

AN ANALYTICAL NARRATIVE ON PAINTERS EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO THE HUMAN FIGURE

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Abstract

This paper is a brief history of painters' approach to the human figure, drawn from the advancement of painting from the prehistoric era to the 21st century. The desire to create art is as old as mankind itself. Since time immemorial, people have used art to communicate information, tell stories and record events. Art is one of the deepest forms of personal expression. Art began underground, in caves, tombs and catacombs. The human figure has been one of the constant subjects of art since the first stone age cave paintings. Artworks, such as figure and figurative paintings have been reinterpreted in various styles throughout history. Examining various periods in the evolution of painting, what are the contrasting sources to which artists turn for inspiration in the rendition of human figure? What are the varying purpose of human figure paintings? Across this broad timeline, what are the distinctive styles, materials and techniques of rendering human figure in painting? These questions underscore this brief narrative of painters' evolutionary approach to the human figure in painting.

Key Words: Narrative, Painting, Human Figure, Approach, Evolutionary

Introduction

The painters' approach to human figure (or human forms) involves a study and appreciation of the beauty of the human body in its visual analysis and portrayal. This process also entails analysis of the postures, such as sitting, standing or sleeping and the movements, such as walking, running, dancing, among other actions.

From the Stone Age to the inception of the enlightenment era, painters were confined to the rules of perspective and resemblance in their approach to human figures. During the ancient civilization, water-based media were mostly used for painting. In Modernism, oil pigments became the ideal media for depicting human figure. Modernists approach was dominated by blending and layering paint, which made the human forms more real. Working from life models used to be the preferred practice until the middle of nineteenth century, when photography was discovered. With this major turning point in the image world, modern painters diversified their approach to include photographic process. They also abstracted human forms, though with clues of resemblance.

Postmodernists approach to human figures in painting is an extension of Modernist style. They deployed more materials in their approach to human figures. Postmodern artists expanded the photographic process with the birth of digital reproduction and pixilation. Nowadays, the length of time needed to complete a portrait painting has led most contemporary painters to use photographs as references of human forms. Postmodern painters also expanded their palettes to transcend beyond the traditional liquid pigments, such as acrylics, water and oil colours, to include digital pixilation, solid colourful materials as well as gaseous colourful materials. Painting is no longer confined to the two-dimensional flat surface.

The painters approach to human figure turned around different art periods, characterized by remarkable events. According to Wilder (2007), an art period can take from 50 to 20,000 years, depending on the level of cultural change. This narrative of painters' approach to human figure is based on the major turning points in the evolution of painting. It reviews selected figure and figurative paintings from the following civilizations: Cave, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Byzantine, Ancient China, Renaissance, Modernism and Postmodernism.

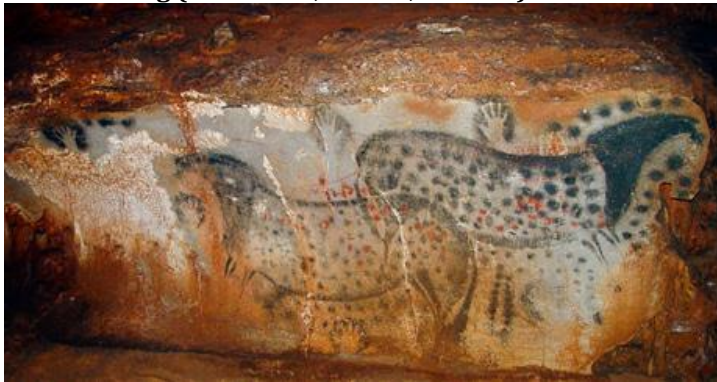
Cave Painting (around 50,000 – 5,000 BCE)

Fig.1: Wall painting in the cave at Pech-Merle, France, 22,000 BCE. 336 cm long.

Source: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/06/photogalleries/cave-handprints-actually-women-missions-pictures/>

The style of Paleolithic work is naturalistic, as exemplified by Wall painting in the cave at Pech-Merle, France (Fig. 1). The painting is composed of horses, spotted negative hand imprints and brown hues. The cave artists used lines and dots to depicts animals on rocks. The two hands portrayed above the horses are signatures of community members. There are also prehistoric paintings discovered in the caves of Australia and India, created around 50000 – 40000 BCE.



