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Into the Twentieth Century

The first 15 years of the twentieth century were crucial for new directions in art. **Vienna** embodies, more than any other city, the struggles of art to evolve to a new stage.

Gustave Klimt's (1862-1918) art includes characteristics of a declining empire. Klimt had an exceptional talent, but he also had academic training. He would become the founder of the “**Secession**” in 1897. The Secession proposed a shift away from the academic style of the late nineteenth-century art and toward a luminous and refined painting with emphasis on decoration.

The human drama and neurosis of **Egon Schiele**, and the melodramatic, almost Baroque, density of Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980), almost fall within the horizon of Expressionism. In Europe, similar developments to the ones in Vienna were also taking place. The conscious feeling of crisis and the collapse of the nineteenth-century certainties was exemplified in **Edvard Munch's** paintings. Munch uncovered feelings of anguish, envy and loneliness. “The Scream” has become the symbol of the existential crisis through which Europe passed at the end of the century.

Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) was a leading figure during the most intense period of Viennese Expressionism. Although he started as Klimt's follower in the movement of the Secession, he would abandon the ornamental style and glowing colors of that style for a deeper involvement in the artistic and literary movement of Expressionism. Some features of his technique—such as the use of sinuous brushstrokes of Austrian Baroque painting—set him decisively apart from the other various groups and avant-garde movements of international Expressionism.

Although **Egon Schiele** (1890-1980) was initially linked to Klimt's movement, his dramatic and graphic style quickly developed into almost the antithesis of the blazing colors and aesthetic elegance of Klimt's movement. Schiele turned his attention to the turbulent existence. His stupefied and terrified figures are surrounded by empty space, filled with doubts and anxieties.

It is often said that much of the twentieth-century art can be summed up in the figure of **Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973). The deepest mark left by Picasso on contemporary paintings remains linked to the brief but decisive period of **Cubism**—the avant-garde movement that represented a figurative point of reference for generations of painters all over the world until after the Second World War. To understand the origins of Cubism, it is necessary to go back once more to the retrospective of Cézanne's work. Cézanne made a particular impression on Picasso and **Georges Braque** (1882-1963). Cézanne's decomposition of vision along regular lines and the brutal and powerful expressiveness of primitive art led Picasso to lay the foundations of what would become known as Cubism.

The painting that sums up the very early phase of the avant-garde is Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" (1907), which took the example set by Cézanne's "Bathers" to an extreme.

Picasso and Braque developed Cubism along the lines of a scientific experiment, which entailed the breakdown of objects into geometric lines and shapes, to the point where the solidity of the material was lost and the result was complete abstraction. For cubists “ painting is not a mirror held up to the world, but a language; a language of mark and shape-making, a structure on a flat surface whose means are infinitely variable, but which has a power to represent things grasped in space in all their complex solidity” (Wood, TV Course). Cubism represented a clean break with the art of the past, a provocative proposal that left the public perplexed.

Over the same period as the development of Cubism, another cultural movement of international significance emerged in Italy: **Futurism**. Futurism rejected the art of the museums and the examples of the past, promoting the progress, the machine and dynamism of the twenties century. Futurists sought to use painting to represent the speed and action of men, animals, trains and automobiles. They also showed interested in photography and cinema.

Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), a futurist, attained results similar to those of the Cubists, but unlike Picasso and Braque, he used color in an explosive and luminous manner. The arrival of the First World War, unfortunately, ended Futurism.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) abandoned the traditional principle of imitation in order to make creative use of color. Matisse would surrender to the use of pure color, launching what would become to be known as the **Fauvism** movement.

André Derain (1880-1954) was able to establish a masterly balance between a free and highly imaginative use of color and control over form, in a deliberate challenge to the Impressionist tradition.

Expressionism embraced the figurative arts as well as the literature, drama and the cinema of the time. “Classical art is expressive of balance, order, rationality, stability, and harmony, what one may think of as calm moods, even though the feeling of calm may be intense. Expressionist art seeks the opposite qualities” (Stewart et.al., 220).

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) ventured into abstraction, covering the canvas in spots and bands of color laid with great freedom. He accompanied his paintings by essays and other writings, which formed the theoretical basis for the birth of the group called **Der Blaue Reiter** (**The Blue Rider**), founded in Munich in 1911 with Marc and Macke.

Franz Mark (1880-1916) started out from a profound understanding of animal anatomy and then went on to paint them in a non-naturalistic, almost abstract way. The shapes of the animals, always recognizable, become part of a carefully modeled rhythm of lines, forms and colors that freely express his feelings about the natural world.

