

Anybody Want To Buy My White Painting for \$20 Million?

By David Johnson

In 2015 there was a painting by an artist named Robert Ryman called 'Bridge' that sold for \$20.6 million at a Christie's auction. If you look it up online you will see that it is just a monochromatic white painting. There is some texture, but nothing all that extraordinary.

Seriously? \$20.6 million for that? Why?

I have been fortunate enough to see some great works of art in museums over the last several years. When it comes to paintings, I was most impressed by the work of Anders Zorn (I did not expect that, but it is amazing in person), Franz Halz, Rembrandt, and John Singer Sargent. There were many others whose names would not be familiar, but their paintings were incredible.

It is hard to explain to someone who is not an artist exactly why these paintings are so good, but when you see something by Rembrandt or Sargent, it is just different than an ordinary painting, even those produced by professional artists. I think a big part of it is that you can see, if you know what to look for, just how skillfully executed these paintings are. It shows a complete mastery of the craft. There are only a few people in the world who are able to do what Rembrandt or Sargent could do, and those who can in modern times have learned a lot from studying their techniques. They were some of the best painters of their respective generations, so their work is historically important for that reason, but it goes beyond that, they are actually some of the best painters that humanity has ever produced, and it is likely to stay that way for a long time, perhaps forever. So it makes sense why these paintings would be worth millions, or even billions of dollars, or actually priceless because they could never be replaced if they were lost. But a white painting that pretty much anyone could do? Should that really be in the same class as works by Rembrandt, Sargent, Velasquez, and Raphael? (I think Raphael's 'School of Athens' is the greatest painting anyone has ever done, although I have not seen it in person.)

Shouldn't there be a certain level of technical skill displayed in order for a painting to be considered one of the all-time great works of art? Imagine if there was a diver in the Olympics who just did a cannonball for his final dive. You might think it was pretty funny at first, if you thought it was just a joke, but how would you feel if he won a gold medal for it? I mean, even if it was executed flawlessly, pretty much everybody can do a cannonball. That is not an Olympic level dive (or even a dive at all) let alone the best one that you would see at the Olympics.

That scenario would never actually happen in diving because in diving and gymnastics the judges do recognize that some things have a higher level of difficulty than others, and they take that into account when they score the competitors. Unfortunately, since modern art has become popular, that is not the case in art.

But why is that? Technical skill is appreciated in other arts. Suppose that you went to a concert where the musician was said to be one of the greatest pianists of our time, or maybe any time, but instead of playing something from Beethoven, or the like, she just played ‘chopsticks’ and then left the stage. Wouldn’t you be disappointed? Don’t you expect to see, and perhaps more importantly, hear more if this person is one of the greatest pianists to ever do it? How would you feel if the audience roared its approval and gave her a standing ovation, and the critics all proclaimed that it was the greatest performance they had ever seen, even though you knew that you could do the same thing on your cheap keyboard at home, as could many others? Welcome to my world. That is how I feel now.

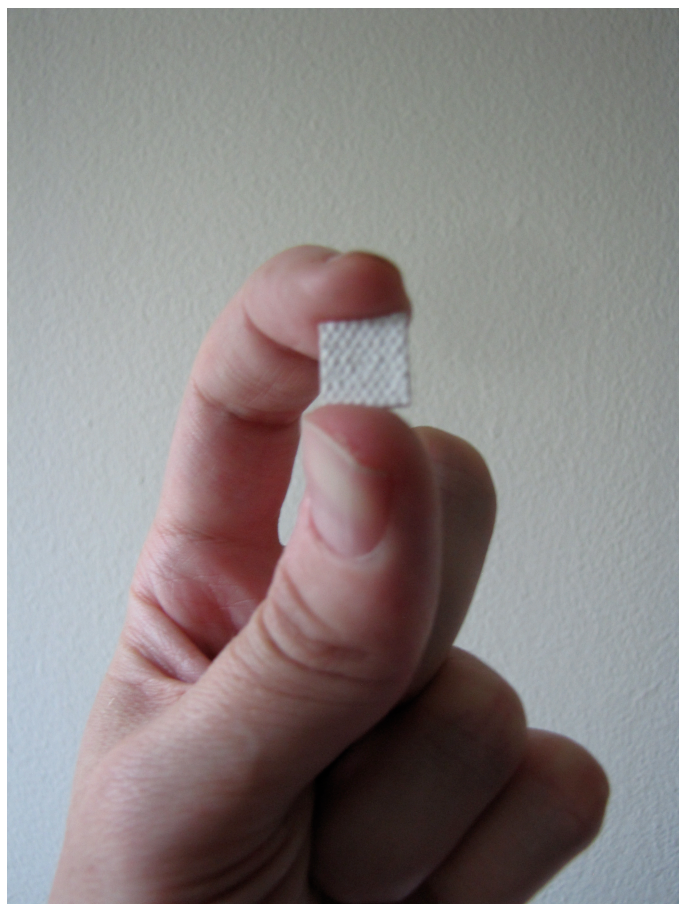
Listen, I get it, part of the appeal of modern art is the joy that elitists get from pissing off ordinary people. The more that the ‘commoners’ hate it, or don’t seem to get it, the more convinced they are that it must be really good, because by definition for them, if the rabble likes it, it must be common, and if the rabble doesn’t get it that can only be because they are not elite enough. Nietzsche would be so proud. He loved to appeal to people’s vanity, you cute little ‘overman’ you, and modern art does the same thing. Many rich and/or well-educated people have so much vanity that such appeals are often very effective. But here is a thought: **MAYBE ORDINARY PEOPLE HATE MODERN ART SO MUCH BECAUSE MODERN ART SUCKS!** Or at least a lot of it does.

