

The Art of Solitude: These three painters are more relevant now than ever before

Why we need to look once again at Amrita Sher-Gil, Edvard Munch and Edward Hopper.



Evening on Karl Johan Street , Edvard Munch, 1892. | Courtesy edvardmunch.org.

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In these times of lockdown, imposed isolation, social distancing, we are making sense of our new world, and the world to-be, not just by looking ahead (thinking of policy changes, medical innovations, sustainable globality) but also by looking at our pasts. We are engaging with books, music, and oral histories to understand how the past dealt with turbulent times, and what the value of isolation and interaction is. Significant then, is another node of past: works of painters. Particularly, three artists' works seems ever-more relevant now.

To begin with is Amrita Sher-Gil's *Three Girls* (1935), the first painting by her when she moved to India. Not only did this painting mark a distinctive shift in her own works, but it was iconic for it laid the path of capturing the inner contested worlds of anxiety and self-reliance of Indian women.

This painting portrays three women, perhaps looking at uncertainty, perhaps wearing an expression of resignation possibly emanating from the drudgery of their domestic and existential burdens. This painting certainly resonates now, especially as women face increased challenges in times of lockdown and pandemic, where their household duties and emotional labour has increased more than ever.



Three Girls, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1935.

The other artist whose work seems extremely relevant now is the American painter Edward Hopper who is known for depicting modern life's essence as unfriendly, anomic, and apathetic. His painting, *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) is particularly relevant now as it illustrates an empty street of small businesses in New York.

Whilst this painting has several renditions, it is most famously received as a commentary on the Great Depression. The looming economic crisis will yet again be spoken by this painting, which was as relevant in 1930 as it is in 2020.



Early Sunday Morning, Edward Hopper, 1930.

Edvard Munch is another artist whose works are extremely poignant now. His painting *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892) portrays the angst of a person in a crowd (in a city). It shows the isolation that modern life can beget, as an individual remains lonely and claustrophobic amidst people.

What we are experiencing now is a feeling of claustrophobia and isolation whilst living an urban life but without the immediate presence of a large number of people. In other words, the physical characteristics of a modern life may have been temporarily left at bay, yet the essence of this modern life remains, and indeed has been accentuated.

Munch's other famous work, *The Scream* (1893), seems most apposite now. Yet again, this painting has different renditions, the most popular being that it represents acute individual angst. As such, *The Scream* almost stands as a metaphor of a modern woman/man who has lost all sense of anchor and stability, and therefore, is one of the works which has been appropriated most by popular culture.

However, this painting's other interpretation seems a bit more relevant now, which follows from its German title *Der Schrei der Natur* (The Scream of Nature), and the use of red and orange colours to depict the background or sky. With a keen analysis on these aspects of the painting, *The Scream* is now also seen as a symbol of the pathos of climate change, as it illustrates nature's cry for help due to the uninterrupted assault on her. The current pandemic is certainly a testimony to the debilitating dynamic between man, animal, and nature, which Munch captured in the 19th century.



Scream, Edvard Munch, 1893. Courtesy edvardmunch.org.

Simon Schama writes in *Power of Art* that it is in times of extreme pressure and crisis that artists have tended to undertake works that embody their most essential beliefs. We saw this with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), whose works, until he made this painting, were apolitical. The bombing of Gernika, the Basque town, in April 1937, led Picasso to completely transform the essence of his art, which also became political commentaries. Indeed, *Guernica* remains one of the most powerful symbols that remind us of the deep wounds and destructions of war.

We have arrived at another one of these turning moments in history, and art will surely capture these times in myriad ways. Artists and graffitists around the world have already begun to respond to the pandemic by painting murals depicting health care workers, the power of love in testing times, and those political leaders who are turning away from the gravity of the situation.

Photographers as Tommy Fung have captured different type of masks worn by people in Hong Kong, and closer home, artists such as Rohan More, illustrate how the pandemic has inverted relations between man and animals, where “for once, the captor is now the captive”. In the coming months, the world will await to see how art further interprets these times, and how though specific to our current human tragedy, these artworks could nonetheless serve as reminders and indices for times to come.

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