

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Painting

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ANCIENT PERIOD

Backdrop. In the sequence of profiles of Western European culture, from the viewpoints of various functions—philosophy, religion, music, dance—we have faced rebuffs. Taking the notion of *western*, seriously, we have time after time discovered that Western Europe, in the ancient or pre-Christian phase, was simply a dark and undeveloped appendage of the Roman Empire. We have little to say about the area of Western Europe in the pre-classical period, except that it was provincial, undeveloped, and in many ways primitive—in its living units, its folkways among territories still hardly cultivated, its relative vulnerability to the immediate perils of life, from wild animals to wild people.

Amazement. Given this temporal and geographical setting, we are stunned to find that in extensive cave paintings, at least thirty five thousand years before us, in Lascaux, Altamira, Les Eyzies, over a wide area of southeast France and Spain, there are networks of cave paintings, many of them cut sharply into the rock faces of deep caves. Many of the thousands of these sophisticated paintings created onto bare rock depict hunting scenes, rituals for cults we have no way to understand, and landscapes. (Startlingly enough, these profusions of highly subtle art can also be found deep in the Sahara, on cave walls similar to those in Europe. Many of the patterns on the African walls are almost identical to those found in Europe.)

Agriculture. To say more than this, about these paintings is almost impossible, for we have nothing but ill lit caves for evidence. To say less is useless. One direction of response is this: that the purposeful concern of these cave painters seems clearly involved with successful hunts, landscape maintenance, and in many scenes fertility: aren't these all panels of the vast looming human change, to an upcoming agricultural existence, the Neolithic revolution in agriculture, in which the quality of human life as a whole will be dramatically advanced?

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Christian. The postclassical trajectory of European painting—once again excluding the highly sophisticated decorative painting of Rome itself, which we are viewing as part of the classical, not the western European, world—involves the effort to find a new set of visual styles for the quickly self-empowering Christian element in western Europe. Frescos, illuminated manuscripts, and sculptures were the main painted surfaces, on which the early Christians tried to express their distinctive view of the world. Their limits, in the pre-Nicene period (prior to 325), were tight. The Christians were a small a community, still despised by the majority, and poor. For a long time symbols such as the peacock, the fish, and the vintner were the chief visual benchmark of the growing Christian community.

Development. Visual symbols of the new, and often proscribed, religion were everywhere to be found in the spreading Christian culture-zone, but they were necessarily restrained; one might say for the next four hundred years after Nicaea, a period during which Christian culture and art was slowly merging with the eastern traditions of the Byzantine, as well as spreading throughout Rome—where the papal presence guaranteed a climate for the arts, despite the serious eclipse of all the now abandoned

structures of *Romanitas*. In the western 'Roman empire'—say in the courts of Charlemagne, in the monasteries of Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England—painting on manuscripts, decoratable surfaces of churches—these arts continued to be refined, and while remaining in the huge shadow of gothic architecture—construction at the monastery at Cluny began in 911, at Chartres Cathedral in 1194, at Notre Dame de Paris in 1163—the painting arts grew steadily in sophistication and acclaim. Cimabue (1240-1302) and Giotto (1266-1337) were on the horizon, with their Byzantine tinged portraits of Christ—angular, severe, bearded—slowly emerging out of themselves into portraits belonging to all mankind, rather than surges of regional historical brilliance.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Renaissance

Awakening. The Renaissance, as we know, is often described as the period of the rediscovery of the ancient classics, and in fact it was a time when, with the advent of the printing press, the growth of cities with their libraries and universities, and the rise of international trade and commerce, new ranges of achievement for the human imagination were swimming into sight. How such ambient circumstances blend with imaginative painting achievements on the ground—Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519); Michelangelo (1475-1564); Raphael (1483-1520); —*is the mystery of a fructuant culture* at its high period—Athens, St. Petersburg, San Francisco, Florence—when a culture is, as we say today, at its hottest. Let's just say, *something happens*, and within a century painting has become, not just an ancillary art to monumental architecture, certainly not just a stiff posture of hieratic fidelity (the Byzantine saint) but a full expression of a culturally enabled genius, replacing his life with art. Leonardo enables our thinking of the whole perfection of the human body, updating thereby the deep humanism of a Greek sculptor like Praxiteles, who was part of the background being discovered through the Renaissance; Michelangelo—say in the Sistine Chapel, where he painted out his high period—was devoted to the complex and colorful world of proportions and etherealities that made up his divine faith; Raphael, with a faultless sense of movement-color, was above all a visual master of the Holy Family, but above all of the human face, his portraits compacting in themselves all that his French contemporary, Montaigne, wanted to say about both the nobility and the baseness of the human condition.

