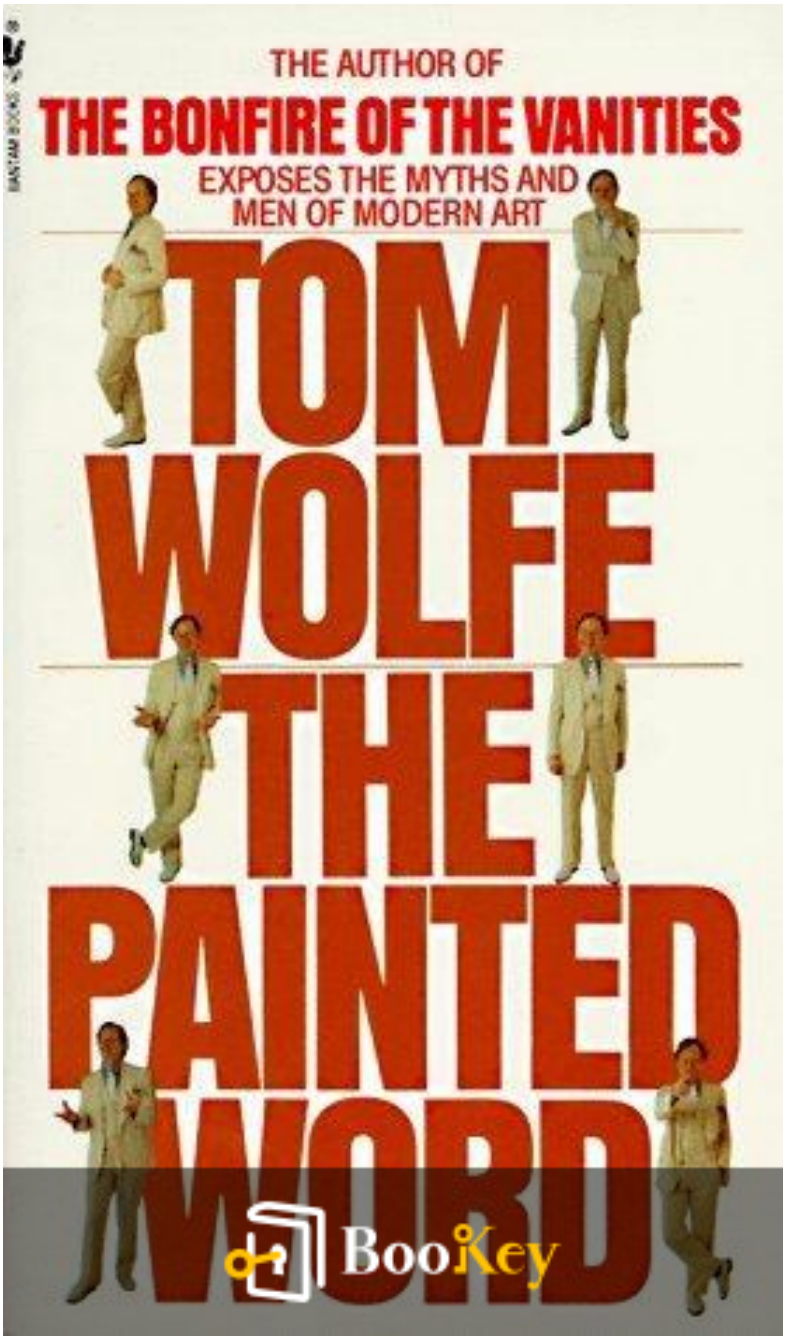
The Painted Word PDF (Limited Copy)

Tom Wolfe



The Painted Word Summary

Exploring the clash of art and theory in modernism.

Written by Books1

About the book

In "The Painted Word," Tom Wolfe embarks on a bold and incisive examination of the modern art world, unraveling the intricate web of theory and critique that has, according to him, overshadowed the very act of painting itself. Wolfe argues that art has undergone a transformation, where the artist's intention is often secondary to the critiques of art critics and the abstract concepts that guide contemporary thought, turning paintings into mere manifestations of intellectual discourse. With his signature provocative style, Wolfe challenges readers to reconsider the value of art in a culture where meaning is often obscured by jargon and elitism, inviting them to explore the implications of a world where the painted canvas is viewed less as an aesthetic experience and more as a battleground for ideas and status. This compelling narrative not only captures the spirit of the art scene but also serves as a sharp critique of how we define creativity and originality in an age dominated by opinions over craftsmanship.

