Video Transcript

Title:
But what is the Avant-Garde?

Duration:
3:51

Speakers:
Single narrator, throughout the video

Transcript

Narrator:
Emerging in the mid-19th century, the avant-garde received their name for their fighting spirit. Avant-garde is French for "vanguard", a military term used to describe the front-line of an army moving into battle. Artists were compared with these soldiers, as they were often a group force, challenging long-established concepts and ideas about art and fighting an entrenched establishment.

Artists such as Courbet, Gauguin and Kirchner were regarded with great hostility, because they pushed accepted boundaries. As these establishments denied the work public exposure, the avant-garde fought this censorship of their art.

Works like this by Ernst Kirchner convey freedom, energy, feeling through their brush strokes and vivid colours. This new approach marked Kirchner as an avant-garde artist; though in his German homeland the Nazis considered him a "degenerate" artist. An unsettling term, with unsettling implications. Do you find this painting ground-breaking, challenging, worthy of censorship? Kirchner's expressionism might have challenged the prevailing styles and authority of the time but reads very differently to a contemporary eye.

Hannah Höch was another German artist breaking new ground in the early twentieth century. She was an early creator of photomontage art; collages of pasted photographs.
We see a tribal mask, baby's torso, an eye from a fashion magazine; an eclectic selection. The figure is mounted on little feet - as if on display; representing treatment of women in Weimar Germany - as inferior and infantile, yet put on a pedestal. The geometric background is almost a cage. Höch was a radical who blazed a trail for photo collage, but was also a pioneer for her gender.

Avant-garde artists challenge, and sometimes provoke us through satire. Many would argue that Picasso’s work remains radical. In “Bottle and Glass on a Table”, the bottle is a piece of newspaper, on which stencilled letters spell “OLD J A R” - short for Old Jamaica Rum. Writing the subject name on the canvas rather than carefully copying its physical form was revolutionary. If newspaper can become a bottle, then what is reality?

[Mooing Cow]

Damien Hirst was a member of the YBA’s, or “Young British Artists”; a more recent group that embodied the avant-garde spirit. Their work highlights the speed at which art moves from disrupting the status quo to becoming accepted into mainstream culture.

Hirst’s revolutionary “Natural History” series takes animal bodies and suspends them in formaldehyde. They appear alive and caught in movement. The work examines life’s fragility and the inevitability of death and disintegration. The emotion of the work is heightened by how banal the animals are. If it were a tiger or a lion suspended at the point of death, the work would read completely differently.

Like life, the avant-garde is fragile and fleeting; a moment that risks being overtaken almost as soon as it is experienced. Rather than see it as a tragedy, let’s be excited by the thought that today’s avant-garde may be familiar, conventional or even cliché tomorrow.