

The Forgotten Fauve

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1 Introduction

Fauvism was a brief sojourn and became the pivotal movement in the history of twentieth century art (Muller, 1967). It affected modern art deeply and produced results beyond itself. It was well known for its arbitrary and vivid usage of colors to convey the artist's self-expression. The Fauves or referred to as the "wild beasts", rejected the norm of academic way of painting and liberated their ideas immensely (Hughes, 1976). Gustave Moreau was considered as an influential figure in the history of Fauvism (Cooke, 2014). He was a professor at Ecole des Beux-Arts where he taught several artists who later became Fauvists (Cavendish, 2005). His teachings molded the skills of these artists by allowing them to be free and to criticize deeply on art that was in front of them. In addition, he had a radical way of thinking and his techniques were evident through bold experimentation of colors. It had a tremendous effect on his pupils and they eventually acquired this technique. Color was the most essential component of Fauvism (Muller, 1967). Artists were highly captivated on the nuances of color and impetuously started creating with flair. Amorphous figures and shapes were ostentatious, not only it bewildered the public but it also transformed a different approach to art. The depiction of everyday life and various portraits were expressed through jovial and exuberant colors in which every single thing in the painting had a purpose. There was a strong attachment between this lustrous form of pigment and the artist himself. It was an unbreakable bond between two souls.

2 Fauvism and Kees van Dongen

As the Fauve movement peered itself into art world, the Fauvists were beginning to fathom their own ideals. This movement was a strong repercussion against Impressionism where it was still deemed as a 'traditionalist art' and an accepted trend (Hughes, 1976). Several criticisms arose that Impressionism 'lacked feeling, the colors were dull and materialistic'. The Fauvists refused to comply with the influences of Impressionism, however the vibrant colors, asymmetrical compositions and subtle brushworks were later acquired. Their ways on how they represent reality has embarked on in the creation of a very marvelous spectacle.

Kees van Dongen was a Dutch painter who became associated with the Fauves (Hopmans, 1997). Critics often remarked his works as lascivious for his colorful female nudes and dandy portraits. Most of his subjects include cabaret dancers and clad women in such a manner that he felt an earnest connection with them. When he was fifteen, van Dongen was a pupil at the Rotterdam Academy for Arts and Sciences where he studied freehand drawing and industrial art (Hopmans, 1997). His parents encouraged him to be a draughtsman but it did not par with his interest (Bondil & Bouhours 2009). Despite his lack of formal artistic training, he made a large number of illustrations during his lifetime and successfully honed his skills in drawing. Like any other influenced artists, he was deeply inspired by Vincent van Gogh's works and decided to stay in Paris to paint (Hopmans, 1997). He was quite diligent towards his work but life was tough for him at the beginning. He wanted to escape the slums of Netherlands and he knew that searching further into the depths of his desire would exude his greatness as an artist (Bondil & Bouhours 2009). His hidden persona was long forgotten but the

productive years he had in Paris established himself in the French avant-garde.

3 Analysis

Van Dongen loved the exuberance of life and living in Paris kindled in him (Hopmans, 1997). His dynamic skills flourished withdrawing from artistic conventions, and yet the critics scathingly attacked his works. He was experimenting with brilliant colors and distorted brushstrokes making his works appear utterly revealing and modern. His works were deliberately Fauve-inspired with an ominous mixture of expressionism epitomizing the avant-garde approach to modern art. According to Bondil and Bouhours (2009), one example was his painting entitled *The Hussar (Liverpool Night House)* done in 1906 (Fig. 1). Van Dongen portrayed a scene



Fig. 1. Kees van Dongen, *The Hussar (Liverpool Night House)*. 1906. Oil on canvas. 100 x 81 cm. Private collection.

outside a brothel where pure and saturated colors parallel the exquisite harmony of a man and woman dancing. It is a representation of a prostitution business and a sex-for-sale game. A hussar is a Hungarian soldier often subjected to relocation and during his stay he probes for an amusement to fulfill at the height of his pleasure (Slavitt, 1987). Both figures are embracing each other passionately where the night is promising in return. The bandy-legged hussar touches the woman's buttocks as a sign of immediacy. His arms are elongated and lean without any attachment to chiaroscuro, which clearly defines van Dongen's simplified form of painting. Both figures are intensified with strong complementary colors from the hussar's snappy navy-blue uniform to the woman's scarlet red dress. It also resonates the flag of France symbolizing patriotism and prevailing oppression that was occurring.

The woman's facial features are filled with abstraction most especially the dark make-up around her eyes. Van Dongen had a

bizarre way of exploiting her charms and her delicate playfulness. Despite the lack of form the analogous colors of scarlet red and vermilion on her face exude a dash of coquetry and elegance. Her hand is out of proportion as she sways through the nocturnal cadence. The panoramic view of the two diminutive women displaying their allures and the dancing crowd in the background achieved the illusion of space, thus creating a vanishing point. The coral pink body of the plump woman on a white dress signifies the color of femininity. The brothel walls are also dappled with the same shade of pink that yields as a 'house of genitalia'. The windows are decorative with flowers blossoming the air of obliteration. Moreover, the tiny daub of pink flower on her tangerine hat conveys the genitalia and promising sex, which is also shown on the head of the dancing woman.