About the author

Tom Wolfe was a prominent American author and journalist known for his distinctive writing style and keen social commentary. Born on March 2, 1930, in Richmond, Virginia, Wolfe was a leading figure in the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s, blending literary techniques with traditional reporting to create immersive narratives. His works extend beyond journalism into fiction, showcasing his sharp wit and insightful observations of contemporary society and culture. Wolfe's innovative approach to writing not only captivated readers but also influenced generations of writers and artists, making him a significant voice in American literature and cultural criticism. His celebrated works, including 'The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test' and 'Bonfire of the Vanities,' exemplify his ability to capture the zeitgeist of the times, and his insights into the world of art and intellectualism are poignantly explored in 'The Painted Word.'

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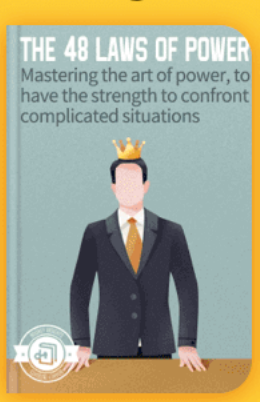

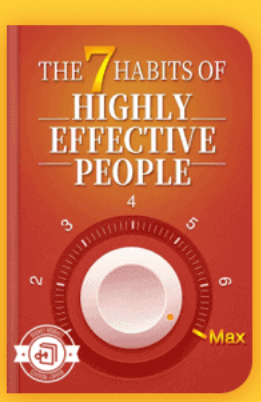

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Summary Content List

Chapter 1 Summary: The apache dance

The Apache Dance

The early chapters of *The Painted Word* outline the evolution of modern art and its societal dynamics, particularly in the early 20th century. Major art movements, although originating before World War I, gained prominence and social acceptance during the 1920s. Cities like Paris, London, Berlin, and New York became epicenters where Modern Art transcended into fashionable dialogues, leading to knock-offs in affluent neighborhoods, symbolizing its ultimate social integration.

Historically, the artist's role transformed through the centuries—from serving nobility in Europe’s royal courts to becoming a celebrated figure within bourgeois salons. By the 18th century, as society shifted post-French Revolution, artists increasingly congregated in intimate circles called cenacles, forming bonds with like-minded individuals while rebelling against bourgeois norms. This era birthed the archetype of the bohemian artist, someone defying societal constraints and seeking creative freedom.

By 1900, during the times of innovative figures like Picasso and Braque, artists sought to challenge the bourgeois vision of reality. However, despite distancing themselves from upper-class societal structures, they remained

close by, often residing in urban enclaves like Montmartre. The proximity was essential—not just for inspiration but also for recognition and success. An artist needed to present an anti-bourgeois image while still appealing to the affluent cultural elite, forming a paradox that became integral to their identity.

The chapter illustrates an artistic mating ritual wherein artists perform their work within the intimate yet competitive community of bohemia, simultaneously hoping to catch the eye of influential patrons and critics who inhabit the upper echelons of society. This dual-phase process consists of engaging in the so-called "Boho Dance," an exhibition of defiance against mainstream norms, and "The Consummation," where those patrons celebrate and elevate selected artists to realms of fame and success.

This metaphorical Apache Dance describes an artist's tumultuous relationship with the art world—marked by defiance, theatrics, and ultimately a surrender to the accolades of the cultural elite. The artist benefits by gaining fame, financial stability, and allure, while patrons experience the thrill of moral superiority by supporting avant-garde art, enjoying the illusion of separation from the bourgeoisie.

As the chapter unfolds, it underscores the modern collector's paradox: to earn status not just through wealth but also by associating with the edgy avant-garde, which provides a counter-narrative to their own affluence.

