



LOOKING AT MODERN ART

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author of
THE VALUE OF ART

I N G S





L O W L Y

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CHAPTER ONE

PEELING THE ONION



*For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing
but the highest quality to your moments as they pass,
and simply for those moments' sake.*



WALTER PATER

For most journeys in life, internal or external, we must learn things. Learned information is often equated with wisdom, but sadly, wisdom and information are not the same. Information is valuable only if tempered by wisdom, and wisdom comes from experience, not learning.

Our systems of education stress the accumulation of information, often at the expense of experience. You may believe that you know a lot, some, or a little, about modern art, but our journey begins with jettisoning what you think you know. This is what I mean by peeling the onion. If you know nothing at all, you may have nothing to peel. This is unlikely because most of us approach adulthood with set attitudes and opinions about art, mostly not based on experience.

On this journey I will ask you to discard all manner of theories, learned behaviors, preconceptions, and props, which manifest themselves as ways to access, understand, and enjoy art, but which instead serve the opposite end, increasing our repertoire of ideas and language while decreasing our engagement with art. Part of what we are going to do is examine those attitudes and opinions and remove them, layer by layer, until we reach a place of clarity, receptivity, and honest judgment. Only in that place can true connoisseurship be practiced; only in that place can judgments of quality have meaning.

I am speaking from my experiences as an art dealer. I cannot *make* a client like a work of art, let alone fall in love with it. All I can do is display the painting, drawing, or sculpture and create the optimum conditions for my client to experience it. Because my living depends on some people liking a work of art well enough to buy it, I need to be able to answer questions about its authorship, history, physical condition, and commercial value. The client's decision about whether or not to buy a work may be influenced by my answers, but a positive or negative response to the work of art can only be decided by his or her engagement with the piece itself.

I could tell her why I like it or tell him what other people have said or written about it—but would that make them like it? Surely you have

experienced being told by a knowledgeable friend about a book or a movie that you simply *must* read or see. Everyone is raving about it! And then you read the book or see the movie and say to yourself, “What? I didn’t think much of that!”

There is nothing wrong with listening to advice so long as, diplomacy aside, your conclusive opinion is genuinely your own.

Others may lead us to new cultural experiences. Sometimes a client will ask me to locate a work of art by an artist whose work is perhaps not my favorite. I do find a piece by him, and when I show it to them, their excitement and enthusiasm may be so palpable that, even without much conversation, I begin seeing it more clearly than I would have otherwise. This is not so much being influenced by their opinion as being impressed by their level of engagement.

This book encourages you to see a broad array of works of modern art and be receptive to those that reach into the core of your being. There is no reason why you should not be able to see a work of art as if you were its first viewer, in the artist’s studio, the day it was finished.

I am asking you to abandon the multitude of distractions, which our culture places between us and the objects of our experience, and engage works of art with a naked eye and mind. Only then can we meet the art on its own terms, and only after that has happened can we trust our taste, have confidence in our judgments, and, if we wish, add information to our insights.

I am a baby boomer. We are fast approaching our past-due dates. When young, some of us engaged in a search for spiritual enlightenment or transformation, and I am perplexed by the extent to which many of us now approach old age seemingly afraid of spiritual elevation. I am not talking about pleasure or happiness but about experiences that shift our soul slightly upward, for a minute or two, or sometimes even for life.

If we spent so much effort in the 1960s getting high, why are we so earthbound now (we and the generations that followed us)? Outside of spiritual communities, society seems to consider discussion of transcendence as impolite as the mention of money used to be among the English upper classes. Why are we afraid of opening ourselves up to the possibility

of experiencing the spiritual and emotional elevation that can happen, easily and harmlessly (and inexpensively), if we know how to see art?

One of the clichés of our culture is that men suppress their feelings while women more freely accept them. In fact, men may talk less about their feelings, but both genders have the same capacity for experiencing states of emotion. Since I am advocating *seeing* art, not gushing about it, however, my male readers may still keep upper lips stiff and jaws clenched when they are in public museums and galleries.

In the final chapter, I detail three transformative encounters I have had with art objects. These occurred decades apart (the first when I was twenty-two, the most recent when I was sixty-two), but the impact of each created within me the same sense of breathtaking awe, combined with the piercing sensation of being in a state of extra-reality. Whatever your spiritual beliefs and practices (or lack of them), I assure you that if you follow my path you will experience similar moments.

