HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

The Business of Art

An Overview of the Marketing of Artworks from the Renaissance to Modernity

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í listfræði

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Abstract

The relationship between art and money tends to be a sensitive issue. In order to discuss the commodification of art with some detachment it is therefore beneficial to distinguish artworks by the way in which they are produced, marketed and received. This essay presents three distinct means of artwork production: the commissioned, produced and mass-produced artwork. These ways of producing art involve artworks produced through contractual constraint; artworks produced with no contracts involved, and artworks produced for the viewing or consumption of a mass audience, respectively. In order to gain a fuller view of the art market, an overview of its history and basic mechanisms is given. Although it is impossible to give a thorough account of how artworks have been received throughout history, an attempt will be made here to give an overview of how the appreciation of visual art has changed from the Renaissance until today. We follow how art has been received through shifting class structures as well as having gained respect as a serious pursuit among the liberal arts. This review presents us with various interesting results. The style of an artwork can in some ways be related to the class of its buyer; the dispute over the commodification of art can be closely tied to its recognition as something beyond a mere decoration and, perhaps most importantly, the commodification of art is neither as corrosive nor as important to an artwork as one might think.

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List of Illustrations

(Artist, title, type, year of production)

Lord Darlington: What cynics you fellows are!

Cecil Graham: What is a cynic? [Sitting on the back of the sofa.]

Lord Darlington: A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Cecil Graham: And a sentimentalist, my dear Darlington, is a man who sees an absurd value in everything, and doesn't know the market price of any single thing.[1]

Introduction

When addressing the issue of the relation between money and art, one must try to avoid taking political stances. But that is easier said than done. Some people are deeply appalled even by the mention of that relation and find it absurd to talk about art in terms of its monetary value, while others find the association most agreeable. So, in the light of our inability to distance ourselves completely from this political dichotomy, one can think of a spectrum of beliefs when discussing the relation between money and art.

At one end of the spectrum we can have the *cynic,* a person who believes that the price of an artwork correctly correlates with its value and on the other end we have the *sentimentalist,* someone who finds the whole business of the business of art to be degrading nonsense. These are of course far from being thoroughly scientific terms, but they can prove to be a useful conversational guide. I trust that one can situate oneself roughly on this spectrum and certainly think of persons that can be found close to the far side of either end. There is however one thing upon which, at least for the sake of conversation, we must agree. Namely that neither the position of the cynic nor the sentimentalist can be the one right opinion of the relationship between art and the means by which it is bought and sold. Pierre Bourdieu had an interesting remark related to this issue:

> "The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by denial of all the negations really brought about by the economy."[2]

[1] Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's fan,* 3rd act
[2] P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977. P. 197

What Bourdieu is basically saying is that the work of art cannot be detached from its society. You can not avoid the fact that the art object has a price and is a result, at least in part, of various economic decisions. It can as well be argued that it is equally hopeless to talk about art exclusively in terms of economic factors. If, however, we can not talk about how the art market transforms the value of an art object in terms of it being somehow always diluted by the profane reality of the market forces, and if we can not quantify the value of art completely in terms of its price – how do we discuss the relation between the art object and the market surrounding it?

The art market, like any other market, is an intricate web of diverse and tacit information between numerous individuals using the price of the artwork as a means of communication. In order to find out what a price of an artwork means, and what it is exactly that happens to an artwork once it has been put up for sale, one has to dig a little deeper.

I suggest a new approach: To distinguish between artworks by the way in which they are produced and presented on the market. In that way we can at least try to get to the core of the issue of what happens to an artwork once it is put up for sale. In this essay I will introduce these distinctions and look at the historical development of the reception of artworks. Then I will look at the applications of these distinctions to find out what happens to an artwork once it is marketed.

Three means of art production

Art can of course be bought and sold in any possible manner, and over time people have found numerous ways to buy and sell artworks in accordance to the socio-economic factors surrounding them. Historically speaking, art has been made in various ways regardless of economic factors, but it has been commodified according to the economic and the political environment surrounding its production at any given time. If we view art production from the Renaissance until the 20th century we can work out a gradual process of diversification, moving from a system of patronage towards an open market for artworks.

1) The commissioned artwork

During the Renaissance, increased affluence in Italy provided increasing opportunities for artists which in turn made exceptional artworks possible. The relationship between the artist and his buyer was mostly through a system of patronage, where the buyer,

acting as patron, commissioned works of art from the artist. The artists acted under the constraints of their respective guilds similar to the majority of artisans at the time. Unlike modern trade unions, guilds did not set prices nor did they negotiate wages for the artists from their patrons. More like a social group of artisans working in a similar field, guilds served mainly as a way to limit production to preserve reasonable prices for artisans.[3]

The commissioned artwork is the first means of production I examine, defining it as art produced with the intent of selling to a particular buyer through a contractual system of patronage. This is the oldest form of marketing for an artwork, and for a long time the only form. Today it is mainly used in instances where production costs for artworks are very high, which will be explained in detail below.

The system of patronage was widely used before the Renaissance in Italy. The reason why I use it as a particular example here is not just because it provides ample literature for this particular research, but because it is believed to be the first time that art was considered to be something beyond a mere decorative commodity.[4]

2) The produced artwork

The system of patronage was a beneficial form of art production within circumstances where power and wealth resided mainly within clerical and regal institutions as well as within substantially wealthy private institutions, like the famous Medici banking dynasty in Renaissance Florence. Due to the absence of clerical and monarchical influence in the Dutch Republic in the 17th century, the bourgeoisie gained power and a new middle class was formed. This middle class, although considerably wealthy, was not as affluent as the upper class or monarchs in Europe at the time. After having controlled the economic landscape of the Netherlands for some time, the emerging middle class started to gain considerable political leverage in the newly formed republic.[5]

The genesis of the middle-class was to bring about considerable changes in the economy and particularly in art trade. Even though an art market had already been

[3] Welch, Evelyn, *Art in Renaissance Italy 1350-1500*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 82-83
[4] Kent, F.W. & Simons, Patricia: *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987. P. 156
[5] Wilson, Charles: The Dutch Republic – and the Civilisation of the Seventeenth Century, World University Library, London, 1968. P. 47

growing during the 15th and the 16th century in the Netherlands, it gained considerable power in the hands of the new middle class. With its recent wealth, there was ample room for consumption beyond necessities. This fact was clearly reflected in the rising demand for decorative objects like paintings, which in turn lead to an increase in professional painters. This growing market paved the way for an unheard of specialization in the field. It is considered that, only in The Hague, the number of active painters grew from 75 in the first decade of the century to almost 300 in the twenties. In the Dutch Republic itself it is likely that the number of painters quadrupled between 1600 and 1619, doubled again between 1619 and 1639 and then increased again by half in the next two decades.[6] Consequently, when the demand rose for artwork, painters could not only produce art according to their own taste, they could do so without having any guarantee of a buyer.

