THE IMPACTS OF THE FUNK ART MOVEMENT

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The Funk Art Movement created great controversy among artists, art critics, and the art-loving public and forever transformed the world’s outlook on art. Taking root and evolving in the San Francisco Bay Area and Davis, California, the movement sparked the 1960’s and 1970’s baby boomer generations to change standards and expectations of what art should and should not be.\(^1\) The change did not come easily, as art critics disliked the new materials incorporated into artwork and did not, in fact, consider the new creations art. Conversely, the general public, especially in the Bay Area and Davis communities, increasingly approved aspects of the works created and began to broaden its views on what constituted art. Despite attempts to end the Funk Art Movement, it turned into a force that changed both the definition of art and art itself, as exemplified through sculpture and the works of Robert Arneson, recycled objects and the works of Robert Hudson, and the renewed idea of individuality in artwork.

Prior to the Funk Art Movement, the United States began witnessing a shift in art styles. The styles ranged from abstract expressionism—the development of abstract art in New York in the 1940’s and 1950’s—to the reaction against it, minimalism—art in its most simple, mainly geometric and linear form. Pop Art, with its inclusion of elements such as advertisements, processed food imagery, news, etc., also materialized in the middle of the twentieth century. Prominent pop artists included Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Leading artists of Abstract Expressionism included visionaries such as Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and Peter Voulkos. Minimalists included artists such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella. These artists and their art styles had a profound impact on the nascent Funk Art Movement.

Pollock, the leader of Abstract Expressionism, helped guide the way into Funk Art by introducing unorthodox ways of painting: splashing, dripping, and swiping paint across

canvases.² Peter Voulkos, another leading abstract expressionist, influenced the Funk Art movement through sculpture; drawing the admiration and attention of Robert Arneson, who studied him intently.³ Both of these artists changed the basics of art and influenced Arneson by proving that the unorthodox is not necessarily bad. At the same time, Pablo Picasso’s art, mainly linear and geometric paintings, demonstrated to Funk Art artists how to speak their mind through art. Minimalism, another mid-twentieth century art style, attempted to portray artwork as sophisticated and simple—minimizing everything on the art pieces. Funk artists rejected this style because it simplified art excessively. Although modern in their own right, Funk artists’ refusal to use these pre-existing expressive styles created a cultural shock for the local communities.⁴

Before the Funk Art Movement, sculptors held to the idea that sculpture required certain standards: conventional, functional, and generally made out of clay. Sculptures had a set of standards that most artists seemingly adhered to: vases made up one category, while heads, busts, and bodies made up another. Each piece contained a function—holding flowers, commemorating a person, or serving as a memorial to an individual or an historical event. Until Funk Art, sculptors rarely thought outside the box.⁵ Mid-twentieth century painters, on the other hand, had a head start on unorthodox methods and unusual ideas. Abstract Expressionism pushed artists to change their way of painting. Most of the paintings that came out of this important movement had no specific purpose, unlike previous paintings that provided its admirers with portraiture and

⁴ "Funk Art."
⁵ . "A Tribute to Robert," Verisimilitudo
landscape, and still-life benefits. Paintings, photographs and drawings of these concentrations are best known through the art of painters such as Georgia O’Keefe, and photographers such as Ansel Adams. The reaction against it, Minimalism, gave way to even more techniques and inventions. Minimalist artists include Donald Judd who had revolutionary ideas in sculpture. His pieces often played with filling large open spaces with a series of boxes. The rectangles and squares that made up his sculptures are covered in bright colors or earthy tones. All of these methods together created a foundation for painters of the Funk Art Movement and the projects that came out of it as they demonstrated how linear and geometric shapes and different strokes of a brush can create a work of art. This occurred, even as critics voiced a different point of view. Similarly, the simplistic techniques of Minimalism and the abstract ideals of Abstract Expressionism provided the creative basis for sculptors in the Funk Art Movement. Robert Arneson and Robert Hudson soon took advantage of the new thinking in the art world.

