

“High Modernism”:

The Avant-Garde in the Early 20th Century

The cultural values initiated by the early modern artists of the nineteenth century were continued and expanded by the “High Modern” artists of the early twentieth century avant-garde. These values were embedded in their art practices and visible in their art forms. And these values were so firmly entrenched that, in spite of repeated challenges from within the avant-garde itself, they were not fully overturned until late in the century.

Modernism placed European man at the center of culture. While images of the divine were the focus of art from Ancient Iraq through the time of the Renaissance, and absolutist monarchs like Louis XIV began to usurp the position of artistic dominance during the Baroque period, in modernity, the figure of man occupied the place of centrality.

Modernism celebrated innovation and originality. Baudelaire had conceived of modernism as a radical break from the historic traditions that preceded it. He saw it as an era characterized by a quest for novelty; he emphasized the artist’s “burning desire to create a personal form of originality.”¹ A hundred years after Baudelaire, American critic Harold Rosenberg was still espousing what he called “the tradition of the New.”

Modernism privileged painting over other media. Like the patrons of the French Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Baudelaire and his nineteenth century avant-garde contemporaries considered oil painting the ideal form for modernist artistic discourse. Although Baudelaire favored realist imagery, as modernism progressed, painting became more reduced, more abstract,

and more distant from lived experience. In the twentieth century, American critic Clement Greenberg argued painting should be reduced to its prime characteristic: its essential flatness.

Early modernists instituted the palace-cum-museum and the commercial art gallery as elite sites for art display. In the early twentieth century, the “white cube” of the gallery itself became an aesthetic archetype. As Irish writer and artist **Brian O’Doherty** notes, “An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art...Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics.”² Throughout the twentieth century, public museums dedicated to the display of avant-garde modernism were designed as expansions of the white cube.

“Unshadowed, white, clean [and] artificial,” they were spaces devoted, as O’Doherty writes, “to the technology of aesthetics.”

In 1936, when the Director of New York’s new Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, charted the history of modernism, he conceived of a single path from the early avant-garde towards increasing abstraction and formal reduction. Today, we see modern art as much more complex and diverse. In this chapter, we trace four modern trajectories. The first continues what Courbet began: realist imagery used, as Sieglinde Lemke notes, in “a politicized aesthetic that criticizes bourgeois attitudes, speaks on behalf of the proletariat, and envisions the liberation of the working class.”³ The second draws on the expressive innovations of van Gogh and moves towards expressive abstraction. The third is based on Cezanne’s formal advances and produces Cubism and related paths to geometric abstraction. The fourth modernist trajectory involves dreams, fantasy, and the quest for the irrational, as practiced in the Dada and Surrealist

movements. All of these trajectories were generated in Western Europe. We conclude the chapter with the first great American avant-garde movement, Abstract Expressionism.

1. Continuing the Realist Tradition

Many early twentieth century artists created icons in support of the revolutionary political causes they espoused. Often socialist or communist, these causes may be difficult to understand from a twenty-first century purview. But it is important to remember that early twentieth century artists lived through the turmoil and unrest of revolutions (among them, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Mexican Revolution from 1910 through 1920) as well as the horror and devastation of two world wars (World War I from 1914 to 1918 and World War II from 1939 to 1945). Many artists viewed radical leftist politics as the only hope against violence and abuse. They put their faith in politics and political art as avenues of healing change. Because they wanted their art to communicate to as wide an audience as possible, they deployed realism--the style that the general public still understood and preferred.

The kind of realist art initiated by Courbet in his avant-garde rejection of the Academy was continued by several early twentieth century artists who similarly sought to protest social ills. Prominent among these was Mexican muralist **Diego Rivera** (1886-1957).

Diego Rivera: Mexican Murals for the Masses

Rivera had traveled in Europe on a government-sponsored art scholarship from 1907 to 1921. He met Pablo Picasso and practiced Cubism while there. When Rivera returned to Mexico, he found the country transformed by the revolution. He also found a government that commissioned its artists to create immense public murals to depict and support the ideology of the revolution. Rivera went from being a Cubist on a formalist quest to become a painter of large

figurative murals. His politically engaged agenda was explicit. He declared, “To be an artist, one must first be a man vitally interested in all social problems.”

From 1929-30 and again in 1950, Rivera painted an immense, multi-layered mural of the history of Mexico in and around a large staircase of the Government Palace in central Mexico City. Drawing from pre-Columbian sculpture and early colonial manuscripts as well as later historical accounts, he composed idealized images of utopian Indian cultures, continued resistance to the conquering Spaniards, and revolutionary assault on imperialist evils.

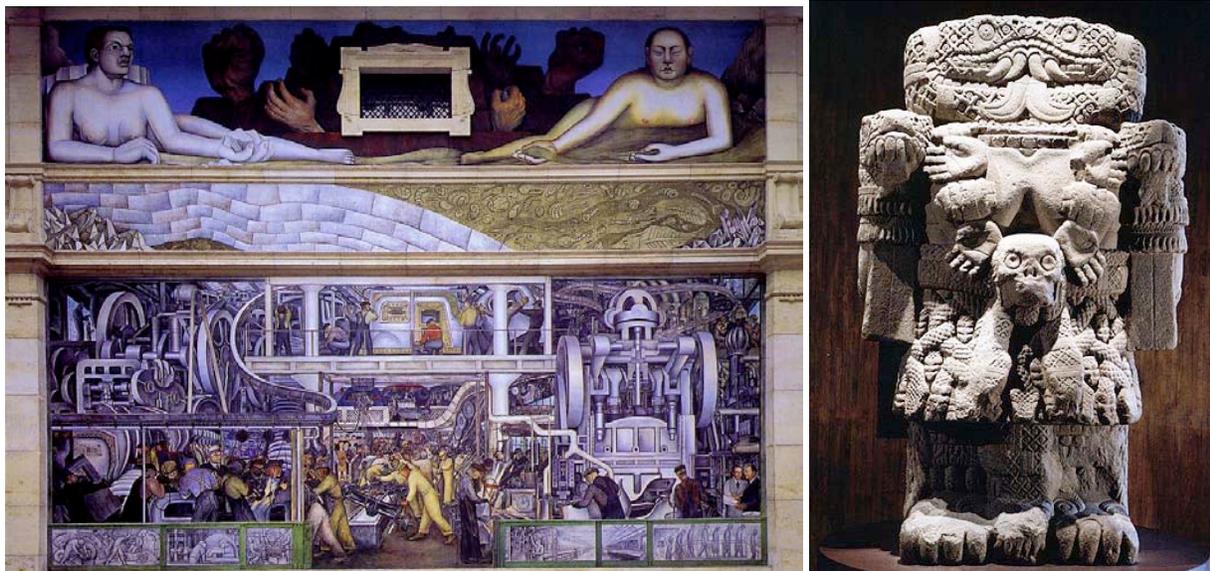
Rivera’s art of social protest had obvious appeal to leftist politics; its appeal extended to the US during Depression. In 1931, he was hired to paint a 20-foot-tall mural in Rockefeller Center in New York. When Rivera refused to eliminate the portrait of Communist theorist Lenin from the center of his *Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (8.1), the Rockefeller mural was destroyed. (The artist later recreated his mural in Mexico City.)



8.1 Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*, 1931.

In spite of the Rockefeller Center controversy, Rivera was hired the next year to do a mural depicting steel workers in the Detroit Institute of Arts. *Detroit Industry* (1932-33) covers

four walls of a courtyard with dynamic murals eulogizing steel workers on the job. Rivera was attracted to the subject because, as he said, “The steel industry itself has tremendous plastic appeal...it is as beautiful as the early Aztec or Maya sculptures.”⁴ Indeed, one of the central iconic images in Rivera’s mural is derived from the Aztec goddess Coatlicue (8.2).



8.2 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, 1932-33 and *Coatlicue*.

Rivera’s optimistic celebration of the working class and urban poor, and of Mexican Indian life and history, made him a popular artist in his home country and abroad, even with people who did not share his commitment to Communism. Other Mexican muralists were not as fully embraced by the general public.

David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974)’s radical political activities in Mexico made him much more controversial than Rivera. His activist engagement extended beyond the Americas; in the late 1930s, he traveled to Spain to fight against General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Siqueiros’ political commitment was one with his art, which made some of his images even more troubling and confrontational than Rivera’s. His *Echo of a Scream* (1937, 8.3) is an agonizing portrayal of a furiously yelling child, who is surrounded by the detritus of war and devastation.



8.3 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Echo of a Scram*, 1937.

Siqueros was also committed to adopting modern technology to visual arts production. In 1936, he taught an experimental workshop in New York City, which attracted diverse US artists including the young Jackson Pollock. One participant remembered about the use of industrial paints in Siqueros' workshop: "We poured it, dripped it, splattered it, hurled it at the picture surface...what emerged was an endless variety of accidental effects."⁵ Later in this chapter, we will examine the impact of Siqueros' innovative painting techniques on mid-twentieth century American art.

Whereas Rivera and Siqueros focused on painting, other politically committed realists turned to printmaking in order to disseminate their images widely.

Kathe Kollwitz: Protesting the Social Nightmare

Turmoil swept through Europe in constant waves of unrest from the beginning of the century to the end of World War II. In response, German artist **Kathe Kollwitz** (1867-1945) developed a form of expressive realism with a strong sense of specific social concern and anguish. She often used the multiple format of printmaking to extend and distribute the message(s) of her images.

In 1893-97, Kollwitz did *The Weavers Cycle*, a compelling series of prints depicting the 1840 uprising of Silesian workers (**8.4**). As early as the 1811 Luddite revolt in England, weavers had been protesting the mechanization of their craft. Karl Marx asserted that the Silesian weavers' revolt in particular was begun with proletariat consciousness. No doubt inspired by Marx's comment, socialist playwright Gerhart Hauptmann wrote his play "The Weavers," which Kollwitz saw and described as "a milestone." Her six prints on the subject were awarded gold medals at two different exhibitions, although Kaiser Wilhelm II—who called all socially

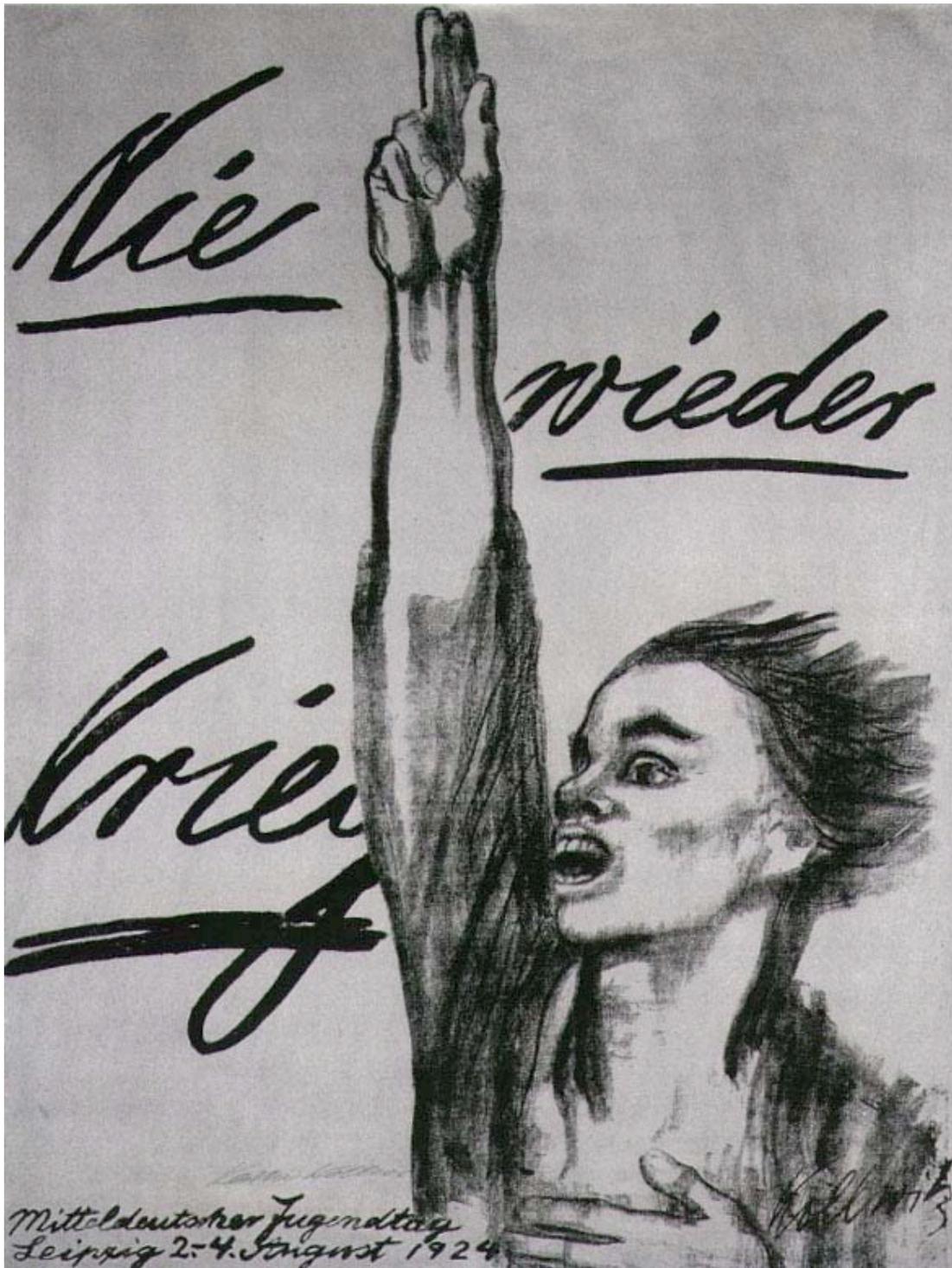
conscious art “gutter art” — vetoed the first award. The success of Kollwitz’s politically-charged images propelled the young artist to national prominence.



8.4 Kathe Kollwitz, “Assault,” *The Weavers Cycle*, 1893-97.

Kollwitz continued to use her expressive realism to effect social criticism and protest political atrocities. After her marriage to a doctor, her models were his patients, the industrial poor. When Germany entered World War I, Kollwitz became an outspoken pacifist. Although she lost her younger son at the very beginning of the war (1914), her art should not be considered merely reaction to personal trauma. Kollwitz was a compassionate artist who was sensitive to human suffering in its myriad forms. Her lithograph *Killed in Action* (1921) shows a mother who has just heard of her husband’s death in combat. The mother’s anguish and fear are reflected in

the faces of the four young children who surround her. Kollwitz's poster *Never Again War!* makes the artist's beliefs most explicit (8.5).



8.5 Kathe Kollwitz, *Never Again War!* 1924.

Most politically committed German artists like Kollwitz were banned from exhibiting by the Nazis. Many migrated to the United States and later contributed to America's postwar artistic prominence. Kollwitz stayed in Germany, afraid that if she left, the Nazis would exact retribution on her family.

While Kollwitz used expressive pictorial means to convey her political convictions, other artists used expressive color, gesture, and figural distortion for formal or spiritual ends. Some were ultimately led to totally abstract expressions.

2. Towards Expressive Abstraction: The Fauves

We have seen that Henri Matisse's painting *Madame Matisse (The Green Line; 8.6)*, which caused a sensation at the Salon d'Automne in 1905, was photographically reproduced in a Paris newspaper. *Madame Matisse* is dominated by shocking complementary values of red and green, ranging from large abstract

background shapes to the bright green stripe

connecting the forehead and nose. In

between the clashing greens and reds are

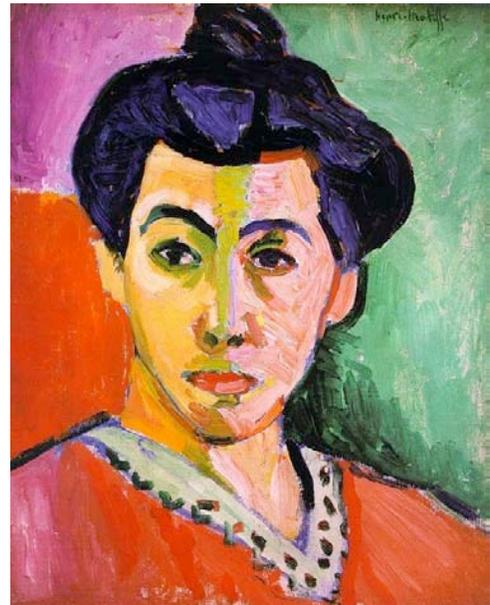
streaks of yellow, blue and purple. The

adamantly intense color and shocking

distortions of form led the critics to call

Matisse and his young artistic followers wild

beasts or *fauves*.



Matisse and the other Fauves had seen a recent exhibition of van Gogh's works, and they took his bold but emotionally powerful color to a stage of total freedom from any purpose other

than artistic expressiveness. In fauve paintings, the figure itself began to crack and give way, under the volcanic pressure of pure color, shape, and line.