These conditions, through the advent of an open market for art, created the produced artwork: Art produced without a contractual promise of a particular buyer through an open art market. Though there were examples of produced artworks on a small scale already in the Renaissance, the market was not nearly as lucrative as in 17th century Holland. Note that this form of art is defined mainly by the intent of the artist, his independence in the production of art, and the only form by which one can talk about the romantic notion of *l'art pour l'art*, or art for art's sake. Even when an artist is given freedom to pursue his interest when doing a commissioned artwork, the completion of the project is always constrained by the intent of the patron - whereas the produced artwork is mostly made in accordance with the artist's intent.

3) The mass-produced artwork

Ever since man created art, he has always retained the possibility of its reproduction. What is relatively new in the history of art production is the possibility of its mass-production. The possibility of reproducing artworks at a low cost emerged with woodcutting followed by the art of etching and engraving in the Middle Ages. In the 19th century lithography offered further opportunities in this field only to be surpassed by photography a few decades later. Mass-production of images followed with an exponential surge and completely changed the way we perceive our visual world. Today, mainly due to the internet, our access to mass-produced images is at an all-time

[6] Prak, Marteen, "Guilds and the development of the art market during the Dutch Golden Age", Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art, vol. 30, no. 3, September 1994, pp. 236-251. p. 238

high. This cultural shift has been the source of great discourse between various cultural theorists, the most famous of them being Walter Benjamin with his monumental essay "*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*".[7]

I define the mass-produced artwork as art produced on a massive scale intended for various consumers. The intent for mass-production is neither directed at a particular buyer nor a particular artist, but rather to a group of viewers (consumers) who receive the artwork at a low cost or sometimes even free of cost. I use the term „mass-produced" for art that has been both produced and reproduced on a massive scale. That is, both original works of art that are intended for mass-production as well as mass-produced copies of produced and commissioned artworks. What I will be mainly discussing here is mass-*re*production.

Means and qualities of artwork production

The table below is no holy truth in regard to the distinction between these production forms. Only the first description, production characteristics, can be regarded as something distinct to each form. Other descriptions here are mainly suggestive and speak to common attributes of every single production form, although they may of course overlap.

[7] The essay can be found in "Benjamin, Walter, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,* Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977". (The short history of reproduced art here is mainly drawn from its first chapter). Another interesting cultural critique of a similar manner can be found in Theodor Adornos essays on the Culture Industry: Adorno, Theodor, *The Culture Industry,* (Edited by J.M. Bernstein), Routledge, New York, 2001

Means and Qualities of Artwork Production

	Commissioned Artwork	**Produced Artwork**	**Mass-Produced Artwork**
Production characteristics	Ordered work, with promise of a buyer	Without a promise of a buyer	Produced for a mass Audience
Marketing characteristics	Patronage (contractual)	Art market	(Not important)
Common Types of Work	Architecture Public Sculpture Altarpieces Religious Work	Paintings Sculptures Installations Happenings	Photographs, Engravings, Printed Works, Films Works in books and on the internet
Production Costs	Substantial, High	Low	Low per unit
Class of consumer	Upper class	(Upper) Middle class	Working class
Sacred qualities*	Sacred	Secular	Profane
Quantities	Singular, Unique	Few (Singular), Varied	Multiple
Who's in charge?	Buyer	Artist	Viewer (Consumer)
Institutional Qualities	Institutions important Religious, Corporate	Art institutions important Museum, Gallery	Cultural Institutions important No one institution in dominance
Relative historical dominance	Until the Renaissance 15th – 16th Century	From the Dutch golden age 17th Century	From the advent of various printing techniques and the photograph 19th - 20th Century
Specialization of the artist	Limited	Substantial	(Not important)
Role of the Artist	Contractor, Employee, Craftsman	Famous, Independent, Artist	Creator of the original "We are all artists now"

*The art object can have a "sacred" quality both in a religious and a secular sense

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In order to clarify these distinctions further I will present examples of works in each category:

Raphael's *School of Athens* (figure 1) is a prime example of a commissioned artwork. Painted in the height of the Italian Renaissance it was commissioned by Pope Julius II for his private library. The work shows all the basic characteristics of a commissioned work. It is ordered with the promise of a certain buyer through a system of contractual patronage and judging from its size (500 cm x 770 cm) and the prestige of the artist at the time we can assume that production costs were high and that the buyer (being the Pope) had ample funds for it. Despite the Renaissance being a time where artists were

beginning to be considered celebrities, Raphael primly serves here as a contractor for an institution.[8]

A more contemporary example is the *facade of the Harpa concert hall and conference centre* (figure 2) in Reykjavík, by Ólafur Elíasson. This is of course an ordered work with a promise of a buyer, but (like most contemporary commissions) it is by a larger extent defined as a commissioned work by its substantial production costs, rather than having sacred qualities. But still, despite the artist's relative freedom, it is always constrained by the wishes of the commissioner.

An artwork made without contractual constraints and a pristine example of a produced artwork is *Bal du moulin de la Galette* (or *Dance at Le moulin de la Galette*) (figure 3) painted in 1876 by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. He, like most other Impressionists, made art without the promise of a particular buyer and that was in part made possible by relatively low production costs. It does not possess any sacred qualities and it is not singular. There are two versions of this work, one of them in Musée d'Orsay in Paris and another smaller one which, as of now, is one of the most expensive works ever to have been sold at an auction (adjusted for inflation).[9] The key behind this being a produced work, rather than anything else, is that it is made independently by the artist himself. He himself said at one point, describing his ambitions towards painting: "I arrange my subject as *I want it*, then I go ahead and paint it, like a child. [Italics mine]"[10] The only institution behind this work is the informal school of Impressionism and posthumously the museum.

An older example of a produced work brings into mind the historical origin of the form: The Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century, which did not only bring about massive socio-economic changes to the Netherlands, but completely changed the way in which the people made and viewed art. Because of the before-mentioned rise of the middle class, demand rose for paintings of a secular and untheatrical style. Due to the fervent competition at the time, painters started specializing in one field rather than having a wide range of subject matters. A good example of this is *Dunes* (figure 4), by Jan Van

[8] Kleiner, Fred S., *Gardners Art Through the Ages*, 13. Edition, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Boston, 2011. Pp. 585-586
[9] Details found on ArtNet database: Link: http://www.artnet.com/PDB/FAADSearch/LotDetailView.aspx?Page=1&artType=FineArt (Last viewed 6.9.2012)
[10] Kleiner, p. 827

Goyen, painted in 1629. He specialized in the field of landscape paintings, like some of his contemporaries specialized in portraiture, still-lifes and genre-paintings.[11] This is something that was almost unheard of before the advent of the open market for art.

