

A Brief History of Modern Art

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Moving through the nineteenth century, the western world experienced shifting periods of revolution in thought, technology, and society as the old ways crumbled before the power of the Modern. At the forefront of social and cultural movement, influencing and reflecting these changes were Artists, exploring elements of their craft and personal expression as never before.

Within the period covered by the label “Modern” Art (which itself is open to debate), many distinct styles emerged, each arising from a different aspect of the changing world, and each reflecting the idea of Modernism in its own way. In this paper I will examine a number of artistic styles and how each explores Modern ideas using representative artists and works.

What is the Modern?

Before we can examine how each style exhibits elements of modern thought, it would be helpful to have a working definition of “Modern.” This definition itself is open to debate, not in the denotation of the word in everyday usage, but in its application in art criticism. Briony Fer, in the introduction to *Modernity and Modernism* provides a thorough discussion of the implications of the word Modern and how to define it, but

such discourse remains a little beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I'll just hint at the vast range of interpretations.

OF THEIR TIME

For the purpose of this essay, I rely heavily on Baudelaire's usage and interpretation of the Modern (as does Fer). It was Baudelaire who, in 1846, published a call to artists to "be of their time." Modern art, then, is art intended to reflect and interact with the artist's own time (and often place). Unlike the History painters of the established of the early nineteenth century French Academy, modern artists do not dwell in the past, but rather paint subjects that were relevant to current culture, and in styles that are not constrained by the rigid Academic style.

WHEN IS THE MODERN?

Using this loose interpretation as a starting point, I believe I can now safely begin examining the styles that exemplify Modern art. But the question remains, where to begin? Though debate over the starting point of the Modern period in art continues, I will take the broad view adopted by this class and begin with the early 1800's and follow through to the mid-1900s's or so.

Romanticism

Arising in direct opposition to the dominant Neo-classical style, a style that was didactic, intellectual, and simplified, Romanticism is based on emotion and often results in chaotic roiling images.

In a continuing period of political revolution and uprisings in France, the Romantic style seems well suited to the volatile climate of the times. One of the foremost of the romantic painters was Eugene Delacroix, considered by Baudelaire, "The last of the great artists of the Renaissance and the first modern."

LIBERTY FOR DELACROIX

Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1834) is one of the best representational images from the spirit of Romanticism. In this work we have a representation of the current (that is, just passed) civil unrest in France, an Anthropomorphization of Liberty guiding a swirling mob of average citizens (with a self-portrait of Delacroix himself among them) to battle. The roiling colored, hazy masses of the crowd and indistinct features contrast sharply to the clean lines, linear structure and local colors that defined the Neo-classicist style. In this way, with extensive use of color and a crowded composition, Delacroix was able to astutely capture the emotion of his time.

GOYA'S SLEEP OF REASON Another of Romanticism's prominent artists was Spaniard Francisco de Goya. Much of his work predating Delacroix's by years, Goya's style evolved through the end of the eighteenth century, and by the early nineteenth century he was producing works which I consider in the Modern vein.

His turn of the century print series *Los Caprichios* (1799-1800) is a disturbing set of images dealing with the darker side of the world he knew. Around the same time, working as court painter to Charles IV, he produced his *Family of Charles IV* (1800). This work contains many aspects that can be viewed under the aegis of the Modern. For one, it makes an interesting twist on the tradition of portrait painting, with Goya including himself within the image. It is a self-portrait depicting the act of painting the portrait itself. Along with this twisting of convention, Goya worked subtle revolutionary elements into the painting by portraying the royal family as ugly and sickly.

In 1814 he painted the *Third of May*, a public response to the war, and an 1808 event in Madrid wherein a large group of innocent people were slaughtered.

By the end of his career, Goya was painting images such as *Saturn Devouring one of His Children* (1821-1823) a work full of disturbing emotion. Images from his final period are sometimes considered Expressionistic.

IN THE EYE OF GOD

In the domain of landscape painting, Caspar David Friedrich's use of the Romantic style tended to depict the awe-inspiring qualities of nature, and represent man's relationship to nature on a spiritual level. Works that most exemplify this are *Cloister Cemetery in the Snow* (1817-19) which depicts a graveyard, crumbling cathedral and a small line of monks within an ominous snowy forest, and *Monk by the Sea* (1809-1810). *Monk by The Sea* uses a small figure against a vast sea and sky conveying a sense of loneliness coupled with the awe of nature. Friedrich said "A painter should not only paint what he sees before him, but what is inside him," and incorporated deeply personal emotional and spiritual ideas into his paintings.

