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## Art Is Communication: A Pragmatic Approach to Understanding Art

Josef MESSERKLINGER

*I don't paint so that people will understand me, I paint to show what a particular scene looks like.* (J. M. W. Turner)

*As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour.* (James Abbot McNeill Whistler)

*A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore risky to send it out into the world. How often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent.* (Mark Rothko)

Art is communication<sup>1</sup>. Communication is the exchange of information. Therefore, arguing from these premises, art is an exchange of information. But whilst verbal communication is the exchange of information through words—a message encoded by a speaker or writer and then decoded by a listener or reader—visual art communicates by other means; in the case of a painting, for example, information is exchanged by the artist putting paint on a canvas and then a viewer interpreting the paint on the canvas<sup>2</sup>.

But how similar is art to language? For example, looking at Caravaggio's *The Calling of St Mathew*<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1) how does the paint on the canvas communicate? Can we analyze paintings as we do written or spoken texts? In this paper, I will compare spoken and written language to the visual art of painting and argue that like with verbal utterances we can understand art only when we are aware of the context in which

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine L'Engle and others have said this.

<sup>2</sup> Or as Chomsky put it: "Words and idioms are as indispensable to our thoughts and experiences as are colors and tints to a painting." W. Chomsky (1957) *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. (p. 3)

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/caravaggio-matthew.html>  
[http://www.artble.com/artists/caravaggio/paintings/the\\_calling\\_of\\_saint\\_matthew](http://www.artble.com/artists/caravaggio/paintings/the_calling_of_saint_matthew)

it was made.

When we speak, we do more than simply use phonological, semantic, and syntactic rules to create utterances. We also use pragmatic rules in order to get our meaning across. We understand how sounds make words and what those words refer to and how words are put together to make sentences while understanding the effect those words and sentences have in context. When we look at a painting, we see lines and colors that create certain effects that are more or less ostensibly obvious—making images of recognizable objects is a common effect—but to understand the meaning of the painting, its deeper effect, we must be aware of the context of the work itself—its form, style, purpose, and genre.

### The Art Language

Languages such as English are based on meanings associated with sounds<sup>4</sup> which follow certain rules. For example, a phonological rule in English is the voicing of plural s. After unvoiced consonants it is unvoiced as in *pots* pronounced /pats/. After a voiced consonant it is voiced as in *pans*, which is pronounced /paenz/. Change the voicing and the words become *podz* and *pantz*. Likewise, prosodic rules affect how sentences are understood. A humorous example is the difference between, *Let's eat grandma.* and *Let's eat, Grandma.*

Similarly, painting and drawing are based on ideas associated with the visual effects and images created by line and color. For example, in painting light is generally associated with understanding, bold lines with strength<sup>5</sup>. Color has associations as well; blues usually with sadness, reds with warmth. Images such as halos call to mind saintliness.

Looking again at Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew*, we see a painting with a strong contrast of light and dark, important elements in the painting much like the punctuation in a sentence, an exclamation mark emphasizing Christ's pointing to Matthew. The images themselves are the words—instead of naming Christ, there is a picture of him. The image stands for the word but in much greater detail. The way they are used, the visual grammar so to speak, helps make the message clear: the light comes from Jesus and is cast onto Matthew. And like with any well-written text where no words are wasted, every element of the painting adds to and reinforces the message, the look of doubt on the face of the boy opposite us even as he sits in the full glare of the light, for example.

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<sup>4</sup> Ignoring for the time being sign language and writing such as kanji.

<sup>5</sup> for more ideas on lines see: <http://tympanus.net/codrops/2011/11/17/lines-in-web-design/>



Figure 1 Caravaggio: *The Calling of St Matthew*

Much more could be said about this painting using analysis of line and color, for example how they form an image that we identify as Christ—the halo and beard—just as the letters of the alphabet spell out his name. But as with verbal communication, to get a message from the visual elements (the words) and how they are put together (the grammar) the viewer must also understand the context they are in. For instance, the importance of light in the Caravaggio can only be understood if the viewer knows a little about the characters, especially Jesus Christ.

### Context creates meaning

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius, wondering about the book Hamlet is reading, asks: *What is the matter, my lord?* Hamlet counters with a question of his own, *Between who?* His response is funny because he misinterprets the question taking it to mean trouble rather than subject. Yet the meaning should be obvious from the context since Polonius has just asked Hamlet, *What do you read, my lord?* *Words, words, words,* says Hamlet.

