

Who says that's Modern? Making use of Primary Sources in Art History

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Introduction

“Because I said so.” Who hasn’t heard that answer at some point growing up? It is really a disappointing answer because in fact, it is not an answer at all. I suppose it’s a frequent response because it generally works (in other words, “there is no time for me to address this” or “I do not know”, so let’s move on)! I am thinking about this phrase as I read through and prepare for a lecture in my Advanced Placement Art History class. It has taken me quite a few years to teach this class with the confidence that I have now. This is a course that essentially spans the history of the art world from my favorite Paleolithic gal the ‘Venus of Willendorf’ to contemporary artists like my student’s favorite ‘Hope’ star, Shepard Fairey and all that lies between (28,000B.C.E. to 2010A.D.). This is all to be covered in about nine months. That said; there are days when “because I said so” is used to keep us moving forward! The luxury of having taught the same course for a number of years is the familiarity I now have with most of the content. While there are still many areas within the curriculum that I have limited depth of knowledge, I now have the luxury to think more critically about what and how I am presenting ideas to my students. I’d like to rephrase this ‘answer’ and begin using “who said so”.

When I first began to read about the Impressionist artists on my own time, I was shocked by the contrast in the words. I thought I knew what these artist intentions were! Apparently when I was first introduced to this period during my freshman year of college, I also must have received that same kind of ‘rushed’ presentation (I’m sure the exam was only weeks away and we had only made it to the 1800’s)! I recall learning about their new technical approach to painting that was based on an obsession with the effects of light on subject. That, along with a handful of images to support this limited objective, was about all I really knew about these artists – until I read their own letters and journals. Edouard Manet said, “It is not enough to know your craft – you have to have feeling. Science is all very well, but for us imagination is worth far more”.¹

In the early nineteen hundreds, the artist Manet began to explore some radical new idea in painting. Not only was he studying the scientific effects of light and color, he began to reference and challenge (visually) a past ideology and conviction about painting. Having a specific voice or direct evidence from a source, provides an additional context about the subject. Such reference helps develop a more critical understanding and depth to what is being studied. Making use of these sources would help my students have a broader context from which to understand such art movements as the Impressionists and thus have a stronger frame of reference for their own analysis and interpretation.

Does reading about an image, through primary source documents, change or influence one’s ability to analyze the work? The influential writing of Clement Greenburg in the mid 1940’s, suggested to many that a revolutionary movement was underway. The literary criticism brought him a great deal of attention and he eventually became part of an influential group of gallery

curators and academia that promoted the avant-garde of Modernism. What is the role of the critic in Modern art? How much influence does such critical writing have in defining the period? Consider the critic Louis Leroy, who after seeing Claude Monet's, *Impression, soleil levant* of 1872, described the work as an unfinished painting, a sketch or "impression". Greenburg and Leroy each had their own set of beliefs about art and art making, often challenging artist and viewers alike to consider a different perspective.

Objective

Making use of good primary sources can guide students to a time and place that no longer exists. The direct evidence and information that primary sources offer can be used for analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of an area being studied. Selecting the primary sources depends on carefully reviewing criteria such as clarity, credibility, accuracy, and relevance. There are so many different perspectives available, part of the problem as a teacher is how to filter and offer clarity to students. Obviously, each source has its own level of validity, but how do we select and then translate these perspectives into student understanding in Art History? In this curriculum unit I want to address two specific goals. The first will be to develop a framework that students can use as a means for understanding and analyzing the primary source - what it provides and what limitations it has in helping us understand a history. The second goal I have for this unit specifically addresses the free-response section of the Advanced Placement Art History exam. These essay questions focus on the student's ability to apply their knowledge by analyzing known and unknown works of art as well as primary source documents from the nineteenth century or later. In large part, this section of the exam is looking for students to demonstrate their ability to analyze the relationship between a work of art and the historical context in which it was created. Given the multitude of perspectives offered to them throughout the year, this is not an easy task.

So in this curriculum unit plan, the second goal is combined with the first to clearly define and frame specific periods within the Modernist movement through the use of primary source documents such as the critical writing of Clement Greenburg, artists statements and group manifestos. What makes this different then what I've done in the past? I have always used images to tell the history. My overarching goal for this unit is to help students recognize (in a way, experience) the early cognitive changes of the Modern artist through the use of these primary sources. These documents will serve as a catalyst for a series of activities that physically engage students in the history they will be studying.

