



6-4 Modern World

 Listen 

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Overview: Modern World

We left the great artists, writers, and thinkers of the nineteenth century as they were beginning to challenge the forms and conventions of their art. Instead of producing neatly painted scenes depicting the world in scientific detail, visual artists began to paint with greater energy and abandon, sometimes slapping paint on a canvas to emulate the effects of light, or drawing exaggerated cartoons to create social criticism (such as the French political artist Daumier).

The very forms that great art depended on were being broken down. In the early twentieth century, this approach to art exploded into a revolution in which creators smashed the old forms and embraced everything that was new. The artist Pablo Picasso pushed the limits of visual art as far as he could before developing cubism, a way of breaking down images into visual building blocks. At the same time, the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky set off riots with the performances of his music to *The Rite of Spring*, a score that incorporated primeval rhythms and dissonant chords, expressed in a suggestive ballet that shocked Edwardian sensibilities. The novels of Joyce, Kafka, and Woolf explored new approaches to painting word pictures, such as setting an entire novel in one day or imagining a world where men turned into insects or were jailed without knowing why. It was no coincidence that these

changes occurred around the time that Sigmund Freud published his theories about the conscious and subconscious mind. Just before, during, and after World War I (1916–18), the modern world was born.

Throughout the twentieth century and into our own time, creative thinkers and artists have continued to explore and challenge with ever-changing works that address the major concerns of the human race and individuals. New cultural media have developed, including the motion picture, invented by Thomas Alva Edison and today considered by many to be the signature art form of our time. The Great Depression, Prohibition, women's right to vote, civil rights in the United States, and World War II all not only paralleled changes in the arts and philosophy, but in many ways were influenced by them. Picasso's mural *Guernica* not only critiqued the whole notion of war but influenced future discussions of conflict by opinion makers and the voting public. The twentieth century was also a time of "isms" in the arts: not only cubism, but also fauvism (the art of wild colors), surrealism (think Dali's melting timepieces), abstract expressionism, and even graffitiism (Basquiat was one of the first graffiti artists to earn serious consideration).

The more extreme factions of the modern world since the birth of *The Rite of Spring* have been called the avant-garde, which is French for "going before." Radicals such as conductor Pierre Boulez proclaimed, "Blow the opera houses up!" (as cited in Peyser, 2007, p. 292) and "All the art of the past should be destroyed!" (Peyser, 2007, p. 119) but not all avant-garde creators have been so focused on destruction. Andy Warhol, a visual artist from Pittsburgh, built an expanding art empire on the humble foundations of Campbell Soup cans and photos of celebrities.

The twentieth century also saw the emergence of new voices in Western culture, especially from those who had been marginalized. The ragtime music of Scott Joplin and other composers and the development of spirituals and gospel music paved the way for the Jazz Age, which reached its peak in the so-called Roaring Twenties. The Harlem

Renaissance further provided a cultural topic for great artists, writers, and other creators whose voices had been repressed for too long. The syncopated beat of jazz led to the Beat Generation, celebrated by Greenwich Village poets such as Allen Ginsberg and writer Jack Kerouac, who also wove Zen Buddhist themes into their work. Women's voices also were raised in song, art, writing, and philosophy. One of the most influential philosophers in the twentieth century was Susanne Langer, who wrote *Philosophy in a New Key*, which explored how people need to create symbols and to inject their world with meaning.

As the world entered the computer and digital age in the last third of the twentieth century, electronic technology became both the message and the medium. In fact, a popular thinker of the mid-twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan, coined the phrase "the medium is the message." As the Beatles took the world by storm in the 1970s, artists created new forms of expression, such as "happenings," cartoons as serious art (Lichtenstein), and music for prepared piano by John Cage. Advances in film resulted in wide screen and special effects, rejuvenating the science fiction genre in movies such as *Star Wars*. Black and white art-house fare by auteur directors such as Truffaut and Antonioni played down the street from Doris Day and Rock Hudson comedies. Later, Spike Lee reinvented the cinema from an African American sensibility.

As the twentieth century entered its final decades, the monumental art of the past, characterized by respectable figures on horseback in stone or bronze, had given way to the colorful plastic art of Claes Oldenburg, known for creating a giant Swiss Army knife sculpture, and Jeffrey Koons's *Balloon Dog*, which looks like an oversized pink balloon toy. Music continued to evolve in creative ways. On the popular front, rock and roll, Motown, country, and folk yielded to rap, hip hop, industrial, and alternative sounds. On the classical stage, discord dominated in the works of the Polish composer Penderecki, while Philip Glass pioneered minimalism. Philosophically, Derrida's deconstructionist ideas helped create a new interest in critical thinking, a tradition that found its roots in the discourses of Socrates more than 2 000 years earlier. Literature

In the discourses of Socrates more than 2,000 years earlier. Literature continued to enchant and inspire millions as best-sellers such as *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* proved that popular fiction could be complex and literary as well as action-packed and exciting.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, these trends continued to give birth to new forms of expression throughout the world. Many digital artists today no longer use pen and paper at all; in fact, cursive writing—the artistic flow of penmanship cherished as a communication tool since the Middle Ages—may not be taught at all in the public schools of the near future. The arts and philosophy may have changed radically over the past 10,000 or more years, but one thing is certain: They are as important and conspicuous as ever and, if anything, have taken on new significance as tools for communication, celebration, and self or societal expression.

References

Peyser, J. (2007). *To Boulez and beyond*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.



[Video: Harlem Renaissance \(2:54\)](#)

Watch this short video on the Harlem Renaissance, an important part of world culture during the first half of the twentieth century.

Caption Video: ["The Harlem Renaissance" \(2:54\)](#)



[Article: Latina Writers Are Silent No Longer](#)

Women, LGBT, and minority writers and artists are coming into their own in the modern world. This article from the *Los Angeles Times* describes the struggles and successes of Latina writers as they assert their right to self-expression and reach wider audiences. In preparation for the next activity, as you read this article, think about other individuals who have made an impact with their creation.



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Activity Details

- Task: View this topic



This learning block begins with innovation and changes in world cultures beginning just before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. New attitudes toward cultural norms, including the birth of civil and women's rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQIA) rights, led to greater freedom in the arts and literature, a trend still unfolding in our own time. After participating in this learning block, you will be able to:

- Assess the impact of the artifacts created by influential people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on the culture and society of the times