Theme 4: Picasso and the Avant-Garde

Lesson 1: The Avant-Garde

Part 1

Avant-garde comes from a military term for the foremost position of an army advancing into battle, the opposite of rearguard. Painters, sculptors, writers, and theorists did not choose such a bellicose label by happenstance. As the above quote from Ionesco suggests, these artists saw themselves as revolutionaries trying to overturn a corrupt and oppressive system. They lived and worked and suffered, as they saw it, on the front lines in enemy territory.

Who or what was the enemy? In a word, the Renaissance, both in the north and in the south. This is, of course, an oversimplification, since the avant-garde emerged some three hundred years after Leonardo and two hundred years after Vermeer. Renaissance principles had given way to classicism by then, the attempt to codify and sustain what was officially considered good taste. Academies of art would then transmit the rules from one generation of painters to the next, weeding out bad students before any damage was done to the art world. Naturalistic illusion remained the basis of good painting, but was far from enough to guarantee good painting. Theoretical frameworks, at times elaborate, decreed exactly what good painting should serve and how. Beginning in seventeenth-century France, painters like Nicolas Poussin\(^1\)—who, paradoxically, spent nearly his entire career in Rome—sought to bring order to art. As Janson tells us:

> The highest aim of painting, [Poussin] believed, is to represent noble and serious human actions. These must be shown in a logical and orderly way—not as they really happened, but as they would have happened if nature were perfect. To this end, the artist must strive for the general and typical; appealing to the mind rather than the senses, he should suppress such trivialities as glowing color, and stress form and composition. In a good picture, the beholder must be able to “read” the exact emotions of each figure, and relate them to the given event.\(^2\)

Paintings produced with idealized naturalistic illusion can be powerfully attractive, not to mention popular. Even today, the tastes of the majority of people painting—like the tastes of the majority of people who buy paintings or reproductions—have not wandered far from classicism. For example, check the catalog of an art poster dealer. Furthermore, all of us have probably caught a glimpse of a show on Public TV in which a painter teaches the viewing audience how to paint a pleasant landscape scene, not by studying a real place in nature but by creating on canvas an idealized image. When I was young, paint-by-

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\(^1\) See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 177–182.

number kits were extremely popular. I probably spent weeks on Leonardo’s **Last Supper**. Most painters are not professional artists and most will never dedicate a lifetime to their craft. They may not have the knowledge or skill required to paint truly naturalistic illusions, but that does not mean their desire lies elsewhere. Most would love to paint a lifelike portrait or landscape. What you never see on Public TV is a show about how to paint non-objective art.

Properly speaking, avant-garde art belongs to a period from the late nineteenth century to mid twentieth century. For some it includes the modernist movement and for others it does not. Although we still call it modern art, especially when we see something we dislike, the historical avant-garde is rather quaint these days. There are still people calling themselves artists who continue to push the envelope, creating works or exhibitions or events that few of us understand and even fewer of us admire; as militant cultural soldiers, they continue to attack the general public, or at least their taste in art, with works that puzzle and at times disgust us. They fight the old battles.
Part 2

Where did it come from?

Modern art came from the art of the past, of course. Or perhaps it would be better to say that modern art arose from traditional currents in art. In other words, modern art did not spring full-blown into existence by chance or design. As Western society moved towards a viable middle class, painters discovered a new clientele to support them. As we saw in Theme 3, by the time of Vermeer there existed a middle class that liked to hang paintings in the home. There were even art dealers, like van Ruijven. This market gave painters more autonomy than the academies, the Church, and the State were willing to grant. Celebrity always enjoyed a certain impunity, as we saw in the case of Leonardo. It still does. But with the ability to paint first and sell later, even lesser-known painters were freer to make their own rules. There is always a price to pay, of course. An artist who fails to please his buyers, just like an artist who fails to please his patrons, soon goes hungry. The great Rembrandt (1606–1669), a generation before Vermeer, is an example of this hard truth.

The Romantic Movement, with its cult of the self, cultivated the concept of art and artist as a reality that transcends mere society. Rebellious, daringly inventive, self-important and at times self-destructive, the Romantics created wonderful, if self-indulgent poems, novels, and paintings on the fringes of traditional and usually hostile society. It helped to be rich, like Lord Byron and the English Romantics, or to write best sellers, like Victor Hugo. In the US, Romantics like Herman Melville had to work for a living. In Spain, the Church and State remained the only viable patrons for painters at the end of the eighteenth century. Consider the career of Francisco de Goya (1746–1828).

