

CHAOS & CLASSICISM

ART IN FRANCE, ITALY, AND
GERMANY, 1918–1936

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Teacher Resource Unit

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Following the chaos of World War I (1914–1918), many European artists moved toward more representational approaches and away from the fragmented compositions and emphasis on experimentation that had dominated the opening years of the 20th century. For nearly two decades after the armistice, art's return to order and enduring values dominated the discourse of modern art. *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936* traces this interwar trend as it worked its way from a poetic, mythic idea in the Parisian avant-garde; to a political, historical idea of a revived Roman Empire, under Benito Mussolini (1883–1945); to a neo-Platonic High Modernism at the Bauhaus, and then, to the chilling aesthetic of nascent Nazi culture.

This Resource Unit parallels the exhibition's themes, follows this vast transformation of modern art, and provides techniques for exploring both the visual arts and other curriculum areas. This guide is also available on the museum's Web site at guggenheim.org/artcurriculum with images that can be downloaded or projected for classroom use. The images may be used for education purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim Museum, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read the guide, and decide which parts of the show are most relevant to your students. For more information on scheduling a visit, please call 212 423 3637.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936

October 1, 2010–January 9, 2011

After the horrific destruction of World War I, a powerful desire for regeneration, order, and classical beauty emerged in Europe, lasting until World War II. Between the wars, artists turned away from prewar experimentalism toward a heroic embrace of the human figure, objective values, and rational organization. *Chaos and Classicism* examines this interwar aesthetic through seven themes discussed throughout this resource unit. Presenting painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, film, fashion, and the decorative arts, *Chaos and Classicism* is the first exhibition in the United States to focus on this international phenomenon in a variety of media across three different nations.

In France, Italy, and Germany, three key artists proved particularly influential in promulgating a classical aesthetic from 1918 to 1936: Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969). Picasso, although Spanish, was based in France from 1904 onward, and his great classical figure

paintings of the late 1910s and early 1920s demonstrate how decisively the Parisian avant-garde adopted the new post-World War I aesthetic. Canvases of mechanized people by Fernand Léger (1881–1955) along with commedia dell'arte paintings by André Derain (1880–1954), Picasso, and Paris-based Gino Severini (1883–1966) figure here too. The notion of a Latinate civilization comes to the fore in the emerging influence of Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), and the exhibition includes excerpts from his 1930 film *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le sang d'un poète*). Architecture and design by Le Corbusier (1887–1965), as well as the Purist paintings he created alongside Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966), forge a visual link with abstraction and Synthetic Cubism. Splendid neo-Greek fashion designs by Madeleine Vionnet (1876–1975) and Art Deco objects by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933) bring the more abstruse aspects of classicizing art and theory into functional items.

In Italy, de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, along with those of Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), bridge the transition into the New Sobriety of Italian art immediately after the war. De Chirico's 1919 essay "Il ritorno al mestiere" ("The Return to Craft") was especially important in prompting renewed interest in Fra Angelico (ca. 1400–1455) and Piero della Francesca (ca. 1415–1492). The exhibition includes still-life works by Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) along with paintings by lesser-known modern classicists like Massimo Campigli (1895–1971), Felice Casorati (1883–1963), Achille Funi (1890–1972), and Ubaldo Oppi (1889–1942). Novecento Italiano (Italian 1900s) artist Mario Sironi (1885–1961) is known not only for his easel paintings and murals but also his bridging both the avant-garde and Fascist-approved culture. The idea of reviving Roman greatness for modernity was pervasive after Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922. Architectural models and design objects, including the Casa del Fascio by Giuseppe Terragni (1904–1943) in Como, Italy, and porcelain by Gio (Giovanni) Ponti (1891–1979), demonstrate the power of the neoclassical paradigm for postwar Italian modernists. Sculpture, the quintessential classical medium, was especially strong in interwar Italy. Marino Marini (1901–1980) and Arturo Martini (1889–1947) created three-dimensional works at once materialist and otherworldly, and a chance to see their sculpture, which rarely travels to the United States, is a particularly exciting aspect of *Chaos and Classicism*.

In Germany, Mies van der Rohe's synthesis of classical form and modern technology was central to the anti-Expressionist ethos of interwar Germany: iconic elements of his Barcelona Pavilion (1928–29), including *Morning* (*Der Morgen*, 1925) by Georg Kolbe (1877–1947), the life-size nude sculpture so well known from original photos of Mies's seminal structure, are featured. Modernist figurative paintings by renowned Bauhaus teacher Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) testify to the German translation of the Italian revival (Schlemmer was deeply influenced by the art of Piero della Francesca, among others). The search for aesthetic *Klarheit* (clarity) in Weimar Germany after the perceived excesses of Expressionist art led to the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) style; works by Otto Dix (1891–1969), Wilhelm Schnarrenberger (1892–1966), Georg Scholz (1890–1945), and Georg Schrimpf (1889–1938) reveal this rationalist approach along with the radically pared-down photographic portraits of August Sander (1876–1964). Modern German aesthetics also lead toward the exhibition's dramatic conclusion. As the Weimar Republic collapsed and Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) came to power in 1933, the new classicism—Parisian myths, Italian role-playing, the German search for objectivity—was monstrously transformed into a quasi-scientific doctrine of human perfection in Nazi Germany. "The new age of today is at work on a new human type," Hitler proclaimed the year after the 1936 Berlin Olympics. "Tremendous efforts are being made in countless spheres of life in order to elevate our people, to make our men, boys, lads, girls, and women healthier and thereby stronger and more beautiful. . . . Never was Mankind closer than now to Antiquity in its appearance and its sensibilities." To recast the insight of German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Fascism rendered aesthetics political. Mies's collaborator, Kolbe, made classicizing sculpture for the National Socialists, just as Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003) produced quasi-documentary propaganda films for the regime. The prologue to *Olympia* (1936–38), her epochal account of the Berlin games, brings *Chaos and Classicism* to a close.

