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"A Rose By Any Other Name": An Exploration of the Importance of the Artist in Art Preferences

Abstract
This study aims to understand the social aspects in the creation of art and artist preferences. One of the main questions being asked is "Does knowledge that a highly regarded artist completed a work influence the viewers' satisfaction in the piece?" In order to answer this question, two methods were utilized. First, a survey to determine artwork preferences in relation to the artist was conducted. Secondly, interviews with people who have formal art knowledge and people who do not were used to grasp a further understanding of judgments. Results indicate that art preferences are not only socially influenced, but also that context may rival aesthetics as a factor in determining preferences. Discussion will include the importance of the artist and the more general context in appreciating art.

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"A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME": AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTIST IN ART PREFERENCES

By

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the social aspects in the creation of art and artist preferences. One of the main questions being asked is "Does knowledge that a highly regarded artist completed a work influence the viewers' satisfaction in the piece?" In order to answer this question, two methods were utilized. First, a survey to determine artwork preferences in relation to the artist was conducted. Secondly, interviews with people who have formal art knowledge and people who do not were used to grasp a further understanding of judgments. Results indicate that art preferences are not only socially influenced, but also that context may rival aesthetics as a factor in determining preferences. Discussion will include the importance of the artist and the more general context in appreciating art.
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Introduction

"A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet." This famed quote from *Romeo and Juliet*, refers to the perceptual relationship that the word 'rose' has to the physical flower. William Shakespeare implies that a rose would be just as appealing, if called by a different name. But how true is this statement? While my own research, which centers on art preferences, is different in content from Shakespeare's floral reference, both are grounded in the same theoretical question—to what extent are we influenced by the name that is attached to an object? Further, are preferences purely perceptual, or are they also derived from cultural knowledge? My research aims to explore these questions, specifically whether artistic judgments are influenced by the knowledge that a famous artist created a work. In other words, would a painting 'smell as sweet' if the viewer did not have this knowledge? Both a quantitative survey and a qualitative interview series served as investigative methods, and the resulting conclusions support the importance of context in determining art preferences.

Background

At the beginning of junior year, I knew my senior thesis research would explore the social worlds of art and accompanying institutions. Study on Western art is often limited to an art historical context, so my goal was to understand the behavioral aspects of art using an anthropological lens. Therefore, I immersed myself in the art world, obtaining an internship at a gallery, volunteering at a contemporary art institution, and attending art openings and lectures.

While this deep engagement in the art world provided me with a foundation to discuss art, as well as a range of art-related contacts, the focus of my study grew from a single event. I attended a lecture on California Impressionist paintings given by a professor of art history.
Supposedly, the topic concerned California Impressionism’s relationship to the Impressionism movement as a whole. However, the discussion focused heavily on the French Impressionists, and when the California Impressionists were considered, it was in a disdainful tone. For example, the lecturer presented a slide, which depicted a painting by the Impressionist artist Claude Monet and another by the California Impressionist artist Anna Hills. Both paintings portrayed similar landscapes and had comparable color schemes. However, there were differences in the works. The Monet was far more symmetrical, and the Hills had thicker brush strokes and more vivid color usage. The attitude of the professor can be illustrated from a section of my field notes: "He described Monet’s painting as being a 'more sophisticated work.' He then scrunched his face up, as if he had just tasted something sour, and explained that he did not know if the “same simplicity and drama was presented in the Hills.”

It was obvious that the professor not only preferred Monet's work, but also found it to be of higher quality objectively. Nevertheless, many factors of this painting's alleged superiority were contextual rather than aesthetic. He admiringly discussed the struggle of the French Impressionists to develop their style, while the California Impressionists were among the first reactionaries to the movement, once there "became a larger market for these types of paintings."

I was confused; I found the Hills’ far more pleasing to view, and I thought others would agree. Perhaps my preference was because my eye was not trained to recognize superior art qualities. This is a valid concern, if one believes art can be objectively good or bad. Still, I had a larger question which focused more on the social aspects of art viewing: to what extent might others be affected by the fact that a famous artist had created a work? Could the name attached to the work enhance its validity to viewers? Additionally, what were the differences between how
laymen and art-experts interpret art? This lecture and the consequential questions it raised are the foundation for my thesis research.

Theoretical Contextualization

While the area of "anthropology of art" has been well documented in terms of significance of material objects within non-Western cultures, the record concerning current American practices are often limited to an art history perspective. However, fundamental theories and scholars have been essential to creating an intellectual framework for this research. Two individual, but connected, themes provide insight into the exploration of the importance of the artist in art appreciation: the context of art and the historical emergence of the artist.

Context

In "Art as a Cultural System," Clifford Geertz discusses many of the central ideas upon which my research is founded. Geertz emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between art and its context, focusing on the cultural aspects of art rather than the formal. He communicates that art is not a universal, but relative, experience. Accordingly, he states "Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop" (Geertz 1497). In other words, a certain piece of art can only be understood within its own context.

Even Denis Dutton, a prominent art philosopher who objects to the idea that art appreciation is culturally learned, and instead believes it originates from evolutionary adaptations, acknowledges the importance of context in understanding a piece of work. Dutton presents a situation where foreign tourists, who have never experienced an opera, replace the native audience of La Scala. While the foreign audience is able to appreciate the impressive
costumes and set design, they are incapable of having a true understanding because the "living critical tradition that an indigenous audience supplies for any vital art form" is not present (Dutton 269).

