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The Museum of Modern Art

MOMA INVESTIGATES THE IMPORTANCE OF OBJECTS IN EARLY MODERNISM

ModernStarts: Things

November 21, 1999–March 14, 2000

In *Things*, the third and final installment of *ModernStarts*, The Museum of Modern Art probes the significance of the object, both real and depicted, to artists during the period 1880 to 1920. The exhibition examines ordinary and extraordinary objects and illustrates the connections between three-dimensional works—sculpture, design objects, and architectural fragments—and two-dimensional representations of objects—paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs.

Visitors to *ModernStarts: Things* can view, in a single large exhibition space on the first floor, some 160 objects grouped into related clusters, such as guitars, chairs, still-life paintings, walls and screens, and design objects. As in *ModernStarts: People* and *Places*, the exhibition is installed thematically and can be viewed in any sequence. *Things* highlights a number of important innovations from the period: a renewed interest in still-life painting, the invention of collage, the development of the object-poem using experimental typography, various approaches to abstraction, and the rejection of historical styles in design. In sculpture, a shift from the traditional techniques of modeling and carving to those of construction and assemblage led to a century of sculptural experimentation.

To reflect how the past is viewed through the prism of the present, a monumental site-specific mural by British artist Michael Craig-Martin wraps the walls in the Museum's lobby and extends through the Garden Hall. Demonstrating how easily the everyday object can seem unfamiliar when taken out of context, *Objects, Ready and Not* depicts an array of vividly colored and often oversized things, many of them references to objects made famous in works of art, such as Marcel Duchamp's urinal, Jasper Johns's can of paintbrushes, and René Magritte's pipe. Simplified and stylized objects, outlined in black tape, float across brilliant lime green, turquoise, and magenta tracts of space. Approximately 11 1/2 feet high and 442 feet wide, the painting extends from the lobby to the exhibition entrance on one side, and to The Garden Café on the other.

Developed partly in response to objects in the Museum's collection, Craig-Martin's piece also includes representations of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, Gerrit Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair*, and the Thonet brothers' bentwood *Side Chair*, with the actual objects displayed on a nearby platform. In addition, four works from the Museum's collection are hung on the wall painting—a cast iron and brass fan (c. 1908) by Peter Behrens; *The Song of Love* (1914), a painting by Giorgio de Chirico; *White on White* (1918), a painting by Kazimir Malevich; and *Guitar* (1912–13), a groundbreaking sculpture by Pablo Picasso. Flanking the exhibition entrance is an installation by video artist Martha Rosler, who uses a deadpan ironic style in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) to express a feminist interpretation of the meaning of common kitchen objects. Over the course of the six-minute video, Rosler presents herself, in her

words, as an "anti-Julia Child" who displays and names each utensil, using an angrily escalating "lexicon of rage and frustration" to convey her emotions. These contemporary juxtapositions encourage consideration of one of the central themes in *Things*, a theme that engaged the imagination of artists of the early modern period and still confronts the viewer today: How does one recognize and identify objects, and expect them to appear?

John Elderfield, Chief Curator at Large, addresses the organizing concept behind the three-part structure of *ModernStarts*: "*People, Places, and Things* recall the old division of genres that, before modernism upset things, began with figure compositions, continued with landscapes, and ended with still lifes. We adopted this division for *ModernStarts* because it persisted in the period 1880-1920 and because it was challenged in this period as never before."

ModernStarts: Things was conceived and organized by Mr. Elderfield and Peter Reed, Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, with Mary Chan, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings, and Maria del Carmen González, Associate Educator, Department of Education. Elizabeth Levine, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, and Kristin Helmick-Brunet, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings, provided assistance to the curatorial team. Administrative Support was provided by Sharon Dec and George Bareford. Other participants in the formation of *Things* were M. Darsie Alexander, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography; Judith B. Hecker, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books; Christopher Mount, Assistant Curator, Department of Architecture and Design; and Jennifer Tobias, Associate Librarian.

Object Posters

The isolated object divorced from a narrative context makes its appearance in the early modern period most vividly in Lucian Bernhard's advertisements, known as object posters. Stark images of objects—a spark plug, a light bulb, and a shoe—are juxtaposed with their brand names: Bosch, Osram Azo, and Stiller. The aim is to create a brand name that is so closely associated with the object that it replaces the original, generic name. For this effort to succeed, the image becomes like a word—stripped of extraneous details to represent the essence of its type. The earliest poster on display by Bernhard is from 1908. His object posters inspired later artists, including the work of the Swiss graphic designer Niklaus Stoecklin from the early 1940s. Three of Stoecklin's vibrant and colorful posters--*Binaca*, *Bi-Oro*, and *Meta-meta*--which depict toothpaste, sunscreen, and a fuel briquette, respectively, are recent acquisitions on view for the first time at the Museum.