The same occurs with art: the meaning is understood from context. Looking again at the Caravaggio, "It's beautiful," is a common reaction<sup>6</sup>. But without knowing more, that is all that can be understood, yet the painting is much more than a decoration. Taking a closer look, you can see money on the table, a couple of old men and some young boys, one of whom looks sleepy—drunk or maybe bored and disinterested? Visual words words words. You could easily think Christ is pointing an accusing finger at them. After all, sitting in the shadows, there is something dishonest about them, something which is communicated in the painting through the visual grammar and vocabulary. But we know from the title that Jesus is calling, not accusing, Matthew. As with the example from *Hamlet*, where the meaning is understood from the context, knowing the background helps the viewer understand the meaning of the painting. So,

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to my English III classes and my Writing II class for their comments.

more than a decoration or even a mere illustration, it is a statement about the light coming from Christ and how people react to His calling, some doubt, others ignore, some question, others are unprepared while some look blankly on, etc. But similar to verbal communication, especially poetry in which the poet would like the reader to think a bit about the image created with words, there is still some ambiguity. In Shakespeare, is Hamlet making a joke or is he just stupid? In the Caravaggio, which one is Matthew?

Furthermore, painters, like poets and writers, sometimes quote each other as a way to recall other contexts. The more familiar you are with art and literature, the more you will notice, for example the similarity between the gesture of Christ in the Caravaggio and the depiction of Adam reaching out to God in Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* (see the article at [artable.com](http://artable.com).) With literature and visual art, recognizing quotes helps the reader understand a work more completely<sup>7</sup>. This is especially true, of course, with Shakespeare who has contributed much to the English language<sup>8</sup>.

#### Form: what is it?

Messages come in many forms: statements, questions, commands and exclamations; lectures, conversation, compliments and comments about the weather; e-mail, essays, insults, threats, and dirty jokes; advertisements, memos, get-well wishes, and love letters. Natsume Soseki, when asked how to translate *I love you* into Japanese, suggested *the moon is very beautiful tonight* because direct statements are rude and embarrassing in Japan. The apparent form, a statement about the moon, is really a declaration of love, which if taken literally would be unfortunate. English also has its utterances whose forms do not follow their functions. Indirect speech acts such as, *Can you pass the salt?* are not questions about someone's ability to do something, but polite requests.

Like messages made in verbal communication, the messages from painting come in varying forms, too. Not all paintings are beautiful decorations or illustrations of memorable stories and famous characters interpreted by a skillful painter<sup>9</sup>. There are also flattery, insults, wit, dirty jokes, declarations of love or pity or outrage, and as we saw with Caravaggio, even quotes in statements about faith<sup>10</sup>. Just as we might point out the moon to someone to express our love or use a question to make a polite request<sup>11</sup>, artists use various forms to express themselves.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer\\_of\\_Seville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer_of_Seville)

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/phrases-sayings-shakespeare.html>

<sup>9</sup> Yet many people define art in terms of beauty, e.g. The Art Instinct by Denis Dutton: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PktUzdnBqWI> Also: <http://san.beck.org/Life18-Art.html> "Art is the beauty created by human beings."

<sup>10</sup> Many things that paintings are not, of course. Some things are better done as words.

<sup>11</sup> Although this tactic, admittedly, sometimes fails! So to with art: not all communication is successful. See <http://www.museumofbadart.org/>

Some artists intentionally use shocking images to communicate. Grunewald's painting of Christ on the cross, part of the Isenheim Altarpiece (Figure 2), for example, is a revolting<sup>12</sup> depiction of Christ's suffering. In the detail from the painting, we can see from the expression on Christ's face how He died, no longer able to draw breath because exhausted by the excruciating pain which this method of execution causes. His body hangs from some pieces of wood to which it had been nailed and left to die slowly. We can also see the crown of thorns wedged onto Christ's head, blood trickling from where it dug into His scalp. Ugly sores cover



Figure 2 Detail *Isenheim Altarpiece*

Christ's body and blood flows from the wound in His chest, which was pierced by a spear to ensure that He was dead; details obvious to anyone who knows the story.

Rather than a comforting image of the Savior as a kind but powerful and wise man come to help us, Grunewald shows us the horrific image of Christ dead on the cross. The artist relies on the viewer's sense of empathy to get the message across: the viewer, if religious, ought to feel humbled. Hardly an illustration, yet this is not a scolding, either. Instead, the religious *can* take comfort after all: faith is difficult and believers must struggle as the Son of God struggled on the cross. And just as the Caravaggio is a call for even the lowest of sinners to follow Christ as Matthew did, Grunewald's crucifixion is a note of encouragement: even God suffered. How much more do ordinary men!

#### Style: how was it done?

In language, style can be something as simple as the difference between a polite request (*Can you pass the salt?*) and a direct command (*Pass me the salt.*) We can greet formally: *Hello, how do you do?* Or casually: *Hi, how are ya?* We can say the same thing in several different ways depending on how we want our words to affect the listener: frighten with official-sounding language: *This is to inform you that your payment is overdue and that service will be terminated if remittance is not made within a week.* Or reassure with friendly words: *Just to let you know your payment is late, but you still have time to avoid disruption of service if you settle the bill by next week.* We

<sup>12</sup> From Jonathan Jones: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/dec/12/art>

can say things sarcastically as Hamlet does when he says to a fellow student, *Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral bak'd-meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.*

