

# How a Science Fiction Book Cover Became a \$5.7 Million Painting



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What's the difference between these two images? On the left is a book cover by legendary artist [Chris Foss](#) for Asimov's *Stars Like Dust*. On the right is a painting by artist Glenn Brown, which just sold at auction for [roughly \\$5.7 million](#), way more than it sold for in 2002.

How did this happen? Brown basically reimagined Foss' work — although it looks as though all he did was repaint it, and fool around with the colors slightly.

**Update:** I added tons more context [here](#), and you should definitely read that second article if you want to understand what's going on.

Brown was actually [sued several years ago](#) by artist [Anthony Roberts](#), after Brown copied Roberts' cover for Robert A. Heinlein's *Double Star* for his painting *The Loves of Shepherds 2000*. At the time, Foss reportedly expressed interest in joining the suit. To be fair, Brown's pastiche of the *Double Star* cover was somewhat less blatant than the above copy of *Stars Like Dust* seems to be.

In any case, I can't find any information about how the lawsuit turned out, but Brown did add the credit "After Anthony Roberts" to his painting's title, and has been careful to credit Foss in the extended title of the above painting.

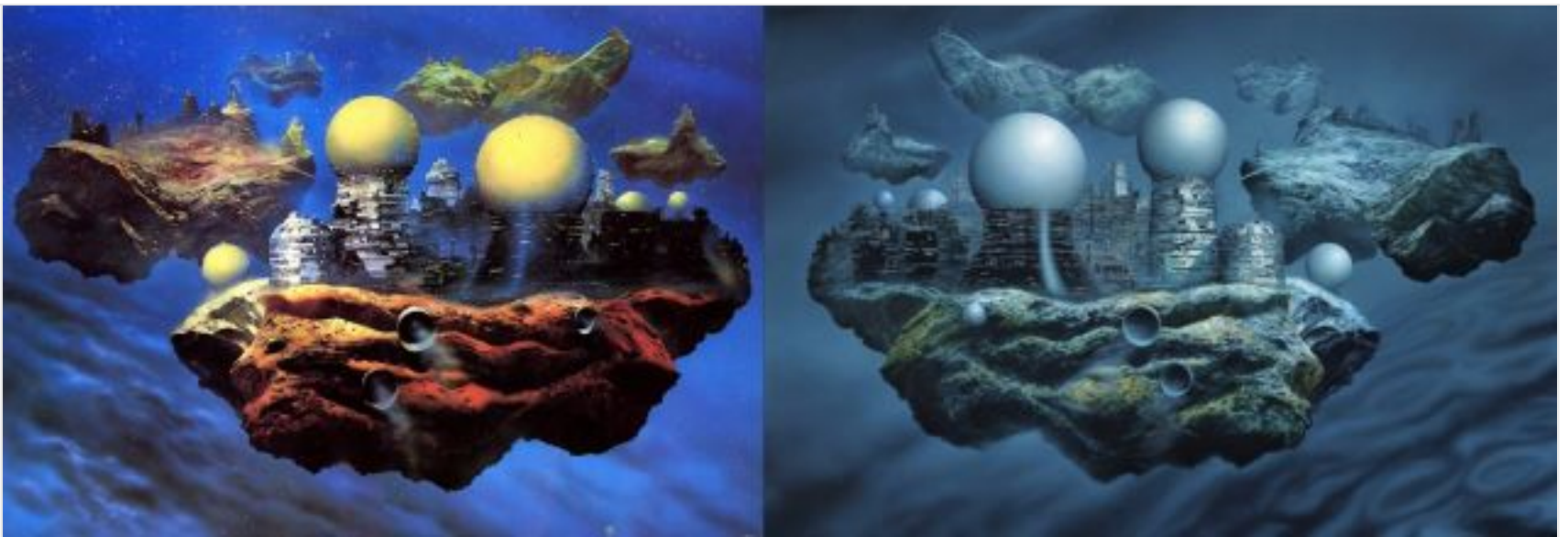
In addition to Foss and Roberts, as [Scott Edelman](#) points out, Brown has also copied the work of science

fiction illustrator John Martin, and has gotten a ton of cachet for it. As a program for an exhibition at the Tate Liverpool explains:

*The vast science fiction paintings in this room envelop the viewer with such scale and detail that their potential reality becomes almost plausible. The Loves of Shepherds (after 'Doublestar' by Tony Roberts) and Böcklin's Tomb (copied from 'Floating Cities' 1981 by Chris Foss) are unusual for Brown in that they are based upon paintings made specifically to be reproduced and reduced in scale – their original versions were commissioned to illustrate the covers of popular science fiction novels. By enlarging them so dramatically, Brown merges the conventions of science fiction illustration with the spectacle of large-scale history or landscape painting by artists such as Jacques-Louis David and J.M.W. Turner. Brown establishes a natural connection between different disciplines, genres and subjects, allowing them to slide with ease from one existence and interpretation into another.*

So it's not *just* that he's copying them and adding a bit more color — he's also enlarging them, and changing their context, creating a "natural connection" with different disciplines.

