

American Modernism: The Influence of Industrial Efficiency as it was Expressed Through
Modern Art

Name:

Course:

Tutor:

Date:

American Modernism: The Influence of Industrial Efficiency as it was Expressed Through Modern Art

With World War II ending, there were tremendous changes on Western from a general perspective, and many other different changes both in the lives and art of the citizens found in various Allied countries. The cultures of the allies of the United States in the war commenced the process of rebuilding, which was a long one. These allied countries were mainly England and France, which came to form part of Western Europe. The United States on the other hand was bathing in the glory of the military victories within the Pacific and European fronts. This was due to the fact that the United States had its industrial complex intact. There was also a widespread innovation as well as increased production of technology and programmes of manufacturing existent in the wartime. A remarkable trend in the artistic sphere was the influx of artists into the United States, which was as a result of these artists fleeing the Nazi occupation in Europe. This phenomenon led to the development of the Art that was prevalent in the period of American Modernism. This study therefore delves into the concept of American Modernism in light of industrial development. The research looks at the manner in which modern art has been used in expressing this important phase of the concept of American modernism.

With the advent of American modernism emerged renowned creative individuals who exhibited, taught as well as shared and influenced a generation that developed during this time. These notable people included Piet Mondrian, Arshille Gorky, Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp¹. Surrealism as a technique of art became very popular among these practitioners of this important historical time. Surrealism was a very new experience for the artists, as it offered

¹ Corn C. Wanda, 1999. *The Great American Thing, Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*

them the freedom towards the exploration of their own psyches. Furthermore, it helped in establishing a connection, which was direct between the deep archetypal self and the art of painting. There was a reawakening characteristic of the modernism period in America whereby individuals went to college to gain knowledge that would help them to make universal sense of the experiences they went through. Art during this time also went through some sort of revolution as it gained academic respectability. Universities began to offer a new graduate professional diploma as well as the distinguished Master of Fine Arts degree². Different theories and criticisms explain the art of the American Modernism era. These theories and criticisms are instrumental in understanding the art of this important phase of American history.

In tackling the period 1915-1935, Corn uncovers the roots of an exceptionalism discourse, a concept that is prominent in the arts and letters of America during the modernism period³. What the theory means in essence is the grand narrative of American exceptionalism, which was a guiding concept for research and writing for the period following World War II in the United States. This ideology hinges on the assumption that the exceptional circumstances that informed the American experience gave rise to the alteration in the course of artistic development as well as development in other fields, whose general trends had been hitherto predictable. There were pertinent questions prevalent in the culture of graduate school of the 1960s concerning the concept of exceptionalist discourse. Corn asserts that the most common of these questions was why the American abstract expressionism more spontaneous abroad as compared to the abstract paintings of 1950s in the same front. The Revisionist texts of the late 1970s and early 1980s attempted an explanation of these questions and revealed the ideological

² Corn C. Wanda, 1999. *The Great American Thing, Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*

³Wiebe Robert . 1998. *The Search for Order*

assumptions bases that were responsible for this school of thought. The origins of these trends were established to be in the Cold War as well as the politicized sites that attempted cultural legitimization, which included sources such as journals⁴, some which drew their funding from the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A)⁵, exhibitions, and organizations such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom affiliated American Committee for Cultural Freedom. In an attempt to examine the cultural history identified with a generation of artists, who perceived the notions of America and Europe as mutually dependent concepts that could not be looked at without the other. These pertinent questions about the art of the modernism period trace their roots to the early twentieth century. The quest to trace these roots is of high relevance to the body of art as there has been an invigorated attempt at rehabilitating nationalist accounts concerning the politics and culture of the people of America dating from World War II. Furthermore, revisionist historians have also undertaken this cause of revisiting American art during this important phase of history.

