

Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite

1. Definitions of Modern Art



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1: Definitions of Modern Art

Luddite: "One who opposes technological or industrial change."
Modern art Luddite: "One who opposes one color paintings."

I like visiting art galleries and art museums. I like viewing fine art, or what I think might be fine art. However, as I've toured many houses of art around the world, I've grown confused about what is supposed to be "fine" art. I'm told it consists of works created by gifted artists who have an inspiration for a piece of work.

An artist's inspiration is the seed for most of the great works we see in art galleries and museums. But many artists turn out works of art without any inspirational motive. Like Joe, the painter of walls, Joe, the painter of canvases, must pay the rent.

The artist's inspiration doesn't matter to me. Inspired or not, I know if something is pleasing or displeasing. I see a picture and may think, "This picture required great skill to create, and it's a pleasure to view." I may think, "This picture required great skill to create, but it's unpleasant to set eyes on." I may also think, "The person who made this picture should find another line of work."

I wish I knew more about the mechanics and nuances of painting a picture, or sculpting a statue. I read art appreciation books on how the artist chooses color and shade for a painting; how the artist decides on the texture of the work. I read how symbols in a painting can convey more meaning to the work than what is shown on the surface of the picture.

I marvel at the talent of some of these artists. I often view a painting and see nothing but lumps of paint. Then as I pull away, the oily clumps become images such as trees, faces, boats, pieces of asparagus. What a gift: The artist can conceive of an image, such as an asparagus, and then apply gobs of paint in such a way that an on-looker will say, "It's an asparagus!"

But I have a problem, one that may be the result of my ignorance of the art profession, as well as the ideas and motivations of some artists. My problem is not with all art. It is with certain forms of modern art.

My difficulty with modern art, especially the representations called abstract art, is that I am often not certain I'm viewing the work of a gifted artist, the drudgery of a hapless eccentric, or the flimflam renderings of a hustler. To add to my confusion, some of this art, which is beheld with enraptured looks from fellow art museum patrons, is painful to behold.

Time and again, as I observe people viewing modern art exhibits, I ask myself, "What am I missing. What's wrong with my aesthetics? Maybe I should take a class on art appreciation."

After pondering the exhibits in the art gallery, I head for the gallery gift shop to buy yet another book on the meaning of abstract art and its place in the cosmos. After reading to page 3 of my new book, it joins a pile of similar books destined for the Good Will bin.

I'm exposing my art-deprived soul to you. But I wager you have some of the same opinions I just expressed. That is, unless you are an abstract art artist, a collector of abstract art, a curator of abstract art, or a published critic of abstract art. Any of these occupations disqualifies you from making objective remarks on these essays. No offence intended. You have your own turf to protect.

Blank Wall or Blank Art?

Several years ago, I was taking in the exhibits at a modern art gallery in Chicago. I walked by a group of people, perhaps members of a tour. I thought they were viewing a painting on the wall. To my surprise, when I turned my eyes to this wall, I discovered they were looking at a blank wall as if it were a work of art.

Two display lights were shining onto the wall, perhaps giving the impression an artist had rendered the work of art with totally white paint. Some of the viewers were smiling and making comments to each other about the “exhibit.” But others were deep in thought. It appeared they were studying the wall.

That’s the power of suggestion. The display lights implied something was being displayed. Because we were standing in an art gallery of paintings, naturally enough, that something had to be a painting.

It turned out the blank wall was just that, a blank wall. It was awaiting the arrival of a picture. I know because I watched the museum employees carry a large painting down the corridor and hang it on this wall.

I went away from this scene thinking if those people were not certain a blank wall was a work of art, perhaps there was hope for me. Perhaps my befuddlement was not unique. But I also thought: Is something wrong here? Should people confuse a wall with art? Does it matter?

Maybe it does not matter. If someone wants to buy a picture of a can of Campbell’s Soup for hundreds of thousands of dollars, that’s the buyer’s business. If someone ponies-up a few grand for a portrait of a white canvas with one solitary black line across it, fine with me. The picture is not on my wall, and the money spent for the piece is not my IRA. To each their own.

Still, doesn’t this kind of creation give you pause? It does me. With this background behind us, for the remainder of this essay, we will take our own tour. We will view some modern art exhibits (paintings), discover what the experts have to say about modern art, and come up with some of our own observations. I say “our” because I am hoping to enlist you into my cause.

A Look of Modern Art Paintings

To set the stage for the tour, Figure 1-1 represents an example of modern art, which is defined as “Abstractions that do not *imitate* the appearance of things.”¹ A circuitous definition if ever I have heard one. Look at the picture again. It *imitates* vertical lines. Even more, it *imitates* wallpaper.

