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Cheyenne Assil

UCSB Library Award Reflective Essay

Winter 2021, my sophomore year at UCSB, I took Dr. Elaine McLemore's Survey of Contemporary Photography at the Museum of Modern Art. Combining my studies of contemporary art and Museum Studies, this class introduced me to my interest in researching and writing art historical research papers. Further developing my research paper into my Senior Thesis with AD&A Museum Director Dr. Ritter, I began to compile information about MoMA's relationship with American art from its founding to the mid 20th century. My renewed goal was to use the Museum of Modern Art as an entry point to understanding the relationship between and influence of art museums on their nation and nation's art. I shared this broad area of interest with my professors and the Ph.D. students in the History of Art and Architecture Department who all gave helpful input as well as assisted me in building the foundations for my bibliography, shaping my resulting paper.

I began by compiling a spreadsheet of all the exhibitions the MoMA held within its first ten years, and categorized each exhibition by its medium, type of show (solo or group), and the artist(s) nationality. Comparing my spreadsheet of roughly 130 exhibitions to the readings from my growing bibliography I began to see a key discrepancy between the way MoMA was being represented and written about and the reality of the Museum's early exhibition history. Publications such as *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* by art historian Serge Guilbaut, writings of art critic Jerry Salts, and publications by key art historians such as Hans Belting all suggested a different narrative of MoMA's relationship with American art than the one I was coming to understand.

To successfully investigate MoMA's relationship with American art I felt I needed primary source material that exemplified the Museum and its founders' intentions with their exhibition programming as well as the public response to the Museum's early exhibitions. Consulting scholars' bibliographies about the Museum of Modern art led me to valuable primary resources, personal correspondence, and original documents that greatly benefitted my research including A. Conger Goodyear's *The Museum of Modern Art; the First 10 Years* which provided insight into the desires of MoMA's founders from the perspective of the Museum's first president, and *Defining Modern Art : Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* a collection of writing from MoMA director Alfred Barr showcasing his attitude and personal preferences of modern art. When these publications were not immediately available in UCSB's holdings I utilized the Library's Interlibrary Loan service to receive the materials I needed from various UC libraries, which was crucial to pushing forward my research.

Knowing that I wanted to further investigate MoMA's attitude towards and relationship with American art, I brought the beginning of my bibliography and research to the Art and Architecture Librarian, Chizu Morihara, who provided insightful resources and advice that guided my project. Chizu assisted me in navigating UCSB Library's various research guides and resources and accessing archival and research resources using UCSB's digital and physical holdings. We picked one exhibition, *19 Living American Artists* (1932), and used it as an example of how to find primary source information about a museum exhibition that, because of its date, may be more difficult to access. I was introduced to the Art and Architecture Library's extensive archives of art magazines and journals where I could find academic scholarship about the Museum and its early exhibitions. The main roadblock I ran into was that the library often did not hold physical copies of newspapers, magazines, and journals from the timeframe I was

interested in. As the Library website stated, publications including *ArtNew*s, the Harvard literary magazine *The Hound & Horn*, and *Life Magazine* all existed in the library's holdings within the time zone I was researching. Further investigation led me to the Arts & Architecture Microfiche and Microfilm Collection. This resource allowed me to find microfilm copies of various publications dating back to my desired time period.

I was also able to access the New York Times digitized archives through my free NYTs account linked to my UCSB email to find reviews of each exhibition and read what journalists and art critics initially said regarding the exhibition. I found original exhibition catalogs from the Art and Architecture AEC collection which displayed how different artworks and artists were presented and written about through various curators' eyes. Using the Museum of Modern Art's digitized archives, I accessed original press releases, exhibition checklists, and exhibition catalogs.