Collectors are drawn to the authenticity of artists and their creations, seeking refuge from the superficiality of their lives while simultaneously consuming art that encapsulates modern rebellion and creativity. This dynamics constitute the essence of the modern art world where societal roles intertwine, and the line between artist and admirer converges in pursuit of prestige and meaning.

Chapter 2 Summary: The public is not invited

In the chapter "The Public is Not Invited (and Never Has Been)," the author explores the complex relationship between modern art and the public perception of it, particularly in relation to its development before and after the First World War. The central argument is that while Modernists like Picasso and Braque made significant stylistic innovations prior to the war, modern art only gained widespread recognition and acceptance in the postwar period due to a select group of tastemakers and cultural elites, rather than any genuine public interest or understanding.

The author dismisses the notion that public opinion holds any real weight in the acceptance of modern art, suggesting that the public's involvement is more akin to being passive spectators or tourists rather than active participants in the artistic process. This "public" comprises countless eager art enthusiasts, including students and casual visitors to museums, who are generally oblivious to the intricate dynamics at play in the art world. The decisions regarding which artists and movements rise to prominence are made in a closed circle of around 10,000 people—consisting of artists and cultural influencers across major cities like Paris, New York, Berlin, and London—while the general populace merely receives updates through media announcements after the fact.

The transformative period of the 1920s marked a shift in the art world,

where modern art became synonymous with fashionably avant-garde ideas, primarily due to certain influential figures using it to elevate their own status. Picasso's rise serves as a prominent example; after gaining fame for his work on Diaghilev's ballet in 1918, he transitioned from a struggling bohemian artist to a celebrated icon of the art world. This transition illustrates the phenomenon of "double-tracking"—the ability of an artist to navigate both the bohemian, avant-garde scene and the societal elite. While some artists remain permanently aligned with bohemian values, unable or unwilling to adapt to public acclaim—represented by the contrast between Picasso's lavish lifestyle and Braque's more humble, scrupulous approach—others successfully embrace the duality required for widespread success.

Ultimately, the chapter underscores the idea that in the realm of art, the merits of an artist's work are often overshadowed by their ability to engage with the cultural elite, resulting in a situation where the public's actual taste and understanding play a minimal role in the creation and success of modern art. The discourse serves as a critique of the romantic notions surrounding public engagement with art, revealing the selective mechanism through which artistic success is achieved and recognized within elite circles.

Chapter 3 Summary: Le Tout New York on a Cubist Horse

Le Tout New York on a Cubist Horse

In the 1920s, modern art experienced a significant surge in popularity across Europe, sparking curiosity in the United States. However, the American painter Marsden Hartley cynically remarked in 1921 that art in America was akin to a “patent medicine” that would only gain traction with mass awareness. He was mistaken; modern art quickly captivated a select elite of wealthy New Yorkers, including influential families like the Rockefellers and Goodyears, who sought to emulate the artistic sophistication enjoyed in Europe, particularly by figures such as Picasso, Derain, and Matisse.

By the end of the 1920s, modern art had established a stronghold in the form of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), founded in the living room of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and attended by affluent patrons. This institution marked not just the acceptance of modern art but its institutionalization, much to the dismay of conservative critics in New York. Doyen of traditional art criticism, Royal Cortissoz, attempted to resist this wave by dismissively labeling modern art as “Ellis Island art,” likening it to the influx of immigrants seen as a negative force. His pejorative insight, however, only prompted mockery from the very circles he aimed to influence.

By the mid-1930s, modern art's credibility soared, as corporations integrated it into their identities. Companies like Dole Pineapple and the Container Corporation of America commissioned prominent artists to produce work that aligned with avant-garde ideals, using these creations in expansive advertising campaigns that popularized modern art concepts even further. The blending of commerce and culture showcased modern art—not merely as a form of aesthetic expression but as a status symbol.

With rising popularity came the burgeoning need for theoretical frameworks to validate and interpret the evolving movements within modern art. This was particularly important for artists as they crafted new perspectives that the mainstream (particularly the bourgeoisie, or middle class) often failed to grasp. Art theory, once a nebulous addition to cultural discussions, became a vital tool in the dialogue around art. Artists were expected to articulate their vision, with many finding that philosophical explanations were necessary; for example, Meret Oppenheim's Surrealist work, the Fur-Covered Cup, was dissected to reveal deeper layers of meaning.

