- Welcome. This is a special talk, one of the ninety-niners. These are based on themes rather than about an artist or an art movement. The themes cover a range of artists and periods and for this talk the theme is "26", specifically the 26 letters of the alphabet, one for each artist or movement. This talk was released on 3 January 2026 and celebrates the human race surviving over a quarter of the twenty-first century.

General References and Copyright

- My talks and notes are produced with the assistance of AI systems such as Perplexity, ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini and Microsoft CoPilot.
- They are also based on information found on public websites such as Wikipedia, Tate, National Gallery, Louvre, The Met, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story.
- If they use information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant page. The talks that are inspired by an exhibition may use the booklets and books associated with the exhibition as a source of information.
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99-14 Art History from A-Z

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, MoMA

- So, this 2026 New Year special covers art history in 26 letters from A to Z. Each letter refers to an art movement or an artist and I select one well-known work. As they are so well-known, like this *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* what I do is described three little-known facts about each work and your job is to see how many you know already. Keep track of your points and see how well you have done at the end.

Notes

- I used Perplexity, ChatGPT, Claude and Google Gemini for research and I found that Gemini was the best at finding unusual facts that I found interesting.

Key artwork for each of the 26 art movements or artists from A to Z.

A - Abstract Expressionism

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *No. 5*, 1948, 244 x 122 cm, Private collection

B - Baroque

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, approx. 322 x 340 cm, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

C - Cubism

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, 243.9 x 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

D - Dadaism

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), *Fountain*, 1917 (readymade object), dimensions variable, original lost, replicas in various collections including Philadelphia Museum of Art

E - Expressionism

Edvard Munch (1863–1944), *The Scream*, 1893, 91 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo

F - Fauvism

Henri Matisse (1869–1954), *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, 80.65 x 59.69 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

G - Gothic

Unknown Artist, *The Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-1399, 53 x 37 cm (each panel), National Gallery, London

H - Harlem Renaissance

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934, mural scale, Hampton University Museum, Virginia

I - Impressionism

Claude Monet (1840–1926), *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872, 48 x 63 cm, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

J - Jugendstil (Art Nouveau variant)

Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), *The Kiss*, 1907-1908, 180 x 180 cm, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

K - Kinetic Art

Alexander Calder (1898–1976), *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, 1939, 289 x 229 x 152 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

L - Land Art

Robert Smithson (1938–1973), *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, earthwork sculpture, Great Salt Lake, Utah (site-specific)

M - Minimalism

Donald Judd (1928–1994), *Untitled*, 1969, stainless steel and coloured plexiglass boxes, dimensions variable, collection locations vary (e.g., Chinati Foundation, Texas)

N - Neoclassicism

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, 129.5 x 196.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

O - Op Art

Bridget Riley (b. 1931), *Movement in Squares*, 1961, 95 x 95 cm, collection varies (sometimes Tate or private collections)

P - Pop Art

Andy Warhol (1928–1987), *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962, 205.44 x 289.56 cm, Tate Modern, London

Q - Quattrocento (Early Renaissance Italian art)

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1486, 172.5 x 278.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

R - Romanticism

Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, 260 x 325 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris

S - Surrealism

Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, 24 x 33 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

T - Tonalism

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket*, 1875, 96.5 x 74.3 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

U - Ukiyo-e

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831, approx. 25.7 x 37.9 cm (print), various collections including The Met, New York

V - Venetian Renaissance

Titian (c.1488–1576), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518, 690 x 360 cm, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

W - Wiener Werkstätte

Koloman Moser (1868–1918), *Vase with Flowers*, c. 1903, ceramic, dimensions vary, Wien Museum, Vienna

X - Iannis Xenakis (modern artist-composer)

Persephassa (1969), sound installation/sculpture, site-specific, various performances and archival collections

Y - Young British Artists (YBA)

Damien Hirst (b. 1965), *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, 243.8 x 213.4 x 518.1 cm, Tate Modern, London

Z - Ziggurat Motif (artistic architectural reference)

No single artist; example: *Ziggurat of Ur*, rebuilt c. 21st century BCE, archaeological site in Iraq, influential in architectural and artistic symbolism

This list includes a canonical major work for each letter representing the assigned art movement or artist, useful for a visually and historically rich slide presentation with artwork details for effective annotation. Some works by Xenakis and for Ziggurat are less traditional paintings but key for representing

their topics.[1][2][3][4]

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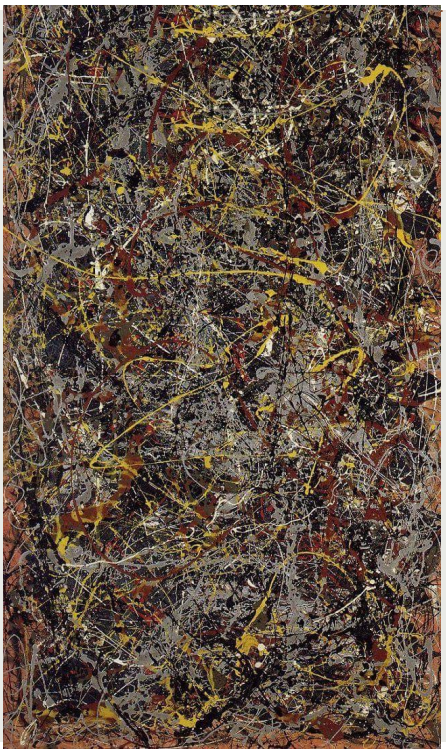

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *No. 5*, 1948, 244 x 122 cm, private collection

A - Abstract Expressionism

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *No. 5*, 1948, 244 x 122 cm, Private collection

Did you know:

1. It Was Seriously Damaged and Completely Repainted by Pollock

- Shortly after the painting was purchased for $1,500 by its first owner, collector Alfonso A. Ossorio, in 1949, it was damaged during transport—a piece of paint fell off the fiberboard. Ossorio sent it back for repair. Pollock was reportedly indifferent, attempting a quick patch job and commenting that "He'll never know. No one knows how to look at my paintings, he won't know the difference." When Ossorio complained about the patch Pollock took the unusual step of repainting the entire work, saying again that no one would be able to tell the difference. Ossorio, however, noticed but found the reworked painting to have "new qualities of richness and depth," considering it "a wonderful example of an artist having a second chance." So, the work we see today is technically a second version, entirely re-executed by the artist himself. Polllock’s difficult to reproduce technique is based on the mathematics of fractals so get a point if you knew it was repainted or you know it has fractal properties.

2. It Was Painted with Industrial House Paint

- The fluid, high-gloss appearance of the painting is due to Pollock's rejection of traditional artists' oils. Instead, he worked with synthetic resin paints (a type of gloss enamel, often referred to as "liquid paints" or "household paints" at the time). He applied these paints not with a brush but by dripping, pouring, and

flinging them from hardened brushes, sticks, and even basting syringes as he moved rhythmically around the fiberboard laid on the floor. This choice of unconventional, commercial materials was a radical break from fine art tradition.

3. It Set a World Record for the Most Expensive Painting (at the Time)

- In 2006, the painting achieved legendary financial status when it was sold in a private sale for a staggering $140 million.
- **The Record**: This price set a new world record for the highest price ever paid for a painting at the time, surpassing Gustav Klimt's Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I.
- **The Mystery Buyer**: The buyer and seller were entertainment mogul David Geffen and Mexican financier David Martinez, though Martinez's lawyers later denied the sale. Despite the denial, the price and the transaction are widely accepted in the art world as factual, marking a major milestone in the global art market

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, approx. 322 x 340 cm, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

B - Baroque

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, approx. 322 x 340 cm, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

1. **A Second Choice Artist**

- The prestigious commission for the Contarelli Chapel, which includes *The Calling of St. Matthew*, was originally given to **a different, more popular painter**, the late Mannerist artist Giuseppe Cesari (pronounced “jo-SEPP-ay CHAY-zuh-ree"). Cesari, who was one of the most in-demand artists in Rome at the time and was even Caravaggio's former employer, was too busy to finish the project after completing the ceiling frescoes. Due to his patron Cardinal del Monte's influence, the young and then-less-established Caravaggio was finally brought in for his first-ever major public church commission, a gig that would become his big break and help launch the entire Baroque movement.

2. **The Pointing Finger**

- Christ's outstretched right hand is a direct homage to Michelangelo's famous fresco, The Creation of Adam, on the Sistine Chapel ceiling . However, Caravaggio's depiction is not a perfect copy. While the gesture is clearly inspired by Adam's more languid, receiving hand in Michelangelo's work, it is also pointed in the same direction as the hand of God the Father in the original fresco. This powerful visual connection symbolically represents Christ as the "New Adam," whose call creates Matthew anew, moving him from the "darkness" of his life as a tax collector to the "light" of discipleship.

