

## Value of Fantasy and Imagination in Modern Trends

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**Introduction** - From the first, modernism felt it should embrace new developments in natural science. For obvious reasons, optical physics and colour theory were to be of lasting importance, from Kandinsky onwards. There was also some input by mathematics into cubism; Einstein's physics found parallels in futurist notions of the fourth dimension; and the curious biomorphs of Miró and Klee may be related to creatures seen under the biologist's microscope. But it was in the human sciences - more tenuous but richer in suggestion - that modern art found both its philosophical courage and a fountainhead of source material. The most important of these soft sciences - which appear even softer today than they did at the time were Freudian and Jungian psychology. The unconscious mind provided nothing less than a new world, a Prospero's island, in which artists could walk their imaginations and release their fantasies. The surrealist interest in dreams and automatism writing, drawing and painting without the mediation of thought cast an immensely long shadow over the whole culture of the twentieth century, while Jung's archetypes breathed new life into symbolism. The latter have persisted long after Jung the clinician has been consigned to the dustbin of history. They can be spotted, for example, in the later post-pop work of Peter Blake.

In more recent times it was not scientific ideas but technological hardware that stimulated the visual arts. While the result has undoubtedly been a preponderance of very ordinary and much bad art, this is beside the point: oil on canvas is also mostly mediocre. Artists have grasped at the opportunities which technical advance gives them because that is their nature - to seek symbolic languages appropriate to their time and their vision. In some cases the languages used in the second half of the century were borrowed from those of the first, merely translated into contemporary terms. Much video-installation art, for example, looks like the kind of thing Dada would have been doing had they been lucky enough to possess DVD. On the other hand, because the material from which art can be made has become so radically different, there have been

immense changes in what can be produced: stainless steel, plastics, fibreglass, polyester resin, neon, acrylic paints and NASA adhesives have all had their effects, as have airbrushes, aerosol sprays, Polaroid cameras, photocopiers and fax machines. Some of these would have delighted advanced practitioners like Malevich or Boccioni, but they would also have utterly changed their art, just as cheap computers and colour printers in the early 1960s would have transformed pop and op art.

The artist's orientation to the world became much more various in the modern era. At one extreme there were the depressives. Gloom-laden and angst-ridden, they contemplated modern society as one might a burnt-out church or a crashed car. Existentialism was the in-house religion of this branch of the avant-garde. It embraced freedom spiritual, cultural and political but this was not a particularly comfortable or comforting clinch. Released from irrational taboos, irrelevant religion and unthinking social obedience, the self became a pit in which exhilaration wrestled with boredom, liberty with fear. In life, anything was allowable, but existence was a cul-de-sac and personal extinction a certainty. In this perspective, art often became a desperate and driven activity but also a meaningless one.

In contrast to these intimations of the existential condition, much of modern art has been nothing but an expression of joy. Matisse, Balla, O'Keeffe, Brancusi, Klee, Moore and Johns are just a selection of the artists who felt no compulsion to make their works into public acts of suffering. And one of the most attractive strands in modernist art has been its sense of humour. To spend an hour in a room with the solemn works of a Clyfford Still or a Ben Nicholson is perhaps thought-provoking. To do so with those of Magritte pays the same dividend, but you will also laugh in delight.

Twentieth-century art is a broad church, complex and fraught with contradictions. Here is an art that dealt in serene unities and hectic disjunctions, in the private meditations of Rothko and Mondrian and the public interventionism of Picasso's Guernica. It embraced the metal and machine

age and at the same time hankered for the pre-colonial art of the black nations. It sanctioned the excesses of Dali and yet adored the monk-like dedication of Albers. It shouted against consumerism while lauding Warhol. And, if very often an art of movement, it was always one of movements, a forest tangled with an undergrowth of -isms.

No selection of art from such a period can hope to be complete. What follows is an attempt to trace a path loosely through the briery wood. At its centre may be found a castle and a sleeping beauty: but she is for each of us to discover

for ourselves.

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