Thoughts on the Emergence of the Unfinished (2018)

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The terms, “final product”, “complete”, or “finished” have been difficult to define within art circles; French poet and art critic Paul Valery touched on this by stating “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” [1] With museums filled with what the public would consider “finished” they beg the question: at what moment in the creative process can a composition be considered Art? While records are sparse and therefor in a way overly powerful, as early as the Italian Renaissance, Donatello vitalized the term “*non-finito*” [2] to describe sculptures left in unfinished states. Throughout the ensuing centuries, these works, existed in a state of non-completion, and were never exhibited alongside works perceived to be “complete”. *Non-finito* works were overarchingly considered mere steppingstones, mistakes, or even failures; however, gradually during in the 19th century, this taboo would blur, as artists pushed artistic boundaries and begin to embrace the unfinished.

Leading up to the 19th century, the culture of painting seldom celebrated the *non-finito*, nor did the public have an aptitude for its reception. Gradually, the public’s demands and expectations of art shifted towards the more open-minded reception necessary to appreciate *non-finito* work. In the early 19th century, artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner introduced viewers to the sublime and brought revolutionary emotion to the painting tradition. Friedrich commented on the role of emotion, stating that “Art stands as the mediator between nature and humanity. The original is too great and too sublime for the multitude to grasp.” [3] These emerging paintings, coupled with the massive cultural shifts brought upon by the industrial revolution, set the stage for the reception of the *non-finito,* and ultimately full abstraction. Artists such as Friedrich and Turner laid down these foundations with their use of the sublime -- a challenge to demand imagination from the viewer. I believe the mathematical sublime, specifically, contributed most effectively to the acceptance of non-finito work as well as the approaching breach of full abstraction.

The mathematical sublime is a term and understanding of the sublime about which Immanuel Kant had theorized a century prior. [4] According to Kant, the mathematical sublime applies to situations when “our ability to intuit is overwhelmed by size” [5] whereas the dynamical sublime applies when “our ability to resist is overwhelmed by force.” [6] While both subtypes were used in paintings by a multitude of artists, I will focus on ones oriented around the mathematical sublime as I believe the dynamic definition did not contribute considerably to the *non-finito*. An excellent example of the mathematical sublime can be found in Friedrich’s painting *Monk by the Sea* [7], a scene of a man placed before a vast storm brewing in the distance with a sea in between. I believe the vague and colossal storm in relative scale to that overwhelms the man situates the composition as mathematically sublime. Furthermore, the storm, elusive in form and shape, leaves murky transitions from positive to negative space as breadcrumbs for the viewer’s imagination to follow. These loose ends are the juiciest forms of the composition. They consume the vast majority of the scene, presenting a blank canvas for imagination to dance, an experience which had been commonly absent previously in painting.

Following Friedrich’s death, his works have consistently been praised for their progressive nature, art historians have since compared them to contemporaries such as Mark Rothko, with the historian Robert Rosenblum stating in his 1961 book, *the sublime* “Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the aestheticians of the Sublime.” [8] This connection between Rothko and Friedrich, I believe, solidifies the immense, progressive, and timeless qualities of these paintings. The English painter Joseph Mallord William Turner practiced capturing sublime emotions within the same realm as Friedrich.[9] Nearing the end of his life, and similar to Friedrich, Turner’s compositions instilled the mathematical sublime, with chaotic scenes expressed through passionate brush strokes.[10] Turner’s painting, *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, exemplify these brush strokes, fortuitous in manner, paired with a sublime that demands participatory imagination.[11] From a compositional standpoint, both *Rain, Steam, and Speed* and *Monk by the Sea* are equally progressive, yet Turner’s work goes further to depict the progression of man from a technological standpoint, as the composition is centered about a hurtling train. [12] While neither

Turner nor Friedrich are recognized for working with unfinished qualities, they demanded the viewer's imagination to fully digest, and to completetheir compositions. This use of the viewer's imagination is what I believe courses through the lifeblood of *non-finito*.