Marcia Eaton discusses context in relationship to beauty. She argues that there are two types of beauty: contextual and Kantian (or 'aesthetic' as I will here on refer to it). One can view aesthetic beauty as everything that falls within a real or imagined frame surrounding a subject, while contextual beauty is what exists beyond that frame. Contextual beauty considers the larger background in which the work was created, such as the artist, date, materials used, and the meaning a work may have to the audience. Eaton shares an example of the duality that exists in the definition of beauty:

I stand near the edge of one of Minneapolis's many urban lakes. A tall purple flower brightens the marshy shore. I recognize that it is purple loose strife, an exotic plant species imported several years ago. I know that it tends to overtake areas where it takes root—that if left alone, it will rapidly destroy the delicate ecosystem so important for water purification and for supporting a wide range of plant and wildlife. I know that this is a dangerous, even evil, plant. A friend of mine who is a landscape designer has a poster on her office door urging us to wipe it out. She tells me she finds it ugly—even repulsive. I stand near the lake, looking at the purple blossoms that stand out so vibrantly against the more or less uniformly colored background of the swamp. I cannot prevent myself from finding the plant quite beautiful (Eaton 11).

Here Eaton presents that preferences can be based on pure aesthetics, as well as the context from which something emerges and the larger meaning it carries. The narrator appreciates the aesthetic beauty of the purple flower, but the landscape designer finds the plant ugly due to the dangers it causes to the ecosystem. Thus, not only do people appreciate something aesthetically, but they also like or dislike what it means, and this consequently affects their judgment of its beauty.
The Artist and the Renaissance

Within the West, arguably the most important contextual aspect of art is the artist. For instance, the name of an artist is often listed before the title of the work on museum labels. However, linking an artwork with the name of its creator is not found across all cultures or times (Kris and Kurz 3). When a creator’s name is attached to a work of art, it gains an additional type of significance, as it "indicates that the work of art no longer serves exclusively a religious, ritual, or, in a wide sense, magic function." Further, it "no longer serves a single purpose, but that its valuation has at least to some extent become independent of such creative achievements" (4).

Even in the West, the concept of the artist is relatively new—only first emerging around three thousand years ago. From Ancient Rome to the Middle Ages, artists were not known to the public, but rather to those within the field. Instead, the "cult of the artist," the glorified fame of an artist beyond intellectual study, is even more modern, having its foundations in the Renaissance (Barolsky 1). In this period, there was a social transition from the creator of art being recognized as an artisan or craftsmen to being thought of as an "artist" (Feldman 74).

The emergence of the Renaissance artist arises in the writings of Dante and particularly the "first art-historian," Vasari, who discussed the personality of artists in conjunction with their careers (Feldman 75). Additionally, a key factor driving social change was the combination of wealth in 15th Century Italy and the desire to not only "be rich, but be seen as rich" (78). This aspiration drove the wealthy to compete for the best artists. As a result, professional artisan guilds, which originated in the Middle Ages, could no longer tightly control the compensation, opening competition between artists for both wealth and prestige (81).
Artists of the Renaissance were also conceptually affected by the rise of humanist intellectuals, infusing the concepts of the movement into artwork. Consequently, the ability to understand compositions became more dependent on having insider knowledge. While an untrained eye would have been able to comprehend basic artistic depictions and perhaps Christian symbolism, “a special class of scholars" was needed to decode allusions to antiquity, paganism, and astrology (Feldman 81). Hence, the foundation of many of our modern conceptions of art can be attributed to the Renaissance, including the emergence of the "cult of the artist," art-history, and the concept that one must have a type of insider knowledge to comprehend a work of art.

**Methodology I**

In order to understand whether a person would be more likely to prefer a work if he/she knew a famous artist created it, I conducted a survey using a random sample of Penn Museum visitors. Stationed at the busier of the two guest entrances, I asked visitors if they would participate in an art preference survey as they entered to purchase tickets. If a visitor agreed, I would then administer a simple questionnaire. While the participants ranged broadly in age and regions, the survey limitations include using a convenience sample with a sampling bias.

The questionnaire was basic; the participants were given a clipboard with two pictures of paintings and asked which they preferred. With the goal of testing whether people are influenced by famous artists, two versions of the survey were given out—one in which the artists' names were provided and one in which they were not. One hundred participants responded to each survey type, for a total of two hundred respondents.
The paintings featured in the questionnaire were inspired by the lecture on California Impressionism. Anna Hills' *By the Roadside near El Torro* was used in the lecture, as well as my survey. The lecturer compared the Hills' to a painting from Claude Monet's Poplar Series. In my survey, I did not use the exact Monet painting, but instead a similar one from the series, called *The Four Trees*, which more closely resembled the colors of the Anna Hill's painting. In picking paintings with similar colors, style, and subjects, the goal was eliminate other factors that could influence a participant’s preference. Nonetheless, similarities were not essential, since the true measure depended only on the change of results based on whether or not the artist was known.

The first group of participants was not told who painted the pieces of art, and the images were kept small enough so the artists’ signatures were illegible. The initial question of the survey asked, “Of the two paintings below, which do you prefer aesthetically?” The respondents of the first group then had the choice to check “Painting 1” or “Painting 2” (Figure 1). For the second group, the same initial question was asked: “Of the two paintings below, which do you prefer aesthetically?” However, the survey changed in that the artists’ names and the paintings' titles were shown above each work. The respondents were told to check “Anna Hills' *By the Roadside, near El Torro*” or "Claude Monet's *The Four Trees*" (Figure 2). Note that the artists’ names were presented before the title, as to draw more attention to this factor. Additionally, having more qualitative roots, I inserted an additional question that read, “(Optional) Why do you prefer this painting over the other?”
Figure 1: The first version of the survey, in which the artists’ names were not given to the participants.
Figure 2: The second version of the survey, in which the titles and artists’ names were given to the participants.
Findings I

Quantitative

The results of the survey are as follows: when the artists’ names were not given, 82 participants preferred the Anna Hills painting, while 18 preferred the Claude Monet painting. When the artists' names were given, 56 preferred the Anna Hills painting, while 44 preferred the Claude Monet painting. While these numbers seem self-evident in revealing the ability of the artist to affect a person's opinion (Figure 3), I would be remiss in not analyzing the statistical significance of the results. In fact, it is possible to estimate the true number of the relevant population who would prefer the Monet to the Hills.