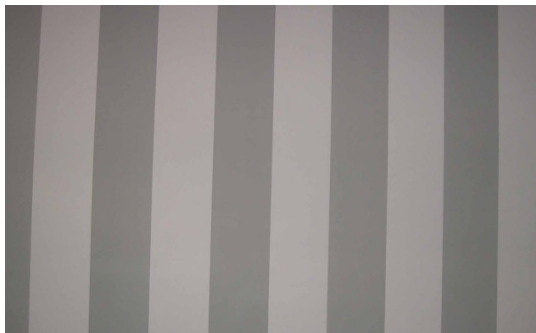


Figure 1-1. Vertical images that imitate wall paper.

¹ “Modern Art,” definition, Microsoft’s Encarta_{TM} Encyclopedia. All quotes, unless cited otherwise, about modern art are from this source.

The picture *is* wallpaper. This wallpaper covers the walls of an upscale hotel in Washington, DC. The hotel, furnished in art-deco, exhibits many modern abstract art paintings, several of which are highlighted in our tour.²

Granted, this first example is contrived. The wallpaper is not disguised as art, and it's likely the wallpaper designer did not lay claim to abstract art creation. Nonetheless, this wallpaper, in comparison to nearby pictures on the walls, represents a complex creation of visual images. We'll use it as a benchmark for comparisons of the art that hangs on the walls of this hotel.

Figure 1-2 is the first picture for our tour: an off-white, somewhat pink rendering of off-white, somewhat pink paint. Thus, it meets the definition of modern art: It does not imitate the appearance of things. Or does it? The picture imitates an off-white, somewhat pink color.



I found this picture on the third floor hallway of the hotel. It's striking in its own way, especially if the "work" is applied to a baby girl's nursery. Giving the painter his due, this effort entailed much more than a visit to the local Sherman-Williams to order up a bucket of white paint. The visit also required buying red paint. The mixing of two colors to produce a third color is complex. I could have consulted with my six-year-old niece to gain an appreciation of the technique involved. I'm sure she would have advised me, "Pour the red paint into the white paint bucket. Stir it around until it turns pink."

Figure 1-2. Off-white/pinkish picture.

Next on our tour is a white picture, which is also on the third floor of the hotel, shown in Figure 1-3(a). What do you think about this work of art? You can't see it? Even with the help of the arrow? I'll place the wall and wallpaper onto the figure, as seen in Figure 1-3(b).

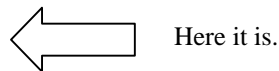


Figure 1-3(a). White picture.



Figure 1-3(b). White picture against wall.

This picture satisfies another characteristic of modern art, "For some critics, the most important characteristic of modern art is its attempt to make painting and sculpture ends unto

² All pictures in this essay are real and hang on the walls of the Washington, DC hotel. I did not create them with a photo package. The only liberty I took was to brighten the images because I snapped them without a flash.

themselves, thus distinguishing modernism from earlier forms of art that had conveyed the ideas of powerful religious or political institutions.” I agree. This picture is an end unto itself.

I have taken the liberty of removing the gray, striped wallpaper from the remaining pictures. As you will see, the pictures unto themselves are intricate enough. It makes no sense to add more complexity.

Next on our tour is another picture I came across on the first floor of the hotel, shown in Figure 1-4. It is a red picture of red paint, or perhaps the painter’s interpretation of a sunset on the Sahara. Whatever this abstraction is abstracting, it satisfies another criterion for modern art, called the modern art attitude, “This attitude is often expressed as art for art’s sake, a point of view that is often interpreted as meaning art without political or religious motives.”

“Art for Art’s sake.” My mistake, as I had the impression that art was for people’s sake. “Without political or religious motives.” Does a still life of a vase convey political or religious meanings?

We stroll down the hotel’s third floor corridor and encounter the next exhibit, shown in Figure 1-5. The image brought to my mind this interpretation of modern art, “Another theory claims that modern art is by nature rebellious and that this rebellion is most evident in a quest for originality and a continual desire to shock.” No question, maroon is a shocking color. And this picture is quite rebellious. Why? Because it purports to be a picture. Even more, it lays claim that it is art.

We continue our tour with the black picture in Figure 1-6. For some viewers, this picture might appear to be a bit morose, but not for someone named *Black*. Taking license with this rendition of black, I interpret it as a tribute to myself. However, I’m not much of a rebel, I’m not very original and have little desire to shock. So, the picture is more likely to be a tribute to black, but not Black.



Figure 1-4. Red picture.

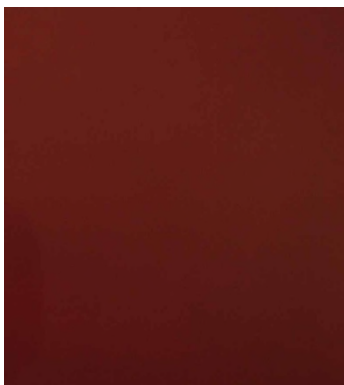


Figure 1-5. Maroon picture.

