An Overview of British Art, 1900-50

What was considered ‘traditional’ art at the turn of the century?

In 1900 the Royal Academy (or RA) in London was still considered the most important place to exhibit work if you hoped to become noticed and accepted by the ‘art establishment’ as an artist.

The Academy favoured paintings on ‘grand themes’ – mythological scenes and history and narrative pictures painted in a technique sometimes called the ‘Grand Manner’.

The Grand Manner was based on High Renaissance art, with its use of traditional one viewpoint perspective with a vanishing point, shading and tone to create the illusion of a three dimensional space, and often an emphasis on painting subjects in an idealised way. Solomon Solomon’s ‘An Allegory’ is a good example of this style, although his imagery is certainly not conventional.

The rise of a wealthy Victorian middle class due to the Industrial Revolution also created more demand for ‘genre’ pictures, or scenes of every day life, that were often sentimental or moralising in tone.

Groups of artists had challenged the typical Royal Academy way of painting. The Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) introduced a new, very highly detailed way of painting using very bright, pure colour as opposed to the darker, more subdued tones of many RA artists.

John Waterhouse’s ‘Psyche Entering Cupid’s Garden’ shows a blend of late PRB painting – although based on a Greek myth both Psyche and the garden she’s about to enter look very British. It also fits into the vogue for a pseudo-Classicism that was popular with artists in the Aesthetic Movement – who advocated the philosophy of ‘art for art’s sake’; pictures did not need to have any moral or social meaning.

James McNeil Whistler had created paintings that nearly reached total abstraction – i.e. not based on any representational subject matter – but he had been severely ridiculed for it.

The ‘Turn of the Century’ section of the exhibition shows how many artists still favoured traditional subject matter, but had begun to adapt some of the techniques created by the French Impressionists working in the 1870’s and 80’s.

Who were the Impressionists and why did their paintings create such a fuss?

Many Impressionist pictures have become so familiar to us because they are used for cards, posters, table mats and advertising that it can be hard to imagine the initial startled response to their work.

Many of the French critics and gallery going public would have regarded their work in a similar light to many people’s reaction to the annual Turner Prize artists today – with a similar response from the press and media.

The Impressionists were a like minded group of artists who developed a completely new way of painting and looking at the world, the complete opposite in many ways of the academic style of painting favoured by the Salon (the French equivalent of the Royal Academy).

They mostly painted outdoors rather than in the confines of a studio, and aimed to capture the transient effects of natural light.
They were not the first artists to paint outdoors, but the manufacture of small, airtight tubes of oil paint and light portable easels made this way of working easier.

Also the rapid progress of photography led painters to believe that it was no longer as relevant to paint precise, highly realistic reproductions of a subject when a camera could do that job. By the 1850’s it took seconds rather than minutes to take a photo and by the 1860’s experiments in colour photography were underway, although the technique was in it’s infancy.

The Impressionists began to explore the influence of photography, and also began to experiment with what a painting could show that a camera couldn’t.

They realised a camera cannot capture the way human beings perceive the world. Often we catch fleeting glimpses of things because we are never totally static, our eyes move and our brain interprets visual information constantly.

Also we see colours in different ways. The chemist, Chevreul, had just published his ideas on the ‘Laws of Colour’. He categorised colours as primaries (red, yellow and blue) and binaries (formed by mixing two primaries together).

He discovered that when a binary colour was placed next to the primary colour that **wasn't** used to mix it, the colours complemented one another. So, for example, orange (red and yellow mixed) stands out vibrantly if it is placed next to blue. Green complements red and purple complements yellow.

The Impressionists experimented with Chevreul's findings. They tried to suggest shape, distance and light through strong, pure colour contrasts rather than the academic 'Grand Manner' techniques of using tone shading and vanishing point perspective.

You can see the brushstrokes in their work because they painted in daubs or dashes of colour. Often they let colours blend in the eye of the viewer – for instance; an area of red daubs next to yellow daubs from a distance looks orange.