3. **Who is Being Called?**

- While the most widely accepted interpretation is that the **bearded man** pointing to his chest **is Matthew**, there is a deliberate ambiguity as to which figure Christ is calling. The bearded man's gesture can be read as him asking, "Me?" in disbelief, or it could be him **pointing to the younger man** next to him and asking, "Him?" In fact, the younger man is still slumped over the money, completely focused on the worldly coins. The ambiguity may have been a choice by Caravaggio to suggest that **God's call is for anyone**—not just one specific person—and that the moment of choice and conversion is available to all men, even the most self-absorbed or corrupt.

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Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, 243.9 x 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

C - Cubism

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, 243.9 x 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1. **The Original Title Was Much More Scandalous**

- Picasso's original name for the painting was *The Brothel of Avignon* (*Le Bordel d'Avignon*), referring to a brothel on Carrer d'Avinyó in Barcelona. The current, more sanitised title, *The Young Ladies of Avignon (Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), was given to the work later in 1916 by the poet and art critic **André Salmon** for its first public exhibition. Salmon reportedly chose the less provocative name to **lessen its "shocking" subject matter** and make it more palatable to the public. **Picasso himself disliked the change** and is said to have referred to it as "my brothel" ("mon bordel") for the rest of his life.

2. **Where are the Men (and the Skull)?**

- In the earliest preparatory sketches for the painting, the composition included two male figures alongside the five women. One was a sailor, and the other was a medical student entering the scene while holding a skull. Picasso removed the men from the final work, arguably to make the viewer the direct, uninvited "customer" or voyeur. The skull was a vanitas symbol, a traditional reminder of mortality, which many historians believe reflects Picasso's anxieties, particularly a contemporary fear of contracting venereal disease from prostitutes, such as syphilis. By removing the skull and student, the threat of death and disease became an implied psychological presence, manifested in the women's grotesque, fragmented bodies and confrontational gazes.

3. Picasso had a “Revelation” in the Ethnographic Museum

- The jarring, mask-like faces of the two figures on the right, which mark the stylistic break into Cubism, were directly inspired by African tribal masks . Picasso later claimed that a turning point for the painting came after a visit to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, where he saw African and Oceanic sculptures. He described it as a "revelation," realizing that these ritual objects were not just art, but "weapons" against "unknown, threatening spirits." This encounter gave him the artistic license to move past traditional representation and use the expressive, anti-naturalistic power of the masks to create the intensely confrontational and aggressive figures on his canvas.

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Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), *Fountain*, 1917 (readymade object), dimensions variable, original lost, replicas in various collections including Philadelphia Museum of Art

D - Dadaism

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), *Fountain*, 1917 (readymade object), dimensions variable, original lost, replicas in various collections including Philadelphia Museum of Art

1. **The Real Artist May Have Been a Woman**

- A strong, persistent, and well-supported historical argument suggests that Duchamp did not create Fountain, but rather submitted it on behalf of his friend, the German Dada artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Evidence includes a 1917 letter from Duchamp to his sister where he wrote: "One of my female friends, who had adopted the masculine pseudonym Richard Mutt, sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture." The Baroness was known for creating provocative works using found objects, and some scholars argue the signature "R. Mutt" is a clever pun on the German word Armut (poverty) or Mutter (mother), fitting her biographical context more than Duchamp's later, more pragmatic explanation. The re-attribution is not accepted by all major museums, but it powerfully challenges the established narrative of Modern Art's origin.

2. **The Original Masterpiece Was Thrown Away**

- The physical object that Marcel Duchamp bought, signed "R. Mutt 1917," and submitted to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition no longer exists. It was lost or thrown out shortly after the exhibition. After the Society's board—of which Duchamp was a founder—voted to "suppress" (hide) the work, Duchamp resigned in protest. He then arranged for his friend, the famous

photographer Alfred Stieglitz, to take a photo of it. The original urinal was left in Stieglitz's care at his gallery, 291, and the best historical guess is that it was thrown away as rubbish by Stieglitz's gallery staff. The Fountain you see in museums today (such as the Tate Modern or MoMA) are later, signed replicas that Duchamp authorized in the 1950s and 60s, a fact that only reinforces his concept that the idea of the artwork is more important than the original object.

3. **The Signature Is a Toilet Manufacturer Pun**

- Duchamp's initial explanation for the pseudonym "R. Mutt" was a dual pun that anchors the work in mundane commercialism: R. Mutt: The "Mutt" was derived from the J.L. Mott Iron Works, a popular New York plumbing supply company from which Duchamp claimed to have purchased the urinal. By changing "Mott" to "Mutt," he added another layer. Mutt and Jeff: "Mutt" also referenced the popular American newspaper comic strip of the time, Mutt and Jeff. By using a name associated with an everyday plumbing brand and a lowbrow cartoon, Duchamp deliberately chose a signature that was anti-artistic, commercial, and completely non-authoritative.

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Image used: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)

Edvard Munch (1863–1944), *The Scream*, 1893, 91 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo

E - Expressionism

Edvard Munch (1863–1944), *The Scream*, 1893, 91 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery, Oslo

1. **The Figure Isn't Screaming—It's Reacting**

- The most common misconception is that the figure is letting out a terrible shriek. However, Munch's own diary entry that inspired the work suggests the figure is actually covering its ears to block out the sound. Munch wrote: "I was walking along the road with two friends—the sun was setting—suddenly the sky turned blood red—I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence—I felt a great, infinite scream pass through nature." The original German title for the work was *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*). This implies the sound is an external, overwhelming force (the anxiety of the modern world) that the figure is attempting to shut out, not create. The figure's posture thus represents a raw, internal psychological reaction to the external world's chaos.

2. **A Secret Inscription by the Artist Himself**

- This version of The Scream has a tiny, almost invisible pencil inscription in the upper left corner. It reads, translated "Could only have been painted by a madman!" ("Kan kun være malet af en gal Mand!"). For years, art historians debated whether the inscription was an act of vandalism by a critic or viewer. However, following modern forensic analysis and research into Munch's letters and diaries, it is now widely accepted that Munch himself wrote the note. It is believed to be a wry, defensive, and personal comment on the public's hostile reaction to the painting when it was first exhibited, acknowledging his fears of

the mental illness that ran in his family (his sister was institutionalised nearby) while simultaneously embracing his emotional expression.

3. **It's Not One Painting, It's a Multi-Version Motif**

- This is the work in the National Gallery, Oslo, but it's important to know that Munch created at least four principal versions of this iconic scene between 1893 and 1910, plus a lithograph that allowed him to reproduce and disseminate the image globally. The four main versions include: two paintings (one in the National Gallery and one in the Munch Museum, Oslo) and two pastels (one in the Munch Museum, and one which sold at auction in 2012 for nearly $120 million). Munch often created multiple versions of his most emotionally potent works, viewing them as a "Frieze of Life," allowing him to continuously explore and refine the core experience of existential angst and human emotion. This practice helped establish the motif as an icon rather than a single, static image.

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Henri Matisse (1869–1954), *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, 80.65 x 59.69 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

F - Fauvism

Henri Matisse (1869–1954), *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, 80.65 x 59.69 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

1. **What was the colour of the dress she was wearing?**

- The subject of the portrait is Amélie Matisse (pronounced “am-ee-lee”), the artist's wife. While she is depicted in an elaborate, colourful bourgeois outfit with a fan and gloves, art historians often quote Matisse on the reality of her attire during the sitting: when asked what colour dress his wife was actually wearing, he is alleged to have replied, "Black, of course.” This contrast highlights that the vibrant, shocking, non-naturalistic colours—the bright green stripe on her face, the orange, and the pinks—were purely expressive and decorative, completely detached from the reality of the scene. This statement perfectly encapsulates the central premise of Fauvism: colour possesses its own independent power and does not have to be limited to representing reality.

2. **What encouraged Matisse to continue?**

- When the painting was first exhibited at the 1905 Salon d'Automne in Paris, it was hung in a room with other non-traditional works, prompting the critic Louis Vauxcelles to famously label the artists "Les Fauves" (the wild beasts). The public reaction was hostile, derisive, and almost universally negative. Matisse was reportedly **devastated** and **deeply discouraged** by the harsh criticism. The painting **was purchased** shortly thereafter by the expatriate American collectors, Gertrude and Leo Stein, for the modest price of 500 francs. This sale was **a huge psychological boost** for Matisse, giving him the validation and

financial stability needed to continue his radical experimentation, effectively saving the fledgling Fauvism movement from its own brutal reception.

