

Things

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

THINGS



modernstarts comprises three exhibitions principally devoted to the visual arts in the period 1880–1920 and drawn from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. This is the period in which the modern—that is to say, modern art—starts, insofar as the Museum's collection is mainly concerned. And it is a period of many modern starts, many different beginnings or initiatives, the most influential of which are represented in these exhibitions.

PEOPLE is devoted to the representation of the human figure; **PLACES** to particular parts of space, represented or real; and **THINGS** to objects, again both represented and real. All three exhibitions include selected works of art made after 1920, including contemporary works, in order to demonstrate the persistence of ideas and themes broached in the period of *ModernStarts*.

This brochure is an invitation to see selected objects in the exhibiton **THINGS** indicated by the  icon on the wall label.

The cover illustration shows a detail of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1951, after lost original of 1913) which is exhibited at the entrance to **THINGS**. Duchamp created the work by placing an industrially manufactured bicycle wheel on the seat of a common, painted wood stool. The wheel was set above the seat, rather than below it, as in an actual bicycle; its placement thus evokes associations of a clock, a sundial, or some mysterious machine. In the exhibition it is shown together with a bentwood side chair by Gebrüder Thonet (designed c. 1876) and Gerrit Rietveld's Red Blue Chair (1923). The *Bicycle Wheel* seems to share qualities with both—its component parts are common like the Thonet's ubiquitous "café" chair, and its curious presence uncommon like the Rietveld chair, which has little to do with utility. Additionally, knowing how any object fits into the common language world of objects is heightened by seeing the kinds of objects that are found in museums, in part because they are found in museums.

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Lucian Bernhard. *Bosch*. 1914. Lithograph, 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (45.5 x 64.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund

Lucian Bernhard's poster of 1914 juxtaposes an image of a sparkplug with its brand name. The aim of this kind of advertisement is to make us associate the specific word "Bosch" with a sparkplug just as readily as we associate it with the more generic word "sparkplug." For this to work, the image has to be unambiguously clear so that it immediately calls up the unwritten word without having to directly refer to it. Other posters in this exhibition, together with some prints, also ask us to ponder the relationship between the image of an object and a word. More broadly, all of the works in this exhibition ask us to think about how we really recognize and name objects. For designers of objects, as well as for those who depict them, this raises the question of what we expect objects to look like—and this becomes a particularly intriguing question in the case of objects that are new to the material world. In the case of the sparkplug, Bernhard needed to show the spark as well as the sparkplug, lest it would be unclear what this strange thing was. Yet seeing the strangeness is part of actually seeing the object, not just recognizing it by name—something this exhibition is designed to encourage.

OBJECTS AS SUBJECTS



Richard Riemerschmid. Bottle.
1912. Molded glass, 11½" x
2⅓" (29.2 x 7.3 cm). The
Museum of Modern Art, New
York. Phyllis B. Lambert Fund

In 1912 both Richard Riemerschmid and Umberto Boccioni made an object called a bottle. Neither conforms to what we expect a bottle to look like. The Riemerschmid comes closest, but it seems more refined and carafelike than we expect of such a commonplace thing. And Boccioni's bottle, opened and spread out in space, barely resembles a bottle at all.

We might say, then, that Riemerschmid and Boccioni made, respectively, a design object and a sculptural object whose *subject* was a bottle, and that both departed from that subject in the objects that resulted—creating bottles of a kind nobody had seen before. Just as modern painters created new forms by working against the “resistance” of accepted types of paintings called “the landscape” or “the still life,” modern object-makers worked against the resistance of accepted types of objects called “the bottle,” “the glass,” and so on.

Makers of design objects had always taken actual objects as their subjects to varying degrees, but, traditionally, sculptors have rarely done this, usually concentrating on the human figure. To do so created an interesting confusion between a design object and a sculptural object, where the only basic distinction between them was that a design object, like