The mass-produced artwork is a little harder to pin down, mainly because it is all around us, and somehow paradoxically the only works that are presented in the list of illustrations for this essay. These are works that are produced and reproduced for a mass audience through mediums such as books, magazines, and most clearly today, the internet. It is important to note that although the production costs per unit are very low, it does not necessarily imply that the production costs per se are high. When printing 10.000 books, each book is very cheap to produce, but the cost behind establishing a printing press is substantial. Early examples of produced artworks can be found in the 18th century engravings of William Hogarth (figure 5) and the 19th century lithographs of Honoré Daumier (figure 6).

It was however the photograph that really paved the way for the production and presentation of artworks on a massive scale. Photography enables the original artwork to be adjusted and fitted to a new context to serve various purposes. A good example of this potential is the extraction of the *angels from Raphael's Sistine Madonna* (figure 7). One can argue that considerably more people are familiar with them than the work from which they originate. There are also various modern examples of original pieces of mass-produced artwork, but they mostly dangle on the verge of being advertisements. One can take *Obama's campaign poster* (figure 8) for his presidential race in 2008 by the graffiti artist Shepard Fairey. When talking about works of that kind, one is venturing on the strange and difficult question of the very nature of art. Therefore, I will place my main emphasis on mass-reproductions of artworks.

Setting prices

To fully understand the way in which art is bought and sold, one has to understand the basics of how a price is set for art. Apart from its production and its demand, the price an artwork obtains depends on how it is marketed. Technically speaking, one has to observe the price mechanism behind the sale of art. There are three basic mechanisms for setting a price of art in any modern economy: First there is the mutual bargaining of a price between a buyer and a seller of a product, then we have the auction where a

[11] A good analysis in the art of the Dutch Golden Age can be found in: Slive, Seymour, *Dutch Painting 1600-1800,* Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1995.

seller calls out an (usually) ascending price for prospective buyers until the highest possible price is obtained and thirdly we have the fixed price, provided by a seller before the exchange takes place.[12]

All three mechanisms can be and have been found on the art market, but it is however divided by two main structures, namely the primary market for art, defined as the market for new art, and the secondary market, serving as the resale market for art. All the mechanisms described above can be used in these two market structures, but commonly the auction remains the favourite setting for the secondary market while the others reside in the primary market.

The primary market

The history of the art market naturally begins with the primary market for art. Although the produced artwork has its origins in the advent of the art market of the Dutch Golden Age, a market for art had been in existence at least since the Renaissance. The reason for focusing on the 17th century art market in Holland for this essay is mainly its size, importance and subsequent stylistic changes at the time.

Before the commonly known independent art dealer emerged, art was mainly sold from the artist directly. Although artworks were mainly commissioned at the time, there is evidence of a considerable retail market both in Florence and Bruges during the 15th century. These ventures were relatively small when compared to the patronage system, with artist dealing mostly in ornaments on the side, but the market in Bruges is considered to have been larger mainly due to its stature as the centre of European trade at the time.[13] The art market continued to grow proportionally along with the movement of power and prosperity away from Italy and towards the north of Europe.

For a long time the art market was dominated by artist-dealers selling off their private stock, and although *merchand-merciers* (loosely translated as trader merchant) in Paris could sell foreign works, theirs was mostly a secondary market venture. Gradually,

[12] Velthuis, Olav: *Talking Prices – Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007. Pp. 80-81
[13] De Marchi, Neil & Van Miegroet, Hans: „The History of Art Markets“, *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, Edited by Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby, Vol. 1, 2006. Pp. 73-78

control in the trade of paintings shifted from the painters themselves towards independent dealers.[14]

Although Paris is considered the cultural hub of the 19th century, London was at the same time the major commercial centre of Europe. The structure of the modern art market owes a lot to developments in the London art market of the latter half of the 19th century, just like stylistic developments of Impressionism and Avant Garde in Paris had a lot to say about the future of modern art. The primary market of today largely consists of independent art dealers that sell art out of private art galleries. This structure has its foundation in London where the first private art galleries emerged around 1850, becoming central to the art market by 1880. Later on, this was to become the main structure for the marketing of art on the primary market around the world.[15]

The secondary market

If we are to believe Herodotus, auctions have existed at least since 500 B.C. where he accounts for the auctioning of brides in ancient Babylon. The brides were herded into a group and ordered according to their respective attractiveness, standing before a group of men who bid for their hand; an arrangement that placed the pretty among the rich and the ugly among the poor.[16] Auctions were not a particularly popular mode of exchange in the art market until in 17th century Holland, spreading around Northern Europe throughout the 18th century. In Holland, the auction was mainly used as means to sell off remaining artwork from the dealers' stock. Along with what is now known as the English auction, where the price ascends until supply meets demand, Dutch auctioneers also used a descending price mechanism in their auctions, known today as a Dutch auction.[17] While the first documented auction for artworks in England took place in 1674[18], auctions at that time were mainly disorganized affairs by booksellers with no specialist knowledge in art. In the first half of the 18th century, Paris was the place to be for lucrative auctions of artworks.[19]

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Fletcher, Pamela & Helmreich, Anne: *The rise of the modern art market in London 1850-1939.* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1911. P. 10
[16] Herodotus, The Histories, Book 1, Chapter 196. Translation by A. D. Godley. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1920. Online source: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text.jsp?doc=Hdt.+1.196&fromdoc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0126
[17] De Marchi & Van Miegroet. Pp. 101-105
[18] North, Michael & Ormrod, David Ed., *Art Markets in Europe 1400-1800,* Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot, 1998. P. 153
[19] De Marchi & Van Miegroet, p. 111

Laws in Paris at that time stated that dealers of art should first be accepted as artists, but to get around that arrangement would-be traders could sign up as a *merchand-mercier*, who could deal in any kind of art made outside of Paris. The Parisian Edme-François Gersaint (1694-1750) was one of the people who benefitted from this loophole, working as a dealer in Paris between 1733 and 1750. A prosperous dealer, Gersaint was accustomed to the dealing practices in the Netherlands and introduced the ascending price auction to Parisians – shifting attention away from the more dominant artist-dealers. What is significant about Gersaints' methods is not necessarily his market structuring, but rather his radical ideas regarding art appreciation. He believed (or convinced people to believe) that anybody could be an art collector and connoisseur, regardless of their wealth and education. In the same respect he noted that individual viewers of art could make their own value judgements towards any given artwork.[20] This was a radical notion in the history of art that was to gain considerable leeway over time, reaching its culmination during the Romantic Movement around the turn of the 19th century.