A first their paintings were criticised for looking unfinished and sketchy – recording mere 'impressions' of a scene. But as light conditions change quickly and constantly they had to work spontaneously.

Another innovation was their decision to paint the world around them rather than stories from mythology and history. They painted modern subjects, that some did not consider to be 'aesthetically beautiful' – such as railway stations and ordinary people in cafes.

Impressionism in Britain.

As people came to understand what the Impressionists were trying to achieve in their work their paintings gained popularity in France. In 1891 an exhibition of Claude Monet's work sold out in three days.

These new ideas took time to travel to Britain, although some British artists travelled to France regularly and became familiar with Impressionist ideas.

Colonies of artists became established in Britain in the late 1880's, following the model of the French 'Barbizon School'. The Barbizon painters practised painting in the open air, and depicted a traditional rural way of life. In Britain two of the most influential colonies were founded on the Cornish coast at Newlyn and St Ives.

Walter Sickert (1860-1942) spent a lot of time painting in France and became friends with some of the leading Impressionists. He was influential in spreading this new attitude to painting to the circle of young British artists he gathered around him.

Another important link between the French and British art world was Lucien Pissarro (1863-1944). He was the son of Camille Pissarro, one of the group of original Impressionist painters. He was taught by his father, Claude Monet and Paul Cezanne. He settled in England in 1890, and became part of the art circle around Walter Sickert. Pissarro's painting 'A Muddy Lane' was painted four years before his death in 1940.

The Grafton Galleries in London had put on an exhibition of French Impressionist art in 1905 and by the 1900's Royal Academy artists were borrowing and adapting elements of Impressionism that appealed to them. The use of dotted and 'dashed' brushstrokes and pure colours is used by Swanwick, Arnesby Brown, and Dorothea Sharp. The fascination with the effects of light is explored in Philip Connard's 'Chelsea Interior' and Alfred Munnings 'Whitsuntide – A Gala Day'.

Most of the British RA artists, however, stuck with traditional subject matter, and didn't embrace 'full-on Impressionism' with its pure colour and less finished, spontaneous technique.

They depict rural scenes showing a somewhat nostalgic and 'timeless' way of life, despite the fact that the Industrial Revolution and introduction of machinery was changing the way of life in the countryside.

Walter Sickert by contrast believed in artists painting their contemporary surroundings. He was a founder member of the New English Art Club, set up to give artists an alternative to exhibiting at the Royal Academy. He also founded the Camden Town Group – an artist-led group that assimilated more of the cutting edge 'avant garde' aspects of Impressionism and the French artists that built on the Impressionists new approach to painting… they were eventually labelled the Post – Impressionists.

Who were the Post-Impressionists?

The term 'Post Impressionism' only came into existence in 1910-11 when Roger Fry organised an exhibition of work in London by a selection of artists who were working in the years following the main popularity of Impressionism. This was followed by 'The Second Post Impressionist Exhibition of English, French and Russian artists'.

The best known are Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne and Georges Seurat. They all developed very individual styles and approaches to painting but were linked by their dissatisfaction with the casual, overtly naturalistic approach of the Impressionists. Broadly speaking the Post Impressionists wanted an expressive alternative to Impressionism that explored emotions and rejected pure naturalism.

Both Van Gogh and Gauguin used colour symbolically and to express emotions. They simplified shapes and gave forms strong outlines with very little detail, which had a flattening effect on the sense of space in their pictures. Their paintings had no definite light source or traditional shading or shadows. Instead of just observing and recording their subject matter they imposed their subjective feelings and responses on it.

Van Gogh in particular experimented in the ways paint could be applied in different marks to create lines and shapes creating rhythms.

At the same time in France there was much interest in what was termed then 'primitive art' – Gauguin admired the directness of the simple woodcarvings made by peasant farmers in Brittany. Both he and Van Gogh shared the enthusiasm that originated with the Impressionists for Japanese prints.

