Symbols of Good, Bad and Ugly: Economic Activity as Subject Matter in 19th and 20th Century Western Art

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of economic subject matter in 19th and 20th century Western paintings. We find that while economic activity occupies a large portion of daily human life, it has been largely ignored as a subject matter for art. The paper examines the differences between economic activity, such as labor, capital, production, and market exchange as artistic subject matter. Using a panel approach, examples of 19th and 20th century paintings that use economic activity as subject matter are examined and classified into sub-categories of motifs. Analysis suggests that industrial production and capital themes are more negatively presented than labor and market exchange themes.

Introduction

Since Thomas More’s *Utopia* appeared in 1516, there has been a long and honored tradition to use thematic symbols, such as metaphors and analogies, to illuminate various aspects of business activity (e.g., Brunswick, 1952; Manning, 1979; Morgan, 1986; Putnam, Phillips and Chapman, 1996). Within this context, debate appears to revolve around some common themes such as: a) the philosophical useful of such vehicles in both economic theory (Hannon, 1997; Kay, 2002) and organizational research (Tsoukas, 1991; Ortony, 1993), a controversial topic so aptly illustrated by the lively debate between Morgan (1980, 1983) and Pinder and Bourgeois (1982) (see also, Bourgeois and Pinder, 1983), b) the appropriate application of particular thematic symbols, such as the optical metaphors of lenses, prisms or mirrors (e.g., Grant and Oswick, 1996; Makherjee and Rahman, 2002), to correctly illustrate various organizational activities, and c) the pedagogical value of symbolic creation in the business classroom (Shaw and Locke, 1993; Ryman, Porter and Galbraith, 2002; Mockler, 2002). Regardless of the academic debate, metaphors, analogies, and other thematic symbols remain some of the most endearing vehicles of communication in the world of business and economics, as illustrated by the colorfully artistic covers of almost any modern corporate annual report.
Morgan (1986) correctly points out that a metaphor is a “way of thinking and a way of seeing,” but just as a metaphor or some other thematic symbol may illuminate an organizational or economic issue it can also describe how its creators perceive the subject. Examining perception within this context slices the discussion in a radically different way; symbols, metaphors and recurring representational themes now become tangible evidence of beliefs, biases, and culture. So while a debate as to whether a “prism” is an appropriate metaphor for “pluralistic experiences” is useful (e.g., Mukherjee and Rahman, 2002), the continuous application of this particular metaphor may also tell us something important about cultural perception of “pluralistic experiences.” This multi-dimensional, and sometimes hidden, tie between the cultural context of symbolism and themes, the subject or topic depicted, and creative process becomes, in part, the foundation for both art therapy in psychology (e.g., Koplewicz and Goodman, 1999) and the various modern schools of artistic interpretation (e.g., Johns, 1991; Lubin, 1994; Prown, 1997).

The context for this study is the world of professional fine art, and the development of apparently enduring motifs and symbols of economic activity. It is often said that art captures the emotions of the time, or as Prown (1997) notes, “art embodies in material form cultural evidence – evidence of belief – and the study of artistic evidence can enlarge an understanding of culture, past and present (p.22).” Here metaphor becomes the intellectual idea of the painter, something that is communicated to the viewer (Fitzgerald, 1998). And as motifs and recurring representational themes develop in art they, in turn, become part of our social history (e.g., Lubin, 1994; Prown, 1997; Stein, 2000). What then is this metaphorical history of work, business and economics; how does the world of professional art, in fact, depict such issues?
Historical Context of Economic Subject Matter

Economic activity and the interchange between labor, capital, production, and market exchange are fundamental to the human endeavor. Regardless of culture and historical era, other than perhaps sleep, economic activity probably occupies the greatest percentage of time of the human life cycle. Prehistoric European art appears to recognize this, and work in the form of hunting, farming, and preparing food is seen as a dominant subject matter in early cave drawings and rock art.

