Theme 4: Picasso and the Avant-Garde

Lesson 4: Everything Falls Apart

Part 1

The Industrial Revolution was part of a technological upheaval that drastically changed Western society forever. There was also an Agricultural Revolution at the same time, accompanied by a Transportation Revolution that significantly improved food distribution. Europe and America experienced a tremendous population shift from the country to the city. More food and new sanitation methods meant that fewer children died and people lived longer. Even epidemics and wars failed to stem the tide. Despite waves of emigration to the New World, between 1650 and 1900 the population in Europe quadrupled, from about 100 million to 400 million. In Paris alone the population doubled within the thirty years preceding the revolution of 1848.

No one had prepared for so many people. With increased urbanization came social unrest. Following a series of crop failures, people began to starve. Nearly a third of Parisians found themselves dependent on a meager and capricious welfare system. Unrest spilled over into violent opposition to the government. Revolutions broke out across Europe, challenging the old order. France suffered yet another wave of extremism and bloodshed. Pierre J. Proudhon declared that property was theft and that God was evil. War broke out in the streets, with felled trees and overturned omnibuses piled into barricades. In June alone, over 1400 people were killed. Although the revolutions accomplished little and are regarded today as bloody failures, they did terrify many people. Social order, social structure itself seemed to lose its appearance of stability, inevitability, rightness. Anything could happen, and often did.

Not coincidentally, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published The Communist Manifesto in February of that year. Claiming their ideas to be objective science, they envisioned nothing less than a brand-new world, unrecognizable to the nineteenth century as it then was. For instance, law and morality—the Manifesto declared—are nothing but class prejudices that exist to protect class interests. Even the family must be abolished. Like religion, it is one more tool used to exploit and oppress the masses.

On top of such assaults on law, morality, family, and religion (Marx and Engels), the undermining of social order and stability (the revolutions of 1848), and the violent repression that followed, along came Charles Darwin to claim that humanity was not planned by God to stand at the pinnacle of creation, but was merely one more step in an evolutionary process. If Darwin’s theory still provokes fierce debate in the twenty-first century, we can easily imagine the shock and dismay it caused when Origin of Species was published in 1859. Bolstered by many intellectuals and scientists of the day, Darwin’s theory of
evolution dealt a real blow to traditional European society and was embraced by Marxists and capitalists alike to support their own theories of Social Darwinism. Overnight the image and likeness of God had become little more than a naked ape. A whole-scale rejection of traditional ideas—the accepted truths on which people based their lives—seemed to be going on.

Part 2

On the bright side, two years later Pierre Michaux invented the bicycle, an ungainly contraption with a huge front wheel and tiny back wheel; it would take I.R. Johnson until 1899 to invent the bicycle frame. Between Origin of Species and the end of the century we find familiar things making their first appearance: traffic lights (1868), the telephone (1876), the light bulb (1879), toilet paper (1880), the fountain pen (1884), the automobile and Coca-Cola (1886), drinking straws (1888), and the matchbook (1889), just to name a few. If we read between the lines, the far reaching changes implied by such inventions become visible: for example, there must be an electrical grid to supply power to all those light bulbs. The invention of drinking straws after thousands and thousands of years of human development implies the sudden popularity of soft drinks and places that sell them and places to drink them. Toilet paper, certainly the most important if least appreciated invention of the nineteenth century, tells us about the spread of sewer lines and running water, as well as a growing awareness of hygiene. The pace of change only increased with the century. Advances in medicine, surgery, and dentistry accompanied advances in warfare like the machine gun, the repeating rifle, revolvers, and dynamite.

Our world begins here, becoming more recognizable year after year. But we must understand that as our world began, another world was ending. The inhabitants of that other world—probably a majority of them—did not greet so many radical changes with open arms. They did not see a new beginning at all; they saw things falling apart. Europe was rushing towards disaster and disintegration, its very foundations under attack. Social structure. Law. Morality and religion. The family. Humanity itself. Was nothing sacred?

No. In 1900 Max Planck published his theory of quantum physics, beginning the overthrow of classic notions of physics and, for starters, tossing out the second law of thermodynamics. Physical reality now came under attack, our sense of existence: how the material world works, and what real and unreal mean. As Jeffrey Mishlove writes: “One interpretation of quantum physics is that physical reality does not objectively exist independent of the participating observers.” Exploring these scientific frontiers, Albert Einstein then went after space and time when he published his Special Theory of Relativity in 1905: $E = mc^2$. He claimed it was no big deal, writing in 1916:
The non-mathematician is seized by a mysterious shuddering when he hears of "four-dimensional" things, by a feeling not unlike that awakened by thoughts of the occult. And yet there is no more common-place statement than that the world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum.

Yet, as Leonardo da Vinci had remarked centuries before, our senses gather information only from what we experience as matter, space, and time: what we see, hear, feel, smell, and taste of the world around us. These new ideas challenged common sense, claiming that our senses created an illusion.

It got worse. Not only were important thinkers undermining traditional beliefs—more than beliefs, they are solid convictions—about the physical world outside us; Sigmund Freud, with the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, assailed ideas about the mental world within: the mind, the soul, the self. For Freud, it all comes down to sex, even in the case of children, at the time considered innocent in every sense of the word. Consider the shock it brought to the old world, especially in the context of prudish Victorian society. As Paul Brians writes:

> Despite the widely-recognized failure of Freudian psychotherapy to heal disturbed people effectively and the rejection of many of his major theories Freud remains one of the most influential figures of the 20th century. Freud's basic insight that our minds preserve memories and emotions which are not always consciously available to us has transformed the way humanity views itself ever since. **Freud said that there had been three great humiliations in human history:** Galileo's discovery that we were not the center of the universe, Darwin's discovery that we were not the crown of creation, and his own discovery that we are not in control of our own minds. The tendency of modern people to trace their problems to childhood traumas or other repressed emotions begins with Freud. One of Freud's more important discoveries is that emotions buried in the unconscious surface in disguised form during dreaming, and that the remembered fragments of dreams can help uncover the buried feelings. Whether the mechanism is exactly as Freud describes it, many people have derived insights into themselves from studying their dreams, and most modern people consider dreams emotionally significant, unlike our ancestors who often saw them either as divine portents or as the bizarre side-effects of indigestion. Freud argues that dreams are wish-fulfillments, and will ultimately argue that those wishes are the result of repressed or frustrated sexual desires. The anxiety surrounding these desires turns some dreams into nightmares. (Emphasis added)

As the first sentence above suggests, you don’t have to be right to change the world.
Eventually, even the words to describe the conflict of old and new were thrown into doubt by developments in the new field of structural linguistics. As we saw briefly in Theme 1, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure—published posthumously in 1916—held that “reality” is not in the world but in us, a product of our minds; whatever sense we make of it, arises from the structure of language, not the structure of the world.

In view of these dramatic and sweeping changes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Salon des Refusés and the ensuing Impressionism and Postimpressionism seem like small timid steps in the evolution of painting. All this was to change with Pablo Picasso and the next avant-garde movement.