

Société Anonyme

Research Question: Modern art of the early 20th century: To what extent did the Société Anonyme contribute to the change of appreciation and perception of art?

Visual Arts Extended Essay

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Introduction

The Société Anonyme was an organization created by pioneering artists Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Katherine Dreier in 1920. The goal of the society was to normalize modern art in America that was already popular in Europe and introduce American avant-garde artists, by sponsoring lectures, exhibitions, concerts, and publications. The organization collected over a thousand pieces of art, and held 80 exhibitions between 1920 and 1940. The founding members were disappointed by the lack of appreciation for modern art in America by critics and citizens and “believed it was important that the history of art be chronicled not by the historians or academics but by the artists.” (Gross) They felt responsible to give credit to all pieces and artists. This society has had a lasting effect since it first began, donating over a thousand pieces to the Yale art gallery.

Marcel Duchamp, a French-American painter born in 1887, was well known for his works of cubism and Dadaism. Cubism is an early 20th century art movement where objects are portrayed in blocky, abstract ways that shows multiple viewpoints and lacks movement. Dadaism is artistic anarchy, showing disgust for politics, social, and cultural values. However, “he steadfastly refused to



be affiliated with any specific artistic movement *per se*. In his insistence that art should be driven by ideas above all; Duchamp is generally considered to be the father of Conceptual art” (The Art Story). Duchamp wanted art to challenge the minds of the viewers and to push the boundaries of art by creating controversial and sometimes uncomfortable paintings that provoked the minds of his audience to question what they believed to be art. One of Duchamp’s most controversial paintings was entitled “Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2” Created in 1912, Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending Staircase No. 2*

submitted this painting to the Cubist Salon Des Independants exhibition. This painting caused much controversy because the board of the exhibition could not decide if the painting fit into the cubist or

futurists paintings because of its cubist structure, but movement and unnatural shape of futurism. While this painting caused a stir, his most famous art piece was a ready-made porcelain urinal signed by R. Mutt 1917, titled "Fountain". Duchamp bought a standard porcelain urinal, had it signed, and submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition. The piece was rejected by the committee even though



Marcel Duchamp,
Fountain

officially rejection was not allowed. Duchamp created this dada piece to make people question if the amount of effort put into a piece gave it more merit. These pieces created so much controversy that made his name became well-known in the art community, and he used this influence to support other artists that created art that was not appreciated because it was too avant-grade.

The second founder of the society was an American visual artist by the name of Man Ray. Man Ray is best known for his photography, which at the time were very contemporary, avant-garde work. Ray took minimalist photographs of which he called 'rayographs', which was new and exciting to photographers and models at the time. Ray was inspired and influenced by the paintings of the cubist movement and Marcel Duchamp himself who he befriended at the Armory Show. This lead to his large involvement in the dada movement around 1918, where he began to create ready-mades just as Duchamp had. Around the start of the society, Ray assisted Duchamp in creating one of the first few examples of kinetic art titled "Rotary Glass Plates." This piece had long stripped rectangular pieces of glass staggered on a tripod that spun around like a fan, creating what they called 'precision optics'. The piece failed many times, but the two eventually fine-tuned the machine.



Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray,
Rotary Glass Plates

The final founder of the Société Anonyme and possibly the most influential member was American artist and lecturer Katherine Dreier. Dreier, raised in a very progressive family, was an

active suffragette, lecturer, and social reformer all throughout her life. Growing up, Dreier was given the same opportunities as her brothers in order to teach her that she was their equal, and this strongly influenced her passion for all artists and art to have the same recognition as the next. Dreier was a vicious supporter of modern art, creating many of her own modern pieces, and felt that it deserved the same appreciation as current art forms. "Miss Dreier was a one- woman crusade to make 'The finer forces' of European avant-garde art felt in America at a time when normalcy translated into provincialism." (Iovine) At the International Exhibition of Modern Art She encountered Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2". She also encountered the criticism towards it, and she was upset by this because she felt this new art form deserved appreciation, even though it wasn't the popular, 'accepted' art form of that time.

