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## **A comparative study of the artwork concept in modern and postmodern eras and its impact on the Musealisation process (with emphasis on visual artworks)**

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### **Abstract**

**Problem Definition:** Comparing the concept of artwork in both modern and postmodern periods, the present study deals with the effect of these two currents on the musealisation process of the work. The questions of this research are as follows: Given the vastness of the contemporary art field and formation of conceptual art with various materials, what are the criteria for selecting an artwork in contemporary art museums and how social conditions and artistic discourses such as modernism and postmodernism affect the musealisation of the work?

**Objective:** The aim of this study is to propose specific criteria for the selection of artworks in contemporary art museums and the research scope includes the works in the field of visual arts.

**Research Method:** The current research has been conducted based on a qualitative approach, and the results have been presented in a descriptive and analytical manner by comparing the concept of an artwork in the modern and postmodern periods. The data collection has been also performed using library resources and databases.

**Results:** The art museums play an active role in the satisfaction of people as well as the global attitude towards art. For this reason, they should have obvious criteria for selecting artworks and defining the masterpiece of their collections. According to this points, museums, along with the artists and museum owners, should involve the socially active groups such as art teachers and sociologists in order to compile and define the art work and set policies for selecting them according to the subcultures with the participation of socially active groups such as art education professors and sociologists, and also contribute to the development of these cultures and not compare them with professional artists with the aim of strengthening indigenous cultures and preserving their values.

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**Keywords:** Museum of contemporary art, Modern, Postmodern, Musealisation, Artwork

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## Introduction

Prior to the emergence of the art movements of the 1960s in Europe and the United States, known today as postmodernism, the art work was an artificial object being evaluated from an aesthetic point of view. Afterwards, with the movements first created by the Dadaists, especially Marcel Duchamp, a huge evolution occurred in the concept of artwork and the use of materials, so that artists later used any media to create it. This led to the advent of special styles such as pop art, conceptual art, minimalism, and expanded the realm of contemporary art. Besides, this fact caused the essence of an artwork and its quality to be the subject of discussion among artists. The museum, as an artistic and cultural institution, has played an important and key role in defining and establishing art in the general culture of the society and has always implemented its own regulations. However, the function of contemporary art museums and musealisation process of the contemporary art have received less attention from the researchers, especially in Iran. Comparing the artwork concepts associated with modern and postmodern eras, the present study deals with the effect of these two courses on the musealisation process of the work of art. The questions of this research are as follows: Given the vastness of the realm of contemporary art and formation of the conceptual art with various materials, what are the criteria for selecting an artwork in the contemporary art museums, and how the social conditions as well as artistic discourses such as modern and postmodern affect the musealisation of the artworks? The scope of the term contemporary in Iran refers to the works that are less than one hundred years old, and the the present research has focused on the contemporary works in the field of visual arts. On the necessity of this research, the authors have relied on the words of Warburton in his book entitled "The art question", who wrote about the benefits of defining art as: Defining art makes it easier to make decisions about the difficult examples and help identify what has been called art so far. It also accelerates the recognition of objects which are likely to have an artistic value and should be considered as artworks (Almasi, 2016, 20).

## Research Method

The current research is practical in terms of the purpose and has been conducted based on a qualitative approach. Also, the results have been presented in a descriptive and analytical manner by comparing the concept of an artwork in the modern and postmodern periods. The data collection has been also performed using library resources and databases.

## Research Background

Many articles and books have been written and translated concerning with the recognition of the modern and contemporary arts in Iran. However, there is limited amount of research on the musealisation of these arts, how to accept and preserve

these works. In the works translated in Iran, Barret in the book entitled "Criticizing art" first mentioned the performance of contemporary art museums. However, Millet in her inspiring book entitled "Contemporary art of history and geography", investigated the performance of contemporary art museums more broadly and asked them to contribute to the contemporary art definition and its classification by preparing a questionnaire and sending it to the great museums of contemporary art. The book entitled "Installation art" by Vivian Van Saaze extensively deals with the characteristics of contemporary art works, especially the installations and protective challenges of the contemporary art museums. One of the relevant researches carried out in Iran is the master's thesis by Almasi (2016) entitled "The role of musealisation processes in the definition of art" in which the researcher has extensively examined the relationship between artistic definitions and the musealisation process of art. Addressing the evolution process of the definition of art as well as that of the museums over history, he emphasized their importance as an organized institution in establishing the artistic concepts in the context of society.

