Van Gogh’s Night Café And Mondrian’s Composition With Red Blue And Yellow As Examples Of Modernist Art

Many movements were born during the era of modernism, and as such, there is a large and diverse number of artworks that could be considered to encompass the traits of modernism. Despite such diversity, many of these works share similarities and have undoubtedly influenced each other in their development. In this essay, two traits will be focused on that are not distinct to a singular movement, but that have influenced and can be seen in many modern artworks from different styles and movements. An important trait in of modernism that will be considered in this essay is the use of expressive and non-representational colour, which Vincent van Gogh’s Night Cafe of the Post-Impressionist movement, is a prime example of. The second trait is pure abstraction, which is considered to be one of the most important developments in modernism. Piet Mondrian’s Composition with Red Blue and Yellow, along with the entirety of the work of the De Stijl movement, is a clear example of the use of pure abstraction, specifically in its use to express spirituality and utopian ideals. These two traits of non-representational colour and abstraction moved beyond these two artists’ works and had a significant influence on artists and movements that developed during the period of modernism.

Modernism Defined

Modernism cannot be defined as a single style or movement, but rather, the term encompasses a group of movements governed by a single philosophy. This philosophy centered around the abandoning of traditional and Classical art conventions, which stemmed from centuries of scholars and academies dictating how artists should make their work. Before the rise of modern art movements, artists were expected to create art that was naturalistic and idealized, often in the genre of history painting. This changed with the rapidly increasing industrialization brought on in the late nineteenth century, which began to deeply affect and transform the lives of everyday people, many of whom felt isolated by it, while others embraced it. This rapid industrialization also brought about urbanization and major social changes, such as a growing middle class, also known as the bourgeoisie, as well as the growth of nationalism.

Due to the increasing industrialization, new and more accessible modes of transportation, and the rise of manufacturing and technology, peoples’ daily life experiences were quickly changing, and so artists felt that art needed to change along with it. Artists began experimenting with new techniques, new materials, and new subjects, which were based on their own, personal experiences and interests. Some chose to depict what they felt, rather than what they could see, through the manipulation of colour and other formal elements. Some did away with subject matter completely, giving way to absolute abstraction. Social and political changes brought on by war and revolution had influenced artists’ work as well, driving some to create art and movements revolving around their political beliefs, as many artists saw art as a means of expressing their utopian ideals for society. Through modernism, artists deliberately abandoned with the traditional conventions of art and created new means of expressing their feelings, experiences, ideas, and values.

Vincent Van Gogh, The Night Café, 1888

One of the earlier movements of modernism was Post-Impressionism. Though it was, of course, heavily influenced by its predecessor, Impressionism, Post-Impressionist artists found the Impressionists' sketchlike art still much too naturalistic and their subjects trivial and spontaneous. The Post-Impressionists elevated the Impressionists' attempt at abandoning of traditional representation by incorporating the idea of using light and colour as a mode of expression than one of naturalistic representation. 'Expressive' Post-Impressionists, unlike the 'analytical' Post-Impressionists, who were more concerned with the scientific use of colour, pushed the idea of using art in an expressive way even further by way of manipulating line, perspective, and other formal elements of art.

Vincent van Gogh's The Night Café typifies the Post-Impressionists' orchestration of formal elements to self-express. Van Gogh wanted to represent "the terrible passions of humanity," and did so effectively through clashing and unharmonious formal qualities, such as its vividly contrasting, acidic colours, skewed perspective, and exaggerated lines. It is also formally typical of Post-Impressionism with the use of short, Impressionist brush-strokes, the heavy impasto, or texture, of the paint, strong outlines and a tilted perspective, the last of which shows the influence of Japanese art on European artists at the time. In terms of the painting's subject matter, it is typical of art of modernism as the painting's unpleasant appearance references the fin de siècle, or turn of the century, and the feelings of anxiety, despair, and insecurity many felt as the nineteenth century was coming to a close. These feelings were also associated with the rise of modernity and industrialization, which Van Gogh attempted to escape when he left his urban life in Paris to live in the countryside of Arles.