Step 1: Form the survey into a yes-no format. The question will now be “Do you prefer the Monet to the Hills painting? The true proportion of the population who would say yes is $p$, while the estimate of the fraction who would say yes is $\hat{p}$. Where $n$ is the number of people surveyed and $x$ is the number of people who responded yes, $\hat{p}$ can be calculated using the formula $\hat{p} = \frac{x}{n}$.

**Artist Unknown**

\[
\begin{align*}
n &= 100 \\
x &= 18
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\hat{p} = \frac{18}{100} = .18
\]

**Artist Known**

\[
\begin{align*}
n &= 100 \\
x &= 44
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\hat{p} = \frac{44}{100} = .44
\]
\[
\hat{p} = .44
\]

**Step 2:** The goal is to estimate \( p \) using \( \hat{p} \), keeping in mind that, since \( n \) is sufficiently large, \( \hat{p} \) is approximately normally distributed. Now, estimate the standard deviation (\( \hat{\sigma} \)) of the test statistic \( \hat{p} \):

\[
\hat{\sigma} = \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}
\]

Substituting:

**Artist Unknown**

\[
\hat{\sigma} = \sqrt{\frac{.18(1-.18)}{100}}
\]

\( \hat{\sigma} = 0.0384187 \)

**Artist Known**

\[
\hat{\sigma} = \sqrt{\frac{.44(1-.44)}{100}}
\]

\( \hat{\sigma} = 0.0496387 \)

**Step 3:** Now find the margin of error (m.o.e.), which can be done by multiplying the corresponding z value by the sampling error. In this case, the corresponding z value is 1.96 (for a confidence level of 95%).

**Artist Unknown**
\[ m.o.e. = 1.96 \times 0.0384187 \]
\[ m.o.e. = 0.075300652 \]

**Artist Known**

\[ m.o.e = 1.96 \times 0.0496387 \]
\[ m.o.e = 0.097291852 \]

After converting the numbers to percentages, the margin of error is slightly over 7.5% when the artist is unknown. These calculations assert with a 95% confidence level that the true proportion of the population that would prefer the Monet to the Hills, when participants do not know who painted each work, lies within the range of 18% ± 7.5%. When the artist is known, the margin of error is slightly over 9.7%, affirming with a 95% confidence that the true proportion of the population who would prefer the Monet to the Hills, when participants know who painted each work, lies within the range of 44% ± 9.7%. Given the limited sample sizes, the margin of errors are high. Nevertheless, the results, even when the margin of error is accounted for, are distinct from one another. Consequently, it is possible to argue with a reasonable confidence level that a person is more likely to prefer Claude Monet's *The Four Trees* when he/she is aware he is the artist. A simple calculation will demonstrate to what extent a person is more likely to prefer Monet when he/she is aware of the artist:

Calculate the change (\( \Delta \)) by subtracting \( x \) from \( y \), and dividing the result by \( x \). Let \( x \) equal the number who prefer Monet, when the artist is unknown, and let \( y \) equal the number who prefer Monet, when the artist is known.

\[ \Delta = \frac{y - x}{x} \]
\[
\Delta = \frac{44 - 18}{18}
\]

\[
\Delta = 1.4444444
\]

Thus, when the artist is known, a person is approximately 1.44 times more likely to prefer the Monet painting than when the artist is unknown.
**Figure 3:** A chart showing the relative number of people who preferred Monet in each survey group.
Qualitative

The option to conduct the survey in person was a difficult but productive choice. Had I chosen to complete the survey using an online method, I would have been able to reach more people in less time. Consequently, I could have provided a more reliable sample with a lower margin of error and possibly a higher confidence level. However, conducting each survey in person allowed me to interact and make notes on the behavior of the respondents. While I have fewer participants, I do have a more holistic data set, which includes information beyond the yes-no survey. Therefore, I chose a quality over quantity approach. Many intriguing patterns emerged from my recordings, which increases the understanding of the supporting quantitative data.

When the painter was unknown, participants were generally quicker to respond with their preference. Hence, the contextual information of the artists’ names provides the participant with more information to process, even though the question is supposedly based on aesthetics alone. Moreover, based on conversations, as well as notes from the comment portion of the survey, when the artist was known a higher proportion of participants explained why they preferred the Hills' painting to the Monet. Only 16 out of 44 participants, 36.4%, gave an explanation for why they preferred Monet to Hills, while 23 out of 56 participants, 41.1%, gave an explanation as to why they preferred the Hills. In contrast, when the artist was unknown, participants were more likely to give an explanation as to why they preferred the Monet. 7 out of 18, 38.9%, explained why they preferred Monet, while 15 out of 82, 18.3%, explained why they liked Hills. These calculations signal that participants may have felt compelled to explain liking the more abstract Monet, but when the artist was known, subjects felt more pressure to justify choosing against a renowned artist.
When the artist was known, some participants chose Hills because she was not Monet. For example, after choosing Hills, respondents made comments such as "I've never heard of her. Let's go with Anna Hills for a little variety," and “I’m kind of perplexed, because I am so familiar with this painting [Monet], but I have never seen this one [Hills], and that kind of makes it more interesting.” In the last quote, I wonder if the participant truly meant that she was familiar with that particular Monet painting, or if she was simply very familiar with the artist. Further, some made their opposition to Monet clear; one young man chose the Hills painting, explaining, "I don't like Monet… never have." Here the famous artist still has an influence on a question that asked about aesthetic preferences. However, the participant's choice is opposite of the typical reaction, in that the response was negative rather than positive.

Furthermore, the types of explanations for preferences changed for Monet, depending on whether or not the artist was known. When the artist was unknown, two people explained liking Monet because it was abstract, while others mentioned the monochromatic coloring and structural elements. All of these factors were again mentioned when the artist was known, but participants also began to give more abstract reasons for preferring Monet. In fact, 6 out of 16 participants listed vaguer and sometimes meaningless justifications for their preference:

• "I'm just going to pick this one… just because."
• “Anna Hills seems derivative."
• “No focal point on Hills”
• "It's different."
• “Style.”
• "I don't know why."
It is important to note that this type of response did not occur in other categories, but only when the artist was known and the participant preferred Monet. Especially when considering the increase in participants who preferred Monet, this indicates that the contextual listing of the famous artist was more influential in these art preferences than the physical features.