Representation

In 1913 the International Exhibition of Modern Art, now known as the Armory Show, held its first exhibition in New York City. This show had an enormous turnout, from average Americans to professional critics. This show created a shockwave in its audience because, again, this was a brand new form of art that they had never seen before. The critics tore apart the cubists, calling them 'insane' and laughing at their pieces. Since this art form was so wildly different than their current accepted art form, it seemed so outrageous that someone would think to create it and call it art. They believed art had to conform to certain guidelines to be considered good, and when they saw someone created something outside those guidelines; it wasn't 'good' or even art.

While it seemed that no one took the art seriously, it still brought modern art to the attention of Americans. With the hopes building off this show, the organization continued to spread modern art across America, by representing a myriad of artist, with no definitive art form and in the 1920's, the Société Anonyme held its first exhibition. The collection had a wide range of paintings; it was "a collection of oddball modernism ranging from the esoteric to the rigorously experimental to the

downright bad” (Schwendener). The Société Anonyme represented artists such as Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, and Wassily Kandinsky. These were the more well-known names that the Société Anonyme represented, but they also represented artists that had little name recognition whose artwork was considered bad by most standards of the time, however if the standards were different, would these pieces be considered good? With Duchamp’s belief that all art had merit, pieces from artists such as himself were interspersed with pieces of lesser known artists. Many were surprised that Duchamp, and the organization in general, would place his paintings next to these overly experimental pieces; they expected his paintings to be with other well-known artists. However, Duchamp did not hold himself above other artists. This again, was the Société Anonyme’s way of arguing to their audience that it doesn’t matter who made it or how much effort was put into it, it still has merit to be called art.

While this style was shocking to their viewers, there was positive feedback from some critics, as Henry McBride said “One must mount two steep flights of stairs and then pay 26 cents to obtain admission to the first exhibition of the Société Anonyme, Inc., but even those to whom an outlay of 25 cents for any purpose whatever is a serious matter will probably not regret the investment. Many a movie at twice the price gives one less to remember.” (Gross, McBride) There was still hope for modern art to be normalized.

Beginning of Modern Art

In the early 1900’s modern art was the new and exciting emerging art form. When human kind reached the 20th century, artists felt that this was the beginning of the modern age. Around this time was the famous work of Sigmund Freud on the meaning of dreams and the unconscious mind, and Henri Bergson expanding and collapsing our concept of time. Work such as this sparked the surrealism movement. The industrial revolution brought the increased construction of cars, planes, and skyscrapers. With these inventions becoming normal in society, many artists began creating

futurist and modernism pieces to reflect their changing world. However even with this change, modern art was still having trouble being popularized. Americans were still used to the more traditional style of realism and impressionism, and the slight shift into American Realism.

American Realism was a style in which American artists would depict the way their society was changing, but in a way that it all looked real. However the contemporary and dream-like style of modern art was bizarre to them.

At this same point in time, Europe already had a more progressive art form normalized in their society. The realist style was popular in the 19th century but was quickly replaced with modern art at the start of the 20th century. With modern art was in most homes in Europe, they were more accepting to new art forms and the carnage of World War I, prompted many Europeans to immigrate to America, bringing their modern art and culture with them. Americans were unhappy with Europeans around this time, and refused to accept their art. They wanted to have their own distinct art in protest of 'Europe'. The goal that Duchamp, Ray, and Dreier had in mind was to have modern art in most Brooklynites homes, and to open the minds of Americans to avant-garde art. They hoped to achieve this through the exhibitions they held because if people saw that if the art was good enough to be in an exhibition, then it was good enough for their homes and lives. The Société Anonyme soon normalized the idea and style of modern art.