Realism

Realism stands as style that is truly progressive in nature, existing as an affront to both Neo-classicism and Romanticism, striving to portray the objective truth, life as it really is (with some brief diversions into allegory). Reaching its height in 1850, it was in some ways egged on by the invention of the camera (the first negative images were recorded in 1826). The camera provoked different reactions among artists, some were threatened by it, some incorporated it into their work, and some, like the realists, saw it as a challenge and strove to paint even more realistically.

One of the principle aims of Realism was to bring to public view the real life of the lower classes. Paintings like Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857) and Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* (1847) were frank depictions of the hardships of life in the lower classes. These particular paintings were both large, depicting the working people in a fashion that gave them almost religious significance. Upper class critics of the time were disturbed by these images, and saw them as a threat to their power, especially in light of recent class struggles.

COURBET KEEPS IT REAL

Courbet continued to shake social norms with his *Burial at Ornans* (1849-50) an enormous painting of his Grandfather's funeral in his hometown. It was designed as a challenge to the Academy's somewhat arbitrary classifications for work: it was painted on the scale and somewhat in the fashion of a history painting (in fact, *History of a Funeral* was part of its original title) yet it portrayed a strange contemporary scene that would normally be a "genre" painting. It also bucked artistic convention. The people it portrayed were not idealized, even somewhat ugly. The painting appeared to lack meaning in that there was no sense of hope (of an afterlife or in this life) given by the painting. Critics argued that the painting was poorly composed; there was no central focus and periphery figures were cropped. *Burial* was accepted into the salon of 1850, but refused in 1855, perhaps because of the controversy it had caused.

In later works Courbet's subversive attitudes continued. His *Young Women on the Banks of the Seine* (1856) also stirred up controversy. It portrayed two unaccompanied young women asleep on the banks of the river. The women were assumed to be prostitutes as they didn't conform to social conventions of his time.

Courbet was somewhat an outsider from the beginning, being primarily self taught (though he did study privately with an Academic painter for a time) rather than a product of the official Academy, perhaps adding to his revolutionary paintings. In defiance of the official Salons, he also held an exhibition of his own work in a “Pavilion of Realism” where he also passed out pamphlets detailing his philosophy.

TRIVIAL AND TERRIBLE

Furthering the social aims of Realism was Daumier. Primarily a print maker, he has several works that stand out as class commentary. Perhaps most important of these is his *Rue Transnonian, April 15, 1834* (18*), a photograph like depiction of the aftermath of an army massacre of innocents in an apartment building. Writing of this print, Baudelaire said, “In this cold attic, all is silence and death...It is history, reality, both trivial and terrible.”

**IMPRESSIONISM'S
INSPIRATION AND GUIDE**

With his style of work setting the stage for the Impressionist movement, Edouard Manet continued the Realist trend of bringing contemporary social issues to light. His first major work, *The Absinthe Drinker* (1858) showed a seedy, debauched side of Parisian life. His *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863) not only broke cultural norms in its portrayal of naked women with men in contemporary clothing, all in a sexually charged pseudo-classical composition, but also brought into question some foundations of academic painting. The work used mathematically incorrect perspective, harsh frontal lighting, and eliminated midtones.

Further rocking the cultural boat in 1863 was *Olympia*, a portrayal of a contemporary nude woman, presumably a prostitute, in an again somewhat classical composition. In terms of painting style, the contrast is high and the painting is very flat, with minimal extension into the canvass.

His last great work, *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1882) is a testament to isolation in a crowd, and still innovative in its technique as the viewer becomes a member in a painting with social power and distorted optics.

Impressionism

**INDEPENDENT AND
INNOVATIVE**

The impressionists grew out of the style of Manet, indeed, he actively interacted with them, and drew upon the independence of Courbet to create a unique artistic movement. Formed as a cohesive group (The Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors and Engravers), the impressionists shunned the official Salon shows and exhibited independently. Eschew-

ing wealthy patrons, they took their art directly to the public and attempted to paint in styles appealing to the public while each pursuing their own unique interpretation of nature, light, and contemporary society. The first generation to grow up with photography, it is interesting to note that the Impressionists tended to emphasize the instantaneous in their art, whether Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), the painting from which the movement gained its name, or Degas' *The Rehearsal* (1873-78). All of these elements highlight their modernity in organization and style.