Style is a way of doing something. A painter might study an object, person, or scene and, looking carefully, try to paint everything that can be seen. Other painters paint quickly to show us what something really looked like at that moment, in other words, impressionistically. Style is obviously an important part of painting, too. Most everyone is familiar with Impressionism, which as the name suggests gives the viewer a feeling for or impression of what something looked like rather than tries to capture every detail in photographic realism. When this style was new, viewers were outraged by what seemed to be unfinished paintings or paintings completed quickly and in a haphazard manner<sup>13</sup>. Yet these painters were doing more than merely trying to record visual details as with a photograph. They wanted to show viewers what they would have actually perceived at that moment had they been there. After all, how much do we actually sense visually when a bird flies past or in the fading light of a fireworks display? Certainly not every barb on the bird's feathers and certainly not much more than an impression of the light and color at night. Rather, the Impressionists were trying to paint the visual effects of motion and light. We only assume the details, our mind filling in what the eyes have missed.

One development of this artistic movement is a style known as Abstract Expressionism in which artists go beyond visual impressions and try to express some emotion without reference to recognizable images. Willem de Kooning's *Woman V* (Figure 3) may seem an ugly mess to anyone expecting a picture of a beautiful woman, but this is not an illustration nor is it a record of some visual experience such as fireworks at night<sup>14</sup>. So, if you are trying to see a recognizable image, you will miss the point of the painting. You should realize that although the



Figure 3 Willem de Kooning: *Woman V*

<sup>13</sup> Or as the critic John Ruskin put it, like a pot of paint flung in the public's face.

<sup>14</sup> See Whistler's [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne\\_in\\_Black\\_and\\_Gold\\_%E2%80%93\\_The\\_Falling\\_Rocket](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_in_Black_and_Gold_%E2%80%93_The_Falling_Rocket)



figure is a roughly drawn cartoon, the painting itself is actually done in an abstract expressionist style, which makes the work truly amusing, a kind of visual sarcasm. The artist has arranged the paint on the canvas in such a way as to suggest a figure much like looking at clouds and seeing sheep<sup>15</sup>. So, if you stop thinking about the funny drawing of a woman and concentrate on the painting, you may get the impression of energy and strength from the colors and swirl of lines.

Like with verbal style, artistic style must fit the context. The style used by Caravaggio in his illustration of the calling of St Matthew, which exaggerates the light and dark, and Grunewald in his depiction of Christ, which exaggerates Christ's suffering, used recognizable images that could be identified by anyone who shared the context, in these two cases Christianity. Yet, how many viewers will get the joke in the de Kooning? Sarcasm in verbal communication is also often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Polonius says, in an aside to the audience of Hamlet's sarcastic explanation of what he is reading, *Though this be madness, yet there is method in it*. Abstract art, too, is often interpreted as madness while its method is unfortunately overlooked.

It is understandable, however, that the shift in style from figurative to abstract has confused some viewers. Rather than speaking the language used for recording visual images, which photography does much better<sup>16</sup>, or the language of illustrating stories, which movies are unparalleled, painters, no longer content to make pictures of things and illustrate well-known stories, started to make objects of pure visual art. Instead of making the lines and colors create images of recognizable objects, they used paint to produce other effects. Examples of this new way of using art are works by Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko<sup>17</sup>. Some may question whether flinging paint onto a canvas can be called art, the Pollock's and Rothko's hung in museums and the lobbies of upscale office buildings prove that at least some people think it most certainly is. Misidentifying these works of art as nonsense is the same as thinking that a foreign language is gibberish or misunderstanding a polite request made by asking a question. Somehow, this art is communicating to certain groups of people, but what and how? To understand, we need to understand another fundamental shift that has occurred in art, and that has to do with its purpose, why it was made.

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<sup>15</sup> After all, when we look at a painting, we are looking at paint on a surface and not, say, an actual flower or a dead man hanging on a cross or goddesses.

<sup>16</sup> But see Andreas Gursky for an example of how a photographer has put this idea on its head!

<sup>17</sup> See for example, [http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/pollock\\_jackson.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/pollock_jackson.html) and not the quote from Pollock: When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It's only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. And compare to these: <http://www.markrothko.org/quotes.jsp>



### Purpose: what's it for?

As with the previously mentioned indirect speech acts such as the request, *Can you pass the salt?* in verbal communication, the listener has to understand why it was said to really know the meaning: *pass me the salt*. Utterances have not only a form and register (tone or style) but also some purpose: to inform, to persuade, etc.

Art also has a purpose which helps the viewer understand what is being communicated by a given piece. Obviously, Grunewald's *Isenheim Altar Piece* was painted not only to illustrate the story of Christ's crucifixion and decorate a church's altar but also to encourage sufferers of a disease to put their faith in Christ, Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Judgment of Paris* was painted for a collector's private viewing pleasure, and de Kooning's *Woman V* was at least in part created for intellectual entertainment.

