

The French and their love affair with art - a brief history

One cannot escape art in France and, as Belinda Hogan finds out, the French have been creating since prehistoric times.



When one thinks of France, one thinks of art. A trip to France would not be complete without a visit to the Musee du Louvre in Paris or to another found throughout the country.

Almost on every street corner you can find an artist to paint you a picture and it's this very simple love of art that makes the French so proud of their culture and so endearing to the rest of us.

Even if you know nothing about art, the names Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Eugene Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Henri Matisse are so familiar they feel like long lost friends. These artists of the 1800s and 1900s are so a part of our psyche they have become part of our vocabulary also.

The French have been having a love affair with artistic expression since the dawn of man and to understand why, one has to go back in time. For the practicality of this overview, French art can be divided into five historical time frames: Pre-history, Celtic and Roman periods, the Medieval Period, the Early Modern Period and the Modern Period.

Left: Das Urteil des Paris (1720) by Antoine Watteau. Original in The Louvre Museum Paris. Opposite, top right: Coins - Coin of the Parisii - 5th-1st CBCE - from Cabinet des Medailles. Opposite, bottom right: Mosaics in the Roman Gaul Villa of Seviac, near Montreal - du - Gers, gers France photo by Joel-Noel Lafargue Opposite, left: Chauvet Cave Painting.



PRE-HISTORY

The earliest known European art is from the Upper Paleolithic period of between 40,000 to 10,000 years ago. France boasts much art from this period including cave paintings. One of the most famous caves, discovered in December 1994, is the Chauvet Cave located in the Ardeche region of Southern France. The discovery of this cave is seen as one of the most important prehistoric rock art sites in the world because of its age, which dates from 30,000 to 33,000 years ago, and because the art is preserved and abundant. Rather than the more usual animals that predominate in Palaeolithic cave art, such as horses, cattle and reindeer, the walls of the Chauvet Cave are covered with predatory animals - lions, panthers, bears, owls, rhinoceros and hyenas. In the periods that followed, from the Neolithic period through to the Bronze Age, the French fascination with art continued to flourish with painted stones, stone work and sculptures being produced.

CELTIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

The Celts had moved into present day France around 450BC and their culture was a major influence on art production during the Iron Age. Devoid of symmetry and linear patterns, the Celts created everyday practical items such as vases, cups and bowls. They also made jewellery and weapons in bronze and gold. When Gaul (as the region was known) came under the Roman Empire from the first century BC to the fifth century AD, art in this region changed dramatically. It was not just Roman architecture that changed the face of this region aesthetically and artistically; it was the creation of frescoes, mosaics, glassware, jewellery and pottery and the teaching of these artistic practices that had much influence on people. You can still see remains of much Roman art in French towns today.

MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The emergence of the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks (5th-8th century

AD) changed the face of art in the region known as Francia. Sculpture regressed as an art form but Celtic decoration made a comeback and people no longer felt the need to build robust Romanesque buildings. The period immediately after this, the Carolingian Renaissance (750AD-900AD), is the first time artists were patronised for their work by royalty, and their art consisted of drawings, metalwork, mosaics, frescos and small-scale sculpture. By the end of Carolingian rule around 900AD, artistic production came to an abrupt end. In-fighting between the provinces split the region with monks the only people really producing art as a means of promoting Christianity.

However, the split in regions meant a diversity of artistic styles was developed with artists drawing inspiration from abroad and from past eras. By 1000AD until 1250AD the rise of Romanesque art had appeared, and Gothic styles (which originated in France) were developing. Architecture was forceful



and Romanesque sculpture was being integrated into designs. Motifs in the form of monstrous beasts were also becoming a feature. Gold, silver and other types of metalwork, sculpture, stained glass design and frescos were being produced in abundance, with painting emerging also. By the twelfth century, the building of cathedrals in St Denis (1140) and Chartres (1145) were recognised as the first ever examples of Gothic art, and the French could claim to be visionaries and revolutionaries in art design. Examples can be still seen all over France.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

With the Renaissance sweeping through Europe in the late 1400s, France became one of the major art hubs. Inspired by the art of Italy, French sculptures such as Jean Goujon and Germain Pilon were at the forefront of the French Renaissance whilst Jean Cousin and Jean and Francois Clout made names for themselves as portrait artists; art

popular at this time. Mannerism, a term given to the elongated and graceful mythical figures depicted in sculpture and painting, also emerged.

By the beginning of the 1600s the grand style of Baroque art materialised due to the Catholic Church wanting to revive itself after the Protestant revolt in the century before. By later this century, French art was referred to as Classicism, because artists adhered to certain rules of ratio and moderation uncharacteristic of Baroque. By the next century the Rococo and Neoclassicism movements appeared with the painting of female nudes, theatre-like scenes and Greek and Roman mythology becoming popular subjects. Artists such as Nicolas Lancret and Antoine Watteau were two of the most famous painters of this time.

MODERN PERIOD

The French Revolution changed art in France with many artists influenced

by the reign of Napoleon. However, landscapes and romantic subjects also became popular. One of the founders of the Impressionist Movement, Edouard Manet, is seen by many as taking France (and the world) into the modern era of art. Manet started to paint and depict modern day life in France. Monet, Renoir and Degas were also contemporaries. By the end of the 1800s, post-impressionists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin depicted the underbelly life in Paris and French Polynesia respectively.

This century had cemented Paris as the world's art epicentre. Artists empowered by the unleashing of Impressionism used colour and content in their work. Surrealism was a movement that followed. African art continued as an influence. Paul Cezanne was the most famous French artist living at this time as was Pablo Picasso, who was living in Paris.

By the end of World War One and the next couple of decades to follow, the French art scene divided into two.

There were those artists who continued with the lessons learnt from previous masters, and those who looked elsewhere for inspiration. The Pop Art movement in New York in the 1960s influenced the likes of contemporary artists such as Yves Klein. Graffiti also became an art form during this time. Some critics argue that many modern French artists today are influenced by historical events such as the Holocaust and politics. Whatever the influence or style, France remains the artistic capital of the world.

This article is a summary of French art. Future articles will examine, in depth, particular periods of French art and culture. ■

Above: La dans au Moulin Rouge by Toulouse-Lautrec (1890) Oil on Canvas

Right: In the Theatre by Degas (date unknown) Oil on Canvas

Opposite left: Rue Montorgueil With Flags by Monet (1886) Oil on Canvas

Opposite right: Pape moe (1893) by Gauguin Oil on Canvas