Fig.2: Wall painting in the cave at Tassili-n-Ajjer, 8,000-6000bce.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Tassili-n-Ajjer>

Among the latest cave paintings depicting human figure is found on the wall of Tassili-n-Ajjer cave in Algeria (Fig.2). It dates around 8,000-6000 BCE. In that era, the cave artists integrated more human figures in their compositions than the earlier periods. Yet, they continued to approach human figures with a sketchy style, characterized by the depiction of war, propaganda and religious beliefs. Cave art is often macho and sometimes comic and highly imaginative as shown. The work is composed of people in motion, that suggests a hunting scene.

Ancient Egyptian Painting (around 2500 BCE)

Egypt was the first civilization to use synthetic pigments. Adams (2012) posits that "Egyptian artists added many new colours to the earth tones used by prehistoric cave painters. Especially striking are Egyptian blues (ground from lapis lazuli), greens (from malachite), and golden yellows (from arsenic trisulfide, known as opriment)". They increased the range of supports to include wooden and stone statues, panels, and papyrus.

Ancient Egyptian artists approached the human forms in a style called "Frontalism" in their figure paintings. They avoided front-view and painted the side-view of human figures. This style, as stated by Centricity (1994 and Mark (2017), is prominent in the palette of Narmer. Frontalism is considered to be an early blueprint. It is a formula for figure representation, that was to rule Egyptian art for 3,000 years as exemplified by the following work.



Fig.3: Nebamun hunting birds, from the tomb of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt, c. 1390–1352 BCE.

Source: British Museum, London, England. http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/british_museum_nebamun_packet1.pdf

A fragment of a painting on gypsum plaster (Fig.3) shows the ancient Egyptian artists' approach to figures on a flat surface. This painting was executed in the tomb of Amenemheb at Thebes. The composition depicts a scene of the deceased nobleman (Nebamun) standing in his boat and chasing birds from a papyrus swamp with his "throw-stick". He catches some birds with his right hand. His hunting cat, on a papyrus stem in front of him, catches two birds in her claws while holding the wings of a third bird in her teeth. His two acquaintances (possibly his wife and daughter) are scaled down in proportion to their rank. Adams (2012) finds that "although the water, plants and figures are represented by the usual conventions, the cat, fish, and birds show a naturalism based on visual observation". The tomb painting was created to function as a symbolic reminder of the eternal nature of life and the value of personal and communal stability for the deceased (Mark, 2017). The dominant colours are blue and brown hues.

Ancient Greece Painting (800 – 323 BCE)

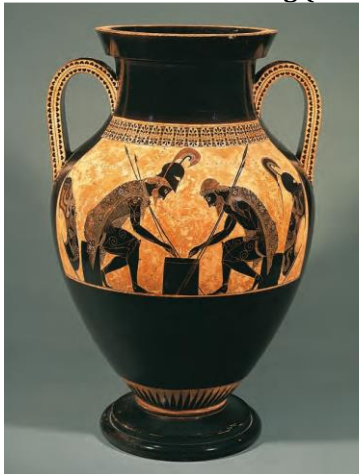


Fig.4: Exekias, amphora, 540–530 BCE. Terra-cotta, 61 cm high.

Source: Adams, L. S. (2012). *A history of western art* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Chris Freitag. P. 88.

Fig.4, shows the vase painting, Achilles and Ajax playing a board game. The composition integrates form with characterization to convey the impression that Achilles, the younger warrior on the left, will win the game. Greek vases were made of terra-cotta. Black-figure artists painted the figures in black silhouette with a slip made of clay and water. Details were added with a sharp tool by incising lines through the painted surface and exposing the orange clay below. The vase was then fired. The final result was an oxidization process that turned the surface of the vase reddish-orange and the painted areas black. The painting technique used during the Archaic period is known as black-figure (c. 600–480 BCE) (Adams, 2012).

