

In everyday language, the terms “modern” and “contemporary” are often used interchangeably. In the context of art, however, they designate two distinct moments in art history. There are specific definitions for both terms, and these definitions will help us to establish an understanding of the images and themes that emerge in both styles of art.

What Is Modern Art?

“Modern art” dates from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries and refers to work that was entirely different from that which preceded it. This art broke with convention, dealt with new subject matter, focused on conceptual concerns, and changed the position of the artist within society. Modernism began as a trend of thought that emphasized the power of human beings to create, improve, and reshape their environment, with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology, and practical experimentation. Thus, in its essence it is both progressive and optimistic. The movement was initially an ideological reaction to the dehumanizing effects of late-nineteenth-century industrialization. Other world events further inspired the movement, including World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945); huge improvements in industry and technology as compared to the nineteenth century; the rise in the power and influence of international corporations; increasing interconnectedness across the globe in the form of cultural exchanges, transportation, and communication; the spread of popular culture from Europe and North America elsewhere; and the “Westernization” of many formerly traditional societies.

Modern art reflects a tendency toward abstract and nonrepresentational depictions of the world. Many styles of art developed during the modern period, including impressionism, fauvism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, pop art, op art, art nouveau, and art deco.

What Is Contemporary Art?

The term “contemporary art” is generally regarded as referring to work made between 1970 and the present. It also implies art that is made by living artists, but essentially contemporary art is seen as something that has never been done before. There is no unifying ideology in contemporary art, and there are no schools, periods, or styles as are associated with modern art. However, certain trends have emerged in contemporary works. Contemporary art emphasizes a rejection of the commercialization of the art world, but it is often connected to the contemporary consumer-driven society. Contemporary art often reflects a strong social consciousness, including themes such as feminism, multiculturalism, globalization, bioengineering, and AIDS awareness. It incorporates the widespread use of a variety of technology-based media and the mixture of both photography and



Contemporary Art vs. Modern Art

language in works. Contemporary art blurs the distinctions between painting and sculpture through the use of everyday objects and other nontraditional media in the final product. In addition, contemporary art includes large-scale installations that emphasize the importance of an architectural context for art.

Contemporary art often makes a connection to the future, but it parallels many developments in contemporary society. Contemporary art works to explode our understanding and perception of art. This kind of art challenges, defies, and excites; it crosses boundaries and asks us to question the meanings of “high” and “low” art. Contemporary art breeds controversy and confronts the viewer with challenging questions. This art forces a relationship to form among the art, the artist, and the viewer. From this relationship, works of art gain new meaning. Contemporary art unites new technologies and materials with traditional styles and processes. The study of contemporary art can help people think in new directions by focusing on the process of looking at and analyzing art, and contemporary artists hope that viewers can translate these skills into their everyday lives.

What Do Modern and Contemporary Art Have in Common?

Modern and contemporary art build on existing subject matter, themes that artists have incorporated into their work for ages. However, changes in the world, new developments in art technologies, a revised conception of art materials, and an expanding view of the definition of “art” have changed the images artists create and the art forms artists choose to use.

Nature

“For me nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces, an event rather than an appearance. These forces can only be tackled by treating color and form as ultimate identities, freeing them from all descriptive or functional roles.”

—Bridget Riley, visual artist

- Artists share an interest in nature.
- Artists express their personal relationship with the environment.
- Artists contrast rural and urban settings.

Portraiture

“Most painting in the European tradition was painting the mask. Modern art rejected all that. Our subject matter was the person behind the mask.”

—Robert Motherwell, visual artist

- Artists explore the personality of themselves and others.
- Artists capture the appearance and social status of the sitter.
- Artists incorporate issues of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender.

Social Commentary

“A work of art is a world in itself reflecting senses and emotions of the artist’s world.”

—*Hans Hoffmann, visual artist*

- Artists report social issues that they feel are important.
- Art can be communication and propaganda.
- Art can serve as a take-off point for social action.

The Commonplace

“Still lifes are always ready to pose. They don’t talk or get tired or need to eat. They possess all the qualities of form and color that are needed to keep a painter occupied for the rest of his life.”

—*Robert Chunn, visual artist*

- Artists expand the range of traditional still life objects.
- Artists include subjects drawn from industrial and popular culture.

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