

# **Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite**

## **2. The Rectangles, Squares, Trapezoids, and Parallelograms Schools**



**Uyless Black**

## **Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite**

**1 Definitions of Modern Art**

**2 The Rectangles, Squares, Trapezoids, and Parallelograms Schools**

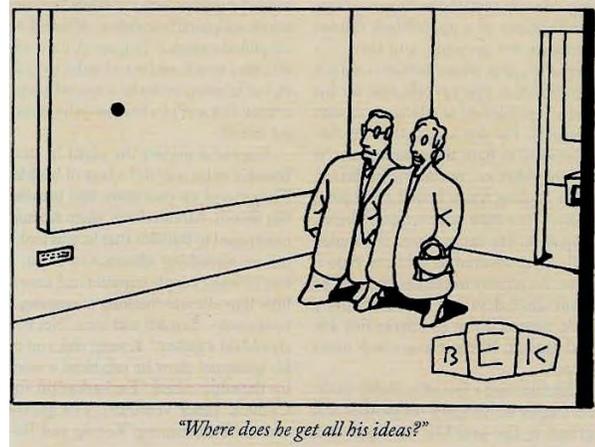
**3 Soups Cans and Mickey Mouse Art**

**4 Ants, Rabbits, and Hand Grenades**

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## Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite

### 2. The Rectangles, Squares, Trapezoids, and Parallelograms Schools



Before we visit the East Gallery of the Smithsonian National Museum of Art---a respected repository for abstract modern art---let's wind-up our tour of paintings that are hung on the walls of the Washington, DC hotel, the subject of our previous story in Confessions 1.

#### The Schools

Figure 2-1 represents a more involved rendering of the single color pictures highlighted in the first essay. As you can see, the painter laid a strip of masking tape across the canvas in order to keep the two colors separated and distinct. See any run-off from one color to another? See any bleeding? This painter knew how to lay down masking tape.

The black rectangle in Figure 2-1 is actually not a rectangle. Looking closely, you will see it is a trapezoid. The lower horizontal line is not at 90° angles to its two connected vertical lines. This illusion is my fault. I took this shot with my camera at an angle to the picture. So the painter actually painted a black rectangle onto the gray canvas. I emphasize this point because the painter has been influenced by the Rectangles and Squares School, a dominant force in modern abstract art. I would not want to place this work in the incorrect disciplinary school; that of the Trapezoids and Parallelograms School (discussed later). This painting shows only rectangles, but subsequent exhibits will high-light the squares part of this school.

Figure 2-2 represents a similar rendering but is considerably more complex because the painter placed *two* lines of masking tape across the canvas. What is more, a ruler was employed to maintain an equidistant relationship between the two lines. (By the way, the color gradients are due to my picture-taking, not the artist's imagination.)

<sup>1</sup> From *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2005, 143.



**Figure 2-1.**  
**From the Rectangles and Squares School.**



**Figure 2-2.**  
**With multiple applications of masking tape.**

Let's take a look at the Trapezoids and Parallelograms School, another influential movement in the world of modern art. As seen in Figure 2-3, this example illustrates the trapezoidal interpretation of two images---which happen to be trapezoids.

In my concentration on the four-sided schools of abstract art, I forgot the Triangle School, an example depicted in Figure 2-4. My momentary lapse is because this school has fallen into disrepute. Its renderings have *only* three sides---thus making its paintings less complex than the School of Squares and Rectangles, and the School of Trapezoids and Parallelograms.



**Figure 2-3.**  
**The Trapezoids and Parallelograms School.**



**Figure 2-4.**  
**The Triangle School**

### **Rembrandt**

The triangle picture concludes our tour of the hotel art exhibit. In my enthusiasm for learning more about modern abstract paintings I paid a visit to the East Gallery of the Smithsonian National Museum of Art. Before we view some of the paintings displayed at the East Gallery, here are a few comments about the Main Gallery. Walking through the first floor, I encountered a special exhibit of Rembrandt's religious paintings. The adjacent rooms contained

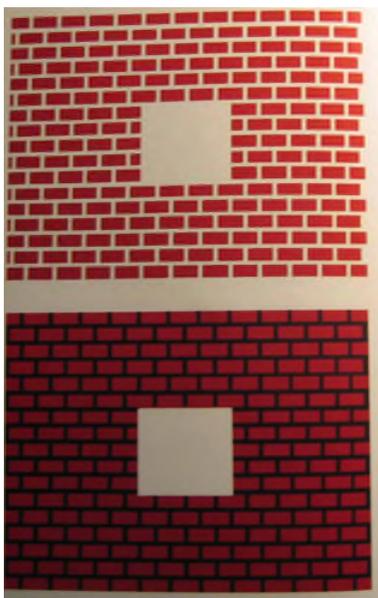
the works of Rubens, Rodin, Vermeer, and Degas. Figure 2-5 is an example of a Rembrandt (self-portrait), to which we return shortly.



