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Hawthorne's Visual Artists and the Pursuit of a Transatlantic Aesthetics

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Introduction

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century in England as well as in America, a visual culture developed, and the number of art markets and exhibitions dramatically increased. Therefore, it is not that remarkable that Nathaniel Hawthorne became interested in the visual arts. He had many friends and acquaintances who were involved in various kinds of fine arts, and he was strongly interested in painting, portraiture, sculpture, engraving, and other visual arts.

Hawthorne was not, in fact, attracted to such pursuits during his early childhood; rather, his interest in the visual arts emerged later under the influence of his wife Sophia after he made friends with various artists through her contacts. He was engaged to her in 1838 and was married in 1842, and wrote many tales that featured art just prior to and following this period, which indicates that he was inspired by his art experience with her.

As Patricia Valanti points out, Sophia devoted herself to learning painterly art under established American painters, including Washington Allston (1779–1843) and Thomas Doughty (1793–1856), and she exerted an influence upon her husband as his mentor in the understanding of the visual arts and was primarily responsible for the place they held in his fiction.[1] Actually, her paintings were so excellent that her talents as a copyist and original artist won praise in Boston's artistic circles (Gollin and Idol 3). Therefore, Hawthorne must have recognized her to be a talented painter, which in turn must have influenced his description of women artists, and he extended his knowledge of art and artists through her.

In addition to this formative sense of art being inspired by Sophia's influence, Hawthorne was raised among women, and was probably affected by the value system of bourgeois and traditional patriarchalism. Although he created women artists and women models

1 Valenti further mentions that Sophia deserves to be remembered among the earliest women in American painting ('Sophia Peabody' 1).

as his significant characters, it seems he did not sufficiently define their identities, status and values. He is situated ambiguously concerning gender issues. Thus, it is quite natural to discuss visual arts and artists for the purpose of reconsidering Hawthorne's aesthetics. Works of visual art partly reveal the artists' psyche, and similarly Hawthorne's characters reveal his psyche. Visual arts certainly manifest varieties of truth which are often difficult to locate in other forms. This analysis will disclose a part of the 'truth of Hawthorne's heart', and will explicate the hidden meanings and the metaphors presented in his art.

Nevertheless, visual arts were not the primary theme to Hawthorne the writer. To date, the discussions of the theme of visual arts in Hawthorne's fiction have not been closely examined in literature, though the representation and implications must be enticing as well as meaningful to the study of this author.[2] One reason for the underestimation of his sense of art may lie in Henry James's severe judgements in his *Hawthorne* (1879). James points out Hawthorne's 'mediocre' aesthetics and writes that, 'Like a good American, he took more pleasure in the productions of Mr. Thompson and Mr. Brown, Mr. Powers and Mr. Hart, American artists who were plying their trade in Italy, than in the works which adorned the ancient museums of the country' (*Hawthorne* 127–8). Besides this view of James, there are several other views of Hawthorne's sense of art, but in the end, James's criticism seems to have prevailed until the current day.[3] Following James, opinions regarding Hawthorne's aesthetics and

2 The only and the most extensive investigation of Hawthorne's sense of the visual arts is Gollin and Idol's *Prophetic Pictures.* There are a few unpublished dissertations from the 1970s that treat his sense of art, his aesthetics, his method and style of using visual arts. Cf. William Alfred Cook, 'Hawthorne's Artistic Theory and Practice'. diss., Lehigh University, 1971; Judith Kaufman Budz, 'Nathaniel Hawthorne and the visual Arts'. diss., Northwestern University, 1973; Patricia Valenti, 'Hawthorne's Use of Visual Elements'. diss., The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1977.

