

Symposium  
What's Modern about American Art, 1900–1930?  
June 19–20, 2009  
Chicago and Milwaukee



## Paper Abstracts

### Friday: Modernism and Painting

#### *Framing the Debate*

##### **Art Histories**

Erika Doss, Professor and Chair, Department of American Studies, University of Notre Dame

Until relatively recently, "modern" art in America was defined in terms of a chronological succession of styles, or isms: Impressionism, Synchronism, Precisionism, and Abstract Expressionism, among others. The art of The Eight was not included in this modernist canon—although the members of The Eight considered themselves moderns and were described by their contemporaries as creating "modern art of one kind and another."

This talk explores the evolution of a twentieth-century American art history that determined what was and was not "modern" in American art. Some art historians and critics defined American modernism as an adversarial avant-garde culture of bohemian painters whose radical styles were predicated on "rebellion," and on outraging the middle-class. Others defined modern American art primarily in terms of formalist experimentation and individual approaches to self-criticality. Yet these "shock of the new" definitions are too narrow, greatly restricting American modernism to a specific set of artistic practices and beliefs that the art itself did not necessarily follow, or embody. Modern American art—including that of The Eight—was fairly inclusive and open-ended, driven by pluralistic interests in cultural integration, the dynamism of contemporary life, a plethora of individual styles, and, repeatedly, a strong ambition to re-create and redefine American social, self, and national identity. As twentieth-century American art history unfolded, however, increasingly precise and limiting definitions of American modernism became canonized, freezing The Eight in a pre-modern time.

##### **Advocates & Critics**

Sarah Vure, Professor, Art Department, Long Beach City College

The sensationalism of the Armory Show of 1913 tends to obscure the fact that the initial goals of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, who organized the exhibition, were directly descended from those of realist painters Robert Henri, John Sloan, and their

circle. These artists sought to enlarge the audience for contemporary art by expanding exhibition opportunities and broadening the public's knowledge of new art beyond that which was sanctioned by the academy. In the five years following the landmark exhibition, numerous principles of anti-mimetic art and theory were developed in the United States in response to European abstraction. For the majority of American artists, whether realist or modernist, the underlying goal of aesthetic endeavor was individuality and freedom of expression. Responding to what was then called ultra-modern art, Sloan thought the new movements a splendid symptom to undermine stale artistic conventions. Henri sought to mitigate the shock of the new and hoped the results of the ferment would be definitively American. Although critical of the avant-garde when they departed from the humanism of art for life's sake, Henri and Sloan were indeed advocates of the modern. From investigating the theory and painterly potential of brilliant color schemes to discussing the innovations of Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso in their teaching; from promoting individual expression to supporting independent jury-free exhibitions, Henri and Sloan fostered American modernism.

### **Dealers & Collectors**

Kimberly Orcutt, Associate Curator of American Art, New-York Historical Society

The myth of the Eight, and more broadly the painters associated with the Ashcan School, apotheosizes a group of rebellious artists who painted according to their convictions and heedless of the art market, eking out their living as reporters, illustrators, and teachers. However, all were associated with galleries and collectors to differing degrees. This widely varied group of painters and their involvements with the art market convey its heterogeneity during the first three decades of the twentieth century, but they also illuminate a particular group of dealers and collectors in their pursuit of the avant-garde.

The artists of The Eight emerged during a pivotal moment when the number of galleries representing American artists grew exponentially in numbers; however, it was not until the later 1910s that most of The Eight had steady and successful gallery representation. Ironically, just when the established gallery world "caught up" to these artists, the mantle of the avant-garde had been transferred to a new young group of American modernists who were inspired by European experiments with abstraction. In contrast, major collectors such as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, John Quinn, Lillie Bliss, Albert Barnes, and Duncan Phillips took a bold and early interest in the work of The Eight. They too would support these artists and their contemporaries in the 1910s and 1920s, but most of them were also among the first collectors to pursue the new generation of American modernists, chasing the avant-garde into its next phase.

