

Modern Art



Edouard Manet, *The Railway*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Modern art began in the mid-1870s in France and Western Europe with impressionists Courbet, Monet, Pissarro Renoir, Sisley and others, artists who painted in the outdoors, or en plein air. With the motto, "art for art's sake," they used broad strokes of pure intense colors—to be blended by the eye—to capture the quality of light.

Their paintings, and those by the subsequent post-impressionists (Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Seurat, 1886-1905), continue to have a wide appeal, with their vibrant colors and depiction of sunlit settings in cities and the countryside. Impressionist artists painted directly from nature, interpreting urban settings, landscapes and people, using broad dabs of paint—rather than creating scenes and portraits realistically in the studio.

The artists employed themes and techniques challenging the status quo in society, as well as the "imitation of life" principle. Their paintings addressed the dramatic political, social and industrial changes occurring in Europe at that time, whereas art of previous eras tended toward religious and mythological themes. Those changes were in large part due to events surrounding the Industrial Revolution, an era from the mid 18th century into the 19th century of profound

changes in manufacturing, transportation, and technology.

The Gare Saint-Lazare

In the catalog, "Manet, Monet and the Gare Saint-Lazare," (Paris train station) © 1993, celebrating an exhibition of the same name at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., several paintings convey the rapid industrialization occurring in Paris in the second half of the 19th Century.

The catalog explains, "Among Claude Monet's many paintings of urban Paris, its boulevards and its monuments, its single most striking and coherent group is that of his canvases depicting the Gare Saint Lazare. Monet set up his easel on the station platforms or on the tracks beside the point de l'Europe, to observe the trains that ran beneath the great bridge, to and from distant places...Edouard Manet, whose seminal picture of The Railway lies at the heart of our discussion, is a striking example of the importance of place, of the artist's relationship to his surroundings."

Robert Atkins wrote in "Art Spoke" © 1993, "Crucial to the development of modernism was the breakdown of traditional sources of financial support—the church, the state and the aristocratic elite...Newly independent artists were now free to determine the appearance and content of their art."

With impressionism and post-impressionism as its philosophical foundation, modern art prevailed in western culture for nearly 100 years—with each new movement inspired by a range of historic and cultural influences and by previous art styles.

Subsequent modern art movements include: expressionism (Munch), fauvism or "Wild Beasts" (Matisse, Derain), cubism (Picasso, Braque), dadaism (Man Ray), Surrealism (Dali, Miro), conceptual art (Duchamp), abstract expressionism (Rothko, Pollock), pop art (Warhol, Lichtenstein) and minimalism (Judd, Stella).

Seminal Event

The New York Armory Show (International Exhibition of Modern Art), composed primarily of European and American paintings and sculpture, opened in 1913 in Manhattan's 69th Regiment Armory. This seminal event featured 1,200 modern artworks, and was viewed by more than 400,000 people in New York and later in Boston and Chicago.

"The Association of American Painters and Sculptors" (AAPS) helped organize the Armory Show. Spearheaded by American painters Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn and by art adviser/historian Walter Pach, the AAPS arranged for art from the "Sunderbund Exhibition" in Cologne; from the "Matisse and Picasso Show" in London; from the Gertrude Stein Circle; from dealer Ambroise Vollard; and from

painters Marcel Duchamp and Jacques Villon to be shipped to New York for the Armory Show exhibition.

The Armory Show exhibited modern artworks by Post-Impressionists Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Seurat and Rousseau; paintings by the fauves, Dufy, Matisse and Vlaminck; by cubists Braque, Duchamp, Leger, Picabia and Picasso; and by German expressionists Kirchner and Kandinsky. American artists, who contributed hundreds of pieces to the show, were dismayed to see their works trivialized by the influence and fame of the European artwork.

Avant-garde was a French military term, meaning advance guard. Impressionists and later modern artists used the term to describe their work, indicating that their paintings and sculptures were in the vanguard of art trends. Avant-garde became part of the English vernacular after the Armory Show opened.

Critics, reporters and cartoonists lampooned many European artworks, calling them, "alien, degenerate and politically dangerous." Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* was described as "an explosion in a shingle factory." Henri Matisse's *The Blue Nude* was derided by the press and burned in effigy by Art Institute of Chicago students.

Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. wrote about the show in *The Nation* in "Old and New Art" (March 1913): "The trouble with the newest art and its critical champions is that fundamentally they have no real breadth of taste. These people are devoted to fanaticisms, catchwords, all manner of taking themselves too seriously... Either these new movements are aberrations and will promptly vanish, or else there is henceforth no art as the world has formerly understood the world and the thing..."

In spite of the Armory Show's contentious ratings, hordes of people were intrigued by the event, while its impact inspired and influenced many of the American artists who exhibited there included Arthur Dove, Stuart Davis, Man Ray and Joseph Stella.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in the wake of World War I, compelled artists and viewers to look more closely at art, which addressed social and political issues, while exploring new styles and approaches to art making—a game changer that helped pave the way for the dawn of contemporary art decades later.

Hilton Kramer wrote in The Nation in the article, "The New Realists," November 1963: "Art, which once brought us closer to our experience, has now joined forces with the objects of the world, which alienate us ever more deeply from having a true sense of ourselves, and it is unclear whether our experience can now be aesthetically explored and repossessed without abandoning art—at least as we have known it in modern times—in the process."