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Eiffel Tower Through The Eyes of Painters

Sibel Almelek Isman a*, Buca Faculty of Education, Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir 35150, Turkey.

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Abstract
The Eiffel Tower, the global icon of France, was erected as the entrance to the Paris International Exposition in 1889. It was a suitable centrepiece for the World Fair, which celebrated the centennial of the French Revolution. Although the tower was a subject of controversy at the time of its construction, many European painters have been inspired by the majestic figure of the Eiffel Tower. They picturised the tower in their portraits and cityscapes. Paul Louis Delance, Georges Seurat, Paul Signac and Henri Rousseau were the first artists to depict this symbol of modernity. Robert Delaunay and Marc Chagall used the image of the tower most frequently. Maurice Utrillo, Raoul Dufy, Fernand Léger, Diego Rivera, Max Beckmann and Christian Schad can also be counted among the artists who picturised the tower. The Eiffel Tower appears differently in the eyes of pointillist, expressionist, orfist, cubist and abstract painters.

Keywords: Eiffel Tower, European art, painting.
1. Introduction

It was the engineer Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923) who gave Paris its most remarkable and most visited monument. Eiffel, an engineer of exceptional distinction, had designed many bridges, including the frame of the Statue of Liberty. The tower was the signpost of the Exposition Universelle of 1889, and for many years it was the world’s tallest structure. However, it was much disliked and criticised at the time; it was a work of engineering that demonstrated spatial possibilities for later structures and also for the decorative arts (Nuttgens, 1997).

The tower rests on four giant supports connected by gracefully arching open frame skirts that provide a pleasing mask for the heavy horizontal girders needed to strengthen the legs. The transparency of the structure blurs the distinction between the interior and the exterior to an extent never before achieved or even attempted (Kleiner, 2009).

In addition to its commercial, cultural and imperial aims, the 1889 International Exhibition also coincided with the centennial celebrations of the French Revolution. Within this context, historian Miriam Levin considers the Eiffel Tower as a conscious and pragmatic artistic expression of the Republican social ideal. Its design, construction and materials are symbolic of the transformative powers of science and technology towards social progress and cohesion (Jones, 2014).

The tower was a gesture of faith in the new technology. Its metallic construction and use of prefabrication were not novel in themselves. The method chosen was more than a hundred years old: Abraham Darby’s all iron bridge at Coalbrookedale in England had been built in 1779, and Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace in 1851. What was novel about the Eiffel Tower was its flamboyant use of forms hitherto associated only with engineering rather than with architecture (Lucie-Smith, 1996).

The tower that served as a triumphal arch of science and industry owed much of its success to the fact that for a small sum anyone could take its elevators to see a view of Paris that was previously reserved for the privileged few able to afford hot-air balloon rides. Thus, it helped to define a distinctive feature of modern architecture, one that it shares with modern technology as a whole: it acts on large masses of people without regard to social or economic class (Janson & Janson, 2001).

Once the tower was up, many French voices rose in anger against it. A petition of 300 names, including Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, Charles Garnier and Alexandre Dumas the younger, was presented to the city government in protest against its construction. They expressed how strongly they disliked the tower: We, the writers, painters, sculptors, architects and lovers of the beauty of Paris, do protest with all our vigour and all our indignation, in the name of French taste against the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower.’ The novelist, Guy de Maupassant, who claimed to hate the tower, ate there everyday. When asked for the reason, he replied that it was the one place in Paris you could not see it (Aaltonen, 2008).

On the other hand, it is the experience of climbing up the Eiffel Tower and viewing the expansive vista around him that the writer Francois Coppee described with such enthusiasm in his poem: Gripping the rail in my hand, / stunned, drunk with fresh air, / I climbed like a spider, / in the immense iron web, / Here I was able to see, covering leagues, / Paris, its towers, its dome of gold, / the circle of blue hills, / and in the distance more, more! (Foa, 2015, p. 197).

