

# WHAT MAKES MODERN ART MODERN?

---

**I**NTENSE, CRITICAL, BREAKING WITH TRADITION, AND AVANT-GARDE—these are words and phrases sometimes used to describe modern art. “Modern” is a chronological and stylistic designation that usually refers to art made from the beginning of the twentieth century until after World War II, although some scholars date modern art from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s or beyond. Traditionally, the history of modern art is organized around a series of intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic developments that informed artworks created at the time. Contemporary historians, however, focus more on the connections between artistic styles than on a linear progression.

These curriculum materials explore developments in modern art in western Europe and the United States between 1906 and 1955. Four works are highlighted: a painting by Raoul Dufy titled *Still Life with Closed Shutters* (1906); Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture *Bird in Space* (1927); *Untitled* (1928), a black-and-white photograph by Marjorie Content; and *Desert Moon*, a mixed-media work made in 1955 by Lee Krasner. This selection of artworks from LACMA’s permanent collection illustrates the ways modern artists broke with centuries-old traditions of art making and turned a critical eye toward the subjects, concepts, materials, and formal qualities of their work.

## Modern Art and Ideas

---

In the twentieth century, the world was transformed by changes to social and political structures, and developments in technology and industry. Modernism evolved as artists sought new ways to respond to and represent their changing world. Artists began to critically examine and explore the premises of art and artistic media. The term *modernism* refers to artists' self-conscious breaking with the past and their search for new forms of expression. Modernist works reveal concerns about art and aesthetics, regardless of whether or not the artist is representing traditional subjects (as in Dufy's still life) or scenes from contemporary life (such as Content's photograph). By questioning traditional techniques and methods of representation, modern artists broke through the boundaries established by art academies to pioneer new art-making approaches.

Successive challenges to the traditions of art making in the nineteenth century gave rise to the term *avant-garde*. From the French for "vanguard," the foremost part of an army, it began to be used in relation to art in the 1880s. *Avant-garde* referred to artists who were considered to be ahead of their time and challenged established art-making traditions. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne were among the first to be called *avant-garde* because of their unique approaches to representing the world. Some *avant-garde* artists criticized political and social ideologies in their work; others pursued a more introspective path, examining and critiquing artistic principles and elements. The term *avant-garde* is sometimes associated with modernism and many modern artists once were referred to as *avant-garde*.

Art historians and critics have organized the stylistic developments of modern art into a chronology of movements and ideas, each of which challenged artistic conventions with greater intensity. What follows is a brief description of some of the schools and movements that characterize modern art. These categories organize modern art into a linear progression of styles, ideologies, and approaches. It is important to recognize, however, that some ideas and approaches developed simultaneously and many artists sought to avoid being associated with any one school of thought.

**Impressionism**—A late nineteenth-century art movement that sought to capture impressions of fleeting moments by representing the effects of light and differing weather conditions on landscapes, cityscapes, and scenes of daily life. Impressionist artists include Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Gustave Caillebotte.

**Postimpressionism**—A movement that developed in response to impressionism. Postimpressionist artists sought to represent modern life by revealing its emotional and psychological aspects. Leading artists in this movement include Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh.

**Fauvism**—From the French word *fauves*, which means "wild beasts," fauvism was an early twentieth-century movement that explored the use of vibrant, bold color as the primary formal element in a composition. The *fauves* included Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse, and Maurice de Vlaminck.

**Expressionism**—An approach to art making that reflects the artist's unique personal vision and often incorporates or expresses emotion. Two important German expressionist groups were Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). Artists associated with expressionism include Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Oskar Kokoschka.

**Cubism**—A style of art that abandoned traditional strategies for creating the illusion of space, such as perspective, and instead presented three-dimensional forms with abstract, geometric shapes, often offering several views simultaneously. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are generally credited with developing cubism at the turn of the twentieth century.

**Futurism**—A movement founded by a group of Italian poets, painters, and sculptors who advocated social and artistic reform. Artists such as Fernand Léger and Umberto Boccioni represented the speed and dynamism of the modern machine age in their work.

**Abstract art**—Art in which no recognizable subjects are depicted. Instead, color, shape, and line are relied upon to convey meaning. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, and Robert Delaunay were at the forefront of abstract art in the early twentieth century. Since then, hundreds of modern artists have made abstract works using a variety of styles and approaches.

**Dada**—An art movement based on deliberate irrationality and the rejection of traditional aesthetic values. Marcel Duchamp and Hannah Höch, among others, are associated with dadaism; they were part of a loosely allied group of artists unified by their collective disillusionment after the brutality of World War I.

