

# Appreciating Modern Art



On our trip we are going to visit several outstanding museums of modern art. The size of these collections will make it necessary for you to focus on a few paintings and look at these carefully rather than rushing through the galleries aimlessly until you are dizzy with modern art.



This booklet is meant to help you appreciate and understand modern art a bit better.



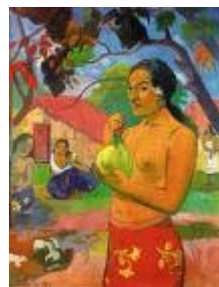
## Task 1. FAMOUS PAINTINGS

Try to find a few works by the artists listed in this booklet. Sometimes we will do this as a group, at other times you will be asked to explore a museum at your own speed. Read the short info about each of the artists and see if you can find the typical traits in the paintings on display.

What do they have in common?

For each of the artists write the titles of the paintings that you have studied in this booklet and add any other interesting facts that you have noticed or aspects you would like to discuss.

Choose your favorite painting by this artist and briefly describe what you see. (note-form) Do you see any objects/ people/ landscape /shapes/ colors/ texture/ lines...?



## Task 2. MAKE YOUR CHOICE

On your walk through the museum choose 2 exhibits that strike you as especially interesting.

One of them should be an exhibit you like a lot, for whatever reasons.

The other one should be an exhibit that puzzles you or shocks you in some way.

For both exhibits, please consider the following questions and discuss them with a friend. Take a few minutes to look at the exhibit in detail. Look at it from different angles and distances and ask yourself....

- How does this piece of art affect me? Why am I looking at it? What reactions does it provoke?
- Would I want to have this piece at home, in my living room?
- What have I noticed first? What do I see? (Describe exactly what you see: colors, shapes, objects you recognize, materials...as if you were describing it to a blind person.
- Does this painting/exhibit remind me of something? Have you seen anything similar before? Where?
- How was this made? Why was it made in that way?
- What's new about this?
- Could I do this as well?
- What is this exhibit made of? What are these materials normally used for?
- Why do I (not) like this?
- What bothers me about it/ What exactly do I like about it?
- Is this art? Should this piece be exhibited in a museum? Where else would it fit?
- What makes this art?
- What do I expect from a piece of art?

**Answer these questions on the blank pages in the back of this booklet.**

On your way out, see if you can buy postcards of the two exhibits of your choice. If taking pictures is allowed, you may also take a picture (without a flash!!!) so we can share our impressions afterwards.

**Enjoy the adventure of modern art!**

## **Claude Monet: 1840 - 1926**

Monet was one of the founding members of the **impressionist** group of painters. these artists tried to capture the effect of light on objects and landscapes. Because light changes so rapidly, the impressionists had to work quickly, using loose strokes of color to create a snapshot - or impression - of a moment in time. Although very popular now, people were puzzled when they first saw the work of the impressionists - they thought the paintings looked rough and unfinished.

Monet used a brush as well as a flexible palette knife to lay the paint thickly onto the canvas, helping him create a very bold lighting effect that adds to the dramatic atmosphere.

## Paul Cézanne: 1839 - 1906

Cézanne began his career as an **impressionist** painter in Paris in the 1860s but he soon developed a style of his own and moved back to his hometown of Aix-en-Provence. There Cézanne liked to paint the same scenes over and over again. Instead of simply copying what he saw, he was trying to understand the patterns and shapes at the heart of nature. Because of his unusual way of looking at a subject, Cézanne has been called the father of modern art.

Look at the paintings on display and write down the titles. Describe what you see (in just a few key-words)

## **Paul Gauguin: 1848 - 1903**

Paul Gauguin was one of the first **post impressionist** painters. He used glowing, flat colors and filled his pictures with hidden meanings. In 1891 Gauguin moved to the Pacific island of Tahiti. There he created his best-known work, depicting the islanders in bright, startling colors. Although Gauguin is very famous today, he died in poverty and was unknown to the public.

