

# **WHAT IS MODERNISM?**

Asking the question of what modernism is all about is not as simple as getting a date or a time period and labeling everything that falls within that time frame as “modern”. There is much spirited scholarly discussion about when or how modernism actually began. For generalists, the standard definition would be "a general term applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the literature (and other arts) of the early 20th century...." (Baldick, 1991).

But what about artists before that time period who already thought of their art as “modern”? Witcombe in his essay, “What is art, what is an artist?” (1997) points out 14<sup>th</sup> century artist Cennino Cennini who in his 1437 book *Il Libro dell'Arte* describes Giotto as having made painting “modern” or of Giorgio Vasari who in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy described art of his time as “modern” as well.

It would seem that the term can describe everything that was made in its time. Such a dilemma which raises so many questions on what can essentially be considered as modern, makes it necessary to adopt a much wider perspective of what modernism actually is. It is imperative to adopt this view in order to thoroughly discover and understand where modernism came from, to clarify its philosophical underpinnings and to know what it tried to accomplish.

### ***Roots of Modernism***

The modern period was said to have begun during the Renaissance when secular humanism placed the burden of society’s preservation and progress squarely on the shoulders of humanity. It used to be that God or nature was the measure of all things, but Renaissance humanism already evoked the modernist trend of thought that human beings ultimately held the power to “create, improve, and reshape their environment, with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation” (Cole, 1983, p.6 ). This pattern of thinking evolved

and expanded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the Age of Enlightenment finally formalized and affirmed this humanist belief as credible; reason indeed and rationality achieved enlightenment of the mind and consciousness and allowed man to see beyond ignorance and superstition.

Accompanying this intellectual movement was the Scientific Revolution (late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) which showed scientific truths as debunking numerous conventional beliefs that were held in place by institutions such as the Church. The open-mindedness of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century period allowed people the freedom to think and apply reason to find truth. But even as scientism became a way of seeing things in a clearer, more objective light, it soon became clear that there were serious challenges to the belief that the continuous and progressive line of development that began from the Renaissance would continue indefinitely; that simple reason was sufficient or that civilization brought nothing but progress and that progress was always positive.

These challenges soon began to shake up the order of things, paving the way for the formation of the foundations of modernism as we have come to know it.

In literature writers such as Richard Wagner and Henrik Ibsen already foresaw what future civilizations and accompanying progress could do to individuals; Ibsen in particular questioned the morally upright Victorian image as false and flawed and presented his views that morality was not as simple as black and white. Philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche began to radically question truth; transforming and reconstructing old notions of morality and of the individual's place in society (Nicholls, 1995, pp.34-35).

In the scientific arena, Charles Darwin's seminal Theory of Evolution which posited that human beings were in essence, biologically animalistic in impulse and origin single-handedly changed the way people thought about religious doctrine which held that man's creation was

made possible by divinity. Economic and economic theorists such as Karl Marx latched onto the same thread of thought and showed how dehumanizing some aspects of the present economic order were.

In art, a new way of seeing was showed by the Impressionism movement which took art away from the artificiality of the studio and into the “realness of the outdoors”. Based on the scientific principle which established that the reason why we can see things is because light is bounced off from an object and into our line of vision, Impressionists such as Manet broke away from the traditional convention of artistic vision and introduced a way of looking at things that also became a way of viewing other things and not only art.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these influences and new schools of thought along with the period’s social, political, and economic forces and currents began to coalesce into the landscape that became known as modernism. Complementing this intellectual landscape was also a changing psychical environment made possible with the wonders and inventions of industrialization which was creating a new landscape filled with bigger and taller buildings, faster and roomier means of transportation, new devices that enabled better communication and expansion of borders as it became easier for people to travel from one place to another.

This physical landscape changed as well how people lived, behaved and thought. The ideas and philosophical constructs put forward by Wagner, Ibsen, Kant, Darwin, Manet, et.al all began to take shape into something that was soon to become the new and “modern” order of things.

### *The Rise of Modernism*

It would be quite impossible to put a definite date on when did “modernism” actually began from the perspective of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the amorphousness of the term did not stop

thinkers and academics from attempting to place it in a specific time frame. Greenberg in his essay *Modernism and Postmodernism* (1979, p.7) states that:

*"What can be safely called Modernism emerged in the middle of the last century—and rather locally, in France, with Baudelaire in literature and Manet in painting, and perhaps with Flaubert, too, in prose fiction..."*

Modernism's first steps were tentative; it was initially described and termed as bold, even revolutionary. Modernists were called avant-garde and society was hesitant to embrace the movement's sometimes brash and aggressive stance to promote its philosophy. People still wanted to embrace what was familiar and reassuringly traditional.

But scientific progress, increasing industrialization and the increasing influence of emerging social sciences in changing how public policies were being crafted made it obvious that the world was changing and opening up to a new era whose shape and form was becoming more and more like the modernism movement.

