

Modernism – college



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Modern Art , painting, sculpture, and other forms of 20th-century art.

Although scholars disagree as to precisely when the modern period began, they mostly use the term modern art to refer to art of the 20th century in Europe and the Americas, as well as in other regions under Western influence. The modern period has been a particularly innovative one. Among the 20th century's most important contributions to the history of art are the invention of abstraction (art that does not imitate the appearance of things), the introduction of a wide range of new artistic techniques and materials, and even the redefinition of the boundaries of art itself. This article covers some of the theories used to interpret modern art, the origins of modern art in the 19th century, and its most important characteristics and modes of expression.

Modern art comprises a remarkable diversity of styles, movements, and techniques. The wide range of styles encompasses the sharply realistic painting of a Midwestern farm couple by Grant Wood, entitled *American Gothic* (1930, Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois), and the abstract rhythms of poured paint in *Black and White* (1948, private collection), by Jackson Pollock. Yet even if we could easily divide modern art into representational works, like *American Gothic*, and abstract works, like *Black and White*, we would still find astonishing variety within these two categories. Just as the precisely painted *American Gothic* is representational, Willem de Kooning's *Marilyn Monroe* (1954, private collection) might also be considered representational, although its broad brushstrokes merely suggest the rudiments of a human body and facial features. Abstraction, too, reveals a number of different approaches, from the dynamic rhythms of Pollock's *Black*

and White to the right-angled geometry of *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue* (1937-1942, Tate Gallery, London) by Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, whose lines and rectangles suggest the mechanical precision of the machine-made. Other artists preferred an aesthetic of disorder, as did German artist Kurt Schwitters, who mixed old newspapers, stamps, and other discarded objects to create *Picture with Light Center* (1919, Museum of Modern Art, New York City).

Thus 20th-century art displays more than stylistic diversity. It is in the modern period that artists have made paintings not only of traditional materials such as oil on canvas, but of any material available to them. This innovation led to developments that were even more radical, such as conceptual art and performance art movements that expanded the definition of art to include not just physical objects but ideas and actions as well.

In view of this diversity, it is difficult to define modern art in a way that includes all of 20th-century Western art. For some critics, the most important characteristic of modern art is its attempt to make painting and sculpture ends in themselves, thus distinguishing modernism from earlier forms of art that had conveyed the ideas of powerful religious or political institutions. Because modern artists were no longer funded primarily by these institutions, they were freer to suggest more personal meanings. This attitude is often expressed as art for art's sake, a point of view that is often interpreted as meaning art without political or religious motives. But even if religious and government institutions no longer commissioned most art, many modern artists still sought to convey spiritual or political messages. Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, for instance, felt that color combined

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with abstraction could express a spiritual reality beneath ordinary appearances, while German painter Otto Dix created openly political works that criticized policies of the German government.

Another theory claims that modern art is by nature rebellious and that this rebellion is most evident in a quest for originality and a continual desire to shock. The term *avant-garde*, which is often applied to modern art, comes from a French military term meaning “advance guard,” and suggests that what is modern is what is new, original, or cutting-edge. To be sure, many artists in the 20th century tried to redefine what art means, or attempted to expand the definition of art to include concepts, materials, or techniques that were never before associated with art. In 1917, for example, French artist Marcel Duchamp exhibited everyday, mass-produced, utilitarian objects including a bicycle wheel and a urinal as works of art. In the 1950s and 1960s, American artist Allan Kaprow used his own body as an artistic medium in spontaneous performances that he declared to be artworks. In the 1970s American earthwork artist Robert Smithson used unaltered elements of the environment—earth, rocks, and water—as material for his sculptural pieces. Consequently, many people associate modern art with what is radical and disturbing. Although a theory of rebellion could be applied to explain the quest for originality motivating a great number of 20th-century artists, it would be difficult to apply it to an artist such as Grant Wood, whose *American Gothic* clearly rejected the example of the advanced art of his time.

Another key characteristic of modern art is its fascination with modern technology and its embrace of mechanical methods of reproduction, such as

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photography and the printing press. In the early 1910s Italian artist Umberto Boccioni sought to glorify the precision and speed of the industrial age in his paintings and sculptures. At about the same time, Spanish painter Pablo Picasso incorporated newspaper clippings and other printed material into his paintings in a new technique known as collage. By the same token, however, other modern artists have sought inspiration from the spontaneous impulses of children's art or from exploring the aesthetic traditions of nonindustrialized, non-Western cultures. French artist Henri Matisse and Swiss artist Paul Klee were profoundly influenced by children's drawings, Picasso closely observed African masks, and Pollock's technique of pouring paint onto canvas was in part inspired by Native American sand painting.