I am not saying that all of it is bad. I like the work of Jackson Pollock and Gerhard Richter, for instance. I am not saying that it has to be representational art in order to be good, I just think that you have to do something. I guess part of what bothers me about the white paintings is that canvases come primed in white acrylic paint (‘gesso’), and it feels like you are not even really doing anything to just have an all-white painting. It is like a blank page. What if a writer published a poem or a short story that had no words? Is that good writing? Don’t you have to actually write something in order for it to even be considered ‘writing’? Art critics who defend the white paintings say ‘you have to do more work’ to appreciate them than with other paintings. Yeah, try all the work. Could a playwright get away with having the audience members write their own play in their head rather than seeing one performed on the stage? And if he could, why would he be considered a great playwright when the audience did all the work?

I guess I did something sort of like that a while back, just as a joke, with my ‘The Shortest Short Story’, but even that was not completely blank, it had words, just not very many of them, and honestly I would be pretty shocked if that were ever included in a collection of the greatest short stories. I am not surprised that an artist thought to do a white painting, I am just surprised that it is valued so highly.

But hey, if you can’t beat them, join them. Money has never really mattered very much to me. I live pretty cheaply, and there is not much in terms of material objects that I even want. But lately it has been rough financially. Really rough. I am living the life that many artists and writers have: I am almost to starve. I still make art because I love to do it, but sometimes I wonder if I should even bother because nobody really seems to want it.

But if this whole white painting thing could work out, that would be pretty cool. This is a standing offer for anybody who has the financial resources to do it, but especially the art museums: I am going to make you one hell of a deal. I will sell you this painting right here for \$20 million, which is over half a million less than what 'Bridge' sold for all the way back in 2015:



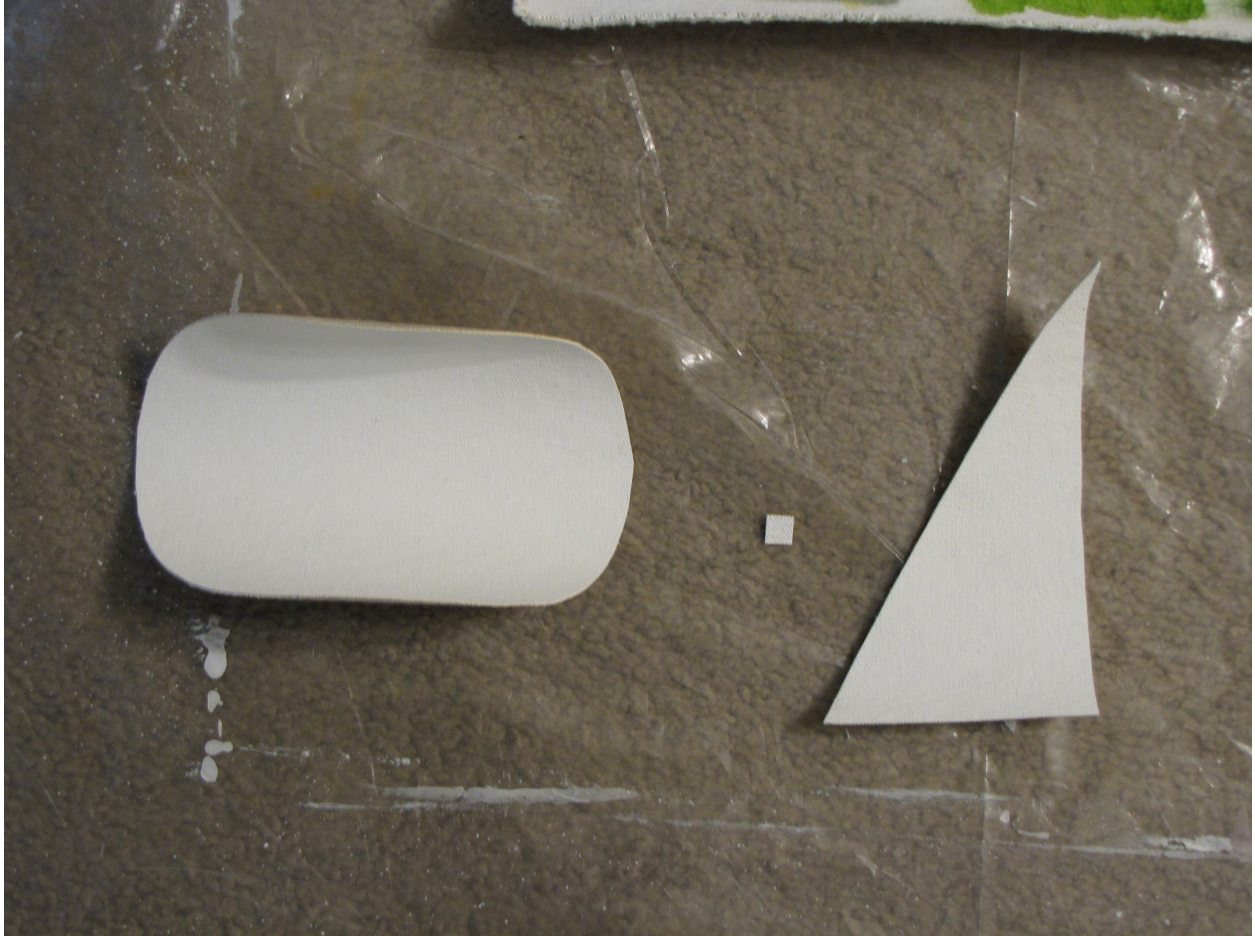
What a deal, right? You would practically be stealing it from me!

This painting is 1 cm by 1 cm. I decided to make it really small so that it would be considered a reaction to the modern art tendency to have gigantic paintings, such as with some of the work of Gerhard Richter. If you want your work to end up in a museum one way to game the system is to have it be considered a reaction to some prior art movement and be perceived as representing a different style, especially if the art historians see it as starting a new art movement. Then it will be considered historically significant even if it sucks. Seriously, Ruby the elephant produced better paintings than some of the ones I have seen in museums.

Maybe my little white painting can make it in if I can start a new art movement. If somebody does pay me \$20 million for it, you can bet I will be doing a whole series

of them real quick. In fact, I have already started. Here are some more:





I call the smallest one 'Blanco', the triangle is 'Blanco No. 3', and the one that is rolled up and looks sort of like a taco is 'White Rain'. Damn, that is artsy, even if I do say so myself.

I will sell all three of these paintings for the low low price of \$20 million each as long as they are well taken care of and go to a good home in a museum. I have to say that I am hopeful, but not optimistic. I doubt it will ever happen. But if the museums and/or investors won't buy my white paintings I want them to give me a reasonable explanation for why. Why are other white paintings valued at over \$20 million and mine is not?

Maybe someone would argue that mine are too derivative, but I didn't try to copy 'Bridge' or any other white painting, one is in the shape of a triangle, and another is an oval, and one is only 1 cm by 1 cm. So far as I know, nobody else ever did that. Kazimir Malevich did a white monochrome painting called 'White on White' all the way back in 1918, so if one is not allowed to use the same theme then none of the white paintings that were done after that one should be considered original, including 'Bridge'.

So what really is the difference between Ryman's paintings and mine? It is not about the painting, it is about who did the painting and the connections that they have. Ryman was part of the exclusive club in the New York art scene, and I am not. That is really what it is. Now, he did work as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for awhile, and when I found that out it made me feel a little bit less upset about it. I guess he paid his dues, at least to some extent. And I guess I do have to admit that he did do a little more with his paintings than just have white gesso on them, although I have not seen anything that he did that could not be easily replicated by pretty much anybody, even someone who has never painted before. I guess you could say the same about Mark Rothko, though, Rothko just used different colors. I am not necessarily upset that Ryman (or Rothko) was successful, it just doesn't seem fair that it all came from paintings that pretty much anyone could do.

I guess the art world is like just about every other avenue in life, success is based more on who you know than what you know, or even what you can do.

2023