

The Age of Positivism: Realism, Impressionism, and the Pre-Raphaelites, 1848–1885

ROMANTICISM BEGAN TO DISSIPATE IN EUROPE AS AN INTELLECTUAL attitude and stylistic trend after 1848 and was gradually superceded by Realism. Increasingly, people came to rely on the physical, physiological, empirical, and scientific as a way to understand nature, society, and human behavior. Hard facts, not feelings, became the bricks and mortar of knowledge.

Positivism is the term often used to describe the new mentality of pragmatism and materialism that emerged in the 1840s. The word was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who in 1830 began to write a multivolume series called *Positive Philosophy*. Comte called for social progress to be based on observable fact and tested ideas—in other words, on science. This new scientific approach to studying society came to be called sociology.

Paralleling Comte's sociology was the appearance in the 1830s and 1840s of popular and widely distributed pamphlets called *physiologies*. These were short essays that analyzed in tremendous detail different niches of French society, not just professions and types, such as the Lawyer, the Nun, the Society Woman, but such specific categories as the Suburban Gardener and the Woman of Thirty. In a world undergoing tremendous flux due to rapid industrialization and urbanization, the *physiologies* were a means of understanding the dramatic transformations that were occurring.

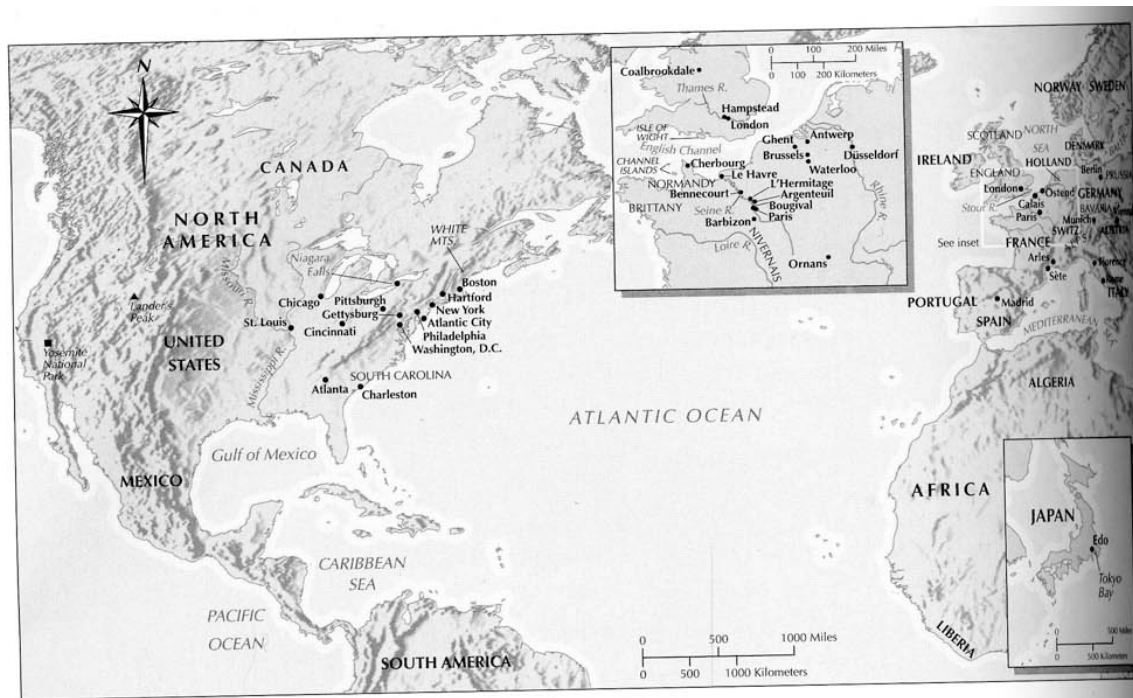
In politics, this new tough pragmatism was called *Realpolitik*, a German word meaning the “politics of reality,” a concept that Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), first chancellor of the German Empire, deftly used to create a united Germany toward 1870.

(See map 25.1.) In religion, Positivism brought about a renewal of eighteenth-century skepticism. Epitomizing Positivism is the rise of photography in the 1840s, which most people perceived not as an art form but as a tool for faithfully recording nature and documenting the rapidly changing world.

In the arts, Positivism resulted in Realism. Now, artists and writers did not idealize or fictionally dramatize life but instead presented it unembellished, unidealized, and by definition as fleeting. As early as 1846, the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire called for an art based on modern life, writing that “The pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences—criminals and kept women—which drift about in the underworld of a great city . . . all prove to us that we have only to open our eyes to recognize our heroism. . . .” By the 1850s, *réalisme* was the rallying cry of the new art and literature. The evangelist of realism was critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary (1831–1888), who in his 1857 Salon review wrote “There is no need to return to history, to take refuge in legends, to summon powers of imagination. Beauty is before the eyes, not in the brain; in the present not in the past; in truth, not in dreams.”

Instead of valuing wild flights of imagination, the exotic, and the sublime, Realists planted both feet firmly on the ground and, generally without emotion, bluntly depicted modern life. This ranged from the grim existence of country peasants and the downtrodden urban poor to the leisure activities of

Detail of Figure 25.17, Camille Pissarro, *Climbing Path*
L'Hermitage, Pontoise



Map 25.1. Europe and North America in the Age of Positivism

the rapidly growing metropolitan middle class and *nouveau riche*. In landscape painting, this realism evolved into Impressionism. Often working in the environs of Paris as well as in the city itself, the Impressionist painters documented the transformation of the landscape from rural to suburban, recording the incursion into the countryside of factories and railroads. They observed, too, the influx of moneyed Parisians, who built fancy weekend villas in farm villages, raced sailboats in regattas on such waterways as the Seine and Oise rivers, and dined, danced, and swam at fashionable riverside establishments. Painting rapidly outdoors with bold brushstrokes and strong colors, the Impressionists empirically captured the world before their very eyes, the shimmering sketchiness of their finished paintings reflecting the impermanence of a constantly changing contemporary world.

