

## **Lego As Art**

Can an original LEGO creation, or MOC (My Own Creation) be art? If we were to adopt an ‘institutional’ definition of art, where art is anything championed as art by appropriate schools, museums, or critics, then there would be no doubt as to the correct answer: MOCs would be art.

After all, many brick-built creations have been displayed by adult fans of LEGO (or AFOL’s) as artworks in galleries, museums, coffeehouses, and other public venues. Notable examples include, but are certainly not limited to, Nathan Sawaya’s recent exhibit at the Lancaster Museum of Art, Eric Sophie’s participation in the Jersey City Artist Studio Tour, and David Winkler’s exhibition of *Yellow Man* and *Red Man* at the Space Gallery in Seattle. In addition, a number of established artists have, from time to time, used LEGO as the raw material for their creations. For example, in 2006 Olafur Eliasson, an Icelandic artist, used three metric tons of white LEGO bricks as part of an interactive exhibit at the National Museum of Art in Oslo, and in the 1990’s Polish artist Zbigniew Libera recreated scenes from Nazi concentration camps (and, notoriously, packaged them as if they were actual LEGO sets) using our beloved plastic bricks. And, in a 2005 Toronto exhibit, *Generation X* author Douglas Coupland exhibited a number of sculptural pieces incorporating LEGO – including what appears to be a complete Ultimate Collectors Series X-Wing encased in amber resin (Coupland has also utilized LEGO figures in the cover art of at least two novels). Thus, at least occasionally, the art world is willing to grant the title ‘Art’ to pieces constructed out of LEGO pieces.

Of course, the institutional definition of art is viewed by many art theorists and art critics (including myself) with a heavy dose of skepticism. Nevertheless, the fact that the art world is willing to treat MOCs as artworks is a good reason for adopting the default position that LEGO can be used to create art. Viewed from the proper perspective, this is not surprising – LEGO creations are (or are similar to) a sub-genre of the more general artistic category commonly known as sculpture. While classic and modern sculpture often makes use of traditional materials such as metal, wood, or stone, there is a long tradition of creating sculpture from less standard (and sometimes more controversial) materials such as lipstick, snow, roses, or even shark flesh. Given such a wide range of raw

materials, the idea of art created with plastic bricks seems positively unremarkable. (Note that all LEGO creations are potential sculptures in this sense, not just those large-scale creations that we tend to label as ‘LEGO sculptures’ at fests and other events.)

Thus, we can grant, for the sake of argument, that at least some MOCs can be art. Of course, this does not mean that all such creations are art. In fact, this stronger thesis seems implausible. Artists, critics, and theorists agree that it takes more than just creativity to create art. Thus, the first, and most important question that I will tackle in this article is:

(a) Which MOCs are artworks?

Now, even if some MOCs can be artworks, there is an additional and immediate issue that needs to be addressed – one that will be familiar to any adult fan of LEGO. Non-builders, while sometimes amused by or fascinated with LEGO creations, nevertheless find it difficult to take designing and building with bricks seriously. Often, after coming clean regarding one’s hobby, the builder will be bludgeoned with comments such as “You play with *LEGOs*? Aren’t they for kids?” [sic] or the slightly less aggressive “Well, I guess everyone needs *some* kind of hobby.” It seems unlikely that such dismissive attitudes would be aimed at the more traditional sculptor chipping bits off of a slab of granite. Given the points made above, however, there seems to be no obvious reason for the difference. So our second question is:

(b) Why does the general public (and why do many AFOLs) find it difficult to see LEGO creations as potential artworks?

Before examining which MOCs are, in fact, art, and why most people find it hard to see them as art, it would helpful to have some account of what art is – that is, a definition of ‘Art’. Two thousand years worth of failures to provide such a definition, however, suggest that we won’t be able to solve this problem in the space of this article.

Nevertheless, there is at least some agreement that what makes a man-made object an artwork is (at least in part) a function of three factors: form, content, and context.

‘Form’ refers to the elements and characteristics that make up the artwork in question and their relation to each other. In other words, the claim that art is partially a function of form entails that an artist working in a particular medium – regardless of whether the medium is paint, stone, or plastic bricks – must display substantial skill in manipulating the medium in order for his creation to be considered a potential artwork (even a bad one).

After browsing the best bits of Brickshelf (an online public gallery for LEGO creations), or strolling through the aisles at events such as Brickfest and Brickworld, one can hardly doubt that many creations display the level of technical mastery necessary to be classified as artworks. It is important, however, that we not confuse form with complexity or SNOT (studs-not-on-top) laden intricacy. For example, Felix Greco’s *Emerge*, while simple, is also a powerful lesson in how to elegantly represent a particular scenario with a minimum amount of fuss and brick-trickery. While it would be simple, in retrospect, to reproduce, there is no doubt that the original design owes much to Felix’s skill as a builder and his dedication to mastering his craft. And this formal proficiency can be appreciated independently of any message associated with the work.

