

Arts

Stores as Art

It was a little before nine in the morning, the cab for the airport was at 10:30, and my daughter needed a new pair of headphones, the old ones having died. I called a local electronics chain; the recorded message said they opened at ten. I called Fry's. The voice at the other end of the phone informed me that they had opened at eight that morning. She sounded mildly surprised that I would ask.

While trying to decide which of ninety-seven different models of headphone to buy, I was also contemplating the nature of Fry's. My conclusion was that Fry's was best understood as a work of art. It combines an elaborate variety of features, from the hours it keeps to the flashing lights that notify you that a checkout clerk is free to the junk food in the checkout aisle, from the selection of goods to the décor — my local Fry's flaunted an ancient Egyptian theme — all designed to convey a single consistent feel, appeal to a particular sort of customer.

In the case of Fry's, an electronics supermarket, the target was geeks. The whole ensemble was designed to make geeks, technophiles, feel at home, feel that this is their place. To fully explain how they do it I would probably have to be an artist capable of creating a similar work myself and I am not, but I am enough of a geek to recognize what they are doing and admire their skill in doing it.

Fry's is only a memory, having died in the pandemic. The store as a store might have functioned online; Amazon did very well. The store as art required people shopping in it and California was locked down.

Fry's was the example most ready to hand, since I live in Silicon Valley. If this piece were being written by my friend Steve Landsberg he would probably cite Wegman's, a supermarket chain originally limited, I believe, to northern New York state.¹ Steve can go on at some length about the MegaWegman stores that are the stars of the chain; he has been known to argue that the existence of Wegman's is itself a sufficient reason to live or near Rochester. A commenter on my blog quoted a friend whom he had taken to Wegman's: "This is the Disneyland of food."

There are many other examples: Apple stores, Trader Joe's. In each case someone with artistic abilities much superior to mine has figured out to create an ensemble, a combination of aesthetics, products, marketing, that sends a consistent message. Properly viewed, it is a new art form, and one of considerable depth and subtlety:

In the artworld, works in this genre are called "installations": multi-media works that modify an environment to create an intended aesthetic effect. Objectively considered, I am sure some stores are better installations than some that can be found in art museums.
(Comment on my blog)

¹ As of 2021, Wegmans now had stores in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, and North Carolina.

Art and Wine Festivals

Art and wine festivals are the current version of what used to be called craft fairs, an institution that, as best I can tell, originated in the U.S. about forty years ago, although trade fairs of other sorts go back much farther. A little googling found an [interview](#) with Carol Sedstrom Ross, apparently one of the originators of the idea:

Probably 90% of the 500 people who showed in that first fair I organized at Rhinebeck in the early 1970's had some other job. When I left Rhinebeck ten years later probably 90% of the exhibitors were making their living from selling their craft.

Two things strike me about such festivals/fairs. The first, suggested by the quote, is that they represent a new way in which individual artists can support themselves, an alternative to selling through art galleries and stores. It seems clear, chatting with the artists, that there is now a substantial population of people practicing a wide variety of arts whose life alternates between making stuff during the week and selling it on the weekend.

The other thing that strikes me is the range of quality. Much of what is sold is cheap in both senses of the term, items with little originality or artistic value produced in quantity. But many of the artists are selling art, sometimes at prices one would expect to see in an upscale store. I was shocked to discover that one pendant, containing an impressive opal, was being offered for just under nine thousand dollars.

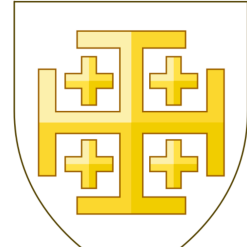
Perhaps I should not have been, since one of the sellers we enjoy visiting and, very rarely, buy from is [Hudson River Inlay](#), a firm that produces marquetry, detailed paintings done in inlaid wood (and turquoise and mother of pearl and ...) and taking the form of tables, wall mirrors, and the like, much of it priced in the thousands of dollars and worth it. What they are doing is, in my view, easily the equal of the pieces in the [Opificio delle Pietre Dure](#), a museum in Florence exhibiting similar work done, starting in the sixteenth century, in inlaid semiprecious stone (free plug for both).

I wonder, if one could look at early 21st century art from a perspective a century or two in the future, how much of what art historians then thought worthy of respect would turn out to be work subsidized by the National Endowment for the Arts, how much work produced to be sold in high end art galleries, how much work sold on weekends, out of booths, by the artists and their friends and spouses.

The prices people are willing to pay for art provide a very imperfect measure of its quality, but at least an objective one. My subjective opinion is that quite a lot of what I see at art festivals, including inexpensive as well as expensive work, is both good art and, in one way or another, original. What my wife and I ended up buying on one visit consisted mostly of dresses for my daughter, shirts for my wife, a dress for my granddaughter and a shirt for my grandson, as well as a few pieces of jewelry—all items more than two orders of magnitude less expensive than that opal pendant. My wife commented afterwards that she and our daughter could spend several hours in a shopping mall, try on three dresses and buy none of them, while less than half an hour at the [Harmony Enterprises](#) booth (another free plug), including the time to take pictures with my cell phone, email them to our daughter in Chicago and get back her decision about which ones to get ("all three of them"), provided three tie dyed dresses for one, three shirts for the other, and gifts for both grandchildren.

Modern Heraldry

The most basic rule of medieval heraldry was the [rule of tincture](#): No color on color or metal on metal. The metals were Or (gold, yellow) and Argent (silver, white), the colors were everything else, principally Azure (blue), Gules (red), Sable (black), Vert (green) and Purpure (purple). It is not known when or how by whom the rule was invented, but it seems to have operated in practice from the early thirteenth century. There are a few exceptions, such as the arms of the kingdom of Jerusalem, and a number of loopholes, such as that the rule does not apply to an object that is its own color, such as a black horse.



Arms of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, "Argent, a cross potent between four plain crosses or"

The rule of tincture still holds, not only for the system of English heraldry headed by the Earl Marshall and the Garter King of Arms but also for American gas stations. The badge of Mobil oil is Argent a Pegasus volant gules. Shell is Gules, an escallop or. Flying A is a winged capital A, argent on gules. Phillips is, per fess argent and gules, "PHILLIPS" azure and "66" argent. All obey the rule of tincture.

The reason is not that Shell oil had to get their sign passed by the Garter King of Arms or some Dutch equivalent but that the rule is functional. The metals are light, the colors are dark. Dark on dark or light on light is harder to see clearly at a distance than dark on light or light on dark. That mattered eight hundred years ago to a knight trying to recognize ally or enemy across the battlefield. It matters today for a driver trying to spot a gas station before he runs out of gas.

While on the topic of gas stations and art, I note that the cars they fill up are not merely wagons for transport; they are also mobile sculptures of sheet metal and glass. Functional objects do not have to be, should not be, ugly. Castles were built to hold off enemy armies and the rain, churches for people to worship in, palaces to house the ruler and his servants; making them beautiful was only a secondary objective. The same is true for the automobiles we drive. I can easily enough imagine a museum, a century or two in the future, devoted to their beauty.