

European Painting and World War I: Evolution of Modern Era and Beyond

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Abstract

World War I, famously known as The Great War, had an immense impact globally. It changed not only the geopolitical equations and alliances among countries but also reshaped both the history and future of modern art and culture worldwide. European painting, having its grand legacy of almost three thousand years (from seven century BC till today) went through a drastic change in its form and focus during this war. Artists changed their way of interpreting the world around as well as their artistic expression. They could no longer express their emotions and views as glibly through their paintings/art works as they did during the romantic or Victorian era, just the period prior to the Great War. Images they produced were mostly fragmented and distorted. This paper focuses on how the trauma and havoc of the Great War affected European painters and their paintings with the formation of various “Isms”, which developed new wave of modern painting accordingly.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;” (Yeats, 1919)

Keywords

The great war, european painting, modern era, fauvism, cubism, dadaism, surrealism.

W.B. Yeats, in his poem, ‘The Second Coming’ drew the picture of modern civilization almost with a prophetic vision. He foretold that in the upcoming days anarchy would pervade the world and the history of mankind would be reshaped not in a pleasant way. That prophecy came out to be true, but with the kind of inhuman hostility that even the great poet himself would not have anticipated its extent. With the very first shot on Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, marked as the beginning of the Great War, the wheel of the fate of mankind started to revolve quickly (“Documentary Matters”, 2015). A subjective way of looking at life developed. Each day the number of idealistic people dying in the battlefield increased, mutual sympathy was the last thing one could ask for, even from neighbouring countries. Soldiers struggling in the battlefield hardly had any idea on whom they would be pointing their rifles at or for what reason. Millions of people lost their lives because of the whimsical and selfish decisions of their rulers. The supreme concern in that circumstance for people in general was only to return to their family members safe and sound, once they had left their house for daily necessities. By no means could they nourish the romantic views of life anymore, which had been propagated only a few decades earlier in the Victorian and

Pre-victorian era. Earnest Hemmingway, in his famous novel *A Farewell to Arms*, written based on his experience of staying in the Italian Campaign during the war, declares-“Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hollow were obscene besides the concrete names of villages, the number of roads, the names of rivers, the number of regiments and the dates” (As cited in Johnson, 2012). So it can be assumed that hazy philosophical questions like – who am I? Why I am here? Where will we go after our death? - were the last things that would enter anyone's mind then as everyone inclined to the war had existence and survival as their supreme concerns. Every insightful individual was upset with the loss of innocence of humanity. This was the nature of the time no one would deny. Artists and scholars from all different discourses, be it art and literature or philosophy, could not avoid the heat of time, alike people in general. As for literature, M.H. Abrams says-“Many young writers were more anxious to express their attitudes than to construct new kinds of art” (1993, p.1685). The same tension existed in the field of art and painting. As Merjian states -‘Victorian imagery was inadequate to express World War I’s anxieties, so new experiments took up the task, with artists incorporating aggressive imagery of combat and its ruinous consequences’ (Merjian, 2014). According to her, the Great War provided the necessary momentum for the painters to bring out necessary changes in their form of structures and use of colour, which is characterized as the modern painting by this art historians (Merjian, 2014).

The medium of expression may vary from each other, but the creative personas from all different genres were inspired to break through the common way of expressing their feelings through bringing necessary changes in their artworks. Johnson says – ‘From the fiction of Hemingway, Virginia Woolf and John Dos Passos to the savagely critical paintings etchings of George Grosz and Otto Dix, World War I reshaped the notion of what art is, just as it forever altered the perception of what war is’ (2012, p.1). The change is known as modernism to art and literary historians.

Modernism can be defined from various points of views. Nevertheless the way Peter Barry defines modernism, is noteworthy. He says- “Modernism’ is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century” (Barry, 2002, p.78). He also marks the modernist movement as an ‘earthquake in the arts’ that ‘brought down much of the structure of pre- twentieth- century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture’ (Barry, 2002, p.78). For him, the time span was from 1890 to 1910 and countries that brought up famous art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Futurism were France, Germany, Italy and eventually Britain. Modernism broke through the conventional ideas and dogmatic point of views of life that were current during Victorian era. Barry also said -

In all the (form of) arts touched by modernism what had been the most fundamental elements of practice were challenged and rejected: thus, melody and harmony were put aside in music; perspective and direct pictorial representation were abandoned in painting, in favour of degrees of abstraction.

