

**Lévi-Strauss writes\* :**

It is this avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even of the spectator which seems to me to constitute one of the outstandingly original features of the art of Western civilization.

**If this is true – though the historical span of Lévi-Strauss's generalization may be too large – the tendency reached its peak during the period of the traditional oil painting.**

The term *oil painting* refers to more than a technique. It defines an art form. The technique of mixing pigments with oil had existed since the ancient world. But the oil painting as an art form was not born until there was a need to develop and perfect this technique (which soon involved using canvas instead of wooden panels) in order to express a particular view of life for which the techniques of tempera or fresco were inadequate. When oil paint was first used – at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Northern Europe – for painting pictures of a new character, this character was somewhat inhibited by the survival of various medieval artistic conventions. The oil painting did not fully establish its own norms, its own way of seeing, until the sixteenth century.

Nor can the end of the period of the oil painting be dated exactly. Oil paintings are still being painted today. Yet the basis of its traditional way of seeing was undermined by Impressionism and overthrown by Cubism. At about the same time the photograph took the place of the oil painting as the principal source of visual imagery. For these reasons the period of the traditional oil painting may be roughly set as between 1500 and 1900.

The tradition, however, still forms many of our cultural assumptions. It defines what we mean by pictorial likeness. Its norms still affect the way we see such subjects as landscape, women, food, dignitaries, mythology. It supplies us with our archetypes of 'artistic genius'. And the history of the tradition, as it is usually taught, teaches us that art prospers if enough individuals in society have a love of art.

**What is a love of art?**

**Let us consider a painting which belongs to the tradition whose subject is an art lover.**



**What does it show?**

**The sort of man in the seventeenth century for whom painters painted their paintings.**



**What are these paintings?**

**Before they are anything else, they are themselves objects which can be bought and owned. Unique objects. A patron cannot be surrounded by music or poems in the same way as he is surrounded by his pictures.**

**It is as though the collector lives in a house built of paintings. What is their advantage over walls of stone or wood?**

**They show him sights: sights of what he may possess.**