



## The Theatrical Canvas (The Symbiotic Relationship Between Theatre And Painting)

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### ABSTRACT

Since ancient Greece, theatre has influenced the evolution of painting, shaping the techniques employed by painters in their works. This paper argues that the symbiotic relationship between distinct forms of expression—painting and theatre—has revolutionized art history. This relationship has blurred the boundaries between dynamic and static art while enriching the viewer's aesthetic experience. The paper explores the history of art and visual culture and shows how this intertwined connection has impacted both. Painters were inspired by theatrical narrative scenes, set designs, costumes, and stage mood; consequently, they transformed how they arranged their compositions, techniques, and color choices. Artists tried to capture fleeting moments of performance by rearranging their figures and gestures, using storytelling elements, and charging them with symbolism. Furthermore, artists innovated new artistic techniques and color selections to depict more dynamic and psychologically intense, undeniably theatrical works. Through this new approach, painters successfully connected various art forms. Artists amplified the emotional and psychological resonance of painting, which fostered significant art movements and motivated numerous artists to employ uncommon tools and approaches in their work. All these initiatives established a continuous discourse between theatre and painting, stimulated creativity through interdisciplinarity, and established avenues for innovative future expressions.

**Keywords:** Painting, Theatre, Art History, Visual Arts, Performance, Interdisciplinary Art, Artistic Techniques, And Color Theory.



## INTRODUCTION

Art historians have always examined the intertwined relationship between painting and theatre to reveal the connection between visual representation and performance. Theatre stage settings have always inspired painters to depict performance, storytelling, and cultural narratives. This relationship sheds light on how societies interpret dramatic art, values, beliefs, and aesthetics. As essential to art history, theatre scenes, and performances have documented cultural activities and conveyed deeper emotional and philosophical ideas (Schneider 2011).

Throughout history, theatre has influenced painting and how artists developed their compositions, techniques, and color characteristics. Integrating the performative aspect into visual representation has dramatically expanded the audience's sensory and emotional experience of painting and the performing arts.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

### Early Interactions Between Theatre & Painting in Ancient Civilizations

The depiction of ancient Greek dramatic spectacle performances continues to impact stylistic choices and be a visual record of growing theatrical traditions, thus confirming its continued appeal to artists and emphasizing theatre's dynamic narratives and the expressive potential of theatricality. For these reasons, imitating the theatrical scenes, elements, and techniques in the painting seems magical and appeals enduringly: they draw on drama, movement, and narrative. Moreover, the immediacy of live performances compels painters to represent performance and dramatic moments and to experiment with composition, emotion, and atmosphere to capture the pinnacle of the dramatic event.

The history of scenic representation in Western art progressed from Ancient Greece to Rome, where theatre occupied a central place in public life; thus, theatre and visual arts became closely intertwined. For instance, mask actors were depicted playing out scenarios from mythology and moral teachings in pottery. As noted by Mary-Louise Hart, "Greek vase-paintings of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. provide our earliest visual evidence for ancient theater" (Walton 2010). Masks in Greek theatre allowed the representation of many characters and accentuated the performative side of such an art form (Walton 2010). A recent example could be the 5th-century BCE vase from the Attica region that portrays the climactic scene from Medea<sup>1</sup>.

This portrayal has been echoed throughout history and across cultures, illustrating that drama is essential for conveying complex human experiences. For instance, ancient Roman frescoes depict theatrical performances that sometimes even display realism among other artifacts. Frescoes in the Pompeii Villa of the Mysteries show off a Dionysian ritual accompanied by dancing and music (Adams 2019). These artworks exemplify the theatrical conventions of the era and underscore the greater cultural importance of performance in Roman society. Their symbiotic partnership established the groundwork for further investigations of dramatic topics in painting.