Given the radical, avant-garde nature of the content, what better opportunity to expose students to multiple perspectives in Modern art history then have them recreate historic art debate style judgments, and re-enactments of interviews, exhibitions, and events. This should prove a valuable source for students to base their understanding and interpretations of the events and the resulting Modern works of art created.

The unit will culminate with a trip to the Modern Art museum in Charlotte, which contains works that are not in their textbook and thus challenge these practiced skills.

Rational and Background

In the past, I have introduced the period of Modernism in my art classes, generally from an American and New York perspective. This not only limits the kind of Modern Art I can use as my examples – but the histories that caused the movement to occur in the first place. For my students the perception of what is ‘Modern’ art is very different than what I am telling them is classified as ‘Modern’ art, and rightfully so. The word ‘modern’ seems to conjure a reference to the contemporaneous; all art is modern at the time it is made. Their point of reference is their birth year of around 1994, the year of the O.J. Simpson trial, the genocide in Rwanda, Kurt Cobain is found dead and Schindler’s List wins best picture at the Oscar Awards. The volume of visual art readily available to them is on a global scale. So how do I introduce the art period called ‘Modernism’ which to my students looks antiquated, generic, and one of my favorite comments - unoriginal?

The Futurists stated “To admire an old picture is to pour our sentiment into a funeral urn instead of hurling it forth in violent gushes of action and productiveness.”³ Sounds like an impressive gesture – it certainly gets my students attention. The advent of technology was embraced by the Futurists and creates many practical points of comparison. The advent YouTube video technology in the classroom provides just such a connection. Access to interviews and films from the past may be appalling to the Futurists - nonetheless it will create a tangible link for understanding context.

I teach in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public school system, which is the nineteenth largest district in the nation with a population of almost 130,000 students. I teach studio art and art history in a school located in the Northeast learning community, with a population of roughly 2100 students grade 9-12. My students come from fairly diverse backgrounds with approximately 35% receiving free or reduced lunch. The Advanced Placement Art History course is an elective that has gradually increased in popularity since our school opened in 2006. The students that take this course are most often visual arts students, though increasingly this is changing. There are a great number of students interested in building an academic resume that will help them get into the competitive colleges they hope to attend. Those students have a very limited idea of what to expect in this course. The arts are often overlooked as a respected scholarly endeavor within the public schools. That said, there is also a general misconception about the depth and breadth of the content covered in the arts course. This is a battle long fought in the field, but contentious nonetheless. It is just this sentiment that will allow me (or is it to challenge me?) the chance to introduce the vast array of visual arts content to my students. This unit will provide just such a vehicle to bridge that gap.

The city of Charlotte has recently opened a series of cultural arts centers within blocks of each other. Included in this plan is a fine art museum, a world-class craft and design collection, an African-American art center, and a contemporary arts museum. Each of these centers has great leadership within their education programs to encourage and support public schools involvement. Making use of these sites as primary sources will be part of this unit.

This unit is broken into several sections, each with a different kind of primary source as the catalyst to examine that period or artist. It will not be taught uninterrupted, but be woven into the existing semesters curriculum (based on chronology). The introduction to using primary sources

in this creative, interactive manner will begin with the Enlightenment period – which will lead us into the Impressionists and Manet in particular. The Futurists and the writing of Marinetti will lead into both the films of the Dadists and the critical writing from the 1913 Armory show in New York. From there we will read interviews and writings of Clement Greenburg on Modernism. This unit culminates with a trip to the Bechtler Museum of Art where students will make connections with works of Modern art and compare their previously studied works with this new collection.

Strategies and Activities

Questioning Primary Sources.

Referring to my reframed question “Who said so?”, we will begin each section of this unit by establishing the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of the primary source we will be using. Our general rubric for establishing this will look something like this:

Who prepared the document? What do we know about the author? Who was the intended audience?

What is the time period of the document? Where was the document written? What do you know of this period and how does this document fit with that knowledge?

Think about the purpose of the source. What was the author's message or argument? What was he/she trying to get across? Is the message explicit, or are there implicit messages as well?

Given the time period, why might the author have chosen to write as they have? Who constituted the intended audience? Was this source meant for one person's eyes, or for the public? How does that affect the source?

This rubric will be used with each section of the unit. Through class discussions, we will be able to move through the documents with a more sound understanding of its function.

