

Towards Abstraction

Cubism brought the art of the early 20th century to a point where it almost started to 'un-learn' the lessons of the last 1000 years of artistic endeavour, particularly in painting.

Since **Giotto**, (Di Bondone, 1267-1337), painters had been struggling to create an **illusion of depth**, the third dimension, in a two-dimensional work.

The struggle became more and more futile as the methods of **photography** became more sophisticated and widely available. Since the **Impressionists** such as **Monet, Cezanne and Seurat** began **breaking painting down into its various elements**, succeeding generations of painters gained more and more **freedom** to experiment and express a more instinctive side to their creativity.

Picasso flattened complex 3D shapes, e.g. Faces, until they were like card-board cut-outs. Unlike previous portraits, Picasso and Braques' cubist heads did not seem solid to the viewer, **did not take up three dimensional space**. Not only do things seem, in these images, to be in the wrong place, proportionally; they also seem wrong in terms of their depth relative to one another. For example, an ear or shoulder can seem closer to the viewer than the nose or mouth in a forward view of the sitter's face.

Juan Gris

Another Spaniard who exiled himself in Paris to further his art at this time was Juan Gris. He expanded **Picasso and Braques'** cubist theories, adding to them his interpretation of the **Fauves'** use of unrealistic, 'free' **colours**, (remember that **Picasso and Braque** used a very **limited palette** of quite dull, muted colours in their Cubist experiments?). This is best seen in Gris' landscape work from a holiday in **Ceret, South East France from 1913**.

Gris' experimentation with bold, bright colouring, is quite similar to **Andre Derain or Henri Matisse's** striking **Collioure** paintings. As these Frenchmen had attempted in 1904, Gris uses searing colours to suggest the intensity of heat in his summer landscapes.

Unlike the **Fauves**, Juan Gris makes no attempt at depth through **perspective**, preferring the **cubist** method of dividing up his canvas into irregular vertical sections which are, in turn, further **fragmented**. Like his more famous cubist counterparts, Gris offers the viewer smaller, broken patches of the landscape, **seen from two or three different angles**. Trees, plants and vegetation jostle in boxed-in sections with roof-tiles, roads, windows, doorways, shutters; never quite giving a complete image of any one structure. The only suggestion of depth comes from the scale of the buildings and vegetation in the 'foreground', as compared to the mountains and forests of the 'background'. Here the use of colour further **confuses** us as we are more used to seeing more muted, softer colours and tones receding into the distance, with more vibrant, stronger hues drawing our attention in the foreground. In this instance we, the viewers, are confronted with cerise pink and verdant green hills advancing towards us out of the canvas, bringing the far away mountains to the forefront of our attention.

This was not a mistake, or simply Gris trying to be different just for the sake of it. What this method underlines, as with all cubist images, is the actual **physical flatness of the canvas**. There is little or no attempt to draw the viewer in, giving a sense of space, as you would normally expect in a landscape painting. Juan Gris, Braque and Picasso were all being remarkably honest and realistic about the limitations of canvas as an artistic tool. They were not trying to fool the viewer into thinking that they were looking through a window, or glimpsing some sort of framed photograph. Instead they were saying,

“This is painting – it’s a craft and one that can do much more than simply reproduce reality. If you want that, buy a camera!”

Again, as with the **Impressionists and the Fauves** before them, the painters who opened the 20th century won great **freedoms** for the generations of artists who have followed them. By around **1910**, the barriers in visual art had been broken down so much as to offer:

Freedom of subject matter;
Freedom of colour use;
Freedom of Perspective;
Freedom of realistic representation.

It was precisely these freedoms that have made the period **1910-1919** my personal favourite in the history of modern art. An explosion of ideas rang out across the western world as artists allowed themselves to shake off the shackles of representation. Following the lead of society as a whole, artists raced towards a newer, fresher, cleaner, more exciting future. (**Don’t forget**, artists do not work in a vacuum. They are as aware of and influenced by the everyday world as the rest of us. Indeed it is almost their job, consciously or unconsciously, to record their interpretation of the world).

