

Modernism vs. the era of realism in art history

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Modernism in art history is used to refer to art forms that according to Witcombe (2000) date back roughly from 1860 to 1970, starting with the paintings of Édouard Manet in the 1860s. The issue of historical dating or definition of art forms in art history is a debated one, but this paper will not undertake debates relating to the dating of different epochs in art history. Going by Witcombe's definition, it could be said that different categorizations or 'sub-eras' under modernism can be made - e. g. Postimpressionism, Symbolism, Fauvism and Expressionism, Constructivism, and Surrealism. (Chipp 1968)

Modernism as a general concept symbolises the age of enlightenment that began in Europe from the seventeenth through to the eighteenth centuries and witnessed the ascendancy of science and reason and the rejection of absolute beliefs passed down from theology and classical writers. The break with the 'ancients' and the focus on the 'modern' man as the center of intellectual activity and knowledge thus typified the modernist era. The use of science and reason was seen as presenting humans with the ability to solve the problems that face human society.

In the area of art as well, the era of modernism also signalled the break with the classical depiction of beauty that idealised beauty in an unattainable form. In this sense, Realism can be said to be part of the modernist definition in art history. (Witcombe, 2000) New forms of 'beauty' that were not idealistic were explored through paintings and other art forms like sculpture and architecture.

The term Realism or the Realist School refers to the nineteenth century art movement that departed from the art forms of the Neoclassicalists and the Romantics. The painting of artists like Gustave Courbet, Honoré Daumier, John Singleton Copley, Thomas Eakins, and Ignace Henri Theodore Fantin-Latour, typified the Realist era in art history. The paintings of the Realists depicted everyday characters and situations instead of the idealist and theatrical presentations in the paintings of the Neoclassicalists and the Romantics.

Realism thus sought to present paintings that are as original as the subject matter being painted. Gustave Courbet for instance saw his paintings as the pursuit of truth and as such presented nature in sometimes unsettling truths that ruffled the sensibilities of the society. In his *L'Origine du monde* (origin of the world) painted in 1866 for instance, Courbet depicted in graphic detail, a nude woman and her genitalia, in a very natural and realistic manner without any embellishments of an idealized beauty.

The realist era could in a sense can also be said to be an interface between modernism and the neoclassical era. The pursuit and depiction of truth in its honest and sometimes ugly reality could be said to be the precursor of the modernist era in art history.

The depiction of nature and natural everyday situations in paintings in the Realist era could thus be found in the paintings of the Postimpressionist painter Paul Cezanne. Cezanne for instance stated in a letter in 1866 (October 19 1866) to his boyhood friend, Emile Zola, that:

“... all pictures painted inside, in the studio, will never be as good as the things done outside. When out-of-door scenes are represented, the contrasts between figures and the ground are astounding and the landscape is magnificent. I see some superb things and I shall have to make up my mind only to do things out-of-doors.” (cited by Chipp 1968, 16)

Vincent van Gogh also commented about the realistic presentation of his painting - *The Potato Eaters*, 1885. He stated in a letter to his brother in 1885 that he wanted the *Potato Eaters* painting to “... prove to be the real peasant picture. I know it is. But he who prefers to see peasants in their Sunday-best may do as he likes. I personally am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than by giving them a conventional charm.” (cited by Chipp 1968, 31)

It must be noted however that whereas Realism typified the art form of a particular ‘school of art’ notably in France and England (the Barbizon School and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), different ‘schools of art’ or epochs in art history can be categorized under modernism. As stated earlier Postimpressionist painters like Cezanne and van Gogh explored a naturalist subject matter in their paintings.

However, the Postimpressionists broke away from the impressionistic/naturalist ethos of Realism and explored a more emotional and colourful presentation of nature in their paintings. The Postimpressionist era with its emphasis on the vibrant use of colours and emotion thus paved the way for other modernist art forms like Symbolism, Cubism, and Fauvism to emerge.

Symbolism for example started exploring the depiction of the artist's personal feelings in paintings. (Chipp 1968, 48) The subject matter was thus not issues that were exterior to the artist and could only be found in nature. A subjective form of expressing the artists feelings even in the portrayal of exterior subject matter became the emphasis. This was done through 'sensual' presentations in the use of colors and form.

Selz (in Chipp 1968, 124) thus argues that: " The Symbolist's attitude of evoking sensations by means of forms and colors established the basis for the trend toward abstraction which is central to the art of the twentieth century".

References

Herschel B. Chipp (with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor) Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968)

Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, ' Modernism' (2000) <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/modernism/roots.html> (accessed on 18/03/08)

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