

Some writers have argued that each discipline has ‘essential characteristics’. To what extent do you agree with this type of argument? Critically discuss, making use of one or more of the set texts on this course.

‘Will no-one stand up to assert the consciousness of having an aesthetic conscience of his own and bring some spontaneous echo of his inner being, some genuinely individual contributory to the furnishing of his own home.’¹

This essay aims to unravel the possible ‘essential characteristics’ of each discipline in order to determine the credibility of such a universal statement. I will seek to identify the essential characteristic of disciplines in an attempt to support this statement. I will be focusing upon modernism in art, and more specifically, Cubism and Futurism. The last two movements will be shown to offer identifiable essential characteristics. These will be discussed in relation to their place within modernism, and alongside the essential characteristic of Modernism. It will then be possible too determine if each discipline is characterised by essential traits or if in fact modern art, and subsequently art as a subject, possesses generic essential characteristics. I will discuss whether or not each discipline merely adopts these generic traits in the creation of new movements or whether each discipline is in fact entitled to claim an identity from individual essential characteristics.

When art was deemed independent from the service or religion of the state artists were given more scope to express themselves in their work. Expressionism was a movement dominated by Germany in 1905-1925. It included everything expressive and unlike trying to be an exact replica of the subject being portrayed it had abstract qualities. Expressionism was intended to represent the feelings and emotions of the artist, ‘the artist expresses only what he has within himself, not what he sees with his eyes.’² Colour, abstraction, line, noise, movement, rotation and shape are all expressive and therefore form the essential characteristics of Expressionism, ‘the entire arrangement of my pictures is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.’³ Avant-garde is a term commonly used to describe modern art. It represents what is new, original and cutting edge. What makes it this though – colour etc. How can you define a work of art? Is it to do with having essential characteristics or can it be categorised without such criteria. These characteristics of modern art can be seen in all works and movements, whether it be Impressionism, Cubism or even Pop Art. From Picasso to Duchamp the Avant-garde philosophy is always present.

Cubism was not intended to create a new movement when it was first found. Picasso said ‘when we invented Cubism we had no intention whatever of inventing Cubism. We wanted simply to express what was in us. Not one of us drew up a plan of campaign’⁴. The collective aim of the Picasso’s paintings was to represent some of the aspects of 3d objects so that all angles can be seen and to correct the inaccuracy of critics’ views. By all the objects being presented on one canvas it brings into view hidden views that traditional paintings would have portrayed. For Cubists and the school of philosophy, the idea of a hidden element being present in the image, therefore may not essentially ‘exist’, made the idea of knowing the far side an abstraction. The Cubists focused upon and incorporated this into their idea. The Cubist artist creates his work with the view of mobility and access to the world.

The characteristics are removed from the traditional method of conveying a sense of realism as it explores the concept of reality on a deeper level. These artists paint reality as a stark visualisation to the raw sight, without any censorship or traditional symbolism: ‘one does not imitate the appearance, the

¹ Henry Van de Velde, ‘Memoirs: 1891 – 1901’

² Alexej von Jawlensky (1864 – 1941) Russian painter of *Der Blaue Reiter*, *das kunstwerk 11*, 1948.

³ Henri Matisse ‘Notes of a Painter’

⁴ Herschel B Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p271

appearance is the result.’ The idea Braque and Picasso depicted is that the scene must not be copied but created. Braque stated: one must not imitate what one wishes to create.’⁵ The paintings also went away from the idea of space and more towards a thickness to reality and that everything is somehow connected.

Pre-Cubism was painted in an expressionist way. It was interested in block geometric shapes. Braque and Picasso became very friendly in 1908 in the Pyrenees and had studios together in Paris and both had a period of similar ‘Pre-Cubist’ work. Picasso and Braque had got to the stage where their works could barely be told apart. They were both taking high risks in producing such a controversial and different style. Their new style of painting had a profound effect on all artistic work after it.

There were two phases of Cubism; Analytic Cubism and Synthetic cubism. Each carried the essential characteristic of flatness but had evolved into specific genres.

