

# Western Art History Lecture: Part II

## Preamble

Most artists carry on a rather informal, yet informed dialogue with one another about art history and current art trends. That is, artists must be conversant about a variety of art forms, related and unrelated to their own work. Thus, this lecture is also designed to demonstrate or model how artists learn from other historical artists; and how we learn to 'read' our own work by comparing it to the works, and intentions of artist who came before us.

According to Marilyn Stockstad,

*“Artists draw on their predecessors in ways that make each work a very personal history of art. They build on the works of the past, either inspired by or reacting against them, but always challenging them with their new creations.”*

*“...When artists appropriate and transform images from the past...they enrich the aesthetic vocabulary of the arts in general...This kind of artistic free-for-all encourages artistic diversity and discourages the imposition of a single correct or canonical (approved) approach or point of view.”*

Thus becoming familiar with art history (the **canon**, is expected of artists. This means taking classes and instruction with art historians (who are usually not artists); it means learning the disciplinary 'code' the epistemology of art history – the methodology.

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## The Changing Role of Artists

By the Renaissance, artists are seen as intellectuals and professionals. They are highly trained in art and across the liberal arts. They know a great deal of science (anatomy, botany, astronomy and astrology)

Increasingly art is made by professionals (not spiritual leaders or just anyone).

Artists sign their work – in doing so they are carving out a role and an audience for their work. By Picasso's time, some art patrons will seem to care more about the artist's signature than the artwork itself.

## **The Royal Academy (and neo-classicism)**

Nicholas Poussin (1594- 1660) was a Frenchman studying art in Italy. He loved the Italians, especially the work of Caravaggio and developed a style of his own based on the principles of the late Italian renaissance and Caravaggio's work.

Further, Poussin developed a theoretical defense for his work and prescriptions for other artists.

**“One must choose great subjects.... The first requirement, fundamental to all others is that the subject be grandiose, such as battles, heroic actions and religious themes.”**

Poussin is calling for a prescribed set of subjects that good art would address. Good art was the result of good judgment (taste).

**Poussin, The Arcadian Shepherds, 1655, 34 x 48 inches**

This work employs even light and a classical greco-roman theme. This work is a good example of the rational, balanced, even-handed qualities of classicism and the Academy. The painting is not strongly emotional, it makes reference to classical themes and mythology (Arcadia was an idyllic place where peace and tranquility were the norm).

Poussin shunned decorative arts (crafts) and genre painting – base subjects of peasants did not fit with his ‘grand manner’

Poussin’s grand manner was adopted and institutionalized in France at the Royal Academy of Sculpture and Painting. This was a training ground for artists.

*The Salon*, was an annual exhibition by the members of the academy. It had a juried component and the members of the Academy, at the height of its power, could make or break an artist in a single exhibition season.

The Salon was open to the public and hung in the gallery walls “salon style” pictures above, below others – crammed onto the wall in very close proximity. This exhibit was critiqued and discussed by connoisseurs and laypeople alike.

Other Royal Academies appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as well, in England and Germany. But the French was the ‘tastemaker’ of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Salon curtailed creativity and innovation by institutionalizing and standardizing aesthetic value until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Jaques Louis David (1748 – 1825)**

Was one leader of the Royal Academy a century after Poussin's ideas were institutionalized there. By the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century, David had refined most of the romanticism and softness out of Poussin's ideals. David's work was glaringly 'rational' generally extolling qualities such as honor and civic duty in paintings that were strongly influenced by a greco-roman flavor in content or tone.

**The Death of Socrates, 1787**

**Napoleon at his Study, 1812**

**Madame David, 1813**

His work is very realistic, convincing, rational – not very expressive not very intuitive or emotional. This is the hallmark of 'neo-classicism' and the last trend before the French Revolution propelled France into cultural chaos.

### **Modernism**

This term is disputed both in terms of definition and time frame. Most scholars identify the Modern Period as 1880 – 1970. The chief identifying characteristic, is a rapid emergence of radical new styles of creating works of art. Many of the "movements" and trends appearing during the Modern era were calculated to work in defiance of, in reaction to previous modes, i.e., dada was an anarchical approach to making art that defied, literally everything that came before it.