By the classical Greek and Roman eras, however, the subject matter for European artists appears to have evolved away from work related topics. This, to a large part, reflected the general Hellenistic philosophical attitude that leisure, community involvement, and happiness were the primary goals in life, and work activities were properly relegated to the lower social strata, or directly associated with slaves (Tilger, 1931; Ryken, 1987). By the 5th century, B.C., religion, family, war, leisure, love and nature were much more popular topics for the Hellenistic and Roman artists. Over the centuries, while certain subject matters, such as religion and love, became more or less important, this hierarchy of subject matter in art that de-emphasizes economic activity appears to have continued past the Renaissance, and with some notable exceptions, up to the modern world regardless of the current fashion of style and technique.

The lack of economic activity as primary subject matter in fine art can be seen in any historical review of Western art during the last seven centuries; and the noted examples in art anthologies, such as Gustave Courbet’s *Stonebreakers (1843)*, Jean-Francois Millet’s *Sower (1850)* or Anton Refregier’s early-20th century WPA murals, are usually cited as path-breaking in the art world primarily because of their social commentary. With respect to the Courbet’s work, for example, Cole and Adelineid (1989) note, “*Stonebreakers* scandalized the Salon-goers of 1850” (p. 238).
The authors are also quick to argue that “Courbet, together with Millet and Rousseau, had turned to nature and images with laborers with realism that increasingly attracted artists who chafed under the restrictive conventions of academic art,” (p. 239).

**Thoughts on the Evolution of Economic Motifs**

Until relatively recent times, art history as an academic endeavor has tended to place its intellectual soul in understanding the evolution and intricacies of style and technique, and the role that various luminaries played in this complex process. Most of this debate has typically revolved around the various schools and “isms” of art, such as “impressionism,” and the nuances of techniques, such as the use of light, color, shape, and structure that constitute these various schools and their variants. Similarly in studies of individual artists, great pain is given to examine how the subject’s style and technique matured with age, social condition, physical ailments, and interaction with other like-minded artists.

While this line of work has certainly provided a remarkable understanding of style and technique, only recently have art historians begun to deeply investigate the evolution and understanding of subject matter and content. And when the evolution of economic subject matter is discussed, depending on the orientation of the historian, inevitably the explanation follows an argument of evolving cultural “awareness” associated with scientific knowledge and secularism.

The march of secularism and science, however, can not adequately explain the evolution of how economic activity is used in art, particularly when one examines the industrial revolution of the 18th century. This industrial oriented, 2nd wave of change, to use Alvin Toffler’s analogy, certainly began to alter and dominate human activity in both Europe and the United States by the late 1700s; but it also introduced a whole new range of potential subject matter for the artist -- factories, industrial technology and equipment, the banking system, transportation, and the
division, specialization and concentrations of labor to name a few. Yet, with the exception perhaps of the social realists of the late 19th and early 20th century, continuing into some of the depression and American WPA art of the 20th century, these new motifs, symbols, and subject matter continued to be largely ignored in the art world.

**Empirical Study**

A rather complete sampling of 19th and 20th century Western painting was undertaken. Sources for the art samples included approximately twenty different Western art history books, several major museum holdings that have been placed on-line, and two different time periods when all the Sotheby’s art auction catalogs and e-bay art internet auctions were examined. In all, well over 15,000 paintings were initially screened for economic activity subject matter. Artists ranged from well-known masters to unknown minor artists, and covered a range of genres. Because the present study focuses primarily on the industrial period, only paintings completed between 1800 and 1950 were included. Limiting the sample to pre-1950 also controlled for subject matter more related to the newer technologies of work, such as computers, telecommunications, etc., and is also pre-television. Art developed under the control of communist countries were excluded from the analysis.

Four general categories of economic activity were identified from this initial screening, labor, capital, industrial production, and market exchange. One hundred forty-eight paintings were identified, and digitized onto slides. The small percentage (about 1%) of paintings that were identified with economic activity subject matter from the large original population underscores the discussion above.

A panel of five individuals, from various backgrounds of art, history, economics, and business reviewed each of the paintings, and developed a more detailed categorization of subject matter.
**Labor Subject Matter.** Three different types of labor oriented motifs were identified, the heroic worker, the harmonious worker, and the industrial subordinate.

