

The Silverpoint Metaphor (2012)

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An abridged copy of the original

Abstract

Understanding and appreciation of art affects the approach to inquiry into the meaning of being and its desired outcomes. Grounded in the experience of a phenomenon of creative freedom this paper examines a desired outcome of ecstasy as a delight in the positive influences of Art and Spirituality with inspiration, awe, wonder, and motivation. These are posited as a number of heuristic phases that enrich the experience. The examination is also grounded in an artistic practice of the fine and ancient art of metalpoint drawing, presented in this paper in metaphoric form, to help understand the metalpoint metaphor as heuristic phases of inquiry and experience. This paper presents my findings embodied in *The Silverpoint Metaphor*.

Introduction

This paper examines the issue of how understanding and appreciation of art can affect the way we approach any inquiry into the meaning of being. My examination is grounded in the experience of a phenomenon of creative freedom whose outcome is an ecstasy of delight in the positive influence of such lived-experiences as inspiration, awe, wonder, and motivation. These lived-experiences comprise a number of heuristic phases that posit a model of discovery to enrich my enquiry and investigation. My examination is also grounded in professional artistic practices of fine art drawing and abstract painting that began in my student years, over fifty years ago during the early 1960's, at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) in Toronto.

Of specific interest is the fine and ancient art of metalpoint drawing, also known as silverpoint, gold, and copper point, that date back to the 15th Century. Among its illustrious and talented line of artists are names including Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Albrecht Dürer, Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Rembrandt, just to name a few. Imagine my delight when Hugo Chapman, Curator of Prints & Drawings and The British Museum in London so graciously affirmed that I too, "*Belong to a long and talented line of artists working in metalpoint.*"¹

I have been drawing in silverpoint, gold, copper, and brass, for over twenty-five years since being introduced to this exquisite medium by Canadian drawing master, John Gould (1929-2010)¹. My body of metalpoint drawings comprises both classical,

¹ Gerrit Verstraete. "*John Gould: Just Me and the Paper*," the authorized biography. Seattle, WA. KDP Publishers, an Amazon Company. 2018

traditional representative drawings, as well as experimental works that explore the oxidation process of metalpoint. This led me to employ these precious metals in the same drawing and to observe the oxidation process as it lightened the copper, darkened the silver, but did not affect the gold. Platinum is out of my budget. Understanding this process allowed me to experiment with tonal surfaces of the drawing according to specific plans that anticipated the effect of light and dark as the drawing matured, sometimes over months, sometimes over years, long after I had completed it. Each silverpoint drawing begins as a medium grey drawing but over time it oxidizes into a beautifully gentle brown with darker variations. I look forward to those moments when each drawing is truly “finished.”

Silverpoint is an exacting medium that entails the experience of a number of phases similar to phases of research inquiry as outlined in Clark Moustakas’ book, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*.² These phases are: Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, Creative Synthesis, and Validation. During my research in these phases as a pattern of practice that metaphorically illuminates the phases of drawing in silverpoint, I became aware that the same use of metaphor is a pattern of phases that reflected my journey in Spirituality. It made the prospect of drawing even more exciting, because as I engaged metal with coated paper I was fully aware that I was drawing phases of my Spiritual growth.

Not until 2009, when I had decided to go back to school at the age of 65, did I discover the remarkable similarity between the art of silverpoint drawing and the art of Spiritual practices. During my graduate studies at the University of Alberta, where I completed a Master of Arts in Communication and Technology, I was able to give voice to this remarkable similarity. I presented my findings in “*The Silverpoint Metaphor*,” a lecture to graduate students at the University’s Extension Faculty. However, after the metalpoint metaphor was presented to students primarily as a research model during the University’s centenary events and art exhibitions celebrating the birth and contributions of Marshall McLuhan, I took the metaphor a step further.

When I continued my research at St. Stephen’s College / University of Alberta, I discovered that at the roots of my understanding of the *Silverpoint Metaphor* also lay the appreciation of Spirituality from a similar perspective of connoisseurship and criticism I had applied to my experiences as an artist. My purpose in writing this paper is to enlighten, inform, and encourage, all who would aspire to pursue both perspectives towards greater understanding not just about the meaning of art but a deeper meaning of *being* as well. By embracing the appreciation of art as a heuristic model for both Art and Spirituality

Dare I even suggest that the process is inspiring, delightful, and perhaps even ecstatic? And dare I even suggest that the process of Spirituality is almost identical to a process of Art that inspires the journey with experiential phenomena of awe, wonder, and delight, and yes, ecstasy?

The Silverpoint Metaphor

I posit silverpoint (metalpoint) drawing as a metaphor that also accurately reflects the process of qualitative research in Spirituality. My lecture to graduate students included a brief description of the method of silverpoint drawing, followed by a demonstration of techniques, and a display of fine art metalpoint drawings from my body of work. To highlight each phase, I invited students to experience drawing in silverpoint with the appropriate tools on prepared paper. I demonstrated the unique “feeling” of a silver stylus on paper coated with calcium carbonate *ground*. The student’s initial engagement was surprising and awe-filled (I had brought enough silverpoint styluses and coated paper for everyone). Then they immersed themselves in drawing line after line, shape after shape, sometimes freestyle; sometimes an object in the room. Incubation gave birth to a delightful conversation and many shared their observations (illumination) because the process spoke of emergent life itself. Silverpoint drawing emerges from the paper when the stylus bites into the *ground* leaving small traces of silver. And when the drawing is done, its life continues as the metal oxidizes over time.

I was able to make a number of references to Spirituality about life that continues even after the drawing is done, that is, even as similar phases of initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, *et al*, have been completed, and the evidence of my lived-experience of Spirituality lives on. The analogy was respectfully received.

On November 20, 2012, I presented the same workshop to students at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia. Both occasions in Edmonton and Kamloops demonstrated an experience of fine art through understanding and appreciation of heuristic phases and as a metaphorically unique approach to an appreciative inquiry into a methodology of research.

And for those who stayed to chat, it became an opportunity to connect the silverpoint metaphor to Art *and* Spirituality.

St. Stephen’s College / University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, June 2015

¹ “The Canadian artist Gerrit Verstraete has helped create greater awareness of the diversity and quality of metalpoint drawing in the United States and Canada as well as globally. He continues to assist galleries and museums in planning metalpoint exhibitions.” (adapted from quote by Hugo Chapman) Stacey Sell, Hugo Chapman. *“Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns.”* National Gallery of Art, Washington; The British Museum, London; Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. Princeton, NJ: 2015. p. 234.

To which he further responded personally with: “*You (Gerrit) belong to a long and talented line of artists working in metalpoint.*” Hugo Chapman, Keeper of Prints & Drawings, The British Museum. London. (June 20, 2015)

² Clark Moustakas. *“Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications.”* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. 1990.