Two fundamental tendencies for Modern artists are the exploration of either **formalism** (the aesthetic arrangement of shapes, colors and forms), or and **expressionism** (the manipulation of formal or representational elements to convey intense feelings).

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

**The Luncheon on the Grass, oil, 7 x 9" 1863**

Manet's work has, historically, been regarded as ushering in Modernism. His work broke dramatically with Academic approaches to painting in a number of ways. Yet in this work he was developing imagery calculated to appeal to members of the academy.

In this work he includes a:

- still life,
- a nude,
- a classical-feeling figure in a landscape,
- clothed figures/group image

What is Modern about Manet's work is:

- Use of photography
- Abstraction/collaged approach to composition (seen in the scale and varied lighting of Luncheon)
- Painterly approach to paint application (brush strokes are evident/ the **act of painting** is evident)

### **Olympia, 1863, oil, 4 x 6 feet**

This work was based directly on Titian's Venus of Urbino (1538) and is another example of the way that Manet's work is modern – he directly 'quotes' an historical work, intentionally drawing comparison between his 19<sup>th</sup> century work and the 16<sup>th</sup> century "Venus". A viewer's knowledge of Titian's Venus reverberates with this more contemporary presentation of a female nude "Olympia" – a goddess as well, but here, a more naturalistically presented as a prostitute. Olympia's gaze is direct, confrontational. Venus' gaze is coy and flirty.

### **Impressionism**

Impressionist paintings, which are now avidly sought out by collectors, were laughed at when they were displayed in Paris. The works seemed unfinished and raw – mere sketches, not formal, finished Art.

### **Edgar Degas, The Tub, 1885, pastel, 27 x 27 inches**

### **Berthe Morisot, In the Dining Room, 1886, oil, 24 x 19 inches**

These works both incorporate the values of the Impressionist artists:

- Contemporary, ordinary events (like bathing or ordinary interiors – no religious or heroic images of gods)
- Emphasis on qualities of light – usually outdoor light, but Degas also liked interior and theatre lighting.
- Brushy, *impressionist* application of paint, that emphasized the paint-ness of the medium rather than disguising it (as in academic work)

### **Post-Impressionism**

Narrowly defined, this category refers to the work of about five artists – two of whom we'll deal with. (Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, and Cezanne are the other 3). Post-Impressionism doesn't necessarily refer to a stylistic trend, but to a period of time.

Though in Post-Impressionist work we often see:

- a departure from 'naturalistic' color, in favor of expressive color
- an emphasis on line
- PI artists often developed imagery that drew from (sub)cultures they found primitive or superstitious (peasants or Tahitians in the case of van Gogh and Gauguin)

- Post-Impressionistic work is usually first and foremost interested in *expression* and this is a rather new characteristic.

### Van Gogh

**La Mousme, 1888, oil**

**Self-Portrait, 1889, oil**

**Dr. Gachet, 1890, oil**

Both Van Gogh and Gauguin are considered postimpressionists.

- Both employed expressive rather than naturalistic color
- Both were interested in subjects that they considered ‘primitive’ or closer to nature
- Both made art that was focused on expression (over accuracy/realism)
- Gauguin’s work often employs a strong sense of line (when compared to impressionists who eschewed the line)

### Gauguin

**Portrait of Meyer de Haan by Lamplight, 1889, oil**

**The Yellow Christ, 1889, oil**

**Are You Jealous, 1892, oil**

### Matisse and Picasso

Matisse, was originally a member of the Fauvist movement (these artists were interested in highly expressive, intense color and abstracted images). Matisse was, along with Picasso, one of the ‘geniuses’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Modern art. His work changed as his understanding of Modern art deepened.

Matisse and Picasso both work moved through several styles in their lifetimes and this may be one of the significant contributions they brought to the Visual Arts – permission and an exhortation to artists to continue evolving their personal styles and visions. The relationship of these two artists placed them in roles as genius-competitors who watched the other artists work, reflected on it and then responded by creating a new work.