*The Heroic Worker:* The most common labor theme in fine art depicts the heroic worker. This motif comes in many forms -- the commercial fisherman battling the rough sea, a lone farmer’s wife planting the field, a black slave cutting wood, the shoemaker hunched over his bench, workers moving lumber on a city construction site, or day laborers breaking rocks for a new country road. Both Courbet’s and John Brett’s *Stonebreaker* images reflect this motif. Other well known examples, with a farm emphasis would include Millet’s *Sower*, Vincent van Gogh’s *Sower with Setting Sun*, Grant Wood’s *Spring in Town* and Anton Refregier’s *Cuban Cane Worker* to name a few. A variety of work responsibilities can be shown, as illustrated by Pierre Auguste Renoir’s *The Washerwomen*, Paul Gauguin’s *The Poor Fisherman*, and even the attractive, but experienced barmaid in Edouard Manet’s *Bar at the Follies Bergere*. The figures, whether young or old, are almost always strong, implying moral character, with sometimes torn, old or dirty clothing to illustrate hard work, unbending commitment, and insufficient financial reward.

It is interesting to note, however, that although the heroic worker is often portrayed, it appears primarily in the sectors of physical labor such as farming, fishing, and construction, less so, but still occasionally in the retail and service sectors, and is almost non-existent in the professional categories of office work, design and engineering.

The heroic worker in art can probably trace much of its philosophical roots to Augustine of Hippo’s (354-430) and the 6th century Benedict of Nursia’s belief in the inherent spiritual value of physical labor, a position that quickly translated into an important tenet of both ancient and modern Christian theology (Ryken, 1987; Galbraith, 2002). Given much of Western art to the 14th century was created within the walls of Benedictine monasteries and associated cathedral schools, it is not
surprising that the heroic worker motif was well cemented into Western culture and tradition. And while many of the 19th and 20th century artists have perhaps more secular beliefs and images in mind when they paint, the motif of the heroic worker remains one of the most enduring artistic subject matters of economic activity.

*The Harmonious Worker.* Here the laborer is shown working in harmony with nature as in John Constable’s, *The Lock.* Generally only a single worker, or perhaps two is presented, and the overall emotion is one of serenity and calmness. The work activity itself is rarely emphasized but rather depicted as simply a single component in a larger natural setting, and the worker himself is presented as either relatively insignificant in physical size relative to the rest of the scene, or is painted with a hazed and misty feeling – a small fishing boat on a larger calm sea or a woodcutter returning home out of a highland forest. Another variant, although less used, is when a larger group of workers are presented, all in harmony with each other either socializing while working, or more often working in harmony as a small work team, such as a family of farmers working together on a farm such as in both Jean Millet’s and Alexander Mann’s *The Gleaners.*

*The Industrial Subordinate.* This motif stems from the relationship workers have with industrial age machinery and equipment. As with the heroic worker this comes in several forms, but usually within a distinct industrial setting – either inside a factory, where workers operate in and about machinery, outside the industrial architecture where workers are surrounded by the factory exterior, or by workers interacting with the structures of the industrial age such large steam locomotives in a railroad yard or on the decks of a large ocean going freighter. Almost always, this motif shows the machinery, equipment, factories and other industrial structures physically and emotionally dominating the human worker as in Carl Henderson’s *The Engine Shed.* Workers are bent over and exhausted, drawn small in scale next to the machinery, or have pained and tired
facial gestures and poses. Sometimes the image of subordination is very subtle, but many times it is quite obvious, clearly as some sort of a “social commentary”.

**Production Subject Matter.** Four different types of production oriented motifs were identified, the industrial subordinate (discussed above as an interaction between labor and production), the industrial confusion, nature’s battle, and nature’s victory.

*The Industrial Confusion:* Here factories, equipment, and industrial technology are presented as a jumbled mess. Colors are mixed and confused; equipment, machinery, electrical wires, steam-lines, and conveyer belts are all intertwined into a tangled maze; and buildings are often misshapen and presented at odd, disjointed angles. Wisconsin WPA artist Robert Schillan’s *Rain, Smoke, Steam* is a typical example of industrial confusion.

*Nature’s Battle:* Another production oriented motif shows some type of a contrast, or perhaps better called conflict, between industrial activity and nature’s beauty – in the middle of a serene valley sits a steel factory; surrounded by a blanket of newly fallen snow lies a coal mine. Usually these scenes show pollution of some type, such as smoke or steam rising from the industrial activity and the scenes often suggest industry as victorious over nature with the surrounding trees and plants leafless or dead. Some of these paintings can be quite striking, and in some case beautifully haunting in the way nature and production is contrasted and compared.

