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Sample assignment for an introduction to Modern art

Exercise to teach students how to use historical documents

### **Writing a Historical Interpretation**

Gino Severini is an artist who is difficult to understand and classify. Most art historians refer to him as an Italian Futurist because he signed the Futurist manifestos. Although he gave lip service to Futurism in his writing, details of his life suggest that he may have been less than committed to the movement. For example, he spent little time socializing with the other Futurists in Milan and Rome; instead he mostly lived and worked in Paris with Picasso's friends. Complicating the situation further, his art does not look much like the other Futurists'.

For this assignment you will evaluate Severini's writing and one of his paintings, *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin*, asking yourself if the painting conforms to the norms and values of Futurism. The painting depicts a nightclub in Paris. You do not need to do library research for this paper because I have scanned nine documents for you to use that were written by Severini or his peers.

The goal of this assignment is to introduce you to writing art history using primary documents. Primary documents are the raw materials of history, while secondary documents are summarized by others. Your textbook and the article by Mary McLeod that you read for the previous assignment are both secondary documents because they are a synthesis of primary documents. When doing this assignment, you may find it useful to reread Linda Seidel's article "On Telling Tales." Her article is about how she learned to think about primary documents like evidence in a court case. She then writes her "verdict" about a specific moment in time.

To complete this assignment well, I expect you to do the following: First, read the pages about Futurism and Severini in your Arnason textbook. Then, try to make sense of the painting by examining its subject matter and artistic properties. Thirdly, read a set of documents that I have scanned until you believe that you have a respectable understanding of futurist norms and values. Restate those values in your paper to show how they either reflect or contradict the messages in the painting, and ultimately judge whether the painting is a valid example of Futurist art. Cite where you found each of the futurist values in the documents.

When grading this assignment I will be looking for the following:

- A clear statement of your stance on whether Severini's painting conforms to futurist values.
- Paraphrases or quotes from at least four of the primary documents.
- Discussion of how each of those documents illuminates the subject matter or artistic properties of the painting.
- Properly formatted citations and a bibliography.
- Continuity between your introduction, the body of the paper, and the conclusion.

- A title that refers to your ideas, not simply restates the assignment title. (Historical Interpretation is not a valid title.)
- Good spelling and grammar.
- Total length of 800-1000 words—no more and no less. In the previous assignment I allowed people to write over 1,000 words, but for this one you cannot.

### **Documents on Courseweb**

#### **Art Criticism by Severini:**

Severini, Gino. *The Artist and Society*. Translated by Bernard Wall. New York: Grove Press, 1946, 1952.

———. *Edouard Manet*. Rome: Valori Plastici, 1924.

#### **Manifestos by Severini:**

Severini, Gino, et al. "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 27-31. New York: Viking Press, 1910, 1973.

———. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 24-27. New York: Viking Press, 1910, 1973.

#### **Excerpts from Severini's Autobiography:**

Severini, Gino. *The Life of a Painter: The Autobiography of Gino Severini*. Translated by Jennifer Franchina. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

#### **Writing by Futurists:**

Balla, Giacomo. "Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 132-34. New York: Viking Press, 1913, 1973.

Balla, Giacomo, and Fortunato Depero. "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 197-200. New York: Viking Press, 1915, 1973.

Carrà, Carlo. "The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 111-15. New York: Viking Press, 1913, 1973.

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. "Let's Murder the Moonshine! Oh! The Joy of Playing Billiards with Death." In *Perspectives on Western Art*, edited by Linnea Wren, 304-08. New York: Harper Collins, 1909, 1994.

Saint-Point, Valentine de. "Futurist Manifesto of Lust." In *Documents of 20th-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Umbro Apollonio, 70-74. New York: Viking Press, 1913, 1973.



Gino Severini. *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin*. 1912. 5' 3 5/8" x 5' 1 1/2" Oil on canvas with sequins.