PROGRAMME EIGHT: 20TH CENTURY ART BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Part 1: Between Genius and the Abyss

MONTAGE SEQUENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

SELF PORTRAIT WITH MODEL, 1909, KIRCHNER (Kunstalle, Hamburg)
"DIE BRUCKE"

LANDSCAPE AT COLLIoure, 1906, MATISSE, (Hermitage, Leningrad)
"FAUVISM"

MANDOLIN, BRAQUE (Tate Gallery, London)
"CUBISM"

FATES OF ANIMALS, 1913, MARC (Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel)
"BLAUE REITER"

DYNAMISM OF A SOCCER PLAYER, 1913, BOCCIONI (Museum of Modern Art, New York) "FUTURISM"

DYNAMIC SUPREMATISM, 1916, MALEVICH (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) "SUPREMATISM"

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA OUTSIDE VIENNA PARLIAMENT BUILDING

The first fifteen years of the 20th Century saw changes in the theory and practice of art among modern artists in western Europe which were so remarkable they've been compared with the great advances made in science and technology at the same time. There's no simple explanation for why this period was so dynamic, nor was the dynamism confined to one centre. Although Paris had long been the focus of modernism it had its rivals in Brussels, Barcelona and Munich. But it was a time of growing tension in western culture.
Of continued rapid industrialisation, of imperialism abroad and rivalry within the States of Europe and at the same time scientific breakthroughs which not only questioned our way of seeing the world, but the very nature of reality itself. Planck’s Quantum theory, Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, Freud’s work on psychoanalysis. It was in 1900 that Freud wrote his Interpretation of Dreams, a prophetic work in view of the tragedies of modern western history, and Freud wrote that book and published it here in Vienna.

**MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:**

Vienna 1900 was one of the intellectual and artistic centres of Europe and in tracing the emergence of modern art in the 20th Century, Vienna embodies perhaps more than any other city the struggle to break with the ossified traditions of the 19th Century to achieve a modern art.

An art for the 20th Century.

Turn of the century Vienna was a prosperous and technologically advanced society, peaceful and secure.
The centre of the Austro-Hungarian empire, ruled over for more than fifty years by the last of the Habsburgs, Emperor Franz-Josef. Franz-Josef symbolised permanence and stability. He cultivated a status quo based on a bureaucracy and state censorship which exerted a virtual stranglehold on the cultural imagination of the capital.

Artistic life was dominated by the Baroque history painting of the Fine Arts Academy.

Architectural endeavour aimed at creating a sense of continuity with a grand past.

The town hall, late Gothic

The Hofberg Theatre, high Baroque

The Parliament buildings, classical Greek

Against this background artists and architects across Europe sought new ways of looking, new forms of building that would embody the idealism and progress of the New Age.
In Vienna these hopes found expression in this building, the Viennese Secession building, designed by Josef Maria Olbrich in 1898. In its simplicity and its distinctive ornamental dome it's an early attempt at modern architecture.

The building housed a group of artists and architects who in 1897 seceded, or broke away from the reactionary Academy of Fine Arts to form their own organisation, the Secession, and surprisingly the Emperor Franz-Josef himself opened the first exhibition here and elements of the notoriously conservative Viennese bourgeoisie were quick to buy from the exhibitors and to commission its architects. But at heart it remained an anti-academic organisation.

One of the founder members of the Secession was the architect Otto Wagner and his design for the Postal Savings Bank of Vienna confidently transports the principles of the Secessionists into the 20th Century. Its a classical building.
but there's no vain glory, no false monumentality.

The use of materials takes pride of place. The newest, including aluminium, combined with the oldest, including marble to produce a result startling in its modernity, given its date of 1904.

But most of all it was the Secessionist painters and their successors, first Klimt, then Schiele and Kokoschka, who possessed the power most effectively to disrupt the conservative values of Viennese society.

In 1902, for the 14th Secessionist Exhibition, Gustav Klimt, the most important of the Secessionist painters, painted this frieze-like work in homage to one of the great figures of the 19th Century, Beethoven.

The Beethoven Frieze is concerned with the highest ideals of art. It portrays the conflict between the human desire for happiness, love and fulfilment, set against the fact of
evil, corruption, death and even the terrors of the unconscious.

It portrays the achievement of pure joy through poetic and artistic creation and it culminates in a final embrace between man and woman. A kiss for the whole world.

The modernity of the Beethoven Frieze lies less in the novelty of its ornamental extravagance, than in its capacity to shock through its sexual explicitness.

