

History of art: classical to minimalism



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18th Century Neo – Classical

Neo classical art was the name given to the art, architecture sculpture that began emerging in the mid eighteenth century in Europe, it was the new age interpretation of classical art, taking its inspiration from stories and great works of art of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.

Johann Joachim Winkelmann's work ' The History of Ancient Art' was one of the major inspirations for the rise of the neoclassical movement. Simplicity and symmetry are the stand out characteristics of the work done in this movement. Some of the famous artists include Pannini, Benjamin West and Jacques Louis David.

The design is kept austere and linear and is much more accurate in its depiction of the ancient times. This was also driven by the recent excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii by Winkelmann. Winkelmann himself was a great admirer of the ancient civilizations and inspired artists to follow their style of art stating " it contains a noble simplicity and a quiet grandeur" he believed that the Greeks artists came as close to perfection as possible and by following them current artists could come close to an idealized depictions of natural form which has been stripped of transitory and individualistic aspects.

One work or art which comes to fore as a true depiction of all that Neoclassical work stands for is, *Oedipus and the Sphinx, by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres , painted in 1808 and reworked at in 1826* when it was finally completed. It is the depiction a scene from the Greek play Sophocles where Oedipus, is stopped in his tracks by a sphinx, who asks him a riddle,

on answering correctly Oedipus won the kingdom of Thebes and a wife. The work is Oil on canvas. As is typical of that period the design is kept austere and linear. Oedipus's stance can be captured perfectly in horizontal and vertical lines, a typical neoclassical characteristic that uses balance and line to highlight beauty and harmony. Another striking feature is imperfectness of Oedipus which makes him a perfect depiction of human form as we all carry our imperfections in line with what Winkelmann said.

The simplicity of the art can also be viewed as shedding the excesses of the Rococo movement. As this form emerged during the French Political and the English Industrial movement, it gives the impression of leaving behind frivolity and heading towards depicting a more serious form of human nature and philosophy.

19th Century – Impressionistic

Rebellious, vibrant, vivid are a few words that come to mind when discussing impressionistic art. Beginning in the mid nineteenth artists such as Degas, Morisot and Monet, began to break the norm of academic painting, by giving up on the detailed stillness of the academic painting and bringing in the restlessness of the world around us into art. The name impressionistic was coined from the inspiration behind the art, which is 'as the human eye sees it'. Impressionist artists tried to capture movement as best as they could, for which they employed light as their favorite element, with different angles of accentuating light being used to depict movement in place and time. This was done with the help of free and short brush strokes of called broken strokes, colors were unmixed giving vibrancy to the design. The difference between impressionistic art and the art before it can be captured by looking

at a tree outside the window, if we observe the tree closely we observe minute details and if we look at it fleetingly we get a different impression. Thus the earlier art aimed to capture every details of the tree, impressionistic art would capture the tree as we will see it if we just casually look up while walking past it, a little hazy, a little blurred, swaying with the wind, with the light making the same green look like a million different colors.

One of the most famous artists of this era was *Claude Monet and his most famous work *Soleil Levant or Sunrise, painted in 1872, oil on canvas.** It is probably the work of art that gave rise to the term Impressionistic as it was described – the impression of the harbor as Money saw it from the window. Another special feature of this work is the use of color makes the setting sun look more vibrant than the rest of the sky, but that is just the perception of the human eye, as a black and white copy of the painting proves that the sun just disappears into the sky, capturing the nature perfectly.

20th Century – Surrealism

As depicted by the name, Surrealism aims to blur the lines between dreams and reality. The main characteristics of this form of art are that the concepts and scenes chosen were illogical and strange to the point of being shocking in many cases, but they were drawn with photographic precision, such that they seemed to be picked out of some unnerving alternate reality.

Elements used were surprise, drawing something so far removed from the viewers imagination such that oddity would drive them in, this was achieved in many cases by juxtaposing reality and fiction, good and evil, truth and

falsehood and sometimes by breaking the sequence of actions that we automatically assume would follow a certain pattern.

Surrealism was also believed to be inspired from the Dada movement which began in Europe after World war I. It was led by Parisian artists, still fresh from the horrors of “ The Great war” attempting to leave reality behind, driven by the belief that bourgeois rationality in thought movement and action had brought the war upon them

One of the more controversial artists of the movement was Andre Masson, for he used a technique viewed with skepticism by many, Auto- drawing or automatic drawing, he would go for days without food and water and use drugs to put himself in a trance like state so that the work of art is truly drawn from point in the mind between dreams and consciousness. This can be very clearly seen from his work also called *Automatic Drawing, drawn in 1924, ink on paper*, the vivid eyes seem to belong to creatures from some dreamlike state and curvy lines seem like an attempt to give them human form

Late 20th Century – Minimalist

This form art was one of the very few that began by finding its footing in post-World War II America, often seen as a reaction to Abstract Expressionist art of the previous decade, minimalist art as suggested by the name aims to shed all the excesses carried by the design to bring out the true form. This can also be viewed as a reaction to modernism, that encourages society to shed its excesses or it can also be called as a reductionist form of art. Another way to understand it is that the art aims to

expose the essence and it does by slowly removing all the non-essential forms incumbent upon the form. Many designs are depicted by geometric patterns where the edges are thin and sharp, and colors have not been used in modulation. This work of art is almost always the artist's perception, derived from a personal experience, it need not follow any mathematical or lyrical sequence, and it is an attempt to present what is exactly as it is, as seen by the eyes of the artist

Frank Stella was one of the earliest artists to take up the minimalistic form, her work *Die Fahn Hoch! Painted in 1959, enamel on canvas* is regarded as a forerunner of minimalist art. The painting on the outset seems like a simple collection of lines, it brings out many hidden meanings and interpretations on closer inspection. Another feature of this and many other paintings by Stella is that the title chosen would be ringing with emotions of temper and hatred like *Die Fahn Hoch* which is eerily similar to the Nazi title. By using such emotive titles for her simplistic interpretations, Stella lets irony do the talking.

Though each form of art chosen above, on its own has broken the norm of the current age, Impressionistic art seems to be the most intriguing. It broke the norm of the day by bringing out, that the only purpose of art is not depiction of form, painting can be truly emotive and intriguing if perceptions and personal views are made to play a part in the final outcome, in many ways Impressionist Art laid the foundation for many other styles to come