### **Renaissance: Perspective and Theatrical Staging in Painting**

Renaissance theatre significantly influenced art history by advancing techniques like linear perspective. This innovation, as described by Martin Kemp, “was not just a technique but a way of seeing the world” (Alpers 1988). Painters like Masaccio and Piero della Francesca used perspective to create depth and space, turning their paintings into stage-like settings. Furthermore, Italian Renaissance painters frequently integrated theatrical elements into their compositions, adding drama and narrative depth. They were especially interested in human expression and storytelling and underscored these compositions, often staging like scenes from a play (Christies's 2021). For instance, the astounding theatrical arrangements of artists like Raphael and Titian in depicting religious and mythological scenes to create dynamic compositions that suggested movement and emotion were starkly at odds with the traditional flat and frontal views.

The Renaissance was a crucial transitional moment in introducing theatrical representation in art by implementing classical drama and humanist ideals as inspiration. Interest in Ancient Greek and Roman theatre led to focusing on the emotional depth and complexity of the characters in the artistic expressions. Italian Renaissance artists were particularly adept at representing theatrical scenes with innovative compositions, keenly studying human anatomy, and with solid sensitivity toward color (Manca 2012). Titian's *The Tribute Money* (1516) represents one of the most characteristic examples of theatrical composition during this period. In that biblical scene,<sup>2</sup> the viewer can notice how the play of light and shade arrests drama and how the eye moves along the central figures while the surrounding crowd is depicted. The disposition of the figures creates a dynamic tension in the scene; it echoes the performative nature of the theatrical scene.

### **Baroque: Dramatic Lighting and Composition in Theatre & Painting**

The Baroque period witnessed an intensification of theatrical elements in painting. Artists like Caravaggio and Rembrandt employed dramatic chiaroscuro, creating powerful contrasts between light and shadow that mirrored contemporary stage lighting techniques.

Caravaggio, who inventively implemented the chiaroscuro technique, conveyed a great sense of theatricality and further shaped painting into a dramatic event. In works such as *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599), Caravaggio displays a truly theatre-like setting by highlighting an intimate moment of revelation (Gough 2024). This composition's dramatic light and shadow—chiaroscuro—render poignancy to the scene and make the onlooker feel like he is participating in some drama unfolding before his eyes.

### **The Rise of Theatrical Painting in 18th-Century Britain**

In the 18th century, theatrical painting was a distinctive genre in Britain. William Hogarth and Johann Zoffany were among the key figures who illustrated the energy of theatrical events, the significance of theatre in society, and how it shapes its culture (Haslam 1996). Such artists often painted scenes with satire and social commentary



that resonated with theatre culture. Hogarth's series includes *The Beggar's Opera* (1729) and *A Rak's Progress* (1735), which mocks the previous theatrical style of social problems pertinent to that time (Christies's 2021). Hogarth's keen observations of human behavior and his visual narration skills prove that painting can be a medium to convey the theatrical drama of everyday issues. For these reasons, his characters often wear exaggerated personae, mirroring the melodramatic nature of famous theatre at the time.

Zoffany's paintings, on the other hand, such as *The Covent Garden Theatre* (1762), are thorough stage enactments that glimpse 18th-century London's theatrical scene where each painting features details of refined stage representations and often represents famous actors in character. This style is best exemplified in his painting *David Garrick (1762) as Richard III*, where he relates a famous favorite actor—David Garrick—in one of his famous roles with dramatic lighting and stage effects, as he recorded the actors' dramatic expressions and costumes with phenomenal accuracy. Indeed, this attention to minute detail on the part of Zoffany presents an outstanding image of theatre within the painting frame and yet shows a diverse gamut of characters to his audience (Berry 2023). Zoffany's works celebrated the intricacies of live performances and the cozy atmosphere of the theatre while providing a historical record of the cultural ambiance of the time.

### Theatre on the Canvas in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe

With the emergence of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, leading artists engagingly sought to capture moments of modernity; thus, theatre scenes reached prominence in their paintings (Stewart 2008). Impressionists such as Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas showed interest in the brilliant atmosphere of Parisian theater life, especially the relationship between spectators and performers.

Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and *The Fife Player* (1866) are radical challenges to the then-institutional conventional representations of female figures through art, taking the theatre as their backdrop in a way that reimagines femininity and intimacy. Meanwhile, Degas captured the grace and movement of the ballet dancers in rehearsals in his ballet paintings, such as *The Dance Class* (1874), to emphasize the performative nature of theatre by exploiting light and shadow to suggest a sense of depth, immediacy, and the fleetingness of performance (Tenneriello 2015).

Unlike theatrical paintings that preceded Impressionism, Degas's work showcases theatre's intimate and routine labor beyond artistry (Google Arts & Culture 2024). In short, impressionists reinvented the connection between painting and theater through innovative techniques and perspectives while emphasizing the everyday performance experience.

On the other hand, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is best known for his depictions of the boisterous Montmartre nightlife. He experimented with composition, lighting, movement, and techniques to resemble theatricality and to portray the other aspects of Parisian theatre's social atmosphere (Christies's 2021). His posters of performers such as the *Moulin Rouge* (1891) and *La Goulue* (1891) were portrayed with exaggerated lines and color to convey cabaret scenes with energy and decadence. However, seeing



a theatre illustration was a cross-cultural influence of Japanese ukiyo-e through bold contours and flat areas of color<sup>3</sup> (Tobutt 2016).

Theatrical themes became more abstract and expressive in the 19th century. The theatre served to work into the inner psyches and emotional depth of artists such as Paul Gauguin. Color and symbolism are used in his paintings, like *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897). He evokes a sense of existential questioning while maintaining a dreamlike composition to challenge traditional notions of representation (Petrová 2021). Gauguin's many ways of rendering theatrical themes signal a growing interest in the inner mechanisms of the human mind and the intricacies of emotions. His works often blur the lines between reality and imagination to encourage his viewers to take on the performative aspect of art on a deeper level.

### Modernist Approaches to Theatre in Art

The early 20th century was a transition into Modernism in layers, where artists started to look beyond the conventional representation of forms, exploring new means to represent theatre and experimenting with abstraction to demonstrate its essence. Cubism, Futurism, and other movements challenged conventional notions about space and time. Pablo Picasso and Umberto Boccioni could bring this dynamism of performance in new techniques. Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911) could be considered the work that changed the course of traditional representations, even those on theatrical scenes (Golding 1958). Unlike live performances, fragmented forms and multiple perspectives give the sensation of movement and dynamism. Angular-shaped and disjointed figures reflect the angles of interaction with performers on stage and how reality can be reinterpreted through an artist's eyes. For example, Picasso's *The Harlequin series* (1917) reflects the spirit of theatrical characters of the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition: geometric forms with layered perspectives. These paintings reflect on theatrical performance's fluidity and multifaceted nature and the emotional depth in the characters' masks. With the Cubist approach, artists could depict the build-up of identity and performance—a pointer to the theatre's composite experience (Google Arts & Culture 2024).

In the same breadth, Italian Futurists celebrated movement, speed, rhythm, and motion to encapsulate the elan of that era. This is exhibited in Umberto Boccioni's *The City Rises* (1910), representing an industrious urban scene viewed in a chaotic yet vital manner, as in some performance art (Paluch-Mishur 2004). It is dynamic, with swirling forms and overlapping planes that show the thrill of modernity and the transcendent potential of art, captured in their bold colors and kinetic composition. This way, Modernists redefined the relationship between theatre and painting, underlining how visual art could capture the essence of performance.

On the other hand, Expressionism changed the portrayal of theatre in painting. It delved into theatricality, emotional, and psychological dimensions. Artists like Edvard Munch and Wassily Kandinsky strove hard to convey the turbulent evidence of dramatic feelings through their compositions and bold colors, all of which intensify the dramatic event.





Perhaps most quintessential to this technique is Munch's iconic painting, *The Scream* (1893), which captures a moment of existential dread as if it is something out of a theater performance (Stefano and Spence 2022). The central figure is distorted, with a swirly background to give a viewpoint of turmoil, unwinding an emotional landscape upon the viewer.