Klimt, like other artists of the Secession, was partly reacting against the stultifying conservatism of turn of the century Vienna. It was a stagnant society, opposed to change, hidebound by class distinction and strict moral codes. In these circumstances the erotic power of Klimt's work caused an outcry.

Klimt's essentially harmonious idealistic view of beauty has a 19th century flavour, a more distinctly 20th century modernism arose in Vienna with a younger generation, especially Egon Schiele.
Schiele like Klimt believed that there was a spiritual dimension to sexual ecstasy, but his was a brutally direct approach to sex.

His depictions of the female nude are projections of male sexual feeling and given they were painted in the first decade of this century, unprecedented in their license and intensity.

Schiele was also deeply obsessed with the self, again a very modern preoccupation. He saw man as a sexual being tormented by a sense of spiritual despair and he thought human existence without meaning, a continual striving, doomed to frustration.

Schiele's willingness to confront himself and his world directly, however disturbing, is at the core of modern art found not only in Vienna, but especially in Germany, in Expressionism.

At this time Germany was engaged in a process of rapid industrialisation and Imperial expansion.
Many artists rejected this new Germany, but ironically they were influenced by the exotic world, discovered in the Kaiser's colonies in Africa and the Pacific. Primitive art.

The myth of the innocent savage held special attractions for artists right across Europe. I think especially of a small group of German artists, hardly more than students, who called themselves Die Brücke, the Bridge. They were based in Dresden.

These artists, like Schiele, thoroughly disliked the idea of art as like some sort of beautiful curtain. Inspired by what they thought of as the directness, the spontaneity of primitive art, they tried to free themselves from the constraints of civilised life.

This picture is by one of them. It's by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and it was begun around 1909, and it shows how they actually tried to live the myth of the primitive. They acted out for themselves in what amounts to nudist bacchanals here on the shores of the Moritzburger Lakes.
They decorated their studios as if they were the centres of a new tribal culture. One so free of civilised restraint that they could remake art.

Later, in Munich, the artist Franz Marc, would write in a way that Kirchner would have understood. "Our ideas and ideals must be clad in hairshirts, they must be fed on locusts and wild honey, not on history if we're ever to escape the exhaustion of our European bad taste".

For the Brücke artists it seemed briefly possible to live and paint as if making a reality out of a primitive idyll. And thus to confront modern Germany, industrial and militaristic, with an alternative.

In France there was a loosely aligned group of artists who could also, at times, paint explicitly primitivising pictures, and who were drawn as well to the pre-industrial,
I mean the Fauves. They preceded the Brücke artists, and provided a vital example for them. Andre Derain was a leading Fauve at this time and this is his Bathers of 1907. For them as for the Brücke artists, an exciting stimulus was provided by Paul Gauguin's exotic, highly coloured, transformations of native life in France's south sea colonies.

Best known among the Fauves was Henri Matisse. This is Matisse's Luxe, Calme et Volupté. He began in 1904 to use a repertoire of coloured patches and marks brilliantly synthesised from Gauguin, Van Gogh and Signac, using them as the sumptuous pictorial vehicle for his own range of pré-industrial idylls. His Luxe, Calme et Volupté is a spectacular example.

Fauve means wild beast, it was a critic's tag. And it was the seeming wildness of paintings like this by Andre Derain that made them for contemporaries so much more modern than their sources and by
their sources I mean Gauguin and even Van Gogh. And yet when one looks at a Derain like this, I think it’s very obvious that the discord, the tension that came of the sexual subject matter of Kirchner in Germany and of Schiele in Austria, just isn’t there.

**CHRISTOPHER GREEN VOICE-OVER:**

The Fauves used their wild way with colour and it was actually much less wild than it seems, much more knowing, they knew exactly how to use a blue against a green, an orange or a red against a yellow. They used their way with colour to ravish the eye. They produced versions not only of a golden age but also what one might call a tourists's world. A world where the sun is always out.
LANDSCAPE AT COLLIOURE,
1906, MATISSE (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris)
POSTCARD OF FRENCH RIVERA

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA
FINISHING ON VIEW OF EIFFEL TOWER

In the early years of the century modernism came in a tremendous variety of forms in many different places. But there was one city which was viewed as the pre-eminent centre of modernism and which acted as a magnet to a motley army of artists who came from everywhere.

Russians, Rumanians, Germans, British, Americans, all drawn by what became a sort of bohemian finishing school for modern artists. And despite the reputation of Schiele, Klimt and Matisse, there was one artist working in this city during those years and right the way through to the middle of the century who is still for us the modern artist.

He is Picasso, the city Paris.

MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

Of all the artists who worked in Paris it is Picasso who has been elevated by critics and historians.