(Barry, 2002, p.78)

When we trace back the history of art and painting we find that, in the Middle Ages, paintings of the West were subjugated by the church. Art works of that time were mostly based on biblical issues. The next period in art history was the Renaissance, which shifted artists’ focus from the spiritual world to real life. Painters of that period started rendering real life places and persons into three dimensions. Convincing use of perspective became widespread and the human body was shown as it really was.

Europe has always lead the major art and literary movements in art history. They also can claim the credit of bringing the modernist movement and introducing the idea of '-ism'.

March of industrial development and technological advancement, popularization of the theories on the evolution of human being, human nature, human mind, as well as theories regarding the formation and function of the Universe (works of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein for example), and most importantly the experience of the Great War left unchangeable marks on the West. Davies *etal* observes –

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw the continued march of modernity. But, as in the preceding decades, artists both embraced and fled from progress. In some instances they even clung to tradition while they purveyed the new.

(Davies et al., 2007, p.945)

According to Davies *etal* (2007), it was Pablo Picasso and Henry Matisse who- ‘successfully knitted the new and revolutionary in style with the familiar and enduring subject matter’. They also mentioned that- ‘The rise of the Fauvism is the first major style to emerge in the twentieth century’ (Davies *etal.*, 2007, p.945). The fauvist artists were greatly influenced by nineteenth century predecessors such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Monet. To mark the characteristics of this first artistic pre-World War 1 movement, Kleiner has pointed at Fauvism as the very first movement to tap a ‘pervasive desire for expression’ (2009, p.911) Henry Matisse (1869-1954) and Andre Derain (1880-1964) were two pioneer painters in the Fauvist tradition. Being very much aware of the aesthetic tradition they belonged to, both Matisse and Derain took the free and expressive use of color to newer heights. Regarding his own painting style, Matisse tells us,

What I am after, above all, is expression, expression for me does not reside in passions glowing in a face or manifested by violent movements. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painters command to express his feelings.

(Quoted by Kleiner, 2009, p.912)

Matisse also clarifies his stance on using colour thus:

Both harmonies and dissonances of colour can produce agreeable effects... The chief function of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible... My choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences... I simply put down colors which render my sensation.

(Quoted by Kleiner, 2009, p.912)



Painting 1: ‘Femme au chapeau’ or ‘woman with a hat’ (1905), Fauvist painting, Henry Matisse

Matisse was greatly influenced by Fauvist movement in which the use of color was depended on an assortment of artists surveillance and sensation. He pushed this independence of color further. Some of the quintessential examples of Matisse's art works are '*Femme au chapeau*' (woman with a hat) and '*La Bonheur de vivre*' (The joy of life) and 'The Red Studio'. Andre Derain, the fauvist painter who was a contemporary of Matisse, considered painting as an intellectual rather than emotional medium. One of his very famous paintings is 'Mountains at Collioure'. Kleiner mentioned a famous art critic contemporary to the fauve painters-Louise Vauxcelles who was shocked by the "orgy of colours" in the works of Matisse, Derain and their colleagues at *Salon d' Automne*. He declared their pictures *fauves* or 'wild beasts' (Kleiner, 2009, p.911).



Painting 2: 'Mountains at Collioure' (1905), Fauvist painting, Andre Derain.

From the expressive orgy of colours of Fauves, the Western painting took a glib transition to a different form of art which has geometry in its origin, that is - Cubism. As with the eruption of war, the earlier forms and formats of painting were not being able to face and uphold the upheaval of the period, Merija says, - "The violent disjunctures of Cubist collage...were a fitting way to express the political and geographic revolution" (Merjia, 2014) However, this famous form of art emerged under the leadership of two of the most gifted artists that Western art history has ever witnessed - Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (Kleiner, 2009, p. 921).



Painting 3: '*Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*' (1907), Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso started working on his renowned painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* by spring 1907 and finished drawing it by the end of that year. However, he did not display it in any exhibition for many years. Picasso used to show this particular painting only to fellow painters by arranging personal exhibitions (Kleiner, 2009, p. 921).

Georges Braque, who was deeply influenced by the fauvists in his early works, is one of the first fellow painters to see the aforementioned painting of Picasso. Braque found that artwork and style so challenging that he started rethinking his own style. Kleiner notes – ‘Using the paintings revolutionary ideas as a point of departure, together Picasso and Braque formulated cubism around 1908’ (Kleiner, 2009, p. 921).