Auctions were to gain more importance over the years, but it was in England where they received the most popularity. This was in many ways due to the fact that they provided a great venue for aristocrats to show off their wealth and good taste in art.[21] It is worth noting that the two largest auction houses today, Christie's and Sotheby's were founded in 18th century England (1766 and 1744 respectively).

Demand for art

The production and marketing of art has now been presented as well as the historical development surrounding the art market. However, this presentation only applies to the supply side of the art market. An account must also be given of the reception and demand for artworks in history. It is futile to talk in detail about the demand for art, given that it is mostly influenced by fashion and taste at any given moment, but it is possible to discuss certain trends over time. Here it will be argued that the appreciation of visual art, from the time of the Renaissance until today, has changed in accordance with shifting class structures as well as having gained respect as a serious pursuit among the liberal arts.

[20] Ibid, p. 108
[21] North & Ormrod, p. 157

Class reception

As has already been noted, the commissioned artwork was and is in part defined by its substantial production costs. That meant that only the very affluent in history could afford art and for a long time that mainly meant the monarchy and the church in any given place. During the Renaissance, with the advent of banking and growing international trade in Italy, demand rose for artworks outside of the throne and altar. Affluent men in Renaissance Italy did not only show demand for a distinct canon of style; they also started to demand a greater variety and quantity of artworks.[22]

The style of "middle class"[23] art had a strong footing in Holland from the 17th century, but had remained isolated in Europe until the 18th century. The middle class aesthetics of 17th century Holland rose mainly from an opposition to the art of the Catholic Church, which was the highly ornamental style of the Baroque.[24] In that way, small, serene and humble genre or landscape paintings became popular, as opposed to the turbulent style of the Baroque. To illustrate this difference, one can take an example of Flemish art (mostly Catholic) and compare it to the art of the Dutch Republic (mostly Calvinistic).

Born in Germany in 1577, but residing mainly in Antwerp, Peter Paul Rubens was a dominant figure, not only in the Flemish art scene but around Europe. Apart from his iconic style and talent, his courtly manner and erudition provided him with ample opportunities for patronage from courts all over Europe. Although his subject matters varied across his enormous body of work, his style is a unique culmination of studies in the masters of the Italian Renaissance.[25] An interesting example of his works can be found in what has been called his Medici Cycle: 21 huge allegorical paintings illustrating the life of King Henry IV of France's second wife, Marie de' Medici. The whole array is an incredibly pompous presentation of the queen providing an interesting example of apotheosis; a glorification of a subject to a divine level. The fifth painting in the cycle, *The Meeting of Marie de Médicis and Henri IV at Lyon* (figure 9), sheds some

[22] Kent & Simons P. 154
[23] The European middle class of the 17th and the 18th century is not to be confused with the modern notion of a middle class. Class structures were considerably different from today. Not as affluent as the monarchy and not as poor as the working class, the middle class at that time was a reasonably wealthy bourgeoisie.
[24] The term 'Baroque art' has been used as an overall term for the art of the 17th century but here I will refer to Dutch art at the time as a stylistically isolated phenomenon.
[25] Kleiner, pp. 674-675

light on this. In it, Maria is seen on a chariot drawn by lions with amorettis on their backs on her way to meet her husband to be. She looks happily towards the sky where Jupiter and Juno rest on a cloud with the personification of France behind them. This display is supposed to identify Maria and Henry IV with the divine couple – poetically indicating their power and prestige.[26]

An interesting counterpart to Ruben's flamboyant style can be found in the works of his Dutch contemporary, Frans Hals, whose iconic style of portraiture provided him with fame that has lasted until today. He is mostly known for his group portraits which, in a unique and naturalistic style, give the viewer an illusion of a momentary encounter with the figures on the canvas. Although most works in Holland at the time were produced artworks, portraiture was an exception to the rule – commissioned mostly by middle class consumers. Hals was born in Antwerp in 1580 but later moved to Haarlem, where he resided for the rest of his life. Unlike Rubens, he never travelled outside of the Netherlands, and mostly had middle-class patrons of a Calvinistic persuasion. What mainly distinguished the taste of Calvinists at the time, as opposed to Catholics, was their distaste for excessive decoration and pomposity, preferring humble clothing and surroundings.[27] This is very apparent when one sees a selection of Hals' portraits, especially his *Women Regents of the Old Men's home at Haarlem* (figure 10). A group portrait of five respectable women, clad in black and white, who could not be further distinguished from Maria de' Medici in the hands of Rubens. Hals shows his brilliance in a different manner, taking care that each and every individual in the painting can be discernible from the rest; replacing Catholic theatricality with Calvinistic humbleness.

This religious sentiment explains how the Calvinistic middle class of the 17th century Dutch republic had a more restrained taste in art than their upper class Catholic counterparts. The middle class of 18th century France, on the other hand, was mainly in opposition to courtly art; a sentiment that was highly obvious during the reign of Louis XIV, only to grow stronger during the reign of his 16th namesake. Arnold Hauser describes the cultural shifts of the 18th century in his *Social History of Art* as the age

[26] Büttner, Frank & Gottdang, Andrea: *Einführung in die Ikonographie – Wege zur Deutung von Bildinhalten.* C.H. Beck Verlag, München. 2009, pp. 185-186
[27] Kleiner, pp. 680-683

> "When the middle class again [attained] economic, social and political power [and] the ceremonial art of the courts, which had meanwhile come into its own, [broke] up again and [yielded] to the unrestricted sway of middle-class taste."[28]

This taste of art was similar to the produced works of the Dutch republic, which gained considerable popularity among the French middle class on the secondary market. The art of the upper class consisted mainly of commissioned works produced by members of the prestigious *Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts* who showed their works to the privileged patrons of art in the famous Salon exhibitions.[29]

The latter half of the 18th century in Europe was mainly defined by two revolutions: The French Revolution of 1789 and the early English Industrial Revolution. These revolutions marked the shift of increasing power to the bourgeoisie middle class in France and the increased affluence and influence of England. Due to England's power at the time, the French art market slowly became immersed with cheaper English luxury goods, turning everything English into the new vogue.[30]

If there is one painter who encapsulates the English style of the era, it would probably be William Hogarth (1697-1746). Trained as an engraver and commercial artist, Hogarth received considerable popularity and financial success with his diverse works. Producing a significant amount of satirical etches, Hogarth is probably best known for his moralistic story of Tom Rakewell, a son of a rich merchant who loses everything in his wasteful lifestyle. *Rake's Progress* consists of eight paintings that he subsequently copied as engravings. A great satire of how people of the middle class strived to live the aristocratic life at the time, the series is painted in a style that owed a lot to his French colleagues at the time while showing a theme that was distinctively English.[31] A good example of one of the paintings and subsequent engravings can be found in the fifth of the series (figure 11 and 5). In it, Tom has squandered most of the inheritance he received from his father and is now seen marrying an ugly but rich old woman in an attempt to regain his wealth. What is particularly interesting in regard to Hogarth is that

