

# Modern and Contemporary Art: quotes by and about artists

## Symbolism

### Maurice Denis

“Remember that a picture—before being a war horse or a nude woman or an anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.”

### Edvard Munch

“No longer shall I paint interiors, and people reading and women knitting. I shall paint living people to breathe and feel and suffer and love. I shall paint a number of pictures of this kind. People will understand the sacredness of it and will take off their hats as though they were in church.”

A precursor of “The Scream” is a drawing of a man (Munch himself) on a similar bridge, with a blood-red sky above. A text accompanying this drawing states: “I walked with two friends. Then the sun sank. Suddenly the sky turned as red as blood ... My friends walked on, and I was left alone, trembling with fear. I felt as if all nature were filled with one mighty unending shriek.”

## Fauvism

### Henri Matisse (“Father of Fauvism”)

“What interests me most is...the human figure. It is through it that I best succeed in expressing the nearly religious feeling that I have towards life.”

“What I dream of is an art...devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter...like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.” (referring to his post-WWI works of serene subjects, warm colors, and elegant composition)

“I took up sculpture...for the purposes of organization, to put order into my feelings, and find a style to suit me. When I found it in sculpture, it helped me in painting.” (referring to sculpture as a complement to painting)

### Maurice de Vlaminck

“I was so moved that I wanted to cry with joy and despair. On that day I loved van Gogh more than I loved my father.” (after viewing van Gogh’s work for first time at 1901 retrospective)

“I painted in order to clarify my thoughts, to assuage my desires, and above all to acquire a little purity. The idea of becoming a professional artist never occurred to me. If anyone had suggested that I should take up painting as a career, I should have laughed in his face. Painting is no more of a career than anarchy, lovemaking, running, dreaming, or boxing. It’s an accident of nature.”

“...with my cobalts and vermilions, I wished to burn down the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and to render my impression without any thought for what has been achieved in the past.” (he was not formally trained and saw no value in artistic education)

“Painting is nothing more than a means of expressing yourself in an original manner, without cashing in on the heritage of artists long since dead.” (claimed he had never been to a museum and had no interest in other people’s painting)

## **Georges Rouault**

“I do not believe either in what I touch or what I see. I believe only in what I cannot see and in what I sense.” (exploration of inner realms of intellect, spirit, imagination)

## **German Expression: Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)**

### **Wassily Kandinsky**

“We both loved blue... Marc loved horses and I loved horsemen, so the name came by itself.” (referring to how the group got its name)

“Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays...touching one key or another purposely to cause vibrations in the soul.”

“We have before us an age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand-in-hand with thoughts toward an epoch of greater spirituality.” (from his theoretical treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*)

“Each period of culture produces an art of its own, which cannot be repeated. Efforts to revive the art principles of the past at best produce works of art that resemble a stillborn child.”

### **Franz Marc**

“I try to heighten my feeling for the organic rhythm of all things, try to feel myself pantheistically into the trembling and flow of the blood of nature—in trees, in animals, in the air. I see no happier means to the animalizing of art, as I like to call it, than the animal picture.” (referring to his painting, *The Large Blue Horses*, 1911)

## **Expressionism**

### **Chaim Soutine**

“This is so beautiful it drives me mad.” (on seeing Rembrandt’s *Slaughtered Ox*)

“In the body of a woman Courbet was able to express the atmosphere of Paris—I want to show Paris in the carcass of an ox.”

Critic’s comment: “...a morbidly introverted person, possibly the least articulate and certainly the most secretive and uncommunicative of 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists.”

Critic’s comment: “His paintings of dead meat look like live human portraits, and his human portraits look like meat.”

Scholar’s comment: “Soutine’s paintings can be classified as expressionist in that they are governed by deeply felt emotions which resolve into distortion of line and color. His inner wretchedness appears to have found release in frenzied brushstrokes and deep, rich, juicy colors, and he is close to van Gogh in the exuberance of his style and the surface quality of his canvases.”

## Constructivism

### Alexander Rodchenko

“I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.” (reminiscing about a 1921 exhibition in which he contributed three monochrome canvases titled *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, and *Pure Yellow Color*)

## Independents

### Aristide Maillol

“The particular doesn’t interest me; I find meaning only in a general idea... for my taste, sculpture should have as little movement as possible.”

“It is necessary when composing the face of a young girl, that I give her the face of all young girls.”