3. **What other painting was part of a trio of portraits**

- *Woman with a Hat* was immediately followed by two other significant portraits of Amélie Matisse, completing a powerful trio of experiments in **non-naturalistic colour** that **cemented his leadership** of Fauvism. The most famous companion piece is ***The Green Line*** (or Portrait of Madame Matisse), painted the same year. In "The Green Line," Amélie's face is bisected by a vibrant green stripe running from forehead to chin, creating an even bolder, more mask-like image than *Woman with a Hat*. Matisse used these portraits to explore how colours could be manipulated to create volume, temperature, and emotion, demonstrating to the world (and to himself) the full potential of his new, expressive style. The three paintings were ***Woman with a Hat*** (La Femme au chapeau, 1905) and ***The Green Line*** (La Raie verte, pronounced "ray", Portrait of Madame Matisse, 1905) are often grouped with ***Open Window, Collioure*** (pronounced "coo-li-or", 1905), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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Unknown Artist, *The Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-1399, 53 x 37 cm (each panel), National Gallery, London

G - Gothic

Unknown Artist, *The Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-1399, 53 x 37 cm (each panel), National Gallery, London

1. **A Birthday Gift from the Virgin Mary?**

- While the diptych is a devotional object depicting King Richard II being presented to the Virgin and Child by three saints, it contains a subtle, specific clue suggesting it was also a **political piece and possibly a highly personal gift**. Richard II's **feast day was September 8th**, which is also the traditional feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (Mary's birthday). It is plausible that the painting served as a political statement on the king's divine right and a spiritual "birthday present" to the king from his celestial protectors, subtly aligning his destiny with the Virgin Mary's. Note he was born in 1367 and would have been in his late twenties or thirties.

2. **The Angels Wear the King's Livery**

- The eleven angels surrounding the Virgin and Child are not just standard heavenly figures; they are explicitly painted as members of Richard II's household by wearing the royal livery. Each angel sports a blue garter (a direct reference to the Order of the Garter) and a white hart badge pinned to their robes . The white hart was Richard II's personal emblem, adopted from his mother, Joan of Kent. By dressing the angels in the king's colors and badge, the artist transforms the celestial court into a direct, sacred reflection of the King's earthly court, confirming his status as God's chosen ruler.

3. **An Unfinished and Hidden Detail on the Reverse**

- The reverse of the two panels features two distinct elements: the **royal coat of arms** (England and France quarterly) and the badge of the **white hart**. However, the white hart on the reverse of the left panel is **only partially completed** . This detail suggests that the work was either painted in great haste for an impending event or that the artist had not fully finalised the entire object before it was delivered and used. It is a rare and surprising glimpse into the rushed, practical, and sometimes incomplete nature of medieval artistic production, especially for such a high-stakes, important commission.

NOTES

- The diptych dates from the late 14th century, likely 1395-1399, and was painted for King Richard II of England as a private devotional object symbolising his divine right to rule.[1][2]
- It is painted on Baltic oak panels with egg tempera and gold leaf, producing vibrant luminous colours typical of Gothic art, merging Byzantine influence with early naturalism.[3][1]
- The iconography includes Richard II kneeling before the Virgin and Child, flanked by angels and saints, with heraldic symbols such as the white hart and broomcod, underscoring its political as well as spiritual significance.[4][5][1]
- The diptych is renowned as one of the most studied medieval European paintings, with multifaceted symbolism and debated provenance, revealing late medieval royal and religious culture.[2][6][3]

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Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934, mural scale, Hampton University Museum, Virginia

H - Harlem Renaissance

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934, mural scale, Hampton University Museum, Virginia

1. **There's a bonus point if you know the artist.**

- (CLICK) It is Aaron Douglas one of the most influential artists of the Harlem Renaissance, was born in Kansas, in 1899.

2. **A Government-Funded Work for the Public**

- The entire Aspects of Negro Life series, including this panel, was **commissioned through the Public Works of Art Project** (PWAP), the first federal program to employ artists during the **Great Depression**. The commission was specifically for the **135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library** (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) in Harlem. This funding meant that Douglas was not dependent on private collectors, allowing him to create a monumental work of historical and political vision, directly accessible to the Black community it depicted, making it true public art.

3. **The Concentric Circles Represent a Cosmic Harmony**

- Douglas's signature style features figures as **dark silhouettes** and uses **concentric circles of muted, radiating colour** (like green, blue, and mauve) that cut across the scene. These circles are **not merely decorative but are symbolic**. They are meant to represent the **rhythm of music** (Jazz and spirituals), the **unifying spiritual light of God and nature**, and the cyclical nature of history. In this panel, a circle often highlights a significant figure or

element, such as the Emancipation Proclamation or the ballot—implying these historical documents are critical, **cosmic turning points** in the struggle for freedom.

4. **The Hidden Threat of the Ku Klux Klan**

- The central drama of the panel lies in the depiction of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. On the left side of the mural, a subtle but deeply threatening element is included: the silhouettes of mounted figures on horseback are visible in the background . These figures, representing the **rise of the Ku Klux Klan**, characterise the backlash against Black political and social gains after the Civil War. Douglas uses the power of silhouette and shadow to underscore the persistent, underlying menace and violence that jeopardized the promise of Reconstruction and forced the Great Migration of Black Americans northwards.

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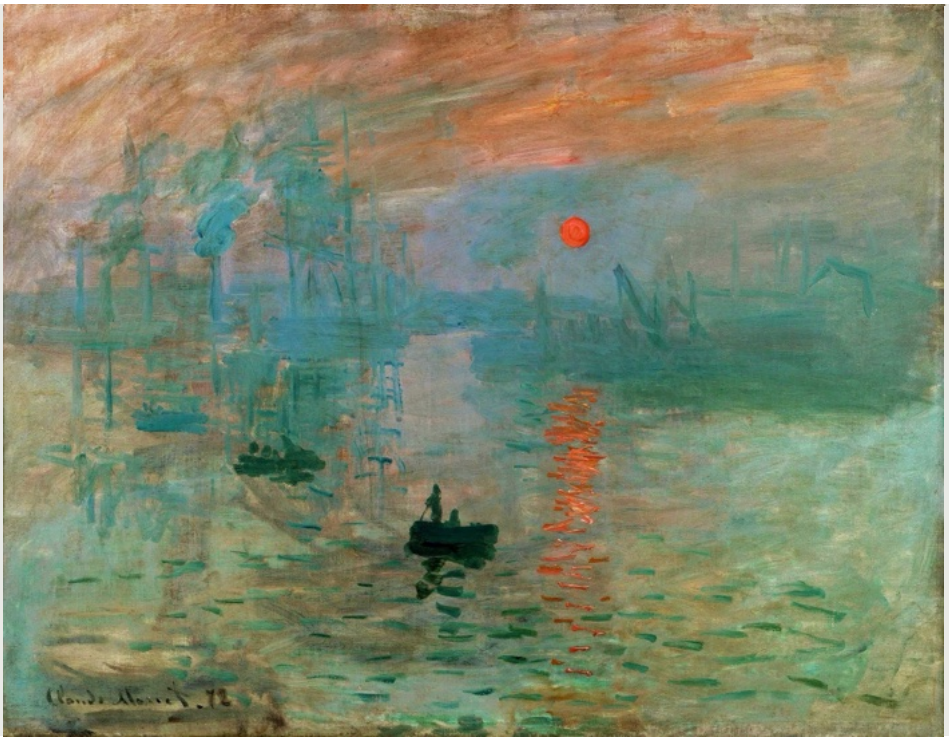

Claude Monet (1840–1926), *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872, 48 x 63 cm, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

I - Impressionism

Claude Monet (1840–1926), *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872, 48 x 63 cm, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris

1. **The painting that accidentally named a movement through mockery**:

- When ***Impression, Sunrise*** was exhibited at the first Impressionist exhibition in April 1874 (held at photographer Nadar's studio on Boulevard des Capucines), art critic Louis Leroy wrote a scathing satirical review in ***Le Charivari*** titled "The Exhibition of the Impressionists." He mockingly used Monet's title to dismiss the entire group, writing that wallpaper in its embryonic state was more finished than this "seascape." The artists embraced the insult and adopted "Impressionist" as their official name.

2. The painting was stolen and missing for five years:

- On October 27, 1985, armed thieves broke into the Musée Marmottan Monet and stole *Impression, Sunrise* along with eight other paintings. The theft took just five minutes. The painting wasn't recovered until December 1990, when French police found it in a villa in Porto-Vecchio, Corsica. During its absence, it became one of the world's most wanted artworks.

3. Scientific analysis revealed Monet painted it in a single sitting at a precise moment:

- Modern scientific studies using astronomical calculations and weather records determined that Monet painted this view of Le Havre harbor on November 13, 1872, at approximately 7:35 AM. The sun's position, tide levels, and

atmospheric conditions all match that specific date and time. Despite appearing loose and spontaneous, Monet captured an actual fleeting moment with remarkable accuracy—the very essence of what he was trying to achieve.

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Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), *The Kiss*, 1907-1908, 180 x 180 cm, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

J - Jugendstil (Art Nouveau variant)

Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), *The Kiss*, 1907-1908, 180 x 180 cm, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

1. **The painting was purchased before Klimt finished it—for a record-shattering price**:

- In 1908, when *The Kiss* was first exhibited at the Kunstschau in Vienna, the Belvedere Museum (Österreichische Galleria Belvedere), that is the Austrian Government, **bought it** while it was **still unfinished for 25,000 crowns** (approximately $240,000 in today's currency). This was a staggering sum—the previous record for a painting sold in Austria had been a **mere 500 crowns**. The purchase was made even before the exhibition ended, as the **Austrian government** considered it a matter of national interest.