[28] Hauser, Arnold: *The Social History of Art vol. III,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962. P. 3
[29] Boime, Albert: *The Social History of Modern Art vol. I – Art in an Age of Revolution 1750 – 1800.* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp. 14-15
[30] Ibid, p. 27
[31] Ibid, pp. 28-29

his engravings received so much popularity that many of them were reproduced and distributed without his consent, leading to one of the first cases of copyright being discussed outside of literary publishing. In 1710 the Statute of Ann, the first comprehensive attempt to restrict the copying and distribution of printed works was enacted, but it did not extend to copies of visual art like engravings. In 1734, the Engraving Copyright Act was passed, protecting engravings that involved original designs, in part because of Hogarth's problems.[32]

If the 18th century was a time of the rise of the bourgeoisie, what mainly identified the 19th century in terms of class structures was not only its continuing growth, but also the increasing strength of class consciousness. For a long time, the working class of Europe did not have a voice at all, but in the 19th century, the idea of socialism was born. The middle class art of the 18th century had been in opposition to courtly and upper-class tastes, but in the 19th century certain artists were not only against the idealism of classicists serving the aristocracy, they were also opposed to the bourgeois art of the middle class.[33] The realism of Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier rose out of this sentiment, providing art that represented the realities of the lowest class and mass-produced them in the case of Daumier. A prime example of Courbet's work can be found in his *Stone Breakers* (figure 12) which portrays the grim realities of menial labour; a portrayal that had been very rare before his time.[34] Daumier was known mostly as a caricaturist and a printmaker, publishing substantial amounts of lithographs over his lifetime portraying, like Courbet, various social issues among other themes. What the lithograph provided artists like Daumier with was the possibility of following the daily life of people, describing it and publishing it with substantial speed. One example can be found in his lithograph *Rue Transnonain* (figure 6), depicting the aftermath of a horrible massacre not long after it occurred.[35]

Birth of beaux arts

Although the Renaissance was a time of considerable change in terms of the reception of art, no consistent theory of aesthetics or the visual arts existed, except maybe for the technical aspects of perspective. One of the really new aspects of art at the time was the

[32] Rose, Mark. Technology and Copyright in 1735: The Engraver's Act. The Information Society, Volume 21, Number 1, January-March 2005. pp. 63-66
[33] Hauser IV, pp. 1-52
[34] Ibid, pp. 60-65
[35] Kleiner, p. 801

advantage visual arts gained by becoming a work of art made by an *artist* after having merely been considered a decorative commodity made by artisans. In the 14th century many painters and sculptors did not even have their own respective guilds. For example, painters in Florence belonged to the guild of doctors and apothecaries, the *Medici e Speziali.*[36] But at the end of the Renaissance, a number of painters and sculptors were considered celebrities, with stars such as Raphael, Da Vinci and Michelangelo, to name a few leading the scene.

It becomes clear to readers of classical literature that the meaning of the term "art" has gone through considerable changes throughout history. In the same respect, the visual arts have only relatively recently become a respectable branch of what we perceive as being art; moving from being just a decoration to an artefact worthy of serious contemplation. In antiquity and well into the Renaissance, visual art was seen as an imitation of nature and deserved no special consideration beyond its status as such. Plato, for example, had a hostile view towards the arts (although mainly regarding poetry), but most classical thinkers shared the view of Seneca who considered that painting and sculpture had no place among the liberal arts; referring to them as manual activities on board with wrestling, perfumery and cooking, rather than intellectual pursuits. This sentiment lived well into the Middle Ages and seemed only to have been seriously challenged for the first time during the Renaissance.[37]

Over time the reception and appreciation of visual art grew until a notion of "fine arts" ("beaux arts") and the study of aesthetics became a reality in the 18th century, fine arts being distinguished from applied arts which have some practical function.[38] This idea arose from the minds of various Enlightenment thinkers, most notably figures such as the German, Immanuel Kant, who produced one of the first concise philosophical theories of aesthetics in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* published in 1764. It was however his fellow countryman, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who created the foundation for the study of art history. In his controversial pamphlet *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* published in 1755, he criticised the rococo aesthetics of the time and indicated

[36] Welch, Evelyn: *Art in Renaissance Italy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. P. 81
[37] Larner, John. *Culture & Society in Italy 1290-1420*, B.T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1971, p. 265
[38] Kristeller, Paul Oskar. *Listkerfi nútímans – rannsókn í sögu fagurfræðinnar*. Transl. Gunnar Harðarson. Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands. Reykjavík. 2005

that "the only way for us [Germans] to become great is to imitate antiquity". Later he would publish his *History of Ancient Art* which is considered to be the first modern example of art-historical writing.[39] This was the intellectual foundation of Neo-classicism, a style which was to dominate the art-scene of the latter half of the 18th century and was mainly defined by the influence of classical Greco-Roman culture. One of the greatest painters of this style was Jacques Louis David who was both a notable figure in the French Revolution of 1789 and as a court painter for Napoleon Bonaparte (figure 13).

At the turn of the 19th century, artists and thinkers revolted against the rigid rationalism and classical fetishism of the Enlightenment with a new and more liberal approach to art and culture. Romanticism was an intellectual cry for freedom, not only politically, but also for individual freedom of thought and expression. The artists of Romanticism shared a belief in the power of intuition and feeling as opposed to rationality and order and showed a style that was considerably more expressive than in the works of their neoclassical colleagues. Arnold Hauser provides an interesting example from the field of music where he contrasts the classical style of Mozart against the romantic Beethoven:

> "Mozart always seems to be guided by an objective, inevitable and unalterable plan, whereas in Beethoven's work every theme, every motif and every note sounds as if the composer were saying 'because I feel it like this', 'because I hear it like this' and 'because I wish to have it so'."[40]

Art was no longer made in order to serve a specific objective or purpose. Rather, it was aimed at expressing the artist's own intent, his own feelings; just for the sake of art itself. The concept of *l'art pour l'art* served almost as a battle cry for the Romantics, indicating that the artist was his own boss and the art he was making had an intrinsic natural value. It is worth noting that art that was made for art's sake could not be commissioned because its foundation lies in its independence from outside influence. The artist was supposed to be free to express what was inherently his own and therefore

[39] Boime, pp. 71-72
[40] Hauser IV, p. 59

many Romantic artworks were produced artworks.[41] This sentiment however was not necessarily well received. Some people stated (quite reasonably) that this was a corruptive force for the arts – that men were able to argue anything "in the name of liberty in art" and "replacing 'what one ought' with 'what I like'".[42]

