

**A Three Part Series on Art**  
**Not Only How to Explain Modern Art**  
**(But How to Have Your Students Create Their Own Abstract Project)**

**by Michael Hocter**

**Summary**

A simplified, but accurate, overview of the emergence of Modern Art – how photographic technology radically altered artists’ approach to visual art, leading to 20<sup>th</sup> Century abstract painting techniques. Teachers will gain an understanding of Modernist Art and how the emergence of the Avant-guard Movement led to non-objective painting that continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Part 1. Radical Change in Painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Part 2. Abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Part 3. Contemporary Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Including a lesson plan to guide students through the process of creating their own abstract art project

**Part 1: Radical Change in Painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Some pursuits of human knowledge are on the more complex side, for instance, can you explain how to produce a great bottle of wine?

Well, actually, yes – grapes, French oak, great weather, soil, and time, etc.

What about gravity and dark matter? Not yet, but we are working on it; just give us a little more time.

All right, how about gaining an understanding of modern art and how can pictures be abstract?

Well, there are some things that are so complex, so indescribable that they defy explanation, but let's give it a try. This explanation will be simplified, but the viewpoint will be accurate.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Avant-garde Painters**

We begin with time. Modern art is seen as beginning roughly in the 1860s. At that time we see the emergence of what will be called the "avant-garde" painters.

The term "avant-garde" is a French military term describing when in fighting a war sometimes a small group of soldiers is sent ahead to the enemy's front lines and of course most of them never come back. They are the bravest and most skilled, their job is to lead the Army in the best direction.

In the mid-19th century a few courageous artists guided the way painters and art could proceed into its future. This vanguard group of revolutionary painters was later called the Impressionists. Many of these artists were not accepted during their own lifetime and had extreme difficulty finding buyers. The irony is that today their works are celebrated and worth millions of dollars at auctions.

### **Beginning of Modern Art**

Who were these warrior painters? What was the conflict? That is the story of how modern art began; it was a revolution to overturn the entrenched powers that at the time set governing laws for painting. These opposing monocratic forces were the entrenched artistic traditions that went all the way back to the Renaissance. Five hundred years of accepted unbreakable rules. What subject matter was allowed and how art was to be created was controlled by the exclusive Royal Academies of Art in Paris, and in major cities throughout Europe that enforced rigid guidelines of instruction. These schools supervised which paintings qualified to be entered in the official exhibitions. Having your work displayed in these official salons meant financial success and professional acceptance.

Painters would spend years learning to master techniques creating academic paintings, a realistic three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional flat canvas. A painter would work in his studio for months creating a number of preliminary plans and sketches, finally presenting the finished painting reflecting the extraordinary talents of the artist. Perfect perspective, believable foreshortening, precise principles of contour, and shading, with naturalistic color used sparingly and muted. Absolutely no trace of

any brushwork, was visible and with a final finish with a clear polish, was then submitted to the judges for potential exhibition. So realistic, and so inviting, that the viewer felt he could easily step through the frame and into a fictional pictorial world. The framed picture would fully comply with the highest standards set by the Royal Academy Schools of Art, unquestioned by those that made the art and those that bought it. Any deviation was dismissed as obviously coming from an untrained artist that lacked any talent.

## **Photography**

But, in the 1840s all of that changed!

A young artist, in Paris, overturned every thing.

A scenic painter in the Paris Opera created a brand-new technology.

Louis Daguerre invented photography, (drawing with light). The camera's images were enthusiastically praised as nearly miraculous. This new technology, daguerreotype photos, captured the solidity of the world with astonishing clarity, beyond belief accuracy, and could do it in less than a minute.

Members of the French Academy asked master painter, Paul Delaroche, to evaluate this new medium. When he saw his first photograph, we are told he exclaimed, "From today, painting is dead." (Hite Galleries, 2010).

The daguerreotype photo produced an exact reproduction of the world with exquisite detail. Soon, Daguerreotypemania spread through the world. By 1860 New York City alone had 70 daguerreotype studios and as many were throughout London and Paris. Skilled painters were no longer needed for family portraits and beautiful landscapes.

Then... An even greater setback for artists!

George Eastman greatly expanded the "drawing with light" technology by inventing flexible film and the Kodak camera. For the price of \$25, (\$600 in today's terms, about the price of a today's computer) anyone could be a photographer and make pictures. Everyone had to have one and nobody could imagine life without one. The one-dollar Brownie camera was marketed a few years later. Millions of pictures were being taken.

Painting and visual art did not die, but certainly underwent a number of profound changes. A recent article in the New York Times pointed out that... in the long

history of painting, 20th century modern art could be called the most illustrious and astonishing story ever told.

### **Photography's Missing Element**

Since the Daguerreotype could easily record optical data so perfectly, artists were left to wonder what they could create that the camera could not. At that time early photographic images were all black-white with shades of gray. Color film was not available until the 1930s.

A small group of French artists, who at that time called themselves "the Anonymous Society of Painters," primarily focused on photography's missing element—COLOR. They began experimenting with color relationships, simplifying, intensifying, and experimenting with a variety of ways to applying color. However before the artist could brush color paint on a canvas, they had to make the paint themselves.

Artists couldn't buy paint. They needed to produce their own.

Painters would buy and hand-grind assorted dry pigments in their studios carefully measuring and blending the dry ingredients with the binding oil. Then mix in the proper proportions to carefully balance the chosen consistency, which of course, must perfectly match their pre-established painted colors. This was difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. This hand-made paint was produced in small batches had a short shelf life and did not travel well; so painting was limited, pretty much, to the studio.

### **More New Technology**

In the early 1840's all of that changed with another brand-new invention that now gave artists the capability and the power to deal with photographic technology's powerful challenge. John Rand took out a patent, "Improvement in the Construction of Vessels or Apparatus for Preserving Paint". (Rand, 1841).

He had invented paint tubes. Large varieties of color paint could now be produced in bulk and sold in collapsible tubes with a cap. The cap could be screwed back on and the paint preserved for future use, revolutionizing painters' choices and techniques by offering a range of pre-mixed new colors in a convenient portable medium. This flexibility enabled the avant-garde Impressionist painters to leave their

studios and work outdoors. “Plein-air Painting” enabled them to completely finish a work in one setting. Auguste Renoir stated... "Without tubes of paint, there would have been no Impressionism". (Lindsay, n.d.)

The Avant-garde French Impressionist style was the first in a series of worldwide movements leading to free 20th century artists from the rigid “academic style” of painting. The age-old link with legible images, narrative logic, and strict representational art was discarded. Realistic pictures were now captured and recorded with the astonishing power of photographic technology.

### **Impressionism - The Beginning of Modern Art**

The second article in this series, “Radical Abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” will trace the influence of the Impressionist artists and the movements that followed leading to 20<sup>th</sup> Century pure abstraction.

### **Michael Hoctor**

Michael Hoctor received a Bachelor of Arts from UCLA’s College of Applied Arts and a Master’s Degree from the UCLA College of Fine Arts. He was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship in Education. Mr. Hoctor taught advanced improvisational skills and acting techniques as well as producing and directing productions of plays and musicals. He taught classes in California’s Gifted and Talented Education Program (GATE). He cofounded the Laguna Beach improvisational theater, Changing Masks, and directed the play Sarah Was Mine at New York City’s off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theater. In 1996, he enrolled in the Laguna Institute of the Arts and has pursued painting since that time. Michael Hoctor is a working artist. He can be contacted at new.synchrony@gmail.com

### **Further Research**

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