However, the trajectory of modern art shifted dramatically due to the rise of political influences. From 1930 to 1941, the art community largely turned away from avant-garde experimentation to embrace Social Realism, which served as a powerful propaganda tool. This politically charged art form, pushing narratives representing working-class struggles and Leftist ideology,

became the dominant style, overshadowing most modernist expressions. Artists like William Gropper, Ben Shahn, and Jack Levine found prominence during this period of activism, stifling dissenting modernist voices. Barnett Newman lamented later that the influence of Marxist and socialist ideologies created an intellectual constraint that left many modernists feeling trapped.

As the 1940s approached, the political landscape shifted, allowing for a resurgence of modernism in art. The end of Social Realism coincided with a renewed exploration of literary and thematic depths within artistic expression, paving the way for a more nuanced and complex era of creativity. With the departure of the political fervor that fueled Social Realism, artists were finally free to embrace the intricacies and explorations of modern art that had initially captivated the public imagination.

Chapter 4: Greenberg, Rosenberg & Flat

In this chapter, the author explores the cultural landscape of Abstract Expressionism from 1946 to 1960, a period when New York City emerged as the new epicenter of Modernism, supplanting Paris. Central to this artistic evolution were influential theorists and critics, notably Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, whose ideas not only shaped the art of the time but also defined how it was perceived by the art world and the general public.

The chapter begins by celebrating the theories of this period, likening them to "castles in the cortex," complex constructs that were influential in shaping the direction of modern art. These theories thrived in a tight-knit artistic community, wherein various cliques and schools, known as cenacles, rallied around artists like Hans Hofmann and later formed what would become the New York School or the Tenth Street School of Abstract Expressionism. This collective included renowned artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, along with their critiques and supporters.

Greenberg's theories emphasized "flatness," arguing that a painting should be a flat surface with paint applied directly, eschewing illusions of depth inherited from earlier art forms. He championed a focus on the purity of the medium, asserting that prior artistic traditions needed to be discarded to achieve this ideal. Greenberg's authority and his arguments resonated deeply within the bohemian circles, as he articulated an unwavering belief that the

future of art hinged on this new understanding of flatness.

Rosenberg introduced the concept of "Action Painting," which shifted the focus from the final product of a painting to the very act of painting itself as a performative event. This idea captivated artists and the public, portraying the creative process as a visceral interaction between the artist and the canvas.

Throughout this era, despite the rising fame of artists like Pollock, commercial interest remained lukewarm. Many collectors struggled to engage with the complexities of Abstract Expressionism, often finding themselves mired in the intricate theories that underpin the styles. The chapter emphasizes that the success of the movement depended not only on artistic innovation but on how effectively its proponents communicated their ideas to the broader public.

The theorists’ confidence and rhetoric, filled with moral authority and passion, invigorated the art community. Pollock, for example, navigated his burgeoning reputation through the lens of Greenberg's theories, often referencing these ideas in his work. As Pollock became increasingly affiliated with this theoretical backdrop, the distinction between his artistic identity and his public persona began to blur, leading to a complex duality in his experience as both a celebrated artist and a struggling bohemian.

Overall, the chapter articulates a nuanced understanding of how theories of flatness and action influenced the production and perception of Abstract Expressionism, capturing the dynamics of an art world that thrived on intellectual discourse and struggled against its own commercial realities. The chapter posits that while the theories did not initially lead to widespread acceptance or financial success, they became foundational to the understanding of contemporary art, paving the way for movements that followed.

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Chapter 5 Summary: Hello, Steinberg

Chapter Summary: "Hello, Steinberg"

In examining the evolution of contemporary art, the chapter delves into the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and the emergence of Pop Art, culminating in Leo Steinberg's pivotal role in this transformation. The narrative opens with a statement reflecting what collectors prefer in art: they generally seek realism masked as something new unless there’s a prevailing movement like Abstract Expressionism. This contradiction set the stage for the birth of Pop Art, which, in its essence, was a reaction against the seriousness of Abstract Expressionism, characterized by artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

In 1963, a magazine editor declared Abstract Expressionism dead, attributing its demise to Steinberg’s assertions. While the shift was already underway, Steinberg was instrumental in legitimizing the appreciation of Pop Art by framing it as a 'higher synthesis' that cleverly incorporated the concept of ‘flatness’—a central tenet of modern art theory initiated by critic Clement Greenberg.

