



Understanding and Enjoying Abstract Art

Written and illustrated by Jim Bennett

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Introduction

As an artist, I encounter people all the time who tell me they don't really care for abstract art. Their comment saddens me because I believe that anyone who dislikes all abstract art is missing out on something that can be truly worthwhile.

Actually, I believe that a dislike for abstract art is based on a person's lack of understanding. With understanding comes an appreciation for at least some art that is abstract.

So, my goal is to try to impart some understanding.

I hope that my explanations will enable you to better understand abstract art and increase your appreciation of this kind of art.

Here are some interesting facts to consider:

1. Abstract art is not something that is totally "modern." In fact, abstract art has existed since prehistoric times.
2. Most of the art that has ever been created has been at least semi-abstract. What we call realistic art began during the Renaissance with the discovery of perspective and a thorough knowledge of anatomy. You might say that realistic art is based on the sciences of perspective drawing and anatomy.

3. There are several completely different kinds of abstract art. A person may like some kinds of abstract art and not others. We will look at three basic kinds of abstract art.

All Around Us

I contend that abstract art is actually all around us. Most of it we don't call "art." Some of it we like, and some we don't. But when we put it in a gallery and give it the name, "art," that's when many of us are confused.

Let me explain...

One kind of abstract art is geometric. It is highly intellectual but it communicates on more than just an intellectual level.

Some people have difficulty understanding what a painting of this type is all about. They ask, "What's so special about a bunch of squares, shapes, and lines? I don't see it!"

At the same time, these very people might look at the architecture of a building or home and exclaim how incredibly amazing it looks. They might even be so impressed that they will tell everyone they know that they should all go see this building.

When people react positively to the architecture, they are, in fact, appreciating the abstract art of the architectural design.

I believe that most of us have had the experience of looking with awe at the architecture of some of the world's most beautiful buildings. We may disagree over which buildings are the most beautiful, but no matter which buildings and which style of

architecture we prefer, we are all responding to the elements of design – shapes, colors, and textures.

I believe it is with that same consideration that we should approach geometric, abstract art when it is a painting or sculpture. These works of art have the same elements of design – shapes, colors, and textures.

However, if we approach the paintings or sculptures with a preconceived set of standards and expectations that all “good art” must realistically depict the image of something I can recognize, we will miss out on an experience I strongly believe is worthwhile and even valuable.

Don’t get me wrong – I’m not against realistic art at all. There is a lot of good art that is realistic. But there is also a lot of abstract art that is also very good.

You see, what is called realistic art and abstract art are not at odds with each other. The one portrays the external world of what is perceived through the senses; the other focuses on the internal world of the intellect, imagination, and emotions.

Perhaps, this is the easiest way to understand – realistic art relates to the external world, while abstract art has to do almost exclusively with the internal world.

Certainly, realistic art often conveys thoughts and feelings, and those are always communicated by the manner in which the artist has portrayed the subject.

Abstract art, on the other hand, attempts to communicate thoughts and feelings directly (especially those that cannot be put into words) without portraying traditional subjects.

This should not be too difficult to understand, because, as I mentioned before, we have a multitude of abstract images all around us.

