The Armory Show of Modern Art, New York City in 1913

A.J. Smuskiewicz

The Armory Show of Modern Art was the first major exhibition of modern art (nontraditional art that began to be produced in the mid- to late 1800s) in the United States. Formally called the International Exhibition of Modern Art, it was held in the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City from February 17 to March 15, 1913. The show, organized by the new Association of American Painters and Sculptors, then moved to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Copley Society of Art in Boston. The exhibition was the first opportunity for Americans to see a large and diverse collection of nontraditional, avant-garde artistic styles, including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Pointillism, Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Futurism. These types of works had generally not been accepted by established U.S. art galleries of the time.

The exhibition generated immense media attention, and an estimated 87,000 guests viewed the works in New York. Many people were shocked and appalled at what they saw, not understanding the abstract or highly stylized representations on display. Others, however, welcomed the new styles as exciting, provocative, and perceptive. The art was part of the larger Modernism trend, which extended into the mid-20th century. This trend also involved transformations in Western attitudes in architecture, literature, music, science, politics, and social organization. The Armory Show helped to firmly implant modern art and the concept of Modernism in the American consciousness.

European Artwork

The Armory Show consisted of nearly 1,400 paintings, sculptures, and other works by about 300 artists. Much of it came from European artists, who were at the forefront of the modern art movements. Their works generated most of the controversy. Among the more notable European pieces were the following:

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) was the most controversial piece in the show. The Cubist painting features abstract shapes superimposed on each other, vaguely resembling legs, a torso, and a head. One critic famously condemned it as "an explosion in a shingle factory." Cubism leader Pablo Picasso had eight pieces in the show. His *Woman with Mustard Pot* (1910) consists of a dark canvas with a warped face and out-of-perspective background. His *Standing Female Nude* (1911) is a drawing consisting mostly of zig-zag lines. These and other Cubist works from the show drew so much attention that the word "Cubism" became virtually synonymous with Modernism in public usage.
Henri Matisse was part of the Fauvism movement, characterized by expressive, colorful works. His *The Blue Nude* (1907) is a seemingly primitive, flat rendering of a reclining nude with thick dark outlines. His *The Red Studio* (1911) features a collage of images on a bold bright red background. Henri Rousseau thrived in the Primitive, or "Naïve," style of painting. In his *Cheval attaque par un jaguar (Jaguar Attacking a Horse)* (1910), bold bright green foliage dominates the canvas. Paul Gauguin, whose work foresaw the Primitive movement, was represented in the show by *Words of the Devil* (1892), which has a tribal appearance.
Gauguin's friend Vincent Van Gogh had 18 of his highly individualistic, emotional, Post-Impressionist pieces in the show. These included *Mountains at Saint-Remy* (1889) and *Self-Portrait* (1886). Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, another artist with a highly individualistic style, was represented by several pieces. These included *Le Divan Japonais* (1892-93), a lithograph with his trademark caricatures of people rendered in flat, solid blocks of color.

![Toulouse-Lautrec's Le Divan Japonais (1892-93)](image)

Paul Cezanne's *View of the Domaine Saint-Joseph* (late 1880s) is a Post-Impressionist view of a Jesuit estate on a hill, with parts of canvas left bare. His *Baigneuses, No. 1* (1877-78) is a sketchy, unfinished painting of nude bathers. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *In The Garden* (1885) is a classic example of Impressionism. It was one of the more conventional-looking pieces in the show.
Paul Signac's *Port de Marseille* (1905) is a Neo-Impressionist example of Pointillism, depicting buildings and boats in water. Georges Seurat's *The Models* (1888) is a Pointillist painting of three nude women. Psychological Expressionism was represented by Edvard Munch's *Vampire* (1893-94), originally titled *Love and Pain*. It is a stylized depiction of a woman either kissing or biting a man's neck. Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneering abstract artist, was represented in the show by *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)* (1912)
American Artwork

American artists had more paintings in show than did the Europeans. However, their work was more conventional and caused far less controversy. Art historian Elizabeth Lunday has observed that American art of the time was about 50 years behind European art in terms of Modernism. Among the American artists represented in the show were the following:

A young Edward Hopper, probably best known for his 1942 painting of a late-night diner titled *Nighthawks*, sold his first painting at this show. It was a new realistic rendering of a sailboat titled *Sailing*. A young Stuart Davis, who became known for his "proto-pop" art of the 1940s and 1950s, had several watercolors and pastels in the show.

There were several moody abstracted landscapes and other oils by established painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Leon Dabo was represented with some of his tonalist landscapes. Marsden Hartley had a number of his expressionist, abstracted still lifes and drawings in the show.
The exhibition included two new oils depicting female nudes by Kathleen McEnery, *Going to the Bath* and *Dream*. Mary Cassatt was represented with her painting of a mother and child titled *Mere et enfant*, from 1903. McEnery and Cassatt were among about 50 female artists whose work was included in the Armory Show.

Reaction and Legacy

Many American art critics condemned and ridiculed the Armory Show. Harriet Monroe wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Something must be wrong with an age which can put those things in a gallery and call them art. … [They] should hang in the curio room of an insane asylum." Some critics simply expressed their confusion at what they saw.

Despite such critics, many works were purchased by prominent collectors, including Lillie P. Bliss, who bought 20 pieces by Cezanne, Gaugin, Renoir, and other artists. These and other pieces from Bliss's collection would later form the core of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Cezanne's *View of the Domaine Saint-Joseph* was purchased for $6,700 (equivalent to about $168,000 today) by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That was the highest price paid for any object from the show.
The Armory Show proved to be a key breakthrough event in American culture. It elevated nontraditional, modern art to the level of "real" art in the minds of the American art community and public. Because of the influence of this exhibition, American artists moved more into the sphere of Modernism. The influence of Modernism was felt in other cultural realms besides pure art, including fashion (from the flapper era of 1920s to the miniskirt era of 1960s) and politics (from women's suffrage and workers' rights in the 1920s to women's liberation and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s). Even the desire to shock and outrage among some modern-day rock and pop stars and other artists can be traced to the legacy of the Armory Show.
Colorful short dresses and go-go boots in the 1960s

Lady Gaga in her famous raw meat dress in 2010