

A Critical Study of Subject Role in Tasting Painting Artworks

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Abstract

This study highlights the role of painting subjects in reading and tasting them. Where examples of painting art from various periods of art history namely primitive to contemporary arts were discussed. These paintings are believed to be representatives of contrasting subjects and concepts. The subject of an artwork is linked to the nature of the era in which it is created; as an era, characteristics in terms of beliefs, philosophy, culture, science, and creative freedom limits have clear impacts on the nature of the artistic subjects presented. In this context, the study assumed that the subject cannot be relied upon in reading and appreciating visual artworks, as the subject may have a clear presence in the works of a certain historical stage, and it may be marginalized, cancelled, or completely excluded in the artworks of another historical stage. Based on the studied artworks, it is concluded that reading and tasting artistic works require the audience and viewers' awareness of the period in which these works were produced. It is recommended to realize the artistic movement to which it belongs to, as these artworks mainly reflect how the subject was dealt with in this era and the aesthetical formulation method used by the artist in expressing the created artwork. Besides, the study confirmed that aesthetic construction should be the main approach to reading and tasting visual artworks, including paintings. The value of the artwork could be identified through the awareness of the audience of aesthetic formulation elements and their ability to embody identified visual values. The study confirmed that the value of the artwork does exist regardless the receivers' awareness of the reason for determining the value of the artwork. Rather, the value of the artwork stems from the extent of the artist's ability to expressively embody his thoughts and feelings employing fine art formulations. Thus, artists would address the audience's conscience and mind. Fine art formulation is primarily the frontal side that can determine the value of the artwork and its intellectual and creative originality.

key words: art; painting; formulation; artwork; audience, aesthetical; contemplator

1. Introduction

Reading and appreciating artworks and especially paintings have been considered as a controversial point of debate among artists and audiences throughout history. The role of the artwork subject in these processes is one of the addressed areas in these discussions, debates, arguments, and investigations. The author has found that common criticism, reading and appreciation of artworks by many critics and audiences are focused on the artwork subject. Although artworks' subjects are usually loaded and represented by a range of meanings and values. Besides understanding and reading paintings almost commence by plastic and expressive artistic values and other aspects and approaches that would exceed the subject. For instance, in contemporary movement artworks, some artists would explain their artworks through written statements i.e., phrases, words, and/or essays where an artwork subject is expressed to converge both the artwork and audience obviating the visual arts elements and principles adopted by the artist.

Subjects of artworks have been the concern of several researchers from various views. Carrier, D. (2020) reviewed paintings from successive eras in art history. It was found that any subject could be used in painting artworks. This is whenever there is a sufficient motive representing it effectively. This approach and consideration developed various paintings of contrasting subjects throughout history (Carrier, 2020). Furnham, A., & Walker, J. (2001) studied the impact of the "Big five" personality traits on artworks' preference. Personality and demographic variables were found strongly associated to positive judgments towards representational art and this was not the case for the pop art (Furnham & Walker, 2001). Winston, A. S., & Cupchik, G. C. in 1992 studied the relationship between audience level of experience in the field of art and their judgments, preferences, and beliefs towards artworks.

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Unexperienced viewers preferred popular artworks because of its pleasant emotional impact, however, experienced viewers preferred high art pieces because of showing complexity and challenging feelings (Winston & Cupchik, 1992). Kettlewell, N. (1988) agreed to some extent with Lindauer and Long's findings supported the insignificance of visual artworks subjects in judging them. Although, preference of artworks would be affected by the subject represented. According to Kettlewell, N., Lindauer and Long mentioned 12 criteria of assessment relevant to aesthetical formulation which are more important than subject (Kettlewell, 1988). Shatford, S. (1986) was concerned with applying methods developed to classify artworks in categorizing paintings based on subjects (Shatford, 1986).

The current research author believes that the contemplator of painting artworks can almost taste and communicate with them using their sight sense. It is one of the human beings' five senses that are used to perceive and communicate with their surroundings. From this point of view, the current study investigates the processes of reading and appreciating painting artworks by highlighting the importance of the topic as a starting point for reading an artwork. Accordingly, various artistic examples of paintings from successive periods of time, are discussed and analyzed, starting with primitive arts, and ending with contemporary arts.

This research study aims to clarify the role of the subject in painting artworks in a historical context, develop a method for reading, criticizing, and appreciating artistic paintings with a degree of depth and objective evaluation, discuss and criticize painting artworks since visual artworks are created employing aesthetical concepts regardless expressed subject. This study goals are to answer the following questions: Do reading, tasting, and criticizing works of art would be done by discussing their topics? Besides, are these processes the most appropriate approaches that would be adopted to understand and appreciate paintings artistic value?

