



How War Revolutionized Artistic Expression in the 20th Century

Before World War I, society largely believed in reason, logic, and order. These values were reflected in traditional art, which emphasized composition and realism. The war exposed the failure of these ideals and this moment produced a rejection of the belief that rational systems could justify the modern world.

From this reaction emerged the revolutionary art movements Dadaism and Surrealism. Although they cannot be solely attributed to war, the conflicts triggered a reaction against traditional rationalism and authority. Artists launched a revolution in artistic expression, ultimately reforming established conventions by critiquing authority, embracing experimentation, and rejecting rationalism.

Dadaism

Dadaism emerged during 1916 in Zurich, a neutral city that became a refuge for displaced artists. Figures central to its emergence, such as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray did not seek to reform art but instead sought to dismantle it.

Hugo Ball provided Dada with its philosophical foundation. Through journals like *Die Aktion* and his invention of sound poetry, Ball attacked language itself, viewing it as corrupted by nationalism and propaganda. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp extended this revolution beyond Europe through their publication of *New York Dada* and Ray's invention of "Rayographs."

In Hugo Ball's *Dada Manifesto*, he declared Dada a new movement defined by rejection. He wrote, "I don't want words that other people have invented... I want my own rhythm." Tristan Tzara pushed this logic further. In his manifesto, he famously proclaimed, "Dada means nothing." He rejected beauty, logic, and rational order, warning that art married to logic would collapse into itself.

Dadaism employed various techniques. Photomontage, developed by the Berlin Dada group, appropriated mass media images by pasting them together. Collage and assemblage incorporated debris—tickets, wrappers, discarded materials—to make art. Marcel Duchamp's readymades pushed this reform further.



Fountain is a porcelain urinal signed "R. Mutt." Duchamp submitted it to test the Society of Independent Artists' claim that they accepted all works without a jury. When it was rejected, the hypocrisy of institutional art was exposed. Duchamp argued that art did not need to be "retinal," but intellectual—defined by context and intention rather than beauty.



Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* critiques the failures of the newly formed Weimar Republic and exposes political and gender inequalities in postwar Germany. Created in 1919, the work confronts both the old and new governments and reflects the instability left behind by war.



Otto Dix's *Skat Players* depicts mutilated war veterans playing cards in a Dresden café. Prosthetic limbs, mechanical faces, and grotesque exaggeration reveal the physical and psychological damage left by war—damage that society preferred not to see.

Surrealism

Surrealism emerged after World War I as artists sought not only to reject reality, but to understand it differently. Influenced by Freud, surrealists believed truth existed in dreams and the subconscious.

André Breton defined surrealism as "pure psychic automatism," free from rational and moral control. He described it as a reaction against rationalism driven by fear. Breton also acknowledged Dada's influence, agreeing with its revolt against prewar systems. Yvan Goll, however, argued that surrealism should move toward construction rather than destruction, emphasizing creative will over psychoanalytic obsession.

Surrealism employed techniques such as Aerography, Automatism, Bulletism, and Cubomania. Automatism, promoted by André Breton, encouraged artists to create without conscious planning, allowing spontaneous forms. Aerography used airbrushing techniques to apply paint, while bulletism introduced controlled unpredictability by altering surfaces through impact or chance. Cubomania, developed by Max Ernst, rearranged cut sections of images into unexpected compositions.



Salvador Dalí's *The Face of War* depicts endless skulls within a hollow face, symbolizing infinite trauma and suffering. The work reflects Dalí's personal losses during wartime.

In *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*, Dalí portrays Spain tearing itself apart during the Civil War. Freud's portrait underscores psychoanalysis as a tool for understanding violence.



Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II* presents an apocalyptic Europe—twisted forms suggesting both wreckage and decay, a civilization destroyed by war.

Dadaism and Surrealism together demonstrate how World War I caused a chain reaction in art. Dadaism represented an immediate rebellion against authority and rationalism, while Surrealism reformed artistic expression by redefining reality itself.

In the short term, the innovative techniques and themes of the arts developed by the two movements became legitimate and more widely accepted. These techniques and themes include chance, nonsense, absurdity, collage, assemblage, etc. Surrealism, specifically, was not only adopted in painting but also in other forms of art like photography and film, while Dadaism largely only dealt with literature and fine arts.

On one hand, these movements introduced new forms of artistic experimentation and encouraged critique of harmful norms and the status quo (warfare, conformity). On the other hand, these movements can seem nihilistic. Groups within the same movement often disagreed, which adds complexity to the movement.

Their impact extends far beyond their time. Together, they redefined what art could be—expanding acceptable media, challenging institutions, and legitimizing concept-driven work. Their influence continues to shape conceptual art, performance art, and experimental practices worldwide. And while war was not the sole cause, it was the catalyst that accelerated artistic revolution and reform.