### Theoretical foundations

The theories presented so far in relation to the art are all psychological and consider the interactions inside the artist as the cause of art creation. However, after the Second World War, the philosophers tried to define art with cultural components. The most well-known functional theories of art is Dickie's institutional theory introduced in 1984, which states: "An artwork is an artificial object created to be presented to an audience in the world of art" (Dickie, 2014, 17). The main concepts of this theory include the following five definitions:

1. An artist is someone who consciously takes part in the creation of an artwork.
2. An artwork is an artifact created to be presented to the audience of the world of art.
3. The audience is a group of people whose members have a relative talent for understanding the object (art work) presented to them.
4. The world of art includes all the artistic systems.
5. Every art world's system is a framework for the exposition of an artwork by the artist to the audience of this world (Dickie, 2014, 43).

In this theory, Dickie has mainly emphasized the cultural structures in which the arts are created more than any other theory. Danto writes: Dickie's institutionalism basically says that determining what is art is all that must be determined through the world of art (Danto, 2020, 48) and the museum has a special place in this regard.

### The modern approach

According to Ramin, the first theory on the essence of art was expressed by Aristotle. This theory is called imitation or representation and is related to the relationship between an artwork and something real which is external with respect

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to it (Ramin, 2015, 190). Furthermore, this theory lasted until the nineteenth century and the advent of the Romanticism. The second theory is related to the Romanticism, which is called "The expressive theory of art". This group considered the expression of the artist's feelings and emotions as a necessity for the art and believed that the artist expresses his feelings through intermediaries and tools such as the color. This theory continued until the beginning of the twentieth century and modernity, with the difference that in modern periods, the aesthetic concepts were also taken as the criteria for evaluating the artworks. Robert Atkins knows the modernism period from 1860 to 1970. He believes that the term modernism is used both to distinguish the style and to define the art school of this era" (Barret, 2012, 89). From the discourse point of view, modern art is influenced by the theories of philosophers such as René Descartes (1596-1650) and Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), who believed that general truths can be achieved by referring to the intellect. Kant believed that art should not be viewed for any purpose other than beauty and pleasure, as the beautiful thing focuses on the specific concerns and issues of the form and composition, not the presentation of a subject or expression of external themes. In 1920, two English critics, named Clive Bell and Roger Fry, proposed the formalism thought influenced by Kant Roger. Fry was a painting expert at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts in New York, and alongside Clive Bell, believed that the artist should pay full attention to the form of the work and its aesthetic issues, and that any social purpose would threaten the artwork purity. Formalism came to the existence in the United States after the Second World War by Clement Greenberg. Formalism is inextricably linked to the modernism tradition, however, the former is the result and consequence of the latter (Barret, 2012, 91-93). Monroe Beardesly (1979) wrote concerning the definition of modern artwork's nature: "The artwork is a deliberate arrangement of conditions to provide experiences with aesthetic characteristics which can be called as the third theory of art and the last psychological one (Dickie, 2014, 13). The subject of beauty, as the extremity of art, caused the artist to be separated from the heart of society and take refuge in his artistic privacy. At this time the artist's individuality became more prominent. According to Ramin, "the concept of the artist in the modern era as a creative person engaged in a special and superhuman activity is a product of the Renaissance period. Prior to that period in Europe, what is known as artworks were created by people who were in a similar situation to other interns, and the painter, designer and builder in the position of apprentices and craftsmen were next to each other with collective responsibilities and shared responsibilities. In this regard, the classification that we generally make between the transcendent and the sublime or decorative arts has a historical background and is associated with the emergence of the concept of the genius artist (Ramin, 2015, 144).

