Art History Learning Journal: Week 7

The Evolution of Modern Art: From Cézanne to Picasso

The early 20th century witnessed a revolutionary transformation in the world of art, with pioneering artists pushing the boundaries of traditional representation. This essay explores the interconnected influences and innovations of three seminal works: Paul Cézanne's The Large Bathers, Henri Matisse's Bonheur de Vivre (Joy of Life), and Pablo Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. By examining these paintings, we can trace the rapid evolution of modern art and its complex relationship with Impressionism.

Cézanne's The Large Bathers (c. 1906) serves as a crucial bridge between Post-Impressionism and the avant-garde movements that followed. In this monumental work, Cézanne depicts a group of nude female figures in a landscape setting, employing his characteristic technique of constructing forms through patches of color. The composition is marked by a sense of geometric simplification, with figures and landscape elements reduced to basic shapes and planes. This approach creates a feeling of solidity and structure that contrasts with the ephemeral effects sought by the Impressionists. Cézanne's palette in this work is subdued and earthy, featuring harmonious tones of blues, greens, and ochres that unify the scene.

Matisse's Bonheur de Vivre (1905-6) clearly draws inspiration from Cézanne's bathers, but takes the subject matter in a bold new direction. Like Cézanne, Matisse portrays nude figures in an idyllic landscape. However, Matisse's painting explodes with vibrant, non-naturalistic color that defines the Fauvist movement. The flattened forms and decorative patterning show the influence of Post-Impressionism, but pushed to new extremes. The sinuous lines and sensual poses of the figures evoke a mood of pure pleasure and contentment, emphasizing emotional expression over realistic representation. While Cézanne sought to create structure through color relationships, Matisse uses color to evoke feeling and create a sense of joyous harmony.

Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) represents an even more radical break from tradition, while still referencing the bather theme. The five female figures are harshly angular and distorted, their faces mask-like and unsettling. The flattened, fragmented forms and disjointed perspective show Picasso moving toward Cubism, a revolutionary approach to representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional canvas. Yet echoes of Cézanne remain in the structural approach to form and the triangular composition. Picasso's color palette is more restrained than Matisse's, focusing instead on the radical deconstruction of form and space.

All three paintings explore the theme of female nudes in nature, but interpret it through increasingly avant-garde stylistic approaches. They share an interest in simplification of form and move progressively further from naturalistic representation. At the same time, each artist develops a unique visual language - Cézanne's structured brushwork, Matisse's expressive color, and Picasso's analytical fragmentation of form.

Impressionism laid crucial groundwork for the development of these modern art styles in several key ways. The Impressionists' emphasis on capturing fleeting visual effects and their own subjective perceptions, rather than adhering to academic rules, opened the door for increasingly personal and experimental approaches to art-making. Their use of loose, visible brushstrokes and pure, unmixed colors on the canvas influenced the expressive techniques of later movements like Fauvism and Expressionism. The Impressionists also began to flatten pictorial space and emphasize the two-dimensional surface of the canvas - tendencies that would be further developed by Post-Impressionists like Cézanne and Gauguin, and eventually lead to the more radical abstractions of Cubism and beyond.

While modern styles evolved out of Impressionism in many ways, they can also be seen as reacting against certain aspects of the movement. Many post-Impressionist and early modernist artists felt that Impressionism, with its focus on fleeting optical effects, lacked structure and substance. Cézanne, for instance, sought to create a sense of solidity and permanence in his paintings that went beyond surface appearances (Rewald, 1986). The Fauves pushed Impressionist color to shocking new extremes, while Expressionist artists emphasized emotional intensity over visual perception. Cubism and other abstract movements rejected Impressionism's focus on visual appearances altogether, instead exploring conceptual approaches to representation.

Modernist artists also moved away from Impressionism's emphasis on naturalism and plein air painting, often working from imagination or memory instead. They sought to express deeper psychological and spiritual truths beyond surface reality. As the art historian Meyer Schapiro noted, "To get beyond Impressionism...meant to seek for form and structure in sensation, to revive imagination and memory in confronting nature, [and] to escape the passivity and indifference of the merely receptive eye" (Schapiro, 1978, p. 47).

In conclusion, the relationship between Impressionism and later modern movements was complex and multifaceted. While Impressionism provided crucial foundations for modernist experimentation, subsequent artists also defined themselves in opposition to aspects of Impressionist practice as they pushed art in bold new directions. The works of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso exemplify this dynamic, showing both the enduring influence of earlier innovations and the relentless drive toward new forms of artistic expression that characterized the early modern period.

References

Rewald, J. (1986). Cézanne: A biography. Harry N. Abrams.

Schapiro, M. (1978). Modern art: 19th and 20th centuries. George Braziller.