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The article in the enclosed Bulletin entitled MODERN AND "MODERN" by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of The Museum of Modern Art, is an important statement which attempts to clarify the use of the word modern as applied to art.

For convenience in quoting all or part of Mr. Barr's article, it is reproduced in full below.

MODERN AND "MODERN"

Modern history is an ambiguous and flexible term. When opposed to ancient history, modern history may begin with the fall of the Roman Empire. But if medieval history is granted autonomy then modern history is said to begin with the Fall of Constantinople or the Discovery of America. Yet if one takes up a "History of Modern Europe" one is just as likely to find the French Revolution or the Council of Vienna or the Franco-Prussian War has been used as a point of departure.

The word modern when applied to art is even more confusing. During the Renaissance modern was an adjective of confident approval applied to the new style which had arisen in emulation of the art of the "Antique" or Graeco-Roman world. Cimabue and Giotto were considered the founders of the modern manner. In the eighteenth century however, when an orthodox "Classicism" based on both archeological research and aesthetic theory, had shattered the self-assurance of the Renaissance, the word modern was often used with humility (or even hostility) to describe the work of the recent past which was thought to have fallen far below the achievement of the "Antique."<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century Renaissance was applied more and more to the earlier centuries of the modern period and Baroque to the post-Renaissance art of about 1575-1775.

Today one may begin the history of modern art with David's dictatorship in 1792, the Delacroix-Constable Salon of 1824, Courbet's one man revolt of 1855, or the First Impressionist Exhibition of 1874 - or if one wishes one may start with Caravaggio or even with

## "Modern"

The term modern art chronologically speaking is then so elastic that it can scarcely be defined. But the colloquialism "Modern Art" in caps or quotes is often no mere question of academic chronology. "Modern Art" is recurrently a matter for debate, to be attacked or defended, a banner for the progressive, a red flag for the conservative. In this sense the word modern can become a problem not of periods but of prejudices.

In "Modern Painters" Ruskin defended Turner and Holman Hunt against the British philistines but twenty years later called one of Whistler's Nocturnes "a paint-pot flung in the face of the public." Whistler brought a lawsuit against Ruskin but himself did not hesitate to call Cezanne's paintings childish. Cezanne in his old age voiced his contempt for "Modern Art" as he saw <sup>it</sup> in the work of Gauguin and van Gogh who in turn had they lived long enough, would doubtless have damned Cubism.

## A Variable Term

Today Cubism is twenty-five years old and some of the believers in the over-emphasis of plastic design which gave rise to Cubism would like to establish an orthodox definition of "Modern" art. A few months ago a well-known New York artist and critic wrote: "The word 'Modern' as applied to pictures has acquired an international definition.... The modern work for instance definitely breaks with all transferring of actual appearances from nature - all copying or mere reporting of facts. It creates all data into an invention. The integration of spaces, colors and forms weaves into a plastic or controlled picture surface...."

Fifteen years ago this definition might have seemed plausible, but in 1934 it is scarcely more valid than Ruskin's exposition of the aims of the Pre-Raphaelites, the revolutionary "Modern" painters of 1850: "They will draw what they see... the actual facts of the scene... irrespective of any conventional rules of picture making." The Super-realists, the most conspicuous advance-guard movement of today, even more than the Pre-Raphaelites, disregard at least so far as their program is concerned the importance of "plastic values."

Since the war, art has become an affair of immense and confusing variety, of obscurities and contradictions, of the emergence of new principles and the renaissance of old ones. As evidence of this complexity one may recall the by no means complete cross-section of modern painting in the Museum's Summer Exhibition of 1933<sup>2</sup>; or glance through such books as Herbert Read's Art Now<sup>3</sup> or Franz Roh's Nach Expressionismus, or the catalogs of the Museum's American exhibitions. The truth is that modern art cannot be defined with any

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degree of finality either in time or in character and any attempt to do so implies a blind faith, insufficient knowledge, or an academic lack of realism.

A. H. Barr, Jr.

1. According to Professor Erwin Panofsky.
2. See Bulletin No. 2, Oct. 1, 1933.
3. See Bulletin No. 7, March 1, 1934.