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The Museum of Modern Art

THE MANY ASPECTS OF FIGURAL ART IN EARLY MODERNISM EXAMINED AT THE MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART

Modern*Starts: People*
October 7, 1999, to February 1, 2000
Second Floor Galleries

A radical rethinking of the nature and meaning of modern art begins at
The Museum of Modern Art on October 7 with the opening of Modern*Starts:
People,* a probing, unconventional exhibition that explores the myriad
ways in which artists approached the figure as the modern age began.

Intended to suggest fresh ways of looking at and thinking about modern
art, *People,* together with Modern*Starts: Places* (opening October 28) and
Things (November 21), eschews traditional presentations that organize
works by chronology, style, medium, or school. Instead, the exhibitions
of Modern*Starts* explore relationships and shared themes, as well as
divergent movements and conflicting points of view, by juxtaposing works
in new and often provocative ways. Adjacencies among the exhibitions
themselves further reveal interrelationships and currents that cut across
diverse styles, movements, and mediums. And while the project focuses on
the period 1880 to 1920, it incorporates works from more contemporary
periods to show how later artists have treated the traditions, themes,
and subject matter of the period.

By organizing the works into broad categories of *People* (the human
figure), *Places* (sites, real and imagined), and *Things* (objects and
representations of objects), the curatorial team, led by co-organizers
John Elderfield, Chief Curator at Large; Peter Reed, Curator, Department
of Architecture and Design; Maria del Carmen González, Associate
Educator, Department of Education; and Mary Chan, Curatorial Assistant,
Department of Drawings, chose an organizing principle that actually
preceded modern art. Visitors will find the galleries devoid of their
well-known historical framework and the art returned to a less orderly
state, as it was before history had named the styles and elevated certain
artists to renown. Instead of the single, chronological route through the
galleries with works segregated by medium, visitors are offered numerous
pathways, each through a group of works similar in subject matter, yet
entirely self-sufficient and independent.

Mr. Elderfield discusses the team's objectives in the exhibition
catalogue: "We wanted to offer something questioning and partial, instead
of something that pretends to be definitive and comprehensive. In doing
so, we think we are following leads set down in the period, which is a
period not of one style and typology but of many searches for a style and
a typology--the ModernStarts of our title. The evidence of the period, at
least, seems that the modern avoids the consensus of a prevalent style or
typology; that if it created one, it would deny itself and cease to be
modern." People occupies the Museum's entire Second Floor and comprises
some 320 works arranged in eight installations. While the components of
People emphasize the many facets of modern art, they also demonstrate
that in a period most prominently associated with the development of

abstraction, the figure remained a central and abiding motif. Figural
language and composition are two of the major issues considered in
People. The Language of the Body shows how modern artists employed
gesture, posture, and facial expression to convey inner psychological
states. *Composing with the Figure* investigates how the human body--often
decomposed or fragmented--appears as one element in complex, layered
compositions, while *Composing the Figure* examines works in which the
primary element is a single figure. *Ensor/Posada* juxtaposes the
apocalyptic figures rendered by two artists, working independently in
different locations, who produced similarly macabre works. *Unique Forms
of Continuity in Space* looks at sculpture, primarily of the single
figure. *Actors, Dancers, Bathers* demonstrates the early modernists'
special interest in representing those who pose or perform, and *Posed to
Unposed: Encounters with the Camera* explores the distinctions between
planned and spontaneous photographs of people.

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing
The visitor to *People* first encounters an abstract wall drawing created
by Sol LeWitt, *On black walls, all two-part combinations of white arcs
from corners and sides, and white straight, not straight, and broken
lines* (1975). The large-scale drawing--in white crayon on black walls--is
made up of 190 combinations of four types of line. Inspired by Eadweard
Muybridge's sequential photographs of a man running, the drawing is
included for the contrast it provides to the exhibition and for how it
reflects two key innovations of the 1880-1920 period: the turn from
figural representation to abstraction based on figuration, and the shift
from narrative, representational subject matter to subjects depicted in
abstract form that ask the viewer to create the narrative.

Language of the Body
Language of the Body, organized by Ms. Chan and Starr Figura, Assistant
Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, explores ways in
which early modern artists used human gesture, posture, and facial
expressions to convey particular moods or emotions. The installation
comprises more than seventy prints, drawings, photographs, paintings, and
sculptures. Among the artists featured are Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch,
Pablo Picasso, Edward Steichen, and Vincent van Gogh.

