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Constantin Brancusi

Born in rural Romania, Brancusi came to art through traditional crafts, learning woodworking techniques in his youth. After moving to Paris in 1904, he joined avant-garde artistic circles, where he drew on his craft-based training to develop a new approach to modern sculpture. Brancusi directly carved his work from marble, limestone, and various woods, sometimes casting the results in bronze.

Using a vocabulary of simplified shapes that pushed towards abstraction, Brancusi created imaginative sculptures that evoke rather than resemble their subjects. He frequently made multiple versions of the same work, returning to the same subjects—birds, newborn babies, female heads—again and again. His multi-part bases often combine several materials to achieve a variety of color and texture. As such, they perform a dual function: they serve simultaneously as components of the artworks and as their supports.

501 **Nineteenth-Century Innovators**

The late nineteenth century was an era of rapid change: the emergence of a mass media, new and faster forms of transportation, noisy and bustling cities, and developments in industry, from the sewing machine to the telegraph.

Vision itself was likewise transformed, whether by new kinds of illumination—such as electric light—or by the increasingly widespread availability of photographic images. Seeing the world differently, artists reacted to these changes; *how* one saw was as crucial as what was seen.

Paul Cézanne took up the challenge by looking harder and closer, conscious of alterations in the visual experience of each moment. Others turned their backs on industrial and technological change to look inward, focus on the domestic, or represent the unconscious, dream, and fantasy. Vincent Van Gogh, too, attempted to visualize the evanescent—wind, stars, darkness—using thick paint to render scenes “as if seen in a dream, in character and yet at the same time stranger than the reality.”

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Early Photography and Film

When photography and film first appeared in the nineteenth century, they fascinated viewers with their ability not only to record but also to reinvent reality. These technologies reshaped the visual culture of the time, providing an alternative to traditional methods of image-making involving hand, pen, and brush.

Cameras served a variety of functions: they were used as documentary tools, instruments of science, and aids to artists and artisans working in other media. And they allowed photographers to create remarkable works of art. Photographs and films captured the highs and lows of life with deadpan mechanical precision. Upending earlier modes of information distribution, they exposed social concerns and facilitated the development of new narrative forms. By reproducing movement in unprecedented ways, and by making the familiar unfamiliar and the invisible visible, these lens-based techniques contributed to shifting conceptions of time and space in the modern era.

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Around *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*

Painted when Pablo Picasso was twenty-five years old, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* seems to have had no lesser goal than the complete reinvention of Western painting.

In a composition that appears still to be working itself out before the viewer's eyes, Picasso banished perspectival conventions and jettisoned idealized notions of beauty. The title, which alludes to the prostitutes of Barcelona's red-light district, fuels the painting's continued ability to shock.

Demoiselles has been typically presented as a progenitor of Cubism—the art of splintered forms and shifting vantage points that revolutionized pictorial language in the years prior to World War I. Here, two works by Louise Bourgeois and Faith Ringgold suggest that there are other sides to *Demoiselles*'s legacy, calling attention to not only its formal innovation but to the painting's radical engagement with African art and its startling depiction of women's power. The extraordinary drama of *Demoiselles* connects to those staged in artworks made generations after, by artists who entered into dialogue with a predecessor as if he were their contemporary.

504 **New Expression in Germany and Austria**

In the years before World War I, artists in Germany and Austria developed a provocative new approach based on high-pitched color and jarring distortions of form. Their focus on the human figure was in part a reaction to the rapid transformations affecting society—industrialization and urbanization, as well as changing attitudes toward sexuality.

Expressionism, as such work came to be known, emerged in several distinct artistic centers. These included Vienna, where Egon Schiele forged a brand of searingly psychological portraiture; Munich, where Vasily Kandinsky and others associated with *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) emphasized the spiritual values they found in nature and folk culture; and Dresden, where Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and others in the *Brücke* (Bridge) group created scenes of their daily life that were, as Kirchner recalled, “strange to the normal person . . . [and] driven by a totally naive, pure need to bring art and life into harmony with each other.” A desire for intensely personal expression and emotional authenticity unified the impulses of these artists.

Between 1911 and 1914, a new generation of artists made a radical shift toward abstraction. Rather than depict objects in the world, they experimented with interactions between forms and colors. “These colored planes are the structure of the picture,” said artist Robert Delaunay, “and nature is no longer a subject for description but a pretext.”