Following Turner, 19th-century post-impressionists acted as one of the last steppingstones before artists began the final ascent to full abstraction. During this period, Cezanne and Monet abruptly departed from the accepted mid-century painting canons, as they produced and sold compositions containing visible underdrawings, incomplete shapes, and unmarked canvas. These open shapes and details form paths of entry for the imagination to fill, something which I believe brings intimacy and depth to the viewer's relationship to the composition, yet I believe viewers and critics would have widely scoffed at such paintings only a few decades earlier, exemplifying the shift in cultural taste and artistic understanding. These decisions can be seen in the many paintings and *ébauches* that Cézanne painted of a mountain viewable from his studio window, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*.[16] [17] Each depiction varies in completeness and form, and can each feel like an isolated record of the emotions and attitudes present during his process.[18] These highlight his architectonic approach to painting, many containing light paint marks laid down with attention to the relation between surfaces and objects, or separated brush strokes that build up forms covering the canvas but without replicating natural space as it is typically perceived in the tradition of Western art. This shift Harkens back to the use of the viewer's imagination which Friedrich employed, I believe this relationship can be directly related to the experience one has while viewing many of Cezanne's works, as both Cezanne and Friedrich produced similarly open-ended compositions presenting loose ends for the viewer's imagination to tie together. In the painting, *Still life with Apples,* Cezanne's acceptance of the *non-finito* is dramatically greater than in *Mont Sainte-Victoire,* as he disregards countless other painting taboos.[19] The composition depicts a still life of apples, vases, bowls, and a curtain; the depiction of almost all of these subjects contains aspects of the *non-finito*, as some areas daringly go past simply alluding to incompletion, as portions are simply untouched canvas which concentrate most in the upper left hand corner.[20] Being fair in judgment of history I believe at the level of incompletion present in the painting that it

Is important to mention the lack of data pertaining to the casualties (do you mean causalities, as in causes?) for the works state, and the possibilities that it was out of Cezanne's control. In *Still life with Apples*, Cezanne added to *non-finito* technique by tangling with nonlinear perspective; by examining the composition closely, the viewer notices perspectival inconsistencies in nearly everything from the corners of the tables to the view of the bowl, all of which sharie a whimsically different perspective. These characteristics of incompletion and deliberate missteps in perspective entice our imagination in a fashion similar to that demanded by Turner. Cezanne and similar artists who produced such progressive work, not only earned the respect of critics, but led successful careers, experiencing financial and critical success within their own lifetimes.[21]

After the 19th century, residue from the taboos of decades past seemed to have all been but forgotten; I believe sale records from the turn of the century are precious examples of how *non-finito* artists had not only appeared and become respected but were selling art at the same levels as previous greats.[22] The August 1899 *Collector and Art Critic* contains data of recent sales from a wide variety of artists, giving us a valuable glimpse into the economical hierarchy of artists at the time.[23] Notable entries present works from Delacroix, Daumier, Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, and Monet.[24] Recorded sales show Cézanne's works selling on average for 6,150 francs and Monet's works selling on average for 6,150 francs, Artists such as Daumier, and Renoir sold for on average for 5,866 and 6000 francs respectively.[25] Using these numbers to directly compare artists though would be misleading, as the titles used in the directory are vague and in many cases, it is nearly impossible know for certain which piece of art is referenced by the entry's title, causing comparisons made between price averages to be troublesome, as value varies drastically depending on the quality of the artist's work. While the sample size addressed here is no doubt limited, I do believe it is enough to further support the claim that these artists experienced respect and the demand from buyers within their lifetime, demonstrating that both the artists and the collectors had begun to accept the *non-finito* as truly complete art.