Though it seems that the Cubist painters are much concerned with the proportions of the figures that they are drawing, (the name of the genre itself is derived from geometry) French writer and theorist Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) explains how a cubist painting is not merely another geometric figure, says – “even in a simple cubism, the geometrical surfaces of an object must be opened out in order to give a complete representation of it”, but he also adds that – “Cubism [is] the art of depicting new wholes with formal elements borrowed not from the reality of vision, but from that of conception. This tendency leads towards a poetic kind of painting which stands outside the world of observation” (As cited in Kleiner, 2009, p.921).



Painting 4: ‘*The Portuguese*’ (1911), Analytic cubism in practice by Georges Braque

Picasso and his intellectual artistic partner Georges Braque developed their styles from ‘representational pictures of fractured forms’ as we see in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, to ‘shimmering evanescent of mirages of abstract lines and brushworks’ in between 1908 to 1910. *The Portuguese* painted by Braque is a perfect example of an artform which was later named – analytic cubism. Davies et al observes- ‘Gone is the emotional terror and chaos of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Braque arranged a grid of lines following the shape of canvas and an orderly geometric pattern of diagonal lines and curves, all recalling Cezanne’s vision of a tightly structured world’ (Kleiner, 2009, p. 921).



Painting 5: 'Guitar, sheet music and wine glass' (1912), synthetic cubism, Pablo Picasso.

Later, Picasso and Braque developed another style of painting famously known as synthetic cubism. Kleiner has defined it as a way of painting in which- 'artists constructed paintings and drawings from objects and shapes cut from the paper or other materials to represent parts of an object.' (2009, p.922) Picasso's 'Guitar, sheet music and wine glass' (1912), and Violin (1915) are examples of synthetic cubism.



Painting 6: 'Shock Troops Advance under Gas from The War' (1924), German Expressionism, Otto Dix

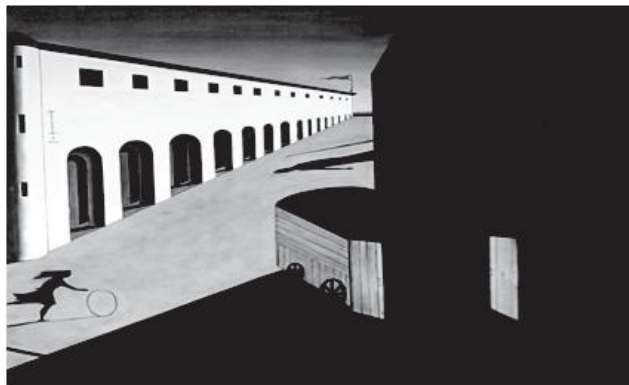
Let us end the discussion on this period of art with a definition of Cubism from Picasso himself. Picasso said that – "Cubism is not either a seed or fetus, but an art dealing primarily with forms, and when a form is realized it is there to live its own life..." (as cited in Kleiner, 2009, P.924).

Fauvism and Cubism had such an impact on contemporary European painters that a new wave of painting was developed, famously known as German and Austrian Expressionism. German expressionism as a creative movement began at a dawn of World War 1 and reached its peak in late 1920s. Kirchner says – ‘Expressionism emerged simultaneously in various cities across Germany as a response to a widespread anxiety about humanity's increasingly discordant relationship with the world and accompanying lost feelings of authenticity and spirituality’. Expressionist artists' artworks covered up various issues and subject matters but the great war and its anguish, brutality and spiritual hollowness had been their center of inspiration. (Kleiner, 2009, p.955).



Painting 7: ‘Charge of the Lancers’, (1915), Italian Futurism, Umberto Boccioni

The response of Italian Futurists towards the war was quite different, because, when almost all the different genres of artists had a sheer aversion towards the war, this particular group of artists embraced it most enthusiastically. Merjia says, the Italian futurists used their works – ‘to agitate for intervention against Italy's traditional ally, Austria’ (Merjia, 2014). ‘The Futurist ringleader’, F.T. Marinetti, declared that – ‘only a giant international conflict could shock Italy out of its cultural slumber’. The Futurists artists served as avant-gardes in the authentic military sense as volunteers along Italy's northern front (Merjia, 2014).



Painting 8: ‘Melancholy and Mystery of a Street’ (1914), Italian Futurism, Giorgio de Chirico

However, in some of their paintings, we find - 'metaphysical cityscapes', that conjures up the 'post – apocalyptic stillness' and 'disquieting anticipation'. We can consider de Chirico's 'Melancholy and Mystery of a Street' (1914) where we see a girl rolling her hoop across a sundrenched square (Merjia, 2014).