### Constantin Brancusi

“Those who speak of abstraction when contemplating my sculpture are completely off the track and prove that they have understood nothing.... For what my work is aiming at is, above all, realism: I pursue the inner, hidden reality, the very essence of objects in their own intrinsic fundamental nature; this is my only preoccupation.”

“Your hand thinks and follows the thoughts of the material.”

“Simplicity is not a goal, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, as one approaches the real meaning of things.”

### Jacob Epstein

*The World* magazine, 1912, in reference to Epstein: “An Egyptian born in late Victorian days, (and an artist who combined the) savage realism of Rodin with the formal realism of the Egyptians.”

### Marc Chagall

“Pictorial arrangements of images that obsess me.” (referring to his own work)

Guillaume Apollinaire, French poet and art critic, in reference to Chagall’s *Adam and Eve*: “A large decorative composition that reveals an impressive sense of color, a daring talent, and a curious and tormented soul.”

### Francis Bacon

“When I made the pope screaming, I didn’t want to do it the way that I did it. I wanted to make the mouth, with the beauty of its color and everything, like one of the sunsets of Monet.”

“You know, I think I’ve got the scream, but I’m having terrible trouble with the smile.” (both quotes referring to his paintings inspired by Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*)

“My work is like a diary. To understand it, you have to see how it mirrors my life.”

## **Henry Moore**

“The head has a blunted and bull-like power but also a sort of dumb animal acceptance and forbearance of pain.”

“First I added the body, leg, and one arm and it became a wounded warrior.”

(both quotes referring to *Warrior with Shield*)

## **Marino Marini**

“When you consider one by one my equestrian statues of the past 12 years, you will notice each time that the horseman is incapable of managing his mount, and that the animal, in its restlessness ever more riderless, comes more and more to a rigid standstill instead of rearing. I believe in the most serious way that we are heading toward the end of the world.”

## **De Stijl**

### **Piet Mondrian**

“The new plastic art starts where form and color are expressed as a unity in the rectangular plane. By this universal means of expression, the versatility of nature can be reduced to more plastic expression of definite relations.”

“For centuries, painters composed by means of natural form and color; at present, the composition itself is the plastic expression, the image.”

## **American Modern**

### **Marsden Hartley**

Scholar, in reference to Hartley’s *Church at Head Tide #2*: “An attempt to locate spirituality within the American tradition, yet the church is abandoned, its black windows shutting out the light of redemption.”

## **Abstract Expressionism**

### **Mark Rothko**

“We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.”

### **Beauford Delaney**

Critic’s comment: “For most of the Abstract Expressionists, the identity of a gay African American man like Beauford Delaney would have been doubly difficult to comprehend.”

Scholar’s comment: “So Abstract Expressionism of the late 1940s sifted through an abstraction whose mesh was exceedingly fine: no mimeticism, no stylistic inconsistency, no religion, no recognizable cultural specificity, no sexuality but heterosexuality, no hard-edged geometry, no acknowledged commercial goals, no delicacy unless it came from heterosexual males.”

### **Phillip Guston**

“There is a strange assumption that it should be understood... that art should be made clear. For whom?”

## **(Later) Surrealism**

### **Dorothea Tanning**

“My painted compositions began to shift and merge in an ever intensifying complexity of planes...I wanted to lead the eye into spaces that hid, revealed, transformed all at once and where there would be some never-before-seen images, as if it had appeared with no help from me.”

“What am I after? A long time ago I said that I want to seduce by means of imperceptible passages from one reality to another. The viewer is caught in a net from which there is no escape save by going through the whole picture until he comes to the exit. My wish: to make a trap (picture) with no exit at all either for you or for me.”

“Keep your eye on your inner world and keep away from ads and idiots and movie stars, except when you need amusement.” (advice for artists)

“There is value in shaking people up, meaning those who have forgotten to think for themselves.”

Charles Stuckey (in reference to Dorothea Tanning): “Tanning’s paintings of 1955 and 1956, like *Tempest in Yellow*, feature the exquisitely rendered head of a partially visible figure otherwise submerged, like a bud inside a rose, in a strange infinity of glowing petal shapes, some few of them suggestive of the same head evaporating into the wind or slowly consolidating from gaseous formlessness...pallid, even ghostly, images as much ‘of’ space and ‘in’ space.”