The trailblazers of abstraction hailed from a number of European cities, but many of them flocked to Paris, the burgeoning center of the art world. Some used shifting, kaleidoscopic forms to capture the dynamism of modern, mechanized life. Others, reacting warily to the effects of industrialization, turned inward to explore the spiritual dimensions of pure color. As painter František Kupka remarked, “The creative ability of an artist is manifested only if he succeeds in transforming the natural phenomena into ‘another reality.’”

Matisse's audacious experimentation with form and color was inseparable from his dedication to an art of harmonious expression, an ambition lost on most of his contemporary viewers. The earliest works in this gallery, small paintings composed of bold strokes of vibrant color made in 1904 and 1905, are among those that led angry critics to label him and his colleagues "*les Fauves*"—wild beasts.

Brilliant color would nonetheless continue to be one of Matisse's most important resources, and by 1909 he began to construct compositions featuring flat expanses of vivid tones that saturate the paintings' surfaces. Matisse radically abbreviated the descriptive elements of his subject matter, sacrificing detail to the overall rhythm and unity of the composition. In his 1908 essay "Notes of a Painter," he wrote that he dreamed of "an art of balance, or purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter." Matisse remains one of the great joy-givers of the twentieth century.

507 **Artists' Books and Prints in Russia**

After Russia entered World War I in 1914, Natalia Goncharova and Olga Rozanova each made a series of prints dramatizing the conflict. Goncharova's visions of angels watching over the Russian troops reflected the prevailing patriotism of the war's early years. Rozanova began producing her *War* prints one year later, when the country had begun to suffer disastrous military defeats; her fractured forms convey the cataclysmic confusion.

Both series extend from the artists' preoccupation with handmade books—thin, crudely bound volumes in which their rough, almost childlike illustrations mingle with the experimental language of their poet-collaborators. Their radical approach to art, spurred by exchanges with French and German avant-garde groups, was meant as a rebuke to Russia's conservative traditions. “Typical of our age is a hunger for freedom,” said Rozanova, “a longing for freedom, a hunger to see the world transformed.”

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Readymade in Paris and New York

The term “readymade” first appeared in a letter Marcel Duchamp wrote in 1915 to his sister, Suzanne Duchamp, herself an artist. He was living in New York; she was in Paris. He invited her to collaborate in creating a “Readymade, remotely,” by inscribing and signing a metal bottle rack he had left behind in his Paris studio “après Marcel Duchamp” (“after Marcel Duchamp”). By designating mass-produced, utilitarian objects such as bottle racks, bicycle wheels, or snow shovels as readymade art, Marcel Duchamp challenged centuries of thinking about the artist’s role as a skilled creator of original handmade works.

The Duchamps were joined by like-minded artists—including Man Ray and Francis Picabia—who all upended conventional notions of what art can be. Animated by a finely honed sense of the absurd, these artists both embraced and critiqued modernity, filling their works with references to the industrial technologies, mass-produced objects, and machines that increasingly defined contemporary life.

509 Florine Stettheimer and Company

New York artist Florine Stettheimer was a painter, poet, and playwright; a designer of highly original furniture, picture frames, stage sets, and costumes; and a celebrated salon host. The parties she threw in her eccentrically decorated studio brought together luminaries from the worlds of art, dance, literature, music, and theater. Such figures, along with Stettheimer's own immediate family, often appear in her elaborately detailed portraits, which blur distinctions between private life and public performance, domestic settings and theatrical stages.

One of Stettheimer's closest friends from the mid-1910s to early 1920s was the artist Marcel Duchamp, represented in this gallery with *Fresh Widow* (1920), a work he attributed to his female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. Works by other contemporaries, as well as like-minded artists working today, extend Stettheimer's interests in accessorizing and ornamentation, design and decoration.

510 **Machines, Mannequins, and Monsters**

In the first decades of the twentieth century, artists in Europe and the Americas brought to life a legion of unsettling figures shaped by shared experiences of sweeping technological change. The desires and anxieties aroused by this new reality were embodied in three motifs highlighted in this gallery: machines, mannequins, and monsters.

Machines promised a bright, efficient future, but they also enabled a devastating warfare that mangled soldiers' bodies, which were then remade with prosthetics. Photographers captured these changes and mirrored them through new artistic techniques such as photomontage. They were also drawn to the increasingly lifelike mannequins that filled shop windows, uncanny doubles of the consumers passing by. And on the silver screen, vampires, golems, hunchbacks, and other anthropomorphic "monsters" reflected a pervasive racism and aversion to difference. Fears about the body's vulnerability and malleability registered across visual mediums, raising questions about what it means to be human.

