Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite

4. Ants, Rabbits, and Hand Grenades

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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
5 Modern Sculptures and Typewriter Erasers
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4. Ants, Rabbits, and Hand Grenades

During these essays about abstract modern art, I have made references to my being an art Luddite. As you likely know from reading history books or watching Don Rickles’ routines, a Luddite is a person whose mind is closed to new thoughts and ideas---to new technologies. I have altered the strict meaning of the word by prefacing it with “art” to identify a person (me) who is opposed to certain renditions of what is called modern abstract art.

I think the Luddites have been unfairly criticized. In 19th century England, many people opposed the building of factories because mechanized manufacturing disrupted their lives and often led to severe abuses to men, women, and children. Twelve-hour work days, meager meals, and dangerous working conditions were commonplace. Painting a still life of a potato over-and-over again was small potatoes in comparison to the spirit-killing repetitiveness of 19th century assembly line work.

In some communities, displaced workers attacked factories and factory owners. In others, rioters, who became known as Luddites, attacked the machines themselves. Not a bad idea:

- Luddite Number One, “Fellas, those automated weaving looms are putting us out of work and into the poor(er) house. What do we do?”
- Fellow Luddites, “Let’s destroy the machines. Management will be forced to hire us back and we can once again provide gruel for our families.”
- Luddite Number One, “Pretty drastic. How ‘bout we enroll in one of those career retraining classes? One that comes to mind is the ‘Learn to Stitch and Sew the Fabrics You Once Weaved.’”
- Fellow Luddites, “Nope. The Stitch and Sew industry has also been automated. So, let’s destroy those machines, as well.”

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1 From The New Yorker, October 17, 2005, p. 176.
The Luddites attempted to defend their communities and their way of life but in the end, they lost. They also lost their reputations because the term Luddite is attributed to a person with reactionary backward views. I recognize I have lost my fight against the acceptance of a canvas of black paint as a representation of art. I admit I am a reactionary, a Luddite in this regard.

**Santa Fe and Its Art**

I spend some of my time in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I have written about this city in other essays, so I won’t retrace those remarks here. Using Santa Fe as the backdrop, let’s continue the examination of modern art and examine several pieces that are on display around this city. We’ll retrace my walk of only several hundred feet around a small area in Santa Fe; we’ll come across an amazing cornucopia of stimulating art. I won’t go into the details of the names of each art gallery, whose works are highlighted in this story. I’ll give you general directions, and you can travel to Santa Fe and see for yourself.

Remember *Them?* The movie was about giant ants that did considerable damage to the southwest parts of America. I loved that movie. As a pre-TV child, with time on my hands, I spent a lot of time watching ants go about their daily activities. Just thinking about oversized ants did wonders for my oversized imagination.

I was predisposed to like the sculptures displayed at an art gallery located on the corner of Canyon Road and Paseo de Peralta. I snapped the photo in Figure 4-1 of two big ants doing battle with each other, perhaps for access to the queen ant’s antechamber.

Do you like the ants? As I said, I do. They don’t shock or disturb us, so maybe they don’t fit the definition of modern art. But they’re funny, at least to your writer, and they required a lot of talent to sculpt.

Let’s add another definition of modern art to those in the first chapter, “Intentionally or not, modern art is often funny.” There…I’m starting to feel better about this whole matter. However, it must also be said that the ants in Figure 4-1 are not abstractions, so maybe they would not be classified as modern art.

![Figure 4-1. Ants.](image-url)
There’s more to this work of art. The artist also created an ant chair and a scorpion sofa. Figure 4-2 shows these works with your writer sitting in the ant chair. Admittedly, the chair and sofa are not pillars of comfort. But so what? Modern furniture, like modern art, is an end to itself. The comfort of your end doesn’t matter.

These whimsical works, and many others, can be found on Paseo de Peralta. I had a talk with the owner of the gallery about the ants. He is an interesting and engaging man. If you in the vicinity, drop by to see more ant sculptures.

Figure 4-3 shows several sculptures located outside art galleries near Canyon Road and Paseo de Peralta. I walked a block or so around Canyon Road to take these pictures. The contents inside the shops are not shown but my photos give you an idea of the wealth of art creations that populate Santa Fe. And this is the tip of the art iceberg. Santa Fe has one of the most prolific (and largest) art colonies in America.
By the way, these works might lead you to think Santa Fe’s artists produce only American Indian and Southwestern America art. Not so. Scores of museums and galleries display or sell Old Europe, modern art; art from many regions of the world. For example, I visited two shops along Canyon Road and Paseo de Peralta selling only Russian art (and those tiny dolls that contain yet tinier dolls).

To make my point about the diversity of art in Santa Fe, Figure 4-4 is an example of an abstract sculpture I came across in this section of the city. What does it represent? I suppose anything the viewer wants it to represent. The bottom part of the work reminds me of Christmas gift wrap. The top part looks like a red, round steel tube—which it is! Let’s listen-in on a conversation between a husband and wife, as they unwrap their Christmas presents.

Wife, “What’s that large present from which the Christmas tree is dangling?”

Husband, “Something I picked up with my crane on the way home from the office. It’s already gift wrapped. See the red bows?”

Wife, “Yes. Thus far, my favorite worthless, ugly apparatus. Another large steel tube…in my favorite color.”