The Enlightenment Documents – Rationalism and Secularization.

As early as the 1500's there was a revival of the humanist's notions of the classical period. The writings of the 18th century Enlightenment period philosophers like Immanuel Kant, could provide us some insight into how and why this occurred. Along with a series of new philosophical ideas about self and knowledge, at its core, the Enlightenment was promoting rationality and science as the 'measure of all things'. Kant claims the motto of the Enlightenment to be “Sapere Aude” (dare to know).

It is during the mid 1600's that coffee houses in England and Paris became the social establishments that we know today. It is here where our conversation about Modernity will begin to develop. True to this primary source unit, my classroom will be transformed into one of these early coffee houses, and where we will first read a short excerpt from Immanuel Kant's 1781,

Critique of Pure Reason. As stated, we will first analyze the documents credibility, accuracy, and relevance using our primary source rubric. Our goal will be to come to an understanding of the source itself to then draw more accurate conclusions about the history. Student will answer as much as they can of the rubric before we read the entire document, through independent research – and then after the reading, complete the remainder.

The complexity of this writing will no doubt be troublesome to my students. I like to set the bar high! But working in groups, reading and together generating a series of questions based on their level of understanding will help individuals get through this challenging read with a sense of confidence. Monitoring the development of these questions will help me as the teacher then guide the discussion. My role will be to guide the discussion towards the artist and works that reflect the times in which they were made.

Chronologically, (and simultaneously) we will exam images such as Joseph Wright of Derby, *A philosopher Giving a Lecture at the Orrery*, along with the Grand Manner portraits of Thomas Gainsborough. We will have considered the theme of morality through the eyes of artists like William Hogarth and Benjamin West. The geometric harmony and rationality of the Neoclassical period developed by artists such as David and Ingres gives us an expanded the vision of morality during a period of great political upheaval.

The rationality reinforced by the aforementioned artwork and writing of Kant was subsequently challenged by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his 1762, *Social Contract* and 1788 *Confessions*, he proclaimed individual freedom to be the first principle of Romanticism. “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains!”³ To further guide students to understand and apply context, we will look at selected excerpts from these two books by Rousseau and ‘attach’ them to a specific work of art. For example, we may look at the dramatic print, *The Sleep of Reason* by Francisco Goya and attach it the Rousseau quote. Student will then explain why the made those connections. We will again make use of the primary source rubric when looking at both documents.

The Paris Salons- The Rise of the Avant-Garde

The subsequent philosophical argument in art emerges as Realist painter Gustave Courbet declares in 1861, “The art of painting can consist only in the representation of objects visible and tangible to the painter...An abstract object, invisible or nonexistent, does not belong to the domain of painting.”⁴

How does this idea reveal itself in the paintings of the time? Using only images from popular Realist painters of the mid nineteenth century, students will be asked to compare and analyze the works (from the Romantic images of the likes of Goya) and then declare what they think would be the philosophies of this movement. (of course they will not be provided the quote above until after) This activity will set the tone for the Salon show to follow.

The period of Modernism called into question the mere idea of ‘truth’ from the Enlightenment; the notion that reason alone stifled the imagination and without imagination and

freedom, no progress could be made. It is about this time that Edouard Manet painted *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass) and where I will introduce the Modernists ideas.

What was Manet thinking? Why did he flatten the space in his painting and abandon most value gradations in favor of strong contrasts? What were the Impressionist artists really painting? Were they challenging conventions or merely painting light? What did it mean to examine a 'new ways of seeing'?

The Academie des Beaux-Arts in France held annual art exhibits beginning in the early 1700's, inspired by Italian model. These exhibits became known as the Salon Exhibits. To show at a salon, a young artist needed to be received by the Académie by first submitting an artwork to the jury; only Académie artists could be shown in the salons.

In the 1863 there were over 5000 works submitted for exhibition, 2217 were selected. The jury, comprised of 14 members of the Academie, was comprised of artists as well as government appointees. Looking at the works selected versus the works rejected may help us understand just what Modern would have looked like at the time. Students will view such comparisons and 'guess' which pieces would have been rejected. They will be expected to articulate why it would have been rejected.