Analytic Cubism explored the idea of being able to see multiple views of objects and surfaces on one piece of art work. The objects and spaces within a work of art were taken apart and destroyed built re-created with angular geometric shapes. Artists used limited amounts of colour, with very natural and earthy shades such as browns, greys and blacks. Analytic Cubism explores the way in which we can make sense of things. There are two types of knowledge senses that provide information which then gets processed and re-combined to make sense of it. Cubism wants to get away from the idea of copying scenes/images exactly and painting them onto a surface.

‘Clarinet and a bottle of Rum’ shows an analytical view of reality. There is limited use of colour so as not to take away the meaning of the painting itself. It is not expressively applied to the canvas; it is more dappled on with a very rough technique, as to not let emotions run wild. Some areas of the painting are more built up with paint than other parts. There is more of an emphasis in the middle sections of the painting than in the corners. It establishes space and movement in space by fragmentising it and laying it flat, showing the flatness of the support of the canvas. Showing the notion of depth and experience in reality.

Synthetic Cubism explored the use of different combinations of styles, mediums and visual language in an art work. As the name suggests, synthetics were important in this phase. The use of collage in Cubism came about as did the introduction of texture. Braque accomplished this texture in his pieces by using sand which created a coarse surface. The use of lettering and charcoal became more frequent. Lettering enabled the painting to have close links to the culture of the time. It brought the painting to the present with the use of everyday products being depicted.

‘Still Life with Chair Caning’ is very important in Cubism as it marks the first collage in fine art. Although the technique of collage wasn’t invented by Picasso, his use of it was revolutionary and modern. ‘Still Life with Chair Caning’ has characteristics of traditional Analytical Cubism however it is still somewhat original and radical. It includes iconography with references to Paris café’s, and uses the oval shapes to distinguish the objects.

The uses of musical instruments in Braque’s pieces involve a sense of touch which introduces not just a visionary aspect but a somewhat tactile one also. The painting also involves textual elements which gives the painting a sense of time and relevance to everyday life. The values introduced by Braque were formed by memory, depth and the viewer’s ability to interpret objects and everyday things. The

paintings where based in nature itself and had established a way to express the paintings where not just formalist but that they are also pictorial.

Cubism marked the first wholly Modernist movement. Cubism has universal essential characteristics that makes it similar to Expressionism/Modernism. Picasso sees Cubism as 'no different from any other school of painting.'⁶ This quote questions the idea that each discipline has essential characteristics as it claims that there is no difference. However, the use of colour, line and shape within Cubism, was used to depict not just what the eye can physically see, but also what it cannot, and Cubist artists believed what could not be seen was as equally important as what could be, and so expressed themselves through their art works. This idea had not been explored in previous disciplines, so therefore, it could be said that the essential characteristics of the movement were what defined it as a movement in its own right. However, they were still similar to the essential characteristics of Expressionism in the sense of colour, line and shape. So maybe, the essential characteristics only defined a particular style in the collective term of modernism, and really defined modern art as a whole, rather than each individual discipline.

The Futurist movement came about after cubism in 1909 and in 1911 manifested itself as a movement. Futurist ideas were forced upon society in an aggressive manner through 'shocking' manifestos that 'neglected all past values, even art itself.'⁷ It too denied anything to do with traditional western art. Their fight for liberty from constraints of the past, led to their reputation as 'the symbol of all that is new, terrifying, and seemingly ridiculous in contemporary art.'⁸ The idea of modern technology and advances in it were portrayed through many of the works from this movement. It conveyed dynamism and movement. Futurists thought of war as a positive influence and believed that the glorification of war would cleanse Italy 'we will glorify war'. 'Patriotic Celebration', a piece by Carra, was a demonstration for intervention for the war. The Revolutionary ideas of war to liberate man and the idea of the will of the people were, as I've said before, important at the time the Futurists came about. War brought about those conflicting with the past and the possible future, and this was a key concept in Futurism. At the time of this work of art, Futurists were quite dominant with the influences of Dada and Surrealism and their ideas have a macho quality as the movement was heavily dominated by the male sex. Futurism not only influenced Italy but had profound effects in Russia, Germany and Britain. Futurism also has close links to Vorticism in that Vorticism was connected with Nazism and the power to rebel, however it is more Illusionist than Futurist.