Existentialism

Theory and Criticism

The renowned artist Fredrich Nietzsche described the image of the modern man as ambitious, lone but suffering and coined this image in the phrase “Will to Power.” This was a very descriptive form of the coming phase of psychic evolution among the human circles. The propounded theory within the period of modernism lay bare the individual as being responsible for, and primarily to his or her own will. This was possible after doing away with all pretense,

⁴ Dreiser, Theodore. 1997. *Sister Carrie*

⁵ Wiebe Robert . 1998. *The Search for Order*. p 181-183

piety, and false authority⁶. This was the basic concept of existentialism that created the way for a new idea about humanity, referred to as *Übermensch*⁷ or translated as Super-human. This character would be able to act out the new consciousness and in the process bringing in the newly discovered freedom and exultation dealing with the notion of being alive. Ayn Rand, a Russian who had migrated into the United States provided a classical example of the theory of existentialism in her writings. Her renowned book of 1943, *The Fountainhead* had a great influence in the history and literature in the United States in the modernism period. In the book, the protagonist, who is a visionary and self-driven architect, prefers to destroy his design in order to get a big commission, instead of having it changed and made inferior by an agency from outside. The author gained the reputation of being a prophet of anti-communist individualism in which she depicted benevolent selfishness. The underlying idea in her theory was that there is need for humans to act basing purely on self-interest in order to become fully human. This ideology which uncompromisingly championed the pursuit of the self, influenced many forms of expression which included art, literature and film in this era

Another notable writer that influenced this phase of development of the art is Clement Greenberg who published in some known New York journals alongside other theorists. He was instrumental in coining of the term “abstract expressionism.” The theorist leaned towards action painting in the 1950s and 1960s. There was the development of language, definitions, and apologetics of what the scholars deemed to be viable new art and the direction in which American Art was supposed to take. The theorists of this school of thought supported the idea

⁶ Wiebe Robert . 1998. *The Search for Order* p 123-143

⁷ Dreiser, Theodore. 1997. *Sister Carrie*. P198-212

that painting possessed a greater number of expendable conventions more than other art forms. This in essence would pave way for other forms of art sculpture and painting whose aim was to do away with all the other aspects except the essential ones. The common pursuit for the artists working on different styles was the authentic purity. This saw some of them turning to Native American as well as other aboriginal cultures with a reduction of superfluous elements in their work⁸. Others immersed themselves into the politics of creation of image itself, while others searched for authenticity in the painting process. The common characteristic among the artists of this time was their belief in the existence of a truth that needed to be ascertained. This therefore saw them exhibit the same vigor that the governments in the Cold War had when they aspired to conquer outer space, as well as the inner space of the atom, which had a lot of mysteries surrounding it.

Abstract expressionism

New York school

The artists of this school are not known to have attended a common art school but they shared the common characteristic of fascination with the development of the influences of European Surrealism and Cubism that had classical principles of a new form of process oriented and expressive art. There was a replacement of the architectonic composition with the entire aesthetic of the hand. The highest ideal of this movement was potent improvisation. The Cedars Bar was the institution that most of the artists working in the city shared in common. In this place, there were intense discussions on important topics such as sex, art, and politics, which

⁸ Wiebe Robert . 1998. The Search for Order. p182-184

many times led to fistfights between artists like de Kooning and Pollock⁹. This state of things created a microcosmic American Bohemian, which energized the European interest in the concepts of eccentric imagination and erudition.

One notable artist from this era is the Armenian Arshile Gorky who fled his country because of the genocide and settled in New York. The artist had been a casualty of the ethnic cleansing that had taken place just before the onset of World War II, whereby more than one million Armenians were killed and Turkey and the remains of what was the Ottoman Empire exiled over two million. The artist settled in the United States in 1920 with a heavy influence of the pioneers of European art such as Picasso, Miro and Kandinsky. The artist applied the improvisational techniques that belonged to the modern masters of the early time on the photograph of him and his mother, which a he had carried into exile. There was an expansion of the visual language that belonged to the quasi-figurative and suggestive form. This approach to art was refreshingly original.

