

Depicting the Worldwide Crisis: The Role of the Artist in Social, Economic and Political Change

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Theme: [History](#)

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Editor's Note

Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin is a prominent Irish artist. His drawings and paintings can be consulted on his website at <http://gaelart.net/>

As the global economic crisis deepens, one may ask how the artist can play any role in social, economic and political change?

Visual artists have been commenting on society since William Hogarth, a pictorial satirist and social critic during the early 1700s, used art to comment on the politics and customs of his time.

The same challenge still exists today – how can the visual artist make images that have a profound effect on people and their view of society and so hope to contribute to making a better society for all?

A painting may be just physical pigments of colour applied to a canvas but how the image is constructed in terms of composition, tone, colour and line is a very particular process that contrasts sharply with music and literature.

Unlike music its pictorial symbols are very directly 'read', and unlike literature it must summarise its images and ideas as parts of one composition, telling a whole story whereas in literature the story can be developed over time.

Thus, in visual art the politics of representation is just as important as the representation of politics. How the people, the political and economic system, work, demonstrations, social structures, oppression, poverty etc. are represented depends on the individual artist's use of style and composition to make an image. What stylistic choices does the politically conscious figurative artist have today to create art that comments on society?

If we look to the past, we can see that over the centuries artists have developed different visual strategies to encompass the 'stories' of their subjects. Four different approaches will be examined here: Allegory, Realism, Expressionism, and Mexicanidad.

One could argue that Allegory and Expressionism have been used as distancing devices while Realism and Mexicanidad draw people in to empathise with the subjects of the composition (usually a reflection of themselves or their own history).

Some artists depict a negative view of society, some keep a neutral perspective (out of a

fear of the art becoming 'propaganda') and some take a positive view by consciously depicting action and change. There is also an important aspect that, as we shall see, sometimes the artists themselves see the strategies as temporary and that in an ideal world they would make different kinds of art. This reveals itself as a tension between the present and the future, the implicit and the explicit, the necessary and the ideal.

Allegory

Allegory can be described as "a figurative mode of representation conveying meaning other than the literal. Allegory communicates its message by means of symbolic figures, actions or symbolic representation." [1]

In visual art there is a long history of using symbols to represent ideas, desirable qualities, political and social issues etc. and in some political regimes allegory has been used as one form of comment that was not vulnerable to immediate censorship.

The Irish artist Seán Keating (1889 - 1977) was one socially conscious artist who used allegory in his paintings to explore the turbulent times of the early twentieth century. Keating made many paintings documenting the Irish War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War. [2] In one of his allegorical paintings, *Night's Candles are Burnt Out*, Keating depicts the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the river Shannon in a realistic style but incorporating many allegorical elements to comment on past, present and future aspects of Irish society at that time.



Night's Candles are Burnt Out (1927-28) by Seán Keating [3]

Keating himself describes what he was trying to achieve thus:

"The title suggests that the dawn has come, when the dim candlelight of surviving medievalism in Ireland is fading before the rising sun of scientific progress, exemplified by the Shannon electricity works, which form the background to my picture. The stage Ireland and the stage Irishman are typified by the skeletons hanging on the left from one of the steel towers which support the electric transmission lines. Beneath are the types of Irish workmen. In the centre of the foreground are two men. One represents the Capitalist, who carries under his arms plans for industrial development. A gunman confronts him menacingly. The two symbolize the constant antagonism between the business elements and the extremists, which hinders the material progress of the State. The priest reading represents the unchanging church, ever present when spiritual guidance is needed but

concerning itself only with a kingdom that is not of this world. In short, my picture depicts the transition of Ireland from a country of ancient stagnation to a state of freedom and progress." [4]

The power of the allegorical style consists in its ability to convey many different aspects of a contemporary issue using multiple elements that would not normally appear in a straightforward realist composition. It allows one to integrate one's philosophical outlook into the composition and give the painting a symbolic significance beyond the sum of its parts. Allegory allowed Keating to put forward his views of society which were prophetic considering the very recent economic and political turbulence in Ireland. He noted that:

"To endeavour to promote social conscience in the name of God and at the same time to permit - under the guise of modernism and advancement - the activities of a naked commercialism (which has fallen into disrepute among the very people who created it) is a process of auto-frustration. Unbridled self interest and reckless exploitation of the moral and physical needs of the human race has brought about the state of things in which collapse is inevitable." [5]

Realism

From the Social Realism of the nineteenth century to the Socialist Realism of the twentieth century, Realism as a movement in art has been a sturdy vehicle for the depiction of socio-political causes the world over.

