Art and the World's Peoples

New Internet Global Database of Painting and Drawing

Theme: [History](#)

> 'We have been poor for hundreds of years, even thousands of years, and they are living in their fancy resorts and mansions'

This quote from one of the 'Red Shirt' protestors in the recent demonstrations in Thailand was an example of the process known there "as ta sawang, or a 'brightening of the eyes' – an awakening, a realization of a truth they had not recognized" (International Herald Tribune 21 May 2010).

It was journalism which would brighten the eyes of the artist John Sloan, a member of the American Ash Can group of realist painting in the early 1900s. According to David E. Shi inFacing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture 1850-1920, journalism "led them to see life up close, as an immense sprawling, kaleidoscopic affair, often sordid and ugly, but always interesting". Sloan believed that "his journalistic work alerted him to the beauty in commonplace things and people."

Croidheáin's paintings of Dublin (http://gaelart.net/

Another well known artist, the Irish painter Jack B. Yeats, started his career by making drawings for various magazines around the same time. In Jack B. Yeats: A Biography, Hilary Pyle writes: "The strong realism, the enjoyment of the ridiculous and of fantasy, and the dry humour, not always obvious, in these Punch drawings, all originated in a deep sympathy with humanity, and produced in his last paintings great works of art."

This interest in life – people and their environment – by visual artists took on a new meaning as unidealised scenes of modern life took over from historical, mythological, and religious subjects. The growing movement towards Realism began in France in the 1850s with Courbet's belief in objective reality as a basis for art, rebelling against the exaggerated emotionalism of the Romantic Movement. Following in the path of Courbet, the Impressionists also set out 'to be true to nature' and went out into the countryside to find subjects for their art.

Since these earlier, heady days of Realism many artists have expanded the variety of forms, content and themes of art concerned to show economic hardship, social and racial injustice, and political struggle or else to simply try and understand our relationship with the natural and built environment. As Modernism became the dominant force in the art world in the twentieth century many of its differing forms were adopted around the world in the pursuit of a socially-based art. All over the world today there is art being made by artists reflecting local and international themes following in the tradition founded by Courbet. Examples of such art can be seen by clicking on the list of countries on my blog at   http://gaelart.blogspot.com/2010/04/social-realism-art-country-list.html.   Countries

mentioned below will refer to this list.

Development of Different Forms

From the middle of the nineteenth century socially-based art took on many forms from Naturalism (accurate and precise details, and portraying things as they are) to Realism (not necessarily depicted exactly as they are in shape, colour, tone, etc.).

With the arrival of Modernism on the art scene some artists used Impressionism (emphasis on light in its changing qualities) [Spain, Czech Republic] while others used Expressionism (distortion for emotional effect) [Germany, Thailand, Israel] as the basis for their art.

Art that specifically addressed social issues, called Social Realism, became very popular in the 1930s [USA]. Since then other forms such as Naive Art [Cambodia], Super Realism [Iran] and even some elements of Cubism [Philippines] and Abstract art [Iraq] have appeared. Local folk art traditions have also had a major influence in some parts of the world today [Singapore, Palestinian Territory, Tunisia, Syria, Vietnam].

Content: Common Themes

Workers

The depiction of agricultural workers in the form of peasants and farmers was one of the early themes of Realist art as artists left the studio to paint en plein air[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/En_plein_air] [Peru, Cuba, United Kingdom, Finland, Netherlands, France].

Industrial workers are a common theme [Mongolia, Denmark, Bulgaria, Albania, Egypt, Australia, Germany, Ireland, USA, Azerbaijan] along with craft workers [Peru, Denmark] and fishermen [Denmark, Norway, France].

Images of work covered themes from building power stations [Ireland, USA, China], markets [Haiti, Singapore, Iraq, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Latvia, Lithuania, Algeria, Armenia, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Russia], women working [Taiwan, Kenya, Cuba, Cyprus, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Estonia, Norway, Syria, Sweden, Brazil, Pakistan], to low paid jobs [Zambia].

Women and children

Many artists depicted women in oppressive situations, women reading [Iran, Azerbaijan], women with guns [Albania, Serbia, Palestinian Territory, Vietnam, Belarus], and children [Belgium].

Social and political themes

Many themes are covered from poverty at home [Romania, Armenia, Argentina, Ireland, Russia]; migration and evictions [United Kingdom, Guatemala, Ukraine, Belgium, Algeria, Ireland]; poverty, prison, disease, hunger, and death [Uruguay, Switzerland, Indonesia, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Ecuador, Hungary, Venezuela, Spain, Ireland, Russia];

unemployment [Argentina, USA]; abortion [Portugal], torture, death, and political repression [Cambodia, Thailand, Kenya, South Africa, South Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, USA]; war [Canada, Austria, Ireland]; demonstrations and strikes [United Kingdom, Ghana, Nicaragua, South Korea, Lithuania, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Argentina, Ireland, Russia, Democratic Republic of Congo, USA]; political activism and meetings [Denmark, Albania, South Africa, Lithuania, France, Democratic Republic of Congo, USA]; civil war, revolution and executions [Italy, Ireland, Russia, Mexico, USA] and colonialism [France, Spain].

Culture

Cultural themes include: the role of the artist [Mongolia, Albania]; music and dance [Sweden, Dominican Republic, Senegal, Japan, Cyprus, Chile, Syria, Brazil, Slovenia, Ireland, USA, Azerbaijan]; dress [New Zealand, Morocco, Pakistan, India, Egypt, Spain, Azerbaijan]; bars and cafes [Poland, Estonia, Australia, Germany, Ireland, USA]; boxing and wrestling [Ireland, USA, Azerbaijan]; native peoples [New Zealand, Israel]; and murals [Chile, Croatia, Columbia, Mexico].

Environment

The depiction of the natural and built environment covers: landscapes [Bosnia, Iceland, Norway, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Finland, Brazil, Czech Republic, Greece], seascapes [Spain, USA] and cityscapes [Nigeria, USA].

From all of the above discussion of social and political themes it can be seen that many artists the world over choose to involve themselves in the life and debates of their country. In the words of the painter Paraskeva Clark (1898-1986) [Canada]:

Those who give their lives, their knowledge and their time to social struggle have the right to expect great help from the artist. And I cannot imagine a more inspiring role than that which the artist is asked to play for the defence and advancement of civilization.

(Anne Newlands Canadian Art: From Its Beginnings to 2000. Firefly Books Ltd. (2000) pp. 74)

 Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin is a prominent Irish artist who has exhibited widely around Ireland. His work consists of drawings and paintings and features cityscapes of Dublin, images based on Irish history and other work with social/political themes (http://gaelart.net/).

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