## **Pre-Pop/Pop Art**

### **Jasper Johns**

“In the earlier paintings, I looked for subject matter that was recognizable. Letters and numbers for example. There were the things people knew, and did not know. In the sense that everyone had an everyday relationship to numbers and letters, but never had they seen them in the context of a painting. I wanted to make them see something new. I am interested in the idea of sight, in the use of the eye. I am interested in how we see and why we see the way we do.”

Critic’s comment: “His art became widely discussed as both the extension of and an attack on the formal strategies of Abstract Expressionism.”

### **Roy Lichtenstein**

He wanted to find a form of art that people would reject: “It was hard to get a painting that was despicable enough so that no one would hang it—everybody was hanging everything. It was almost acceptable to hang a dripping paint rag, everybody was accustomed to this. The one thing everyone hated was commercial art; apparently they didn’t hate that enough, either.”

### **Andy Warhol**

Gerard Malanga (in reference to working with Warhol): “Andy embraced his mistakes. We never rejected anything. In other words, if we were in the process of making a series of paintings and all of a sudden one painting went off a bit, or the image inadvertently overlapped the previous image, we kept right on moving along. We’d keep it, or as Andy would say, ‘It’s part of the art’.”

## Hard Edge/Minimalism/Conceptual Art

### Frank Stella

“My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object... You can see the whole idea without any confusion. What you see is what you see.”

### Donald Judd

“Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is one of the most salient and objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it is thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.”

“The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall.”

### Sol LeWitt

Conceptual art is art that “is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or his emotions,” and he declared, “the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product.”

From Cleveland exhibition: “It all started with a question: if you take an open cube and systematically subtract its parts, how many variations are created?”

## Contemporary Art

### Chuck Close

“Likeness is a by-product of the way I work. It would bother me a lot more if I did a lousy job of translating the photographs of someone I knew than if it were a stranger.”

### Yoshitomo Nara

“My art represents my childhood experiences. It is not influenced by Japanese pop culture. I played with sheep, cats, and dogs when I came home from school.”

### Takashi Murakami

When asked about straddling the line between art and commercial products, he responded: “I don’t think of it as straddling. I think of it as changing the line . . . how in Japan that line is less defined. Both by the culture and by the post-War economic situation. Japanese people accept that art and commerce will be blended; and in fact, they are surprised by the rigid and pretentious Western hierarchy of ‘high art.’ In the West, it certainly is dangerous to blend the two because people will throw all sorts of stones. But that’s okay—I’m ready with my hard hat.”

### DoHo Suh (about *Some/One* and similar works)

“It was night, and I was approaching this [football] stadium from the distance. And I saw this light in the stadium, and so I thought there’s some kind of activity going on. . . . I started to hear these clicking sounds, like the sound when the metal pieces touch together. It was like there were thousands of crickets in the stadium. And then I . . . walked slowly and went into the stadium on the ground level, and then I see this reflecting surface in the dream. And I realized I was stepping on these metal pieces that were the military dog tags. And it was slightly vibrating; the dog tags were touching each other, and the sound was from that. And from afar, I saw the central figure in the center of the stadium. I slowly proceeded to the center, and then I realized it was all one

piece that gradually rose up and formed this one figure. And it tried to go out the stadium but couldn't go out because the train was just too big—it was just too big to pull all the dog tags.”

“It's a form of identification, and it's made out of stainless steel. So, it's a permanent material; it will not rust. And each soldier has to carry two dog tags. And when a soldier is killed in battle, one dog tag has to remain on the dead body, and one is taken away by a surviving soldier in order to report the death of that soldier, in order to secure the identity of that soldier.”

## **Miscellaneous**

**Thomas Hoving** (former director, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

“Art happens when anyone in the world takes any kind of material and fashions it into a deliberate statement.”

“...there is a lot of ugly stuff out there calling itself high art, ghastly junk masquerading as ‘real art’ with few experts willing to blow the whistle on it. Yet the fact is that it's still terribly difficult to tell if one living artist is truly better or more universal than another. It's still very hard—maybe impossible—to predict which artists working today will become the old masters of the future.”

In reference to the Minimalist artist: “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it.”

**Kim Levin** (critic)

“The mainstream trickled on, minimizing and conceptualizing itself into oblivion, but we were finally bored with all that purity.” (from her article “Farewell to Modernism”)