

Max Ernst : Fiat modes pereat art = Let there be fashion, down with art

Author

Ernst, Max, 1891-1976

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Max Ernst

Fiat modes pereat ars (Let there be fashion, down with art)

Three from a portfolio of eight lithographs
Cologne: Verlag ABK and Schlömilch Verlag, 1919–20
Each 17½ x 12" (43.7 x 31.9 cm)

Printer: the artist

Edition: One of only a few known sets. An edition of 60 sets was initially announced, the majority destroyed by the artist.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

Max Ernst's *Fiat Modes*, considered a masterpiece of printed art, introduces the viewer to Ernst's large body of prints and illustrated books, an integral component of his overall work. Indeed, not only does this first printed project by Ernst provide a summary of the principles of the elusive art and literary movement known as Dada, which flourished in cities throughout Western Europe and in New York from 1915 to 1923, but it also serves as a prototype for the thematic and compositional motifs of his more well-known Surrealist paintings and collages of the 1920s. Whereas the allusions to shop windows and fashion were possibly inspired by the works of Ernst's Rheinland artistic colleague August Macke, the imagery of mannequins placed within disturbing disjunctive spaces with unexplained shadows also indicates the influ-

ences of Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà, and Francis Picabia, artists whom Ernst had recently discovered through reproductions of their work in the Italian periodical *Valori Plastici*.

The emergence and increasing popularity of the portfolio format in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stemmed, in part, from the flexibility it allowed artists to expand upon a particular theme by means of seriality. In *Fiat Modes*, made in homage to de Chirico, Ernst consciously subverts this customary function by continuously frustrating the viewer's inclination to understand the series of images as a logical narrative progression. Instead, he creates a symbolic evocation of the collapse of instrumental reason and of disbelief in the idea of causality, notions he formulated in response to his military service in World

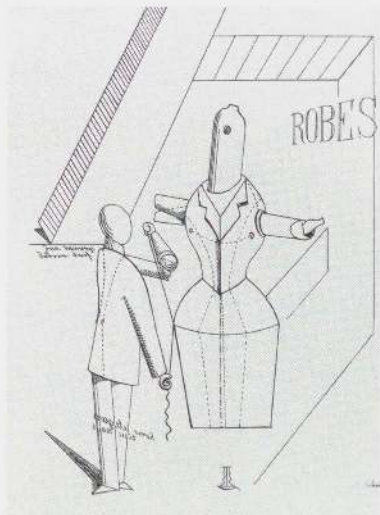


Plate 1

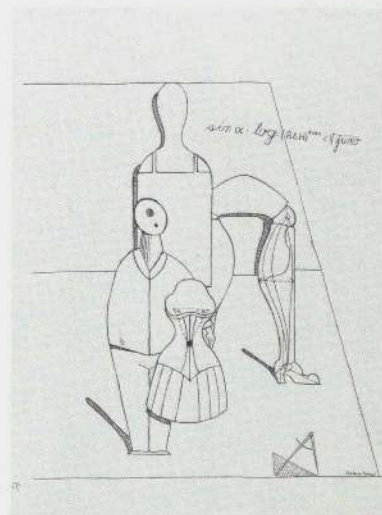


Plate 2

War I, having witnessed the war's destructive employment of technology. Ernst's unconventional use of the portfolio falls well within the Dada movement's art-making objective to shock the viewer out of his or her everyday mind-set and to instigate a questioning of one's conditioned response to reality.

Ernst creates *Fiat Modes* entirely through precise line drawing, unaccompanied by text. Its mechanistic style registers the avant-garde rejection of both human touch and craftsmanship, characteristics generally understood as prerequisites of art. The first plate establishes the artist as creator in the guise

of a tailor in the process of unraveling a spool of thread (or, alternatively, drawing lines) before a dummy. The inscriptions "Pereat ars fiat modes" (Down with art, let there be fashion) to the left of the tailor, and "homo elegans tissi mus" (most elegant man or mouse) inscribed across his legs, are written in reverse to suggest that we are standing behind a transparent glass, possibly a shop window.

In the next print, Ernst continues with his visual puns, presenting us with an overlapping sequence of a headless dummy, which would become a major symbol in Ernst's work, the robotic tailor, and a towering, faceless, bowling-pin-shaped figure with protruding thigh and lower leg. In a gesture that willfully negates mathemati-

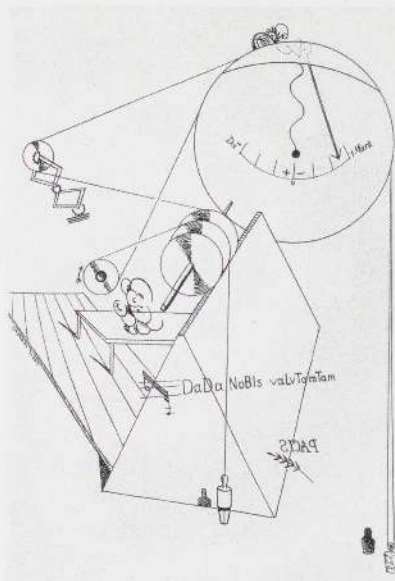


Plate 8

cal logic and the systems of measurement, Ernst places in the lower right-hand corner a compass that has drawn its own shadow, and in the upper right he adds a nonsensical mathematical formula. The prints that follow continue to turn upside down the principles of pictorial perspective invented by Renaissance artists and instead reveal an irrational spatial environment filled with dismembered figures, pulleys, gears, and other mechanisms. By the final plate, the tailor/artist as well as the puppet-like forms have disappeared, replaced with whimsical imagery consisting of a small anthropomorphic weight at the

lower center whose attached cord leads to a circular scale that measures the value of "1 Mark" versus Dada. Below are various inscriptions including "Dada NoBis vaLuTamTam," a word pun on the phrase from the Lord's prayer "...and give us our daily bread." *Fiat Modes* creates a hall of mirrors, an illogical reality akin to a dream sequence in which Ernst wryly comments upon what he believes to be a misguided belief in the infallibility of human progress based upon instruments of reason.

Robin Reisenfeld
Associate Curator

This card is made possible through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Bert Freidus.
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