Their style as a whole, while it varied for each individual artist, was quite conscious of the paint on the canvas. The artists' brushstrokes tended to be broad and clearly visible.

THE LIGHT IN OUR EYE

As a whole, but particularly Monet and Renoir, the impressionists were interested in the behavior of light, and the way the human eye saw. Monet's series *Rouen Cathedral* under varying weather conditions, as well as his haystacks show his interest in light to an extreme degree, where the light becomes the subject of the painting more than the object. Renoir, meanwhile, was first a figure painter, and seems to have been more interested in the way the light interacts with his subjects; *Le Moulin de la Galette* (1879), for example. The distinct differences can be seen by comparing the two artists entries in *The Frogpond* series (1869), these paintings themselves reflections of contemporary recreation.

The Impressionists continued the social commentary that preceded them. Degas examined the lives of ballet dancers in (by some estimates) hundreds of works, and the experiences of other working women in paintings such as *Milliners* (1882). The two prominent female impressionists, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat each broke ground first by being prominent female artists and also by painting subjects that explored the lives of women in contemporary society and exhibited the constraints which held them.

Post-Impressionism

Growing from impressionism, a series of movements and individuals arose, extending the style and principles in different directions. Some further developed the study of light in a more scientific vein, while others followed the more emotional aspects. Here I will briefly discuss both.

**SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH
GEORGE**

The concept of Divisionism, exemplified by Georges Seurat in his *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-86) is rooted in the study of how we, as humans, perceive color and light. The entire painting is comprised of minute colored dots that when viewed from a distance form the scene. When viewed up close, the dots are readily apparent and the image breaks down. Seurat based his painting on studies he did outdoors on a popular relaxation island (following the on location method of many impressionists and some realists), but he would then work on the painting in his exacting technique back at the studio. (I recommend the Stephen Sondheim musical “Sunday in the Park with George” for an intriguing fictionalized account of this process).

Seurat also continued in the vein of social commentary with his work, here making an anti-utopian statement. After all, the figures in the painting look so, well, bored.

**IT WASN'T ME, IT WAS THE
ONE EARED MAN**

On the more emotional side, and coming after Seurat, was Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh originally began as an academic painter, but after being exposed to the Impressionists and the early Post-Impressionists (like Seurat) he began to find his own style. Spreading paint thickly upon the canvas, Van Gogh's hand was evident in everything he painted. Using sometimes arbitrary and jarring colors in paintings such as *The Night Cafe* (1888) he was able to express volumes of emotional content in a single painting.

Not only did Van Gogh act as a pioneer in the use of color, he also extended the work of Goya in using his paintings to express his state of mind. Perhaps nowhere is this more visible than in *The Starry Night* (1889).

GAUGIN, GAUGIN, GONE

Paul Gauguin, an associate of Van Gogh's, also contributed greatly to the Post-Impressionist styles. Following some important early work, he became fascinated in the “primitive,” an idea that was grabbing a fair amount of popular attention. By primitive we mean non-western culture and artwork, as well as children's art and the art of the insane (maybe that's why he hung out with Van Gogh.) He moved to the Polynesian islands, taking a very young native mistress, and began to paint works steeped in spiritualism and tribal mystery, while further exploring the use of color to express emotion. Notable among these works is *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892) which has often been compared to Manet's *Olympia*.

Symbolism

The symbolist movement dealt with issues of religion and personal human torment at the end of the nineteenth century. representative works include Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1917) and *The Scream* (1893) by Edvard Munch (though Munch is often categorized as Expressionist in his dealings with anguish and isolation).

Fauvism

Around 1901, several retrospective exhibitions were held, making the collected works of Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne available to the public for the first time. Inspired by the daring use of color the short lived Fauvist movement arose.

BORN TO BE WILD

Fauvism, meaning "wild beasts," found its chief practitioner in Henri Matisse, who worked to free color in his work, first in the Seurat inspired *Luxe, Calm, et volupté* (1904) and soon evolving into works like *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905-06). These works not only used color arbitrary to express the artist's thoughts and emotions, but they were depictions of an idealized, Arcadian society. In *The Open Window at Colliure* (1905) his color and style truly broke free in what is sometime's considered an "anti-impressionist" painting. The painting is more than sketch-like, with broad swatches of rough, heightened color.