The exhibition is curated by New York University Professor of Modern Art Kenneth E. Silver, a renowned expert on European art between the wars, assisted by Helen Hsu, Curatorial Assistant, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, with Vivien Greene, Curator of 19th- and Early 20th-Century Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as curatorial advisor.

This exhibition is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and The David Berg Foundation.

◀ THE AVANT-GARDE LOOKS BACKWARD ▶

Within days of the armistice, Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966) and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) (1887–1965) published a manifesto for a new aesthetic titled *Après le cubisme* (*After Cubism*, 1918). “The war ends; everything is organized,” they asserted. “Here, only order and purity illuminate and orient life; . . . To the same extent that [yesterday] was troubled, uncertain of its path, that which is beginning is lucid and clear.”¹ Purism, the new postwar style that they founded, sought to invoke order and clarity and incorporated artistic references to antiquity.

Classicism had long been important for French cultural identity, and its broad definition of classical included not only ancient Greece and Rome and the Italian Renaissance, but also the work of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). More generally, the words “balance, calm, harmony, purity, clarity and the ideal,”² as well as “measured” and “order” were all part of the rhetoric of classicism.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), a Spaniard who was living in France, was key to popularizing this classical renaissance. Before the war, he had been an international symbol of radical art, the avant-garde of the avant-garde. While

even the most virulent Cubists began to be inspired by tradition and national styles, Picasso encouraged a return to traditional draftsmanship and classicism before and with more gusto than any other artist (while continuing to work in Cubism).

“Picasso’s *Woman in White* (*Femme assise, les bras croisés*, 1923) is a masterpiece of his Neoclassical period, which lasted from 1918 to 1925. Here, the artist depicts a seated figure as a dreamlike vision of fragile perfection and refinement. He achieves this effect through the application of several layers of white wash and superimposed contours in soft shades of brown and gray. As in many of his other figures of the period, the idealized treatment of her facial features reflects Picasso’s study of classical art.”³ Self-possessed and with an expression that combines resolve and concern, she is the incarnation of this approach.⁴



Pablo Picasso, *Woman in White* (*Femme assise, les bras croisés*), 1923. Oil, water-based paint, and crayon on canvas, 99.1 x 80 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1951; acquired from the Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Woman in White*, 1923

- ▶ Ask students to describe this painting in as much detail as possible and include their observations about the subject as well as the technique. What did they notice that was not apparent at first glance?
- ▶ According to Kenneth E. Silver, the exhibition's curator, "Picasso's woman . . . establishes a relationship with something beyond the confines of the picture's space but significantly does not engage with the viewer."⁵ What do your students think she might be looking at? What in the painting suggests that to them?
- ▶ What might this woman be thinking? If we could read her mind, what might we discover?
- ▶ The words "balance," "calm," "harmony," "purity," "clarity," "ideal," "measured," and "order" were all used to describe classicism. Which of these words apply to *Woman in White*? Are there some that don't? Explain.
- ▶ Some people see this painting as a portrait of a woman or a composite of several women that the artist knew. Others have seen this work as an allegory (a symbolic representation of an idea) and believe that *Woman in White* is an idealized expression of France's national identity. If Picasso intended this painting as a symbol of France, what qualities does he seem to be portraying?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In 1919, in the wake of World War I, French critic Jean Laran declared, "The war has taught us a hard lesson which must not be lost . . . to prune the trees of dead branches and cease producing bizarre oddities . . . [no more] backward houses . . . [no more] chairs with five legs."⁶ Laran was imploring artists to move away from the more experimental, prewar approaches to art. Research the styles that were popular just before WWI, including Cubism and Fauvism. Why might a devastating war cause artists to change their approach?
- In addition to neoclassicism, Picasso explored many styles, including his Blue Period (1901–04), Rose Period (1905), Analytic Cubism (ca. 1908–11), Synthetic Cubism (beginning in 1912–13), and Surrealism (beginning ca. 1924) during his lifetime.⁷ Research Picasso's life and work and consider what interests, events, and forces supported these stylistic changes.



Fernand Léger, *Two Women (Deux femmes)*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 58.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Gift of Richard S. Zeisler, 1991

◀ CLASSICAL BODIES, NEW HUMANITY ▶

In 1925, German art historian Franz Roh (1890–1965) wrote, “The latest painting wants to offer us the image of something totally finished and complete, minutely formed, opposing it to our eternally fragmented and ragged lives as an archetype of integral structuring, down to the smallest details. Someday man too will be able to recreate himself in the perfection of this idea.”⁸ This ideal of well-formed paintings and equally formed people became a model across the political spectrum.