## Museums

Jennifer Jane Marshall, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, University of Minnesota

The Great Depression witnessed the birth of a second generation of art museums in the United States. MOMA in New York, the Whitney, San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim Foundation's Museum of Non-Objective Painting all opened in the years between 1929 and 1939. While the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Chicago Art Institute bore the traces of Gilded Age largesse in their comprehensive collections, the new museums of the 1930s staked a more modest claim, though one similarly marked by historical circumstance. These institutions assumed responsibility only for the collection and display of modern art. Indeed, "responsibility" is how the young staff members of these new museums observed their cultural role. The climate for art's display and reception had shifted dramatically since the heady days of the 1910s and 1920s, when exhibition spaces like Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291 or the Société Anonyme not only showed the art of the avant-garde, but were instrumental on the front lines of its provocations. With the stock market crash of 1929 and a growing sense of nationalist isolationism, modern art had once again come under fire. As a result, the new museums of the 1930s approached their work defensively—safeguarding modern art within the protective confines of permanent collections, while also fending off accusations of "tommy-rot" by offering a conservative account of modern art's history. This talk will consider how America's modern art museums—and the stories they still tell about modernism's masterworks – bear the trace of 1929.

### *Keywords I—Places & Passages*

#### Transatlantic

Debra Bricker Balken, Independent Curator

In the early 1920s, American art criticism was poised at a critical juncture, having imported various interpretative models that included the writing of Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Guillaume Apollinaire as well as Sigmund Freud. Although Marius de Zayas and Paul B. Haviland had advocated for a formalist discourse in their collaborative venture, *A Study of the Modern Evolution of Plastic Expression*, a tract published by Alfred Stieglitz's '291' gallery during the Armory Show and which advanced a closed reading of modernist art that focused on its visual attributes, eventually such prescriptions would lose traction, offset by the more heady ideas of Freud. Where Stieglitz, and many of the artists he represented, such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe, would continue to track the ongoing iterations of formalism through books such as Bell's *Art*, in which he elaborated on his idea of *significant form*, and even folded into Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Art: Its Tendencies and Meanings*, the writing of many prominent advocates of modernism in

New York, such as Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, and Edmund Wilson, ultimately would become inflected with psychology.

While the formalist model for criticism became less ascendant during the 1920s, and awaited resurrection by George L. K. Morris and Clement Greenberg a decade later, Freud, ironically, became more serviceable in the construction of a national identity for American art—his theories of sexuality easily yielding to metaphors of prowess. And whatever the considerable attention paid to Apollinaire in New York, like Bell and Fry, his ideas would become construed as too cerebral and limiting, unable to accommodate the robust originality of American modernism.

## **Cities**

Wendy Greenhouse, Independent Art Historian

As subject and formal inspiration, the city has always been integral to the construction of modernism. From “gritty” realism to formalist interpretations of modernity’s unprecedented speed, scale, and mechanization, the development of American modernism is inseparable from the American city as the essential expression of the new. But which city? While early twentieth-century New York monopolized the imagination as *the* American city and could even be seen as embodying America itself, other cities, notably Chicago, were also emerging as sites of modernist practice. There, artists applied new ways of seeing and painting to the portrayal of familiar local settings, asserting Midwestern identity as they particularized iconic urbanism.

## **American Scene**

Jason Weems, Assistant Professor, History of Art Department, University of California, Riverside

During the early twentieth century many American artists turned to local subject matter as a means to recontextualize modernity. Shifting away from universalizing imagery of the industrial city in particular, these artists looked to the nation’s regional subject matter to craft more resonant iconographies for American identity. This paper explores the aesthetic and cultural debates that underlie this “scenic turn,” with special attention to rethinking the critical and historical discourses that led much of this work to be stereotyped as reactionary and antimodern. Although some Americans might have imagined the business of early twentieth-century modernization—and its visualization—would be streamlined and irresistible, it was not in fact a clean process. For many people, making sense of modernity involved a complicated dialogue between tradition and innovation; the promise of new opportunities weighed against the security of old practices. In the case of regionalist scene painting the interjection of local idiom into artistic practice gave visual form to the oppositions that many Americans were negotiating in their daily lives. Only by looking in a new and sustained way at such local color *as modern*, I argue, might we fully understand

the temporal, locational, and cultural hybridity of early twentieth-century American art in the country, the city, and elsewhere.