**Figure 2-5. Rembrandt self-portrait.**

### **More Abstractions**

One painting in the Main Gallery was a rendering of asparagus, accompanied with lettuce and some other greens (not shown here because of gallery restrictions). My hypothetical modern, abstract artist would likely have been bored doing a still life of vegetables. Perhaps this artist would be more fulfilled creating the painting shown in Figure 2-6. I came across this piece in a book I bought at the National Gallery Book Shop (another book to add to my Good Will stack).<sup>2</sup>



The author has this to say about the two pictures, “Wilhelm Von Bezold (1837-1907), a meteorologist in Berlin,...discovered that certain colors, when evenly distributed, changed entirely the effect of his rug designs, which were his occupation. One of my students, following Bezold’s example showed (in Figure 2-6) light red bricks laid up with very white mortar, and then showed the same bricks laid up with pure black mortar.”

I interrupt the author’s explanation to ask you to draw your own conclusions about these two images. I can almost hear you say, “Obviously, the bottom picture is darker than the top picture. But there surely must be an aspect to this art that I am missing.” You are missing nothing. I had the same thought as you. So did the author, “The red with the white looks much lighter than the red with the black.

**Figure 2-6. Example of the Bezold effect.**

<sup>2</sup> Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1963, XIII-1.

To understand why, let's consult our six-year old art critic, who would likely respond, "Black is darker than white."

I admit I am being harsh while making a joke. I recognize the writer was suggesting that our minds lie to us about colors, and that red can appear to be different shades when viewed with other colors.

Nonetheless, without getting too far afield, I ask you: Would you rather look and study Figure 2-6 or Figure 2-5? Mr. Rembrandt is not a 10 on the male hunk scale. Still, he beats looking at a bunch of bricks.

I paid \$13.00 for this book. Here are some other pearls of wisdom from page 45:

- "Usually, we think of an apple as being red."
- "A lemon is yellow and an orange is like its name."
- "Bricks vary from ochre to yellow to orange, and from ochre to brown to deep violet." (What happened to red, as in Figure 2-6?)
- "Tea will look lighter in a spoon than in a cup."

It's hopeless. Try as I may, I can't break-through to the plane this writer is on. I'm missing something vital to art appreciation.

### **The East Gallery**

This part of the essay describes my recent experience at the East Gallery. First, I suspected I would find more of the same that I found in the art deco hotel. That is, more paintings of all blue, black, and red canvases; more rectangles, squares, and trapezoids. But I hoped against hope. After all, I would not be viewing paintings from a hotel's walls, rendered by someone I never heard of. I would be looking at renowned artists' work displayed in a prestigious art museum.



**Figure 2-7. The East Gallery Main Floor.**

Figure 2-7 is a snapshot of a wall in the main atrium of the East Gallery. No! Eighteen paintings of paint. As I entered the East Gallery and beheld this wall, my hopes for visual stimuli were dashed.

Sure enough, the canvases in the hotel are the same as these famous pictures. This situation raises copyright questions, because the black canvas on the wall of the hotel is the same image as the black canvas on the wall of this gallery. A copyright is defined as: "The legal right of creative artists or publishers to control the use and reproduction of their original works." However, as of this writing, the courts have not (yet) allowed a color to be copyrighted. But who knows? A few years ago, the city of New York attempted to have its skyline copyrighted.

- I imagined a conversation I might have had with the museum's curator, "I need enlightenment. The eighteen paintings on this wall represent what?"
- Curator, "Colors. Paint. Colors of paint. Paints of color."
- Me, "Why hang them? What's wrong with keeping the wall unadorned? It's constructed of beautiful stone."
- The Curator responds, "You don't know much about art, do you?"

Sufficiently chastised, if only in my imagination, I continued touring the East Gallery. During my tour, I encountered wonderful, even fantastic paintings and sculptures. I viewed art that provoked and engaged my senses.

But true to my fears, I came across many renderings that reinforced my apprehension that I was being duped. I offer Figure 2-8 as evidence. And again, I am not kidding. I did not create any of these pictures for my diatribe.



**Figure 2-8. The Rectangle School.**

The piece is an ordinary rectangular canvas, hung on an off-white wall; a green painting of green paint presenting itself as a powerful interpretation of the color green. A canvas from the Rectangle School, yet hung at creative non-90<sup>0</sup> angles to the wall.

