

Personal Turmoil to Mass Reproduction of Art: An In-Depth Study of Expressionism and Pop Art

Paramita Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Painting Specialization, Government College of Art & Craft, Calcutta, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

This article observes the growth of modern art through a study of Expressionism and Pop Art, emphasizing their individual styles and historical contexts. It starts by placing Expressionism within the timeframe of early twentieth-century Germany, highlighting its intense association with the earlier artistic practices such as Gothic art and Romanticism. This art movement is examined in terms of its core focus on emotional turbulence and the eventual expression of emotional trauma in various forms of art. For this rich language of expression, artists like Edvard Munch, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and the members of the Bridge group are considered pioneers. The article also discusses the Blue Rider group, especially Wassily Kandinsky, whose contributions to abstraction and spirituality were ground-breaking in modern art. The article then make a shift to Pop Art, the post-war United Kingdom and the United States, where artists engaged with consumerism and mass media culture. It explores artists like Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, and Andy Warhol and how they expressed their artistic practices by including everyday objects and popular images. Largely, this article explains these two important art movements, although differing in character, from internal emotional experiences to the outward impacts of materialism in popular culture.

Keywords: Emotional Turbulence, World War, Popular Culture, Consumerism, Unconventional Practice

Introduction

In order to discuss Expressionism in twentieth-century Germany, it is necessary to point out that it is not merely pertinent to the zeitgeist of that epoch but, more importantly, that the essence of Expressionism is intrinsically German. While Expressionism is seemingly related to Fauvism, Fauvism restricts itself to a study of colors, whereas Expressionism portrays a sense of extraordinary range and freedom. Like Gothic art and Romanticism, Expressionism is inherently tinged with its German identity, and it was based on inner unrest, giving importance to subjective emotions rather than objective truth. It has the power to convert the visual language into a vehicle of emotional depth, reflecting anxiety and personal agitation. On the other hand, Pop Art readdresses the outer world, its engagement with mass culture, consumerism and the scenario of the day-to-day life. Thus, Pop Art questions the conventional hierarchies of art.

From Gothic Art to Romanticism: Expressionism as an Intrinsic Part of What Is Considered German

Expressionism is considered to be an intrinsic part of what is considered German, and it emerges amid the

Gothic and Romanticism, replete with its suffering, astonishment, freedom of form, and intensity of colors. From 1905 to 1908, during the era of Fauvism in Paris, the Bridge group in Germany established itself (1905, Dresden; 1911, Berlin). In this context, the names of Munch, Kirchner, Heckel, and Paula Modersohn-Becker emerge. Those associated with the Bridge group were undoubtedly influenced by these artists. These names can be further categorised into two groups: 1. Precursors and 2. Individuals. Among the first, we find artists like Munch and Ensor, and among the second, we find names like Paula Modersohn-Becker and Emile Nolde.

Experimentation with form, intense manifestation of expression

It is necessary to discuss the form, flow and direction when speaking of this movement. Since the manifestation of expression is of primary importance, the artists concerned themselves extensively with form. They started with diverse formal experiments and did not restrict themselves merely to painting, but engaged with etching, woodcutting, and lithography as well. The viewer became a part of the artists of the Bridge group as well, not perhaps as artists but as definitely as critics, and they were known as "passive members". These passive members would be given annual "portfolios" of prints of the woodcuts. This in turn led to increased popularity and engagement with their works (H. H. Arnason, et al., 1998).

The Primary Characteristics of Expressionism: Manifestation of Subjectivity, Intense Colors, and Spontaneous Self-Reflection

The Expressionist artists tried to capture the spontaneous expression of their engagement with self-reflexivity and their surroundings. They used to foreground personal imagery. In addition, they used intense color contrasts and tried to highlight "realising the inherent" through their brushstrokes.

Edvard Munch: Intense Colors in Pictures, Absence, and Self-Reflexive Manifestation of Expression

Discussing Expressionism is incomplete without bringing up Edvard Munch's name. His country of birth, Norway, was far removed from the artistic circles of contemporary Europe; thus, his freedom from any traditional baggage is usually considered to be a positive for him.

His name brings to mind, first and foremost, his most famous painting, *The Scream*, in which intense deep reds are used to capture the manifestation of a scream, while the calmness of the bridge proffers a sharp contrast.

Other notable works include *The Sick Child*, *Vampire*, and *Puberty*. The painting *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* contains a unique light source from the bottom of the frame, which highlights the intensity of the artists' grief. *Puberty* portrays the intensity of the mental and the physical unease and hesitation of adolescence.