People and general society then began to question what they had always embraced as the familiar and the reassuringly traditional; soon psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud provided society with the means or the blueprint to go about this re-examination of society and the self.

This effectively freed humanity from the thinking of the past that dictated external and absolute reality to be the arbiter of how man viewed and understood the world. Freud's peers such as Carl Jung further expanded on this exploration of the subconscious to find a connection and bond among all individuals within the unconscious sphere of the mind; more importantly, Jung also explained that society's occasional impulses to break social norms was not inherently evil or motivated from something baseless, but actually was part of a means to express one's inherent animal instincts.

This complements and builds upon what Darwin had already established (and now widely accepted) as the “animal” side of man.

In science, scientists such as Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr brought humanity further, both into a deep inward and outward exploration of frontiers as they had never gone before with groundbreaking works such as *The General Theory of Relativity* and the birth of Quantum Physics. In the arts, it was inevitable that every kind of art form from music to painting, to architecture and even dance was touched and transformed by the modernist movement.

This transformation was anything but peaceful or traditional; the bounds of realism were pushed even further, convention was discarded, natural movements and rhythms were disrupted and new ways of looking and critiquing things were constructed.

Figurative arts saw the rise of painters such as Pablo Picasso, Klimt and Henry Matisse who brought a new edge and vision into the solid and angular forms of their paintings. In music and dance, the collaborative efforts of Mahler and Richard Strauss, Stravinsky and Nijinsky produced testaments to a changed and invigorated stage where substance and expressions won over structure or restrictive traditional forms.

Literature was at its most exuberant, reflecting both the times as well as looking forward fearlessly into a future filled with possibilities both positive and negative; the latter was no longer feared but seen as part of a cycle of life whose outcome was determined not by the strictures of the past ages, but by individual effort and dynamic social forces.

Writers such as Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner wrote of the muscularity of the times; of man still attempting to control forces beyond his control and sometimes succeeding. Others like T.S. Eliot, H.D. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Federico Garcia Lorca, Ezra Pound and Marcel Proust, wrote about the human condition at its worst and at its best, and with always a

warning that the individual who pits himself against the larger establishment must face the consequences of his actions. Women have slowly found their voice in the modern age as writers such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf began to champion the causes of women as an essential ingredient to a truly modern age that has to abandon the old and oppressive shackles which has kept women at the sidelines (Nicholls, 1995, pp45). Others still like William Butler Yeats wrote of nationalism and a pride of place that would later find powerful echoes in the establishment of democracy and nation-hood in the emerging 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By the time the Second World War ended, modernism had entrenched itself deeply into society; this was clearly evident in the way the urban landscape had changed, or been reconstructed after the upheavals of two world wars. Modernism was also reconstructing itself alongside the changes that were happening in society at large. Technology was no longer something in the realm of theory or a curiosity to be gazed at in a fair or in an exhibition. Automation and industrialism became the norm in even the most humble of homes; the telephone, the mass production and availability of automobiles, the speed of travel and communications created new lifestyles, new trends, behaviors and social manners. (Kolocontroni, et.al, 1998, pp.210).

The impact of these was immediately felt within the nuclear family structure as interactions and goals in families changed.

In the arts, the evolution from Picasso's barely recognizable forms took even a more radical shape as Abstract expressionism took center stage. If not abstracted forms, then minimalism and the purity of form reigned with works by Piet Mondrian, Andre Breton and Fernand Leger (Sonesson, 2006). The physical urban landscape had changed dramatically as well, even as efforts during the war to avoid destroying buildings and landmarks with great

historical value preserved some of the traditional forms and influences. But with modernism, modernist architects and designers wanted to do away with the traditional and turned to technology to give them the flexibility to create forms that had none of the styles and decorations of the past. They believed that modernity should evoke function and fundamental usefulness but not necessarily rejecting aesthetics. Architects such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe of the Bauhaus school created stunning forms that emphasized material and geometrical perfection, creating a modern design philosophy that spilled over into interiors, furniture design, fashion, graphic design and product designs (Bauhaus, 2007). Literature took on a darker turn as the memories of the war and of the horrors of fascism were still fresh in everyone's minds, provided material and context for the exploration of not only inhumanity, but also of a larger sense of compassion and social responsibility in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past

### Conclusion

Modernism in its entirety is difficult to define and contain as it touches and affects every part of society. But in essence, its most enduring (as well as most controversial) trait is its rejection of anything traditional and established; this rejection in turn has created a whole new mode of thought and way of life that eventually convinced those who were against it to believe that this was part of humanity- that it must be inherent in society to express itself, to experiment, to be radical and to explore. Modernism has showed that we live in a dynamic world that is not bound by singular and absolute laws. While science has discovered some things to be indeed absolute, there is still plenty more to discover and question which would hopefully move us even further into a clearer understanding of ourselves.

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