What the romantic notion of *l'art pour l'art* opened up was not only a democratization of art production, but also its commercialization. Theodor Adorno, a critic of the industrialization of culture remarked:

> "It was hardly accidental that the slogan *l'art pour l'art* was coined polemically in the Paris of the first half of the nineteenth century, when literature really became large-scale business for the first time."[43]

Although art history represents Courbet and Manet as the masters of the Second French Empire (1852-1870), the art life of the time was mostly dominated by art that is today mostly forgotten. In the consciousness of the bourgeoisie, paintings by the likes of Paul Baudry (figure 14) that was agreed upon by the Academy was considered more acceptable. Agreeable art for the bourgeoisie at the time mirrors the modern notion of consumerist art; decorative art that is easily digested and appreciated.[44] In the visual arts, new means of mass production were making headway in sync with the exponential surge of technological progress. Lithography presented artists like Daumier with a wider and more diverse audience than art had received before and photography was soon to enlarge that audience – presenting a challenge to artists as well as a new gap between what is to be considered *Art* and what is not. The challenge was diverse, ranging from a new notion of how to represent the "real" with art along with the gradual loss of importance for portrait paintings. The divergence surrounding the appreciation of art was however divided between the taste of the public, the Academy and what was considered the Avant-Garde, or innovative art.

[41] Ibid, p. 18
[42] Wilcox, John: *The Beginnings of l'Art Pour l'Art, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticsm,* Vol. 11, No. 4, Special Issue on the Interrelations of the Arts (Jun., 1953), pp. 360-377. P. 372
[43] Adorno, p. 159
[44] Hauser IV, p. 59

The masters of Impressionism, the first group of artists that centred upon an ideology, were badly received by their contemporaries but later gained appreciation and admiration of both the art market and critics. This theme of obscurity, later transformed into popularity, was to become reality for most subsequent masters of the Avant-Garde; misunderstood at their own time while receiving recognition later on.

The commodification of art

The cynic and the sentimentalist have conflicting concerns when faced with the commodification of art, the latter being opposed to the notion of valuing art as a commodity and the former confused about art being considered as having any value beyond its status as such. The truth of course is that both of their concerns are simultaneously right and wrong. However, in order to understand their dispute fully one has to begin by asking the question: Why does this conflict exist and when did it originate?

Tensions regarding the commodification of art have existed for a considerable amount of time in the history of art. The evolution of this particular conflict however goes hand in hand with both the democratization of art through its mass-production and the elevated status art has gradually received since the Renaissance. Beginning with the notion of art as being something other than a decoration, the sentimentalist view of art was born only to be further amplified with the romance of *l'art pour l'art* and the ideology of the Avant-Garde. This created a new gap between *high art* and *low art*; art for the educated and/or affluent and art for the masses. The mass-produced artwork created a platform for the masses to appreciate artworks, but it also served a culture of what is today considered consumerist or commercial art.

What further complicates the dispute of the cynic and the sentimentalist is that gradually art became so radical and innovative that it did not even have to be beautiful to be significant. After modernism and the advent of the ready-made, every single object around us has obtained the possibility of becoming art. But that does not mean that it was to be clearly distinguished as such apart from ordinary objects. Now, one has to first realize that an artwork is both an object and a concept entwined within a certain context. That is, an ordinary object can simultaneously be regarded as an artwork and an ordinary object, but there is something other than mere appearances that mark the division between the two. The philosopher Arthur Danto illustrated this dilemma in his

essay titled *The Artworld*. In it he states that "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an *artworld*." [45] The contemporary artwork, according to Danto, does not exist in vacuum and it is not always easily discernible from everyday objects. In order to distinguish between an art object and a regular object, one needs the institutions of art, which is a theory and a history of art, to fill in the gap. This becomes especially clear when one thinks of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (figure 15) or Andy Warhol's *Brillo boxes* (figure 16); ordinary objects (a urinal and a box of laundry detergent, respectively) taken into the conceptual context of art. To recognize Duchamp's urinal as art, and not just a urinal, you need to put it into context with a certain theory of art and realize its art-historical significance. You need to realize that he is making a point about an object that is indifferent to the viewer and not attached with significance to a particular artist which was a completely radical notion in the history of art at the time it was produced.

When art objects are put on sale (commodified) it is not just the object in itself and its production cost that correspond to a price. Just as the price of every object is correlated to its demand, the price takes into far greater consideration the *artworld* surrounding the artwork rather than just its cost of production. The price is an attempt to quantify the gap that exists between the object itself (paint on canvas, cut marble, etc.) and its status in the *artworld*. However, it naturally remains a limited indicator of value. A price, in any economic setting, is merely a means of communicating all the various tacit elements of the market. It does not contain all relevant information regarding the object – it is an indicator of value that fuels the market.[46]

Because the price an artwork obtains is an indicator of value, we cannot take the sentimentalist view of completely ignoring it. Whether we like it or not, a price says something about the artwork. Rembrandt's *100 guilder etching (Christ healing the sick)* (figure 17) is not merely a biblically themed etching by a 17th century Dutch artist; through the price we learn that it was highly valued at one point. This information transforms the way we look at the artwork. We cannot forget that it cost 100 guilders;

[45] Danto, Arthur, *The Artworld, The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting. (Oct. 15, 1964), p. 580.
[46] For a background in the intricacies of the market forces beyond Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, I highly recommend: Hayek, Friedrich A., *The Use of Knowledge in Society, The American Economic Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4. (Sep., 1945), pp. 519-530.

we cannot forget that someone else valued the object highly and we cannot forget that somebody put his money where his mouth was.[47]

Deconstructing the commodification of art

At the moment it is helpful to take a step back and look again at how an artwork receives its various prices. The three forms of artwork production, introduced in the beginning of this essay, correspond to three different ways supply meets demand when an artwork is sold and purchased. Because a price for an artwork is meaningful, it can prove to be beneficial to try to decode what exactly that meaning entails. And given that the three distinctions provide a way to understand and classify the way an artwork is presented on the market, it can hopefully serve as a toolkit when finding out the symbolic meaning of its price.

Thus, when we are faced with a commissioned artwork, we can infer that it was made through a contractual relationship between the artist and his patron, that production costs were probably high and that the buyer's intent was probably dominant in the production process. The produced artwork on the other hand was likely dominated by the intent of the artist and his array of work was possibly specialized in one way or the other. Meanwhile, we know that the mass produced artwork has low production costs per unit and is intended for a mass audience.

The production process shows how the value of an artwork is increased or decreased apart from its intrinsic "artistic value". That value is also fuelled mainly by the factor of scarcity. Scarcity, in economics and in art, produces value to some extent, given that the object in question has an economical or an aesthetical utility beforehand. So the notion of quality depreciation (or loss of an aura) for an art object when it is reproduced is in this sense a question of its relative loss of scarcity.

