

Impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, afrofuturism... Why do we think of art according to 'movements'? Jennifer Higgle explores how these art historical groupings came to be

SALTISM, ANYONE?



William Roberts
*The Vorticists at the
Restaurant de la Tour
Eiffel: Spring, 1915* 1961-2
Oil paint on canvas
182.9 × 213.4 cm

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religious topics – artists often articulated their myriad intentions by associating themselves with a movement.

Take impressionism, for example. In an article titled ‘Exhibition of the Impressionists’, Louis Leroy, the art critic for the Paris magazine *Le Charivari*, wrote disparagingly about Claude Monet’s 1872 painting *Impression, Sunrise*: ‘I was just saying to myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in the picture ... Wallpaper in its formative state is more finished than this seascape!’ In 1877, a loosely affiliated group of artists, united in their anti-academicism, rebelliously decided to adopt the name – even though the styles of Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and others, were quite different. Similarly, both fauvism and cubism came into being because of a put-down by another art critic, Louis Vauxcelles.

Look up ‘art movements’ on Wikipedia and you’ll be confronted with hundreds, many of which are obscure. (‘The Incoherents’, 1882, anyone?) It’s impossible to generalise about art movements; each one is unique. For instance, in 1909, the founder of futurism, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, published its proto-fascist manifesto on the front page of Italian and French newspapers, declaring, among other things: ‘We want

to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.’

By contrast, Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) was dreamed up in Germany in 1911 by a group of artists who were incensed that Wassily Kandinsky’s painting *Composition v* had been rejected by an exhibition at the Munich New Association of Artists. In 1912, the term orphism was coined by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who felt that a wildly diverse group of artists – including Robert and Sonia Delaunay, František Kupka, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp and others – shared a similar dreamy sensibility. In 1916, dada was born in a Zurich nightclub, although the dadaists refused to agree on who came up with the name or even what it meant – but since they embraced illogic, this sort of makes sense.

Dada grew into surrealism – which continues to morph in myriad directions across the planet, as does afrofuturism, which is less an artistic style than a manifestation of the intersections of myth, race and technology. Even the development of abstract expressionism, one of the most famous of art movements, is murky: the term was first employed in 1919 in an article on German expressionism but came into its current usage when used to describe the paintings of Hans Hofmann in 1946.

Confusingly, some art movements were established to highlight the individuality of their members: in China, for example, the Stars Art Group (also known as Xing Xing) was founded in the late 1970s to champion personal expression in the face of state control.

One thing is clear: art is not neat, and neither is its evolution. It doubles up, turns back on itself, talks with ghosts, is often contradictory, obstinate, and obtuse. This is as it should be. Art is not accounting; it celebrates life in all its chaotic glory. Art movements certainly reflect something about the art made at a certain point in time, but their generalisations are often best taken with a pinch of salt. Saltism, anyone?

The collection display *Vorticism* is at Tate Britain until 25 September 2022.

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