The use of apologetic language was present in both survey types, but particularly in the survey in which the artists were known and participants chose Hills. The following quotes are from this category and exemplify the use of justificatory language:

- "Even though I know its Monet."
- She laughed and said, "I don't even know it [the Hills]."
- "I actually like the other one [Hills] better."
- “I know it's a Monet, but I prefer Anna.”

Even when the artist was known, one person guessed the Monet incorrectly, saying, “That's Manet, but I really like Painting 1.” The use of words such as ‘but,’ ‘even though,‘ and ‘actually’ further suggests that participants were expressing an expectation to prefer Monet and that they needed to justify their preference.

Group behavior was not only interesting, but also an integral aspect of observation, since this study aims to understand social aspects of art preferences, such as impression management. When a group of two or more was asked if they would like to participate, it was common for one member of the group to recommend that another member complete the survey. For example, I approached a couple in their mid-twenties to ask if they would like to participate in the survey. The man said to his female partner "You do it. You are the art person." The identification of an “art person” reveals the sentiment that art is more than subjective. Perhaps this man and others
thought there was a correct answer, and that some type of insider knowledge was needed to give an opinion/answer. With the exception of two people who directly declined to be surveyed, the act of recommending another member of the group was the most common form of avoiding participation in the survey. In other cases, certain member of groups would evade participation more literally by removing themselves physically, engaging in an outside conversation, or avoiding eye contact. It was in the social group that people seemed most self-conscious and less confident in their own ability to provide art preferences.

Methods II

An interview portion of the study aimed to provide a more detailed understanding of art preferences, based on the level of artistic knowledge that each participant had. In this context, the word 'art' extends to fine arts related to painting and sculpture, and does not include music, poetry, theatre, dance, or architecture. I interviewed two types of people—experts, those with a formal art background, and laymen, those without art knowledge. The basis for determining who fit into each group depended on their formal level of knowledge, as well as self-identification. For example, one of the laymen has a "general interest" in art but did not consider himself an art expert. His profession and degree—neither of which was fine arts related—supported this. Thus, he was grouped into the laymen category. This portion of the study is by no means representative of an entire population; it was a convenience sample with the primary purpose being to supplement the findings of Method I.

Subjects were identified using personal contacts, as well as recommendations from other participants, and all were given code-names to conceal their identity. Interview lengths ranged from around 5 minutes to 25 minutes, with less artistic knowledge correlating to a shorter
interview. Interviews were conducted in person, often in offices, but in more casual situations, it was more convenient to discuss at a local cafe. The majority of the conversations were audio recorded and later transcribed. In the two instances where participants declined to be recorded, detailed notes were made during the interview, including exact quotations. These unrecorded interviews will be identified within the participants’ individual sections. Both groups were asked the same open-ended questions (Figure 4), with the interview style being flexible enough to let open-conversation flow and topics range. Like the survey, interviewees were asked if they preferred the Hills painting or the Monet. The names of the artists were not revealed to the participants until they selected a preference.
**Art Preference Interview Questions**

Of the two paintings, which do you prefer aesthetically?

- [ ] Painting 1
- [ ] Painting 2

Why do you prefer this painting to the other?

(If not already answered) What formal qualities do you prefer about this work?

Are you familiar with the artist of either work?

What is your background knowledge regarding art?

What is your background knowledge regarding impressionist art specifically?

Do you think that knowing who the artist of a work is affects your opinion of that piece of art? Why or why not?

Do you think that other people would be affected by having knowledge of the artist?

Would the person's knowledge of art have an influence on whether or not he/she would be affected?

Do you believe the ability to see superior quality in art is available to someone who does not have extensive knowledge of art?

Is there anything else you would like to add concerning the relationship between art preferences and knowledge of artists?

---

**Figure 4:** A list of the standard interview questions that were covered in each interview.
Findings II

Laymen

Jake

My interview with Jake was unrecorded, by his request. He stated that he felt more natural while not being recorded. His degree is in mechanical engineering, and he works as a senior production engineer at an automobile company. He explained that his only knowledge regarding art was a theatre class he took to fulfill an arts requirement in college. When I asked about his knowledge regarding Impressionist art specifically, he stated that he had none, but he could "point out a Van Gogh or Rembrandt" (neither is classified as an Impressionist artist).

Jake was shown the sheet of paper with both paintings and was asked which he preferred aesthetically. In response, he repeated, "Just based on aesthetics?" I confirmed with a 'yes.' Later I asked how his answer might have been different if it were not based purely on aesthetics. He clarified by saying that his answer might change if he were choosing a painting for his home. For example, he explained jokingly that his decor and his wife's taste would influence his decision. Again, this depicts how some still consider outside influences, even when asked for a preference based only on aesthetics.

After being shown the paintings, Jake preferred Painting 2, because he enjoyed that the work was less realistic and more abstract, adding that this was "probably not typical for an engineer." He also stated that a less primary reason he liked the work was the "cool reflection" of the pond. I asked Jake if he was familiar with the artist of either work. He said he was not, and I told him the two artists while pointing to their respective painting. When he learned that he had picked Monet, he said in a happy and proud tone "Monet, Nice! I've heard of him." His pride in
picking the Monet is similar to the attitudes of the survey participants who had also unknowingly preferred Painting 2 and later discovered Monet was the creator, further supporting the idea that the subjects perceive the question as having a right or better answer.

