

Introduction

Welcome to the Understanding 20th & 21st Century Art Course at the London Art College

This course is intended to extend the studies that students have made on the Art History course and focus more particularly on more recent developments in art. Many former students have expressed a desire for a course of this nature, some because they find contemporary art so difficult to understand or appreciate, others because they wish to bring their knowledge and interest more up to date. I have called the course Understanding 20th and 21st Century Art because it really seeks to create a basis for understanding and appreciating more contemporary art, rather than suggesting any chronological study. Although compared with the previous course we are now only considering the last 120 years rather than two millennia or more of art, the sheer diversity and scale of art production would render a more comprehensive study more difficult to accomplish.

The intention is therefore much like the previous course – to provide a framework for students to appreciate and evaluate individual works that can then be applied to work outside of the course.

It is suggested that students undertake the LAC Art History diploma course first, though it would not be such a requirement for students with a prior knowledge of general art history. The main intention is to encourage and develop interest and knowledge and though it may prove useful to students wishing to pursue a more academic course elsewhere, it is, like all courses at the LAC, primarily for your personal enjoyment and development. The exercises and assignments may be tackled at your own pace and to your own level of commitment.

20TH & 21ST CENTURY ART



Reclining Figure 1951 - Henry Moore

Art is not something that is remote from the world in which it is created. It is generally a response to the circumstances of life, albeit personal or related to a particular location or series of events. I have previously argued that the term art can equally be employed in the making of a meal or a garden, choosing and wearing clothes etc. and it certainly extends beyond the so-called 'fine arts' painting, sculpture, literature and music, to embrace architecture, design and the performing arts. Many of the arts have a history and association, in the West at least, with a cultural elite that linked them to the changing centres of power: church, royal and imperial courts, economic and political European capitals etc. If we concentrate on the visual arts, excluding for the moment performance, we might contend that traditionally, up to the 19th century, they have emphasised 'traditional notions of beauty' – an aesthetic that derived from classical judgements about what is ugly

or beautiful – often linked to its moral value; and the representation of actual objects, scenes and persons etc. These were often presented within 'visual narratives', pictorial scenes that might be of religious or classical origin, or simply of actual events or scenes that were seen or imagined by the artist. This practice was inevitably subject to changes in fashion over the centuries but only within limited boundaries. The patronage of early pharaohs, chiefs and other leaders with their interests in securing power, either in this world or the next, gave way to that of the church and its prescribed beliefs. This in turn was replaced by the economic power of a ruling elite with its focus on ownership and image and later the interest in science and understanding that culminated in the Enlightenment. It was not until the late 19th and early 20th century however that the primacy of the artist's own views and interests began to truly emerge above that of their patrons. Why this should happen at this stage is one of the first areas we will examine.

EXERCISE 2

The following movements may be seen as subdivisions within a larger movement. Try and identify the description and artists belonging to the subgroup and place it within the larger group to which it belongs.

1. Fauvism 1900 – 1910
2. Die Brucke (The Bridge)
3. Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)

- a. Brought together artists in Germany with similar anti-bourgeois and vaguely revolutionary aims, utilising simplified forms in strong colours and flat shapes but remaining essentially representational rather than abstract.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde

- b. Originally named after a painting by one of its founders. Based upon an openness to experiment rather than a common manifesto, it drew upon ideas from German and Russian folk art and non-European primitive art as well as new painting from France and Germany and theories about colour symbolism.

Russian – Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine

French – George Roualt

- c. A loose group of artists from several countries whose work emphasised painterly qualities and the use of strong colours over realism or direct representation. They took their title from the French for The Wild Beasts.

Henri Matisse, André Derain, Raoul Dufy



The Scream 1893 - Edvard Munch

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism (literally after-modernism) is the term that has been given to the course that contemporary art has taken from the early 1970s to the present. It is generally seen in theoretical opposition to modernism, as discussed below. If modernism was seen to champion the formal aspects of art – the style rather than the content, with abstraction as its consummate (ultimate) form; postmodernism is concerned with the more complex and multiple ways of seeing. It championed a more pluralist form with content derived from the new concerns of late 20th century society, including race, ethnicity, gender and popular culture. The term first became current within the visual arts in the 1980s although it had been used to express a dissatisfaction with modern architecture in the 1950s and used earlier outside of art to refer to a wider range of departures from the objectivity and progress that was first associated with the Enlightenment.

Like the term modernism it has a range of wider associations in literature and philosophy that are linked to the arts and feed into its emerging and often conflicting definitions. At the risk of simplifying its meaning we shall restrict ourselves at this stage to the broad differences to modernism in art from which, in retrospect, it is seen to be an intentional departure. (see table later)



Angel of the North 1994-8

Antony Gormley

If the changes in society around the turn of the century formed the focus for the development of a new, modern art it might be argued that the new protests and demands for social reform in the USA and France in the 1960s had an equivalent impact on western culture and the notion of what art should be. Civil rights, anti-war, feminism and emerging issues of gay and lesbian identity created new voices that claimed a fresh authority. As the modernist art that was originally seen as avant-garde and standing apart from mainstream culture became increasingly accepted, commercially and institutionally, it was supplanted by new forms that were inherently based upon, while simultaneously critical of, commercial mass culture.

One of the hallmarks of postmodern art in general is the erosion of boundaries between 'high art', elite and serious and 'low art', popular, entertainment. If modernism was seen to be linear and progressive, seeking out the 'big solution' in a positive and utopian form,

IDENTITY

As with landscape, identity may be seen as a theme that has always been present in art history in various guises but it is only since the beginning of the 20th century that it has emerged as a topic in itself. As artists began to be able to express their individuality in their work it was inevitable that the expression of identity would extend beyond stereotypes and portraiture into a greater element of self-awareness, both as individuals and as artists. **Expressionism** was the first movement to focus on expressing emotional and spiritual meaning rather than physical reality and utilised the visual language of line, tone, form and colour etc. to do so. It may be argued that all art is expressive to some extent but expressionism foregrounds intense emotion through bold colours, exaggerated mark-making and distortion etc. (see Munch, Macke, Klee, Kandinsky etc.) Prior to the war a series of movements also developed that embraced the increasing dynamism of the industrial world with its rapid developments in transport, communications and mass production. In Italy Futurism and its equivalent in England **Vorticism**, developed ideas about the **dynamism** and fluctuation of objects and time that **Cubism** had begun to explore.

Such extreme emotions are more likely to be evident in times of personal or social upheaval and though expressionism emerged before the 1st World War, the experience of waste and destruction that the war brought to Europe gave it a new social and political emphasis (see Otto Dix, George Grosz etc.)

Between the wars a whole series of artists and movements began to explore various directions in reaction to the imponderable horrors of the Great War.



Artists have explored collective and personal memories on many levels but the work of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis has undoubtedly been a major influence. Although symbolism and fantasy art existed prior to the publication of his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* it is in the work of the surrealists that we see the ideas of free association, dream analysis and the power of the unconscious being applied to art. Beside the use of dream analysis, they emphasized that “one could combine inside the same frame, elements not normally found together to produce illogical and startling effects.” This juxtaposition of objects and images is a key element in the work of the surrealists, whose origins lie in the earlier Dada movement, which was a response to the excesses and values that they believed had brought about the Great War.

The Son of Man 1964 - René Magritte