3 James's followers did not think highly of Hawthorne's sense of art. Before James, George Woodberry stated that: 'He was not wholly uncultivated in art, though his aesthetic sense had been rather a hope than a reality all through his life' (262).

sense of art did not seem to be worthy of publication. Rather recently, Rita K. Gollin and John Idol, Jr. put together a comprehensive compilation of critical opinions, and they formed several conclusions, including the fact that Hawthorne repeatedly tried to acquire a taste for the visual arts, that his preference for Dutch painting reflects his abiding admiration for artists who could treat life realistically without succumbing to a 'worldly' view of life, and that he was deeply ambivalent in his judgement of art and artists (5–9). The last 'conclusion' is highly relevant to this dissertation, and one of my aims is to elucidate his 'deeply ambivalent' sentiment.

The period of the 1850s and 1860s, when Hawthorne resided in England and Italy, is referred to as 'High Victorian' (Janson 162), and his view of art should be seen as being influenced by Victorianism.[4] Hawthorne's aesthetic sophistication seems to be specifically in accord with the evolution of British art history, and most of the artworks in his fiction were by Italian Old Masters, which were popular in Victorian England as well as in Puritan New England. The portrait paintings in his early tales and romances and the embroidery in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) are influenced by the concept of the Reformation in England.[5] The last romance treats Victorian art, culture and aesthetics, such as the art works of Romanticism, Neoclassicism, and Pre-Raphaelitism. Hawthorne's stay in Italy 'gave him a more hopeful

4 Since the 1830s, American literature was becoming increasingly national by becoming increasingly international, but 'their [Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman] imaginations lacked those deep tones of indigenous coloring and that acute sense of nationality which gave depth to the work' (Spencer 79 and 298). Also, it was considered: 'For the artist America was impossible! The Artist did not require a patron, a subsidy, or the shouts of the republic. But he could not breathe the air of his native land, so choked was it with the dust of Manifest Destiny' (S. Williams 52–3).

5 After the time of Henry VIII, Jacobean art became secular rather than religious, and until the early eighteenth century, its subject matter consisted almost entirely of portraiture. Most of the major painters in that period who were working in England were also foreigners (Wilson 9). Miniature, portraiture, and visual art objects, such as embroidery, gold and silver smithing, flourished in the seventeenth century. Hawthorne made insightful comments on portrait paintings under the Stuarts, and he favoured Sir Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641), Sir Peter Lely (1618–1680), and Sir Godfrey Kneller (*c*.1646–1723).

view of human nature than he ever before entertained' (Wright 167). His last art romance, set in Rome, narrated an 'essential' essence of human nature – the moral weakness, the limited powers of man, but conversely, the inexhaustible creativity, the insatiable passion, and pitting of nature against art.

In this study, I will primarily focus on Hawthorne's artist characters that create works of visual art as a means of ultimately disclosing Hawthorne's own conflicting aesthetics. There are several reasons for choosing the theme of his conflicting aesthetics and the transatlantic perspective. One aspect concerns the longstanding underestimation of his aesthetics; the visual arts have not been directly dealt with as an insistent moral theme in his fiction. A second reason is that Hawthorne's aesthetics seem to be concretely shown in his descriptions of visual artists and their works, though often skilfully camouflaged by his literary technique. In addition, the non-native characteristics, which may be deemed 'transatlantic' in his fiction, have been cited as an 'enchanting element'. The transatlantic view within his work is thought to have originated from his personal Europe complex – in other words, the conflict between new America and old Europe – and can be found particularly in relation to his visual artists and their works, such as his characters' having backgrounds in England or Italy. Such elements may also be derived from the contact with European sensitive artists in America, where art value is perhaps confounded by Puritanism, as well as the wider community of 'unsophisticated' native artists. This kind of art situation in Victorian America caused Hawthorne to reflect upon his own position as an artist. Thus, Hawthorne as an artist confronted specific conflicts and dilemmas. He was fettered by New England Puritanism and, at the same time, was strongly attracted by Victorian culture and the Catholicism of the Old World.

