

The Telegraph Oct 14, 2011

George Condo's favourite paintings

US artist George Condo uses old-style oils to create startlingly modern images. In Britain for a retrospective of his work, he takes Alastair Sooke around the National Gallery and shows him his five favourite paintings.

By Alastair Sooke

I remember coming to the National Gallery in London for the first time in the early Eighties, and seeing a lot of the paintings that I'd studied in college. It was such a thrill to see Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* [which depicts a moment from the Gospel of Luke, when the resurrected Christ reveals himself to two of his disciples]. The fascinating thing about this work is the way that Caravaggio pushes out into our space, rather than into the space of the picture. He does that by foreshortening the arm of the disciple wearing a shell on the right. Also, the basket of fruit is coming off the bottom edge of the table towards us, and Christ's hand is reaching out into our space, too. And look at the scale of the hand by the right-hand disciple's head – it's gigantic. Caravaggio used anatomical distortion to create effect: had the hand been smaller, it would have destroyed the drama, and the whole painting is so exquisitely dramatic. Another thing that's amazing is the veracity of detail: the shine of the wood, the rotting fruit – you can see the wormholes. The most shocking thing was that Caravaggio painted from life, and made everybody human. What is divine here? There's no halo around Jesus, who is clean-shaven – unrecognisable until he makes this gesture to bless the bread in front of him. To me, this painting says that there's nothing out there besides us. It's very subversive in that sense.

Michelangelo, *The Manchester Madonna*, c.1497

Have you ever looked at a painting by one of the Old Masters and thought, "how did they get that flesh tone?" Well, this unfinished painting by Michelangelo tells you how. You can see its step-by-step development. Drawing outlines of the forms with a brush was the beginning. Then the forms were blocked in, before the anatomy was carefully executed. The colours were smoothed with a light fan brush, blending tones to give them that glowing intensity. Look at the greenish under-painting in the two figures on the left. During this period of the Renaissance, artists would lay down a green like that, and it would make the flesh tones applied on top start to glow. In other words, the under-painting affects what you finally see – it's an amazing technique. Along with *The Entombment*, another unfinished painting by Michelangelo in the National Gallery, this is a really rare occasion for a painter to look at a work and see how it's painted. I can't think of a single artist who hasn't borrowed techniques from these two paintings – aside from artists who don't know how to paint.

Titian, *The Death of Actaeon*, c. 1559-75

In this painting the goddess Diana has transformed the hunter Actaeon into a stag, in revenge for surprising her as she bathed naked in the woods. Look at this poor guy with a deer's head, reaching back as his own dogs attack him. The painting may not have been finished – some of the passages are so suggestive. But it shows that if you're good enough, then just suggesting can be enough. Everything is in the right place. The farther back you get, the more realistic it becomes. I like the scale of the figures: Diana is gigantic, and Actaeon is miniaturised. I love the painting's power, its suggestive brushstrokes. It's almost as if the dying leaves of the woods have blown up to create this image with its rusted tones. It's all so spontaneous – and yet, on the other hand, there's a lot of gravity without it being belaboured. Titian is always moving quicker than the painting, rapidly pushing all these forces together, and the painting evolves out of that. At a certain point, when this painting had got that speed, and that intensity, I think Titian said, "That's enough – that's what I want."

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669

By the time Rembrandt painted this [in the last year of his life], he'd had so many losses: he'd lost his money, his reputation, his children, his wife – he'd lost everything. There'd also been an absolute reduction of colour in his work – this is basically all browns. He looks like a man who has suffered. There's a real existential despair in this painting. It has the feeling of deep meditation on the end of life, a sense of encroaching darkness. While everybody else was painting extraordinary ceilings and massive commissions, Rembrandt was no longer being asked to do anything – he'd fallen out of grace. But it doesn't matter. This portrait isn't about pleasing anyone; it's about making a great painting. More than any artist before him, Rembrandt increased the psychological complexity of the sitter's gaze at the viewer. Rather than breaking out of the picture plane to engage the viewer, like Caravaggio, Rembrandt engages you in the mind of an actual person. This is a real guy. Look at what those eyes have been through. This is the most honest, sincere type of painting. It's unbelievable.