Purpose is closely connected to form, style and intended audience, and so a very important question, more important than *what is it?* is *what is it for?* Why was a particular work of art made? Often times, like with the Caravaggio and the Grunewald, artists are commissioned by a patron who would like to decorate a public place. Yet a very long tradition in art is its political purpose. Roman triumphal arches were created to celebrate military victories, JMW Turner's *Slave ship* was painted to call attention to the barbarous practices in the slave trade<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Mark Rothko's color field canvases continue a tradition that goes back perhaps to pre-historic times and reached its height with Leonardo Da Vinci: the artist is exploring scientific ideas through intuition and keen observation. Yet, whereas earlier artists were speaking to the public with their paintings to inform or persuade them, artists like Pollock paint to share ideas with other artists and interested and informed viewers.

So, clearly, not all works are an attempt to illustrate, to show people what something looks like. Unfortunately, sometimes the artist's only intent is to shock; however, this was not the case with painters such as Pollack and Rothko. Yet people who expected illustrations were shocked nonetheless<sup>19</sup>.

Painters such as Pollock and Rothko attempted to strip art to its formal components, to communicate as Chomsky has suggested using only line, color, depth of field, and movement<sup>20</sup> without reference to any identifiable forms such as the human figure, still life or landscape. For example, Rothko wanted to create a mood, to recreate in the minds of his viewers as they look at one of his paintings the same feelings he had

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Slave\\_Ship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Slave_Ship)

<sup>19</sup> This confusion leads to jokes about polar bears in snow storms.

<sup>20</sup> Op-art is an interesting example: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Op\\_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Op_art)

while painting a given work. In his painting, *No 14* (Figure 4), the red field of color gives off a feeling of warmth, but the mood is perhaps the melancholy we might feel at the end of a day. Standing close to the painting, we may perceive the cool dark field below as a frightening void on which we float or a solid platform on which to plant our feet. There is a kind of serenity from being alone, or you might feel that the flat horizon is as empty and lonely as a Midwestern prairie. To create this mood, Rothko has done away with the story behind the drama as we find in Caravaggio and given us just the drama, the light and shadows. The ambiguity of such abstraction, like ambiguity in language, allows us to find meaning of our own in the work.

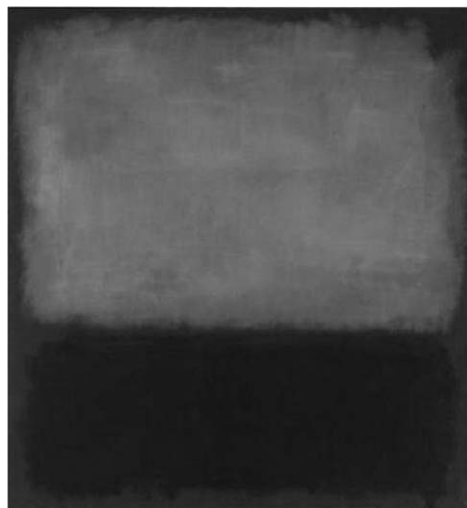


Figure 4 Mark Rothko: *No 14*

#### Genre: where does it belong?

A final aspect of context is genre, closely related to form, style and purpose but also content. Genre, however, are broader and usually determine the other aspects of context. The audience will have certain expectations depending on the kind of communication, and when these expectations are broken, it can be either entertaining or unsettling<sup>21</sup>. For example, we do not expect a newsreader to give the news in haiku nor do we expect to see ballet when we go to a boxing match.

And as with the other aspects of context, knowing the genre helps us to understand the message. Still, modern viewers may have difficulty placing a work such as Lucas Cranach the Elder's *The Judgment of Paris* (Figure 5)<sup>22</sup> which appears to be an illustration of a tale from classical mythology. A well-known story to educated men in the late medieval era, Hermes, shown standing in the center of the painting, is sent by Zeus to ask Paris, seated on the left, to judge in his stead who is the most beautiful of the three goddesses, Hera, Athena or Aphrodite, and thus deserving of a golden apple offered as a prize by the goddess of discord, Eris. In the painting, Paris is wearing contemporary armor and the goddesses are depicted as three nudes. Cupid, flying overhead, alludes to the outcome while the fortified city on the bluffs in the background suggests the city of Troy.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/OutOfGenreExperience?from=Main.UnexpectedGenreChange>

<sup>22</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judgement\\_of\\_Paris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judgement_of_Paris)