Here's Foss' "Floating Cities" and Brown's "Bocklin's Tomb":



Similarly, in an interview, Brown defends his practice of exhibiting and selling slightly tweaked versions of book covers:

*The Foss paintings never look like my versions of them. Mine are always played around with.*

*The colors are altered, the cities were redrawn and I was always inventing things to increase their intensity right from the start. ... I never want to lose that notion of appropriation—people say to me, sooner or later you'll stop copying other artists and you'll make work of your own, but it's never been my point to try to do that, because I never thought you ever could. The work is always going to be based on something, and I wanted to make the relationship with art history as obvious as possible.*

In a blog post, [Scott Edelman](#) calls B.S. on this whole business: "I have nothing against artists of all kinds referencing other works when that work ends up being transformative. But Glenn Brown's work is *not* transformative."

Check out a video from Sotheby's, praising Brown's "Monumental Sci-Fi Fantasy Work":

Some choice quotes:

*In this work, Glenn Brown tackles some of the fundamental questions of existence: Why are we here? Are we alone? What happens after we die? This painting challenges the viewer to imagine a space which is totally foreign, unknown.*

I'll give the last word to another gallery curator, describing Brown's paintings [to the Guardian](#):

*There is this wonderful thing Glenn does and I don't think any other painter does [it] – he questions the existence of painting itself.*

It's really true. I've been staring at the righthand painting up top for half an hour, and I still can't quite believe it exists. [[Scott Edelman](#), h/t Aaron Stewart-Ahn]

# How Plagiarized Art Sells for Millions

Every now and again the stitching between fine art and technology looks a little more naked and pisses people off. So let's scratch the scab and look at why.

Yesterday one of my favorite cultural bloggers, [Charlie Jane Anders](#) posted this on io9:

CHARLIE JANE ANDERS on IO9 - HOLY CRAP WTF - Today 5:00pm 12,891

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Click to see the post on io9.com. Go read it and come back here righteously effed off.

The [story](#) discusses the fine art paintings of Glenn Brown which are little more than enlarged copies of science fiction book illustrations. In the post's comments and on Twitter, there's some outrage.

And I get why there's outrage. I am not going to try and persuade you that Glenn Brown's work has merit or that the curator speaks wisdom. But I'd like to explain how I think we have reached the point of basically plagiarized work becoming fine art worth millions. You may not know the history of dubstep to feel you hate a dubstep mix of Beethoven's Fifth. But the story of how dubstep came to be still matters to the final piece of music.

Okay that was the last music analogy. Let's talk about visual art and why this Brown guy is such hot stuff.

## SOME DEFINITIONS THAT MATTER

**Fine Art** - Fine art is a specific cultural discipline with its own jargon and conventions. It is distinct from other forms of art like illustration or tattoo design. It is an umbrella term with many subsets. For the rest of this post, when I say "fine art" I mean "visual fine art".

**Art** - often when people mean "fine art" they just say "art". This leads to all kinds of confusion about defining what "art" even means. If fine art is an umbrella term, art is a tent over the umbrella. It's almost a useless term. Fine art and illustration and tattoo design are all art: illustration and tattoo design are not fine art. In this post I am talking about the more specific thing, fine art.

**Modernism** and **Post-Modernism** - two subsets of fine art. Fine art history is filled with movements and counter-movements that follow them. More on them as we go.

**Appropriation** - fine art speak for taking something you didn't create and using it for your art.

**Referencing** - talking about something in fine art without actually having an opinion. It's an illusion of being a passive, objective observer. You "reference" pro-choice/anti-abortion imagery in the media by appropriating it and let the viewer decide what it means with their own baggage.