Matisse explained the basis for his art in his *Notes of a Painter* (1908): “Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings.”⁶

Expressionist art was bolstered by contemporary thinkers like philosopher R. G. Collingwood and aesthetician Benedetto Croce, who believed that art was first and foremost the expression of feeling. As they theorized it, “the artist first experiences a unique intuition, then organizes and articulates it inwardly, and finally endows his or her intuition with an external form, which can be a painting, poem, or piece of music.”⁷ (Although the concept of art as personal expression has continued to dominate popular understanding, readers should remember that many of the artists surveyed in this text created art either to satisfy the demands of their patrons or to make a political statement; their “feelings” had very little to do with the matter.)

By 1906, Matisse had begun to collect African art and incorporate Africanesque images into his paintings. Convinced that what he called “primitive art” had a kind of primal truth, Matisse quoted its forms in his own art, to endow it with expressive energy. While his *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra* (1907, **8.7**) was thematically related to the reclining odalisque of the Academic tradition, the figural distortions were inspired by what the artist called the “invented planes and proportions” of African sculpture.⁸



8.7 Henri Matisse, *Blue Nude: Memory of Biskra*, 1907.

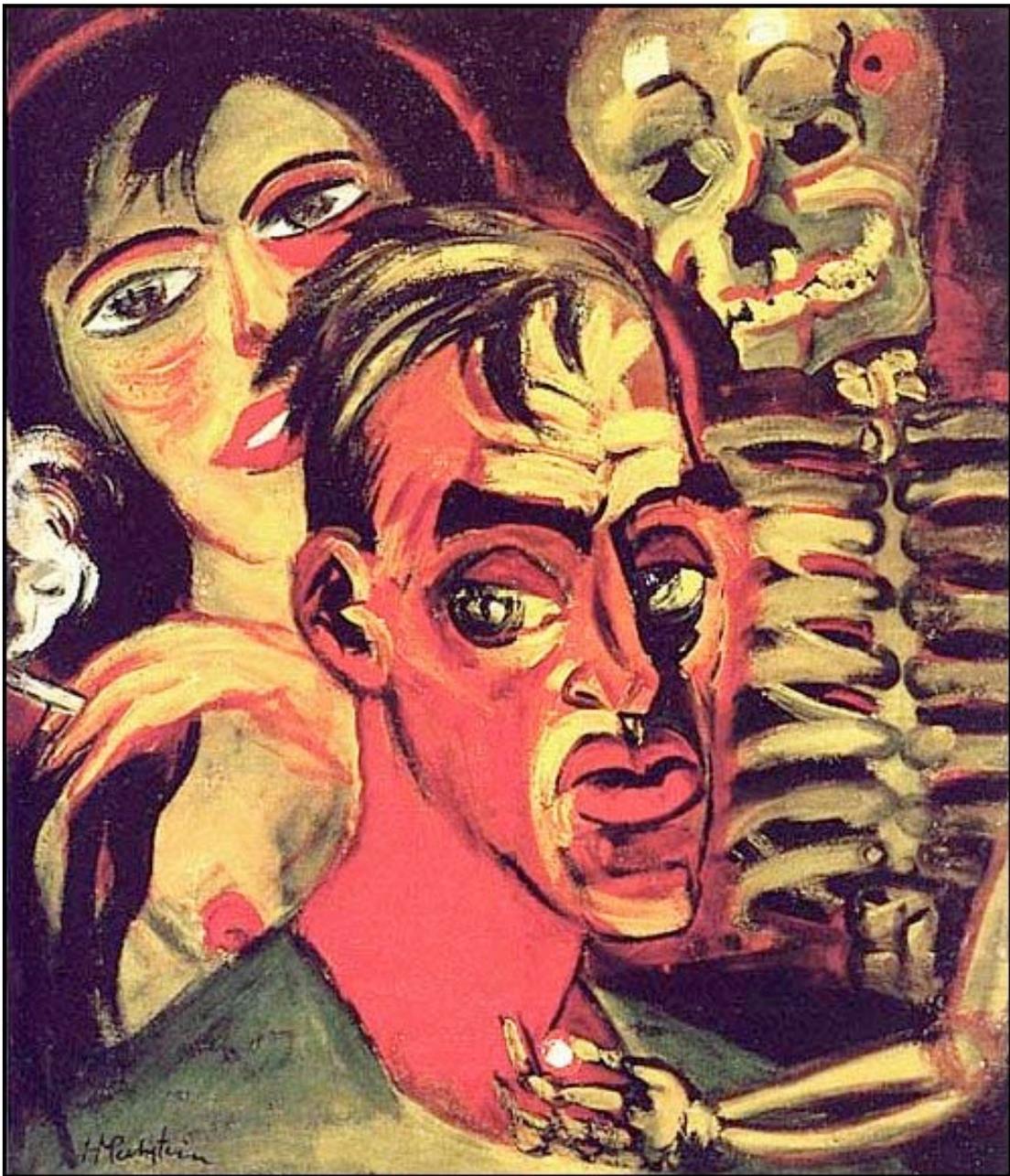
German Expressionism in Die Brücke

In 1905—the same year as the first Fauve exhibition in Paris—a group of young men in Dresden formed Die Brücke (The Bridge), an avant-garde group that employed expressive fauve-like intensities of color and distortions of form. Led by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), the Die Brücke artists painted disturbing scenes of urban Europe before World War I and carved large, roughly hewn wooden sculptures derived from the African and Oceanic art they saw in German ethnographic museums.

Die Brücke painter **Max Pechstein** (1881-1953), like Gauguin before him, traveled to the South Pacific where he witnessed the subjects of many of his exotic paintings first-hand (8.8). Describing his experience there, he wrote, “Wooden houses with tall, pointed gables house the natives. On these houses I now saw in the flesh, in their everyday use for which they were made,

the carved and painted beams which first inspired me in Dresden and filled me with the desire to visit them in their original setting.

“I see the carved idols, in which trembling piety and awe before the uncontrollable forces of nature have marked their way of seeing, their fear and their subjection to unavoidable fate.”⁹



8.8 Max Pechstein, *Self-Portrait with Death*, 1920.

Unlike Pechstein, most of the early twentieth century expressionists who incorporated African and Oceanic imagery drew on their experiences with objects that had been ripped from their original cultural contexts, often by collectors who participated in the European conquest and colonization of people they considered “primitive.” However consciously or inadvertently, the artists who co-opted or “appropriated” de-contextualized images of other cultures also contributed to the problematic relations between Europe and its colonies in Africa and the South Pacific. As James Clifford notes, many early modernists “came to recognize the elemental, ‘magical’ power of African sculptures in a period of growing *negrophilie*, a context that would see the irruption on the European scene of other evocative black figures: the jazzman, the boxer (Al Brown), the *sauvage* Josephine Baker. To tell the history of modernism’s recognition of African ‘art’ in this broader context would raise ambiguous and disturbing questions about esthetic appropriation of non-Western others, issues of race, gender and power.”¹⁰

In addition to the Fauves and Die Brücke, there was a third group of early modern expressionists. This group, Der Blaue Reiter, was led by the artist who created the first sustained body of totally nonfigurative abstractions: **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944).

Wassily Kandinsky: The Journey to Expressive Abstraction



In 1912 Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky and German artist Franz Marc published an almanac of illustrations and essays called *Der Blaue Reiter* (*The Blue Rider*, **8.9**), which revealed and discussed the sources of their artistic explorations. This compendium of illustrations included examples of children’s art from Europe and Arabia, Russian icons and folk art, archaic

Greek sculpture, Japanese prints, nineteenth-century German folk art, as well as over fifty illustrations of European avant-garde art since the Impressionists, including works by Matisse and the other Fauves.

This book is a remarkable example of how the mass media presented almost unlimited sources of visual language for avant-garde artists. Kandinsky used these sources to create abstract paintings that were radically different from anything that had preceded them. His lyrical abstract forms had something of the freedom and spontaneity of music. He wanted to use the elements of art—line, shape, and color—in the same intuitive way that the musician used harmony, tempo,

and rhythm. From 1907 to 1912, his work, like a slow-motion film, moved gradually from representation to lyrical abstraction. With his 1912 painting *Improvisation with Green Center*, #176 (8.10), Kandinsky indicated that he felt he had achieved his goal; he titled this painting in the traditional way musical compositions are named.



Even though Kandinsky's step to completely abstract painting depended on the combined influence of folk art, popular art, and avant-garde art, it was a thoroughly personal achievement. He was overwhelmed by the expressive power of abstraction:

“This solution liberated me and opened up new worlds. Everything ‘dead’ trembled. Not only the stars, moon, woods, flowers of which the poets sing, but also a cigarette butt lying in the ashtray, a patient white trouser button looking up from a puddle in the street...everything shows

me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul... Thus every still and every moving point (= line) became equally alive and revealed its soul to me.”¹¹

The remarkable thing about this passage, written in 1913, was Kandinsky’s emphasis on his view, vivified awareness of the concrete, physical world around him. “Abstract” thus did not mean Kandinsky was cut off from nature; rather, by focusing directly on his emotional responses, abstraction intensified his awareness of nature’s impact. It is in this sense that he called his art spiritual—that is, an art based primarily on an inner human reality instead of on the observation of the external world.

Kandinsky wanted his paintings to have a specific kind of impact. He hoped his paintings would help people break through visual conventions and habits reinforced by the omnipresent images of the mass media. He explained the spiritual content of his abstract art in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). Now translated from the original German into numerous European and Asian languages, Kandinsky’s book has been widely influential; it is still required reading for abstract art classes throughout the world.

For Kandinsky and the other modernists who focused on the spiritual—rather than on the distressing realities of the material world—art was “about something that seemed more important, something that was ineffable, something that transcended history.”¹² They felt that the aesthetic realm could awaken feelings that were somehow above or beyond those encountered in the daily social environment.

Kandinsky would have agreed with media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that “the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counterenvironments that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a nonperceivable situation.”¹³

Kandinsky's Spanish contemporary, **Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973), proposed a similar goal for his art. "When I paint, I always try to give an image people are not expecting and, beyond that, one they reject. That's what interests me. It's in this sense that I mean I always try to be subversive. That is, I give a man an image of himself whose elements are collected from among the usual way of seeing things in traditional paintings and then reassembled in a fashion that is unexpected and disturbing enough to make it impossible for him to escape the questions it raises."¹⁴

3. Towards Geometric Abstraction: Pablo Picasso & Cubism

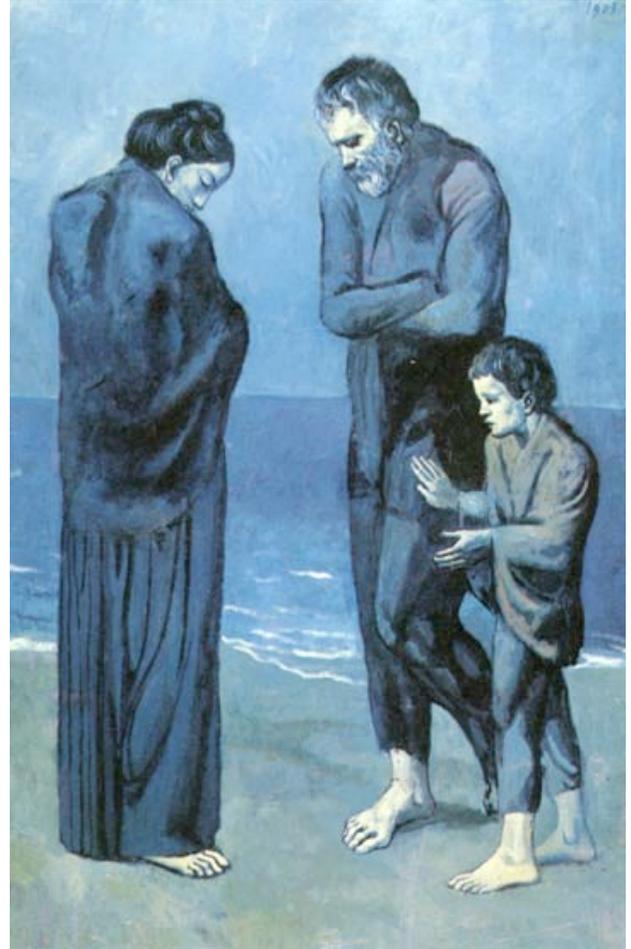
Picasso was well equipped to make the avant-garde journey to abstraction. His father, an art teacher in Barcelona, encouraged his gifted child. Picasso's *Science and Charity* (1896, **8.11**), a scene of a doctor bent over the bed of a dying woman while a nun embraces the woman's child, demonstrates that he had mastered Academic realism by the age of 15. When Picasso arrived in Paris in 1901, he immediately began to absorb the lessons of the Post Impressionists.



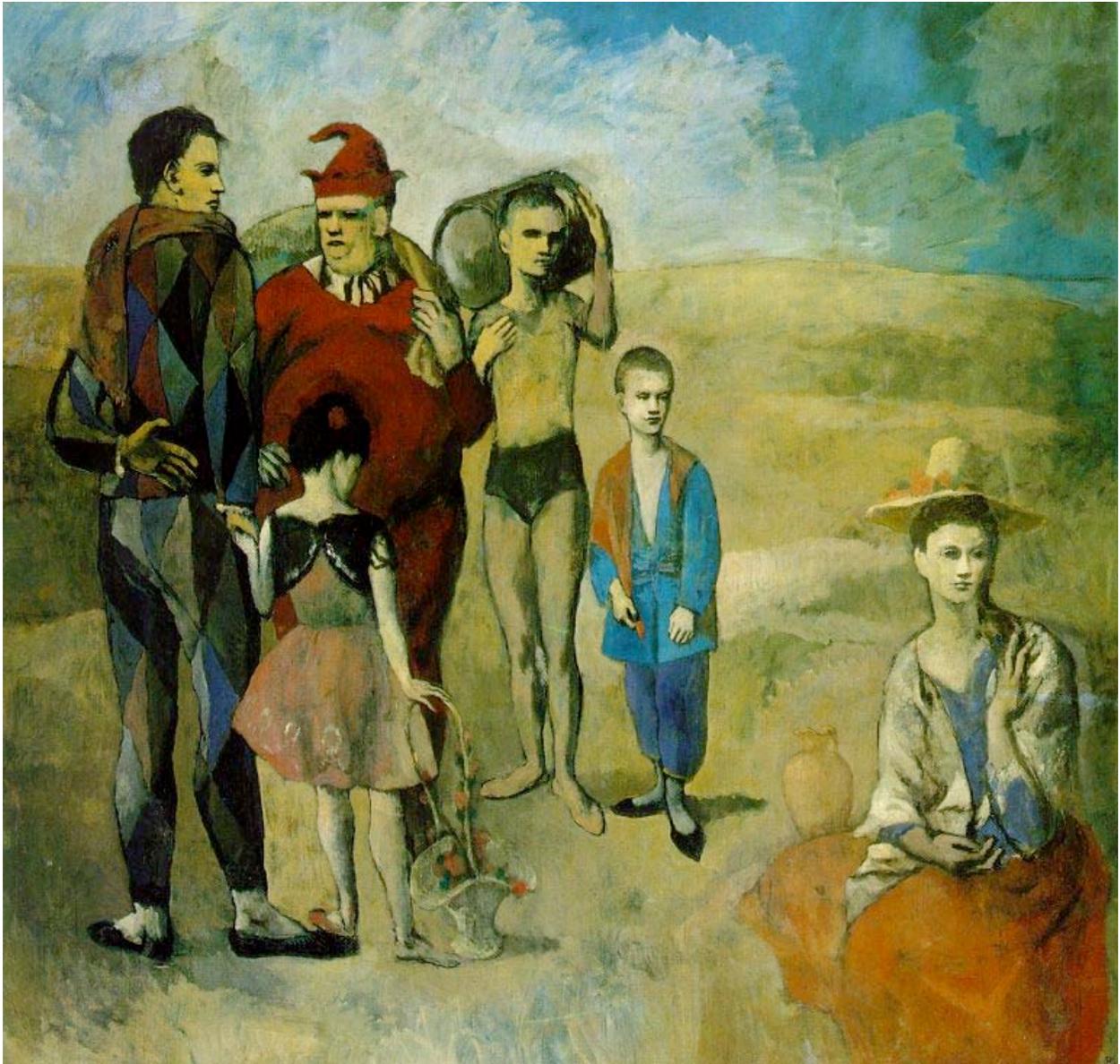
8.11 *Science and Charity*, 1896.

