

Exhibition: *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*

On View: February 12–June 18, 2017

Location: Art of the Americas Building, Level 2

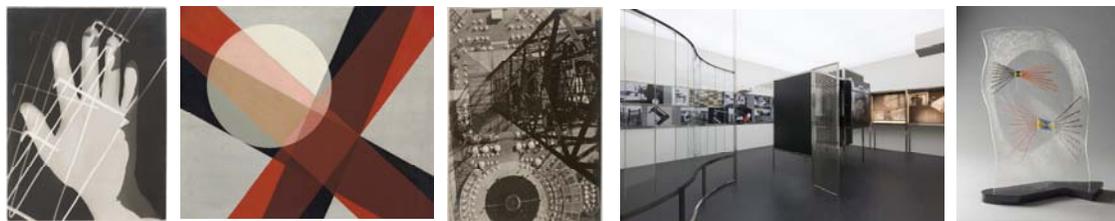


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(Los Angeles—January 10, 2017) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, the first comprehensive retrospective of the pioneering artist and educator László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) to be seen in the United States in nearly 50 years. Organized by LACMA, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, and the Art Institute of Chicago, this exhibition examines the rich and varied career of the Hungarian-born modernist. One of the most versatile figures of the twentieth-century avant-garde, Moholy (as he is often called) believed in the potential of art as a vehicle for social transformation and in the value of new technologies in harnessing that potential. He was a pathbreaking painter, photographer, sculptor, designer, and filmmaker as well as a prolific writer and an influential teacher in both Germany and the United States. Among his innovations were experiments with cameraless photography; the use of industrial materials in painting and sculpture; research with light, transparency, and movement; work at the forefront of abstraction; fluidity in moving between the fine and applied arts; and the conception of creative production as a multimedia endeavor. Radical for the time, these are now all firmly part of contemporary art practice.

The exhibition includes approximately 300 works, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, collages, photographs, photograms, photomontages, films, and examples of graphic, exhibition, and theater design. A highlight is the full-scale realization of the *Room of the Present*, an immersive installation that is a hybrid of exhibition space and work of art, seen here for the first time in the United States. This work—which includes photographic reproductions, films, images of architectural and theater design, and examples of industrial design—was conceived by Moholy around 1930 but realized only in 2009.

Moholy-Nagy: Future Present is co-organized by Carol S. Eliel, Curator of Modern Art, LACMA; Karole P. B. Vail, Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; and Matthew S. Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, Department of Photography, Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition's tour began at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, continued at the Art Institute of Chicago, and concludes at LACMA.

The LACMA exhibition is designed by the Los Angeles-based architecture firm Johnston Marklee. The installation's design reflects the transparency and dynamism of Moholy's work, with a diagonal visual "cut" through the entire exhibition space. At the same time, details of the installation pay specific homage to Moholy's vocabulary both in Germany (a black line running along the floorboards and around doorways) and in Chicago (organically shaped plinths and pedestals for the later sculptures). *Moholy-Nagy* is accompanied by a comprehensive exhibition catalogue, the most extensive English-language book on the artist to date.

"Moholy-Nagy is considered one of the earliest modern artists actively to engage with new materials and technologies. This spirit of experimentation connects to LACMA's long-standing interest in and support of the relationship between art and technology, starting with its 1967–71 Art and Technology Program and continuing with the museum's current Art + Technology Lab," according to Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "This exhibition's integrated view of Moholy's work in numerous mediums reveals his relevance to contemporary art in our multi- and new media age."

"Moholy's goal throughout his life was to integrate art, technology, and education for the betterment of humanity; he believed art should serve a public purpose. These goals defined the artist's utopian vision, a vision that remained as constant as his fascination with light, throughout the many material changes in his oeuvre," comments Carol S. Eliel, exhibition curator. "Light was Moholy's 'dream medium,' and his experimentation employed both light itself and a range of industrial materials that take advantage of light."

About the Artist

László Moholy-Nagy was born in Hungary in 1895. He enrolled as a law student at the University of Budapest in 1915, leaving two years later to serve as an artillery officer in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. He began drawing while on the war front; after his discharge in 1918 Moholy convalesced in Budapest, where he focused on painting. He was soon drawn to the cutting-edge art movements of the period, including Cubism and Futurism. Moholy moved to Vienna in 1919 before settling in Berlin in 1920, where he served as a correspondent for the progressive Hungarian magazine *MA* (Today).

The letters and glyphs of Dada informed Moholy's visual art around 1920 while the hard-edged geometries and utopian goals of Russian Constructivism influenced his initial forays into abstraction shortly thereafter, particularly works that explored the interaction among colored planes, diagonals, circles, and other geometric forms. By the early 1920s Moholy had gained a reputation as an innovative artist and perceptive theorist through exhibitions at Berlin's radical Galerie Der Sturm as well as his writings. His lifelong engagement with industrial materials and processes—including the use of metal plating, sandpaper, and various metals and plastics then newly-developed for commercial use—began at this time.