### The postmodernism approach

With the end of the Second World War in the 1960s, the social structure of the arts in Europe and the United States changed and attitudes were emerged in the arts, known as the postmodernism. Postmodernism itself is not an independent style of art, but any tendency and experience which seeks to reject the modernist guidelines and separate them all from the realm of art. Movements such as pop art, neo-realism (rejection of easel painting), activism, op art (visual art), movement art, minimal art, Fluxus movement, artistic happening movement, conceptual art, anti-figure, poor art, earthy art, physical art, performing arts, video art and recycling art are examples of postmodern attributes which have greatly influenced the contemporary art. Although concepts such as technology and industrialization paved the way for the emergence of modernism in Europe, the advent of media such as photography and video, the World Wide Web and concepts such as the globalization figured the postmodernism thought. Some philosophers such as Douglas Crimp and Walter Benjamin know the emergence of photographic media and mechanical reproduction of the artwork (proliferation of the work) as the cause of decline in the modern art. However, some authors such as Danto believed that the art has ended with Brillo pads box of Andy Warhol and the consumable wastes brought by the pop artists to the galleries and museums (Barret, 2012, 98). The origins of these developments can be traced in the works of neo-Dadaists and their leading artist, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp challenged the entire Western art tradition by choosing a ready-made object (his toilet stone) and sending it to an exhibition in New York. Their action was more than a joke in the art world. In "Duchamp's theory of the ready-made", the handmade object is placed in the artwork instead of the image. The inherent quality and features of objects are not important in this coexistence. However, what matters is the artist's idea and intention that turns them into an artwork. Danto states that all twenty Duchamp's ready-made works were objects being taken from the living world and upgraded to the level of artworks. In these works, Duchamp removed everything that is related to the skill and mastery, and especially to the eyes of the artist from the concept of art (Danto, 2020, 42). Smith traces the origins of the use of various objects and materials to the use of collage techniques by artists throughout the history of art. He stated that: "The Surrealists expanded the use of collage, and then the Dadaists adapted this technique to their own spirits and found it analogous to the "anti-art" element with their particular attitudes (Smith, 2010, 131). From the perspective of postmodernists, anyone can be an artist and the artist is not a unique being, because the individuality of every human being is the result of language, social relations and unconscious mind. Anything can be an artwork, even without being beautiful, original and unique, it is only required to carry a message or an idea. The "ready-made" element raised questions about the nature of art and artwork, and researchers such as Dickie and Danto sought

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attempted to define art in their researches. Although the theories of scholars are fundamentally different, they all have in common that the novel artworks cannot be examined without knowing their historical and geographical conditions. Danto expresses that in order to know what art is or not, we must be in its conceptual space and become familiar with the argumentative discourse of the art world (Barret, 2012, 97), and Dickie emphasizes the confirmation of the cultural structures of society or the art world (Danto, 2020, 48).



Figure 1.

Warhol Braille Box.

Source: [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)

### Contemporary art and the existential necessity of museums

Contemporary art does not necessarily refer to works produced in the contemporary period. Catherine Millet explains that contemporary art is a term which has become widespread since the 1980s and replaced the terms pioneering and living arts. "A form of art is discussed, not all the art that all today's living artists being contemporary with us have produced" (Millet, 2009, 19). The modern art has entered the heart of museums since the 1980s, and increased their power more than ever for four main reasons.

**1. The multiplicity of modern art:** The realm of modern art is so extensive so that one requires an official institution such as a museum to distinguish art from non-art. The task of the museum is to "organize what is presented in the most complete form of disorder and to stabilize what is unstable, because not only materials are slippery, but also the meanings" (Mille, 2009, 113).



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**2. The need for interpretation:** In order to interpret the individual methods of the artist, the museum places the art work in its historical and cultural context, forms its meaning and tries to establish a dynamic connection between the work and the audience.

**3. The need to be centralized and institutionalized in the official culture of society (Smith, 2010, 13):** The museum presents what is inside it to the society as a document of human life and activity. According to Almasi sayings, Hito Steyerl believes that “museums have a role similar to the factories and their main function is to produce culture, art, etc.” (Steyerl, 2014, 13).