2. **Klimt's father and brother died and his work had been viciously attacked by critics**:

- In 1892, both **Klimt's father** Ernst Klimt the Elder (a gold engraver) and his **brother Ernst died within months** of each other—his father from a stroke and his brother from pericarditis. Then, in the early 1900s, Klimt's University of Vienna ceiling paintings (Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence) were viciously **attacked as "pornography" and "perverted excess,"** wounding his reputation deeply. In 1907, while working on *The Kiss*, Klimt confessed his creative crisis in a letter: "**Either I am too old, or too nervous, or too stupid—there must be something wrong**." Yet from this lowest point emerged his most celebrated work.

3. **The gold leaf technique had deeply personal significance—and was considered sacrilegious by some**:

- Klimt's father and brother were both metalworkers (his **father a gold engraver**, his brother also trained as an engraver), and they had died about 15 years before The Kiss was painted. The extensive use of gold leaf in the painting was both a **tribute to them** and inspired by **Byzantine mosaics** Klimt saw during his **1903 trips to Ravenna**, Italy. Because gold leaf was historically **reserved for religious art** depicting saints and divine figures, some critics considered Klimt's use of it to celebrate earthly love and sensuality to be **sacrilegious**.

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Alexander Calder (1898–1976), *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, 1939, 289 x 229 x 152 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

K - Kinetic Art

Alexander Calder (1898–1976), *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, 1939, 289 x 229 x 152 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1. **It still hangs in the exact stairwell for which it was commissioned in 1939:**

- When MoMA opened its new building on West 53rd Street in 1939, the museum commissioned Calder to create Lobster Trap and Fish Tail specifically for the **principal stairwell**. The mobile still hangs in the same stairwell for which it was made over 85 years ago, making it one of the few artworks anywhere that remains in its original intended location. Calder served as MoMA's unofficial "house artist" during its formative years.

2. **Calder's mobiles were inspired by Mondrian's rejection of his idea:**

- In October 1930, when Calder visited Piet Mondrian's studio at 26 rue du Départ in Paris, he was struck by the coloured cardboard rectangles tacked on the walls. Calder suggested to Mondrian that it would be fun to make these **rectangles oscillate**, but Mondrian, with a very serious expression, replied: "**No, it is not necessary, my painting is already very fast**." This single visit gave Calder "**a shock that started things**." Though he had heard the word "modern" before, he said he didn't consciously know or feel the term "abstract" until that moment. At **age thirty-two, he decided he wanted to work in the abstract**—and created moving art that Mondrian had rejected as unnecessary.

3. **Marcel Duchamp coined the term "mobile"**:

- In 1931, Marcel Duchamp visited Calder's studio at 14 rue de la Colonie in Paris and saw a motor-driven abstract sculpture with three elements that had just been painted and wasn't quite dry yet. Duchamp asked "Do you mind?" and put his hands on it. When Calder asked what to call these new works, Duchamp immediately produced the word "mobile," which in French refers to both "motion" and "motive". This single word would define an entire genre of kinetic sculpture.

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Robert Smithson (1938–1973), *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, earthwork sculpture, Great Salt Lake, Utah (site-specific)

L - Land Art

Robert Smithson (1938–1973), *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, earthwork sculpture, Great Salt Lake, Utah (site-specific)

1. **The artwork vanished underwater just two years after creation and remained invisible for three decades:**

- Created in 1970 when water levels were particularly low, Spiral Jetty was submerged in 1972, appeared briefly in 1982 until droughts caused the lake to recede in 2002, and it has remained visible ever since. At its highest, in 1987, the water rose 16 feet above the rocks. During its decades underwater, the work became legendary primarily through Smithson's accompanying film and essay—most people knew it only as a myth until the drought made it permanently visible again.

2. **Smithson paid only $100 to lease the land and spent $9,000 to build a 6,650-ton masterpiece—then died three years later surveying another earthwork**:

- In spring 1970, Robert Smithson paid $100 to lease 10 desolate acres of brine and rocks. The sculpture was financed in part by a **$9,000 USD grant** from the Virginia Dwan Gallery of New York. In April 1970, it took **six days**, 625 man-hours, 292 truck-hours, $9,000, and **6,500 tons of basalt, limestone and mud** for Robert Smiths to construct the Spiral Jetty. Tragically, **while surveying the site in 1973**, **Smithson was killed in a plane crash** alongside pilot Gale Ray Rogers and photographer Richard I. Curtin. He was only 35 years old and working on his final earthwork.

3. **The contractor thought it was the most pointless thing he'd ever built—until Smithson paid him $3,000 more to completely redo it:**

- Phillips often told people that his best-known construction job was "**the only thing I ever built that ... was to look at and had no purpose**". Phillips described the use of earth-moving equipment along the lakeside as "tricky", and said of Smithson that "**I don't think he had done any geology work or anything on it. He just had in his mind what it should look like.... He just had the eye for it. I assume it was the artist in him**." Even more remarkably, at first, Smithson wanted more of a j-shaped jetty, with a small island in the centre, but when he stood on the hill and looked down on the sculpture he was disappointed. So he paid foreman Bob Phillips and his crew another $3,000 to take away the "j" and make a counterclockwise, true spiral instead.

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Donald Judd (1928–1994), *Untitled*, 1969, copper, Ten unit, each 22.9 x 101.6 x 78.7 cm, with 22.9 cm intervals; overall height: 457.2 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

M - Minimalism

Donald Judd (1928–1994), *Untitled*, 1969, copper, Ten unit, each 22.9 x 101.6 x 78.7 cm, with 22.9 cm intervals; overall height: 457.2 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

1. **Judd despised being called a Minimalist—the very term that made him famous—and fought against it his entire career:**

- Though universally considered "the father of minimalism," Judd vehemently rejected the label with visceral intensity (Medium, January 2022; Wikipedia, September 2025). He preferred calling his works "**specific objects**," explicitly stating they were **neither painting nor sculpture** (Art Institute of Chicago). In his 1965 essay for Arts Yearbook, Judd wrote: "**The new three dimensional work doesn't constitute a movement, school, or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities**" (Wikipedia, September 2025). As one critic noted, for someone considered a minimalist pioneer, "the fact that he hated this term with all his heart" reveals how much the movement evolved beyond his intentions (Medium, January 2022; Calina Marinas blog, July 2022).

2. **Judd didn't make his sculptures himself—he ordered them by telephone from industrial fabricators like Bernstein Brothers, a roofing and ventilation company**:

- Starting in 1964, Judd began **delegating fabrication** to professional artisans, particularly Bernstein Brothers, a sheet metal shop in Queens that specialised in roofing, heating, and ventilation (Wikipedia, September 2025; Artforum, March

2012; Judd Foundation). The mistaken impression was that Judd "merely phoned his fabricators to order his metal structures," but archived order sheets reveal **meticulous specifications** (Artforum, March 2012). A December 4, 1964 order shows "Don Judd 53 East 19th St" ordering four boxes 30" x 30" x 30" costing $40 each (Artforum, March 2012). Judd explained: "**I started having work made by a sheet-metal factory and slowly the studio became much neater, and I had a lot of cactus in it and I mostly sat around making sketches**" (Judd Foundation).

3. **Judd purchased his studio and exhibition space for just $68,000 in 1968—and it later required a $23 million restoration**:

- When Judd bought the five-story cast-iron building in SoHo in 1968 (**101 Spring Street**), the area was still rough and undesirable (Wallpaper, August 2022; Architectural Record, March 2019; Places Journal, May 2011). The 1870 building, designed by Nicholas Whyte, became **his first owned property** and the **birthplace of his concept of "permanent installation"** (Judd Foundation). He spent the **next 25 years renovating it floor by floor**, installing works by himself, Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, John Chamberlain, and others (Archello). After his death in 1994, his children Rainer and Flavin Judd oversaw a **$23 million restoration completed in 2013** (Wallpaper, August 2022; Ala Champ magazine). The building remains frozen in time, with items left exactly as Judd placed them, including an unfamiliar tube of toothpaste on the bathroom counter and bottles of liquor from distant places (1014.nyc).

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Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, 129.5 x 196.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

N - Neoclassicism

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, 129.5 x 196.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1. **David deliberately included Plato—who wasn't actually at Socrates' death—but made him look decades older than he really was**:

- Plato sits at the foot of the bed as an elderly, bearded man in white robes, but he was **only about 29 years old when Socrates** died in 399 BCE (Wikipedia; Mental Floss). More remarkably, **Plato wasn't even present** at the execution—he was ill that day according to his own account (Mental Floss; Exploring Art with Alessandro). David painted Plato as present because he wanted to reference the author of the Phaedo, the dialogue that preserved this story, rather than depict historical accuracy (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). The painting may be set in **Plato's imagination as an old man** attempting to conjure the scene while **writing years later** (Wikipedia).