The Uses of Art

It is the most important function of art and science to awaken this [cosmic religious] feeling and keep it alive.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

“Why is it art?” Gerald asked, shocked, resentful.

“It conveys a complete truth,” said Birkin. “It contains the whole truth of that state, whatever you feel about it.”

—D.H. LAWRENCE, *WOMEN IN LOVE*

The impulse to make marks as a basic declaration of existence predates virtually every other known aspect of human culture. In 2008, tools and ochre pigment, dating from between one hundred thousand and seventy thousand years before the present, were found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa. A number of pieces of ochre are incised with seemingly abstract patterns. These predate comparable objects found in Europe by at least thirty thousand years. After the need for food and shelter, making

forms is a basic instinct, and many believe it emerged long before spoken language, although for obvious reasons it is unlikely the birthday of the latter will ever be determined.

In my previous book, *The Value of Art*, I argued that today art possesses three values: potentially maintaining or increasing its commercial value; enhancing social interaction, for example, in the company of fellow art lovers; and providing the opportunity for private contemplation of, and engagement with, the object. The value of art seventy thousand years ago was unlikely to have been monetary, but it was most certainly social, though possibly never entirely private. Susan Sontag aptly described pre-historic art as “incantatory, magical . . . an instrument of ritual.”¹

Great art may be inspired by divinities, but all art is made, used, and abused by imperfect humans. The history of art, from the beginning of recorded history to today’s screaming headlines, is replete with tales of squalor, theft, forgery, fraud, and riches beyond imagining. The cast includes evil potentates, acquisitive prelates, robber barons, and hedge-fund billionaires, and it is salted liberally with mad starving geniuses. Every age has put art to a great variety of both good and bad uses.

American culture, which is despised and emulated (often simultaneously) in many other countries, is highly goal oriented. Regardless of how many generations of immigrants have brought with them diverse beliefs, the Protestant ethic still rules. The purpose of our children’s education is to get a job, build a career, and move on up the ladder of success. To enjoy this success we have to stay alive. To stay alive as long as possible we have to eat right and get plenty of exercise.

But to attain what goal are fifty million people per year visiting American museums, hunting for visual excitement? Many are tourists, domestic or international; others are supporting their local institutions. One way or another, they may simply enjoy art—and some might admit it makes them feel better.

The real issue is that because we are a profoundly goal-oriented society, most of us need practical reasons for studying art: to teach (recycling information), to get a job (as artist or art businessperson), to collect (invest?), or

even to further the eternal quest for self-improvement (be more socially desirable).

This “outcome orientation,” as Harvard University professor of psychology Ellen Langer has called it (more about her further on), is one of our most fundamental mind-sets. Among the difficulties generated by this pervasive goal orientation is an inability to engage in a process of seeing art for its own sake; the child thinks he or she must learn something, must have an “answer.”

Art is no panacea. It cannot cure disease, feed the hungry, or eliminate war. In every culture, however, there is a reverence for images and objects, which seem to have no purpose except to be experienced, and which can take us to a better place or make us aware of the better part of the place where we exist.

Sadly, when fine art is part of the discussion in our culture (public or private), its function as a spiritual elevator plays second fiddle to its roles as:

- Financial Instrument (Wealth)
- Iconic Object (Entertainment)
- Social Identifier (Prestige)
- Information Provider (Education)

It is important to see how ubiquitous these roles are and how they skew our thinking and cloud our vision.

Art as Money

Among the things we pay the most for, art does the least for us in terms of sustaining our lives. The price of an artwork, as I point out in *The Value of Art*, is based on collective intentionality, a consensus among artists, dealers, and collectors. Since most art is portable, and depending on the time and place, can be sold or exchanged at an agreed upon value, it has been used through the ages for investment and the transfer of assets. In some countries, its import or export is taxed, in others (the United States, for

known for rigorously rectilinear compositions of black lines and blocks of primary colors.

I believe it is superfluous to make this argument because there is usually a fine draftsman in the student work of every great artist whether or not they apply that skill to their mature work. Drawing from life helps the art student to see, as we will learn in the next chapter.

