The Contrast of Hope and Despair

The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of new inventions and new ideas, and saw a spirit of optimism and hope over the future. There was a sentiment that the sky was the limit when it came to what mankind could achieve. Mankind would move forward through inventions and discoveries, but the optimism from these achievements and inventions would be tempered due to the outbreak of World War I. The outbreak of World War I would employ this very same spirit of invention to create new weapons of war. The war was a devastating affair where countless lives were lost, and with them the spirit of optimism that had emerged from before the war. Robert Delaunay, who drew inspiration from cubism and fauvism, and his painting  *The Cardiff Team* was produced a year before the outbreak of the war. This painting presents the observer with a light and colorful scene of a rugby game. The background is filled with the great achievements of the turn of the 20th century, and one’s eyes are guided slowly upward, similar to the previous optimism of this upward progress. In contrast, Ernest Ludwig Kirchner, who helped create expressionism, and his painting *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* stands in the opposite direction. Delaunay’s painting is hopeful and optimistic, but Kirchner presents a harsher scene of a soldier with empty eyes staring at the observer with a bloody stump of a hand outreached to the observer. Delaunay's and Kirchner’s contrasting paintings reflect the times in which they were created through the painters’ use of color, through the painters’ use of specific imagery, and through how the painters depict and express the imagery.

Through the use of color, the painters try to convey the mood of the times in which the paintings were created. Delaunay’s painting utilizes light and airy colors to present a fun and bright scene, while Kirchner uses dark and sickly colors to present a more ghastly scene in comparison. Delaunay’s colors are bright and airy, to emphasize the hope and optimism of the time period. During that time period were wondrous new machines and discoveries that painted a bright future for mankind. Kirchner on the other hand uses a jarring composition of dark and sickly colors to emphasize the harshness and sickness stemming from the war. The war stood in a dark contrast to the bright optimism of the previous time period. For example, in Kirchner’s painting, the soldier’s face is painted using a sickly yellowish hue, and the bloody stump is accentuated using a sickly green hue. The colors of Kirchner are in contrast to Delaunay’s colors, which present to the observer a lighter and more abstract scene. Through their choice of colors, both try to express either the optimism entering the twentieth century, or the harsh and sickly reality of the war.

Utilizing specific imagery, the painters try to reflect the time period that they inhabit, as well as their own experiences and thoughts. Delaunay’s painting presents its audience with the achievements of mankind, these same achievements fueled hope and optimism for the future. The rugby team represents the internationalization of sports, one facet of the increasingly interconnectedness of the world that was emerging at that time. The yellow sign represents the ability to mass advertise at a breakneck speed, because of the new technological inventions, and the prominence of the word Astra, star, further emphasizes the belief of man reaching for the stars. In the background, the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of modernity at the time, towers above everything else; testament to man's ability to build and reach upwards. The Ferris wheel pictured, was built for the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, a fair celebrating past and future achievements. Near the upper left is a flying airplane that represents the flight of the Wright brothers and the crossing of the English Channel by plane. This represents man’s newly acquired mastery of the air. These images celebrate the achievements of man and express an optimism for the future. Kirchner on the other hand has less optimistic images in his painting. At the forefront of the painting is a sickly and wounded soldier. The soldier’s eyes are completely black with no pupils, and his face appears sickly with a less than happy expression. This represents the loss of optimism of both mankind and the painter for themselves and the future. His arms are outreached to the observer, with a bloody stump of a hand presented to the viewer. Near the background to the left is what appears to be a canvas with painting on it. The painting is disjointed and violent, looking almost like a gaping wound. To the right of the painting is a nude model, but the soldier is disinterested in her. Here the painter tries to express the injuries of war, his sense of impotence, artistically and sexually, because of the war. He presents a scene of both physical and psychological injury using specific imagery. Both the painters try to reflect their specific time periods by using specific imagery.

Lastly, it is how the painters depict the imagery of their paintings that helps reflect on their time periods. Delaunay’s painting is more abstract, and uses blotchy simplified geometric shapes to provide the outline for the images, putting an emphasis on using color to flesh them out. Delaunay uses light brush strokes to help make the colors appear blurry and light, while Kirchner uses heavier brush strokes to make the colors appear darker. The appearance of blurriness of Delaunay’s painting contributes to a sense of movement and form, which parallels the forward movement of mankind, and the fast movement associated with modern life. The lighter appearance of Delaunay’s painting also furthers the sense of a brighter future that many hoped for. Kirchner’s heavier brush strokes contribute to a sense of weight and stillness. Here the forward march is brought to a halt, and the previous sentiment of optimism is brought into question. The outline of the soldier and the nude are distorted, and the colors are jarringly composed. Kirchner is focused on the depiction of the psychology and emotion of the soldier rather than trying to present a pleasant aesthetic. Delaunay focuses on using color to give form to abstract and geometrical shapes that present the light and cheery scene.

The twentieth century started out with optimism and hope for the future. Mankind had invented new technologies and new ideas that questioned established traditions and beliefs. This optimism was broken with the outbreak of World War I. Robert Delaunay's *The Cardiff Team* and Ernest Ludwig Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* provide an interesting look at the change in perspective between the opening of the twentieth century and the outbreak of World War I. Both painters use color in different ways to try to convey the mood of their respective time periods. Delaunay expressed the hope and optimism of the beginning of the twentieth century, while Kirchner expressed the harsh reality of the war and its effect on this culture physically and mentally. Both painters used specific imagery to reflect their respective time periods, and as well as express their own thoughts and experiences. The painters also depicted these images in certain ways to better reflect their time periods. Delaunay focused on abstract elements and airy colors, while Kirchner focused on the harsh imagery and jarring colors. These pieces of art are important because of how they reflect their respective time periods, and how they catalogue the change of thought and perspective between them. The different art styles show how events in history can drastically affect the art and culture of the times. Even now, the styles and concepts that these artists helped create still influence the art and culture of today.