

# The Turn of 20th Contemporary Art under the Big Social Crisis

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**Abstract:** The current COVID-19 pandemic has immensely impacted artists and their artwork. Such as the spread of the epidemic has led to the emergence of a new art form-NFT and so on, and also made online art exhibitions and virtual spaces became a popular way of viewing exhibitions. The same applies to the 20th century, artists knew that they had entered a unique and modern age of artistic expression. The modern world would bring both opportunities and challenges to the people. Historical evidence has shown that art is a highly dynamic field characterized by its ever-changing nature. Characterized by various social crises such as the Great Depression, 1918 Influenza Pandemic, First World War, and the Second World War, among many others. The Great Depression of the 1930s influenced art, particularly painting, to a great extent. During the depression, art became a tool for reflecting the current conditions, social critique, and activism.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, social condition, art forms

## 1. Several specific situations of mutual influence between art and social development in the 20th century

### 1.1 Art as a reflection of the economic conditions

Most of the paintings developed during this time reflected the current economic difficulties affecting the country and the world at large. The Great Depression was a period of economic downturned that spanned for over a decade, from 1929 to 1939 (Robbins 1). The stock market crash paved the way for more adverse conditions, including homelessness, unemployment, and deterioration in the living standards of Americans. The sitting president at that time, Herbert Hoover, could not resuscitate the economy from the ravaging effects (Robbins 2-3). Art has always been about portraying contemporary society. The Great Depression gave artists ideas to capture the harsh conditions that people underwent during this period.



Figure 1. The Great Depression by David Lewis (Retrieved from Cynon Valley Museum)

The above painting demonstrates the extent to which social crises can offer artists ideas, influencing their work. The Great Depression was a period of economic difficulty for the Americans (Robbins 3). The painter has managed to summarize

the contemporary situation using a single image. The above image illustrates four men; three sited on the bench and another one on the floor. The men are visibly sad, stressed, and in dire condition. Essentially, the painter has used the painting to communicate the widespread employment during the period. Homelessness was also a significant issue, demonstrated by one of the men seeming to sleep on the floor. A social crisis is an opportunity to capture society. Through works such as this, individuals can have an idea of how the Great Depression affected Americans. Crises such as the Great Depression allow artists to develop artworks that will withstand the test of time and act as historical watermarks for the future.

## 1.2 The Increasing Impact of Art in Activism



Figure 2. Bernarda Bryson Painting depicting a couple (Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art)

The 1930s was a period characterized by immense political rhetoric thanks to the failing status of the current government. Artists did not want to be left behind and thus used their skills and expertise to advocate for change. Artists realized that art actually cannot change everything but plays a critical role in shaping conversations. Since the Great Depression, art has played a critical role in advocacy, building solidarity, and presenting information often suppressed into the public domain (Vitz 81). Previously, some quarters have demonstrated the need to separate art from politics. However, the Great Depression painters and artists defined this call. During the 1930s, most artists ensured that their work was filled with political content (Gutiérrez 233). Artists increasingly demonstrated their solidarity with the most vulnerable groups during the depression, including the workers and the poor. Essentially, this demonstrated the extent to which art was used to influence policy and citizen. Artists created artworks that focused on fundamental aspects such as worker strikes, poverty, anti-fascism, and a general lack of affordable housing (Vitz 81-82). Bernarda Bryson depicted above illustrates how Great Depression artists used their skills for the betterment of society.

The painting is a representation of rural America during the Great Depression. The couple looks impoverished at best. Their facial expression is a representation of frustrations and sadness. The residential area in the background is dilapidated and unfit for humans. One of the buildings has a writing "666 Malaria Chills and Fever." The painting is a work of activism at its best. Bernarda Bryson was determined to bring the voices of the vulnerable to the limelight during the difficult years. The painting allows the audience to appreciate the extent to which rural life deteriorated, including how sickness was a major concern. Such paintings were not meant for their cosmetic value but rather to compel the government to act. It influenced the political class to increase their attention to the rural areas equally important to the recovery process. Due to their admirable work, President Roosevelt New Deal program incorporated artists as workers. As a result, artists often got jobs in painting, photography, or lithography (Allee 13-14). The same cannot be said of other periods where artists were often overlooked and ignored. Therefore, the 1930s will remain a period when artists raised their stake and increased their sense of self-importance through activism and depiction of social issues.



Figure 3. "Nighthawks" by Edward Hopper (Retrieved from the Art Institute of Chicago)

And same as the most famous painter, Edward Hooper and his masterpiece Nighthawks. During the World War II, the artist Edward Hopper depict the inner loneliness and nervous because it was created in the most turbulent period in the United States-one year after the outbreak of Pearl Harbor. Although Hopper only described a very subtle scene of the entire country, he conveyed the age background of the entire country and society as a whole. Like other works, it also provides precious historical materials for recording the current history and conveying information.

### 1.3 Art and the growth of social realism

The Great Depression also influenced art by ushering in a new mode of artistry inspired by social realism. Researchers regard social realism as a movement that sought to depict the social realities of life. Social realism was critical of various aspects affecting the economic, social, political, and racial conditions of life(Morgan 3-4). It primarily sought to challenge the various challenges affecting the poor and the working-class citizens. Social realism applies in virtually every aspect of art, including painting, literature, printing, and photography, among others. The ability of the artists to portray society using various lenses contributed to their incorporation into the New Deal.



Figure 4. "Drought" by Jacob Kainen (Retrieved from the National Gallery Art)

The artwork above is a classic example of social realism. During the Great Depression, many artists sought to reflect on some of the real-life challenges that affected the citizens of America. For instance, the image above is an illustration of the environmental devastation during the depression. The economic challenges witnessed had far-reaching implications for the environment, especially in situations where the native lands were overgrazed and over-utilized (Gutiérrez 234). The American Indians living in the reservation suffered the most impact. The painting illustrates various environmental challenges, including unproductive lands, erosion, and environmental degradation by cutting trees. The farmer illustrated in the artwork shows a sense of despair and lack of hope. Therefore, this is an example of social realist art that portrays a picture of the deeply-rooted issues associated with the depression of the 1930s.

## 2. Similarities of the artwork

Each of the artworks presented provides vital information regarding the status of art during the Great Depression. They demonstrate the dynamism of art and how artists reflect the prevailing conditions of society. Each of the paintings is self-explanatory and gives an overview of what the Great Depression was all about. Moreover, they are non-fictional in their approach and explore the real-life challenges associated with the devastating economic downturn. Lastly, these arts focus on people issues, including various social, economic, and political aspects.

## 3. Impact of change in society today

The effect of the Great Depression on art is a reminder of the vital role that artists occupy in society. Currently, individuals face social crises such as pandemics and climate change that threaten humanity in various ways. Through social realism, artists have an opportunity to contribute through activism and ensure that their audiences appreciate the situation. They can also use this to challenge the government to take necessary actions. In addition, as illustrated during the New Deal, governments must work closely with artists as they are society's mirror and provide people with a different and better lens at issues.

## 4. Conclusion

During the depression, art became a tool for reflecting the current conditions, social critique, and activism. The Great Depression was a difficult economic time for the US. It changed the role of artists and the way they presented art. Artists, particularly painters and photographers, became more critical of their artwork. They used their content to critique the current situation and provide the vulnerable with a voice. Through social realism, artists depicted several aspects of social importance, including the environmental degradation and suffering of the working class. Therefore, this demonstrates the extent to which social crises can influence artistic expression.

## References

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