Tables and Objects

This section investigates the relationship between tables and objects in still-life paintings by artists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Paul Klee, Edouard Manet, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, and Picasso. Henri Rousseau's *Flowers in a Vase* (1902), with its slight upward incline, is still a straightforward rendering, modern in its crisp, geometric clarity, while Gauguin's *Still Life with Three Puppies* (1888) and Miró's *Table with Glove* (1921) defy gravity, lifting up the objects for inspection. Part of the reason is that the artists intended to create uncertainty as to how the painting should be read; and in some cases, they began to think of their still-life paintings as horizontal tabletops hung vertically on the wall. The edges of the canvas in Picasso's *The Architect's Table* (1912) and Georges Braque's *Soda* (1912) mimic the shape of a table, merging the paintings and the tabletop as one. In contrast, Matisse's *Gourds* (1915-16) does not depict the table, and puzzles the

viewer as to its existence. Two actual tables by Edward William Godwin (c. 1875), and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1904) are included for the clarity of their design and for their similarities to the tables in the paintings.

Objects as Subjects

This section comprises a mixture of design objects and sculptural objects. Traditionally, sculptors have rarely taken things as their subjects, usually concentrating on the human figure. To do so created an interesting confusion between a design object and a sculptural object, where the basic distinction between them was that a design object, like Richard Riemerschmid's molded glass bottle (1912), had to be functional, while a sculptural object, like Umberto Boccioni's *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912, cast 1931), did not. A case in the exhibition will display these objects as well as others, including abstract sculptures that look like design objects, as in László Moholy-Nagy's *Nickel Construction* (1921); design objects that look like abstract sculptures, such as Sven Wingquist's chrome-plated steel Self-Aligning Ball Bearing (1929); and utilitarian objects offered by artists subtly altered as sculptures, for example, Man Ray's tack-studded flatiron in *Cadeau* (c. 1958, replica of 1921 original). This latter development was inspired partly by Duchamp's "Readymades," such as his *Bicycle Wheel* (1951; after lost original of 1913), which are everyday objects presented as sculpture.

Objects/Words Words have usually been kept outside the space of pictures, as titles or commentaries, in the belief that the verbal and the visual are separate, opposing realms. Picasso and Braque began to include words in their pictures around late 1910. The images in a group of prints by these artists come, in large part, from a similar pool of brand names, advertising slogans, and objects of popular culture as Bernhard's object posters. In contrast, however, Picasso and Braque put words in their compositions not only to allude to the apparatus of mass culture but also for their personal meanings and associations.

Typographic design was liberated during this period. Graphic designers learned to use words and word fragments with much the same freedom as a painter would use visual elements. One particularly rich example is a collage-poem, taken from a book by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (Plate for *Les Mots en Liberté Futuristes*, 1919). It shows a woman at lower right, and above her, words and word fragments that tell us they comprise a letter she is reading from her lover who is away at war. Marinetti arranged and animated the words and phrases to illustrate the sounds and sensations of the war.

The interplay between words and objects is further examined in a group of magazine pages designed by the artist Francis Picabia in the publication 391. Picabia gave a new, sexualized meaning to illustrations of a propeller, a light bulb, and a spark plug by associating the objects with body parts and assigning them the provocative titles *Ass*, *Américaine*, and *Portrait of a American Girl in a State of Nudity*, respectively. Appreciation of industrial objects such as the propeller led artists to both depict and emulate the shape and finish of such forms. On view in *Things* is a two-foot-wide brass boat propeller (c. 1925), perhaps similar to the one that inspired Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi, and Fernand Léger on a visit to the Salon of Aerial Locomotion in Paris in 1912. Duchamp said: "Painting is finished. Who can do better than that propeller?"

Objects, Walls, Screens

The play between opacity and transparency is as fundamental to

architectural facades as it is to all three-dimensional objects. And while architecture is concerned with the relationship of floor, wall, and ceiling, it is the design of the vertical plane that is often a place of heightened visual interest. The windows, walls, and screens of this section, by such architects and designers as Antoni Gaudí, Eileen Gray, Louis Henry Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright, share common concerns with early modern painting and with relief constructions conceived as flat vertical objects hung on walls.