**Surrealism**—Considered by some scholars to be a successor to dada, surrealism was an intellectual, literary, and artistic movement that explored ways to represent in art the world of dreams and the unconscious. René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Meret Oppenheim are associated with this movement.

**Abstract expressionism**—The first major avant-garde movement to emerge in the United States, abstract expressionism (sometimes called action painting) took root in the late 1940s. The artists associated with the movement—such as Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lee Krasner—made paintings that used abstraction to convey strong emotional or expressive content.

**Minimalism**—A movement that some scholars see as a direct response to the critical and popular success of abstract expressionism. Minimalist artworks are characterized by a severe reduction of form and an emphasis on the viewer's physical relationship to works of art as seen in the sculpture of Tony Smith and Donald Judd.

The works highlighted in these materials represent a survey of modern styles and schools of thought. Raoul Dufy's *Still Life with Closed Shutters* (1906) illustrates his use of the expressive qualities of color to represent a traditional subject, as well as his association with fauvism. Brancusi's sculpture *Bird in Space* (1927) is an example of the artist's exploration of abstraction and represents his critical exploration of sculptural media and concepts. Photographer Marjorie Content captured New York's Washington Square Park in her photograph *Untitled* (1928). Although Content did not consider herself an artist, the photograph is an example of how modernist views influenced the perspectives of amateur and professional artists alike. Lee Krasner's *Desert Moon* (1955) reflects an interest in abstraction that is rooted in nature and the everyday world.

**Consider the following questions as you explore these works of art:**

- What makes a work of art modern?
- In what ways do modern artists break with established art-making traditions?
- What are the subjects and materials of modern art?

RAOUL DUFY (France, 1877–1953)

## ***Still Life with Closed Shutters***, 1906

---

**R**AOUL DUFY'S WORK HAS BEEN SAID TO CONVEY PLEASURE AND JOY. IN THIS PAINTING, DUFY USED A VARIETY OF saturated colors in contrasting shades to depict a still life of fruit arranged on a tabletop. Sunlight filters through the closed shutters behind the table and makes a dappled pattern across the floor. Broad brushstrokes and bright colors create a lively composition and bring a fresh perspective to the traditional genre of still-life painting.

- *Search Collections Online at lacma.org to see examples of traditional still-life paintings. Compare Dufy's Still Life with Closed Shutters to Abraham van Beyerens's Banquet Still Life (1667). In what ways are they similar or different? What makes Dufy's painting modern?*

When this painting was made, Dufy was part of a loose association of artists known as the fauves, who explored the expressive qualities of color and its use as the primary formal element in a composition. The fauves took their name, which means "wild beasts" in French, from art critic Louis Vauxcelles. He used the term disparagingly in his review of a 1905 Paris art exhibition in which a group of classical sculptures was surrounded by paintings of striking color by artists Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck. The broad brushstrokes, patterned surfaces, and brilliant colors Vauxcelles observed in the paintings are defining characteristics of fauvism.

Fauvism was among the first of the avant-garde movements to flourish in early twentieth-century France. Dufy and his fellow fauves painted conventional subjects such as landscapes, portraits, and still lifes in a way that broke from established artistic traditions. From 1904 to 1908, the fauves pioneered a modern vision of the everyday world.

The fauves sought to develop an approach to painting that combined the immediacy of impressionism with the expressiveness of highly saturated color. Their innovative and "wild" use of color is one of the qualities that distinguished fauvism from academic art. Derain described fauvism as "color for color's sake," encapsulating the way these artists abandoned nuanced use of color in painting, such as soft transitions or shading, in favor of its unrestrained use. Rather than use color as it is perceived in nature to create the illusion of perspective or volume, the fauves used color for its expressive qualities. De Vlaminck, in fact, often put color on canvases directly from the tube, without mixing in other pigments to modulate it.

Although they shared some tendencies, artists associated with fauvism developed individual approaches that aligned with their personal aesthetics. Some artists, such as Matisse and Derain, used harsh, contrasting colors to create visual effect, while others—including Dufy—used milder shades. In artworks from this time in his career, Dufy was determined to paint not only what he could see but what existed in his own reality. He was particularly interested in depicting light in his paintings. He used colors that are found in nature not to re-create the visual perception of those hues but to represent the chromatic equivalent of light as he perceived it.