Baroque. A slider concept, like early modern, may help to carry us over to the deeply different painting world of the Baroque, say 1660—1800. Arrival on those shores will leave us breathless with new scenarios—not only the deep and dark of antiquity expunged, but the struggle of paganism with Christianity on its last legs. A whiff of the great names may have to suffice—Caravaggio, Rubens, Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, Greuze, Watteau—the names of masters of grace—yes, of course, also violence to the fulness of life—grace in the sense that the art which invested these geniuses in lives of artifice, was in fact truly a life in which life and art were intertwined. The tribute to artifice, always implicit in this Baroque period work, always inflects the painter's interest in the real world. One thinks of antique scenes in Lorrain, ports and harbors and misty evening landscapes, or of vast historical conflict of armies and men, in which every tree seems to proclaim *I am a tree Claude painted*; the history of art seemed one with history in actuality.

Question A slider concept is useful, but what in fact was going on between Leonardo and Lorrain. Can we say that in those one hundred and fifty years something like a modern world view was being sketched.? By the baroque period, the existential immediacy of the Renaissance is absent, that fury of excitement that emerged with the rediscovery of the classical, that is with the energies of an open and intense cultural zone not hampered by religious strictures or social niceties. In place of that immediacy there is now a pulling back from the requirement that the painter should say all and look everything in the face. The pulling back may simply be 'forgetting how to do it,' and needing time, which could be code language for needing revolution, which was not far away.

MODERN PERIOD

Revolutions The rash of revolutions, which from the late eighteenth century were to tit-tat across the face of the industrialized world, from Mexico City to Saint Petersburg, by way of Paris and Washington, was to be part of yet another mind set reshape—postclassical, Renaissance, Early Modern, Modern—which have had their repercussions in painting, an art which prides itself on its inability to hide anything. This new world, which to the parents of a child born in 1930 seemed the ‘modern world,’ was to contain as many surprises in the art gallery as in the streets or the battlefields, and those surprises were all interconnected. Let’s think of a few of the things we saw in the gallery, while we were watching the news (or listening to it) with increasing astonishment. Let’s call those things by the names of their painters: Ernst, *Ubu Emperor*, 1923; Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937; Chagall, *I and the Village*, 1981; Hockney, *A Bigger Grand Canyon*, 1998.

Paintings Is there anything revolutionary about the four paintings chosen above? Ernst, because he was a wit as well as a social critic, chose to make his parody of the grand dictator fit the comic mode of a top spinning in the sand. Nuff said. He mocks authority. In 1923 that might still have seemed naughty, but hardly dangerous. And yet there was a danger, for sure, involved with the statement Ernst was making. If you were a fellow mocker you were headed for political danger down the road. Look out! Picasso strikes out at the dictators, as Ernst mocked out. Ernst worked a cartoon, Picasso presented a torn and bloody screen covered with the ruins of a bombed Spanish village. Chagall, in ‘I and the Village,’ fills us in on the gentler side of political harshness, but in the way he makes the eyes of a man and of a goat fuse, he makes it clear that the modern painterly eye must be at home in the full range of imaginative settings. Hockney tweaks. Like Chagall he wants a revision of perception, but he does not give it to you, he proposes it. Bigger Grand Canyon, eh? Always adroit and at an angle, Hockney makes us see a strange world in a familiar way. Four small revolutions.

Modern. Modern goes on, demanding reasons why it should exist, at the same time that the immense ocean of visual symbols, the mirrors mirroring mirrors effect of our time, keeps slurping up the latest shocker with no apparent indigestion. True while it is, that painting—good painting-- reflects its time, it is nonetheless true that the historical categories in which painting develops are not fixed, even in hindsight. Where we are going in painting now, will to some extent depend on where we are going as a culture. Is it plausible that painting might, given its embeddedness in a world made of camera images and instant digital copies—not to mention competitor arts like the video—that painting might be replaced in the repertoire of human creations? The opposition will cry that nothing could replace the visual imagination, as a maker of worthy images of man. The journey charging forward at Lascaux, by that account, is destined to continue, by some creative mandate that is part of being human. A selfie and a self-portrait have nothing to do with one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Once an historical sequence, like that of European art, is established, it is possible to see how one link leads to the next. (Which links, in the history of European painting, seem to fit together most naturally?) But a seeming breakthrough set of actions, like the cave painting in southwestern Europe does not seem to come with a precedent built into them. Where do you think the impulse to these paintings came from?’

Does ‘modern painting’ seem to you to be about the nature of the visual symbol, and the uses of that symbol to designate patterns in the mind? If so—please speak up to the contrary! —does that mean that photography, for example, can as a rival surpass the art of painting, as a depiction of the world? Can you think of ways in which the great painter goes beyond photography, in the search to depict the world? Has the camera any imagination?

Painting is a popular entertainment activity, and there are millions of ‘Sunday painters’ in the world today. What drives them to this activity? They say they are ‘taking it easy,’ but if so why in this manner? Are they caressing familiar places? Recreating parts of the visible world? Seeking for some kind of dexterity-perfection?

SUGGESTED READING

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