

American Modernists

University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2007
Educational Packet developed for grades K-12

Introduction

In this museum visit students will view the work of the *American Modernists* from the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, American artists who 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.

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.

History

Modernism: Making a Sharp Break with the Old

For artists in America before World War II, Europe was considered the center of the art world and it was essential that artists live and study there in order to be successful. In the Post-War years, New York became the recognized art world center. While European art continued to inspire, emulating or copying it and not seeking your own personal voice in your creative process was considered taboo.

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.



John Sloan, *Burglars*, 1903, etching, 4-1/8 x 5-3/4 cm, Gift of Mr. William Dean, University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

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. Artists included Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Eugene Delacroix, Edgar Degas, Paul Cezanne, Odilon Redon, Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Vincent Van Gogh, Constantin Brancusi, Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, Paul Signac, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Raoul Dufy, Georges Bracque, Paul Gauguin, and Alexander Archipenko. Although criticized by the public and the press, the *Armory Show* profoundly affected artists in the US and American Modernism was born.

Arguably the determining 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.



Andrew Dasburg, *Trees in Ranchitos*, not dated, lithograph on white Nacre paper, 16-1/2 x 23-1/2 inches, Purchase made possible by Friends of the UW Art Museum, University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

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)

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.

A book and an exhibition: *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, was created and organized by the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, and the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington. Published in 1999, the book and its companion exhibition present an overlooked chapter in the history of American modernism. Between the wars, artists on both sides of the Atlantic were creating a new visual language celebrating an America not of virgin wilderness but of ingenuity and invention. They used tools of the new styles—cubism, expressionism, and Dadaism—to render America’s sinuous, glistening, engineered world, from spark plugs and dynamos to factories, suspension bridges, and skyscrapers.

“We want to reestablish the early story of modernism and the sense that New York had in the teens and twenties of rivaling Paris. The history of New York as an art capital starts here,” says Wanda M. Corn, the Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History at Stanford University, author of the book and exhibition curator. “These artists also created a certain identity for New York that we still depend upon as an index of its special-ness,” continues Corn, “skyscrapers, the Brooklyn Bridge, Broadway. They helped to index the highlights of a tour around Manhattan. It’s what we all do when we go to New York.”

(Susan Saccoccia, neh.gov/news/humanities, 2007)

American Modernists begins with representative works by each of The Eight artists. The following artists presented here were influenced by, or studied with, the artists in The Eight, or were energized by the subsequent Armory Show. The exhibition has been curated from the University of Wyoming Art Museum’s permanent collection.

Artist Statements

To artists, modernism is a trumpet call that both asserts freedom to create in a new style and provides them with a mission to define the meaning of their times and even to reshape society through their art. History of Art, Janson, 2001

I do not photograph nature. I photograph my visions.
Man Ray

Make something new.
Ezra Pound

The transformation from the old school to the new is not an easy one...When I decided to make the change, I had to lay aside my brushes for almost a month and think nothing but impressionism. Then I went at it slowly and timidly, feeling my way. I am still in transition, I know. I can't tell what tomorrow will bring about. Alfred H. Maurer

I began to realize you don't paint with color – you paint with conviction, freedom, love and heart aches, with what you have.
William Gropper

Paint what you feel. Paint what you see. Paint what is real to you. Robert Henri

Lesson Overview

Students will learn about the work of some of the American Modernists from the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. They will explore the work of the original *Eight* founders of the Armory Show and artists who studied or were influenced by these *Eight* American modernists. Students will look to see what new and original ideas came out of these works: etchings, lithographs, serigraphs, monotypes, oil paintings, pastels, and watercolors. Students and teachers will consider the concepts behind the art work, and how they fit into the idea of a new modern American art.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to complete a **pastel**, an **acrylic painting**, or an **etching** modeled after any one of the modernist paintings or prints, the idea being that each student will try, in his or her own way, to create something new. The modeling will be done after some of techniques used in producing a painting, an etching or a pastel but not in the ideas, or subject matters that each student will bring to the project.

Students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about the American Modernists' work before arriving at the art museum, using study guides (available on-line) to explore ideas. While here they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it, and even sketching it. They will begin conversations about the theories behind the work which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue these ideas in their home classrooms and schools.

Essential Questions

Grades K-6

- What is art?