## **Vincent Van Gogh: 1853 - 1890:**

Van Gogh was influenced by the Impressionists, but went on to develop his own very individual style of painting, which is known as Post-impressionism. He sold only one painting during his lifetime, yet today he is considered to be one of the world's greatest artists. An anxious, often tormented person, Van Gogh spent most of his life trying to understand the world through his art.

Van Gogh worked energetically, using paint straight from the tube and laying it on in thick brushstrokes.

Van Gogh lived in poverty and suffered attacks of mental illness. In 1888 he famously cut off part of his left ear. For years Van Gogh lived in a mental institution in SaintRémy in the south of France. The struggle to capture the ever-changing colors of the trees and the earth under the hot sun became his obsession. The swirling, energetic brush strokes reveal van Gogh's turbulent state of mind. Van Gogh committed suicide at the age of 37.

## **Pablo Picasso: 1881 - 1973**

Born in Spain, Picasso was the son of an art teacher. As a young man, Picasso painted scenes of circuses and city life. Although these were realistic paintings, Picasso found the people and places around him made him feel sad and lonely, so he painted many of the using only different shades of blue. This time in his life is known as his "Blue Period." As the years passed, Picasso experimented with new styles of painting and sculpture, and became fascinated by African art. He also worked with another painter, Georges Braque, and together they developed a new form of art called **Cubism**.

Cubist paintings may be difficult to understand at first. The objects are not realistic and the picture looks like cut up into pieces. Rather than just painting what he saw with his eyes, Picasso used his imagination to try to show the object from many different points of view and put them into new, interesting contexts.

## **Georges Braques: 1882 - 1963**

(1882–1963). From 1909 until his death, the French artist Georges Braque devoted himself to the still life—tabletop arrangements with musical instruments, pieces of fruit, and other objects. Of Braque's fascination with objects, the painter Juan Gris once said, “In the guitar Braque found his new Madonna.” When the human figure did appear in his paintings, it was treated simply as another...

Together with his friend, Pablo Picasso he created a new movement in art called cubism.(see Picasso)

## Henri Matisse: 1886 - 1954

Henri Matisse, born in 1869, began his working life doing administrative tasks for a court. As a gift, his mother gave him his first art supplies and he fell in love with painting.

He studied art in Paris where he painted mostly landscapes and still lifes. He was successful at this and the state even bought five of his paintings. In 1898, he discovered impressionism. A friend and fellow painter, John Peter Russell introduced him to the work of the impressionists including van Gogh who was still unknown and Gauguin. Matisse's style changed completely following this discovery and color took center-stage in his paintings.

This love of color evolved into **Fauvism**, in which natural scenes are portrayed in unnatural, usually extremely bright, colors.

By the end of his life Matisse was thoroughly interested in patterns and from this interest came his collages. Made from boldly hand-painted paper cut into shapes, Matisse's collages were usually large works of simplicity.

## Dadaism

The crazy pieces of Dadaist art are meant to turn our world upside, to make it seem crazy and absurd. The Dadaists meant for us to rethink the items that surround us so that we might rethink our world.

Dadaism began in Zurich, Switzerland and spread to France, Germany, Spain, and the U.S. The movement began around 1916 and continued until about 1920.

The artists known as Dadaists thought that World War I was a terrible thing. They thought it was ridiculous for people all over the world to spend years killing each other. Because the war shaped the world in which these artists lived, this distaste for WWI became a distaste for the state of the world.

The Dadaists protested through their art the war and the current culture. Raoul Hausmann's "The Mechanical Head" shows a man who cannot think for himself but accepts everything he is told. He has a wooden head with tight lips and eyes that show no expression. The mechanical man will never argue or share an opinion of his own. Look for yourself:



According to the Dadaists, once the culture had been stripped down it could be rebuilt. So the Dadaists made chaos out of the WWI culture by, for instance, calling a urinal a fountain and putting it on display (shown here, by Marcel Duchamp). The Dadaists took common objects and created art with those objects, thus bringing out the often ignored beauty of the everyday world.