- *Many of the fauves only worked in this style for a short period of time. Matisse, however, remained interested in the possibilities of color and continued to explore the ideas developed during the fauvist period throughout his career. Look at the enclosed CD to see an image of Matisse's painting Tea (1919). How does it compare to Dufy's Fauvist work? What elements of the fauve style did Matisse continue to develop in Tea?*



RAOUL DUFY

France, 1877–1953

*Still Life with Closed Shutters*, 1906

Oil on canvas, 31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 25<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.23

© Raoul Dufy Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI (Romania, 1876–1957, active France)

## ***Bird in Space***, 1927

---

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE MEANING OF HIS SCULPTURES, CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI OFTEN REPLIED, "I GIVE YOU pure joy." *Bird in Space* is a key example of Brancusi's work. Rather than imitating nature, Brancusi sought to capture the "essence" of his subjects. In this work, one of a series on the subject, the gracefully arching form is meant to represent flight.

Brancusi focused on a variety of subjects throughout his career, such as the human form and a variety of animals—including the bird, the fish, and the turtle. He often returned to the same subject, making a series of works that explore a single theme. *Bird in Space* is part of a progression of artworks that focus on the bird form. Brancusi made at least seventeen versions of the *Bird in Space* in bronze and marble over the course of twenty years. Each time he revisited a subject, Brancusi altered the height and proportion. He stated that he repeated forms not to "merely do them differently, but to go further."

- *Brancusi wanted to create art that would defy categorization. Although he resisted being associated with any one modern art movement, he made a significant impact on modern sculpture. In what ways is his work modern? Consider the formal qualities of Bird in Space, such as its shape and form, as well as the subject. How do these qualities compare to the other modern works in these materials?*

This version of *Bird in Space* is made of highly polished bronze. The golden finish Brancusi created on his bronze sculptures was his own invention and was unlike that of any other western artist at that time. The reflective surface contradicted the closed form of his sculptures by blurring the boundaries between the artwork and its surroundings. Brancusi often intensified the mirrored effect by polishing the sculptures and manipulating the lighting in which they were seen. According to Brancusi, the surface of a sculpture should appear to go on forever, unhindered by the boundaries of its form.

In addition to bronze, Brancusi worked in marble and different varieties of wood, such as oak, walnut, and maple. Many of his wood sculptures are made of multiple blocks that he carved and placed on top of each other. Brancusi often built a sculpture from many interchangeable and varied parts. He frequently would create a sculpture only to disassemble it and reconfigure the pieces into a new whole. Even sculptures that were made of a single form, such as *Bird in Space*, were subject to variations by changing the bases on which they were displayed.

A sculpture's base may echo an expressive quality of the work or it may call attention to its proportions. Brancusi understood this relationship between the base and sculpture, and he made all of the supports for his works.

- *Take a long look at Bird in Space and make a sketch of it. Next, make another sketch of the sculpture but change its base. Consider designing a base of a different shape and size. In what ways does the base influence your understanding of the artwork? Make a few sketches of the sculpture each with a different base. If you were the artist, with which base would you pair the sculpture?*



CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI  
Romania, 1876–1957, active France  
*Bird in Space*, 1927  
Polished bronze, height: 73 in.; diameter: 8 in.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,  
Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.13  
© Constantin Brancusi Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris  
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

MARJORIE CONTENT (United States, 1895–1984)

## *Untitled*, 1928

---

**M**ARJORIE CONTENT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A PHOTOGRAPHER WITH A POETIC SENSE OF THE WORLD. Her photographs are small in scale (many are only three-by-four inches), yet in many photographs she captured expansive views of urban or natural landscapes. In this image, Content photographed a bird's-eye view of Washington Square Park in New York. A tree is silhouetted against an area where four paths converge. Both the tree and the paths extend beyond the margins of the composition, asking the viewer to wonder what lies beyond the frame.

- *Take a close look at this photograph. What did Content capture in the frame of her camera? What details seem most important? Why do you think the artist chose to photograph this scene from above? In what ways would the image change if Content had photographed Washington Square Park from a different vantage point?*

Content is known for her small-scale photographs of ordinary things, as well as portraits and street scenes. Many of her compositions capture surfaces and the ways they are altered by light and shadow. In this photograph, the even lines of the fence surrounding the path and the shadows they create contrast with the jagged tree branches looming above. For Content, light and shadow are the subject, rather than mere qualities of the subject.

Content's interest in photography began in the 1920s, but she pursued it for only fifteen years. She once wrote, "In photography I knew I was getting to be a better workman . . . (and I suspect that when I could no longer observe improvement that was the point at which I lost intense interest)." She left little documentation of her inspiration or her approach to photography, but it is known that she was acquainted with the painter Georgia O'Keeffe and the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Some scholars believe it was Stieglitz who sparked her interest in photography and influenced her unique perspective.

Stieglitz championed modern photography and worked to promote the medium as equal to traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture. When he met Content, he ran the avant-garde Gallery 291, which exhibited photographs and other artworks by artists who also sought to bring modern photography to the awareness of critics and collectors. Stieglitz served as Content's informal mentor and may have taught her how to print her photographs. Her association with Stieglitz and O'Keeffe also would have exposed her to the latest trends in art.