Through its form and subject matter, the painting is an example of modernism and how artists wanted to change how and why they created things. Van Gogh's The Night Café departs from the Academic style, adjusting form and colour to express his feelings towards humanity. He does not idealize his subject like Classical artists did, but he deliberately chose to create something that wasn't beautiful. In a letter to his brother regarding the painting, he said, " the picture is one of the ugliest I have done." Van Gogh's Night Cafe, and his work as a whole, also helped introduce the concept of the use non-representational colour and colour as a means of expression to modernism. Colour was an extremely important component to Van Gogh's self-expression. Of it, he said, "color expresses something by itself" (Landensack 186). This idea – that colour in painting did not have to represent nature, but could be used as a mode to represent one's own nature, that is their feelings and personal perspective – had an influence on many artists of the period that followed, including Franz Marc of the German Expressionists, who understood and utilized the symbolic element of colour, as well as Pablo Picasso, who famously used colour in this manner during his Blue Period.

Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red Blue and Yellow, 1929

The Dutch modernist movement, De Stijl, meaning 'the style,' also called Neo-Plasticism, was a group of early abstract artists who focused on the reduction and simplification of form and colour. In this movement, artists had completely abandoned content, and instead focused strictly on form. Just as the Post-Impressionists thought the art of the Impressionists was too naturalistic, the Neo-Plasticists thought the same of the Cubists, who were still creating art based on nature. Instead, the Neo-Plasticists focused on creating art in its purest state, which, as described by their co-founder, Piet Mondrian, could be achieved through the use of "the plane or the rectangular prism in primary colour (red, blue, yellow) and non-colour (white, black,

grey)” (Reynolds 178). This desire to create pure, harmonious art was a reaction to the First World War, which left the world in a chaotic, distressed state. Under De Stijl, artists sought to lay a utopian groundwork of purity and harmony for society through their art. This idea of utopian art – that art could have a transformative impact on and represent one’s ideals for society – is a recurring theme of many modernist artists and movements, many of which, including De Stijl, created manifestos to outline their own beliefs.

One of Mondrian’s works, Composition with Red Blue and Yellow is a clear example of what the Neo-Plasticists had envisioned in their creation of pure, utopian art. It is extremely typical of De Stijl artwork, following the movement’s strict formal rules of using horizontal and vertical lines and simple colours. Formally, it is especially modern, doing away with any natural representation of reality, as De Stijl artists opposed materialism and naturalism. In reference to natural form, they stated in their manifesto that they had used their art to eliminate “that which blocks pure artistic expression.” They believed that it was only through abstraction that artists could seek the true nature of reality. In Mondrian’s own words, 'Nature (or, that which I see) inspires me . . . but I want to come as close as possible to the truth and abstract everything from that, until I reach the foundation of things' (Kandel 85). Mondrian, along with other De Stijl artists, felt that nature no longer needed to be used to express reality and spirituality, and so they eradicated symbolism and subject matter, and instead focused on the purity and harmony created in the relationships between line and colour. Their utopian use of pure abstraction can be compared to that of other artists such as Suprematist Kazimir Malevich, who believed that the use of abstract, geometric forms was a superior means of pure expression than naturalism, and that art could present a new society in a time of revolution. Wassily Kandisnky had also discovered in his work a new, more powerful sense of spirituality that was not tied to the physical world, and later realized that pure, geometric forms were more spiritual than natural ones.

Conclusion

Van Gogh’s Night Café and Mondrian’s Composition with Red Blue and Yellow are representative of modernism in several ways. Night Café exemplifies the deviation from naturalism, which Van Gogh did through the use of non-representational colour and manipulation of formal qualities in order to create an emotional effect. Van Gogh’s work was extremely influential in this manner, as the use of non-representational colour, whether to express, symbolize, or for colour for colour’s sake, is evident in many modernist works. Night Café also incorporates a recurring theme in modernist art, which is the isolation and anxiety that many felt as modernization and industrialization began to have a considerable effect on peoples’ lives. Mondrian’s Composition with Red Blue and Yellow is a prime example of pure abstraction in a utopian, spiritual, and expressive manner. The artwork and the De Stijl movement epitomizes the notion of removing content and naturalism, which were connected with their realities of war, in order to find the true nature of reality. This idea of utopian art can be seen in other movements that were formed in times of war and revolution. The two artists’ works were extremely influential and the modernist traits which they embraced are ones that can be seen in the larger span of modern art.