This research study focuses on reading and appreciating painting artworks and based on discussing and investigating the following concepts: One concept stating that the subject of an artwork is not the basis of judging its value, rather considering an artwork subject as an approach to reading and tasting it would make it lose its true value. The other concept confirms that most of the critics and receivers consider an artwork subject as a starting point for criticizing and evaluating it. The originality and significance of this search study lie in highlighting the constants which every individual of audience and/or critics are supposed to proceed or adopt when reading, tasting, and criticizing works of art.

2. Research Methodology

This research employed an inductive analytical approach, based on analyzing and studying examples of painting artworks produced in successive periods of time, where the idea of the theme of the artwork and its impact on the ability of the critic and the audience in the context of criticism, reading and tasting painting artworks are considered.

This study divided the stages of painting artworks analyzed-since the man existence on earth and till current days-into four basic stages. This classification is based on the clear characteristics and features distinguishing each of these stages as follows: (1) Primitive era,(2) Across successive civilizations ,(3) Modern era and (4) Contemporary or Post-modern painting era. Examples of these stages were reviewed and discussed to investigate the current research problem, aim and objectives which are focused on the subject in the works of painting.

3. Background

Rules of reading and tasting works of art have been the concern of art theorists, aestheticians, artists and even art academics. There are several constants that would be set by audience, readers and art connoisseurs while contemplating and judging an artwork, in this section these constants applicable to painting artworks are discussed:

3.1. Moderate mood of contemplator

In this state of mind "Moderate Mood", the audience or contemplator's mood must be natural and calm, so that he can communicate with the artwork and read it deeply without extremism in judgment and/or evaluation.

3.2. Neutrality of contemplator

Regarding this state, the receiver would be able to obviate any prior decisions with or against the artwork which would be set in advance based on preconceived ideas or special orientations. This state makes the receiver evaluate the artwork according to what it is and its affiliation to a specific artistic direction, and not according to the art movement to which the contemplator or critic or receiver belongs to or prefer.

3.3. Distance between the receiver and the artwork

This requirement or aspect is linked specifically to the visual art area including painting artworks. The larger an artwork is, the longer distance is required to be between receiver and contemplated artwork to perceive the artwork clearly. And vice versa, the smaller the artwork area is, the smaller the appropriate distance is needed to communicate and receive the work of art clearly. This matter is also relative, as it depends as well on the contemplator's vision strength level.

3.4. Time period spent in contemplation.

The time duration used and spent by receivers to contemplate an artwork is one of the constants that would be considered. Receivers would spend sufficient time reading and tasting a piece of artwork including paintings. The more time the receiver contemplates an artwork, the deeper tasting of artistic value will be conducted.

4. The Art of Painting

Painting art is one of the early forms of art produced by humans in art history. From the beginning of their existence on earth till current days, it is employed to express ideas using the artistic language of formation. Painters were found addressing themselves and expressing their emotional coexistence then they transfer and direct their artworks to receiver addressing them. Several studies confirmed that an artwork is a message sent from "Me" i.e., the creator to others i.e., "Receiver" based on the intention of reaching what we can call the state of "Us". This aims to uniting both sides in terms of the psychological state that brings them together and removes any differences and gaps between them in viewpoints, opinions, and emotions. The visual messages that painters have created were developed mainly to express themselves and their thoughts in a visual formulation that represents the features and characteristics of their era. By contemplating artworks of several eras, it was found that artworks reflect the era in which they were produced in terms of their cultural, scientific, political, and social aspects and features. In the following four subsections the four stages of art making identified in the methodology section will be discussed.

4.1. The First stage: Primitive Art

The Primitive art paintings found on the caves' walls in different regions of the world, such as the caves of southern France and Spain, depict primitive artists' thoughts, fears and dreams using symbols and elements of distinct degrees of spontaneity and credibility that would not be compared with any other later historical stage or artistic movement. Besides, Primitive artists painted on the walls of the caves -in which they lived- reflecting their environment namely they're daily activities such as hunting animals. The primitive artist's method of expression was not affected by any prior experience, impact or obtained knowledge of painting techniques. However, the art that was produced instinctively, spontaneously, and controlled by their desire for expression without expecting any reward. Therefore, in their paintings on the walls of their caves, they used the available techniques in their environment (i.e., polished stones, charred remains of bones, and blood of living creatures) producing a limited color palette embodying their artistic theme. These paintings' values were evident in reflecting and expressing the subject of expressive grace and credibility making the subject a special and expressive plastic value.

Figure 1 shows an example representing painting artwork from the primitive era. This painting is in Lascaux Cave in the south of France. It depicts a moving horse, although the subject is quite clear, the value of the work doesn't lie in it. However, the value is highlighted through the credibility of its expression and its artistic culture and sense.

