

The early twentieth century: paradox?

Business



“ When nations grow old the Arts grow cold And Commerce settles on every tree” ? William Blake (1757-1837) Although poet William Blake lived when women wore stifling corsets and brocade-draped crinolines, his insight on culture and modernity is anachronistically apt. The early twentieth century, marked by Cubism’s birth and the Great Depression’s end, was the definitive turning point from traditional Arts to modern Commerce, from past to present. Yet the early 1900s cannot be characterized as either old or new.

Rather, it simultaneously embodied both states. It was a chrysalis: the “ rebirth” of a larval society into its enlightened form. Never did another period so entrenched in history yearn so desperately, confidently, and ebulliently for a bright and boundless future. Triggered by the technological golden age, this period captured several dichotomies: tradition and modernity, order and chaos, elitism and democracy, and objectivity and subjectivity. While technology forced the early twentieth-century society into modernity, it too clung onto conventions of a recent past.

Cubism, for example, rejected one-point perspective, a conventional and simplified mathematical model that had flourished since Brunelleschi developed it in the fifteenth century. Instead, it proposed that onlookers were neither still nor objective, and that one’s perspective was a mosaic of myriad relationships between the object and the eye from different views: frontal, sideways and, perhaps most importantly, from above. After all, in 1903, the Wright brothers did not just invent the airplane; they created aerial perspective. Technology also widened European empires in Africa and allowed European artists to plunder African art just as their countries

exploited its conquered people. Despite new technological discoveries, art was still rooted in its academic past.

For example, although Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1911) depicted fractured bodies and savage African-inspired masks, it mirrored a common Renaissance subject—*The Three Graces*. In the early twentieth century, technology could only augment, not supplant, traditional art. World War I was the first event that illustrated the cataclysm when old met new. To its pawns—the soldiers—traditional war was “a test of vitality, culture, and life,” revolving around nationalism, heroism, and honor. But as soldiers “play[ed] the game,” hulking tanks bombarded them with bullets, while poison gas smothered them with toxic yellow smoke. It was this dissonance between traditional chivalrous ideas and brutal modern methods that made the war, as Hemingway lamented, “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth.”

“Another feature of early twentieth-century culture was the movement away from refined order and toward unbridled chaos. Futurism preached an anarchic upheaval against timidity, institutions, and history through spontaneous art. To “destroy the old sickly cooing sensitivity of the earth,” Futurists painted swiftly-moving surfaces by dislocating and dismembering objects, and dispersing their elements across the canvas. For example, Gino Severini's *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912) shows a feverish, mechanical dance—fragments of burgundy skirts interspersed with monocled faces, naked women on scissors, and intricately embellished shoes. Futurism cast aside Classical refinement and order, instead imbuing chaos, “the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness ... courage, audacity, and

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revolt” into motion. Yet as Futurism embraced spontaneous disarray, it too retained some historical propriety.

It portrayed society as a well-oiled, sublimated and simplified machine, uniting every member into a cohesive, frictionless whole. Fernand Leger’s *Three Women*, for example, have smooth geometric shapes in perfect unison and harmony. Futurism embodied the early 1900s’ fusion of both carefree pandemonium and refined efficiency. With modern psychology’s emergence, early twentieth-century art discussed the vacillation between objectivity and subjectivity. In 1899, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, illuminating the uncharted world of psychoanalysis and the unconscious. A growing emphasis on internal reality came with a deeper connection between art and the soul.

Art became a universal visual language of emotion, where unconscious and unadulterated forms could physically manifest. Yet Surrealism’s canvas for the soul was so defined, unambiguous, and seemingly objective that it concealed all irrational, magical, and instinctive emotions. For example, Magritte’s *The Human Condition* (1933) portrayed a landscape on an easel that exactly overlapped the view itself. *The Human Condition*, a literal snapshot of the impossible, merged the image with the object and played with reality and fantasy. After all, Magritte eloquently stated, “ Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see, but it is impossible.” Behind the most banal and realistic Surrealist works lay untamed ideas.

Besides uniting reality and farce, the early twentieth century also marked the nascent departure from elitism toward democracy. The conservative National Academy of Design had long coordinated American art, restricting its appreciation to the wealthy upper classes. Infused with decorum and nobility, art was a pseudo-religion inaccessible to the masses, while artists were worshipped as culture heroes. The 1913 Armory Show was art's first transition from elite to commonplace. While only wealthy rulers and merchants patronized Renaissance artists, purchasing works like Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* solely for their own eyes, in 1913, anyone interested—from businessmen to housewives—could admire Monet's otherworldly snowscapes and Van Gogh's swirling olive orchards.

In the early twentieth century, the art market embraced the largest audience it ever had (205, 000 viewers in total), setting the foundation for an increasingly democratic society. Dadaism, for example, followed the Armory Show's footsteps, demystifying art with its curious creations and commonplace readymades. After World War I, disillusioned by the failures of the ruling class, artists frenetically repudiated aristocracy in favor of the common man. Dadaists criticized the "aggressive, complete folly of a world left in the hands of bandits" and demanded for "the cleanliness of the individual" to prevail. Since a truly democratic art involved the choice of an individual's mind over that of hand, anyone could create art; if one thought it was art, it was art. By producing painting to negate painting and sculpture to negate sculpture, Dadaism truly embodied the 1910s' growing egalitarianism.

The proletariat's power continued growing into the 1930s, reaching its apex in Jose Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932). Ortega y Gasset bemoaned, "The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will." As the masses burgeoned over the early 1900s, they grew increasingly powerful over a diminishing elite, threatening to reverse the roles of yesteryear. In his *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), Andre Breton espoused, "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions." Breton encapsulated the climate of the early twentieth century: the congregation of seemingly antithetical ideas into a cohesive turning point between past and present. The advent of the century bridged tradition and modernity, order and chaos, elitism and democracy, and objectivity and subjectivity, as a seamless transition between old and new—truly the birth of the modern.