Artistic Styles before the Société

In 1911, American artist George Bellows created *New York*, and painting that depicts a busy street in what appears to be downtown Manhattan. In the background, high rising skyscrapers crowd together. Cars and people fill the streets. This appears to be a realist painting of



George Bellows, *New York*

the time in New York, however if you look closely, you can see that mixed with the cars on the street there are horse drawn carriages. This is a prime example of American Realism, because it shows the 'old way' with the horse drawn carriages, and how that is now mixed with their new society with the cars and skyscrapers. Bellows is depicting the change in American society with this realism



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street, Berlin*

style. Realism was still very popular in America at the time, but the symbolism of each piece was new. Realism used to simply depict a scene or object as it was. American realism was a way to show a change in society while remaining realistic, believable. The art style itself was not very different, but the ideas and meanings behind it all were.

Around the same time that Bellows created *New York*, Ernst Kirchner, a German artist, created a piece titled *Street, Berlin*. This piece shows a group of people walking down a street which is assumed to be in Berlin Germany. Similar to *New York*, in that it contains people on a street, however Kirchner uses a warped, almost dream-like style for the shapes and colors of all the objects. The people seem to be mixed together, almost like they are liquid that is seeping into each other. With its surreal style, this painting can be uncomfortable for the viewer. This style had been normalized to Europeans.

Street, Berlin was created a short 2 years after *New York*, and in those 2 years the world didn't change much. So the differences between European art and American art during the same period were quite apparent. In the early 1900's, "American artists who seemed to paint as if nothing had changed since the Realist and Impressionist movements of the nineteenth-century" (Kahn Academy), while Europeans were deep into the expressionist movement, in fact, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was one of the leaders of the expressionist movement. While they both depict people on a

street, there is the obvious difference in the style used to portray them. In Bellow's piece, they look real, like he was recreating a photograph. While in Kirchner's piece, they seem cartoony, dream-like. This was an important difference in styles that the Société Anonyme recognized and publicized.

While the Société Anonyme was gaining recognition and influence, there were still quite a few factors that were occurring at the time that could have helped popularize modern art. Political and economic instability in America led to artists and people to rebel against society's norms. This instability helped start the dada movement. As stated above, the industrial revolution and American commercial power led to businessmen buying European art and incorporating European architecture in their rapidly growing cities. Modern styles were beginning to pop up in the streets that Americans would then see every day. It could be argued that modern art would have slowly been normalized in American society on its own because it would increasingly be used in our everyday lives. It would have become normal, yes, but it would not have been properly appreciated for the art that it is.

However, even with these influences, would modern art be accepted and appreciated by all without organizations such as the Société Anonyme? Would the perception of art be any different than before? The Société did more than purchase art; they held many exhibitions, held in spaces for the public to see. The exhibitions made the viewing of modern art extremely accessible and easy for all Americans to see, and the exhibitions that were held saw thousands of spectators. The exhibitions either traveled to multiple cities on a tour, or remained in one space. These exhibitions were important because they were not a contest just for judges to look at; it was for average Americans and other artists to experience new and unfamiliar art. Political instability and growing cities influenced the artists to create modern art and for people to understand that times were changing, however, the Société Anonyme was responsible for bringing it to the public. The lectures

that Dreier held were again for the public, they were meant to teach the public about the styles and importance of art.

Americans had witnessed modern art many times, and each time had a difficult appreciating its beauty. The attempts of the Armory Show brought modern art to the attention of the public were simply brushed off. The Société Anonyme's persistent efforts helped Americans appreciate modern art and art itself. Many organizations held exhibitions for art, however the biggest difference was that these artists' works were interspersed with each other. This showed people that it doesn't matter who created it or how much time they spent on it, it is still art.

Impact of Société Anonyme

When Duchamp first displayed "Nude Descending a Staircase No.2" it "quickly drew outrage from a public unfamiliar with current trends in European art" (Kahn Academy). It received much negative criticism from audiences and critics alike, just as most modern paintings were receiving at the time. Today, this painting is seen as one of the most influential paintings in the modern art movement, and receives much appreciation. Wassily Kandinsky, one of the artists represented by the Société Anonyme, was met with negative criticism and setbacks in his earlier works. He created many abstract art pieces that were seen as a colorful mess at first. Many of Kandinsky's pieces were named "Composition (followed by a roman numeral)" which was a nod to musical compositions. When people saw these pieces, no one saw the hint of



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition IV*

music. Later, people began to admire his use of movement, shapes, and colors to show the vibrations of music and emotions in each of his composition pieces.