2. **Sir Joshua Reynolds was so overwhelmed he visited the Salon nine more times and compared it to the Sistine Chapel—while David's rival withdrew his competing painting in humiliation**:

- When The Death of Socrates debuted at the Paris Salon on August 25, 1787, it was exhibited alongside Pierre Peyron's painting of the exact same subject (Mental Floss; Wikipedia). The influential English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds compared David's work to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and Raphael's Stanze rooms, then returned to view it nine more times, declaring it "in every sense perfect" (Mental Floss; Wikipedia). David had deliberately sought a commission

to paint the same subject as Peyron, knowing their works would go head-to-head (Kelly Bagdanov). David's painting received such overwhelming acclaim that Peyron pulled his work from the exhibition during its last days to avoid unfavorable comparisons, and Peyron's career never fully recovered (EBSCO Research Starters; Kelly Bagdanov). Count Potocki derisively stated that Peyron's work "has shown up the quality of David's picture by proving to the public how far beneath him one could be" (Wikipedia).

3. **Thomas Jefferson declared it the best work at the 1787 Salon—and David signed his name in two different places with symbolic meaning**:

- Thomas Jefferson, then American minister to France (from 1785 to 1789, 3rd President from 1801 to 1809), was present at the unveiling and wrote to artist John Trumbull that "**the best thing is the *Death of Socrates* by David, and a superb one it is**" (Wikipedia; Decorative Arts Trust). Uniquely, David signed the painting in **two places**: his full signature "L. David" appears on the grey bench where Crito (the man in the coral robe clutching Socrates' thigh) sits, while just his initials appear under Plato (Mental Floss; WikiArt). The signature placement under Crito—the disciple who tried to persuade Socrates to escape in Plato's dialogue Crito—suggests David identified most closely with him as someone who "**clutches at the morals and values that Socrates represents**" (Mental Floss). The initials under Plato acknowledge the source of the story (WikiArt).

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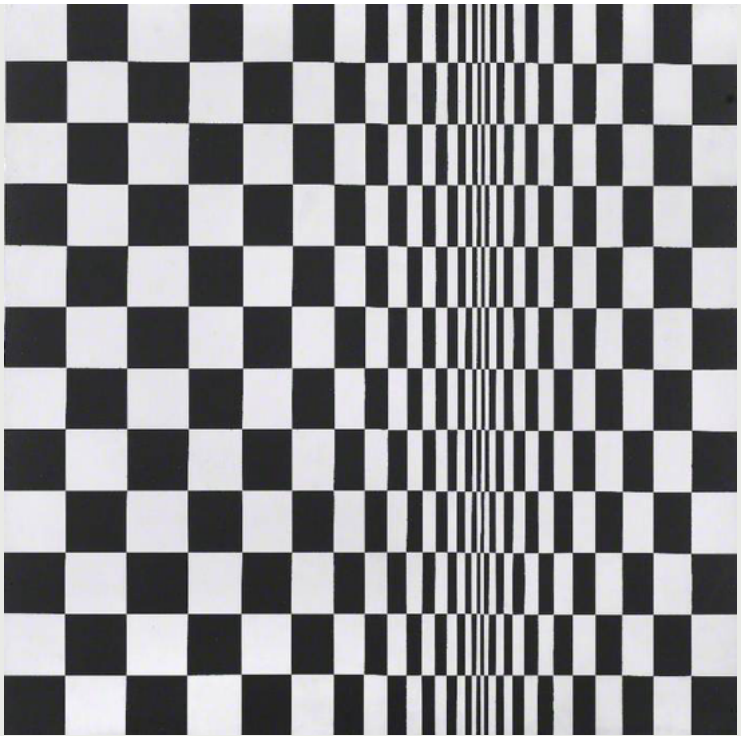

Bridget Riley (b. 1931), *Movement in Squares*, 1961, 123.2 × 121.2 cm, Arts Council Collection, Southbank, London

O - Op Art

Bridget Riley (b. 1931), *Movement in Squares*, 1961, 123.2 × 121.2 cm, Arts Council Collection, Southbank, London

1. **Riley's first solo show happened by complete accident:**

- She ducked into a gallery doorway to escape a rainstorm and the owner immediately offered her an exhibition. In late 1961, Riley was still working part-time as an illustrator at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, completely unknown in the art world (Artforum, September 2023; Wikipedia). On a rainy autumn afternoon, she rushed into the doorway of Gallery One at 16 North Audley Street to shelter from a torrential downpour (Artforum, September 2023; The Art Story). The gallery owner Victor Musgrave came over and said "**Why don't you come in and look properly?**" (Artforum, September 2023). Riley showed him studies for what would become her breakthrough works, **including *Movement in Squares*** (Artforum, September 2023). Musgrave offered her a solo exhibition for May 1962 (Arts Council Collection; The Art Story). Only about a dozen people attended the opening, and only one work sold—*Movement in Squares* itself, purchased by influential critic David Sylvester (Artforum, September 2023; Arts Council Collection).

2. **She made it in one sitting**:

- Riley created the entire design for Movement in Squares in a single uninterrupted sitting—and was "surprised and elated" when she finally looked at what she'd made. During a difficult creative period, Riley decided to make a fresh start with the simplest possible shape: the square (The Art Story). She later

recalled: "Everyone knows what a square looks like and how to make one in geometric terms. It is a monumental, highly conceptualised form: stable and symmetrical, equal angles, equal size. I drew the first few squares. No discoveries there. Was there anything to be found in a square? But as I drew, things began to change" (Google Arts & Culture; The Art Story). She created the entire design in one sitting without stopping, then painted each alternate square black to create contrast (The Art Story). When she finally stepped back to look, she was "surprised and elated" by what she saw—the squares appeared to compress, expand, and move in ways she hadn't anticipated (The Art Story; Google Arts & Culture).

3. **Someone copied it:**

- In 2013, Riley successfully sued German artist Tobias Rehberger for plagiarism when his wall-sized installation at the Berlin State Library too closely resembled Movement in Squares. Riley discovered that Rehberger had created a large checkerboard work called Uhrenobjekt ("Watch Object") for the prestigious Berlin State Library's reading room that bore striking resemblance to her 1961 painting (Wikipedia; Op-Art.co.uk, January 2014). She immediately launched a plagiarism lawsuit demanding its removal (Wikipedia; Cassone, January 2014). The German court denied the removal request but ordered the work covered until the case was resolved—it remained hidden for over a year (Op-Art.co.uk, January 2014; Greg.org). In January 2014, they reached a settlement: the work could remain displayed only with the revised title Uhrenobjekt nach Movement in Squares von Bridget Riley ("Watch Object after Movement in Squares by Bridget Riley"), and Rehberger paid Riley €10,000, which she donated to SPACE Studios, the charitable organization she co-founded in 1968 (Cassone, January 2014; Op-Art.co.uk, January 2014).

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Andy Warhol (1928–1987), *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962, 205.44 x 289.56 cm, Tate Modern, London

P - Pop Art

Andy Warhol (1928–1987), *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962, 205.44 x 289.56 cm, Tate Modern, London

1. **The iconic diptych wasn't Warhol's idea**

- Collector Emily Hall Tremaine created it by suggesting he pair two separate paintings together: When art collectors Burton and Emily Tremaine visited Warhol's Lexington Avenue studio in 1962, the still-emerging artist didn't have a dealer yet and was selling works himself (Artnet News, October 2022). Emily Tremaine later recalled: "**He seemed shy and it took a bit of coaxing before he showed us everything. He first showed us the black Marilyns, and several pictures later the coloured one appeared. I said I thought they should be presented as a diptych, Andy replied 'gee whiz yes**' so he brought back the black one, stood it next to the coloured one and we all saw we had achieved a very complex and moving statement about Marilyn, so I really felt I was a collaborator!" (Artnet News, October 2022; Tate, 2020s). Tate curator Gregor Muir confirmed: "This Diptych was put together not by Warhol, but by the collector" (Phaidon, March 2020). The Tremaines bought both paintings, and they've been a single artwork ever since (Artnet News, October 2022). Tremaine sold the work to the Tate Gallery in 1980 (WikiArt).

2. **Warhol created the work just weeks after Monroe's death—and never owned or had permission to use the publicity photograph he appropriated**:

- Marilyn Monroe died on August 4-5, 1962, at age 36 from a barbiturate

overdose (Wikipedia, October 2025; History.com, May 2025). Warhol started the silkscreen just weeks afterward, completing it by November 1962 when it debuted at New York's Stable Gallery (Phaidon, March 2020). The source photograph was a publicity still from Monroe's 1953 film Niagara, taken by photographer Gene Kornman (Tate, 2020s; Wikipedia, October 2025). Critically, Warhol did not own the promotional photograph and did not have permission to use it—the publicity photograph was owned and distributed by Monroe's movie studio (Wikipedia, October 2025). His appropriation eventually resulted in a settlement with the photograph's owner (Wikipedia, October 2025). The work was transformative enough that a strong fair use argument could be made today, but Warhol's unauthorised use was undeniable (Wikipedia, October 2025).