This transformational approach to pictorial language, appropriate for a new world order, can be seen in the paintings of Fernand Léger (1881–1955). His use of streamlined forms derived from mechanical imagery dates from WWI, when he served in the French army. “His predilection for military hardware and their gleaming surfaces coincided with his feelings of solidarity with fellow foot soldiers in the trenches. The machine aesthetic he adopted at this time reflected his hopes of creating a truly popular art form that would describe and inspire modern life. After the war, he turned away from the experiments with pure abstraction that characterized his earlier work and infused social meaning into his art.”⁹ For Léger, “rendering the mechanical world became a necessity,” and his postwar paintings freely mix both mechanical and human elements.¹⁰

As a call to order resounded throughout postwar French society, Léger introduced the monumental, classical figure into his work. He offered an idea of classical women reminiscent of Picasso but without the aura of antiquity. Léger’s distinct style includes the clean, geometric forms of industry and mass production that signaled a renewed social and aesthetic environment. Many of his paintings took mechanical devices as their subject, and all were informed by cool precision and exacting workmanship.

“Women occupied a traditional place within Léger’s ideal new order. Counterpoints to the urban world of industry and work, Léger’s many depictions of women embody a domestic realm of tranquillity and leisure. He treated his depictions of women no differently than the most austere mechanical form: edges are sharp, colors are distinct, and modeling follows a conspicuously stylized formula.”¹¹ Léger’s modern women are as upright as columns, their hair, with its metallic shine, falling to one side. *Two Women (Deux femmes)*, 1922) combines these precise robot women with sharply delineated details of an idealized, domestic interior.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Two Women*, 1922

- ▶ Describe this painting carefully. What colors, forms, and shapes do your students notice? What adjectives can be used to discuss this work?
- ▶ As a class, how many items in this painting can your students name? Which ones remain ambiguous?
- ▶ Léger developed a distinct style of painting that mixes organic and mechanical forms. Through a group discussion, have the class work together to write a description of his style.
- ▶ Discuss the connection between the two figures in the painting. What visual clues has Léger provided to help us understand their relationship?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- In books or on the Internet, research Léger's work. Compare paintings done before 1914, the beginning of WWI, with those created after the conflict. The Guggenheim's Collection Online features a good selection of his work at guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online. Have your students describe the differences that they notice. Are there similarities? Would one know that these works were by the same artist? Explain.
- Toward the end of his life, Léger recalled,
"It's in the war that I got my feet on the ground. . . . I found myself on the same level as the entire French people; as I was assigned to the Engineering Corps my new comrades were miners, ditch-diggers, artisans who worked wood or iron. . . . At the same time I was dazzled by the open breach of a 75-millimeter gun in the sunlight, by the magic of the light on the white metal. . . . That open breach of a 75 in the full sunlight has taught me more for my plastic development than all the museums in the world."¹²

Léger said that the contact with other soldiers turned him away from his prewar style and toward the monumental figure paintings that mark his later work. He credited his time in the military for changing his views of both life and art. Ask students to speak to someone who has been affected by war and learn how the experience changed his or her point of view.
- WWI was one of the largest and bloodiest conflicts in history. Research its causes, impact, and aftermath.

Gio (Giovanni) Ponti, *An Archaeological Stroll* (*La passeggiata archaeologica*) urn with cover, 1925. Manufactured by Richard Ginori, Doccia, Italy. Porcelain, 50.2 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Edward C. Moore Jr. Gift, 1931. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY



◀ CRAZY FOR CLASSICISM ▶

“Greek and Roman history and myth, which had long provided the West with a common narrative, abounded in the visual arts between the wars as it never would again. The supposed purity, simplicity, and high-mindedness of Greek art and thought were especially influential.”¹³

The classical craze swept across Europe and could be seen in Fascist-approved art in Italy, in draped garments emulating antiquity by high-fashion designers in Paris, and in the choreography of George Balanchine (1904–1983) as he worked on his ballet *Apollo* (1928).

In Germany the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement called for a realistic mode (in contrast to Expressionism and abstraction), while in France the Purists “criticised the fragmentation of the object in Cubism” and “proposed a kind of painting in which objects were represented as powerful basic forms stripped of detail,” to lend a “timeless, classical quality.”¹⁴ Even the Surrealists were persuaded. As Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) had used Greek myths in developing psychoanalysis, the Surrealists—who were influenced by him—took classicism as their new pictorial language.

“The return to order that pervaded interwar painting and sculpture also appeared in objects for daily use. Rather than mere copies, models

from the glorious past were treated to novel modernizations, effectively updating classical imagery—along with the attendant values of antique harmony and proportion—for contemporary life.”¹⁵

A pioneer of Italian modern design, Gio (Giovanni) Ponti (1891–1979) was vital in bringing the modern classical aesthetic to the decorative arts. “He interpreted Roman subjects in ‘a modern and quirky vein,’ producing delightfully self-conscious send-ups of serious historicism.”¹⁶ In the urn *An Archaeological Stroll* (*La passeggiata archaeologica*, 1925), Ponti modified the Greek *lekythos*, a vessel for oil or perfume that features a long shape and a thin neck. The pattern on Ponti’s flask resembles Roman brickwork, and its color is like marble masonry. Fashionable figures in period dress appear among various relics, including columns, sundials, vessels, and candelabra, that mix classical motifs with a playful modern attitude.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *An Archaeological Stroll* urn with cover, 1925

- ▶ Have students look carefully at this *lekythos* (lek-uh-thos) and describe it in detail. Does it remind them of anything they have seen before? What might it be used for?
- ▶ As a class, create a list of words associated with the term “classicism.” How many of those words apply to this object? Which ones do not?
- ▶ Although this *lekythos* was inspired by Greece, it was created in 1925. What qualities of this object seem modern?
- ▶ Ponti titled this work *An Archaeological Stroll*. How does knowing the title help one better understand the object?
- ▶ Compare Ponti’s urn with one from ancient Greece. How are they similar? How are they different?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Before you begin this activity, visit metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi_cepaeu.htm to view a selection of *lekythoi*. Students should describe the characteristics of this type of ancient vessel in preparation for planning their own designs for a classically inspired urn.