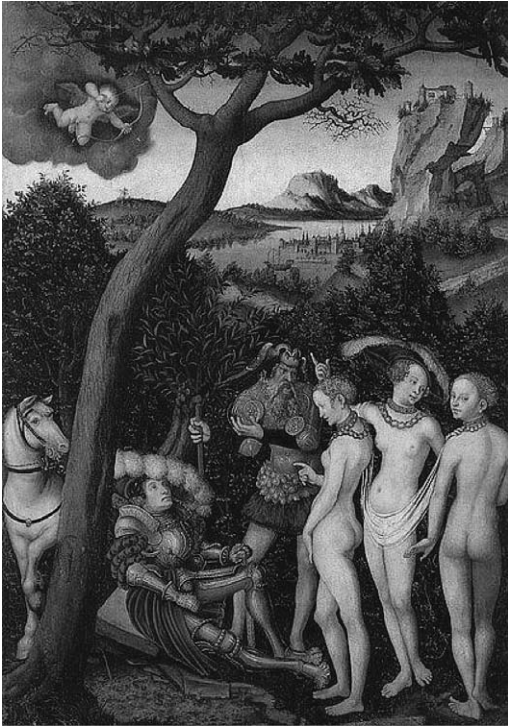


Figure 5 Lucas Cranach the Elder Judgment of Paris

The painting appears to modern eyes as a typical Northern Renaissance illustration of a Greek myth, a genre sometimes called *mythological painting* which is very distinct from the then increasingly popular *history painting* and the more common *religious* (i.e. Christian) *painting*. Because we tend to put paintings from this era into one of these categories, we ignore an important but obvious element in the painting that may affect how we think about and categorize the work: the three goddesses are in the nude, and reading the painting from left to right we, like Paris, are being asked to judge their beauty<sup>23</sup>.

Keeping context in mind and that artists in the Renaissance were tradesmen<sup>24</sup>, Cranach chose to illustrate the moment of the story when female beauty was on display (albeit in what modern viewers may find modest poses) not for his own amusement. During this era, most art was made to glorify God and decorate churches. Secular art such as this had a very limited market since it was a luxury that only the wealthy could afford<sup>25</sup>. The story, according to Wikipedia, "...offered artists the opportunity to depict a sort of beauty contest between three beautiful female nudes." The myth is a respectable veneer for this kind of painting. Cranach ignores other important details of the myth that might appeal more to the intellect, e.g. which is more valuable: power, wisdom, or sensual pleasure? After all, Paris did not choose based on his criteria for beauty, but on the value of each of the goddess's bribes. Yet this is mostly overlooked in the painting even though the entire story hinges on the bribe that Paris chose, sensual pleasure, and its consequences. But Cranach is not trying to retell the story or get us to think about philosophical or moral issues. He's trying to sell his art and a beauty contest is much more interesting to look at and so a better subject for visual depictions making this more than just an illustration of a myth.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.rowan.edu/open/philosop/clowney/aesthetics/philos\\_artists\\_onart/freud.htm](http://www.rowan.edu/open/philosop/clowney/aesthetics/philos_artists_onart/freud.htm)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.renaissanceconnection.org/artistslife.html>

<sup>25</sup> see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erotic\\_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erotic_art)

### Double entendre: two or more meanings

Sometimes words can be interpreted in more than one way. Newspaper headlines are notorious for the humorous way in which they can be read with two meanings. For example, *Kids Make Nutritious Snacks*<sup>26</sup> is a well-known example. Shakespeare uses them in his plays and rap musicians often include them in their songs<sup>27</sup>. Multiple interpretations are often possible with visual art, and viewers debate what is meant by a work. Is the figure in Bacon's painting *Figure with Meat*<sup>28</sup> (Figure 6) frightened or frightening? Much depends on the expectations viewers have when looking at the painting.

In this painting, Bacon quotes from one genre of painting, still life, and adds it to a quote from another, portrait painting, juxtaposing Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef*<sup>29</sup> and Velazquez's portrait of *Pope Innocent X* to create a surreal image that is either humorous or frightening depending on how you look at it. Perhaps Rembrandt saw something worth recording when he painted the carcass hanging in a meat shop, or it may just have been a study for another painting, a prop, so to speak, in a story he was going to illustrate. On the other hand, Velasquez may simply have been commissioned to paint or wanted to paint the portrait of a powerful man and show his



Figure 6 Francis Bacon: *Figure with Meat*

viewers something about the man's character. Without any of this background knowledge, Bacon's painting somehow looks humorous: a screaming man sitting between two halves of a butchered cow. Or is he screaming at the viewers, trying to frighten them away? Both interpretations are possible. But unless we take a close look and think about the picture, our understanding is limited, a bit like listening to two foreigners speaking in an unknown language and getting the idea from the tone of voice that one is either angry or excited about something. If the listener, or in the case of the Bacon painting the viewer, knew the language, more could be

<sup>26</sup> <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080924235726AA8OmHy>  
[http://www.fun-with-words.com/ambiguous\\_headlines.html](http://www.fun-with-words.com/ambiguous_headlines.html)

<sup>27</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_entendre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_entendre)

<sup>28</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure\\_with\\_Meat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure_with_Meat)

<sup>29</sup> Itself a quote from a painting by Pieter Aertsen, *Meat Still-Life*, 1551: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/aertsen/butchers-stall/>

understood about what is being said.

