

Modernist preoccupations with progress: an exploration



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The term 'Modernism' relies upon notions of progress in that it is defined by an 'artistic and literary superiority of moderns over ancients'. The 'modern' era enjoyed scientific, technological and social progress, whilst the uncivilized and primitive past was very much left behind.

That is not to say that modern artists neglected to recognise their debt to the past and although modernists tended to reject notions of time as linear, the causal development of time meant modern artists and writers often looked to the past at least as a tool for comparison. It could be said that Modernist art reacted to the rapidly changing and dehumanised world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by actually challenging common notions of progress and demanding a reappraisal of the direction in which society was moving.

The artistic movement known as Cubism originated in the minds and art of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and at first stood as an experiment in style alongside avant-garde developments in western art. Like many of the movements under the 'Modernist' umbrella, Cubism sought to move away from established notions of art; Cubism's roots are in realism, but Cubist artists also challenged the convention of naturalism and the illusion of three-dimensional seeing. This was initially done by presenting a two-dimensional picture surface with flat forms and tonal colours, which aimed to bring together the mind and the eye without trying to fool the viewer into seeing something other than the 'reality' of the picture surface. In this way, Cubism presented a more accurate reality than previous artistic movements that used the convention of three-dimensional representation, because we do not see the world from a singular perspective. Whilst self-confessedly indebted

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to his Impressionist forebears, Picasso changed modern notions of art by ‘reappraising [his] fundamental materials, to redesign composition and remake form’.

What was seen as a breakdown in society, with the advent of mechanised warfare and impoverishment of the human spirit, encouraged Cubist artists to present a new way of looking at the world. Cubist techniques of presenting both sides of a chair or all the perspectives of a model’s face served to create an art in which normal notions of vision and thought are challenged; are we not able to move around an object and see it from all sides?

Cubist artists first introduced collage as a tool to communicate their desire to bring life and art closer together, and so allow society to progress through ideas within art. Collages were paintings with objects attached to the canvas; Picasso stuck pieces of newspaper, stamps and rope to his canvas in order to ‘break down the boundaries between art and life, causing the viewer to ponder various kinds and degrees of artifice’. That small pieces of ‘real’ life were appearing on the canvas showed the Cubist’s increasingly innovative style and the lengths to which they would go to move away from art as artifice and present a new type of artistic ‘progress’ that attempted to bring observers away from the constructed emotional portrayal of the artistic subject (as in Impressionism) and towards an art which gives ‘more attention to sensuous and tactile quality’. Critics of Cubism blamed Picasso and his peers for becoming more concerned with geometry than with art; the response was that science and emotion are brought together in Cubism to create a more rounded and stimulating experience of life than previously offered by other art forms.

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Whilst the Modernist's obsession with moving away from past conventions and creating new intellectual depths may have seemed extreme, this preoccupation with 'progress' was a direct response to what they saw as the devaluation of art, literature and society in general throughout the Victorian period. Techniques used by the Cubist artists to comment on and re-evaluate art included 'fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and juxtaposition', which were part of the standard Modernist repertoire. Modernist artists wanted to create and communicate new ways of experiencing art and therefore the world. There was very much a feeling that art could not only reflect and represent life, but also lead to changes within society; by challenging notions of progress, especially in the wake of the war and mechanisation, Cubist artists created their own type of progress, which was very much involved with the way the mind and the eye worked.

Cubist art was controversial and little understood and any contemporary commentary could be seen to devalue the art itself, but it could be said that Cubism was an art that sought to see everything without conforming to accepted forms or styles and without pandering to popular notions of civilized human progress. The modernist era brought about the notion that everything's been done and said and painted already and Cubism was at the centre of one of the last great revolutions in early twentieth century art; partly because it fought against notions of progress, incorporated the devalued and partial art forms of the past and created a new world view which epitomised the Modernist preoccupation with progress.