

Compare and Contrast between Banksy and Monet

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper would compare and contrast various works of Impressionism with the works of Banksy, the renowned graffiti artist. It would especially focus on how the avant-garde movement have changed by contrasting the two movements, each of which occurred at the beginning of 20th and 21st century. For each movements are too broad to discuss in general, this paper would focus on one representative artists from each movement. This paper would focus on Monet the impressionist, the only genuine impressionist without the influence of other forms of art, and on Banksy, currently the most influential graffiti artist in London. write background about topic of paper.

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INTRODUCTION

"London is to street art, at the start of the 21st century, what Paris was for Impressionism at the start of the 20th," claims Bob, one of the foremost graffiti artist in Britain who currently works for London Art Gallery. (Bob, 2008) Each Impressionism and Graffiti art had occurred at the beginning of the 20th and 21st century, and presented itself as the epitome of the avant-garde movement around its time. Thus, the difference of these two art movements reveals the change in avant-garde movement during the most rapidly changing century in human history. Significantly influenced by World Wars and modernization, the avant-garde art now implies deeper meaning than mere self-reflections or plain arts. By comparing and contrasting works of Monet with those of Banksy, the stark change of avant-garde art in relation with the change of human history will be recognized.

Body:

1. Graffiti as Art Movement:

Graffiti is currently forbidden in many countries. Controversial issues around graffiti are sensitive enough to offend those who reject graffiti, and "Great British institutions have been polarized" with whether to accept or forbid graffiti. (Akbar and Valley, 2015) Here, graffiti would be identified as art.

1.1 Definition of Art:

Defining the meaning of art has been subject of debate since the birth of aesthetics. Until the

Renaissance when art was solely about direct imitation of reality, the prime of beauty was the exact replication of the subject. As artists advanced toward self-representational paintings, mainly during Romantic period, aesthetics defined art as the medium to communicate various feelings of the artist. The boundary that separates art from non-artistic form is highly flexible and unsettled that currently holding definition of art may change in time. To argue that graffiti is one of the art form, this paper would analyze how graffiti fits in both conventional and non-conventional definitions of art.

1.2 Graffiti as Art:

Conventional definition of art is subdivided into two categories: institutional and historical. The most prominent institutional definition is suggested by George Dickie. The most recent version consists of an interlocking set of five definitions: (1) An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art. (2) A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public. (3) A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them. (4) The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems. (5) An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public (Adajian, 2012). Graffiti artists involve in graffiti with certain degree of understanding with their art, utilizing spray paint and stencil. They also understand how to convey public messages through the works of art in distinctive styles. (1) Graffiti works are the works produced by

street artists to be displayed in the public. Although the works are not to aim specific groups, the works are shown in street for wider range of viewers. (2) Public viewers of graffiti works are people who can recognize the subject drawn on the wall when viewing the artworks. (3) These three factors make graffiti a part of artworld system, thereby identifying graffiti as art.

Historical definition of art come in various ways, but the unifying claim that binds historical definitions is as followed: certain entities belong unconditionally to the class of artworks, while others do so because they stand in the appropriate relations thereto. (Adajian, 2012) Above all, graffiti shows its relation to the artworld stylistically. Graffiti works are rooted in cave arts, the first arts created by mankind, in that the works are created upon the structure which its firsthand function is not for display. Also, although first graffiti paintings were no more than just scribbles on the wall, graffiti grew into one branch of social movement; the messages or images on the wall started to contain political or social messages. This laid graffiti along the same line with other artworks, such as Realism or Political Pop Art. Now, through important graffiti artists as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, graffiti art is slowly recognized as the art for everyone to enjoy. The quote in Graffiti Bible by Meynendonckx also proves, "Graffiti is often 'damage' to private or public property. However, society seems to be slowly starting to accept this artistic form of expression." (Meynendonckx, 2012)

Nonconventional definition of art values aesthetical judgment, property, and experience. Graffiti artists employ artistic properties and forms to express their experience, usually related to social issues. The works are criticized or praised by the public, critics, and other fellow graffiti artists. Meeting the aesthetical standards of the definition, graffiti is art.

