

How have artists used painting as a conduit of expression and meanings in modernism?

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Abstract

In this thesis I will discuss how artists have used painting as a conduit of expression and meaning in modernism. I will be discussing artists and their works along with their different states of minds while creating these works. My aims for this thesis are to research how these artists have used painting to express themselves and to have a better understanding of what these artists experienced that led them to create their expressive paintings.

Introduction

There are many influential artists who have used painting as a form of self-expression of their feelings from the start of modernism. Artists use painting to express the different emotions and feeling that they are feeling, I believe that the way that these artists use painting to express the negative or the positive emotions that they feel when creating their works.

To understand how painting is used as a form of expressionism. I will research artists from the start of modernism and investigate what obstacles they were going through in their life that led them to create these expressive paintings and I will also investigate what they did to show these expressions and feelings through these paintings whether it was through the colours used, the lines or the design of the paintings themselves that tell us about these meanings behind them. I will research into the different experiences that these artists I chose went through as I feel that this will help me gain a better understanding of why these artists turned to painting to express themselves and their emotions.

How artists use painting as a form of expression and meanings is a topic of interest as I am a young artist who feels that painting allows the artist to put on paper what they are feeling without words. I want this text to show how many artists have been able to express themselves by replacing words with painting as it is important to speak upon how painting is a robust way of expressing oneself. I want to also have a better

understanding of what expression is and means through art therefore I will gather information regarding expression in this topic area, I will also gather information on modernism in art as I would like to show my understanding on this also. To support my leading question artists such as Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Edvard Munch, and Kandinsky will be investigated within this thesis to gather the information of how artists use painting as a conduit of expression as each artist has been through trauma which led to them using painting as a form of self-expression in diverse ways.

These chosen artists are all modernist painters who present forms of expression within their paintings to show their feelings and emotions. Each artist presents these expressions of feelings and meanings in their own ways such as use of tones, shades, and colours and from their own experiences in life. The aim of chapter 1 is to research deeper into painting as a medium and expression and meaning shown through painting and present an argument of how painting is an important medium to be able to express ourselves freely, I will also discuss expression and meaning within modernism painting and discuss what modernism means in depth.

Chapter 1 - Painting as a conduit of expression and meaning

Firstly, I would like to introduce the themes of expression and modernism within painting and art and speak upon the importance of the use of painting within expression and how painting as a medium can be used as a form of expression and meaning. Modernism in art “is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation” (Childs, 2007), this tells us that modernism in art is a form of creation or decreation for the artist which is experimental and complex. “The tradition of the new” (Childs, 2007), is what modernism was described as. Modernism also associates “notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form” (Childs, 2007), suggesting that modernism within art allows these artists to create what they wish to create and to express what they wish to express through their paintings rather than creating paintings that include traditional art forms and genres, having the option to express themselves freely. As these artists can express themselves freely through their works it allows them to express themselves in a whole separate way as they can paint what they wish.

These artists use painting as a conduit of self- expression as they feel that is the best way that they can express their feelings and emotions as McNiff (2019) states that “art offers a way of communicating and expressing oneself when words are not accessible nor capable of doing what art can do”. I believe that this statement given by McNiff in the article *‘Reflections on What “Art” Does in Art Therapy Practice and Research’*

presents a good argument that art does offer an effective way of being able to express and communicate emotions and feelings that one cannot say or put into words.

Next in this chapter I will touch upon the themes of expression and what expression means. "Expressionist painters concentrated more on shadow than light, on the sinister effects of shade and dark, the qualities of nightmare and alienation" (Childs, 2007). Painters who turn to expressionism within their works often look at the dark parts of their life's by concentrating on the aspects described by Childs such as the shadows, the shade and the dark and the alienation that they are feeling and experiencing. These are concentrated on "in opposition to the celebration of incandescence and beauty" (Childs, 2007).

An artist who uses painting as a form of self-expression focuses on the reality that they feel, the reality that they are living in is shown through their paintings, they show their reality through the artwork they choose to make and the ideas that they choose to use then modify the feelings that are expressed through their paintings also. "The art of painting is the expression of ideas and emotions" (Bell, 1999), again stating that the expression shown through the artists painting comes from their ideas and emotions that they are feeling, therefore these ideas and emotions led these artists to create the paintings that they chose to create and allowed them to express how they were feeling.