The essential characteristics of the Futurist movement were; colour, movement, dynamism, and reflecting the machine age. The subject and content were very important and were similar to Cubism in that the shapes of some of the artworks were angular in form and the use of collage was also used in Futurism, which was a revolutionary concept of Cubism. It also had similarities to Expressionism in that through the use of text and the strong messages of war, the Futurist's conveyed a form of their expression. What separates it from the other disciplines is that it is of the machine age, and it looks towards the future and not to the past. This was the essential characteristic to Futurism. Without it, it would not have that distinct feature that would separate it from Cubism, and Expressionism.

Art works, such as 'Patriotic Celebration', were almost statements of the Twentieth Century living and expresses new technology within the pieces themselves. For example, the introduction of the motor car and the noise associated with industry. The use of cars and speed in the art pieces allows a certain amount of movement. Carra's 'The Red Horseman' (1913) shows movement in that the horse is seen to be running with the use of more than 4 legs being shown on the piece, a kind of mapping of the horses

⁶ Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) 'Picasso Speaks' Art in Theory

⁷ Futurism – The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p9

⁸ Futurism – The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p9

movement. The primary goal of the Futurist was to ‘transport the spectator to the centre of the canvas, to involve him in the action of the painting and thus to awaken in him a response with the painters vision, a vision of the “inner core being”.’⁹ The spectator would be drawn to the centre of the array of technical forms, but would then become a participant in the action taking place.

Noise is included in many pieces of Futurist pieces, i.e. Dada and his sound poems. It represents the sound of everyday life as well as looking and feeling it. Noise is a different characteristic used in Futurism but it can be linked to Expressionism as noise is an expressive action, therefore it can be argued that it doesn’t form an essential characteristic in Futurism. However, if looking at it that way, you can conclude that everything is an expression of some sort, and so why then isn’t every work of art classed as Expressionist? Is noise therefore different enough to be a separate essential characteristic or is it one that is shared with all that is Expressionist? Noise was only really recognised through Futurism, so in that way it could be argued that it is different enough, as it was only when it was suggested that it could be referred to as an expression, it wasn’t identified before hand.

DOES THIS MAKE SENSE OR IS IT A LOAD OF CRAP CAN IT BE REWORDED BETTER??

Movement and speed is shown in Futurist art works through lines of force that are thrown out from the centre. This conforms to one of the requirements laid out in the Manifesto of Futurism; ‘we affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed.’ This idea of ‘new’ suggests therefore that it is a characteristic specific to Futurism. The idea that it opened ‘the ‘new’ in modern life’ suggests that it created an essential characteristic not only to Futurism but the possibility of it as a characteristic in movements that followed Futurism. In fact,

ARE THERE ANY MOVEMENTS AFTER FUTURISM THAT INTRODUCE THE IDEA OF THE BEAUTY OF SPEED????

However, speed itself is not a new characteristic in art. Speed can be classed as movement, and movement plays a key part in all Modernist movements that I have looked at, i.e. Expressionism and Cubism. With this in mind, speed could be an essential characteristic of art in general in the twentieth century, although Futurism took it to a different level and developed the idea further than it had been done previously.

DOES THIS MAKE SENSE?

Futurism has characteristics similar to that of Cubist work through the idea of movement. Braque’s ‘Clarinet with Bottle of Rum on a Mantelpiece’ sows some sense of movement within the painting; however it is seemingly more stationary than Futurist work.

‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’ gives reference to freeing Italy from its past and its ‘second-hand clothes’¹⁰. It also states that the use of old ideas/objects should be ‘gagged’. They looked upon any man that went against tradition should have a title of honour bestowed upon them. This idea was played with in ‘Patriotic Celebration’. The idea that futurists ‘art is intoxicated with spontaneity and power’ is a key concept in this idea of not using influence from past movements.

The 11th point in the manifesto is quite theatrical in the way they saw things; ‘bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts.’¹¹ This in a way can be seen in their art works as it is a very imposing way of seeing the world for what it has the potential of being, rather than what it is realistically like.

⁹ Futurism: Politics, Painting and Performance, p22

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Perhaps Essential characteristics are not defining specific movements but defining art in general? Both Picasso and Pablo Picasso claimed that they had never consciously become cubists as such, but they are recognised of being from the cubist movement; 'when we invented Cubism we had no intention whatsoever of inventing Cubism'¹², 'As I never consciously, and after mature reflection, became a Cubist, by dint of working along certain lines, have been classed as such,'. This strongly backs up the the argument by some writers that each discipline has essential characteristics, as it suggests that Picasso and Juan's works had characteristics of the movements, without intention, which ultimately classed them as being part of it, therefore there must have been essential characteristics particular to the Cubist discipline in order to put them within it and not class it as something else.