We should not assume that the artist who drips and dribbles like Jackson Pollock or slashes like Lucio Fontana or scorches with a flamethrower like Yves Klein possesses less skill than an artist who can make a lifelike portrait of your mother. All art is the product of the imagination channeled by physical activity, and the great artist creatively controls that activity regardless of its nature.

Materials

I am more interested in seeing what the material tells me than imposing my will on it. — JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

Art does not have to be made from pastels on paper, oil on canvas, marble, or bronze. Long before the fifteenth century, when Jan van Eyck boiled glass, bone, and mineral pigments in linseed oil to make “oil paint,” human beings invented ways to make pictures, and since the dawn of time scul-

tures have been made from whatever could be manipulated or worked with tools. The creation of portable sculpture-like objects may in fact predate our species: the so-called Venus of Berekhat Ram, a human figure in stone discovered in the Golan Heights of Israel in 1981, is thought to be more than two hundred thousand years old and the product of a hominid-like *Homo erectus*, earlier even than Neanderthal man. Bronze casting is more than five thousand years old, and since then there is virtually no hard material that has not been used by one civilization or another to create objects of art.

The first creative decision that an artist makes is the choice of materials, and no great artist ever takes this for granted.

Female Figurine
from Berekhat Ram,
Golan Heights, Israel,
Lower Paleolithic
233,000 BP
Volcanic material
1 ³/₈ × 1 × ³/₄ in.
(3.5 × 2.5 × 2.1 cm)
The Israel Museum,
Jerusalem



WHAT IS A WORK OF ART?

Ink and pen, paint and brush, chisel and mallet are carefully selected. The choice of materials is obviously based in culture, but artists who break with historical precedent and use unconventional materials are challenging themselves to create the equivalent of new alphabets and challenging us to engage them as potent vehicles of expression. When times are tough, artists are forced to use whatever comes to hand, which can lead to creative innovation.

In the early 1990s, some dissident artists in China were not allowed to purchase conventional art materials. Ma Liuming, RongRong, Cang Xin, and others, living in a desolate area of Beijing they dubbed East Village in emulation of the New York City neighborhood, developed photography-based installation and performance works that became the foundation of a strong new wave of contemporary art in China that soon attracted international attention.

John Chamberlain
Dolores James, 1962
Welded and painted steel
72 ½ × 101 ½ × 46 ¼ in.
(184.2 × 257.8 × 117.5 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York



CHAPTER THREE

Whether dictated by political or economic exigencies or freely chosen, the stuff that works of art are made from engages our senses and is part of what we see. Sculptor John Chamberlain chose salvaged auto parts as his sculptural medium and was able to wrest from them dynamic and vivid sculptures that transformed, yet did not disguise, their origins. The casual viewer may pass one and think, “Crumpled cars—that must be a Chamberlain,” and move on, but the engaged viewer will pause long enough to see (and feel) its force and drama.

Does bronze appear hard or soft? The finish and patina of a bronze sculpture affects our perception of it just as much as the thickness (or thinness) of layers of pigment on a canvas determines how we see a painting. The walls of painter Lucian Freud’s Spartan London studio were laden with inches-thick layers of paint wiped from the loaded brushes he used when applying layer upon layer upon layer of congested paint to build the fleshy substance of his nudes and portraits. We like to think of great artists “mastering the medium,” implying skillful manipulation, but with some modern art, the more nuanced concept of letting the medium speak for itself is just as appropriate.

This is true for artists who employ technology, create environments, and perform. Are we intrigued with installations by Joseph Beuys because of the novelty of the mediums he used (such as felt, fat, hare’s blood, zinc, and beeswax) or because, after spending time with them, we experience our senses shifting?

For Beuys, substance and texture play as important a role in his work as color, possibly more so, and with dramatic success. Immersed in it, our eyes become our fingers, there is no need to touch; the substances proclaim their own power. Artists who choose to use less conventional mediums are challenging themselves to make them “speak” and it is up to us to accept the challenge by not dismissing them simply because we find the medium unorthodox.