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to the status of the modern artist-as-hero. To honour him the French have installed all the works that he never wanted to sell in the grandest of museums, a supreme monument founded by the establishment to an artist whose reputation was built on the subversion of establishments.

Here at the Musée Picasso is an exhibition focused on the single most famous modern picture painted by Picasso, Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. This painting is repeatedly claimed to be the first modern painting of the 20th Century.

Far more important I think is the fact that this painting has really two quite separate identities, even reputations. In the first place it has a reputation as what might be called a highly expressive painting, a painting whose content is sexuality and violence. In the second place it has a reputation as 'the' work that opened the way to a movement which we think of as really quintessentially 20th Century, I mean Cubism.
It was essentially as a renewal of the language, the means of painting and sculpture that Cubism was so important.

CHRISTOPHER GREEN VOICE-OVER:

And what is usually picked out as anticipating Cubism in this painting is above all the treatment of the human figure.

The figures are stylised, but this is not all. Those on the right, especially the crouching nude, seem literally to have been dislocated, pulled apart. One feature is pulled right out of alignment with another.

This is the result of an attempt by Picasso to fuse into his depictions of figures views from varying angles, as if he, the artist, or they, the figures were in movement as he conceived them.

The dislocations of multiple viewpoints, along with another factor, the apparent flattening of space, were to be characteristic of what later, around 1908 to 1911, came to be called Cubist painting.
Picasso moved into this kind of painting with Georges Braque as his ally.

The Mandolin, painted by Braque in 1910, shows just how subtle Cubist art can be. It is very different from Les Demoiselles; quieter, much more difficult to decipher. The eye oscillates between hints of a Mandolin and a jug, dislocated by multiple perspective, and a structure of glinting shards or planes shattered right across the picture surface.

Many people, the British critic Roger Fry for instance, thought pictures like this totally abstract. They only saw the structures of planes.

And certainly it can seem in a figure painting like this by Picasso that the geometric structure of planes is antagonistic to any normal perception of the subject, and that eventually it must completely cloak the subject, take over.
But actually Picasso's and Braque's Cubism never broke with representation. What such pictures said was that painting is not a mirror held up to the world but a language, a language of mark and shape making, of structuring on a flat surface whose means are infinitely variable but which has a power to represent things grasped in space in all their complex solidity.

What then of its other reputation? I mean, its reputation as an expressive picture which is about sex. Well, I think it's obvious that it is a painting in which Picasso uses these technical innovations we've talked about to give an added expressive charge to his figures. And at the same time I think it's very obvious that this isn't simply a group of nudes posed for an artist. This is, these nudes are presented as, prostitutes who are on sale to us.
MEDICAL STUDENT, SAILOR AND FIVE NUDES IN A BORDELO, 1907, PICASSO (Kunstmuseum, Basel)
MEDICAL STUDENT AND SIX NUDES, 1907, PICASSO (Unknown)
FIVE NUDES, 1907, PICASSO (Philadelphia Museum of Art)
NU ASSIS, 1906-7, PICASSO (Musée Picasso, Paris)
HEAD AND SHOULDERS OF WOMAN OR SAILOR, 1907, PICASSO (Musée Picasso, Paris)
NUDE WITH RAISED ARMS, 1907, PICASSO (Musée Picasso, Paris)

BUST OF WOMAN, 1907, PICASSO (Pompidou Centre, Paris)
STUDY FOR LES DEMOISELLES, PICASSO (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris)

LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON, FULL PICTURE

If one looks at the way Picasso developed the composition through suite after suite of studies, one sees how his response to women at this moment combined both fascination and disgust; in these studies he never beautifies, he tends to brutalise.

By removing two male figures from the painting, the medical student and the sailor, he focuses attention exclusively on his women.

The effect of this is to heighten the confrontation between us, the spectators, and them. In the end they engage us directly eye to eye, on our scale, almost in our space. And they become not so much the objects of desire as the objects of mystery, terrifying, dangerous. This brothel is not a place of pleasure, it's a place of disease and death. These women are no less disturbing than the women of Klimt and Schiele.

Finally of course it's clear that the brutality of Picasso's treatment...
of his nudes has a savage, a
self-consciously primitive aspect.
Once again modern art and the whole
range of so-called primitive arts
right outside the post-Renaissance
European tradition are brought
together, discordantly, disruptively.

Picasso confronts his own society
with a savage alternative made
available by colonialism.

At this time Picasso was leading a
Bohemian way of life, sexually
liberated, consciously
anti-bourgeois. And yet ironically
in order to survive as an artist
outside the academies he needed the
bourgeoisie, and modern art would
not have developed in the way that
it did without the patronage of a
rising and wealthy middle class and
without the network of art dealers
which they fostered throughout
Europe.

MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

Picasso and Braque were taken up by
a dealer called Daniel-Henri
Kahnweiler. He was intensely
interested in modern art, especially Cubism.
And prepared as he was to wait for profits, he provided them with an income while he bought up all their work.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PICASSO
IN HIS STUDIO AT 11 BOULEVARD DE CLICHY,
1910 (The Lee Miller Archive)

SHOTS OF BOULEVARD DE CLICHY
PHOTO PICASSO

Picasso moved to a new apartment on the Boulevard de Clichy and was able to hire a maid.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PICASSO'S STUDIO, QUAY SCHOELEHER, 1913 (The Lee Miller Archive)

Under such an arrangement both artists could afford to ignore the huge public exhibitions of the pre-1914 years and dedicate themselves to their work alone.

CHRISTOPHER GREEN VOICE-OVER:

They developed still more provocative Cubist techniques, inserting words and sticking on pieces of coloured paper and materials to make collages. Now everything could be many things. A piece of newspaper could be a simple
rectangle, or it could be read, or it could be cut to shape as a soda syphon.
And anything went from passages of drawing to scraps of printed or mass produced rubbish.

If this was art it was as ephemeral as popular culture. Painting wasn't quite painting any more. And indeed Picasso even began to build his collages out from the picture surface to make a new kind of constructed sculpture, impromptu, flimsy but deadly serious.

These were developments that would show the Dadaists and the Constructivists after 1914 how to question the conventions of painting and sculpture to devastating effect. And they enormously expanded the scope of Cubism. One could even read about international crises in Picasso's 1912 compositions.

Yet the wider world remained a long way off, a distant murmuring in the background. Neither Picasso or Braque were in any sense political activists, and neither engaged with the more spectacular aspects of the city around them.
There were though modernists throughout Europe who could not and would not ignore the realities of modern urban life, its tensions and its contradictions. After all, most of them lived and worked in cities. And the modes of expression developed by the Cubists proved extremely good at rendering the spirit of urban life, not only in its edginess, but in its pleasures, its excitement, its electricity.

FUTURIST MONTAGE, FAST CUTS OF ROAD MARKINGS, WHIP PANS, CARS AND PAINTINGS
SPEEDING AUTOMOBILE, 1912, BALLA (Museum of Modern Art, New York)
DYNAMISM OF A SOCCER PLAYER, 1913, BOCCIONI (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)
FLIGHT OF A SWALLOW, BALLA (Rijksmuseum Kroller Muller, Otterlo)
DYNAMISM OF A SOCCER PLAYER

Speeding Automobile
Dynamism of a Soccer Player
Flight of a Swallow

Cubism was literally propelled across the canvas by the work of the Italian futurists. This is Boccioni's impression of a football player in motion. Excited by speed and movement, they wanted to capture the impact of modern life on all the senses.
The Futurists' fascination with dynamism and movement reached a remarkable climax here in Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*.

Boccioni claimed to have found in this work 'pure plastic rhythm. Not the construction of the body, but the construction of the action of the body'.

It is also, of course, an image of faith in the power of modern man to storm the future.

But the Futurists were not simply experimenting with form. Their work was the manifestation of the most political of all the avant-garde groups, though on authoritarian right rather than the Marxist left.

Their leader Filippo Tomasso Marinetti hated the past. He wanted to drag Italy into the 20th Century with violence; one of his slogans was war, sole hygiene of the world.

The themes of war and an impending apocalypse can be found in the work of many artists of this time, but their roots lay in the 19th Century.
As the 19th Century progressed, many writers and thinkers, among them the visionary German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, came to believe that European culture was in a desperate crisis, that its beliefs and institutions were on the point of dissolution and that a period of war and revolution would follow, fought out on a hitherto unimaginable scale by the mass armies of the industrial west. These kind of ideas came to occupy the thoughts of artists too, among them Vassily Kandinsky. This is Kandinsky's Apocalyptic Composition Number Six, painted in 1913. Two years before in Munich Kandinsky had formed a new group of artists, Der Blaue Reiter, the Blue Horseman. This theme of an impending apocalypse was a central concern not only of Kandinsky but of Blaue Reiter artist Franz Marc. Here in Kandinsky it's expressed of a mystical abstraction.

But the explicit meaning, conveyed in the metaphor of a great animal disaster comes out in Franz Marc's Fates of Animals, painted in 1913.
Michael Wood Voice-Over:

Predictably, this painting has often been treated as a prophesy of the Great War, out of which came the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the creation of Weimar Germany and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

It was, remarkably, as the war claimed its victims, that Kasimir Malevich in Russia developed his own kind of mystical abstraction.

