

The Artist and Nature

Ryan Woods

The sun, emblazoned in the blue, abyssal sky above, shined down upon the terrestrial greenery turning to the warm colors of red and brown and yellow and falling to the dear earthen floor where its lifeblood and nutrients would return later to the trees and offspring of trees from which it came, and the creatures of the forest hurried about making preparations for the cold winter months ahead, running to and fro gathering the gifts of their arboreal guardians and homes. And the cool stream rushed along the dirt path and among the stones, the water as clear as glass and glimmering like diamonds as it played its soothing trickle-tune. The ground was moist and beginning to be blanketed with crunchy leaves that would sink into the mud and become a crisp ground-covering. And the grass was tall, mature after growing all summer.

To this scene of autumn tranquility was added a man, an artist, to be specific, who had resolved earlier that morning to travel into the woods he had always loved and to capture this beautiful autumn day with paint and paper to keep with him and his family to enjoy and revere. The artist was a young man, but he was experienced, and talented at that. Many times he had painted landscapes and scenes of beautiful nature. But this would be his best.

He set up his easel and readied his equipment by the side of the stream looking over it, through the trees, and out into the fields. The trees were sparse enough to view the green meadows beyond and the brilliant sun, yet dense enough to signify the location as a forest. And the stream would run along the bottom of the page.

The artist began to paint. It most certainly was his best. He enjoyed it like no painting before. He felt he understood beauty, purely and simply, and could capture nature in all its majesty and wonder.

He was nearly finished when he heard footsteps, soft, yet crunching on the leaves. He turned to see who it was.

And, behold, he saw a woman, beautiful beyond compare, garbed in a dress of green leaves and ivy, with a crown of orange, red, and yellow leaves, an autumnal circlet, on her head. Her skin was soft and pale, yet still with a touch of color. She seemed to be overflowing with life, yet reserved, like summer fading into autumn and autumn giving way to the cold and frigid winter.

She stepped carefully and with a fairy-like grace. Her hands were thin and dainty, and her arms sharply defined, yet smooth, like liquid crystal in bodily form. And she looked upon the artist with her blazing eyes. They were one minute orange, another, blue, and seemed to hold the entire range of color in their pearl-white beauty, like orbs of quiet light. She looked youthful, but wise, and her countenance expressed a hint of anger. All the same, there was something welcoming about her.

Her mouth was thin and curved to a point where it was neither smile nor frown. Her lips were defined, pink and delicate, yet sharp and stern.

And the manner in which she carried herself, gracefully moving her arms and legs, caressing the foliage she neared, and holding her head erect, while at the same time leaning back comfortably and silently conversing with trees like old friends, had an air of wonder and a touch of terror in it.

On the whole, this woman was astonishingly beautiful, and the artist was taken aback. Here beauty could not be mastered nor controlled, but it ran wild in vibrant life and majestic power.

She continued towards him. The artist was unable to speak, so could only stare, and this he did. His picture was dwarfed behind him as this woman came near.

At last, she spoke in a voice, pure like a mountain spring, soft like a gentle breeze, joyful like the songs of birds, powerful like the roar of thunder, and harsh like the frigid winter, all at once, and she said,

“Dear son of man and traveler here in my dominion, child and stranger, I speak to you. For you are the one that is called an artist, yes?”

The artist could only nod. This woman was bewildering, and he was flustered.

“I perceive your cowering fear. Foolish human that dare be prideful in my absence! Yet at the same time I am moved to comfort you and offer you warmth and joy.

“I speak to you because you are chief of your race, in head of your profession. You are the greatest artist I have found. And now, I lay bare to you my anger and my request.

“You sons and daughters of man build your homes and make your lives here in my domain, altering what you deem needs be altered, and both destroying and perverting what once was pure. But this grudge I bring not to you. No, in this respect, you artists are very much in my favor. You see me, and you admire me. You will not have me corrupted. And I thank you for that.

“No, that is not my grudge against you. But this is: you artists enter into those areas where I remain as I should be, where I am still pure, and you bring with you your products of civilization, your easels, your paper, your paint, and your brushes. And you search. You search for a place where you can find beauty at its greatest, and you begin to record it. And as you record it, you pervert it. You distort it and destroy it. You make a pathetic rendition, a wretched portrait of me.”

By this time, the artist was overwhelmed and confused. And the woman continued in greater force.

“Fool! Do you not understand me? Look at what you have made. See your work.”

She stepped over to his easel and held her hand towards it.

“This scratch, this manipulation, this perversion you call art, this is what I

loathe. This and the lot, the world over. It robs me and slanders me. I am simplified and misrepresented. I am made child's play and fool's jest. I am destroyed by you, in the image of your minds. I seek to be beautiful for you. I give you all I have. But how do you repay me? You make this, this filth. You rob me and laugh at my loss. Shall I forgive you? I daresay, I cannot do so now.

"But I may. That is why I shall make a request, a plea and heartfelt commission: Go, seek out this wretched art and destroy it. Seek it until you reach the ends of the earth and beyond; circle back and circle forth. Save me from your artist's hand, until the last stain is washed away."

Now, fully understanding the woman and perceiving that her assault was on his profession and love, he gathered up his courage and, like the inspiration that gives birth to and sets in motion the creation of a work of art, let his defense flow out to meet the challenge and make its impassioned statement.

"Dear woman, Nature, as I perceive your name to be, I now respond to you both as adoring subject and loving sibling.

"Art is not, as you say, a distortion or perversion. Neither is it an assault upon your beauty. Rather, it is a glorification, a joyful praise, and thankfulness for your presence. It is not a mockery, but a compliment. We love you and would not see you harmed. There are some in this world that may seek to destroy you, but, I assure you, this is not the rule for man. We are travelers here, as you say, and we can do you damage from time to time, but we are not your enemies.

"The profession of art is pure. It is an honest form of joy and praise. It takes your beauty and adds to it. It does not detract from it. I did not come here today to rob you or harm you. I came here to bask in your beauty and share in your joy. I came here to add what I could to it, by making a new rendition. Certainly, it might not be great, and it definitely cannot even attempt to match you in beauty, but its purpose lies not in wickedness. Its purpose is to glorify what is already there, to stack joy upon joy, beauty upon beauty.

"I mean you no harm. I assure you, art is an addition to beauty, an addition and glorification of Nature, not a detraction from it—not a detraction from you."

The woman was surprised. She expected to achieve her ends and that the young artist would submit to her ways, but now she was undone. She thought and, after a pause, spoke again, this time with a smile.

"Dearest human, dearest artist, I now see the truth of your words. You, and many others like you—you have all meant me no harm. Indeed, you have complimented me, and I failed to see it. It is I who owe an apology. It is I who have been in the wrong. Forgive me, son of man, and do please mean it from the heart. And, in recompense, I will answer you a request."

"Dearest Nature, dearest sister, I can request nothing more from you but this:

remain beautiful and increase in beauty, that the profession of art might ever seek you and emulate you and, in so doing, praise you for your beauty. I am infinitely grateful and overjoyed at your understanding. I thank you and most certainly forgive you.”

And dear Nature turned away, walking on into the distance, that the artist might complete his work.