Picasso's early paintings in Paris, although relentlessly melancholic, already challenge the realist norms he had grown up with. Many of these works were dominated by a blue tone laced with the garish colors appropriate to the sordid and desperate circumstances of his early struggle to establish himself. His subjects included prostitutes, destitute young lovers, beggars—he even

he even painted the funeral portrait of a friend who had committed suicide over a love affair. In order to underscore the poverty and suffering of *The Tragedy* (1903, **8.12**), Picasso abandoned linear perspective, rejected naturalistic/descriptive color, and elongated and thinned the figures, thus eliminating naturalistic proportions. But human form—especially the female form—remained primary the subject in Picasso's art. He abstracted and distorted but he never gave up the object, never went totally non-representational (as Kandinsky had done).



By 1904 Picasso's painting had begun to bring him some financial success. His work then took on a lighter tone and included circus scenes, harlequins, and lovers who seem to have a future. *Family of Saltimbanques* (**8.13**), despite its barren landscape and figures who are isolated by their private poses and gestures, has a new sense of openness and humor.

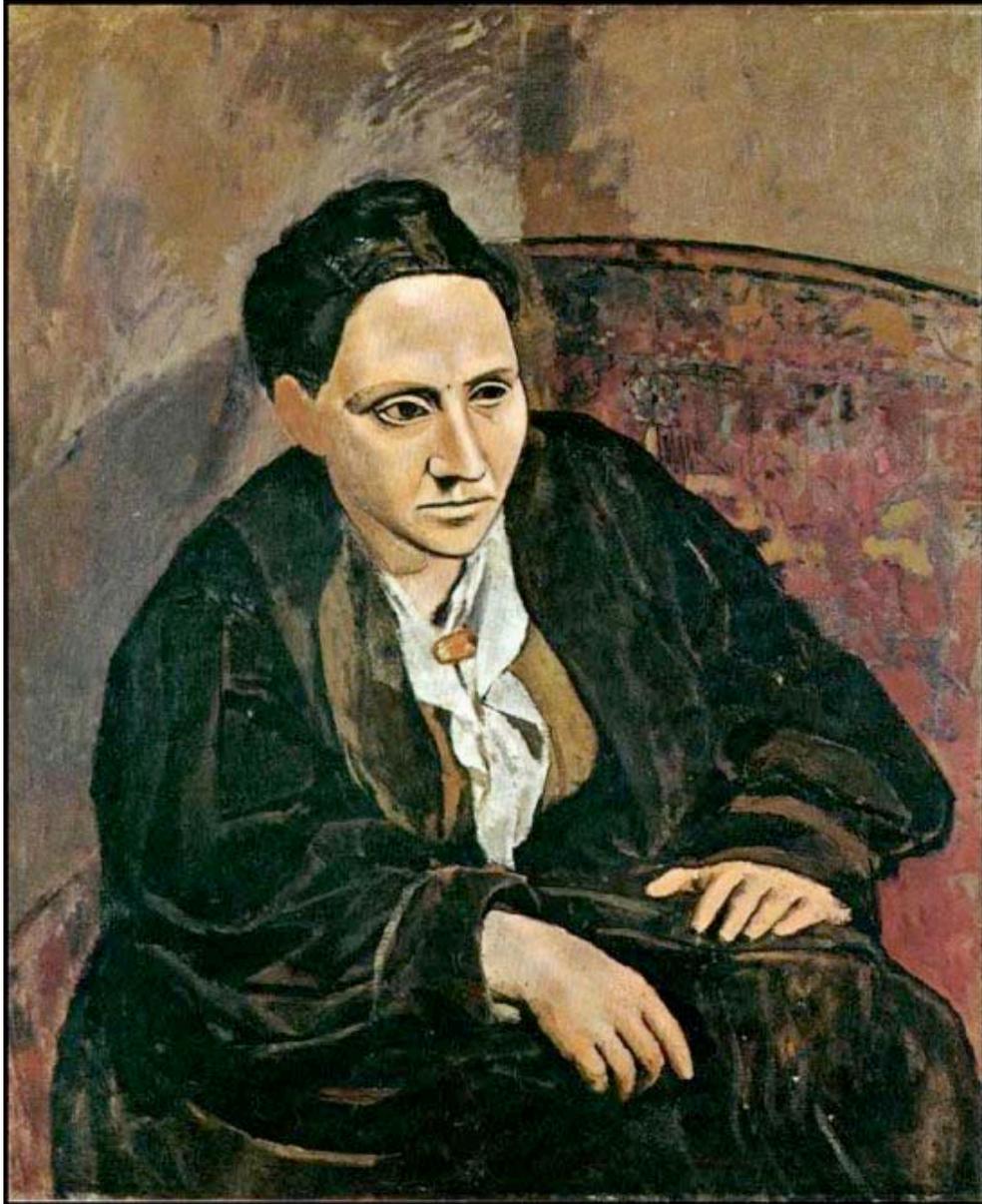


8.13 Picasso, *Family of Saltimbanques*, 1904.

That same year, Picasso saw a retrospective exhibition of the work of Post Impressionist Paul Cezanne. Picasso was impressed by the way Cezanne employed multiple perspective views and the manner in which the older painter reduced natural forms to geometric solids.

Another early influence on Picasso was American writer Gertrude Stein (8.14), who purchased several of the young Spaniard's paintings. An avant-garde writer herself, Stein was tremendously influential on an entire generation of avant-garde artists. She was searching for a

whole new structure for written language and urged Picasso to do the same the visual language. Stein was one of several women in early twentieth century Paris who had weekly “salons” — gatherings of artists and intellectuals who discussed ideas over dinner and drinks. Another frequent guest at Stein’s salons was the painter who became Picasso’s lifelong rival, Henri Matisse.



8.14 Picasso, *Gertrude Stein*, 1906.

It was not until 1907 that Picasso produced a painting that showed that his own avant-garde education was complete. This same painting brought him to the border of Cubism—and also brought him all the discomforts of confronting the unknown.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*: The Beauty of the Ugly

Les Femmes d'Alger is one of the strangest paintings in the history of Western art (8.15). It is really Picasso's incomplete meditation on the nature of painting itself. The story of this work provides an illuminating glimpse into the creative process involved in all avant-garde art.



8.15 Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907.

Picasso normally painted rapidly and without preliminary sketches, yet he worked on this painting for almost six months before he would allow anyone to see it. His studio became littered with half-finished drawings. He painted over much of his original idea. Most unusual of all, he was not sure, even after six months, of what he had done.

The biggest disappointment of all came when he invited close friends to see the painting. Most of them thought it was ugly, or improbable. Matisse thought it was a hoax or a practical joke. The famous critic Felix Fénéton responded with some advice for Picasso: “It’s interesting, my boy. You ought to devote yourself to caricature.”¹⁵

The painting was, in a word, ugly—and remained so.

Also among the few people invited to see the intimidating group of painted women was Gertrude Stein, who immediately sensed that Picasso had created something more important than a beautiful painting in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Stein realized it was the prototype for a new phase in art. Later, she wrote:

“Picasso said once that he who created a thing is forced to make it ugly. In the effort to create the intensity and the struggle to create this intensity, the result always produces a certain ugliness.”¹⁶

As Emile Zola had done when writing about Edouard Manet, Gertrude Stein focused on purely formal aspects of Picasso’s painting and neglected the subject matter. But Modernist innovations are rarely simply formal; almost all are clothed in content.

The content of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d'Alger* is both explicit and complex. Avignon is the name of a street in the red light district of Picasso’s hometown, Barcelona; *Les Femmes d'Alger* portrays five nude prostitutes in a bordello. Picasso’s early studies for the work included a student and sailor; the women were posed “on display” for the potential clients. The final version

of the painting eliminates the male presence inside the painting, shifting it to the implied heterosexual male viewers, whose visual appraisal parallels the “consuming” vision of the original student and sailor. However, the male gaze is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the “ugly” female images. How can we come to terms with the possible meanings of Picasso’s troubling painting?

Gender Politics & *Les Demoiselles*

Les Demoiselles d’Avignon now hangs in a prominent position in New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Discussing Picasso’s masterwork alongside other female images in the museum, art historian Carol Duncan notes, “Most often they are simply female bodies or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy—those ever-present ‘Women’ or ‘Seated Women’ or ‘Reclining Nudes.’ Or they are tarts, prostitutes, artist’s models, or low-life entertainers—highly identifiable socially, but at the bottom of the social scale...In different ways, each of these works testifies to a pervasive fear of and ambivalence about woman. Openly expressed on the plane of culture, this fear and ambivalence, it seems to me, makes the central moral of modern art more intelligible—whether or not it tells us anything about the individual psyches of those who produced the works.”¹⁷ The “central moral” or driving impulse of much modern art, argues Duncan, is one of conflict between the male artist’s sexual/biological desires and his need to transcend the realm of matter, which was earthly, and therefore female in dualist schemas. This conflict is manifest in Picasso’s oeuvre, with its ongoing vacillation between images of ethereal madonnas and images of debased whores.

The process that went into painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* reflects the artist’s inner struggles. As Picasso worked through various preliminary versions of the painting, the composition began to change. The figures became female nudes with flat, angular outlines. Then

the faces began to change. They now show artistic ancestries that range from Egypt to the native art of Africa. The two most distorted faces, painted long after the painting was started, reflect Picasso's introduction to African art through some examples owned by Matisse and Picasso's own study of the African Art in the Musee de l'Homme (The Museum of Man) in Paris.

Les Demoiselles & The Appropriation of African Art

The Post Impressionists, particularly Gauguin and Cezanne, had opened art "to the possibilities of non-mimetic representation and of using 'distortions' from naturalistic forms for expressive ends." In doing so, they also opened artists' eyes to other visual languages "that had not only eschewed naturalism but seemed to be involved with deeper, more spiritually compelling kinds of expression."¹⁸ We have seen that European artists like Matisse began to look at what was termed "primitive art," particularly the sculptural arts of West Africa, in the first decade of the twentieth century. What they found deeply influenced their own art production.

Art historian Sieglinde Lemke argues that, given the profound and pervasive nature of African influence in avant-garde practices, "black cultures played a seminal role in the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm; modernism includes the presence of the so-called primitive at its heart."¹⁹ She considers what she terms the "primitivist modernist aesthetic" to be one of the major trends of modernism. In addition, the interrelation of formal and cultural difference that we have seen in early photography, in the South Pacific paintings of Paul Gauguin, and now in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles* anticipate the increasingly integrated multiculturalism of later twentieth century art and life.

Lemke notes that "primitivist modernism" served to undo earlier sacrosanct bipolar oppositions of fine art/primitive art as well as we/they and civilized/savage. "As a consequence, the fixed binary oppositions, which had been apparently absolute and noncontingent until the

nineteenth century, started to merge or dissolve in the curious dynamism of race in European and, to a lesser degree, American art and cultural history. What had been thought of in the West as unalterable opposites began to drift into one another. The color line became more permeable, even if only symbolically or at the level of popular culture...This cultural mixing was, by and large, a critique of binary divisions that was neither complete nor conscious but had wide-ranging effects.”²⁰

This is not to say that Picasso—or Gauguin for that matter—consciously intended to perform such a critique. Both artists responded to so-called “primitive” art emotionally, extracting from its original cultural context what satisfied their own desires. Gauguin feminized “primitive” cultures when he wrote of the “nourishing milk in the primitive arts.”²¹ Picasso saw “primitive art” as a primal model to justify his own image making. Writing of his first exposure to African art in the Paris ethnographic museum, he asserted, “Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment I realized that this was what painting was all about. Painting isn’t an aesthetic operation; it’s a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. When I came to that realization, I knew I had found my way.”²²

***Les Femmes d'Alger*: A Problem, Not a Solution**

One explanation of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is that it was not a solution for Picasso as much as the statement of a problem.

Its perplexing combination of forms posed the final phase of the question that had preoccupied painting since Manet: What is a painting if it is not a perspective window onto the

world? Van Gogh, Cezanne, and other artists had moved painting quite a distance away from photographic realism, but the basic question still remained: Could a painting exist only in terms of its own language of color, line and shape? Could art, like music, be totally free of the objective world of appearances?

Picasso did not answer this question immediately. He labored for six months on *Les Femmes d'Alger*; then he simply stopped working on it. The painting remained in his studio for another thirteen years before he would allow it to be shown in public. His paintings of the next few years show how he, like an archaeologist probing through level after level of sediment, finally reached a layer that became one of the basic languages of twentieth-century art—the layer now known as Cubism.

Beyond *Les Femmes d'Alger*: Picasso's Journey to Cubism

In the summer of 1909 all the influences that had been percolating in Picasso's mind came together. The intellectual provocation of Stein, the austere clarity of Cezanne, and the bold material expressiveness of African art gave him the ingredients for the resolution of the artistic problem stated but unresolved in *Les Femmes d'Alger*.



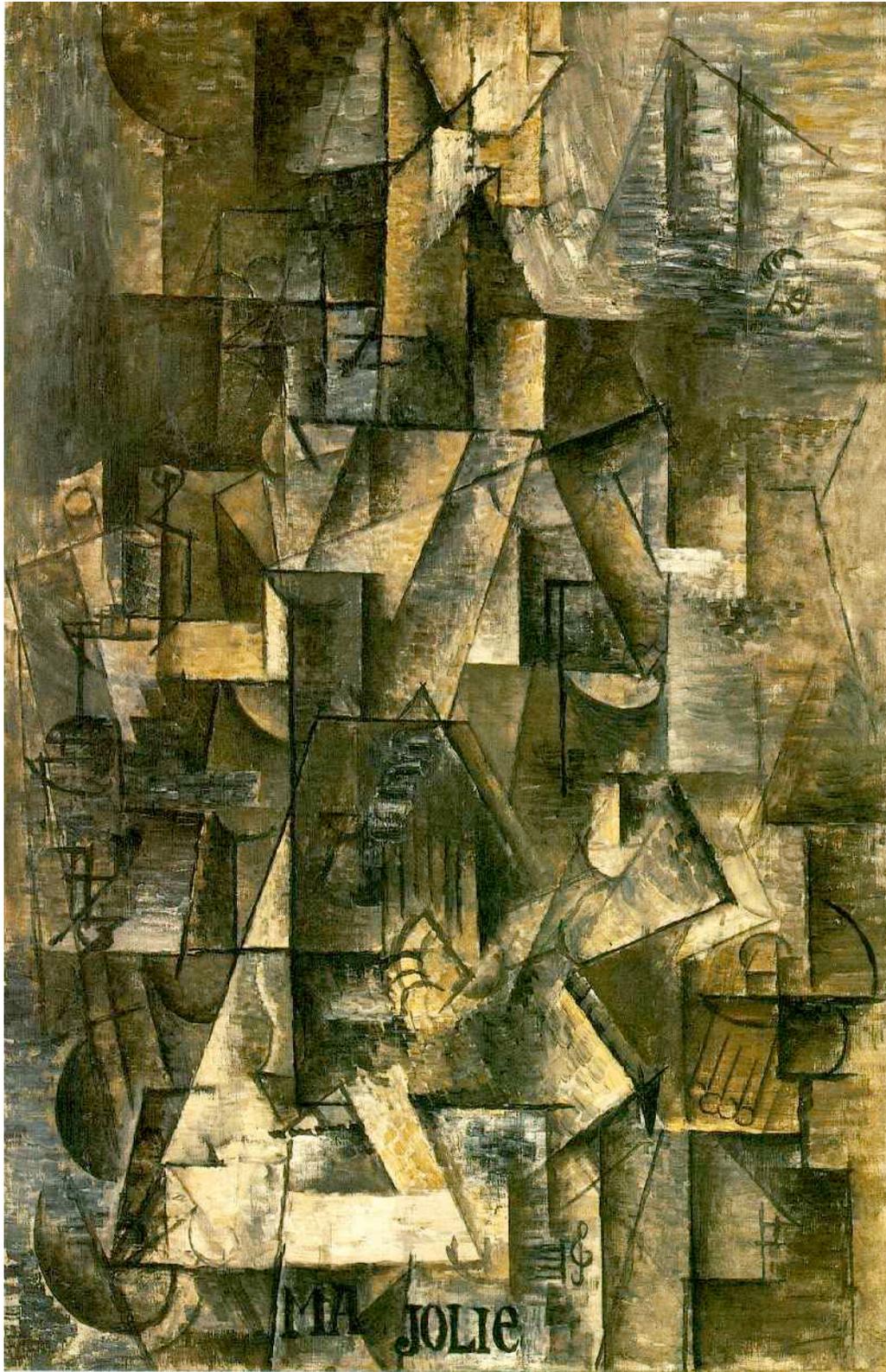
Picasso spent the summer of 1909 in Spain. When he returned to Paris in the fall, he took back several landscapes he had painted of Spanish hillside villages (8.16). Anticipated in *Les Femmes d'Alger* and crystallized in the Spanish landscapes, Picasso's avant-garde movement became

known as Cubism. The name derives from Matisse's 1908 reference to "little cubes" in paintings that, as the critic Louis Vauxcelles later wrote, "reduced everything, place and figures and houses, to geometrical schemes, to cubes."

