

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## ART OF THE FORTIES

February 24 - April 30, 1991

In another fifty years we will know more about the forties; it takes the perspective of one century to know another....Yet in a century the violence of the forties will still not have lost its pain and ugliness, and it will still seem wonderful that out of the human spirit so much art could be made in a world where the artist was far more often the victim rather than the honored benefactor of the people.

-- Guy Davenport\*

The art of the 1940s, a turbulent decade that in many respects reshaped the world, is the focus of a major exhibition opening at The Museum of Modern Art on February 24, 1991. Drawn entirely from the Museum's great holdings from the period, ART OF THE FORTIES features works of painting, sculpture, drawings, prints, photography, architecture, design, and film. Viewed from the perspective of the 1990s and the dramatic changes in Central Europe, the exhibition surveys the creative climate of the Western world during World War II and the first years of the Cold War.

On view through April 30, 1991, ART OF THE FORTIES was organized by Riva Castleman, deputy director for curatorial affairs and director of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, in consultation with the curators

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of Painting and Sculpture, Drawings, Photography, Architecture and Design, and Film. The exhibition is supported in part by a grant from The Bohen Foundation.

Comprising approximately 275 works, ART OF THE FORTIES features masterpieces and popular favorites alongside objects that have rarely been seen in recent years by approximately 200 artists (complete list of artists enclosed). Arranged thematically, the installation integrates the various mediums in sections that reflect the history, development of ideas, and evolution of imagery of the decade. From the Surrealism of wartime Europe to the recognition of Latin American art to the flowering of Abstract Expressionism in America, the exhibition also illustrates the active role The Museum of Modern Art played throughout the decade.

During the forties, the Museum sponsored many of the European refugee artists, acquired significant works labeled "degenerate" by the Nazis, and established a fund for the purchase of Latin American art. The Museum contracted with the United States Government to create an Armed Services Program, through which it hosted a G.I. canteen, offered art therapy to veterans, and circulated inspirational exhibitions, most notably Edward Steichen's ROAD TO VICTORY (1942). In addition, through its annual USEFUL OBJECTS exhibitions, the Museum not only emphasized good design but also advised the public as to which materials should be reserved for the war effort.

ART OF THE FORTIES begins with images of war and the American Depression, starting with José Clemente Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank* (1940), a six-part fresco commissioned by the Museum after the fall of France. Pablo Picasso's *Charnel House* (1944-45) and Pavel Tchelitchew's *Hide and Seek* (1940-

42) allude to the horrors of the war. Military photographs document air battles and concentration camps, while Bill Brandt's image of an air raid shelter and Dorothea Lange's portrait of Japanese internees convey the plight of civilians at home and abroad. Posters carrying anti-poverty slogans and war propaganda vividly evoke the prevailing mood.

When the refugee artists arrived in the United States, they brought with them many of the guiding models of modernism, joining the abstraction of the old world with the spirit of the new. Piet Mondrian's ode to New York City, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), and a model of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House* (1945-51) begin a section on geometric abstraction. With these are shown drawings for Rockefeller Center murals by Fernand Léger, another refugee, photographs by Harry Callahan and Paul Strand, Alexander Calder's *Constellation with Red Object* (1943), and Henri Matisse's illustrated book *Jazz* (1947). The biomorphic tendency in abstraction found widespread expression in furniture design, as seen in works by Frederick Kiesler and Isamu Noguchi. The powerful influence of the Surrealists is shown in a remarkably rich selection of paintings and sculptures by Louise Bourgeois, Max Ernst, André Masson, Matta, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy.

The worlds of architecture and design were forever changed by the prodigious new materials and technical developments necessitated by the war. Charles Eames's system for molding plywood found manifestations in such objects as a glider nose and chairs. Tupperware was introduced and soon became a household word. Lightweight aluminum made possible the mass production of objects ranging from cocktail shakers and typewriters to racing cars; Buckminster Fuller even envisioned prefabricated aluminum dwellings to meet the postwar housing demand.

A gallery devoted to postwar figuration includes portraits and figure studies by Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, Frida Kahlo, and Henry Moore. Photographs of prominent political, cultural, and literary figures of the period predominate, including Irving Penn's *Nathan and Mencken* (1947), Arnold Newman's *Robert Oppenheimer* (1949), and W. Eugene Smith's *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* (1949). Henri Cartier-Bresson's portrait of Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) evokes the doctrine of Existentialism and its popular interpretation by artists, notably in Alberto Giacometti's agonizingly spare sculptures.

The final galleries focus on the vital interaction that helped to kindle America's first internationally recognized movement, Abstract Expressionism. Among the important works that depict the earliest manifestations are paintings by Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, and Jackson Pollock. The expansive canvases of gestural and color-field painting by Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still that follow are filled with the energy that would dominate the art world for the next decade.

The film component, drawn from the Museum's Archive, surveys the rich cinematic history of the forties, which ranges from avant-garde works and Hollywood classics to wartime propaganda and combat films. Among the works featured are *Casablanca* (1942), Michael Curtiz's classic wartime love story; *Laura* (1944), Otto Preminger's dark and witty murder mystery; *Paisan* (1946), Roberto Rossellini's Italian neo-realist film; and *The Third Man* (1949), Carol Reed's account of a manhunt in post-World War II Vienna. The awareness of psychoanalysis in the forties is reflected in both Hollywood features such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and independent films such as Hans Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1946). The development of the American avant-garde is traced through films by such directors as James Broughton, Maya

Deren, and Sidney Peterson. The program also includes a tribute to the important film society, Cinema 16, and ends with a fiftieth-anniversary screening of perhaps the most celebrated film of the forties, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941).

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\*PUBLICATION *Art of the Forties*. Edited and with an introduction by Riva Castleman. Essay by Guy Davenport, Alumni Distinguished Professor of English, University of Kentucky. Detailed chronology of important political, social, and cultural events. 160 pages. 48 color and 125 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Clothbound, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., \$39.95. Paperbound, \$19.95; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

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