Begin with a sheet of 11” x 14” paper. Fold it in half the long way. Beginning at the top center, draw half of the silhouette for the *lekythos*, remembering that the fold will be the center axis of the vessel. Next cut the shape out with a pair of scissors. Unfold the paper, and the shape will be symmetrical. Try a number of possibilities by altering the proportions.

Although Ponti’s *lekythos* was inspired by Greek pottery, it is not a copy. It demonstrates a more modern approach to design and decoration. Using paint or colored pencils, create a surface design that is inspired by antiquity but also has references to contemporary society. When the class is done, discuss the various designs and personal approaches to mixing ideas from antiquity with those from today.

- Ponti was one of Italy’s most influential designers, and his oeuvre includes automobiles, furniture, interiors, and buildings. Working with a multitude of materials, he is a pivotal figure of 20th-century architecture and design, and young practitioners are increasingly rediscovering his work today. Research Ponti’s other work and describe his approach to design. Which object do your students like the most? Why?
- The Neue Sachlichkeit movement was centered in Germany in the 1920s. Artists Otto Dix (1891–1969), Georg Grosz (1893–1959), and Georg Schrimpf (1889–1938) are among its most famous members. Research their work and describe the characteristics that they have in common.
- In France, the founders of Purism, “artists Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (better known by his pseudonym, Le Corbusier), titled their manifesto ‘Après le cubisme’ (‘After Cubism’) and dismissed their Cubist predecessors’ work as outdated decoration.” Ozenfant and Jeanneret along with their closest colleague, the painter Léger, believed that art should be “precise” and “attuned to the science and industry that permeated modern life.”¹⁷ Students can learn more about these three artists and then describe which qualities their work shares.

◀ THE CONSTRUCTORS ▶

In the years after the war, metaphors of construction and reconstruction became popular, and architects, builders, and engineers were greatly admired. The new approach to architecture was modern in its lack of historical styles yet traditional in its principles. Architect Le Corbusier encouraged this modern classical approach of purity, clarity, and refinement.

The building that most clearly expressed these principles was the Barcelona Pavilion (1928–29), designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969). Built for the 1929 *Exposición internacional* (International Exposition) in Barcelona, the German government's pavilion held the opening reception. Simple, unembellished, and featuring a flat roof, Mies's structure differed greatly from the surrounding pavilions that referenced previous styles and periods.

While the extensive use of glass and the chrome-plated columns show its modern setting, the Barcelona Pavilion is a "synthesis of classical form and modern technology,"¹⁸ following the Miesian belief that it was possible to reconcile new with old. The building mixed new materials, such as glass, steel, and chrome, with classical ones, such as Roman travertine, green Alpine marble, ancient green marble

from Greece, and golden onyx from the Atlas Mountains. In another form of unifying the contemporary and the ancient, Mies also used new materials for the specially designed chairs, ottomans, and tables, which borrowed the x-shape of the old Roman *curule*.¹⁹ Installed near a shallow open-air pool was another nod to classicism, the allegorical sculpture by Georg Kolbe (1877–1947) titled *Morning* (*Der Morgen*, 1925). This pairing of the classical body surrounded by clean contemporary architecture made the pavilion's "marriage of the modern and the antique complete."²⁰

When the exposition closed in 1930, the building was disassembled but not forgotten. As time went by, it became important not only in Mies's career but also in 20th-century architecture as a whole. In 1983, the *Fundació Mies van der Rohe* was founded with the express purpose of rebuilding the pavilion. The reconstruction adhered to the original characteristics and materials as closely as possible. Completed in 1986, it stands on the original site and is open to the public.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, 1928–29. Exterior view from front, 1929. Gelatin silver print, 16.5 x 22.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Installation view: *Exposición internacional* (International Exposition), 1929



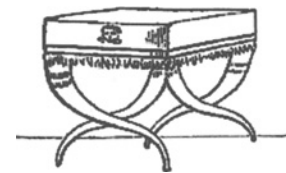
VIEW + DISCUSS

- ▶ Look at several views of the reconstructed Barcelona Pavilion on the Fundació Mies van der Rohe Web site at miesbcn.com/en/foundation.html. Instruct students to create a list of adjectives that describe their responses to the structure.
- ▶ Is this a place that your students would want to experience in person? Explain.
- ▶ Mies van der Rohe believed that architecture could reconcile both old and new. Did he achieve this goal in the Barcelona Pavilion? Explain.
- ▶ Mies adopted the motto “less is more” to describe his way of arranging a building’s components to create an impression of extreme simplicity. Ask the class to respond to this phrase. Do your students agree or disagree? Explain.

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In collaboration with the industrial designer Lilly Reich (1885–1947), Mies also designed a leather-upholstered metallic chair especially for the pavilion. This icon of modern design is still manufactured today. The Barcelona Chair was adapted from a Roman folding chair known as a curule. Have students compare the chairs and answer the following questions.
 - Which would you prefer to own? Why?
 - Which would you prefer to sit on? Why?



