



# STUDY GUIDE

## WHY IS MODERN ART SO BAD?

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**KEY TERMS:** beauty standards      master taste      art aesthetic-relativism

<b>NOTE-TAKING COLUMN:</b> Complete this section <u>during</u> the video. Include definitions and key terms.	<b>CUE COLUMN:</b> Complete this section <u>after</u> the video.
<p>What is held up today as the best of modern art?</p> <p>Besides artists, who else is responsible for the preponderance of bad art and the rockbottom lowering of standards?</p> <p>What can people do to reverse the damage done, especially in terms of being victims of bad taste?</p>	<p>How did the great masters bring such beautiful art into the world for so long?</p> <p>Why is the art world so deeply saturated with bad art right now?</p>

## DISCUSSION & REVIEW QUESTIONS:

- How should answering the question of ‘What is art’ be approached? Who should decide? Is it even possible to decide? If so, what types of measures should be used? Who should decide upon the measures and standards? Why? Do you think that art should be identified and measured by objective standards, or should it be subjective- employing the ‘aesthetic relativism’ mentioned by Mr. Florczak? In other words, is art something to be recognized or something to be judged? Explain.
- The study of Aesthetics began with the question ‘What is beauty?’ But later, genuine artists realized that sometimes even something ugly could be genuine art, so the question became ‘What is art?’ Why do you think that people sometimes confuse the question of ‘What is art?’ with ‘Is the art good or bad?’ Can something be both ‘art’ and ‘bad’ at the same time? Why or why not?
- Often, new generations of artists come along and rebel against the ‘old guard’ in order to innovate, expand, and elevate an art medium- for example when Miles Davis came along and gave the world the slow, lyrical ‘Cool’ jazz that was a rebellion against the fast and busy ‘Be-Bop’ that jazzers (including Miles!) had been playing before that. However, we learn in the video that, “Beginning in the late 19th century, a group dubbed The Impressionists rebelled against the French Academie des Beaux Arts and its demand for classical standards,” and that as a result, “...with each new generation standards declined until there were no standards. All that was left was personal expression.” Why do you think that the rebellion in this case failed so spectacularly? Why did the trend go in the wrong direction? In the case of ‘Cool’ jazz, the artform was elevated because the standards were kept so high, but in the case of the impressionists the standards were allowed to sink drastically, thus leading to a collapse of the medium. What factors do you think contributed to throwing out all standards? Do you think that mere personal expression should be entitled to be treated as art? Why or why not?
- Further, Mr. Florczak goes on to state, “Without aesthetic standards we have no way to determine quality or inferiority [of a given piece of art]. “ Do you agree with this assertion? Why or why not?
- What is the difference between a crafted object and art? What makes Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s painting “Spring” artwork worthy of being displayed in the Getty Museum, but a kindergartener’s finger painting just a ‘craft;’ what is the difference? If ten people are standing around a statue, but only 4 of them are experiencing it as art, is it art? You bring home a truly beautiful painting that stirred your soul in the gallery and really knocked you out. You hang it by the front door. For the first few months, you admire it every day. Ten years later you aren’t even aware that it is there. Is it art? What about if you move, and ‘rediscover’ the joy the painting brought you in the first place? Can something be art, then not art, then art again to the same person? Did it ever stop being art? Some cultures (such as the Inuits) craft an object, then throw it away or sell it- because they see the ‘art’ as the process, not the eventual product. The process is meaningful to them as art, but the product is worthless as art. Would you consider this cultural norm to fall under the ‘aesthetic relativism’ that Mr. Florczak decries? Why or why not? What do you think art is?

## EXTEND THE LEARNING:

### CASE STUDY: The Holy Virgin Mary

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the article “At \$2.3 Million, It’s The Most Expensive Painting Made Of Elephant Poop,” then answer the questions that follow.

- What is so offensive and bad about Mr. Ofili’s work? Do you think it reaches a high standard? Do you think it is art? Why or why not? Would you pay 2.3 million dollars for it? Why or why not?
- In the video, Mr. Florczak informs us that, “Not only has the quality of art diminished, but also the subject matter has gone from the transcendent to the trashy. Where once artists applied their talents to scenes of substance and integrity from history, literature, religion, mythology, etc., many of today’s artists merely use their art to make statements, often for nothing more than shock value.” How big a factor do you think that ‘taste’ should be in determining the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of art, if at all? Why do you think that some so-called ‘artists’ choose such awful subject matter? Do you think that these ‘artists’ are just trying to make up for their lack of skill or imagination? Why or why not? Why don’t more people who claim to value art and aspire to be artists study the great masters first and attempt to emulate them and strive for something greater, to elevate the medium rather than degrade it if they respect it so much?
- What do you think motivates patrons to admire, pay to view, and in some cases purchase such trash? Doesn’t supporting artists who produce bad art just validate their thinking and encourage them to make more? Why or why not? How does supporting bad art and bad artists affect the overall art industry? How does it affect the genuine, good artists?
- Do you think it is okay to judge a person’s art as bad? Why or why not? Do you think it’s acceptable for someone with no formal or informal training in photography to purchase a professional level camera, start taking pictures, and call themselves a ‘photographer’ or ‘artist?’ Why or why not? Doesn’t this sort of behavior contribute to confusing others, especially upcoming generations, about what photography is? Why or why not?



