

Then and now

# 1900: Art at the Crossroads at the Royal Academy, London

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At the turn of the last century, Paris was host to a giant exhibition designed to display all that was best about the modern world. One of the Exposition Universelle's main attractions was a stunning display of electric light—the first that many ordinary Parisians had seen. In this respect it owed much to major displays of the nineteenth century, like London's Great Exhibition, which had demonstrated an assurance in new production techniques and the opening of the world to colonial expansion. These were triumphal displays of the power and might of the imperialist countries—capitalism at its height, developing new products, exploiting hitherto untapped resources and forcing open new markets.

The Great Exhibition's most lasting contribution to the state of the culture it represented was to be the architecture of the new Crystal Palace built to house it. The Exposition Universelle, however, featured a huge display of then contemporary art from 29 countries, the Exposition Decennale. It is this display which inspires the Royal Academy's (RA) exhibition *1900: Art at the Crossroads*.

The decision to display art at all at the Exposition speaks of a greater awareness of cultural questions than exists today. One only has to look down the River Thames towards the Millennium Dome to realise that even the most flawed display of art in an exhibition of its time represents a great advance over the current state of cultural consciousness. However, as becomes clear through the RA's exhibition, the view it presented of contemporary art was extremely partial. It is possible through the displays here to see the ideological pressures at work in selecting artworks for the Exposition Universelle.

All of the works in the current exhibit not displayed in Paris in 1900 were created in the period 1897-1903. The curators of *1900* have chosen to display works in three categories: works that were on display at the Exposition Decennale; works not on display at the Exposition by artists who were represented by other works and pieces by artists who were not represented at all. Through such a juxtaposition of works, it is possible to see both what was “officially” recognised as well as what was still struggling with its underground status.

A brief review of who was and was not represented in Paris is illuminating. On display were such artists as Leon Lhemitte, Fritz von Uhde, Alfred Guillo, Ferdinand Khnopff, Franz von Stuck, Gustav Klimt, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Fredric Lord Leighton, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and Pablo Picasso. Working at the same time, but not represented in the exhibition, were Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Henri Matisse, Paul Gauguin, Pierre Bonnard, Walter Sickert, Edvard Munch, Giacomo Balla, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Piet Mondrian, Vassily Kandinsky, and Raoul Dufy.

It cannot be said that these were all young Turks, gunning for the art establishment. Certainly Mondrian, Kandinsky, Picasso and Balla all had their best work ahead of them, but many of the Impressionists were

already in their fifties. Monet turned 60 in 1900. This was not some youthful rebellion that was being ignored. These were artists at the height of their work who were forging a new way of looking at the world, a new way of representing it. It was not a way that fitted into the vision of the Exposition Universelle. This can be seen most clearly in the galleries of landscape and city paintings. Those artists who were seeking a new way of painting light (most notably Monet) were not represented in Paris. Similarly in their representations of the city, those who sought to find new ways of representing the movement of people and vehicles (Monet again, and Pissarro) were overlooked.

Two of the exhibition's thirteen galleries feature exclusively pieces on display in Paris. Certain stylistic and thematic currents are identifiable. Many of the pieces bear the stamp of a pedantic realism and deal with neo-classical or religious subjects, often in deliberately anachronistic construction. It is surprising how many paintings in the exhibition are based on the triptych form of medieval iconography (one of the galleries is given over exclusively to them), even when they do not deal directly with religious subjects. Constantin Meunier's portrayal of the lives of Belgian miners is one work that employs religious imagery: the three parts of his “The Mine” are subtitled “Descent, Calvary, Return”. Historical narrative lingers on, and many of the paintings are cloyingly sentimental.

Hand in hand with this is an extensive use of mythological material, popular with many symbolist artists in the late nineteenth century. I freely confess to having burst out laughing at the stupendous silliness of Burne-Jones' “Lancelot at the Chapel of the Holy Grail”, but his medievalism came as welcome relief from the Victorian versions of Greek and Roman imagery on display elsewhere. In the works of artists like Leighton and Alma-Tadema, we can see the Romantic fascination with classical antiquity stripped of its ground-breaking invention and reduced almost to formal exercise. (Almost, but not quite: someone as boring as Alma-Tadema was quite palatable, but Leighton's voluptuously half-awake naiads [water nymphs] proved a little too exciting for Victorian England).

Outside of these two galleries the rest of the exhibition is constructed along thematic or technical lines. There are galleries of “Bathers and Nudes”, “Woman-Man”, “Social Scenes”, “Interiors and Still-Lives”, “The City”, “Landscape”, “Rural Scenes”, and “Religion”, as well as galleries devoted to triptychs, portraits and self-portraits. Everywhere the same glaring contradictions emerge.

In the room of “Bathers and Nudes”, for example, a string of classical nudes is broken by the sudden richness of Degas' “After the Bath”. Pierre Bonnard's “Nude with Black Stockings” is clearly in a brothel, which marks her apart from the more academic glorifiers of the classical form. What marks out the painters of the demi-monde like Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, though, is not a study of that world for its own sake but for the opportunity it afforded to provide a new way of looking at the

human form. Toulouse-Lautrec's "Woman Crouching with Red Hair" conjures a new fleshtone which is not the luminously affluent one of the artists of the Salon or the Academie.

That demi-monde recurs in the gallery of paintings about the city. Toulouse-Lautrec and Maurice de Vlaminck both painted prostitutes at bars. Neither featured a moral element to it. The young Picasso, 18 years old and painting in his Blue period, drew a seductive and dangerous picture of the bars of Paris. It was also one which was lit, as in the "Moulin de la Galette", by electricity. That new power source proved a pole of attraction also to Giacomo Balla, whose fascination with technical developments was to lead him to Futurism.