3. **Warhol carried a tape recorder everywhere and called it his "wife"—he recorded thousands of hours of conversations to create emotional distance from the world**:

- Beginning in 1964, Warhol acquired his first mass-marketed portable cassette recorder, the Norelco Carry-Corder, a device to which he felt so devoted that he referred to it as his "wife" (Project MUSE, March 2015; Artforum, September 2023). He explained: "The acquisition of my tape recorder really finished whatever emotional life I might have had, but I was glad to see it go. Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem just meant a good tape, and when a problem transforms itself into a good tape it's not a problem any more" (INCITE; Revolver Gallery, May 2025). Warhol carried the recorder everywhere, clutching it close to his body like a security blanket in public (The Serving Library). He ultimately created about 4,000 hours of recordings before his death in 1987 (INCITE). The recorder featured so regularly with his public appearances that calling it his "wife" became one of his signature quirks (Best4Frames).

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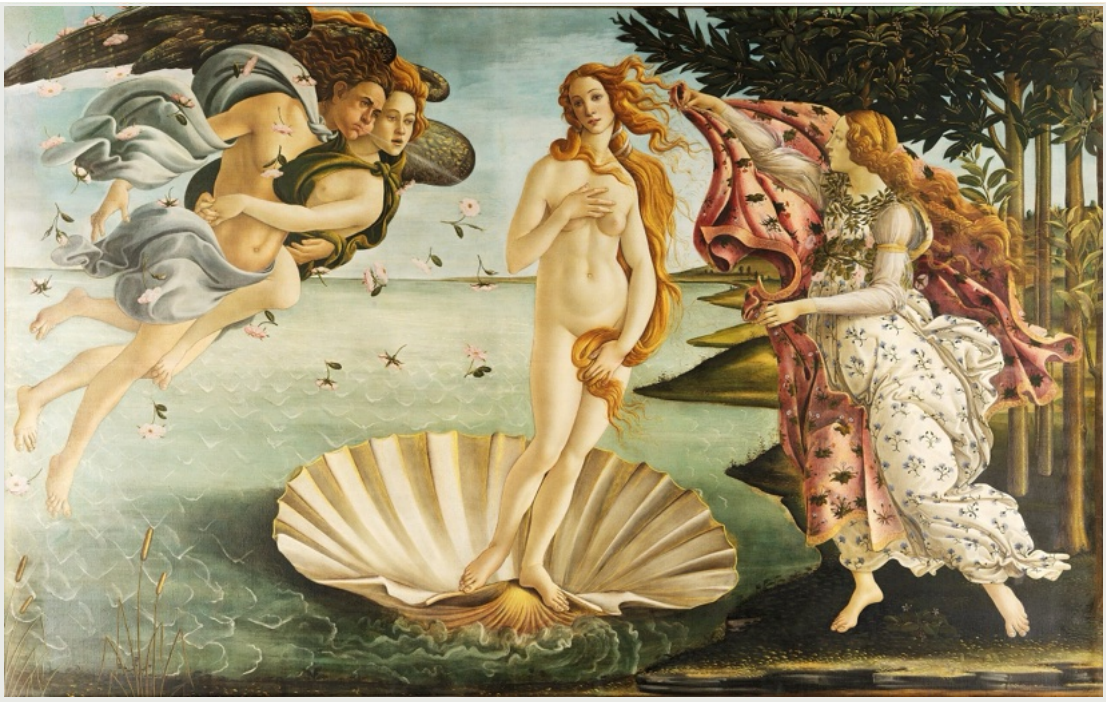

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1486, 172.5 x 278.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Q - Quattrocento (Early Renaissance Italian art)

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1486, 172.5 x 278.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

1. **Venus is anatomically impossible:**

- While Renaissance art is often praised for its realism, Botticelli's Venus has an **elongated neck and torso**, and her **left shoulder slopes** at an improbable angle. She stands in a classical contrapposto pose, but her weight is shifted so far over her left leg that she would be unable to stand (Sandro-Botticelli.com). This was a deliberate choice by Botticelli, who sacrificed realistic anatomy to create an ethereal, otherworldly figure that follows a graceful, flowing "Gothic" curve, emphasising her divine and non-human nature (Wikipedia).

2. **It was painted using cheap materials:**

- Most artists would use the more common and prestigious wood panels in 15th-century Tuscany. Canvas was considered a **cheaper, "inferior" material**, often reserved for less important works or items like banners (Sandro-Botticelli.com). Botticelli's choice to create such a large-scale mythological masterpiece on canvas was revolutionary and makes it one of the first and most important Tuscan paintings on this support (Mental Floss, Uffizi Gallery).

3. **What was it hidden in a private room:**

- It was likely commissioned by a member of the Medici family as a wedding gift and was intended to hang in a private bedroom, possibly over the marital bed (Mental Floss). Because its depiction of a **large-scale, non-religious female**

nude was so daring for the time, it was not intended for public viewing and was kept hidden for about 50 years. This was lucky as this privacy likely **saved it from destruction** during the infamous "Bonfire of the Vanities" in 1497, when the friar Girolamo Savonarola and his followers burned "sinful" objects, including many works of art (Mental Floss).

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Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, 260 x 325 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris

R - Romanticism

Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, 260 x 325 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris

1. **Why were reviewers originally shocked?**

- When the painting was first exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1831, it was highly controversial and received mixed, and often shocked, reviews. While the new government of King Louis-Philippe purchased it, critics and the public were **appalled by the "ugliness" and raw realism of the scene**. Liberty was decried not as a beautiful, clean goddess, but as a **"vulgar" and "dirty" woman** of the people, with critics **scandalised by her exposed breast**, grimy skin, and visible **underarm hair**. The heroes, too, were seen not as idealised classical figures but as a "rabble" of common, dirty-faced insurgents (Louvre Shop).

2. **Why was it hidden from public view?**

- It was deemed so **inflammatory and "revolutionary"** that it was quickly hidden from public view. After its purchase in 1831, the government, fearing it might incite further unrest or set a "bad example," removed it from display after the June Rebellion of 1832. For decades, it was considered too dangerous to show and was even returned to Delacroix for a time. It spent most of its early life "hidden in an attic" and was only put on permanent display at the Louvre in 1874, more than 40 years after it was painted (Wikipedia, 19thcenturyart-facos.com).

3. **What colour was her dress?**

- A recent restoration in 2024, which removed eight layers of yellowed varnish and grime, revealed many "lost" details and proved that a key part of the painting had been misunderstood for decades. Restorers discovered that Liberty's dress was not, in fact, yellow, as it had appeared for over 70 years. Delacroix had **originally painted it a light grey, adding touches of yellow** only to the bust to enhance the figure. This effect was lost in a 1949 restoration that overpainted the dress in a uniform yellow. The **2024 cleaning** also uncovered other hidden details, like a man's boot in the bottom-left corner that had blended into the stones and tiny flecks of red, white, and blue that Delacroix had hidden throughout the canvas to echo the flag (The History Blog, The Guardian).

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Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, Museum of Modern Art, New York

S - Surrealism

Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, 24 x 33 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1. **How big do you think it is?**

- Despite its monumental fame and impact, the painting is shockingly small. Many people who see it in person for the first time are surprised to learn that the entire canvas is only 24 by 33 centimetres (9.5 by 13 inches), which is only slightly larger than a standard sheet of notebook paper (https://www.google.com/search?q=Dal%C3%ADPaintings.com , Reddit).

2. **What inspired the world-famous "melting clocks"?**

- A very specific and unusual hallucination: **melting cheese**. Dalí himself claimed that while many critics assumed the soft watches were a nod to Einstein's theory of relativity, the true inspiration came to him one evening after dinner. He had been staring at the remains of a "very strong" Camembert cheese, observing it "melting in the sun," and this vision of "the Camembert of time" became the central image of the painting (Wikipedia, Mental Floss).

