

# From modernism to post-modernism

[Art & Culture](#), [Art Movement](#)



The Modernists wanted to free art from the constraints of classicism and to promote critical, free thought but whether or not they succeeded is still a matter of debate. It began with Manet's Impressionism on to the outrageousness of Dali's Surrealist Manifesto. It was an intellectual attack on classical thought. Modernism and its successor, Post-Modernism indulged the artistic world in the subject of intellectual critical thinking and individualism and could be seen as the bravest contradiction to what art was previously believed to be.

Modernism infiltrated every form of thought including philosophy, law, music, literature and architecture. It wanted the world to have their own thoughts and not believe what they were told to believe. Yet how different was Post-Modernism from Modernism? Did it succeed in changing the way people think and is it really 'art for art's sake'? In this essay we examine these questions with reference to artist who were prominent Modernists.

By definition 'modernism' is "period dating from roughly the 1860's through the 1970's and is used to describe the style and ideology of art produced during that era." (Witcombe, 1997). Therefore this era of art included styles such as Impressionism, Surrealism and Realism. It is a broad spectrum from which to work. Arguably, Monet was the father of Impressionism, who saw the value of art no longer in reproducing the subject in detail and to perfection, but rather to capture the moment in time that could never be captured again. Professor Witcombe of Sweet Briar College says that it is generally agreed that Edouard Manet was the first of the 'modernist' painters (Witcombe, 1997).

Classical artists had been preoccupied with classical subjects, particularly in the ' Romantic' period such as Delacroix and David (Witcombe, 1997).

Modernism appeared to have failed in the early 20th Century, with the collapse of the Communist movement. It seems that at that stage looking at Surrealism for example, free thought and freedom of expression was about to be tested again with the onset of the World Wars. Yet where Modernism itself began and where it ended is still largely a mystery to most people. For instance, looking at the work of Cezanne in the early stages of the Modernist period, the essential ' breaking down' of subjects to their smallest most geometric states gave rise to a form of minimalism that contradicted the complexity of the Modernist age.

Sigmund Freud ushered in the ' new age' of mental evaluation with world-shaking consequences and his ideas stretched from philosophical thought through to the film industry. Acceptably known to have influenced the work of painter Salvador Dali and film-maker Alfred Hitchcock, Freud's ' modern' thought was seeking to ' free' the mind of the constraints of classically accepted reality. Essentially (as with the Cezanne's art), this meant breaking humanity down to its smallest and simplest parts.

As Witcombe describes it, " it should be clear that modernist culture is Western in its orientation, capitalist in its determining economic tendency, bourgeois in its class character, white in its racial complexion, and masculine in its dominant gender." (Witcombe, 1997). As art became freed of the bonds of classical feudal law, so society attempted to pursue ' liberalism' with Karl Marx's Utopia rising and falling abruptly with the failure of Communist Russia.

There was at this stage too a profound interest in understanding the human interaction. The old idea of science as a purely empirical discipline gave rise to the human element in the work of sociologist Max Weber (Ludington, 2000). Artists no longer wished to conform to a particular style of art but preferred to create their own signature style. Even in the Impressionist school, a distinguishing factor could be found in each of the artists making them individual: Monet, Renoir, Manet, Degas and Van Gogh.

Picasso's solid external outline and geometric shape can be seen distinctly in the work of Paul Cezanne, meaning that his idea was not entirely original but influenced by previous artists. The idea of being unique and 'inventing' a new art was and always will be contested by the reality that and 'influence' 'recreates' the already created. Modernism was meant to free the artist of this exact emotion as well as being representative of the present social climate. This could be seen effectively in the work of Gustav Klimt and Antoni Gaudi in the early 1900's. The Art Nouveau period specifically identified the new-found freedom of money and if there was none, to at least pretend there was.

Casa Battlo (1906-1908), Antoni Gaudi architectural piece, resembled the carefree nature of the Art Nouveau period. Being completely fantasy and out of this world it appears it could have been made from an assortment of candy rather than brick and mortar. The dream-like realm for which Surrealism became known is subtly different to this in its pure indulgence and decadence.

Previously the Church had been the patron of the arts, meaning that most of the art that was endorsed was done so with the understanding that it would be classical in nature, therefore ranking Gaudi as particularly rebellious in this aspect. The Renaissance architect Brunelleschi, who's Dome of the Cathedral in Florence can be seen as poles apart from Gaudi's offering, was controlled by the needs of the Church rather than pure self-indulgent imagination like Gaudi's.