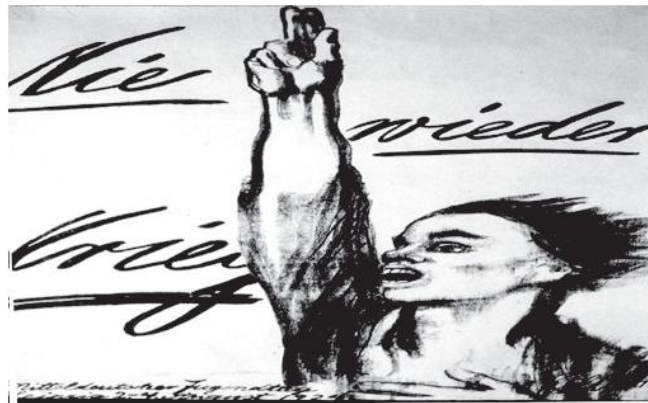
'Along with their rhetoric of jingoistic virility', Merjia mentions that the Futurist painting and poetry - 'nurtured a playful and subversive "anti-aesthetic" that would inspire artists for the rest of the 20th century'. It is ironical that, the anti-war stirrings of Dada are the form of art that bore out Dada's most immediate influence (Merjia, 2014).

'Physically and psychologically' says Davies *et al* 'World War I devastated Western Civilization. The destruction and loss of life were staggering, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers dying in single battles. The logic, science and technology that many thought would bring a better world had gone horribly awry' (2007, p.983). That was the period the Dada movement gained its momentum. Dada formally began in neutral Zurich back in 1916, where a large number of artists gathered to seek refuge from the war and dedicate them in order to – 'remind the world that there are independent men, beyond war and nationalism, who lived for other ideals'(Davies et al., 2007 p.985).

Dada movement has a depressing background. During the great war, artists around Europe were forced to join the military forces of their nations. Instead of asking them to contribute in the war through their patriotic artworks, the duty of fighting in the battle field and killing their opponent was imposed upon them. Most of them were unaccustomed to this. As a result, along with many other civilians, they died in the battlefield, fighting. In Davies et al's words -

'The great war halted much art making, as many artists were enlisted in their countries military service. Some of the finest were killed, such as German expressionist Marc and Italian futurist Boccioni.'

(Davies et al., 2007, p.985)



Painting 9: 'Never Again War' (1924), Berlin Dada, Kathe Kollwitz

These artists who were being pressurized to join the war against their will initiated the movement called Dada, which is a French word meaning 'hobbyhorse'. The words association with childishness as well as the random violence of the poets' act of word choice fit the postwar spirit of the movement perfectly (Davies et al., 2007, p. 985).

Dada, like as the Great War itself, spread quickly around different parts of Europe and America. With Jean Arp (of 'The Entombment of the Birds and Butterflies' fame) as its mouthpiece Zurich Dada flourished. New York Dada with Marcel Duchamp as its leader, Berlin Dada with Kathe Kollwitz and Hannah Hoch as its leader thrived at the same time.

'The war's traumas also spurred utopian cultural projects', says Merjia – 'after the guns fell silent'. Andre Breton (1896-1966), who was a pioneer of the Dada group, went to Paris in 1922, just after a year of the end of the Great War. As the Dada movement was originally linked with German Expressionism, many French art critics disliked it. The effect of his intellectual surroundings in Paris and his in-depth study of Freud's psychoanalysis during the war paved the way for Breton to start and lead the surrealist movement in 1924 (Merjia, 2014).



Painting 10: 'The Persistence of Memory' (1931), surrealism, Salvador Dali

The new wave of painting which followed the period of the Great War is popularly known as – 'The Roaring Twenties' (Phillips, 2011). Surrealism, as mentioned earlier, along with Baha'ism and narrative abstract painting was in its peak. Shape, splash, blocks of colours, weeping women, florescent lights, urinals and untidy beds all could be considered as art in this brave new world (Phillips, 2011).

That is what modern painting is all about. There is no perfection, no wearing masks, no exaggerated attempts to beautify the subject rather presenting everything as it is. The reason of that is explained very poetically in Erich Maria Remarque's famous novel on the shock and trauma of World War I, All *Quiet on The Western Front*, where he wrote that – 'The first bomb, the first explosion, burst in our hearts' (Remarque, 1929). Artists are the most sensitive to feel the pulse of the time and the frustration, depression, fragmentation brought by the Great War made them change their way of artistic expressions. The answer that laid near to the massacre of the Great War was Modernism, the – 'slippery but indispensable term' which denotes a vast range of sensible and aesthetic responses to that age (Johnson, 2012). The modernistic approach in art history arrived decades ago, but its clamorous arrival gained momentum because of the vast collective trauma and distress caused by the Great War.

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