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The Museum of Modern Art

THE ROLE OF ANTIMODERNISM IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN ART IS EXAMINED

Modern Art despite Modernism

March 16-August 22, 2000

Second floor

Throughout the century, the evolution of avant-garde modernism has been accompanied, contested, and complicated by alternative expressions. *Modern Art despite Modernism*, organized by Robert Storr, Senior Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, examines the diverse and widespread efforts by anti-avant-garde artists to synthesize modernism with tradition or to bring modernism to a halt with a "return to order." The exhibition is on view from March 16 through August 22, 2000, as part of *Making Choices*, the second cycle of MoMA2000 that focuses on the period 1920 to 1960.

Modern Art despite Modernism comprises close to 100 works from the 1920s through the 1980s by artists who have deviated from, questioned, challenged, or revolted against modernism, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Balthus of the School of Paris; Neue Sachlichkeit artists Otto Dix and Max Beckmann from Germany; British artists Gwen John and Walter Sickert; Latin American artists Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros; Depression-era American artists Paul Cadmus, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, and Andrew Wyeth; postwar European artists Alberto Giacometti, Lucian Freud, and Francis Bacon; postwar American artists Larry Rivers, Philip Pearlstein, Fairfield Porter, and Alex Katz; and postmodernists Gerhard Richter and Philip Guston, among others. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog of the same name.

Modern Art despite Modernism provides an opportunity to examine the breadth of the Museum's collection through many lesser known or infrequently displayed works. The exhibition encourages a dialogue on the contrasts between the selected works and the art commonly thought to be MoMA's main fare, and on the larger artistic phenomena that have in some instances been treated as tangential or even distinct from the Museum's central concerns. "The debate over the many proposals for what modern art should be is alive on the Museum's walls," notes Mr. Storr in the catalog. "Echoes of those disagreements will continue so long as modern art can be spoken of in the present tense."

Central to the conflict between modernists and antimodernists was the status of figuration. By the end of World War I, the antimodernists--many of whom were former members of the avant-garde--prompted a return to traditional representational styles of painting, drawing, and sculpture. For example, pioneering Cubist Picasso turned to Neoclassicism, creating such works as *Three Women at the Spring* (1921). Here, the artist has rendered three monumental female figures in earthy tones and a relieflike assemblage of rounded and flattened body parts. Likewise, Beckman and Dix, Germany's premier Expressionists, became exponents of a harsh new realism known as the Neue Sachlichkeit or New Objectivity. Dix, for instance, reintroduced the intricate, precise figuration of Northern

Renaissance masters in works such as *Dr. Mayer-Hermann* (1926). Here, Dix's use of an emotionally detached level of precision results in an unflattering, almost satirical rendering of his subject.

In the Americas, artists employed elements of naturalist, Renaissance, Romantic, and Baroque art. Leaders of these diverse, backward-looking styles included Albright, Peter Blume, Cadmus, Arshile Gorky, Kahlo, Rivera, Charles Sheeler, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Wyeth. Tchelitchew's *Hide and Seek* (1940-42) verges on abstraction, teasing the viewer's eye with the tricks of a classically trained illusionist. Conversely, Wyeth's controlled attention to detail in *Christina's World* (1948) makes it an immediately intelligible painting.

In the period following World War II, European artists such as Giacometti, Freud, and Bacon persisted in the beliefs that the human figure was the focus of image-making and that narrative was one of modern art's essential functions. The so-called School of London, which included Bacon, Freud, and David Hockney, among others, was notable for its resistance to abstraction, particularly to the gestural painting that dominated the mainstream from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. At the same time, a second generation of New York School artists, including Katz, Pearlstein, Porter, and Rivers, responded to Abstract Expressionism with a return to figurative painting. Pearlstein's *Two Female Models in the Studio* (1967), for instance, is a rigorously observation-based painting devoid of symbolism and narrative.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw a resurgence of figurative painting and sculpture. Artists such as Guston and Richter challenged the avant-garde's experimental practices of Minimalism, Conceptualism, installation art, and new media art forms. For instance, Guston's interest in figuration also prompted his return to narrative painting, through which the former Abstract Expressionist frequently addressed American political and social conflicts. Although these artists have been dubbed postmodernists, the exhibition presents their works in the context of aesthetic currents that have long run parallel with or counter to mainstream modernist art.

Drawing the figure also constitutes an important aspect of anti-avant-garde art from any given period. A section of *Modern Art despite Modernism* entitled *Drawing Lessons* presents two brief surveys of works on paper. The first focuses on the return to contour drawing, including works by Jean Dubuffet, Natalia Sergeevna Gontcharova, and Rivera, among others. The second survey examines a later period of Pop-influenced drawings, including works by artists such as Balthus, Peter Blake, Freud, Giacometti, Hockney, Katz, and Andy Warhol.

PUBLICATION

Modern Art despite Modernism by Robert Storr. 9 1/2 x 12", 248 pages. 172 color illustrations, 26 b & w. Clothbound \$55, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., paperbound \$35. Both available in the Museum Book Store.

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