511 **The Vertical City**

What would a city of towers look like? From its first appearance in the late nineteenth century, the American skyscraper fundamentally changed the shape and experience of the city. By the early twentieth century, Europe's avant-garde architects celebrated America's bold conquest of height, and new building technologies prompted a competition across the Atlantic to innovate structural approaches and ever-greater transparency.

But challenging the scale of historic cities also sparked anxiety. These dramatic changes were radical—what if offices towered over churches? Artists began to represent the transforming urban landscape in new ways, creating a dialogue between the city and art making. Inventive photographers and cinematographers, for example, explored methods of capturing the sensory impact of the modern city's expanded scale, accelerated pace of movement, and vertiginous heights.

Envision a new artistic language in stride with a changed world: this ambition was shared by many artists across Europe in the early twentieth century. In the context of the Russian Revolution of 1917, artists proclaimed that a revolutionary society demanded forms of art liberated from the past. Rejecting traditional painting's loyalty to recognizable subject matter, they instead promoted nonrepresentational art, exhilarated by its potential to free viewers from the material realm while connecting to radical politics and imagining a more perfect future. In Holland, a group called De Stijl championed abstraction as a model for cultivating the values of universality and connectedness. "If we cannot free *ourselves*, we can free our *vision*," declared the artist Piet Mondrian. "Art must move not only parallel with human progress but must advance ahead of it."

Between the world wars, clusters of artists, architects, and designers joined forces to work internationally as agents of economic change and social transformation. Convinced of the underlying unity of all art forms, many groups in the Netherlands, Germany, and the newly established Soviet Union aspired to harness the vast potential of industrial production and new technologies to address modern needs in the home and workplace. At the same time, middle-class women experienced new social and professional freedoms, such as opportunities for art and design education.

Broadcast via telephone, radio, film, and an explosion of print media, innovative ideas and products transcended national boundaries. Despite numerous factional disputes and false starts, the utopian experimentation of the interwar years left a powerful legacy in terms of interdisciplinary models of education, the increasing visibility of women as makers and designers, and the international networks through which creativity flowed.

In the years after World War I, Paris once again became a crossroads for artists from around the world. Many sought new forms of classicism, looking for ways to connect the shaky present to solid foundations of the past. Fernand Léger turned to the sleek mechanical parts and mass-produced objects of modern industry for inspiration, believing that art and machines together could remake the world. “The object is everywhere in contemporary life,” he declared in 1925, reflecting his fascination with machine-made things. Pablo Picasso, conversely, proposed a different type of modern classicism grounded in his own prewar Cubism. Still others, like designer Eileen Gray, created works that embody the rich crossover between “*style moderne*” (the predominant decorative style of the 1920s and 1930s), austere geometric modularity, and luxury craft.

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Claude Monet's Water Lilies

In 1915 Claude Monet built a large studio near his house in Giverny, a town northwest of Paris, for the creation of what he would call his *grandes décorations*. These works depict the elaborate lily pond and gardens that Monet had created on his property. He captured this subject matter in more than forty large-scale panels and scores of smaller related canvases between 1914 and 1926, the year of his death.

In 1955 The Museum of Modern Art became the first museum in the United States to acquire one of the large-scale panels. MoMA curators' interest in Monet at that time had much to do with currents in contemporary art: the grand scale and all-over compositions of Abstract Expressionist paintings by artists such as Jackson Pollock made Monet's large paintings newly relevant. Since then the Water Lilies have held a cherished position in the Museum, affirming Monet's conviction that art can provide a respite from an increasingly urban, commercialized, and technological world.

Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup is a quintessential Surrealist object. To produce it, Oppenheim purchased a cup, saucer, and spoon from a Paris department store and covered these otherwise unremarkable household items with fur. In doing so, she transformed common, utilitarian things into something simultaneously attractive, disturbing, and sexually charged.

Beginning in the 1930s, many artists associated with Surrealism turned to object-making with vigor. They were captivated by the notion that certain objects possessed mystical, magical, or talismanic powers. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories—which suggested objects could function as projections of unconscious sexual desires—served as an important touchstone. Painting, collage, photography, and film were also enlisted to defamiliarize the familiar and, in the words of René Magritte, to make “everyday objects shriek out loud.”

