

Art as a political statement essay example

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



Art refers to the use of both human imagination and creative skill to typically express ideas in a visual form. The visual form that results fulfills the aesthetic principles that depict beauty. It is something that is beyond ordinary significance. This may be a painting, a sculpture, a drawing, a picture or any other that falls in this category. Throughout history, art has been used to serve certain political ends and also tackle political issues by addressing political themes in their expressions. Several happenings in history compelled artists to make political statements using their art as a way of speaking out.

Art and politics have a relationship that is both subtle and complex. As an artist creates his visual form, he incorporates the world around him or her into his or her creation. The artist attempts to consciously understand the complexities of life and then use images to express this. In this way, the artist creates awareness. A true artist strives for the artistic truth and marshals up all the available resources to express it. The basic periods in the history of art include the Classical, Renaissance, Baroque, New-Classical, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and the Modern period that consists of modern architecture, surrealism, abstract expressionism and cubism. The current period is the Contemporary .

The main achievement these movements achieved in their artwork is the triumph of personal expression. Artists used various genres, forms and styles in their art to convey their political and philosophical views. The search for newer ways of expressing one's artistry as well as for individuality led to the adoption and development of various types of artwork. Such themes as misery, social injustice, and control of power, alienation, and resettlement

among others were tackled in the works of art. Every piece of it, be it a painting, sculpture or architecture told a certain story in a given artist's life.

One such art period that used art to make a political statement is Impressionism. As an art movement, Impressionism began in the mid-19th century inspired by antiestablishment, the desire to portray the modern life rather than historical and mythological subjects of the academic discourse and foreign influences, especially from Asia . Instead of dwelling on such traditional subject as fantasy, mythology and historical phenomena, the likes of Rosa Bonheur, Gustave Courbet and Jean Francois Millet; all Frenchmen, set out to paint images that represented real life. This, however, did not mean they abandon their traditional paint application technique. They continued using canvas whereby they would smoothly apply paint on it and then blend it so as to make the surface flat.

Although a realist, Edouard Manet's name is closely linked to the start of the impressionist movement. This is because he added a number of impressionist features to his realist works and continued to use canvas by ensuring it was smooth and flat, just like other impressionists; although he later abandoned this technique. The artist who first embraced Impressionism was none other than Claude Monet. At the Paris Salon in 1872, Monet's landscape named Impression: Sunrise was exhibited at which Louis Leroy; an art critic satirically reviewed it by coining the term Impressionism. This was meant to be derogatory; little did he know that the term would be embraced by artist.

Monet and his fellow artists who used the same style in their painting took up the term and even decided to create an exhibition for their artwork. In his landscape, Monet had not attempted to disguise the strokes of the brush, and neither did he try to blend the pigment so as to bring out an accurate scene having smooth tonal gradations. The painting had a sketchy quality thus continuing the modernist exploration began by the realists because of the use of a canvas surface and paint. These features became the authentic style of the Impressionist paintings; they incorporated such qualities of sketches as spontaneity, abbreviation and speed. The impressions recorded by these artists in their paintings consisted of the interaction between subjective responses and the objective descriptions of the universe .

Although the Impressionist exhibition created in 1874 by Monet and his colleagues performed poorly, it was the start of many more exhibitions that began getting people's interest. It was in the third Impressionist exhibition that the creators of this style of art began referring to themselves as Impressionists. The Impressionist movement began as a form of rebellion against the academic art which only supported a small range of artistic work that focused on traditional topics with complex techniques, thus allowing them into their annual Salons. These Salons rejected works done by adventurous artists. Napoleon III yielded to pressure from people due to dissatisfaction with the Academy jurors' decision to reject certain pieces of art into the Salons and moved with speed to set up Salon of the Rejected for the exhibition of those artworks that were rejected in regular Salons.

Still there were rejections by the Academy jurors even after this move, thus prompting Manet to mount his own private exhibition, copying from Courbet. This is what actually put Manet's name among the originators of this movement. Monet and other Impressionists therefore established their exhibitions after a number of other artists had attempted the move . These actions gave the artists lots of autonomy, and they did not have to stick to the harsh and authoritative viewpoint. The Society of Independent Artists was formed in 1884, and every year the association created an exhibition. This was yet another reaction to the conservative way the regular Salon was operated.

Realism was yet another art movement that majorly began in France as a response to the idealistic classicism of exotic themes and academic art by Romanticism. Realism intended to express a truthful and objective perception of society's contemporary life. It came to the fore after the 1848 revolution that saw Louis-Philippe's monarchy's overturn. It developed into Napoleon III's empire, coming to an end late in the 19th century. Through the depiction of modern subjects that related to the working class' daily lives, Realists were able to democratize art as a response to the society's fight for democratic reform. By presenting their work in gritty details, they would show the daily experience of the humble then parallel it with the working class' elevation into positions of high art as well as literature .

One renowned proponent of this movement was Gustave Courbet. He challenged the conservative style of using history painting that was for a very long time favored by the regular Salons sponsored by the state. He

exhibited two of his best paintings; *The Stonebreakers* and *A Burial at Omans*. These showed common people from his native home on the monumental scale. Some people misinterpreted his expression and concluded that it was a form of antiauthoritarian political threat. In these works of art, Courbet managed to flout the artistic conventions of his days. His style was deliberately simple, employed lots of common imagery and many critics viewed it to be crude. His other piece of art was *Young Women from the Village*. It flouted the artistic perspective and rules of scale of the day went ahead to challenge the class separations of the time by depicting the closeness between the characters in his painting; the young women. These represented the rural middle class together with the poor herds' boy whom they help.

