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978-0-521-11232-1 - Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art

David W. Galenson

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Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art

From Picasso's Cubism and Duchamp's readymades to Warhol's silk-screens and Smithson's earthworks, the art of the twentieth century broke completely with earlier artistic traditions. A basic change in the market for advanced art produced a heightened demand for innovation, and young conceptual innovators – from Picasso and Duchamp to Rauschenberg and Warhol to Cindy Sherman and Damien Hirst – responded not only by creating dozens of new forms of art, but also by behaving in ways that would have been incomprehensible to their predecessors. *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* presents the first systematic analysis of the reasons for this discontinuity. David W. Galenson, whose earlier research has changed our understanding of creativity, combines social scientific methods with qualitative analysis to produce a fundamentally new interpretation of modern art that will give readers a far deeper appreciation of the art of the past century, and of today, than is available elsewhere.

David W. Galenson is Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research. His other published works include *Painting Outside the Lines* (2001) and *Old Masters and Young Geniuses* (2006).

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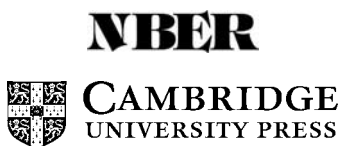
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DAVID W. GALENSON

The University of Chicago



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To Stan Engerman

Lance Davis

Clayne Pope

And the memory of Bob Gallman

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Preface

During my last semester in college, I took a course on the history of modern art. I loved it; what I learned has increased the pleasure I have gotten ever since from visiting museums and art galleries. When I took that course, however, I never imagined that more than three decades later I would write a book that would provide a very different analysis of the art of the twentieth century.

I still have the textbook from my college course, George Heard Hamilton's excellent *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880–1940*. It began with a clear statement of the problem to be explored, which I dutifully underlined:

In the half-century between 1886, the date of the last Impressionist exhibition, and the beginning of the Second World War, a change took place in the theory and practice of art which was as radical and momentous as any that had occurred in human history. It was based on the belief that works of art need not imitate or represent natural objects and events.

The book's cover illustrated what Hamilton called the "watershed between the old pictorial world and the new," Picasso's jarring painting of 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Hamilton's book, and the professor's lectures, provided a detailed narrative of the shift from an art that represented the natural world to one that recorded the artist's ideas and emotions. Yet neither Hamilton nor the professor offered any explanation of why this radical change had occurred when it did: their narratives described the ideas and styles of a series of artists and movements, without offering any analysis of why this sequence occurred at this particular time. The description of the rapid

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succession of styles was so absorbing, however, that I did not think of the underlying issue of causation. I simply concentrated on understanding the narrative on its own terms, as an explanation of the formal concerns that had led one artist after another to make a series of dramatic innovations.

In 1997, I began studying the question of why some modern artists have done their most important work early in their careers, and others late in theirs. This research eventually led to a new understanding of individual creativity in general, based on a recognition of the fundamental differences in the processes followed, and the work produced, by conceptual and experimental innovators. This analysis placed the history of modern art in a new light: I could now see that the radical change that Hamilton had described was initiated and carried out almost exclusively by conceptual innovators. Intrigued by this discovery, I began studying the new patterns of behavior that conceptual artists had devised in the course of the twentieth century. As I catalogued these surprising new practices, it became increasingly clear to me how the art of the twentieth century as a whole was dramatically and systematically different from that of all earlier periods. And as a result of a separate research project, I realized that the underlying reason for this was economic.

In the course of my research on the life cycles of modern artists, I had gotten to know Robert Jensen, an art historian who had written a book about the early development of the market for modern art. In 2002, we wrote a paper that presented an economic analysis of the changes that occurred in the market for advanced art in the late nineteenth century. We showed that the Impressionists' group exhibitions of 1874–86 had the effect of eliminating the monopoly the government-sponsored Salon had previously exercised over artists' ability to present their work for serious evaluation by critics, and purchase by collectors. The Impressionists' exhibitions, and others that were established following their example, constituted a legitimate alternative means for artists to present their work to both critics and collectors, and this created a competitive market where there had previously been a monopoly.