Yet another view holds that the basic motivation of modern art is to engage in a dialogue with popular culture. To this end, Picasso pasted bits of newspaper into his paintings, Roy Lichtenstein imitated both the style and subject of comic strips in his paintings, and Andy Warhol made images of Campbell's soup cans. But although breaking down the boundary between high art and popular culture is typical of artists like Picasso, Lichtenstein, and Warhol, it is not of Mondrian, Pollock, or most other abstract artists.

Each of these theories of course, is compelling and could explain a great many strategies employed by modern artists. Yet even this brief examination reveals that 20th-century art is far too diverse to be fully contained within any one definition. Each theory can contribute a part to the puzzle, but no single theory can claim to be the solution to the puzzle itself.

Art of the late 19th century anticipated many of the characteristics of modern art noted above. These include the idea of art for art's sake, the focus on originality, the celebration of modern technology, the fascination with the "primitive," and the engagement with popular culture.

Modern art's celebration of art for art's sake was initiated by French artists associated with impressionism, including Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot. Abandoning direct references to religious and historical subjects, many of the impressionists broke away from the French art establishment in the 1870s and exhibited their paintings independently, anticipating the modern desire for independence from established institutions. In painting scenes of everyday life, especially life in local bars and theaters, the impressionists anticipated modern art's interest in popular culture. In depicting railroads, bridges, and examples of the new cast-iron architecture, they anticipated modern art's fascination with technology. And by pioneering new artistic techniques (that is, applying paint in small, broken brush strokes) and by intensifying their colors, they anticipated the modern fascination with originality. By exhibiting quickly executed works as finished paintings, they forced the public to reconsider the sketch, no longer as a preliminary exercise, but as an end in itself, thereby anticipating the tendency of modern artists to change and expand the definition of art.

In the last two decades of the 19th century a number of artists who had been inspired by the impressionists' style and technique reacted strongly against the impressionist example. These artists, who were eventually called postimpressionists, established a number of alternate approaches to

painting, each of which was to have remarkable repercussions for 20th-century art. Paul Gauguin, for instance, rejected the impressionist technique of applying touches of color in separate, small brushstrokes in favor of using large areas comprised of a single color bound by heavy contour lines. This innovation had an impact on Matisse and scores of later artists who used color as an expressive device rather than as a means for copying nature. In 1891 Gauguin decided to settle on the Pacific island of Tahiti, motivated by a desire to leave Western civilization and embrace a simpler form of existence. His work there contributed to the modern fascination with non-Western art.

Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, a friend of Gauguin, used both color and brushwork to translate his emotional state into visual form. In addition, he infused his paintings with religious or allegorical meanings (black crows as symbols of death, for example), countering the impressionists' emphasis on direct observation.

The work of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch was based on the assumption that painting could sacrifice truth to nature for expressive purposes. Munch used harsh combinations of colors, distorted forms, and exaggerated perspectives to give visual form to the alienation of the individual in modern, industrial society. The works of Gauguin, van Gogh, and Munch laid the groundwork for the later development of expressionism in 20th-century art.

Other postimpressionist artists reacted against impressionism in a different way. French artist Georges Seurat sought to raise art to the level of science by incorporating the latest theories about light and color into his work. He divided color into its constituents (purple into blue and red, or green into

blue and yellow, for example) and applied these colors to his canvas dot by dot. His method, called pointillism, was meant to eliminate all intuition and impulse from the activity of painting.

Another postimpressionist, Paul Cezanne, sought to introduce greater structure into what he saw as the unsystematic practice of impressionism. Objects appear more solid and tangible in his paintings than in the works of his impressionist colleagues. But despite this increased solidity, Cezanne did more than any previous artist to destabilize the integrity of form through subtle distortions and seeming inaccuracies in his many still-life paintings. Objects do not rest comfortably on their bases, vases seen from the front have rims seen from above, and the horizontal edges of tables, when projecting from either side of a tablecloth, sometimes do not match up. It is almost as if Cezanne was dismantling the very solidity he meant to reintroduce to the depiction of objects.

Cezanne also introduced a radical innovation in works such as his *Mont Sainte Victoire* (1902-1906, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City): The edge of the mountain opens up to allow areas of sky to penetrate the otherwise solid mountain. With this simple device, Cezanne decisively changed the course of art history. Two physical entities—earth and sky—believed to be distinct and separable were now made interchangeable. The world as it is seen and experienced, Cezanne seemed to say, is not as important as the laws of picture making. After Cezanne's example, the world of reality and the world of art began to drift apart. The fragmentation initiated by Cezanne's work spearheaded Picasso's later experimentation with form and invention of cubism.