Julian Bell (1999) who is the author of the book '*What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art*,' states that the term of expression is a "physical metaphor for a mental

process which belongs to individuals,” the feeling and emotions and mental processes that artists are experiencing inside are then expressed and become physical through their paintings rather than being kept inside of them. Bell (1999) also believes that expression is a way of “experiencing the act of representation, as if it were a bodily effort of pressing or forcing out whatever is to be represented”, therefore she believes that expression is a way of letting out what needs to be left out for example what the artists is feeling, so to represent their feeling and emotions through their paintings and to force out these emotions into their work. There is a mention of colour in correspondence to expression through paintings in the book *What is Painting?* , the author Julian Bell (1999) states that colour is an “obvious candidate to carry the burden of expression in painting” and also states that “colour is what we associate automatically with feeling”, which is stating that the colours that artists chose to use in their paintings shows what emotions they are feeling, she mentions the colour “red” meaning anger and ‘the blues’ which are “age-old metaphors”, she believes that ‘associations of this kind have probably always been evoked by painters” stating that painters have shown these through their artworks and used colours as representations of how they are feeling for example van Goghs use of the colour yellow in his paintings. “The psychological state of an individual affects the way in which they express themselves” which is a statement made by Hina Azeem (2018), suggesting that the way that an artist expresses oneself is left down to their state of mind therefore what their mental state is like at the time of creation, therefore if an artist's mental state is

bad then they will express themselves differently than if they were in a good mental state. Azeem (2018) asks an important question, “Can a brush stroke convey the same emotion as a word?”, which opens the discussion of how painting is a conduit of expression for these artists.

Anthony Rudd (2022) states that Van Gogh is an “obvious example” of an artist who shows “expression theory” within his paintings. Rudd (2022) explains what a “simple version of expression theory” means, “a simple version of expression theory would claim that a painting primarily makes present to the viewer is the artist’s personal feelings and emotions”. Rudd (2022) believes that “setting personal emotion aside- a good painter does always express something distinctive, a style, a sensibility”, although artists use painting as a conduit of self-expression of feelings and emotions, there is always something expressed through the style or sensibility from a good artist/painter, therefore Rudd is stating that even if there is no means for any emotional expression through an artist's painting there is always something distinctive expressed. It is mentioned by Rudd (2022) that an artist “inevitably expresses not only the ‘hidden depths’ of things, but also the hidden depths of his or her own self”. Therefore, he is stating that artists can express themselves from hidden depths that they have not explored through painting, which I feel is important as this shows that painting allows the artist to express things that are hidden deep within them and their own self, therefore allowing them to release their feelings and emotions from deep inside. It is mentioned within this text that Rudd (2022) believes that the “way in which

a universal emotional quality is made present" within a painting is what is most important and not "what was going on in the artist's soul", meaning that Rudd believes that the way that the artist presents these certain emotions and feelings within their paintings is more important than what the artist is feeling within, he thinks that this is an "invisible" that a painting can "make visible" which is "not restricted to specifics". Which states that Rudd thinks that an artist can make what is invisible for example the emotions and feelings that the artist is feeling within which cannot be seen into something visible such as the painting itself which shows these emotions.

Emotions can be shown in many ways through an artist's paintings, "this is not restricted to specifics" a painter "captured the expression of grief, surprise on someone's face" and "painting as a whole can convey emotions" (Rudd, 2022) suggesting that the visible emotions that are shown within an artist's painting are not restricted and are shown through many ways such as the expressions on a face and the way that the expression looks tells us the emotions that are felt within a piece, and that the way that these emotions are expressed through paintings are not restricted to anything and can be shown however the artist feels like conveying them in the painting. Rudd (2022) also believes that the "facial expressions" that are shown of characters in a painting may "be a part of the emotional tone" but also believes that the same tone will be "present in paintings in which no persons are represented". Arguing that an expressionistic painting of one's emotions does not have to present a person or facial expressions to show the emotions felt by the artist, the emotions can still be present