In this period it can be argued that technology was advancing at a rate much faster and more socially beneficial than even today. Radio, Telegraph, motorcycle, train, ocean liner, aeroplane, electric lighting, domestic labour saving devices, quality of housing, quality of life in general; all were improving beyond measure in the western economies at this time.

Artists chose the **dynamic energy** and excitement of their time as the subject of their work. Thus we have:

The Italian **Futurists** celebrating speed and movement;

Giacomo Balla –	Abstract Speed The Car has Passed,	1913	
	Abstract Speed,	1913	
	Rhythms of a Bow	1912	
	Leash in Motion	1912	
Umberto Boccioni-	Synthesis of Homan Dynamism	1912	
	Speeding Muscles	1913	
	Dynamism of a Cyclist	1913	1913
	Unique Forms of Continuity in Space	1913	

The Russians and Germans exploring emotion, music, expression:

Wassily Kandinsky-	Improvisation Klamm	1914	
	Improvisation No. 30	1913	

Alexi Jawlensky-	Portrait of Alexander Sacharoff	1909
Otto Dix-	Self Portrait as a Soldier	1914
Ernst L Kirchner	Five Women on the Street	1913
	Potsdamer Platz	1914
Auguste Macke	Lady in Green Jacket	1912
Franz Marc	The Small Yellow Horses	1912
	Tyrol	1914

Parisians celebrating their city's status as the City of Light

Robert Delaunay-	Fenetre, (Window)	1912
	Eiffel Tower	1911

Sonia Delaunay

All of this was a march towards **abstraction** – that is, the complete **removal of anything recognisable** from the artistic image. There was an obvious fear of moving to a point where an artist created something that had **no concrete link to the 'real' world**. At first glance, many of these images listed above do seem to be completely unreadable. Looking further, though, the viewer can make out a wheel here, a hill or mountain there, a facial feature, part of a building, a figure.

These 'traditional' images became more and more caught up in what seem to be **emotions, moods, sensations, feelings, atmospheres, forces, movements, glimpses, expressions**.

On top of the technological advances already mentioned, **social change** was becoming a larger feature in the lives of more peoples across Europe. It is often said that **the ordinary citizen has never been more valued, more equal or more prosperous** than the period in western history immediately before WWI. This excitement, optimism and freedom is what the artists of the time are documenting.

WW I halted much of this progress, particularly in Britain ,Germany and occupied France, as you might expect. However, for some nations, the war had a lesser impact, while for others, **the dynamism of conflict** was embraced. This is true of the artists practising in those nations too.

As we have already seen in the design disciplines, the **de stijl** movement in the **neutral Netherlands** advanced into **abstraction** quicker than the rest of mainland Europe, as witnessed particularly in the work of co- founder **Piet Mondrian**, e.g. Pier and Ocean, 1915.

The main Italian movement, however, the **Futurists** embraced warfare. They saw it as the ultimate use of technological and scientific advances. For them the Great war heralded the chance for **revolution** in Italy; a way of moving the whole nation out of its traditional agricultural poverty and into a prosperous industrialised future:

" We wish to glorify war – sole hygiene of the world". So went part of the **Futurist Manifesto of 1909**

Umberto Boccioni-	The Red Horseman	1913
	Futurist Synthesis of War	1914
Gino Severini-	Red Cross Train	1915

In Britain, all thoughts were turned to the war effort, almost exclusively. The Imperial War Museum in London and now Manchester house, amongst other things, a tremendous collection of images from the War Office's '**War Artist**' programme. Artists were chosen, (and in fact still are), to go with troops into battle and record the true scenes from the front.

Excellent examples of these include:

Paul Nash-	The Menin Road	1916
Stanley Spencer-	Travoy's Arriving with Wounded	1918