### **Studio/Figure Painting**

Robert Cozzolino, Curator of Modern Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

In the winter of 1918, 21-year old Ivan Albright enlisted in the U.S. Army and by that summer he was in France, assigned to Base Hospital No. 11 in Nantes. For approximately nine months, Albright drew the young, multinational wounded of the Great War. Base 11 was part of a large, crowded hospital complex that was served by elite surgeons from prominent medical schools and considered a leader in treating the physical and psychological effects of battle. Perhaps for this reason, Base 11 received difficult cases, including a large portion of the wounded from the Argonne offensive in October, 1918. In this environment, Albright rendered the new nature of wounds for fascinated surgeons, documenting the healing process in patients before, during, and after treatment by observing surface and hidden wounds that were revealed by x-ray technology. A decade later, in a profile for the *Chicago Daily News*, Albright dismissed his subsequent academic training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and National Academy of Design by calling his World War I experience “the best art training I ever had.” This paper takes Albright’s assertion seriously and considers how the visual, cultural, and historical circumstances of modernity transformed conceptions of the human body. How tenable was the act of sitting in the studio to paint the figure in the wake of cultural upheaval ushered in by events such as the Armory Show, World War I, and later, the Great Depression? The challenge for Albright and his contemporaries was how to reform the body in light of these unprecedented experiences.

### ***Keywords II—Principles & Practices***

#### **Pedagogy**

Barbara Jaffee, Associate Professor of Art History, Northern Illinois University

Marking an image with a few bold lines in order to suggest certain “truths” about its internal structure was once as common to the teaching and practice of art and its history in the United States as diagramming a sentence was to a grammar school education. Yet little is known about the origins of this distinctive methodology or its role in popularizing modernist aesthetics in this country. American artists associated with the development of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century whose work evidences the impact of diagrammatic pedagogies include Arthur Davies, Robert Henri, George Bellows, Stuart Davis, Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Jackson Pollock, and many others.

Diagramming became a tool of art pedagogy in the United States in the context of a more or less official campaign to make art responsive to the needs of industry—a campaign with roots in nineteenth century industrialism and educational reform. This paper will demonstrate, through an exploration of links between industrial modernization, progressive education, and the training of artists, that an interest in abstraction in the 1920s and beyond was not simply a product of the sensational debut of French Cubism at the Armory Show. Although Cubism emerged in the wake of that exhibition as a major tendency in American art, it is important to recognize that the horizon of expectation that made Cubism a success was created by circumstances that far preceded 1913.

## **Realism**

John Fagg, Lecturer in American Literature, School of American & Canadian Studies, Faculty of Arts, The University of Nottingham

Led by Robert Henri, the Ashcan School positioned themselves as America's first avant-garde. They crafted a narrative in which their realist rejection of academic conventions and engagement with New York street-life made them, like Manet and his circle, painters of modern life. But, in a different story about American art, painters wedded to such realist commitments were left behind by the increasingly abstract currents of international modernism. In the wake of the 1913 Armory Show and the sensation created by Matisse, Duchamp, fauvism and cubism, many American artists, including members of the Ashcan School, moved toward forms of abstraction. Reacting to this turn of events, Lloyd Goodrich and other critics and curators identified realism as a uniquely American quality in modern art. In the nationalistic discourse of the 1920s, American realist art provided an antidote to esoteric European "isms."

When told in broad strokes these stories expose "realism" and "modernism" as terms defined and redefined according to the needs of artistic movements and historical circumstances. Hindsight may encourage us to reconcile the warring factions—to see realism and abstraction responding to the shared stimulus of urban modernity, or to argue that "isms" are critics' inventions that bear little relation to the way that art is actually made. But would this not be analysis shaped by our own historical moment, by our current willingness to cross boundaries that once seemed entrenched? Realist movements in art and literature have always sought to define themselves against a romantic or abstract other. The story of modern art in America is in part the story of factions, movements, counter-movements, and competing, conflicting concepts.

## **Radicalism**

Allan Antliff, Canada Research Chair, Department of Art History, University of Victoria

If, like the early twentieth century activist Emma Goldman, we regard society's betterment as a collective process wherein individual freedom and social freedom are contiguous, then

art has an important role to play in the struggle for a just and humane world. Radicalism in art lies in its power to appeal to us as potential accomplices while refusing to closet artistic expression within the confines of oppressive social relations. Examining the work of Robert Henri and other radical modernists during the era of World War I, I will discuss their search for avenues to break out of alienation, affinities that bridged the gap between artist and audience, ruptures that drew Americans into contested social ground where nothing was sacrosanct.