John French Sloan (1871 - 1951), an American artist and a leading figure of the Ashcan School of realist artists "concerned himself with what we call genre: street scenes, restaurant life, paintings of saloons, ferry boats, roof tops, back yards, and so on through a whole catalogue of commonplace subjects." [6]

Sloan was active in American left wing politics but refused to make overtly political art which he saw as 'propaganda'. He tried to keep some distance between his art and his political ideas which were more implicit than explicit in his paintings.



McSorley's Bar (1912) by John Sloan [7]

Sloan commented on this problem when he stated that:

"I was never interested in putting propaganda into my paintings, so it annoys me when art historians try to interpret my city life pictures as 'socially conscious.' I saw the everyday life of the people, and on the whole I picked out bits of joy in human life for my subject matter." [8]

While highlighting the lives of the poor and the oppressed were implicit in his art, he rejected the implication that this was the only reason why he painted. As if to emphasise the importance of making art as a process in itself he told his students "I have nothing to teach you that will help you to make a living". [9]

Expressionism

Expressionism was "a cultural movement, initially in poetry and painting, originating in

Germany at the start of the 20th century. Its typical trait is to present the world in an utterly subjective perspective, radically distorting it for emotional effect, to evoke moods or ideas.” [10]

Expressionism is an ideal style for political art in that it allows the artist to pour out his/her anger at an oppressive system/government/political party in a very dramatic way. However, as a style it can also sink into an almost Swiftian misanthropism. A good example of this is the German artist George Grosz (1893 – 1959) whose work was described by Robert Hughes thus:

“In Grosz’s Germany, everything and everybody is for sale. All human transactions, except for the class solidarity of the workers, are poisoned. The world is owned by four breeds of pig: the capitalist, the officer, the priest and the hooker, whose other form is the sociable wife.” [11]



The Funeral (Dedicated to Oskar Panizza) (1917 – 1918)
by George Grosz [12]

Even for Grosz himself, Expressionism had its limits:

“My aim is to be understood by everyone. I reject the ‘depth’ that people demand nowadays, into which you can never descend without a diving bell crammed with cabbalistic bullshit and intellectual metaphysics. This expressionistic anarchy has got to stop ... A day will come when the artist will no longer be this bohemian, puffed-up anarchist but a healthy man working in clarity within a collectivist society.” [13]

Thus, Grosz hoped that one day the need for such extreme art would not be necessary and that the artist would eventually be integrated into an egalitarian society where he/she would become like the artisan/craft worker of earlier times, a worker without the ego of the contemporary artist.

Mexicanidad

Mexicanidad is an art style which mixes Mexican culture and heritage and was exemplified by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886 – 1957). His art was based on large figures using bold colours and Aztec influences. This style allowed him to incorporate contemporary political struggle with depictions of the Aztec past. He painted many murals in public places which he saw as a democratic art form that all people could have access to regardless of race and social class. [14]



History of Mexico from the Conquest to 1930 (1929 –1931) by Diego Rivera [15]

Rivera’s influences ranged from the Italian masters to the political warfare on the streets:

“During my seventeen months in Italy, I completed more than three hundred sketches from the frescoes of the masters and from life. Many of the latter depicted street clashes between socialists and fascists which occurred before my eyes. I often sketched while the bullets whistled around my ears.” [16]

Rivera’s style is a consciously and overtly political style (which Sloan would have seen as ‘propaganda’) covering everything from childbirth and education to political demonstrations

and revolutionary activity. This style celebrates political activity as a core activity of social life, now and into the future.

Conclusion

The global economic crisis demands a response from artists just as it demands a response from other types of social commentators. The above four visual strategies show starting points that can be used and developed by artists today looking for ways to explore contemporary problems.

Notes:

[1] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory>

[2] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Se%C3%A1n_Keating

[3]

http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/shannon_hydroelectric_scheme/shannon_hydroelectric_scheme.htm

[4] Seán Keating: In Focus, Eimear O'Connor (Associated Editions, 2009) p. 20/1

[5] Seán Keating: In Focus, Eimear O'Connor (Associated Editions, 2009) p27

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_French_Sloan

[7] http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/John_French_Sloan

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_French_Sloan

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_French_Sloan

[10] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expressionism>

[11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Grosz

[12] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/1/18/Grosz_Widmung_an_Oskar_Panizza.jpg

[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Grosz

[14] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_Rivera

[15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_Rivera

[16] My Art, My Life: An Autobiography Diego Rivera (Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1991) p.72

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