

Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite

3. Soup Cans and Mickey Mouse Art



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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**

Confessions of a Modern Art Luddite 3. Soup Cans and Mickey Mouse Art

“Art is not the truth; it is a lie that enables us to see the truth.”
Quote on the wall of The Santa Fe Museum, from David Bradley.

I start this essay with the above quote. I came across it in the Santa Fe Museum. If you know what Mr. Bradley means, please let me know. I have asked several of my friends and they are equally confused. Anyway, let’s continue our exploration of the East Gallery of the Smithsonian National Museum of Art.

In my exploration of modern abstract art and my tour of the paintings in the East Gallery I came across another duplicate canvas---beyond the solid color paintings in the atrium of the Gallery. Similar to the renditions I found in the DC hotel and on the atrium wall of the Gallery, I snapped a photo of the black and white picture shown in Figure 3-1. It’s almost identical to the black and white picture in the hotel (See Figure 2-1). Maybe they are from the same artist. If they are not, did the hotel artist violate the copyrights of the East Gallery artist? No. The canvas in Figure 2-1 has a straight line (from the Straight Line School); the canvas in Figure 3-1 has a curved line (from the Curved Line School). So, they are different (but equally banal?).

I could not make out the name of the artist of the hotel’s paintings, but the East Gallery piece was a 1976 painting by the famous Ellsworth Kelly. It is titled, “White Curve VIII.”



Figure 3-1. Black and white painting.

White curve? I see a black curve. Maybe this mixed perspective is the brilliance of the painting: With one stroke of the brush, two curves are created. Additionally, it appears Mr. Kelly painted several “White Curves.” Perhaps “White Curve IV” is hanging in the hotel.

The Microsoft encyclopedia had this to say about Ellsworth Kelly: “American abstract painter and sculptor, best known for his experiments with color.” Experiments? Black and white paint? One curved line?

Does this painting engage your senses? It does not do a thing for me but I don’t want to dismiss it. I want to understand why so many people consider it a work of a genius. My puzzlement is one reason I am writing these essays about abstract modern art. I’m trying to sort it all out.

This quote also comes from the encyclopedia: “His best-known later works have been his panel paintings, which consist of several canvases, sometimes as many as 64, joined together; each canvas is painted a different and brilliantly intense color, creating a vibrant, carefully balanced whole.”

If I used profanity in my writings, at this point I would say, “Bull shit.” But I don’t use profanity, and therefore, I will not say “Bull shit.” Nonetheless, even if I did not say “Bull shit,” my thinking “Bull shit” has allowed me to get the words “Bull shit” off my chest. And I thank you for reading my thoughts.

I was beginning to find many of the renderings in the East Gallery tiresome. Obviously, I was also beginning to think the descriptions of the paintings to be drivel. Whatever my mental

state was at the time, I began looking for something to fire a synapse or two. A soup can would suffice.

And I found it. Look at Figure 3-2 (I snapped a photo of some of the cans in the picture). Not just one soup can, but 200 of them; all renditions of Campbell's soups. Black Bean soup, Consommé, Mushroom soup and others, all done by Andy Warhol in 1962. True to the theme of the picture, Mr. Warhol titled this work, "200 Campbell's Soup Cans."



Figure 3-2. Soup cans galore.

According to the encyclopedia, "Warhol is considered one of the most important American artists of the 20th century. His work and ideas both reflect and helped shape American mass media and popular culture."

Art critics tell us Warhol's soup can picture is social commentary. They say he was using paint and pencil to express his view about the banality of modern life. I happen to like Campbell's soup and don't think it banal; my favorite is split-pea with ham. I've read that Mr. Warhol also said he liked soup. Perhaps Andy was into homemade soup and was offended by his cuisine being canned. Or perhaps he was proclaiming that institutionalized soup was a metaphor for our institutionalized society. (In Confessions 6, we investigate these and other possibilities.)

A Crack in a Luddite's Indolence

I don't know much about Andy Warhol's work. But from this surface knowledge, I suspect he had the idea of doing something that was different from others; to express himself and his creations in a unique way. We can only respect this motivation. It's what many of us aspire to. We may not paint or sculpt, but we hope to do whatever we do differently from others. That's what makes us individuals.

Besides, how many still life paintings of apples and oranges, accompanied with jars and vases, can be painted before no one cares to look at them or no one cares to paint them? I watch

the TV programs that show a painter showing me how to paint a landscape. The first few times I marvel at how his gobs of paint come to resemble gobs of snow or leaves on a tree. After a while, it becomes boring; nothing much more than mastering mechanical techniques. I don't deny the artist's talent, but it appears he is knocking-off his own stuff; repetition of the same snow bank and tree.

How many pieces of asparagus are painted before someone says, "Enough asparaguses! I'm going to paint a can of asparagus soup."

Anyway, regardless of Warhol's possible plan to be original, some of his work was the same as other artists of his time. Admittedly, no one had painted soup cans, but some painters had done paintings of cartoon characters and assorted commercial products.