Ancient Chinese Painting (500bce-1200)**Fig.5: The official Chinese court portrait of Empress Cao, around 11th century**

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:B_Song_Dynasty_Cao_Empress_Sitting_with_Maids.JPG

Fig. 6 shows an official Chinese court portrait of Empress Cao (wife of Emperor Renzong) of Song Dynasty, created around the 11th century by unknown artist. Painting in the Chinese traditional style is (Ragans, 2005) known as guóhuà, meaning "national" or "native painting". The painters' approach to human figure in the 11th century was dominated by techniques in calligraphy, that are done with a brush dipped in black ink or coloured pigments. In creating this portrait, silhouettes of the Empress Cao and maids were firstly created in flat colours. Next, calligraphic technique was used to capture resemblance, and in definition of shapes, forms, drapery and patterns.

Byzantine Mosaic (500-1200)**Fig.6: Court of Theodora, apse mosaic, San Vitale, C. AD 264cm × 365 cm**

Source: Kleiner, F. S. (2009). Gardner's art through the ages: A global history (13th ed.). Boston, MA: Clark Baxter

Fig. 5 shows a group portrait, that represents Court of Theodora. Apart from painting with pigments, the Byzantine artists used mosaic to render human figures on Wall. Unlike Hellenistic mosaic, made by arranging pebbles on the floor, Christian mosaic, as shown in this work was made by adapting the Roman method of embedding tesserae in wet cement or plaster. Tesserae is a Greek word, that (Adams, 2012) mean "squares" or "groupings of four". They could also be round in shapes. Byzantine artists used Tesserae of small squares and rectangles, cut from coloured stone or glass, to create realistic portraits. They also used gold tesserae, made by pressing a square of gold leaf between two pieces of cut glass, for definition of forms, lighting and shimmering effects.

Renaissance Painting (1400-1530)



Fig.7: Mona Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1503–5. Oil on wood, 76.8 × 53.3 cm

Source: Musée du Louvre, Paris, France,

http://www.paris-paris-paris.com/paris_landmarks/museums/louvre

The Renaissance artists were confined to the rules of realism and perspective. The painters served as photographers. Their approach to human figure was dominated by the urge to capture the exact replica of images on canvas. In most of their works, Renaissance painters employed models. In creating 'Mona Lisa', Leonardo used singers and jesters to keep Madonna Lisa (his model) smiling, while he painted (Adams, 2012). 'Mona Lisa' (Fig. 7) is composed of a female figure in a sitting position, rusty colours and a background made up of sky and landforms.

Stained-Glass Windows (1000-1400)

The painters' approach to human figure was still confined to the depiction of resemblance and the rules of perspective despite the difficulties in working with stained glass material. Stained glass is translucent coloured glass cut to form a window design. Compositions are made from pieces of coloured glass formed by mixing metallic oxides with molten glass or fusing coloured glass with clear glass. The artist cuts the individual pieces as closely as possible to the shape of a face or whatever individual feature is to be represented. The pieces are then fitted to a model drawn on wood or paper, and details are added in black enamel. The dark pigments are hardened and fused with the glass through firing in a kiln. The pieces of fired glass are then arranged on the model and joined by strips of lead. The predominant colours of Gothic stained glass tend to be blue and red, in contrast to the golds that characterize most Byzantine mosaics (Gardner and Kleiner, 2013).

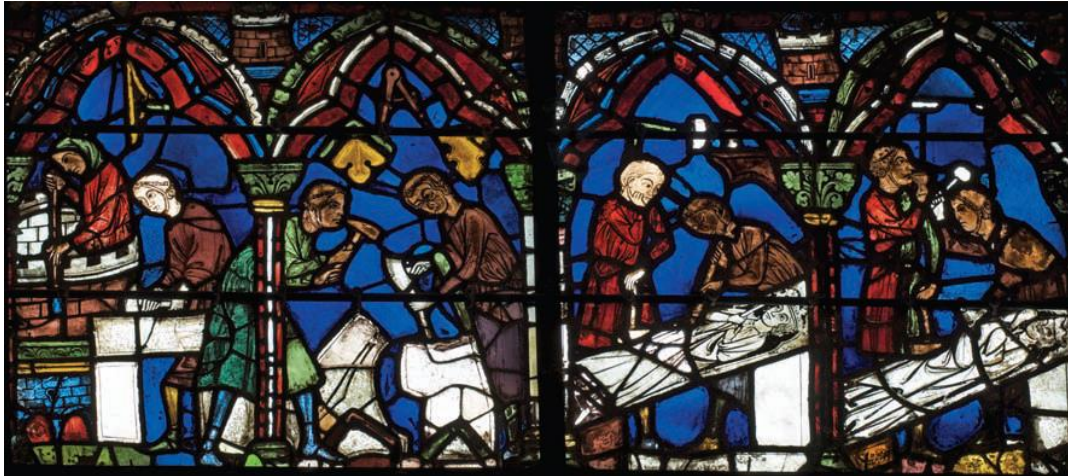


Fig.8: Stonemasons and sculptors, 1200–1220.