At first glance, Paul Cézanne's apples, Henri Rousseau's junglescapes, and Giorgio de Chirico's eerie arcades may appear to have little in common. All, however, were celebrated by French poet André Breton as key figures in an art historical lineage leading up to Surrealism's arrival, which he announced by manifesto in 1924. For Breton, progress in art was marked by a return to what he described as "the wild eye," untainted by convention and reason.

What unites the disparate works in this gallery is a turn away from external sources of inspiration toward an internal model based on direct, unmediated experience. These artists—who range from the nineteenth century's Georges Seurat to Breton's contemporaries Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso—rejected the idea of painting as a copy of the visible world in favor of that which is hidden, and perceptible only to the artist.

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Architecture for Modern Art

MoMA's first purpose-built building, at 11 West 53rd Street, opened to the public in 1939. It was designed amid lively debates around the question "How should modern art be exhibited?" Many believed that the radically new forms of early-twentieth-century art required strikingly new types of spaces in which they would be encountered by the public. Proposals ranged dramatically—from the scale of the cabinet to the scale of the tower. Some exhibition designers carefully choreographed the trajectory and even the posture of visitors, while others created loosely structured, expansive spaces that encouraged serendipitous discoveries and open-ended associations between works. On the occasion of MoMA's most recent expansion, looking back at some of these concepts reminds us that the architecture of museums, galleries, and exhibitions plays an important role in determining how art is experienced.

From the depths of the Great Depression, the impulse to capture the distinctive character of the United States was felt by photographers, poets, filmmakers, and painters alike. Walker Evans answered this call, harnessing photography to connect art with the everyday. His friend Lincoln Kirstein wrote of his photographs in 1938: “What poet has said as much? What painter has shown as much? Only newspapers, the writers of popular music, [and] the technicians of advertising and radio have in their blind energy accidentally, fortuitously, evoked for future historians such a powerful monument to our moment.”

For many artists, the government provided essential support, fostering creative expression as singular as the individuals receiving funding. The resulting works embraced the prevailing progressive agenda and supplied a vision of the lives of ordinary Americans. Nearly half of the pictures Evans included in *American Photographs* had been commissioned by the Farm Security Administration, a federal agency. The images function ably both as documents of contemporary experience and in the service of Evans’s art.

521 ***Masters of Popular Painting***

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, MoMA mounted a number of exhibitions dedicated to artists far removed from the mainstream art world. As Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the director at the time, noted, they were known as “naives, amateurs, self-taught, folk or popular artists, Sunday painters, instinctives . . . which, though none is really satisfactory, throw some light on the character of their art.” He was referring to artists who did not train or work as professional artists.

Today they are most often described as “self-taught” or “outsider,” terms that still fail to convey the broadly eclectic nature of their work. For Barr, who worked to incorporate self-taught artists into the narratives of art history, attention to them was essential to understanding modernism and its insistence on the non-academic and the instinctual. Several of the artists featured here were included in the Museum’s 1938 exhibition *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*, and works by them were acquired soon thereafter.

“I have not painted the war,” said Pablo Picasso in 1944, “because I am not the kind of painter who goes out like a photographer for something to depict.” In the months that followed, however, he began work on *The Charnel House*, a monumental evocation of the horror of World War II. It is one of numerous searing, history-engaging works that artists of various nationalities in diverse circumstances created during the cataclysmic period that stretched from the rise of Nazism and other totalitarian regimes, in the 1930s, to the end of the war, in 1945. Some, like José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, had always mixed art and politics. Others, like Picasso, felt newly compelled to use their art to confront the events unfolding across the world stage. In many cases, these artists found a modernist language of fractured forms well suited to conveying a reality contorted by violence and destruction.

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British Prints from the Machine Age

“I was interested in the shapes and rhythms and patterns of things,” reflected Sybil Andrews on her time at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art in London, where she worked and studied during the 1920s and '30s. Together with her Grosvenor peers Cyril Edward Power and Claude Flight, Andrews promoted a new medium for the machine age: the linoleum-cut print. Invented as a floor covering in England in 1860, linoleum was inexpensive and easy to handle, but until then had only rarely been used for printmaking.

To make their prints, the Grosvenor artists carved a design into a piece of linoleum, which was then inked, covered with a sheet of paper, and rubbed with a wooden spoon to transfer the design. Depicting subjects such as competitive sports and industrial labor, the school's members developed a signature style in which rhythmic patterns conveyed the speed and dynamism of modern life. The artists' goal, as Flight wrote, was to wrest “an unusual experience from a commonplace subject.”