This work Red Square was painted in 1915, and was part of a sequence of works, often more complex, which he called Suprematist. For him these coloured shapes floating in white, infinite spaces, could convey the awe of religious experience.

He, like the other mystics who put their faith in abstraction, kept aloof from the real apocalypse of 1914.
In Kandinsky's words: "When religion, science, and morality are shaken ..., when the external supports threaten to collapse, then man's gaze turns away from the outside world toward himself."

END OF PART ONE
When the Great War ended in November 1918, there can have been few people who did not hope that the terrible losses and suffering which it had brought, might be somehow redeemed in a happier, post-war world, with more just societies and where nations might live perhaps even in harmony with each other. But in fact the history of the twenty years in between the two World Wars, the subject of this programme, is one of increasing division and disillusionment in western culture. The advances made towards more egalitarian social order were countered by economic collapse in Europe, by civil wars and by the growing spectre of Fascism, and the
Utopian hopes born of the tragedies of the First War, dissolved eventually in totalitarian nightmare. And in the story of the art of the west the legacy of the Great War is also a troubled one.

MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

This is a picture of hell, a vision of grotesque dead men, a swarm of possessed human beasts sailing down hill into destruction.

This is how George Grosz saw Berlin in his work Funeral Procession of 1918. A city on the verge of chaos.

In France the sequel to victory was a period of stability.

In this new era of reconstruction many artists who had been involved with Cubism before 1914, injected into their work a new realism and order.

Fernand Leger was one of these. His painting Mechanical Elements is an image of the machine, not as destroyer but as the precise yet infinitely powerful tool with which a new France would be built.
It was at this point that Picasso remade his links with the classical past.

And Matisse continued to paint untroubled evocations of life in the South of France.

In Germany the sequel to defeat was revolution. A bitter struggle between nationalists and revolutionaries. Grosz's observations of Nationalist brutality made him one of the Left's most powerful propagandists.

'I felt the ground shaking beneath my feet and the shaking was visible in my work'.

His caricatures of Weimar Germany are a bitter rejection of a society depraved by greed and power. Grosz's contempt was shared by wider artistic developments in Europe and America.

Those developments became known as DADA.
DADA was like a storm that broke over the world of art.

It had many centres, from Zurich to Hanover, from Cologne to New York, and many sorts of artistic expression. Unlike Grosz in Berlin, these DADA artists did not see the exposure of class divisions as their central purpose. They attacked the very foundations on which nations were built. Truth, beauty, reason and science, and in the wake of the catastrophe all these values were brought into question.

In Paris and New York Marcel Duchamp produced his 'ready made'. A hatstand, a bottle rack. Ordinary everyday items promoted to the status of art objects, simply because the artist had signed them.
And by signing this urinal and wanting to show it as a piece of sculpture, Duchamp had pierced the whole body of western art with ridicule.

Yet despite the international activities of the Dadaists, they were running against the tide.

In Paris there were several artists whose pursuit of Utopian ideals was pushing French modernism towards an age of abstraction.

This is the studio of Constantin Brancusi, a Rumanian who moved to Paris in 1906. Throughout the years of the war he evolved a highly pared down figurative style constantly reducing elements of his subject to the simplest of forms.

This is a "crying head".

This is a seal
A "bird"
A pretty Hungarian girl

And this is his "Bird in Space", rubbed and smoothed down to a single ascending convergence of long curves that simply express the spirit of the bird.
Though Brancusi's sculptures are highly abstract they still have an object at their centre.

The problem for many abstract painters was how to justify removing the object and go beyond into what they saw as a higher order.

Many took Cubism as their starting point.

Geometric abstraction was a logical extension of Cubism which had freed western artists from traditional representation and given them the freedom to produce more conceptual images.

**Margit Rowell Voice-Over:**
In the early twenties, Piet Mondrian became one of the first western artists to paint in a pure abstract manner.

And if we look at a series of tree paintings that he completed in 1908 to 1912,

we can trace his development away from figurative work to the use of Cubist greys and Cubist composition,

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and finally, to an altogether more subtle Cubist image. In Paris in 1914 he turned his attention to buildings.

For instance, this church here on the left was one of his subjects.

He analysed the facade and finally distilled it into completely abstract compositions.

By reducing the church to a series of vertical and horizontal lines and carefully worked out rectangular oppositions, the church begins to disappear.

And this would lead to a visual embodiment of the oppositions fundamental to all existence.

Vertical, horizontal, active, passive, spirit and matter.

