

Pioneers of Modern Art

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Introduction - Modern art is the art of almost the whole of the twentieth century, but it began in the nineteenth. During the 1880s, three very different pioneers, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, started to push beyond impressionism, trying to find for their painting a new moral and emotional framework. The impressionists had been content to look at nature with attention but without passion. They did not want to question it, or place themselves in it. The post-impressionists expected to get involved and in this way brought a renewed, almost righteous, ripple of feeling back into their work. In a short time the ripple became a tidal gush of vividly coloured emotions which inundated painting. For a time it became an artist's duty to fill the canvas with sensibility. This flowed unchecked for the first decade of the new century, until it provoked the reaction of cubism.

The parameters of cubism may be gauged by two remarks from its founders. 'For me painting is a dramatic action in the course of which reality finds itself split apart,' said Pablo Picasso flamboyantly. The quieter, subtler Georges Braque chose to emphasize a less percussive aspect of the new art when he disclosed: 'I don't believe in things. I believe in relationships. This kind of talk, and more particularly the painting to which it referred, was met with blank incomprehension by 95 per cent of those who encountered it. They saw only the deranged product of two probable lunatics.

As we see now, cubism was no more insane than impressionism was in the 1870s, when it faced the same charge. In any case, the new painting was much more than just an expression of its leaders' creative force -although there was plenty of that in Picasso and Braque. It was an answer to the problem of unbridled emotion in the Nabis, the post-impressionists and the Fauves. That answer, so apparently extreme and contorted, was imbued with a very twentieth-century sense of paradox. The writer Karl Kraus described it as making 'a riddle out of a solution', a formula that comes as close as six words can to expressing the spirit of cubism. Despite its inflammatory reputation, the discourse of this art was intellectual, its methods of composition deliberate and studious and the colouring of

its pictures decidedly low-key.

Yet the word 'inflammatory' is just. Cubism lit the touchpaper for an explosion, the largest intellectual revolution in the visual arts since the Renaissance discovery of perspective. And its pioneers, closeted in their Montmartre studios, brooded on many of the central preoccupations of the twentieth century: the space-time continuum, the atom, the validity of sensory experience. They were not alone in this. It was the age of science, in which twentieth-century humanity suddenly caught hold of the suspicion that observable reality might be an illusion, or a confidence trick. And what if, instead of nobility and an immortal soul, we carried inside us only a snake pit of competing desires or, worse, a void? These are profoundly unsettling but, for some individuals, feverishly exciting thoughts which arrived along diverse channels. Einstein and Freud were two of the most important of these. Cubism was a third.

The post-impressionists declared that looking is not seeing. Braque and Picasso's first task, with their split-open multiple-aspect forms, was to show that seeing is not understanding. Their next task, a challenge that was taken up energetically by a host of offshoots, was to invent visual languages beyond seeing. Right at the front of what was beginning to be called the avant-garde of art the metaphor is a military one, referring to those 'riding point' at the head of an army cubism now began to fly above, or circle around or even pass through solid form. Its followers went on, like a victorious raiding party, to capture the essence of movement, expose misconception and root out the fundamentals of sensory truth. The consequences of all this activity, packed into a few momentous years just before the (differently shattering) upheaval of the First World War, were profound and irreversible. For all serious artists, cubism had broken through the wall of protective illusions about pictorial space. The breach was established and the apparently ragged and disorganized forces of 'the new art' poured through, proclaiming liberation.

The artists themselves sometimes grasped the same liberty in their private lives, creating the stereotype of the penniless, hell-raising bohemian, always drunk on absinthe.

Some, like Modigliani, really were like this. But most were profoundly serious people and occasionally too much so for their own good: Braque's reputation suffered to an extent because of his personal dullness next to the bravura of Picasso; Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock just suffered.

The absolute creative freedom claimed by modernism was bound to put it on a collision course with the new authoritarian politics which arose in the wake of the First World War. This, after all, was at least in part a reaction to the avant-garde in the arts, which was seen as symptomatic of an overall social sickness and disorder. Stalin's cultural apparatchiks called it 'formalism' and sent many artists to the Gulags. The Nazis condemned it as Degenerate Art and mounted a scathing exhibition of the stuff in Munich in 1937. At its opening Hitler, the failed watercolourist, declared: 'If artists do see fields blue, they are deranged and should go to an asylum. If they only pretend to see them blue, they are criminals and should go to prison.' Hitler and Stalin had some reason beyond their own prejudices to hate modern art, because many of its leading figures were sympathetic to, if not deeply involved in, left-wing revolutionary activity. Picasso's great protest painting Guernica rages against the rise of Franco and his use of terror bombing in the Spanish Civil War. Dada and surrealism were from the start aligned on the political left. And, in the 1960s, art and political subversion became in

some quarters virtually interchangeable.

On the other hand there were spiritual (and spiritualist) dimensions to modernism that had little to do with politics, including the extraordinary rise and (by mid-century) fall of theosophy, an attempt to start a new religion mainly by two women, the Russian Madame Blavatsky and her English acolyte Annie Besant. Theosophy had little to do with cubism but it left its imprint on modern art through four key avant-gardistes, Wassily Kandinsky, Constantin Brancusi, Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock. The vital constant here is the opposite of Guernica's public howl. It is an intensely private and inner art, a dialogue with the soul. Pollock, one of its most intense practitioners, called all painting self-discovery. 'Every artist paints what he is,' he said, though he also insisted that what was created went on to live 'a life of its own'. The strong implication here is that the artist, as creator of 'living' works, bears a solemn responsibility that is unique among human activities.

References:-

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