I continued by asking if he thought having knowledge of the artist would affect someone's opinion of a piece of art. He said, "I could see how it would skew [a preference]. The name brand... Americans are about name brand." When I asked if a "non-art" person would be more, less, or equally affected by having knowledge of the artist, he said that the less knowledge a person has regarding art, the more likely that person would be to be "skewed" towards a famous name. He provided examples, citing that a non-sports person would be more drawn towards the well-known Payton Manning, and a non-classical music person would be inclined towards the renowned Beethoven. I then went on to ask if he believed the ability to see a superior quality of art is available to someone who does not have extensive knowledge of art. He replied, "No, other than blind luck, just as I don't believe a common knowledge person has the knowledge to understand an engineering or architecture feat.

Jake's response to the questions concerning the abilities of laymen in comparison to experts were distinct from the other laymen interviews in that he very directly asserted the more distinguishing qualifications of the experts. He asserted that laymen would be more likely to be skewed by the "name brand" of a famous artist, and compared the skills to interpret art to those of more widely-recognized as objective fields. Other laymen participants either argue that a laymen's view is superior or offer explanations as to why both groups might be more skilled.
Kate

Kate is the acting chief ranger at a national historic site. She received a Bachelor of Arts in history and Master's degrees in history, with a concentration in museum studies, and in resource interpretation. Upon asking Kate to be interviewed for a project on art preferences, she graciously agreed, while conceding that she "probably won't be much help." Later, Kate explained that she has no formal or informal knowledge of fine arts, but is more familiar with arts such as theatre and music. She added that she "has only been to a couple art museums in [her] life."

I asked Kate which painting she preferred. She looked over the images for about 10 seconds before replying, "I think I like Painting 1 [Hills] better." She explained that the piece "maybe seems a little bit more homey, or the landscapes a little bit more welcoming, with the mountains in the background, and it looks maybe like that is a trail of some sort...It is easier to tell what it is, I guess. It is also a little bit more vibrant I feel." When I asked if she was familiar with either artist, she exhaled as she said "Noooooo!"

Kate thought an opinion would change if a person knew a famous painter created a work. She said that while she did not know the "exact correlation," being more familiar with the artist would cause a person to be more attracted to a work. She also acknowledged that recognition could have the opposite effect: "I feel like someone who studied a lot of Monet would probably like him... but perhaps you don't like Monet." Concerning if there were differences between laymen and people with an art background, Kate explained: "On the one hand, yes, I think that someone with more knowledge is going to have a better grasp on artists and their works, her voice inflected as she continued:
But on the other hand I know from experience in the history field the more I know the less interested I am. Perhaps I have a better perspective [than an expert], on at least the aesthetics of art, not knowing anything about it…Partially because I'm not scrutinizing the detail behind it. I just look at it and like it because it is pleasing to me, not because the artist used a certain brush stroke.

Further, the conversation moved towards museums. Kate stated that since becoming familiar with history museums she has become a "stroller." When discussing how people would aimlessly tour museums, staring blankly at "must-see" pieces, she commented "that is what you do at an art museum, because Jackson Pollock, for example, is a really famous guy."

Throughout the interview, Kate's language was striking. In addition to a lot of 'ummms' and awkward laughs, she frequently modified her statements with words that diminished the certainty of her thought, such as 'perhaps,' 'maybe,' 'I guess,' and 'I feel.' It is possible that this could be attributed to her style of speech, but having interacted with Kate in other situations, I know that her speech is not always modified in such a way. Even within the interview, when she discussed topics she felt very comfortable with, such as history, she spoke in a more certain manner.

Jackie

Lasting about four and a half minutes, Jackie's interview was certainly the shortest. When I first asked her to participate, she agreed but said, "You’re asking the wrooong person." Throughout our time talking, she seemed uncomfortable and responded curtly. With a cosmetology degree, she works as a hairdresser, and explained that she has no artistic knowledge. Jackie preferred the Hills painting, because of its coloring.

When I began asking her about how she might be affected by knowing a famous artist created a work, she explained with a laugh, “I don't keep up with artists… I don't know the
difference," but added that others would certainly be influenced. She thought people with an art background would be more influenced than people without. Jackie stated, "You shouldn’t have to have a background [to understand a superior quality in art]. You can look at something and tell that it’s good." Here Jackie uses 'you' to refer to an average person. She later distinguished this by saying that art experts judge a painting based on contextual factors rather than aesthetic. This addition was interesting, because it shows a discrepancy between thought and behavior. Clearly, Jackie did not feel qualified to talk about art; she was curt and even said she was the "wroong person." However, she explained that art should be something that anyone, regardless of background, can judge equally.

**Michael**

Michael graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English, and now works as a writer and editor for various publications. He has a “general interest” in fine arts and is a "big fan of Impressionist art," but he would not consider himself an expert in the field. He expressed his preference for Painting 1 [Hills], saying that while he appreciated the intricacies of Painting 2 [Monet], he liked the coloring and shading of the first composition.

I asked if he knew who created either work, and he guessed that Édouard Manet created Painting 1. Later, Michael explained that one of the reasons he preferred Painting 1 was because he thought it might be a Manet: “Manet is a less formed, more Impressionist artist, and the painting seemed more Impressionist, so I think if you are actually a fan of that art you might be drawn to the things that you like about Impressionism.” His argument is valid: if someone likes certain aspects of one artist or movement, it is likely that he/she will be drawn to similar aspects in another's work. However, considering the scope of this project, it is interesting that he said he
picked painting 1, because he thought it might be the work of yet another famous, French painter.

When discussing why people might prefer the work of Monet, Michael touched on the concept of originality: "People feel Monet is a fundamental artist in that era, so they are drawn to the original source." His opinion on the abilities of laymen and experts was conveyed in a way that acknowledged the skill of art professionals, while still conceding that it depends on the type of art, stating, “I think that someone who is trained might be more discerning, but I think that it might depend on the genre and era." He elaborated that a trained eye might be able to interpret modern art better than an untrained eye, but less abstract works put the two groups on equal grounding.

Art Experts

Dr. Novak

In determining interviewees for the art expert portion, I knew it would be necessary to return to my original source. Consequently, I asked to interview Dr. Novak, the professor who gave the lecture on California Impressionism, which inspired my research question. He is an art historian who works at an Ivy League institution. He declined to be recorded, so during the interview I made detailed jottings of his responses, including exact quotations.

