

Art and management: beyond the brush

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Art is all around us in numerous forms and whilst art is naturally open to interpretation it is always an expression of cognitive reason whether conscious or otherwise. Managers and those that study the field should be willing to look outwardly at other areas to bring new learning, insight and perspective to their own fields.

For a long time the sectors of science and art have proven a treasure trove to management gurus for insight into areas not previously considered. Typically art is viewed in terms of a finished product, but the area that I will discuss in this article will be one of construction. That is to say not the end result of the art itself but the process that the artists used to create the works. It is in this process that many transferrable lessons for managers can be learned.

In order to explore this topic I shall be referring to three artistic works produced across half a millennia. Those artworks are produced by arguably three of the greatest artists of all time: Leonardo da Vinci; Pablo Picasso and Jessica Ive.

The Baptism of Christ - Verrocchio

Andrea del Verrocchio was a Renaissance painter primarily based in the Italian city of Florence in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Like many Renaissance artists Verrocchio worked in a number of mediums including stone as well as paint. Amongst a number of paintings that are attributed to Verrocchio it is known that he was responsible for the production of the painting shown below which he entitled The Baptism of Christ.



Whilst arguably a very nice painting, at 177x151cm it is hardly imposing and although nicely composed it isn't that different to many other works created at the time. In most respects then we could argue that this painting is unremarkable.

Fairly obviously the painting shows a central figure of Christ being baptised by John. The eye, however, is drawn to the angels on the left-hand side of the painting for some reason. They seem to stand out from the image and look more lifelike than the other people.

Verrocchio's studio was well known for training other painters of the time and despite his flair for teaching he is an artist that is not widely known. In common with many artists at the time Verrocchio drew the main parts of the painting himself and let his students produce the 'supporting cast', if you will. The angels were painted by one of Verrocchio's more talented students; one Leonardo da Vinci. Whilst perhaps pleasantly surprising this little fact does not explain the root of the pull that the angels have. Da Vinci was one of life's great experimenters, never quite satisfied with what life apparently was; he always wanted to know more and develop more, that much is well documented. The angels in Verrocchio's painting; those figures that steal the image were one of da Vinci's experiments. His experiment was that he used Oil Paints, which is considered to be one of the very first uses of this medium.

What Leonardo Da Vinci did in one small insignificant corner of someone else's work was to redefine the artistic world. He changed the medium that the great painters of the age used, in the art field this shift was significant and continues to be so to this day. Verrocchio is said to have been so impressed by his student that he vowed never to paint again.

This may be well and good from an art history point of view, but what does this teach us as managers?

Da Vinci wasn't satisfied with the way things were and sought to improve the previous way of thinking. He chose to take a massive risk (imagine if Verrocchio hadn't liked the angels) and to challenge the status quo. That challenge was to change the environment and would set the scene for the next several hundred years. We are taught that to some extent we must bide our time, have confidence and choose our moments carefully but most of all da Vinci reminds us that 'ordinary', 'normal' or 'the way it's always been done' must be challenged. As managers we must make the same challenge in all that we do.

Guernica – Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso's famed painting of the Guernica bombings is altogether a much more impressive but sombre affair than the Baptism of Christ standing as it does a comparatively enormous 3.5m wide by 7.8m wide. This painting has received much scholarly interest regarding its contents and context but this painting is also of interest to managers as its method of construction provides valuable lessons.



The painting whilst large is also highly a complex work of art. It is a structured painting with many different sections combining and interacting to create the finished work. Perhaps we could go as far as to call it a *system*.

Guernica dominates a bright but rather austere gallery space on the second floor of the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Away from the main work however lies separate artworks that are much more of interest to us as managers. Dotted around the gallery are a selection of some of the 70 plus preparatory works that Picasso made for the main painting. In the setting of the museum these preparatory works of varying degrees of completeness and complexity are displayed as almost a 'warm-up' to the main event however it is interesting to see how the artist managed his own work and the construction of the image through meticulous planning.



What can be seen from these supplementary works are preparations that are in different states of completeness; some are vague sketches others are virtually complete works in their own right. We can see progress being made by the Spanish painter as he worked towards the final artwork. These preliminary works track the development of the whole arrangement, what must have been very quick charcoal sketches are developed in later sketches towards more complete works. We can also see various trials of slightly different individual works until Picasso is satisfied that it can be transferred to

the final composition. Perhaps more fundamentally though we are reminded how crucial good planning is as well as ensuring that sufficient space exists to develop ideas before committing them to action.

