

Introduction to appreciating Western Painting

The western painting tradition we are familiar with today inherited most of its roots from Greek art.

The core pursuit of western painting is the re-creation of nature. Faithful reproduction of what the human sensory organs perceived was the rule. The Greeks 'beautified' nature into an idealised state, as can be seen from their human sculptures. Later artists used this formula, faithfully depicting what the eyes can observe, at the same time presenting nature in an idealised state. This situation continued until the introduction of the impressionists (2nd half of 19th Century) movement.

Western painting is mainly composed by patches of colours, unlike Chinese painting which is dominated by lines. This is a fundamental difference between Western painting and Chinese painting expression.

Modernism in the Western tradition

Western art historians often refer to the impressionist movement as the beginning of modernism. In a simplified way, modernism can be seen as the process whereby the pictorial language broke free from the nature abiding requirement, diversifying into others. This process eventually led to abstraction, which is a difficult topic for many people.

Abstraction

Most of the traditional western paintings can be easily appreciated since it is congruent with our sensory organs. Traditionally, we appreciate western paintings by the realism skills of the artist and the atmosphere or mood the picture presented. At the same time, with the invention of photography, it became more and more clear that photographs can be a substitute for realist paintings. Western artist began to question what kind of positions should painting take.

Kandinsky was the first artist to advocate the idea of removing the subject matter out of painting. Is there a pure pictorial language that is independent from the subject matter? For example, if we listen to Beethoven's symphony No. 3, we may say that it is 'heroic', but musical notes do not have apparent meanings, unlike sounds in language. This led Kandinsky to question, could lines and colour patches themselves, without a subject, form beautiful paintings? I.e. can there be a 'pure' painting? Most people can't understand abstract art because they are looking at the picture with a mindset that a picture needed a subject matter.

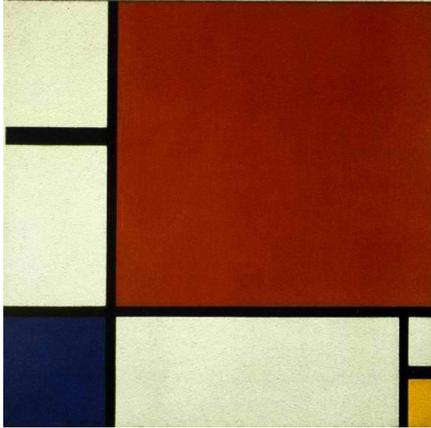


Fig 10
Piet Mondrain, Composition II in red, blue and yellow
20th century

This piece of work shows how the big red grid can be balanced by the smaller ultramarine and yellow grid so that they are aesthetically appealing. For example, we can conclude that ultramarine has a greater 'density' than the red, so a smaller patch of ultramarine (together with the yellow) balances the bigger patch of red.

This type of work questions the fundamental rules which govern our interpretation of pictures, just like how grammar governs language.

The 5 pillars of art from western painting's perspective

Subject matter

Traditionally the subject matter in western painting either served a functional purpose, e.g. documenting scenes, portraits of nobility and aristocrats, or for preaching religion. In comparison, Chinese paintings were traditionally primarily for self spiritual cultivation. Modern lifestyles shifted the focus from functionality to aesthetic pleasure, e.g. for decoration. Generally speaking, western themes are more varied, spanning almost anything the eyes can see or the mind can imagine.

Composition

Usually western compositions are more scientific and match closely with human visual experience. For example western paintings usually employ either one or two point perspective, which is not common in Chinese painting.



Fig 11
Leonardo Da Vinci, The Annunciation
15th century

Compare with Fig 6 and 7. Da Vinci used a single vanishing point perspective. This creates a sense of depth at the centre of the painting. One important achievement of the Renaissance is applying scientific analysis to perspective in paintings.

Lines/brushstrokes

Before the impressionist, western painting do not keep distinctive brushstrokes in the finished works. For example, if we look at Fig. 10, we will not see any distinctive brush strokes. With the introduction of impressionism, the raw brushstrokes were preserved, or even exaggerated. These give an added dimension to the beauty of the painting, because brush strokes are expressive and often show energy in them. In a similar way, the brushstrokes function the same ways as they do in Chinese painting, in fact studies showed the New York school¹ came under direct influence from Chinese calligraphy.



Fig 12
Xing Qin Xin, Cock Fighting
2006

Notice how the brushstrokes contributed to the texture of the chicken

Colour

If brushstrokes are most important to Chinese art, then colours are most important to western art. Even in a monochrome pencil sketch, western artists strive to capture the shadows and tonalities based on areas. The western palette had a wide varieties of colours for artist to use from.

Western artists had developed techniques In using colour that closely mimic nature, from the exactness of the colour, to the extent of producing the texture. At the same time, modern developments in art cut off reliance on nature as a model. Artists use colours freely to express themselves instead of studying colours in nature. For example, trees can be painted pink or purple, so long they are in harmony with the objects in the painting.

¹ The New York School is a movement that started in New York soon after WWII. Prominent figures were Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKoong, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and etc.

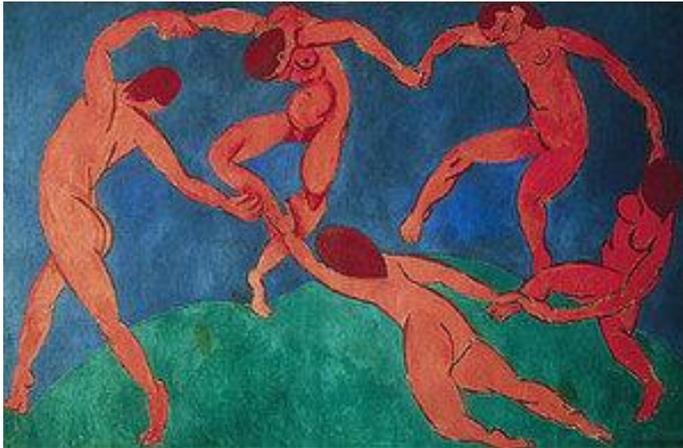


Fig 13
Matisse, The dance
20th century

The use of colour was more imaginary than a reflection of nature. Instead of reproducing nature, colours were used to create effects. E.g. the warm orange and red resonates with the energetic forms, while the cold blue and green background adds to the solidity of the background. The stark contrast between, cold and warm colours captures the viewer's attention almost instantly.

Form

In line with the notion of reconstructing nature, until abstraction came into place, strict adherence of the subject matter to nature is required. Western painting, especially the traditional ones, will painstakingly capture the details in the painting, from the colours to forms. Furthermore, certain shapes appease to the eye as beautiful.



Fig 14 a
Michelangelo, David (Detail)
16th century

One of the reasons why the statue *David* is so intriguing is because Michelangelo correctly captures the anatomy of the human body to such a level of detail, and it became difficult to imagine that such works can be created by a mortal being.

Notice also the beauty added by making the hand arch a little inwards towards the leg. If it was straight, it will appear more stiff.

Fig 14 b
This simple railing of a balcony shows us that certain shapes and curves can appease the eye.