The scene is filled with interaction, from stranger-to-stranger filtering the garish mood. The juxtaposition of colors of the crowd emanates like a flow of confetti, duplicating another couple that resembles the hussar and the woman. There is an array of blending undertones of taupe gray and charcoal on the pavement revealing the emptiness and detachment from normal living. The hussar's gesture was quite phallic where his both legs are wide open and conspicuous of his sexual innuendo. The dark hues of midnight blue accentuate his tiny buttocks ready to thrust himself deeply with desire. The intrinsic brushstrokes of Maya blue delineate the contour between the background and the woman and therefore, her striking presence becomes recognized. Her pensive countenance is a bare acceptance of her fate. She learned how to separate herself from the harsh conditions of society and the men she has slept with did not matter to her. As a woman, she is vulnerable and only took heed of her own survival. She does not love him yet she yearns affection and searches for truth, as her heart silently pleads for rescue from the harrowing nature.

Impressionism presents a different statement in which Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting entitled *Dance at Bougival* (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Dance at Bougival*. 1883. Oil on canvas. 182 x 98 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

carries a distinct notion from van Dongen's work (Schjeldahl, 2012). Renoir successfully captured the moment in time of a

dancing couple in a festive gathering. Identified on this painting was Suzanne Valadon who was a frequent model for the artists and also a former acrobat (Somerville, 2025). She simultaneously had titillating affair with Renoir whilst accomplishing this piece (Hewitt, 2017).

The rich hues and the effects of light illuminate the scene through hazy brushstrokes and hence, achieving motion blurs in the background. The streaks of complementary colors of amber yellow and Persian blue exemplify the blissful afternoon. In addition, the primary colors of scarlet red, Naples yellow and cobalt blue are dispersed across the canvas. There were no outlines to create form but Renoir used these variations of analogous colors from sapphire, duke blue to navy blue. In addition, there is a mixture of warm and cool tones to emphasize the jaunty crowd. The texture is damp and still fresh from Renoir's fine and sensational patches of color. The clad woman is aloof and her mind seemed to have wandered off under her lusty red hat that is garlanded with flowers. Her apricot and creamy white skin is as smooth as Renoir's palette, unharmed and fragile. As she gracefully moves, her dainty white dress undulate to the ground that denotes purity and embellished womanhood. The obscure gentleman was attentive to the harmonious rhythm and to the woman he is dancing with and thus, his concealed appearance befits a mere escort. He respectfully takes her into his arms and their fingers are clasped together above his shoulder, dancing in a courteous manner. It seems that they have never been acquainted before and despite their intimate gesture, the tandem gives off a sense of distance from one another. The three clad people in the middle ground are happily conversing with one another as they relish the liquor on the table, which raises a question if they are bound to be aware of the distressed conditions outside their extravagant lifestyle.

The Hussar (Liverpool Night House) is a symbol of the havoc that ensues social conscience. It is a veritably captivating scene that projects a troubled sense of wholeness. Women who commit such deviance are clearly objectified and treated in desertion. The woman in *The Hussar* projects an image that is germane to modern life. It insinuates a realistic content that represents a society that is poor and sinking in despair. Not only van Dongen genuinely empathized with the downtrodden humanity, but he also immersed himself into the gritty streets of urban life. He embraced the underlying vulgarity in the society in order to stimulate the social inequalities and poverty-stricken communities, and this is how he viewed the world. Renoir, however, depicted an elite society wallowing in a luxurious activity.

The message of *Dance at Bougival* is rather simplistic than to characterize an emotional depth. Renoir focused on social standards and marveled at life that is grand, pleasant and serene. His paintings were filled with gaiety, which clearly states that he was an optimist. His blurred effect applied on canvas developed his own personal style, it almost seems as if his subjects are actually moving. He meticulously paid attention to detail, most especially to the countenance of his subjects. In addition, Renoir was enamored with Suzanne Valadon and he painstakingly captured her compelling beauty. Suzanne Valadon represents a woman of social stability and abundant of lavish comfort. Her pulchritude brings the sweetness of life that renders a memory of pleasure. *Dance at Bougival* is an example of a rich Parisian life that equates a semblance. There is tremendous poverty happening underneath but Renoir viewed life without an eye of despair. Both artists saw the world in a different way in order to lure us beyond the natural sensation in art, embracing it with a keen vision of what is life around us.

4 Conclusion

The Fauvists dared to imagine that was powerful and miraculous. They uprooted a startling impact in modern art by translating them

world through the extremities of color. They found the means to interpret reality in their own paradise as a new form of jargon. They found solace through honesty, amplifying the details of life. It is almost a transfiguration where a potential greatness is foreseen of what has to come. Fauvism was a decade of lucid experimentation where artists are breaking out from its own shell. Feelings are deemed with purity and spontaneous outpour of intensity. It gave birth to new subsequent movements like a branch of a tree bearing ripeness and bloom. A daring innovation floated up to the surface and revealed its brilliance. Van Dongen manipulated the Fauve style of painting through the prominence of obscenity and nevertheless, color was the most quintessential element of his work. He refused to mask reality and saw the monstrosity of the world with vehemence. Moreover, he constructed his own identity that made his work truly recognizable. He simplified the complicated and exaggerated the basics. It is true that the creative process never stops – from inspiration to a germ of an idea, to the earliest drafts, to the birthing pains, to the moments of disquiet and doubt, to the breathlessness from the final thrust and finally, to the smiles from ear-to-ear. There is nothing else like it. As Cartier-Bresson (1952) once said: “*For the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude towards something that is moving.*” Fauvism transgressed in avant-garde ideas and defined the importance of modern art today.

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