Since the Renaissance, when pictures were meant to tell stories, the
bodies in artworks were made to "speak" through the way they were
arranged or posed. Although early modern artists assimilated many of the
figurative conventions that had become familiar from the past, they were
less motivated to depict the external world or illustrate well-known
texts than to examine the subtle interior states of the human psyche.

Van Gogh's lithograph *Sorrow* (1882) and Steichen's photograph *In
Memoriam, New York* (1905) are two works that use gesture and posture to
evoke a particular emotion. They emanate from a long tradition of
depicting women seated or bent downward to represent grief, as in a
lamentation in religious art. Erich Heckel's woodcut entitled *Fränzi
Reclining* (1910) is clearly related to the traditional subject of the
reclining nude, but he uses an angular and flat treatment of the body
that contrasts sharply with the more rounded and voluptuous figures
familiar from the past. The reclining nude in Paul Klee's *Virgin in a
Tree* (1903) is a grotesque, satirical figure rooted partly in life and
partly in the imagination.

Other works explore the various features and movements that give the face
its different moods and attitudes. While the direct gaze in Munch's *Self-
Portrait* (1895) gives the subject an intense and psychologically

provocative presence, the averted eyes in Theo van Rysselberghe's *Self-Portrait* (1888-89) suggest reverie, avoidance, or withdrawal.

Composing with the Figure

Composing with the Figure, organized by Mr. Elderfield and Ms. González, examines the changing role of the figure in pictorial art in the period 1880 to 1920. Comprising some seventy paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints, photographs and a video installation, *Composing with the Figure* features multi-figural compositions, including many important Cubist works and great monumental paintings of the early part of the century.

As artists began to think less about representing the figure than about using the figure as a compositional element, new attention was paid to the relationship of the figure and background as way in which to convey meaning. Despite the enormity and centrality of the subject's placement in Gustav Klimt's *Hope, II* (1907-08), the brilliant colors and patterns of the woman's dress that flood the composition are more mesmerizing than the figure itself. Likewise, Paul Signac's *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon* in 1890, pulls the viewer's attention to the dynamic, swirling background given equal precedence in the work's title.

Other important developments, such as the decomposition and reassembly of the figure, can be seen in Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné's *Symphony Number 1* (1913) and Giorgio de Chirico's *The Great Metaphysician* (1917). Baranoff-Rossiné's assemblage of wood, cardboard, and crushed eggshells, and de Chirico's painting of a mannequin head, stretcher bars, and other materials, are figural constructions using objects and materials traditionally not associated with the human form.

Figurative works also became less narrative and more ambiguous in the representation. Henri Matisse's *The Moroccans* (1915-16) does not portray a specific moment in time, but, rather, a compilation of recollected images. Similarly, Umberto Boccioni's sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) captures the motions of a body moving through time and space.

Composing the Figure

Composing the Figure, organized by Mr. Elderfield, Ms. González, and Elizabeth Levine, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, focuses on figural compositions using the single figure. Ten paintings and sculptures by Matisse and Picasso, in which the composition of the figure is effectively the composition of the work, are on view in the installation.

Picasso's *Nude with Joined Hands* (1906), in which a female figure stands enclosed within a continuous pink ground, evokes an Arcadia unspecific in time or place. Similarly, Picasso's *Boy Leading a Horse* (1905-06) is a timeless piece in which the composition is made by the figure in relation to the field.

Ensor/Posada

Ensor/Posada juxtaposes the prints of James Ensor (Belgian, 1860-1949) and José Guadalupe Posada (Mexican, 1852-1913)--artists working contemporaneously on different continents and in different formats--to examine how their imaginative imagery of skeletons, demons, and masked figures, mirrors the other's. While the specific culture and technique of each artist fueled his respective work, both produced similarly apocalyptic, grotesque, and satirical interpretations of society at the end of the nineteenth century. Organized by Judith B. Hecker, Curatorial

Assistant, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, the installation comprises approximately twenty works, including prints and broadsheets, by each artist.

Ensor's hometown, the coastal resort city of Ostend, with its tourists, parades, religious processions, and raucous Mardi Gras celebrations, inspired his crowded compositions and disquieting subject matter, evident in the print *Death Chasing the Flock of Mortals* (1896). Carnival masks sold in his family's souvenir shop and literature of the period, particularly the macabre tales of Edgar Allan Poe, also provided sources for his imagery.