August Macke (1887-1914) was an intense and tragic figure from the early period of **German Expressionism**. Macke represents the lyrical and joyful side of the movement. His paintings were of great dynamism and imagination.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) founded the **Die Brücke** group and is perhaps the most typical and consistent exponent of the German group of Expressionists. **Die Brücke** represented, also, an artistic movement—which published writings and engravings in a magazine of the same name. Kirchner painted landscapes and portraits in brilliant colors, characterized by distorted expressions.

Among the historic avant-garde movement of early twentieth century, one innovation stands out above all: the birth of **abstract art** around 1910. Kandinsky and Malevich were two of the original founders. The development of **abstractionism** during the twentieth-century has followed a contradictory course; however, after the Second World War it would be considered the only “modern art.”

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) would experiment with a new style that would be met at the time with violent criticism. He also made a passionate study of Cubist decomposition, concentrating on the essentiality of the straight line.

In 1917, Mondrian founded the movement **De Stijl**, with van Doesburg, and in the same year, he painted his first pictures made up of blue, far from any reference to reality. From 1920 onward, his work became one of the poles of the international debate over **Constructivism**, and the painter moved closer to the themes of the **Bauhaus**.

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), founder of the **Suprematist** movement, was one of the principal points of reference for the emerging international tendency of abstractionism. In his case, the quest for an “absolute,” nonfigurative form of expression had purely pictorial means

initially. Only later, he would develop the relationship with Constructivism that many Western artists were finding in the same years through their links with Bauhaus.

Art Nouveau was an international phenomenon with roots in Impressionism, Symbolism, and industrialization. “Essentially naturalistic, it avoids straight lines and sharp angles. It is ahistorical, concerned with the ever-shifting here-and now....From Impressionism, it drew the taste for movement expressed by the implication of change....From Symbolism, Art Nouveau drew its eroticism....Industrialization had produced a reaction against the machine-made product” (Stewart et. al., 217-218).

Bauhaus was an architect committed to the idea of functionalism as an aesthetic principle, and art as a social necessity. “Reductive form, free of objects description, was not only a feature of functionalism. It was also a means of expressing the idea of essence, the pure state of being” (Stewart et. al., 237).

The **Bauhaus School** aimed to investigate the role of function without ornament, to bring clarity and simplicity into design, with a feeling for rhythm, light and material. Its technical approach to art and strict discipline led to a total abandonment of the emphasis laid on decoration in Art Nouveau and made the concepts of “functional” and “beautiful” synonymous, clearing the way for the industrial design.

For **Constantin Brâncusi** (1876-1957), a Romanian who settled in Paris, the essence and not the exterior represented the real part of a subject. “The Kiss” and “Bird in Space” are two of his representative sculptures.

The **Dada** movement (1916-23) can be interpreted as an extreme psychological and moral reaction to the war raging in Europe. It was “like the storm that broke over the world of art” (Wood, TV Course).

Within the sphere of avant-garde art, Dada put itself forward as a total rejection of all values and models, including those handed down by the movements of the second decade of the century. Dada was born in Zurich when the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, the writer Hugo Ball and the sculptor and painter Jean Arp formed the literary and artistic circle “Cabaret Voltaire.” Unlike other “isms,” the name Dada, found by chance in a dictionary, was not meant to signify anything.

The Dada group proclaimed itself anti-art, anti-literature and anti-poetry. However, it did not hesitate to use the materials and techniques of industrial production—but in a way that broke all rules.

The complexity and variety of the international movements and the multitude of artists it’s amazing. Paintings in the United States, heavily influenced by the European art throughout the nineteenth century, started to show signs of complete independence. Painting in America during this period would represent the abstraction and figurative art.

Edward Hopper was a painter with a refined , lucidly realistic technique. Hopper’s figures eked out a solitary existence, in soulless cities that had grown too fast. His paintings are metaphysical compositions, in which reality is frozen.

On the contrary, Jackson Pollock expressed himself through action, to such an extent that he chose to describe his work as “Action Painting.” Pollock’s large canvases are abstract compositions in which there is practically never any link with the figurative.

For Georgia O’Keeffe, flowers represented the preferred form. O’Keeffe “who achieved a visual purity in her work, with clean contours, shared affinity for smooth shapes and simplified forms” (Wood, 298).

We should also mention that Chicago would become the birthplace of modern American architecture.

With the ending of this magnificent period, human civilization would move into the second half of the twentieth century and become what we consider ourselves today: the Modern World.

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew, et. al. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989.