Manet's, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* was rejected outright by the Official Salon. What is it about this work that is so 'Modern'? Was this really the beginning of a battle between the old and the new? Manet, a previous prizewinner, eventually showed this piece in the subsequent Salon des Refuses of 1863. This voluntary show set up with the support of Napoleon III. He had agreed that the judges may have been too harsh and decreed that he would allow the public to voice their opinion on the rejected works. This democratic approach is subsequently adopted in a number of other exhibitions in America and Europe.

Using actual works (okay, they will be color copies!) of art that were submitted to the 1863 Paris Salon show, students will become the judges in the exhibition. They will reference the philosophical ideas of the past (such as Kant and Rousseau) and create a checklist as to what is acceptable for this particular exhibition. Each will select two works that they feel, based on these philosophical ideals, and should not be shown. Those works will be 'hung' in a Salon des Refuses, where we will analyze what Enlightenment ideals were being (visually) rejected. One work from each student will be discussed first, as a group, the second piece they selected will be an independent writing activity that will allow me to check for individual understanding more thoroughly.

The Futurists – Technology

It called for the destruction of museums and libraries (said to be mausoleums) and glorified speed, violence, and warfare; it declared, "a roaring motorcar is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace"⁵.

The early twentieth century was marked by amazing changes in technology. Artists were affected by these innovations – which often became the subject of many of their works of art.

This was also a time when entire nations were mobilizing against each other. Artists responded in their work with social and political commentary – protesting, supporting, questioning, and narrating events around them.

The most obvious primary source to be used here would be Manifesto of Futurism, written by the Italian poet, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. It is Marinetti himself who helps set the stage for why this movement was embracing a new way of seeing, a “loathing of ideas from the past...especially artistic traditions”⁶. His radical and passionate writing represented to many the triumph of man over nature.

Student will begin by analyzing the source using the rubric designed for this unit. Because of the complexity of this reading, we will begin by reading The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism, 1908, together and discussing

How did they respond visually? What were the techniques used by the painters and sculptors of the movement to create...movement? Were they successful? These aesthetic questions will be discussed as we read through the Manifesto of Futurists Painters, written by Umberto Boccioni in 1910. Using a select number of paintings and sculptures, the class will analyze and develop a critical response to these questions.

We will be simultaneously discussing the idea of technological innovations in the 21st century. Together, they will create a list of the technological innovations used today such as MP3 players, video technology, as well as scientific advancements like cloning and gene therapy. Discussions will be relevant to how their lives are different because of these innovations – if they in fact are.

After reading the Manifesto of the Futurists, student will then develop their own manifesto based on class opinions. What are they in favor of and what would they denounce? Why? What should the future hold and what action can we take to ensure the future we see as the best? Outlining what the class is for and against. Included in this will be what the class thinks the future should hold and what actions it might take towards creating that future.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art or The Armory Show of 1913 – Modern Art in America

Between February 17 and March 15, 1913, one of the most spectacular cultural events took place in New York City at the Sixth-ninth Regiment Armory building. Organized by Walter Pach, Walt Kuhn, and Arthur B. Davies, the exhibition combined the newest contemporary examples of European art with their American counterparts. The exhibit itself stood to declare New York as a contender in the modern art milieu, by exposing American artists to the artistic movements of cubism, post-impressionism, and fauvism.

To help my student understand the impact this show had on American artists as well as the general public requires a familiarity with the American art narrative. Chronologically, they will have just completed the period of French Impressionism and Post Impressionism along with works the American Romantic painters. Introducing this exhibition with the primary sources that

I have, will help us create a link between the European past and the American Abstract Expressionist to come.

The early American painters drew from European ideas of constructing images of grandeur, solemnity, and dignity. Portraiture of heroic, romanticized men and landscapes promulgating “Manifest Destiny” depicted monumental mountains and dreamy sunsets with astonishing cloud formations. This aesthetic was grounded in realism, based in large part by the conservative association of artists who were members of the National Academy of Design (NAD). The presence of conventional NAD taste, dominated the American art scene at the end of the nineteenth century.

John Marin and Arthur Dove were two Americans who showed some sign of challenging this hegemony. Dove's one-man show at Gallery 291 in 1912 is credited as the first public exhibition of abstract art by an American⁷. Though sales were weak and little other gallery space was available for such works, there were a few American painters and sculptors who fought to respond to this convention in 1912 by forming the Association for American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS). Their intent was to open the otherwise limited scope of art – with a particular interest in Abstract Art. Almost immediately, ideas for the Armory Show began to develop.