Another aspect of Modernism that came into dramatic play was the advent of photography. With this reproduction of images it was no longer necessary to reproduce subjects as they were in reality or to record events. It did not take long for philosophical writers such as Roland Barthes to recognise that even with these remarkable prints of the past, they could never truly represent the subject they captured. With a photograph of his mother he was convinced that yes, this was his mother but, no it was also not his mother. It was in effect a picture of his mother. Rene Magritte in this era also painted his famous pipe entitled *Ce n'est pas une pipe*, which said that while it was a pipe, it also wasn't.

The reasoning behind this was that if you cannot actually smoke it, it cannot be a pipe. The question was to what extent does Modernist 'unpacking' become 'over unpacking'? The 'unpacking' process of Modernism in terms of art is perhaps best seen in the work of Salvador Dali. "[Freud's Interpretation of Dreams was] one of the capital discoveries of my life...I was seized with a real vice of self-interpretation, not only of my dreams but of everything that happened to me..." (The Great Artists. Vol 73: 2311). The

Persistence Of Memory 1931, by Salvador Dali is oil on canvas and is 9 ½ inches by 13 inches in size. It shows a series of stopwatches melted over the motifs and there is 'double imagery'.

It includes a side profile of Dali himself. Completely Surrealist, Dali worked alongside Breton on the Surrealist Manifesto which attempted to free mankind of the constraints of the mind. "Surrealism will usher you into death, which is a secret society. It will glove your hand, burying therein the profound M with which the word Memory begins." (Breton 1924). This was the core of Modernist thinking, that man should by all intents and purposes link beyond the real (or imagined reality) to what he really is (unpack himself). Like Freudian psychology the belief in Surrealism is that repressed memory locates itself in the subconscious constantly.

This was called the superego, the responsibility of man to appease this memory leads to unexplained and unresolved dreams that often recur (Freud. 1949: 77). Compare this to the era we now live in, (the Post-modern era into which we have slipped) and the difference is that we are now trying to free ourselves from the constraints that Modernism has put on us.

Post-Modern artists still toy with the idea that what is chiefly within us is expressed through creativity. But now the addition of technology to the equation makes us the 'controller' of the said creativity. Computer technology replaces the need for composed qualities in artwork (specifically graphic) meaning that there has to be a marriage of technological advancement and artistry in order for the artist to survive. Going back in time to the first expressions of rebellion in art such as Grunewald and Bosch,

who represented dreams in their art and compare this to Dali who interprets the dreams.

It becomes clear that what is believed to be an entirely new movement in art is really only a manifestation of experiments used in the past. With World War I & II the former quest for world domination attempted once again to put the world of art under the scrutiny of the powers that be but did not succeed. This means that the completed change was here to stay, that the movement from Impressionism to Surrealism and through to Pop Art and Op Art was free to mobilize itself into the future.

“ Earth to earth ashes to ashes dust to dust”, 1970, Lawrence Weiner, Guggenheim Museum, was what Post-modernism has offered us. In comparison to the fine art of the past few centuries, this piece does not seem to amount to much, but then it is an example of what humanity has become and therefore holds specific importance. A plain grey, white and black plaque with the words ‘ earth to earth ashes to ashes dust to dust’ written across it reveals to us an human race that is really and honestly empty.

It is not entirely correct to say Modernism has succeeded in its purpose, but to say that it has failed is also untrue and perhaps a little unfair. Times have changed and continue to do so. The greatest archives we have in memory of the evolution of man are in our art. Modernism as an ideal failed, communism failed and to a degree Freud failed, but the gift they gave us was a solid movement into a time that has been littered with the ‘ new’.

Modernism failed in that it became the cult-like movement of constraint that it tried so hard to break.

It succeeded in producing an art that was truly indicative of the individual. Modernism is, regardless of its successes and failures, a distinct mark in history in the same way that the Renaissance was to the 1400's-1500's. We no longer paint young ladies on swings with farthingales and voluminous skirts, because they do not exist in our world. We hardly go to war in kilts and with battleaxes either because so much of our time has changed. The continuum of thought and critical thinking still plagues us with the knowledge that there are some things we will never explain or understand. However the world changes, our creativity is always there.

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