Paula Modersohn-Becker

Along with Munch, Paula Modersohn Becker's name is notable. While not as famed as Munch, she brought forth a personal expression of femininity unique to her position as a woman amidst the Bridge group.

Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff

Among the other members of the Bridge group were Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff. Heckel was known for his formal materiality. *Bathers in a Landscape* is one of his notable works. Rottluff's work reflected the

influences of the Fauves and Matisse. While Matisse spoke of the prosody and balance of colors, Schmidt-Rottluff's work drew upon an increasing dissonance of colors.

James Ensor

Ensor was another prominent name in this artists group, who studied in Brussels for three years and went on to spend the rest of his life in Ostend, Belgium where he ran a souvenir shop selling masks and other trinkets. The masks in his shop were a recurrent inspiration and theme for his work throughout his life. His major works include *Portrait of the Artist Surrounded by Masks* and *Scandalized Masks*.

Emil Nolde

Nolde joined the Bridge group in 1906 for about a year, was known for the fierceness of his portraits, and went on to leave the Bridge group to paint religious themes. His *The Last Supper* is reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt. The Nazis confiscated a large number of his paintings.

Figure 1. Edvard, Munch. The Scream.
Oil, Tempera, Pastel, and Crayon on Cardboard.
36 x 28.9 inches. 1893.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scream



Decline of the Bridge Group and the Advent of the Blue Rider and Artists like Kandinsky

With the decline of The Bridge group came the advent of The Blue Rider (1911 – 14); however, it was not a formally defined group, as was The Bridge group. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc published a journal of contemporary art called *The Blue Rider Almanac*. Unlike the intense internal distress captured

by The Bridge group, The Blue Rider focussed on capturing the essence of the eternal calm while at the same time focusing on the subjective manifestation of expression particular to Expressionism (G. H. Hamilton, 1970).

The Russia-Germany Connection, Musical Silences in the Works of Kandinsky, and the Hope of a New World Order

Though The Blue Rider was essentially a German movement, Kandinsky's Russian origins served to give the movement a Russian connection. The movement emerged essentially in and around Munich, where the artists dared to explore calmness amid the instability during the period preceding the First World War, as there was a significant community of displaced Russians who had carried their cultural heritage with them. Kandinsky was among the first to depict musicality through his paintings. He was successful in the intermarriage of forms, music, and color, and while initially identifiable objects could be found in his paintings, his later compositions were wholly abstract, depending on shapes and colors. His notable works include *Composition (series)*, *Improvisation (series)*, and *Blue Mountain*. *Improvisation*, which implies a spontaneous composition without preparation, was a series of works implicitly associated with music and soon became an important tenet of expressionist artists. The emergence of a universal form and spirituality became an inherent theme in his work. The publication of his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1911 is a notable turning point, as are the mysteries of the cosmos depicted in his paintings.

Alongside Kandinsky we find artists like Paul Klee, Franz Marc, and Jawlensky. On the other hand, we find artists like Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Beckmann, who went on to portray the terror of war, noisy cityscapes, and industrial machinery as reflections of their contemporary political climate. To draw to a close, we can say that the Expressionist movement left an indelible mark on the history of art. The work produced by this movement can enrich us and provide a counterbalance to the illnesses of modern life.

Figure 2. Kandinsky, Wassily. *Improvisation 4*. Oil on Canvas.
62.9 x 42.7 inches. 1909.

Source: <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-428.php>



Emergence of Pop Art: A Different Outlook from Expressionism

The era of Pop Art is primarily the 1950s in Britain. Lawrence Alloway derived the term from the word “popular” during this time. The term “pop” came into prominence during the 1956 exhibition *This Is Tomorrow*. It is fundamentally linked to Dadaism and Surrealism.

Materialism in contemporary art was a defining feature of this era. Exhibitions by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA, London) highlighted this extensively, focussing on its consumerist nature. In this context, it becomes necessary to mention the collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* an outstanding work of Richard Hamilton. This collage was used for the poster of the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* in 1956 (H. Foster, 2012). Merely leaving behind tradition for consumerism is not the only essential feature for Pop Art; David Hockney's swimming pools are considered defining masterpieces of the art movement.

Figure 3. Hamilton, Richard. *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*. Collage. 10.25 x 9.75 inches. 1956.