Mondrian was a Utopian, he wanted to build a geometric world that would
so totally satisfy the human psyche
it would render painting obsolete.
Although Mondrian's ambitions were
never realised, there was one event
where such Utopian ideals did find
practical expression.

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA:

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was
not only a momentous event in world
history, it had great significance
for the story of Russian and of
western art. Although, as one
Russian painter put it, Vladimir
Tatlin, 'we artists had achieved our
revolution before 1914'. But for a
brief time art and politics seemed
to join hands in expressing that
dream of a Utopian society.
Artists, politicians, people in the
street, saw art as one way of
helping to reshape the world and
artists were able to break out of
their traditional confines of
museums and galleries and grapple
with the practical problems of
everyday life. 'Put art into
production', 'put art into technology', were the slogans of the day, and even 'down with art, long live technical science'. The artists then saw themselves as part of the political struggle, consciously breaking with the bourgeois traditions of western art. Revolutionary politics had demanded and received revolutionary art.

MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

The message of the Revolution had to be communicated in every way possible. Posters, pamphlets, public demonstrations, even trains, painted with images of revolutionary victory. They were sent out on propaganda missions across a vast and devastated country.

Artists such as Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, who were on the margins of artistic life before the
ROSTA WINDOW: WORK AND WATCH OUT, 1921,
LEBEDEV (Russian Museum, Leningrad)
PHOTOGRAPH OF POPOVA IN HER STUDIO, 1920
PHOTOGRAPH OF STEPANOVA IN A GALA DRESS
PHOTOGRAPH OF STEPANOVA AND OTHERS
CLOTHES DESIGN,
STEPANOVA
BOOK COVER NO. 6,
SUETIN

EXT. IVAN GOLOSOV CLUB
INT. IVAN GOLOSOV CLUB
PLAN FOR A CONSTRUCTION
FOR THE PLAY "THE
MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD",
1922, POPOVA
(Tretyakov State Art
Gallery, Moscow)

PLATE DESIGN, CHEKHONIN
PLATE DESIGN, CHEKHONIN
CUP AND SAUCER
TEA POT

revolution, suddenly found
themselves at the centre of the
leading avant-garde group, the
Constructivists.
And women such as Popova and
Stepanova, worked on an equal basis
with their male comrades in
constructing this new world, a world
based on function and materials,
appropriate to the needs of the
future society.

The Constructivists paved the way
with new ideas for typography,
architecture and furniture design.
This is the interior of a Moscow
Workers' Club around 1920.
They produced costumes and set
designs for Constructivist theatre,
such as these by Popova.

Ceramics were also an effective way
of continuing the themes of work and
revolution. These designs were
based on the suprematist
compositions of Malevich in 1923.

The Revolution had given artists a
unique opportunity to express their
utopian visions.

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And this structure was to be the Constructivist masterpiece. Vladimir Tatlin's Tower, designed as a monument to celebrate the third anniversary of the Revolution. It would have been the Communist Party's headquarters. The sphere at the top was to be a broadcasting station. The cylinder an information centre, the pyramid to house the Secretariat, the cube a debating chamber, and the whole structure was to spring out of the ground and stand twice as high as the Empire State Building.

But in 1919 there wasn't enough steel in Russia to build Tatlin's Tower. Likewise, many other Constructivist projects were never realised because of lack of resources.

Between 1914 and the early 1920's, Russia was isolated from the rest of Europe and rather like a closed laboratory developed their own unique theories about the role of art in the modern environment. And then from 1921 onwards when the allies lifted their blockade of Russia after their attempt to crush the young Revolution, many western artists were simply inspired by what they saw of the boldness of the...
Russian artistic experiment, and then the ideals of the Russian avant-garde flooded into Europe, especially through Germany and through the work of artists like Lissitzky and Kandinsky who worked at the Bauhaus.

Established in Weimar in 1919, the Bauhaus was a design school where the objective was to rethink all aspects of the environment. Painting, architecture, sculpture, furniture, decorative objects, even photography, the theatre and the dance, and unite them in a single vision which would be appropriate to the needs of the new society. Unlike the Russians, whose Utopian dreams for a new society were never fulfilled, many of the Bauhaus projects were in fact put into practical expression, and these are the things which have provided the guidelines for much of the great design in the twentieth century.
Modern architecture is also synonymous with the Bauhaus. This house was designed by Walter Gropius, the first Bauhaus director. Bauhaus architects were synthesising Constructivist ideas of functional materials with modern methods of prefabrication. On this experimental housing estate near Dessau in Germany, built in 1926, they could erect a house in three days. Thus realising the dream of many families who wanted clean, light and economical housing.