While the Impressionists were committed to creating an empirical representational art—a realistic art—a by-product of their stylistic developments was the advent of Modernism. To the following generations, their bright color and broad brushwork, that is, the abstract qualities, seemed to challenge the representational components as the subject matter of the painting. In the twentieth century, critics and historians would label this shift in art towards abstraction as “Modernism.” Impressionism also marked the appearance of the *avant-garde*: the notion that certain artists and ideas are strikingly new or radical for their time. This meant, in effect, that artists began making art that was only understood by a handful of people, namely other *avant-garde* artists and a few art experts, including collectors. The disconnect between the *avant-garde*

and the general public, including the working class, who felt comfortable attending the highly publicized academy exhibitions, is reflected in the rise of commercial art galleries as the principal venue for the display of new art and the corresponding decline in power of academic salons throughout the Western world. While Realism served as a springboard for the abstraction of Modernism, we must remember that first and foremost it was a movement preoccupied with the dramatic changes occurring in society, and that its birth coincides with the great European-wide Revolution of 1848.

REALISM IN FRANCE

The year 1848 was one of uprising in France. Republicans, liberals, and socialists (those advocating a classless society in which either a popular collective or the government controls the means of production) united in that year to demand an increased voice in government, and when King Louis-Philippe refused, armed conflict was imminent. The king abdicated. A provisional government was soon replaced by the Constituent Assembly. But the working class was still not represented, and already organized into labor camps instituted by the new government, it revolted, storming the parliament. War raged in the streets of Paris, and 10,000 people were killed or wounded. This proletarian rebellion produced shock waves of class revolution that radiated throughout Europe, resulting in similar uprisings in major cities. Even England was threatened, as the Chartists, a socialist group, agitated for workers' rights, going so far as to gather arms and conduct military drills. As one contemporary French writer

Progress and Its Discontents: Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, 1880–1905

THE CLOSING DECADES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY PRESENTED A cultural dichotomy. On one side were those who optimistically reveled in the wealth, luxury, and technological progress of the industrialized world. On the other were those who perceived these same qualities as signs of decadence, excess, and moral turpitude. The former experienced

exuberance and pride, the latter despair and anxiety. Depending on one's viewpoint, the period was either *La Belle Époque*, "the beautiful era," or *Le Fin de Siècle*, "the end of the century."

The end of the century, as well as the 14 years leading up to World War I, indeed constituted a period of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity, nurtured by virtually forty years of peace following the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. National consolidation was largely complete, with many countries functioning as republics. Germany and France joined England and Belgium as truly industrialized countries, with Germany producing twice as much steel as England by 1914. The United States was included as well in this exclusive group. Spurred by both capitalism and a heated nationalism was a dramatic increase in imperialism, which resulted in the carving up of Africa as well as parts of Asia and the Pacific islands into fiefdoms to be economically exploited. Now there was a true world market, with goods, services, capital, and people continually circulating across borders and around the globe.

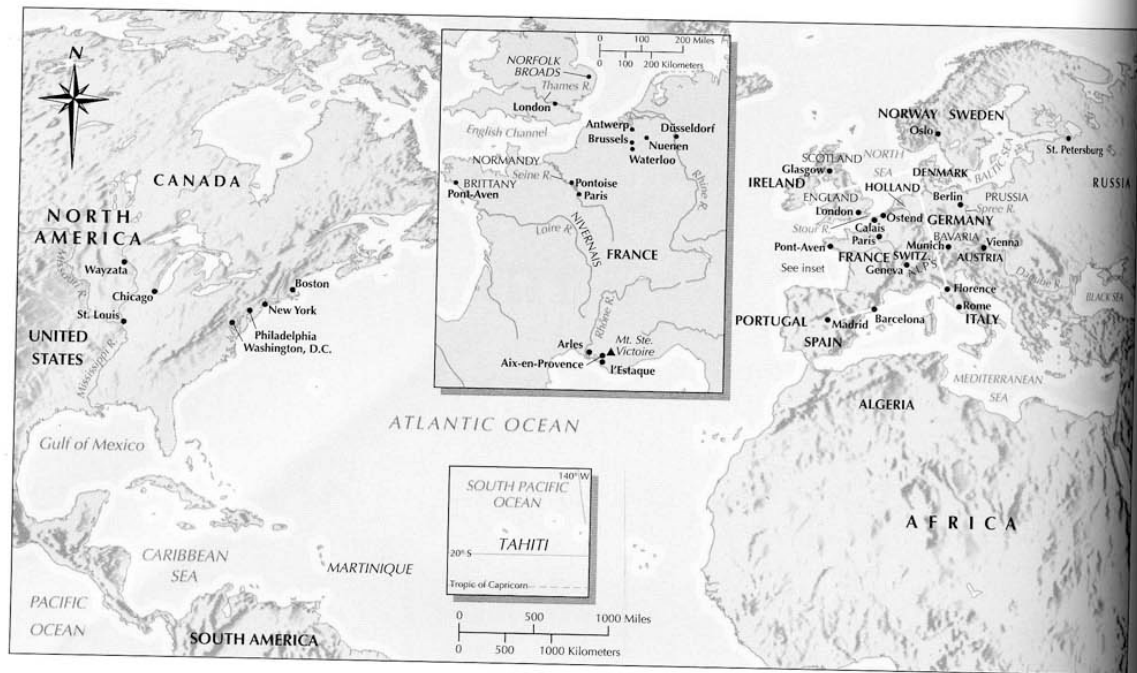
The modern era, which began in the eighteenth century, now evolved into a new phase called *modernity*, often labeled the "New Industrial Revolution." The steam engine was refined and improved. Electricity, the telephone, the internal combustion engine, automobiles, submarines, airplanes, oil,

moving pictures, and machines increasingly defined modern life, whose pace quickened even as it became more comfortable and efficient. In 1901, Guglielmo Marconi sent a wireless signal across the Atlantic, further shrinking the globe.

Cities epitomized modernity. Anonymous and impersonal, they were a magnet for people uprooted from the countryside as industrialization spread. These new city dwellers were less respectful of tradition than their rural counterparts and open to new ideas, which circulated rapidly with the dramatic increase in newspapers and literacy. Detached from traditional institutions, they identified with the state, reinforcing the fierce nationalism that also defines the period. With this confluence of people and ideas, cities became powerful centers for social reform, especially supporting socialism and Marxism. Newspapers, magazines, and books exposed the miserable living and working conditions of the poor, and became a persuasive force for change, especially when illustrated with photographs.