These are two examples of artists whose criticism towards their modern art changed through the 1920's (the peak of the Société Anonyme). This is evidence of the change in heart of modern art for Americans and that their appreciation of those styles was shifted and opened up. Duchamp and Kandinsky specifically were artists that were represented by the Société Anonyme, meaning that their art was in these exhibitions and lectures. Drier's lectures goal was to teach people about modern art, and the exhibition's goals were to present modern art in order to normalize it and give it the appreciation it deserves. Based on the changed criticism of Duchamp and Kandinsky's pieces, it would appear that the Société Anonyme achieved the goals it had in mind.

Conclusion

While our society was vastly changing, America was a bit late to the new trends and styles. Europe had already normalized modern art and with the tension of WWI, Americans did not want to support European trends and work despite those who immigrated and brought modern art into America originally. This disdain caused America to keep their 'old-fashioned' art styles, of which the Société Anonyme wanted to change. With its many lectures and exhibitions, the Société pushed modern art to the view of American audiences. With an evolving society, change of style and trends (of anything) is inevitable; but this stubbornness stunted the change in accepted art forms. Modern art would have eventually been normalized in Americans lives; however that could have taken months or years later. The Société Anonyme acted as a catalyst for this change.

Dreier eventually donated the pieces in the possession of the Société Anonyme to the Yale University Art Gallery for people to always be able to admire and interpret the art. Dreier gave around 200 pieces to the YUAG, and today, the collection holds over a thousand pieces. Still to this day pieces are donated to the collection, and they are still presented to the public. The pieces have been and will always be displayed because it will always be the goal of this collection to open people's minds and test what people believe to be art.

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Images

#1



"Nude Descending a Staircase No.2"

Marcel Duchamp

1912

Oil on Canvas

147 x 89.2 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art

#2



"Fountain"

Marcel Duchamp

1917

Urinal

Unavailable

Collection SFMOM

#5



Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray

Rotary Glass Plates

1920

Painted glass, iron, electric motor, and mixed media

65 1/4 x 62 x 38 in.

Gift from the Société Anonyme to the Yale University Art Gallery

#3



George Bellows

New York

1911

Oil on Canvas

42 x 60 in

Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

#4



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Street, Berlin

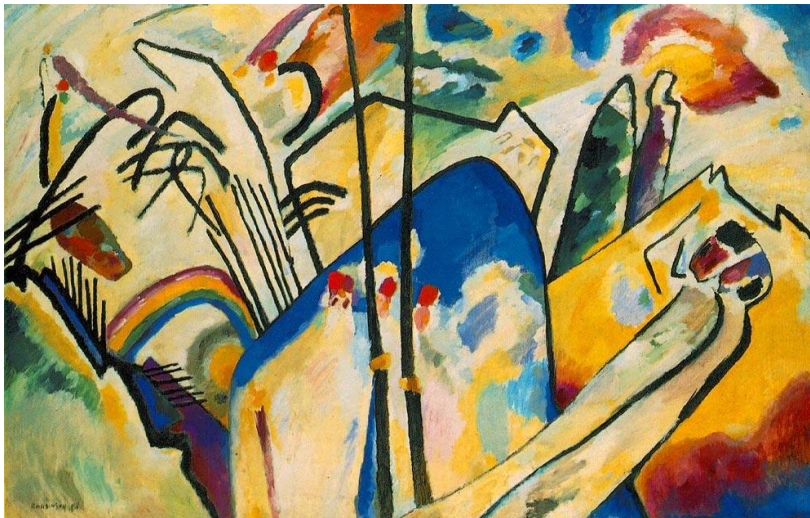
1913

Oil on Canvas

$47\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{7}{8}$ in

German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse,
MoMA

#6



Wassily Kandinsky

Composition IV

1911

Oil on Canvas

62.8 x 98.6 in.

Dusseldorf, Germany.
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-
Westfalen, Germany