Progressivism

The art of the modernism period was in harmony with the ideology of progressivism. According to Wiebe, progressivism was the central force in the changes that were exhibited in the structure which the politics and governments that marked the onset of the twentieth century¹⁰. The scholar differs from his colleagues, who were in existence both in his time and afterwards in the sense that he perceives progressivism as a progressive ideology. In essence, he saw it as modernizing, reforming, and forward-looking. This departs from the view

⁹ Corn C. Wanda, 1999. *The Great American Thing, Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*

¹⁰ Dreiser, Theodore. 1997. *Sister Carrie*. P198-212

that the ideology was regressive, reactionary, and retrograde. Progressivism involved the replacement of the age old values of community life such as promptness, frugality, efficiency and foresight that were concentrated in a small town set-up, with the assumptions arising from a bureaucratic order that focused on regularity, rationality, continuity, functionality and management.

The abandonment of the values that concentrated more on relationships between individuals in favor of a bureaucratic orientation was a big leap towards the establishment of a capitalistic society that was characterized by impersonality and urban industrialization. Progressivism as such shaped the political and intellectual tools that were important for Americans to face the twentieth century economy that was highly industrialized and interconnected. Bureaucracy was the underlying pillar of the ideology as it provided the worldview that provided a sophisticated approach to the social problems that had become complex as opposed to community centered moralist approach of the era that had existed before.

The art and literature in the progressivism era responded to the needs of the bureaucratic order, departing from the moralist approach that had been dominant in the previous phase. This was a new social order and it found expression in works of art that belonged to this school of thought. These works highly exalted the industrial advancement while presenting the conservative community life as outdated and not compliant with the technological innovations of the time. These works promoted a sense of anti-communist individualism in which the pursuit of self-preservation was overriding. Marcel Duchamp's painting of the lone modern man highlights the individualistic characteristic that is an inherent characteristic of capitalism¹¹. In his painting

¹¹ Dreiser, Theodore. 1997. *Sister Carrie*. P198-212

1954 painting of *Head Surrounded by Sides of Beef*, oil and pastel on canvas in which he brings together a copy of Velazquez's painting, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* and other images that he draws from a slaughterhouse, Francis Bacon makes comparisons between raw meat, the crucifixion, and the tribulations an individual goes through. He brings out the hidden aspect that every individual has within their "self" which in a way makes the viewers come to terms their own experiences in a rapidly changing modern world¹².

Music and Theatre

Both in the United States and the West, the post World War II celebrations were short-lived as there were the fears of the Cold War as well as the nuclear standoff that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. For the artists of this era, the Suburban lifestyle of the war veterans that was characterized by pleasantness, comfort, predictability, and safety were the repressive and cold features that were purely Capitalistic. A genre of jazz known as Bepop challenged all the pleasures of that conventional era. Musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk composed forms of music that was both eccentric and innovative in a bid aimed at deconstructing the swing styles that were associated with the Harlem Renaissance. This break from the conventional formed the inspiration for the artistes of the 1960s and 1970s to reinvent Jazz and create a new genre out of it referred to as fusion. Closely associated to this form was Beat poetry. This genre, just like *Bepop* dwelt on unveiling the unsocialized consciousness, and condemned the pretentious suburban culture that ignored this important point. The form blamed modern society for undermining what was pure and natural through industrialization. Young and educated audiences of white background experienced the

¹²Corn, Wanda M. 1999. *The great American thing: modern art and national identity, 1915-1935*.

earthy forms though a blend of Blues. These developments in conjunction with other influences gave rise to Western Counterculture, a philosophy that emphasized rebellion and self-expression as well as gratification.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that there was a remarkable revolution in the art of the modernism era owing to the different developments in the industrial sphere. Industrial developments and modernity shaped the manner in which art developed. The era produced experiences and circumstances that eventually led to a rich art culture expressed in various forms of paintings, films, and music.

Bibliography

Corn, Wanda M. 1999. *The great American thing: modern art and national identity, 1915-1935*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dreiser, Theodore. 1997. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Doubleday.

Weibe, Robert. 1998. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.