I began this project in the fall of 2022 which unfortunately coincided with the challenge of the Art & Architecture Library Service Desk closing for financial reasons. While I had less access to specialized staff as a result of this closure, I remain grateful for the support of my thesis advisors, the History of Art and Architecture Department, the Art and Architecture Librarian. In the end, I was able to compile all the advice and guidance I had received to create an extensive bibliography and thoroughly research my Senior Thesis paper.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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MoMA and American Art: A Re-Evaluation of the Museum of Modern Art and its Presumed Eurocentric Attitude

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in the degree
Bachelor of Arts in Art History
by

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> The artist must be given a chance to be seen. That is the duty of the gallery and the museum – and particularly of the museum. There is much double-talk from our more responsible museums about their devotion to modern work – and then some more shows are staged with strictly regional underpinnings. Now if our museum directors have a valid interest in creative, progressive painting it is their obligation to exhibit that painting – devotedly, consistently, logically – until the public becomes familiar with the language, the ideologies, and the spiritual values of the artists. There can be no other method that will substitute for this encouragement.[1]
>
> - Samuel Kootz, 1943

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, founded in 1929, is recognized as helping bring modern art to America and charting a history of modernism in this country. This paper will discuss the early years of the Museum of Modern Art and its role in creating a foundation for the relocation of the center of modern art in the Western world from Europe to America post World War II, and how, in doing so, it complicated the course of American modernism. It is often argued amongst leading scholars that MoMA had a euro-centric focus in its founding.[2] This argument proposes that in its early days, this institution perpetuated a European view of art, and placed Europe -- specifically Paris -- at the center of Western art through its exhibitions and, as a result, through the history of art that it was constructing. However, the narrative of MoMA that will be argued here has not been perpetuated to the extent of this dominant and more popularized narrative, which has ultimately won out over time. Yet charting MoMA's early exhibition history and the intention of its early players shows flaws in the commonly held consensus of this institution.

To create an understanding of the cultural context that the Museum of Modern Art was situated in, we must first contextualize the art scene in America leading up to the Museum's

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[1] Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, (New York: Hastings House, 1943,) viii.
[2] Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*; Sandler, Newman, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*; A. Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art; the First Ten Years,* (New York, 1943).

founding. When opened in 1929 the art world took place in Europe with Paris, specifically, leading the discourse. At this time, to be taken seriously as an artist and have your art supported and recognized you either had to study in Europe or be a European artist. The prominent museums in the United States that presented art to the American public focused on European art, and was directly correlated to the already limited number of private collectors in America doing the same.[3] European art was favored by US patrons resulting in a limited cultural sphere for American artists who were not yet regarded as global players in the larger discourse of art.

The Armory Show, which took place in 1913, is often considered one of the first large scale introductions to modernism in the United States.[4] Before this, the main (and one of the only) locations to view avant-garde art would have been Alfred Stiglitz's gallery, 291. In his book *Pioneers of Modern Art in America: 1910-1920,* American art historian Lloyd Goodrich investigates early modernism in America and charts the context of American art moving from the 19th into the 20th century. Goodrich argues that the current leaders of American art during the turn of century were products of the academic schools abroad.[5] Following the turn of the century, more Americans relocated to Paris. While many of these artists left for Europe to attend these academic schools, they came into contact with leading European artists, such as Picasso and Matisse, who began to introduce Americans to the brand of modernism developing in Europe.[6]

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[3] See Lloyd Goodrich, *Pioneers of Modern Art in America; the Decade of the Armory Show, 1910-1920.* (New York: Published for the Whitney Museum of American Art by Praeger, 1963), 40; Sybil Gordon Kantor,.*Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002); Robert Rosenblum, *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999); Kootz. *New Frontiers in American Painting, 8, 18-19.*

[4] See Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*, 8, 12, 44; A. Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art, The First Ten Years*, 13; . Kootz. *New Frontiers in American Painting, 25-28.*

[5] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*, 8-16.

[6] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*, 12.

The group of American artists who brought the ideas of European modernism back home were confronted with the stark realities of the American artistic landscape. As stated by Goodrich, in the early 1900's "the United States' phenomenal material growth had not matched its artistic growth" as the art scene in America was still extremely conservative.[7] At the time, modernism had not been as eagerly adopted by American audiences as it had in Europe. Additionally, the few dealers who were interested in American art were only interested in academicians – art either sourced from or upholding European academic traditions.