Picasso's Spanish landscapes share three pictorial strategies with the rest of Picasso's Cubist works. First, they do not imitate or seek to reproduce the surface appearance of natural forms: The houses in the Spanish villages, for example, have neither doors nor windows. Second, they use a geometric vocabulary: The houses are reduced to simple cubes and rectangles. Third, the forms are presented from multiple perspective views: The roof of a Spanish house might be seen from above, one of its walls from the side, another wall from below.

One way to understand Picasso's approach to Cubism is to compare it to the action of the human eye. In looking at someone's face, for instance, the eyes do not focus (as implied in the structure of the perspective image) on a single point. The eyes move constantly around the face, or any other subject, and keep assembling detailed glances into an ongoing composite. Human sight is intelligent; we construct this composite in our heads, not in our eyes.

Despite the movement toward abstraction, some Cubist paintings—with the help of their titles—enabled the viewer to see bits and pieces of recognizable form and meaning. *Ma Jolie* (1911-12, **8.17**), for instance, has surprisingly concrete references despite its highly abstract form. *Ma Jolie* was a romantic tribute to Picasso's new love, Eva (Marcelle Humbert), and the title a phrase from a then popular cabaret song—note the fragmented musical notation in the painting. Also at the bottom of the composition is a part of Gertrude Stein's calling card left at his studio while Picasso was working on the painting. These apparently random elements thus form a concrete pattern closely connected to Picasso's personal experiences at this time.



8.17 Picasso, *Ma Jolie*, 1911-12.

Collage

The word collage comes from the French verb *coller*, to glue. Gluing images together had been done before, of course; people had been gluing photographs into albums for decades. But the Cubists were the first artists to use collage as a deliberate and sustained pictorial strategy. Picasso multiplied the perspective positions in *Ma Jolie* by including the card, musical notation and text. By 1912, he began to incorporate fragments of words, bits of torn wallpaper, and so on into many of his paintings.

Still Life with Chair Caning (1912, **8.18**) is a Cubist rendition of breakfast at a sidewalk café. Many outdoor cafes in Paris have small, glass-topped tables and wooden chairs with cane-woven seats. Picasso's painting depicts such a glass table top, with some of the chair caning seen through it. On top of the table are the utensils for the meal: a cup, a glass, and a plate. There is also a part of the morning paper.



The oval painting is “framed” by a circle of actual rope. Although the utensils are drawn and painted, the rest of the visual information is given through collage. The chair caning is depicted with a piece of shelf paper. The newspaper is represented by a torn headline collaged onto the surface of the painting. Only the letters *Le Jou* (from the name of the newspaper, *Le Journal*) remain. “Jou” is also the stem of the French verb *jouer*, to play.

Picasso has announced that he is playing with our perceptions. What is real? Are the words real? Is the drawing real? Is the mass-produced image of chair caning real? Is the actual rope real, when it is employed as a picture frame?

Today, when you look at television news and see an image from a different part of the world in a square behind the newscaster’s head, you are seeing something made possible by Cubist vision: you are seeing a video collage. Video collages violate the Renaissance concept of a “window into another (more perfect) world” in which the same spatial rules apply. Rather than a unified vision, video collages present multiple perspectives. Collage is such a common part of our current visual environment that we take it for granted. But perhaps we should take the time to ask, again, what’s real?



Another of Picasso’s collages is titled, simply, *Guitar* (1913, **8.19**). A classical Spanish guitar needs strings and sound box, which this one does not have. Even without these, we “get” that this image represents a guitar. Picasso has interrogated the process of visual communication again. What does it take to signal “guitar”? What kinds of codes, symbols does it take?

Picasso often worked in several styles simultaneously. Throughout the 1930s, he produced both astonishingly realistic images and puzzling Surreal ones. (We will discuss Surrealism later in this chapter.) His most important painting has been interpreted as Surrealist as well as Cubist, but its greater significance has to do with its content.

***Guernica*: Picasso's Protest of the Inhumanity of War**

In 1937, Spain was in the midst of a Civil War. General Francisco Franco had organized a military assault on the elected government in Madrid. Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy sent troops, weapons, food and other supplies to support Franco's forces. In addition, Hitler used Spain as a kind of testing ground for the weapons of mass destruction he would soon unleash on Europe in World War II. At one point, he offered to send to Spain what is popularly known as the *blitz krieg*, a squadron of airplanes that could level a city or part of a city with bombs. Franco instructed the Germans to bomb Guernica because, as capital of the Basque people of Spain, it was home of the most accomplished guerrilla fighters in the war. The Germans bombed Guernica on market day, killing non-combatant elderly, infirm, and women with small children. It was the first widespread bombing of civilians, what today would be considered a war crime.

1937 was also the year of a world's fair in Paris. The democratic government of Madrid hired Picasso to do a mural for the Spanish Pavilion at the fair. Picasso created his monumental *Guernica* for the pavilion (8.20). Powerful and expressionistic, it is an abstracted image of a city under siege. A woman grasps the dead body of her child. Another flees from a burning building. A man lies dead and dismembered on the ground.

Picasso was a trickster and often refused to talk about the meaning of his work. When he did, he frequently contradicted himself on purpose. Since we can't be certain of the artist's intentions, viewers must generate their own symbolic meanings for the painting.



8.20 Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937.

One “reading” of *Guernica* relates the images to the bullfight, Spain’s national sport and art form. If that is accurate, the bull figure on the far left and the horse in the center are the keys to its symbolism. Note that the bull’s body frames that of a woman holding the dead body of her child and howling in anguish at her loss.

The purpose of the bullfight is to kill the bull with a sword that is inserted in his strongest part, his neck. To weaken the neck muscles, the *picador* rides in to the bullring and pierces the bull’s neck several times with a long spear that has a metal tip. The bull charges his attacker, striking the *picador*’s horse again and again. Both the *picador* and his horse are well armored, so they are rarely hurt. Nonetheless, the horses, when attacked, are frightened and scream in pain and fear. Like the horse in *Guernica*, a *picador* horse may open his mouth to scream, but we do not hear him. He is silenced.

The *Guernica* horse may be a *picador*’s horse, with a *picador*’s broken spear piercing his body. His may also represent the attacked people of Spain who cried out in fear and pain, but whose voices were silenced.

There are five human victims in *Guernica*: The decapitated man whose body parts are scattered across the ground line, the woman and her dead child, a second woman who runs out of a burning building, and a fourth woman who holds a lamp out of a second floor window as the building continues to burn.

But not all of *Guernica* is darkness and horror. There is a redundancy of light and a glimmer of hope as well. The lamp points towards a sun that in turn frames a light bulb. To the immediate left of the sun/bulb is a small dove, symbol of peace for many viewers and symbol of the Holy Spirit for anyone raised a Spanish Catholic, as was Picasso. On the ground, next to the man who has apparently lived by the sword and died by the sword, is a small flower, symbol of new life, beauty, the ever-regenerative powers of the earth.

Picasso did the painting in black and white so it would have a media impact. (Newspapers, magazines, and filmed newsreels were all black and white at that time.) The grays, whites, and blacks of the painting, when combined with the stippled marks dotting many of its brutal shapes, suggest a uniquely twentieth-century experience: witnessing distant and terrible events through the impersonal halftone photographs and printed words of the newspaper. Picasso hoped that the world would see the painting in the mass media, if not in person, and become aware of the plight of the Spanish people. He hoped that the world would come to the help of his nation and prevent Franco from taking over.

By the end of the world's fair, that is exactly what happened. Franco went on to become one of the longest-lived dictators of the twentieth century. Picasso sent *Guernica* to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it stayed until Franco's death. Unfortunately, the painter died before the dictator, so Picasso never got to see *Guernica* as it is now installed, with pride, in Madrid.

Picasso's mural portraying man's inhumanity to man is widely considered the masterpiece of 20th century art. Its images still have power in the twenty-first century. A tapestry version of *Guernica* now hangs in the United Nations. In 2003, when Colin Powell delivered a speech urging the world to join the United States in attacking Iraq, the tapestry was covered so that Powell's face would not be framed by images of death and horror. A few days later, anti-war activists in New York City recreated the *Guernica* images to protest the US invasion of Iraq.

Although many twentieth century artists protested war, one avant-garde movement actually celebrated the violence of war and revolution. This movement was Italian Futurism.

Futurism: Transforming Cubism into the Visual Language of the Machine

The Futurist movement began—before Cubism was born— with the writing, funding, and recruiting efforts of the wealthy Italian writer and poet Filippo Marinetti, who wanted to unmythify Italy from what he considered to be its stifling preoccupation with its glorious past. Futurism therefore sought an art that would actively embrace artist, spectator, and art object in an acceptance of the emerging machine-dominated society of the early twentieth century. Marinetti's mechanized vision had been articulated as early as 1900:

“We declare that the world's splendor has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed... We shall sing of the great crowds excited by work, pleasure, and rebellion; we shall sing of...the factories suspended from the clouds by the twisted strings of their smoke...of broad-chested locomotives pawing at the rails like huge steel horses bridled with steel tubes; and of the gliding flight of aeroplanes.”²³

Futurists, quite simply, wanted to create icons that conveyed the experience of the individual absorbed into a machine-dominated world.

The Futurist Myth: The Autonomous Individual as Mechanized Superman

The Futurist world of science and the machine held out new and radical possibilities for the individual. The artist **Umberto Boccioni** (1882-1916), Marinetti's most brilliant follower, summarized the Futurist admiration for science by urging the contemporary individual to "draw support from the tangible miracles of contemporary life just as our ancestors drew support from the religious atmosphere which surrounded them."²⁴

From the tangible miracles of contemporary life, the Futurists hoped would emerge a new kind of individual. Ultimately, Marinetti looked forward to a kind of superman who would be "mechanized...with replaceable parts."²⁵

Futurist theory, however, lacked a new visual language to express the dynamism of its ideas.

The Artistic Language of "Universal Dynamism": Futurism Discovers Cubism

In 1911 the Futurist **Gino Severini** saw Picasso's Cubist experiments of Picasso. He immediately urged Marinetti and other Futurists to come to Paris, knowing they would agree that Cubism was the visual language they had been seeking. The small group of Futurists who took the train to Paris in the fall of 1911 began the transformation of Futurist art by adopting the language of Cubism.

Boccioni was the most talented and versatile of the Futurist artist; his work before 1911 came closest to the dynamic energy of Futurist theory. *The City Rises* (1910, **8.21**) captured the spirit of workmen and horses rhythmically united in heroic labor. Only the line of the building roofs along the top of the painting linked this image with the realism of the past.



8.21 Boccioni, *The City Rises*, 1910.

Boccioni gave equally brilliant artistic form to his sculpture titled *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913, **8.22**). This work exhibits the forceful beauty, as well as the disturbing contradictions, within Futurist theory. The figure's armorlike anatomy strides toward the future with an aggressive and warlike determination that accurately reflects the sense of motion, mechanization, and pure force so avidly sought by the Futurists as the deepest essence of modern life. The language of Cubism has certainly freed this sculpture from Italy's classical past; it would be virtually inconceivable outside the twentieth century. Boccioni's sculpture also lacks any sense of human personality. Its title could equally well describe a diagram or an experiment in physics. The human face has disappeared.



8.22 Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913.

Icons of “Universal Dynamism”: Art as Propaganda for Violence, Speed & War

The Futurists took the art-for-art’s-sake attitude of Cubism as an absurdity. Futurist artistic ambition aimed at a cultural revolution, the artistic renovation of Western culture from architecture to clothing to children’s toys. With this agenda in mind, it is not surprising that the Futurists became the first group to consciously use the mass media as exhibition space for their art and ideas.

By 1913, the Futurists had confronted London, Brussels, Munich, Amsterdam, Berlin—and even Chicago—not only with their art, but also with public “manifestos,” or statements, spelling out their radical ideas and goals. The “Manifesto on the Reconstruction of the Universe,” for instance, envisioned the production of toys that would train children for war—the maximum condition of “universal dynamism’s” total expression of human and cosmic energy:

“With plastic complexes we will construct toys that will accustom the child to physical courage, to fighting and to war (with enormous and dangerous toys that will work outdoors).”²⁶

Their words hardly sound revolutionary in today’s world, where little boys regularly play with war toys. Unknowingly, the Futurists celebrated a social process that anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss later analyzed: toys, which are often miniaturized versions of adult tools, serve to socialize children for the adult world. (In the early twenty-first century, as high school shootings increase alarmingly, the Futurist exhortation to train children for violence has an ominous ring.)

With admirable consistency, the Futurists welcomed World War I. They directed their art just before the outbreak of the war to ridiculing Italy’s reluctance to enter the conflict, and as war approached, Marinetti exhorted his artists to “live the war pictorially.”

The Futurists went beyond living the war pictorially—several enlisted. Boccioni and two other Futurists, the architect St. Elia and the musician Russolo, died during the conflict. Marinetti

himself survived the war, but he apparently did not learn its pictorial or its human lessons. In 1929 he became the minister of culture for fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

Futurism hoped, without success, to initiate a cultural revolution through art. Another movement of avant-garde art, also using a language based predominantly on Cubism, came close to success just at the time Futurism ceased to exist: the Constructivist avant-garde of the Russian Revolution.

Constructivism: Russia Welcomes the Avant-Garde

Unlike the Italian Futurists, Russian avant-garde artists found themselves in the midst of a political revolution that involved the entire fabric of Russian culture. Nevertheless, by the time the Russian Revolution occurred in 1917, the avant-garde revolution had already arrived.

Kandinsky had crossed the threshold into pure abstraction by 1910, and he returned to his native Russia to teach art in one of the new state-sponsored schools.

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) performed the same function for Constructivism that Boccioni and other artists had for Futurism. In 1913 he visited Paris and met Picasso. Inspired by junk collages in Picasso's studio, returned to Russia and began to make what he called "constructions" (8.23).²⁷ Tatlin admired the objectivity of Cubist abstraction and its bold affirmation of materials. He adopted Cubism as the basic language for icons of the Russian Revolution. Its geometric impersonality enabled Constructivist art to represent the values of the new regime without the confusion of traditional symbolism. Tatlin and his fellow artists attempted to apply the visual language of Constructivism to the full range of practical and political concerns of the state. From 1917 until the early twenties, avant-garde art and revolutionary politics were dedicated, if uneasy, comrades.



8.23 Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, 1919.

Cubism's impersonality and its angular, machinelike forms made it ideally suitable to a society based on a scientific view of history in which technology was to be the ultimate organizing principle in all areas of life. Nothing illustrates the ardor and compatibility of the brief alliance of these artistic and political revolutionaries more than the monument proposed by Tatlin for the Third International in 1919.

Tatlin took eighteen months to perfect the design and model of a spiral structure that would jut 1300 feet into the sky above Moscow and, by a slightly tilted angle, point toward the pole star (thus symbolizing the constancy and cosmic importance of the Revolution).

Inside the spiral structure were to be three glass buildings, one on top of the other. The top building was to be a sphere that would rotate once an hour and broadcast radio, telegraph, and loudspeaker messages as well as project giant images—weather permitting—onto the clouds. The middle building was a cube-shaped office building that would rotate once a month. The bottom building, shaped like a cone, would rotate once a year; it would house assemblies and congresses.

This visionary structure was never seriously considered for construction by Soviet authorities. Nevertheless, the model was displayed in Moscow and Petrograd and toured rural Russia, where villagers carried it in processions like the traditional icons of saints. Its image was printed on postage stamps. Tatlin's design, in Russia and the West, gradually became a generally recognized symbol of the aspirations, if not the achievements, of the new Soviet state.