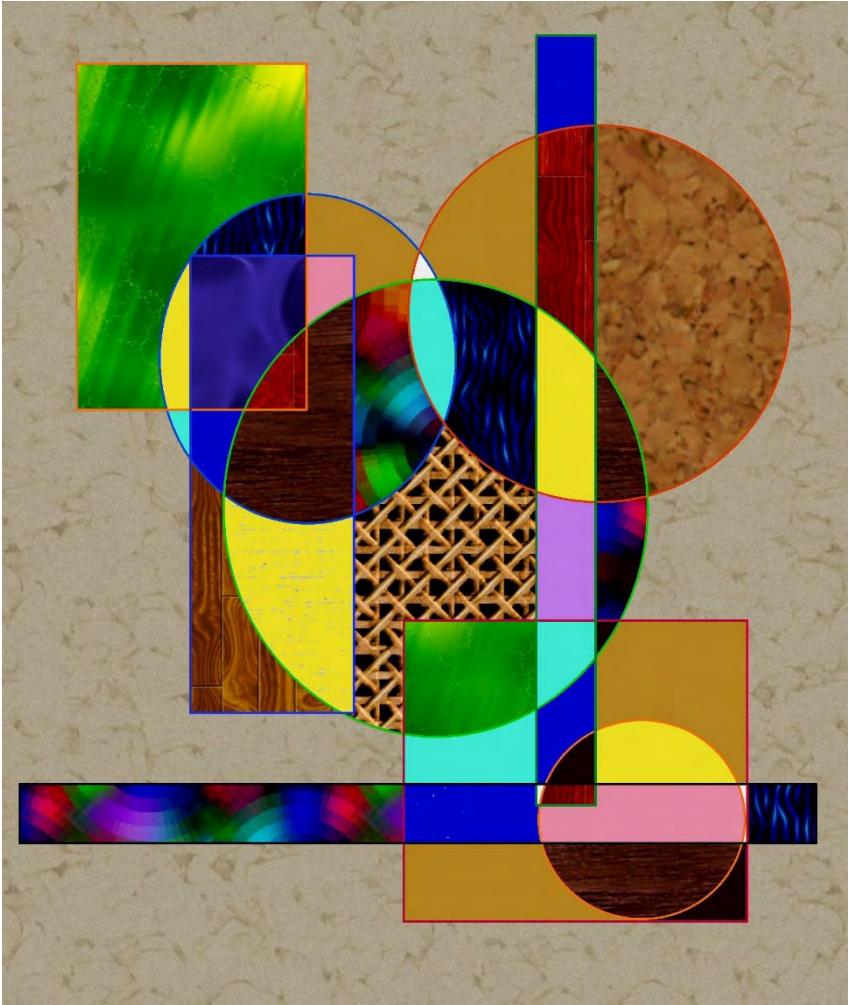
For example, a number of popular logos use abstract designs to help establish their company brands. Four come to mind: the globe with red-white-and-blue wavy lines of Pepsi, the swoosh symbol in the shape of a wing for Nike, four squares of Microsoft, and the three interlocking ovals of Toyota.

You can be sure that these companies paid huge sums of money to have their logos created. They recognize the power of design to impact people.

I'm sure you can think of many other examples of geometric design. Which designs do you think are most interesting? What is it about these designs that makes them especially interesting?

The point is, you can apply those same criteria to abstract art that uses a geometric design. It's exactly the same thing.

On the next page is an example that I created digitally to illustrate geometric abstract art.



Geometric abstract art. An illustration by Jim Bennett.

So far, I've mentioned two examples of abstract designs – architecture and corporate logos. But there are many more. Let's take a look

Expressionistic Abstract Art

Perhaps the most difficult kind of abstract art to understand is the type that is referred to as expressionistic.

Sometimes the paint is splashed or dripped onto the canvas. Other times when a brush is used, the paint is applied in bold and rapid strokes.