### **The Joy of Life, 1905, oil, 6 x 8 feet**

This is an example of **formalist** work – Matisse is interested more in developing composition around color and line, than depicting something emotional about this scene of nude figures.

### **Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J. Version O), Pablo Picasso, 1911, oil**

This work is viewed by many historians as the precursor to Cubism. It was made in response to Matisse’s *Joy of Life*. The term *demoiselles* is a euphemism for prostitutes, and d’Avignon refers to a red-light district in Barcelona, Spain – not the French town.

Picasso's use of hard angles and stark, hostile faces worked against the traditional portrayal of sexual women as soft, supple and accessible. There is a contradiction between the access these women appear to offer and the unapproachable look of them.

This work was, initially, unacceptable to Picasso's peers – even Matisse threatened to break off their friendship, viewing this work as a mockery of modern art. But Braque saw a possibility in the use of flattened and angular shapes....

## **Cubism**

There are actually two phases to Cubism, Analytic cubism (about 1909 – 1912) and Synthetic Cubism (1915 and onward)

**Georges Braque, Violin and Palette, oil 1909**

**Picasso, Ma Jolie, 1911, oil** (image of a woman holding a zither)

**Analytic Cubism**, was an aesthetically, ascetic approach to painting. Braque and Picasso limited their palettes to neutral colors (browns, grays) and focused on developing 2D images that incorporated a 3D view of objects. *Simultaneity* was their goal. But the criteria for this work became so rigorous and narrowed, that the work of both artists began to look similar.

In analytic cubism, there was an emphasis on still life or café imagery – generally, no figures.

**Synthetic Cubism**, was more expressive, looser and more open to interpretation. Many artists developed abstracted images based on angular, flattened shapes. Synthetic cubism – and the influence of cubism – appears between 1915 – 1940...and beyond.

**Fernand, Leger, Three Women 1921, oil, 6 x 8 feet**

**Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red, oil, 20 x 20 inches, 1930**

Mondrian takes the idea of angular shapes to its edge – and in doing so, eliminates the narrative or associative aspects of western art as it has been conceived up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**This is an excellent example of how rapidly art is changing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century/Modern era.**

## **Dada**

An equally perfect illustration of how rapidly and simultaneously art movements are developing is Dada, which appeared in 1916. This movement emphasized irrationality and individuality. It repudiated bourgeois culture, which the founders felt resulted in WWI. Dada means “hobby horse” in German and is also meant to evoke childish gibberish. Dada was short-lived – until about 1923, when many of its members shifted to Surrealism.

**Hugo Ball, “Karawane,” photo from Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 1916.**

Ball performed a dadaist poem, which consisted of nonsensical sounds. His legs and body encased in blue cardboard tubes, he flapped his legs and arms slowly as he recited the poem. In retreating to pre-civilized words, he avoided language which he felt were the medium of journalism and politicians. Thus the work was critical. It was also playful, and childlike – a chief characteristic of dada.

**Hannah Hoch**

**Strange Beauty, collage, 1929**

**The German Girl, collage, 1931**

**Peasant Wedding, collage, 1931**

**Surrealism**

Begun in 1924 by Andre Breton, the french intellectual and writer. He wished to shift the emphasis on irrationality that was a hallmark of Dada, to something more constructive, freeing human behavior, yet focusing on the irrational.

The result was Surrealism – which emphasizes the unconscious or subconscious. This movement owed much of its approach to the psychology of Sigmund Freud. The aim of the surrealist movement was to help people discover a ‘larger’ reality or surreality that lay beyond rational notions of what is real.

Surrealists were bound to the movement primarily in the diverse ways they tapped into the unconscious. Many developed images from dreams, or engaged in other ways of unlocking the unconscious: sleep deprivation, drugs, psychoanalysis. Automatism was the mode in which some artists and poets worked, freely drawing or writing without judging or scrutinizing the work.

**Frida Kahlo, The Two Fridas, 1939, oil, 6 x 6 feet**

**Rene Magritte**

**The Treason of Images, oil 1928-29**

**The Therapist, oil 1937**

**Emigration of Artistic Ideas to the US**

With the rise of Facism in Europe and WWII, many of the leading artists and thinkers in Europe emigrated to the US – New York. With them, came the ideas and movements that had been developed in Europe. With them, the center of artistic enterprise soon flourished in the U.S. And NYC fast became the place to make one’s name as an artist.