The metaphoric imagery in designs by Gaudí and Sullivan gave rich poetic expression to their buildings. In Gaudí's hands, strips of wrought iron are transformed into ribbonlike waves to form a protective grille (1905-07) for Casa Milá, a Barcelona apartment building. Buildings designed by the American architect Sullivan are clothed in a profusion of lacy ornament that gives the underlying structure an expressive voice, as in the recently restored cast-iron balustrade (1898-99) from the facade of the Gage Building in Chicago, which Sullivan designed using densely foliated forms interwoven among the geometric armature. Wright's belief in fundamental geometric forms--seen here in stained glass windows, concrete and terra cotta wall blocks, and a carpet design--was as much a response to modern methods of production as an intuitive understanding that abstract forms carried spiritual values.

Two objects that achieved archetypal status in the period examined by *ModernStarts* are the guitar and the chair, this is reflected in the exhibition by displays of works with guitars as subject and a grouping of chairs.

Guitars

The guitar, especially in its Spanish flamenco and classical forms, was a popular musical instrument in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and became an iconic subject for avant-garde artists. As a symbol of the bohemian life in artists' studios and cafés, the guitar became so prevalent in the paintings and sculptures of Cubist artists as to become virtually their talisman. For Picasso and Juan Gris, the instrument additionally evoked the Spanish culture of their homeland, where the guitar is thought to have originated. Stringed instruments also belong to the tradition of still-life and genre painting, where they frequently have amorous connotations. Picasso (like others) reflected the artistic and literary ideas of the era by associating the guitar with the female form; three of his variations on the subject are on view, along with works by Braque, Gris, Henri Laurens, Le Corbusier, and Joaquín Torres-García.

In Picasso's *Guitar* (1912-13), the artist opened the door to a century of rich sculptural experimentation. Revolutionary in form and technique, the work is constructed--rather than modeled or carved as Western sculpture had been since antiquity--of sharply cut sheet-metal planes, that merely suggest, instead of define, mass. In the collage *Guitar* (1913), Picasso used wallpaper and newspaper in an attempt to disrupt traditional methods of representation and to insert materials deemed unacceptable in art. The architect and painter Le Corbusier preferred the solid depiction of things to the Cubist fracturing of form. In *Still Life* (1920), he borrows the objects of a Cubist picture and stabilizes them through carefully composed horizontals and verticals, pure geometric forms, and rhyming shapes. The Uruguayan-born Torres-García, who was raised in Spain, believed abstraction should be rooted in the real world. In *Guitarra* (1924), a small, roughly hewn, painted wood relief barely evokes the instrument. The toylike size, rudimentary forms, and unrefined finish

give this sculpture a playful quality; its whimsy and subject suggest an homage to Spain and to his compatriot Picasso.

Chairs

With the elimination of much applied decoration and elaborate upholstery, early modern chairs evoked a sculptural presence through their unity of form and function. Usually designed with mass production in mind, wood was the favored material: inexpensive, flexible, and pleasant to touch. The chairs on display in *Things* include those by designers such as Josef Hoffmann, Mackintosh, Gustav Stickley, the Thonet brothers, and Wright.

In Mackintosh's Side Chair (1897), designed for Miss Cranston's, a famous tea room in Glasgow, the tapering slats of the chair's back and halolike headrest are curiously perforated with the outline of an abstract bird in flight. An important precursor to Rietveld's Red Blue Chair was Wright's Side Chair (1904), which exemplifies the designer's avoidance of curved forms and demonstrates a startling simplification of parts, emphasizing the horizontal and vertical planes of the seat and back. Wright's principles of clear, structural expression were shared by Hoffmann, a founding member of the Vienna Secession and the Wiener Werkstätte craft studio, in whose adjustable-back chair, the *Sitzmaschine* (machine for sitting) (c. 1905), one sees the interplay of curved bentwood elements and flat rectilinear planes. Bentwood technology, perfected in the nineteenth century by Austrian furniture manufacturers, provided designers with the opportunity to manipulate wood rods into an infinite variety of curvilinear shapes. The profile of the Thonet brothers' Rocking Chaise (c. 1880), which appears to be a continuous piece of wood, is in fact spliced together; its sinuous frame and cane seat achieve an extraordinary effect of lightness and transparency.