One might say that the Bauhaus marks the beginning of the modern era in architecture. But if we are looking for that which expresses the highest ideals of the modern movement it must be the Villa Savoye, completed by Le Corbusier in 1930. This villa shows Le Corbusier's ideal in microcosmic form of a city raised on stilts.

At first sight even the most ardent modernist might be caught unprepared
by its abstract conception. But one should not be deceived by the simplicity of its geometric exterior.

As one approaches the villa's main entrance, a complex interior begins to reveal itself.

The owners of the villa would ascend to their living area along a grand ramp that rises up through the house.

Le Corbusier defined architecture as "the magnificent, knowledgeable and correct play of volumes in light."

He saw architecture in highly idealised formulations.

The Villa Savoye is at once a superb illustration of his ideal of formal harmony and a precise application of design principles derived from an analysis of re-enforced concrete construction. The body of the Villa
Savoye is lifted off the ground by columns; the internal spaces are opened up into each other, since the walls no longer support any load: windows are extended freely in strips across the facade: and on the flat roof is a garden.

Another architect - idealist, but of a very different kind, was at work in America, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Wright's contributions to twentieth century architecture emerged well before World War I with his so-called "Prairie" style, seen here in the Robie House of 1908-9, with its horizontal thrust, sheltering overhangs, terraces and enclosed gardens.

Although always identified with a peculiarly American vernacular, Wright's inspiration was eclectic, including Viennese, Japanese, and Mayan sources. His work would be published in Europe as early as 1910 and would have an influence internationally, including on the architects of the Bauhaus.
Wright's concern for a marriage between architecture and landscape would lead to his 1936 house outside of Pittsburg, "Falling Water", built on a natural rock over a small waterfall.

But at the same time, in the difficult years of the 1930s, he became more socially conscious and focused on the needs of urban life. He remained nonetheless attached to the elements of nature, seen as the organic forms and use of natural light in such buildings as the Johnson Wax building of 1936.

But these developments in art and architecture did not go uncriticised.

Even at the time many people felt that such work was elitist, that it didn't speak the language of ordinary people. Why, for example, was it necessary to strip a building of all its decoration or reduce a picture to a few lines? And so, ironically, at its most progressive point modernism was still widely unacceptable and many architects did not follow its lead. You can see this in some of the buildings made
at that period in New York, like the Chrysler building of 1928, the Empire State from 1930, and the Rockefeller Centre here from 1932.

MICHAEL WOOD, voice-over:

The problem was what style would appropriately express the enthusiasm for progress, industry and democracy in America? Ironically the solution was in a more narrative decorative style, that became known as Art Deco.

This building is both a monument to the power of capitalism and a clear statement that the figurative tradition is still very much alive.

In the entrance hall the Rockefellers commissioned a huge mural from the famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera; he called it Man at the Crossroads.

For Rivera there was a simple choice facing working man - who he places as if at the controls of world history - a choice between capitalism and socialism. For
Rivera, virtue lay on the side of socialism since the ruling system in Mexico had already passed successfully through its own Revolution.

To place such a propaganda image in the headquarters of one of the leading capitalist dynasties of America was to invite disaster. The press expressed outrage at the inclusion of Lenin in the mural, and the Rockefellers ended things by dismissing Rivera, and having his work destroyed in 1934. Only a replica survives.

It may seem surprising that such an artist could have painted for the great American cities, but where his theme was the power of the machine and the marvels of technology, he overrode political opposition earlier in the 30's. His populist realism and a strong traditional sense of compositional order appealed directly to the widest of publics, in the States as well as Mexico.

Rivera's art corresponded to a notion of revolution and social realism.

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Elsewhere, in Europe, another revolution was taking place, led by a poet who saw himself so much as a revolutionary that he travelled to Mexico to visit Rivera and Trotsky: Andre Breton.

The Surrealist revolution also emerged in reaction to the abstract aspects of modernism.

For the Surrealists art opened a route to the marvellous or the surreal.

This is Rene Magritte's *Le Double Secret* painted in 1927. The Surrealists understood perhaps better than any group that man is like an iceberg of which only a small part is visible in the light of the conscious mind. The rest of which is submerged and moved and guided by the darker currents of the human subconscious.

The problem was how to find ways into the subconscious, how to release the spontaneous flow of imagery and writing that would be as unsettling as the chance encounter.
of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.

Andre Breton advocated two routes into the marvellous, through dreams and automatism.

Influenced by psychoanalytical theory, Breton decreed that subconscious images could only become available if the oppressive control of reason was evaded.

The transcription of dreams attracted the so-called painter painters such as Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali.