in a painting with just colour or shapes without any figure present, meaning that there is no limit to how artists can express these emotions. The painter Kandinsky thinks that the “ultimate aim is the expression” (Kandinsky, 1977) when creating a painting, therefore stating that he thinks that the aim when creating a painting is to show expression and emotion. Throughout this chapter I have touched upon the topic of expression within painting and painting as a conduit of expressing emotions and how these feelings can be expressed and can be shown through their works. In the next chapter I will move on to researching modernist painters who have used painting as a conduit of expression and meaning. I will touch upon the painters, van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Frida Kahlo, and Kandinsky.

Chapter 2- Painters and expression

To begin this chapter, I will discuss the artist Vincent van Gogh and speak upon his work and how he used painting to express his emotions and feelings while also discussing his state of mind and experiences which led him to do this. Vincent van Gogh is a prime example of an artist who uses painting as a conduit of self-expression. Van Gogh is described as “the incarnation of the suffering, the misunderstood martyr of modern art, the emblem of the artist as an outsider” (Charles, 2014). According to Walker (2008) van Gogh was a “realist” and a “symbolist” just as much as he was an “expressionist”, therefore Walker is stating that Van Gogh keeps his paintings real and

represents only truths in his artworks besides expressing himself. As mentioned by Walker (2008) Van Goghs paintings became labelled as “expressionistic” through his “intense colour contrasts, arbitrary use of colours, impasto, emphatic lines and brushstrokes” and “compositional patterning”, Walker (2008) believes that these components are what Van Gogh used to create his expressionistic paintings, therefore he used these to show his emotions and feelings through these paintings, from the colours used to the lines and brushstrokes used, these aspects were used to show what emotion Van Gogh was feeling when creating a certain painting. Van Goghs life was described a great amount through his paintings, his life became his paintings, “his passionate character and the dramatic story of his life thus became as significant as his work” (Walker, 2008), suggesting that by Van Gogh using these paintings as his way of expressing himself allowed his “dramatic” (Walker, 2008) life became more known and noticed.



Figure 1, van Gogh (1889), *Starry Night*, [Oil on canvas]

Mental hospitals were a normal occurrence for the painter van Gogh as he was admitted to one in Saint-Rémy on May 8th, 1889. While he stayed at this mental hospital, he “felt a duty to work” and “started painting as soon as he arrived” (Charles, 2014) there, he asked his brother to send him “canvases and colours” (Charles, 2014) for his stay so that he could carry on producing his work even though he was stuck within the walls of a mental hospital due to his mental illnesses. Charles (2014) states that while van Gogh stayed at this mental hospital he proceeded to “paint landscapes, in which he recreated the world of his childhood anew” while also continuing “to study the effects of colours”.

It seems like painting was van Gogh's escape and way of expressing how he felt during his stay as it is mentioned that he “spent his days in a more or less uniform way: He ate breakfast, then around nine o'clock he left for the countryside with his easel and his paint” (Charles, 2014) and carried on painting throughout the day, all he did was paint while in there. Van Gogh enjoyed being out in the nature or the country which Charles (2014) mentions that “the sadness and health of the country – reflects van Gogh's own situation” and that “nature always was a kind of home for him – a home that he could never share with anyone else” and that he must have “found some comfort in the close-ups of the vegetation he drew and painted” (Gogh, 2010). Also suggesting that by going out and painting these landscapes in the country helped him

express himself in ways he could not express to anyone else. But although van Gogh found comfort by painting and drawing these landscapes and nature while being in the mental hospital, by looking at these and creating the “many paintings and drawings of the walled field visible” (Gogh, 2010) from his room were “painful reminders of the fact that he was literally and fugitively a prisoner” within the mental hospital, he was constantly surrounded by the “same jagged walls that closed off his living space”, (Gogh, 2010)