2. Avant-Garde:

2.1 Definition of Avant-Garde:

The expression 'avant-garde' refers to groups of artists who are apart from the mainstream of art, and withhold traditional artistic ground set by predecessors. In *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* by Kostelanetz, the concept of avant-garde incorporates three factors: to surpass the contemporary aesthetical customs, to keep the recognizable distance between the new form of art and currently celebrated movement, and to find its viewer later in the future. (Kostelanetz, 2000)

The term avant-garde is not a permanent term that goes along with the movement. If once absurd form of art is later accepted as part of the mainstream art, such movement may not be called avant-garde movement anymore. This applies to various movements of the past, such as Romantics, Impressionism, or Realism. Nevertheless,

movements of the past are worthy of analysis as part of the history of avant-garde movement.

2.2 Impressionism:

One of the first major movement of modern art, Impressionism was the beginning of the modern avant-garde movement.

In 1863, Manet first had stirred up the art society with his painting, *Lucieon on the Grass*, displayed in Salon des Refuses. This became the first shot against the academic and salon, and stimulated many enthusiastic artists to transcend the classical trend with unique, unprecedented method of impressionism.

Impressionism started the official exhibits in 1874. The first Impressionism exhibits was led mainly by Monet, Morisot, Pissaro, Renoir, and Degas. Although not very successful from the beginning, the movement and the artists themselves were able to gain fame and popularity through several exhibits that followed.

To clearly state the characteristics is not easy since the styles and subjects vary greatly among painters. However, if it were to put it in one phrase, it would be that impressionists expressed individual's subjectivity through impression of the reality; this clearly differentiated impressionism from traditions in that classical style of art focused in exact duplicate of the reality. Bonnard, a painter of mid-20th century who saw and worked with impressionists very closely, best organized about impressionism, "The Impressionists worked on the motif, but they were better defended against the object than others by their very procedures, their manner of painting." (Patin, 1993) Impressionists were interested not in merely reflecting the reality but in fitting reality into the individual's idea. Also, since the rise of Impressionism coincided with the advent of industrialization, artists were able to adopt Japanese culture. Particularly influenced by Japanese woodprints, impressionists abandoned traditional method of chiaroscuro and depicted world in flat manner. Broken and coarse brushstrokes were also found in impressionistic paintings, thereby being criticized by academics as immature.

Despite many criticisms and initial failures to gain recognition, Impressionism is now one of the most loved art movement. Cultivating art giants such as Cezanne, Monet, or Degas, Impressionism is meaningful not only as the first modern avant-garde movement but also as the major movement in art history.

2.2.1 Claude Monet:

"We often see Monet, and went to his housewarming recently. He is very well established and seems to have a strong desire to carve out a place for himself," praised Eugene Boudin who led the ultimate impressionist into the world of painting. (Patin, 1993) After the death of his mother, Monet was raised by his childless aunt. He started selling

his caricatures, signed 'O.Monet', and met the most important figure in his life, Eugene Boudin. Following the suggestion of Boudin, Monet agreed to assist him in the open air, and realized that he was destined to paint for the rest of his life. As Monet started his career outdoor, he drew rest of his paintings *en plein air*, significant feature which made Monet stood out.

Oddly, Monet had no interest in academy or salon, the sole way for the artist in France to succeed during 20th century. In this way, though, Monet was able to cultivate distinctive style of his own. Monet's usual subjects were outdoor objects and activities ranging from water lilies and popula trees to train station in St. Lazare. Monet's main goal in his paintings was to capture the changing moment of time, as he claimed, "For me, the subject is of secondary importance: I want to convey what is alive between me and the subject." (Heinrich, 2011) He drew in plein air to capture the change of sunlight at different moments. Monet dramatized the effect of ephemeral moment through unclear, broken brushstrokes in repetitive rhythm. Also, he often suggested unusual line of vision, arranging subjects in diagonal composition. This traits altogether, which matches perfectly with stylistic features of impressionists, made Monet the ultimate impressionists.

2.3 Graffiti:

Graffiti first appeared in the late 1960s at some American cities like New York and Philadelphia. From short signatures to full piece of painting, graffiti developed on the streets by various anonymous artists. Soon, graffiti found its own way to Europe, with England as the major field.

Graffiti art differs greatly from previous works of art. Graffiti artists, most of whom are unprofessional, use pseudonym to secure anonymity. Works are displayed freely over the street, and attract everyone on the street as viewers. Styles and themes do vary, but mainly utilize stencils to finish the work quickly and "have a veritable message to convey about our society." (Meynendonckx, 2012) Still in the process of developing, graffiti is one of the most promising avant-garde movement of 21st century.