Picasso comments on Cubism in an interview with Marius de Zayas. Picasso explores the connection of research in art and the notion of art as an evolutionary process. Picasso believes that searching plays an insignificant part in art, and that it is the finding that is what is important. He exclaims that the artists that find are the ones that are admired. He goes on to exclaim that 'when I paint my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for.'

Picasso backs up the idea that Cubism originally portrayed. He says that 'through art we express our conception of what nature is not'¹³. He says this in relation to the idea that cubism shows all perspectives of objects and that it can be seen from all angles, which gives the piece its abstraction.

In relation to the evolution in art, Picasso argues that there is 'no past or future in art'¹⁴ therefore evolution cannot physically happen. He believes that the artworks don't evolve but more the ideas of people change as does their ways of expression. Picasso claims that the art works simply vary and not evolve.

Whistler was an Impressionist. The essential characteristics of this style are colour, light/dark effects and mist. Whistler's paintings confirmed the interest of the artist and reflected artist's views of what art is and that it is not a commission from individuals. It had no influence from outsiders and portrays the artists influence completely. It wasn't concerned with non art issues, such as religion and is produced as a commodity. It marks a move towards art for art sake.

In his paintings, Whistler shows that he is after an aesthetic response. He was not concerned with the correct representation but more with the atmosphere the painting portrays. Whistler believed subject matter was not as important as the translation of the painting itself. He relates his painting to music through the term 'nocturne'. He does this to refer to musical harmony and separates art from life. Music is the most abstract form of art, and therefore is the perfect comparison for his abstract pieces. It creates a mood and feeling without any obvious visual stimuli. 'Nocturne' introduces the imaginary figure of a conductor bring the colours of the work together.

He uses the perception of light and shade in his nocturnes. He has an abstract style and is concerned with how things look different under different sources of light, i.e. the scene would look one way in day light and another in moon light. In 'Nocturne in Black and Gold' he uses the light that comes from the fireworks, and focuses his attention on the visual shimmers that appear.

Whistler's nocturnes were very similar in that they all used limited colour. The scene was mainly dark and tones of blacks, greys and dark blues were used. They had contrasting areas of colour, i.e. gold and silver, which drew the attention to the subject and what was being depicted. The use of mist set the

¹² Pablo Picasso, Conversation, 1935 – Theories of Modern Art, Herschel B Chipp

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scene and all works had similar characteristics. What sets it out from the other pieces is its style. It is abstract, but not in the ways of cubism and futurism where the subjects were pulled apart and played with, but more of abstraction of real forms, created from the idea of darkness and nightfall and the time of day the paintings reflected.

In the Whistler/Ruskin trial, Whistler was questioned about the *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, and was criticised that it wasn't a real work of art because it doesn't portray a real scene. Ruskin said: "I have seen, and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's paint."¹⁵ Ruskin didn't understand the reasoning behind Whistler's style. Instead of painting the gardens and scenery that the scene could include, Whistler concentrates on the sparks and fireworks and the abstract effect that they create. It could be said, therefore, that Whistler's pieces did have the essential characteristics of traditional representational art, but with the introduction of the scene being painted in darkness the forms change so it represents something quite different.

How do you define a work of art without specific characteristics to look for?

It is difficult to define modern art in a way that includes all of 20th century western art

Using the idea of Picasso's in that art is not evolutionary and that it changes within itself, leaves the suggestion that all art work has essential characteristics but each discipline holds within it a core set of essential characteristics that do not differ from one another, but share certain aspects, in some form or another. This would include the illusion of space, use of colour, whether it be dull greys or fuchsia pinks, structure and form, identity and towards the twentieth century a degree of flatness within the art works themselves. With this in mind, in answer to whether or not I believe that each discipline has essential characteristics I would say yes, but they are not necessarily different to each other. Art is a collective term for many disciplines and throughout its history it has gone through changes but has kept certain recognisable traits that would make it into a work of art.