Vincent Van Gogh was “diagnosed posthumously” (Wolf, 2001) with many disorders and these have been proposed to “explain how van Gogh’s physical state may have influenced his work” (Wolf, 2001), stating that these different disorders that van Gogh was diagnosed with explain that the way that he was feeling during creating his works had a considerable influence. Wolf (2001) also states that van Gogh had a “fascination with this vibrant colour”, this colour is yellow and that there are “two theories centre on why he used so much yellow” within his paintings. “Evidence suggests that he had manic depression, a chronic mental illness thought affects many creative people” (Wolf, 2001), therefore it is obvious from this statement that Vincent van Gogh was going through a dark time and experiencing a lot of traumas in his life which he expresses through his paintings such as *Starry Night* (1889). It is stated that “Van Gogh painted *Starry Night* (1889) from his window in an asylum in southern France” (Publishers Weekly, 1996), suggesting that he was painting what he was feeling while staring out of his window in an asylum, therefore for Van Gogh to be in an asylum

means that his mental health at that point in time was extremely bad therefore he expressed his feelings while being there within his painting of *Starry Night* (1889). Another influential artist that expressed emotions and feelings through his paintings who I am going to discuss next is Edvard Munch, I will discuss how Munch presented these emotions through his paintings while also discussing the state of mind he was in while making his works and speak upon the experiences which led to him using painting to express himself.

Edvard Munch an artist who “painted his life onto a canvas” (Azeem, 2018) shows us his life through his paintings, and his goal was to find “a way to explore his own psychology and feelings”. It is stated by (Azeem, 2018) that Munch suffered with many illnesses leading up to his death such as being diagnosed with “depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder”, which can be seen through his various paintings that he created before his death which were shown by his “use of colours and characters” (Azeem, 2018), these components were used by Edvard Munch to express his feelings during his dark times that he encountered; therefore he used colours and characters to show these expressions. Munch wanted to put all his effort into painting his “soul’s diary” (Prideaux, 2005), he intended to paint his “reactions to whatever happened to him in his life” (Prideaux 2005), this tells us that Munch wanted to create a series of work into a sort of diary of his entire life and everything that he went through throughout his entire life to capture his reactions to these events that had happened to him. Munch’s ambition while creating his paintings was that if he looked inside himself, he would be

“capable of building an image of eternal truth from the transitory and particular laboratory of his own life experiences” (Prideaux, 2001), Munch wanted to show the truth that was inside of him and how he was really feeling from his life experiences when expressing himself in his paintings, he wanted to create paintings that showed these experiences. Although Munch was a modernist artist which meant he created expressionism art he didn’t always create artworks in which he expressed himself, his early works consisted of himself drawing himself and his family, “the artist’s early artworks fell into the category of naturalism due to their subject matter, which was often a critical commentary on society, and the realistic style” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020), before Munch experienced the tragic losses of his sister and brother, he painted himself and his family but after these tragedies and losses that he encountered within his life the way that he created his paintings changed and became darker and expressive.



Figure 2, Edvard Munch (1885-1886), *The Sick Child*, [Oil on canvas]

The Sick Child (1885-1886) is a painting by Edvard Munch (1885-1886) which was “based on the deeply traumatic memories of his sister’s illness and death” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020) and it is mentioned that while Munch was creating this painting he was trying to “focus primarily on his own impressions” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020), Munch tried to capture his first impressions of this moment when it was happening within the painting, therefore trying to capture how he was feeling onto the canvas. “I ... tried again and again to catch the first impression – the transparent pale skin against the canvas – the trembling mouth – the trembling hands ...” (Munch, 2005), stating he tried to capture and express these emotions and feelings such as the pale skin, the trembling mouth and trembling hands using paint on canvas,

he wanted to express all these emotions to show the true impressions being felt. *The Sick Child* (1885-1886) is described as like a “page from a diary full of emotions and feelings” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020) and that the painting itself became a “means to record both his feelings of despair and guilt that he had been the one to survive and to confront his experience of loss” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020), suggesting that Munch saw this painting as a way of getting all of his feeling out like a diary but without using the words and using paint instead, he expressed himself by filling the painting with each of his emotions and feelings such as the guilt that he was feeling while going through the illness and loss of his sister, the grief is very much present within the painting of *The Sick Child* (1885-1886). Within the painting *The Sick Child* (1885-1886), Munch chose to use a darker colour palette which “reflects the general gloomy mood” (Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, 2020), these dull colours express the sad mood in which Munch was feeling and how the moment felt to him.

