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. 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...
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?

- 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?

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.
4. Class structure changing: race relations, rich and poor, inequality of women.
5. Advancing technology.
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.