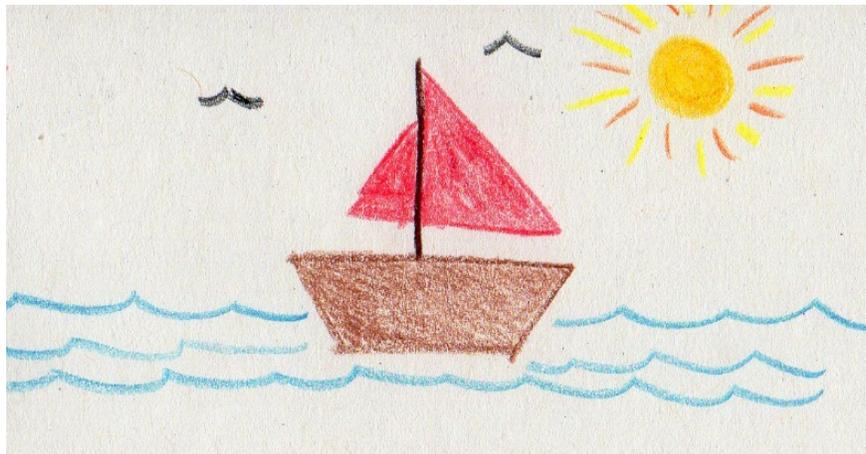
The finished article shows the results of small scale trials and emphasises the need to break down complex issues into more manageable sections which are then subject to careful examination and experimentation.

Picasso shows us that whilst the finished work is much more than just the sum of the parts those individual parts still matter and they must be treated accordingly. As managers we know how important it is to see the *big picture*, but I think Picasso really shows us the importance of also seeing the small pictures. Without those small pictures the big picture cannot exist; it is the same in management. Good managers ignore the detail at their peril!

Boat – Jessica Ive

So, onto my third artist. The next work comes from a young new UK based artist, an artist who perhaps is not quite ready for a retrospective at the Guggenheim but nonetheless is a master in her own right and can give us pause for thought in our management reflections.

Before I get too carried away with overdramatic preamble I should point out that this future grandmaster is six years old.



Jessica is the daughter of a colleague of mine called Steve and being the doting father that he is, Steve often brings in artwork by his kids and posts them onto the sides of his office cubicle. Sometimes they are crayon drawings, sometimes finger paintings and even the occasional collage.

With our open-plan layout I look straight onto the pictures next to Steve's desk and as I was sat the other day contemplating a particular issue I looked over at Jessica's painting of a flower and another of a boat and this got me to thinking: why would a child paint a picture of a boat when we live eighty miles from the sea and why was it so colourful?

When I thought about this scene some more I came back to the idea about the way that the image was constructed. On reflection three particular factors seemed to be necessary to create the picture:

- [Exposure to stimuli

- [Imagination
- [Optimism (or at the very least the absence of pessimism)

It is clear that you need all three of these items. If one is missing the others can take over; without an experienced view of your world, imagination can run riot and the picture being painted starts to diverge even further away from reality.

So how does a child know what a boat looks like? Well the obvious answer has to be that they have seen one, maybe on TV, in a book or whilst on holiday by the seaside. They have seen a boat bobbing around and have memorised that image. Whilst this may not exactly seem revolutionary information let us think a little more about this concept. In our case Jessica has experienced a learning opportunity, has internalised that information and is interpreting it in her own way based on her own perceptions and values. As managers we must do the same thing. We all know those managers that go around with their eyes wide shut or drive decisions from behind a desk using only a spread sheet. Jessica teaches us that in order to paint a good picture we must get out there (wherever 'there' may be for you) to gain experience and understanding. In an ever more complex world this continues to be the case.

Another key ingredient has to be imagination. That question not of 'why' but of 'why not'. Jessica's drawing shows how important imagination is. As managers we must be imaginative; we must be imaginative when we avoid or solve problems, imaginative when we set goals and imaginative when we lead our teams into unknown territory. Without imagination we are stuck with nowhere to go and nowhere to grow. It is imagination that pushes these bounds and asks 'what if?'

The final point then that we can take from Jessica's painting is that of optimism. Anyone that has ever been on holiday to the English seaside will know that the sea is never blue, the sky never clear and the sun more often than not doesn't put in an appearance, yet this scene is full of vibrance and colour. And what do we as managers learn from this? I think we must learn that whilst we must of course manage cautiously we should not forget to look for the colour and optimism in our industries. This is where inspiration will lie and may well be where we grab that one opportunity to find great value for our businesses and our customers.

So, overall what can we as managers learn from art?

In this piece I have described three very different artworks and I have especially focused on their methods of construction rather than just their face value. Perhaps this in itself is a lesson that managers should go behind the obvious but if so then that is for another article. The three artworks here tell us to:

- [Challenge the status quo
- [Plan meticulously and don't neglect the detail
- [Get out there, be imaginative and be optimistic

Whether you agree with the links I have drawn to art I don't know but hopefully what you will agree on is that by being open to concepts from other fields managers have a great opportunity for drawing inspiration and new ideas that may just prove capable of making a difference in an increasingly complex world.