Constructivism had its most practical impact on Soviet society through graphic design. Soon after the 1917 Russian revolution, **Alexander Rodchenko** (1891-1956) and his partner **Varvara Stepanova** (1894-1956) turned from painting to design and photography in order to support the Communist government. By 1922, they had published their radical philosophy as the

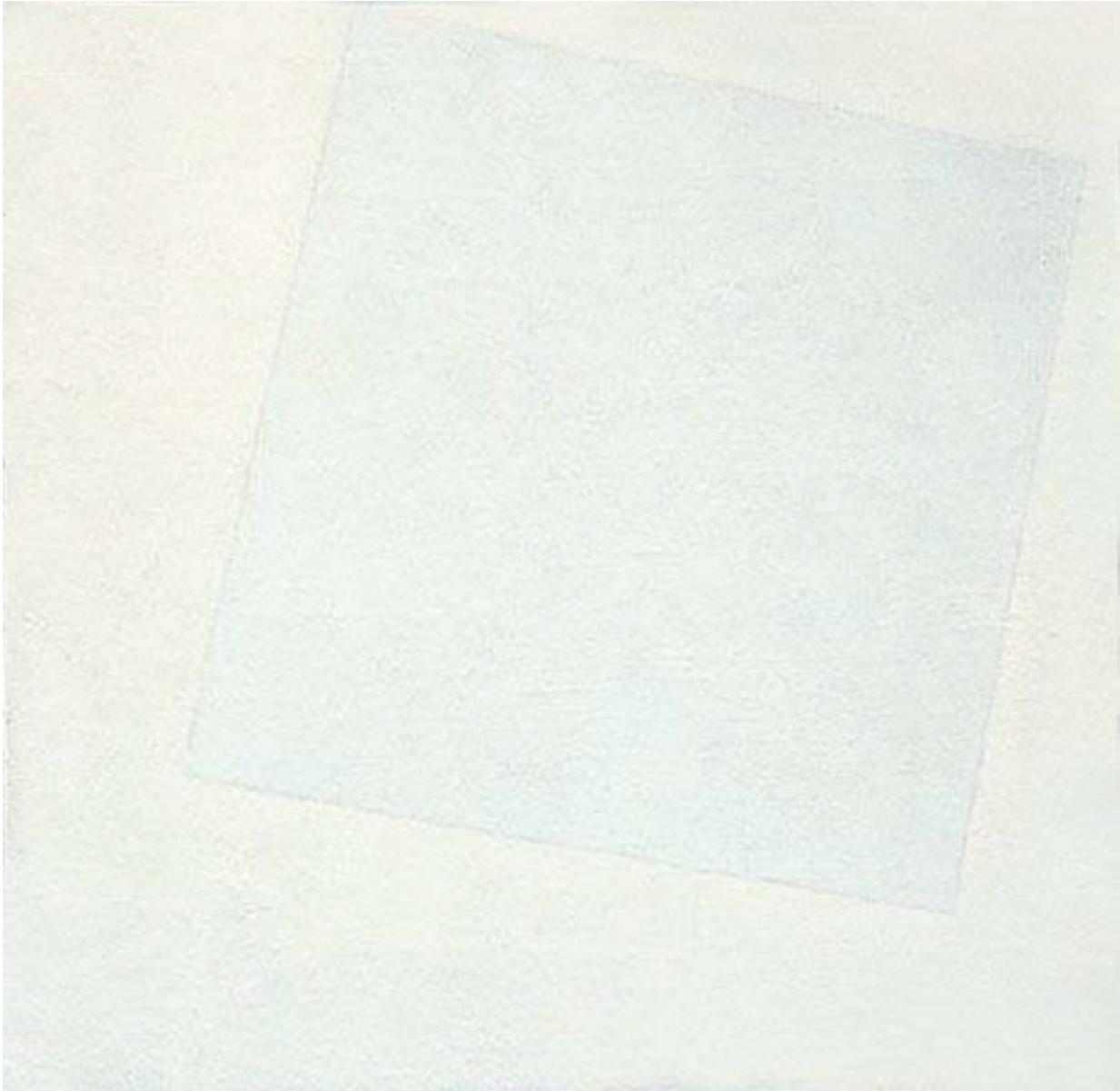
Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists. After declaring, “Our sole ideology is scientific communism based on the theory of historical materialism,” they announced their tasks: to construct designs, organize exhibition, and establish links with all aspects of the “unified Soviet machine” which “practically shapes and produces the emergent forms of the communist way of life.” They declared “uncompromising war on art” and asserted that “the artistic culture of the past is unacceptable for the communistic forms of Constructivist structures.”²⁸ Completely rejecting the figurative realism of past art, they created totally non-figurative designs for all aspects of Russian material culture. Abstract posters advertised everything from the quality of Soviet baby-bottle nipples to the imminent arrival of electricity for every Soviet home. The Constructivists, like the Futurists, also submitted designs for clothing—appropriate attire for the “new Soviet man.”

Constructivist art also reached the Russian streets and byways. In the words of the poet Mayakovsky, they “set out to make the streets their brushes and the square their palette.”²⁹ In 1918, Red Square in Moscow was often decorated in brightly colored Constructivist imagery for public ceremonies. During the following few years, trains and boats decorated in Constructivist style made their way through rural Russia carrying “agitprop” (agitation-propaganda) teams to lecture and convert the peasants to the virtues of socialism, Bolshevik-style.

Kasimir Malevich & Suprematist Abstraction

Another Russian artist, **Kasimir Malevich** (1878-1935), had visited Paris for a month in 1912 and then returned to Russia as a Cubist. Back in Moscow, he was commissioned to design the costumes and sets for Futurist opera. The theatrical backdrop in black and white triangles inspired him. By 1913 Malevich “took Cubist geometry to its most radical conclusion.”³⁰ His *Suprematist Composition: White on White* was his statement of absolute artistic purity (8.24). A

simple white square on a totally white ground, the painting represented Malevich's "Suprematism," the supremacy of feeling over fact.



8.24 Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1913.

Malevich wrote, "In the year 1913 in my desperate attempt to free art from the burden of the object, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field...the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art...the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called

forth...”³¹ He added, “I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things...To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons. The forms of Suprematism, the new realism in painting, are already proof of the construction of forms from nothing, discovered by Intuitive Reason...our world of art has become new, non-objective, pure.”³² Malevich’s work has been called “the most reductive, uncompromisingly abstract painting of its time.”³³ He took the journey of abstraction to the end of absolute reduction, *ad nihilum*.

The Russian public, however, did not understand totally abstract art. In 1932, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin decreed that Socialist Realism (naturalistic art that celebrated the worker) was “the only acceptable form of art.”³⁴ The Soviet artistic revolution thus retreated back to a style of art similar to that favored by nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalists. All independent artists and art groups were censored. Malevich’s works were relegated to storerooms, hidden, or destroyed. He was imprisoned for two months and interrogated about his artistic philosophy.

Constructivism was gradually retired to the museums or the trash dumps. Kandinsky left Russia; Malevich lingered on, but in total obscurity.

4. Dreams, Fantasy & The Pursuit of the Irrational

The devastating affects of World War I—the “Great War” of 1914-1918--compelled many artists to re-evaluate the traditional form and content of creative expression. Convinced that the institutions and ideologies of European history had made the war possible, they determined to reject everything that bourgeois culture upheld as valuable. Since the Enlightenment had honored the “true light of reason,” they would seek the irrational. If it “made sense” to be logical, they would embrace the absurd. If art was supposed to be ideal and uplifting, they would do all they could to undermine moral standards. If art production was

supposed to demonstrate carefully controlled technique, they would allow chance to determine the nature of their images and objects. Although the first bursts of anarchism were relatively brief, their artistic investigations had lasting impact on the art and culture of the twentieth century.

Dada: The Avant-Garde Turns Against Culture

As early as 1916, a group of artist and writers met regularly at the Café Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland. (Switzerland, a neutral country, accepted people from other European countries who fled the Great War.) They discussed the calamity that surrounded them. The common theme of their writings, their art, and their philosophy was that the traditional culture had to be discredited and brought down. It would have to be reduced to rubble before any new culture could be envisioned. This sense of returning to an absolute beginning is perhaps one reason for the choice of “Dada”—the nonsensical sound of baby talk—as the name for a highly diverse and fluid movement that spread from Switzerland throughout Europe after the Great War ended.



The best description of Dada would probably be a page of randomly selected words and photographic snippets, with an overlay of graffiti. The tone of Dada can also be seen in the gesture of Dada’s leading theoretician, **Marcel Duchamp**, in exhibiting a urinal as a piece of sculpture—and signing it “R. Mutt” (8.25). Nevertheless, despite the destructive tone of Dada, it is clear in retrospect that Dada explored approaches to art that have

contributed as heavily to the art of our day as any other avant-garde movements. Three specific contributions of Dada have become especially important: art as performance (or happening); art as environment; and art as the chance combination of industrially produced objects and images (assemblage). Duchamp was instrumental in developing all three of these Dada practices.



Elegant, intellectual and refined, Frenchman **Marcel Duchamp** (1887-1968) began his career as a painter. His *Nude Descending a Staircase #2* (1912, **8.26**) combined the Futurist machine aesthetic with Cubist faceting in a dynamic echo of Etienne Marey's early photographic records of people in motion.

Duchamp sent four paintings to the New York Armory Show, 1913, the exhibition that first introduced the US public to the European avant-garde. His *Nude Descending the Staircase* was the scandalous centerpiece of the entire exhibition. One critic likened

it to "an explosion in a shingle factory." Undeterred by the critical scorn, Duchamp began to press harder at art's traditional boundaries. He introduced pure chance into his work: the *3 Stoppages Etalon* (1913-14, **8.27**) is an abstract painting of forms whose contours were created by the chance shapes a string took when dropped. Then, declaring that most painting was merely "retinal," Duchamp sought to create art that was more cerebral than



physical, to “put art back at the service of the mind.” In 1913, he invented readymades, which his friend Andre Breton later defined as “manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of art through the choice of the artist.”

Readymades like Duchamp’s *Bottle Dryer*

(*Bottlerack*, 1914, **8.28**) were “found

objects” selected from stores at random:

Duchamp claimed he made his choices by

total aesthetic indifference. According to H.

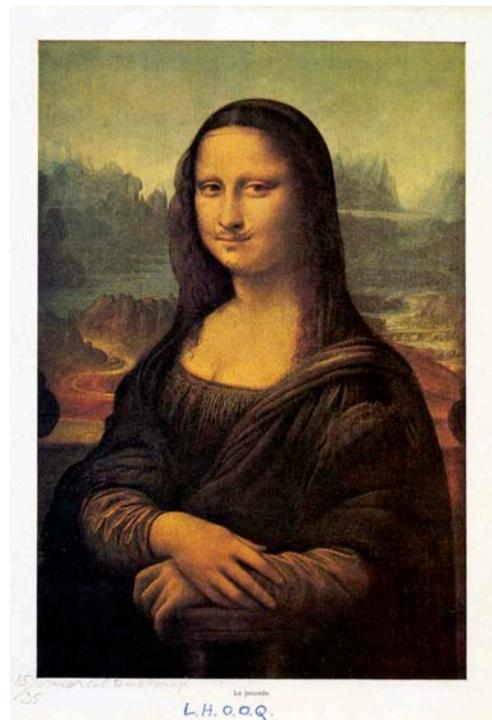
H. Arnason, the readymades “demonstrated

in the most irritating fashion to the art world

of Duchamp’s day, that art could be made

out of virtually anything and that it required

little or no manipulation of the artist.”³⁵



Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919, **8.29**) was what the artist called a “rectified readymade.” It is a color reproduction of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, with the letters L.H.O.O.Q. written on the bottom. Pronounced in French, the letters are a pun of an obscene phrase: “She has a hot ass.” Duchamp “rectified” the reproduction by giving Mona Lisa a mustache and goatee, thus changing her gender even as he sexualized her.

He continued his exploration of the boundaries of gender and gender representation by assuming a female alter ego, Rose Selavy. Her name is a pun of the French phrase “*Eros, c’est la vie*” (Eros, that’s life). When he appeared as Rose Selavy--when he *performed* her—Duchamp’s personality became as important as his art objects.

Duchamp also explored the boundaries of art as it had been located in traditional exhibition spaces. He designed the installation of two major art exhibitions, transforming them from simple white rooms to evocative environments with, in one case, a ceiling draped with dusty coal bags, or, in another case, miles of string crisscrossing from wall to wall, turning the interior into a dense web in which paintings were secreted like alien pods.

Duchamp spent the last several years of his life constructing a mixed media sculpture that occupied an entire room. First exhibited after the artist’s death, *Etant donnees: 1. La chute d’eau 2. Le gaz d’éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-66, **8.30**) is one of the most mysterious and troubling works of avant-garde art. Today installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the *Etant donnees* room can only be seen through a small peep hole in an old wooden door (imported by Duchamp from Spain). The viewer is forced into the discomforting position of voyeur. What is seen through the peephole confounds the viewer’s sense of discomfort. Inside the room is what appears to be a woman’s nude body reclining on brittle sticks beside a river. Trees and mist are seen in the distance, along with what appears to be a waterfall. The woman’s face is not visible; viewers can only see her torso, her left arm—which is raised to hold a gas lamp—and part of her left leg. The torso, with its waxy white skin, does not seem quite correct anatomically. In fact, nothing seems quite correct. Why is she outdoors, lying on the brittle sticks? Has she been raped or killed? Then why is she holding the lamp?





Some critics have interpreted the female figure as a symbol of nature, raped by culture but still holding the light of reason (?) or insight (?) Some critics see the woman as Art, in all her complex presentations. Other critics have dismissed Duchamp's installation as representing the depravity of a "dirty old man." Still others dismiss it as kitsch. Given Duchamp's almost overwhelming importance to late twentieth century art, *Etant donnees* is an artwork that must be reckoned with. But even now, more than forty years after Duchamp finished *Etant donnees*, it remains as elusive and contradictory as its creator.

Dada, by its own definition, had to move on. A movement that accepted the dark center illuminated by Dada but also embraced a way to create a new culture out of this irrationality came next: Surrealism.

Surrealism: Exploring the Inner World Through Art

Surrealism sought a way out of the entire cultural pattern that had produced the blind alley of the World War I. Unlike Futurists, however, Surrealists placed no faith in the machine or in technology in general. They believed cultural revolution had to begin in the consciousness of individuals. Surrealism grew right out of Dada—indeed, many of its early members had participated in Dada performances and "actions"—and shared Dada's anti-rational position. Although the movement changed and evolved over time, Surrealism was from its inception an effort to undo bipolar oppositions like rational/irrational, real/unreal, and waking/sleeping.

Like the Futurists, the Surrealists had a new model of the human person based on science. Instead of physics, however, their model was based on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud.

Freudian Psychology: Evolution & Revolution Lie Within

Surrealism accepted the Freudian view that linked the human person to the cosmos through the inner biological structure of consciousness itself. In this theory, the mind has three layers or dimensions: the superego, the ego and the id. The superego can be described as the level of awareness that is first given to the individual by parents and then society as the individual matures. The superego is experienced as the “voice of conscience” that tells us what to do and what not to do. It can also be described as the pattern of conformity inevitably accompanying participation within a culture.

The ego can be described as the “real” self, although it experiences tension whenever there is conflict between the parental/cultural values and the individual’s own ingrained perceptions and preferences. This discontent between the superego and the ego is, according to Freud, unavoidable. Abnormal persons are those who are unable to adjust to the tension resulting from this conflict.

The id refers to the subconscious (ordinarily inaccessible to conscious thought). The most basic human drives—unseen and unknown—operate in this primordial wilderness of the mind. These drives normally find expression through the acceptable patterns permitted by the ego and the superego. In psychotics, these drives rip through both outer layers and discharge their energies in ways that defy the patterns approved by the culture as a whole.

Another aspect of Freudian theory is the Oedipus complex. Freud believed that the ancient story of Oedipus had contemporary relevance because it told a psychological truth: all little boys go through a period in which they want to kill their fathers, who are seen as threats to the boys’ love for their mothers. Further, Freud believed that when little boys see their parents naked, they recognize the similarity with their fathers’ bodies, but are frightened by the

dissimilarities with their mothers'. Imagining their mothers once had penises that they now lack, the boys begin to fear they might become castrated as well. They fear their penis might be cut off through contact with female genitals, which are conceived as *vagina dentatas* (toothy vaginas).

Freud believed that dreams and fantasies are the places in which the fears and anxieties of our unconscious are depicted. Such depictions are symbolic: many dream images stand for other forms that have similar shapes or functions. For example, kings and queens appearing in dreams represent the dreamer's parents. Many of Freud's dream symbols are sexual. Guns, swords, and long neckties are what Freud calls "phallic symbols," that is, symbols for the penis. Shells, eggs, rooms and boxes represent female genitalia.

An appreciation of Freudian theories (simplified as they are here) is necessary in order to appreciate Surrealist art. To begin with, even though the Surrealists accepted Freud's theories, they rejected his psychological goal for people: adjustment to normal, middle-class (bourgeois) society. To the Surrealists, normalcy was a lie; the war had proved it. The Surrealists wanted to escape from bourgeois life in order to uncover a more real ("surreal") state of existence, or at least of consciousness. Art was part of the process of uncovering and, if necessary, creating, this surreal form of consciousness.