Dadaism paved the way for other art movements such as Surrealism. The movements that follow Dadaism were charged with the responsibility of rebuilding what the Dadaists had stripped away.

## Marcel Duchamp: 1887 - 1968

**Readymade** is the term used by the French artist Marcel Duchamp to describe works of art he made from manufactured objects. His earliest readymades included *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, a wheel mounted on a wooden stool, and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* of 1915, a snow shovel inscribed with that title. In 1917 in New York, Duchamp made his most notorious readymade, *Fountain*, a men's urinal signed by the artist with a false name and exhibited placed on its back. Later readymades could be more elaborate and were referred to by Duchamp as assisted readymades. The theory behind the readymade was explained in an article, anonymous but almost certainly by Duchamp himself, in the May 1917 issue of the avant-garde magazine *The Blind Man* run by Duchamp and two friends: **'Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.'** There are three important points here: first, that the choice of object is itself a creative act. Secondly, that by canceling the 'useful' function of an object it becomes art. Thirdly, that the presentation and addition of a title to the object have given it 'a new thought', a new meaning. Duchamp's readymades also asserted the principle that what is art is defined by the artist.

# Surrealism

The same distaste for World War I and for the thinking of the society of the time created Surrealism.

Originally writers began the Surrealist movement. In 1924, Andre Breton explained Surrealism in his Surrealist Manifesto, and a few years later artists began to paint in the style he described. **Surrealists wanted to free their minds of rational thought, to write or paint the ideas that were buried deep in their minds. These artists did not wish their work to make simple, logical sense.**

This is why many of the paintings look like **scenes from a dream (or nightmare)**. Many Surrealist paintings, like [Salvador Dali's Swans Reflecting Elephants](#), include imaginary creatures or real-life creatures shown in unnatural ways. Some paintings, such as [Max Ernst's Seascape](#), include several seemingly unrelated objects. Others twist realistic images by using strange colors.

## Salvadore Dali: 1904 - 1989

He was a [Surrealist](#) in all aspects of his life. Dali strove to shock people, not only through his art, but with his actions and his words as well.

While at school, Dali painted in the Cubist style and experimented briefly with [Dada](#). It was also during this time that he developed the first of his many strange styles of dress: He grew his hair long and wore sideburns and he dressed in suit coats, stockings, and short pants that stopped at the knee. After nearly four years of school, his ego had grown so large that he decided he was too good for any of the professors to judge him. When he expressed this feeling, he was kicked out of the academy.

After he left the Academia de San Fernando, Dali began to experiment with Surrealism. He also grew a thin mustache that curved up at either end. Both the mustache and the surrealist style would last the rest of Dali's life.

In 1989, Salvador Dali died. Some believe that, on his deathbed, he was forced to sign blank canvases. As the rumor goes, paintings were later created on the canvases and passed off as Dali's work.

## Juan Miró: 1893 - 1983

In 1920 Miro made the first of a series of trips to Paris. In 1921 he settled permanently in the French capital. He met Pablo Picasso and many of the other great painters and artists living in Paris - the center of arts in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

From 1924 on, Miro joined the circle of the Surrealist theorist Andre Breton. His painting style took a turn to **Surrealism**. His comrades were Andre Masson and Max Ernst. But he never integrated himself completely into this group dominated by Andre Breton. He remained an outsider with his own, distinct style and artistic "vocabulary".

Miro art is characterized by brilliant colors combined with simplified forms that are reminiscent of drawings made by children. Joan Miro art integrates elements of Catalan folk art. He liked to compare his visual arts to poetry.

