

ALMOST, BUT NOT QUITE

How do they do it? Capture a likeness, on paper or canvas, of a person or place. Or three dimensional with clay or wax, let alone wood or stone. From the time I was little, I was aware of “art,” and awed by the ability of the representational artist. (In my teens, I decided that the absolute greatest were Rembrandt and Michelangelo.) There was art in my home. When times were good, my mother had bought several paintings and prints, and even a marble bust. I grew up with them, and I still have a lovely watercolor of a young farm girl, which must have been painted in the mid-to-late 1800s.

As a kid, I drew stick figures like almost every kid. In junior high school, we had art classes, and there was an elective class where students learned to make linoleum prints, but I did not take it. Their work was featured in our literary magazine, the Knowlton Herald. I was impressed with them, and had a hard time trying to understand how you get a picture by “cutting away.”

In elementary and junior high, when bored, instead of doodling, I drew the back of the head of the kid in front of me. Then I would attempt to draw the entire classroom. This required a sense of perspective which I never could get, but it was fun trying. Years later, I learned about the vanishing point where all the lines meet. (This is different from the sad story I had once heard: that parallel lines never meet)

Early on, I became aware that some people have “talent” and some people don’t. No matter what the field: sports, academics, food preparation, and certainly, the arts. Study is important, you must learn the fundamentals, but if you don’t have the innate ability, you may get good but you won’t be great. When I was drawing the back of the head of the boy in front of me, a few of my classmates were drawing faces, copying comic strip characters and, a popular subject during World War II: airplanes. They had talent, I thought they were great, and it came naturally to them. I would have liked to have been as good as they were.

My first introduction to doing “art” was at camp when we were introduced to “arts and crafts.” Yes, we made lanyards out of gimp, and there were crayons and paper, but we also had access to clay and plasticine. (Clay has a water base and dries out and hardens and can be fired, but plasticine has an oil base and can be reused.) I had a great time shaping all kinds of things--people, faces, animals--and concluded that I was a better sculptor than a drawer.

And from the time I was a teen-ager, I sketched. When I looked at the finished product, I thought, “almost but not quite.” Later, on trips, I would always take a sketch pad with me. However, to really remember whatever it was that I saw, I depended on my camera. Still, it was sketching that really forced me to “look.” It was the same as my experience copying drawings, which I did for a brief time in my 20s. I began to see things that I would not have otherwise observed: the shapes, the relationships, the colors, and my old nemesis: perspective.

I have written about the wonderful union-sponsored sculpting class I joined when I worked for the ILGWU in the early '50s. Our teacher, Arturo Sofo, required all his new students to first copy a plaster reproduction of Venus de Milo. We worked in plasticine, and then our work was cast in plaster. When our plaster cast was returned to us, Sofo taught us how to finish it, and give it an appropriate patina. I was proud of this first effort. All my friends were impressed. I still have it, and people are still impressed. Nevertheless, I thought to myself, "almost but not quite."

And so it went with the other pieces I made. They weren't bad. A head, a bas relief, a copy of a sculpture by Michelangelo. Almost, but not quite. I enjoyed the act of creating. I was grateful when Sofo looked at the work, nodded, and then pointed out where more work was needed. Aha! I did what he suggested. It looked better. I thanked him. I tried to improve the way I looked at the subject, attempting to reproduce it. I concluded that the first step is mastering the technique, and once you have that down, you can start doing art. But it was clear that I was not a natural.

In my sculpting classes, I tended to measure myself against the other students. I was better than some, but there were always a few others who were really good. Twenty-five years later, I resumed sculpting at a class at the Boston Center for Adult Education. We sculpted in clay from live models. I loved the opportunity to sculpt again, and I loved the added attraction of live models.

Again, what I sculpted was pretty good, but not great. Over the next couple years, I was quite productive. As opposed to the clay figures I made at camp, we fired our work, and I was pleased with what I had produced. In fact, I sculpted so many figures, I gave them as gifts to family and friends. However, I suspect that those receiving the figures must have thought, "almost, but not quite." Maybe even, "pretty good for someone without talent." It takes a lot to be a Michelangelo or a Rodin. We are who we are. I did have fun doing it, though.

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As I finished the above, I realized the same might be said about my writing, my poetry, my photography, and maybe even my life. Both, "almost, but not quite," and "pretty good for someone without talent." And, I might add, that for the most part, I am having fun doing it.