As well as Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch, another artist who used painting as a form of self-expression was Frida Kahlo. Kahlo went through many traumatic experiences throughout her lifetime from illnesses, surgeries, miscarriages, and affairs. She is said to have utilised “quantitative tools to investigate the relationship between the colour palette” (Turkheimer, 2002) and utilised her “mental health at various times in her life”, meaning that she made practical and effective use of the colour palette she used by using colours that represented how she was feeling and her mental health. Turkheimer (2002) believes that the colour red that is present in

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits are used because of the painter's "physical pain and deep emotional rage" which he also states was "hypothesis tested", which tells us that Kahlo's use of colour played a role in how she showed these emotions within her paintings and showed what emotions she felt.

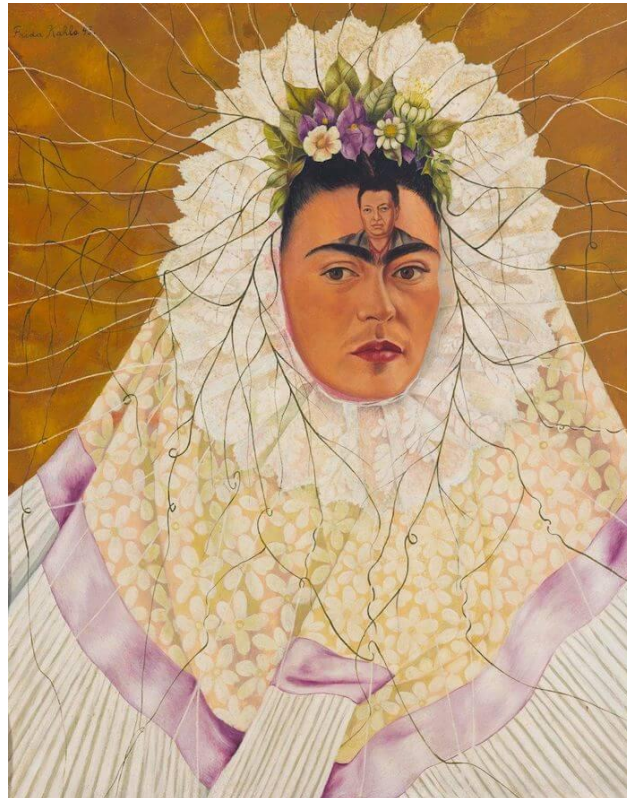


Figure 3, Frida Kahlo (1943), *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana*, [oil painting]

Frida Kahlo created many paintings to tell her story and to express herself, she painted herself "cracked open, weeping besides her extracted heart, haemorrhaging during a miscarriage, anesthetized on a hospital trolley, sleeping with a skeleton" (Herrera, 1991), she created all these paintings which included these traumatic experiences as a way of coping with them and expressing how she felt. Kahlo (1991) in her own words stated, "I paint self-portraits because I am often alone". She says, "I

paint my own reality” and “the only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration,” stating that she painted what went on in her own life, her own reality and that she would paint whatever she was feeling without thinking about anything else and express only those emotions within the painting. Kahlo is said to have “pierced through events and appearances to seize the deepest layers of that reality” (Herrera, 1991). Although Kahlo expressed herself as a “heroine” (Herrera, 1991) within her paintings she also expresses her vulnerability too, as Herrera stated, “she insisted that we know her vulnerability”. Herrera (1991) also suggests that for Kahlo “painting self-portraits was a form of both psychological surgery and denial”, by expressing the pain that she was feeling into an “alternate Frida” she was able to release the pain that she was feeling, “she not only confronted and confirmed her embattled reality, but she also exorcised pain”, stating that by creating these self-portraits she was able to release and confront the pain that she was feeling within. The sources of Frida Kahlo’s art were through pain and her body as the author Carlos Fuentes (1995) states “Her pain. Her body. These were the sources of Kahlo’s art,” suggesting that the pain that Kahlo went through fuelled her artwork and was one of the main focuses that she expressed through her paintings.