The mid-twentieth century also generated its share of subject matter for the Funk Art movement. The time period, rife with alarming and exhilarating events, world and regional wars, and unconventional thoughts and ideas grew to be the perfect time for a new form of art to come about. San Francisco Bay Area and other Northern Californians closely followed the Hippie years and the protests against the Vietnam War. This generation lived by the ideals of acceptance, free will and free thought; thereby contributing to the willingness to take chances in art. This helped to spark new art forms, mainly Funk Art.6

Robert Arneson, according to popular opinion, started the Funk Art Movement. Encouraged by his father to draw and act creatively, Arneson began writing comics as a teenager which helped him to think outside the box. Comics, he said, gave him the ability to delve into

other artists styles and allowed him to closely study them. Arneson, head of the ceramics department at University of California, Davis, found himself occasionally motivated by his students surprising, unconventional and unprecedented ideas. Influenced greatly by the expressionist work of Voulkos, Arneson developed the confidence to do what others hadn’t.  

The revolutionary idea that sculpture can be non-functional represented a key impact of the Funk Art Movement. By exploiting and expanding this idea, Robert Arneson served as an artist “at the forefront of a movement that took ceramic art in a new direction.” Arneson affected the definition of modern art by demonstrating that sculpture can be non-functional and still be considered art. This is no small accomplishment as he had to break a several thousand-year old belief of what constituted sculpture. In ancient Greece, sculpture provided political and religious leaders with visual and three-dimensional manifestations of propaganda and religious idols. Even through the early 1950s, art nearly always had purpose such as a portrait, or a vase, with the notable exception of modern artists such as Picasso and Pollock. Although early in his career, Arneson, like most other artists of the time, focused on political drawings and sculptures, he eventually started using clay for nontraditional art pieces. He created widely criticized large scale pieces that began to be placed in public places. The most famous example of this constituted a series of pieces known as The Eggheads. The Eggheads proved to play a vital role in convincing people to accept this new style of art. Installation of the pieces occurred in large, public places, mainly on the University of California, Davis campus, making it difficult for the public to avoid them. Also, as they are nearly as tall as an average person, one could hardly

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8 Arneson, "Oral History Interview with," interview.
11 Mike Sintetos, "Robert Arneson,"
miss seeing them, even from a distance. For example, one of his Eggheads, set upside down at
the height of an average sized woman, is difficult to miss, especially with Arneson’s addition of
intricate forehead wrinkles. The man, if one peers at it upside down, is wearing a large smile and
has his eyes closed as if in the middle of laughing.

The Funk Art Movement also impacted today’s definition of art through the introduction
of new materials to the art world and the idea of experimentation with outlandish ideas in art.
Robert Hudson soon assumed the leadership role in promoting these new ideas. Most notably,
Hudson introduced the notion and use of recycled materials in artwork. Funk artists, especially
Hudson, seemed to work off the theory that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Hudson
had no fear of failure and a willingness to do things others hadn’t. He became one of the first
artists to combine painting, sculpture, and found objects. Arneson also celebrated the use of
found objects. Used toilets, typewriters, soda bottles, as well as other garbage and objects,
became staple objects in his artwork. By the end of the 1970s, Funk Artists used “the leftovers
of human experience” in art and the art critics described the pieces as “bad smelling or funky”. As a result of descriptions like these, art critics interpreted the new generation of artists to be
creating objects that should not be considered art. The use of recycled materials and found
objects has changed the modern definition of art because artists can now use any material of their
choice without the risk of significant criticism, as that which occurred in the mid-twentieth
century. Although this movement originated and grew in the San Francisco Bay Area and Davis,
California, the acceptance of the use of found, recycled, unusual and/or unexpected materials has
pushed artists nationwide to use new mediums without the fear of being criticized.

14 Sintetos, "Robert Arneson."
15 “Funk Art.”
Funk Art also influenced the art of today because of Hudson’s juxtaposed pieces. He became one of the first artists to combine vibrant colors and patterns. His combination of painting, drawing, and ceramics broke down barriers in the art world. He had a fantastic ability to “draw from a reservoir of images, memories, ideas, and stories [to develop] a unique and ever-expanding language which he puts to use in a multitude of mediums.” His skill allowed him to create a piece that falls between two dimensional and three dimensional. Many of Hudson’s pieces carefully combined the vibrant colors and the uses of recycled and found objects that are forever associated with the San Francisco Bay Area and Davis, California Funk Art Movement. For example, in his 1963 piece entitled Double Time, he began using vibrant colors as well as textures and patterns that stand out. Another example of Hudson’s work is entitled Outrigger. This piece carefully juxtaposes antlers, enamel on steel, and cast iron and treats all three as if they are a canvas. The pieces connect into a tower full of bright colors and pieces of steel that appear to be jumping out of the central structure. The statue is currently on exhibit at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California. Arneson, though not as well known for it, began using white earthenware clay as opposed to stoneware and painting with brightly colored glazes before firing. This newly articulated idea of adding vibrancy into sculptural artwork created a standard followed by artists today. Because of Robert Arneson and Robert Hudson, artists are no longer afraid to step out of their comfort zones and use items that will stand out.