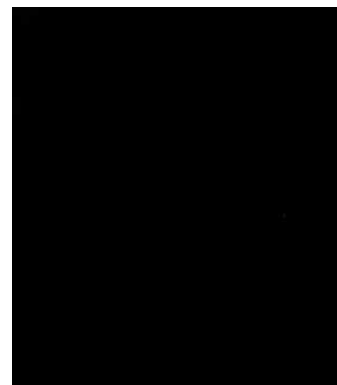


Figure 1-6. Black picture.

Next, take a look at Figure 1-7. Here is another so-called expert opinion on modern art, “Many people associate modern art with what is radical and disturbing.”

I find a picture of orange paint disturbing for the simple reason I do not like the color orange. The only radical aspect of this work is the insolence of its creator for painting it.

At first glance, the exhibit in Figure 1-8 might be confused with the exhibit in Figure 1-6. Look carefully and you can see they are not the same. The painter added some white to his paint bucket to lighten the final color. It is another example of a six year old's bag of creative tricks.

Next, consider the exhibit in Figure 1-9, a yellow composition, located on the fourth floor of the hotel. Taking another cue from our definitions and views of modern art, here is a quote, "Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky felt that color combined with abstraction could express a spiritual reality beneath ordinary appearances." Figure 1-9 conjures many realities. All of them are the yellow color, translated into a single image of the color yellow. As suggested by Mr. Kaninsky, this canvas combines color and abstraction, but I question if it has any spiritual underpinnings beneath its ordinary appearance.



Figure 1-7. Orange picture.



Figure 1-8. Gray picture.



Figure 1-9. Yellow picture.

The Nature of the Abstraction

The yellow picture concludes our tour for now. Later, we will examine more intricate works that hang on this hotel's halls. Shortly, we'll visit the East Gallery of the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art to investigate if the art we have just seen is original or a knock-off of famous art. If we can fortify ourselves with a drink, we might even venture into Western Philosophy for a look at Schopenhauer's view of art (if we do, I'll warn you ahead of time). For now, let's return to the definition of modern art, "Abstractions that do not imitate the appearance of things."

Generally, I agree with this definition. But it is the *nature* of the abstraction that is important. Henri Matisse was a modern artist, as was Picasso, and Jackson Pollock. The same goes for Grant Wood, Munch, and Cézanne. These painters created works that engage us. They are provocative. I like the *nature* of their abstractions.

On the other hand, at least to this art Luddite, Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* and cans of soup are pure shtick. Who knows? Maybe all the pictures in our tour are shtick. Maybe the artist is making fun of me. Perhaps he would be in stitches if he knew his shtick was the center piece of my essay.

Nonetheless, I like Warhol's Campbell's cans and his Monroe work because I am fond of soup and very fond of Marilyn Monroe. I like the bold colors in the paintings: the red on Campbell's soup can, and especially the red on Marilyn's lips.

A Simple Solution to My Problem

My problem with modern abstract art, specifically the kind of works highlighted in our tour (and similar stuff found in many galleries and museums), is simple: I don't know if I am

being taken-in. Because of my doubt, I would like to say to the painter of our tour pictures, “Hello painter, do me the favor of painting an unembellished picture, an exact representation of an object. I am asking you to revert to the old school and paint an *imitation* of something. Say, a vase of flowers, a landscape, a portrait, a piece of asparagus.

“Yes, I know you will be bored. I recognize you might say, ‘Use a camera.’ Fine, just one rendering. It won’t take very long. If your work shows any talent at all; if it reflects the subject accurately, then you can paint anyway you want. *I’ll respectfully take it in, and try to understand your message.*

“I have an exception to my test for you. If you cannot create an accurate reproduction of the piece; if your creation is not an imitation of the subject, but your abstract work is so stunning, so unusual you capture something very special, go to it. But be careful with your interpretation of my exception. A soup can doesn’t qualify. Nor does human excrement lying on a pile of rags. Nor does a toilet resting on its side. Nor does a blank wall. Pollock qualifies.³ So does Picasso. And some others.

“Here’s the rub. If your painting is something less than a literal view of the subject, *and* your abstract work can be created by my six-year-old niece, then I ask you to identify yourself as a *social commentator*, perhaps a *satirist*, maybe an *art anarchist*, perhaps a *con man*, even an *interior decorator*. But please refrain from using the word, *artist*.”

After all these years, I’m glad I finally got this subject off my chest. I feel much better. We’re off to visit a modern art museum: the East Gallery at the Smithsonian.

³ Richard P. Taylor, “Order in Pollock’s Chaos,” *Scientific American*, December 2, 2002. Recent studies of Mr. Pollock’s paintings contend his work was a systematic process. His paintings have been analyzed with computer models and display many of the features of fractal geometry, an amazing revelation about this painter.