

## 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 her 1966 essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag vehemently opposes specific methods of analyzing artworks that reduce them to mere examinations of their content. Sontag contends that interpretation often seeks to inject more meaning into the content than the artwork inherently possesses in its form. Consequently, she argues that interpretations that focus on content tend to devalue the significance of the artwork's form. Sontag asserts that content comprises the artwork's "prescriptive" ideas (12), which serve as a pathway for the viewer to grasp the artist's "picture of reality" or "statement" (4). This is achieved through an interpretation of the artwork's form. On the other hand, form encompasses the "descriptive" elements of the artwork (12), including figures, colors, and lines. These elements, in themselves, should suffice to evoke a response in the viewer.

Sontag perceives this response to the artwork's form as an encounter with its intrinsic "essence" — the experience of the artwork in its pure state. She regards this personal and unmediated encounter with art as a source of enchantment, suggesting that interpretation can transform what might be an "incantatory, magical" experience into a burdensome interpretive exercise (3). Hence, Sontag urges viewers to resist the temptation to interpret an artwork's content excessively so that they may fully embrace its enchantment, allowing it to incite a genuinely magical experience (14).

However, as Sontag dismisses the distinction between content and form as "an illusion" (11), she advances a theory that challenges the practice of interpreting artworks while denying the existence of content open to interpretation. In her words, "It is the habit of approaching artworks in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy... there is such a thing as the content of an artwork" (5). Sontag effectively downplays its role within an artwork by regarding content as fanciful. Her theory, which opposes such interpretations, ultimately rejects the viewer's natural curiosity to explore the relationships between content and form within an artwork.

Yet, without interpretation, experiencing the formal elements alone may sometimes fall short of fully conveying the magic inherent in an artwork. Take, for instance, the painting "Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince." In this case, the painting's magic is not solely derived from its formal elements but through a nuanced interpretation of its content and form. Resisting interpretation of the painting's content through its form may not allow viewers to access the enchantment in this artwork fully.

Upon initial examination, "Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince" presents a captivating yet enigmatic tableau. The painting, despite its relatively modest dimensions, approximately 8x7 inches, bursts with vibrant vitality within the confines of its canvas. The vivid colors immediately seize the viewer's attention, drawing them into an unfamiliar and intriguing narrative. Seven figures grace the scene in the composition, arranged in a linear formation. Among them, two are male, while the remaining five are female. The Gopis, representing damsels, share a typical attire characterized by fabric loosely draping their bodies, exposing certain areas. Delicate, floor-length veils gracefully adorn their foreheads, and their forms are embellished with intricate jewels and ornamental dangles.

In stark contrast, Krishna, the central figure of the composition, boasts a complexion of deep, mystical blue. He stands with his right arm tenderly encircling his beloved Radha's right shoulder, symbolizing their profound connection. Radha reciprocates this affectionate gesture by enfolding Krishna's left arm with her own, signifying their intimate bond. An essential element of the narrative unfolds with the introduction of a young prince, who is depicted offering Radha and Krishna a fan and a leaf. This royal figure becomes a pivotal character in the scene, adding layers of intrigue to the composition. The artistic composition is further enriched by two towering, slender trees, resplendent in bright green hues, flanking the central figures on either side.

Additionally, two more Gopis, depicted as barefoot and engaged in playing musical instruments, occupy the lower portion of the composition against a backdrop of gray sand. The entire scene is meticulously framed by a continuous stripe of red color, which harmoniously complements the prominent red circle encasing Radha, Krishna, the Prince, and the Gopis. In summary, "Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince" presents a visually captivating narrative, combining rich colors, intricate details, and a sense of mystique to engage the viewer in a story that beckons exploration and interpretation.

Despite Susan Sontag's theory, which encourages viewers to minimize their interpretation of content, the formal elements present in "Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince" may not, on their own, suffice to evoke the magical experience that Sontag desires. Sontag's perspective advocates for an exclusive focus on the form of the artwork, its inherent actions, and the emotions it may evoke, as long as it does not lead to interpretation. However, adhering to her guidance may result in viewing the artwork as little more than a blank canvas.

Upon close examination, the formal elements of the painting reveal themselves relatively straightforwardly. The canvas itself possesses a slightly coarse texture. The color palette is characterized by bold red, subtle yellow, and various shades of green, interspersed with white, grey, and blue. The shapes encompass circular forms within the central red circle and rectangular ones in the framing stripe. The lines are marked by sharpness in the upper trees, except the middle tree, while they adopt a more rounded quality in the lower trees, although without perfect symmetry. This description represents a basic overview of the formal elements that constitute the painting.