Source: Gardner & Kleiner (2013). *Gardner's art through the ages: A global history* (14th ed.), p. 375.

A figurative painting (Fig. 8) typifies the painters approach to human forms with stained-glass. It is a detail of a stained-glass window in the Northernmost Radiating Chapel in the Ambulatory, Chartres Cathedral, France. This work portrays some stonemasons and sculptors at work. The composition is realistic, dominated by red and blue hues. The artist used black lines for details.

Modern Painting (1870-1970)

Modern Painters' approach to human figures was very radical, as they rejected the conventional style of naturalism, and abstracted the human figures. Most of their paintings retain some identifiable features, like clues of resemblance. The most influential movements of modern art are: Fauvism (1905-7), Cubism (1908-14), Futurism (1909-14), Expressionism (from 1905), Dada (1916-24), Surrealism (from 1924), Abstract Expressionism (1948-60) and Pop Art (1955, 1970).

Fauvism demonstrated the independent power of colour. Fauvist painters highly subjective approach to art was in contrast to the classical content-oriented outlook of the academies. Futurists introduced movement into their canvas. Expressionism popularized subjectivity in painting and showed that representational art may legitimately include subjective distortion. Dada focused on performance art and ready-mades. Surrealism generated an unusually, new set of non-rational images. Abstract expressionism popularized abstraction.

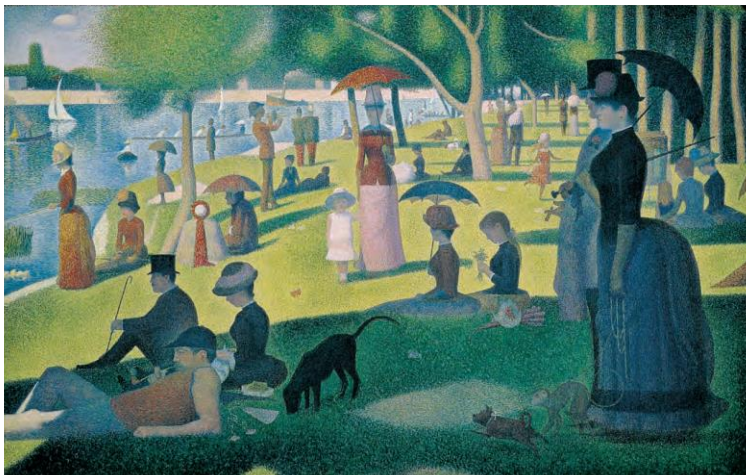


Fig.9: A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884 - 86, Georges Seurat. Oil on Canvas, 207 cm x 308 cm, Source: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/27992/a-sunday-on-la-grande-jatte-1884>

In Fig. 9, Seurat uses pointillism (dot technique) to transform human figures and Grande Jatte scenery. For two years he made miniature outdoor studies, before painting the large canvas. This painting was among the works shown at the final exhibition that marked the end of Impressionist movement. Seurat laboured extensively over a period of two years (1884-86), making, reworking the original as well as completing numerous preliminary drawings and oil sketches (Adams, 2012). The approach to figures entailed a scientific precision, as the artist tackled the issues of colour, light and form. Captivated by optical and colour theory, he juxtaposed tiny dabs of colours. Through optical blending, the collation of dots transforms into luminous forms.