Another major force for molding this period was the emergence of the "New Woman," women bent on changing the restrictive laws and conventions of Victorian society. The women's movement launched in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in both Europe and America became a powerful force in the last quarter, as women organized and forcefully demanded political, economic, and educational and social equality. By the 1890s the term "New Woman" was coined, and the mass media, especially in America, developed a visual image

Detail of figure 26.16, Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*



Map 26.1. Europe and North America 1904–1914

to describe her: She was tall, athletic, and independent and she rejected the restrictive conventions of the Victorian era, wearing comfortable masculine-inspired clothing and even flaunting her sexuality. This New Woman threatened most Victorian men who viewed her independence as a challenge to their power. They preferred women stay at home, uneducated and without financial independence. Male artists were no exception, and the castrating, dominating *femme fatale* became a popular theme, a visual expression of male fears. At the same time, an increasing number of women artists presented women from a female viewpoint, one that gave them social importance and dignity, as Mary Cassatt and Julia Margaret Cameron had done before (see Chapter 25). These artists broke with the male tradition of depicting women as sex objects, defined only by their dependence on men.

On the world stage, the late nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in a sense of European superiority. Despite the sharp political divisions arising from nationalism, Europeans and such European-linked countries as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand shared a similar way of life and attitudes. They felt their world constituted the “civilized” world, and everything—and everyone—else was “backward.” Enlightenment philosophy and science, Europeans believed, had reached a climax, creating the most sophisticated and elevated branch of humankind. As never before, Europeans became race conscious, with whites considering themselves superior. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, set forth in the *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871), was twisted to

reinforce this view of white supremacy. If life was a struggle that resulted in the “survival of the fittest” through “natural selection” of the “most favored races,” then clearly, it seemed, advanced European civilization was the “most favored race.”

Many cultural anthropologists, however, refused to label any society as better than any other, and found tribal societies to be just as complex as Western civilization. The mores and values of any culture, they argued, were appropriate to its environment and circumstances. Nonetheless, those Europeans who lamented industrialization and who were suspicious of unchecked progress perceived the newly colonized, exploited territories as unspoiled utopias, havens from the materialistic evils of modern civilization. Continuing the tradition launched by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century, they viewed these so-called primitive societies as still steeped in Nature and thus virtuous and pure, as well as connected to universal spiritual forces.

A renewed search for the spiritual appeared in the closing decades of the century. Anthropologists demonstrated that the rituals, practices, and beliefs of Christianity were not unique at all, but had parallels in tribal cultures and Eastern religions. The strongest expression of this attitude appeared in Sir James Frazer’s (1854–1941) multi-volume *The Golden Bough*, which even declared that magic and religion were separated by a very fine line. As growing numbers of people fled progress by embracing an intense spirituality, they were drawn to orthodox Western religions as well as to Eastern-inspired practices such as Theosophy and Rosicrucianism. Many were also drawn to animism and the occult.

The late nineteenth century also marks the rise of psychology. The German physiologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) transformed psychology from a philosophy to a natural science by basing it on scientific method, which he detailed in his 1874 *Principles of Physiological Psychology*. From Russia, the research of Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) sparked an intense interest in how human behavior is conditioned by experience and environment. And in Vienna, the neurologist Sigmund Freud began to formulate his theories of the unconscious, publishing his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. This interest in the mind and the elemental forces driving human responses went well beyond science to permeate popular and high culture, and artists as diverse as Auguste Rodin and Edvard Munch increasingly focused on the unseen forces residing deep within the mind that produced such outward manifestations as sexual urges and anxiety.

In many respects progress was the watchword of the late nineteenth century, and the force to which artists responded. The vast majority rejected it, seeking a spiritual, utopian, or primitive alternative. The result was a range of styles or movements, chief among them Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau. Most of the artists built on the brilliant formal innovations of Manet and the Impressionists and created work that was more abstract than representational. Their art was also highly personal, not reflecting a group vision. Consequently many artists, like Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, cultivated their own distinctive form of mark-making. Often their work was visionary, depicting fantasies and dreamworlds, and often it was spiritual, as it sought relief from the crass, empty materialism of modernity and a more meaningful explanation for existence. Many artists found their subject matter in the sanctuary of the Classical, medieval, and biblical past, which the Realists had so fiercely rejected. Even modern architecture indulged in fantasy and spirituality. Art Nouveau, for example, succeeded in freeing architecture from the dominance of the eclecticism of revival styles by creating buildings that eerily resembled strange but marvelous organic forms. At the same time, the great Chicago architects of the 1880s and 1890s developed the first glass and steel skyscrapers and, in the case of Frank Lloyd Wright, complex houses made up of a relentless modern geometry of horizontals and verticals. Still, they invested their modern buildings and houses with a powerful spirituality that tied them as much to cosmic forces as they did to the constant march of progress. While Realism and Impressionism had sought to capture the essence of the modern world, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau largely struggled to escape it and provide an antidote.

POST-IMPRESSIONISM

The early twentieth-century British art critic Roger Fry coined the term Post-Impressionism to describe the avant-garde art that followed Impressionism, work that became a springboard that took art in new directions. Each of the Post-Impressionist

artists—Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin—developed a unique style. Still there are artistic conditions that unify the period from 1880 to 1904. The Post-Impressionists rejected the empiricist premises of Realism and Impressionism in order to create art that was more monumental, universal, and even visionary. Post-Impressionists also rejected a collective way of seeing, which we saw in Impressionism; instead, each artist developed a personal aesthetic. Like the Impressionists, however, many Post-Impressionists continued to mine Japanese art for aesthetic ideas. They also maintained the anti-bourgeois, anti-academic attitude of the Impressionists, similarly turning to artists' cooperatives and private galleries to promote their art.

Paul Cézanne: Toward Abstraction

Actually, Cézanne (1839–1906) is the same generation as the Impressionists, developing his Post-Impressionism in tandem with the rise of the style. Born into a wealthy but socially isolated family in Aix-en-Provence in southern France, he rejected law and went to Paris to study art in 1861. He enrolled at a drawing academy, but was essentially self-taught, copying paintings in the Louvre by Delacroix and Courbet, among others. From 1864 to 1869, Cézanne submitted rather crude, dark, intensely worked paintings depicting mysterious, morbid, and anonymous orgies, rapes, and murders to the Salon. These works were rejected, as the anti-bourgeois, anti-academic Cézanne knew they would be. In part, they were meant to shock. Using a palette knife and the dark pigments of Courbet, he was also inspired by the Romantic imagery of Delacroix as well as the thematic brazenness of Manet. He even painted several *Modern Olympias*, one of which he showed at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. (He would participate in the first three shows.)

In 1872, Cézanne left Paris for Pontoise and then nearby Auvers at the suggestion of Pissarro (see fig. 25.17), who was already living there. The older artist became his mentor, and they bonded in their desire to make an art that stylistically looked modern. He began painting landscapes, occasionally at Pissarro's side. With this steadying influence, Cézanne's emotionalism dissipated, his palette lightened, even becoming colorful, and his compositions took on a powerful structural integrity, which had been suggested in his earlier work but now blossomed. As he would state later in life, he wanted "to make of Impressionism something solid, like the art in the museums." We can see how he achieved this goal in a work from the next decade, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (fig. 26.1), painted in Provence around 1885 to 1887. Typical of Impressionism, this canvas presents a light-filled landscape painted with broad brushstrokes and fairly bright color. The picture seems to shimmer at first, then it freezes. Cézanne has locked his image into a subtle network of shapes that echo one another. The curves and bends of the foreground tree branches can be found in the distant mountain and foothills. The diagonal lines on the edges of the green pastures reverberate in the houses, mountain slopes, and the directionality of the clusters of parallel dashlike brushstrokes,

Toward Abstraction: The Modernist Revolution, 1904–1914

IT IS TEMPTING TO VIEW THE FIRST YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AS A time of wholesale modernization, when traditional ideas and values joined the horse and buggy as outmoded and irrelevant. In reality, the situation was much more complex. Astonishing scientific discoveries and new modes of living did transform irrevocably the day-to-day existence of most inhabitants of the

industrialized West. Yet, at the same time, traditional social values and habits of thought continued uninterrupted. A defining characteristic of early twentieth-century culture was the ability to reconcile the competing impulses of tradition and innovation. By knitting together the new and revolutionary with the familiar and enduring, a new social fabric was created.

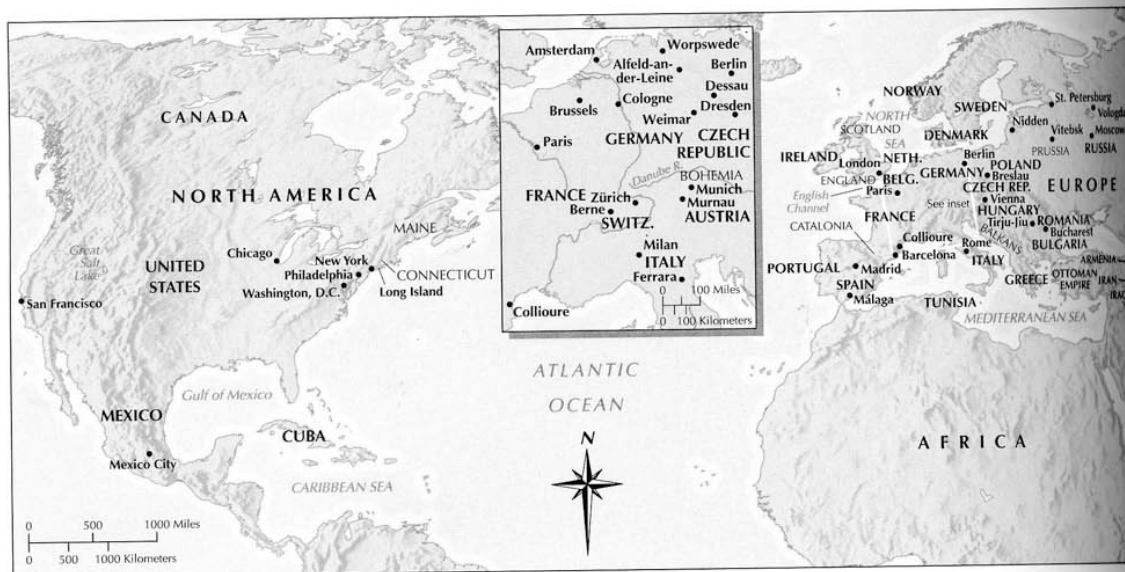
In the political arena, imperialism continued to stoke nationalist ambitions and economic growth. This combination gave the West tremendous military and industrial strength but was also the root of its greatest weaknesses. Fervent nationalism led many toward a narrow patriotism, or chauvinism, that sharpened political, racial, economic, and religious differences. Of course, many rejected such ideas and instead embraced an Enlightenment-generated liberalism that exalted the individual over the state. But the intensifying nationalism and its accompanying imperialism won out, culminating in 1914 with the start of World War I, with most of Europe against Germany, Bulgaria, Austro-Hungary, and Turkey (see map 27.1). This conflict was so cataclysmic that it transformed utterly Western cultural assumptions and aspirations.

Scientific endeavors reveal clearly the interplay between tradition and innovation. By the turn of the twentieth century, scientists recognized that Newtonian physics could only partially

explain the nature of atoms. Physicists sought to understand where Newtonian principles succeeded in predicting the structure and behavior of atoms and where they failed. One major breakthrough came via the experiments of Max Planck (1858–1947), who proved in 1900 that energy was not distinguishable from matter. He also showed that energy was emitted and absorbed in bundles called quanta, disproving the idea that energy existed in a stable, uniform state. Energy and, hence, matter were in constant flux. This concept was especially pertinent to the discovery of radioactivity in 1902 by Ernest Rutherford (1871–1937). In 1913, the atom itself was further redefined when Niels Bohr (1885–1962) declared that it consisted of protons and neutrons. But the greatest amendment to classical physics was proposed by Albert Einstein (1879–1955). Einstein's revolutionary proposals appeared in a series of papers published in 1905 and 1916, and they included his theory of relativity, which claimed that time, space, and motion were not fixed but all relative, especially in relation to the observer's own position. The Newtonian world order, based on notions of energy and matter that remained stable, was now supplanted by a more complex and contingent notion of the universe.

Similar ideas emerged in accounts of human behavior by philosophers and psychologists. Henri Bergson (1859–1941), a French philosopher, was so influential in the first years of the twentieth century that he was well known even to the general public. Bergson postulated that we experience life not as a series

Detail of figure 27.30, Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*



Map 27.1. Europe and North America 1904–1914

of continuous rational moments, but as intuited random memories and perceptions that we then piece together to form ideas. The world, therefore, was complex and fractured, or as expressed by the Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910), whose theories independently paralleled Bergson's, a "booming buzzing confusion." Only intuition transcended this chaos. The mind, according to Bergson, was pure energy, an *élan vital* ("vital force") that penetrated the essence of all things. While Bergson was philosophically redefining consciousness, Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) continued to refine his ideas of the unconscious through observations made during clinical practice, an approach that he felt gave his conclusions a scientific basis. Despite taking a different approach, Freud likewise developed a model of human consciousness as fragmented and conflicted.

Artists pursued similar lines of inquiry, testing traditional approaches to art making against new ideas. And, as did the philosophers and scientists discussed above, they used diverse measures to gauge their success. Some artists, like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, emulated scientists, treating their studios like laboratories where each creative breakthrough served as a steppingstone to the next, as they sought to develop a new model of visual perception. Others, such as the Italian Futurists, embraced modernity and used the radical stylistic developments of Picasso and Braque to capture the technological wonders and new psychology of the modern world. Others, however, like the German Expressionists, sought an antidote for the cold, impersonal tenor and crass materialism of modernity and tried to invest contemporary life with spirituality. Continuing Gauguin's quest to find a spiritual peace in a primitive world that was in tune with nature, many artists turned to the direct, more abstract vocabulary of tribal art as well as children's, folk, and medieval art. Many of these artists were heavily influenced by Theosophy (see page 919) and believed in the mystical interpenetration of all

things, which they sought to capture in their art and architecture. For artists attempting to visualize the spiritual, the essence of which is abstract, the new stripped down vocabulary of art was the perfect vehicle.

FAUVISM

The rise of Fauvism, the first major style to emerge in the twentieth century, is part of a colorist tradition that can be traced back through Van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, and Delacroix to Titian and the Venetians. The Fauves, however, took the free, expressive use of color to new heights. Van Gogh and Gauguin had the greatest impact on the Fauves, as is readily apparent in the work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and André Derain (1880–1954). Matisse was well aware of the aesthetic traditions with which he was wrestling. Trained in the studio of Gustave Moreau (see fig. 26.16), Matisse had received an exacting academic education under the auspices of the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He understood the extent of his participation in and departure from tradition when, in 1905, he presented his latest pictures at the *Salon d'Automne*, or Autumn Salon, an important venue for vanguard artists. As exhibitions of avant-garde art proliferated in Paris at the turn of the century, the *Salon d'Automne* enjoyed a special status as a juried show where critics anticipated seeing the best of the new work. Few critics or other viewers for that matter were prepared for what they saw there in 1905.

By that year, Matisse had not only moved beyond his academic training with Moreau, but had passed through an Impressionist phase in the 1890s, then a Cézannesque period, and finally a Neo-Impressionist stage. Strongly influenced by the Post-Impressionists' use of color for formal and expressive ends, Matisse pushed even further the independence of color. His experiments proved too radical for some. Art critic Louis Vauxcelles was so shocked by the "orgy of pure colors" he encountered

Art Between the Wars

PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY, WORLD WAR I DEVASTATED WESTERN civilization. The destruction and loss of life were staggering, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers dying in single battles. The logic, science, and technology that many thought would bring a better world had gone horribly awry. Instead of a better world, the advancements of the nineteenth century had

produced such high-tech weapons as machine guns, long-range artillery, tanks, submarines, fighter planes, and mustard gas.

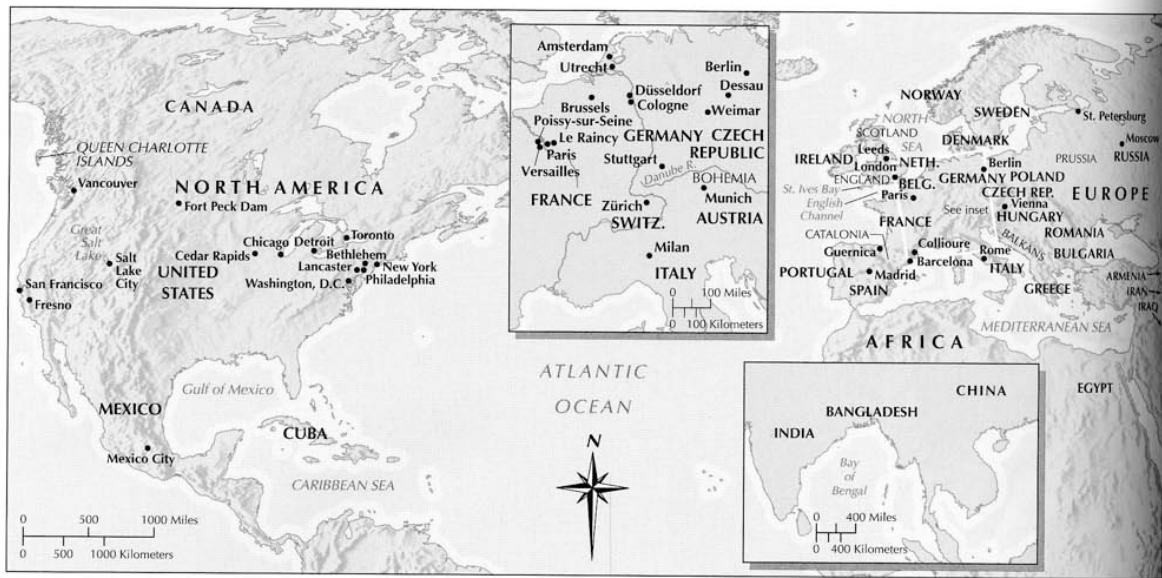
To many, the very concept of nationalism now seemed destructive, and the rise of the first Communist government in Russia in 1917 offered the hope of salvation. Around the world, branches of the Communist Party sprang up, with the goal of creating a nationless world united by the proletariat, the working class that provides the labor force for the capitalist system. Others maintained that a new world order could not be attained without first destroying the old; they advocated anarchy, which remained a constant threat in the postwar decades. Despite this drive to create a nationless and classless world, by the 1930s, it was fascism that took hold of European politics. Fascism, a totalitarian political system that exalts the nation over the individual and demands allegiance to a single leader, held a special appeal in nations defeated in World War I. Germany, in particular, had been humiliated by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and had suffered extreme inflation and then economic collapse. Germans gradually became enthralled by Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and the Nazis, who skillfully used economic crises and anti-Semitism to consolidate their power. In Italy and Japan, as well, fascists, under the command of charismatic leaders took control. Armed with new technological tools of

destruction, these nations would plunge the world into another great war by 1939.

While fascism, communism, anarchy, and democracy jockeyed for dominance in Europe, America enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in the 1920s. Historians have called the economic and cultural exuberance of the postwar years the Roaring Twenties; it was a time of jazz, speakeasies, radio, and film. The 1920s also saw the rise of the city as the emblem of the nation. Technology and machines were king in America, where the world's largest skyscrapers could be erected in a year. This economic exhilaration came to a screeching halt with the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent the entire world into a downward economic spiral known as the Great Depression, which lasted throughout the 1930s. A reactionary backlash then occurred in both Europe and America: fascism in the former, and a conservative regionalism and isolationism in the latter. Nonetheless, the 1930s marked the advent in America of liberal social and economic programs, instituted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration (1932–1944). Believing that economic markets were inherently unstable, Roosevelt advocated The New Deal, which created millions of government sponsored jobs, including many for artists.

Perhaps the strongest defining influence for artists between the wars was the Great War itself and the technology, science, and Enlightenment rationalism that allowed it to be so devastating. The war directly produced Dada, a movement

Detail of figure 28.47, William van Alen, Chrysler Building



Map 28.1. Europe and North America (with Asia insert)

that created a nonsensical nihilistic art that attacked bourgeois values and conventions, including a faith in technology. The Dadaists aimed to wipe the philosophical slate clean, leading the way to a new world order. Other artists embraced the modernity of the Machine Age (as this interwar period is sometimes called), seeing it as a means to create classless utopias; still others rejected it, seeking higher truths or a meaningful spirituality in an increasingly materialistic, soulless world. Both groups often turned to abstraction to implement their vision. Those supporting technology embraced the geometry and mechanical look of the Machine Age, while those who rejected it sought higher truths using an organic or biomorphic vocabulary.

A second major force for the period was Sigmund Freud, whose theories about the unconscious and dreams were a formative influence on Surrealism, a prevailing movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Like many abstract artists, the Surrealists sought to reveal invisible realities, not spiritual realities, but nonetheless elemental universal forces that drove all humans. These unseen realities were deeply embedded in the mind and symbolically revealed in dreams. Freud maintained that the conventions of civilization had repressed the elemental needs and desires that all people shared, and that this suppressed, invisible world of desires and sexual energy was fundamental to human behavior, the driving force within all humans. Freud acknowledged that civilized societies required the repression and channeling of those desires, but asserted that individuals paid a price in the form of neuroses and discontent. For Surrealist artists, as well as writers and intellectuals, Freud's theory of the unconscious confirmed the existence of realities unseen by the eye or perceived by the conscious mind, and they served as the springboard for the development of Surrealist imagery and style.

Politics also strongly shaped the art of the period. Many not most avant-garde artists were socialists and Communist or at least sympathizers, and their utopian dreams and aesthetic visions stem in part from these political ideologies. The narrative, representational murals of the great Mexican artist directly champion Communism, especially when paired with science, as the vehicle for creating a classless utopian society. With the rise to power of Hitler and his National Socialist Party, many avant-garde artists turned their attention to making anti-fascist imagery and exposing the insane thinking and sadistic brutality of the new German government.

This period also saw a growing interest in racial and ethnic identity, which was expressed in Mexican art and African American art. The Mexican muralists were preoccupied with national identity, which they associated with the indigenous population, not Euro-Mexicans, while African Americans sought to uncover their heritage and culture. Just as Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, and Margaret Julia Cameron sought to present women from a female viewpoint as opposed to that of a male, obtaining very different results, the Mexicans and African Americans did the same for African and native cultures. These artists presented a very different image of and attitude toward non-European cultures.

DADA

The Great War halted much art making, as many artists were enlisted in their country's military service. Some of the finest were killed, such as Expressionists Marc and Macke, and Futurists Boccioni and Sant'Elia. But the conflict also produced one art movement: Dada. Its name was chosen at random, the story goes, when two German poets, Richard Huelsenbeck and Hugo Ball, plunged a knife into a French-German dictionary and its

Postwar to Postmodern, 1945–1980

SCHOLARS TRADITIONALLY VIEW WORLD WAR II (1939–1945) AS A TURNING point for the art world, the time when its focus shifted from Paris to New York. In fact, the 1950s, not the 1940s, were the watershed for the second half of the century. Now Duchamp's preoccupation with how art functions became a driving force as the decade progressed. Likewise, many artists became

obsessed with the concept, rooted in the early Cubism of Picasso and Braque, that art and image making were a form of language, and they dedicated their work to revealing the structure of this visual language and the complex ways it could be used to present ideas and opinions, even to deceive and manipulate.

Artists also realized that art need not be limited to the traditional mediums, such as oil on canvas or cast bronze or chiseled marble. It did not have to hang on a wall or sit on a pedestal. Artists could use anything to make art, and by the late 1950s and 1960s, they did. They made art with televisions, film, junk, earth, fluorescent lights, steel tiles, acrylics, entire environments, postcards, and words. Performance Art, earthworks, Conceptual Art, Mail Art, happenings, and Video Art are just a handful of the movements and materials that sprang up from the mid-1950s through the 1970s.

In part, this burst of new mediums reflects the expansive spirit of the period, especially in America. World War II ended 16 years of financial depression and deprivation in America, and by the 1950s, the United States had become a nation of consumers. Returning soldiers, eager to resume their lives, married and had children in record numbers, creating the baby-boom generation. They moved from cities to new cookie-cutter tract houses in the

suburbs. And, as never before, Americans shopped—for cars, televisions, labor-saving household appliances, boats, and movie cameras. Americans were fascinated by everything technological, symbolized by the Cold War space race.

The new postwar American lifestyle, however, was not equally available to all. Magazines, newspapers, and television depicted a distinct hierarchy within American democracy, with white males heading up a patriarchal society that viewed women and people of color as second-class citizens. Beatniks, Zen Buddhists, underground improvisational jazz musicians, bikers, and urban gangs of juvenile delinquents established alternative lifestyles in the late 1940s and 1950s.

But it was the civil rights movement that first seriously challenged the status quo in the second half of the 1950s, gaining tremendous momentum in the following decade. Spurred also by the Vietnam Conflict (1964–1973), which generated persistent anti-war protests, the mid 1960s began a period of social upheaval that produced the feminist movement, Gay Pride, Black Power, Gray Power, and environmental groups such as Greenpeace. It was an age of liberation aimed at shattering the status quo and questioning the validity of any claim to superiority or fixed truth. And in the forefront was art. But before this artistic revolution could occur, the center of the art world had to move from Paris to New York. This “coup,” often referred to as the “Triumph of New York Painting,” coincided with the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s.

Detail of figure 29.18, Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*



Map 29.1. Europe and North America (with Asia insert)

EXISTENTIALISM IN NEW YORK: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Abstract Expressionism evolved out of Surrealism, which traced its roots to the Dada movement of the 1910s (see page 984). Like the Surrealists, the Abstract Expressionists were preoccupied with a quest to uncover universal truths. In this sense, their heritage goes back to Kandinsky and Malevich as well (see pages 957 and 967). In many respects, Abstract Expressionism is the culmination of the concerns of the artists of the first half of the twentieth century. But the Abstract Expressionists were also driven by a deep-seated belief in *Existentialism*, a philosophy that came to the fore with the devastation caused by World War II. The war shattered not only faith in science and logic, but even the very concept of progress, the belief in the possibility of creating a better world. A belief in absolute truths had been abandoned.

Existentialism maintained that there were no absolute truths—no ultimate knowledge, explanations, or answers—and that life was a continuous series of subjective experiences from which each individual learned and then correspondingly responded in a personal way. Essential to this learning process was facing the direst aspects of human existence—fear of death, the absurdity of life, and alienation from individuals, society, and nature—and taking responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong, good or bad. The Abstract Expressionists, like so many intellectuals after the war, embraced this subjective view of the world. Their art was a personal confrontation with the moment, reflecting upon their physical, psychological, and social being.

The Bridge from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism: Arshile Gorky

Surrealism dominated New York art in the early 1940s. In late 1936, the seven-year-old Museum of Modern Art mounted the blockbuster exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*, an eye-opener for many New York artists. Many artists not converted by the exhibition were swayed by the dramatic influx of European artists who fled the Continent shortly before and during World War II. André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, and Max Ernst were just a few of the many artists and intellectuals who sought the safety of Manhattan and were a powerful presence in the art world. Peggy Guggenheim, a flamboyant American mining heiress who had been living in Europe, returned to New York and opened a gallery, Art of This Century, which featured Surrealism. Surrealism was *everywhere*, and many New York artists took to it enthusiastically.

Just as Dada developed into Surrealism, New York Surrealism seamlessly evolved into Abstract Expressionism. The transformation occurred when all of the symbols and suggestions of myths and primordial conditions disappeared, and images dissolved into a complete abstraction containing no obvious references to the visible world. We can see the beginning of this process in the paintings of Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), an Armenian immigrant, whose family fled Armenia to escape the genocide of the ruling Turks of the Ottoman Empire. (See map 29.1) Gorky's mother died of starvation in his arms in a Russian refugee camp. By the 1930s, Gorky was in New York, where, over the next decade, his

The Postmodern Era: Art Since 1980

THE ART THAT CAME TO THE ART WORLD'S ATTENTION TOWARD 1980 IS generally known as *Postmodern* art. The term was coined in the mid-1960s by European literary critics in the circle of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and first applied to literature. (Derrida's theories are also called Deconstructionism or Post-Structuralism.)

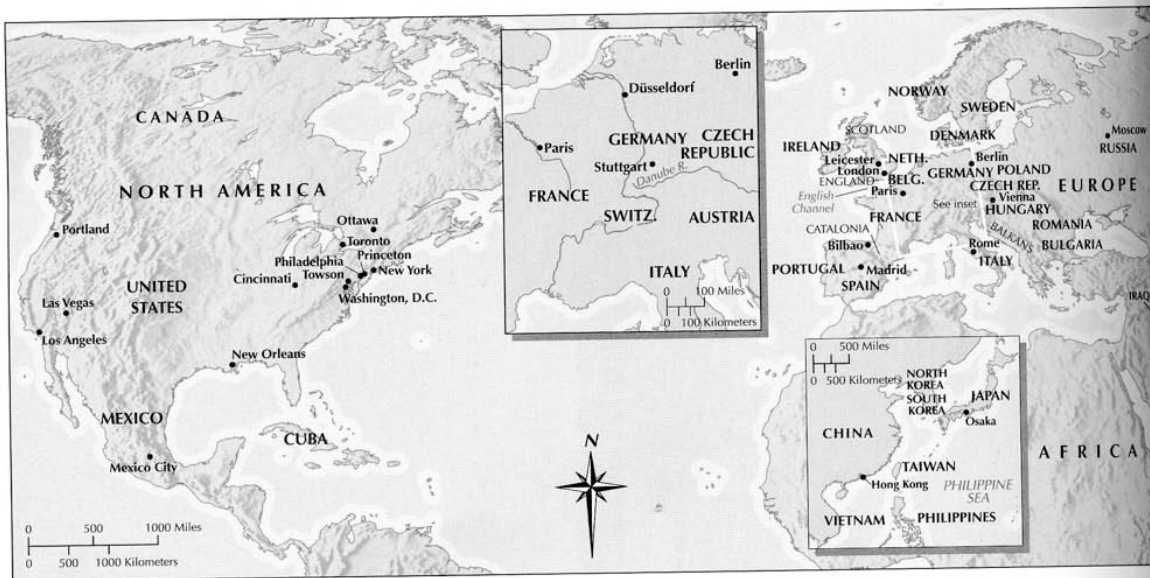
At the heart of European Postmodernism is the premise that all literature and art is an elaborate construction of signs, and that the meaning of these signs is determined by their context. A Raphael altarpiece, for example, meant one thing to a sixteenth-century Catholic viewing it in a church (its original context), but it conveys a different message today when it is presented as a fine art object in a prestigious museum. Context can change as viewers bring their personal experiences to the work. Postmodernists claimed there can be no fixed meaning, and thus no fixed truths. By the late 1970s, artists and critics had digested this theory and applied it to art. Postmodern theory now became the driving force behind much art making and criticism.