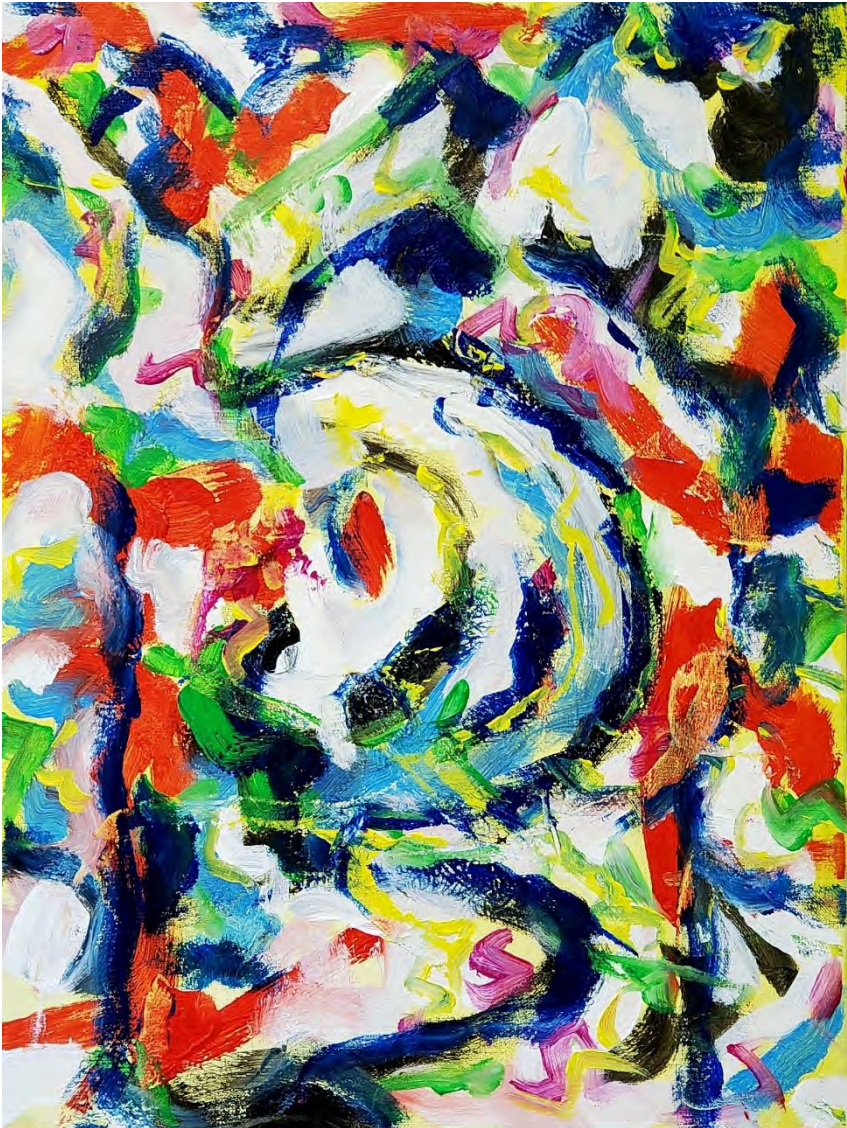
Many people think these works of art look like nothing more than a confused jumble of paint without any plan or organization.

This style of painting has been called “action painting” for good reason because the purpose is to express action. This way the viewer is able to see how the paint has been applied and “senses” the action of the painter. Indeed, this style invites you to imagine the energy and forcefulness of how the paint was applied to the canvas.

This kind of vibrant design has been used effectively on everything from advertising to wrapping paper to greeting cards to posters to fabric design, and to packaging of products we buy at the store.

The key to understanding this kind of abstract art is to understand it is the artists' depictions of energy.

If you were asked to paint pure energy, how would you do it?



Expressionistic abstract art. An illustration by Jim Bennett.

Can you see the energy?

Imaginary Abstract Forms

The third and last kind of abstract art I would like to discuss is art that presents imaginary forms that sometimes resemble images of fantastic scenes with purely imaginary flowers or insects or other dreamlike forms.

Some of the works of Kandinsky have these kinds of abstract forms. They portray a fantasy reality unlike anything we've seen in the real world.

These imaginary forms allow the artist to play with movement, shape, and color much like a musical composer plays with the sounds of the different instruments in an orchestra. Indeed, paintings of this sort are usually quite “musical” in their portrayal of rhythm, harmonies, and contrasts.



Imaginary forms abstract art. An illustration by Jim Bennett

Enjoy

It isn't really necessary to like ALL abstract art, but if you can find at least one or two examples of abstract art that you can understand and enjoy, then you have already expanded your appreciation for art of this type.

Like with all genres of art, works of abstract art vary in quality. Some abstract works are internationally recognized as being great art. Frankly, many abstract paintings are considered by the experts to be of lower quality.