Kahlo’s themes within her paintings are made from her ‘reactions in life’ (Fuentes, 1995), he states that Kahlo said herself that her themes within her paintings “are my sensations, my states of mind, my reaction to life”, therefore proves that Kahlo’s

paintings are created from what she is feeling and her reactions to all her traumatic experiences within her life. Kahlo was said to have “imploded” (Herrera, 1991) all her feelings and emotions into her paintings of self-portraits and that these self-portraits were not just a “means to communicate feelings” but also a “device to keep feeling in check”, meaning that her self-portraits that she painted were not just to express her feelings but also a way of keeping her feelings under control by putting them all onto a canvas.



Figure 4, Wassily Kandinsky (1913), *Composition, VII*, [oil painting]

Lastly, I would like to speak on the artist Kandinsky, who is “capable of expressing his aims and ideals with any clearness and moderation” (Sadler, 1997). Kandinsky (1886-1994) states within his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that “every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions”. Within an article written by The Dover Publications (1977) it is stated that “it is no common thing to find an artist who, even if he be willing to try, is capable of expressing his aims and ideals

with any clearness and moderation” and states that some people would find this a “flaw in the perfect artist”, people thought that Kandinsky should have expressed himself through ‘line and colour”. Kandinsky created his artwork freely and expressed himself through his paintings how he wanted to. Kandinsky (1997) himself believes that artists “sought to express in their work only internal truths”, therefore stating that he thinks that artists express themselves through their paintings using their inner truths meaning their true feelings and emotions when they are creating their artworks. “Kandinsky himself described how he came to recognize that colour and line in themselves could be sufficient vehicles for the expression of emotions” (Chilvers, 2015), revealing that Kandinsky figured out a way of expressing his emotions through his paintings, he came to realise that the way he could express these feelings was through colour and line. Kandinsky included colour and line in all his paintings, which shows that he expressed his emotions throughout all his work. Chilvers (2015) alleges that Kandinsky believed that a “pure artist” strives to “express only inner essential feelings and ignores the superficial and fortuitous”. As mentioned before Kandinsky thought that colour and line could be a terrific way of expressing his emotions. Chilvers (2015) states that Kandinsky thought that “colours have a spiritual vibration that could be linked with a corresponding vibration in the human soul”, stating that Kandinsky believed that colours were linked with the human soul, which is why he chose to use many assorted colours within his works to express his feelings.

Conclusion

In conclusion to the leading question 'How have artists used painting as a conduit of expression and meanings in modernism?' the information that I have gathered and discussed has given an insight of modernist artists and their how they use paintings to express their emotions and feelings. I have also gathered information on what modernism and expression means and how art itself is a positive way of expressing these feelings and emotions that someone is feeling.

To begin my thesis, in chapter 1 I developed a discussion based on my leading question, I gathered information regarding painting as a conduit of expression and meaning. I spoke upon the importance of using the medium of painting as a form of self-expression, while also touching upon the meaning of modernism within art to show my understanding of what it means and touching upon the theme of expression within art too, speaking upon what expression means within art and how it is used with painting when artists are trying to express themselves.

Within chapter 2 of my thesis, I discussed the following artists, van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Frida Kahlo, and Kandinsky, which are all modernist artists who chose painting as a conduit of expression of their feelings and emotions. For these chosen artists I formed a discussion in which I spoke upon their works and their states of minds while creating their paintings such as the traumatic experiences or the experiences that they

were going through during the period of their creations, which led me to discuss how these artists used painting to express themselves, I touched upon the techniques that some of the artists used within these paintings and also what themes that they took interest in to create these works, for example van Gogh during his stay at the Saint-Rémy took interest in the landscapes and nature while Kandinsky found that colour and line was his way of expressing himself through his paintings. Therefore, throughout my thesis I have provided information regarding artists who use painting as a form of expression, their state of minds while creating these works and how they express themselves through painting which all support my thesis question.

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