On the contrary, Kandinsky turned to non-representational forms and used color and abstraction to capture the essence of music and performance. In works such as *Composition VII* (1913), Kandinsky worked toward synesthesia, a meeting of vision and sound. His explorations of rhythm and movement in painting parallel the experience of theater and highlight how modern artists worked to contain the ephemera of performance through creative means.

Moreover, artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Egon Schiele focused on emotions and psychological depth. In his *Berlin (1913) Kirchner's Street*, the figures are exaggerated and distorted to reflect the disfigured and even dark situations of Expressionist theatre. Expressionist painters combined the optical experience with the heightened sensory energy of modern theatre to bridge the gap between the visual arts and the raw emotions of avant-garde theatre.

### Contemporary Approaches to Capturing Theatrical Moments

Contemporary art has seen a departure from traditional painting as the primary medium for depicting theatre scenes. Today, artists draw from a panoply of mediums, including photography, video installations, and interactive performance art, to illustrate the immediacy and complexity of theatre. They have blurred the boundaries between performance and visual art to reflect how contemporary art is becoming more interdisciplinary.

Since photography and video art can capture transient moments, they have become popular with artists to document theatrical performances in a way traditional painting could not. Photography has also become a rich resource for artists interested in theatrically staging identity issues. Cindy Sherman, for instance, bases her *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-1980) on cinematic and theatrical influences and depicts herself as several archetypal characters. Her work captures the visual aspect of performance and tackles it with themes of gender, identity, and representation (Bay, Baker and Izenour 2024).

In the current art scenario, theatre and visual arts have moved further by resorting to other multimedia approaches that merge multiple forms of expression. Artists like Marina Abramović and Pipilotti Rist use Performance Art to relate more to their audiences to blur the boundaries separating the performer from the observer. They capture the intense physical and emotional experiences on their canvas, the body. This interplay may be perceived in Abramović's *the Artist is Present* (2010). As its title suggests, audience members were invited to sit across from the artist and engage with her in a silent, intimate exchange (Westerman 2014). The work demonstrates how contemporary art can turn the spectator into one who performs in the performance. Thus, the work resists theatricality, as the performance is one moment, creating a specific and unique dialogue between the artist and her viewer.



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Performance art has fundamentally changed the record of theatrical moments using the camera. Chris Burden is one of many contemporary artists who have broken the division between theatre and visual art by representing transient performance experiences in photography or on video. For example, Burdens Shoot (1971), in which he had himself shot in the arm as part of a performance, poses questions about the nature of art and violence and the involvement of the artist (Ward 2001). In this work, the documentation aspect serves as a critique and a reflection on the boundaries of Performance and Performing Arts. Photography and performance videos, in this manner, act as artworks and, at the same time, reflect on the performative aspect of visual arts. Such crossings between theatre and visual arts point to the dynamic nature of artistic expression and highlight the impossibility of categorization.

Equally impressive in her immersive approach to installation works, Pipilotti Rist has used projections and soundscapes in works such as Sip My Ocean (1996) to envelop the viewer in a manner often found only within a theater. While dealing with themes of identity and femininity, Rist invites her audience into her workplace, where visual art and performance remarkably merge (Tucker 2012). Contemporary artists continue to challenge notions of theatrical representation through new technologies and innovative methods of storytelling that engage audiences in fresh and dynamic ways.

### COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES & COLOR CHOICES

The theatre has profoundly influenced painters' approaches to composition and color, leading to more dynamic and narrative-based paintings. Artists began to conceive their compositions as stage sets, with careful attention to the placement of figures and objects; therefore, they were charged with drama and symbolism. This strategy is evident in Deigo Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), where he arranges the figures in a complex, stage-like, and dramatic composition. Moreover, painters' perspectives have aided them in imitating the theatrical-framing concept. For example, Degas employed unconventional viewpoints and cropping techniques, making his works reminiscent of stages viewed from different angles, as they would be in a theatre. In addition, painters have adopted theatrical principles in arranging their figures in their compositions to narrate stories and visually convey emotions. Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1786) exemplifies this approach, with figures arranged in a frieze-like manner reminiscent of staging in classical theatre. the influence of theatre on painting also extends to the technical work of creating dramatic lighting effects. For instance, Rembrandt and Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro creates a sense of depth and drama that transforms the viewing experience. Moreover, artists have experimented with new techniques to capture the ephemeral qualities of theatrical performances, such as in the Impressionists' work, who focused on capturing the fleeting effects of light inspired partly by the changing lighting conditions in theatres.