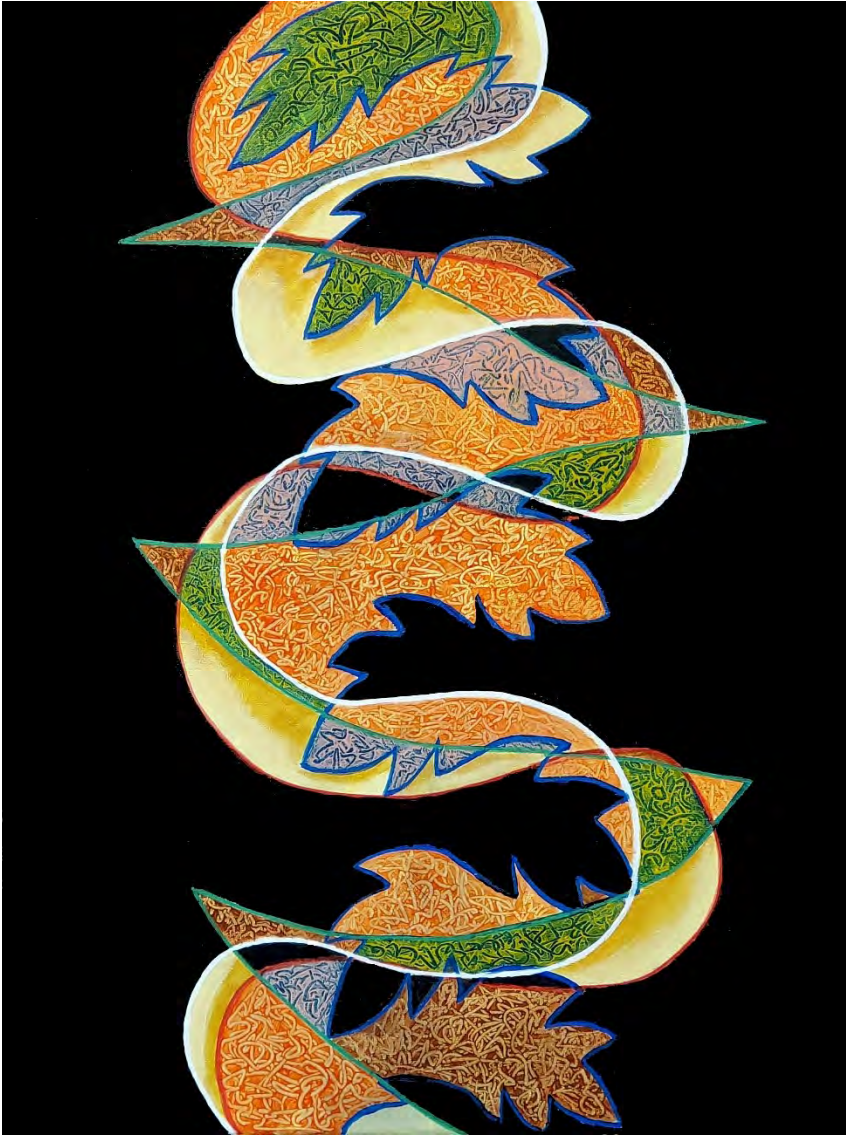
One interesting fact is most of the great works of abstract art were done by artists who could draw realistically. For example, Picasso could draw so well that he passed all the exams of art school at a very young age.

If that is the case, why do you suppose these artists have chosen to create abstract art?

I believe it is because they desire to create something that is new and different and has never been seen before.

Note: A lot of people who usually do not care for abstract art, have responded very positively to my art, "Luminous Streams." I invite you to take a look at bennecelli.com. Perhaps you will like my abstract paintings too!

I have included a reproduction of one of my paintings on the next page.



“Rustling Autumn Leaves,” acrylic on canvas. 24 x 18 inches,
by James (Jim) Bennett
bennecelli.com