

Two heads may be better than one, but why?

Uta Frith and Chris Frith visit 'Modern Couples' at the Barbican

The idea of the lone scientific hero has long been abandoned. Team work is essential to science and the number of authors on scientific papers has steadily increased with single author papers largely confined to mathematics and philosophy. We work as a couple and we believe we wouldn't have done so well on our own. We know quite a few other psychologist couples of whom we suspect this is also true. There is even some experimental evidence that people working together can achieve more than the same individuals working on their own. Why is it so different in the arts? Here the lone creator still flourishes.

We wondered if "Modern Couples" might give us an answer. This is an exhibition of art from the modernist period at the beginning of the 20th century. This was a time when people, especially artists, were breaking away from the conventional stereotypes, in particular the subservient role of women. Did the groupings that briefly flourished produce better art? But there is a problem. There is no control group. We don't know what would have been produced if each partner had worked in isolation. Moreover, the couples, or threesomes (after all – they were Avant-Garde!), represent many varieties of relationships, short-lived, life-long, passionate or platonic.

Our immediate impression was that full collaborations were very rare. Apart from one painting shared by Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst (*The encounter*, 1938), nearly all the other pieces are attributed to single authors. Although, in some cases (e.g. the Barcelona chair designed for the 1929 International Expositions in Barcelona), there is evidence that a joint work, here between and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, became associated with just one name.

So, did advantages arise for individuals when working as part a couple or a group? Lilly Reich's influence was rediscovered in a MOMA exhibition in 1996. In other cases one of the partners, especially if it was a woman, still waits to be taken out of obscurity. Mutual support is one obvious advantage, and it is a sad observation that, when this support was lost, often through separation due to war, the effect was devastating and could result in mental breakdown. Another advantage arose when couples were able to pool different skills and knowledge. Some of the more successful couples involved a painter and photographer (O'Keeffe & Stieglitz) or an artist and a designer (Klimt & Flöge).

We were particularly taken by the work of Sophie Täuber-Arp and Jean/Hans Arp. Sophie brought her training in textile design to the partnership. Likewise, in the case of Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Sonia supported both herself and her husband through her wonderful textile designs and her business acumen. Interestingly, it seemed to us that the women produced the more striking works of art, which stood out by their exquisite style and superior craftsmanship. In the past these works might well have been relegated to the applied arts, the lesser relative of pure art, and more readily embraced by persons of lower status. But now they shine.

But where was the evidence that better work resulted from these couplings? To us it seemed very slim. The obvious exception is Virginia Woolf. Without Vita Sackville-West, she would not have written *Orlando*; without Leonard Woolf, she probably would not have published anything. So, on the whole we were not impressed with an overwhelming sense of the whole being more than the sum of the parts. There was evidence of mutual admiration and a certain amount of imitation, But the parts too in many cases only just make the B-list. In some cases it is not at all obvious why these particular modern couples were included – unless it was the lives, rather than the art, that was of most interest.

What is our take-home for readers of this magazine? From the empirical evidence we believe that two heads are better than one. But this exhibition suggests that this is not necessarily reflected in a better product or outcome. Rather, it is found in reciprocal inspiration and confidence building. And this is not to be sneezed at.