Trading links with Japan had been limited until the 1860's when a sudden influx of exports led to a vogue for all things Japanese. Japanese prints are very stylised. They also feature large, flat areas of strong, pure colour with distinctive outlines and simplified contours to shapes.

Both Van Gogh and Gauguin were preoccupied with exploring our relationship with nature. Both came to reject the artistic world of Paris – Van Gogh spent many years in rural France painting the peasant communities and Gauguin eventually settled in Tahiti and painted the indigenous people of the South seas.

Georges Seurat took an alternative route to expand on Impressionist innovations. He devised a more ordered and controlled technique of applying paint that came to be known as 'Pointilism'. He adapted the Impressionist technique of placing primary colours next to their complimentaries but used very regular, carefully placed dots, he was not interested in spontaneous mark making at all.

He began to develop a formal visual language of line and form. After Chevreul's new theories on colour, a lot of research was undertaken into the psychological effect of shapes and patterns. Seurat developed a system of painting based on the symbolic significance of lines and contrast of colours. Contemporary mathematicians and psychologists claimed that lines that sloped up to the right, warm colours and light tones gave an impression of happiness and well being. While the opposite: lines that sloped downwards, cold colours and dark tones induced feelings of sadness.

Seurat used these findings in his very stylised pictures, deliberately distorting shapes and lines and colour to create a particular mood or atmosphere in his paintings. Edward Wadsworth uses the Pointillist technique in 'Imaginary Harbour'.

And finally, Paul Cezanne worked throughout his life to develop a new approach to pictorial space that didn't depend on one point perspective to render an illusion of depth.

He attempted to unite modern subject matter with the sense of grand scale and permanence achieved by the 'Old Masters' of Renaissance art. His work was influential in the development of Cubism… but more of that later.

Back in Britain

The exhibition of Post Impressionist work exhibited in London was described by one reviewer in the Pall Mall Gazette as: 'the output of a lunatic asylum'. This did not deter Roger Fry from organising a second similar exhibition in 1912.

These exhibitions had a major impact on artists working at the time. Clive Bell, the critic and writer declared after the 2nd exhibition: 'The battle is won. We all agree now that any form in which an artist can express himself is legitimate, and the more sensitive perceive that there are things worth expressing that could never have been expressed in traditional forms'.

Again, individual British artists absorbed the new stylistic ways of approaching painting and adapted and amended them for their own uses and devices.

At about this time the Slade School of Art in London was a strong alternative to the Royal Academy schools. The roll call of students that attended the Slade reads like the catalogue list of the Creative Tension artists: Augustus and Gwen John, Duncan Grant, C.W.Nevison, Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, Edward Wadsworth, William Roberts, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, David Bomberg to mention a few. The reputation of the Slade began to wane after 1914 but in its heyday it produced a prodigious number of talented artists.

The general trend in Britain was towards independent artists groups and societies, often created to give artists the opportunity to set up independent exhibitions of their work.

The Camden Town Group was formed in 1911. Sickert, at 51 was the oldest member, most were working artists in their 30's. The group combined Impressionist and Post Impressionist ideas but retained the British tendency towards solidity, mass and realism in art. They did embrace the Impressionist approach of painting their own environment and finding 'beauty' in unexpected places. Their pictures had no literary meaning.

In 1914 Spencer Gore died of pneumonia and Gilman died of influenza in 1919, by 1914 many of the other members were called up for the First World War and the group dissipated.

A Plethora of 'Isms'

In the wake of the Post Impressionism, new 'isms' rose to the surface.

Symbolism was a literary and musical, as well as visual 'movement' that began in the 1880's. It began as a response to the end of the 19th century – the 'fin de siecle', and aimed to find the 'deeper meaning of things' or 'hidden reality'. Symbolism encompasses the 'Blue' and 'Rose' periods of Picasso and Paul Gaugain's and Van Gogh's art had 'symbolist tendencies'. Many different artists and writers have been lumped together under the 'Symbolist' banner.

Common to all Symbolist work, perhaps, is the belief that facts only acquire significance when they can be converted into symbols of experiences otherwise incapable of communication or expression.

