

The Art of Change

The classical model of art history appears as a relatively orderly progression until it reaches the 20th century. Although in fact one can observe an increasing degree of self-consciousness and individualism in the work of artists prior to this, it is during the 20th century when conditions of life changed so dramatically for many – that art began to radically challenge its traditional subjects, forms of representation and general boundaries. This reflected developments in thought that began to challenge established beliefs in other areas: the political economy of Karl Marx (that was ultimately to lead to socialism and communism); the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin; the philosophy of Nietzsche; the psychology of Sigmund Freud; Albert Einstein's theories of relativity etc. Later in the century two cataclysmic World Wars and the subsequent threat of nuclear annihilation demanded that people should think, hear and see things in a different way. The visual arts responded to this new and changing world by reflecting and challenging it – through what has become termed as Modernism. It is important to understand the way in which this term can be applied to a very diverse and at times, apparently conflicting series of movements and directions in art from near the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century.



Red and Blue Chair 1918
Gerrit Thomas Rietveld

EXPLORING THEMES

The main themes that are to be explored in assignments are landscape, identity and the abstraction although they will impinge upon other related themes. These may also be seen against a background of Modernism and Post-Modernism. It is therefore proposed to 'flypast' some of these developments within these thematic areas rather than explore individual movements or artists in detail. There is plenty of material available on the internet and in the course book 'Movements in Art since 1945' that examines these areas in detail. The concentration here is on gaining an overview of some of the changes in approach that have taken place during the last century.

LANDSCAPE

Landscape has appeared in Western art since the middle ages when man first began to overcome the fear of the untamed forest, largely by exerting his authority over it, ie. cutting it down and using it for construction and fuel. It formed idealised backdrops for religious images and classical themes but did not really appear as a subject in its own right until the 17th century when the 'view' became romanticised and recorded as a beautiful arcadia – a visual paradise. It was also incorporated in portraits to indicate ownership or propriety (see Thomas Gainsborough – *Mr and Mrs Andrews*)

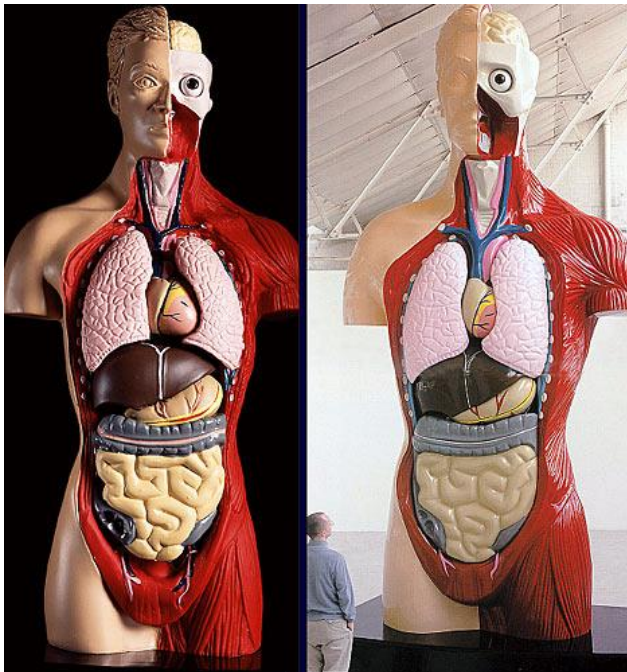
Out of the naturalist ethic of 18th century Realism, that sought to portray subjects with an objective reality without embellishment or interpretation grew a new major artistic movement, that was to become known as **Impressionism**. At the end of the 19th century the Impressionists began to portray their surroundings in terms of a new kind of realism. This was not the precise recreation of a three dimensional landscape upon a two dimensional canvas but an 'impression' of the effect that light and colour created at a given moment in time .

San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk 1908
Claude Monet



The Impressionists pioneered the use of light in painting as they attempted to capture light as seen from the human eye. **Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir**, were all involved in the Impressionist movement. They were not only interested in the landscape but also believed in painting directly from life and therefore much of their work was carried out 'en plein air' or outside of the studio, though sometimes completed in the studio.

Other artists have explored the manner in which reality and its representation have been reversed in 21st century culture. They have examined the way in which imitations of reality now precede and construct reality in terms of films, so-called 'reality TV' and other developments. In this way the pastiche or the 'simulacrum' have been used to challenge our assumptions about what is 'real' and what is 'constructed', what is unique and what is borrowed from the great library of cultural imagery that has been built up over the centuries. They have developed art practices which involve the 'appropriation' of ideas, images, styles, artefacts and objects from previously existing works and recontextualising it, to give it new meaning within its new context (see *Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst etc.*)



This is an extremely contentious area in which several leading artists have been involved in legal suits that have examined the divisions between transformative and derivative works, and questioning the questions of copyright infringement and legality involved in this practice. In this it may be seen that once again art reflects the issues that are manifesting themselves in contemporary society – plagiarism, injunctions, wiki-leaks etc.

Children's Toy or Work of Art?