“...that's not art! He is nuts and his imagination has gone wild”⁸, so said President Theodore Roosevelt as he walked through the first exhibition put on by AAPS, the Armory Show.

On March 16, 1913, Kenyon Cox spoke to the New York Times about the group of Futurists and Cubists that exhibited in the show; “They maintain that they have invented a symbolism which expresses their ...souls. If they have really expressed their soul in the things they show us, then God help their souls!” He went onto compare Marcel Duchamp's cubits painting *Nude Descending the Staircase* to the fairy tale of “The Emperor's New Clothes”.⁹

In contrast, Walter Pach compared the Cubists to the historical development of music. He describes primitive sounds (a child crying, a hunter imitating birds and animals) which became organized into melody, that later were combined with harmonies, and developed further into sonatas and symphonies. “In these highest developments of the art, the original elements have become totally unrecognizable, and yet the force with which they move us...the composer evokes in us a mood...”¹⁰

Each of these men wrote at great length about this exhibition and it is through their writings that we will examine the impression Modern art had on the contemporary American scene during the turn of the century. As a class, we will begin by reading *The Statement* by Arthur B. Davies, one of the exhibition founders who was instrumental in forming AAPS. This text is a terrific symbiotic link with the Academie des Beaux-Arts exhibition of 1863.

“...that the time has arrived for giving the public here the opportunity to see for them selves the results of new influences at work in other countries in an art way...it proposes to enter no controversy...put the paintings, sculptures, and so on, on exhibition so that the intelligent may judge for themselves by themselves.”¹¹

Student will be asked to draw parallels with this text (the full version) and that of the 1863 Paris Salon show. For example, we may begin with a few simple comparisons such as who was in control of the works put into each exhibition and how were they judged? How was the Armory show different, from the point of view of contemporary popular artists; how was it similar? What was the reaction by the general public (those not affiliated with the arts)? Another interesting question that could help contextualize the ideas of how radical and influential the ideas of the Modern artists were at the time, is to have students deliberate the purpose of art in both Parisian and American society.

Following our study of C. Greenburg and the Abstract Expressionists, we can also refer back to this idea of the function of art and discuss the implications each of these shows had on future movements.

Using the publication *For and Against*, each student will be asked to read one of the selected four essays/critiques from the text (two of the authors were in favor of the exhibition and two were opposed). Before they read the essay they will have to complete a 'background check' on the author as well as addressing the other questions from the rubric we developed at the beginning of this unit. For example; think about the purpose of the source, what was the author's message or argument? Roosevelt's critique of the show is an example of how I may guide or introduce students to this activity. Following much of his other writing at the time, Roosevelt designates the function of art to reflect and reinforce national identity. The artwork that Kenyon Cox creates abides by the traditions of the National Academy of Design and Walter Pach was an artist and teacher who surrounded himself with the likes of Gertrude Stein (an avid modern art collector in Paris) and later Marcel Duchamp.

Together, students will share the results of their individual assessments of the critique they were given. Through class discussion, we will compile a list of assessment criteria they feel that each author must have followed when viewing the Armory Show (and ultimately writing their critique).

The next step for students is to take on the role of that individual author as they move into the hallway where a mock Armory show will be set up. The works will be labeled and there will be a mix of European Modernists and Americans. The show represented over three hundred artist, with one-third American and the rest foreign. There are a number of sources that list the artists whose work was exhibited at this show along with some really interesting narratives (personal letters to his wife)¹² about the trips Walt Kuhn took to amass the shows extensive and impressive European collection.

As the title of the text indicates, *For and Against*, I will pair students with an author (a.k.a. another student) of the opposite opinion. The pair will then select a work of art and create a short debate presentation that addresses the favors and concerns about that particular work.

Making use of the primary source document in this way will help me measure what the student has learned about analyzing a document. Because the student is being asked to interpret a work from the perspective of another person, it will also help students understand the

influences of society, cultural differences and historical issues.

Dada and Surrealism

This portion of the unit will be constructed a bit differently. It will begin with a studio art activity. Students will follow ‘directions’ from Tristan Tzara’s 1920 poem *To Make A Dadaist Poem*. This activity will be the catalyst for introducing both the American and European Dada artists from 1915 to 1923. True to the philosophical ideals of these artists, students will continue to complete a series of unconventional and juxtaposing activities in an attempt to create a context for them in understanding the period.