The emergence of modernism in the early 20th century posed challenges for American artists who were still heavily influenced by European traditions. While few American artists began to embrace modernism independently of this tradition, they were in the minority and faced numerous obstacles. One of the most significant challenges was gaining recognition and support from the public and art institutions. As Lloyd Goodrich observed, "Museums were concerned with the past, or if with the present, only with the safely conservative".[8] Prior to the 1920s, American artists were just being introduced to modernism and those who adopted this avant-garde approach to artmaking struggled to find venues or financial support for their work. The American public and patrons were accustomed to traditional European academic art, and the success of American artists was often contingent upon their adherence to these established conventions.

European influence dominated the art market in the early 20th century, with Paris in particular shaping the critical discourse around American art. This main European hub kept a firm grip on Western culture and situated American art as derivative and second class to that of

[7] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*, 16.
[8] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*.

itself. In America, Parisian dealers actively dissuaded collectors from buying American art. As historian Forbes Watson noted in the early 1900s, "America had been treated to a quarter of a century of propaganda so astute and untiring that even minor talents, if quoted on the Paris picture bourse, could sell perverse and disingenuous work more easily on the American market than American major talents could sell sincere and able pictures."[9] The large presence of Parisian art dealers in America exacerbated this problem, reinforcing the notion that American art was second-rate and discouraging the American public from supporting their own artists.

In 1936, MoMA held the exhibition *New Horizons in American Art.* The accompanying catalog's preface, written by the exhibition's curator Holger Cahill, contextualizes the American art scene of the time, noting that many American artists were heavily influenced by European traditions and struggled to gain recognition in their own country. As Cahill observes, the American artist had "become a stepchild in his own country" and as a result of European artistic influence and the propaganda of European art dealers in America, "his efforts to conform to contemporary European practice and to American admiration of this had really please nobody – perhaps least of all himself."[10] The American artists' efforts to conform to European practices had failed to impress either European or American audiences broadly. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, this trend had begun to shift, but for the artist to challenge European dominance, they needed support from both American art institutions and their audiences, something that MoMA helped play a pivotal role in establishing. MoMA's early exhibition programming helped to lay the groundwork for a new era of American art, highlighting artists'

[9] Watson, Forbes. *American Painting Today*. (Washington: American Federation of Arts, 1939), 15.
[10] Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 15.

practices who were experimenting with new techniques, styles, and subject matter, and ultimately challenging the dominance of European art in America's market.

It is largely agreed that by the mid 1940s, America had overtaken Paris as the center of the Western art world.[11] This period, led by Abstract-Expressionism, had found widespread success and support from both an American and international audience. Yet, as this paper lays out, this success and recognition of American art was not seen before this point. This paper's focus pertains mainly to the early 1930s, primarily before the US government's involvement with American artists and the immigration of European artists to America. This essay will evaluate the Museum of Modern Art's role in deepening the understanding of modern art in America, specifically regarding the Museum's early initiatives and how they laid a foundation for a favorable climate, which led to the later relocation of art centers from Paris to New York following World War II. It is the aim of this paper to re-address the upheld narrative of MoMA in its formational years, evaluating how the Museum's early exhibition programming assisted in America, specifically New York, later taking center stage of the art world. MoMA did so by both supporting American artists and preparing the American art viewing public to do the same. To accomplish this goal, this paper looks into the Museum's early exhibition programming, the public and critical reception of this programing, and the intentions of the Museum's founders, which when taken together help illuminate a history of the Museum. In doing so, this essay will insert a new argument that allows for another point in understanding the eventual transition of centers of the art world, and the role the Museum of Modern Art played in said transition.

[11] Barr, Sandler, and Newman. *Defining Modern Art*, 16.