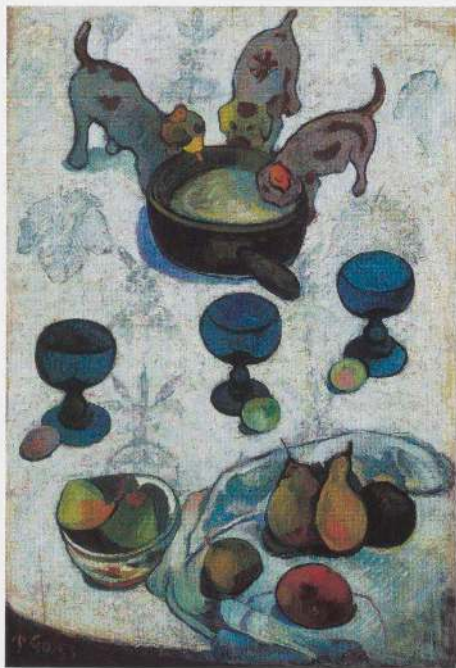


Umberto Boccioni. *Development of a Bottle in Space*. 1912 (cast 1931). Silvered bronze, 15" x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (38.1 x 60.3 x 32.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Aristide Maillol Fund

Riemerschmid's bottle, had to be functional whereas a sculptural object, like Boccioni's bottle, did not. This led to the creation of some fully functional design objects that are virtually indistinguishable from sculptural objects. (It may have, too, sanctioned the creation of design objects that are just barely functional, though it did not begin this trend.) But this phenomenon raised an interesting question: if there was no difference between making nonfunctional sculptural objects and functional design objects, what was the point of making sculpture at all?

The result was a crisis in sculpture. In the face of this some artists made the conscious attempt to create objects as sculptures, enjoying the freedom that this conflation provided, for such works—bottle, glass, cup and saucer, iron, and so on—are a bit like the illusory objects in still life paintings released into the real world. Others created abstract sculptures that look at first sight like design objects, only of uncertain use and of a kind never seen before. And yet this crisis facilitated, conversely, the appreciation of design objects that look like abstract sculptures and the invention of "readymades" by Marcel Duchamp, which are everyday objects presented as sculpture.

TABLES AND OBJECTS



Paul Gauguin. *Still Life with Three Puppies*. 1888. Oil on wood, 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (91.8 x 62.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund

Tables and objects belong with one another. Although a material thing of any size, including a table, is rightly thought an object, nevertheless we commonly think of objects as the sort of things that can be put on tables, things much smaller than ourselves, within our reach and our control. Although objects may be placed upon the floor or hung on the wall or on the ceiling, these will tend to be unusually large or flat or light objects. The majority of objects belong on tables, and the genre of still life painting developed to record this fact and its implications.

Paul Gauguin's *Still Life with Three Puppies* does not, at first, seem to be set on a table. The feeding puppies of the title may cause us to think that it is set on the floor—until the three matched glasses beside them make us realize that the puppies form a sort of table ornament. We are fooled by Gauguin's nearly vertical presentation of the tabletop; in fact, the table is only truly identifiable from the curve of its edge at the bottom of the painting.

Gauguin's image keeps us visually interested by creating visual uncertainty that we have to come to understand. This visual uncertainty is only resolved by realizing Gauguin must have meant the tabletop and the vertical painting to read almost as one. This means that he thought of his still life painting rather like a horizontal tabletop hung vertically on the wall—like a special kind of wall-object.

Pablo Picasso's *The Architect's Table* takes the logical next step. The still life painting is not only imagined as a tabletop hung on the wall, it is the shape of a tabletop as well. Although tabletops *can be* rectangular, paintings usually *are* rectangular. Therefore, paintings that were oval or round would more effectively serve to resemble tabletops. Picasso's painting plays with the tension between the idea of the horizontal tabletop in space and its vertical presentation by smothering it with details, some of which could be lying horizontally on a table—like Gertrude Stein's calling card at lower right—and some of which simply could not—like the hard-to-decipher brandy bottle with the word "MARC" on its label.



Pablo Picasso. *The Architect's Table*. 1912, Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (72.7 x 59.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The William S. Paley Collection