Although Sontag contends that form alone can elicit emotions, it is through the interpretation of both content and form within "Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis with a Young Prince" that the formal elements can bestow upon the viewer the anticipated magical experience. It is essential to recognize that the experience stemming solely from the formal elements may be characterized as "accurate" and "precise," but it may fall short of offering a "loving description of the appearance of [the] artwork," as Sontag claims (13). Consequently, the impact of these formal elements on the viewer may defy Sontag's theoretical expectations, as the elements beckon interpretation and engagement beyond mere formal observation.

An illustrative instance of such interpretation becomes apparent upon closer examination of the painting. The central figures in the artwork appear to be deeply in love, and a more detailed analysis of their postures and hand positions underscores their passionate connection. The title of the painting designates the sole male character as "a young prince," a characterization that suggests the trappings of royalty do not bind him. His reverent gesture, offering a leaf and a fan to Radha and Krishna, signifies a devotional attitude and reinforces their romantic entanglement. The four Gopis aligned in the same row within the circular composition resembles Radha, potentially symbolizing various facets of her profound love for Krishna. These

Gopis, both inside and outside the circle, exude an aura of celebration: those within the circle gracefully move their arms adorned with bracelets and bangles in a rhythmic dance, while those outside the circle engage in playing musical instruments.

By limiting one's perspective of this painting solely to its formal elements, one might miss out on discerning the characters' intricate relationships and emotions. However, delving into interpretation offers viewers a richer and more profound experience of the painting's essence. Through interpretation, the viewer gains access to the nuanced connections and emotions within the artwork, enabling the unfolding of its magical allure and fostering a deeper appreciation of its "thing."

The skillful use of colors within the painting conveys a subtle but potent emotional intensity that enriches the interpretation of the artwork. Through this interpretation, the profound love between Radha and Krishna materializes as a vivid and passionate bright red circle, visualizing their intense affection. This passionate red encircles the entire frame, acting as a lens that allows viewers to perceive the intricate dynamics among the depicted figures. This fiery red hue starkly contrasts the surrounding pale-yellow background, which embodies a more subdued and passive ambiance beyond the fervent confines of the red circle. The deliberate juxtaposition of the two Gopis positioned at the bottom against this pale yellow background hints at the possibility that the love depicted within the passionate red circle may possess a greater depth and intensity than those celebrated by those in the passive and serene pale yellow backdrop. The painting's carefully chosen shades of green further contribute to the overall narrative. Some plants exhibit dark green tones, representing an element of darkness that contrasts with the light green hues in the vibrant red circle. This nuanced interplay of colors invites viewers to engage in a more profound and emotionally charged experience of the painting, enhancing the magical essence of this formal element and enriching their overall perception of the artwork.

The utilization of lines within this painting masterfully conveys an underlying sense of transcendent perfection that enhances the viewer's interpretation and appreciation of the artwork. The circular lines present in the prominent red circle immediately draw the viewer's gaze toward the figures within it. Flanking Radha, Krishna, and the other figures, the towering trees with sharp leaves on either side resemble two prominent asterisks, asserting their presence and subtly beckoning for interpretation. Upon closer examination and interpretation, one can discern that the intricate, symmetrically complex lines have been meticulously rendered to direct the viewer's attention toward the emotional significance of the canvas. Through interpretation, the true essence of these lines is fully revealed, highlighting the interconnectedness between content and form within the artwork. This interplay between content and form allows viewers to uncover various layers of magic woven into the painting's narrative, enriching their overall experience and deepening their understanding of the artwork.

In conclusion, "Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince" is a painting of profound significance, the depths of which are unveiled through a thoughtful interpretation of both its form and content. When viewers engage in this process of interpretation, the artwork transcends its surface appearance, revealing a multi-layered richness that invites exploration and contemplation. Susan Sontag, in her essay "Against Interpretation," may dismiss this type of interpretation as "foolish" (9), yet it is precisely through the interpretation of the content that the painting's colors, shapes, and lines acquire their magical resonance.

Consequently, contrary to Sontag's assertion, the true essence of the artwork is not realized by refraining from the interpretation of its content but rather through the nuanced exploration of both form and content. Sontag's critique characterizes this interpretive approach as "defective, false, contrived, and lacking in conviction" (9). However, it is a valuable means of fostering a deeper and more critical appreciation

of an artwork, exemplified here by "Krishna, Radha and the Gopis with a Young Prince." Through interpretation, viewers can unlock the layers of meaning within the painting, thus elevating their understanding and enabling a more profound connection with this captivating work of art.

## Works Cited

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