- His paintings were done "automatically" - similar to automatic writing in literature. He put everything on paper or canvas that came to his mind.
- He got ideas for his artwork from simple things like a grain of dust, a bug on a wall or wheels. He also painted things from his dreams.
- He loved color and thought using color was easy. He used red, yellow, blue, green and black most often.
- He painted from his dreams and imagination. His paintings are fun and funny, show odd shaped animals or people. To him, conveying a feeling was more important than making a picture look "real".
- Miro was friends with many surrealist and abstract painters, including Pablo Picasso, Andre Masson and Max Ernst.

## Yves Klein: 1928 - 1962

Klein had painted his first **monochromes** - paintings consisting of a single color - whilst working in a framing shop in London in late 1949 which he exhibited in his room privately, inviting only friends. Klein`s work is influenced by the philosophy of Judo, which involved long periods of meditation

His second private exhibition of monochromes took place whilst Klein was in Tokyo late 1953, around the same time as he earned a diploma from the Kōdōkan Institute, as a fourth degree Dan, achieving the highest level possible for a European.

'The philosophy of Zen, which is essentially prevalent in Kōdōkan judo, is primarily concerned with an increased sensitivity for the present and an extended concept of space and time. This new form of spirituality had a direct effect upon Klein's artistic activities.'

Look at one of the monochromes for a few minutes and see what it does to you. How does it affect you compared to other works, such as pop-art or Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.

## **Andy Warhol: 1928 - 1987**

Like Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol was a leading member of the **pop art** movement. His early work was made up of repeated images of objects and people that Warhol felt were symbols of the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s -- Coke bottles, soup cans, dollars bills, and movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe, for example.

Andy Warhol fought against the idea that a work of art should be unique and handmade. One of his favorite techniques was silk-screen printing. It allowed to make many prints of his work, mimicking the mass production of consumer goods. Before becoming an artist Warhol worked for an advertising agency.

## **Roy Lichtenstein: 1923 - 1997**

Roy Lichtenstein was one of the most famous representatives of **pop-art** in the 1960s. They were inspired by the color and energy of a new, popular culture of fast food, fast cars, color television, advertising, fashion, movies and popular music. Lichtenstein especially loved comic strips. He copied the bright, eye-catching colors that leap out at the viewer, as well as the dots of the printing process that make up the images. Many of his works are huge and based on just one frame from a comic strip.

We don't know the whole story, so we have to guess what is happening. Who are they? Where are they? What is going on?

## **Jackson Pollock: 1912 - 1956**

During World War II many artists left Europe for the U.S. Their ideas about cubism, surrealism, and abstract art inspired American artists, such as Jackson Pollock, to develop a new art movement. It became known as **abstract expressionism**.

Pollock was the most famous abstract expressionist. He tried to express his innermost feelings through painting and developed a new technique called "drip painting", which allowed him to work quickly and with little planning. Pollock would lay the canvas on the floor and pour paint straight onto the surface from a can. With sticks, knives, and trowels (Spachtel) he would spread and drip the paint across the canvas, creating a jumble of twisting lines and colors.

Many of Pollock's drip paintings are huge.

Look at Jackson Pollock's paintings for a few minutes and ask yourself what state of mind they evoke in you.

## Edward Hopper: 1882 - 1967

Edward Hopper is one of America's best-known artists, famous for his paintings of New York City and small New England towns. He painted ordinary scenes with great **realism** - city streets and country roads, houses, restaurants, storefronts, and bedrooms. Hopper was particularly skilled at creating atmosphere through his use of light and shadows. Many of his scenes do not have any people in them, adding to the stillness and melancholy of the setting.

When looking at Hopper's paintings, ask yourself what atmosphere and feelings they evoke. What's the story?

**My personal choice: A work of art that I like a lot**

# My personal choice: A work of art that puzzles me

Texts based on and adapted from: **JESSICA CAMIS** at <http://artsmarts4kids.blogspot.com>

Anna Nilsen, *Art Fraud Detective*, Kingfisher, 2000 and Anna Nilsen, *The Great Art Scandal*, Kingfisher, 2003

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