

Art in a Fast-changing World

By the early 1900s, people worldwide were transforming their habits, identities, and landscapes more dramatically than ever. Artists and designers, inspired by innovations such as radios, skyscrapers, ocean liners, and even the development of modern psychology, responded with cutting-edge representations of new and familiar subjects.

International Modernism explores how this response to modern life evolved through much of the 20th century, from the 1913 Armory Show in New York that introduced many Americans to the European avant-garde, to the postwar optimism that lasted through the early 1960s, to the growth of photography as an art form. Installed from fall 2015 through mid-2016, the exhibition centers on objects from the Kunin Collection as well as paintings, prints, photography, and design from Mia's collection.

The Big City

Skyscrapers forever changed the urban experience. Tall, slender, and typically stepped back as they rise—a distinct profile that originated with a New York City regulation to allow some light to reach the streets—skyscrapers became an artistic shorthand for modernity. Some artists and photographers created angular, dramatic depictions of an astonishing skyline. Others used the everyday buildings of industrial architecture to show the alienation of modern urban life. In a mix of marketing savvy and genuine inspiration, designers and manufacturers produced chic skyscraper-inspired objects for the home.

Modern Identity

The material comforts of modern life come with costs—the stress of a fast-paced lifestyle, advertising influencing how you live—and artists quickly picked up on them. Portraits in the early 1900s were marked by flat planes of color, stark surroundings, and piercing interpretations—and artists didn't spare themselves the same, often biting depictions. They turned to photography, an increasingly popular art from the 1920s on, to capture spontaneous moments that portraiture never could before. And designers created stylish accessories for modern life, status symbols that helped project a put-together appearance.

Cocktail culture

Art and design celebrated imbibing from the 1920s Jazz Age through the 1950s “Mad Men” era, even during Prohibition. When manufacturing or selling liquor became illegal in the United States in 1920, clandestine clubs, or speakeasies, proliferated. But the real celebration began in 1933 when Congress passed the 21st Amendment, repealing Prohibition. Cocktail parties came out into the open, accompanied by innumerable objects for refined drinking. Underground music movements such as jazz thrived in this uninhibited and creative atmosphere, in turn inspiring visual artists to capture the excitement of the time.

The Circus and Other Entertainments

Many of us now think of clowns as scary, thanks in part to avant-garde artists. Their portrayals of circus life, from poignant portraits to the spectacle of the performance, revealed the subculture behind one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the early decades of the 1900s. They highlighted its characters and often showed a more sinister or contemplative side than the circus projected. Immersed in American and European culture, artists also cast a modern eye on dance and even the traditional entertainments of the bullfight.

Break It Down: Abstraction

Simplify. Reduce. This was the goal of most American and European abstract art—but to different ends. The Dutch artists of the De Stijl (The Style) movement sought to create a new, universal style of painting, architecture, and design. Russian artists of the Constructivist movement stressed the social purpose of art. Some artists used flat, geometric planes of color—usually black, white, gray, and the primary colors of red, blue, and yellow. Others followed the example of Cubist artists, distorting their subjects with fragmented compositions and unnatural colors while still making them recognizable.