Therefore, I will discuss the aesthetics and the artists of the visual arts in Hawthorne from the perspectives of transatlantic culture and society. Accordingly, in Chapter I, the early 'study' tales related to painted portraits, 'The Prophetic Pictures' (1837), 'Sylph Etherege' (1837), and 'Edward Randolph's Portrait' (1838), chiefly mirror Hawthorne's conflicting ideas of morality, beauty, perfection and immortality as a main theme. His dualism results in the ending being

concluded ambiguously: artist-characters sacrifice themselves to achieve their aims in order to realize their ideal in art. Hawthorne's artists often try to realize their ideal but the result is (outward) tragedy. While pursuing these art tales, Hawthorne himself came to experience a taste of the life of an artist through them. The painters in these tales came back from the grand tour, and probably Hawthorne might write of them, visualizing his actual grand tour about twenty years later.

In Chapter II, I will discuss *The Scarlet Letter*, which does not necessarily treat art and artists as the main theme. Rather, they are projected into the social and cultural backgrounds of New England society, and consist of an aspect of the characterization of a few main protagonists. If we view Hester Prynne optimistically, she is a sinful woman who redeems herself through embroidery and other good works, bringing new beauty as well as a moral revitalization to the rigid patriarchal Puritan society of her town. She breaks the stereotype of the female sex role by living independently and with a free will, as well as by contributing to society through needlework and charitable activities despite the stigma of adultery. By virtue of her manner of living, she sterns Puritans around her, change their preconceptions and gain new values. Thus, embroidery art signifies an important part of Hester's individuality, and it seems to serve to reconstruct her life. This romance offers embroidery, which is indispensable to the various kinds of decoration for the European aristocracy, as a symbolic art, fully partaking of the typical Hawthorne symbolism and ambiguity.

In Chapters III–V, based upon on the last completed art romance, *The Marble Faun* (1860), the characters of the Anglo-Jewish oil painter Miriam Schaefer, the New England copyist Hilda, and the American sculptor Kenyon are discussed from a transatlantic perspective of art. Covering a great many art-related places and artworks by Italian great Masters, Hawthorne alighted upon a small coterie of American and European artists in mid-nineteenth-century Rome, and his scenario was consequently used as a standard guidebook of Italy by English and American tourists (Wagenknecht, *The Man, His Tales and Romances* 126). In terms of its European characteristics, this romance can be seen as a harbinger of works dealing with 'the

international theme', as it includes antithetic concepts at every turn, as Richard Millington points out.[6]

Hawthorne certainly paid very careful attention to delineate the details of artists and art works. His dualistic idea effectively projected the confrontation of the artist characters, their models, and the aesthetic subjects. Miriam and Hilda respectively represent the different status of women artists in nineteenth-century Europe, and they struggle against established patriarchal culture and society. Hilda and Kenyon, as expatriate artists, are provocative from the transatlantic perspective. They come to face the severe reality, and they have to realize that they can never fill the gap between the Old World and the New World, and finally return to their country with conflicts. In England and Italy, Hawthorne became acquainted with many expatriate artists and, as we can see in the preface of this last romance, the actual artists he met are reflected in his artist characters, though elaborately disguised in his 'romance'. The sad conclusion, that the three artists cannot pursue their art in Italy, the Mecca of art, and become 'drifters' in terms of their status as genuine artists, does not always prove hopelessly tragic.

Hawthorne's artist-characters' ambiguous destinies may include misunderstandings and disputes, but they reveal many heretofore hidden facets concerning the art, culture, and society of mid-nineteenth-century America, and bring a sense of reconciliation to the conflicting aesthetics and the transatlantic perspective within him.

6 The following opinion explains: 'In the territory that constitutes *The Marble Faun*, a plot of redemption confronts a plot of condemnation; maturation confronts regression; freedom confronts restriction; a cynical, cosmopolitan narrator confronts a pious, sentimental one; plot confronts travelogue; an aesthetic of originality confronts an aesthetic of imitation; moral complexity confronts moral absolutism' (Millington 178).