He preferred the French Impressionists to the California Impressionists, "because the Impressionists [French] were quicker and earlier in understanding which landscapes to capture" in depicting the modern times. "They were just—grittier isn't right—more able to leave that in the picture.” In referring to "that" quality, I asked if he meant through content. He confirmed,
while detailing the significance of Monet's choice to paint freshly planted poplars. Dr. Novak also explained that the French were able to challenge the highly composed *tableau* and push towards a more sketchy direction, while the California Impressionist's remained content with the *tableau* standard. When asked why he preferred the sketchiness he said that it conveys the "the quickness of the changing landscapes."

Dr. Novak’s preference was more based on context than aesthetic, so I asked him about this. He appeared almost insulted by the question. He said “No. It is aesthetic; you can see that it looks quick.” Nevertheless, this is still grounded in the context of the work; he expressed that his preference was related to the fact that the actual French landscape was changing quickly, and so he appreciated that the French depicted the same quickness. Thus, the appreciation arises from the context, rather than the aesthetic appreciation for a sketchy looking piece.

He did not believe that laymen would be able to recognize a superior quality in art, immediately explaining, "No! It would be like asking me if someone can speak French without knowing the language. Art is a language that has its own grammar. You need to know that language not only to paint, but also to understand." We discussed the likeliness that laymen might believe that they could understand superior art quality, and Dr. Novak encouraged me to relate a person’s own occupation to him/her in order to show that a layman and expert do not have the same understanding in any field. This part of the conversation was similar to the arguments that Jake gave in defense of artistic understanding as a concrete skill.

**Olivia**

Olivia is a visual art major at a small, public university. She currently has two semesters left before obtaining her degree. The art history classes she has taken concern photography and
design history background. Upon asking her preference, she looked at the images for about 10 seconds and then murmured, "Hmn" She continued to look for another 10 seconds, before finally deciding she preferred Painting 2 [Monet]. While explaining her preference she described the work:

“"It is more linear. It feels more structured and plainer. It's the reflection of the trees in the background, and the use of a lighter color shows that they are pushed into the background. I like that the highlights and shadows in the photo describe exactly what you are looking at. Even though if you were to get up there would be very tiny, gestural brushstrokes... if you were to watch the artist paint it, you could see how it developed.”

Olivia added that she tends to be drawn to abstract works, despite her own style and training, which she describes as more photo-realistic. When I asked why she liked abstract art she said, "At the time that they were made, the artists were thinking in a totally different way from how art was made before. As technology developed, with different material, the art was able to grow with each era.” This led me to ask if aesthetics or context took precedent in forming her appreciation, she responded, "For me, I like doing research into the materials and background... what their processes were when they created the work.”

The conversation moved in the direction of specific work created by Jackson Pollock. I asked Olivia what her opinion was on the artist, and she interrupted my question by finishing the stereotype of his work I was describing— "anyone one can do that." As we discussed, she explained the significance of his work beyond its formal qualities, “At the time nobody else was doing it—it’s really contextual. While I can put this paint on a canvas, I'm not Jackson Pollock, and I'm not in the 60s. It is more about the artist."
Concerning the topic of preferences being influenced by the fame of an artist, she agreed that it would make a difference and attributed this to familiarity. “People like famous artists when they recognize who they are... whenever you have experience with an artist or have researched them, and you recognized their name, you’re more likely to like that piece of art.” Olivia stated that art professionals might be less affected by knowledge that a famous artist created a work, because they can tell if a composition is good. Initially, I thought she seemed uncertain in her answer, because of the use of the word 'might,' along with indicators from her tone. However, as she continued to talk through her explanation, her voice became more confident:

Having an art background helps [understand art]. I went to an art museum with a friend, and she would mosey along not really looking at art. Whereas I would look for much longer, and I felt rushed. I feel like as an artist I have more of an appreciation than someone who has never held a paint brush before...they don't understand. It's one of those experiences where it's amazing to see Picasso’s pencil marks, but it is also a learning experience.

Overall, my conversation with Olivia highlighted the importance of context in forming art preferences. She was upfront, even blunt, about her own. She is fascinated by the medium in which a work of art is created, and that influences her appreciation of that piece. Relating to her regard for context, there is also the concept of originality. For example, she discussed how anyone could create a piece of art like Pollock’s, but he was significant and his work validated, because he was the first to do it. Moreover, she saw the effects of fame as a social reality: "Now any piece made by Picasso is going to sell because of those famous pieces, whether the other pieces are as good or as compositionally strong."
Professor Sykes

I spoke with Professor Sykes, who is an art professor and a practicing artist. During her time in college, she studied medicine and studio art, with a focus in painting, and she later received a Master’s of Art in painting. Currently, she teaches foundation level painting, and sometimes printmaking classes, while her personal artwork includes drawing, painting, and mixed media. Concerning Impressionist art, Professor Sykes has a formal, technical, and conceptual interest, but she did not consider it her favorite movement. She explained, “It is a pivotal movement that I use a lot in my teaching, when talking about the transition between historical and modern painting and the characteristics of colors.” However, she was hesitant to introduce Impressionism into her classroom at first, because she did not want "Painting I to be about 'Oh, let's make pretty pictures,' which is what Monet makes.”

I asked her which painting she preferred based on aesthetics, and she responded, “Just aesthetics alone?” After I confirmed, she picked Painting 2 [Monet]. Her reasoning was that "I tend to really like complex, temperature related color relationships, and there is a lot more subtle temperature and intensity relationships going on.”

Professor Sykes was engaged in the topic of behavioral aspects of art. She described her observations concerning laymen and art:

It has been my experience that many people who are not formally trained perceive the fine arts to be an elite, highly intellectual activity, and many people are very fearful about expressing opinions about artworks for that reason. Part of it may be wanting to appear as if they have good taste or style—you can argue all day long about what that actually means or if it exists.