Dali's painting Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, a premonition of a civil war, seems to embody his ambition to visualise images of complete irrationality with incredible precision.
Through his highly naturalistic style Dali gives a sense of reality to images that are unreal, inspired by nightmares and visions.

The second kind of surrealist artist, the painter poet, is exemplified by the sculptor Alexander Calder and the painters Joan Miro and Max Ernst. Using poetic techniques of free association, they explored ways of reducing the conscious control of the rational mind.

Miro's paintings from the 20's, like Siesta seem to have no structure, just a loose free flow of images which seem to come out of the blue.

Max Ernst, using a technique of rubbing natural objects, such as wood, shells and leaves, managed to bring forth unforeseen images, creating landscapes that are truly surreal.
This painting of 1927 is called Forest.

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA:

Ironically it was in those societies which claimed the most far-reaching utopian ideals that the fiercest backlash against modern art and abstraction took place. Stalin in Russia, Hitler in Germany, reviled modern art as 'degenerate, decadent and elitist,' and they sought to replace it forcibly by an art portraying the proletarian glories of their new order.

A kind of heroic social realism, in which ultimately the political meaning was absolutely unambiguous and totally controllable, which of course it could never be in modernism.

For Hitler himself the modern artists were babblers, dilettantes and 'art swindlers' who should be abolished in favour of the creative power of the masses.

As the Nazi director of the museum in Essen put it: 'the most perfect artefact of the last era did not come from the studios of modern
artists, it is the steel helmet.'

Spain, immersed in civil war, offered the perfect opportunity for the nazis to test Germany's war readiness. In a show of Fascist solidarity with Franco, the Luftwaffe tore apart the little Basque town of Guernica. This was a signal for Picasso to offer a response to the savagery of the times.

In a period of just a few weeks he painted the huge canvas Guernica to hang in the Spanish pavilion at the Paris exhibition of 1937.

Extreme distortion, licensed by Cubism, comes together with symbols of violence, horror and fear that reach back to Europe's oldest myths and rituals, to the myth of the minotaur and the ritual of the bull fight.

Some wished for something simpler but its effect as a political
statement by a modernist against blind cruelty of those who claimed to stand for civilisation was instant.

In 1937 an exhibition of so-called degenerate art opened in Munich. It was organised by the Nazis to demonstrate the thoroughly Jewish, bolshevik and anti-aryan nature of modern art from Gauguin onwards. Art approved by the Third Reich portrayed idealised images of Labour, Maternity and Family Life, in a figurative style untroubled by any considerations of form.
MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

The storm clouds gathering over Europe now threatened to devastate the continent not only physically but culturally. Indeed, to submerge the Western humane tradition. And as war grew inevitable and the Nazi persecutions, especially of the jews, grew more intense, many writers and artists fled to freedom, to London and especially to the United States.

NEWSREEL COMMENTARY:

From a dozen once free and democratic nations are coming scholars and artists, doctors and scientists, who have found that the pursuit of wisdom and the practice of the free arts are no longer possible in Nazi Europe.

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA
ON ROOF TOP IN NEW YORK

And so it's no accident that around 1939-40 the centre of creative vitality in Western visual arts moved away from Paris here to New York.
MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

Of the many hundreds of artists who came to New York many would not return to Europe for some years, if ever. For Mondrian, Ernst, Lipchitz and many more this was now their new home.

And here at the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929, their work was already being collected and displayed and they would be influential on a new generation of American artists, among them; Pollock, Rothko and Motherwell.

If we try to summarise the art of those astonishing 40 years at the beginning of the century, then we have to say that above all it was an art based on optimism, despite war and the rise of fascism. An art based on the freedom of human creativity. And perhaps no work expresses that idea more poetically than this: Miro's Birth of the World painted in 1925. Its theme is nothing less than the creation of the universe, but expressed through the metaphor of artistic creation, through the very process of painting itself. The great canvas has been
washed with thinned paint and then dripped, spattered, rubbed and dragged with rags, and then out of the formless void emerge defined shapes. A bird perhaps, a person, a shooting star.

MICHAEL WOOD VOICE-OVER:

It is a painting which anticipates much - a precursor of abstract expressionism which came after World War 2.

MICHAEL WOOD TO CAMERA IN FRONT OF BIRTH OF THE WORLD, MIRO (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

In all these developments we've traced, through Cubism, Abstraction, Surrealism, to the cosmic visions of Malevich and Kandinsky, we are asked to look not to the past but to the future. As Miro put it, 'to open a door to a different future, free of all hypocrisy and fanaticism.'

*** THE END ***

1st March 1989