Roland Barthes, the French philosopher, critic and semiotician emphasised the powerful impact of the tower: ‘it is an object when looked at, it becomes a lookout in its turn when visited. The tower is an object which sees, a glance which is seen.’ (Barthes, 1997, p. 4).

Artists inspired by this great symbol of Paris created various depictions. The aim of this paper is to see the tower through the eyes of painters.
2. Depictions of the Eiffel Tower

The French painter Paul Louis Delance (1848–1924) painted one of the first depictions of the Eiffel Tower (Figure 1), which was opened on 31 March 1889. Delance’s oil painting was dated January 1889, three months before the grand opening. There were many photographs showing the construction phase of the masterpiece of the metallic industry. But a few paintings were executed during the stages of building. For this reason, Delance’s work was considered precious (www.carnavalet.paris.fr).

![Figure 1. Paul Louis Delance, Eiffel Tower and Champ de Mars in January 1889, 1889, Oil on Painting, 126,5 x 192,5 cm, Musee Carnavalet, Paris](image)

The French Pointillist artist Georges Seurat (1859–1891) depicted the tower (Figure 2) in the same year as Delance. Seurat drew inspiration from the art of theoretician Charles Henry and saw himself as the pioneer of a scientific painting that is based on objective principles and defined rules. Illuminating in this regard is a small wood panel, which Seurat executed in 1889, showing the still unfinished Eiffel Tower. The tower was at that time painted in bright enamel, which only served to heighten the revulsion for the structure felt by conservative-minded artists. The choice of motif clearly reveals Seurat’s acceptance of technology and progress, which he wanted to contribute to, in the field of art, through his pointillist method (Duchting, 2000).

![Figure 2. Georges Seurat, The Eiffel Tower, 1889, oil on wood, 15 x 24 cm, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco](image)
The Spanish Impressionist artist Luis Jimenez Aranda (1845–1928) picturised the tower with the figure of an elegant lady (Figure 3), as a part of the Paris Exposition in the same year of its opening. The painting shows a woman fashionably dressed with a black jacket over a white shirt and a small red hat on her head, leaning against a stone balustrade. In her right hand she holds a tan leather glove, and in her left hand she holds a closed red parasol. To her right are two chairs and a table. In the seat of one of the chairs is a black umbrella and on the table rests the newspaper Le Figaro, and two beer mugs. In the background, several pavilions of the Paris Exposition on the Champs de Mars, and a section of the Eiffel Tower in its original red brown colour can be seen (www.Meadowsmuseumdallas.org).

Figure 3. Luis Jimenez Aranda, Lady at the Paris Exposition, 1889, oil on canvas, 70.8 x 120.7 cm, Meadows Museum, Dallas

The French artist Robert Delaunay (1885–1941) was very interested in the image of the Eiffel Tower. He painted in an Impressionist style, but in 1906 he began the experiments with the abstract qualities of colour that were to provide the central theme of his career. His starting point was Neo-Impressionism, but instead of using Seurat’s pointillist technique he investigated the interaction of large areas of contrasting colours. He was particularly interested in the interconnections between colour and movement. By 1910, he was making an individual contribution to Cubism, combining its fragmented forms with vibrant colours and depicting the dynamism of city life rather than the standard repertoire of still life. He did a memorable series of paintings of the Eiffel Tower, in which the huge monument seems to be unleashing powerful bursts of energy (Chilvers, 2009, pp. 172–173).

In the spring of 1909, he produced the first of the interior views of the Gothic church of Saint Severin in Paris, which were his earliest mature works, and these were followed by his Eiffel Tower series, mostly painted in 1910–1911 (Lucie-Smith, 1996, p. 44). In both the series, Delaunay varied his position and the perspective only minimally or not at all. The Eiffel Tower series comprised over thirty pictures and among them were oil paintings and works on paper. Delaunay took up the subject again from 1920 to 1930 (Gantefuhrer-Trier & Grosenick, 2004, p. 54).