## **Abstract Expressionism**

The automatism of Surrealism interested American artists, as did the aesthetic and formal issues of Cubism. From these two approaches, American artists developed their own 'movement' or approach to art.

However the American "movement", Abstract Expressionism, was more focused on a collective unconscious than the private, personal subconscious one as had been Surrealism which was linked to the work of Freud.

American artists, preferred the work of Carl Jung and used his ideas; they believed that in plumbing the depths of their own unconscious, artists were really making more universal statements that would be accessible to, and speak for, many, many people.

Jung maintained that the artist whose images tapped into the "primordial" human consciousness would have a positive psychological effect on viewers – even if the viewers did not understand the representations.

**This idea will develop into a break between artists and viewers that will widen in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.**

*Action Painting* – the gestural application of paint in an unconscious, or intuited manner was central to Abstract Expressionism.

**(Hans Namuth photo of Pollock, painting, 1950)**

**Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm #30, 1950, various paints 9 x 17 feet**

**Willem DeKooning, Woman I, 1950, oil 6 x 4 feet**

**Lee Krasner, Composition, 1949, oil**

Rothko and Frankenthaler, while often linked to Abstract Expressionism, were more interested in fields of color developed on the pictorial plane. These artists sought to express the inexpressible through color and form. The expressive aspect often appears in the way paint is applied to the canvas – as an action or stain.

**Mark Rothko, Homage to Matisse, 1953, oil, 9 x 4 feet**

This work was made in Homage to Matisse's Joy of Life, as was Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. version O), 1912.

**Helen Frankenthaler, Before the Caves, 1958, thinned oil paint**



Note that most of the AE artists are working in nonobjective imagery. The Figure, by now, has fallen out of favor stylistically. It has too many associations with history and antiquity and academicism, and thus is not useful in expressing the inexpressible. The figure, in fact conveys the expressible. The rational. AE work is about the spirit and the psyche. Figures won't work.

### **The Avant Garde**

Elitism had been creeping into the arts since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work of the Fauves, Matisse, Picasso, Dada and Surrealism may have been intended to reach the average person, but many artists simultaneously seemed to move toward increasingly theory-based art: Art that had to be understood theoretically in order to be accessed.

The Avant Garde means the 'advance guard' – the soldiers who ride ahead to see what is on the horizon. Culturally, the AG has operated the same way: composers, writers and artists are often viewed as 'visionary' – they can see trends coming and they understand them long before the mainstream art lover does.

But this view can also create a chasm between an art audience and artists. Artists may make work that is inaccessible and then frustrate over the fact that 'laypersons' don't understand it. Conversely, marginalized audiences may become angry with art forms they cannot access or don't understand. They may lose faith in art as something that speaks to, or for, them.

### **Pop Art**

1961-1962, artists working in this manner, often found AbEx too stuffy and avant garde. They, perhaps like their dada forebears, preferred to simplify and lighten the artistic aura by working with and from forms drawing from commercial culture: comic books, advertisements, movies and television.

Many were interested in eliminating the elitism of Action Painting/Abstract Expressionism by making images about ordinary, mundane, disposable, consumable objects.

By making images about, or drawing on, consumable objects, these artists hoped to inject a little humor into art – and to make it accessible to a generation that had, perhaps, been marginalized by the demands of Avant Garde art.

### **Roy Lichtenstein, "Forget It, Forget Me", oil, *about 4x4 feet*, 1962**

Lichtenstein draws from cartoon illustrations, inexpensive, narratives that are mass produced via printing methods – he even includes the Benday® dot-pattern that is used to create tones in printing.

**Andy Warhol, Marilyn Diptych, oil, acrylic, silkscreen, 7 x 5 feet, 1962**

Warhol too draws on mass production and printing in this work – the smudges that come with reckless commercial printing processes, say something about the disintegration of celebrity – and perhaps more directly of Marilyn Monroe.

**Next lecture: Post-Modern images of the body**