

## The Legacy of Visual Art in Charlotte Brontë's Writings

by Meredith Birmingham

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If circumstances had been different, Charlotte Brontë might have been remembered as a painter rather than as an author. As it is, the world knows little of her attempts in the visual arts. She was in fact quite serious about art and indeed aspired to be a professional artist. Perhaps, had she received the right kind of training, we would know Charlotte Brontë not as the author of *Jane Eyre*, but as a painter of Romantic landscapes or picturesque scenes.

Yet this was not to be. As Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars explain in *The Art of the Brontës*, Charlotte's skills were based on a knowledge of imitation; she could copy minute details of engravings, but rarely worked from life or expressed originality in her drawings and paintings.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Charlotte put aside her watercolours and, as Elizabeth Gaskell said, 'took the better mode of writing'.<sup>2</sup> However, Charlotte did not admit complete defeat in the realm of visual art. Rather than allow her artistic talents to waste away, she salvaged her skills by using artistic theory in her literature. In doing so, Charlotte turned what could have been a discouraging failure into success.

In 'Art and Artists in Charlotte Brontë's Juvenilia', Christine Alexander explains that Charlotte's artistic interest began at a young age, when she read critical articles about art in various magazines. The Brontës also had a series of Annuals available for their perusal.<sup>3</sup> Through these media, Charlotte gained a sense of the modern feeling in art. She became familiar with the picturesque landscapes and scenes of the Romantics. At her fingertips was the latest news about London exhibitions, as well as critiques on contemporary artists like Turner and Reynolds, along with prints of their works.

Alexander and Sellars explain that Charlotte had lessons with several art masters: John Bradley and possibly Thomas Plummer. Later, Branwell was taught by the one of the

leading painters in Leeds, William Robinson. Although it is thought that Charlotte did not actually share in these lessons, she would have been affected indirectly by seeing Branwell's progress.<sup>4</sup>

During Charlotte's time at Roe Head, she continued her study of art. Throughout these early years, Charlotte's art education was focused on learning to copy other works of art. As Alexander and Sellars describe, copying was the foundation of art education. At home, Charlotte had copied Bewick's wood engravings, Finden's engravings, and various other pieces.<sup>5</sup> At Roe Head, she proceeded in much the same way.

During her time in Brussels, Charlotte was encouraged to work more from nature.<sup>8</sup> Still, such pieces as she did create were generally very much in the style of the picturesque engravings she had so long copied. Charlotte's participation in an 1834 exhibition in Leeds seemed to give hope to her plan to be an artist. She exhibited two copies of engravings, which were displayed along with works by other well-known artists of the time.<sup>9</sup>

However, Charlotte eventually realized that her future as an artist was bleak. As Lyndall Gordon says in her biography of Charlotte, she was often frustrated with her artwork and would burn pieces that she felt did not merit her intentions.<sup>10</sup> Her reliance on imitation was also a hindrance; her desire for originality demanded a product of her own creation or else a stop to her professional aspirations. She would later express her thoughts on imitation, saying: 'Unless I can look beyond the great Masters, and study Nature herself, I have no right to paint'.<sup>11</sup>

It was Charlotte's insistence on imagination in art that ended her artistic ambitions. Yet it was that same force—her inescapable Imagination—that compelled her to write. As she said in the preface to Emily's *Wuthering Heights*,

the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules and devise principles, and to rules and

principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time when it will no longer consent to 'harrow the vallies, or be bound with a band in the furrow'—when it 'laughs at the multitude of the city, and regards not the crying of the driver'—when, refusing absolutely to make ropes out of sea-sand any longer, it sets to work on statue-hewing, and you have a Pluto or a Jove, a Tisiphone or a Psyche, a Mermaid or a Madonna, as Fate or Inspiration direct. Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption.<sup>12</sup>

In literature, Charlotte was directed by her imagination and so satisfied her artistic desires with words rather than paint or pencil.

Even so, she did not let her visual art experiences go to waste, but used her skills, theories, and even failures to enhance her writings. For example, Alexander and Sellars point out that Charlotte made use of her ability to observe details in people—a likely inheritance of her observation of fine points of engravings.<sup>13</sup> Her description of Mr. Rochester, for instance, is vivid:

I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, cholera; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw—yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonized in squareness with his physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic sense of the term—broad chested and thin flanked; though neither tall nor graceful.<sup>14</sup>

Using phrases like 'broad and jetty eyebrows', 'square forehead', and 'full nostrils' gives a very definite image of Mr. Rochester. A portrait could have been painted from Charlotte's description. In fact, Jane does sketch Mr. Rochester from memory, describing her sketch with much the same language:

Soon I had traced on the paper a broad and prominent forehead and a square lower outline of visage: that contour gave me pleasure; my fingers proceeded actively to fill it with features. Strongly-marked horizontal eyebrows must be traced under that brow; then followed, naturally, a well-defined nose, with a straight ridge and full nostrils; then a flexible-looking mouth, by no means narrow; then a firm chin, with a decided cleft down the middle of it: of course, some black whiskers were wanted, and some jetty hair, tufted on the temples, and waved above the forehead. Now for the eyes: I had left them to the last, because they required the most careful working. I drew them large; I shaped them well: the eye-lashes I traced long and sombre; the irids lustrous and large.<sup>15</sup>

The very act of describing a piece of artwork in words is enough to display Charlotte's ability to illustrate verbally.

Charlotte even describes personality in terms of art. When Mr. Rochester first comes upon Jane in Hay Lane, she describes his approach, saying:

A rude noise broke on these fine riplings and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear: a positive tramp, tramp; a metallic clatter, which effaced the soft wave-wanderings; as, in a picture, the solid mass of a crag, or the rough boles of a great oak, drawn in dark and strong on the foreground, efface the aerial distance of azure hill, sunny horizon and blended clouds, where tint melts into tint.<sup>16</sup>

Charlotte foreshadowed Mr. Rochester's personality, using a simile comparing Mr. Rochester's approach to a picture. Associating Mr. Rochester with 'rough boles of a great oak, drawn in dark and strong on the foreground' reveals his strong and dominating temperament.

Many of Charlotte's characters view their lives as a series of pictures. In *The Professor*, William Crimsworth describes his life in terms of art, saying that 'three—nay four—pictures line the four-walled cell where are stored for me the records of the past'.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly in *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone's life is recollected as a string of pictures:

Then, too, her [Caroline's] imagination was full of pictures—images of Moore—scenes where he and she had been together; winter fireside sketches; a glowing landscape of a hot summer afternoon passed with him in the bosom of Nunnely Wood; divine vignettes of mild spring or mellow autumn moments, when she had sat at his side in Hollow's Copse, listening to the call of the May cuckoo, or sharing the September treasure of nuts and ripe black berries...<sup>18</sup>

Charlotte's characters live in worlds where art and artistic thought dominate. They practice art, describe themselves and others using artistic terminology and acuteness, and think of their lives in terms of art.

Charlotte also used ideas from artistic theory in her literature. Her familiarity with art criticism via magazines and Annuals provided her with a knowledge of Romantic ideas of the time: the importance of morality and truth in art and the power of the imagination, for example. Such ideas helped her to develop an aesthetic in artwork which she continued in her writings.

The use of art to convey a moral lesson is manifested in *Shirley* when Caroline asks Robert to read *Coriolanus*. Robert inquires after her motives for making him read Shakespeare, asking if it is 'with a view to making me better; is it to operate like a sermon?' Caroline replies that 'it is to stir you—to give you new sensations. It is to make you feel your life strongly, not only your virtues, but your vicious, perverse points'.<sup>19</sup> By reading, Robert is meant to sympathize with the characters. He will presumably learn more about himself as a person by identifying with the characters and learning from their conduct.

Charlotte was especially concerned with conveying truth in her novels. Jack C. Wills explains that 'it was this unshakable conviction that an artist should concern himself primarily with higher truths which both governed the direction taken by Charlotte Brontë's own works and formed the basis of her critical pronouncements'.<sup>20</sup> Throughout her novels,

her characters are both obsessed and tormented by truth, while the reader is reminded periodically that truth is valuable, if harsh.

For example, *Shirley* begins with a warning to readers:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto.<sup>21</sup>

The tale will be one of harsh realities—just like a ‘Monday morning’. However, like the resumption of work, harsh realities are necessary. Pleasure without pain is much like perpetual sunshine; pleasant for awhile, but without the comparison of a stormy sky, it soon becomes monotonous.

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe explains that facing the harsh realities of life is what makes people aware of the truth of their situations:

I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth; I like seeking the goddess in her temple, and handling the veil, and daring the dread glance. O Titaness among deities! The covered outline of thine aspect sickens often through its uncertainty, but define to us one trait, show us one lineament, clear in awful sincerity; we may gasp in untold terror, but with that gasp we drink in a breath of thy divinity; our heart shakes, and its currents sway like rivers lifted by earthquake, but we have swallowed strength. To see and know the worst is to take from Fear her main advantage.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever Truth has to reveal, it is better to know it than to deal with the horrors of anticipation. By facing reality, one avoids the delusions of imagination.

Yet Charlotte greatly believed in imagination as the lifeline of creativity and hope. The struggle between emotional imagination and rational truth had been fought on the

battlefield of art before Charlotte ever lifted a pen. Reynolds addressed the issue a century before, saying that ‘reason, without doubt, must ultimately determine every thing; at this minute it is required to inform us when that very reason is to give way to feeling’.<sup>23</sup> There is a point when imagination must be allowed to express itself; otherwise, one runs the risk of creating simply a ‘common-place invention’, as Reynolds puts it.<sup>24</sup>

Charlotte likewise feels the importance of imagination, even as she realizes its delusive nature. In *Shirley*, the narrator explains:

You would suppose that it [imagination] imparted some glad hope to spring, some fine charm to summer, some tranquil joy to autumn, some consolation to winter, which you do not feel. An illusion, of course; but the fanatics cling to their dream, and would not give it for gold.<sup>25</sup>

The ‘illusion’ of imagination is what allows people to cope with the harshness of reality. While truth teaches valuable lessons, its severity would sometimes be difficult to manage without the escape provided by dreams and fancies.

For example, in *The Professor*, William Crimsworth uses his hopes and dreams to sustain him through adversity:

Difficulty and toil were to be my lot, but sustained by energy, drawn on by hopes as bright as vague, I deemed such a lot no hardship. I mounted now the hill in shade; there were pebbles, inequalities, briars in my path, but my eyes were fixed on the crimson peak above; my imagination was with the refulgent firmament beyond, and I thought nothing of the stones turning under my feet, or of the thorns scratching my face and hands.<sup>26</sup>

By focusing on the visionary, William is able to undergo tribulations without feeling too strongly the real severity of his situation.

Lucy Snowe is likewise sheltered from reality by imagination:

This hag, this Reason, would not let me look up, or smile, or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken in and broken down. According to her, I was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond. Reason might be right; yet no wonder we are glad at times to defy her, to rush from under her rod and give a truant hour to Imagination—*her* soft, bright foe, *our* sweet Help, our divine Hope.<sup>27</sup>

So, while Lucy is a devotee of truth and reality—she ‘liked to penetrate to the real truth’—she also values Imagination because it allows her to escape briefly from the sometimes too exacting Reason.

Both truth and imagination—legacies of her experience with art and art criticism—had their place in Charlotte’s mind and literature. It was ironically her obsession with both of these forces that spurred on the demise of her visually artistic ambitions. If she could not produce something both truthful and imaginative, she would offend her sense of what true art needed to accomplish.

Yet, just as Charlotte’s artistic techniques and aesthetic served a purpose in her writing, so did her artistic failures. She created Jane Eyre, who shared both her passion for and her frustration with visual art. Jane, like Charlotte, painted and drew, but was dissatisfied with the results. When Mr. Rochester examines her portfolio, he asks her if she felt satisfied with her products. She replies: ‘Far from it. I was tormented by the contrast between my idea and my handiwork: in each case I had imagined something which I was quite powerless to realize’.<sup>28</sup> Jane’s feelings about art correspond with Charlotte’s. Charlotte said of her own art skills that ‘it is not enough to have the artist’s eye, one must also have the artist’s hand to turn the first gift to practical account’.<sup>29</sup> Both the creator and the created suffered the agony of an extremely visual imagination locked in by an inability to fully express such impressions.





## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 507.
- <sup>3</sup> Christine Alexander, 'Art and Artists in Charlotte Brontë's Juvenilia', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 20.4 (1991), pp. 180, 185.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Art of the Brontës*, pp. 22-27.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Art of the Brontës*, pp. 17-20, 42.
- <sup>6</sup> Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron, ed. by W. Brockedon, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1833).
- <sup>7</sup> Robert H. Taylor Collection. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Princeton University Library
- <sup>8</sup> *The Art of the Brontës*, p. 57.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Art of the Brontës*, pp. 26-27.
- <sup>10</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), p. 40.
- <sup>11</sup> Earl A. Knies, *The Art of Charlotte Brontë* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 55.
- <sup>12</sup> Charlotte Brontë, preface to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), pp. xviii-xix.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Art of the Brontës*, p. 56.
- <sup>14</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1991), p. 93.
- <sup>15</sup> *Jane Eyre*, p. 172.
- <sup>16</sup> *Jane Eyre*, p. 87.
- <sup>17</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 173.
- <sup>19</sup> *Shirley*, p. 88.
- <sup>20</sup> Jack C. Wills, 'The Shrine of Truth: An Approach to the Works of Charlotte Brontë', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 15.5 (1970), p. 394.
- <sup>21</sup> *Shirley*, p. 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 539.
- <sup>23</sup> Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Stephen O. Mitchell (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), p. 194.
- <sup>24</sup> *Discourses on Art*, p. 193.
- <sup>25</sup> *Shirley*, p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> *The Professor*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Villette*, p. 263.

<sup>28</sup> *Jane Eyre*, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *The Brontës at Haworth* (New York: Collins & Brown Ltd., 1992), p. 66.