Velázquez, Philip IV of Spain in Brown and Silver, 1631-32

As much as I love *The Rokeby Venus*, I find this painting by Velázquez absolutely virtuosic. Velázquez painted King Philip IV of Spain so many times that the heads are almost interchangeable. He always has the same face, with those Bourbon lips, that little moustache, and that golden tuft on his head. What fascinates me about this painting is the way that Velázquez has painted Philip's costume. If you look closely, the brown of his garments is simply the priming of the canvas. There's actually very little paint. There's the reddish-brown of the ground, then the shadow tones, and these white markings on top. Velázquez doesn't attempt to recreate what's in front of him, as the Dutch painters would have done, by representing every little detail on a molecular level. Instead, he creates the illusion of following the form of what he's painting with the most minimal of gestures. He has such freedom of gesture, the paint is somewhat impressionistic – Velázquez is showing off what he can do. He still had to get it "right", but he took the liberty to do it his own way. And that's what makes him so inspirational to painters – like Picasso, who was enthralled by Velázquez.

Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601

'To me, art history is one big family,' says George Condo, bounding up the steps from Trafalgar Square into the National Gallery. 'It's like the ocean – and if you're a drop of water that can fit into that ocean, it's a good thing.' Ever since he made his name with a series of "fake Old Master" canvases in the early Eighties, the New York-based artist, now 53, has been obsessed with the art of the past. Many of his paintings are executed using techniques handed down via art-historical tradition, and today he remains that rare thing: a contemporary artist content to limit himself to time-honoured oils on canvas. 'I'm using traditional means to arrive at something radical,' he says.

Whenever Condo is in London, which is usually once or twice a year, he visits the National Gallery, which he describes as "one of my favourite museums in the world". Having invited him to show me his top five paintings in the collection, I meet him there ahead of the opening of a new retrospective of his work, at the Hayward Gallery on the South Bank.

As we walk through the National Gallery, Condo – who designed the cover of Kanye West's album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* – happily holds forth on almost every painting that we pass. Seemingly energised and excited to be back, he praises the 16th-century Italian painter Moroni as "the master of grey" ("Moroni has always been useful to painters," he says), and castigates a portrait of Cardinal Richelieu by the 17th-century Flemish-born artist Philippe de Champaigne: "It looks like he's wearing a rubber cloak. Bizarre, isn't it? Grotesque, in a strange way."

"Grotesque" is an adjective often used to describe Condo's ribald canvases. Full of fantastical, distorted creatures of his imagination, they have a distinctly nightmarish quality, seasoned with a dash of insanity – the Chapman Brothers are indebted to him, as are the painters John Currin and Glenn Brown. In 2006, Condo's series of 15 paintings of the Queen caused outrage in Britain. Several commentators objected to the fact that he had depicted Her Majesty with a mangled face, like a Cabbage Patch Kid doll.

As a result, I was expecting Condo to pick out grotesque or disturbing paintings, such as Massys's *Ugly Duchess*. Yet when we pass Cornelis van Haarlem's gruesome 1588 painting of a dragon plunging its fangs into the face of some hapless character from Greek mythology, Condo wrinkles his nose. "That's pure grotesqueness to me," he says. "Not something I want to wake up in the middle of the night and look at."

Instead, Condo chooses paintings by some of the greatest names in the history of art: Michelangelo, Titian, Caravaggio, Velázquez, Rembrandt. Where does his love of the Old Masters come from?

"When I was a kid, my parents would say, 'Even Picasso was able to understand the Old Masters before he painted *Les Femmes d'Alger*.' So there was always that pressure in the background. But also, in painting you have to develop your own logic – and what is that logic based on? As far as I'm concerned, it's based on the knowledge of other paintings. Your impressions of humanity are coloured by your knowledge of art."

- George Condo: *Mental States* opens at the Hayward Gallery, London SE1 (0844 847 9910), on Tues. George Condo: *Drawings* is at Sprüth Magers, London W1 (020 7408 1613), until Nov 12. Alastair Sooke interviews George Condo on *The Culture Show* on BBC Two at 7pm on Fri