The introduction of humor and self-identity into the art world constituted another major change in art resulting from the Funk Art Movement. The change from Abstract Expressionism

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17 Funk Art, Artfullyawear
18 Robert Hudson, “Frank Lloyd Gallery.
20 Arneson, House Pot, in The Art of California
to Pop Art allowed for a transformation in sculpture because it added even more humor as well as allusions into artwork. Both Robert Hudson and Robert Arneson are well known for humor in art work. Arneson, partly because of his background in comics, often liked to add a cartoonish aspect to his pieces. This idea of humor being incorporated into artwork sparked a further rejection of minimalism in modern art. Although sometimes bawdy in nature, artists would took joy in making fun of themselves or their friends in their pieces. For example, many of the Arneson Eggheads included anatomical features that looked much like his own. Arneson stated how he viewed the world upside down, and often portrayed his Eggheads upside down to symbolize it.\(^{21}\) The artists involved in the movement had no difficulty putting themselves, or their acquaintances, out there.

Before Funk Art, artists did not usually bring their individual identity into artwork. As a result of the Funk Art Movement, self-identity became a major aspect in art. In a series of self-portraits, Arneson incorporated nearly every comical and serious aspect of himself into the pieces. After he completed his focus on political drawings and sculptures, he increasingly began to study the effects of cancer and chemotherapy on his own body.\(^{22}\) Again, influenced by the work of Voulkos, Arneson began creating comical interpretations of himself and his friends.\(^{23}\) In his other pieces, he appeared as a chef, a man picking his nose, as a jean-jacketed hipster in sunglasses, and even semi-portrayed himself in his Egghead sculptures.\(^{24}\) Arneson also used photographs, mirrors, and drawings to create self-portraits and reveal a new identity each time.\(^{25}\) The unprecedented way that Arneson portrayed himself in his work created yet another cultural

\(^{21}\) “A Tribute to Robert,” Verisimilitudo.
\(^{23}\) “Bay Area Art Picks,” The San Francisco Chronicle, April 26, 2012,
\(^{24}\) Sintetos, "Robert Arneson."
\(^{25}\) “A Tribute to Robert,” Verisimilitudo.
shock to the art community. Arneson also played with the individuality of others. Following the death of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, Arneson, commissioned by the San Francisco public arts committee, created a bronze bust of the mayor.\textsuperscript{26} The bust included several bullet holes, signifying the number of times the mayor had been shot. This piece, although an example of individualism of an artist, created great controversy over where it should be placed—an argument unresolved today. The way Funk artists carried out their interpretation of portraiture created an entirely new category of art for artists today. Locally and nationally, artists now portray themselves in any way they choose.

The Funk Art Movement, although short lived, created many changes in the art world that are still alive today through sculpture, new materials, and individualism in artwork. Because of artists like Hudson and Arneson, the art world drastically changed during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Sculpture can now be non-functional or functional, as well as vibrantly colored. Sculptures can also be made out of recycled or found objects. As a result of the movement drawings, paintings, and sculptures can now include self-identity and comical portraiture. Both locally and nationally, artists are employing the techniques and styles of the Funk Art Movement into their works. The art is still displayed at highly visible locations in Sacramento, Davis, and San Francisco California. The Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California houses both an Arneson and a Hudson piece. University of California, Davis, is home to many of the Robert Arneson Egghead sculptures. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is home to the previously mentioned controversial bust of the mayor. These artists revolutionized new forms of art during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Arneson and Hudson both developed specific techniques in the art world that have been widely used by artists across the country. Vibrant colors, recycled and found objects, non-

\textsuperscript{26}“Robert Arneson: Self-Portraits in Bronze,” \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, March 1, 2012,
functional forms, and individualized artistic representations are all characteristics found in art today.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


   This book gave a few examples of Robert Arneson's work. The major one in here, the *House Pot*, exemplifies his work with low fire glazes. It also is one of his beginning non-functional pieces—non functional art is a major impact of the movement. This work is made out of clay, one of two of Arneson’s most famously used mediums (the other being found objects). The piece is also a perfect example of the vibrant colors used in Funk Art. Arneson is one of the main founders and creators of the Funk Art Movement. His piece, *House Pot* was sculpted during the movement.