Our paper dealt only with the late nineteenth century, but when I considered the extension of this analysis to the early twentieth century, I found another important institutional development. As Monet and the other Impressionists began to gain success in the market, increasing numbers of private dealers became willing to sponsor and exhibit the work of artists who, like them, had not gained recognition in the traditional way, by exhibiting in the official Salon. By the early twentieth century, there were enough of these enterprising dealers to create real economic

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opportunities for young artists. The first young artist who appears to have recognized this, and set out in systematic fashion to create competition among dealers for his art, was Pablo Picasso – the same young artist who made the most dramatic break with traditional painting, with *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 111).

Combining the economic analysis of the development of competition in the market for advanced art with Hamilton's narrative of the dramatic change in modern painting, I realized that Picasso and other conceptual innovators who followed him were profoundly affected by the new market structure. In modern art, as in many activities, a competitive market allowed innovators greater freedom of action than monopoly: Picasso and his successors did not have to satisfy a jury controlled by the conservative Academy of Fine Arts, but instead needed only to find a dealer who would exhibit their paintings, and a few collectors who would consistently buy their work. This change in market structure explains why artists in the twentieth century behaved so differently from their predecessors of the nineteenth century. This book examines some of the most novel forms of behavior they created. Thirty-five years after I learned the traditional view of the history of modern art, I believe this book presents the first real explanation of *why* modern art changed so radically in the early twentieth century, and of why it has continued to change so rapidly ever since.

This book is dedicated to Lance Davis, Stanley Engerman, the late Robert Gallman, and Clayne Pope, four economic historians who have been my friends since I first entered the profession. In spite of the fact that none was ever paid for the job, they have also all been my teachers. And thanks to the National Bureau of Economic Research, for a number of years they were formally my colleagues, as fellow research associates of the Bureau. All four are wonderful economic historians; together they taught me the fine art of doing quantitative history and showed me the pleasures of doing it well. I will always be grateful for the interest they took in my research in economic history, and for the extraordinary education they gave me.

Immediately before I began to study the life cycles of artists, Clayne Pope and I collaborated on a research project on the life cycles of immigrants in the nineteenth-century United States. Clayne's interest in my work survived my radical change of subject matter, and I am grateful to him for many valuable conversations on a subject that was far from his own professional interests.

Throughout my work on this book, Robert Jensen provided active encouragement and unlimited access to his vast knowledge of modern

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art. Discussions with Rob improved my understanding of nearly every topic treated in this book, and made the process of writing it much more enjoyable.

I am grateful for Morgan Kousser's continuing enthusiasm for my research on artistic creativity, and for Joshua Kotin's interest in this work outside his own field of study. Conversations with Josh Schonwald helped me solve problems of both substance and style. I appreciate the encouraging reactions to my research of a number of my Chicago colleagues, particularly the generous comments of Robert Lucas and Richard Posner. At the NBER, I thank Marty Feldstein for his interest in my research.

At Cambridge University Press, I thank Frank Smith and Jeanie Lee for their interest and efficiency.

I am grateful to Julio Elias for arranging for me to present my work at three extraordinary forums in Argentina. I have benefited from the opportunity to present portions of this research at the American Federation of Arts Conference, "Art Matters," in New York, 2005; at the Skoll Forum on Social Entrepreneurship, Oxford, 2007; at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Museums Association, Ottawa, 2007; at the Civic Ventures Purpose Prize Summit, Palo Alto, 2007; at the NESTA Conference on the Creative Economy in the 21st Century, London, 2008; at the SYFR Conference on Creativity, Vail, 2008; at symposia on creativity at the Universidad del CEMA, Buenos Aires, 2008, and at the Universidad Nacional de Tucuman, 2008; at a forum on contemporary art at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), 2008; and at the Annual Social Entrepreneurship Summit, Toronto, 2008. I am grateful to many of the participants at these conferences for their comments, as well as participants at seminars and lectures I gave at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris; the American University of Paris; SUNY Buffalo; Queen's University, Belfast; Trinity College, Hartford; and the University of Chicago.

I thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a fellowship that gave me time to finish this book. Earlier versions of Chapters 4, 5, and 7 were published in *Historical Methods* and *Historically Speaking*; I thank them for permission to reprint some material here.

Shirley Ogrodowski, Amanda Edwards, and Saerome Parish all learned firsthand the trials of experimental research, as each typed a series of revised versions of the chapters of this book. Their feelings toward this process may be evidenced by the fact that none of the three still works for me, but I am grateful for the efficiency and unfailing good cheer with which they worked on the manuscript.