Early in the twentieth century, artists began to use whatever came to hand, so-called “found objects.” I have mentioned Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain*. Another piece of found sculpture, from circa 1917, is a cast iron plumbing trap, turned upside down and mounted on a miter box, assembled by



Morton Livingston Schamberg and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who titled it *God*. Since then we have had a century of sculptors using everything from sticks, stones, and sand to household appliances. David Smith welded together pieces of rusted farm equipment and Jean Dubuffet (a former wine merchant) made sculptures of cork. Sometimes cost was a factor, particularly early in an artist's career, since working with marble and bronze is expensive, but more importantly, these and other artists found inspiration in everyday materials and were challenged to alter our perception of their basic properties. In 1955 Robert Rauschenberg purchased a stuffed Angora goat for fifteen dollars and eventually combined it with a discarded car tire, mounted them on a horizontal painting, and called it *Monogram* (1955–59).

Morton Livingston
Schamberg and Elsa von
Freytag-Loringhoven
God, c. 1917
Wood miter box;
cast iron plumbing trap
Height: 12 ³/₈ in. (31.4 cm);
Base: 3 × 4 ³/₄ × 11 ⁵/₈ in.
(7.6 × 12.1 × 29.5 cm)
The Philadelphia
Museum of Art.
The Louise and Walter
Arensberg Collection,
1950



When I visited the late Hollywood producer David Wolper and his wife's magnificent collection of Picasso sculpture, he pointed out the one he liked best. Titled *Centaur*, the work is made out of old boxes, an easel, a light stanchion, and a lens box, materials left lying around after Henri-Georges Clouzot filmed Picasso painting for his film *The Mystery of Picasso* (1956).

In the 1960s and 1970s, young American artists experimented with anything and everything (particularly if it could be bought cheaply in the myriad stores on Canal Street in Lower Manhattan in New York City where every sort of hardware might be found in bins on the sidewalk). Claes Oldenburg engaged his wife Patty to sew soft sculptures of everyday objects made out of canvas and vinyl stuffed with kapok; Robert Morris and Richard Serra experimented with felt and vulcanized rubber; and Bruce Nauman used wax, fiberglass, polyester resin, aluminum foil, and neon tubing. In Europe, Günther Uecker was making three-dimensional paintings using nails. Some of the (to me) most original and strikingly beautiful sculptures of these years were made by Eva Hesse out of a very wide variety of commonplace materials including latex, rubber, fiberglass, rope, string, plywood, Masonite, papier-mâché, cheesecloth, cotton, sawdust, and hair.

Need I go on?

Even when we are not actually touching an object, our eyes can sense its texture, and we can be shocked by the novelty of the material or we can enjoy the physical “feel” of it. Other senses can also be engaged: Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely's electrically powered machine sculptures make a wonderful racket, and not long ago the Museum of Arts and Design in New York found enough artists engaging our olfactory senses to mount an exhibition devoted to *The Art of Scent 1889–2012* (2012).

OPPOSITE
 Pablo Picasso
Centaur, 1955
 Painted wood
 90 × 79 × 29 in.
 (228.6 × 200.66 ×
 73.66 cm)
 Los Angeles County
 Museum of Art.
 Gift of Gloria and
 David L. Wolper

Color

Describing a work of art by listing its colors is pretty useless. Not only do you and I probably have a different red in our minds when someone says, “This painting has a red stripe on a blue background,” but unless we see it we have no idea how the “red” stripe is modified by the “blue background.” Colors juxtaposed change just as much as colors mixed together, and all

CHAPTER SIX

REAL CONNOISSEURS ARE NOT SNOBS



Painting is now become the sole object of fashionable care; the title of connoisseur in art is at present the safest passport into every fashionable Society; a well-timed shrug, an admiring attitude and one or two exotic tones of exclamation are sufficient qualifications for men of low circumstance to curry favour.



OLIVER GOLDSMITH

I am well aware that the word “connoisseur” rankles some people. For many it conjures up smug superiority, an entitled, I-know-more-than-you aura of snobbery. I have worked with a few clients like that. When I worked at Christie’s, I met a young man of instant fortune with a fairly good collection of auction-bought pictures who made an effort to learn by heart the paragraph or two bolstering each painting in the auction catalogue. When I visited his collection at his home, he would stand in front of a work unembarrassed to recite back to me sentences of strained praise I had frantically limned in the early hours to make my catalogue deadline.