Steinberg argued that Jasper Johns’ use of everyday symbols—such as flags and targets—reflected a new artistic direction that maintained flatness unlike

the illusions offered by Abstract Expressionists. He contended that artists like Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko were now relegated to a category that included classical artists, suggesting that their works represented illusion rather than the authenticity of flat surfaces.

Steinberg's theories gained traction through lectures at the Museum of Modern Art, rivaling Greenberg's previous dominance in art discourse. His cooler, urban approach appealed to the tastes of the 1960s, associating him with a new intellectualism in art. Steinberg famously articulated that "all great art is about art," arguing that contemporary pieces inherently referenced their artistic predecessors. Ironically, as Pop Art emerged, Greenberg and fellow critic Harold Rosenberg failed to adapt, dismissing Pop Art rather than finding a way to incorporate it into evolving artistic narratives.

Pop Art reinvigorated the New York art scene, attracting attention akin to that of the Beatles in music. Featuring iconic works from Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, it celebrated American culture while subverting traditional definitions of realism. Steinberg and theorists like Lawrence Alloway argued that such artworks transcended mere representation, existing instead as commentaries on the various signs present in modern society.

Artists embraced hedonism and commercialism with open arms, contrasting the tortured backgrounds of their Abstract Expressionist predecessors. They

indulged in the luxuries and socialite lifestyles of the era, with figures like Warhol becoming emblematic of this new freedom. Warhol famously humorously remarked that there was nothing more bourgeois than avoiding bourgeois culture, fully embracing the societal stage.

While Steinberg legitimized the artistic shift, many patrons and culture enthusiasts still found comfort in Pop Art's familiar, albeit kitschy, aesthetics. This underlying irony thrilled them, slighting critics who were wary of its perceived triviality.

In essence, this chapter illustrates the complex dynamic between artistic evolution and consumption, illustrating how new movements challenge established norms, often accompanied by a mixture of bewilderment and exhilaration that can define a cultural moment. Steinberg's insights not only advanced art theory but also guided collectors and spectators through the rapid changes in contemporary art, stressing the importance of response and adaptability in the ever-evolving landscape of modern creativity.

Chapter 6 Summary: Up the fundamental aperture

In the experimental landscape of the mid-1960s, Minimal Art emerged as part of a revival of abstract art, coinciding with the vibrant popularity of Pop Art. This era witnessed a shift towards a more theoretical understanding of art, one dominated by intellectual frameworks rather than mere aesthetic pleasure. A notable event marking this transition was the 1965 exhibition "The Responsive Eye" at the Museum of Modern Art, showcasing Op Art—characterized by its optical effects and perceptual illusions. Artists like Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely garnered attention for their visually stimulating works, which soon inspired the fashion industry to produce clothing inspired by these avant-garde designs.

Op Art, or "Perceptual Abstraction" as its creators preferred to call it, aimed to detach art from traditional representation. Artists argued that while Cubism opened the door to abstraction, they sought to advance it by reducing the artwork to pure perception—an experience occurring solely in the viewer's mind, stripping the paintings of their connection to the outside world.

In this context, prominent art critic Clement Greenberg adjusted his stance, moving away from defending Abstract Expressionism in the face of Pop Art's rise. He critiqued the "idiosyncratic brushstrokes" typical of Abstract Expressionism, labeling them the "Tenth Street touch." This led to the

emergence of Post-Painterly Abstraction, a style aiming for greater reductionism—eliminating representation and even the brushstroke itself.

As artists went further in their quest for minimalism, the Minimalist movement began to reject sentimental associations traditionally linked to art. They eliminated emotional hues and embraced harsh industrial colors. This discipline led to novel expressions of art; Frank Stella's shaped canvases and artists painting directly on gallery walls eliminated the canvas as an object of focus, emphasizing instead the raw geometric forms that defined the space itself.