When the viewer accepts the *non-finito* and its effects, and the use of imagination, I believe the resulting change in perception of unfinished works ripples

through their understanding of art, thereby illuminating and bringing meaning to aspects of art previously neglected. As a society, I believe our appreciation of the *non-finito* is cultivated from the foundations laid in the late 19th century, which was followed by evolving opinions on many works. Throughout history artists commonly created works which from time to time were never finished, something which nearly every artists experiences to this day, some of these works from history are viewed by many as heightened by their incompletion.[26] For example, Michelangelo's world renowned series of sculptures for the Tomb of Julius II, referred to as either "The Prisoners" or "Slaves," were left incomplete after his part in the commissioned project was scrapped by the politicians funding the project.[27] [28] [29] In their abandoned state, when approached from a modern standpoint, these sculptures epitomize the wonder and imagination of the *non-finito*, depicting partially completed figures entombed in coarse unrefined bare rock, appearing to the modern viewer as if clawing their way out of encapsulating prisons. [30] [31] Gilbert Creighton commented on them stating, "That the perfection of their pain could not have been added to with a thousand more chisel blows." [32] These sculptures are widely celebrated, praised and, coveted by millions, yet their existence had been neglected for hundreds of years, only being celebrated starting in the 20th century. [33] Prior to their display in the Louvre (?) they had led a sheltered life for centuries, Michelangelo himself never having taken them into the public eye. Instead they sat unfinished in his studio where they remained neglected until his death.[34] I believe the praise *The Prisoners* receive today is testament to this new reception founded in the 19th century, one dismissive of technical perfection and instead now viewed freely, with meaning found in the very state of incompletion. An uncomfortable aspect of many of these new-found meanings seem to be credited to the genius of the artist and neglect the intentionality of the artists. This false credit (or perception) can house a contrasting bias in a work's understanding, *The Prisoners* being no exception to this idolization. Michelangelo himself left *The Prisoners* untouched and neglected in his studio until his death, which I believe portrays his feelings towards them as simply incomplete, and unworthy of the public eye, an opinion which contradicts the praise and acclaim the works have received in the 20th century. Art historians such as Gilbert Creighton seem to hold the unfinished state of *The*

Prisoners on a pedestal, an opinion I believe to be misleading and far from the truth of the sculptures' original context.

While wrongly crediting artists with hidden truth and beauty is misleading, I believe it necessary to mention the notion that these old masters were not oblivious to the beauty of the *non-finito*. Some historians believe that many artists such as Titian or Rembrandt created *non-finito* works, yet I've found these paintings to meet a definition on the *non-finito* which is loose in requirements.[35] Eva Reifert, an art historian from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote in her 2016 article on the *non-finito* that she considered Rembrandt's portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels from between 1626 and 1663 to be a *non-finito* painting. Reifert determined that it was Rembrandt's "inclination to leave entire areas of works in a seemingly unresolved state."[36] While certainly this work is unfinished, this fact does not in my opinion heighten the level of the painting, nor do I believe Rembrandt used the unfinished state as a tool in the process. This difference in defining the *non-finito* shines light on the broad opinions of the term and even the same definition can be interpreted differently and inconsistently applied to the same work by different people. During my research I've found the definition to be somewhat consistent in text but found the interpretation and examples to focus to widely varying writer to writer, Gilbert commented on these varying opinions stemming specifically from interpretations of Michelangelo's prisoners stating "A great many people have published their views about Michelangelo's unfinished works. Their ideas evidently differ, if chiefly on specifics, while general ideas are relatively few. It may be worth noticing that there is no similar body of comment on any other artist's unfinished works"[37], I believe this contradictory nature is due to how undefined the *non-finito* is historically, this compounded with an inconsistent categorization of *non-finito* work, troubles my faith in the value of the published information I've read and more importantly, the implications of these historical inconsistencies. As displeased as I am with these realities, I understand that for a conclusion to be met, people must continue to theorize on the *non-finito* to realize any hopes of reaching a consensus.