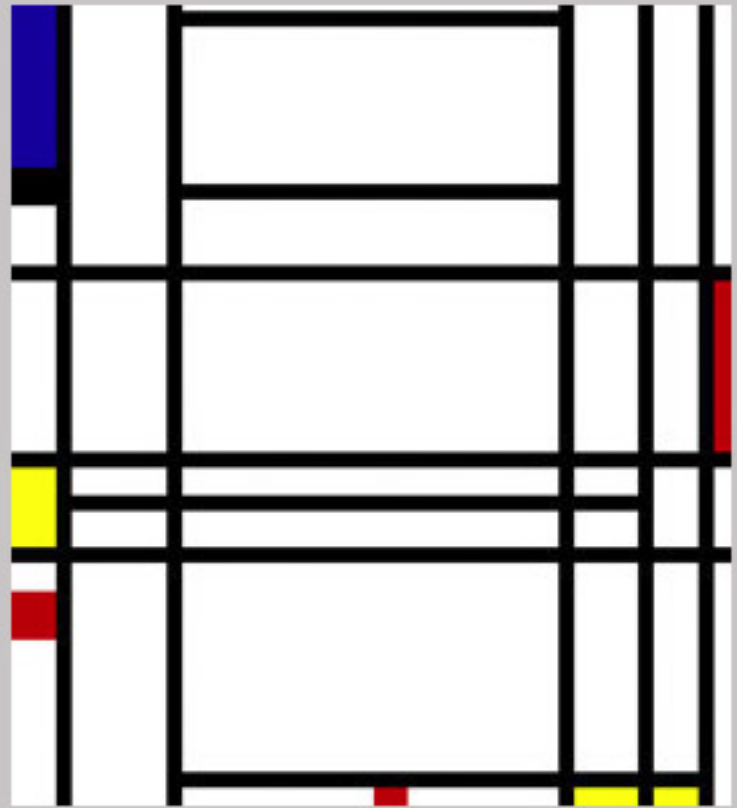
## **WHAT IS MODERNISM?**

Modernism in visual fine art displays some general hallmarks. Started around the beginning of the 20th century, it has some different movements within it, but I'll keep this broad.

Modernism was quintessentially self-referential. The paintings were not about landscapes; the sculptures were not about human figures. Instead, the painting was about paint; the sculpture was about stone or bronze it was made from. A giant rectangular block of stone with one chisel-divot knocked out of it would be the ultimate Modernist sculpture. Sculptures were not painted, they were left in their native material, and paintings had visible brushstrokes.

It was almost a Platonic ideal, defining painting by itself.

Paintings about paint:



Clockwise from top left: I Saw the Figure 5 In Gold by Charles Demuth, 1928; Composition No. 10 by Piet Mondrian, 1939-42; Autumn Rhythm by Jackson Pollock, 1950.

Demuth's painting is important later: remember that 5. Next we have Mondrian's simple geometry - if I may digress, in school we watched two slide shows at high speed of Mondrian's paintings of trees and lighthouses over the years and eventually both subjects converge in style to become this. It's a simplification and reduction of forms until nothing remains but painted shapes. Last of course is Jackson

Pollock's paint splatters. His paintings are said to be a nightmare for conservators: unprepared canvas and house paint so thick it just cracks and falls off. Try gluing that back on in the right spot.

Modernism also kind of weirdly tended to be very macho. This was a manly type of art. Watch Karel Appel paint "[like a barbarian](#)". We said this all the time in school and laughed our heads off.

Along with the machismo came an idea that you couldn't ignore the aura of the final, original work. The paintings were best seen in person to get their full effect. When you see a monumentally large painting by [Rothko with opposing colours](#), the eye reacts to the colour boundary by making it appear to vibrate, the same effect you get looking at the boundary of bright complementary colours writ large.

To sum up:

- Paintings about paint
- Purity of the original work
- Purity of the art media
- Macho barbarians

## **LOOK OUT, HERE COMES POST-MODERNISM**

On the Simpsons, bartender Mo once described Post-Modernism as "po-mo: weird for the sake of weird". Actually, it's often poking a stick in the eye of the ideals of Modernism. Most "post-" movements in art history are rebelling against the movement before them, attempting to subvert and supplant their predecessors. Artists are jerks like that.



Remember *I Saw the Figure 5 In Gold* by Charles Demuth, above? Check out this example of Post-Modernist jerkery by Robert Indiana:



The Figure Five by Robert Indiana, 1963.

Oh yeah, he went there: Modernists believed in the sanctity, the soul of the original artwork they made. And then Indiana comes along and does a little vrip-vrip record scratch and remixes Demuth.