LEFT: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, Barcelona Chair, designed 1929. Chrome frame with Sabrina white leather, 76.8 x 74.9 x 76.2 cm

RIGHT: Drawing of a Roman curule chair

Next your students can research another historical style of furniture and incorporate one or more elements into a contemporary design. When they finish, they can share their drawings with other students along with the antique inspiration for them.

- International expositions have captivated imaginations and inspired ambitious, unusual architectural projects. Students can research plans from previous expositions and world’s fairs and then design a pavilion that expresses how they would represent their country to the world. They can use traditional drawing materials, Google SketchUp, or another program to create 3-D models. Download Google SketchUp at sketchup.google.com/download.
- The triumph of the Barcelona Pavilion was short-lived. When Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) was elected in 1933, the Weimar Republic ended, and a few months later, the Nazis closed the Bauhaus, the influential design school where Mies was the director. Mies emigrated to the United States four years later and continued to work as an educator and architect. Visit greatbuildings.com/architects/Ludwig_Mies_van_der_Rohe.html to view some of his American buildings, including:
 - Crown Hall, Chicago, 1950–56
 - Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, 1946–50
 - Lake Shore Drive Apartments, Chicago, 1948–51
 - Seagram Building, New York, 1954–58

August Sander, *Berlin Coal Carrier (Kohlenträger)*, 1929. Gelatin silver print, 29.3 x 22.3 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the photographer. © 2010 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur–August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY



◀ CLASSICIZING THE EVERYDAY ▶

In the 1920s European governments were polarized between the extreme right and left, and dictators controlled several regimes. Strong nationalistic feelings and left-wing beliefs spread through the European working classes. Meanwhile, other nations were being taken over by new right-wing ideologies.

As political moderation grew less popular, both progressives and conservatives claimed classicism as their own. For the former, classicism represented the long lineage of modern ideas, many of which were rooted in ancient cultures. For the latter, it was the antithesis of progressive social ideas. Many artists who dared to express their individual artistic visions could be threatened with political repercussions.

In this climate, August Sander (1876–1964) undertook an ambitious project of photographic portraits to reveal specific classes of people and the type of work they did. “Sander’s Cologne studio was a popular gathering place for young artists who engaged in lively debates about social and aesthetic concerns of the day, in particular the politically minded, left-wing artists known as the Cologne Progressives. These discussions helped advance Sander’s idea to create a dynamic, cumulative portrayal of modern society.”²¹

Sander began *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the Twentieth Century*) in 1922 when he was 46 years old. He started by making a list of the various occupations he wished to portray. He decided to take most of the photographs in

his native Westerwald region (near Cologne) because he knew it so well. Each day he biked to a different area, where he took photographs of tradesmen, workers, and countless other people. In his image of a coal carrier, “the doorway framing the laborer sets a boundary between the bright light of day and the shadowy depths behind him. The man’s bent leg, which seems to propel him forward, lends dynamism to a composition that might otherwise have been static.”²²

Although Sander’s plan was to capture some 600 portraits of his countrymen, in 1929 he produced a book featuring many of the photographs he had already taken. Because he had the misfortune to be photographing as the Nazi regime came to power, he was able to capture far fewer images. The Nazis eventually banned his book, raided his studio, and destroyed many pictures because they felt that Sander’s honest images of people did not represent the master race they wished to create. To protect his work, Sander hid his negatives in the countryside. After the Nazis were defeated in World War II, the negatives that survived were reclaimed, newly printed, and widely distributed. Today they are recognized as a masterful depiction of a particular people at a specific time in history.

VIEW + DISCUSS

- ▶ Before showing the photograph, tell students that they are about to see a photograph taken in 1929 called *Berlin Coal Carrier*. Ask them to make a quick sketch and/or write a sentence or two about what they expect to see. Then show Sander's photograph. Discuss the similarities and differences between the image and their expectations of a work with that title.
- ▶ This person's eyes seem to be looking directly at you. If your students started a conversation with him, what might be the dialogue? What would he say about his livelihood, his place in society, and life in Germany in 1929?
- ▶ Curator Kenneth E. Silver included this photograph in the Classicizing the Everyday section of the exhibition. In what ways does this image express daily existence? How might it be seen as classical?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- Sander lived in Cologne, a city that was largely supportive of Hitler's Nazi regime. Research the climate in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s and why the government would perceive Sander's work as a threat and want it destroyed.
- Sander believed that society was organized into a hierarchy of occupations and documented the professions of his time, including the craftsman, industrialist, farmer, doctor, pharmacist, notary, judge, attorney, soldier, aristocrat, clergyman, teacher, businessman, politician, writer, actor, painter, architect, and musician. Imagine continuing Sander's project and creating a photographic inventory titled *People of the Twenty-First Century*. What lucrative jobs from the early 20th century have since disappeared? Which ones continue? What new professions would need to be added to a 21st-century archive of jobs?
- Sander stated, "We know that people are formed by the light and air, by their inherited traits, and their actions. We can tell from appearance the work someone does or does not do; we can read in his face whether he is happy or troubled."²³ To what extent do your students agree or disagree with this statement? How much do they believe one can assume from a person's appearance only, without getting to know him or her?
- Because Sander knew many of his subjects, they posed willingly, and he encouraged them to arrange themselves and consider their pose. Their trust in his abilities and the quality of his project resulted in the naturalness of his images. Work with a partner to create a photographic portrait. Before taking the picture, students should decide what to wear; what their poses, facial expressions, background, and lighting will be; and how they might crop it. Have them discuss how these choices convey information about who they are.