Reception to Matisse's work was art first uncertain, with detractors decrying them as barbaric, attacking their discordant colors, but his innovative use of color and often primitive themes continued in this style until about 1910.

German Expressionism

Two important groups arose in German expressionism in the early twentieth century, The Bridge, and the Blue Rider.

DIE BRUCKE

The Bridge group was comprised of four architectural students with an interest in the primitive as well as art by Van Gogh, Gauguin and Munch. Representative works are *Squatting Woman* (1910) by Heckel and *Nudes* (1910) by Kirchner. In many ways this group was responding directly to the German academic painting of the time, which was Impressionist.

DER BLAU REITER

Kandinsky, the dictatorial leader of The Blue Rider group was, perhaps, even more innovative. After he was rejected twice by the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, this group was formed in 1903. His works were often rooted in music, like *Improvisation #26* (1912) and bordered on the non-representational. As World War I grew imminent, his works dealt with the war in apocalyptic themes. Kandinsky believed that modern society had become too object oriented (like C++ I suppose) and were not spiritual enough and, hence, viewed the coming war as a good, purifying event, like the great flood of many primitive oral traditions.

Cubism

Whereas fauvism was the raw emotional development of the early 1900's, cubism was the intellectual. Led by Picasso and Braque, working in close union, cubism slowly broke down the representational images into essential lines, often, in later works, discarding color, and incorporating modern linguist theory into the art work. Using Ferdinand Sasseur's ideas of language as contextual signs, Picasso and Braque would incorporate identifying labels into their more and more abstract cubist works.

The first cubist work was Picasso's *Damoiselles Davignon* (1907). A painting of the interior of a brothel, it is innovative and disturbing on several levels, incorporating multiple visual perspectives and including the viewer as part of the painting.

Examples of full fledged analytic cubism, incorporating linguist theory, are Braque's *The Portuguese* and Picasso's *Ma Jolie* (both 1911). In these works the figure has almost fully disintegrated into lines and angles.

A group of cubist followers sprung up around the work of Picasso and Braque, but the two leaders never exhibited with hem, and the followers' work took on a life of its own.

Rapid Fire-isms in the early Twentieth Century

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid change in society with mass production of the automobile beginning, electric lights becoming more common everyday, etc. and the art world experienced many spurts

of innovation as well. I will now quickly go through a bunch of the smaller or shorter lived movements that developed.

FUTURISM

Beginning as a literary movement, Futurism in art arose in Italy. It dealt with geometric Abstractions influenced by cubism. Their beliefs are outlined in the *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909 by Marinetti. Essentially they believed that the past should be wiped out so that human society could begin anew with a fresh start. As a representative work, I offer Balla's *Swifts, Paths of Movement* (1913).

SUPREMATISM

A Russian style, developed by Milevitch, Suprematism dealt with the Supremacy of feeling above all else. Milevitch's very spiritual work included *Black Cross* (1915) and *Black Square* (1915). As one of the important artists in the quest for true non-representational art, Milevitch later pre-dated *Black Square* as 1913 in order to bolster his claim of having obtained the "holy grail" first.

DA DA

Da Da was a short lived Anti-art movement arising from the neutral sanctuary of Zurich during World War I. Da Da artists were anarchist in bent and mocked the notions of good art. Duchamp was a major practitioner of Da da, and as part of his work displayed "ready mades." Ready Mades were objects he purchased, sometimes combined, sometimes signed, sometimes just left as they were, and displayed in a gallery like *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). His assertion was that the artist's choice was the important thing, whether he was choosing paints from a tube, or objects from a market. Perhaps his greatest achievement was his constructed *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-1923)

SURREALISM

Surrealism, founded by Breton, explored the human subconscious using the new tools of Freudian theory. It was Illusionist in nature and often portrayed bizarre dreamscapes fraught with psychological meaning. Perhaps the most enduring surrealist image is Salvador Dali's *the Persistence of Memory* (1923).

**ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM**

I leave my discussion of this for essay two.

Almost Done

The many artistic styles and movements that we have discussed this semester all reflect the idea of modernity by being of their own time, dealing with contemporary images or issues, and continuing to innovate new methods of expression through the varied use of paint and canvas or sculpture. I hope to have demonstrated through example, description and off-hand asides more specific ways in which each of these styles can truly be called Modern.