

*a sympathetic artist has devised a
brief museum tour for those who
don't understand the abstracts*

The Art of Being Modern

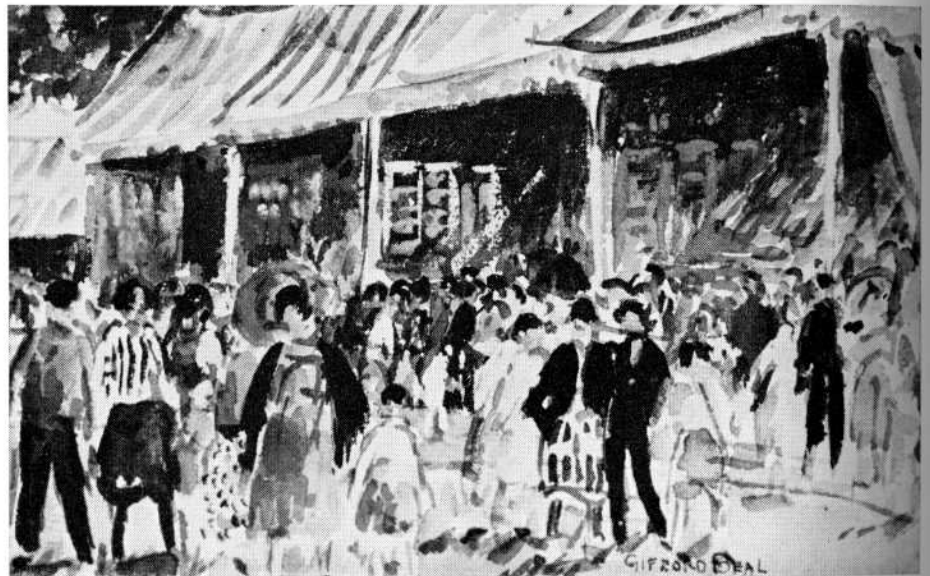


Fig. 1. Gifford Beal, "Figures in Sunlight." Watercolor. 22½ x 18½.

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DURING the past 75 years modern art has been inevitably affected by the rapidly changing events that have touched all areas of human experience. New knowledge in the sciences of physics, mathematics, psychology and sociology, new developments in technology and industry and new situations in political and economic areas have all contributed to the necessity for new viewpoints. The new viewpoints in modern art—Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and the various directions in abstraction—reflect the impact of the dramatic changes that have shaped 20th century life.

The first of new directions in modern art began in 1874 with the movement called *Impressionism*. The French artists who initiated the movement, Edouard Manet,

Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, were interested in applying new scientific theories of color, advanced by physicists, to the realm of painting. If, as the physicists demonstrated, ordinary sunlight was composed of every bright-hued color of the rainbow, then the artists decided, it was necessary to revise obsolete theories and techniques in art in the interpretation of light and color with the help of the new knowledge. Impressionism abstracted light and color in terms of the new scientific knowledge about reality. Small strokes of bright colors were used to create new luminous and shimmering effects of atmosphere and light. In the painting (Fig. 1) by Gifford Beal, an American impressionist, the interest in light and changing reflections captures the momentary and transient as-

pects of reality in a quick, spontaneous and sketchy fashion. Impressionism became the springboard for later 20th century directions in art by demonstrating the abstraction of one aspect of reality—color. Following movements in art began investigations of other aspects of reality on the basis of new knowledge and, if there was no new scientific knowledge as a guide, on the basis of intuition. Many intuitive approaches to changing realities were later corroborated by science and modern technology. Space and time were explored by the Cubists; the undeniable realities of emotions and human dreams were explored by the Expressionists and the Surrealists, and other artists reflected the effects of wars and tensions in our time.

One of the most important of the many



Fig. 2. Abraham Rattner, "Bird Bath." Watercolor. 24½ x 30¾.



Fig. 3. George L. K. Morris, "New England Church." Oil. 39 x 45.

directions in early 20th century art was *Cubism*, which was originated in Paris about 1907 by Picasso, and which has since influenced major artists throughout the world. An American variation of Cubism by George L. K. Morris (Fig. 3) serves to illustrate the parallel between the scientific concepts of relativity in the human experience of space and time and the artistic concept of simultaneity in vision. In "New England Church" the experience of a Sunday in church is expressed in a kaleidoscopic manner which fuses remembered fragments of the wood grain of the pews, the wheels of a carriage, the glass panes of a window, views of the spire and exterior of the building, a section of the hymn book, and even a tic-tac-toe symbol which suggests a boring sermon. Nothing in the scene is fixed and static in the traditional sense of space and time. Instead, the merging images and shifting spaces suggest relative viewpoints which change with different remembrances and fragments of the experience. This kind of simultaneity in expressing space-time relationships in art has become part of the visual vocabulary of our time and was later used in movies and television techniques.

