

The Changing Role of the Artist in Modern & Contemporary Art

By Valerie Butler

Prior to the advent of Modernism, both art and the artists who produced it primarily served the purposes of church and state. Often seeking to legitimize their power, government and religious entities hired skilled artisans to produce awe-inspiring public works. Architects designed temples, palaces, and churches; sculptors produced monumental statuary; painters filled walls and books with colorful civic and religious themes.

Up until the late 18th century, such art was commissioned by wealthy patrons seeking to impress and/or instruct the works' viewers. But then the forces of modern life conspired to bring an untimely end to all those centuries of aesthetic domination. Industrialism birthed a new middle class, and these formerly unwashed up-and-comers had disposable income to allocate for works of art. The art they purchased had little in common with the staged heroic pieces of yesteryear: these were scenes from everyday, without overt religious or historic content. Freed from the dictates of ruling class patrons, artists were able to experiment with different styles and varied subject matter. Modern artists used their liberty to challenge social norms, express their emotions, and explore aspects of visual perception.

CHALLENGING SOCIAL NORMS

Eduard Manet's *Olympia*, dated 1863, is considered a foundational work of Modern art. The artist portrays his reclining subject, most likely a prostitute, in a setting his peers would have recognized as contemporary. Nudes were nothing new or controversial in the world of 19th century art; but Manet's painting was labeled immoral and lewd. *Olympia* rejected the artistic norm of portraying nude women as passive, idealized mythological creatures.



UNACCEPTABLE - The direct gaze and realistic portrayal of a prostitute in her boudoir. Eduard Manet, *Olympia*, Realism (1863).



ACCEPTABLE - Submitted the same year, an idealized nude of the goddess Venus. Note her highly "appropriate" indirect gaze and partially covered face. Alexandre Cabanel, *The Birth of Venus*, Academism (1863)



Several decades later, Marcel Duchamp challenged artistic norms to new extremes with the introduction of the “Readymade”. He signed a plain white urinal “R. Mutt”, called it a fountain, and submitted it with his entry fee to an open art exhibit. Somehow, “this article disappeared” and was not shown; Duchamp protested the exclusion of his work:

“Now Mr. Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.

“Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”

Marcel Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case,” *Blind Man* (New York) 2 (1917)

In drawing attention to an everyday object, Duchamp not only challenged aesthetic norms, but also the ideas that go into determining artistic value. *The Fountain* and subsequent Dada “Readymades” devalued beauty and technical skill, opting instead to expose and examine systems of meaning. Witnessing not one, but two global upheavals, the questioning spirit of Duchamp informs the Pop Art movements of the United States and Europe. Pop Art’s embrace of the banal and the commercial has its roots in Duchamp’s resolve to call an ordinary urinal, “Art”.

EXPRESSING EMOTIONS

Much like Manet is credited with bringing Modern Realism to the fore, Vincent Van Gogh is heralded as the champion of Expressionism. His works, while representational, used color, line, and form to express emotion and his personal point of view. His late 19th century works appear to have influenced German Expressionists in the years leading up to World War I. Kirchner’s *The Street* and Kandinsky’s *Improvisation No. 28* show two facets of German Expressionism.



The eerie palette and renderings of this Dresden street conveyed Kirchner's dissatisfaction with urban life. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *The Street*, German Expressionism (1910). Kandinsky demonstrates that a non-objective painting can convey emotion and spirituality. Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation No. 28*, German Expressionism (1912)

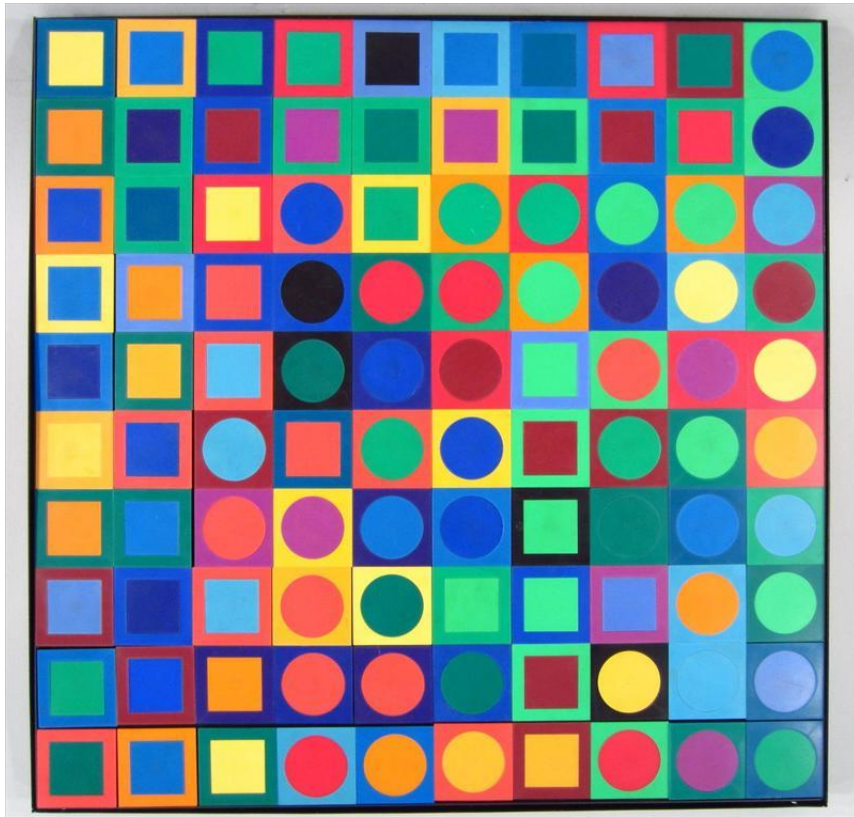
After World War II, American artists – some fairly recent refugees from post-war Europe – took up the mantle of Abstract Expressionism.



Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock both used expressionist technique to convey emotion. LEFT, Willem de Kooning, *Woman 1*, Abstract Expressionism (1950-2). ABOVE, Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, Abstract Expressionism (1950).

EXPLORING VISUAL PERCEPTION

Some schools of Modern and contemporary art have their roots in Rationalism, an intellectual, almost scientific approach to aesthetics. Even the hazy images of Impressionism were derived from the study of optics, the way the human eye perceives color and light. Cubism, invented by Pablo Picasso, ignores the rules of perspective drawing and shows a subject at many angles all at once. De Stijl reduced compositions – both paintings and architecture – to black, white, and primary-colored rectangles with black outlines. One can draw direct lines from these schools of thought to post-war art, as depicted in the works below.



The geometric shapes and pure colors of Vasarely's Op Art recall elements of Mondrian's De Stijl designs. Victor Vasarely, *Planetary Folklore*, Op Art (1964). Bridget Riley's *Twist*, below right, is a study in optics, as the human eye perceives static lines to be motion.



With Nicolas Schöffer's *Le Lumino*, one can be literally immersed in impressions of light and color.