This idea of a ‘message’, however, brings us to the second criteria relevant to the evaluation of MOCs as artworks. ‘Content’ refers to that which is expressed by the artwork in question, whether this expression is a thought, an emotion, a feeling, or whatever. In other words, an artwork must make some sort of statement – it must say something to the viewer (or, at the very least, the creator must have intended that it say something).

Content can range from the rather obvious (in the case of some literature) to the profound and allegorical. Complicating the situation further is the fact that content (unlike form) is not inherent in the work of art itself, but exists in virtue of a sort of implicit agreement between the creator (and her intended ‘statement’) and the viewer (and her, hopefully careful and well-informed, interpretation). As a result, a particular work, say a street scene in a train layout, might be just that – a representation of a particular real or imagined street, and nothing more – or it might have deeper layers of meaning involving the portrayal of an idealized, and ultimately fictional, ‘every-town’.

The correct interpretation depends upon both the intentions of the builder and her success in conveying this intended message to her audience.

Given the complexity of matters of content, it is not surprising that it is often difficult to isolate the ‘message’ conveyed by particular MOCs. Part of the reason for this is that, as mentioned above, content is not overt, but depends upon both the intentions of the artist and the complicity of the viewer in cooperatively evaluating the creation in question. With LEGO artworks, however, there might be an additional impediment to discovering the intended content – if any – associated with a particular work. Many (but certainly not all) builders seem somewhat self-conscious about publicly revealing the deeper meaning behind their creations, even when the creation of the MOC in question was motivated primarily by a need to express this emotion or idea. This reservation likely stems at least in part from a fear that such pronouncements will seem pretentious when the medium through which this message is being broadcast is a children’s toy. This problem is intimately connected to our second question – why the public, and we ourselves, find it hard to embrace the idea that toy bricks can provide the raw material for the production of serious, legitimate art.

Nevertheless, if one searches a bit, it is not difficult to find brick-built creations that clearly are intended to convey, and succeed in conveying, a profound and multifaceted message to its audience. For example, few viewers of Steve DeCraemer’s *POV3* (winner of Best-In-Show at Brickfest 2005) would consider, even for a moment, viewing this creation as a realistic representation of some event. Rather, the different scales of building in this creation, coupled with the controversial subject matter, force the observer to search for a deeper underlying meaning which can be used to understand the work as a unified whole. Of course, there will likely be deep disagreement regarding what the correct such interpretation is. (The situation in this instance is further complicated by DeCraemer’s insistence that the identity of the large crucified figure on one side of the sculpture is open to interpretation, despite his – that is, the brick-built figure’s – resemblance to Jesus of Nazareth). Such disputes regarding the proper interpretation of an artwork are nothing new, however. The critical issue is the realization that at least some LEGO creations possess meaning at all.

Thus, there is no doubt that at least some models built with LEGO bricks can be more than merely models of some real or imagined object, place, or event. LEGO creations can, in addition, display sophisticated formal properties and convey meaningful content, two functions that, as we have already noted, are often thought to be critical to an object's consideration as an artwork. This leaves our third criteria – context.

'Context' refers to the historical factors, critical institutions, and personal inspirations connected to the creation and/or reception of the artwork. In other words, the context of an artwork is the place of the artwork within a larger artistic tradition.

The context of an artwork is not, strictly speaking, a third criterion that stands alone, independent of context and form. Instead, what counts as formal excellence is often at least partially dependent on the historical factors that shaped the tradition in question. In addition, the ways that an artwork can be understood – its content – are often shaped by the historical background of the work.

The notion of context can be used to explain why new media often find substantial resistance from the artistic community, art critics, and the public, even when the new artworks in question are clearly both expressive and technically first rate. Some examples: In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the novel had to fight for acceptance as a legitimate art form, since it was originally considered to be merely unenlightened trash entertainment for the unwashed masses. Likewise, photography (in the late nineteenth century) and cinema (in the early to mid- twentieth century) had to struggle for acceptance as legitimate artforms. Currently creators and critics of comics and graphic novels are engaged in a similar battle to defend their craft.