She hypothesized that artists and people in related fields are “more comfortable with the ambiguities of art than the general public.” Professor Sykes explained that since a famous artist
has been validated by experts and is “categorically correct,” laymen would be more inclined to prefer a famous artist over a lesser known artist. She compared this to experts who have “a learned system by which they can evaluate,” adding that those with a background may be wary of an artist like Monet who is "exquisite, but also very commercialized." She continued, "A lot of professional artists, myself included, are very wary about going right to this big name... because it is so popular and you don't want to undercut the real value of the artistic merit of the piece by simply going to the more famous name.” As was present in some of the survey participants' responses, this comment illustrates the possibly negative influence a famous artist can have on a viewer's preference.

Concerning whether or not laymen could identify a superior quality of art, Dr. Sykes had a hopeful approach: "If they were in a vacuum out of context of everything that they have been taught about what is good, bad, and valued, then they might be able to, because it is such a psychological experience. I think if a person could separate themselves from what their elementary teachers told them, or step away from what would look pretty over their couch—remove themselves from the context, which is totally impossible—then I would have a great deal of faith in a person's ability to assess an innate quality, in a hypothetical world.” Even with this optimistic approach, she asserts the ability of a layman to identify superior art is only possible in a hypothetical vacuum.

Kasey

Kasey's undergraduate degree is in art history, and her Master's is in museum studies. She works as the associate director at the gallery where the California Impressionist lecture and exhibit was held. The exhibit included the Anna Hills painting, but not the Monet work.
responsibility to conduct condition reports of incoming and outgoing works, meaning that she would have meticulously examined Anna Hill's *Roadside near El Torro* at least twice. She preferred the Anna Hills painting, and I asked if she thought her preference could have been affected by the work being in the show. She explained that she doubted this, because when she saw both pieces, she thought the Monet might have been in the show as well, stating with a laugh, “Things start to blur together.” Instead she explained that she preferred Hill’s because of the use of “the sunlight!—The play of light on the leaves.”

Kasey thought people would be more affected by knowing a famous artist created a work, with her response emphasizing that those with a lack of knowledge would be more influenced. “I think people are like ‘I’m supposed to like this Monet or else people will think I don’t know anything about art,’ because those artists have been elevated to the top of the art field. I think that is where elitism in art comes into play.” She restated this concept in a way that compares a famous artist’s work to someone who is lesser known:

People have been told Picasso is *Picasso*, and the guy on the New York street corner who is making paintings can’t possibly move you in the way a Picasso can…. There really are expectations, and there is that pressure. I think the museum as the institution needs to work on that. I think that would make it more approachable.

Our conversation led to the debate over whether art is subjective or objective. Kasey started, “I think it’s totally…uh” She hesitated and changed the modifier she was using, “I think it is *mostly* subjective, but there are certain technical aspects like knowing how to make a composition.” She continued, “I think it should be subjective. *Should* be. In a perfect world… In reality, there are critics and other institutions telling us what we should like.” Again, the discrepancy between theory and practice in art appreciation is illustrated. Moreover, she thought
that anyone has the ability to recognize a superior composition; “Visually if something’s balanced or not balanced your brain will pick up on these points, even if you don’t realize it.”

In all, Kasey’s interview not only showed a relatively greater confidence in laymen, but was also an example of how a professional considers aesthetics more influential than context. Further, she mirrored the common laymen’s view that art should be accessible to all, while still acknowledging the expectations within art preferences. She is certainly the outlier in the art expert interviews, with most others taking a more contextual and objective approach to art.

Trends in Interview Findings

Variation existed within expert and layman interviews, particularly in Jake and Kasey’s interviews. Hence, the relationships that laymen and experts have with art is not binary, and art preferences are not entirely dependent on the level of artistic knowledge a person has. However, certain trends do emerge from the interview data, which suggests that there is a tendency for participants to have certain reactions based on their knowledge.

While the interview sample size is not large enough to make a statistically significant observation, it is intriguing that 3 out of 4 laymen preferred Hills, while 3 out of 4 of the experts preferred Monet. Perhaps there is an objective compositional superiority in the Monet painting, but a more likely explanation is that there is a standard taught in art fields that lead preferences towards works like Monet.

Considering that one group was formally trained in the field, it is not surprising that the two groups used different language while talking about art. Laymen tended to use basic language. For example Kate described the Hills painting as "homey" while others described liking the colors and shading. At times, the language was even casual, with Jake explaining that
he thought the reflection of the pond was "cool." Often, art experts would describe the same aspects of a piece, but in a more elaborate manner. For instance, Professor Sykes was attracted to “temperature related color relationships." Essentially, she is describing color, but her description is more precise and sophisticated than those of the laymen interviewees. Further, the experts’ language shows a deeper understanding of the techniques used in painting. While explaining her preference for Monet, Olivia stated, "It's the reflection of the trees in the background, and the use of a lighter color shows that they are pushed into the background."

Among laymen, there was a mixed view on whether or not knowledge was needed to understand a work of art. In many cases, the point was made that one should not need to have a background to understand, and instead interpretation should be made on aesthetics alone. On the other hand, most experts were fairly certain in their assertion that knowledge was needed to appreciate art. Both Kasey and Dr. Sykes thought all could potentially see the superior quality, but conceded that societal pressures have a strong effect on preferences. Furthermore, both groups expressed the importance of context—albeit in varying ways. Laymen thought that too much focus on context caused the true preference to be lost, while experts often found it essential, and perhaps inseparable from preference.