Born in the province of Aragon, he went to Madrid to study painting at the academy that still stands today in the Puerta del Sol. He did so well following the rules of classicism of the time, that he soon got a job painting cartoons for the Royal Tapestry works. In other words, the Queen would decide one day: “I want something pretty in that useless spot above the door, something with yellow in it to match the sofa.” The tapestry makers would relay the order to Goya, who then painted something pretty to the exact dimensions of that useless spot above the door and with the exact yellow of the sofa. Once the tapestry was completed, the painted cartoon was of no further use or interest. It is amazing that any of them survived. In the example at right, Parasol (1777), the fact that the image was meant to be nothing more than a disposable cartoon allowed Goya a freedom of expression impossible in academic painting. The colors are slapped around, the woman’s skin tones are mysteriously unnatural, the landscape is laid out more abstract than naturalistic, and the source of light defies analysis: the darkest part of the sky, to which the parasol points, seems to shine on the figures. The entire

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3 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 207–212.
4 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 249–254.
composition is about to slide off the canvas the way the little dog threatens to slide off the woman’s lap.

Although cartoon making may strike us as a somewhat ignominious task for a trained painter, Goya was good at it and turned out cartoons for nearly twenty years. He also painted panels and frescos for churches and portraits for the royal family. In 1789 Carlos IV appointed him painter to the court. Three years later, a long illness left him deaf. His painting darkened in tone and intent. Though he continued to paint the court, in a series of etchings he bitterly satirized modern life. The frank pose of the Naked Maja (above), scandalous in his own time, presented a woman not only without clothes, but without allegory, without mythology, without covering or pretext of any kind. She confronts the viewer shamelessly. When Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808, a bloody war ripped society apart for nearly six years. Goya chronicled the savagery in a series of etchings called The Disasters of War, which depend on a quick hand and schematic detail to render a complete narrative with a minimum of strokes (at left). Although the crown was restored in 1814 under the abominable dictator Fernando VII, Goya soon fell out of favor and retired to his country house. Still deaf and now isolated, in his seventies, he turned inward and found mainly horror. And the beginning of modern art.

Part 3

The so-called Black Paintings were executed directly on the walls of his home. You can take a virtual tour of Goya’s country house, upstairs and down, to see how the fourteen paintings were laid out: [click here](https://www.goya.es/). To understand how modern Goya is, compare one of the Black Paintings with an earlier painting by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1639), one of the greatest artists of the Baroque. Both images of Saturn Devouring His Children are shocking. The story comes from classical mythology: Saturn, one of the Titans, had overthrown his own father and taken over as head god; fearing the same fate at the hands of his children, he ate each one as it was born. In the end his child Zeus / Jupiter escaped and put an end to Saturn’s cruel reign.

Ruben’s treatment (at left) reveals the anatomy and detail we have come to expect in the creation of naturalistic illusion that is the hallmark of the Renaissance; now it comes in the more dynamic presentation of the Baroque, which may be defined as dramatic realism. Naturalism or realism, the intent is clear: to foster the illusion of three dimensional objects in space through the handling of light and dark and color variation. Though Saturn is a god, his body is perfectly human down to every aging muscle and sinew. Goya, on the other hand, does not show us anything human; his Saturn is a wild-eyed monster. The

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5 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 159–164.
torso and the lower limbs conform to no natural body. Ruben’s Saturn is in the heavens. Where is Goya’s Saturn? It seems more like a cave. Goya uses color, as well as light-source modeling, arbitrarily. Furthermore, Ruben composes his image within the picture plane, while Goya violently crops his Saturn on the right side. Although painted around 1820, Goya’s image shows the tendency to distort, deform, and dehumanize that will characterize the avant-garde almost a hundred years later.

Goya is a complex figure in art history, having created almost 2000 paintings, drawings, engravings, and lithographs. His final works are very different from his early works, both in technique and theme. The classicism of the academy, remember, tried to dictate not only \textit{how} to paint, but \textit{what} to paint. The freedom of the Black Paintings may be attributed in part to the fact that Goya painted them for nobody but himself. Only his few closest friends ever saw them in his lifetime. But the absence of patrons and buyers can never fully account for the raw vision itself, or the composition and technique that flew in the face of Goya’s own academic training.

What makes Goya so modern? Art historian Janis Tomlinson answers:

\begin{quote}
Certainly, one aspect of his modernity is an expansion of visual narrative that leads ultimately to the emancipation of image from word, […] And when narrative is absent or secondary—as in the “Black Paintings,” the \textit{Majas}, and Goya’s portraits—the relation of subject to viewer is confrontational.\footnote{Tomlinson, Janis. \textit{From El Greco to Goya: Painting in Spain (1561–1828)}. New York: Abrams, 1997. 161.} \end{quote}