Content's work was published in the French journal *Photographie* alongside images by Henri Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész, and Dora Maar, among others. Content's studies of flowers, close-up portraits, and details of urban landscapes reflect her critical focus on shape, form, and space—as well as her interest in the formal qualities of an artwork, such as line, pattern, and texture. Although she may have considered herself an amateur, her work reflects a sophisticated understanding of, and interest in, modern aesthetics and styles.

- *George Eastman created the first camera designed for recreational purposes. Beginning in 1888, his Kodak cameras were sold in the United States. Many people soon saw the medium as a convenient and novel way to document their lives, while others, including Marjorie Content, saw photography as an opportunity to turn a critical eye toward the everyday. What is the role of photography and the photographic image in your life? What do you document through photographs?*



MARJORIE CONTENT  
United States, 1895–1984  
*Untitled*, 1928  
Gelatin silver print, 4½ x 6½ in.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund, M.89.85  
© Marjorie Content  
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

LEE KRASNER (United States, 1908–1984)

## ***Desert Moon***, 1955

---

**M**ANY OF LEE KRASNER'S WORKS ARE ROOTED IN NATURE AND NATURAL FORMS, AND SHE GAVE THEM TITLES that reference their inspiration. In this collage, Krasner combined oil paint in saturated shades of orange, red, and pink with sections of oil on paper torn from separate artworks. The bold shapes and brushstrokes create a dynamic, expressive composition.

- *Ask students to define "painting." What kinds of paintings have they created? What are some of the choices artists make when they paint? Describe Desert Moon. How does it differ in style, materials, technique, and subject from a traditional painting?*

Krasner is often associated with abstract expressionism, a vanguard movement in the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s sparked by American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. Around this time, New York became the center of avant-garde activity, since many European artists relocated there in response to World War II. Because many of the artists associated with abstract expressionism lived and worked in New York, the group is also referred to as the New York school. This group generally shared the belief that by clearing their minds of initial preconceptions and anticipation of the end result, their artworks would develop freely with each brushstroke. Often large in scale and characterized by expansive brushstrokes or broad areas of expressive color, these works combine shapes, lines, and forms to represent emotions, individual feelings, and personal experiences.

- *Some abstract expressionists believed that spontaneity and improvisation were important parts of their artistic process. Ask students to create a small drawing in pencil that expresses an emotion or idea. What elements of their drawings represent their emotion or idea?*

Abstract expressionism is described by some scholars as the attempt to establish the self through the act of painting. Many of these artists believed that nonrepresentational painting (painting without references to nature or the external world) was the most direct way to express spiritual and emotional truths. In contrast, Krasner maintained a connection to nature throughout her career. The shapes and colors she combines in her works of art recall natural elements, but the exact sources may be hard to determine.

Krasner's interest in nature was grounded in the organic cycles and processes of nature more than specific elements or objects. She kept a collection of shells, geological specimens, semiprecious stones, and green plants, yet these things only appear in abstracted form in her work. Instead, the gestures in her artworks seem to suggest that the invisible forces of the wind, the tides, and the seasons that affect natural objects and determine their structure and shape are of greater concern to her.

Krasner began making collages in the early 1950s from other artworks that she ripped or cut apart and then recombined into new compositions. She started making collages using her own torn pieces as well as paintings, drawings, and photographs by her artist-husband Jackson Pollock. Krasner believed that her work was part of a discourse with her own earlier pieces and Pollock's art. In her collages, early works are turned into a new media that is arranged without consideration for its original intention or message.



LEE KRASNER

United States, 1908–1984

*Desert Moon*, 1955

Collage of oil on paper on canvas, and oil on canvas, 58 x 42½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Jo Ann and Julian Ganz Jr., Robert F. Maguire III, Leslie and John Dorman, Betty and Brack Duker, John and Joan Hotchkis, Mr. and Mrs. H. Tony Oppenheimer/Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation, Lynda and Stewart Resnick, Sheila and Wally Weisman, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross, Judith and Steaven K. Jones, Myron Laskin, Tally and Bill Mingst, and Irene Christopher through the 2000 Collectors Committee, Director's Discretionary Fund, Judith and Richard Smooke, and two anonymous donors, M.2000.82

© 2008 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

These curriculum materials were prepared by Elizabeth Mackey and Rachel Bernstein and designed by Jenifer Shell.  
© 2009 Museum Associates/Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

Funding for Evenings for Educators is provided by the Joseph Drown Foundation and the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the City of Los Angeles  
Department of Cultural Affairs and the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education.

