the form of a passionate, bright red circle. It also surrounds the entire frame as if passion is a lens through which the viewer can visualize the relationship among the figures. This passionate red strongly contrasts to the pale-yellow background, representing an outer and more passive atmosphere outside the active and passionate red within the circle. Unlike the other Gopis in the big red circle, the two Gopis at the bottom juxtapose against this pale yellow, thus hinting that the love manifested in the passionate circle may be stronger than the love celebrated by those in the passive and pale yellow. The dark green tones of some of the plants reflect darkness that contrasts with some of the other plants with light green tones within the red circle. Upon an interpretation, an enhanced experience of the "thing" of the colors reveals the emotional intensity, thereby creating an enhanced magical experience of that formal element.

The use of lines in this painting conveys an idea of transcendent perfection. The round lines in the big red circle immediately attract the viewer's eyes to the figures within it. Tall trees with sharp leaves on each side of Radha and Krishna and the other figures resemble two asterisks claiming attention - inviting an interpretation. Upon an interpretation, an enhanced experience of the "thing" of the lines reveals that, though symmetrically complex, the lines are drawn in harmony to call attention to the emotional significance on canvas. One could interpret the content of this artwork and find more ways in which magic unfolds, which the form of the artwork only would not reveal.
In sum, *Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince* is a painting with rich meaning uncovered by interpreting its form and content. When the viewer interprets it, the painting takes on a multivalent depth. Sontag regards this type of interpretation as "foolish" (9), but is it not an interpretation of the content of this artwork that makes its colors, shapes, and lines speak in such a magical way as they do? Therefore, unlike Sontag's claim, it is not by cutting back the interpretation of the content of this painting that the "thing" of it happens. Sontag struggles against this type of interpretation, deeming it "defective, false, contrived, and lacking in conviction" (9). However, it is valuable to reveal to the viewer a critical appreciation of the artwork that *Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince* certainly deserve.
Works Cited


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