

Modernism: rejecting the past

AVI 4M1

The Backdrop:

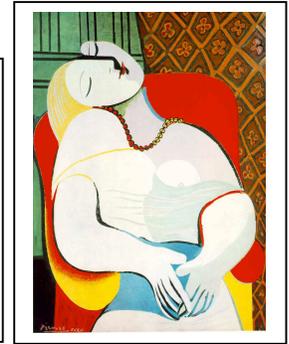
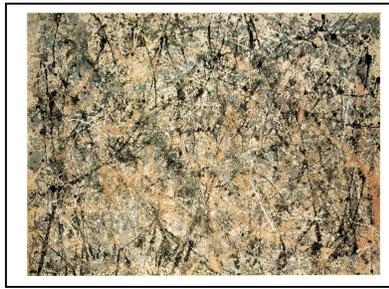
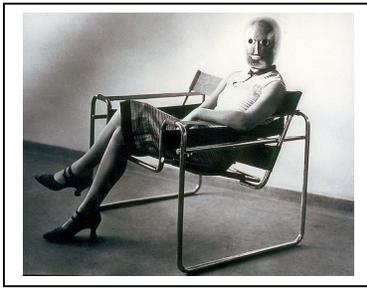
1900: machines = good; humans were improving; Europe dominated the world; symbols of progress such as the Eiffel tower, the automobile and the airplane created hope for a bright future.

By 1918: machines and old ways of thinking had slaughtered a generation (W.W. I, “The Great War”); a golden future of prosperity had turned into a suicidal future of violence (more people have been killed by war in the past 100 years than in all the preceding 10 000 years combined!); industrialization brought prosperity for some but pollution and urban poverty for many more.

There was a loss of innocence!

To the Avant Garde, old ways = death and hypocrisy!

New ways = society’s only hope!



Modernism is an umbrella term for many art styles and movements in the 20th century that vary greatly from one another. However, all Modernist movements share the following 4 key characteristics:

1. THE SHOCK OF THE NEW:

- Shock = good. New = good. Good art broke any ties with the past and tradition.
- Rules were broken to create new visions.
- Extreme reactions to previous trends; art and society must “start from zero”.
- Traditional media was used in new ways.
- Acceptance of new media as serious art (photography, motion pictures, etc.)

2. ABSTRACTION IS ESSENTIAL:

- All progressive art (that is, good art) employed some form of abstraction / distortion of reality.
- “The artist paints not what you see but *what you know is there*” (Pablo Picasso).
- Abstraction can be divided into 3 basic kinds:
 - Emotional, expressive abstraction (Expressionism)
 - Intellectual abstraction (Cubism)
 - Psychological abstraction (Surrealism)

3. AVANT GARDE ATTITUDE

- Artists began to see themselves as so avant garde that they were separate from the rest of society.
- Only artists knew the truth and real value of their own artwork and its importance. Everyone else was passé.
- Emphasis was placed on the increasing importance of theories and manifestos to explain art – all new art had to have a theory.

4. INTEGRITY OF MATERIALS

- The materials from which one makes art should be visible and authentic, not pretending to be anything else (a painting is not a “window onto the world” but merely paint on canvas).
- Architecture: little or no decoration to hide the “integrity of materials”; concrete looks like concrete, etc.

These characteristics applied to all art forms: fine art, dance, music, film, theatre, design, etc.