We can learn more by thinking about the elements of the painting. On the one hand, Bacon is quoting the Velazquez painting of Pope Innocent X. If we look at that, we see a critical portrait of the pope—the piercing eyes suggest a severe man, impatient, intolerant, shrewd and cold. The arched eyebrow suggests mistrust while the corner of the mouth is slightly raised in an ambiguous smile: is the pope smiling to hide his embarrassment at being looked at by the painter so intently, or is he hiding something else? On the other hand, raw meat hanging in the market was a common sight in Rembrandt's time, but for many of us now, it is somehow repulsive as we have distanced ourselves from such unpleasant processes, the killing and dismembering of a once living animal—blood, raw flesh and exposed bones. In Bacon's painting, the pope seems to be jumping out from the carcass splitting it in half as if lunging at the viewers to scream at them. Or is the figure frightened, feeling that death is near?

#### Miscommunication: wrong message

Although context is needed to understand any communication, sentences can be confusing in other ways. When reading this sentence, *The old man the boat*, you may expect that the first three words are a noun phrase referring to a man who is old. Psycholinguists call this a garden path mistake; the reader expects the sentence to continue in the usual way when in fact the words are being used differently. In the example, *man* is used as a verb<sup>30</sup>. The same happens with art: viewers expect an illustration but are met with a chaos of line and color. This is the case with the de Kooning. Context is not the problem; expectations are.

The expectations from an illustration are simple. As the label suggests, an illustration should show us what something looks like. Nonetheless, viewers must make the effort to connect the images to their knowledge of the myths and history of their culture. Viewers must find a message in the art rather than wait for a message to be given to them, the art inspiring a reaction in them. Great art inspires deep, moving memorable reactions. Reactions, however, can also be negative. For example, some of Caravaggio's paintings were rejected for the naturalistic way they depicted Christ and his followers, e.g. Matthew as a drunken old bastard or possibly a dissolute young man and not a saint.

Expectations from abstract art such as Rothko's, however, are less clear, the work demanding more from the viewer. His later works seem to ask the viewer, what do

<sup>30</sup> Japanese learners of English do this when they add the particle *to* in phrases such as *\*going to shopping*, continuing in the usual way *going to* plus a noun such as *school*.

Also see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-23284179>

you think? How do these colors, their combination and placement on the canvas make you feel?<sup>31</sup> The shallow and empty headed of course, will get the wrong idea or think nothing at all. Artists, unfortunately, cannot choose their viewers, so their work runs the risk of being misinterpreted, with uniformed and insensitive viewers getting the wrong message because of misplaced expectations, mishearing, for example, *cunning runt* for something else.



Figure 7 Robert Rauschenberg:  
*Monogram*

As an example of how interpretations vary, viewers may react in one of several ways, some negative, to Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (Figure 7) depending on their expectations. The work, a goat stuck halfway through a discarded tire and standing on a pile of trash may look like a collection of garbage to those expecting beauty in art. To those thinking about sixties activism, the work is a statement about the environment. Unlike the screaming pope in Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat*<sup>32</sup>, jumping out from between two halves of a beef carcass to scare us, the goat looks helpless and in distress. Considering the symbolism, goats and car tires, others will see something else<sup>33</sup> and may accuse Rauschenberg of simply making a dirty joke<sup>34</sup>. Those who find the joke offensive or who find the image incomprehensible may feel insulted. In fact, conservative critics feel that:

*Contemporary painters and makers of installations show contempt for the audience and do not work for the public good. They seek a response but it is a negative response. They are not geniuses and have to shock to get noticed. In fact they are not really artists - but purveyors of clever tricks without deep meaning. Art is communication but contemporary art fails to communicate because of a disjuncture between subject and beholder, form and purpose*<sup>35</sup>.

Others will be offended by his inappropriate and disrespectful use of an animal's body<sup>36</sup>. A sympathetic audience might see an angry "goat" out for revenge, a man in

<sup>31</sup> perhaps a dangerous tactic for an artist since it gives control of the work to the viewer

<sup>32</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure\\_with\\_Meat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure_with_Meat)

<sup>33</sup> For one interpretation see: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/may/15/art>

<sup>34</sup> This is perhaps like having a cute teddy bear use foul language in what some may expect is a children's movie.

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.newenglishreview.org/David\\_Hamilton/Art\\_and\\_Communication/](http://www.newenglishreview.org/David_Hamilton/Art_and_Communication/) (july 7 2013)

<sup>36</sup> For example: <http://www.peta.org/b/thepetafiles/archive/tags/artist/default.aspx>



trouble and the tire a kind of life preserver. Others still may find the joke funny and just laugh—a clever but fun trick. Nonetheless, what is important is that the work holds our attention, that we look at and think about the art and evaluate the work on its merits as communication: does it only intend to shock and nothing more, or does it actually say something, expanding and quickening in the eye of the viewer?

#### Nonsense: no message

Sometimes, however, no sense can be made of communication. For example, in analogies such as “*Francis is to closer as eggs are to glory.*” the relationship between the ideas is so far apart as to render the analogy nonsense. Nonsense, defined as “words or signs having no intelligible meaning,”<sup>37</sup> thwarts our expectations and defies interpretation. Sentences such as, “*Has anyone really been far even as decided to use even go want to do look more like?*” although grammatically correct, are beyond interpretation because we do not know what the words refer to; there is no context<sup>38</sup>. We can generate many other sentences which are pragmatically impossible such as, “*My typewriter is having difficulty breathing again.*” We can try to find meaning in the words by giving them a context, for example the well-known sentence, “*Green ideas sleep furiously.*” but often the effort results in frustration.