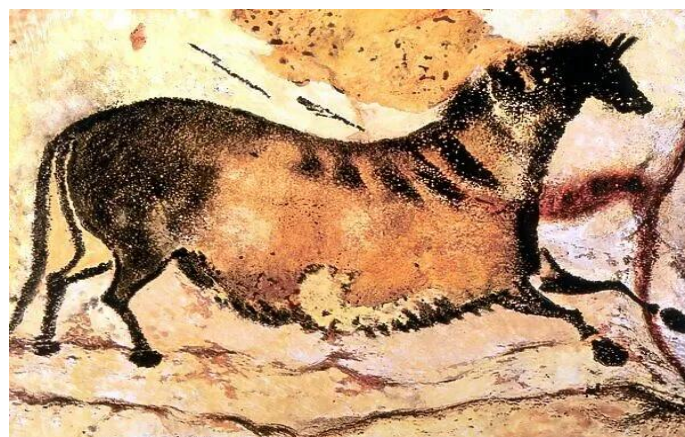


Figure 1 Primitive Mural Painting, Lascaux cave, Southern France

4.2. The second stage: the Civilizations Arts

By early organization of human groups, successive human civilizations appeared. Consequently, ruling bodies were established, and soon different civilizations spread throughout the earth in which governmental systems, beliefs, and existing policies varied resulting in various human activities. Therefore, generally arts and especially painting art were found particularly reflecting the nature of each established civilization including its pure artistic features. It was found that religious themes dominated artworks of all ancient civilizations in their successive stages. This is evident in the ancient Egyptian civilization paintings, the artistic topics represented are religious based on the idea of resurrection and immortality which dominated the artworks produced and all subsequent stages.

In the Christian Civilization, Christian faith dominated its artworks' themes which is inspired by the life of Christ and his Virgin Mother. Later, during the Renaissance era in Italy, several artists such as Da Vinci, Raphael and others excelled in expressing issues supported by the church and the existing ruling systems at the time. However, the techniques of expression and methods of formation differed in each geographical area according to several influences such as the religious beliefs. After a while, in the shadow of the Islamic civilization, Islamic arts were based mainly on the idea of monotheism of the one Creator, God Almighty, so the artworks were based on features stemming from the Holy Qur'an texts. The art of Arabic calligraphy was established significantly, which was independent in terms of value in addition to the decorative arts characterized the Islamic civilization.

From the above discussion, it is evident that "Creed" is the main approach to comprehending the fine arts and the key source of artworks' subjects' inspiration in the successive human civilizations. While unique aesthetic artistic solutions and appropriate techniques were developed to express these subjects affected by the geographic, economic, and technologic development of each civilization. The following three examples from Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 show examples of artworks produced in the ancient Egyptian, Christian and Coptic civilizations which are a clear reflection of the idea of the faith influence on drawn and represented subjects expressing these stages.



Figure 2 A mural painting, ancient Egyptian civilization - Tutankhamun's Tomb, Luxor, Egypt



Figure 3 Mural painting (The Last Supper) - by the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci - Italian Renaissance



Figure 4 An example of using Arabic calligraphy and Islamic decoration in Architecture.

4.3. The Third stage: Modern art

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, there have been successive revolutions in science and technology fields caused major changes in peoples' lifestyles. These revolutions have reached art production, developing various artistic forms in successive directions and schools. The individualism in the artistic expression and plastic formulation has become a source of admiration and distinction for artists. This has been noticeably reflected in various fields of fine arts, consequently, a series of schools and artistic trends of significant various orientations in expression styles -in subjects highlighted or artistic formulation employed- were developed. For instance, the Neo-classicism movement was established by Jacques-Louis David and other artists by returning to themes inspired by the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations creating classic noble artworks.

While the Romanticism movement was established by artist Casper David Friedrich in Germany (who considered its religious form), Francisco Joya in Spain (who adopted the Romantic Political style), while in England, the natural romantic movement was supported by Joseph Turner and his colleagues. The romanticists were affected by their surrounding natural, social, cultural, and political circumstances.

On the other hand, the Realism movement emerged in Europe intensely finding a great place supporting the workers and farmers' revolution demanding their rights. The French painter Gustave Courbet depicted themes inspired by the middle-class social life, which was not previously a source of artistic expression, causing a revolution in the subjects adopted by artists. In the late nineteenth century, the Impressionism movement was revealed creating artistic noise and clamor that had never been conducted by any previous art movement or school. This is to the extent of considering this art movement as the real start of modern art. This movement has liberated the artistic vision of nature that was subject to the academic approach, which lasted for decades dominating the aesthetic concepts of fine arts. In this movement, artists had the freedom to choose the subject, and use the appropriate artistic formulation.