The Eiffel Tower dated 1911 (Figure 4) shows how Delaunay explored the developments of Cubist fragmentation more explicitly. In his series of paintings of the Eiffel Tower, the artist presented the tower and the surrounding buildings from various perspectives. Delaunay chose a subject that allowed him to indulge his preference for a sense of vast space, atmosphere and light, while evoking a sign of modernity and progress. Like the soaring vaults of Gothic cathedrals, the Eiffel Tower is a uniquely French symbol of invention and aspiration (www.guggenheim.org).
This painting titled *The Window* (1912) (Figure 5) belongs to a series of 13 works produced between 1912 and 1913. Influenced by the reading of ‘The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors,’ written in 1839 by the French chemist Gustave Chevreul, Delaunay constructed his composition using just colour, which replaced design and drawing, volume, perspective and chiaroscuro.

During his ‘deconstructive’ period, he painted volumes exploded by the action of light into coloured areas, thereby losing illusionist depth. The *Windows* series ushered in a more ‘constructive’ period, described by Guillaume Apollinaire as Orphic Cubism. The prism of colours is put back together in a two-dimensional space, while the image of the Eiffel Tower, an evocation of the modern world, can be just made out in the middle of the composition (museedegrenoble.fr).
The Russian artist Marc Chagall (1887–1985), who had a strong sense of fantasy, depicted the Eiffel Tower many times just like his friend Delaunay. Russia’s young artists were likelier to be better received in Paris than in their own country. Sergei Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet, the entire troupe of dancers, musicians, writers and painters had created a sensation there with their mixture of sublimity and exoticism. Alexei von Jawlensky, Vassili Kandinsky, Jacques Lipchitz and all the artists who were to achieve worldwide fame, took advantage of the fashion to get to know modernism in its place of birth. Chagall expressed the inspirational significance of Paris for his work with the following words: At that time I had grasped that I had to go to Paris. The soil that had nourished the roots of my art was Vitebsk; but my art needed Paris as much as a tree needs water. I had no other reason for leaving my homeland, and I believe that in my paintings I have always remained true to it (Walther & Metzger, 2000).

After Chagall moved to Paris from Russia in 1910, his paintings quickly came to reflect the latest avant-garde styles. In Paris through my Window dated 1913 (Figure 6) Chagall’s debt to the Orphic Cubism of his colleague Delaunay is clear in the semi-transparent overlapping planes of vivid colour in the sky above the city. For both the artists, the Eiffel Tower served as a metaphor for Paris and perhaps modernity itself. Chagall’s parachutist might also refer to contemporary experience, since the first successful jump occurred in 1912. Other motifs suggest the artist’s native Vitebsk. This painting is an enlarged version of a window view in a self-portrait painted one year earlier, in which the artist contrasted his birthplace with Paris. The Janus figure has been read as the artist looking at once westward to his new home in France and eastward to Russia. Chagall, however, refused literal interpretations of his paintings, and it is perhaps best to think of them as lyrical evocations, similar to the allusive plastic poetry of the artist’s friends Blaise Cendrars (who named this canvas) and Guillaume Apollinaire (www.guggenheim.org).

Bridal Pair with the Eiffel Tower dated 1939 (Figure 7) is another sensational depiction of the Eiffel Tower by Chagall. His Jewish Russian memories can be traced in the traditional wedding scene, village houses, musical instruments and dear animals such as donkey and cockerel.
Figure 7. Marc Chagall, *The Bridal Pair with the Eiffel Tower*, 1939, Oil on Linen, Musee National d’Art Moderne, Paris

Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886–1957) had also contributed to the collection of Eiffel Tower images with a canvas dated 1914 (Figure 8). In the summer of 1914, as the European political situation was reaching a crisis point, Rivera and several other artists and writers travelled to the Balearic Islands, off the Spanish coast, for a walking and sketching tour. While executing naturalistic landscapes, he continued his experiments with Cubism. Their sojourn was interrupted by the news of the eruption of World War I. Rivera openly proclaimed his patriotism for France during the period. The painted record of his patriotic fervour, a work entitled *Eiffel Tower* was executed in Spain in November 1914. His innovative composition highlights the Eiffel Tower, merging its structure with the Great Wheel. The tower was also an appropriate symbol for France during the conflict, as it functioned as a radio transmitter and flashed electric light in the blue, white and red of the French tricolour. Rivera was not content with simply creating homage to his adopted homeland, but added another banner on a building on the lower right that echoes the Mexican national colours of green, white and red ([www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)).