◀ PERFORMANCE/ANXIETY ▶

In an effort to distance themselves from the past, avant-garde artists avoided references to anything that resembled old academic ideals. They sought inspiration in surprising places: icon painting, primitive art, the circus, music halls, and commedia dell'arte. Also known as the Italian Comedy, commedia dell'arte is a form of theater that originated in the streets and market places of the early Italian Renaissance, though its roots can be traced as far as back ancient Greek and Roman theater. It was characterized by masked types and improvised performances based on sketches or scenarios. Troupes of actors, each of whom had a specific function or role, traveled throughout Europe to present their shows, and the art form continued in popularity until the 18th century.

“Self-consciously artistic, picturesque, and typological,” the Italian Comedy was suitable for modern artists because of its folk conventions and lack of naturalism. “Commedia dell'arte offered much more for postwar artists than familiarity alone. As a genre both venerable and contemporary, it fulfilled the idea of modern classicism at the same time that it provided an alternative story line to the ancient myths that so powerfully gripped postwar European culture. A Latinate family of man, the commedia dell'arte represented normalcy in a period taken with the idea of common sense and anxious to cast off prewar emotionalism: ‘No Othello, no Hamlet, no Phèdre or Chimera, no one who agitates his mind with overpowering emotions,’ wrote scholar Pierre Louis Duchartre, ‘the *commedia dell'arte* is a complete world where each can find his nourishment.’”²⁴



André Derain, *Harlequin and Pierrot* (*Arlequin et Pierrot*), 1924. Oil on canvas, 175 x 175 cm. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Herve Lewandowski, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

After WWI, artist André Derain (1880–1954) was “celebrated and promoted by Parisian dealers and writers, and became a figure of admiration, for a new generation of painters and intellectuals. . . . [His] ability to synthesize traditional subjects and genres with his own milieu . . . contributed to the popularity of his works.”²⁵ Derain’s prewar style displayed vibrant, unrealistic colors and expressive brushstrokes, but after the war, he sought out order and stability. In 1924, he painted the melancholy *Harlequin and Pierrot* (*Arlequin et Pierrot*), in which “their austere gaze adds to an atmosphere of melancholy and stillness.”²⁶

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Harlequin and Pierrot*, 1924

- ▶ Have the class describe this painting as carefully as possible. What colors, patterns, and textures do they notice?
- ▶ This painting contains two central figures. Who might they be? What can one learn about them by looking at their poses, expressions, and the way they are dressed?
- ▶ How would the class describe the mood of this painting? How has Derain created this feeling?
- ▶ Would your students like to attend a show featuring these performers? Why or why not?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- Before WWI, Derain was associated with Fauvism, a style of painting known for its jarring, luminous colors and broad brushwork. His approach to painting changed significantly following the war and a 1921 trip to Rome for the 400th anniversary of the death of the Renaissance painter Raphael (1483–1520). In Rome, Derain pursued 16th-century artistic ideals, such as mastery of line, realism, and structure, and decided that he was a realist at heart.

Compare Derain's prewar paintings with those that followed the war. How are they different? How are they similar? Which does the class prefer? Why?

- In commedia dell'arte, the sad clown Pierrot loves Columbine, who prefers Harlequin. Usually unmasked with a whitened face, Pierrot "wears a loose white blouse with large buttons and wide white pantaloons."²⁷ Fundamentally naïve, this trusting soul is often played for a fool.

Harlequin is known for his physical agility, often doing cartwheels or flips. A competitive lothario, he lusts for all women and often makes fun of other suitors. He is a "slow thinker" who "desperately tries to hide his lack of brains."²⁸

Working with a partner, students can create a commedia dell'arte scene that animates Harlequin and Pierrot. In this theatrical form, actors worked without scripts, following only written scenarios that outlined the action. "Players made their performances accessible to all social classes by removing language as a barrier through employing skillful mime techniques, universally understandable characters, traditional gags and pranks, identifiable masks, and broad physical comedy."²⁹ Students should use as many of these techniques as they can.

Franz Würbel, Berlin Olympics poster (Dutch version),
1936. Linen-backed lithograph, 101 x 63.3 cm.
Collection of Jack Rennert, New York

◀ THE DARK SIDE OF CLASSICISM ▶

Hitler, the German dictator who in his youth had aspired to be an artist, favored classicism and disdained experimental styles. “He considered the ancient Greeks to be ‘Nordics,’ ancestors of the Germans. ‘It is therefore no surprise,’ he declared in one of his first speeches as chancellor, in September 1933, ‘that each politically historical epoch searches in its art for the link with a period of [an] equally heroic past. Greeks and Romans suddenly stand close to Teutons.’”³⁰ Art’s function, he said in 1935, was to be the model for racially pure humans—“to create images which represent God’s creatures, not miscarriages between man and monkey.”³¹

After assuming power, the Nazis moved quickly to “perfect,” in their words, German culture. In November 1936, they banned all art criticism, and in 1937 confiscated virtually all modernist works in German museums—nearly 5,000 works in the first seizure—and presented 650 of them in the *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*, 1937) show to demonstrate the perverted nature of modern art. The exhibition traveled throughout Germany and Austria, attracting more than two million visitors, and featured many artists who are now considered masters of 20th-century art, including Marc Chagall (1887–1985), Max Ernst (1879–1976), Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944), and Paul Klee (1879–1940), among others.