Posada worked within the tradition of journalistic satire, which included images of calaveras, or personified skulls and skeletons, as shown in the illustration *This is about Don Quixote the First, the Unequaled Giant Calavera* (c. 1895). These images, issued for the Day of the Dead, captivated broad audiences and became symbols of the Mexican homeland. In addition to indigenous myth, folklore, and Catholicism, Posada drew his subjects from sensational news stories, exaggerating their shocking aspects in order to heighten their allure. While the power of Ensor's images-printed in drypoint and etching-comes from their crowded pageantry, infinitely receding space, and myriad of details, Posada's images, printed in relief engraving, are rendered instantly captivating through their bold markings, stop-action figures, and simplified space.

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space
The period from 1880 to 1920 saw a change from figurative sculptures that read in the first place as surrogate figures to those whose sculptural qualities are more evident. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space,* organized by Mr. Elderfield, presents some twenty-three works dating from this transitional period, by such well-known artists as Alberto Giacometti, Aristide Maillol, Matisse, and Auguste Rodin.

The size and scale of figurative sculptures is important for the composition of the work, as well as the way in which the work affects the beholder. For example, at just over three feet tall, Rodin's *Three Shades* (1881-86) seems much less naturalistic when compared with other life- or larger-than-life-size sculptures, such as Rodin's *John the Baptist Preaching* (1878-80). The installation's generous gallery space allows viewers to experience these sculptures in the round, and to consider questions relating to size, distance, and the perceptual and physical composition of modern sculptures.

Two series of sculpted heads, Rodin's studies for the *Monument to Balzac* (1891-97), and Matisse's heads of Jeanette (1910-16), a young neighbor of the artist, demonstrate a gradual metamorphosis. The evolution of the five heads in each project shows a progression from naturalism and realistic representation to subjective interpretation, in the case of the Rodin, and more severe, architectonic interpretations in the case of the Matisse.

Actors, Dancers, Bathers
Certain artistic subjects reappear throughout the history of modern art, and may be interpreted in a variety of styles. Organized by Mr. Elderfield and Ms. González, *Actors, Dancers, Bathers,* comprising some thirty diverse works in various mediums, invites viewers to compare the many variations on these three recurring themes.

Images of actors, dancers, and bathers generally show the subjects posing or performing. Actors assume character identities or play roles; dancers

perform choreography; and bathers, through their continual reappearance as artistic subjects, have become types of artistic performers. Through variations on the themes of actors, dancers, and bathers, the viewer may consider to what extent the performer shapes the composition of the work and to what extent the composition shapes the performer.

For example, Paul Cézanne's *The Bather* (c. 1885) and Rineke Dijkstra's photograph *Odessa, Ukraine. 4 August 1993* (1993) both depict a young male bather squarely facing the viewer. Though created over a century apart and in different mediums, the postures of the bathers are strikingly similar. While the tendency toward abstraction in Cézanne's work suggests that this could be any bather, Dijkstra's sharp photograph is a highly individualized portrait.

Paintings, photographs, drawings, and sculptures are installed by group: actors, such as The Beggarstaffs's *Hamlet* (1894); dancers, such as Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas's *Two Dancers* (1905); and bathers, as in Edward Hopper's *Train and Bathers* (1920).

Posed to Unposed: Encounters with the Camera
Organized by M. Darsie Alexander, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography, *Posed to Unposed: Encounters with the Camera* considers the primary distinctions between the planned and the unexpected-posed and unposed-in photographs of people. The installation, comprising some sixty-five works spanning the history of photography, illustrates the clear distinction between posed and unposed, as well as instances in which the two categories overlap. Works by such well-known photographers as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lange, and Weegee are presented in dialogue with one another to suggest the many permutations of this theme.

The earliest works in the installation, daguerreotypes from the 1850s, were posed out of necessity-long exposure times required that sitters remain absolutely still for a period of several minutes. This often resulted in highly stylized portraits such as George N. Barnard's Untitled (1850), which depicts four somber children seated against a satin backdrop.

Beginning in the 1890s, the widespread availability of handheld cameras enabled photographers to take pictures easily and unobtrusively, without any direct contact with their subjects. Photographers such as Cartier-Bresson, Tod Papageorge, and Garry Winogrand record the subtle and sometimes unexpected effects of life in motion, capturing impromptu poses, voyeuristic scenarios, and spontaneous displays of emotion. Mugging for the camera, or the instinct to "strike a pose," is a form of interaction between people and the camera that can be considered both posed and unposed. For example, in Helen Levitt's *New York* (c. 1940) two boys clearly perform for the camera, making exaggerated gestures that evoke the dramatic poses of great actors or orators. Yet, similarly to unposed works, the subjects are shown in the midst of spontaneous action, which is registered in their expressions.