French poet Andre Breton was the leader and primary theorist of the Surrealist movement (8.31). His 1924 "Surrealist Manifesto" summed up their cultural goals:

"To discover America, Columbus had to sail with a shipload of madmen. Just look around you and see how that that madness has taken shape and endured...I believe in the future resolution of those two states, apparently so contradictory, that we

know as dream and reality, their resolution into a sort of absolute reality or superreality ('surrealism')."³⁶

Surrealism: Techniques for the Shuttle to Inner Space

This unknown continent desired by Breton and his followers had already been vividly seen in the work of Henri Rousseau. The problem for the Surrealists was to find a way to take themselves into the unknown—and then back. Gaetan Picon described their intention this way: “The Surrealists landed on an unknown continent, but there was no question of their settling there; what they did rather was to organize a shuttle between the old world and the new.”³⁷

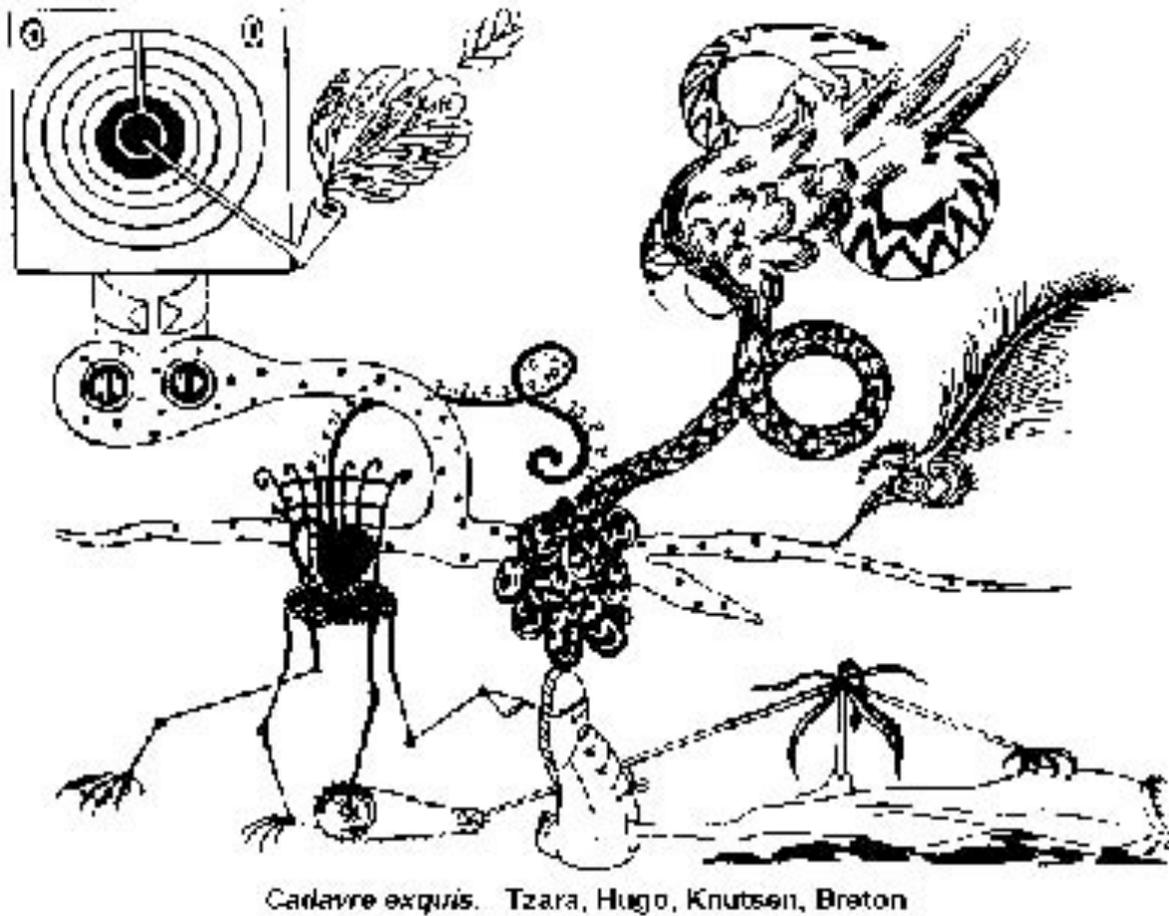
And what was this shuttle? It was any technique that enabled an artist to descend into the subconscious and then return to the surface of ordinary reality with art (or writing) based on the experience. Hypnosis, starvation, boredom, drugs, were all tried—sometimes in combination. The most successful techniques turned out to be collaborative games, collage, the deliberate use of chance and the depiction of dreams.

***Cadavre Exquis* (Exquisite Corpse)**

The Surrealists were inspired by the unexpected juxtapositions of a line of Isidore Ducasse's: “Beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.” They immediately recognized the sexuality of the Freudian dream symbols in the phrase: if the umbrella, closed, was interpreted as a phallic symbol, then the sewing machine would be female and the dissecting table would represent a bed.

The Surrealists invented a game designed to create similarly shocking juxtapositions. A group of people sat around a table, each with a blank sheet of paper. Each wrote a word at the top of the paper, folded it so that it was hidden, and passed it to the adjacent person. Each then wrote another word or phrase on the second paper, folded it again, and passed it on. This continued for

a total of four or five times. The papers would be unfolded, the collaborative sentences read. The first sentence the Surrealist produced with this game was “The exquisite corpse drinks the new wine” (hence the name of the game) (8.32).



8.31 “Cadavre exquis,” by Tzara, Hugo, Knutson, and Breton.

Exquisite corpses were also created with images, so that participants drew forms on each section of paper, folded it and passed it on. Exquisite corpse bodies could be created with heads above the first fold, torsos and arms above the second, genitals and lower torsos above the third, and legs and feet at the bottom of the page. Freed of the normal expectations of authorship, participants in exquisite corpse games allowed themselves to risk and invent linguistically and verbally. The Surrealists had discovered a new route to collaborative creation.

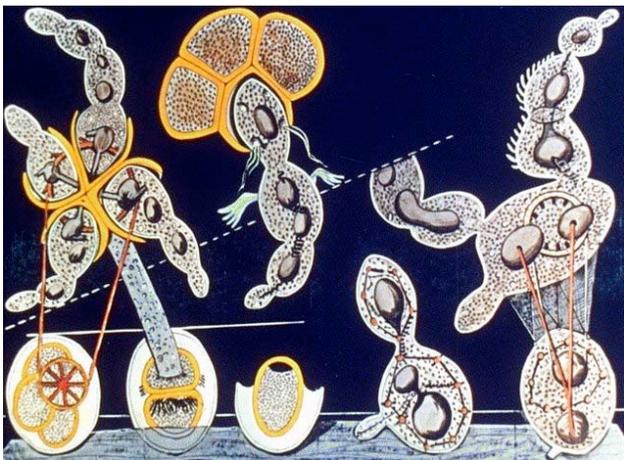
Max Ernst: The Visual Shuttle of Collage

The Surrealists also used collage to generate unexpected juxtapositions. The collages of German artist **Max Ernst** (1891-1976) are especially significant because they originated in response to the mass media environment. He traced his interest in collage to a particular rainy day in 1919 when he was idly flipping through the pages of a catalogue of scientific instruments. His reaction resulted in an amazing description, first, of media overload and, second, of the creative process responding to this overload:

“The sheer absurdity of this assemblage [of catalogue images] caused a sudden intensification of my visionary faculties and brought forth a hallucinating succession of contradictory images, double, triple, and multiple images overlaying each other with the persistence and rapidity peculiar to love memories and the visions of half-sleep.”

Ernst was able to turn this totally unsought experience into art:

“All I had to do was to add to these catalogue pages, painting or drawing over them...what I could see within me...What before had been banal pages of publicity was transformed into dramas revealing my inner-most desires.”³⁸



Some of Ernst's collages are based on his manipulation of illustrations from scientific catalogues (8.33). Others employ nineteenth-century engravings. In short, Ernst not only turned mass media images into his own personal language, this language told him about his own subconscious self.

The mass media image was the bait that enticed the forms that lay deep in the subconscious to rise to the surface and become art. Once made into art, the subconscious became

part of conscious awareness. This was the cultural revolution envisioned by Surrealism: a society built on individuals who lived in this kind of vital contact with their own inner selves.

In 1924, Ernst combined collage, assembled “found objects” and painting in a work he titled *Oedipus Rex* (8.34), a clear allusion to Freudian theory. For other works, he tried what the Surrealists called “automatic” techniques for accessing the unconscious directly. He placed paper on various surfaces, and rubbed it with chalk to pick up the textures, then allowed the resulting forms to “suggest” an image. He put globs of wet paint on one sheet of glass, then pressed a second sheet against it, forcing the paint to “squish” out into new shapes. Or he applied wet paint to glass and held it over a candle, allowing the smoke to move and alter the paint. Again, he let the chance development of shapes and textures determine the result of his painting.



8.34 Max Ernst, *Oedipus Rex*, 1924.

Later in his career, Ernst did a depiction of his “automatic” processes that allowed the unconscious to create art directly. He called it *Surrealism and Painting* (1942, 8.35). The amorphous, unformed creature of the unconscious approaches a canvas with brush in hand. On

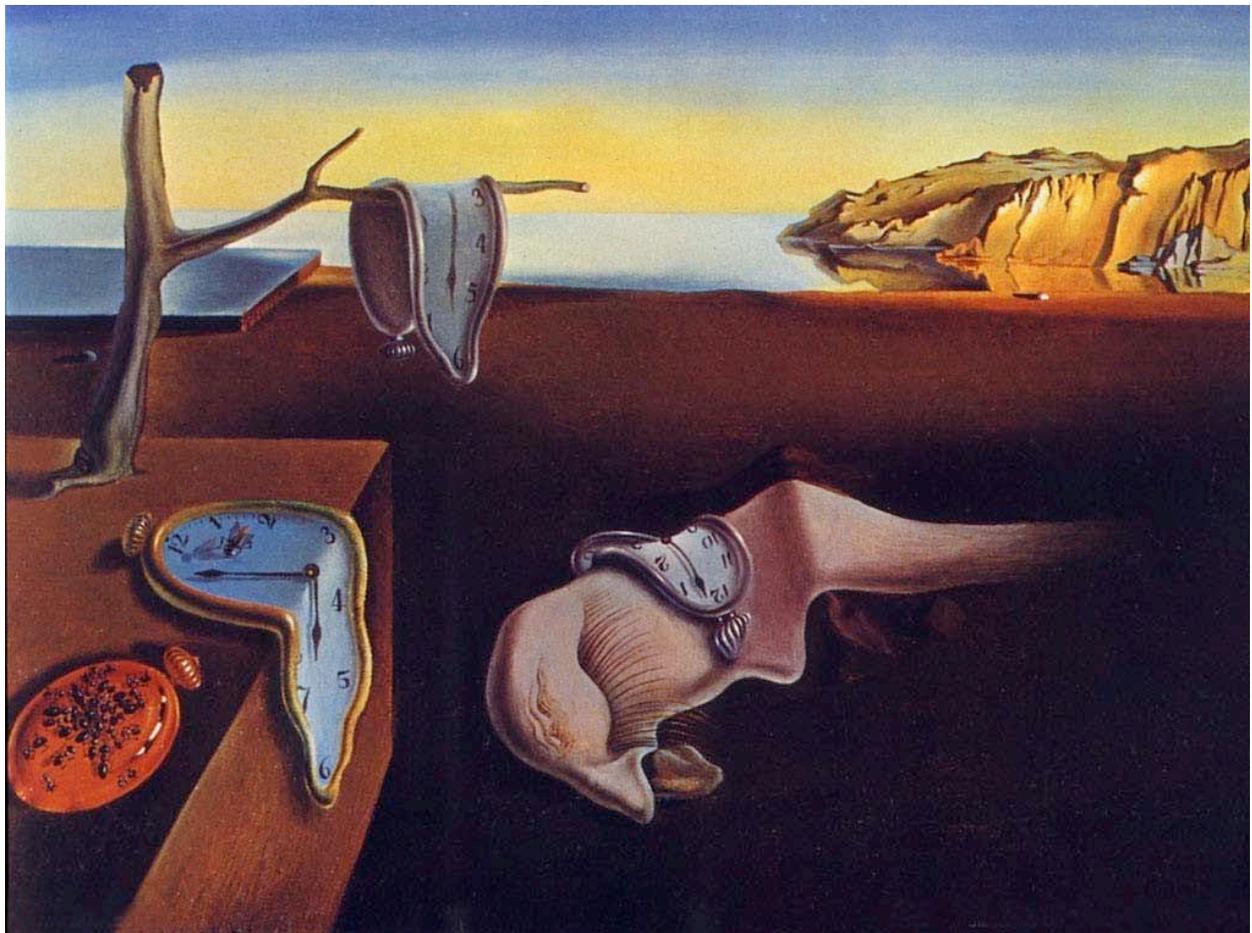
the surface of the canvas are drips and splatters that strangely anticipate the abstractions of American Action painting (discussed below).



8.35 Max Ernst, *Surrealism and Painting*, 1942.

Salvador Dali: The Visual Shuttle of the Dream

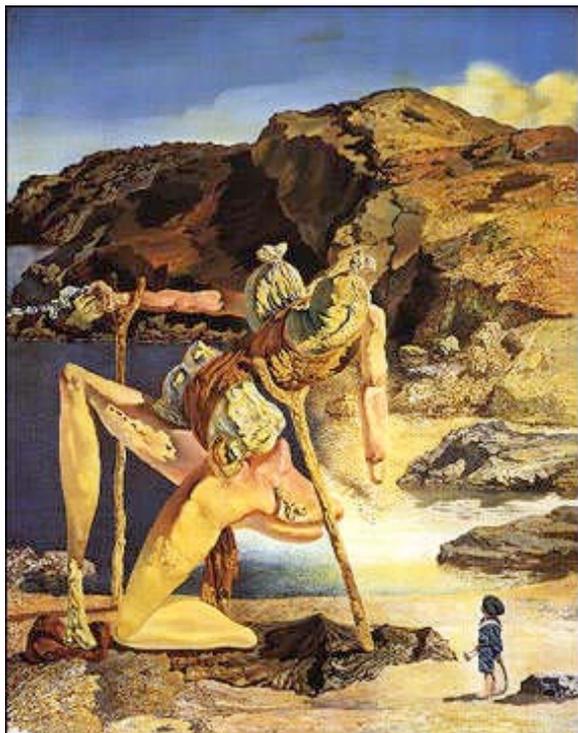
Another kind of shuttle to the unconscious was brilliantly designed and operated by a young Spanish painter, **Salvador Dali** (1904-1989), who began his involvement with the Surrealists in Paris in 1929. Dali's technique was very direct: he simply painted his dreams –in perfect perspective.



The Persistence of Memory (1931, **8.36**) is an early example of Dalí's style. Despite its small scale (9 1/2 by 13 inches), it has the perspective depth of the Academic painting tradition Dalí admired. Its overbright colors also reflect Dalí's enthusiasm for the popular colored lithographs of the nineteenth century. Dalí has referred to his paintings as "hand-colored photographs" but he nevertheless subverted photographic realism by turning inward into the world of dreams, where watches melt and strange creatures emerge from alien landscapes. The undulating creature in the foreground of Dalí's *Persistence* is in fact a dream-distorted portrait of the artist's head seen in profile and looking down. Careful viewers can identify the wisps of hair on the top of the head, the eyebrow, eyelashes, nose, and open mouth. Dalí knew that Freud

believed all dreams are about the dreamer; the artist inserted his self-portrait into almost all of his personal dream paintings.

The melting watches in *Persistence of Memory* remind us that although we are taught that we can measure time exactly—we use precise mechanical devices to do so--sometimes time seems malleable as we are experiencing it. Memory is not a fixed absolute either; memory accumulates and shifts throughout time.



Dali's *The Spectre of Sex Appeal* (c. 1930, **8.37**) includes a self-portrait of the artist as a child in a little sailor outfit. Playing on a rocky beach, he encounters a crippled monstrous female figure. The gigantic female symbolizes the Freudian conflation of mother and nature. Huge and terrifying to the tiny little boy, she represents male fear of the female. In painting this, Dali was clearly violating accepted social

standards: typically, Western cultural men are not allowed to express their fear of the female sex.

Fear of the female is also the subject of Dali's *The Accommodations of Desire* (1929, **8.38**). A series of irregular egg shapes surround the central image of a man and woman locked in destructive embrace. Lions' heads or parts of lions' heads appear in most of the eggs. The key to this Dali dream image is a female torso with a small lion's body painted at the bottom of her

torso. The lions' heads represent Freud's *vagina dentate*--the toothy, threatening orifice of female genitals.



8.38 Salvador Dalí, *The Accommodations of Desire*, 1929.

Dalí teamed with another Surrealist, Luis Bunuel, to produce a remarkable film, *Un Chien andalou* (*A Dog from Southern Spain*, **8.39**) that captured the radical vision of Surrealism by its bizarre and unpredictable cuts, dissolves, and double images. The two young Spaniards wrote the film at Dalí's home one summer, sharing memories of dream images and collaborating as if they were making a filmic exquisite corpse. In addition to several irreligious and erotic scenes, *Chien* shocked the public with a scene of what appears to be a woman's eye being cut by a razor. (It is actually the eye of a dead cow, obtained from a butcher.) Moreover, it violated film-viewing expectations because it refused to cohere into a rational narrative. Instead, it had the "logic" of dreams.



