

WHAT IS MODERN ART?

Many people are baffled when they go to an art gallery and see a splattered canvas given the same status as an "Old Master". The role of art in western culture has changed in the last hundred years. Technical skill and realism, predominant since the 15th century*, are now less relevant. Yet most people still regard such qualities as the hallmarks of good art.

Before modern art

The following subjects were the mainstay of "traditional" art:



1. Portraits. People have always wanted to have their likeness recorded for posterity, but only the rich could afford it.

2. Religion and mythology. Scenes from the Bible and from Greek and Roman legends provided colourful and morally instructive subject-matter.

3. Scenes of everyday life. As society became more and more democratic, demand grew for pictures which could be easily understood without a classical or religious education.

Anonymous Byzantine: Madonna and Child on a Curved Throne. c1200. Tempera on wood. 81.5 x 41.9cm (32 1/8 x 16 1/2 in). National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA



Paolo Uccello: The Battle of San Romano. c1450. Tempera on wood. 181.6 x 320cm (5ft 11 1/2in x 10ft 6in). The National Gallery, London, England

4. Historical events. Those in power wanted to record important events, particularly when they were the heroes or victors.

5. Landscapes. Nostalgia for the unspoiled natural world grew as western society became more and more industrialized.

6. Still lifes. Artists sometimes painted objects for their symbolic qualities, but as often for their own sake.

Rachel Ruysch: Still Life with Snake. 1685-90. Oil on canvas. 52 x 40cm (20 1/2 x 15 3/4in). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England



o What changed?

The invention of photography in the 1830s encouraged artists to attempt even greater realism in their paintings in an effort to compete with it. But as the 19th century wore on, some artists began to question the need for art to refer to the outside world at all. This led to the development of **abstract art**.

A second factor was the decline of patronage - the system whereby the church, royalty and the aristocracy commissioned works of art. By the 19th century art dealers had begun to sell uncommissioned art to a wider public. This gave artists more freedom to paint what and how they liked.

o Modern art movements

As artists began to experiment with new styles and techniques, they gathered in groups to talk about their ideas. Artists with similar aims sometimes formed a movement (for example, Futurism). Apart from creating a sense of solidarity and confidence, the movements gave them authority, groups of artists tended to be taken more seriously than individuals.

o Avoiding "isms"

It is very tempting to pigeon-hole artists, according to the movement they were most associated with. But this ignores the fact that each artist is an individual, and every work of art unique. The knowledge, for example, that Dalí belonged to the Surrealist group when he painted the Persistence of Memory may help our understanding of the painting, but it is only one aspect of the work.

o The avant-garde

Deriving from "vanguard" (the leading unit in an army), this term refers to artists who defy the establishment. But yesterday's avant-garde often become today's mainstream, as new artists explore yet more radical ideas.

* The 15th century marked the beginning of a time of cultural rebirth in Europe known as the **Renaissance**.