# QUIZ

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- 1. Quality in art is not objectively traceable.**
  - a. True
  - b. False
  
- 2. Today, the beauty of art is measured by\_\_\_\_\_.**
  - a. The artist's technical abilities
  - b. How much it has improved upon previous generations of masters
  - c. A universal standard of quality
  - d. Aesthetic relativism
  
- 3. Modern art is \_\_\_\_\_.**
  - a. Even more beautiful than art from the past
  - b. Often silly, pointless, or purely offensive
  - c. Technically masterful
  - d. All of the above.
  
- 4. The Impressionists rebelled against the French Academie des Beaux Arts and its demand for \_\_\_\_\_.**
  - a. Exorbitant member fees
  - b. Religious affiliation
  - c. Classical standards
  - d. Unstructured designs
  
- 5. Which of the following is NOT a classical work of art?**
  - a. The Mona Lisa
  - b. The Pieta
  - c. Petra
  - d. The Dying Gaul



# QUIZ - ANSWER KEY

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[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/01/chris-ofili-elephant-dung\\_n\\_7470692.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/01/chris-ofili-elephant-dung_n_7470692.html)

December 2, 2015 [Huffpost Arts](#)

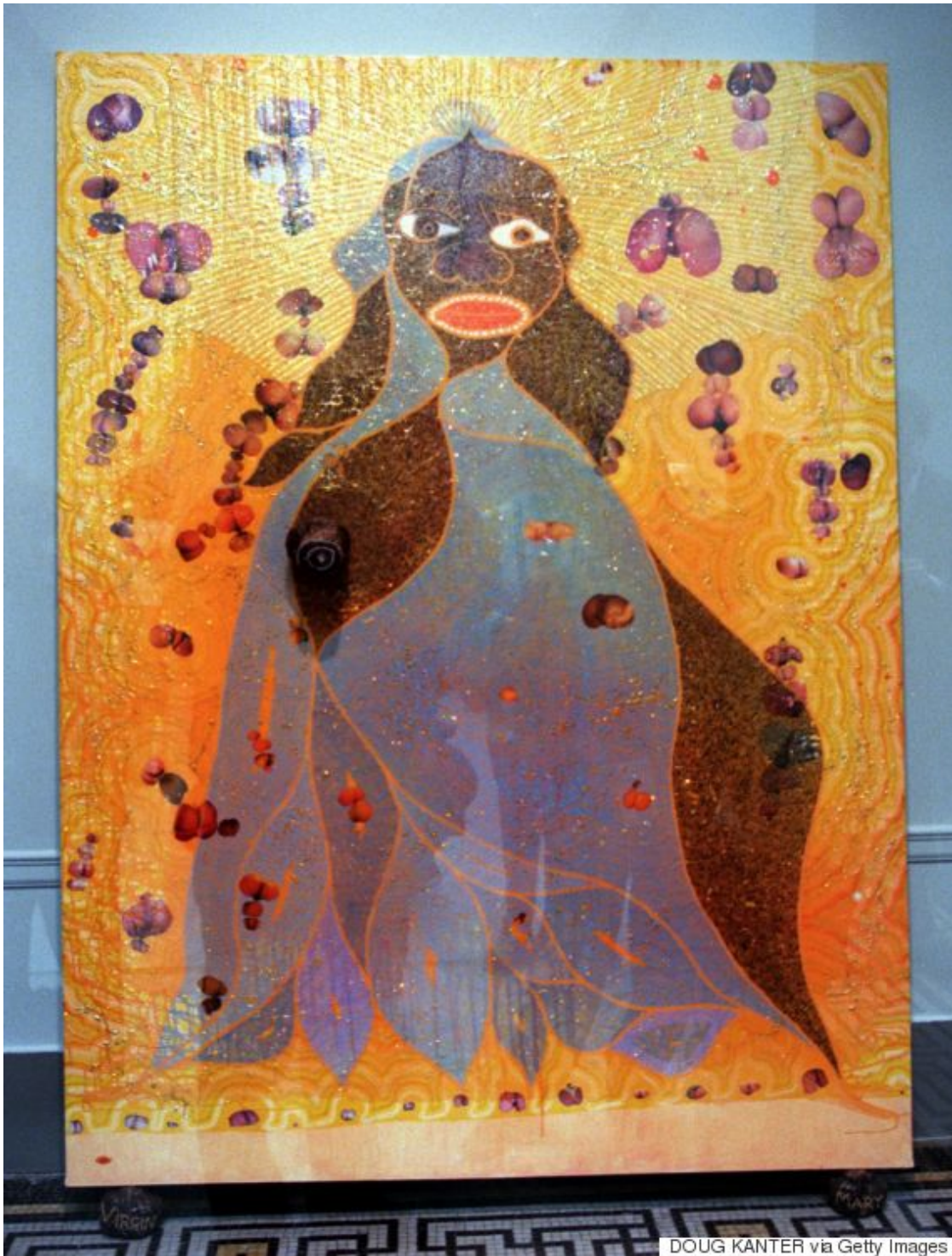
Edition: U.S.