8.39 Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel, movie stills from *Un Chien andalou* (A Dog from Southern Spain).

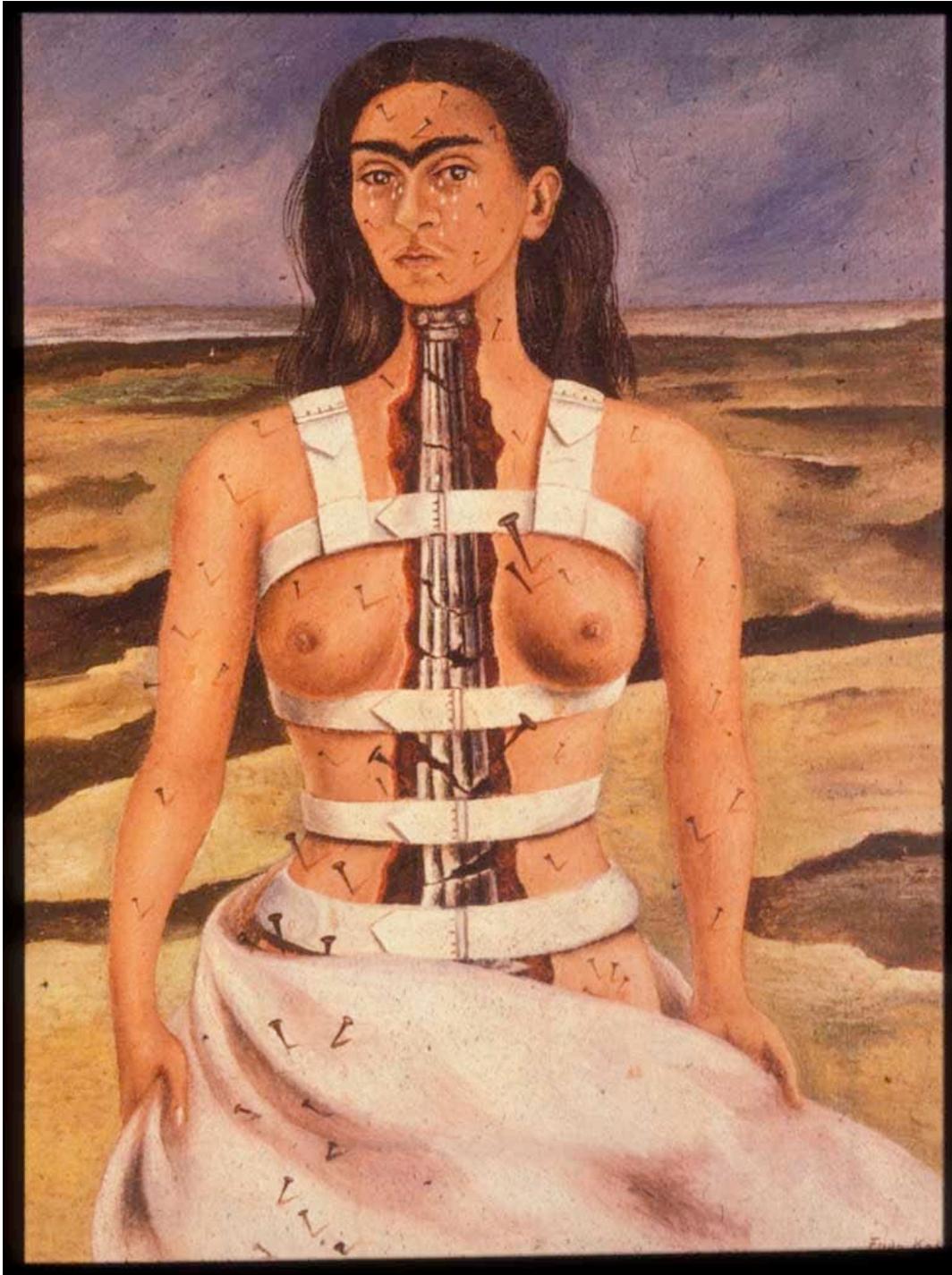
Dali's early work also demonstrated his talent for publicity. He extended subconscious imagery into real life with stunts like arriving nude in a sports car filled in cauliflower in front of the Paris Opera. After the major Surrealist Exhibition in Paris in 1938, Breton expelled him from the movement. Even for Surrealism, Dali simply showed too much ego.

Frida Kahlo: Surrealist Images of the Wounded Self

Like Dali, Mexican artist **Frida Kahlo** (1907-1954) created exquisitely "real" portrayals of dream images. Kahlo (who married Diego Rivera in 1929) painted intimate, autobiographical self-portraits, often when she was recuperating from the numerous surgical procedures she had in attempts to correct the horrific damage that had been done to her body in a 1925 traffic accident. Although well exposed to the avant-garde art of her day (she was, after all, an avant-garde artist's wife), Kahlo chose pre-Columbian art, Mexican folk art and popular arts as her sources. Direct and finely crafted, Kahlo's paintings have wide appeal today, in spite of the sometimes disturbing content.

Kahlo often painted her struggle with the pain of her body. *The Broken Column* (8.40) shows her nude torso split open, revealing a shattered marble column in place of her broken

spinal cord. The tears on her face and nails in her body symbolize the physical anguish she was feeling.



8.40 Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*.

When he traveled to Mexico in 1938, Andre Breton met Kahlo and claimed her as a Surrealist. For the 1939 Surrealist show that Breton organized in Mexico City, Kahlo executed her monumental *Dos Fridas* (8.41). It depicts two seated images of the artist, each with her heart exposed over her blouse and veins running down to her lap.



8.41 Frida Kahlo, *Dos Fridas*, 1939.

Like many Mexicans, Kahlo was of mixed racial background. Her father was a German Jew, her mother a Mexican Indian. To represent this, the two Fridas are dressed in the attire of her grandmothers, one European, the other indigenous. The two cultural heritages are symbolized by the small objects that the two Fridas hold in their hands. The European Frida holds a medical instrument in attempt to stop the blood surging out of a vein, but it is not effective: blood continues to splatter on the European Frida's white skirt. The Indian Frida holds a small portrait of Diego Rivera as a child. Unlike the Western medical tool, this image of love does stop the bleeding.

Kahlo's *Dos Fridas* also reveals the artist's interest in her pre-Columbian past. The two faces and two hearts recall the dual faces and hearts of Coatlicue. In addition, the exposed hearts recall the Aztec practice of heart sacrifice to maintain the balance of the cosmos.

Kahlo did not view her pain and suffering in the pessimistic fashion one might infer from a superficial response to her works. Indeed, she wrote in her journal, "Everything moves according to only one law—life. No one is apart from anyone. No one fights for himself. All is all and one. Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are nothing but a process in order to exist... We have always been hater-love-mother-child-plant-earth-light-lightning-etc.-world giver of worlds—universes and universal cells..."³⁹

Rene Magritte: The Surreal in Language & Representation

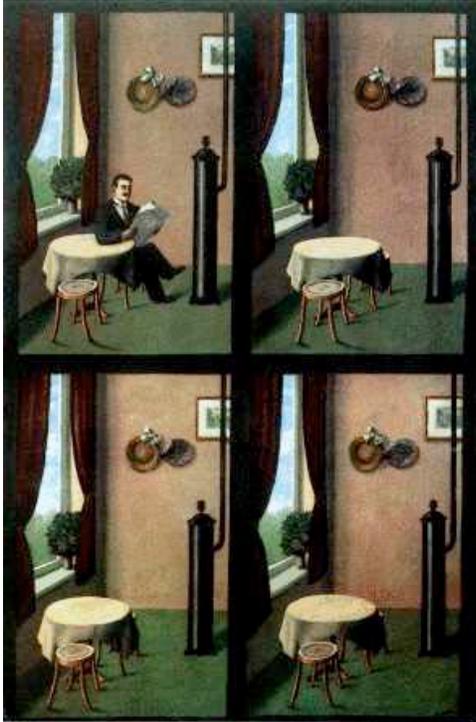
Art historian Suzi Gablik writes that Belgian Surrealist **Rene Magritte** (1898-1967)'s life was a solitary posture of immense effort: the overthrow our sense of the familiar, to sabotage our habits, to put the real world on trail."⁴⁰

Magritte is best known for mysterious, melancholy images that imply an ominous presence, like his iconic *Menaced Assassin* (1926-27, **8.42**) which portrays a dead woman, lying

nude on her bed, with a man (the assassin?) who is casually listening to a record player beside her. Three men with features similar to the assassin's peer into the room from an open window. Two other men flank the open door, unseen by occupant of the room. They carry a bludgeon and a net large enough to capture him. As in Dali and Bunuel's film, the narrative implied by Magritte's painting does not cohere. Where is this taking place? What is going on? Who are the three witnesses outside the window? And, perhaps mostly importantly: How can that man listen to music in such a nonchalant fashion when a dead body lies nearby?



8.42 Rene Magritte, *Menaced Assassin*, 1926-27.



Magritte continued to challenge narrative structures with his *Man Reading a Newspaper* (1927-28, 8.43). The canvas is divided into four quadrants and presents four almost identical scenes. In the upper left-hand scene (the first as you "read" the image from left to right, top to bottom), a man sits at a table beside an open window and reads a newspaper. Although the scene of the room is repeated in each of the other three quadrants, the man has disappeared. His presence in one scene and absence in the others is troubling.

What has happened to him? Has he been abducted? Has he died? The emptiness of the three quadrants without him is unsettling, but Magritte withholds from the viewer, refusing to satisfy any longing for narrative.

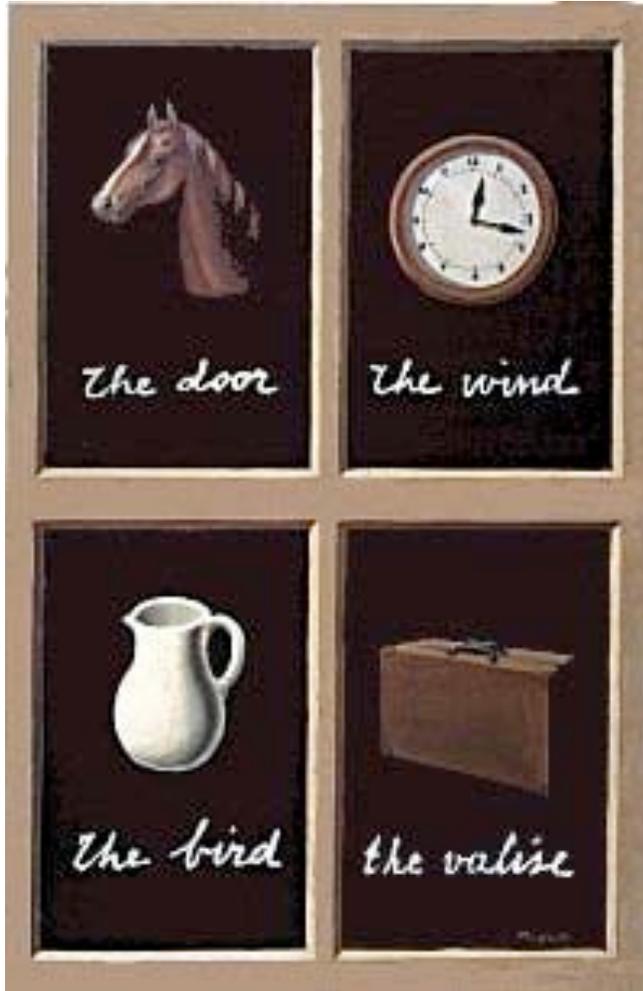
In other paintings, Magritte explores the structure of language. The theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, first published in 1915, were of tremendous importance to Magritte. As discussed in the Preface, Saussure argued that the relationship between a word (which he termed a signifier) and what it represents (the signified) is never automatic or "natural." The connection between signified and



signified is always culturally constructed. Magritte makes his reference to linguistics clear in his title *The Use of Words* (1928-29, **8.44**). It is a photographically real image of a pipe with the words “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe)” written below it. Of course it is not a pipe: it is a painting of a pipe! Magritte reminds us that images are representations (re-presentations), never the “real” thing. Words are representations, too.



Magritte addressed the signified/signifier relationship in several paintings, such as *The Key of Dreams* (1936, **8.45**). Again dividing the canvas into four quadrants, he placed a horse’s head in the top left. Under it, he wrote “The door.” To the right, he painted a clock and wrote, “The wind.” Below that, a pitcher was labeled “The bird.” Finally, an image of a valise was labeled “The valise.” In addition to illustrating the arbitrary assignation of words to objects and



images, Magritte points to Freudian theory with his title. But Freud theorized that dream images have specific symbolic meanings; Magritte seems to imply that our understanding of such symbols may be correct only *some* of the time.

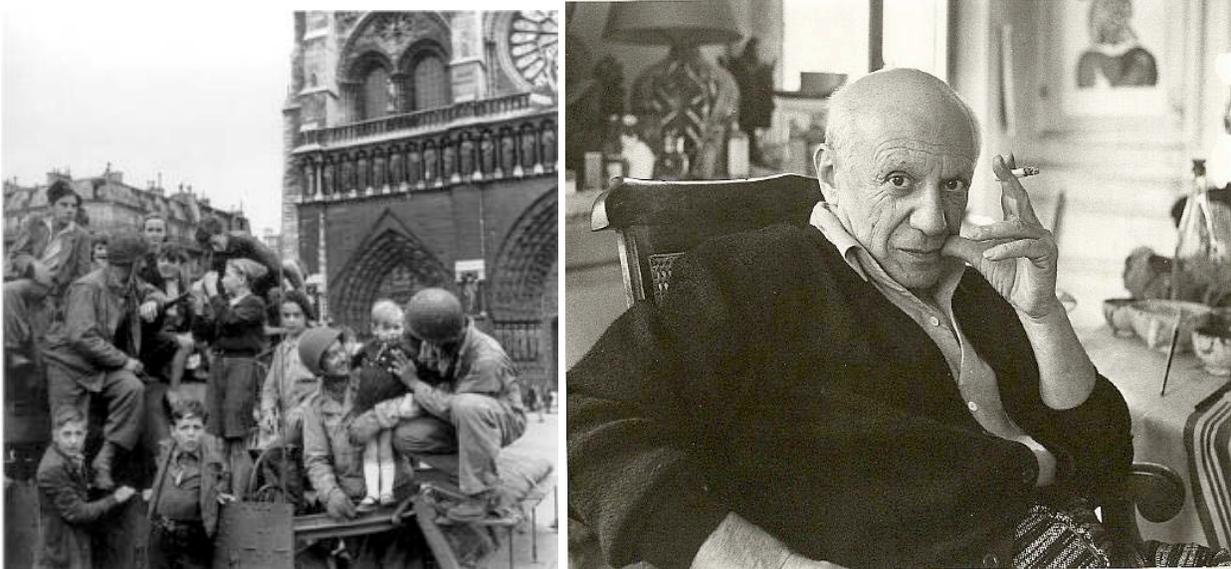
While Dada artists, particularly Marcel Duchamp, provided prototypes for the later avant-garde art forms of performance, installation and environmental art, as well as art that employs industrial materials, Magritte's Surrealist

paintings stand as prototypes for Postmodern explorations of narrative, language, and the function of representation.

Lee Miller: Surrealism & the Nightmare of War

American **Lee Miller** (1907-1977) entered the Surrealist circle with photographer Man Ray, then became a remarkable Surrealist photographer in her own right. When German troops occupied France, she moved to London with the man who would become her husband, Roland Penrose (a Surrealist painter who later wrote one of the first important biographies of their mutual friend Picasso).

In London, Miller was hired as US war correspondent for *Vogue* magazine. In 1944, she crossed the English Channel to join our troops, then continued with the army as it moved east, into liberated Paris (8.46). While there, she found and photographed Picasso and some of the Surrealists who had stayed there during the war (8.47).



When the army moved into Munich, Miller was--by happenstance of journalistic assignment--bivouacked in Hitler's private apartment there. A fellow journalist photographed the beautiful but weary Miller in the former dictator's bathroom. Then Miller and her companions traveled to Dachau and Buchenwald.

Miller was one of the first photographers to record the atrocities of the Concentration Camps (8.48). In June 1945, as she sent her photographs to the magazine, she cabled *Vogue* editor Audrey Withers: "I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE." The written accounts Miller sent along with the photographs told of "six hundred bodies stacked in the courtyard of the crematorium because they had run out of coal the last five days"; of men strapped to whipping stalls; of the signs of torture; of the nightmarishly emaciated state of the survivors. She added, "The tourists invited by General Patton fainted all over the place, although some

remained arrogant. Even after the place was ninety-five percent cleaned up, soldiers who are used to battle casualties lying in ditches for weeks are sick and miserable at what they see here.”⁴¹



8.48 Lee Miller, “Freed Prisoners” and “Liberation of Dachau,” both 1945.

Lee Miller was not the only avant-garde artist horrified—and profoundly changed—by Hitler’s war. Although Miller had chosen to stay in Europe, many of the other avant-garde practitioners had fled. Many were Jewish or Communist or homosexual—precisely the people Hitler targeted for torture and extermination. Hitler particularly targeted avant-garde artists.

