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An economist quantifies inspiration

U. of C. professor offers a formula for creativity

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Painting Outside the Lines: Patterns of Creativity in Modern Art

By David W. Galenson

Harvard University Press, 251 pages, $29.95

Few art critics would dare to designate a single peak year for a painter, arguing perhaps that the exercise is far better suited to baseball players, cars or cabernets. But David W. Galenson is a University of Chicago economist, not an art critic. Thus, in "Painting Outside the Lines: Patterns of Creativity in Modern Art," he quantitatively examines the output of painters ranging from Eugene Delacroix to Ed Ruscha--a span that covers roughly 150 years of art history and the shift from realistic painting to the use of canvases as mere staging areas for conceptual art. Aesthetes will surely loathe not only the book's premise but also its process: Galenson funneled eight generations of painters through a multiple-regression analysis, using data from auction houses--the institutions that aesthetes most love to hate.

Based on auction hammer prices from 1970 to 1997, Galenson pinpoints one year in which each artist's paintings have fetched the highest prices. French Impressionist Paul Cezanne peaked at 67, he determines, and American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko peaked at 54, but after age 26 it was all downhill for Pablo Picasso, the Spanish Cubist. Galenson's ambition, however, goes beyond merely charting market trends; he aims to analyze inspiration itself. Historically, he claims, collectors and museums have paid the most for paintings that mark a watershed for artists, so therefore the top auction prices also signal their period of greatest innovation.

Next, the economist sets out to erect a grand theory of creativity within modern art, positing two distinct forms of innovation. "Experimental innovators," like Cezanne or Rothko, arrive at their breakthroughs via incremental change and a refinement of technique, reaching an artistic zenith late in life; "conceptual innovators" can completely revolutionize their art within a single piece--in Picasso's case, the proto-Cubist "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," which some critics consider the 20th Century's most significant painting.

In France and America, a generation of "experimental" painters was rapidly succeeded by a generation of "conceptual" painters. Stars of the Impressionist movement such as Cezanne and Camille Pissarro fought decades for critical respect, only to have their limelight stolen by radical new approaches such as Cubism, Fauvism and Pointillism. In America, Abstract Expressionists such as Rothko, Barnett Newman and Willem de Kooning--who had made America an artistic powerhouse for the first time--were rankled when attention swiftly shifted to Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Naturally,

intergenerational conflicts ran rife in Paris and New York.

While Galenson's description of these parallels between the American and French painting scenes seems accurate and interesting, one gets no sense that he's developing new art history here; he relies too heavily on extended verbatim citations in these biographical sections. This seems part of a larger problem with "Painting Outside the Lines": It reads like a quirky little journal article that blithely ingested steroids. Even with its numerous illustrations, the book reaches only 170 pages before segueing into 80 pages of appendices, footnotes and so forth. The economist starts at least three chapters with nine or more quotations in a row, and huge passages are devoted to asserting that artistic movements concentrate in major metropolises, that great artists have often studied with other great artists, and that individual artists coalesce into movements. This will hardly surprise anyone with a basic knowledge of how the art world works.

Perhaps art-world insiders are not the target audience. But if the book is targeted toward social scientists, then the numbers upon which the economist suspends his theories become doubly troublesome. Galenson bases his book on data culled from auctions from 1970 to 1997. Granted, that's a long period, but I suspect that over time the peak year for his artists would shift--especially for those with several periods of critically acclaimed production. Picasso offers a clear example of the pitfall presented by auction prices. Citing the Spaniard as a conceptual innovator par excellence, Galenson ranks 1907 as Picasso's pinnacle; because he painted "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" that spring it seems to perfectly prove the author's point. But in November 2000, three years after the latest data used by Galenson, Christie's set a Picasso record when "Woman With Arms Folded" sold for $55 million. The piece dates from 1902, during Picasso's blue period, which is now burning up the market. Does that suddenly make it more important than Cubism? Few critics would suggest so.

For Cezanne, Galenson's archetypal experimental innovator, recent auction sales likewise prove problematic. In May 1999, Sotheby's sold the highest-priced Cezanne, "Still Life With Curtain, Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit," for $60.5 million. The oil dates from 1893-94, more than a decade before the 1906 peak Galenson's data designated. Another example: American Ed Ruscha peaked in 1961 by Galenson's reckoning, but his auction record of $687,750 is held by an untitled 1989 painting of a Standard Oil sign.

In fairness, many recent auction results seem to validate Galenson's analysis. And without access to the author's dataset, it remains hard to gauge what effect, if any, the recent sales would have on his overall conclusions. But they do point to the trickiness of using auction prices to assess quality. Why? Because auctions are the most volatile sector of the art market. The potential buyers for truly great works could fit into a single speedboat, and ultimately hammer prices indicate only the value perceived by two rich men: the winner and the last underbidder. Sales tend to be distorted by the caprices of a few wealthy individuals, some of whom exit the market after a few rapacious years. In the late 1990s, for example, Las Vegas casino owner Steve Wynn--previously not a collector of any note--suddenly pumped up prices with no-holds-barred bidding on everything from Rembrandts to Rauschenbergs, much as late-'80s Japanese bankers had driven Impressionism (even mediocre Impressionism) sky-high before disappearing from the auction scene.

But for all their slipperiness as data, auction sales at least are public. The gallery and private-dealer transactions that play an equally important role in the art market remain confidential; their entire business model is based upon the absence of price transparency. Even more problematic for quantitative study, art is an expensive but intrinsically worthless commodity. A piece's value at any point is a matter of agreement within the market, not the fundamental utility of the object itself. No matter how high-priced, for example, a painting becomes worthless wood and cotton if proven to be forgery.

One has to admire Galenson's ambition and audacity, for the task he set himself was neither easy nor obvious. But the art market comes down to this: unique products, created by people whose reputations undulate constantly, being sold as luxury goods, often for undisclosed prices, to a small subset of rich people with a wide range of potential motivations. It's an endlessly fascinating field, but one can hardly imagine any legitimate industry that's less well-suited for regression analysis.