**4. Finding the historical origins of the artwork:** By documenting the artworks, museums seek to find the historical roots of the work and trace it throughout the history. “Every work is justified in relation to its past and is automatically recorded along with this background. The creation itself is a potential ring of the history chain. In fact, the more chaotic, incomprehensible and meaningless contemporary creation seems to us, the more one will feel the need to accelerate its history making” (Mille, 2009, 54).

### The influence of the modern and postmodern periods on the musealisation process according to Dickie’s theory

All the activities of a museum are described by the musealisation process. According to Mairesse and Desvallees, musealisation is the extraction operations, physical or conceptual, of something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museum status and converting it into a “museum artwork”, in other words, introducing it to a **Museal Field**. **Musealisation** is created with a separation or interruption phase. The artworks or real things are separated from their original context to be studied as an evidence of the reality to which it previously belonged (Mairesse & Desvallees, 2013, 79-80). In this definition, one is faced with a semantic evolution, as something is separated from its main context (artist’s studio) and examined in the museum environment as an evidence of reality. This evolution and separation do not depend on the originality and essence of the work, but on the museum’s interpretation of it and associated initial documentation. The formation of aesthetic criteria in art coincides with the birth of museums in the eighteenth century. The museums that were formed during this period are very object-oriented, and the criteria for evaluating them are the taste and aesthetic experience of a few, and they do not pay much attention to the connection with the society. John Dewey, one of the earnest critics of modernism, stated in an article entitled “Art as experience” that: “It is fundamentally unacceptable to classify and separate different areas of life, then to create a system of values, and finally to condemn everyday life for not being sacred. The modern world’s art centers, such as museums and galleries, have created halo of sanctity around the artistic object and kept it out of the public access” (Shayganfard, 2009, 86). Cynthia

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Freeland mentioned the elitism of art museums and stated that the museum audiences account for only 22% of the population throughout North America and Europe (Almasi, 2016, 12). With the advent of postmodern movements, art institutions such as museums took more social approaches and attempted to align their internal and external policies and spaces with new artistic forms. The slogans of World Museum Day, raised annually by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), have made attempts in recent decades to draw the attention of museum owners around the world to issues outside the museum construction such as the environment, subcultures and social challenges. Hoffmann in his book entitled "curating from A to Z name of book in english ", pointed out to the differences between museum and other art institutions, and said that the museum is a formal institution which sets it apart from other art-offering venues such as large galleries, biennials and major art festivals. The museum has been created in order to teach the development of society, and unlike galleries whose main purpose is to generate income for the artist and themselves as well. The main incentive for the centers collecting artworks is to teach and raise the community issues (Hoffman, 2018, 51). The new museums are a kind of community-oriented ones which try to define the artworks in the context of their history and culture. In relation to the impact of museums in the years after the Second World War, Danto stated in an article entitled "The Dream of Awakening": "I remember how New Yorkers expected the Whitney Biennial to learn the path that art took". In this regard, Clement Greenberg was a reference for many years, but his rule largely ended in 1984. Instead of the artistic movements, political ones such as feminism sought a space to exhibit their works. The tendency towards cultural diversity, rather than being a movement, was the decision of the exhibitors to depict the art of blacks, Asians, Indians and homosexuals (Danto, 2020, 39). Although new theories emphasize the socialization of museums, addressing social issues is not easy and challenging for the contemporary art museums. Catherine Millet's reports in the book entitled "Contemporary Art of History and Geography" and Cyntheia Freeland's articles indicate that the contemporary art museums in the United States and Europe still prefer to follow modernism guidelines. Millet quotes Jan Debaut as saying that contemporary art, rather than people's lives, makes the life of museum managers difficult (Millet, 2017, 37). The art world generally follows a type of discourse which affects the musealisation process. For example, the selection of an artwork at the Museum of Modern Arts in New York or the excellence of a work at an international biennial affects the musealisation process of the works in all art museums around the world. In fact, the museums tend to employ a repetitive pattern of art constantly. They prefer to ignore an artwork which does not follow the prevailing culture and discourse. This is mainly due to the fact that each artwork with its own materials and characteristics creates a new challenge for the museum. For this reason, the history of museums also reflects the history of the elimination of many



minorities. As much as a museum can value a work or artist, it can deprive another of that opportunity.