As they present their Dadaist poem with the class, I will have playing in the background the 1926 film by Marcel Duchamp, *Anemic Cinema*. This silent film depicts a spiral design spinning, a spinning disk replaces it. These two continue in perfect alternation until the end: a spiral design, a disk. Each disk is labeled and can be read as it rotates. The messages, in French, feature puns and whimsical rhymes and alliteration. The final message comments on the spiral motif itself. During this ‘event’ (combination of the film and reading) students will be asked to consider the question ‘is this art’? They should take a minute to think about and be able to articulate what makes something a work of art. What is art suppose to accomplish? Who is it for?

At the conclusion of these presentations they will divide into groups to discuss and debate what they wrote in regard to art question. The task will be to establish a list to present to the class on what they think is the most important and the most contested criteria for something to be called a work of art. I will write these on the board for the class to review and discuss.

Keeping this newly established list in mind, the next activity will be to watch a short clip of another Marcel Duchamp film called *Dreams that Money Can Buy*. There are seven surreal dream sequences in the film that are in fact creations of a contemporary avante-garde artist. The particular clip I found was written and directed by Fernand Leger called, *The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart*. Students will be asked to write down ‘any random idea’ that comes into their mind as they view this clip.

A second video clip by the artist Man Ray will be viewed directly following the Duchamp clip and students will be asked to write down not only what they see, but also how they are seeing it. This film is more abstract and will create a nice transition to the final film clip, also by Man Ray. *Emak-Bakia*, 1926 (*Basque for Leave me alone*). A brief explanation of the technique he uses in the film will be provided. As a filmmaker, Ray exposed lengths of actual film to light after sprinkling them with pins, grains of salt and other common objects. In his use of disparate materials, Man Ray said he made this film in strict conformity with Surrealist principles. The film opens with a series of apparently unrelated shots. Unidentifiable black and white images, flashing flakes, dancing pins... A neon sign broadcasts the day’s news. The images become more abstract, more erratic, and finally we see a woman’s eye between a car’s headlights. A man drives his car into town and enters a tailor’s shop. Discarded shirt collars are piled up. The man removes his own shirt collar. As it falls, it revolves and gradually becomes a formless white shape mingling with black space. A woman has garishly made-up eyes. But she is really asleep, and these are false eyes painted on her eyelids. She opens her eyes...

For this final film clip, student will be asked to write where or how this film fits in their 'is it art' criteria list. A guided class discussion will follow. The goals for this discussion will be to provide context to the films by analyzing them as the primary sources they are. I will use the rubric for questioning primary sources as a way to help guide this discussion.

Dada sprang up during and immediately after World War I – largely a response to the tragic toll exacted by the Great War. New machine age technology was blamed for bringing the world to the brink of self-destruction. Artists asked the questions – what price would modernity's material benefits cost them? Their answer... art that was anything but rational: simultaneously absurd and silly, confrontational and nihilistic. Dada art objects were also made, but artists preferred to exploit chance results, and unconventional forms produced by unorthodox means. The works were aptly dubbed anti-art. As a class, we will study some of these works. The critical response was often controversial. Immoral, vulgar, and plagiaristic were the terms that often described Marcel Duchamp's 1917, *Fountain*.

In a final unconventional act of study – students will be asked to create a 'ready-made' show. The students own critical analysis of this show can be presented as a poem, short film, or traditional written critique. The basis for showing understanding in this analysis is the relationship between the object and their new understanding of 'is it art'.

Abstract Expressionists – notions from Greenburg

As the nineteenth century progressed in Europe, artistic freedom becomes the dominant mode to progressive modernism. *L'art pour l'art* (translated as "art for art's sake") expresses a philosophy that art possesses its own intrinsic value and should not be made to satisfy any utilitarian or moral function. The French slogan is credited to Theophile Gautier, a critic who wrote extensively on all forms of art. He supported the rallying cry of the Modern artists who claimed that art should be produced not for the public's sake, but for art's sake.