In 1923 Moholy began teaching at the Bauhaus, an avant-garde school that sought to integrate the fine and applied arts, where his colleagues included Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and other pathbreaking modernists. Architect Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, invited Moholy to expand its progressive curriculum, particularly by incorporating contemporary technology into more traditional methods and materials. He also had a part in Bauhaus graphic design achievements, collaborating with Herbert Bayer on stationery, announcements, and advertising materials.

Photography was of special significance for Moholy, who believed that “a knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet. The illiterates of the future will be ignorant of the use of the camera and pen alike.” In the 1920s he was among the earliest artists to make photograms by placing objects directly onto the surface of light-sensitive paper. He also made photographs using a traditional camera, often employing exaggerated angles and plunging perspectives to capture contemporary technological marvels as well as the post-Victorian freedom of the human body in the modern world. His photographs are documentary as well as observations of texture, captured in fine gradations of light and shadow. Moholy likewise made photomontages, combining assorted elements, typically newspaper and magazine clippings, resulting in what he called a “compressed interpenetration of visual and verbal wit; weird combinations of the most realistic, imitative means which pass into imaginary spheres.” *Moholy-Nagy* includes the largest grouping of the artist's photomontages ever assembled.

After leaving the Bauhaus in 1928, Moholy turned to commercial, theater, and exhibition design as his primary means of income. This work, which reached a broad audience, was frequently collaborative and interdisciplinary by its very nature and followed from the artist's dictum “New creative experiments are an enduring necessity.”

Even as his commercial practice was expanding, Moholy's artistic innovations and prominence in the avant-garde persisted unabated. He continued to bring new industrial

materials into his painting practice, while his research into light, transparency, and movement led to his 35 mm films documenting life in the modern city, his early involvement with color photography for advertising, and his remarkable kinetic *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* of 1930. An extension of his exhibition design work, Moholy's *Room of the Present* was conceived to showcase art that embodied his "new vision"—endlessly reproducible photographs, films, posters, and examples of industrial design.

Forced by the rise of Nazism to leave Germany, in 1934 Moholy moved with his family to Amsterdam, where he continued to work on commercial design and to collaborate on art and architecture projects. Within a year of arriving the family was forced to move again, this time to London. Moholy's employment there centered around graphic design, including prominent advertising campaigns for the London Underground, Imperial Airways, and Isokon furniture. He also received commissions for a number of short, documentary-influenced films while in England.

In 1937, the artist accepted the invitation (arranged through his former Bauhaus colleague Walter Gropius) of the Association of Arts and Industries to found a design school in Chicago, which he called the New Bauhaus—American School of Design. Financial difficulties led to its closure the following year, but Moholy reopened it in 1939 as the School of Design (subsequently the Institute of Design, today part of the Illinois Institute of Technology). Moholy transmitted his populist ethos to the students, asking that they "see themselves as designers and craftsmen who will make a living by furnishing the community with new ideas and useful products."

Despite working full-time as an educator and administrator, Moholy continued his artistic practice in Chicago. His interest in light and shadow found a new outlet in Plexiglas hybrids of painting and sculpture, which he often called *Space Modulators* and intended as "vehicles for choreographed luminosity." His paintings increasingly involved biomorphic forms and, while still abstract, were given explicitly autobiographical or narrative titles—the *Nuclear* paintings allude to the horror of the atomic bomb, while the *Leuk* paintings refer to the cancer that would take his life in 1946.

Moholy's goal throughout his life was to integrate art, technology, and education for the betterment of humanity. "To meet the manifold requirements of this age with a definite program of human values, there must come a new mentality," he wrote in *Vision in Motion*, published posthumously in 1947. "The common denominator is the fundamental acknowledgment of human needs; the task is to recognize the moral obligation in satisfying these needs, and the aim is to produce for human needs, not for profit."

Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition is installed chronologically with sections following Moholy's career from his earliest days in Hungary through his time at the Bauhaus (1923–28), his post-Bauhaus period in Europe, and ending with his final years in Chicago (1937–46). Exhibition highlights include:

Photogram (1926): In the 1920s Moholy was among the first artists to make photograms by placing objects—including coins, lightbulbs, flowers, even his own hand—directly onto the surface of light-sensitive paper. He described the resulting images, simultaneously identifiable and elusive, as “a bridge leading to a new visual creation for which canvas, paintbrush, and pigment cannot serve.”

A 19 (1927): Moholy integrated his ongoing fascination with light, transparency, and motion into *A 19*. He created a sense of transparency in paintings such as this by using separately mixed, opaque colors rather than by layering the neighboring pigments. Geometric forms—circles and diagonals in particular—are leitmotifs in Moholy's work.