### Conclusion

Comparing the modern and postmodern arts, the present study dealt with the effect of these two movements on the musealisation process and performance of the contemporary art museums in selecting the works of contemporary artists. As seen in the comparison of the artwork concepts associated with the modern and postmodern periods, the contemporary art is not known by a particular style, but is a complete collection of all personal styles and techniques of the artists who create these artworks using various media. The postmodernism movements that affected the contemporary art, sought to overthrow all the modernism guidelines which had become the mainstream of art by museums and other art institutions with their anti-museum nature. However, later in the 1980s, due to their multiple and heterogeneous nature, they returned to the heart of museums and caused changes in their architecture and management. New museums paid more attention to the social and cultural aspects of the arts, and postmodern community-centered museums replaced the object-oriented ones in the modern era. In the United States, instead of focusing on the evolution of modern art stylistics, museum owners showed more attention to the social movements such as feminism and the art of minorities such as Indians and blacks, and artists from Africa and Asia, and added to the circle of art and artists more than before. According to the question of the present research, it can be observed that the criteria of contemporary art museums for selecting artworks are often the same as the modernism approach. The modern period's discourse with an elitism approach and postmodern one with a socialist approach were found to influence the musealisation process. The reason for the current prevailing modernism approach of museums for the selection of artworks is that the postmodernists' sociocentrism has not been without its challenges. In all eras, the dominant discourses of society have influenced the musealisation process of the artworks and have created an important challenge between museum owners and the dominant art community. The risk of accepting minority works sometimes becomes so dangerous that the museum prefers not to accept them and not to face the sharp criticism of artists who surround the discourse of art. However, while defining its collection, the museum can make a balance between various discourses in the society by addressing the less heard voices, and thus take steps towards the realization of social justice and development as well. In Iran, the contemporary art museums also tend to follow a single pattern while defining their collection. It is normal that the definition of a collection in the contemporary art museums throughout Iran can be the topic of an independent research. The definition of a collection, instead of following a single pattern, can be associated with the examination of the social

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conditions of the community and the environment around the museum. For example, if the number of female suicides is high in the museum environment, the museum should focus on the lives and challenges of women in the community, collect and select women's artworks, and play an active role in reducing the suicide statistics and social harm by holding relevant workshops and expanding the concepts of the collection, especially for the female students. One of the challenges the contemporary art museums are faced with is the desire of contemporary art to the globalization. For this reason, some local art museums attempt to bring the indigenous artists closer to the dominant discourses of the art world. Although these policies are considered to be important in promoting the indigenous artists, but also cause the risk of forgetting indigenous values and subcultures. The main problem here is ignoring the discussion which has been repeatedly emphasized by ICOM in recent decades about the danger of globalization and the role that the museum can play in relation to the local communities and preservation of their cultural values. The museum must be the reflection of a sound that is worth hearing, but has received less attention. The main problem here is ignoring the debate that has been repeatedly emphasized by the World Museum Council in recent decades about the danger of globalization and the role that the museum can play in relation to local communities and the preservation of its cultural values. The museum should be a reflection of a sound that is worth hearing, but has received less attention. The first duty of the museum is to preserve the cultural heritage of the people, to connect with and spread it in the world culture. The criteria proposed to museums for selecting the artworks and developing the necessary strategic policies include the participation of museum owners accompanied by the artists and active social groups such as art professors and sociologists. In the meantime, the artworks of subcultures should be taken into consideration in order to help their development by emphasizing the preservation of indigenous values. Also, the habitat, experience, artistic style of artists in disadvantaged areas and not comparing their works with those via the professional artists (this is important in relation to the indigenous artists) should be considered. Finally, exhibiting the works of less seen groups in order to balance the different voices of the art world is another part of the museums' social responsibility in this regard.

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