Husband, “I knew you’d like it. Let’s irritate the neighbors once again and add it to the other large, ugly, red, steel tubes in our front yard.”
My art Luddism has surfaced again. I can’t help it; it’s stranded on my DNA; maybe lodged in my synapses. I admit this sculpture gained my attention, mostly in trying to figure out what the sculpturer was thinking when she created it. Compare the sculpture in Figure 4-4 to the sculpture in Figure 4-5. Which do you like better? Don’t like swings and whimsical children? You’re not sentimental? Figure 4-5 is maudlin? Wimpy?

I prefer the swinging child, but I must say I was taken by the ants. If I had a large-enough yard, I would be tempted to purchase some of these pieces. I could sit in my ant chair and watch the other two insects duel with one another…out of the side of my eye, watch the reactions of my neighbors.

![Figure 4-5. Whimsical or maudlin?](image)

Let’s consider the sculpture in Figure 4-6. If you don’t like this work, I suggest you are in need of a humor fix. It’s not a black canvas, or a bunch of red tubes. It’s a funny piece of art. I smile each time I look at it.

![Figure 4-6. Who could not like this sculpture?](image)
The Value of Modern Art

We conclude this essay with another example of modern art. It is also located in Santa Fe. Figure 4-7 is a shot I took of the Hand Grenade. At the time I snapped this picture, it was located in front of an art gallery on Paseo de Peralta (I provide the name of this gallery, because this work is the centerpiece to this story: The Linda Durham Gallery (I recommend you visit the gallery if you are in Santa Fe)).

Figure 4-7. A sculpture that gets your attention.

The artist (Martin Horowitz, www.goldleafpictureframes.com) did not want to confuse anyone about what he was creating. None of this...."It’s a bird? It’s an asparagus? No, it’s a hand grenade.” Take it or leave it, that’s what it is, a hand grenade. No abstractions here.

What is the message the artist is trying to convey? Pro-war? Anti-war? How about you? You don’t like instruments of war? You like the sculpture because instruments of war are cool? You’re not sentimental about hand grenades? The work shown in Figure 4-7 is hostile? Belligerent?

I think a viewer could interpret this work as either pro-war or anti-war. To confirm this point, I looked-up Martin Horowitz. He also owns the Goldleaf Frame Makers store on Gallisteo Street.

I asked, “Frame maker?”

Mr. Horowitz, “Yes, frame making gives me the freedom to create any kind of art I choose, regardless of its marketability. Are you interested in the Hand Grenade? I am offering it for $30,000. It’s covered with 23 karat gold leaf!”

My thoughts were to pay a visit to an Army Surplus store, pick up an old hand grenade souvenir, dab some Home Depot gold paint on it, but I replied, “No, I collect more conventional art. I wanted to look you up to ask more about your sculpture.”
Mr. Horowitz displayed slight disappointment at this discovery, but he was still gracious and open to conversation about this work.

I continued, “I find your sculpture very interesting. Provocative is a word that comes to mind. I’d wager you get praise and criticism from both pro-war and anti-war folks. I have Red friends---to the right of Attila the Hun---who would love to display your piece. I live up in North Idaho, in the middle of White Aryan Nations country. Your Hand Grenade would be a winner up there. I have Blue friends who think the America’s Revolutionary War should not have been fought. They’d like the piece, too, but for different reasons. Anyway, I’d guess the reactions to the Hand Grenade are mixed.”

Mr. Horowitz agreed, and mentioned Ms. Durham had collected a number of essays and letters about the work. I asked him why the Hand Grenade had been moved from its position in front of Linda Durham’s gallery.

He answered that someone had pushed it over and broken the lever and pin. He continued, “I fixed it. Then we were asked to loan it for a display in Chicago. We sent it up there. It was displayed for several days in the open without any damage at all.”

He then explained the sculpture was sent to an exhibit in Galisteo, a small community south of Santa Fe. There it was damaged again, as shown in Figure 4-8. I took this photo of the sculpture as it sat on the porch of Mr. Horowitz’s fame making store.

The vandals sprayed black paint for their X and O game on the side of the grenade. (Looks like the game was a draw.)

Mr. Horowitz, “I’m leaving the piece at the front of my shop until it’s sold, or I decide to do something with it.”

I replied, “Don’t blame you. Say, someone might want the Xs and Os to remain on the sculpture. In a way, the graffiti adds to its multiple interpretations. They create more controversy.”

Mr. Horowitz, “My thoughts as well.”

Mr. Horowitz and I talked for a while. He showed me other works he created. One was a gold disk. It was attached to a wall in this office. It resembled a miniature flying saucer.
was it: just a gold disk; an ambulatory aircraft fixed onto a wall. I wanted to ask him about the
purpose of this sculpture, but decided I would not take any more of his time.

Returning to the hand grenade piece, were the sculpture desecrators vandals? Were they
art Luddites? Were they pro-war? Anti-war? Were they drunks who staggered out of a local bar
and looked for something to diss? Who knows, but it’s interesting that the art was attacked in a
small town in New Mexico but left alone in big, bad Chicago.

The hand grenade was not my cup of tea as far as placing it on my lawn. It might entice
White Aryan Nations folks to drop by to chat about it.

Mr. Horowitz assuaged my modern art Luddite brain. I found the sculpture to be
stimulating, suggestive, and fascinating; even cheeky; certainly provocative.

Now, about his flying saucer…