2.3.1 Banksy:

Graffiti artist who thrills the society the most, Banksy grew up with rich street art in Bristol. With the influence of artists such as 3D and Nick Walker, he started painting on walls and trains in Bristol at the age of eighteen. In the interview with *Wired* magazine, Banksy reveals his reason for becoming the street artist as "to be a fireman, do something good for the world" and "to show that money hasn't crushed the humanity out of everything." (Wright, 2009) Thus, most of Banksy's work contains messages against war, mass media, authority, violation, and injustice.

Although nothing besides his work and pseudo name is known about Banksy, he is now almost the most controversial but acclaimed cultural figure. His works, once erased by zealous police man, is now being protected with translucent plastic and sold for high price, even by famous celebrities as Christina Aguilera and Angelina Jolie. The most famous graffiti artist, yet who has a clear goal and strives toward it, Banksy is the epitome of street artists.

Comparison:

Contrasting points between Banksy and Monet are unique because of the common ground they share as avant-garde artists. Banksy represents the graffiti art, the avant-garde movement of 21st century. We could acknowledge similarities Banksy share with Monet, and identify both impressionism and graffiti along the same line, avant-garde movement. Differences then stand apart as the change that occurred during a century.

Both movements were strongly defied from the public at first sight. Impressionists' use of short brushstrokes was seemed by the critics as unfinished and immature. Artists were viewed as incomplete with certain degree of knowledge in art and painting, and considered as amateurs. Graffiti artists also share this characteristic with impressionists. Graffiti artists were first considered only as vandals, and every graffiti was considered illegal. Although, as graffiti settled in the form of art movement, and with the help of few important street artists as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, people slowly started accepting graffiti as one of art activities, debate still continued on whether to fully accept graffiti as art movement or ban as vandalism.

Two movements are now welcomed as distinctive, beautiful forms of art. Impressionists started gaining fame and financial support, and artists like Monet and Degas gained high reputation and popularity. Graffiti art also achieved some elevated status than vandalism, and increasing numbers of works are recognized to be placed in artistic context conveying social messages. Still, graffiti isn't fully appreciated by the society, and the debate on whether to ban or allow graffiti continues. Also, street arts have very limited approach to art market, and isn't considered as the subject of marketing. This features are what holds graffiti as avant-garde art of the modern society.

3. Contrast:

3.1 Method:

Oil had been the most common medium used in Western civilization, and this was same for impressionists. Longer drying time of oil painting allowed artists to portray paintings in greater details, and lustrous appearance proved oil as the most adequate medium to capture the transient moment of light. Thus, impressionists highly preferred using oil

on canvas, and also enabled later generations to see well-preserved works of the past.

Banksy abandoned the traditional use of canvas and oil, and chose stencil method on the street wall. He especially used stencil so that he could shorten the painting process. In his book *Wall and Piece*, he explained about the incident in which he had to hide under the dumper truck to avoid the police. (This will be explained again in 4.4.) Banksy recalled, "I was staring straight up at the stenciled plate on the bottom of a fuel tank when I realised I could just copy that style and make each letter three feet high." (Banksy, 2009) He has also introduced stencil method in his websites and books.

3.2 Transience:

Mainly centered in Paris, exhibitions of impressionism is held in various part of the world. The paintings, carefully preserved by experts, endured more than a century to reveal themselves to modern viewers and will survive another century or more. In contrast, graffiti works are less likely to survive even a year, and are easily removed or replaced. Details will be observed with the example of *The Pulp Fiction* and *Woman with a Parasol-Madame Monet and Her Son*.

The *Pulp Fiction* piece was located in London, above a series of stores on Old Street near Vine.



Fig. 4.3.1: *The Pulp Fiction*, original.

However, in may 2006, the work was covered by a massive Obey poster. Soon over the poster was written 'Banksy was here' in a pink paint. Then, in following July, new version of *The Pulp Fiction* masked over the original site, two men in banana outfits and guns.



Fig. 4.3.2: *The Pulp Fiction*, new version.

Just after two months, crudely written message of 'Nothing Lasts Forever' took place over the painting. It continued changing by various painters

until Banksy took charge over the site again in September, 2007.



Fig. 4.3.3: *Old St. Cherub*, by Banksy.