Cultural historians have related the fragmentation of form in late-19th- and early-20th-century art to the fragmentation of society at the time. The increasing technological aspirations of the industrial revolution widened the rift between the middle and the working classes. Women demanded the vote and equal rights. And the view of the mind presented by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, stipulated that the human psyche, far from being unified, was fraught with emotional conflicts and contradictions. The discovery of X rays, physicist Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, and other technological innovations suggested that our visual experience no longer corresponded with science's view of the world.

Not surprisingly, various forms of artistic creativity reflected these tensions and developments. In literature, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf experimented with narrative structure, grammar, syntax, and spelling. In dance, Sergei Diaghilev, Isadora Duncan, and Loie Fuller experimented with unconventional choreography and costume. And in music, Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky composed pieces that did not depend on traditional tonal structure.

Music not only took its place among the most experimental of the arts, but it also became a great inspiration for visual artists. Many art critics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were influenced by German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, who had proclaimed that music was the most powerful of all the arts because it managed to suggest emotions directly, not by copying the world. Many painters of the late-19th-century symbolist movement, including Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau, tried to emulate music's power of direct suggestion. By including abstract

forms and depicting an imaginary, rather than an observable, reality in their paintings, Redon and the symbolists paved the way for abstract art.

The idea that art could approximate music is reflected in Henri Matisse's Red Room (Harmony in Red) (1909, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia), a painting whose subtitle is borrowed from musical terminology.

From Gauguin, Matisse borrowed large areas of unvaried color, simplified shapes, and heavy contour lines. The simplicity of Matisse's drawing style relates to Gauguin's fascination with the art of non-Western cultures. Matisse also employed the abstract designs of carpets and textiles, reinforcing the flatness of the painting rather than attempting to create the illusion of depth. His interest in these designs demonstrates the influence of forms of creativity not often associated with fine art.

Although Red Room was intended as a pleasing image of middle-class domesticity, Matisse's manner of depiction was considered highly revolutionary, especially in the way he assigned intense colors to objects arbitrarily and not according to their appearance in nature. A scandalized contemporary critic declared Matisse and his fellow artists Andr Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, and Georges Braque (of France), and Kees van Dongen (of the Netherlands) to be fauves (French for "wild beasts"). This derogatory term became the name of their movement. Fauvism lasted only from about 1898 to 1908, but it had an enduring impact on 20th-century art.

Pablo Picasso, a friend and rival of Matisse, also invented a new style of painting, focusing mainly on line rather than color. Picasso's art changed radically around 1907, when he decided to incorporate some stylistic

elements of African sculpture into his paintings. Unlike Matisse's pleasant image of a middle-class interior, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* (1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York City) does violence to the human form by means of radical simplifications, arbitrary and harsh color combinations, and extreme distortions of human anatomy and proportions. The painting's space, moreover, does not conform to the logic of perspective, the traditional system for portraying depth in a picture, and is so fragmented that it is difficult to read clearly.

The violence inherent in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, however, gave way by about 1912 to his more meditative paintings, such as *Ma Jolie* (1912, Museum of Modern Art, New York City). In this and other examples of analytical cubism, the subject, usually a portrait or still life, is fragmented into a series of intersecting and interpenetrating geometric planes. Cezanne's influence can be felt in this fragmentation, as can Picasso's love of ambiguity and merging of opposites. Solid and void, figure and environment, background and foreground interpenetrate in defiance of both the logic of traditional painting and the logic of everyday experience. *Ma Jolie* is painted in muted tones of gray and brown; this lack of color also is characteristic of analytical cubism, as is the incorporation of lettering. The words MA JOLIE (French for "my pretty one") appear at the bottom of the painting, referring to a popular song of the time and reinforcing the link between modern art and popular culture.

These links were further reinforced in Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, Musee Picasso, Paris), to which the artist affixed a piece of oilcloth printed with the woven pattern of caning. This was among the first instances of collage, a violation of traditional painting techniques by the inclusion of

foreign material. After the cubist experiments of Picasso and his French colleague Georges Braque, no material would ever be considered foreign to art, opening the door for art to redefine itself again and again as the century progressed.

Picasso's cubism proved remarkably influential. French artists who experimented with it included Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Lger, and Juan Gris. Their use of the style to glorify modern life's relationship to technology distinguishes their work from Picasso's and Braque's. Lger, for example, simplified forms in *The City* (1919, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania) into flat areas of color or suggestions of three-dimensional cubes or cylinders. In this work, Picasso's quirky and personal version of cubism has yielded to Lger's more mechanical and impersonal one. The shift reflects a contemporary political belief that the individual personality should be subordinated to the demands of society as a whole. *The City* is Lger's vision of an ideal community, or utopia: humanity's merger with the machine.

