

Flaws as Insight: The perfection of imperfection in art

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by Catherine Milner

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In the world of art, perfection has often been the benchmark of greatness. Masterpieces, like the Sistine Chapel or Venus de Milo embody a devotion to excellence in their precision and gracefully balanced composition.

Yet equally compelling is everything that is wrong, bad and mad in art, as in life. It is the imperfections in works of art - and arguably in human beings - that often make them more beautiful, challenging the viewer in ways that a polished work, doesn't. As John Ruskin said: "To banish imperfection is to destroy expression," and what is art if not a means of communicating feeling?

Key to the beauty of Tracey Emin's sketches for instance are their unfinished messiness. Phyllida Barlow's sculptures are so broken they could have been made from the sweepings from a building site yet they hold a powerful sense of terror in their destruction. But it is perhaps in ancient art and antiquities that one most appreciates the glory of the imperfect.

The amputated arms or blunted noses of Greek and Roman marble sculpture are part of what makes them so moving, it is as if they are martyrs to generations of maltreatment yet retained their dignity and become all the more precious for it. What is absent becomes as eloquent as what is present.



A Sculptural Group with Seated Youth (Branchus?) and Boar. Roman, 2nd-early 3rd c. A.D. Marble, H. 73cm
Courtesy of [Cahn](#), image copyright [Nick Birgin](#).

A fine second or third century CE Roman male torso being sold by Cahn Galerie for instance has neither arms, legs nor head and yet what remains is the essence of the entrapped body; an elegy to man restrained.

Equally arresting is a first century BCE sculpture also being sold by Cahn, whose small pit-shaped mouth eyes and notched mouth is almost cartoonish. Yet its crude execution speaks through the ages in a way no amount of fine carving could improve.

Like wrinkles on the face of an ageing beauty, one of the most concerning aspects of old pictures can be the craquelure of the varnish.

A Celtic Head. Celtic, 2nd-1st cent. B.C. or later. Stone (possibly sandstone), H. 12.2cm
Courtesy of [Cahn](#), image copyright [Nick Birgin](#).

Yet one of the most beautiful items recently sold by the [Rountree Tryon Gallery](#) is a 17th-century Dutch oil painting of Tobago that was the star of its stand at the Treasure House Fair last summer. Its fine craquelure spread across the surface of the painting is a natural byproduct of centuries of exposure to varying temperatures and humidity but rather than attempt an aggressive restoration that might have diminished the painting's historical authenticity, the gallery chose to stabilise the cracks while leaving them visible.

"From our point of view, the craquelure is part of the appeal," says Rowland Rhodes, Associate Director of the gallery. "We would always do the bare minimum of restoration because otherwise the painting can start to look very flat."

Jan Karel Donatus van Beeck (Dutch, 1638-1722), The Battle of Tobago Bay, 3rd March, 1677. Oil on canvas, signed and dated.
Courtesy of [Rountree Tryon Galleries](#).

Equally, a magnificent 16th century portrait of Richard Wingfield by Robert Peake the Elder, currently being sold by Philip Mould, still features all the richness of the sitter's velvet waistcoat simply because the painting has been left alone.

In some cases, imperfections or irregularities can provide essential insights into the artistic methods or intentions behind a piece. Infrared scans and X-rays of historical paintings, for instance, often reveal earlier iterations or corrections made by the artist. These ghostly underdrawings reveal the artist's struggles and decisions. Even a small crack or area of fading can carry significant meaning, telling of the work's history and the conditions it has survived.



Robert Peake the Elder

by Richard Wingfield (1587), oil on panel.
Courtesy of [Phillip Mould & Company](#).

Many cultures embrace breaks and imperfections in art, finding beauty and meaning in damage.

Consider the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, which honours the ruined, transient, and incomplete. Cracked ceramics, weathered surfaces, and the marks of time are valued as reminders to accept flaws and the inevitability of change.

Kintsugi, the art of mending broken ceramics with gold, silver, or platinum, takes this idea one step further by actively celebrating damage. It's a concept embraced by artists like Bouke de Vries, whose reconstructed ceramic vessels and plates - sold by Adrian Sassoon - transform shattered fragments into ethereal works of beauty. Equally, Laura Bordignon sells Edo-period tea vessels and inkstone boxes, where wear and patina enhance both their historical and aesthetic significance.

Yō (2024) by Koichiro Isezaki
Courtesy of [A Lighthouse Called Kanata](#).

Imperfection also adds character, as seen in works by artists like Koichiro Isezaki, who crafts pots - sold by A Lighthouse Called Kanata - that are skewed, squashed and bloated, yet exude a dynamic wildness. In a world increasingly driven by digital perfection, the backlash is coming with an increasing value being given to the unique, authentic and human made. In celebrating imperfection, we celebrate the resilience of art - and of life itself - and it reminds us that beauty lies not in flawlessness, but in the stories those flaws tell.