More examples:



From Truisms, © Jenny Holzer. Holzer made a huge mark with a giant LED board in Times Square in the Eighties. The medium could hardly be less traditional, and the moving messages spoke directly at people

- Modernists liked paintings about paint: so Post-Modernists use non-traditional material and found objects.
- Modernists liked pure colour and and pure stone: so Post-Modernists often use mixed media in the same piece.



Campbell's Soup I, by Andy Warhol, 1968.

- Modernists liked the sanctity of the original: so Post-Modernists used commercial illustrator materials like screen printing.
- Modernists liked their art to be pure and removed from societal concerns (titles like *Composition No. 10*): so Post-Modernists made their art about pop culture.

This was taken to a logical extreme by Andy Warhol. Celebrities and commodities were being mass-produced on an industrial scale. So rather than make art that exalted in its own materials, Warhol used prints of mass produced goods like soup cans and Elvis. He embraced commercial culture and made it

okay to put kitsch on a pedestal. And I think he would have loved what came next.

## INTERNETZ

A major hallmark of imagery on the internet involves R-A-R: referencing, appropriation, and remixing. The media you view the image on is the computer. It's the same media you can make a copy of the image from, and the same media you can use to alter it. And then share it. It's amazing. I paint trilobites with wings on them: I'd never survive if my audience was a small village. But I can show the whole world.



Batman Lightsaber Shark © Andrew Zubko. How big is the original? Doesn't matter. This painting owned the whole world.

The tools we can use with ease online are borne out of a post-modern sensibility. Available in unlimited quantities! And the original media, whether Platonic paint or mixed media collage doesn't matter anymore, because it's all pixels.

Coming back to Glenn Brown's art, I noticed some commenters saying "it's exactly the same" as the book covers it copies. But that's an opinion also shaped by internet culture. There's one major difference with Brown's work versus the books the originals' adorned: *size*. Notice how I never bother to list a painting's dimensions on Symbiartic? Because it doesn't matter. You're looking at the pixel version anyway, which is altered by your screen and software. Who cares if the original Jackson Pollock above is 17 feet long?

When I show people an original drawing, they always want to know: will I make a painted version, you know, in colour? If I paint it on a 9x12" canvas, people aren't impressed. But if it's 12 feet high, it becomes Impressive. It has Presence. So long as you see it in person.

That's what Brown's transformation is from the original work, but you can't see it online.

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## **OKAY CAN I HATE IT NOW?**

In Charlie Jane Anders' post on io9, there's a quote where Brown says explicitly that there is no such thing as being 100% original, because we are all shaped by our culture. This is a very Post-Modernist thing to say, it's reacting against notions of "pure" imagination and creation. And hey, it's true.

*"The work is always going to be based on something, and I wanted to make the relationship with art history as obvious as possible." --Glenn Brown*

So what do \*I\* think of Glenn Brown's appropriated art, referencing great SF illustrators? I could use the big put-downs from fine art school and call it commercially technical, overly kitsch and academic in its attempt at realism. I think it's crappy fine art. But it's crappy fine art borne aloft on millions of viral cat pictures and an internet culture of ripping and running with images without regard for the original creators. It's the fine art we culturally deserve, just as much as Warhol's soup cans were fitting for the commercial-goods industrial era. Would I pay millions of dollars for it? Hellz no. But the momentum of post-modernism's love of referencing, appropriating and remixing is what led it to be worth that much.

You can imagine hundreds of years from now someone trying to pass off selling the world's first lolcat image the way fingerbones-of-Saints relics are coveted in churches today.

Glenn Brown's ripped-off science-fiction cover is worth millions because we spend all day reblogging pictures of *Firefly-My Little Pony* mash-ups on Tumblr without giving a shit about the mash-up artist's

name (or even deeper, the names of the artists who designed the Firefly cast's costumes or the My Little Pony characters in the first place).

Fine art culture is holding up a big expensive mirror at you and internet culture right now.

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Image sources:

Top image: [screencap of io9](#) featuring work by [Chris Foss](#) and [Glenn Brown](#).

Modernism: [Demuth](#); [Mondrian](#); [Pollock](#)

Post-Modernism: [Indiana](#); [Holzer](#); [Warhol](#)

Internetz: [Zubko](#)

*\*Endnote: From time to time here on Symbiartic, I decry the lack of creator attribution on images that occurs on aggregate sites. But I'd like to applaud the editors and writers at io9 who in my experience consistently respect creators. You all rock.*

*Also thanks to [Karen James](#) and all those on Twitter who encouraged me to write this.*