

Abstraction Versus Realism

As we have discovered, by the **late 1920s**, westernised people no longer relied on visual art to reflect real life back at them; to allow them the vanity of looking at themselves, (let's face it, we all do it. Looking at a friend's photos from a party, do you not linger most over the ones with you in them?).

No, by this point in history the public had variety clubs, organised sporting events and, increasingly, the **cinema**.

As Europe tried to put the horrors of **The Great War** behind them, artists sought, as they always have, to improve the quality of life through art. Now it was abstraction that became the most modern means of doing this for many.

Piet Mondrian, the co-founder of the **de stijl** school in The Netherlands, said of this idea:

"Only the pure appearance of the [visual] elements, in a balanced relationship can lessen the tragedy of life".

A wee bit pompous, perhaps, but **Mondrian** really did believe this and you can make up your own mind as to whether he has a point or not.

With visual art being stripped back further and further with each new generation, it was almost inevitable that there would be a backlash. Since the Impressionists we had seen a gradual erosion of '**realism**', in favour of this idea or that. When it came, this backlash was felt internationally. The grudge match of **Realism vs Abstraction** emerged most strongly in the late 1920s and has been going on, in some form, **ever since**.

In Germany, **the Neue Sachlichkeit, (New Objectivity)** tried to counter the rise of abstraction with crisp, clean, detailed images, (sometimes called '**the sharp line**'), of the mundane, familiar everyday world. Strangely, since this form of realism had been out of fashion since the late 1800s, the modern world that the Germans painted shocked some viewers with the stark way in which it was presented. Truths that they had ignored or dismissed came into sharp focus and were sometimes upsetting.

Social Commentary became common in such artworks, some even taking the form of caricature to underline the ridiculousness of society and to drive home a potentially unpopular message.

For example:

George Grosz, 1883-1959 (Germany)

Pillars of Society, 1926 (Figure Composition)

Brutal art for a brutal society? The title is a sarcastic comment on the corruption of the **Weimar Republic**, the new seat of government in post-War Germany. Pictured are a right wing, (**Fascist**), newspaper journalist; a fat, jolly, slightly debauched looking priest, (remember, **Hitler** was driven to persecute the Jews by a twisted interpretation of the teachings of the **Catholic church**); the infamous Reichswehr soldiers; a confused looking NSDAP, (**Nazi Party**) supporter, his head cut in half to expose a mess, (**steaming excrement?**) and a similarly headless, **swastika-wearing**, beer swilling manacled gentleman.

Grosz represents, more with weary sarcasm than actual humour, the cabinet of the **German government**, (Could we paint a similarly 'flattering' image of our own British government?). Was he the only one to see this happening? Could **Grosz** be the only one who was scared by the characters in power? Do you see what I mean by 'potentially unpopular message'?

Otto Dix, 1891 – 1969 (Germany)

The Parents of the Artist, 1924

"... 100 photographs could only ever offer 100 different snapshots, but never the 'phenomenon' as a whole..."

This painting was made some time **after** a visit to his parents. **Dix** wanted to paint the whole from small detailed studies he had made of their hands, faces etc; as well as his memories to distil the essence of what he could remember about his parents. **Otto Dix** did not want to focus on any one moment. For that he would have taken a **photograph**.

The result is a painting that gives an **idealised** view of his mum and dad, the way he saw them. No-one could argue that this was **totally real**, for Dix anyway.

Guess what? (Surprise surprise), this kind of reaction to abstraction was happening all over. Let's look outside of Europe for a change. At last the **Americans** had stopped just copying what we were up to and were round about now starting to produce some interesting ideas of their own. Scarily, they were beginning to form some kind of **national identity**:

Georgia O'Keefe, 1887 – 1986 (USA)

Light Iris, 1924 (Still Life?)

Red Canna, 1925 (Still Life?)

Radiator Building, NY, 1927 (Built Environment)

Poppies, 1928 (Still Life?)

Ben Shahn, 1898 – 1969 (USA)

The Passion of Sacco & Vanzetti, 1931-2 (Figure Composition)

Handball, 1939 (Figure Composition)

Charles Sheeler, 1883 – 1965 (USA)

River Rouge Plant, 1932 (Built Environment)

City Interior, 1935 (Built Environment)

Edward Hopper, 1882 – 1967 (USA)

House by the railroad, 1925 (Built/Natural Environment)

Sunday, 1926 (Built Environment)

Early Sunday Morning, 1930 (Built Environment)

Room in New York, 1932 (Figure Composition)

Gas, 1940 (Built/ Natural Environment)

All of these Americans pictured a quite sad, **lost country** where the power of **industry had taken over** and individual people were left behind. **Georgia O'Keefe** felt cast out into a wilderness of wild flowers, as a woman in a man's world. **Ben Shahn** saw men cast out of work with no welfare system to prevent them from starvation and decay. Charles Sheeler saw huge industrial plants like the **Ford Motor Company** take over landscapes and banish any trace of man as far as the eye could see. **Edward Hopper's** subjects look hopelessly lost and isolated in a world that is just passing them by. The people we pass in the street and never notice.

This **Realism** movement was pretty tough really. The artworks were not easy to look at. They stirred your **conscience** and made you face some of the unpleasant truths about the world around you, that you were part of. Is it surprising that these images are **less popular** than the abstract ones of the same time?