

The Role of Objectivity in Orchid Judging

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"Why can't the judges be objective?" How often have you overheard that, or related euphemisms, on the lips of a frustrated exhibitor dejectedly clutching a plant that only hours earlier had seemed a sure candidate for a red-hot AM? How often have you heard it, in fact, whenever orchid growers gather? The underlying notion seems to be that it is possible to have tough-minded criteria for evaluating orchids, criteria which, with relentless computer-like logic, will neutralize even the most satanic human perceptual perversities.

Here the Handbook on Judging and Exhibition seems to offer contradictory formulations. It refers to independent judgments [4.2.1.2 (6), 4.5 (6)] and differing viewpoints [4.7 (3)], thus implying the subjective element. But, at the same time, it asserts [4.5 (5)] that knowledge must be organized objectively, with recognition of personal preferences and prejudices. It heightens this latter emphasis through the later quasi-canonical descriptions of the "general form" of flowers in the various genera, something which the necessary size comparisons with previous awards made during a judging underscore. Which is it to be? Are we doomed, willy-nilly, to human prejudices, or can some objective system really exist to ensure that no worthy plant is denied its due need of recognition?

Alas, the question is really too acute. Humans, by definition, have prejudices. All the information they receive about the world that surrounds them comes through either their own, or others', perceptual processes. A bit of comparative anthropology shows that different global regions often have contrasting ideas of what constitutes meritorious shape, or color, of anything. Again, many orchids growing in situ represent mere weeds to natives, but pearls beyond price to those dwelling elsewhere. Humans, then, seem doomed to be subjective - not a bad fate, actually, as this article will show.

But can the objective exist? Some would think so. After all, in this era of rampant science and technology, the notion of precise, "hard" knowledge has gained considerable currency. Science supposedly offers impartiality as it marshals logical deductions from alleged "facts." But most philosophers of science, and quite a few practicing scientists as well, would now agree that this overstates matters. Measuring systems and logical systems are constructed by humans, for humans; as such, they reflect human prejudices. Of course, they all seem to "work," but only because they are essentially self-confirming; there simply exists no way of getting outside the system, as it were, and offering a transcendent critique.

The famous German philosopher Kant neglected this last consideration, producing what he thought was a purely logical way of viewing the world, but which, through lack of transcendent critique, must be relegated, by definition, to the status of one of his prejudices. Even the supposedly "hardest" disciplines of physics and mathematics become remarkably inexact and subject to human vagaries; witness the current debate about black holes or the status of non-Euclidean geometries.

Certainly science, as applied to orchids, has produced a string of "hard" facts becoming "soft." The mighty Linnaeus classified what we now call *Phalaenopsis amabilis* as *Epidendrum amabile* (1753); after briefly being *Cymbidium amabile* (1814) the plant finally received its current classification when the genus *Phalaenopsis* was established in 1825. Linnaeus felt he was using facts and logic to make his classification - but was he? At one time all the slipper orchids were lumped together, but now they are split into four groups - which position is the more objective? On a larger scale, the same facts that seemed so convincingly to support Darwin's original paradigm for evolution now, to many, suggest an evolution of fits and starts, quite a departure from the original conception. Were all these earlier thinkers deluded with notions of objectivity? If so, how can we claim to have slain the fiend of human prejudices? What will orchidists one hundred years hence say about our orchid "knowledge?" The answer seems, plausibly, that any given era makes judgments according to its prevailing standards of what constitutes "knowledge." Those standards can, and do, change.

How does this affect orchid judging? No one can claim to be speaking the Eternal Verities but, rather, to be offering an informed opinion, an opinion that will have what passes for objective input but that by definition: one, can never be entirely so; and two, reflects only the current state of thinking. No so many years ago a noted British orchidist claimed, as Dr. William Wilson's recent AOS Bulletin article usefully reminds us, that no *Paphiopedilum* hybrids involving *Paph. rothschildianum* would ever be awarded again. But witness the Awards Quarterly issues of recent years, despite the Handbook on Judging and Exhibition enshrining the round shape for *paphiopedilums*. Again, to continue in this genus, *Paphiopedilum* Battle of Egypt 'Alpha' probably could not receive an FCC today. But does that mean that the era that honored it had less objectivity? Indeed, how many of the current FCCs will hold up fifty years hence? No person, or era, has a monopoly on absolute truth, since that truth, if it exists at all, only exists as a philosophical construct in, say, Plato's "World of Forms."

Need these considerations imply that any bit of garden rubbish can be awarded by a kind of relativity gone to seed? I rather think not. Instead, we must strive to eliminate as many recognizable confounding factors as possible, realizing all the while that there may be many factors of which we are unaware, thus ensuring that even our most allegedly impartial evaluations will still betoken our prejudices. Some confounding factors come

from ethics and are usually of easy recognition: a judge should not score a plant of which he/she possesses a division, or has hybridized. But then things get murky. For example, returning to the paphiopedilums, I happen to yawn at Paph. primulinum and its hybrids. Many extol the virtues of this species, and Lord knows I've tried to like the thing. But I don't. What if at some future time, *dis volentibus*, I'm called upon to score one? Here the problem is self-correcting, since my score would be such a lowball, despite my best efforts, regarding point spread, as to be discarded. But what of a green paphiopedilum? I have no known dislike of the color, in plants or elsewhere. But I own only one paphiopedilum of that color and, indeed, only one other green orchid, a *brassolaeliocattleya*. The fact that I've put my collecting priorities elsewhere probably says something, but how much does it say - am I incapable of judging a green anything? What of the opposite case - does my possession of a quantity of red paphiopedilums and cymbidiums mean I may be prone to overscore those colors? And what of prejudices not involving color at all? Since we can't own everything, does my not owning a *Grammatophyllum speciosum* mean I have some lurking prejudice that would hinder my judging it? After all, orchidists have a reputation of ingenuity; presumably, if I really cared, I ought to be able to build some architectural contrivance big enough to house it.

Introspection may answer some of these questions. But I seriously doubt if it could answer all of them, nor should it. All one can do, rather, is to identify one's known prejudices and, coupling them with ethics, seek to remove their possible pernicious potentials. But we can never get rid of all the prejudices we have as humans and, indeed, probably can never recognize them without benefit of a mind-probe from science fiction. Put differently, would you really want a computer scoring a flower? I note, as an ultimate irony, that some computer scientists are now attempting to write programs that will introduce human subjectivity to the machines. Being human means having prejudices - the sooner we recognize it the better. Nevertheless, if confronted with *Paphiopedilum primulinum*, I think I'd better disqualify myself.