The commissioned artwork (the "highest" form of production in this hierarchy of scarcity) is usually unique and retains value in some way precisely because of that. In another sense it is valuable because it is made with a precise purpose for a particular

[47] It's actually not certain that the etching actually sold for 100 guilders, but it is known that his works were valuable in his time. For a background on the issue: Dickey, Stephanie S., *Thoughts on the Market for Rembrandt's Portrait Etchings,* from the book: *In his Milieu – Essays on Netherlandish Art in the Memory of John Michael Montias,* editors: Golahny, A., Mochizuki, M.M., Vergara, L., Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006.

customer. Disregarding its "artistic" value, it gains value from its scarcity and sense of purpose.

The produced artwork is not always unique, but necessarily limited, and therefore retains value. But the purpose of its production is varied and never limited to a particular buyer. It gains value because it is produced autonomously by the artist usually "for art's sake". So it has value in the power of its scarcity along with the additional value of the fact that it is an original work of art from the artist himself.

In general, an artwork logically loses value once it is no longer scarce, but made common through its mass-production. It loses the "aura of the original" like Walter Benjamin put it. What he means by that is that a mass-reproduction normally puts an artwork out of its original surroundings and context. Naturally, once we put Raphael's original *Sistine Madonna* (figure 18) out of the monastery it was commissioned for and into a museum, we are extracting the work out of its holy context and into the more profane setting of the museum. But when we further extract a copy of that painting into books, and further take the angels on the bottom of that painting (figure 7) to decorate chocolate boxes and perfumes, the context of the original exists only as a faint echo from the past.

However, there remains a possibility that the mass produced work of art can produce an additional value for its produced or commissioned counterpart. Thus, when we mass-reproduce a work by Raphael (commissioned) or Renoir (produced) in books and on the internet, we can induce interest in the paintings that they probably would not have received otherwise. Although the study of original artworks is crucial for any art historical analysis, one can hardly imagine learning about art history without the use of mass-produced artworks. Something similar applies to the marketing of artworks. The excessive mass-production of Munch's *Scream* (figure 19) for example most certainly had a lot to do with it being the most expensive artwork to be sold at an auction (in nominal terms).[48]

[48] Records for the Sotheby's Impressionist & Modern Art Evening Sale, 2. May 2012. Link (Last viewed 10.08.2012): http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/impressionist-modern-art-evening-sale-n08850/lot.20.html (last viewed 24.8.2012)

Values of art

Although it is in many ways crude to talk about art in terms of utility or through a system of values, it is obviously certain that in no way does the commodification of an artwork automatically dilute its value. I am not implying that it cannot be a corrosive factor, but the way we look at art and appreciate it is almost always connected to the way it has been produced and, to some extent, to the way it has been bought and sold. The concept behind the artwork is flexible, whether it implies to its aesthetic or "artistic" value (for lack of a better word), and it can remain unscathed. On the other hand, the purpose of the production of the artwork is always fixed. The individual work is physically fragile, but the idea behind it (and its artistic merits) remain robust and sometimes more powerful when it is exchanged on a market.

One can however still think of the act of treating art like a commodity as being g corrupt or degrading for the artwork. In many circles of the art world people make a division between actors on the primary and the secondary market for artworks, considering the latter "parasites" and the former "promoters" of art. This is a reasonable opinion, due to the fact that operators of the primary market usually negotiate prices with prospective clients whilst taking care of the artist's reputation, serving dually as his merchant and an artist's agent in the art market. A dealer on the primary market sometimes has to take care that the price for the works of a particular artist does not inflate too heavily with the purpose of building up his reputation gradually. The secondary market on the other hand operates mostly on the basis of supply and demand, and the primary objective for the auctioneer is to achieve the highest possible price for the artwork. [49]

What we learn when we analyse the history of the marketing of artworks is that the sentimentalist view of art is something that can only arise when we think of art as something greater than mere imitation or decoration. It is only when we put an artwork upon the pedestal of high art that we are introduced to the idea of commercial low art, as opposed to just the division between art of good or bad quality. Like atheism arose as a response to Christianity and not as an independent idea, the sentimentalist view arose from the idea that visual arts are worthy of contemplation as well as adoration. That does not however imply that the cynical view is the natural or right way to appreciate art. Appreciating art only in terms of its monetary value is similar to appreciating a meal exclusively in terms of nutrition, or sex in terms of conception.

[49] Velthuis, pp. 77-96

Conclusion

Although the cynic and the sentimentalist may never reconcile their differences one must hope that an analysis of the market aspects of the art world does not fall into the hands of either one of them. The three means of producing artworks that have been presented here, along with a brief history of their demand, are part of an approach to look at the art market as it is: a meeting of tacit information between various individuals communicating by the medium of the price. Distinguishing art works by how they are produced, marketed and received can hopefully bring us closer to the question of what meaning a price for an artwork has, and whether we should take that meaning seriously.

Through this analysis we learn that the three distinctions of artwork production, the commissioned, produced and the mass-produced artwork, correspond to three different ways supply meets demand when an artwork is sold. The consequent marketing of an artwork then takes place on a primary market for new art or a secondary market when an artwork is resold. Although the reception of artworks cannot be pinpointed exactly, one can work out that the appreciation of visual art from the Renaissance until today has changed in accordance with shifting class structures as well as having gaining respect as a serious pursuit among the liberal arts. From the Renaissance until the 20th century there was a gradual shift of power to the middle class which initially had a more humble taste in artworks when compared to the grandiose taste of the church and the court. The middle class were mostly buyers of produced artworks, rather than patrons of commissioned ones. Later on, there grew a consideration for the lower classes through realism, only to be further amplified through mass-produced artworks.

For a long time in history, art was not considered to be anything beyond a decoration. But during the Renaissance a notion of the artist (as opposed to artisan) was born, the concept of fine arts (as opposed to practical arts) was put in theory in the 18th century and later the idea that art could be made for "art's sake" transformed the appreciation and production of artworks well into the 20th century. A cultural division between the art of the people (commercial art), the Academy and the Avant-Garde was born.

It has been argued that the sentimentalist and the cynical view are equally useless when we discuss the commodification of art. The former, born out of the notion of art being something greater than decoration, overestimates the corrosive effects of buying and

selling art. The latter completely misses the point of art and the market by understanding the price of an artwork as an exhaustive indicator of its value. My intent by deconstructing the mechanisms and history of artwork marketing is to reveal that commodification is neither to be feared nor taken too seriously. Hopefully, this revelation opens the path to a deeper understanding of art through its commercial aspects without giving rise to excessive cynicism or sentimentalism.