The painting was completed shortly after a gun crime that affected several children. The work, when posted on Banksy's website, entailed explanation from Banksy. He wrote, "Last time I hit this spot I painted a crap picture of two men in banana costumes waving handguns. A few weeks later, a writer called Ozone completely dogged it and then wrote 'If it's better next time I'll leave it' in the bottom corner. When we lost Ozone [Ozone-21-year-old Bradley Chapman – was killed by a train in January 2007] we lost a fearless graffiti writer, and as it turns out a pretty perceptive art critic. Ozone-rest in peace." (Bull, 2009)

As the *Pulp Fiction* site reveals, graffiti work is hard to even survive a month, and is easily replaced by other works or removed by the government or the owner of the wall. *Old St. Cherub* may also hide itself from the viewer under other work of art someday. Although the graffiti works would endure the pass of time through photography, the future generation won't be able to view actual graffiti like the current generations would see impressionistic works.

Monet's *Woman with a Parasol-Madame Monet and Her Son* was produced in 1875 and is currently displayed in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Displayed first in Monet-Rodin exhibition, it was one of the four paintings of *Sketches of Figures in Open Space*.



Fig. 4.3.4: *Woman with a Parasol-Madame Monet and Her Son*.

Although over a century years old, the painting is still well-maintained under the protection of National Gallery of Art. The painting is also moved into different part of the world to expose itself to wider range of viewers. This stands in contrast with the transient nature of graffiti works.

Anonymity:

From the start of his career, Monet had no interest in academy, and wanted to paint in his style. Nonetheless, Monet held various exhibitions to display his painting and often sold his paintings. This later led him a great fame, and he is called the ultimate impressionism by the following generation. Most people are able to name Monet when they see his paintings, and numerous books report us about his personal life.

However, anonymity was the way for Banksy to continue his career as artist. Since graffiti is recognized as illegal act in most part of England, Banksy had to avoid police by maintaining anonymity.

This anonymity strengthens the reputation and the impact of his works. People are able to understand the work of Banksy without being hampered with the real personality of Banksy. Banksy's messages are delivered without distortion due to the perception of who he really is, and makes him seem more genuine. He shows his agreement toward this view in his book *Existencilism*, "You find that people who know you rarely listen to a word you say, even though they'll happily take as gospel the word of a man they've never met if it's on a record or in a book. If you want to say something and have people listen then you have to wear a mask. If you want to be honest then you have to live with a lie." (Wright, 2009)

The world still wonders who he may be, but the degree of loyalty that his acquaintance show makes Banksy a man of anonymity. Absence of hindrance on interpreting the art work by painter's identity is one of the changes that occurred in avant-garde movement.

3.3 Time spent on painting:

Because Monet wanted to capture the most genuine scene of the day – will be described in 4.5 – he waited days and nights to portray the authentic scenery. The extend of his effort is revealed in the series of Rouen Cathedral.

From 1892 to 1894, Monet had spent two years to paint *Rouen Cathedral series* in a reserved room near the cathedral. The façade of the cathedral varied only in three minimal angle, thus fully displaying the change of the light on the cathedral. After two years passed, Monet moved back into his studio and reworked the cathedral views. Experimenting different moods, Monet produced pastose paintwork of rich texture. In devouring himself to panting, Monet was not restrained by time spent.



Fig. 4.4.1: part of *Rouen Cathedral Series*, by Monet.

Banksy was bounded by time while producing his work. The reason also stems in the illegal nature of graffiti. To elude police, graffiti artists should finish their works as quick as possible, and so did Banksy. A related incident is shown in his book, *Wall and Piece*:

When I was eighteen I spent one night trying to paint 'LATE AGAIN' in high silver bubble letters on the side of a passenger train. British transport police showed up and I got ripped to shreds running away through a thorny bush. The rest of my mates made it to the car and disappeared so I spent over an hour hidden under a dumper truck with engine oil leaking all over me. As I lay there listening to the cops on the tracks I realised I had to cut my painting time in half or give up altogether. (Banksy, 2009)

3.4 Purpose:

Monet's main focus in painting was to depict a scene of 'clear look'. He imagined a subject that was not distorted by prejudices, and wanted to describe his subject in the most genuine way. In order to achieve his purpose of drawing, Monet tried more than depicting the subject itself, but observed the light and atmosphere to portray on canvas. He once even claimed, "For me, the subject is of secondary importance: I want to convey what is alive between me and the subject." This led him to draw series of paintings: drawing the same subject in various viewpoints at different time periods.