   The interview with Robert Arneson allows readers to see what his childhood was actually like. It gives information on his background with art and who influenced him throughout his adolescent years. Readers find that his parents, mainly his Father, grew to be huge factors in his decision about becoming an artist. He has a very diverse background. The interviewer discusses with Arneson his writing of comics as a teenager and how that influenced his art later in life. The interview shows how his art developed throughout his lifetime. This source is valid because it is an interview of the man who started the Movement.


   *Double Time*, sculpted by Robert Hudson is a perfect example of his juxtaposed work. It combines nearly all aspects of his involvement in the Funk Art Movement. The work balances pattern and texture. Beginning with him, pieces began to be brightly colored. Hudson had an uncanny ability to combine a multitude of art techniques. *Double Time*, sculpted by Hudson during the movement, is a piece of art that exemplifies some of the main characteristics of the movement.

The article briefly describes Arneson's sense of humor. It again mentions his most controversial piece, the Bust of George Moscone. This bust, having been rejected by the public arts committee, took years before finding a place to stay. The SFMOMA is the only place willing to house this famous sculpture. This piece helps artists to continue and relive aspects of the original movement. The *San Francisco Chronicle* is an accurate and valid source because it is the newspaper of one of the two areas where the movement originated.


In the article, Artner gives information on how Arneson and Voulkos elevated sculpture into the modern world of art. Artner wrote the article just after Arneson’s death from cancer in 1992. It briefly discusses Arneson’s life and his career. It tells of where he held his largest exhibits and why they are the most important of his showings. The article also talks about his years teaching at UC Davis. The article is written by a credible reporter.

**Secondary Sources**


The online database gave insight to multiple artists involved in the Funk Art Movement. It reviewed the newly found use of recycled objects. The database described the art simply as “funk”. It listed many art pieces developed during the movement. It also gave a semi timeline of the artists who became involved in the Funk Art Movement. The article, written by a professor at Washington State Story is valid because it includes confirmed information on art of the movement and examples of the artists who create “Funk Art”.


The *Artfullyawear* blog details and analyzes some of Robert Hudson’s work. It showed how the movement has influenced life today. Some of Robert Hudson's works developed during the movement are shown on this website. It gave examples of some of his vibrantly colored pieces.
One of the works shown on the website includes all aspects of the movement: bright colors, non-functional, and made from found and recycled objects. The blog helps to elaborate on some of the qualities attributed to the movement that can still be found in art today.


This database gave another insight on the involvement of humor in the Funk Art Movement. The website lists another group of artists involved in the Funk Art Movement. It also shows images of work created during the period. The images each fit into one or more of the major impacts in the Funk Art Movement. These impacts, new materials, individuality, and new sculpture are accurately depicted on this site.


On the website, Sintetos shows Arneson's involvement with UC Davis. It discusses how he dropped all conventional forms of art in order to create something different. Sinetos lists some of the outlandish materials he used such as toilets in his artwork. It also tells how he always wanted to look beyond the normal. The author shares some information on how he first started creating large public pieces for the UC Davis campus.


Arneson's tribute is an important source on Arneson's achievements and on his struggle before finally succumbing to cancer in 1992. The site gives an outside point of view on his work from the beginning to the end of the Funk Art Movement. The entire website, as it is interactive, gave way to many interviews, videos, and works of art. It is a credible source because everything is related directly to Robert Arneson or is based off of reliable sources. Some of the videos on the website are of Arneson himself.


The biography on Robert Hudson discusses his involvement with the Funk Art Movement. It shows how he played a major role in it. Background on some of the pieces he created is also included on the site. The site lists some of the mediums he used—mainly recycled
and found objects. Hudson’s work is perfectly described as being "hybrid". The Gallery is reliable because it has housed some of Hudson’s most famous pieces that have been studied by artists and art critics. Galleries rarely report inaccurate information. Most galleries use information directly from the artist in their reports about his or her art.