With art, viewers may be unable to interpret a work because they do not know what the work is in relationship to. When Catholics see a painting of a crucifixion that shows a bearded, haloed, mournful looking man hanging from a cross, no one needs to tell them that this is the Savior pitying man. They understand because they share a context, Catholic Christianity. To understand Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, it may be helpful to know that the artist was bisexual, something that not many ordinary people may know or may care to know about.

Now, perhaps to prevent misinterpretation and in some cases give a work meaning, art routinely comes with explanations. The explanations help put the work into context and help the audience understand what they are looking at. This may be necessary for art from ancient or foreign cultures, but when the explanation refers to our culture yet is not convincing or nonsense itself, the words only add to the confusion<sup>39</sup>.

The art must speak for itself. The words, if needed at all to explain and justify a work, are not a substitute<sup>40</sup>. Otherwise, the art is at best an illustration of the words,

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/nonsense>

<sup>38</sup> <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/has-anyone-really-been-far-even-as-decided-to-use-even-go-want-to-do-look-more-like>

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/24/arts/animals-have-taken-over-art-art-wonders-why-metaphors-run-wild-but-sometimes-cow.html>

<sup>40</sup> Compare having to explain a joke. It usually kills the humour.



or worse, just decoration, since if the art is not communicating, and art is communication, it follows that the work is no longer art, something which Rothko feared. Artists who must declare that what they have presented is art—be it a visual dirty joke, shock art such as dead sheep preserved in formaldehyde or a telegram<sup>41</sup>—must do so because the message is not self-evident. But if something is art only because an artist says it is then viewers can just as easily deny the claim. Shock, speaking in a louder voice, will not help the listener/viewer to understand. The art must communicate, not statements about it. To think otherwise is to confuse the relationship between art and communication: although art is communication, communication is not art.

Furthermore, we might ask: if art is whatever the artist says is art, what is the point of making art?<sup>42</sup> Duchamp anticipated this question with his submission of “Fountain” to an art salon. Just as when a child picks up a stone to show his father to comment on the stone, the urinal Duchamp displayed was a comment about art, but not art itself. Aesthetics is not art. The brochures accompanying a painting or sculpture may help us to interpret the work, but the words do not make something art<sup>43</sup>.

Art is a form of communication, an *exchange* of ideas. So, while artists can claim that one thing is art, viewers can just as easily claim that another is art, too, the kitsch in poster shops, for example. Picasso, admitting that some of his work was nonsense, may ironically not have understood this (see endnote.) Although the artist creates the work, he no longer controls the art or its message: the audience or perhaps the user of the art does. While some art, movies now especially, appeal to ordinary people, paintings such as Pollock’s *No 5* and de Kooning’s *Woman V* are more challenging to ordinary viewers who must make a greater effort to understand them. For many, the effort is too great and these works are more easily thought of as investment property, valuable only because they are backed by a system of art collectors and curators<sup>44</sup>. Likewise, posters of cute kittens sell because people like them.

If art has no apparent meaning and no longer communicates to ordinary people it is because the average viewer cannot make sense of the work. To be more than some funny or morbid decoration or a well-crafted natural history exhibit, the art must communicate something meaningful. In the past, patrons—such as the church, kings, and wealthy merchants—courted painters like Caravaggio and Velázquez and more recently Rothko to decorate their churches, to flatter them with portraits, or to add prestige to their offices because their work was a more powerful and fluent form of communication

<sup>41</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Rauschenberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Rauschenberg)

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.artsjournal.com/letters/20040310-11773.shtml>

<sup>43</sup> For example, this essay is not a painting, nor is it, of course, a pipe.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.rowan.edu/open/philosop/clowney/Aesthetics/Art-Universal.html>

than speeches or books. A glance at Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X tells us more than can words by biased church biographers<sup>45</sup>. But now ordinary viewers do not know what to expect so cannot comprehend what they are looking at and more and more seem to have stopped trying to understand.

### Common sense

If art is at least a form of communication and so in some way an exchange of information, the exchange of information through art is not quite the same as the exchange of information in, say, a dialog, and obviously, although a picture is worth a thousand words proven again and again by essays such as this, painting is not a good way to write a grocery list let alone perform other types of communication done more suitably with words. Still, the painter has some idea he/she would like to express, for example, depicting Jesus suffering on the cross in a way that sufferers of a disease can sympathize with or using paint on canvas as a way of creating an object that can be understood in purely formal terms of line and color. Viewers may come to one of these paintings, for example the painting of Jesus hanging on the cross or patterns of paint drops on a canvas, and will only understand as much of the work as they are able to using their knowledge of its context and applying their thoughts to what they see. Obviously, someone completely unfamiliar with Christianity will find a painting of someone dying on a cross to be ghoulish in the extreme, and anyone looking for meaning in an abstract painting yet unwilling to follow the play of line and color will find it incomprehensible. The interpretation depends on the connections the viewer can make with other ideas about visual experience.

