

## Assignment: What is Art?

**Artist: Brice Marden**

Title: Grove Group 1

Date: 1972

Media: Oil and Wax on Canvas

Size: Approximately 6 by 9 feet



**Monochrome (one-color) paintings as art:**

It is difficult for some viewers to accept monochrome paintings - one that consists entirely of a single color or subtle variations on one color. They encounter even more resistance, since they have no apparent subject of any kind – no stylized horses, no multicolored grids, not even stripes. Monochrome paintings are probably the most challenging type of abstract art. A monochrome painting is typically one large rectangle of color.

Why would anyone want to make such a work? For that matter why would anyone want to look at it? People create and study monochrome paintings for the same reason that they become fascinated with any other kind of visual art: because, in the end, all art is an arrangement of colors and shapes, which some (though not all) viewers find exciting. Many people have strong feelings about colors, whether in the abstract or when buying cars, clothes, and mini-blinds. Visual artists, like other people, tend to favor certain hues and avoid ones they dislike, but some painters become so fascinated with a particular color that merely using on a multicolored composition is not enough. Instead they devote entire canvases – or a series of canvases – to explore variations on that color.

With *Grove Group 1*, Brice Marden decided to create a gray-green rectangle, so large that it becomes not merely a patch of color hanging on the wall but the wall itself. In other words, while we are looking at it, the painting becomes our environment, filling our field of vision with the particular hue the artist has chosen. Of course, the viewer is free to like, dislike, or feel neutral about this color – of the whole idea of an enormous monochromatic rectangle. Still, it may be useful to know that Marden's painting is an example of the movement known as Minimalism, which evolved during the late 1950s and 1960s among avant-garde artists whose paintings and sculptures had the minimum number of elements necessary to make works of art.

In a broader historical context, such art makes sense: Minimalism was largely a rejection by a group of young artists of the Abstract Expressionists who had dominated the avant-garde art world the previous decade. The young and new Minimalists felt that the Abstract Expressionists art was over emotional. Therefore, if the canvases painted by artists like Jackson Pollock (Abstract Expressionist) had multicolored, irregular, action filled surfaces and compositions, then the work made by the new artists would be monochrome and non-painterly.

It is important to note that something important is lost in the translation of a painting to the printed page. For Minimalist monochrome canvases, the smallest changes of color and texture are absolutely critical. Most of the time, what a reader sees in a book illustration of a minimalist painting is a flat, unchanged, relatively uninteresting rectangle that gives a little sense of the excitement of the original.

Likewise, it is nearly impossible to capture in copies the small changes in surface texture formed, in Marden's picture, by the combination of oil paint, wax, and the weave of the canvas. In order to get the full impact of any artwork, you need to see the original. Also, this kind of art also demands more time than the three seconds the average gallery or museum visitor typically allows to each work. To form an adequate opinion about a painting like *Grove Group I*, you really need to sit or stand quietly in front of it for several minutes at least.

Bibliography:  
Why a Painting is Like a Pizza (p 50-53)

**An article published about Grove Group 1:**

The Museum of Modern Art, *MOMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 303

The beautiful blue-gray-green of *Grove Group I* was inspired by the colors Marden saw in a stand of olive trees in Greece, and he has described works like this one as referring to nature. Yet this monochromatic painting is far from the "window on the world" of the traditional landscape, and even from the sense that many abstract pictures allow of opening onto another space. Working in a rich mix of oil paint and wax, Marden creates a surface of substance and mass, opaque and dense. At the same time, that mass seems weightless, that thickness glowing: it is as if, in carefully building up the surface, Marden had been able to trap within its layers the light that saw its making.

Bibliography:  
[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3758&page\\_number=6&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3758&page_number=6&template_id=1&sort_order=1)

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Name:

**Answer these questions in complete sentences:**

1. Define the word art (what would the dictionary say art means?).  
Write it in your own words.
  
2. Describe the artwork: What does it look like? What colors are used?  
What materials are used? Etc.