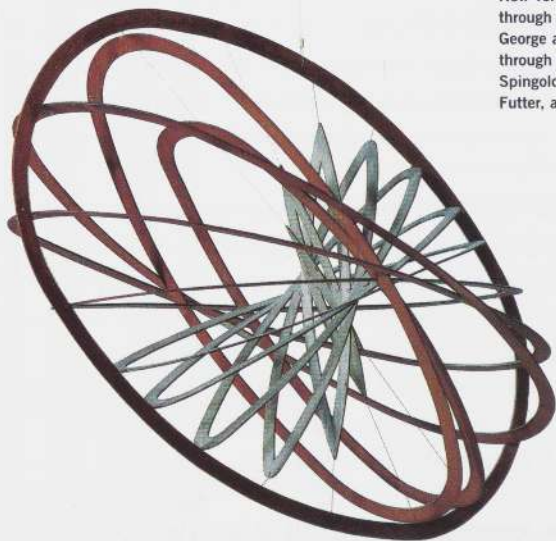
OBJECTS, WALLS, SCREENS

The play between opacity and transparency, between wall, window, and screen is as fundamental to architectural facades as it is to all three-dimensional objects. And although architecture is simultaneously concerned with the relationship of floor, wall, and ceiling, it is the design of the vertical plane that is often privileged as a place of heightened visual interest. The transformation of a wall into a screen or protective grille by means of perforations and voids situates the work illustrated here by Antoni Gaudí between architecture and sculpture. In Gaudí's hands strips of wrought iron are transformed into flowing, ribbonlike undulations to form a protective grille on the ground story of a Barcelona apartment building, which he designed in an equally organic fashion. The fluidity of the screen evokes images of fishing nets hung out to dry—a common sight on the Mediterranean. But the inherent strength of the functional wrought iron screen belies any appearance of an object blowing and twisting in the wind.

Antoni Gaudí. Grille from the Casa Milá, Barcelona. 1905–07. Wrought iron, 65¼ x 72½ x 19½" (167 x 184 x 50 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. H. H. Hecht in honor of George B. Hess and Alice Hess Lowenthal



Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Spatial Construction no. 12*. From the series *Light-Reflecting Surfaces*. c. 1920. Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint, and wire, 24 x 33 x 18½" (61 x 83.7 x 47 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquisition made possible through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis, and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Erna Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds



Suspended from the ceiling and twisting gently in the ambient air, Aleksandr Rodchenko's novel *Spatial Construction no. 12* represents a completely new kind of art that is as far removed from traditional easel painting and sculpture on a pedestal as the post-Revolution Soviet society was from Czarist Russia. Concerned with how to invent a new kind of art emblematic of a new social order, Rodchenko assembled strips of plywood in concentric oval shapes and painted them with light-reflecting aluminum paint to create an object evocative of planetary movements and seemingly devoid of the effects of gravity. The quasi-scientific shape resembles a gyroscope but without top, bottom, or base, thus heightening the construction's spatial quality as if tracing the orbit of an object through the universe. The shadow cast on the wall increases the dynamic quality of the radically new art. Significantly, Rodchenko's sculpture shares qualities with other objects in the exhibition that were designed and constructed of separate elements for a rational purpose and yet equally as often achieve some mysterious quality.

GUITARS AND CHAIRS

If one can identify objects as archetypes in the period covered by *ModernStarts*, then surely the guitar and chair are granted this status. Guitars and chairs are common objects, and yet by looking at the various depictions of guitars in the exhibition, one would in fact have little understanding of what a guitar actually looked like. And looking at the variety of chairs on view tells us that there is no such thing as a typical chair, but rather, a chair is an object of perpetual reinvention manifesting a diverse range of aesthetic expression.

In a still life painting of 1920 the architect and painter Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (known as Le Corbusier) placed the guitar, along with other banal objects including bottles and pipes, at the center of his composition on a table in a room. What is so remarkable about this painting has nothing to do with a realistic depiction of a guitar, but rather the way the guitar's various parts (such as the curving sides and round sound hole) are rendered as solid elements that can also be interpreted as other individual objects. For instance, the sound hole resembles a stack of white plates more closely than



Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret). *Still Life*. 1920. Oil on canvas, 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (80.9 x 99.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Van Gogh Purchase Fund



Charles Rennie Mackintosh.
Side Chair. 1897. Oak and
silk upholstery, 54" x 19½" x 18
(137.1 x 49.2 x 45.7 cm). The
Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of the Glasgow School of Art