The futurists, a group of Italian artists working between 1909 and 1916, shared Lger's enthusiasm for technology, but pushed it even further. As their name suggests, the futurists embraced all that glorified new technology and mechanization and decried anything that had to do with tradition. They declared a speeding automobile to be more beautiful than an ancient Greek statue.

In combining Picasso's fragmentation of form with Seurat's pointillist painting technique, *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (1913, Museum of Modern Art, New

York City) by Umberto Boccioni is typical of futurism. But the most noticeable feature of Boccioni's many-legged soccer player is its depiction of motion. To achieve this sense of motion, the futurists drew upon sequential photographs of human movement by photographer Eadweard Muybridge and scientist Etienne-Jules Marey. "A galloping horse," the futurists proclaimed, "has not four legs but twenty." Like Lger, the futurists believed that a new society could be built only if citizens sacrificed their individuality for the good of the larger group. The new ideal human being suggested in Boccioni's painting would be more machine than man: strong, energetic, impersonal, even violent. Other futurist painters are Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carr, and Gino Severini.

Whereas an embrace of the new and technological was the hallmark of the Italian futurist movement, a group of artists in Germany called Die Brücke (The Bridge) celebrated not technology but human instinct. Die Brücke, founded in Dresden in 1905, included German artists Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. These artists saw the modern city as a place of alienation.

In such works as Berlin Street Scene (1913, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany), Kirchner underscored the artificiality of city life and the way people lose their identity in a crowd. His human figures have distorted proportions and generalized facial features. Kirchner heightened the sense of anxiety with clashing color juxtapositions and angular shapes, the latter inspired by African sculpture and German woodcuts. Those artistic forms appealed to the expressionists not only for their simplification of human anatomy but also for their roughness, which revealed traces of the artist's

hand and the difficulty of working in wood. Following Gauguin's example, the expressionists frequently represented the human body in the midst of nature, presumably freed from the strict moral codes of middle-class society.

In 1911 a second expressionist group was founded in Germany, this time in Munich, called Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). This group included Russians Wassily Kandinsky and Alexei von Jawlensky; Germans Franz Marc, August Macke, and Gabriele Mnter; and the Swiss Paul Klee . Like the members of Die Brcke, the artists of Der Blaue Reiter appreciated non-Western art as well as children's drawings, folk art, and handicrafts. But the members of Der Blaue Reiter were more interested in the spiritual side of humanity than in its instinctual side. Kandinsky wrote a treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), in which he connected representational art with materialism and abstract art with spirituality. As had the late-19th-century symbolist painters, Kandinsky drew parallels between painting and music, and believed that colors could evoke different emotions in the same way as different melodies and sounds do. In Kandinsky's abstract works, such as *Improvisation 28* (1912, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City), the contours of shapes remain incomplete, as if open, and line and color function independently of one another. Although some scholars view these works as the first examples of abstract art, others have discovered that many of Kandinsky's turbulent preliminary sketches refer to scenes of the deluge, Last Judgment, and other biblical events. This discovery suggests that the spirituality Kandinsky accorded to abstract art was not just a general idea, but a crucial aspect of his subject matter.

E. Russian Suprematism and Constructivism

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Two Russian groups also arrived at abstraction in the early 20th century. Around 1913, painters Kasimir Malevich and El Lissitzky initiated a movement called suprematism, and sculptors Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksandr Rodchenko founded a movement known as constructivism.

The suprematists, like Kandinsky, believed that abstraction could convey a religious connotation. In 1915 Malevich painted a black square on a white background and exhibited it in the corner of a room the traditional location for a Russian icon (religious image). According to Malevich, the term suprematism was meant to evoke the “supremacy of pure feeling.” The square symbolized sensation; the field or background, nothingness. What Malevich wanted to depict was the pure essence of sensation itself, not a sensation connected to a specific experience such as hunger, sadness, or happiness.

The constructivists sought an art that would be abstract, yet easily understood. Their sculptures celebrated the material properties of objects, such as texture and shape. Influenced by Picasso’s techniques of collage and construction, Tatlin created sculptures without using the traditional techniques of carving or modeling. Whereas carving requires removing materials to reveal a sculpted form, construction is an additive process by which the artist combines ordinary materials such as metal and wood to build a sculpture. Unlike Picasso, Tatlin never painted or altered his materials, preferring instead to have their untouched surfaces relay their true nature. In his proposal for a Monument to the Third International (1919-1920, wooden model in the Russian State Museums, Saint Petersburg), Tatlin designed a huge metal structure that would celebrate the foundation of the

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new Soviet state. He intended it to be taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris and to have internal rotating elements that would house government offices, some rotating once a day, some once a month, some once a year. This highly impractical monument was never built, but it exemplifies several tendencies of modern art: its tendency to express utopian ideals, to experiment with new materials and techniques, and to blur the boundaries between fine art and engineering.