In other works, the photographer has deliberately complicated the distinction between posed and unposed photographs by creating posed pictures that possess the casualness of a snapshot or by recording a natural occurrence that looks remarkably staged. This deliberate ambiguity is evident in Tina Barney's *Sunday New York Times* (1982), in which an of-the-moment photo is, in actuality, carefully orchestrated.

ModernStarts was conceived and organized by Mr. Elderfield, Mr. Reed, Ms.

Chan, and Ms. González. Ms. Levine replaced Ms. Chan in the final few months of the project. Administrative support was provided by Sharon Dec, Assistant to the Chief Curator at Large, and George Bareford, Administrative Assist, Department of Chief Curator at Large. *People* was installed by Mr. Elderfield, Ms. González, and Ms. Levine, with Ms. Alexander, Ms. Hecker, and Ms. Figura. Exhibition design and production was coordinated by Jerry Neuner, Director, Exhibition Design and Production; and graphic design by Ed Pusz, Assistant Director, Department of Graphics.

SPONSOR
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ORIENTATION GALLERY
*Making*Modern*Starts,* mounted in the first-floor Garden Hall Gallery, functions as an orientation gallery to *People, Places,* and *Things,* and previews the Museum's future beyond MoMA2000. A statement by Director Glenn D. Lowry accompanies the display of a new study model of the future Museum of Modern Art by architect Yoshio Taniguchi. Conceptual explanations and floor plans of Modern*Starts* are presented, along with a representative sampling of works including Constantin Brancusi's *Mlle Pogany* (1913), Lucian Bernhard's lithograph *Bosch* (1914) and Koloman Moser's Vase. Additionally, *The Red Studio* (1911), an iconic work by Henri Matisse, depicts people, places, and things.

PUBLICATIONS
Modern*Starts: People, Places, Things* Exhibition catalogue by John Elderfield, Peter Reed, Mary Chan, and Maria del Carmen González. 456 illustrations, including 235 in color, 360 pages, 9 1/2 x 12". Clothbound $55 and paperbound $29.95 distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, and available in the MoMA Book Store.

Body Language Texts by M. Darsie Alexander, Mary Chan, Starr Figura, Sarah Ganz, and Maria del Carmen González, Introduction by John Elderfield. 115 illustrations, including 51 in color and 64 in duotone, 144 pages, 7 x 10". Paperbound $19.95, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, and available in the MoMA Book Store.

ACOUSTIGUIDE
MoMA Director Glenn Lowry, contemporary artist Sol LeWitt, and MoMA curators who organized the exhibition will narrate an audiotour of the galleries.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS
The Museum of Modern Art is planning several public programs in conjunction with Modern*Starts: People*. A series of Brown Bag Lunch Lectures will address the evolution of modern art and the themes it encompasses as represented by the Museum's collection. A lecture series, Conversations with Contemporary Artists, will allow visitors to gain a wider understanding of modern art. A course, *People and Places in the*

Photographic Image: the Body and the City, 1870s-1920s, will explore depictions of the human figure and the city in the modern media of photography and cinema. The Museum also offers a series of Saturday morning guided tours for families with young children to introduce participants to the diverse world of modern art.

EDUCATIONAL BROCHURE
A brochure is available to visitors at the entrance of the exhibition. This illustrated publication serves as both an overview and as a guide to the themes within the exhibition. The brochure was written by M. Darsie Alexander, Starr Figura, Judith B. Hecker, and John Elderfield, with the consultation of Maria del Carmen González.

WEB SITE AND INTERACTIVE KIOSKS
A subsite devoted to the exhibition will be available via the Museum's Web site, www.moma.org, and adjacent to the galleries via interactive kiosks. It will contain an introduction and eight sections addressing all the installations within *People,* including curatorial essays, numerous selected works, a search function, and a floorplan of the exhibition.

VISITOR PACKAGES
A special MoMA2000 package is being offered to visitors. For $50, the visitor will receive admission for one to the Museum, a MoMA2000 appointment calendar and lunch at Sette MoMA, the Museum's elegant Italian restaurant.

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