



# National Identity in the Arts

## A Geography of Modernism

WITH VERY FEW EXCEPTIONS, the phenomenon at the start of the 20th century known as Modernism was an international affair. Stylistic innovations that began in France (as so many of them did) would quickly spread to the rest of Europe and indeed across the Atlantic. National identities became blurred. One exception to this is in Germany, whose artists, though learning from France, created a distinctive Expressionist style. This changed after the 1914–18 war, though the new art of social criticism maintained much of the over-the-top theatricality of the old.

After 1945, New York quickly took the title from Paris as World Capital of Art. Just as American culture spread globally, so did the example of American artists in responding to it. We shall look at two aspects in particular: the American genius for improvisation, which gave us mid-century jazz and Abstract Expressionism; and the particular American awareness of the commercial world, which a decade later would bring us Pop. *rb.*

### A. The Modernist Pandemic

A brief survey of the many movements that sprang up in Europe and America between Impressionism in the 1870s and Minimalism a century later. Most can be assigned a national origin, but a few such as Art Nouveau and Dada began almost simultaneously in several places. Most also spread internationally, though a few such as Futurism and De Stijl remained largely the property of the countries of their birth.

### B. Germany: Color and Conflict

Joining in informal collectives such as *Die Brücke* in Dresden and *Der Blaue Reiter* in Munich, German artists before WW1 developed an intense style of heightened colors and simplified forms. One of them, Wassily Kandinsky, was pushing this towards abstraction at the same time that his friend Arnold Schoenberg was taking similar steps in music.

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**Marc:** *Fighting Forms* (1914, Munich NP)

♫ **Strauss:** *Salome*, ending (Nadja Michael, London 2008)

**Kandinsky:** *Improvisation 27, "The Garden of Love"* (1910, NY Met)

♫ **Schoenberg:** *Five Orchestral Pieces* (1912), w/Kandinsky

♫ **Schoenberg:** *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Hila Baggio, Israel

**Kirchner:** *Self Portrait as Soldier* (1915, Oberlin)

**Dix:** *Self-portraits*, 1914–18

## C. Weimar Contrasts

While Expressionism was not entirely dead, most artists in the Weimar Republic responded to the trauma of defeat and depression in one of three ways: a “new objectivity” (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) turning a merciless lens on conditions of the time; nihilistic movements such as *Merz* and *Dada* that reveled in absurdity; and its opposite, an esthetic of logic and rational design emanating from the famed art school, the Bauhaus.

**Dix:** *Skat Players* (1920, New National Gallery, Berlin)

**Dix:** *Metropolis* (1928, Stuttgart)

♫ **Wiene:** *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, end of Act II

**Höch:** *Cut with the Kitchen Knife...* (1919, Berlin)

♫ **Schwitters:** *Ursonate*, excerpt (Michael Schmid)

♫ **Brecht/Weill:** *Mahagonny*, Alabama Song (Catherine Malfitano)

## D. The Art of Improv

Abstract Expressionism, arising in New York in the nineteen-fifties, arguably a descendant of Kandinsky’s work 40 years earlier, was the first American art movement to make its mark on the global scene. In its reliance on chance and improvisation, it has much in common with the jazz of the period, as played by Miles Davis and others.

**Dove:** *Gershwin’s "Rhapsody in Blue"* (1927, p.c.)

**Frankenthaler:** *Nature Abhors a Vacuum* (1973, Washington NGA)

**Gorky:** *Water of the Flowery Mill* (1944, NY Met)

**De Kooning:** *Woman and Bicycle* (1952, NY Whitney)

**Pollock:** [*Painting*, 1952]

**Kline:** *Painting #2* (1954, NY MoMA)

♫ **Schulman:** *Blue in Green* (Miles Davis)

♫ **Judson Dance Theater:** MoMA promo video"

## E. Popping Up All Over

Pop Art is generally considered to have begun in Britain in the mid-fifties as a response to American commerce. But it became an international phenomenon only when it burst upon the New York scene in the early sixties, in the work of Andy Warhol and numerous others.

**Paolozzi:** *I Was a Rich Man’s Plaything* (1947)

**Hamilton,** *This is Tomorrow* exhibition, 1956

**Johns:** *Flag* (1954, NY MoMA)

**Johns:** *Ballantine Ale Cans* (1960, NY MoMA)

**Warhol:** *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962, NY MoMA)

**Oldenburg:** *Clothespin* (1976, Philadelphia) & *Eraser* (1999, NGA)

**Lichtenstein:** *Whaam!* (1963, London, Tate Modern)

**Rosenquist:** *F-111* (1964, NY MoMA)

♫ **Allen & Visconti:** *ANDY, a PopOpera*, finale

## Artists, Composers, and Writers

William **Baziotes** (1912–63, *American painter*), Bertolt **Brecht** (1898–1956, *German playwright*), Miles **Davis** (1926–91, *American musician*), Stuart **Davis** (1894–1964, *American painter*), Willem **de Kooning** (1904–97, *Dutch-American painter*), Otto **Dix** (1891–1969, *German painter*), Arthur **Dove** (1880–1946, *American painter*), Helen **Frankenthaler** (1928–2011, *American painter*), Albert **Giraud** (1860–1929, *Belgian poet*), Arshile **Gorky** (1904–48, *Armenian-American painter*), Walter **Gropius** (1883–1969, *German architect*), Richard **Hamilton** (1922–2011, *English artist*), Hanna **Höch** (1889–1978, *German painter*), Jasper **Johns** (b.1930, *American painter*), Wassily **Kandinsky** (1866–1944, *Russian-American painter*), Ernst Ludwig **Kirchner** (1880–1938, *German painter*), Franz **Kline** (1910–62, *American painter*), Roy **Lichtenstein** (1923–97, *American painter*), Franz **Marc** (1880–1916, *German painter*), Piet **Mondrian** (1872–1944, *Dutch painter*), Emil **Nolde** (1867–1956, *German painter*), Claes **Oldenburg** (1929–2022, *Swedish-American sculptor*), Eduardo **Paolozzi** (1924–2005, *Scottish sculptor*), Jackson **Pollock** (1912–56, *American painter*), James **Rosenquist** (1933–2017, *American painter*), Arnold **Schoenberg** (1874–1951, *Austrian composer*), Grace **Schulman** (b.1935, *American poet*), Kurt **Schwitters** (1887–1948, *German painter*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian-American composer*), Richard **Strauss** (1864–1949, *German composer*), Andy **Warhol** (1928–87, *American artist*), Kurt **Weill** (1900–50, *German-American composer*), Robert **Wiene** (1873–1938, *German director*)