

The Des Moines Register

Huh. So 'Modern' art is now a century old



Michael Morain, mmorain@dmreg.com 11:07 p.m. CST March 7, 2015



(Photo: Special to the Register)

For something so hard to pin down, Modern art has a surprisingly definite starting point.

"In America, it probably began on February 17th, 1913," said Connecticut filmmaker Michael Maglaras.

That's when thousands of people pushed their way into a New York art show with the sort of rowdy enthusiasm we associate nowadays with Black Friday. The first annual International Exhibition of Modern Art was the talk of the town and, for most visitors, their first chance to see work by the likes of Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp.

The makeshift galleries in the massive armory displayed more than 1,000 works, and many of them were shocking.

"People saw the 'Blue Nude' by Matisse and thought, 'What the hell is that?' " the filmmaker said. "They began to scratch their heads and question whether they were being stupid or naive or whatever. But you know what? They were being provoked."

Maglaras documented the whole scandalous spectacle in a new film called "The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show." He'll discuss it at a screening on March 26 at the Des Moines Art Center, which this Friday opens "Antique Abstraction," a related exhibition about the 100th birthday of abstract art.

But first: a crash course in art-history "isms." When photography came around in the mid-1800s, it was more realistic than anything anyone could draw or paint. Some artists responded by switching to a new way to express themselves, called Impressionism, which emphasized the feeling of a particular moment rather than its realistic details.

And when they outgrew Impressionism, by 1900 or so, they stretched it into brainy Cubism, which broke down objects into their basic lines and shapes, and its moody sister, Fauvism, which used bold colors to express various emotions.

When Cubism and Fauvism ran their course, many artists abandoned realism altogether and ventured into abstraction. Wassily Kandinsky led the charge in Europe, but Americans like Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe weren't far behind.

The public may have laughed at the 1913 Armory Show, but "it was a kick in the pants to the American art scene," said Art Center curator Laura Burkhalter.

For the upcoming show, Burkhalter pulled about 20 works from the museum's permanent collection — mostly European, all made within 10 years of 1915 — to re-trace those first forays into abstraction.

Some of the works on aging paper are rarely displayed.

One highlight is a delicate 1911 print, a still life by Picasso, that shows some of the artist's earliest Cubist doodles — the broken outline of a bottle of wine, a playing card, maybe a wine glass, too.

A 1905 watercolor by Andre Derain bursts with bright Fauvist reds and greens. The central figures are up for debate — men? women? — but the moment's lively joy is as clear as day. And it's easy to see how the scene could melt into abstraction, without any hints of the spotted trees or picket fence.

That is, it's easy now. But it wasn't back then.

Modern art "is hard to digest because many artists have *made* it hard to digest," said Maglaras, the filmmaker. "These guys were in your face, saying 'I don't care what you think is on this canvas. I don't care whether it makes sense to you. This is my point, and I'm going to confront you with it.'

"It's all about the confrontation," he said.

Burkhalter recalled that someone (the German writer Otto Ludwig) once said that it takes 100 years to discover a good idea and another 100 to understand it.

"I love that," she said. "I love that abstraction is a 100-year-old idea and it's still challenging people — but we're almost there."

'Antique Abstraction'

- **WHEN:** Friday through Sept. 13. Visiting hours are 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, and noon-4 p.m. Sunday.
- **WHERE:** Des Moines Art Center, 4700 Grand Ave.
- **ADMISSION:** Free
- **INFO:** www.desmoinesartcenter.org

RELATED EVENTS:

- 6 p.m. March 26: Filmmaker Michael Maglaras presents his documentary about the 1913 Armory Show.
 - 6:30 p.m. April 23: Music historian and NPR host Michael Lasser returns to discuss corresponding developments in early 20th century music.
- 6:30 p.m. June 18: Curator Laura Burkhalter leads a guided talk through the gallery.