20th Century Art

Like the imagists, modern artists evoked rather than described experience, abstracting the intrinsic qualities and essential meanings of their subject matter to arrive at a concentrated emotional experience, providing artists with a means by which to move beyond traditional ways of representing the visual world.

Cubism - On the cubist canvas, the comfortable, recognizable world of the senses disappears beneath a scaffold of semitransparent planes and short, angular lines; ordinary objects are made to look as if they have exploded and been reassembled somewhat arbitrarily in bits and pieces. Artists deconstructed the realistic details in their minds and reconstructed them into childlike blocks, reducing everything to cubes.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) theorized that the world is made up of shapes and colors, that what we see are fragments, reassembled by our mind. We do not see objects or figures; instead, we see events extending over a period of time. The eye is in continuous motion and observes continually shifting viewpoints. We misconceive that a stable field of vision exists. If we could slow down our vision, we would see images that are pieces of things and people.

- Picasso – Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Figure 32.2 – pg. 7)
- Mask from Etoumbi region, Congo (Figure 32.3 – pg. 7)
- Picasso – Man with a Violin (Figure 32.4 – pg. 8)
- Braque – Still Life on a Table (Figure 32.5 – pg. 9)
- Picasso – Guitar (Figure 32.7 – pg. 9)
- Ceremonial Mask, Ivory Coast (Figure 32.6 – pg. 9)
- Picasso – Guernica (Figure 34.11 – pg. 66)

Futurism – Technology and art, linked by the modernist mandate to “make it new,” sparked the futurist movement in art. The futurists were enthralled by the speed and dynamism of automobiles, trains, and airplanes, and new forms of technology, including electric light and time-lapse photography (in which “multiple profiles” gave the appearance of movement in time and space).

- Duchamp – Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (Figure 32.11 – pg. 12)

Fauvism – led by the French artist Henri Matisse (1869-1954), fauvism made color the principal feature of their canvases. This group, branded as “fauves” (from the French fauve or “wild beast”) because of their crude and savage use of color, employed flat, bright colors in an arbitrary manner, using color in bold spontaneity and instinctive application.

- Matisse – Madame Matisse (Figure 32.12 – pg. 13)
- Matisse – Dance 1 (Figure 32.13 – pg. 13)

Abstractionism – a movement of artists seeking to purge art of all recognizable subject matter. The pioneers of nonobjective art, had all come into contact with the principal art movements of the early 20th century: cubism, futurism, and fauvism. Their research into subjectless form had yet another goal: that of achieving an art whose purity would offer a spiritual remedy for the soullessness of modern life. One of the great ironies of the birth of nonobjective art is its indebtedness to the mystical and transcendental philosophies such as theosophy (a blend of Eastern and Western religions that emphasizes communion with nature by purely spiritual means). Piet Mondrian equated spiritual progress with geometric clarity. The commitment to pure abstraction as the language of spirituality reflects the utopian humanism of modernists who perceived their art as a wellspring of social harmony and order.
Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) - what mattered in a work of art was form: a pleasing arrangement of lines and color, existing for no purpose other than aesthetic experience. In his work, Kandinsky distilled the familiar world into pure shapes and forms, and believed that color could become like music, beautiful for its interrelationships of tones and intensities.

- Kandinsky – Panel for Edwin Campbell No. 1 (Figure 32.16 – pg. 15)

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) – limited his visual vocabulary to “pure” forms: rectangles laid out on a grid of horizontal and vertical lines, the three primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) and three values – white, gray, and black. The paring-down process achieved a compositional balance of geometric elements.

- Mondrian – Composition (Figure 32.19 – pg. 17)

Expressionism - the new psychology made its most dramatic and long-lasting impact on the visual arts. As art became the pursuit of the subconscious, artists expressed hidden emotions, repressed desires, dreams and fantasies and the irrational and antirational forces of the id.

- Munch – The Scream (Figure 33.1 – pg. 35)
- Chagall – I and the Village (Figure 33.4 – pg. 38)
- De Kooning – Woman and Bicycle (Figure 35.1 – pg. 79)
- Pollock – Number 1 (Figure 35.5 – pg. 81)
- Hopper – Nighthawks (Figure 35.8 – pg. 83)

Surrealism - Artists sought to imitate the unfamiliar world of dreams and the unconscious mind, the goal being to make the unconscious mind a tangible part of the external world. Surrealists employed recognizable shapes and forms but placed them together in unrecognizable contexts. The pioneer psychological studies of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung influenced Surrealist artists such as Spanish painter Salvador Dali, who created a dream world made up of recognizable images irrationally positioned.

- Miro – Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird (Figure 33.8 – pg. 41)
- Klee – Fish Magic (Figure 33.9 – pg. 42)
- Magritte – The False Mirror (Figure 33.10 – pg. 43)
- Dali – The Persistence of Memory (Figure 33.11 – pg. 43)
- Kahlo – The Broken Column (Figure 33.12 – pg. 44)

Superrealism - artists imitated reality as they saw fit. Pop Art is an extension of superrealism that greatly exaggerates the ordinary (Andy Warhol). Art cannot be defined, because art is the action of the artist (O’Keeffe).

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) - Approached her subjects by intuitively magnifying their shapes and simplifying their details to underscore their essential beauty. She imitated one or two striking and colorful forms in the familiar world and transferred them to canvas with many details left out. She saw the world as a place in which certain shapes leapt out at the artist for whatever reason - the colors, the aesthetic appeal of the form itself, the textures, the unconscious significance to the artist.

- O’Keeffe – Cow’s Skull with Calico Roses (Figure 33.13 – pg. 45)