It is possible to see many strands of artistic development emerging simultaneously and independently in the exhibition. Gauguin's Arcadia was in a bright primitivism. Others, like Walter Sickert, found it in a different tone to the classically-arranged relaxations of the academic artists. For Renoir and Felix Vallotton, earlier artists provide inspiration rather than demanding adherence. Similarly in the gallery of "Woman-Man" representations of the Christian story of Salome show widely varying responses. Jean Benner (who was represented at the Exposition, but not by this work) made his Salome a sexy teen-siren, in contrast to Wilhelm Trubner's rather sturdily naked portrayal, which seems to be promoting the health-giving benefits of nudism. Lovis Corinth, by contrast, came up with an astonishingly lurid and melodramatic reading of the story.

The "Woman-Man" gallery features some of the most startling works of violent imagination in the exhibition. Where Khnopff wraps his vision in wilfully obscure arcana and Richard Bergh's "Nordic Summer Evening" presents us with a model of bourgeois idyllic respectability, Wojciech Weiss's "Obsession" is red with hellish lust, and the women in Munch's pictures are predatory and destructive. The pictures by Khnopff and Bergh are forgettable, whilst Munch and Weiss's works claw themselves into your consciousness. It is a room full of strikingly lurid misogynistic imagination, from which Franz von Stuck's "Sin" emerges as the most fully-formed expression, a dark painting of a naked woman entwined with a serpent.

The other side to this warped sexual tension can be seen most clearly in the room of "Social Scenes". Many of the works shown in Paris celebrated the passive victims. There are heart-rending scenes like the unbearably contrived "Awakening of an Abandoned Child" by Eugene Robert. Pathetic, large-eyed children are a common theme, as in Eeno Jarnefelt's "The Burn-Beating". Like many Victorian liberal images, it is difficult to tell in what way he is opposing the child's presence to the agricultural work. We are supposed to sympathise with the child, but not necessarily see the hardship of the environment behind her. Some artists did deal with this differently: Meunier's bust of an old miner attempts to give some dignity to a hard life, while Stanhope Forbes tried to give manual labour a nobility in his "Forging the Anchor".

But it is the children that provide the most enduring images. Hereditary syphilis was a powerful subject for artists of the period (e.g., Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts"). Here two paintings deal with the subject. Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida's "Sad Inheritance" is a pitiful scene of children on crutches being helped into the sea by a priest. Here it is the subject itself that is emotive—the (doomed) children are being comforted by the priest. Compare this, however, with Munch's "The Inheritance", with its bitter use of Madonna and Child iconography. One is an exercise in conscience salving, of dealing with "issues". The other is a bitter and heartfelt piece of work that remains haunting because it cannot prescribe panaceas (any more than Ibsen had in "Ghosts").

Sentimentality resurfaces in the gallery of interiors, where Claudel's reverie is one of the more craven representations. However, again, other less sentimental works are on display—paintings of empty rooms, of figures turned away from the viewer. Even though Claudel shares an

almost empty interior with artists like Hammershoi, the effect created is completely different. For artists like Hammershoi and Bonnard there is a ripple of emotional impact which is not created by Claudel's Cinderella-ish skivvy in rags at the fireplace. It is the same difference in perception that elsewhere creates Jules Breton's chocolate box images of peasants on the one hand and Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's heroic image of "The Human Tide" on the other.

It receives its most striking expression, however, in the portraiture on display. There are many that attempt to recreate the nobility of the figure in a return to grand portraiture, e.g., Sargent's "Mrs. Carl Meyer and her Children", or Boldoni's painting of James Alexander McNeill Whistler. This nobility of figure has, in Whistler's own "Portrait of George W. Vanderbilt" degenerated almost into a parody of itself. Vanderbilt is effete, a wimpy and spineless figure. Yet on the other side of the room is Munch's brilliantly austere "Portrait of Aase and Harald Norregard". It is not a noble representation but a more honest one. Elsewhere Cézanne's "Man with Crossed Arms" is a brooding presence, defying the return of glorification of position in portraits.

There are some wonderful pictures here, then, alongside quite a lot of paintings I would normally cross the road to avoid. But what do the curators hope to express through this arrangement? At the beginning of the exhibition they claim that it "argues for ... a reassessment of the conventional history of western art at the turn of a century which had seen exceptional economic, technological and social change". The juxtaposition does highlight the contradictory development of artistic endeavour in that period, and it certainly makes one look again at the relationship between pieces of work of quite different styles. It might also make one question how the work of someone like Leighton, Bouguereau or Alma-Tadema could possibly be seen as reflecting a century of technological or social change, rather than as belonging to a world that was disappearing in 1900.

The curators have failed in one of their stated aims, which is that "rather than proposing stylistic confrontation [the exhibition] explores a dialogue between traditional, or academic, artists ... 'modern masters' and those ... who were yet to be recognised as early protagonists of modernism". In affording all of these artists equal weight the exhibition does a similar disservice to certain artists (and the spectator) as the Exposition Universelle did in 1900. Then they were not exhibited because they were too audacious, too freakishly modern. Now we are told that the innovators and the "traditional, or academic, artists" were of equal worth. Neither position is valid, yet this exhibition does at least show us the artists and the sharp differences between them.

1900: Art at the Crossroads runs at the Royal Academy of Arts, London until April 3, 2000

For more information on the exhibition visit:  
<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/www-nf.htm>



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