Nonetheless, when I came across his painting of soup cans in the East Gallery, it caught my eye. It somewhat fit two of the definitions of modern art introduced earlier:

- "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."
- "Many people associate modern art with what is radical and disturbing."

The painting did not shock but it did surprise. It did not disturb me, but I nevertheless viewed it for several minutes thinking, *What is it and why?* Perhaps my response was the same as the gallery patrons in Chicago who were looking at a blank wall.

Each time I view the soup cans picture, I smile. I'm amused because I can't quite get over the notion of Mr. Warhol being a flim-flam man and taking me to the cleaners. Ironically, Warhol became a caricature of the very culture he lampooned. Nonetheless, he did not paint blank canvases, and for that, I am thankful.

Returning to "Confessions 1," we revisit the basic definition of modern art, "Abstractions that do not *imitate* the appearance of things." Could be, but Andy drew a pretty cool imitation of soup cans.

The Encarta Encyclopedia also has this information on Mr. Warhol, "Warhol took a similar impersonal approach in his experimental motion pictures. *Empire* (1964) provides an eight-hour view of the Empire State Building seen continuously from the same camera angle." Popcorn anyone?

All is forgiven Andy. Shortly after I encountered the soup cans and heard about your epic *Empire*, I came across your "Marilyn," painted in 1962, and shown in Figure 3-3.

I'm starting to like some of this modern art. And at least Mr. Warhol demonstrated the ability to draw. The rendition of Marilyn actually looks like Marilyn. So, go to it Andy. Draw anything you like. Make your social commentaries. You've earned your "artistic" badge.

The same cannot be said for Willem de Kooning, another famous artist. Figure 3-4 shows one of de Kooning's works.¹ Microsoft's write up on this man claims he "...is unusual among abstract expressionists in that he continued to paint the human figure." I'm not certain this claim is accurate, as the rendition of a human in Figure 3-4 is not all that human. I wonder if de Kooning would pass our "paint an asparagus" test? He did not pass the "paint Marilyn Monroe" test. Yes, the canvas is Willem's interpretation of Marilyn Monroe.

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Figure 3-3. Marilyn.



Figure 3-4. Marilyn.

Let's take a look at a couple more East Gallery offerings before wrapping up Confessions 3. Figure 3-5 shows a Roy Lichtenstein oil on canvas, painted in 1961. It's titled "Look Mickey." What do you think? Social commentary? A satiric view of Walt Disney? A protest of the fishing industry? I'm tempted to say, "It's a bunch of Mickey Mouse."



Figure 3-5. M..I..C..K..E..Y.....Mouse

A few years ago, I spent a few days in Madrid, Spain. My hotel was located across the street from the Prado as well as the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia museums. Picasso's *Gernica* hangs in the Sofia. Figure 3-6 is my snapshot of this painting.



Figure 3-6. Picasso's *Guernica*.

Picasso created this painting after learning about the Nazi bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica. Using a bullfight theme, some critics claim the bull (on the extreme left) represents brutality and darkness, and the wounded horse the Spanish people. An exploding light bulb symbolizes the loss of the light of reason. Corpses and dying people are self-explanatory. The overall distortion of the painting conveys the message of the grotesqueness of the event.

You may like it. You may not. Whatever you may think of it, this painting is at least thought provoking. For your writer, it gets my meager artistic juices flowing. And I wager we all agree that it edges out the rendition of a trapezoid. It even beats a canvas of black paint. It's a close second to Marilyn.



Figure 3-7. Rebellion against the Straight Line School.

In deference to our six year old art critic, I will conclude this essay with one last picture, shown in Figure 3-7. I couldn't resist this one. Notice this painter had trouble with his masking tape. His black paint has bled onto other parts of the canvas.

Maybe not. Maybe this painter created an abstraction of the use of cheap masking tape. If you've ever bought low-priced masking tape for painting your wall, you can relate to this picture. Or, cutting some slack, maybe the artist was once from the Straight Line School and grew rebellious that this line of work (so to speak) was becoming boring.

A few years ago, during my research on other subjects, I asked a person I encountered on a street in Washington DC about his extensive use of body piercing. I asked him, “What’s the point?”

He said, “There is no point. That’s the whole point.”

It’s not for me to slay the paragons of modern abstract art. After all, I can’t even get through a book on art appreciation. Still, I revere Rembrandt. His work astounds me. I am pleasantly mystified when I view Jackson Pollock’s seemingly chaotic, random splashes.

I don’t pretend to understand a painting of white paint, the painting of a black rectangle, or a blue trapezoid. I can relate to a Warhol’s Marilyn, even a soup can---especially if viewed within the context of the painter’s social statements. But for this other stuff of solid color canvases and colored rectangles, perhaps the body-pierced person’s statement is apropos to many of the paintings we have viewed thus far in these essays, “There is no point. That’s the whole point.”