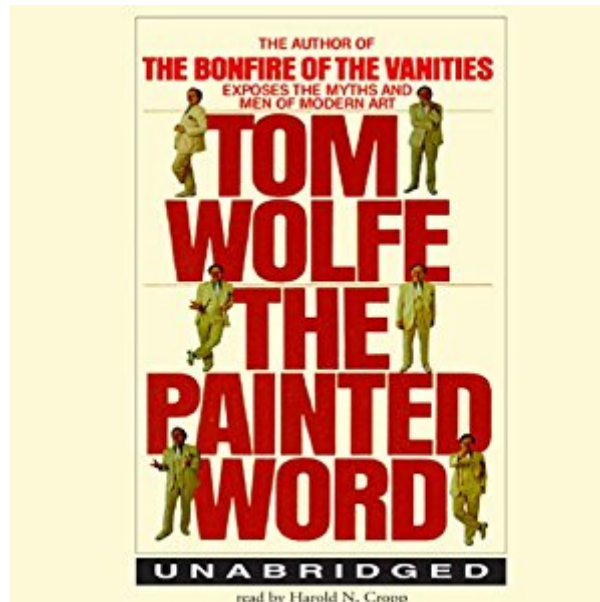




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The Painted Word



Synopsis

No one skewers the popular movements of American culture like Tom Wolfe. In 1975, he turned his satirical pen to the pretensions of the contemporary art world - a world of social climbing, elitist posturing, and ingeniously absurd self-justifying theorizing. From the fuliginous flatness of the 50s to the pop op minimal 60s, right on through the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't 70s, Tom Wolfe debunks the great American myth of modern art in an incandescent, hilarious, and devastating blast.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

One doesn't need to read this book to know that modern art is vacuous, but this book provides structured arguments consistent with what I know when I see much of what passes for modern art. Mr. Wolfe reviews the shallowness of the theories of modern art. It is not clear why the critics of modern art decide to favor one particular scruffy guy who paints lines to blots and not another. The way it works, as I understand from the book, is that lucky, favored one gets invited to parties and enjoys the patronage of the monied set that follows the currently favored critic who currently has the best platform for espousing what passes for analysis of current art trends.

This book was copyrighted in 1975 and I believe I read it way back then as a 21 to 22 year old aspiring music student. Eventually, I earned my undergraduate degree in music theory. From my present vantage point in life, this book makes even more sense to me than it did when I was actively

pursuing an understanding of what the fields of art were all about. Like many young people, I wanted to buy into the material I was learning and investing so much time and energy into mastering, so the point of this book would likely have disturbed me and the humor and delight of it might have eluded me. Now, I laughed on nearly every page and found his insight and reporting delightful and informed. I know the kind of theory that is all about playing intellectual games and puzzles and the way certain artists and musicians are attracted to playing those games (in music, think of things like total serialism, microtonalism, and theater pieces like "fur music"). I never liked them, and tired of even talking about them. I remember in one doctoral seminar readings in music theory. We had to read like 1,500 pages a week of this stuff and then discuss it with each other in class. Many took this stuff very seriously; after all they wanted to become professors teaching this stuff for the rest of their lives. I suppose I wanted a career like theirs, too. But I wanted to study music theory to learn about how great music actually works. And there is a lot of good and helpful explanatory stuff out there. But too much of the stuff, as exposed and revealed naked by Wolfe in this little book, is like being hungry and instead of getting a meal, you write an article analyzing a photograph of an engraving of a painting of a still life of a pork chop and then wondering why you were becoming malnourished. The gist of the book is the rise of "abstract expressionism" as a way to escape the limitations of representational art. The intellectual leaders of the movement were two art critics - art theorists - Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. They each had artists they championed and yet they were supplanted by the "Pop" art of the 1960s. Wolfe captures every precious stance they took and the ferocity of the debates fought with their tiny mouse sized swords from the 1930s through the time of the publication of this book. Yes, the book is now nearly forty years old and many things in the book may seem foreign to young readers of the present. I think that is all the MORE reason to read it. Trying to see things as they were seen when they were new is a difficult but precious thing to capture. And to see what used to matter and why it was thought to matter and then capture why it slipped away to unimportance is even more valuable because it offers lessons on what will happen to our present ideas of importance, style, theory, and all kinds of other things we debate and fight over that won't be discussed or even remembered in a future not far away. Plus there are the drawings Mr. Wolfe did at the beginning of each chapter. Hilarious stuff. I remember when the New York Times mattered as Tom Wolfe describes it in this book. Now reading newspapers, let alone a huge newspaper that took half a day to read, seems sadly quaint. But read this book. Reviewed by Craig Matteson, Saline, MI

A friend gave me "Why your 5-year old Could Not Have Done That", which was extremely

unsatisfying as it quickly got into Art Theory's Conceptualism as the "Reason". This book, while unnecessarily snarky much of the time, at least presents a believable scenario. I had sought such explanation from curators, docents, and others in my peregrinations through museums and private collections, but this was the first time the explanation made sense. Kudos to the author (and hisses to the editor).

My first Tom Wolfe book left me, well, not overly impressed, it was o.k. Not a very big book, about the size of a child's book and that kind of sums up the content, lacking. I agree with his comparisons of the poor artist being supported by the rich and pompous know it all art critics who seem to choose what everyone will like. I have a background in art history and absolutely love the subject and had hoped that Wolfe would have given me something entertaining, historical and interesting. I think digging more into the lives of all these artists and their specific interactions with the art machine (the rich and the critics) would have made for a more interesting book. What I read was pretty much what I already knew.

If you have ever been confused, amused, or just plain confounded by abstract art, this book will make it very clear what its all about and what its not! Wolf described the forces, real and imagined, that brought this art movement to the fore. On the way you will smile and laugh at the goings on in the NY art world of the 50's and 60's. When you are done, you may well ask was it real? It is a relatively short book and does not assume you have or need a degree in art history. Get a laugh and little insight into one of the more offbeat eras of art. When you are done, you may never think about abstract expressionist art again in the same light, or any light.

This is a super send-up of the art world by the master of the send-up, Tom Wolfe. It is also educational, or, least it is for an art tyro like myself. Should be read over and over again. Fans of Wolfe will not be disappointed. Reveals the closed shop of art criticism and the narrow world of the critic, artist, buyer, distributor, auction world, current fashion etc and the convoluted angels dancing on a pinhead decision making process on what is a work of art and what is not. The Painted Word reminded me of Cakes and Ale, by W Somerset Maugham and how Maugham successfully used the novel to lampoon the literary world. Wolfe achieves the same effect using non-fiction but doesn't have a Rosie Driffield to supply a valedictory guffaw, or, perhaps, he is Rosie Driffield.

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