Photograph (Berlin Radio Tower) (1928/29): Moholy used a traditional camera to take photos that often employ exaggerated angles and plunging perspectives to capture contemporary technological marvels such as the Berlin Radio Tower, which was completed in 1926. This photograph epitomizes Moholy's concept of art working hand-in-hand with technology to create new ways of seeing the world—his “new vision.”

The Room of the Present is an immersive installation featuring photographic reproductions, films, slides, posters, and examples of architecture, theater, and industrial design, including an exhibition copy of Moholy's kinetic *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* (1930). *The Room* exemplifies Moholy's desire to achieve a *Gesamtwerk* (total work) that would unify art and technology with life itself. A hybrid between exhibition space and work of art, it was originally conceived around 1930 but realized only in 2009, based on the few existing plans, drawings, and related correspondence Moholy left behind.

Vertical Black, Red, Blue (1945): This sculpture from LACMA's collection demonstrates Moholy's use of new industrial materials for his art, in this case Plexiglas that he incised, painted, and shaped. The work appears differently depending on how it is lit: frontal illumination makes prominent the paint colors named in the title, whereas backlighting causes them to recede, drawing out instead the intricate whorl of incisions in the plastic. Such changes are activated by the viewer, who, circling the work, can effectively see two pieces in one.

Catalogue

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue offers extensive and fresh essays on the breadth of Moholy's output as an artist, writer, and teacher and also considers his importance for contemporary art. Edited by exhibition co-curators Carol S. Eliel, Karole P. B. Vail, and Matthew S. Witkovsky, the catalogue includes essays by all three as well as by Julie Barten, Sylvie Pénichon, and Carol Stringari; Stephanie D'Allesandro; Jennifer King; Olivier Lugon; and Elizabeth Siegel.

Complementary Exhibition

Moholy-Nagy: Future Present is accompanied by *Light Play: Experiments in Photography, 1970 to the Present*, a complementary exhibition of works from LACMA's permanent collection. *Light Play* features a selection of still- and moving-image works by artists who have extended, as did Moholy, the parameters of photography, a medium defined as the recording of light: Walead Beshty, Phil Chang, Robert Heinecken, John Houck, Masood Kamandy, Farrah Karapetian, Barbara Kasten, William Larson, Sheila Pinkel, Susan Rankaitis, Alison Rossiter, Wolfgang Tillmans, James Welling, and Jennifer West. The project is organized by Deirdre O'Dwyer, Research Assistant, Modern Art, and Eve Schillo, Assistant Curator, Photography. This exhibition will be on view on weekends in LACMA's Study Center for Photographs and Works on Paper, adjacent to *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*.

Light Play exhibition hours: Saturdays and Sundays, 10am–7pm

Credit:

Moholy-Nagy: Future Present is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Los Angeles presentation is made possible by Alice and Nahum Lainer.

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All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Kitzia and Richard Goodman, with generous annual funding from the Judy and Bernard Briskin Family Foundation, Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Emily and Teddy Greenspan, Jenna and Jason Grosfeld, The Jerry and Kathleen Grundhofer Foundation, Taslimi Foundation, and Lenore and Richard Wayne.

Image captions:

(Left) László Moholy-Nagy, *Photogram*, 1926, gelatin silver print, 9 3/8 x 7 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund, M.86.23, © 2017 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

(Center Left) László Moholy-Nagy, *A 19*, 1927, oil and graphite on canvas, 31 1/2 x 37 5/8 in., Hattula Moholy-Nagy, Ann Arbor, Michigan, © 2017 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

(Center) László Moholy-Nagy, *Photograph (Berlin Radio Tower)*, 1928/29, gelatin silver print, 14 3/16 x 10 in., The Art Institute of Chicago, Julien Levy Collection, Special Photography Acquisition Fund, 1979.84, © 2017 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, digital image © The Art Institute of Chicago

(Center Right) László Moholy-Nagy, *Room of the Present*, constructed 2009 from plans and other documentation dated 1930, Mixed media, inner dimensions: 137 3/4 x 218 7/8 x 319 3/4 in., Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2953, © 2017 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, photography by Peter Cox, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

(Right) László Moholy-Nagy, *Vertical Black, Red, Blue*, 1945, oil and incised lines on Plexiglas, on original base, 18 x 14 1/4 x 6 1/4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Alice and Nahum Lainer, the Ducommun and Gross Acquisition Fund, the Fannie and Alan Leslie Bequest, and the Modern and Contemporary Art Council, M.2012.135a-b, © 2017 Hattula Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, photo © 2016 Museum Associates/LACMA

About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

Location and Contact: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard (at Fairfax Avenue), Los Angeles, CA, 90036 | 323 857-6000 | lacma.org

LACMA press contact: press@lacma.org, 323 857-6522

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