The Nazis also planned to demonstrate its efforts at remaking the National Socialist body in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. “Although African American track star Jesse Owens [1913–1980] won four gold medals (rendering Hitler’s claims of Aryan superiority somewhat shaky), the



German team overwhelmingly dominated, winning 89 medals.”³² With a stadium and pageantry that mimicked the ancient Greeks, the games provided an opportunity for the Nazi Reich to associate itself with classical antiquity.

Hitler set about creating a genetically specific classicism. “The new age of today is at work on a new human type,’ he told his countrymen less than a year after the Olympics had finished. ‘Tremendous efforts are being made in countless spheres of life in order to elevate our people, to make our men, boys, lads, girls, and women healthier and thereby stronger and more beautiful. . . . Never was Mankind closer than now to Antiquity in its appearance and its sensibilities.’”³³

The official poster for the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin was chosen through a competition. Franz Würbel, a Berlin painter and graphic artist, won, and his poster included the Brandenburg Gate as the landmark of the host city, Berlin, with the figure of a wreathed victor with his arm raised in the Olympic salute. The five rings were also included in the background and the words, “Berlin 1936, Olympic Games, 1st–16th August,” were inscribed in capitals on the Brandenburg Gate. The poster was distributed and displayed around the world.³⁴

VIEW + DISCUSS

Berlin Olympics Poster, 1936

- ▶ Ask students to describe this poster. What information does it communicate? Include ideas that are conveyed through text as well as the visual components.
- ▶ The poster contains several symbols, the Brandenburg Gate, the Olympic rings, and a laurel wreath. Research these symbols. How does knowing their meaning influence the class's understanding of the poster?
- ▶ On the Internet, research posters that have promoted the Olympic Games over the past century. How have the designs changed? How have they stayed the same? Do you think the Berlin 1936 poster could be used for a 21st-century Olympics? Explain.
- ▶ The word "propaganda" is used to describe "the systematic manipulation of public opinion and political beliefs, generally by the use of symbols, such as flags, monuments, speeches and publications."³⁵ Do your students consider this poster propaganda, a marketing tool, and/or advertisement for an upcoming event? Explain.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

EXPLORATIONS

- The Nazis hoped to show German superiority to the world during the 1936 Olympics. Although German athletes won many medals, Owens, an American track and field athlete, achieved international fame by winning four gold medals. It can be argued that there has never been a more important sports story than his performance in Berlin. Research his life. What insights, conflicts, and ironies do your students discover?
- The 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London will occur 100 years after the first official Olympic poster (for the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm) was created. The host country generally sponsors a contest to choose the official poster. Using either traditional art materials or digital tools, the class can design a poster for the upcoming games. What images, symbols, colors, and composition will best express the ideals of these events? Once completed, discuss your designs and motivations with the class. For more information, download the Olympic Museum's resource guide Olympic Games Posters at multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_776.pdf.
- Research the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition, which showcased work that the Nazi government found objectionable. What threats to their ideals did the Nazis see in modern art? Explain.
- One of the most blatant and successful uses of classicism in the service of Nazi propaganda was the film *Olympia* (1936–38). This controversial documentary, directed by Nazi sympathizer Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003), was commissioned by the regime and focused on the 1936 games. Segments of the film are available on YouTube. View clips and then discuss the class's response to the artistic, political, and social implications of the director's approach.

RESOURCES

Silver, Kenneth E., *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936*. Exh. cat. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2010.

———. *Esprit De Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org>.

A More Durable Self

"Highlights from the Collection," Museu Picasso, <http://www.bcn.cat/museupicasso/en/collection/highlights.html>.

The Museum of Modern Art, <http://moma.org>.

Classical Bodies, New Humanity

Fernand Léger Museum, <http://www.musee-fernandleger.fr>.

Crazy for Classicism

La Pietra, Ugo, ed. *Gio Ponti*. New York: Rizzoli, 2009.

The Constructors

Berger, Ursel, and Thomas Pavel, eds. *Barcelona Pavilion: Mies van der Rohe and Kolbe, Architecture and Sculpture*. Exh. cat. Berlin: Jovis; Georg-Kolbe-Museum, 2006.

The Fundació Mies van der Rohe, <http://www.miesbcn.com/en/foundation.html>.

"Barcelona Pavilion – Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Online," Great Buildings Online, http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Barcelona_Pavilion.html.

Classicizing the Everyday

In Focus: August Sander; Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008.

Sander, August. *August Sander*. Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1977.

Performance/Anxiety

Kalitina, Nina. *André Derain: A Painter through the Ordeal by Fire*.

Bournemouth, England: Parkstone & Aurora Art, 1998.

Vegelin van Claerbergen, Ernst, and Barnaby Wright, eds. *André Derain: The London Paintings*. Exh. cat. London: Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2005.

The Dark Side of Classicism

Banyard, Peter, *The Rise of the Dictators, 1919–1939*. Edited by John Pimlott. New York: Franklin Watts, 1986.

Schaap, Jeremy. *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org>.

Video: Jesse Owens 1936 Olympics Adolf Hitler, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXle5GBLSUs> (accessed August 5, 2010).

NOTES

¹ Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, *Après le cubisme* (Paris: Editions des commentaires, 1918), pp. 11–12, quoted in Kenneth E. Silver, "A More Durable Self," in Silver, *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2010), p. 20.

² Patrick Elliott, "Sculpture in France and Classicism, 1910–1939," in *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, de Chirico, and the New Classicism, 1910–1930*, ed. Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1990), p. 283, quoted in Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 20.