Granted, despite macabre pictures of someone being executed by hanging them on a cross and works of art created by flinging paint onto a canvas, much of art is about beauty and may thus be decorative in nature. Paintings of Christ dying on the cross, no matter how gruesome, decorate churches across the world and paint-splatter patterns are used everywhere from fabric design to nail art<sup>46</sup>. But more than mere decoration, works of art have a message that they communicate to their viewers, even though some artists may simply want to point out that something is beautiful, a declaration of love, which includes so much of the kitsch found in poster shops that some people admire. For other artists, there is a personal feeling or idea that they may not be able to put words to or one to which a picture may be more suitable. A visual joke is sometimes best expressed by using the actual objects—a goat and a car tire for example—than by trying to describe it in so many words or with a cartoon.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08020b.htm> notice paragraph 2 where it says that "Innocent found it necessary to take action." Compare, "*Mistakes were made.*"

<sup>46</sup> <http://jezebel.com/5852165/how-to-give-yourself-paint+splattered-jackson-pollock-nails>

Therefore, a work of art should not be judged by its value as illustration or decoration, but by the ideas it communicates through visual means that evoke knowledge of a shared context. And like with words we value highly—Shakespeare’s plays, the works of Plato and Aristotle, the Bible or the Koran, for example—paintings are important because of the ideas they communicate. The drawing a child brings home to his or her parents is priceless to them. Poster shop kitsch may have great sentimental value to those who decorate their homes with it. If Caravaggio’s paintings were mere illustrations, his name would have been forgotten with the countless other illustrators who came before and after him.

However, it is not art’s monetary value that determines how well a work communicates or whether it is important. To think that a painting’s price at auction is a measure of its artistic value is to further misunderstand art and see it only in the context of an investment. Not all artists are as fortunate as Picasso, for example, who had a powerful patron to support him<sup>47</sup>, and even then they need more than a sympathetic audience<sup>48</sup>. They need an audience with whom they can communicate.

Unfortunately, more and more viewers cannot get a message from art. Some feel uncomfortable because they do not understand, much like a traveler may feel uncomfortable when surrounded by people speaking another language, a kind of culture shock. The only way to overcome this culture shock is to learn more about art and make an informed response to the work. It would be unfortunate for such communication to fail and it would a shame if the only new art appreciated by the general public are the pictures that children bring home to their parents or popular motion pictures.

Viewers, of course, are free to look at a painting and simply feel that they like or dislike it without further thought, but before we can evaluate a work of art, we must first understand it as communication.

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<sup>47</sup> See footnote i at the end of this paper.

<sup>48</sup> *...art also serves as a channel of expression to release, elevate, and understand our inner conflicts, fears, and tensions as well as our aspirations, hopes, and ideals. This sublimation may occur both in the creating artist and the sympathetic audience.*  
<http://www.san.beck.org/Life18-Art.html>

## Endnote

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<sup>i</sup> *Most people today can no longer expect to receive consolation from art. The refined, the rich, the professional do-nothings, the distillers of quintessence (art critics) desire only the peculiar, the sensational, the eccentric, the scandalous in today's art. And I myself, since the advent of cubism, have fed these fellows what they wanted, and satisfied these critics with all the ridiculous ideas that have passed through my head.*

*The less they understood them, the more they admired me. Through amusing myself with these absurd farces, I became celebrated....But when I am alone, I do not have the effrontery to consider myself an artist at all, not in the grand old meaning of the word; Giotto, Titian, Rembrandt and Goya, they were great painters. I am only a public clown. I have understood my time and exploited the imbecility, the vanity, the greed of my contemporaries. It is a bitter confession of mine, more painful than it may seem. But at least and at least it does have the merit of being honest.*

*Picasso's confessions to Giovanni Papini*

Nov. 1951- "New Gogs Diary" (<http://www.leftbrainpainting.com/modernart/> July 8, 2013)

### Credits:

Figure 1: Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Calling\\_of\\_St\\_Matthew\\_\(Caravaggio\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Calling_of_St_Matthew_(Caravaggio))

Figure 2: Wikipaintings: <http://uploads4.wikipaintings.org/images/matthias-gr%C3%BCnewald/the-crucifixion-detail-from-the-isenheim-altarpiece.jpg>

Figure 3: Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kooning\\_woman\\_v.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kooning_woman_v.jpg)

Figure 4: Wikipaintings: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/mark-rothko/no-14-1960>

Figure 5: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas\\_cranach\\_judgement\\_of\\_paris.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas_cranach_judgement_of_paris.jpg)

Figure 6: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Figure\\_with\\_Meat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Figure_with_Meat)

Figure 7: Artnet: [http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz1-11-06\\_detail.asp?picnum=4](http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz1-11-06_detail.asp?picnum=4)

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