Fauvism got its name from a critic who described their style of painting as being like 'wild beasts'. The chief 'Fauve' was Henri Matisse. They wanted to create a style of painting that appealed to raw emotions and was direct and non- naturalistic. They advocated an unabandoned use of colour and form and their work verved more towards abstraction than Van Gogh and Gaugain.

Cubism built on Cezanne's struggle to create a new kind of pictorial space. From 1900 – c 1912 Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque began to play with the notion that a picture could show an object from many different angles and viewpoints all at once. We move through the world, and don't just stand in one place – their paintings demonstrated this.

Futurism was born in Italy, not France, in 1909, and was a bit of a boys' club. The destruction of the old tradition establishment was to be replaced by new technologies and revolutions, beauty was to be found in speed and new inventions: cars, planes, and trains. The experience of being human was to be revolutionised by the arrival of a fully mechanised society.

Bloomsbury

The Friday Club was founded by Vanessa Bell in 1905. It eventually evolved into the Bloomsbury Group – a set of eclectic artists, writers and intellectuals. These included the artist Duncan Bell, the writer Virginia Woolf (Vanessa's sister), the economist John Maynard Keynes and the writer and historian Lytton Strachey. The Bloomsbury artists were strongly influenced by Matisse – strong colour, highly decorative patterns.

From this same 'stable', in 1913, Roger Fry founded the Omega workshops. This was a reaction to what Fry saw as the poor quality of mass-produced goods. Artists and designers were paid to create hand made fabrics, carpets, furniture, pottery, etc. At one point Fry had enlisted the services of Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Wyndham Lewis, William Roberts, Edward Wadsworth too produce work with an experimental bias. Unfortunately the project was not well administered and by 1914 it had run into financial difficulties.

Personality clashes between Roger Fry and Wyndham Lewis led to a split and many artists left to follow Lewis in his founding of The Vorticists.

Vorticisim was a fusion of Cubism and Futurism, led by Wyndham Lewis. The Vorticists celebrated the new technologies and speed of the C20th. Bomberg, Wadsworth and Jacob Epstein were all members for a while. The celebration of the destruction of the old and its replacement by new technology suffered a radical set back at the outbreak of the first world war with the use of new technology such as machine guns and tanks to cause massive loss of life.

Impact of the First World War

Many of the artists featured in Creative Tension were directly affected by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Many saw active service:

Nevison volunteered but was turned down due to ill health. He became an ambulance driver and was invalided out in 1916.

Edward Wadsworth joined the Royal Navy Reserve in 1917 and was eventually invalided out. He went on to work on designing 'dazzle camouflage' for British ships.

Paul Nash volunteered in August 1915. He was injured in 1917 but returned to the Front as an Official War Artist.

David Bomberg volunteered in 1915 for the Royal Engineers and did active service until 1917 when he was transferred to a Canadian regiment as a War Artist.

Due to ill health Stanley Spencer joined the Royal Army Medical Corp in 1915, he returned home in 1917. One of his brothers, Sidney, was killed in action.

William Roberts volunteered for the Royal Field Artillery as a gunner in 1916 and served until the end of the war in France.

Duncan Grant did agricultural work as a Conscientious objector.

Mark Gertler was also a Conscientious Objector, as a result at least one London gallery refused to exhibit his work in the aftermath of World War I.

After the War figurative and traditional representative art became popular again at the expense of the more non-representational styles of painting for a while.

Who were the Surrealists and what planet were they on?

Twelve years after the Surrealist Manifesto was published in Paris, the 'First International Surrealist Exhibition' was held in London in 1936. This was the largest show of Surrealist art in the world up to that time. It was partly organised by the artist Roland Penrose.

Surrealism took a delight in the marvellous and the strange. At the same time that Sigmund Freud was exploring how dreams could be used for the purposes of Psychoanalysis, the Surrealists were exploring how our minds work when reason and rationality are suspended. Surrealism was not just considered to be an art movement but a state of mind, an attitude and new way of experiencing the world that placed as much, if not more, importance on the imagination than the pragmatic senses.