So how do we look at Modern art? There emerges a trend that modernist art is defined by the formal terms – line, color, shape, space, and composition. The work of art is now seen as separate from the material world, the formalist view could control and define this idea. In visual art, formalism is a concept that posits that everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within the work of art. The context for the work, including the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist, is considered to be of secondary importance. Formalism is an approach to understanding art. The formalist, American art critic Clement Greenburg saw modern art as having achieved “ a self-referential autonomy”. A work of art came to be seen as a single piece governed by the internal laws of stylistic development. Art stood separate from the materialistic world and the mundane affairs of ordinary people, it is moving from the critical content, and instead focusing on itself. Painting is about painting "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself"¹³ "Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cezanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in"¹⁴

As a class we will complete a brief biographical ‘data sheet’ on Clement Greenburg. Again, our primary source rubric will be the guide for this data sheet. Students will then be assigned to read Greenburg’s *Modernist Painting* essay of 1965. They will be looking for specific references to the idea presented specifically from a formalist view on Modern art.

Because of the difficulty of this text, we will first watch a series of YouTube interviews with Greenburg to give students a familiarity with his language and ideas. Teams of two or three students will be working on this summary. The goal for the summary of this is to help students understand Greenburg’s ideas by essentially questioning his intent and his success at communicating it. (see **Appendix A** for an example of this document).

Using the main ideas understood through the analysis of this document, students will apply their understand through a series of short descriptive essays that focus on the works of Abstract Expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, William deKooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline. These short essays will focus on the formalist approach of Clement Greenburg. Before writing these essays, students will watch Episode 7 of Robert Hughes, *American Visions*; in this film Clement Greenburg, along with Jackson Pollock and a number of other artists are interviewed directly. To further our understanding of who Greenburg was, we will listen to a *RealAudio* talk he gave at Western Michigan University in 1983 on the subject of *Taste*.

Reframing Modern Art

Much of this unit plan is still dependant on what has been my traditional approach to teaching Modernism. Sequencing periods with events and moving through a timeline and textbook are standards that I can’t teach without. They provided a necessary comfort level to my students (and often to me – especially on those days when “because I said so” is the fuel for getting through a given standard!).

But what is it about Modern art that arouses the senses and generates such widespread interpretations as the ones I have covered in this unit? Much like staring out the window on this very Sunday morning, wondering if it is cold out there – I / we will never know until we step into it. That said, the conclusion of this unit will include a tour and study of works from the collection at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. Here students will experience real painting, prints, and sculptures. Their senses will be engaged and they will be out of their comfort level in terms of study. To prepare them I will have asked them to bring images from the six specific Modern movements from this curriculum unit.

Once we arrive at the museum, we will take a general tour. There are in all museums, and in particular the Bechtler, some great stories to tell about the patrons and artists (relationships between them and how works have been acquired). This will give them no help for the task they will be assigned next, but it provides a necessary source of familiarity with the space that will (hopefully!) build confidence in the assignment. I say this because it has always been the case that my students are afraid to take intellectual chances – to put out there an idea that they have not been told – something that is theirs alone. That said; their assignment is to ‘match-up’ a work of art from the collection with one they brought with them. They will be asked to create comparisons based the various themes brought forth in this unit. From philosophical debates of

the Enlightenment to the modern age of machines; through the anti-art and the art of pure formalism, students will present one of their comparisons to the class for discussion and they will also develop an essay based on a different comparison they selected. Allowing the class discussion first will help build the critical thinking necessary for the independent essay assignment.

Appendix A- What Is Questioning the Author?

Questioning the Author is a set of inquiries that students can make about the content they are reading. This strategy is designed to encourage students to think beyond the words on the page and to consider the author's intent for the selection and his or her success at communicating it.

The idea of "questioning" the author is a way to evaluate how well a selection of text stands on its own, not simply an invitation to "challenge" a writer. Students are looking at the author's intent, his craft, his clarity, his organization...in short, if the author has done well, students can say so, and they can identify why they say so. Likewise, if students are struggling over a selection of text, it may be because it hasn't been written very clearly. Students can see this, and say so, but then they are invited to improve on it.

How Does It Work?

The standard format involves five questions. Students read a selection of text (one or more paragraphs, but generally not as much as a whole page), and then answer these questions:

What is the author trying to tell you?

Why is the author telling you that?

Does the author say it clearly?

How could the author have said things more clearly?

What would you say instead?