3. **What is the strange, fleshy creature slumped in the centre of the painting**

- A self-portrait of the artist. This "monstrous" figure, which Dalí used in other works like The Great Masturbator, is a distorted, dream-like representation of his own face in profile. You can make out a large nose, long, insect-like eyelashes on a closed eye, and perhaps even a tongue oozing from its nose, representing Dalí himself as a "fading" creature in the dreamscape (MoMA,

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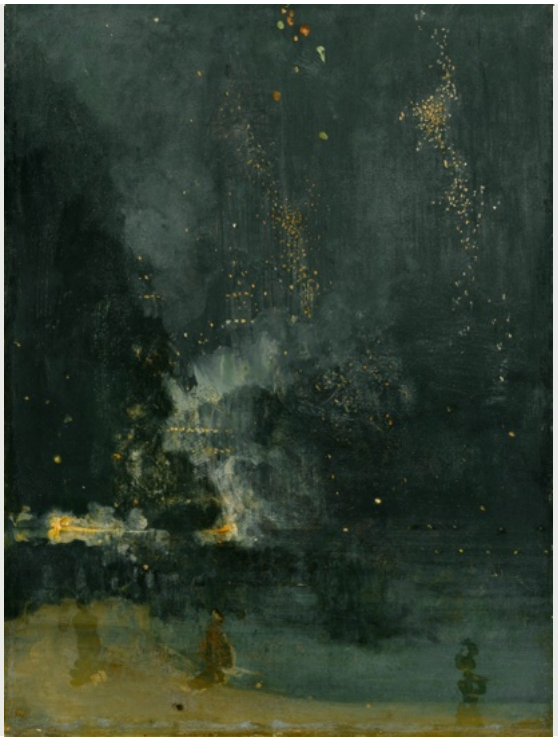

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket*, 1875, 96.5 x 74.3 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

T - Tonalism

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket*, 1875, 96.5 x 74.3 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

1. **Whistler sued for libel and won but it made him bankrupt. Why?**

- This painting is famous for having bankrupted the artist after he "won" a lawsuit over it. The influential art critic John Ruskin wrote a scathing review of the painting in 1877, accusing Whistler of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" and asking 200 guineas for it. Whistler sued Ruskin for libel. He did technically win the case, but the court, siding with the idea that the lawsuit was frivolous, awarded him damages of only a single farthing—the smallest coin in the realm. Whistler, who had to pay his own massive legal costs, was financially ruined and forced to declare bankruptcy (Britannica, Artsy).

2. **How did Whistler's own lawyers destroy his case?**

- During the infamous trial, the painting was accidentally presented to the court upside down. Whistler was trying to explain his work to a skeptical judge and jury, insisting it was an "artistic arrangement" of a fireworks display over London's Cremorne Gardens. His case was not helped when his own legal team, unfamiliar with the highly abstract work, accidentally displayed the painting in the wrong orientation. This embarrassing gaffe only reinforced the defense's claim that the painting was a chaotic, incomprehensible mess (Seattle Artist League).

3. **How did Whistler damage his own case?**

- Whistler's defense of the painting's price became one of the most famous justifications for the value of modern art. When the opposing lawyer, Sir John Holker, challenged Whistler on the 200-guinea price, he sneeringly asked how long it took him to "knock off" the painting. Whistler replied, "Two days." The lawyer pressed, "The labour of two days, then, is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?" Whistler's legendary retort was, "No, I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime" (DailyArt Magazine, The-Artinspector).

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Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831, approx. various collections including The Met, New York

U - Ukiyo-e

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831, approx. 25.7 x 37.9 cm (print), various collections including The Met, New York

1. Why was the colour so important?

- The iconic, deep blue colour of the wave is not a traditional Japanese pigment. It is Prussian blue (known in Japan as Bero or Berlin Blue), a synthetic pigment that had recently been imported into Japan from Europe via the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki.
    - **The Innovation**: Traditional Japanese blue was made from the indigo plant, which lacked the intensity and stability of Prussian blue. Hokusai and his publisher were among the first to fully embrace this vibrant, affordable new pigment, and its spectacular use in the ***Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*** series (which *The Great Wave* begins) effectively popularised the colour in Japanese printmaking.
    - **The Impact**: The saturated blue was a major selling point, signalling a bold, modern, and expensive look to the prints, which were otherwise cheap and mass-produced pop art of the Edo period (Artnet News, Ronin Gallery).

2. Is this a Tsunami?

Despite its enormous scale, the wave depicted is not believed to be a tsunami, but a rogue wave or an oki nami (offshore wave). The speed and movement of the water are typical of a large, breaking ocean wave.

- **The Real Title**: The official, full Japanese title is Kanagawa oki nami ura, which translates to "Under the Wave off Kanagawa." This title emphasizes the perspective of the viewer and the small fishing boats, who are literally cowering under the monstrous, claw-like crest of the water.
- **The Boats**: The three tiny boats are oshiokuri-bune, fast cargo vessels used to transport fish, likely the first catch of seasonal bonito, from the Izu Peninsula to the capital, Edo (modern-day Tokyo). The print, therefore, is not just a landscape but a snapshot of an everyday, yet perilous, commercial journey (Mental Floss, Japan Forward).

3. How big do you think it is?

- Surprisingly small. Most people assume it is large but it is a small woodblock print, an ōban format, measuring only about 10 x 15 inches (approx. 25.7×37.9 cm). This small scale makes the dramatic contrast between the colossal wave and the distant Mount Fuji all the more powerful.
    - **The Mountain's Role**: Hokusai famously uses forced perspective to make the sacred, 12,388-foot-tall Mount Fuji appear as a small, insignificant triangle, dwarfed by the power of the sea. Mount Fuji is meant to be the true subject of the entire series, but in this first print, it is nearly consumed by the water.
    - **A "Hidden" Subject**: Some scholars suggest the print is a masterpiece of rusumoyō (the "absent subject" technique) in Japanese art. It may be subtly celebrating the coveted first catch of bonito fish, a high-status seasonal event, by showing the specific boats used to transport them, and the rough conditions the fishermen braved—a meaning the common viewer in Hokusai's time would have instantly recognised (The Art Institute of Chicago, Japan Forward).

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Titian (c.1488–1576), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518, 690 x 360 cm, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

V - Venetian Renaissance

Titian (c.1488–1576), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518, 690 x 360 cm, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

1. Why was it so controversial?

- When the massive altarpiece was unveiled in 1518, it caused a sensation—and not all of it positive. The Franciscan friars who commissioned it for their high altar were initially doubtful and hesitant to accept the work.
    - **The Shocking Dynamism**: Traditional altarpieces were often static, with saints and apostles in calm, composed poses (like the earlier works of Giovanni Bellini). Titian's painting, by contrast, was an explosion of energy, with the Apostles at the bottom depicted as a "frenzied mass" with bold, gesticulating movements and exaggerated emotional expressions.
    - **The Figure of Mary**: Mary herself was depicted not as a stiff, queenly icon, but as a fully human, vibrant woman in a moment of physical ecstasy, with her robes twisting around her in the wind. This dramatic realism was considered by some "oafish painters and foolish masses" to be indecorous and too novel for a sacred altar (Britannica, Best Venice Guides).
    - **The Unveiling Story**: A story (though likely apocryphal) holds that the friars were only persuaded to keep it when the Holy Roman Emperor's ambassador offered to buy it, proving its value (The Geographical Cure).

2. Is this a small painting?

- Many of the works we have seen are small than you might assume but this is different, it is colossal. Painted on multiple wooden planks, and was specifically designed to command the immense space of the basilica.
    - **Colossal Size**: At roughly 690×360 cm (22 ft.7 in.×11 ft.10 in.) it is the largest painting on wood panel Titian ever created. This colossal size was necessary to make the figures legible from the main entrance, far down the Gothic nave (Wikipedia, WikiArt).
    - **Visual Framing**: Titian cleverly used the architecture of the church, positioning the altarpiece perfectly within the arch of the monks' choir screen. This marble screen acts as a natural frame, making the painting the absolute focal point for anyone walking toward the altar.
    - **Three Zones, One Movement**: The sheer verticality is emphasised by Titian's innovative composition, which divides the narrative into three dramatic zones (Apostles below, Virgin in the middle, God the Father above) united by a spiral of movement and a revolutionary use of light and colour that pulls the eye upward (Smarthistory, Visual Arts Cork).

3. Recent Restoration Revealed its True Colour Palette

- Due to centuries of exposure to candle smoke, dust, and aggressive 19th-century restorations, the painting had become terribly darkened, prompting an 18th-century visitor to describe it as "most terribly dark but nobly painted" (Wikipedia).
    - **The Threat**: In addition to age, the painting faced modern threats, including an active woodworm (tarli) infestation and vibrations from the reinstalled organ pipes directly behind the fragile panel (Save Venice Inc.).
    - **The Rescue**: A major conservation effort, led by Giulio Bono and funded by the non-profit organization Save Venice Inc., was completed from **2018–2022**.
    - **The Reveal**: The treatment **removed layers of discoloured varnish, grime, and heavy overpainting** from previous centuries. The successful cleaning process revealed Titian’s original, **spectacularly vibrant and richly saturated Renaissance colours**, allowing viewers to appreciate the

luminous, gold-tinged atmosphere and the bright reds and blues that caused such a sensation when the work was first unveiled (Save Venice Inc.).