Theatre has significantly impacted painters' use of color, influencing both palette choices and application techniques. The bold colors and exaggerated features of theatrical makeup and costumes have influenced painters' approaches to color and form, as is evident in post-Impressionist works. Moreover, painters have adopted



theatrical color techniques to set mood and atmosphere. For example, the symbolist painter Odilon Redon used color to create dreamlike, otherworldly atmospheres. Furthermore, the development of color theory was also influenced by theatrical lighting techniques. Josef Albers' works would be a great example. He explored the interaction of colors that parallel how theatre set designers use lighting and colored lights to create different effects and moods on stage. In short, painters have adopted theatrical techniques in their use of color to direct viewers' attention and create visual hierarchies and dramatic effects within their compositions.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

Painters have adopted theatrical techniques to evoke more robust emotional responses from viewers. Dramatic lighting, expressive gestures, and carefully composed scenes construct an emotionally charged experience. Ashly Burch notes in her article on techniques: "True emotional resonance in acting often stems from vulnerability" (Jenell 2024). This principle also applies to painting, where artists strive to create vulnerable and authentic emotional expressions in their subjects.

Painters created large-scale paintings, panoramas, and triptychs to immerse viewers in theatre-inspired experiences. Immersive paintings use theatre-like tactics to bring the viewer into the action and blur the barrier between observer and observed. Thus, painters sought to explore dramatic body gestures and facial expressions to portray multidimensional and complicated stories that crossed the emotional bounds of a single painting.

### BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: present PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS IN STATIC PAINTINGS

The fascination with theater has made painting blur the boundaries between the two art forms. This convergence is challenging traditional notions of static and performative arts. Many painters have incorporated performative elements into their static works to create a sense of movement and action within the confined frames of the canvas. For instance, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642) exemplifies this approach: "The art of painting is a still art, but in paintings like *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt does everything he can to suggest movement" (Boztas 2024).

His dynamic composition creates the illusion of a frozen theatrical scene, inviting his viewers to imagine the moments before and after the depicted action.

Influence has also flowed in the opposite direction, with theatrical productions drawing inspiration from famous paintings. *Tableaux Vivants*, or *Living Pictures*, became popular in the 19th century, with actors recreating scenes on stage from well-known artworks. This practice further blurred the lines between the static nature of painting and the live performance of theater (van Eck and Bussels 2010).

Now, in the 21st century, boundaries between painting and theatre have become even more porous with the emergence of Installation, Performance Art, and Participatory Arts. These hybrid forms often combine visual art, theatre, and elements of audience participation to create an immersive experience for the viewer and challenge conventional categorizations of the arts.





## THEATRICAL PAINTINGS: CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

A significant contribution of theatrical paintings is the advancement of narrative techniques that transcend static imagery. For centuries, theatrical events have inspired painters to incorporate visual narrative and emotional depth. By employing dynamic composition, dramatic expressions, and the complexities of human experience, artists have paved a new path that revolutionized visual arts approaches (Stiles and Selz 2012). Notable artists such as Titian and Gentileschi employed composition and expression to create tension and movement within their scenes, inviting viewers to interpret the ongoing story. Such capability of depicting moments of tension, conflict, and resolution became a hallmark of theatrical representation and later influenced various art movements, including Baroque and Romanticism. The importance of narrative continues to shape contemporary painting through storytelling, figurative, and symbolic means on the theatrical canvas (Bay, Baker and Izenour 2024).