Oddly, Monet also depicted the changing society during his time due to industrial revolution, especially the scene of train station in Saint Lazare. Less interested in the presence of human in the station, he focused in dramatized nature of the train. By his choice of subject, Monet could characterize the biggest trait of his epoch and describe industrialization in inspirational manner, just as other impressionists did.

Purpose of Banksy's works clearly stands apart from that of Monet, who concentrated more in depiction than in the message.

Banksy constantly divulge his resistance against authority and power. Through his work, Banksy strongly reveals his distaste towards the government and authority, thereby showing himself as anarchist.

Government officials, such as military soldiers or police officers, discloses personal desire, thereby relinquishing their obligation and power. Examples include soldiers drawing a peace mark, and a police officer doing drug.



Fig. 4.5.1: *The Gare Saint-Lazare*.

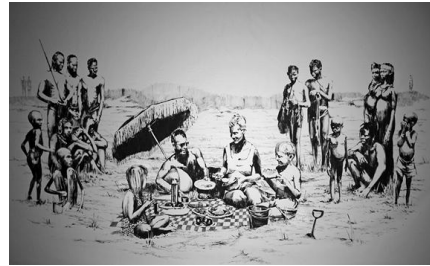


Peace motif is recurrent theme in Banksy's art. His works declare strongly for peace, and against violence and war. In Banksy's work, a dove is wearing bulletproof vest, while the grim reaper wearing smiling mask holds scythe over the message 'Wrong War'. Banksy's powerful image is often used by people as the slogan for anti-war movement.



Banksy prosecutes the standing injustice in our society: racial, economical, political inequalities. The most adequate example is *Picnic in Africa*. This work criticizes the western oriented thoughts, and discloses how closed, how racially selfish the comfort of western civilization is.

Banksy also touched upon problems of capitalism, environmental pollution, or formalism. He attempted more on the problems of the society, than aesthetical properties when painting works as Monet did. This may be a notable change that happened in 21st century.



3.5 Display:

Traditionally to display works and succeed in their field, artists had to submit their work in Salon. Other way to display works in Monet's era was to hold individual exhibitions usually through funding. Thus, people weren't able to see Monet's paintings everyday, and had to wait for other exhibitions to view more of his works. In case Monet couldn't get enough funding to hold exhibitions, drawings weren't possible to disclose themselves to the audience. Nowadays, Monet's works are mostly displayed in art museums that are accessible to wider range of viewers. International projects for display are also common, enlarging the opportunity of seeing the masterpieces.

Banksy, on the other hand, displayed his works on street. His viewers included everyone walking along the street, and his purpose was to 'show' than to sell. Although some owners of the wall tried to sell the works of Banksy after he got famous, Banksy's initial intention was to step away from the commercial business around artworks. Wider range of audience and non lucrative feature are the main two changes that occurred to 21st century avant-garde works.

Conclusion:

With the same basis they share as avant-garde artists, Banksy and Monet informed about the changes occurred within a century in avant-garde movement.

Change in method shows that artists could find other medium than oil to paint. Even other artists of 21st century, in different movements also, use striking materials to produce art. This difference may be revealed clearly through comparing Banksy and Monet.

Purpose of the artists, furthermore the function of art, has expanded beyond artistic expression. Nowadays art often include social issues, and functions as the medium to reveal the problems of the society. This feature is well shown through the contrast.

Change in the way of display indicates the change in the viewer of art. Once considered the assets of noble, art is now shared more commonly and easily. Granted, the extreme example of commonly shared art is graffiti. Still, for the contrast provides the information about the change in the viewers of art, the change in the display point may be valued.

How graffiti works are transient, anonymous, or produced quickly may not be shared characteristics of 21st century avant-garde artists. However, these assets of the street art is part of what makes graffiti so distinctive that they were not to be left out. Though these contrasting points may not reveal the significant change that occurred between 20th and 21st century, they are important features in graffiti art, and thus are reasonable to be discussed.

Since art is created by mankind, it responds to the society that people live in, and corresponds to the changes in human history. Exemplifying how the shift from 20th to 21st century had affected art, the comparisons and contrasts of impressionism and graffiti art through Monet and Banksy have value within historical context and inform deepened sight into avant-garde history.

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