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Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956), Stoclet Palace, Brussels, Belgium, 1905-11

W - Wiener Werkstätte

Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956), Stoclet Palace, Brussels, Belgium, 1905-11

The main dining room of the Stoclet Palace, c. 1914 with Gustave Klimt's T*ree of Life*

1. **What is a Gesamtkunstwerk?**

- Literally a total work of art. What that means here is that every element of the building and the interior down to furniture, door fitting and even cutlery were designed by members of the Wiener Werkstätte. The sumptuous dining and music rooms of the Stoclet Palace exemplified the theatrical spaces of the Gesamtkunstwerk ("total work of art"), celebrating sight, sound, and taste in a symphony of sensual harmonies that paralleled the operas of Richard Wagner, from whom the concept originated. The couple who commissioned it, Adolphe and Suzanne Stoclet, wanted a total artistic environment, and that applied to their own appearance as well. Architect Josef Hoffmann was so intent on the palace and its inhabitants being a single, perfect work of art that he reportedly **designed clothes for Madame Stoclet**. This was done to ensure **her dress would not clash with her living room** decor, especially after she arrived home from a trip to Paris wearing a gown by designer Paul Poiret.

2. **Is it open to the public?**

- The Stoclet Palace is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but it **remains a private residence** still owned by the Stoclet family and **has never been opened to the public**. Even after being granted protected status, the family has prevented access. When family patriarch Adolphe Stoclet died in 1949, the residence was

inherited by his daughter-in-law, Annie. After her death in 2002, the house passed to her four daughters, and press reports have described ongoing disagreements among the granddaughters about the property's future.

3. (CLICK) **This is the dining room, what disturbing symbolism do we find in Klimt's mosaic**

- (CLICK) The mosaic is the only landscape he produced during his golden period. It includes a tree of life, a woman and an embracing couple. The tree symbolises the link or journey from earth to heaven. The disturbing element if the black bird which in many cultures symbolises death.

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Iannis Xenakis, *Persephassa* (1969), sound installation/sculpture

X - Iannis Xenakis (modern artist-composer)

Iannis Xenakis (pronounced “ee-an-is zen-a-keys”), *Persephassa* (1969), sound installation/sculpture, site-specific, various performances and archival collections

1. **Bonus Point**

- Give yourself a bonus point if you have heard of the Romanian born French-Greek composer and music theorist Iannis Xenakis (pronounced “ee-an-is zen-a-keys”, 1922-2001), he used mathematical models as part of his composing including set theory, stochastic processes and game theory.

2. **The Audience is "Trapped" in a Sound Vortex**

- The most unusual and defining feature is its site-specific spatial arrangement. Persephassa is scored for six percussionists who are positioned in a circle (or hexagon) completely surrounding the audience.
    - **The Effect**: This placement transforms the concert hall from a proscenium stage into a three-dimensional sound field. Xenakis uses this setup to create dramatic, swirling trajectories where rapid-fire rhythmic accents and rolls (accelerando) are passed from player to player, creating the overwhelming, visceral impression of a sound vortex moving at incredible speed around the listener's head.

3. **Where was it premiered?**

    - In the Ancient Ruins of Persepolis in Iran. The piece was commissioned by the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF) and the Shiraz Arts Festival and premiered in 1969 at the

ancient ceremonial capital of the Persian Achaemenid Empire: Persepolis.

- **Significance**: This highly unusual site reinforced the composer's architectural and cosmic themes. The colossal sound of the percussion, including drums, gongs, and even sirens and pebbles, performed against the backdrop of 2,500-year-old stone ruins, created a unique fusion of advanced, stochastic music (based on mathematical models) and a massive, telluric (earthly) energy. The title itself is an archaic name for the Greek goddess Persephone/Kore, linking the work to ancient forces of life, death, and rebirth.

3. What instruments are used?

- You have seen some but beyond the standard drums and cymbals, the score calls for an array of unique instruments and sound effects that serve Xenakis's goal of using percussion to create a massive sound mass rather than simple rhythms.
    - **Unusual Instruments**: The instrumentation includes objects like maracas, wood blocks (simantras, a reference to Greek monastic rhythm devices), mouth sirens, and loose pebbles.
    - **Acoustic Architecture**: Xenakis meticulously scores these sounds to "travel" in specific patterns around the audience. This movement is so critical to the form that the piece is often described as a "sound choreography" or "acoustic sculpture," where the motion of sound in space is as important as the notes being played.

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Damien Hirst (b. 1965), *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, 243.8 x 213.4 x 518.1 cm, Tate Modern, London

Y - Young British Artists (YBA)

Damien Hirst (b. 1965), *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, 243.8 x 213.4 x 518.1 cm, Tate Modern, London

1. **Is it the original shark?**

- The original tiger shark, purchased for £6,000, was poorly preserved as Hirst's team used a too weak solution of formaldehyde and it began to deteriorate (shrink, wrinkle, and lose its colour) within a few years. The original shark had become so deteriorated and murky that its owner at the time, Charles Saatchi, had the animal skinned and its skin stretched over a fiberglass mold, according to some reports. Hirst attributed some of the decay to the fact that the Saatchi Gallery, in a misguided attempt at conservation, had supposedly added household bleach to the formaldehyde solution, accelerating the deterioration instead of stopping it.
- When the work was sold to collector Steven A. Cohen in 2004 for a reported $8 million, Hirst offered to replace the animal to maintain the piece's initial terrifying visual impact. A new shark was caught and preserved using a more advanced scientific technique in 2006.
- This replacement sparked a huge debate about conceptual art versus materiality: Is it the same artwork if the central physical object is entirely different? Hirst argues that the concept (the encounter with death) is the art, and therefore the piece remains the same.

2. **What did The Sun newspaper mockingly call it?**

- When the work was first exhibited in 1992, the public and the press were both fascinated and enraged by the price tag (£50,000 paid by collector Charles Saatchi).
- The British tabloid newspaper The Sun famously ran a story with the headline: "**£50,000 for fish without chips**." This headline instantly captured the public's skepticism about the astronomical prices of contemporary art. If you got close to the price or any version of fish and chips you did well and got the point.

3. **Roughly, how many animals, including insects, have been killed for Hirt's pieces?**

- The estimate is roughly a million (913,450).

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Ziggurat of Ur, rebuilt c. 21st century BCE,

Z - Ziggurat Motif (artistic architectural reference)

No single artist; example: *Ziggurat of Ur*, rebuilt c. 21st century BCE, archaeological site in Iraq, influential in architectural and artistic symbolism

I end with a masterpiece of ancient engineering.

1. **What was it made from?**
    - **Materials and Waterproofing**: The core of the massive structure was built from unbaked mud bricks, which are susceptible to water damage. To protect it, the exterior was clad in a thick layer of kiln-fired (baked) bricks set in bitumen, a naturally occurring tar, to create a water-resistant layer. Ancient engineers also incorporated "weeper holes" throughout the façade to allow any moisture inside the mud brick core to evaporate, preventing the entire structure from swelling and collapsing.
    - **Massive Scale**: The lower portion alone is estimated to have required some 720,000 baked bricks, each weighing about 33 pounds.
2. **Which God does it celebrate?**
    - **Dedicated to Nanna**: The ziggurat was dedicated to the moon god Nanna (also known as Sîn), the patron deity of the city-state of Ur. The entire structure was essentially an artificial mountain designed to elevate the god's temple closer to the heavens.
    - **The Highest Sanctuary**: At the very top, which has not survived, was

believed to be a small temple or shrine. Unlike a modern church, the ziggurat was not a place for public worship. Only the priests were permitted to ascend to the top to care for the god and attend to his needs, which included providing food and a bedchamber for Nanna.

3. **How was it used as a shield by Saddam Hussein?**
    - **Saddam Hussein's Restoration**: The ziggurat has been restored several times throughout its history, most recently in the 1980s under the orders of Saddam Hussein. He rebuilt the façade of the lower level and the monumental staircases.
    - **A "Human Shield" Tactic**: During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein parked MiG fighter jets near the ziggurat, likely believing that American and Coalition forces would refrain from bombing the area to avoid destroying the irreplaceable 4,000-year-old archaeological site. The structure, unfortunately, still sustained some damage from small arms fire and nearby explosions.

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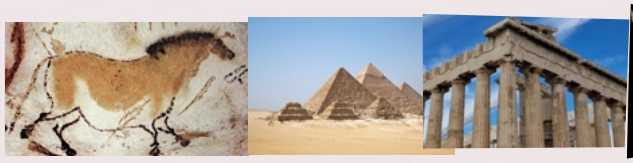
99-14 Art History from A-Z

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, MoMA

- As I said at the start, this is a thematic talk in the "99" series which I record for special occasions, in this case the year 2026 because of the number of letters in the alphabet.
- There were two bonus points so 80 facts in total, if you knew over 60 you are a mega-star and should be giving these talks. If you got over 40 excellent and over 20 well done, you know your art..
- Thank you for your time and attention.



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