Emerging art forms like Earth Art in the late 1960s, exemplified by works from Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, rejected conventional gallery settings. This genre was aligned with the burgeoning New Left movement, which critiqued the elitism associated with the "Museum-Gallery Complex," advocating for art's existence beyond traditional confines.

The late 1960s also sparked the evolution of Conceptual Art, which prioritized the idea behind a piece over its physical manifestation. Artists explored abstract concepts, questioning the necessity of permanence in art. Works varied from ephemeral installations to entirely invisible creations, where documentation became paramount. An example was Peter Hutchinson's "Arc," which captured the lifecycle of decay in an installation, emphasizing the process over the product.

The concept of impermanence led to a more radical notion of art. Lawrence Weiner epitomized this shift with a piece that existed purely in language, devoid of visual reference; he proposed that art need not be built, allowing for a vast range of interpretations by the audience or "receiver."

By stripping away all elements of traditional art—realism, forms, colors, and even the creator's ego—this movement heralded a new age of Art Theory, ultimately indicating that art could be conceived merely through language and thought, existing in a space beyond tangible experience. This evolution marked a significant departure from the visual, leading to an era where critical discourse became the canvas for artistic expression, culminating in the abstraction of art itself into theory.

Chapter 7 Summary: Epilogue

In the epilogue, the narrative delves into the resurgence of realistic painters, particularly those engaging in a style known as Photo-Realism, which represents a significant departure from the prevailing movements in contemporary art. For the past six years, artists in this genre have emerged from obscurity, emboldened by what they perceive as an excess in modern art theories that have strayed into absurdity. This revival includes well-known figures such as Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes, who meticulously replicate color photographs of everyday scenes—like vehicles, storefronts, and urban landscapes—onto large canvases. Utilizing techniques such as slide projection to ensure precision, these artists have managed to both delight and irritate critics, who often express outrage at what they deem a "return to philistinism" or a celebration of mediocrity.

The critiques are rich and varied; Estes, as a leading figure, faces harsh judgments including claims that his work embodies "incredibly dead paintings" that strip subject matter of its social context. Critics lament that the triumph of common, unremarkable views in galleries echoes past fears of cultural dilution, drawing a parallel to historical artist disparagements linked to demographic shifts in society.

The epilogue reflects a back-and-forth tension in the art world, as the Photo-Realists, while being criticized for lacking intellectual rigor and

fidelity to the creative values of modernism, insist that their work transcends mere realism to embody "photo systems." They deliberately avoid emotional or evocative representations and seek technical uniformity to align themselves with this established narrative.

At the same time, the discussion ventures into a broader critique of the supposed abandonment of theory in modern art. The author postulates a future retrospective that would feature not just painters but also art theorists who shaped the narrative of this era—Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Leo Steinberg—as central figures in the development of art philosophy in 1945-1975. This speculative elaboration paints a picture of an academic discourse that left artists grappling with outdated forms of expression, drawing a stark contrast to the scientific method that advanced understanding in fields outside the arts.

By anticipating how future generations will scrutinize this unique period, the epilogue ultimately positions the concept of the "Painted Word" as a critical and possibly absurd chapter in the history of art, filled with both irony and a certain somber humor as society reflects on its priorities and definitions of creativity.

Critical Thinking

Key Point: The resurgence of realistic painting is a testament to the value of authenticity in art and life.

Critical Interpretation: Imagine stepping into a world where the mundane, once considered ordinary, becomes extraordinary through the lens of authenticity. The resurgence of realistic painting reminds you that there is profound beauty in everyday experiences, urging you to seek depth in simplicity. When you embrace authenticity in your own life, you begin to illuminate the extraordinary nuances in your surroundings—be it a sunset, a bustling street, or a shared laugh—with a renewed perspective. This chapter inspires you to reject the notion that greatness must be obscured in complexity or abstraction. Instead, challenge yourself to appreciate and express the beauty in reality, recognizing that sometimes, the most powerful art comes from faithfully capturing life as it is.