A thorough analysis of the early years of the Museum of Modern Art, its presentation of both painting as well as alternative forms of expression including photography, mural painting, and objects of cultural heritage, and the response to these exhibitions by the American audience together demonstrate the role and impact of this institution in its early years. Charting MoMA's exhibition history, a pluralism for American modernism is formed that counters the commonly held view that MoMA doggedly perpetuated a Eurocentric narrative of modernism. The narrative that this paper charts uncovers that the MoMA was not only an early champion of American art by laying out a history that simultaneously challenges the common assumptions that MoMA upheld European artistic dominance, but that in doing so, the Museum complicated the narrative of American modernism, shifting the publics' biases and setting a foundation for both public support and a newfound receptivity to American art**.** While painting is the main medium of expression held onto by history, we must look into the multidisciplinary construction of modernism provided by the Museum's robust early exhibition programming which showcased the ways the Museum complicated the narrative of American modernism.

This paper intends to challenge the upheld myth of MoMA, revealing a more complicated narrative that has not been favored by history. Before continuing with this paper's argument, the author would like to acknowledge that historically, the conversation surrounding modernism has focused on a very western narrative. While not completely Eurocentric, MoMA and among other Western institutions of art, have upheld this narrative, imposing an often hegemonic assertion of modernism, especially relating to the time period discussed below. Current and developing scholarship in the field of art history is evaluating simultaneous movements in modernism, separate from that of Europe and America. The author wishes to acknowledge this developing

scholarship and the existence of other modernisms outside a Euro-centric viewpoint.[12] While the research and line of questioning presented in this study does not directly pertain to all facets of this developing scholarship, this paper aims to be a starting point into further investigations into the narrative of modern art.

[12] Among others, see Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, (London: Verso, 2019); Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Sarah A.Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut : Drawing Alliances*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

Charting MoMA's intentions

To begin charting the impact of the Museum of Modern Art and the ways it championed American art and complicated the narrative of modernism, we must first dissect the early intentions and perspectives of the Museum and its founders. *The Bulletin* was a means of communication for the museum to provide further insight into the Museum's programming and intentions. As stated in the very first issue of *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, published in June 1933,

> *The Bulletin* is exclusively a membership privilege […] The purpose of *The Bulletin* is to give information about the activities of the Museum. Articles will also be printed which have a bearing on the past, present or future work of the Museum and in addition give facts or points of view not ordinarily published elsewhere.[13]

In 1940, the Museum published a bulletin titled "American Art and the Museum" reflecting on the Museum's first ten years. Here, MoMA directly addresses the criticism it had received stating that the Museum had been overly concerned with the avant-garde art of foreigners. Its opening sentence states that "the Museum has always been concerned with American art."[14] To defend this argument, *The Bulletin* presents a report detailing both the extent and variety of initiatives that have been taken in American art by the Museum since its founding a decade prior. Before listing specific statistics, this document shared three factors that had affected the Museum's presentation of American art. One key factor highlighted was the Museum's mission: to show the best of the modern arts, without discrimination. *The Bulletin* specifically states that it intends to do this by showing art found "throughout the world as well as in the United States", putting the art of the US alongside leading artistic output elsewhere. [15] Therefore, any display of American

[13] Alfred Barr, "Cablegram." *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art,* Vol. 1, no. 1 (1933).
[14] "American Art and the Museum." *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1940).
[15] "American Art and the Museum." *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 3.

art by MoMA can be seen as regarded among 'the best' in its eyes. Another factor listed is that the primary focus of the Museum was painting and prints. Despite this focus, this retrospective publication found that MoMA has taken an active leadership in alternative fields of expression. While the issue that other institutions in the US -- specifically in New York including the Metropolitan Museum and the Whitney Museum -- primarily focused on American contemporary art, providing a challenge for MoMA to avoid duplicity in presenting American works. This, paired with the fact that MoMA is not specifically an American institution, contributes to why the Museum found that it had done more for the mediums of American film and architecture than the combination of all other American museums.[16]