³ "Pablo Picasso: Woman in White (53.140.4)," Heilbrunn Timeline of History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/53.140.4> (accessed August 5, 2010).

⁴ Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit De Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 289.

⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶ Jean Laran, [untitled], *Art et décoration* 36 (May–June 1919), p. 180, quoted in Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 20.

⁷ "Collection Online: Pablo Picasso," Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/pablo-picasso-bio> (accessed August 25, 2010).

⁸ Franz Roh, *Post-Expressionism: Magic Realism* (1925), quoted in Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 27.

⁹ "Collection Online: Fernand Léger. Woman Holding a Vase (definitive state). 1927," Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/woman-holding-a-vase> (accessed August 25, 2010).

¹⁰ Arthur Manwick, "Painting and Music during and after the Great War: The Art of Total War," in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Initiative; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 509.

¹¹ "Two Women" National Gallery of Art, http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=72169 (accessed August 5, 2010).

¹² *Fernand Léger, 1881–1955*, exh. cat. (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1956), quoted in Theda Shapiro, *Painters and Politics: The European Avant-Garde and Society, 1900–1925* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), p. 141.

¹³ Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 32.

¹⁴ "Purism," Tate, <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=237> (accessed August 5, 2010).

¹⁵ Helen Hsu, "Gio (Giovanni) Ponti: An Archaeological Stroll (*La passeggiata archeologica*)," in Silver, *Chaos and Classicism*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 34.

¹⁷ Suzanne Muchnic, "With the Purist Intentions: After Cubism, two artists sought a pared-down aesthetic. LACMA revisits the overlooked period," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/apr/22/entertainment/ca-54343> (accessed August 5, 2010).

¹⁸ Fritz Neumeyer, "Mies's First Project: Revisiting the Atmosphere at Klosterli," quoted in Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 36.

¹⁹ Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "August Sander (Getty Center Exhibition)," Getty, <http://getty.edu/art/exhibitions/sander/index.html> (accessed August 5, 2010).

²² "Coal Carrier, Berlin (Getty Museum)," Getty, <http://getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=40664> (accessed August 5, 2010).

²³ "August Sander," Getty, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1786> (accessed August 5, 2010).

²⁴ Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 43.

²⁵ "André Derain – Harlequin and Pierrot," *Renoir to Picasso: Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris*, National Gallery of Victoria, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/orangerie/derainimage.html> (accessed August 5, 2010).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wikipedia, s.v. "Pierrot," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierrot> (accessed August 9, 2010).

²⁸ Wikipedia, s.v. "Harlequin," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlequin> (accessed August 9, 2010).

²⁹ New World Encyclopedia, s.v. "Commedia dell'arte," http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Commedia_dell'arte (accessed August 23, 2010).

³⁰ Silver, "A More Durable Self," p. 46.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 47.

³³ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁴ "Olympic Games Poster 1936 Berlin," Olympic Games Museum, <http://olympic-museum.de/poster/poster1936.htm>.

³⁵ Columbia Encyclopedia, s.v. "Propaganda," dictionary.com.

ALLEGORY

A symbolic representation of an idea.

CLASSICAL

Referring to the culture, art, and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome.

CLASSICISM

a style that uses techniques from or creates a mood that invokes antiquity. Classicism has been the dominant style repeatedly since the medieval period, particularly during the Renaissance and from the mid-18th to the 19th century.

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Italian theatrical form, popular from the 16th to the 18th centuries, that features masked actors improvising with stock characters and scenarios.

COLOGNE PROGRESSIVES

A loosely organized group of artists based in Cologne, Germany, during the 1920s and 1930s that sought a new visual language to support the working class in its conflict with the wealthy. The group's influence waned when the Nazis took power and later declared their art "degenerate."

DEGENERATE ART

A term used by Nazi officials to describe art deemed unfit for society, usually applied to avant-garde styles. It is also the name of an exhibition, organized by the Nazis in 1937, of works that they had purged from German museums. The show traveled throughout Germany and Austria, attracting more than two million visitors, and featured many artists who are now considered masters of 20th-century art, including Marc Chagall (1887–1985), Max Ernst (1891–1976), Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944), and Paul Klee (1879–1940), among others.

FASCISM

A set of political beliefs, party, or government that privileges the nation and race over individuals, encourages extreme discipline, social regimentation, autocratic rule, and suppression of opposition.

LEKYTHOS (LEK-UH-THOS)

An ancient Greek oil flask with a long elliptical shape, thin neck, and loop-shaped handle. Often featuring detailed figure paintings on a white ground, they were used in public baths and gymnasiums as well as for funerals.

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT

German for "new objectivity," a 1920s artistic style that used a realistic approach to figuration and color in reaction to Expressionism and abstraction as well as the devastation of World War I. This movement had two wings, the Verists, which included Georg Grosz (1893–1959) and Otto Dix (1891–1969); and the Classicists, which included Alexander Kanoldt (1881–1939) and Georg Schrimpf (1889–1938).

PAVILION

A light, usually open building used for shelter, concerts, exhibitions, and many other public events in a park or at a fair.

PURISM

A movement founded by Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) in 1918 with their defining manifesto *Après le cubisme* (*After Cubism*) that privileged rationality, order, science, and technology in its simple, machinelike aesthetic.

WORLD WAR I

A military conflict from August 1914 to November 1918 that involved two alliances of the major European powers. More than 65 million people fought in what was known as the Great War until World War II, due to its unprecedented scale.