Appendix B – A list of Primary Sources

The Critique of Pure Reason, I. Kant

Social Contract and Confessions, J. Rousseau

Selected works from the 1863 Paris Salon Show

Manifesto of Futurism, F.T. Marinetti

Critical writing from the 1913 Armory Show (and selected works)

How to make a Dadaist Poem, T. Tzara

Anemic Cinema, M.Duchamp

Dreams that Money Can Buy, M.Duchamp

The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart, F. Leger

Emak-Bakia, M.Ray

Modernist Painting, C. Greenburg

Taste (realaudio), C. Greenburg

Endnotes

¹ Frascina, Francis, and Charles Harrison (eds.) 1982. *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Published in association with The Open University. London: Harper and Row, Ltd. Reprinted, London: Paul Chapman Publishing, Ltd.

² F.T. Marinetti, *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* 1908

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. 1762, *Social Contract* and 1788 *Confessions*

⁴ Robert Goldwater, *Artist on Art* Maarco Treves 1958 3rd ed.

⁵ Robert Atkins, *Art Spoke, A Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords 1848-1944*. Aberville Press 1993

⁶ Richard Tansey, Fred S. Kleiner, Horst De LA Croix, *Gardner's Art through the Ages* Gardner's, 12th ed.

⁷ HYPERLINK "<http://www.artandeducation.net/papers/view/9>"
<http://www.artandeducation.net/papers/view/9>

⁸ Arthur B. Davies, *For & Against, Views on the Infamous 1913 Armory Show*. Hol Art Books 2009, 49

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/kuhnwalt>

¹³ Clement Greenburg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Art and Culture, Beacon Press, 1961

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁷ HYPERLINK "<http://www.dadart.com/dadaism/dada/015-dada-movies.html>"
<http://www.dadart.com/dadaism/dada/015-dada-movies.html>

¹⁸] HYPERLINK "<http://redux.com/stream/item/1739556/MAN-RAY-CINEPOEME-Paris-1926>" <http://redux.com/stream/item/1739556/MAN-RAY-CINEPOEME-Paris-1926>

¹⁹ Clement Greenburg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, *Art and Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961

²⁰ *ibid*

Annotated Bibliography

Atkins, Robert, *ArtSpoke: A Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords 1848-1944*. Maarco Treves 1958 3rd ed. Written by an art critic, historian and curator, this book can be used for instruction and is appropriate for students. It is a very user friendly, organized book.

Covering Realism through Surrealism it includes (and I will use it in for this unit for this feature), entries on concepts that were crucial to the development of modern art.

Chipp, Herschel B. *Theories of Modern Art; A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Berkely. University of California Press 1968. Text has a copy of the Futurist Manifest along with hundreds of other original sources. This is an essential book of primary sources for this unit.

Davies, Arthur B.(statement), *For and Against, Views on the Infamous 1913 Armory Show*. Hol Art Books 2009. Found this book at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. – it is available elsewhere. I was a major catalyst for this unit. It contains essays from contemporary artists, critics and even President Roosevelt on the exhibition. Essays are short, can easily be read by student in one class period or less.

De Duve, Thierry. *Clement Greenburg ,Between the Lines*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press 1996. This text is a good reference for understanding Greenburg outside of Greenburg! It also contains an interview with Greenburg that helps develop an sense of his style and mannerism.

Dempsey, Amy. *Styles, Schools, and Movements: the Essential Encyclopaedic Guide to Modern Art*. London. Thames and Hudson 2002. Great illustrations and organized chronologically. It is the only book I have that provides so many of the 20th century art schools and movements.

Fineberg, Jonathan. *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. Englewood Cliff. Prentice Hall. 2000. This is an American perspective on art since 1940. A great guide for students to see and read (sequential) events/movements in Modern art; with some good spotlights on specific, well-known artists.

Fascina, Francis, and Charles Harrison (eds.). *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. The Open University. London: Harper and Row 1982

King, Ross. *The Judgement of Paris: The revolutionary Decade the gave the World Impressionism*. New York. Walker and Company. 2006. Categorized in the Biographical and Historical section of books, this narrative tells the story of the artistic rivalry and cultural upheaval in the early 19th century in Paris. Excerpts from this text can be used in class to ‘paint the picture’ of the what the Salon shows look and felt like. Very nice descriptions!

Stokstad, Marylin, *Art History revised edition*, New York. Abrams 1995. Classroom textbook

Tansey, Richard . Fred S. Kleiner, Horst De LA Croix, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*. 12th ed. Wadsworth/Thompson Learning. Classroom textbook – student version.

