

How two-dimensionality in figurative painting is as relevant today as it was in medieval Europe

Five hundred years after the Renaissance has modulated proportion, anatomy and perspective attempting to illustrate the biblical in a staggeringly realistic form in order to arise faith from its followers and divinity from its artists humanity finds itself in an image-saturated digital world where reflection, appreciation and indeed contemplation over what one sees is kept to the minimal. Instead, the spamming of vastly understood, easily recognisable iconography takes the stage again both in the digital realm but also in urban contexts. Corresponding and responding to this observation, historical references from two-dimensional figurative, linear and seemingly flat art currents are being re-contextualised and mixed together; shaping up abstract surfaces and creating placative-sque compositions that ultimately aim at reflecting on contemporary socio-political issues and whilst doing so, reducing the speed with which we observe.

Comparing side by side, all periods and regions where figurative two-dimensional painting was the norm, we can't help but sort out the obvious similarities at hand; whether we observe decorative tomb paintings in an ancient Egyptian tomb, the cover of a satirical 20th century Azerbaijani magazine targeting colonialism and western influence ¹, analyse byzantine frescos or look at post-war figurative painters such as Henri Rousseau. Perhaps the most important characteristic of such depictions is the high importance and ideology of it (the painting/illustration) being clearly informative, readable by it's observants. In order to picture a story, all you need are clear characters, clear participants, clear outlining and a clearly visible situation. Contradictory to what one might think, the more realistic or naturalistic an image, the less easily one can read it, because the possibility of interpretation threatens the obvious. The ideal aim being: communication and fast understanding of what is being communicated.

Medieval artists never had a problem making the illiterates understand what was being shown to them, because they were not constrained by figuring out how something would look natural or behave in a realistic dimension. If a man would be depicted pointing, then his finger could be bigger than his whole hand. If a king was depicted horse riding, then he would do so in clear profile regardless of proportion. Even though, that is all so freeing in concept (in terms of composing images), another characteristic all currents of two-dimensional painting have in common is almost clearly constricted and defined imagery ². Individualistic expression or experimentation was not needed. In Egypt, feet were depicted from the profile view, so was the head, the shoulders were wide and frontal, so was the "cat" eye. Any reinterpretation of those clearly set standards was deemed nearly heretical. A god was always depicted the same, a woman always smaller, a tree always from the front, a pool from above (ref. "The garden of Nebamun"). In Persian miniatures one can barely tell one person from the other. After conservative Islamic influence, there was a huge period of purely decorative art; reduced to depictions of only non-human subjects (Second to 13th century middle east, north Africa and Spain). In 20th century satirical magazines (Ref. Molla Nasreddin) male aristocracy was mostly depicted fat, western women were usually in shock, Germans always in uniform. Logically, if clear, fast information is the aim, one must find the same recognisable correspondents, creating a vocabulary of imagery. The form and language of iconography becomes segregated, regulated and therefor limited.

And yet, even in the most limited of contexts artists have always managed to squeeze in a little blink of the eye, or a slightly rounder hip. Understanding this, makes us understand the power inflicted upon subliminal detailing that these limited periods caused. The perfection or even slight alteration

of an outline becomes, to whom is interested, a gateway of subtexts and mystery. Orhan Pamuk's Nobel Prize Winning Novel "My Name is Red" reevaluates the manifestations of such philosophies in 16th century Ottoman Empire.³

Arriving back to the contemporary, at first glance, one would say that due to digitalisation, everything can be documented and presented in a realistic manner, considering the technologies at hand. I beg to differ, that despite most content presenting us with clear plasticity, we are living in a renaissance of flatness. Flatness is defined by its meaning, its nature, its impact and its idiom – the flatness I speak of is a conceptual one. The majority of content we see today is for marketing purposes. Be it self-marketing, manifesting itself in personal or influence-oriented social media sharing or corporate marketing; the ultimate goal remains the same: fast communication and understanding of what is being communicated. One could state that the two key stages of creating modern imagery are staging and thematising.⁴ Finding a motif and presenting it as evocative is a process consciously or unconsciously done by everyone in response to the overquantified content we are experiencing which calls for competition over who can receive more attention and therefore better results.

The hyperactive amount of imagery almost forces the modern smart-phone-user to only experience image material in a secondary, passive manner. 70-80% of users ignore paid ads all together, including on websites, apps or personal social media accounts⁵. There are roughly 52,000,000 photographs being uploaded on Instagram on a daily basis⁶ (including documentation of art, fashion, architecture etc.). It comes as no surprise that being bilaterally (in the digital but also physical realm) forced to see so much, we develop a way of chewing and almost instantly forgetting we swallowed.

Another parallel I would like to sketch has to do with the way in which iconography has become, once again, segregated. If we conduct a research (and I know this from my personal experience), we will discover confessions of image expression. Users that might not even know each-other conduct and share the exact same styles, angles, photos, moods, they automatically belong to an easily recognisable segment or group. Corporate businesses do so too, whilst trying but failing at gaining market value based on originality and distancing. Creators who aren't necessarily creative but feel forced to create, will consciously decide which group they feel best being a part of and will act upon that decision. Artificial positions are once again projected and without even intending to, iconography becomes yet again limited.

Pop-Art, Abstract Expressionism, Geometric Abstraction, Constructivism, Nihonga, Symbolism, Art Nouveau are all post-war iconic art movements (abstract or figurative), which shaped up contemporary expression and painting aesthetic back to a two-dimensional related nature.

Today's viewers are not as illiterate as the medieval public when Charlemagne firstly unified Europe, but they are far less keen on spending time consciously observing. This is due to an over-load of material (material we also don't necessarily look for). I personally embrace flatness just as much as I do perspective and I strongly believe any form of expression can be just as profound as the other. Therefore, I advocate for conscious filtering of what we see, when we see it, observance and reflection. To this day art remains a powerful humanitarian discipline that can evoke those ambitions of intellectual thought and sensitive reflection, and making art consciously realising that over-accessibility is death to curiosity could direct the art engaging public into a bright and better future.

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