Figure 8. Diego Rivera, *Eiffel Tower*, 1914, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington
French painter, graphic artist and designer Raoul Dufy (1877–1953) created several watercolour vistas of Paris, including the images of the tower. The Eiffel Tower dated 1935 (Figure 9) is a good example of his mature style, showing his love for the city. His early work was Impressionist in style but he became a convert to Fauvism in 1905. However, he soon returned to a lighter style, and in the next few years he developed the highly distinctive personal manner for which he became famous. It is characterised both in oils and watercolours by rapid calligraphic drawing on backgrounds of bright colours and was well suited to scenes of luxury and pleasure he favoured (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009).

The German artist Christian Schad (1894–1982) was associated with Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), a movement in German painting in the 1920s and early 1930s, reflecting the resignation and cynicism of the post-war period (Chilvers, 2009). As one of the leading exponents of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement and according to the Austrian art historian and critic, Wieland Schmied Schad is the prototypical possessor of the cool gaze which distinguishes this movement from earlier forms of Realism (Stremmel, 2004). Schad gained international fame with portraits of artists, intellectuals and aristocrats. He was born in Munich; lived in Zurich, Geneva, Vienna and Berlin; and visited Rome and Naples (Dantini, 2008). Although he had experiences with many European cities, he preferred to depict his own image with the great symbol of Paris. In his Portrait with Eiffel Tower (Figure 10), a young but tired-looking man in a suit can be seen with one of the feet of the tower in the background. The gaze of the artist as well as the weather of Paris is cool.
3. Conclusions

The Eiffel Tower, a symbol of modernity, the jewel of the Parisian skyline, has been an inspirational monument for artists. Most naturally, French painters included the image of the tower in their artworks. However, Spanish and German artists and even the South American painter Rivera created compositions comprising the grand vista of the tower.

The pictorial Eiffel Tower contributions of the artists Delance, Seurat, Signac, Delaunay, Chagall, Dufy, Rivera and Schad are aforementioned. But there are many other significant names in the European art that immortalise the tower, such as Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Utrillo, Henri Rousseau, Jules Ernest Renoux, Louis Beroud, Louis Welden Hawkins, Fernand Léger and Max Beckmann.

Some grand buildings become the emblem of a city with its great architecture and historical significance. Notre Dame Cathedral (1345), Arc de Triomphe (1836) and Garnier Opera (1875) may be counted among the symbols of Paris. Saint Mark’s Basilica (1092), Doge’s Palace (1340), Rialto Bridge (1591) and The Church of Santa Maria della Salute (1687) are the first magnificent buildings that come to mind when one thinks of Venice. Houses of Parliament (1860) and Westminster Bridge (1862) symbolise London, whereas The Colosseum (70), Pantheon (120) and The Trevi Fountain (1762) remind of Rome. There are many paintings depicting these grand works of architecture in European art history. The Eiffel Tower is the most recent structure among these landmarks. Being built at the end of the 19th century, it presaged and heralded 20th century modern architecture.

It is interesting to see that sculptors were not keen on the the Eiffel as much as painters. It would be exciting and rewarding to see the image of the tower in three dimensions created by the hands of sculptors.

Since the first half of the 20th century witnessed various approaches to painting, the Eiffel Tower had also different appearances reflecting the artistic styles of the time. Therefore, it may be considered as natural to see the tower in pointillist, expressionist, orfist, cubist and abstract forms. Some artists regarded the tower as the city’s new visual element. On the other hand, artists such as Chagall and Schad created more personal pictures by adding their self-portraits and autobiographical traces.

References


