Machine imagery in twentieth century art

Technology

The beginning of the twentieth century was shaped with explosive advancements in industry and engineering. The Industrial Revolution in Europe brought the world closer together (and would soon cause conflict of power among nations) with developments like the steam engine, railroad system, advanced weaponry, and reinforced steel. Drastic increase in population led to a need for building cities up instead of out; thus, the skyscraper and high rise buildings, made from iron, steel, and glass, covered the land in Europe. The arms race between Britain and Germany soon extended to the rest of Europe, with all the main nations dedicating their industrial base to the manufacture of equipment and weapons needed for looming battle. In 1914 the First World War broke out across Europe and devastated and changed the lives of millions of people. Artists during this time were significantly influenced by the new age of machinery, and mechanization (the idea that machines will replace human labor.) The use of machine imagery to depict the human figure is found in many styles such as Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism .

Cubism's use of fragmentation and grid like patterns paved the way for other styles and introduced ways to form the human body into mechanical parts. The French artist, Fernand Leger, channeled Picasso and Braque's style of cubism in his painting, Nude Figures in a Wood. Leger's artwork uses bold tubular shapes and monochromic colors to symbolize the new mechanical world. The figures look more like robots than humans and it is difficult for the viewer to decipher the trees from woodcutters. Leger wrote an essay, The Machine Aesthetic: Geometric Order and Truth in 1924, and stated " I have made use of the machine as the others have used the nude body or the still

life." This quote places the machine beside the nude figure and still life (standards used in art for centuries) as an artistic ideal that reflects perfection. In 1912, Marcel Duchamp created a piece known as Nude Descending a Staircase. Duchamp was captivated by early cinematic art and the movement of the body in chronographs by Etienne-Jules Marcy. Although his work departs from cubism, it still contains the style's use of reductive palette and uses brown, tan, and black colors. The mechanized figure in the painting has been broken down into separate parts and multiplied to mimic staccato movement. Both of these paintings use cubist elements to create the human figure in a mechanical and robotic motion.

The Futurist style in Italy used cubism elements to showcase political views and goals of revolution. Futurism began as a literary concept started by the Italian poet, Filippo Marinetti. He wrote The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, and stated that Italy needed to let go of its Renaissance and Neo-Classical artistic values to become more modern. Marinetti believed that these classical ideals were dying out and new avant-garde art needed to be embraced, evening going as far to claim that " A roaring motorcar, which looks like as though running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace." The artist Umberto Boccioni sculpture, Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, is a perfect example of machine imagery and revolutionary use of sculpture in futurism. The figure is made of quivering bending planes of bronze and stands with his legs dramatically set apart in mid-stride. The sculpture evokes energy and motion while distorting the space around the figure.

Lastly, the Russian artist, Kazimir Malevich, uses cubist geometry to create his Morning in the Village after a Snowstorm in 1912. The cylindrical robotic figures of the townspeople walk through a mechanized landscape of snow that is formed in hard edged lines. The colors, red, blue, and gray give the painting a cold metallic feeling and the shape of the figures remind the viewers of a man made from tin.

The depiction of human figure as machine-like and robotic in motion is a reoccurring theme throughout pictures and sculptures at the beginning of the 1900s. With the new age of industry came a new view of the world and its inhabitants. A fear of machines taking the place of human and animal labor formed along with the concept of beauty found within the speed and dynamism of machinery and technology. All of these ideas were materialized in the art of the early twentieth century through cubism and other styles.