William Gropper, *War Series*, not dated, lithograph, 8-3/4 x 12-1/4 inches, Gift of Mr. William Dean, University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

- What is modern art?
- When we speak of original art work, what does that mean?
 - How do you know when viewing art work whether it is the same or traditional or if it is created in some way new or original? Or how can a viewer recognize a “new idea/concept/style” in art just by observing it?
 - How do the paintings and prints you view in this exhibit express new ideas?

Grades 6-12

- What do we mean by style when we speak of art?
- What do we mean when we say art work is traditional or classical?
 - Can you name various techniques used in these prints and paintings to show that they are striving for a new modern art in a different style?
 - Do these works present the culture, and the social and the political climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? How so?
 - How are the American modernists similar and different from the European modernists?
 - How are the modernists different than the romantics, classicists, etc.?



Ernest Feine, *The Mine Superintendent*, 1937, mixed media, 18 x 14 inches, Gift of Mr. Richard Plotka, University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

Art Questions to Consider

Grades K-6

- What do you see?
- Describe the kinds and types of marks the printers and painters have made.
- What shapes and forms do you see?
- What colors do you see?
- What and who are the subjects of the paintings and the prints?
- How are these prints and paintings the same and how are they different?

Grades 6-12

- How many ‘isms’ in art can you name that would go under the heading of modernism?
- What techniques can you name in the paintings and prints?
- How can the same techniques be used to make something new in art?



Mark Tobey, *Confusion*, 1962, Tempera, 27-7/8 x 14 inches, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Neustadter, University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

Pre-visit Activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities.

- Students will read and research about the American Modernists in art magazines, books at the library and on the internet.

- Students will research information on any of the individual artists included in this exhibit:

Robert Henri
 Everett Shinn
 William James Glackens
 John Sloan Maurice
 Prendergast George Luks
 Ernest Lawson
 Arthur B. Davies
 Will Barnet
 Man Ray
 Fairfield Porter
 Joseph Stella

Alfred H. Maurer
 Abraham Walkowitz
 Joseph Solman
 Andrew Dasburg
 Mark Tobey
 Reginald Marsh
 William Gropper
 Howard Norton Cook
 Ernest Fiene
 Romare Howard Bearden
 Jacob Lawrence



Jacob Lawrence, *The 1920's...The Migrants Cast Their Ballots*, 1974, serigraph, 32 x 24-7/8 inches, Gift of Lorillard, a Division of Loews Theatres, Inc., University of Wyoming Art Museum Collection

- Students will explore different artist's techniques in creating their works.
- Students will explore relationships from modernism in art to modernism in literature, poetry and jazz.

Museum Activities

Part 1 – Time frame: 45 minutes

- Students will closely observe the works of the American Modernists on exhibit in the art museum.
- They will identify lines, shapes, forms, patterns, repetition, color, light and shadow, technique and style in the existing work.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore the artists' prints and paintings in relationship to the idea of modernism and creating something new.
- They will explore the concepts behind the art work in the exhibit.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.
- Students will answer questions on a museum worksheet.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

Part 2 – Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum)

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will explore the concepts of modernism in art by either painting, using pastels or creating a print.
- Students will create a painting or print trying to make something new.
- Students will explore techniques in the making of a pastel, a painting, or a print.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the works of American Modernists and the concepts of modernism in America (an essay, art work, research paper).
- Students create their own modernist drawings and paintings to explore new ideas.

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching and drawing objects.
- Students should be able to identify shapes and colors.
- Students should be familiar with the concepts behind modernism.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of the American Modernists' works, plus the historical knowledge gained from studying the work and time frame of these works from the late 19th C to the early 20th C ties to multiple curricular areas including art, history, social studies, writing, reading, geography, and philosophy. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

Some recommended resources

These are just a few of the many resources available. We welcome other suggestions that teachers and students find helpful which can be added to this list.

- UW Art Museum website: www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum
- Exhibition descriptive materials (contact the museum education program for more information)
- Research on the internet about the American Modernists, modernism, and American modernism in art.
- *Modernism: Designing a New World*, by Ian Christie, Mark Benton, Christopher Wilk, and Mark Jones, 2006
- *Modernism* by Richard Weston, 2001
- *Modernism* by Peter Childs, 2000
- *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 1999
- *Modernism: An Anthology*, S. Rainey, 2005
- *American Women Modernists, The Legacy of Robert Henri, 1910-1945*, Brigham Young University Art Museum, 2005

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Assessments and documentation of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a pdf file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via e-mail (wbredehoft@uwyo.edu).

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them as art of teaching and student portfolios.