

Art 345, Modern Art in America

End of Part I, Summary of origins and impact

The Period and the Problem

Although the beginning and stimulus for the Modern period is understood differently by various field authorities, the suggestion that it began alongside the Industrial Revolution (i.e. c.1850 ff) is a widely accepted one. My position, based on the outworking and exhaustion of the main paradigms that went before it, is that it began c.1850 as a result of the discovery of entropy that year. Entropy is the gradual collapse of the stuff of the universe back to its original state of chaos, which results from the fact that every reaction involves an irrecoverable loss of an infinitesimally small amount of energy. Reality as we know it, therefore, is not only fragile but doomed.

In this light, the Industrial Revolution, with its astronomical increase in energy reactions both held out the hope of a better-provided, wealthier future for all, and caused an unprecedented acceleration in entropy. In 1920 there was widespread hope that this process could be halted after all, when Maxwell announced his “demon” – which was, unfortunately, debunked in 1922. There have been no solutions to the problem proposed since then. In the early decades of the 20th century, the problem seemed positively palpable.

Two Significant Responses

Within our scope, two big movements of early 20th century express the response to the problem of entropy and had a definitive impact on European and American art: Cubism and Surrealism.

Cubism (c.1910 ff) was the most influential and seminal art movement of the century: it examined the paradoxical nature of the image as a flat rendition of 3D objects and as the focus of various kinds of perception and interpretation by artist and audience. It was the starting point for many later movements, including true abstraction (i.e. the uncompromising rejection of figuration). Abstract art extends the focus beyond the image itself to forgotten perceptual confusions and moves the attention to existential problems of consciousness and chaos, the problem of self-definition causing the loss of potential, which is also the loss of freedom, and the encroaching danger of disintegration back to entropy

Surrealism (c.1924 ff) emphasised the personal, the intuitive, the subjective, memory, and psychology. This was a recognition that traditional intellectual processes were in crisis, spurred by WW1 and the 1922 debunking of Maxwell's Demon which had been the intellectual bulwark against entropy. Intellect, therefore, was arguably failing. Non-scientists, influenced by the philosopher **Henri Bergson**, promoted intuitive alternatives to the intellect. Bergson conceived intuition as *a means to transcend outward appearance and attain true reality*. Meanwhile, physicists continued to wrestle with the quantum physics that had caused problem.

In 1927 these physicists turned their attention to quantum particles before their journey towards entropy. They concluded:

1. Quantum units have *no objective reality*
i.e. the quantum is an indeterminate/undecided state, *it exists but cannot be described or defined* (it is like a "ghost")
2. *The observer changes thing observed*
i.e. when the quantum encounters *anything at all* (including other quanta) it crystallizes at random or to complement the measuring device (human or mechanical). Any attempt to assess its nature/identity while in the quantum state will *determine* its final id/nature but will show *nothing* about its original id/nature. Reality, therefore, shifts.

The combination of the revelations of quantum mechanics and Bergson's concept of intuition would change the whole Humanist academic endeavour, as scholars ("observers"),

- (a) attempted to stay *out of contact* with the object of study – and then discovered they couldn't
- (b) attempted to *fuse with it*, or to *get inside it*

So, then

Notice the almost gravitational coherence of the scientific, philosophical and artistic recognition of the problem and response to it. Mentally review the artists we have considered (and will consider) in light of this issue and lightly gauge its relevance and impact on them.

Post Script

Almost all the American artists we have considered so far claimed to have weak graphic skills and thus developed alternative modes of working. Remember this: drawing has always been the primary *intellectual test* of artistic quality. In a post-historical, intuition-oriented era, intellectual-assessment and testing-for-quality are both irrelevant. Now you need to think about what kinds of response are properly relevant for modern and postmodern art. Remember also to think about the function of this art in relation to our reality and our paradigm.