In addition to the sections described above, a wall of ten photographs illuminates a number of themes addressed in *Things*, including pictures that reduce objects to abstractions, as in Paul Outerbridge's dramatic photograph of a simple cracker box (*Untitled*, 1922), and Paul Strand's rendition of bowls as abstract, universal shapes (1915). Others simply depict objects in a straightforward vernacular style, as in William Bell's *Perched Rock, Rocker Creek, Arizona* (1872).

Sculpture Garden Installation

To trace the artistic tradition emanating from Picasso's innovation in constructed sculpture of 1912-13, an installation of 12 fabricated metal works from the 1960s and 1970s are on view in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, including works by Anthony Caro, Barnett Newman, Claes Oldenburg, David Smith, and Mark di Suvero. The earliest sculpture in the installation is Picasso's *Monument*, which was constructed in 1972 after an enlargement of the 1928 original maquette. Newman's 25-foot steel work, *Broken Obelisk* (1963-69) returns to the Sculpture Garden after 12 years on loan. The installation was organized by Patricia Houlihan, Associate Conservator, and Laura Rosenstock, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

ABOUT MoMA2000

ModernStarts is the first cycle of MoMA2000. The Museum of Modern Art's response to the millennium, MoMA2000 is a 17-month-long series of exhibitions that presents well-known and less-familiar artworks in unusual juxtapositions and new contexts. An exploration both of the Museum's unparalleled collection and of new ways of displaying it, MoMA2000 provides a provocative look at some of this century's most compelling and powerful art. Conceived as a preliminary laboratory for the reinstallation of the Museum's collection after the completion of our

new building project, it offers fresh interpretations of the premises, meanings, and diversity of modern art.

MoMA2000 presents three major exhibition cycles that focus on distinct historical periods: 1880 to 1920 (*ModernStarts*), 1920 to 1960 (*Making Choices*), and 1960 to the present (*Open Ends*). Each historical cycle will be interspersed with works from other periods, creating a dialogue between various historical moments. Installed throughout the entire Museum, works in all mediums will be presented in innovative, multidisciplinary ways.

SPONSORS

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ORIENTATION GALLERY

Making ModernStarts, 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 model of the future Museum of Modern Art by architect Yoshio Taniguchi. Conceptual explanations and floor plans of *ModernStarts* are presented, along with a representative sampling of works including Constantin Brancusi's *Mlle Pogany* (1913), Koloman Moser's *Vase* (1902), and Jupp Wiertz's lithograph *AEG Drahtlampe* (AEG Wire Lamp, c. 1915). Additionally, *The Red Studio* (1911), an iconic work by Henri Matisse, depicts people, places, and things.

PUBLICATIONS

ModernStarts: People, Places, Things. Exhibition catalogue, edited 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 Bookstore, Online at www.momastore.org, or by calling 1-800-793-3167.

ACOUSTIGUIDE MoMA Director Glenn D. Lowry, contemporary artists Michael Craig-Martin, Sol LeWitt, and Maria Fernanda Cardoso, and MoMA curators narrate an audiotour of *ModernStarts*.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Museum of Modern Art is planning several public programs in conjunction with *ModernStarts*. 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 Mr. Elderfield, Ms. González, and Mr. Reed.

WEB SITE AND INTERACTIVE KIOSKS

A subsite devoted to *ModernStarts* is available at www.moma.org that includes curatorial essays, numerous selected works, a search function, and a floorplan of the exhibitions. An online project by Michael Craig-Martin, *16 Objects, Ready and Not*, can also be viewed through the MoMA Web site. The project showcases an array of brightly colored objects that slowly drift across the screen as the colors within each object change continuously. Users can interact with the piece by selecting background colors and setting objects in various hues. In order to view the entire work, users must save it to their local hard drives and activate it as a screensaver.

MODERNSTARTS CD

The *ModernStarts* CD conveys the concept that during 1880-1920, many musical traditions were challenged and new forms defined. Composers veered away from form and tonality and ventured into the realm of new harmonies, rhythms and colors. The CD includes pieces by Claude Debussy, George Gershwin, Scott Joplin, Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, Erik Satie, and Aimé Doniat. The *ModernStarts* CD is produced in the U.S. by Museum Music, Inc. 14 selections. Running time: 55.25 minutes. \$14.98, available at The MoMA Design Store, The MoMA Bookstore, online at www.momastore.org, or by calling 1-800-793-3167.

VISITOR PACKAGES A special MoMA2000 package is being offered to visitors. For \$50, the visitor receives 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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press office menu

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