The jury of the Exposition Universelle that was held in Paris in 1855 rejected Courbet's major pieces of art after which he opted to withdraw his other eleven earlier submissions that had been approved. He thus set up his own exhibition close to this official exhibition. Jean-Francois Millet as well presented his works in this style. Millet recorded scenes depicting rural life with peasants busy at work. An example is the *Sheep Shearing beneath a Tree*. He even moved from Paris to settle in Barbizon, a rural area, at a time when majority of the population was relocating from rural areas to settle in industrial cities. He spent his remaining life in Barbizon; close to the subjects he enjoyed painting in his artistic career .

Compared to Courbet's style, Millet's was more conservative. His subject was also regarded to be politically subversive, just like Courbet's. An example

was *The Gleaners* which was an honest portrayal of rural poverty. This piece of art even provoked a scandal. His heavy use of paint and the postures of the gleaners depicted the physical hardship of whatever it was they were involved in. Unlike Courbet, Millet manifests a sculptural presence in his subjects and tends to generalize the figures he uses. These features make his works stand out and also give them a certain sentimental quality.

The political activism Courbet involved himself in at the Paris Commune in 1871 landed him in jail. Later on he was incarcerated before he was allowed to serve a prison sentence that lasted six months for taking part in Vendôme Column's destruction. He observed keenly the conditions children were exposed to when put under custody. He thus documented these in *Young Communards in Prison*, a drawing that was published in *L'Autographe*. The subjects expressed by Realists were not always embraced by the authorities and the mighty. They were perceived to be political statements meant to provoke more revolutionary ideas.

In the modern era, surrealist art was generally perceived as a political statement. The artworks that characterized this artistic movement were a response to the undesirable state of the society the artists lived in. They expressed their discomfort concerning the state of the social and political affairs of the time. Surrealism began after World War I and was a form of opposition against bourgeois values that included rationalism which is said to have accounted for much of the destruction and loss of life in the War. It retained most of the painterly fashions of past generations but dealt attacks on pretensions of high art.

The most notable act in this movement's history is Marcel Duchamp's undertaking to paint a moustache on Mon Lisa's painting during the Dadaist movement. Dadaism is one of the various Surrealism art movements, and it developed due to class struggle, political unrest, and misunderstandings with regard to resource allocation and social roles. The aftermath of the war that consisted of destructions, pain, manipulation of the public due to politics and resource polarization is what shaped Dadaism. The Dadaist movement intended to show the worthlessness of war.

Surrealism art movement was not only made up of paintings, sculptures and architecture like previous periods. It was also made up of writers who composed poems and other fictional compositions as works of art. Unlike the surrealist paintings that evaded direct and obvious confrontation with the period's class struggle, surrealist writers took an active role in radical politics. The term Dada was christened in the year 1916 and was adopted by most artists and poets of this time.

It was Breton's wish to create a movement through which artists could come together to oppose war through their subconscious thinking. The interest of Surrealists was the exposure of the complicated inner worlds of violence, sexuality, and desire. It was this that led to the transgressive behavior that characterized this movement. The pieces of art of this time were creative works and revealed an artist's inner mind through a certain unique and symbolic manner as a way of uncovering anxieties and examine them analytically using visual means. Archetypal symbols and dream imagery

were employed by these artists, in addition to collage aesthetic, even in the film genre.

The exhibition that was held in 1925 in Paris attested the success of the interwar modern architectural movement. This consisted of the production of useful objects for homes, building construction, and interior decoration. The pavilions and entrances of this particular exhibition were well decorated to portray a new trend referred to as Art Deco that involved linearity. It was from these that Organic Architecture emerged. It began as a form of response towards rationalism and people enthusiastically began embracing it, especially within the United States. This style got inspired by the artistic experiments of the avant-garde in the century's previous two decades. This period was marked by an architectural style that ensured a dynamic balance despite it being asymmetrical and disjointed. Frank Lloyd Wright is one of the architect's involved in this modern architectural movement. His architectural philosophy had lots of influence in Scandinavia, Germany and Netherlands as well as on a few other European countries' architectures.

In Italy, the Modern architectural movement was begun in the year 1930 by Gruppo 7, a clique of seven architects who favored rational architecture, as opposed to the Fascist regime's monumentalism. They sought to establish basic architectural types on the basis of order, logic, total adherence to functionalism and clarity. They therefore set out to give architecture freedom, so that it did not stick to the Futuristic avant-garde approach of the time as well as a cultural climate that presented a wrong perception of the

spirit of the times. The movement intended that the architectural design does not totally break from the classical architecture's enduring values and from those of the European tradition.

Art and architecture have had a significant impact on the political happenings of various times. They served the purposes they were put to as political statements effectively. Each piece of art told a lot concerning the history of the artist's society. Therefore, by consciously and critically studying the pieces of art of the past, one can develop a full understanding of the developments of the historical times and thus appreciate the same . The world around a given artist in one way or the other would feature in his or her process of creation. Ben Shahn's Vanzetti, for example, addresses the theme of social injustice; Pablo Picasso's Guernica expresses an outcry of grief and also glorifies Soviet workers among other artworks. It is therefore confirmed that artists employed their artworks in making political statements throughout the course of history.

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