Successive artistic trends have emerged influenced by this movement "Impressionism" but in varying social, cultural, and political circumstances in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most significant modern schools that emerged at this stage include the Brutalist school, Cubism, Abstraction, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.

The Abstract movement considered the artwork as a musical piece of art that has its own language. This is evident in the artworks of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, on the other hand, the surrealism art dealt with the subject in an astonishing methodology, as it touched on niche ideas that were not presented about the human psyche and the subconscious. Artworks of Spanish painter Salvador Dali is the best evidence to this movement. Figures 5 to 7 show examples from modern art schools representing clear differences and discrepancies in the selected and highlighted artistic subjects, their role and the artistic formulation employed.



Figure 5 The Cubist School - Guernica (1937), by the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso



Figure 6 Abstract school model - In the blue 1925, by the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky

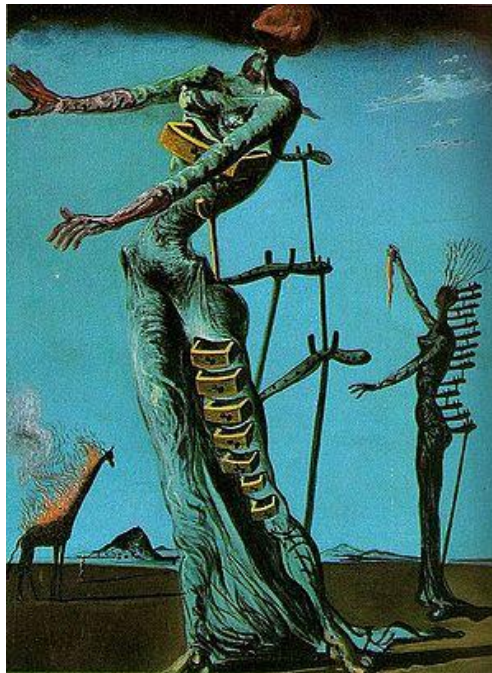


Figure 7 The surrealist school - Giraffe Burning (1935), by Spanish artist Salvador Dali

4.4. The fourth stage: Contemporary art (Postmodern art)

Since the beginning of the mid twentieth century, multiple trends have been emerged in the fine arts field producing artistic trends with unusual artistic characteristics, with which all artistic values and usual plastic methods changed. For instance, “Interactive art” and “Conceptual art” (the art of the idea) are clear evidence of these changes.

Conceptual art was presented by the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, who found that the interactive art technique based on using modern technology such as photography and video art would assist in achieving added value to the artwork. The receiver can interact with the artwork dynamically and not just emotionally. The following examples presented in figures 8 and 9 represent contemporary artistic trends (Postmodern art).



Figure 8 Interactive art...work titled "Frontier Quests" (1998) by Scott Snippy at the NTT Communication Center in Tokyo



Figure 9 Conceptual Art ... Joseph Kosuth, A Chair and Three Chairs, 1965, Museum of Modern Art, New York

5. Findings and Recommendations

This study investigated the approach of adopting artworks subjects in reading and appreciating paintings. Artworks and paintings from different periods in art history were discussed as examples of artworks throughout history. The study concluded that paintings produced throughout the history of art have been affected by several factors including beliefs, technology, environment, society, and freedom of creativity. The religious beliefs of the artists and the era they belong to were found the primary motive for producing several civilizations' artworks, regardless their artistic or creative orientation. The level of advanced technology available in an era was found providing humanity with techniques affecting people's lives and consequently the artists' styles of expression and their used techniques. Besides, the nature of the environment namely its geography and/or topography would be able to shape artists' conscience and pushes them to develop a unique artistic expression consistent with their environment nature. Furthermore, an era's social, economic, and political conditions and circumstances, in addition to customs and traditions, are all social systems that were found directly affecting the artworks production. Artists' ability to freely express themselves without being opposed by political systems or intellectual or ideological references stand against their desire to express their vision and ideas was found important in painting artworks.

Finally, artworks' subjects were not found to be an appropriate approach to criticize or taste artworks, rather the value of artworks stems from the credibility of expression and the artistic language used. By answering the question "To what extent do artistic method/s used by artists achieve a degree of influence on the receivers?" it was concluded that artworks would be valued and tasted by audience and even panels of judging painting artworks applying a high degree of objectivity and awareness of the tasted and read artwork value and authenticity.

This study recommends the inevitability of raising the public tasters' awareness of fine artworks including paintings. This recommendation is based on current research conclusion that paintings are visual works in the first place which cannot be tasted through oral speech or written words or phrases, it would rather be tasted through the sense of sight, which makes contemplators recognize those expressions expressed in the painting artworks and understand their artistic values according to their visual culture background.

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