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Illustrations

Figure 1. Raphael, *Philosophy (School of Athens)*, Fresco, 1509-1511

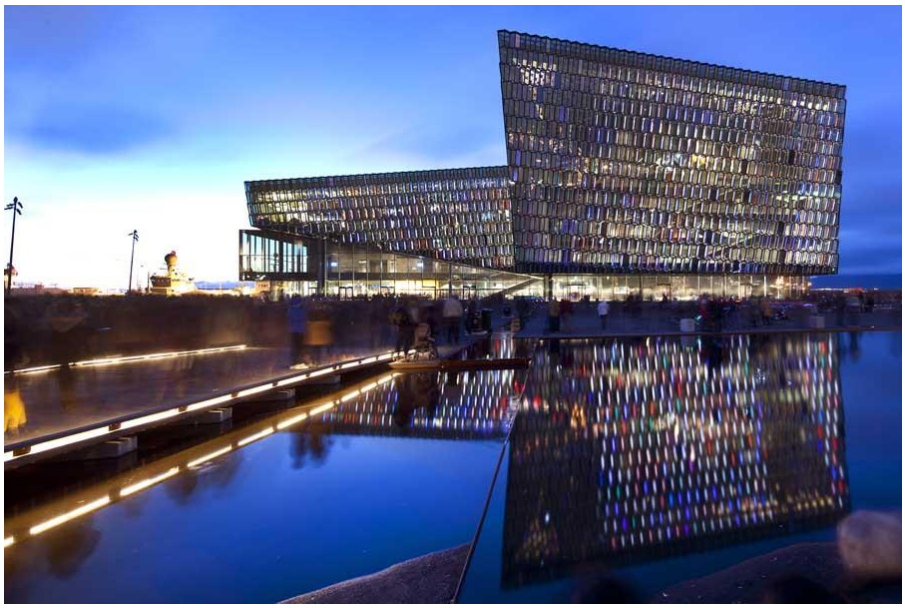

Figure 2. Ólafur Elíasson, *The facade of Harpa Conference and Concert Hall*, 2011

Figure 3. Pierre-Aguste Renoir, *Balle le Moulin de la Galette*, Oil on canvas, 1876

Figure 4. Jan van Goyen, *Dunes*, Oil on canvas, 1629

Figure 5. William Hogarth, *A Rakes Progress V*, Engraving, 1735

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Figure 11. William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress V*, Oil on canvas, 1732-33

Figure 12. Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers*, Oil on canvas, 1849

Figure 13, Jaques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, Oil on canvas, 1784

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Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

Figure 15. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, Urinal, 1917

Figure 16. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Soap Pads Box*, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood, 1964

Figure 17. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Healing the Sick (100 guilder etching)*, etching, 1647-1649

Figure 18. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, Oil on canvas, 1513-1514

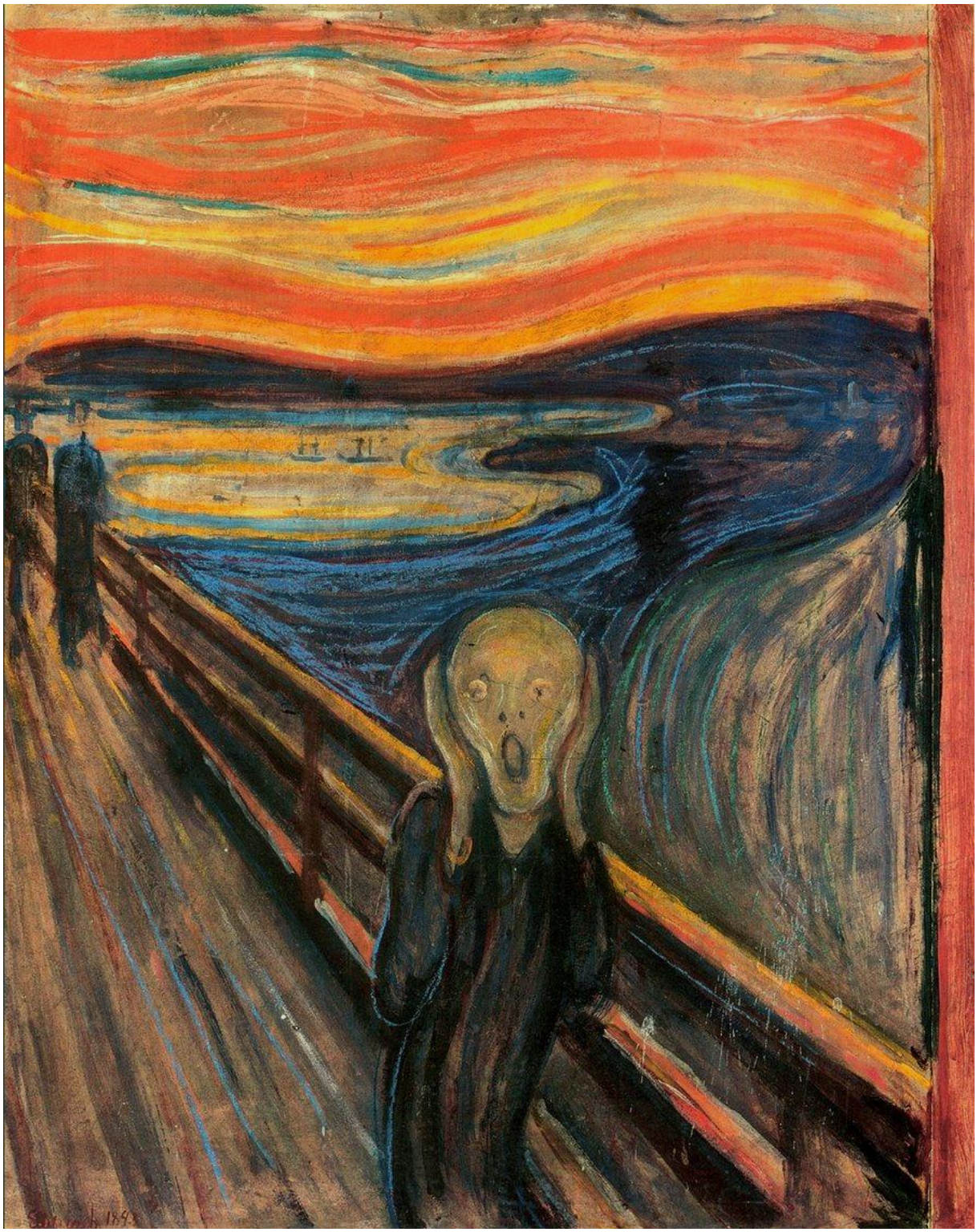

Figure 19. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, Tempera and pastels on cardboard, 1893 (This is the version in the National Gallery in Oslo – the version that was recently auctioned in Sotheby‘s was painted two years later)