Expressionism, another of the diverse directions of modern art which appeared around 1900, also reflected new human awareness of forces shaping our lives. Expressionism in France, Germany and Scandinavia attempted to deal with the intangible aspects of reality by expressing human emotions and reaction to life. Van Gogh, Matisse and the German artists transformed ordinary physical reality into intense emotional visual statements of the artists' reactions to nature. Rather than docile imitations of nature, expressionist art intensified the natural rhythms of forms and height-

ened colors. Distortion serving expressionist purposes can be seen in Abraham Rattner's watercolor, "Bird Bath," (Fig. 2) where the curved shapes of the fluttering birds are exaggerated into visual graphs of motion. The free, bold and spontaneous brush strokes are typical of the emotional surge of expressionist art where the artist identifies intimately with his subject.

Another painting by Rattner, "Yellow Table," (Fig. 4) demonstrates the merging of two of the main directions in modern art—Cubism and Expressionism. The forms of the fruit, flowers and woman are freely exaggerated in an expressionist manner to enhance the repeated shapes and curved rhythms common to all. The shifting spatial viewpoints of the different ob-

jects and the geometric analysis of the forms indicate a Cubist quality in the artist's reorganization of nature. Many contemporary works of art indicate a similar confluence of directions.

Though much of modern art is predominantly abstract, there has always remained a strong current of *Realism* which, modified and strengthened by the new directions mentioned above, continues to be a valid style in reflecting our century. A social realism which essentially follows older 19th century traditions in its statements about social and moral values can be seen in the work of Ben Shahn. Shahn's painting, "Renaissance," (Fig. 5) completed after World War II, comments upon the

continued



Fig. 4. Abraham Rattner, "Yellow Table." Oil. 35 x 40.

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Fig. 5. Ben Shahn, "Renascence." Tempera. 36 x 28.

rebuilding and regrowth of European society after war's destruction. Symbolically, the artist states a fervent hope for the continuity of human aspiration. The ancient column surviving earlier destructions is equated with the surviving remnant of a steel structure of our time. The woman and the bush are used as symbols of human and natural regrowth and regeneration of enduring values. The artist reveals his faith in the endurance of the human spirit despite catastrophes and expresses a deep philosophical and moral concern that is typical of the symbolism of many modern works of art.

"Cemetery" by Edmond Lewandowski (Fig. 7) suggests some of the same qualities of social realism mentioned above. However, in its haunting evocation of a dream-like situation and in its brooding statement of an often repressed thought, it can be

seen as an example of *Surrealism*. Surrealism began in 1924 as an attempt to penetrate the regions of the subconscious mind with its dreams, fears, frustrations and inhibitions. The new science of psychoanalysis developed by Freud served as the basis for artistic exploration of the dream world and its strange obsessive qualities. The hidden aspects of man's mind which are so important in governing his actions became a new source of subject-matter for the artist.

"Blue Dunes" by Loren MacIver (Fig. 6) may be seen as the result of several other directions in modern art. The poetic mood and lyrical quality suggests Neo-Romanticism, a movement of the mid-1920's. A soft and gentle expressionism, an atmospheric, misty treatment implying impressionist interest in subtly changing light and an abstract pattern in the simplified

forms of the plants combine to express an individual statement of the artist's love of nature and tender respect for life's fleeting experiences.

In an age dominated by super-organizations and conformity, the artist's vision becomes the last refuge for individual sensitivity. The artist in the 20th century continues to nourish our sensibilities as did the artists of the past. In order to fully express his relationship to the events around him, the modern artist has had to invent, develop and refine new visual vocabularies of space, color and form. Older traditional vocabularies necessarily had to be revised, amended and enlarged to serve new purposes. Modern art, like modern life, is in a constant state of dynamic change and the modern artist may be expected to reflect that state of flux in constantly sensitized reactions to it.



Fig. 6. Loren MacIver, "Blue Dunes." Oil. 47x37.

All works illustrated are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, and represent a large number of paintings of both modern and traditional styles.



Fig. 7. Edmond Lewandowski, "Cemetery." Gouache. 31½ x 37.