## Saturday: Painting and Design

### *Interdisciplinary Discussion*

#### **Art and Design 1900**

Joseph Cunningham, Curator, American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation

The relationship of art and design in America in the first quarter of the twentieth century is a strange and complex topic. Even in the wake of the radical integration of art and decoration epitomized by James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room of 1876, heroic architect designers such as Frank Lloyd Wright, George Washington Maher, and Purcell & Elmslie all but dismissed fine art from their interiors. Influential furniture and interiors makers like Gustav Stickley, Harvey Ellis, and George Mann Niedecken attempted to improve the lives of their clients through tasteful and authentic room decoration but likewise made no space for the hanging of serious paintings. So, where did this deep-seated commitment to total design harmony (the home as *Gesamkunstwerk*) leave painting and sculpture in the homes and lives of collectors?

Investigating the nature of interior decoration, furniture design, and the integration of design and fine art in domestic spaces reveals a shocking disconnect between these two forms of art around 1900. In this paper we will analyze the theoretical constructs that divided art and decoration at the turn of the last century and examine a number of key interiors from the period in order to piece together the story of how art and design grew so far apart around 1900.

### *Panel Discussion*

#### **Ornament**

Virginia Terry Boyd, Professor, Design Studies Department, University of Wisconsin—Madison

Ornament is a powerful tool in the communication of social and cultural ideas and as an emblem that symbolizes a commitment to particular beliefs. This is particularly true of the

use of ornament in design between 1900 and 1930 in America and Europe. During this period it was an integral element among the many expressions of Modern in the design of the objects of daily life. The presentation looks at how a selection of designers and movements embraced it or consciously rejected it as they pressed to find a visual vocabulary that captured the energy and change occurring in the new period around them.

## **Authenticity**

Sarah Fayen, Curator, Chipstone Foundation

In the late nineteenth century, an exploding volume of mass-produced and inexpensive stylish housewares gave the growing multitudes of Americans access to fashions previously reserved for the elite. New, more abstract criteria for judging taste arose to help those near the top of the social hierarchy differentiate themselves from the increasingly acquisitive hordes. In this competitive environment of self-representation, *authenticity* became a catchword for designers and consumers who set themselves apart from the goods they considered derivative and cheap.

In his particular pursuit of *authenticity*, Buffalo furniture designer Charles Rohlf's prioritized the individual artistic vision and commitment of the maker. Using romantic language, Rohlf's argued that authenticity or "truth" in furniture came from the "unfettering of the wings of imagination." Each individual had artistic inclinations and needed only to set them free, a notion very much in line with reform movements in art education and tenets of Aesthetic Movement leaders like E. W. Godwin, Oscar Wilde, and James McNeill Whistler.

At the same time, Rohlf's also believed that authentic designs came from heart-felt dedication to a particular type of labor. The best hand-carved wood, for instance, came from a person committed to that particular skill and a belief in, as Rohlf's put it, "the supreme dignity of labor." While his statement borrows from the vocabulary of socialism, Rohlf's ridiculed the utopian communities and price-sharing cooperatives created by some of America's early twentieth-century Arts and Crafts leaders. He did not believe in the inherent morality of hand-work. It was not the action of the chisel that elevated the maker, he believed, but rather the maker's steadfast commitment to the carving. In these ways, Rohlf's version of authenticity in design combines the ideals of individual expression championed in the nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement with the new Arts and Crafts Movement ideals, which found authenticity in the removal of historic ornament and the use of natural materials.

## **Antimodernism**

Amy F. Ogata, Associate Professor, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture

Antimodernism is a paradoxical term. It means both an embrace of the conditions of modernity and a reaction against them. In this paper, I suggest how antimodernism was employed as an artistic strategy around 1900. By looking at the art and design at the turn of the century in both the U.S. and Europe, I explore how this paradoxical term produced a variety of expressions. Anxiety about the effects of industrialization provoked sophisticated artists to adopt the charged imagery of an imagined past or take up handicrafts in the hopes of reasserting a new vitality in everyday goods. Many looked to unindustrialized means of manufacture and traditions of the peasantry, to idealized images of exotic places, and even to the naïve insight of children for an “authentic” cultural expression. As both social critique and nostalgic sentimentality, antimodernism offers a look at the deeply contrary impulses of turn-of-the-century art and design.