What makes a connoisseur? For one, it is *not* learning what others think or say. I believe the essence of connoisseurship is being confident in your own considered reactions to works of art based on firsthand experience, regardless of the opinion of others. The connoisseur starts and ends with the object. In between there is the fascination of authorship, manufacture, condition, history, and culture, but without extended engagement with the object, the factual knowledge is useless.

Let’s get personal. What makes me think I can walk into a gallery, a museum, an art fair, or an auction house with strong instincts for the good, the bad, and the indifferent? It is because I have spent half a century seeing similar objects. Remember, you are not training your eyes to become art dealers (who choose what will sell) or to become museum curators (who choose what may be popular or relevant for others); you are training your eyes selfishly, as a marksman might do, to become a better shot, but not to make a killing.

The first painting by Jean Dubuffet that I saw was in the racks of the gallery where I got my first full-time job at the age of eighteen. It was a good painting and I reacted very positively. My boss had to tell me who the artist was. Within a year or so, I had seen many more, in other galleries and in museums. This experience sharpened my judgment (and greatly increased my pleasure). Decades on, I have seen hundreds of works by Dubuffet in private collections, commercial galleries, public museums, and in major exhibitions devoted to his work. The pleasure I feel when I see a great painting by Dubuffet has been enhanced by having seen so

many others by him. The more you see, the more you feel; and the more you feel, the more you are sure about what you feel.

Caution: connoisseurship as I am discussing it here is not about the monetary value of artworks. As a dealer I may know what different types of works by many modern artists may currently be worth on the market, but that does not make me a connoisseur; it simply makes me a good appraiser.

The Qualities of Art

There are three qualities shared by works of art that inform my always developing sense of connoisseurship:

Mastery of the Medium

Today an artist's tools can be anything from old-fashioned oil paint and pig-bristle brushes to a 3-D printer, but she or he cannot express themselves effectively until they not only know how to use them but have had *a lot* of practice. And I mean a lot, perhaps even Malcolm Gladwell's famous ten thousand hours.

Those of us not trained as artists need only try making a rainbow with watercolors to find out what it means to be unable to control a medium. There is a wonderful short film from 1949 of Pablo Picasso effortlessly painting a vase of flowers on a pane of glass (the camera shooting Picasso through the glass as he works). He mugs at the camera but doesn't miss a stroke, the brush a natural extension of his body and his mind.⁶⁸ Skill is not an end in itself, and in the greatest works of art it is an invisible ingredient, absolutely necessary but not so evident as to distract from the whole.

Clarity of Execution

Because Paul Cézanne used negative space ("empty" canvas) as a vital element in many of his compositions, many suppose these are unfinished paintings. The fact is, he delivers only what is required for the painting or

watercolor to work on our feelings. Less is not always more, but the power of a great deal of modern art lies in restraint and fine editing, whether the work has hard straight lines or a jumble of thick impasto. Artists often talk of “knowing when to stop.” Artists who do know when to stop, deliver clear statements with maximum impact.

Authority of Expression

The “voice” of a work of art can be very big and loud (literally, like the forty-foot-long cacophony of drums and wheels by the Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely, *Fatamorgana, Méta-Harmonie IV* [1985], in the Museum Tinguely in Basel) or very quiet, like a subtle pencil drawing by Agnes Martin, but the voice must also have power if it is to resonate. No hems or haws or stammering. It may be that sometimes when you have stood in front of a work of art and decided it didn’t “do anything” for you, it was not because of the style or composition or color, but because it had no authority.

The Connoisseur as Detective

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes debuted in 1887 and still inspires novels, plays, films, and television shows. The fictional detective’s great talent for deductive reasoning is well illustrated in the story “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box,” in which an unmarried landlady receives a box containing two severed ears. Both are pierced, but Holmes perceives that one is male and one is female. The deduction Holmes makes, which solves the case, is that one of the ears bears a remarkable similarity to that of the landlady and must have belonged to her sister.

Holmes’s lesson for us is that he does not approach his work with pre-determined information. Recapping this adventure for his sidekick, Dr. Watson, he declares:

We approached the case, you remember, with an absolutely blank mind, which is always an advantage. We had formed no theories. We were simply there to observe and to draw inferences from our observations.⁶⁹