Timeless aspects of modern art: the first of a series of exhibitions marking the 20th anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 16, 1948 to January 23, 1949

Date
1949

Publisher
The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL
www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2845

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.
TIMELESS ASPECTS
OF MODERN ART

THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF
EXHIBITIONS MARKING THE
20TH ANNIVERSARY OF
The Museum of Modern Art

New York, November 16, 1948 to January 23, 1949
20th Anniversary Series of Exhibitions

To celebrate its twentieth anniversary, the Museum of Modern Art is organizing a series of special exhibitions which will present outstanding works of modern art in settings designed to assist the public to discover the relationship of the art of our time to the art of other epochs and its place in the modern world.

*Timeless Aspects of Modern Art*, the first exhibition of the series, deals with the relationship between modern art and the art of past periods. The second exhibition, *Modern Art in the Modern World*, will be concerned with the affinities between contemporary art forms and other characteristic manifestations of our present civilization.

These two theme exhibitions will be followed by a series of smaller shows presenting background material to the major movements in modern art.
Timeless Aspects of Modern Art

Many phases of human culture are represented in this exhibition. In addition to paintings and sculptures by modern artists it includes works of art from the archaic horizon of Mediterranean civilization, from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe, from the Far-East, pre-Columbian America, the primitive peoples of Oceania and Africa, and replicas of two of the oldest known sculptures, the originals of which were made about seventy-five thousand years ago.

Purpose

The exhibition is the result of many experiences in finding kinships between works of art of different ages, particularly between the work of modern artists and that of artists of other eras and cultures. The arrangement gives the visitor an opportunity to compare the various works of art for himself and to see and sense their relationship. Some visitors will doubtless not agree as to the validity of all relationships suggested here and will discover others which have not been stressed or foreseen. Yet it is believed that a walk through the galleries will show that modern art is not an isolated phenomenon in history but is, like the art of any period, an integral part of the art of all ages.

The exhibition also serves as a reminder that such "modern" means of expression as exaggeration, distortion, abstraction, etc., have been used by artists since the very beginning of civilization to give form to their ideas.
Affinity and Resemblance

This exhibition is not devoted to the tracing of influences, derivations or traditions. Some of the artists represented here have affirmed their indebtedness to works of art or art styles of other epochs. Others have created forms related to works of art they have never seen. We are concerned here mainly with analogies and affinities.

Works of art can be related to each other in many ways. Their affinity may be based on the artists’ physical pleasure in certain rhythmic movements; on their fascination with clean-cut, mathematical order; on their desire to perceive and render the inner structure of things; on religious emotion, and many other factors.

The problem of understanding the affinities between works of art is not unlike that of understanding affinities between people. All of us are familiar with the experience of meeting persons who remind us strongly of someone we have known before. This experience can be based on likeness of features and body or on similarities in ways of thinking and acting. Both the physical and the mental similarities are sometimes accidental, sometimes the result of basic relationships such as kinship or similar environment.

Purely accidental resemblances are irrelevant to the understanding of both people and works of art and can, in fact, become very misleading. There are no cut and dried rules by which superficial likeness can be differentiated from true affinity but an exploring eye and a keen interest will go far toward providing the experience necessary to sound judgment.
Organization

This exhibition obviously cannot attempt to include all important phases of art history nor all major movements of modern art. But it presents a wide range of art forms and many types of relationships from stylistic affinities to affinities of content.

As the visitor enters the exhibition he sees a Chinese painting from the thirteenth century, a landscape by Cézanne, a Cubist picture by Picasso and an etching by Piranesi made about 1740. All these pictures are linked by emphasis on structure. This emphasis often displaces concern with likeness and leads to various forms of abstraction as, for example, in Lipchitz’ Woman and Guitar, in Picasso’s The Painter and His Model, and in African Negro sculpture. Geometric forms, like those found in African carvings, also appear in the archaic Greek Horse but are used here to create a stylized likeness of the animal’s shape. In the serenity of Lehmbruck’s Standing Youth this stylization becomes the bearer of an emotional content that grows to religious fervor in the Romanesque Crucifix of the thirteenth century, in Rouault’s Christ Mocked by Soldiers and Hyman Bloom’s The Synagogue. The Coptic Madonna and Child of the ninth century in the same gallery introduces a formal element that can also be found in the stone head by Modigliani, in figurines from the Cycladic Islands of the third millennium, in an archaic Greek bronze, a predynastic Egyptian clay figure, and in Brancusi’s Bird in Space.

The exhibition ends with a section devoted to the mysterious and fantastic shown in the paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Piero di Cosimo and Yves Tanguy, and in a different sense in the works of Klee and Miro exhibited with a painted bowl of the ancient Maya and a group of Eskimo masks.

We fully realize that this exhibition is based in part on personal interpretation and do not present it as a dogmatic statement but as an invitation to the visitor to undertake his own explorations.

* See the reverse of this folder for a complete checklist and a chart suggesting a variety of sequences not mentioned in this outline.
Excerpt from Statement by Picasso: 1923

To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was. Art does not evolve by itself, the ideas of people change and with them their mode of expression. When I hear people speak of the evolution of an artist, it seems to me that they are considering him standing between two mirrors that face each other and reproduce his image an infinite number of times, and that they contemplate the successive images of one mirror as his past, and the images of the other mirror as his future, while his real image is taken as his present. They do not consider that they all are the same images in different planes.