In conclusion, I believe that 19th century Europe saw the process of painting undergo a transformation, blossoming from rigid technical perfection, to compositions harboring the delights of the imagination and that the acceptance of the *non-finito* is

emblematic of this shift. I believe this shift was cultivated by the compounding of multiple cultural shifts culminating in an incubator, supporting a flourishing of new ideologies and opinions within the art community. [38] These revelations furthered the painting community philosophically and laid the groundwork for the heightened acceptance of abstraction that has proceeded. Many paintings created during this cultural epoch, can still be conceptually related to contemporary work, such as Rosenblum did with Turner and Rothko. This connection solidifies the power of just how progressive and revolutionary the nonfinito was. [39] Not only did this shift change the course of habits of perception that prescribe a culture around the viewing of art, but in many cases changed our perspectives on the art that predated the 19th century, such as Michelangelo's *The Prisoners,* which is now celebrated and thought to be elevated by its *non-finito* qualities.[40] Qualities artists such as Cezanne, who would later emphasize upon, his paintings based on *Mont Sainte-Victoire being one of many testaments.* Not only did these artists blossom within the *non-finito* but they were fortunate enough to be accepted and praised for the unfinished qualities of their work, experiencing monetary success within their lifetimes, something which is not always true for the avant-garde.

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[1] Valéry, Paul, Charms. Emile-Paul Frères, 1922. XXX
[2] Pope-Hennessy, John Wyndham. Donatello: Sculptor. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993, 71.
[3] Eisenman, Stephen, and Thomas E. Crow. Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011, 154.
[4] Burnham, Douglas, "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed November 15, 2016. http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/.
[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid
[7] Friedrich, Casper David. Monk by the Sea [Der Mönch Am Meer]. 1809. Museen Zu Berlin, Berlin.
[8] Ibid
[9] Eisenman and Thomas, *Nineteenth Century Art,* 145.
[10] Ibid, 350-368.

[11] Ibid, 145.

[12] Turner, Joseph Mallord William, *Rain, Steam, and Speed*. 1844. Oil on Canvas. 91 x 121.8 cm. The National Gallery, London.
[13] Eisenman and Thomas, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 145.

[14] Guentner, Wendelin A, "British Aesthetic Discourse, 1780-1830: The Sketch, the Non Finito, and the Imagination." *Art Journal* 52, no. 2 (1993): 40-47. doi:10.2307/777237.
[15] Eisenman and Thomas, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 350-368.

[16] Cézanne, Paul. *Mont Sainte Victoire seen from Les Lauves* 1902-1906. Oil on Canvas. 63.5 x 83 cm. Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland.
[17] Cezanne, Paul. Mont Sainte-Victoire 1904-1906. Oil on Canvas. 65 x 81cm. Private Collection.
[18] Ibid

[19] Cézanne, Paul. *Still Life with Apples* 1895-98. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[20] Ibid

[21] "Foreign Sales." *The Collector and Art Critic* 1, no. 6 (1899), 93. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25435246.
[22] "Sales." *The Collector and Art Critic 2,* no. 11 (1900), 187-91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25435398.

[23] Ibid, 189.

[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid, 188.
[26] Gilbert, Creighton E. "What Is Expressed in Michelangelo's "Non-Finito"" *Artibus Et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003): 57-64. doi:10.2307/1483730, 61.
[27] Buonarroti, Michelangelo, Prisoner (Atlas). 1530-1534. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.
[28] Buonarroti, Michelangelo, Prisoner (Awakening Slave). 1516-1519. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.
[29] Anthony Hughes and Caroline Elam. "Michelangelo." *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T057716pg1,

[30] Buonarroti, Michelangelo, Prisoner (Atlas).
[31] Buonarroti, Michelangelo, Prisoner (Awakening Slave).
[32] Gilbert, "Michelangelo's "Non-Finito"", 61.
[33] Ibid, 57-64.

[34] Hughes and Elam. "Michelangelo."
[35] Reifert, Eva, "Unfinished Works in European Art, Ca. 1500–1900." The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, last modified august 2016, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/unfi/hd_unfi.htm.
[36] Ibid

[37] Gilbert "Michelangelo's "Non-Finito"", 57.

[38] Eisenman and Thomas, *Nineteenth Century Art*, p145.

[39] Rosenblum, R. (1969) The sublime. In H. Geldzahler (Ed.), 353.
[40] Gilbert, "Michelangelo's "Non-Finito"", 61.