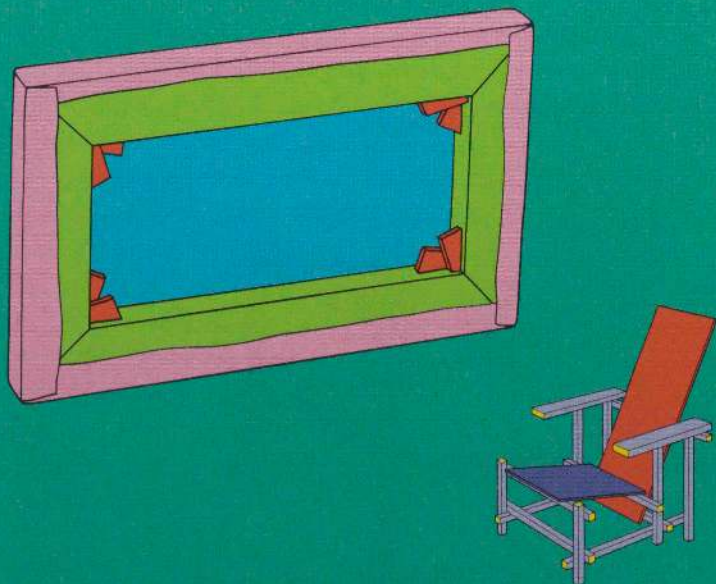
a spatial void of the guitar. In the foreground, what appears to be a fragment of architectural moulding or an open book rhymes with the double-curved side of the guitar. Similarly, a dark brown solid shape resembles the back of the guitar or a chair pushed up against the table. Unlike the fractured forms of objects and space in the Cubists' compositions, Le Corbusier favored "pure" forms of simplified geometric shapes, albeit rendered with some spatial ambiguity, that nevertheless convey an underlying order he believed was shared by all objects.

Given the extraordinary presence that chairs command in our environments, it is not surprising that modern designers, most of whom considered architectural spaces and their contents as total works of art, explored a vast range of forms for these archetypal objects. Although he aimed for a "style-less style" and eschewed references to the past, Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed a high-backed chair for the Luncheon Room of Miss Cranston's famous tea rooms in Glasgow that is actually suggestive of many things. The linear tapering slats of the chair's back support an oval halolike headrest curiously perforated with an abstracted bird in flight that creates a vertical screen for privacy. The anthropomorphic references of the headpiece are even more evident when the chairs are grouped around a table, thus defining a zone of conversation.

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN

Since the late 1970s, Michael Craig-Martin has been compiling a pictorial dictionary of man-made, usually domestic objects. He maintains that the only type of object that needs to have more than one picture in the dictionary is the chair. He suggests, in effect, that when we ponder what we expect a chair to look like, we realize that there is not one single, typical chair—no one chair that typifies the chair—in the same way that there is, a typical stepladder or lamp. His painting of Gerrit Rietveld's Red Blue Chair takes a famous modern chair that has virtually escaped its functional category of "chair" to become an aesthetic design object and colors it unexpectedly (no longer the "Red Blue" Chair) in order to change and accentuate its aesthetic design. The canvas, at the left, shown from the back is an aesthetic creation, a painting, that has been returned to the functional category of "object" because we cannot see what is painted on it. But this imageless object becomes a painting again, Craig-Martin's painting. His wall painting of common and uncommon, domestic and artistic objects asks us to ponder what we expect objects to look like, what we expect objects to be, and perhaps what objects we expect to find in The Museum of Modern Art.

Michael Craig-Martin. *Objects, Ready and Not* (detail). 1999. Acrylic, housepaint, and tape on wall, dimensions variable. Collection the artist



PUBLIC PROGRAMS

For information about Brown Bag Lunch Lectures, Conversations with Contemporary Artists, Adult Courses, and other special exhibition programs being held in conjunction with the exhibition *ModernStarts* please refer to the Museum Web site at www.moma.org, or you may visit The Edward John Noble Education Center. For further information about Public Programs, please call the Department of Education at 212 708-9781.

PUBLICATIONS

ModernStarts: People, Places, Things. Edited by John Elderfield, Peter Reed, Mary Chan, Maria del Carmen González. 360 pages. 9½ x 12". 456 illustrations, including 235 in color. \$55.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Body Language. By M. Darsie Alexander, Mary Chan, Starr Figura, Sarah Ganz, Maria del Carmen González; introduction by John Elderfield. 144 pages. 7 x 10". 115 illustrations, including 51 in color and 64 in duotone. \$24.95 paper; \$19.95 in The MoMA Book Store.

French Landscapes: The Modern Vision 1880–1920. By Magdalena Dabrowski. 144 pages. 9½ x 11½". 136 illustrations, including 45 in color and 28 in duotone. \$24.95 paper; \$19.95 in The MoMA Book Store.

Viewers with the *ModernStarts* catalogue at hand should know that the contents of the exhibition THINGS vary somewhat from the contents of this section in the catalogue.

This brochure was written by John Elderfield, Maria del Carmen González, and Peter Reed. *ModernStarts* was conceived and organized by John Elderfield and Peter Reed with Mary Chan and Maria del Carmen González. Elizabeth Levine replaced Mary Chan in the final few months of the project. Administrative support was provided by Sharon Dec and George Bareford.

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