*Nature’s Victory:* Nature occasionally wins, and reclaims it honor. This final motif depicts nature’s ultimate victory over industry. Typical scenes from this category would include the abandoned flour mill overgrown with vines and soft flowers, or the half submerged, broken freighter being slowly reclaimed by an angry ocean.

**Market Subject Matter.** Perhaps equal to labor subject matter in frequency is the subject matter of market exchange. Almost always, however, market exchange is presented by artists as a
harmless, subordinate vehicle to social interaction. This is done in two ways, the market place or the invitation.

*The Market Place:* First, and most common, are the crowded street markets that depict physical movement, conversation between patrons and sellers alike, and an opportunity to present the fashion designs of the day. Flower markets, pottery markets, fish markets, clothing markets, and at times, even slave and marriage markets are all presented as social activity. Markets are colorful and often culturally diverse. They are places to meet, flirt, and socialize. Camille Pissarro’s *The Village Market*, Guy Buffet’s *St. Remy Marketplace*, and *The Flower Seller* by Pablo Picasso represent typical examples of this motif.

While most of the markets are typically outdoors, some paintings present the same motif within a shop, such as a tailor’s clothing shop. August Macke’s *Milliners Shop* depicts excitement and social interaction, but within an interior retail setting,

*The Invitation:* The second, albeit slightly less common, approach is to present a view of the vendor as an attraction or enticement for social interaction – the street vendor has his or her wares presented, usually in a colorful or friendly manner, asking one to approach, engage, and perhaps make a purchase. In Francis H. Beaugureau’s *The Grain Market*, for example, the colorful wares of the vendor makes such an invitation to the viewer.

**Capital Subject Matter.** Without question, capital or money based subject matter is the least frequent of the four economic related motifs. In fact, in our sample only three paintings were identified that had an obvious capital oriented theme. One was an abstract “tachism” piece by Georges Mathieu titled, *The Financial and Economic System*, that without the benefit of knowing the painting’s title the representational content would have been difficult at best to identify. The other two pieces were somewhat similar, depicting unattractive caricatures of money lending.
However, given that only three examples could be found, it would be difficult to generalize about categories of capital depiction, other than recognizing that capital does not appear to be a common motif in Western art.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Several interesting conclusions can be drawn from our study. First, economic activity as subject matter, when compared to love, war, nature, and religion, etc., is relatively rare. Artists that embrace the new motifs of economic activity are rarely found. Few share, for example, American artist Joseph Stella (1880-1946) thrill and excitement of the new economy. Given the powerful and important role economic activity plays in our daily life, this low frequency of depiction in fine art raises an interesting question as to why?

Second, a preliminary taxonomy of economic subject matter was developed. Subject matter from all aspects of economic activity was found in our sample. Although labor and markets appeared the most common motifs, a number of production and industrial motifs were also identified, particularly from the 20th century. This is also an interesting finding considering the industrial revolution had started a hundred or so years earlier, yet only relatively recently have these motifs have been used in art.

Third, from the perspective of value and interpretation, impressions suggest that Western artists, regardless of stylistic approach, nationality, or historical era, tend to view and use the subject matter of labor and market exchange much more positively than the themes of either industrial production or capital. Several related explanations might be offered. First, economic activity is a complex process; something that requires deep study and understanding, whereas love, war, and religion are more powerfully “felt” emotions. Second, an explanation might lie simply in the personal experiences of the artist. Most artists, for example, probably hold a relatively
sophisticated understanding of both labor (they paint) and market exchange (they price and sell their artistic products). The complexities of industrial production and capital, however, are much more foreign, and perhaps threatening. When it comes to economic subject matter, artists probably tend to paint with a more positive “hue” only those components they really comprehend.

When it comes to economic motifs several questions might be raised; does art reflect a true sense of our cultural history, as many modern art historians might argue, or does art reflect the biases and misunderstanding of the artist themselves? If so, does this suggest a path of economic education directed toward those who paint our cultural history? Further research and discussion is clearly needed to expand and delineate these issues.
References