# At \$2.3 Million, It's The Most Expensive Painting Made Of Elephant Poop

The Huffington Post | By [Priscilla Frank](#)

This week, Richard Prince broke the (art corner of the) Internet when his [appropriated images of young women's Instagram photos went up for sale for \\$90,000 apiece at the art fair Frieze](#).

Here to steal the spotlight from Prince is an old favorite when it comes to art world controversy, Chris Ofili. And, we're quick to admit, we'd far rather read and write about Ofili.



DOUG KANTER via Getty Images

In particular, we're talking about Ofili's 1996 piece "The Holy Virgin Mary," a work Ofili referred to as "[a hip-hop version of the story](#)" of the Madonna. His shocking depiction of an African Virgin Mary features an exposed breast formed from lacquered elephant dung as well as a robe made of pornographic depictions of women's asses. The work is being sold via Christie's this June, and is expected to go for a cool \$2.3 million.

Although the painting was made in 1996, it wasn't until 1999 when the feces-adorned Virgin was exhibited [at the Brooklyn Museum](#), and the elephant dung really hit the fan. The piece, part of "Sensation," Charles Saatchi's show of works by Young British Artists, particularly enraged Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a devout Catholic who in reaction attempted to cut off the museum's city subsidy and remove its board, calling the piece "[sick stuff](#)."

Despite the commotion Ofili caused with the work, the Turner Prize-winning artist didn't opt for his unconventional medium sheerly for the purpose of provocation. The material, which he culled from the London Zoo, is, in part, a reference to Ofili's African heritage. "[It's a way of raising the paintings up from the ground and giving them a feeling that they've come from the earth rather than simply being hung on a wall](#)," he told The New York Times in 1999. "There's something incredibly simple but incredibly basic about it. It attracts a multiple of meanings and interpretations."

The most popular interpretation, of course, seems to be something along the lines of, "Ohmygawd, this painting is made of [s\*\*\*]!" The massive backlash and conversation surrounding Ofili's work speaks less to the masses' scatological obsession, and more to the pop-up binary that so readily assembles between the religious right and the artistic left; the traditional and the experimental, those who think artists should let religious figures fraternize with bodily excrements and those who disagree. For another example, see [Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ"](#).

While many insular art world dialogues are filled with contradictions and subtleties, the Ofili controversy presents a chance for the art-loving masses to converge over a mutual love of artistic expression. It's not the most nuanced of artistic debates, but at least those wishing to host a Facebook rant without doing much research know exactly where they stand. It's moments like these that bring the most disparate corners of the art world together to fight for a common goal: the dutiful right to rub poop on a canvas.

Fast forward more than 15 years and "The Holy Virgin Mary" has risen to a nearly mythical status in art world folklore, following Ofili's widely praised retrospective at the [New Museum last year](#). Until now, the incendiary art object has been in the possession of Australian collector David Walsh. According to Vulture, Walsh is a "[gambling billionaire \(really\) who built an underground museum in Tasmania and filled it with conceptual contemporary works, alongside mummies](#)."

The Virgin is slated for auction as part of [Christie's June 30 auction of postwar and contemporary art in London](#), and it's expected to sell for around two million dollars. In fact, according to a Christie's spokesperson, a third party has already guaranteed a minimum price for the piece. It could go for even higher; right now, Ofili's record auction price is \$2.8 million, [for the 1998 "Orgena," sold in June 2010](#).

Yes, this work also featured Ofili's secret ingredient.