Furthermore, theatrical paintings have served as an indispensable method for preserving historical theatre traditions, visual records of costumes, set designs, and lost performance styles. By capturing scenes from plays, operas, and performances, painters have documented cultural practices and social norms that might have otherwise been lost over time. For instance, Zoffany's detailed depictions of 18th-century British Theatre provide insights into stagecraft and acting conventions of the era. These theatre-themed artworks have become significant historical resources that trace how performance and spectacle evolved through the centuries (Pearce 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The symbiotic interplay between painting and theatre has played a pivotal role in revolutionizing the visual arts, fostering an ongoing dialogue that pushes the boundaries of artistic expression. This symbiosis has influenced not only the technical aspects of painting, such as composition, lighting, and color but also how artists conceptualize and convey narrative and emotion. The infused theatrical elements in paintings have enabled artists to create more dynamic, immersive, and emotionally charged works, while such painterly innovations have, in turn, influenced theatrical design and performance.

This reciprocal relationship has blurred the boundaries between the static and the performative, challenging viewers to engage in emotionally resonant ways. This relationship also hinges on the idea that theatre has always been called the Art of the Senses. Whether from the dynamic performative qualities of ancient Greek drama to the intimate backstage views of the Impressionist painters or the modernists' abstractions, painters throughout history have drawn inspiration from theatre's performative qualities. Each period or style has had its perspectives, techniques, and cultural highlights to represent theatre scenes and dramatic events.

Artists have transformed composition, color, and gesture to express theatre in art, depicting static representations and adding movement and narrative depth. The techniques of theatrical paintings have underpinned broader trends in art history: narrative composition and emotional expression.

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Beyond their artistic value, these works are also historical records of past periods, costumes, set designs, and performance styles and provide crucial cultural evidence of the significance of theatre in different societies. As one continues to explore the intersections between various art forms of expression, the enduring influence of painting-theatre nexus serves as a testament to the power of interdisciplinarity in revolutionizing artistic innovation and deepening the understanding of human expression.

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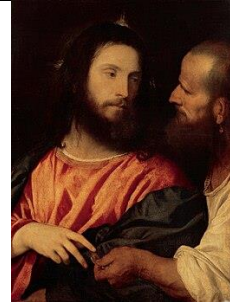
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Titian - The Tribute Money, 1516.



Caravaggio, Calling of Saint Matthew, 1599.



William Hogarth, The Beggar's Opera, 1728.



Joseph Zoffany, David Garrick and Mary Bradshaw, 1762.



Edouard Manet, The Fifer, 1866.



Edgar Degas, The Dance Class, 1874.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, The Moulin Rouge, 1892.



Paul Gauguin, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?, 1897.



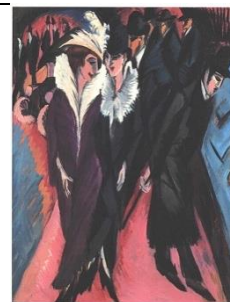
Umberto Boccioni, The City Rises, 1910.



Wassily Kandinsky






Edvard Munch, The Scream,



Ernst Ludwig-Kirchner,





Composition VII, 1913.	1893.	Berlin, 1913.
		
Deigo Velázquez, Las Meninas, 1656.	Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii, 1786.	Rembrandt, The Night Watch, 1642.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “*Medea*, in Greek mythology, an enchantress who helped Jason, leader of the Argonauts, to obtain *the Golden Fleece* from her father, King Aeëtes of Colchis. She was of divine descent and had the gift of prophecy. She married Jason and used her magic powers and advice to help him. In one version of the story, when they flee and are pursued by Aeëtes, Jason, in conspiracy with Medea, cuts her brother Apsyrtus to pieces and throws him into the sea to delay the pursuit” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

<sup>2</sup> The scene depicts *Christ* instructing Peter to get money for paying their temple tax by catching a fish.

<sup>3</sup> The term *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵) translates as “pictures of the floating world,” referring to the transient, hedonistic lifestyle of the urban population. Ukiyo-e paintings often used outlined forms, allowing inks to be dripped on a wet surface and spread towards the outlines (Kolen and Kraft 1976).