I said to myself, "I'll settle for Marilyn's lips, even some soup cans. Just give me an image that triggers a synapse in my luckless brain."

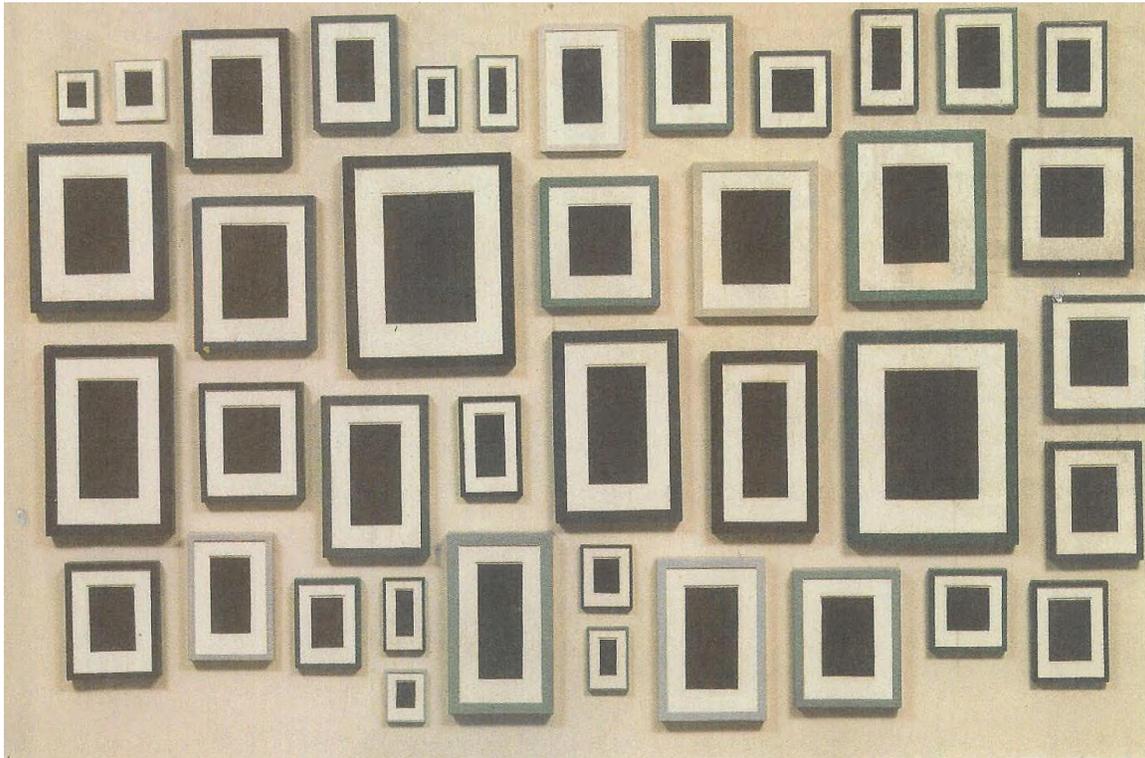
Recognizing the visual adventures that awaited me, I proceeded toward other exhibits in the East Gallery, recounted in the next report to you.

To finish this segment, a few weeks ago I came across the picture (by Allan McCollum) shown in Figure 2-9. I did not see it first-hand; it is part of a temporary exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>3</sup> (We'll pay a call there later.) I include it here because I thought of the eighteen canvases (Figure 2-7) when I saw the forty (count them yourself) frames with blank images that are hung on the wall at the Met. Sorry, they're not blank; they're black, but of different sizes and with different color frames. I would not want to diminish the creativity that is evident in this work, but if I ever encountered its creator, I would challenge him to draw a piece

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<sup>3</sup> Holland Cotter, "Framing the Message of a Generation," *New York Times*, May 31, 2009, 23-25.

of asparagus. Still, he did use frames, which is a different approach from many famous painters who shunned the picture-framing lobby.



**Figure 2-9. Framed by forty frames.**

The work is titled, “Collection of Forty Plaster Surrogates.” Surrogate, as in a replacement for something else. The artist was on the mark with the title: It’s a replacement for artistic talent. Tongue-in-cheek? Social comment? Tired of painting still-life vases? Fine, but at least *paint something*.

The art critic Holland Cotter wrote about this exhibition. Here is a question from Cotter’s column, “Who chooses which portraits will hang in the hall of fame, which art will live on in museums...?”

Who indeed? For the “Collection of Forty Plaster Surrogates,” it may have been the influential Picture Framing School, out to hawk their artistic philosophies to counter the eroding effects of the Picture Non-framing School. Or it could be that Mr. Cotter is putting us on.