TOPIC OF THE WEEK

What happened to art and literature when Western culture stopped trusting that reality could simply be represented?

It is one of the great turning points in Western culture.

The crucial change was this:

> **Art stopped assuming that reality was something we could simply look at, describe, and reproduce.**

That does **not** mean artists suddenly believed reality was unreal. Rather, they increasingly realized that **we never encounter reality without mediation**—through perception, memory, language, consciousness, history, culture and perspective.

1. The old confidence: “the world is there”

For much of nineteenth-century Western art, there remained a powerful assumption:

There is a world → the artist observes it → the artist represents it.

A portrait represents a person.
A landscape represents a landscape.
A novel represents people living in a world.

Even when artists were highly subjective, representation remained an important anchor.

Then several things happened.

2. Perception became problematic

Paul Cézanne is crucial here.

Cézanne discovered that when he looked at a mountain, there wasn't simply **“the mountain”** waiting to be copied.

There was:

mountain + light + colour + perspective + movement of the eye + the artist's perception.

So painting began moving from:

“How does the object look?”

toward:

“How do I experience the object?”

That is a profound shift.

3. Then the object itself began to dissolve

Pablo Picasso and Cubism took this further.

Why represent an object from **one privileged viewpoint**?

A person doesn't experience a chair, a face or a room from only one angle.

Cubism therefore presents multiple perspectives simultaneously.

The painting isn't necessarily less truthful.

It is asking:

> **Could fragmentation actually tell us more truth than a single perspective?**

And suddenly **representation itself becomes a philosophical problem.**

4. Literature underwent the same crisis

This is where your earlier question about Eliot, Pound and Cummings becomes especially interesting.

James Joyce doesn't simply tell us what happens to a person.

He tries to reproduce something closer to **the movement of consciousness itself**.

Virginia Woolf does something similar with inner experience.

Instead of:

> Event → description → reader

we get something more like:

> perception → memory → sensation → thought → association → memory → perception

The **form of the work begins to imitate the structure of consciousness.**

5. Language itself becomes suspect

This is where e. e. cummings becomes fascinating.

If language is supposed to describe reality, what happens when conventional language itself distorts experience?

So cummings breaks:

grammar
punctuation
capitalization
syntax
spacing

He isn't merely being unconventional.

He is effectively asking:

> **If the language is inadequate, why should the poem obey the language's rules?**

6. And then Duchamp asks the most dangerous question

Marcel Duchamp takes the crisis somewhere else entirely.

He puts an ordinary manufactured object into an art context.

Now the question becomes:

> **Is art about representing reality—or can art simply alter our way of seeing reality?**

That changes everything.

The artist no longer necessarily has to **make an image of something**.

The artist can make us **notice something differently**.