

American Modernists UW Art Museum, 2007

Gallery/Study Guide

American Modernists explores the stylistic developments and diverse approaches to the image-making process as American artists undertook to create new art during the 20th Century. Beginning in the late 19th Century, American artists began discarding the conventions and traditions of the past in search of something “new.” Personal expression and individualism were embraced as artists forged new visual vocabularies.

Arguably the seminal event in the development of modernism in America, the *Armory Show* introduced American artists, critics, and audiences to new art on an international scale. It was held between February 17 and March 15, 1913, at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York and then traveled to Chicago and Boston.

Modernism in visual arts, music, literature, and drama rejected the old Victorian standards of how art should be made, consumed, and what it should mean. In the period of “high modernism,” from around 1910 to 1930, the term modernism refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post-World War I period. Around 1910, just as the automobile and airplane were beginning to accelerate the pace of human life, and Einstein’s ideas were transforming our perception of the universe, there was an explosion of innovation and creative energy that shook every field of artistic endeavor. Artists from all over the world converged on London, Paris, and other great cities of Europe to join in the ferment of some of these new ideas . . . it was an era when major artists were fundamentally questioning and reinventing their art forms: Matisse and Picasso in painting, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in literature, Isadora Duncan in dance, Igor Stravinsky in music, and Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture.

- Askart.com, 2007

The organizing artists, Arthur B. Davis, Walt Kuhn, Walter Pach, and a committee of progressive painters and sculptors, selected 1300 works in an attempt to trace the story of modern art from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Although there had been shows of modern art in New York before this, nothing of this scope or influence had been seen. The Armory Show transformed the market for art, and thereby marked the birth of modernism in America.

The exhibit *American Modernists* presents those early artists who had their own personal voice and created something as new as American Jazz before the end of World War II. Some of these artists were first recognized at the famous Armory Show in 1913 in New York.

The first step in understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. Because there are over

twenty pieces of modern art to observe and artists to become acquainted with, pick out one to three artists or art work to spend more time on viewing and

getting to know. Here are some questions for you to consider when looking at the exhibit *American Modernists*.

- Which media do you see represented here (e.g. oil, pastel, charcoal, etc.)?
- How do the pieces differ from each other?
- How are they similar?
- Can you name the different techniques and/or styles you see being tried in some of the prints and paintings?
- Do you find any connections between artists in this exhibit? (Hint: read the text panels for each artist.)
- Are there any apparent connections between the works of art (for example, does one artist appear to visually influence another)?
- Because the motto of the modernists was *make something new*, how does each work you view seem to present a new technique, style, or idea? Remember: you are comparing this work to work from the 19th century and earlier.
- After looking at this work, how would you define modernism? Does this term stand for any one particular style? Does it refer to a time period? What are the defining qualities of modernism in your opinion?
- How does this work appear to us today? Does it still feel new? Why or why not?
- Look for the quote by Alfred H. Maurer next to his painting. How does he describe the process of changing from the

In 1908, an exhibition in New York would change art in America. Frustrated by the lack of recognition for artists who were working outside the mainstream of the acceptable traditions that dominated the National Academy, eight artists banded together to present their work to the world. Under the leadership of artist and educator Robert Henri; Arthur B. Davies, William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan organized their only exhibition together. The *Eight* was shown in the Macbeth Gallery, drawing 7,000 visitors. The experimental work being created in Paris found its way to the US through these inventive and progressive artists.

The *Eight* paved the way for what was to become the seminal Twentieth Century exhibition in the US that introduced and promoted modern art—the first *International Exhibition of Modern Art*. Presented by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors in 1913, it was held at the 69th Infantry Regiment Armory in New York City and hence became known as the *Armory Show*. . . Although criticized by the public and the press, the *Armory Show* profoundly affected artists in the US and American Modernism was born.

American modernism took many forms as artists from various locales and backgrounds experimented with their own particular vision. Thus, the traditional subject of still life painting became newly expressive as painters brought their subjective responses to bear on fruits and flowers. The urban landscape was also a favorite theme among painters sometimes called the Precisionists, known for their sharp-edged renditions of agrarian and industrial vistas. In these works, the painters invite viewers to look anew at something mundane, to seek contradictions and ironies where none had been evident before.

- Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio, 2006

“old school to the new?”

- Name the artist or art work in this exhibit that especially appeals to you. What is it about this piece that draws you to it?

Some *characteristics of modernism* were, of course, a reaction to time and place. Here are some specific characteristics of modernism:

1. Social picture of the period: rise of cities and industrialization.
2. A response to WWI and a sense of social breakdown: violence, decadence, and destruction.
3. Dehumanization, anonymity of people: loss and despair.
4. Class structure changing: race relations, rich and poor, inequality of women.
5. Advancing technology.
6. Politics of war, revolution.
7. Physics, Einstein, uncertainty principle
8. Religion, God is dead, everything is meaningless: fear of death.
9. Pattern of construction (art) that saw the world in fragments and unrelated pieces.
10. A point of view that is remote and detached from its subject.
11. Meaning must be searched for by the viewer.
12. The subject of the work asks what is the purpose of art? The meaning of life?
13. What is the use for art in a world falling apart?
14. Anti-Romantic, meaning not in nature but in art itself; meaning is subjective; the art work needs not have a meaning.
15. Modernists are searching for new forms.
16. Modernists break with the past deliberately.
17. Old subjects are the means; art is an end in itself.

- The box to the left describes characteristics of the time period during which modernism began. Do you see any of these traits or concepts in the prints or paintings that you have chosen to view?
- Select a characteristic from the list at the left and see if you can match it with an artwork. How has the artist addressed or incorporated that concept into the artwork?
- Do you think the style of artwork, and the medium used, strengthen or detract from the artist's presentation of the idea? Why?
- How do artists reflect what is occurring in the world around them?
- Do you think artists only reflect change, or do they sometimes initiate change?
- Review the list again. Has the world changed much in 100 years?
- If you were to address an idea or concept important to you in today's world, what would it be? What medium would you select to express your idea?