In 1917 Dutch painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg founded an artistic group known as De Stijl (The Style). Other members included painter Bart van der Leek, sculptor Georges van Tongerloo, and architect Gerrit Rietveld . Like the suprematists and constructivists, many of the artists of De Stijl were committed to the idea of abstract art and to the view that it had a purpose beyond mere decoration. Art, they felt, could change the nature of society and create a new kind of human environment. Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue* (1937-1942, Tate Gallery, London) reveals De Stijl's tendency to reduce painting to its most essential elements. Horizontal and vertical black lines divide the white canvas into rectangles, some of which are painted red, yellow, or blue. The surface of the painting reveals nothing impulsive or intuitive; everything seems (but was not always) pre-planned in the mind of the artist. Intending their work to look impersonal and machinelike, De Stijl artists echoed the cubists and futurists in their hope that a new society could be built by rejecting individuality and embracing a collective will.

Although Mondrian's rectilinear geometry is worlds apart from Kandinsky's dynamic and apocalyptic images, both artists were dedicated to the idea of

abstract art and shared the belief that abstraction could convey philosophical meaning. Just as Kandinsky saw his abstractions as conveying a sense of spirituality, Mondrian saw the asymmetrical grids of his compositions as metaphors for the balancing of opposing forces: man and nature, individual and society, and so forth. These ideas were so central to Mondrian's work that he envisioned his compositions as the basis for architecture and interior design, a vision that Rietveld and other architects later helped fulfill.

After the unprecedented devastation of World War I (1914-1918), some artists lost faith in abstraction. In particular, many came to believe that abstract art looked trivial and superficial when so many millions of people had lost their lives, entire cities were coping with food shortages and political corruption, and these cities were overrun by soldiers crippled during the war. In Germany artists belonging to a movement known as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) believed that to address these problems art should no longer divorce itself from everyday experience, pursue abstract philosophical ideals, or probe the individual psychology of its creator. These artists, who included George Grosz and Otto Dix, advocated a return to more traditional modes of representation along with direct engagement with the pressing social and political issues of the time. Dix's *Matchseller* (1920, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart), for example, rejects cubism, expressionism, and abstraction in favor of a more immediately comprehensible kind of representation. Addressing the insensitive treatment of soldiers who had risked their lives for their country, this painting shows a crippled soldier selling matches on the street as passersby pointedly ignore him. Dix was aware that the postwar

treatment of veterans depended on their social class. Thus his image denounced not only war in general but also the specific social tensions that were dividing Germany at that time.

The slaughter of World War I affected artists in different ways. Some felt, as Mondrian did, that human betterment lay in the creation of an impersonal, mechanistic way of life, whereas others agreed with Dix that it lay in drawing attention to political problems. Still others concluded that the very idea of human betterment was a pointless illusion. For this group, the main lesson of the war, if anything, was the bankruptcy of reason, politics, technology, and even art itself. On this premise, several artists and poets founded a movement whose name, dada, was purposely meaningless, and whose members ridiculed anything having to do with culture, politics, or aesthetics. Centered at first in Zurich, Switzerland, dada later spread to Berlin, Paris, and New York City. Among its members were German poet Hugo Ball, German artist Kurt Schwitters, Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, Romanian artist Marcel Janco, American artist Man Ray, and French artists Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia. The dadaists attacked the idea of art or poetry by creating collage constructions from discarded junk, such as Kurt Schwitters's *Painting with Light Center* (1919, Museum of Modern Art, New York City). They also would write satirical poems by picking words out of a hat. Chance and accident were among the dadaists' most common creative devices.

An early and particularly influential dada work is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917, Museum of Modern Art, New York City), an ordinary, mass-produced urinal that has been transformed into a work of art simply by being exhibited

in a gallery and receiving a new title. Duchamp wished to ridicule traditional ideas of art, creativity, and beauty. The artist (although Duchamp always denied being “an artist”) would no longer create works of aesthetic merit based on inspiration or talent, but would select prefabricated everyday objects. And although these objects, which Duchamp dubbed ready-mades, had originally been functional, Duchamp denied their utilitarian function by putting them in a new contexta gallery or museumand by changing their title.

Bibliography: