

Intro to the Museum Past and Present

Lesson Plan: Inventing Modern Art in the US

Readings:

- "MoMA: The Early Years" *MoMA* 9 (Winter 1979): 2-3 and "MoMA: 1935-1950" *MoMA* 10 (Spring 1979): 2-3
- Susan Noyes Platt "Modernism, Formalism and Politics: The "Cubism and Abstract Art" Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art" *Art Journal* 47.4 (1988): 284-295
- Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives. Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800-1940* (Berkeley, 2008): 156-168.
- Charlotte Barat and Darby English, "The Artist Wasn't Present: On MoMA's Fumbled First Showing of Black American Art," *ArtNews* July 17, 2019
<http://www.artnews.com/2019/07/17/among-others-blackness-at-moma-excerpt/>

Reading Question Prompts from Thursday

1. What narratives did the Museum of Modern Art create around modern art? (especially via the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition of 1936). Who is "in" – who gets left out?
2. Alfred Barr is a key name in the history of modern art. Reflecting both on how MoMA presents its own history, how Noyes Platt describes the Cubism exhibition of 1936, and Macleod's argument about gender in the museum, be ready to list 3 significant impacts of Alfred Barr's work at MoMA. For each impact, note 1-2 pieces of evidence for that impact.
3. What are the implications for charting a more inclusive history of modern art in today's museums? (consider MoMA's recent rehang; news of the BMA selling Warhols to acquire art by women artists and artists of color)

Learning Goals:

- To explain the social role of modern art collections (private & institutional) in the US at the moment they are being created in the early 20th century
- To recognize the role MoMA played in creating and diffusing an influential narrative of modern art history, and the gendered and racial impact of the MoMA narrative at the time
- To interpret the legacy of the 1930s MoMA narrative in present-day installations of modern art, from object selection to design

Lecture Outline:

- The players & the place of women in the origin story of MoMA
- Motivations of women as collectors of modern art
- Creating MoMA
- What is modern art?
 - What was collected?
 - What narratives did MoMA establish under Alfred Barr and why?
 - Making *Cubism and Abstract Art* Exhibition of 1936

- Impact of exhibition; impact of catalog
 - How is modern art to be viewed?
 - Gendered perspectives ~ theme throughout
1. The players (*women; & their portraits*):
 - a. Mary Quinn Sullivan *trained as an artist and worked throughout her life at Pratt Institute, started collecting after her marriage to lawyer. They collected together
 - b. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller* “art is one of the greatest resources of my life.... it enriches the spiritual life and makes one more sane and sympathetic, more observant and understanding, as well as being good for one’s nerves.” *married to JD Rockefeller who praised her highly conventional portrait for painting her “so truly as I see her” and refused to let her hang any modern paintings in the public areas of the home
 - c. Lizzie Plummer Bliss *unmarried, lived with her parents who relegated her modern collection to the basement

Cf: Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (and her unconventional portrait - in pants! by Robert Henri – which her husband hated and refused to have in their home); her commitment to producing art and her mother’s fear she would study the nude!

DISCUSSION: Why did so many wealthy *women* collect modern art during the first half of the 20th century (according to MacLeod reading) -> use Rockefeller quote as prompt if students need warming up! > point out local connection to Evergreen Museum and Alice Warder Garrett

2. Why make a museum? Progressive Era reforms & educational ideas
 - a. Compare and contrast MoMA trustees (incl. these three women) and Alfred Barr explanations
 - i. Trustees: The goal of the museum is “to acquire from time to time, either by gift or by purchase, a collection of the best modern works of art....[so that NYC]...could achieve perhaps the greatest museum of modern art in the world”
 - ii. Barr “The purpose of the new museum is: “Establishing and maintaining in the City of New York a museum of modern art, encouraging and developing the study of modern arts and the application of such arts to manufacture and practical life and furnishing popular instruction”
 - iii. Point out also 1) emphasis on acquiring and 2) use of word “modern” which is less straightforward than one might think (remind students of Gertrude Stein quote something can be either modern or museum but not both)
 - b. Debating / Defining Modern art 1900-before Cubism & Abstract Art show versus post exhibit
 - i. Brancusi *Bird in Space* legal case & the diversity of conceptions of modern art pre-Barr 1937 exhibit
 - ii. Discuss: Compare Barr’s first and revised torpedo diagram of the ideal MoMA collection

1. Sense of permanent movement/change – idea of “progressive, original, challenging”
2. “modern” becoming a conceptual rather than chronological term
- iii. MoMA’s founding collection & Lillie Bliss – ongoing significance of Cézanne, *The Bather*, 1885 in MoMA’s narrative of modern art; in art-history textbooks since then, and in critical reception of modern art as process-oriented
- c. Cubism and Abstract Art 1937
 - i. Discuss diagram from front cover, its intellectual contentions and approaches – *who is at the top? What categories of information are presented? How are they connected? How does this relate to Barr’s intellectual influences as described by Platt? Point out also if students don’t pick up on it that non-Western art and machine esthetic presented as similar categories – discuss what the diagram suggests they have in common ie: not a contextual approach, about the flow of form*
 Example > Installation view of exhibition showing Picasso painting *Dancer* juxtaposed with an African sculpture (point out catalog features Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* to make the same point) – *what messages does such a display convey?*
 - ii. Platt also proposes a political context for Barr’s motivations.
 Discuss....emphasize: scholarly, historical and political motivations for shape of exhibition as it took form
3. Impact of MoMA and its 1937 exhibition
 - a. Debate over the avant-garde vision – decision, later retracted, to keep a moving wall of 50 years for collection and the move towards a purely conceptual (and NARROW) definition of modern (that would exclude women and artists of color!!!! Non-Western artists etc...HAND OUT AND DISCUSS press release for Edmonson show; use Darby English piece as springboard for analysis)
 - b. But would include design > but only and deliberately the masculine form of design “machine art” and not the feminine “decorative”
 - i. Discuss quote: “We are confronted on every hand with indications that the time has come in America when Art is again taking its proper place among the normal interests of men. Indeed it may be said quite bluntly that no really significant development of contemporary art can take place in this country without the whole-hearted participation of men whose intimate relations with commerce, industry, and productive enterprise makes them rather than women, the immediate instruments for applying the arts to practical life” Artemas Packard, “A Report on the Development of the Museum of Modern Art” 1935-1936
4. Legacy: 2019 Reopening and Rehang. Hand out and Discuss feminist art-historian Maura Reilly’s critique (in ARTnews October 31, 2019) – cf: (if time) the positive reviews (or at least headlines) in NYTimes, ARTNews, Boston Globe etc...

Introduction to the Museum: Past and Present
Key Terms and Discussion Questions handout
11/14 Inventing the Modern in the United States

Key Terms:

Mary Quinn Sullivan
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller
Lillie Bliss
Alfred Barr
Cubism and Abstract Art (exhibition 1936)
“white cube”
Sculptures by William Edmonson (exhibition 1937)
2019 Rehang of MoMA

Reading Questions for 11/19 articles:

What does Conn mean by Naked Eye Science? What is this in contrast to?

How, according to Conn, has the relationship between the science museum and scientific research changed over time?

A key theme in the reading is the struggle between research and education. Identify several concrete examples of where this struggle is at play.

Summarize Conn’s general history of the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences in the latter 19th century one or two sentences. What was its fate and how was that manifest? What links do you see to other “museum moments” we have encountered this semester?

What is the future of science collections today? (consider Alberch and Krishalka especially)