Almost comically, laymen tended to believe that experts would be more affected by a famous artist (with the exception of Jake), while all experts thought laymen would be more affected. Interestingly, nobody said that the groups would be equally affected or similarly influenced, suggesting that people view an expert's understanding of art as integrally different from a layman's.
Discussion

The art world initially intrigued me because of its complex relationship between art-insiders and outsiders; insiders ponder the absurdity of tourists strolling through a museum, blankly looking at each piece of art, while outsiders mock the seemingly pretentious nature of the field. These observations led me to contemplate why outsiders have a skeptical and sometimes negative view of the art field. This research has allowed me to hypothesize on why this is. Partially, the conflict is due to the arguably subjective nature of the field, but I argue that the uncomfortable behavior of laymen around art can also be attributed to the fact that art is visually comprehensible. Often, the subject of an artwork is a familiar to the viewer—commonly displaying a recognizable image such as a body or landscape. However, the viewer knows that art is judged by specific criteria. If viewers are unfamiliar with the tools to interpret a work, they remain in a conflicted space where they feel as if they can see what a work depicts, but not what it means. Compare this situation to someone with only a general understanding of mathematics looking at a complicated math proof that uses variables and Greek letters. Without explanation, he/she would not know what the problem is depicting let alone what it means. The person would probably be more comfortable with and accepting of this complete ignorance, whereas the interpretation of an artwork might be more taxing. Thus, I argue that it may be more disconcerting for a person to comprehend a subjective field partially than to not understand an objective field at all.

Just as Walter Benjamin argues in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that a work's uniqueness in time and space grants it an aura, it is possible to view an artist as having a certain type of aura. While this does not fit precisely into Benjamin’s Marxist theory, it is possible to note the similarities. Reactions to an original piece of art in
comparison to a copy are parallel to a famous artist’s work compared to a lesser-known artist’s piece. There seems to be something magnetic about the authenticity of the famous artist and his/her work. The metaphorical description of a magnetic field can be translated literally, when considering how a large crowd will surround a famous artist's work in an art museum, while there will be a lack of an audience at a less famous neighboring piece. Works, such as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, which analyze the heroization and magic-like qualities designated to the artist, support the aura of the artist theory. This proposed aura is a potential explanation for the increase in preferences for Monet, when his name was revealed. It is also possible that this aura could be applied to famous individuals in other fields. This was insinuated when Jake suggested that Payton Manning and Beethoven would have more support from people unfamiliar with their respective areas. Hence, this research is significant in making a more general statement about the effects that fame has on a person's perceived validity.

The relationship between aesthetics, contextually, and preference seems to be inseparable in some cases. In the survey, participants were asked to judge an artwork based on aesthetics alone. The increase in preferences for Monet, when the artist was known, indicates that context was still affecting the preferences, despite the limits of the question. Further, this trend was present in the interviews. Two participants clarified that their answer was based on aesthetics alone, and there was a great deal of importance placed on context, particularly among art professionals. For example, Dr. Novak was committed to the idea that the quickness of French Impressionists' work was based on aesthetics alone, even though he explained that his appreciation for the sketchiness of the work stemmed from the fact that it mirrored the changing landscape of the painter's reality.
A large part of the contention between accessibly and elitism can be related to the idea of subjectivity and objectivity in art. If art is always subjective, it should be accessible to all, meaning no specialized knowledge is needed to judge or interpret it. On the other hand, objectivity in art is correlated to a view of art as an elitist activity, meaning there is a correct way to understand a piece of work. Further, these ideas can be extended to contextual and aesthetic beauty. While there are guidelines for a "good" composition, much of what is considered great about an artwork is often attributed to its context. For example, Olivia stated that while anyone could create a work like Pollock's, he was the first to do it and this validates his work. In order to understand the context's relationship to aesthetics, objective, insider knowledge is needed, which reinforces the idea of art as elitist. Aesthetic beauty relates to the more subjective, accessible view of art, as its basis is purely based on what is visually appealing to the eye.

This research highlights the contention between the two views on art (Figure 5). The view of art as elitist is apparent, when considering the behavior of participants in the project. Behavior, including the identification of an art person and use apologetic language, signaled that laymen did not feel qualified to discuss art. Anxiety about how an art preference will cause other to perceive a person is also present in the study, particularly among the survey participants in groups, who suggested others take their place in the survey or who avoided it all together. This indicates that impression management is a concern that extends to artistic tastes. Still the interviews demonstrate that there is a general idea, especially among laymen, that art should be accessible to all. Many laymen even felt that they were better at interpreting art, because they were focused on the pure aesthetics, unlike experts who they feel focus on too much the context. Thus, a discrepancy between theory and practice exists: people tend to think art should be accessible, but their behavior deems it as elitist.
**Figure 5:** An attempted schematic representation, in which contextual beauty and aesthetic beauty, along with their correlating concepts, collide to create an incongruous reality.
Conclusion

The research presented supports that cultural/social factors are significant in art appreciation, with the artist having an essential role within our own viewing culture. Results demonstrate that participants are approximately 1.44 times more likely to prefer the work of the famous artist, Claude Monet, when his name is revealed than when it is concealed. Qualitative methods support that art preferences are influenced by the fame of an artist, in most cases positively, but also negatively at times. This influence is at least to some degree recognized by both art experts and nonprofessionals, although much variation exists between and within the groups. Returning to the initial concept posed—would "a rose by any other name" still smell as sweet? In light of the research results, I would argue against Shakespeare. Instead, I would assert that a Rose called "a Monet" would probably smell even sweeter.
Endnotes

1 For further readings on the relativity art practices see Joseph Alsop's *The Rare Art Traditions*, which uses the lens of art collecting to study cultures that ascribed such a behavioral system to art.

2 The distribution of $\hat{p}$ is technically binomial, but a normal approximation is used, because the binomial distribution approaches the normal distribution as $n$ approaches infinity.

3 I conducted a preliminary survey concerning art preferences. Essentially, the parameters were the same as the survey presented in this paper, but it was conducted using an online outlet, reaching only one hundred people, all of whom were given the artist unknown questionnaire (Figure 1). While I have not formally included the results in the scope of the paper, because the method was too different to be viewed as part of this study, it is significant that 22 out of the 100 people asked preferred the Monet, without knowing the artist. The result supports the data collected in the formal, in person survey.
References Cited