Of course, these ideas did not just form in the late 1970s. Marcel Duchamp had made similar statements in the 1910s, as did Conceptual artists, such as George Brecht and Joseph Kosuth, in the 1960s. Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein in the 1950s and 1960s had all been interested in similar issues. While the immediate seeds of Postmodernism in the visual arts date from this period, a self-consciousness about entering a new era only occurred in the art world in the late 1970s. In large part, this new awareness stemmed from the critical writing in the new art magazine *October*, which reflected Derrida's ideas. (See page 1110, *Additional Primary Sources*). Now a large number of

artists and critics asked more overtly and persistently: How do signs acquire meaning? What is the message? Who originates it? What—and whose—purpose does it serve? Who is the audience and what does this tell us about the message? Who controls the media—and for whom? More and more artists, such as the American Cindy Sherman and the German Sigmar Polke, began using familiar images in new contexts, revealing—or *deconstructing*—their deeper social, political, economic, and aesthetic meanings. The preferred mediums for many of these artists were those of the mass media, namely photography, electronic signs, billboards, and video.

While this Postmodernist attitude signified a major thrust in art toward 1980, it has been only one of numerous issues that have preoccupied the art world in the last 25 years. The period is characterized by pluralism, in effect, continuing the pluralism associated with 1970s Post-Minimalism. Now, however, it had a philosophical foundation in Postmodern theory. By denying any one system, reading, interpretation, or truth, Postmodern theory destroyed the credibility of the authoritarian hierarchies of styles, media, issues, and themes, and it opened the door for everything and everyone. It also had an enormous impact on art history, as art historians began to question the validity of the traditional story of art, generally told from a narrow viewpoint that has emphasized the evolution of style. Now scholars approached art from countless angles, using issues of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, economics, and

Detail of figure 30.29, Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*



Map 30.1. Europe and North America (with Asia insert)

politics to demonstrate the many layers of meaning and ideas embedded in a work of art. In part, this trend had begun in the late 1960s, a result of the social revolution that accompanied the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War and challenged the validity of the status quo.

In effect, Postmodernism marked the end of the Modernist era. Modernism viewed modern art as a linear progression of one style building upon the last, continuously advancing art toward the “new.” The search for the new had been a mandate of Modernism that had lasted into the 1950s and 1960s, as we saw in the art of Frank Stella and Donald Judd (see pages 1056 and 1058). The tearing down of all art barriers in those decades and the proliferation of styles and media in the pluralistic 1970s meant, in a sense, that there was nothing new to be done. By the 1980s, artists had license *not* to be new. Not only did they appropriate art in every imaginable style and media from the history of civilization and combine it as they saw fit, many of the leading artists, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jeff Koons, Kiki Smith, and Damien Hirst, did not even concern themselves with cultivating a distinguishable style as they jumped from one medium to the next, relying on a theme rather than a look to tie their work together. For them, message was more important than having a readily identifiable, single style, a quality that had been one of the hallmarks of Modernism. Artists also challenged the premium that Modernism placed on individuality and authorship; some began working in groups, such as Guerilla Girls, Group Material, and Collaborative Projects (Colab).

The Postmodern era also redefined the nature of the art world itself. The art establishment widened to embrace artists of all ethnicities and races, accepting all kinds of media, styles, and issues without placing a value on one over another. In this new multicultural environment, artists who had been marginalized in the 1970s became mainstream. Furthermore, artists from all over the world, not just America and Europe, molded contemporary art. A benchmark exhibition for presenting this new

world view was *Magiciens de la Terre*, presented in 1988 at the National Museum of Modern Art (Pompidou Center) in Paris and featuring artists from all the continents, especially emphasizing those working out of the mainstream rather than those adhering to European and American trends.

The acceptance of artists worldwide mirrors the global restructuring of the last 25 years. Political and economic realignments resulted as first the U.S.S.R. and then China abandoned a strict adherence to Communism, experimented with capitalism, and opened up to foreign trade and investment. In the 1990s, Europe formed the European Union, and the United States, Mexico, and Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement. Barriers were falling everywhere, with people crossing borders more readily than ever before. Another important force behind the creation of a world art is the long-term impact of the American civil rights movement and the independence movements, especially in African and Asia, of the post-colonial 1950s and 1960s. These movements asserted their cultural traditions as viable and valuable alternatives to mainstream culture, which in the last 25 years have increasingly been woven into the fabric of a world culture. But perhaps the communications field more than anything else was responsible for the creation of the “Global Village.” Television, cellular phones, satellites, computers, and the Internet have linked the world. The Post-Industrial era is also the Information Age. Today, the world’s leading artists come from countries as varied as Lebanon, Iran, Israel, Cambodia, Thailand, Korea, Japan, China, South Africa, Mali, Russia, Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, and Iceland.

In this world of complex media and changing interpretations, scholars do not always agree on the meaning of Postmodernism. While the term initially was applied specifically to the European philosophy that emerged in the 1960s, today scholars and historians use the term quite loosely, to encompass all of the art made since 1980. In effect, they use it to mean art made after Modernism. We will use it in the same way.