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_what_is_it_that_makes_today%27s_homes_so_different,_so_appealing%3F



Using Collages: Surpassing Surrealism in Its Influence

Pop Art used collages extensively, in which newspaper and magazine cut-outs were pasted onto canvases. Peter Blake was a notable Pop Art artist whose work *On the Balcony* (1955-57) deserves to be mentioned. Surrealist influences can be extensively found in the works of American artist R. B. Kitaj, noted for works like *The Ohio Gang* (1964).

Economic Conflict in Art, Financial Turmoil in British Politics, and Affluence in American Society

Due to the Second World War, tremendous consumer hardship was experienced in Britain, while the United States assumed economic leadership in the world. As a result of this situation, consumption patterns were transformed, and the populace started eating from tin cans instead of consuming fresh market produce. To accommodate and respond to such socioeconomic upheaval, art began appropriating objects from daily life.

Pop Art and Dadaism were intrinsically linked; however, Pop Art did not carry the negative aura that often surrounded Dadaism. Unlike the earlier perception that art was beyond the comprehension of the common

person, Pop Art artists worked to make their art comprehensible and accessible to the masses (H. Honour, et al., 1991).

Robert Rauschenberg is an artist who has to be mentioned when discussing the Pop Art movement, and he skilfully used everyday objects and trash by highlighting the role of the creator. His notable works include *Bed* (1955) which used an actual quilt, and *Monogram* (1955 – 59), which used a stuffed animals and thus worked towards “shocking” the audience.

Jasper Johns, on the other hand, while known for his interpolations, was quite different from Rauschenberg, using wax and blood to create surfaces in relief. His well-known works include *Target* (1961) and *Flag* (1954-55).

Another prolific American Pop artist was Roy Lichtenstein, who incorporated comics heavily into his work, relying on tiny dots of color commonly associated with that style to create large works of art. This technique helped to create a sense of separation between the work of art and life and helped him offering new direction to other artists of the movement. His notable works include *Artist's Studio: The Dance*, inspired by Matisse's *Dance*, as well as *Bedroom at Arles* inspired by Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*.

Figure 4. Lichtenstein, Roy. Artist's Studio: The Dance.

Oil and Magna on Canvas.

96.181 x 128.15 inches. 1974.

Source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79538>



Figure 5. Lichtenstein, Roy. Bedroom at Arles.

Oil and Magna on Canvas.

170 x 130 inches. 1992.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bedroom_at_Arles



Figure 6. Warhol, Andy. Marilyn Diptych.

Silkscreen and Acrylic on Canvas.

80.709 x 114 inches - Overall Size for the Combined Two-Panel Work. 1962.

Source: <https://www.artistsandillustrators.co.uk/how-to/art-theory/top-tips-from-andy-warhols-art/>



Andy Warhol's work tries to challenge the viewer. He drew upon everyday consumer products for his art, successfully creating an aura of exceptionality around himself and his work. Using Coca-Cola bottles and

Campbell's Soup Cans as subjects for his work, justifying their usage in his 1975 Memoir *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B Back Again)* by saying that, since he had been using them for the previous twenty years, they were inextricably linked to him. He also drew upon silver-screen stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor and famous paintings like the *Mona Lisa* as subject matter for his work. His works often had the appearance of hurriedly or carelessly taken photographs. One can say to wind up that Pop Art took its momentary contemporaneity to an extreme by using relevant consumer products as subject matter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although Expressionism and Pop Art are truly divergent in their intention and manifestation, they together create a valuable path in the history of art from inner chaos to external cultural echo. While Expressionism deals with inner turbulence and the execution of art forms that are often full of repulsive in colors and lines, Pop Art embraces the outward reality of the consumerism and mass media. Both of these art movements question traditional art forms in their own ways and enlarge the possibility of what can be "called art". There is a saying that change is the only constant. These art movements demonstrate this in a significant way and help the art world and society to move forward with new ideas and notions. These two movements have established a dialogue with each other and have shown the extent the art can develop; even with their ideological differences, both have contributed to the history of artistic achievement.

References

1. George H. H., 19th and 20th Century Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Harry N. Abrams, 1970.
2. Hal F., The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha, Princeton University Press, 2012.
3. Hijorvardur H. A., Marla F. P., A History of Modern Art, 4th ed., Thames and Hudson, 1998.
4. Hugh H., John F., A World History of Art, Lawrence King Publishing, 1991.
5. Thomas C., The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design, 1930–1995, Yale University Press, 2014.
6. Thomas C., The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent, Yale University Press, 2004.