

# Modernism

## Modernism in literature



Virginia Woolf

English novelist Virginia Woolf, 1928.

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industrialization and urbanization and by the search for an authentic response to a much-changed world. Although prewar works by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after World War I. The enormity of the war had undermined humankind's faith in the foundations of Western society and culture, and postwar Modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation. A primary theme of T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1922), a seminal Modernist work, is the search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. With its fragmentary images and obscure allusions, the poem is typical of Modernism in requiring the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text.

Eliot's was not the dominant voice among Modernist poets. In the United States Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg evocatively described the regions—New England and the Midwest, respectively—in which they lived. The Harlem Renaissance produced a rich coterie of poets, among them Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry* magazine in Chicago in 1912 and made it the most important organ for poetry not just in the United States but for the English-speaking world. During the 1920s Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, and E.E. Cummings expressed a spirit of revolution and experimentation in their poetry.

A sense of disillusionment and loss pervades much American Modernist fiction. That sense may be centered on specific individuals, or it may be directed toward American society or toward civilization generally. It may generate a nihilistic, destructive impulse, or it may express hope at the prospect of change. F. Scott Fitzgerald skewered the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Richard Wright exposed and attacked American racism in *Native Son* (1940), Zora Neale Hurston told the story of a Black woman's three marriages in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Ernest Hemingway's early novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) articulated the disillusionment of the Lost Generation. Meanwhile, Willa Cather told hopeful stories of the American frontier, set mostly on the Great Plains, in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), John Steinbeck depicted the difficult lives of migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and William Faulkner used stream-of-consciousness monologues and other formal techniques to break from past literary practice in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

Across the Atlantic, the publication of the Irish writer James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922 was a landmark event in the development of Modernist literature. Dense, lengthy, and controversial, the novel details the events of one day in the life of three Dubliners through a technique known as stream of consciousness, which commonly ignores orderly sentence structure and incorporates fragments of thought in an attempt to capture the flow of characters' mental processes. Portions of the book were considered obscene, and *Ulysses* was banned for many years in English-speaking countries. Other European Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative continuity included Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and the American expatriate Gertrude Stein.

Bloomsday map of Dublin featuring sites from James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Rubén Darío

Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío.

The term Modernism is also used to refer to literary movements other than the European and American movement of the early to mid-20th century. In Latin American literature, Modernismo arose in the late 19th century in the works of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and José Martí. The movement, which continued into the early 20th century, reached its peak in the poetry of Rubén Darío. (See also American literature; Latin American literature.)

## Modernism in the visual arts and architecture



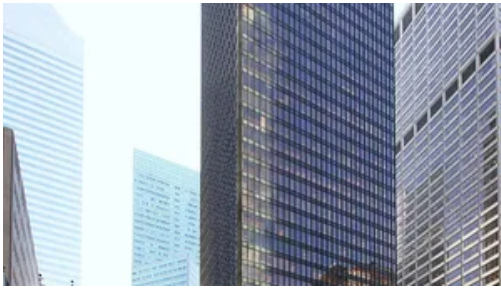
Édouard Manet: *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*

*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, oil on canvas by Édouard Manet, 1882; in the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

In the visual arts the roots of Modernism are often traced back to painter Édouard Manet, who, beginning in the 1860s, not only depicted scenes of modern life but also broke with tradition when he made no attempt to mimic the real world by way of perspective and modeling. He instead drew attention to the fact that his work of art was simply paint on a flat canvas and that it was made by using a paintbrush, which sometimes left its mark on the surface of the composition. The avant-garde movements that followed—including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Constructivism, de Stijl, and Abstract Expressionism—are generally defined as Modernist.

Over the span of these movements, artists increasingly focused on the intrinsic qualities of their media—e.g., line, form, and color—and moved away from inherited notions of art.

By the beginning of the 20th century, architects also had increasingly abandoned past styles and conventions in favor of a form of architecture based on essential functional concerns. They were helped by advances in building technologies such as the steel frame and the curtain wall. In the period after World War I these tendencies became codified as the International Style, which utilized simple geometric shapes and unadorned facades and which abandoned any use of historical reference; the steel-and-glass buildings of Ludwig Mies



Seagram Building in New York City

The Seagram Building (1958), designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson; in New York City.



Igor Stravinsky

Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky, c. 1920.

van der Rohe and Le Corbusier embodied this style. In the mid-to-late 20th century this style manifested itself in clean-lined, unadorned glass skyscrapers and mass housing projects.

## Modernism in music and dance

Composers, including Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Anton Webern, sought new solutions within new forms and used as-yet-untried approaches to tonality. Schoenberg was the pioneer when he discarded traditional harmonic concepts of consonance and dissonance, leading to the development of atonality and 12-tone technique (in which all 12 tones of the octave are serialized, or given an ordered relationship). Stravinsky's revolutionary style, variously labeled "dynamism," "barbarism," or "primitivism," concentrated on metric imbalance and percussive dissonance and introduced a decade of extreme experimentation that coincided with World War I, a period of major social and political upheaval.

In dance a rebellion against both balletic and interpretive traditions had its roots in the work of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, proponent of the eurhythmics system of musical instruction; Rudolf Laban, who analyzed and systematized forms of human motion into a system he called Labanotation (for further information, *see* dance notation); and Loie Fuller, an American actress turned dancer who first gave the free dance artistic status in the United States. Her use of theatrical lighting and transparent lengths of China silk fabrics at once won her the acclaim of artists as well as general audiences. She preceded other modern dancers in rebelling against any formal technique, in establishing a company, and in making films. By examining a specific aspect of dance, each of these innovators helped bring about the era of modern dance.

While Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in 1915 established Denishawn, a nonballetic school, two of their students brought a new seriousness of style and initiated modern dance proper. Doris Humphrey emphasized craftsmanship and structure in choreography, also developing the use of groupings and complexity in ensembles. Martha Graham began to open up fresh elements of emotional expression in dance. Humphrey's dance technique was based on the principle of fall and recovery, Graham's on that of contraction and release. At the same time in Germany, Mary Wigman, Hanya Holm, and others were also establishing comparably formal and expressionist styles. As in Duncan's dancing, the torso and pelvis were employed as the centers of dance movement. Horizontal movement close to the floor became as integral to modern dance as the upright stance is to ballet. In the tense, often intentionally ugly, bent limbs and flat feet of the dancers, modern dance conveyed certain emotions that ballet at that time eschewed. Furthermore, modern dance dealt with immediate and contemporary concerns in contrast to the formal, classical, and often narrative aspects of ballet. It achieved a new expressive intensity and directness.



Katherine Dunham

American dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham in *Tropical Revue*, 1943.



Michael Graves: Portland Public Service Building

Portland Public Service Building, Portland, Oregon, designed by Michael Graves in a postmodern style, 1980–82.

Another influential pioneer of modern dance was dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham, who examined and interpreted the dances, rituals, and folklore of the Black diaspora in the tropical Americas and the Caribbean. By incorporating authentic regional dance movements and developing a technical system that educated her students mentally as well as physically, she expanded the boundaries of modern dance. Her influence continued into the 21st century.

## The birth of postmodernism

In the late 20th century a reaction against Modernism set in. Architecture saw a return to traditional materials and forms and sometimes to the use of decoration for the sake of decoration itself, as in the work of Michael Graves and, after the 1970s, that of Philip Johnson. In literature, irony and self-awareness became the postmodern fashion and the blurring of fiction and nonfiction a favored method. Such writers as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, and Angela Carter employed a postmodern approach in their work.

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