



Robert Ryman: Used Paint

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Robert Ryman's essentially all-white paintings have challenged and confounded museum-goers since their first appearance half a century ago. This unique study on the artist is a slightly advanced read, but nonetheless recommended to any level book club seeking meaning in what may at first appear to be rather meaningless art. Page numbers refer to Robert Ryman: Used Paint, Suzanne P. Hudson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2009. This guide was created by Hol Art Books.

1. The book opens with *A Note on the Illustrations* in which the author gives a disclaimer as to the difficulty of satisfactorily reproducing images of Ryman's work. She quotes the artist himself: "You have to see the real thing ... Books leave you with the wrong impression. Seeing a real painting is the only way to do it." (p. xvi) Do you agree? If so, do you believe this is true for all artwork or only for works of a subtly like Ryman's? What exactly is lost in reproduction? Try it. In your museum, compare a work on the wall with a reproduction of it from a postcard or museum guide. What's the same? What's different? What comes across in one that you don't in the other?

2. In the *Introduction*, the author offers an example exclamation that typify viewers' first reactions to Ryman's work, and in fact, first reactions to much modern and contemporary art starting with abstraction: "But *I* could do that!" or, we might add, "My *kid* could do that!" (p. 6) What was your first reaction to Ryman's work, or to work like it? Do you feel similarly? Would you be willing to try to make something similar, or have you before? What were the results?

3. As discussed in *Chapter 1: Primer*, Ryman's first introduction to and education in painting really came from his time working as a guard in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1950s, a time in the museum's history when art education was a central mission. Several times the author refers to the museum of that time as a "laboratory". Have you ever worked or volunteered in a museum? What's the difference between visiting

as a tourist or member, and being in the galleries as an employees? How did this experience effect Ryman's work? What might have Ryman's work looked like had this first exposure been to books and reproductions rather than to the physical artworks themselves? Are museums laboratories today?

4. Why white?

5. As explored in *Chapter 2: Paint*, in Ryman's continuing narrowing in on the fundamentals of what makes a painting a painting—the stroke, the frame, the support—he came also to the artist's signature and explored it as a central part of a number paintings. (p. 92–) If a painting's signature is a sign of its authorship, is this claim to authorship necessary in art, as Ryman seems to suggest it is? Even if we don't know the author, is the idea of an author still important? What about street art? What about decorative arts? Ancient Art, Greek Art, Egyptian? When did the Artist become such a fundamental part of Art and how does it change our view of art overall?

6. Traditionally in art, especially in painting, the support upon which the artwork is executed (the canvas, the paper) is meant to be only that, a support. Ryman changes this. He insists the support act as part of his mark-making. That its particular visual qualities be every-bit as important as the paint laid on top of it. (p. 126) Looking at works in your museum, how have other artists previously hidden or spotlighted parts of their work beyond the image itself? What about works with frames

that have been constructed and painted by the artist? Or those that have been affixed to the walls with visible tacks, or clips? How do these acts effect our reading of the work?

7. Given their seeming simplicity, one would fairly expect that once you've seen one Ryman work, you've seen them all. But as it turns out, the more you see, the more their astonishing variety comes out. This became particularly obvious in the context of his 1972 Guggenheim retrospective. (p. 180) By carefully defining the differences from one white Ryman painting to another white Ryman painting, we (like critics in the 1970s who were seeing Ryman's work in quantity and in person for the first time) can come to find what it is exactly that the artist is exploring in his work. So, looking at several Ryman works together, what is he after?

8. Any of us that have spent anytime at all in a museum can attest to the unrelenting draw of the ubiquitous museum wall label. Visitors habitually look to these labels almost before they look to the art, and sometimes even for a longer time. But what can be said in words about a Ryman painting that is not simply there on the wall in the painting itself? As the author puts it *Chapter 5: Wall*, "To look carefully at the work is to read the work, and this experience, Ryman suggests, is enough." (p. 236) Is it?

Further Resources:

Ryman on PBS's Art21
www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ryman

Robert Ryman: Critical Texts Since 1967
www.rampub.com/art/978-1-905464-09-8