The Degenerate Art Show & the Artistic Flight from Hitler

Before he turned to politics, Hitler had tried to be a painter. When he came to power in the 1930s, he began destroying avant-garde art works and persecuting avant-garde artists—probably at least in part because they had previously mocked and criticized his lack of talent. In 1937, Hitler had his staff organize an exhibit of all the avant-garde art they could assemble. They called it the Degenerate Art Show (**8.49**). Huge crowds milled through the exhibition, seeing the

“perverse distortions” of the avant-garde. Beside the paintings, the Nazis had written satiric texts on the walls highlighting the perceived offenses of the art.



8.49 *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art), 1937.*

Many of the avant-garde artists fled to the United States. Duchamp was already in New York. He was joined there by Andre Breton, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali (who also spent time in California). As artists, musicians, poets and filmmakers immigrated to New York, the center of avant-garde activity shifted from Europe to the US. Their avant-garde ideas stimulated an artistic florescence in the Big Apple and gave birth to the first great American avant-garde art movement: Abstract Expressionism.

5. The Avant-Garde in America: Pollock & Abstract Expressionism

The art movement that ushered in the postwar triumph of American art--Abstract Expressionism--is most closely associated with an artist named **Jackson Pollock** (1912-1956). Pollock, as he liked to remind people, was born “out West” in Cody, Wyoming. Although he grew up in a family that was torn apart by the Great Depression, his strong-willed mother managed to keep her five children together despite the family’s incessant drift from one

temporary location to another. Eventually, they settled in Los Angeles long enough for Pollock, regardless of frequent conflicts with teachers and administrators, to graduate from high school.

In 1930, Pollock moved to New York's bohemian Greenwich Village. He studied at the Art Students' League under Thomas Hart Benton, whose paintings of rural American folklore echoed Pollock's own strong populist sentiments. Pollock was also interested in radical political ideas and painting based on social consciousness. During the thirties he was especially impressed by the works of Mexican muralists Rivera and Siqueiros.

Pollock's most important encounter in the 1930s, however, was with his own alcoholism. He was hospitalized several times, including one period of voluntary commitment. By 1939, he was desperate. As he struggled to avoid continuing deterioration, he became increasingly drawn to the more inner-directed art of Surrealism. Breton and other Surrealists were in New York by this time, having fled Hitler, and Pollock had become familiar with their ideas as well as their art.

In 1939 Pollock decided to undergo psychotherapy under the direction of Doctor Joseph Henderson. Henderson practiced a form of therapy based on the theories of C.G. Jung. Jung began as a follower of Sigmund Freud. Freud saw the unconscious as primarily the dimension of the mind where instinct and repressed memories must be carefully stored and monitored. Jung, however, eventually broke with Freud because he saw the unconscious as also containing all the potential of future personality growth, like an acorn "contains" the future oak tree. Jung also believed that universal myths found in the world's religions and cultures are mirrored in an individual's personal dreams—a theory popularized in America by the late Joseph Campbell (and applied by George Lucas in his *Star Wars* epics.)

Since Jung's theories give a priority to the creative and mythic dimension of the mind—or psyche—Pollock responded enthusiastically to Henderson's urging to use not only his dreams

and fantasies, but also his spontaneous feelings to create drawings as the basis for their year of work together. This process of direct drawing based on intense feeling not only helped heal Pollock's inner confusion but also enabled him to transform Surrealism into his own highly personal style.

From Therapy to Art: Private Rituals Become Public Myth

The first phase of Pollock's paintings from the early forties reflects the highly figurative and symbolic imagery uncovered by his drawings during therapy. The Surrealist-inspired *The She-Wolf* (8.50) at first looks like a field of scrambled calligraphy or graffiti. The title, however, helps the viewer discover the she-wolf figure, outlined in strong black and white lines, that faces to the left and dominates the entire width of the painting. Like other paintings of this period, the image is built on an interplay between a partly veiled form that emerges from weaving lines moving through fields of solid color.



8.50 Jackson Pollock, *She-Wolf*, 1943.

This kind of highly personal, partly veiled imagery gradually gave way in the late forties to Pollock's unique form of abstraction: Abstract Expressionism, or Action Painting. These paintings are so intimately connected with the process of painting them that the process itself must be described with as much detail as the paintings.

Pollock's "Action Paintings": Dancing Out the Inner Man

Pollock's technique for producing his Action Paintings reveals an ingenious adaptation of elements that range from the abstract work of Kandinsky and Navajo sand-painting to, more obviously, psychotherapy and Surrealism.

Pollock approached painting with the movement of his whole body instead of just his eye and hand. He abandoned the paintbrush and stretched canvas. Using various kinds of paint, including enamel, he either poured them out or dripped them from a stick as he moved across the huge canvases stretched out on the floor of his studio. In a way, he danced his paintings into existence. As he said, "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, working from the four sides, and literally be in the painting."⁴²

Though related to the ritualized painting of Native American art, Pollock's approach was totally personal and subjective. It involved drawing forth his own inner myth instead of a public, community myth like that of the Navajo or other native cultures.

Pollock was also unlike Native American artists (as well as most Western artists throughout history) in that he had no preconceived image when he began his painting ritual. As he had done in the drawings for Dr. Henderson, Pollock wanted to "express his feelings rather than illustrate them." He wanted to discover the look and the meaning of painting only after he had produced it. The following description of Breton's "automatic writing" comes close to

describing Pollock's approach, if the word *painting* is substituted for *monologue* and *executed* for *spoken*: "Automatism is...a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without the intervention of critical faculties."⁴³



8.51 Jackson Pollock, *Number 27, 1950*.

Two paintings from 1950 illustrate the results of Pollock's attempt to immerse himself directly in the painting process. *Number 27, 1950* (**8.51**) shows the kind of shallow space that Pollock's technique produced. The moving streams of yellow, black, red and white enamels each appear to flow on top of each other. Each thus creates a different spatial layer within the painting. The effect is of a very thin or shallow space filled with brilliant energy, color, and form. Pollock's "drip paintings" is that they capture a sense of change or motion itself as their main subject matter.

A second painting from 1950, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (**8.52**), is almost seven by ten feet. Even though it too is formed by the dripping and pouring technique, it is quite different from *Number 27, 1950*. The lines are leaner and form a more complex pattern. As the title implies, an opening appears to be forming in the middle of the painting like the center of a cloud

that is about to dissolve and reveal the space behind it. Both of these paintings resemble the late water lily paintings of Monet in their visual richness and monumental scale. Unlike Monet's paintings, Pollock's works seem to dip just below the threshold of ordinary perception to suggest the pattern of energy underlying natural forms.



8.52 Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, (Lavender Mist)*, 1950.

This quality of verging on a recognizable or natural image was important to Pollock. He insisted that his paintings had a connection to the real world. When a well-known artist remarked to Pollock at this time that he should do more drawing directly from nature, Pollock's reply was direct and simple: "I am nature."⁴⁴

If the artist is nature, what the artist paints from within himself or herself is already, to some degree, a picture of nature. The marks, lines, and drips, in other words, will take care of

themselves. The nature that is visible in Pollock's paintings is nature glimpsed through the filter of his own consciousness and personality. This is precisely what Zola said about Manet's work. Kandinsky, whose paintings Pollock had seen at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 1945, had also insisted that subjective abstraction produced a direct contact with nature. Pollock had thus produced another version of the subjective abstraction of the avant-garde. He had also effectively transcended the historic nature/culture opposition.

Pollock & the Mass Media: The Public Myth Destroys the Private Self

Jackson Pollock, however, was unable to keep the precarious grasp on his inner world represented by the vulnerable weblike patterns of his paintings. By the middle of the twentieth century, the avant-garde had become news. Pollock suddenly became a celebrity. The unraveling of his inner life began in 1948, when *Life* magazine installed him and his paintings in a three-page spread with color photographs under the headline "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"

This is the same *Life* magazine that only a decade earlier had lumped the "unrealities of modern art" alongside the "irrational bloodiness of war" and the "devious channels of politics" as the main scourges of modern life.

Other magazines and newspapers followed with a glare of publicity. Ironically, it was this publicity that apparently trapped Pollock in a mirror of his own creation: his own carefully projected public image. Pollock had been something of an outsider since high school, when he was expelled for fighting with a coach. From the time he arrived in New York, he had liked to swagger around bars; he had played the role of a kind of bohemian cowboy powered by a reputation for hard drinking and hard living (he had once tried to demolish a friend's sculpture

with his car). Pollock's image, in other words, was ready and waiting when the media discovered him.

Unfortunately, Pollock could not handle the tension between the greatly magnified public self in the media and his private self. The delicate balance he had worked out through therapy and a discipline he achieved through the support of his artist-wife, Lee Krasner, was destroyed, and his alcoholism returned. One night in 1950, he became extremely drunk at a party and forced his girlfriend and her friend into his car, determined to drive them home. Tragically, Pollock crashed the car into a tree, killing himself and his lover's friend.

Pollock's singular art, his readily available public image, and his tragic death guaranteed his status as a legendary artist-hero like van Gogh and Gauguin before him.

Myth of the Artist II

The myth of the artist as a tormented, alienated genius creating truly original art in anguished isolation that has crystallized in the late nineteenth century around Vincent van Gogh was extended to the high modern avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo and Jackson Pollock have all been portrayed as versions of the van Gogh-generated mythic artist. Anthony Hopkins portrayed Picasso as an egocentric womanizer in *Surviving Picasso* (1996, Great Britain, James Ivory).

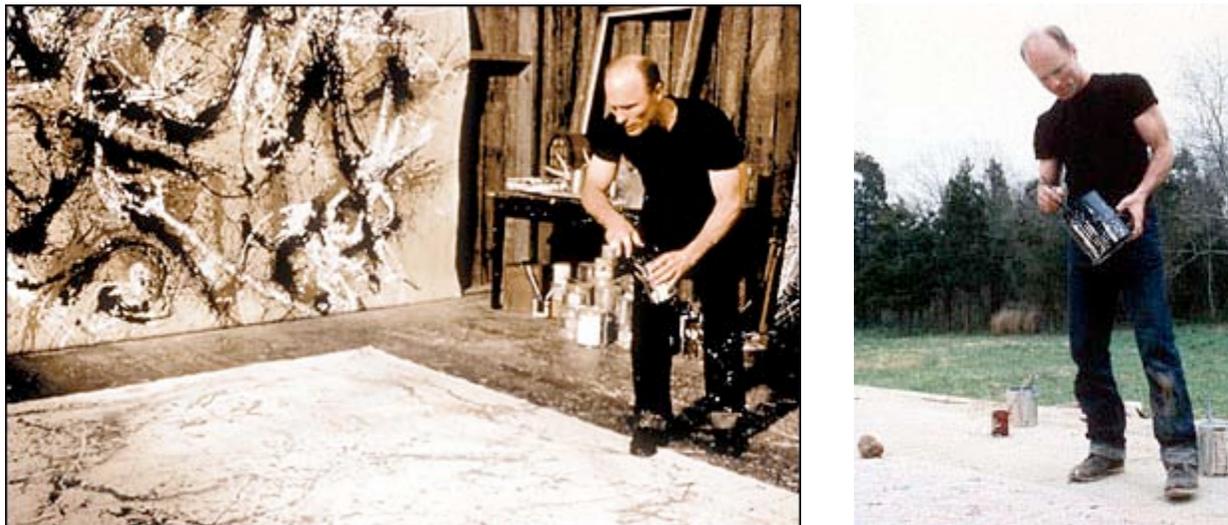
Kahlo's tumultuous life was the subject of two films about her, both titled with her first name: the 1984 *Frida* (Mexico, Paul Leduc) and the 2003 *Frida* (US, Julie Taymor, **8.53**).

Although both films used Kahlo's astonishing paintings as visual material for their lush cinematography, neither focused on the woman as artist. Instead, she was portrayed as a tormented victim of bodily pain, romantic deception (on the part of Rivera), and marked public indifference until the very end of her life.



8.53 Julie Taymor, movie stills from *Frida*, 2003.

Actor Ed Harris both starred in and directed his tribute to the American Action painter in *Pollock* (US, 2003, 8.54), but again, audiences came away troubled by the artist's relentless alcoholism and self-destruction—but with very little understanding of his art.



8.54 Ed Harris, movie stills from *Pollock*, 2003.

The crazy, misunderstood artist has become such a powerful stereotype through its repetition in the mass media that many people forget that many twentieth century modernists—like Kathe Kollwitz and Wassily Kandinsky, to name only two—were normal, hard-working members of society. The equation of artist and insanity became so entrenched in the dominant culture that in the late twentieth century, there was a flurry of films that portrayed artists as psychopaths and killers.

In *Legal Eagles* (1986, US, Ivan Reitman), Daryl Hannah played a New York artist accused of murder. In *Color of Night* (1994, US, Richard Rush), actor Bruce Willis played a psychologist in pursuit of a crazed painter-killer. Similar narratives have appeared in television dramas. For example, an October 2004 “Law & Order: Criminal Intent” program presented a (fictional) crazed photographer who killed women in order to turn them into totally controlled artistic subjects. And murder-mystery maven Patricia Cornwell published a book in which she suggested that Jack the Ripper was in fact famed artist Walter Sickert (*Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed*, New York: Putnam Adult, 2002).

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P.E. Chavet (New York: Viking, 1972) 420-22.

² Brian O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube, 1855-1974” *Artforum*, 1976 (from a 1975 series of lectures at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

³ Sieglinde Lemek, “Primitivist Modernism” *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art, A Documentary History*, Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 410.

⁴ H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Prentice Hall & Harry N. Abrams, 1998) 429.

⁵ Arnason 430.

⁶ Henri Matisse, quoted in Julie Sheldon, “Matisse and the Problem of Expression in Early Twentieth-Century Art” *Investigating Modern Art*, Dawtry, Jackson, et al, eds. (London: The Open University, 296).

⁷ Sheldon in Dawtry, Jackson, et al, eds, 296.

⁸ Arnason 114.

⁹ Pollock, quoted in Flam and Deutch 426.

¹⁰ James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern, 1985” Flam and Deutch 357.

¹¹ Wassily Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” reprinted in *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964) 23-24..

¹² Liz Dawtrey, et al., eds., *Investigating Modern Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press & The Open University, 1996) 22.

-
- ¹³ McLuhan 342.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in McLuhan 342.
- ¹⁵ Felix Feneon, quoted in Janine Warnod, *Washboat Days* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973) 122.
- ¹⁶ Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) 9.
- ¹⁷ Duncan 348-49.
- ¹⁸ Jack Flam, "Introduction" Flam and Deutch 3.
- ¹⁹ Lemke 409.
- ²⁰ Lemki 409.
- ²¹ Paul Gauguin, quoted in Flam and Deutch 416.
- ²² Pablo Picasso, quoted in Flam and Deutch 425.
- ²³ Filippo Marinetti, quoted in Maryanne W. Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 39.
- ²⁴ Umberto Boccioni, quoted in Martin 45.
- ²⁵ Boccioni in Martin 30.
- ²⁶ Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, "The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe," quoted in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, trans. Robert Brain (New York: Viking Press, 1978) 199.
- ²⁷ Arnason 227.
- ²⁸ Michael Bierut, et al., eds. *Looking Closer 3, Classic Writing on Graphic Design* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999) 12-13.
- ²⁹ Arnason 227.
- ³⁰ Arnason 223.
- ³¹ Arnason 224.
- ³² J.H. Nash, "Cubism, Futurism & Constructivism:" Britt, *Modern Art* 198.
- ³³ Arnason 224.
- ³⁴ Arnason 222.
- ³⁵ Arnason 275.
- ³⁶ Andre Breton, quoted in William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968) 64.
- ³⁷ Gaetan Picon, *Surrealists and Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, 1983) 63.
- ³⁸ Max Ernst, quoted in Picon 11-12..
- ³⁹ Hayden Herrera, *Frida, A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 328.
- ⁴⁰ Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992) 9.
- ⁴¹ Antony Penrose, ed. *Lee Miller's War* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1992) 165.
- ⁴² Jackson Pollock, quoted in Jack Hobbs, *Art in Context* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 286.
- ⁴³ Andre Breton, quoted in Michel Courrouges, *Andre Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism*, trans. Maura Prendergast (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974) 101.
- ⁴⁴ Jackson Pollock, quoted in Harold Rosenberg, "Hans Hoffman: Nature into Action," *ARTnews*, May 1957, 24.