Fig.10: Les Femmes d'Alger, 1907, Artist: Pablo Picasso, Oil on canvas, 244 x 234 cm

Source: Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>

Cubist style of painting is clearly different from the styles of other movements in modernism era. Cubism is an early 20th-century avant-garde art movement that revolutionized European art. The Cubist painters transformed human figures by breaking up human forms and reassembling them into geometric compositions. Picasso and Braque are among the most influential artists of this movement. Human figures appear ugly like climbers roped together, each pulling the other up. Cubism view a subject from a variety of perspectives simultaneously. Cubist painters were not bound to copying form, texture, colour, and space. Their approach to human figures entailed an exploration of cuboids, glasses, newspapers and still-life as visual effects to redefine human forms.

Postmodernism (1970-2017)

The approach to human figures by postmodernist painters is an extension of the modernist's style and techniques. Notable movements in Postmodernism include Conceptual art, Minimalism, Video art, Performance art, and Installation art. These movements are diverse and connected by certain characteristics. Postmodernism overturned the idea that there was one inherent meaning to a work of art, or that this meaning was determined by the artist at the time of creation. Instead, the viewer became an important determiner of meaning. The viewer is deployed by some artists to participate in the work as in the case of some performance pieces.

Other artists went further by creating works that required viewer intervention to create or complete the work. With the emergence of appropriation, some postmodernists sometimes use photographs with little or no alteration to the original. Some postmodernist lay more emphasis to idea as the major driving force of their works. However, another tenet of postmodernism, that visual culture could be appreciated and enjoyed without any aesthetic training, undermines notions of value and artistic ingenuity.



Fig.11: New Waves, 1997, Stephen Achugwo, Oil on canvas, 126cm x 74cm

Source: Achugwo (2000), Dynamics of concentric lines in painting. Nigeria: Unpublished M.F.A. project report.

One of the styles of transforming human figures in postmodernism is demonstrated by *New Waves*, produced by the Nigerian artist - Stephen Achugwo. In this work, Achugwo transforms the forms of a Nigerian woman dancing to a traditional Igbo song that heralds the Owu Festival. He uses concentric circles, curves and arcs to interweave forms, space, melodies and rich cultural critiques.

Apart from a single-figure composition, the painting explored transparency.

Relying on polychromatic rendition, concentric circles and curves were made to reflect through the flat planes. In some parts, one colour fuses into another while in other parts rigid lines are used to create a clear demarcation along the boundaries of different colour zones. *New Waves* highlights the changing phase of Nigerian culture. The female figure (lady-dancer) portrays the influence of the foreign culture in Nigeria. The influence is suggested through the changing phase of the lady-dancer's attire, transparency and the interacting planes. Chains of concentric circles and curves, reflecting through interacting planes represent the melodious tones of the Igbo traditional music.



Fig.12: Mona Lisa, Artist: Jane Perkins, size: 120cm x 90cm

<https://www.whitezine.com/fr/inspiration/jane-perkins-recycled-art.html/attachment/jane-perkins-mona-lis>

In Fig.13, Jane Perkins reproduces Mona Lisa with beads, coral shell and found objects. She began by creating a realistic wash of the subject in acrylics. This is followed by gluing coral shells, beads, plastic buttons, plastic toys and found objects, onto various colour zones of the picture plain to remake the portrait of Madona Lisa. Apart from Perkins' style and technique, postmodernists employ several approaches in representing or defining human figures in painting.

Conclusion

Painting is evolutionary and responds to change in culture. From the Stone Age to this age of digital revolution, there have been continuous improvement and advancement in the quality and quantity of materials available for painting. Painting also continues to advance in scope and definition. The painters' approach to the human figures continues to evolve. Painters' approach to human figures began with the attempt to captures the human forms realistically. With the discovery of more colours and expanded colour palette, painters achieved photographic resemblance. By the Modernist era, photography was emerged and painters' approach to human figures changed from realism to include abstraction. In postmodernist era, painters' approach to human figures include realism, abstraction and conceptualism. Painting has moved off the canvas and off the wall. There is a wider approach to the treatment of human figures than any of the earlier era of art.

A brief narrative of painting is important for artists in so many ways. Artists should equip themselves with the knowledge that they are handicapped in, some of which abound in the previous art movements. Instead of concentrating too much on only one avenue of inquiry, artists should continue to research and internalize as much knowledge as possible. Artists should also look outside their immediate disciplines for researchers who are also mining the past, as it is this multidisciplinary approach, that will enrich their understanding and interpretation of images, and enrich their artworks.

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