If an appropriate context is required for a creation to be treated as legitimate art, then this resistance to new forms of art is understandable. In early days, when a new artistic medium is only beginning to generate a substantial number of works, there is no context, or tradition, within which to evaluate individual instances of that medium, or against which one can recognize them as artworks at all. For example, in the very early twentieth century the extremely small number of films, and their limited distribution, made it hard for viewers to distinguish between good and bad films. In addition, at this point in the history of film there were few, if any, recognized masterpieces of, and there existed little if any serious historical or critical work on the nature of film. This is not to

say that early films were not artworks – some, quite obviously, were. Rather, the point is that, during the early years of cinema, the required context for judging films *as art* was not yet available. As a result, doubts regarding the status of cinema during this period are, in retrospect, understandable (even if ultimately mistaken).

I would like to suggest that LEGO, viewed as an artistic medium, finds itself in a position similar to that of the novel 200 years ago and film 100 years ago. The problem is not that artistically valuable works are not being created with LEGO bricks. The problem, rather, is that the lack of an established artistic tradition – a context – makes it difficult for both the builder and his or her audience to recognize the artistically relevant characteristics within these creations. As a result, brick-built creations – even those that are formally excellent and deeply meaningful – cannot, at present, be fully appreciated and evaluated as artworks, since without such historical and critical context there exists no settled criteria against which to make such judgments.

We have now reached a point where we can answer the two questions set out at the beginning of this article. We begin with the latter question: Why does the public find it difficult to view MOCs as genuine artwork, and find it difficult to view AFOLs (at least some of us) as legitimate artists? The answer is similar to the reason why early filmmakers were not viewed as artists – because the theoretical background – that is, the context – against which such judgments are made is, at this point in time, lacking. Given this deficiency, it is unsurprising that typical viewers of LEGO creations fill this gap by judging the works in question in terms of the LEGO-specific context that is available to them – the (in fact correct) idea that LEGO is a children’s toy created with the intention of entertaining their sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, and neighbors. In short, the public (and, to a lesser extent, AFOLs themselves) in some sense do not know how to evaluate LEGO creations as artworks, but they do know how to evaluate these same works as toys. Given this fact, is it any wonder that they do?

Equally important is our first question: Which LEGO creations are art? The simple answer is: Those which display sufficient formal skill with the medium, and which convey some substantial meaning, message, or emotion to the audience. Of course, much more needs to be said regarding what counts as formal skill when working with plastic bricks. In addition, some fuller account of the sort of content that can, and should,

be expressed in such work is required. But the point of the last few paragraphs is just this: Without a proper context – that is, without a historical and critical account of the artistic tradition in question – what counts as appropriate criteria for evaluating LEGO artwork is still up in the air. Thus, we might be certain that some of the works we now admire will be treated as significant artworks in the future (I certainly am!). At the moment, however, we lack the tools for determining which ones those are.

Nothing said above suggests that LEGO creations are not art. I have argued, however, for a related claim: At present, we are lacking the theoretical background necessary for competently *judging* particular LEGO creations in terms of their quality as artworks. This is not to say that we shall always lack such a context. On the contrary! I propose that you, the reader, understand this remainder of this article as a call to arms – a demand that we pursue and develop the serious analysis of the aesthetics of LEGO. Our current creations, and those of the future, will be recognized as art only if we develop the critical tools required to evaluate them as art – that is, if we, through historical and theoretical work, we provide our creations with an artistic context against which they can be judged and understood.

Achieving this should be no harder than it was for other artistic mediums in the past such as the novel, cinema, and comics. In fact, it will likely be easier, given the clear analogies that can be drawn between LEGO artworks and other art forms such as sculpture. In addition, there are already some easily identifiable questions whose answers are likely to lead us quite a long way towards our goal, such as:

- (a) Is LEGO art merely a sub-category of sculpture, or an independent art form?
- (b) What, if anything, follows from the fact that LEGO is a mass art form (like comics, film, and television), that is, it is a medium that is easily accessed and understood by the general, untutored public?
- (c) Does the modification of pieces, or the use of ‘clone’ bricks, inherently impede the artistic process?
- (d) Are some building ‘themes’ within the LEGO community more conducive to creating art than others?
- (e) What impact, if any, does the fact that LEGO is intended as a children’s toy have on the proper interpretation of LEGO artwork?

This list, of course, is not exhaustive, but it certainly gives a brief idea of the richness of the areas of inquiry that we are entering into here. Whether we reach definitive answers to all, some, or none of these questions, the search will undoubtedly provide insights into what we build and why. More importantly perhaps, the development of a framework within which we can address these issues will also provide the theoretical context against which we can evaluate LEGO artworks, and this task is one that is worth undertaking for its own sake. I have attempted to take some initial first steps in this direction in this article, but there is much more work to be done. I hope that some of you will join me in carrying it out.

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