The Surrealists questioned our perceptions of reality; they encouraged artists to see the extraordinary hidden within the ordinary. The poet Andre Breton claimed: 'I believe in the future resolution of the two apparently contradictory states, dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality, a super-reality'.

Towards Abstraction.

The Ben Nicholson landscape in Creative Tensions demonstrates how painting moved away from representational imagery towards the purely abstract. If you remove the houses, trees and horse, this picture would be completely abstract – just lines, colours and forms.

Nicholson is now better known for his completely abstract paintings. He studied at the Slade, and was a member of the Seven and Five Society . He married the abstract sculptor, Barbara Hepworth in 1934. From 1939 – 1958 they lived at St Ives in Cornwall – resurrecting the place as a centre for modern artists.

In 1910, around the same time as Fry's Post Impressionist exhibition, a large show of Chinese pottery was held in London. This led to a resurgence of interest in ceramics. The simple but elegant forms of the Chinese pots opened a debate between painters and designers on the potential links between the applied arts and 'Fine Arts'. The concern of many Modern painters with 'truth to materials' and an interest in shape and form were shared by potters and designers.

This new interest in studio pottery resulted in collaborations between artists and potters. The potter William Straite Murray taught ceramics to Roger Fry, Straite Murray was invited in 1927 to exhibit his work alongside Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Ivon Hitchens.

In 1931 Paul Nash encouraged a group of friends to form 'Unit One'. The artists involved included Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Edward Wadsworth and Tristam Hillier. The diverse individual approaches and styles of each artist was reflected in the group's name which was intended to suggest unity and individuality at the same time.

Eventually Unit One did divide between those artists who wanted to pursue Surrealist ideas – mainly Nash, Wadsworth and Edward Burra – and those who were moving towards producing a purely abstract art, Nicholson and Hepworth being in the forefront.

They were strongly influenced by a wave of European artists interested in abstraction who began to come to Britain because of the political events in Europe in the 1930's. The Dutch abstract painter Piet Mondrian came to London from 1938-40 and entered the artistic circle of Nicholson. Also members of the radical minimalist German school of art and design, the Bauhaus arrived in Britain.

The only purely abstract picture in Creative Tension is 'Abstract' 1946 by Alistair Morton. Morton was born in Carlisle. His family owned a textiles firm, which Morton joined at the age of 21. His father founded Edinburgh Weavers, and eventually Morton became the firm's Artistic Director. He commissioned many modern artists to create designs for the firm, including Nicholson and Hepworth.

Looking back at his work in the 1930's Nicholson stated:' What has remained for me and others of my generation, is a confirmation of the belief that art, whether it is painting, sculpture or architecture can be one of the great constructive and unifying forces in our lives'.

Revival and Survival.

Subject matter and representational work continued to be very important to many artists, and the Royal Academy exhibited mythological and allegorical pictures throughout the early C20th. Galleries often brought the most popular RA pictures, as they represented what was considered popular at the time, and hence were an indicator of public taste. Also many of these paintings complemented the Victorian Classical styles of architecture of many Museums and Galleries.

Some artists explored representational art using new painterly techniques, as can be seen in Lucien Freud's work – the only living artist included in Creative Tension.

Others, like Charles Spencerlayh, explored social concerns. 'Why War', painted in 1938, was the RA's 'Picture of the Year' in 1939.

In 1901 a group calling themselves the 'Society of Painters in Tempera' were founded. Tempera was a technique where paint was mixed with egg white used by early Renaissance painters. These painters also adapted Renaissance imagery and aimed to reinvent traditional ways of working. Gerald Leslie Brocklehurst's portrait 'Dorette' is clearly based on Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' but depicts her as a contemporary 1930's woman in a timeless setting.

Key Images

Activity sheets based on twelve of the pictures in the exhibition are available, aimed at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils. There are also teachers’ background notes on this picture.