By the 1940s, the Museum of Modern art faced criticism for promoting a Eurocentric view of art in the United States. In response, the Museum published a bulletin outlining its commitment to American art, detailing its perspective and the ways the institution championed American art since its founding up to that point. Further, in the accompanying catalog of a later exhibition held by MoMA evaluating American art up until the mid 20th century, *The Natural Paradise in Painting: Painting in American 1800-1950*, the author states that "the Museum of Modern Art has always had a special commitment to the visual arts in America."[17] This assertion was supported with evidence from the Museum's early acquisitions and exhibitions, such as Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (1925) (Fig. 1), which was one of the first paintings to enter MoMA's permanent collection.[18] The Museum of Modern Art argued that the

[16] "American Art and the Museum." *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 3
[17] Kynaston McShine (Ed.), Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum, John Wilmerding, *Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950 (*New York, N.Y: Museum of Modern Art, 1976): 7.
[18] Kynaston McShine (Ed.), Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum, John Wilmerding, *Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950 (*New York, N.Y: Museum of Modern Art, 1976): 7.

history it promoted since its founding was committed to American art, despite the public perception.

It can be easy in retrospect to construct a narrative that is favorable to oneself to combat criticism, which is why it is important to critically evaluate the Museum's claims of supporting American art. By investigating primary sources that display the initial intentions of this institution and its founders, this paper seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the Museum of Modern Art expanded the understanding of American art, thus creating a foundation in both artists and viewers for the later shift of global cultural epicenters. Through primary sources such as correspondences between museum officials, the initial public and critical reception exemplified in newspaper articles and art magazine reviews, and evidence such as exhibitions, catalogs, and acquisitions, the Museum helped lay the foundation for American art's global acceptance – paving the way for a shift in cultural epicenters.

The following investigates those involved with establishing the Museum, including both their interests and desires, as a means to reveal the intentions they hoped their new institution would assert and uphold. The Museum of Modern Art was founded by three progressive and influential patrons of the arts, Lillie P. Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who saw a need to challenge the conservative policies of traditional museums and establish an institution devoted exclusively to modern art.[19] The Museum opened with the original trustees A. Conger Goodyear, Paul Sachs, Frank Crowninshield, and Josephine Boardman Crane who appointed Alfred H. Barr as the founding director. When discussing the role of the Museum's founders, Barr emphasizes the influence of their artistic tastes on some of

[19] "About Us: Mission Statement" MoMA, accesses March 12, 2022, https://www.moma.org/about/mission-statement/.

the early exhibitions held.[20] Communicating with A. Conger Goodyear, the first president and an original trustee of the Museum, Ms. Rockefeller acknowledged the challenge faced by American artists surrounding a lack of support from the American public and a lack of opportunity to display their work. Rockefeller claimed that she was interested in providing a space for the future generation of artists and cultivating a more receptive audience. Reflecting on the traditional art works that she and her husband had been collecting up until this point, she held that they would not have relevance for the present generation of either collectors or artists, so in her words, she turned "to the art of the present, and those who were developing it."[21] As a result of her realization of the shifting needs of both the American public and artists, Rockefeller collected a cross section of art created by rising Americans produced in the United States from 1915 to 1925, and even had a gallery built in the top floor of her home to display her collection of American works (Fig. 2).

In response to Rockefeller's personal gallery, art dealer Edith Halper, who specialized in American art and helped to bring market success to many American avant-garde artists, commented:

> The fact that Mrs. Rockefeller […] is now so thoroughly interested in American Art is of great importance to the public not accustomed to interesting itself in native art. She is setting an excellent example by establishing a private gallery in her home for the exhibiting of works she owns by American artists.[22]

Miller highlights her fellow founder's distinct interest, stating, "of the very large [art] collections

[20] A. Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art; the First Ten Years* (New York, 1943): 16.
[21] Abby Rockefeller to Goodyear, March 23, 1936, Rockefeller Papers, RAC. Quoted in Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002): 195.
[22] Edith Halper to Preston Harrison, December 12, 1928; quoted in Diane Tepfer, "Edith Gregor Halper and the Downtown Gallery Downtown; 1926-1940; A study in American Art Patronage," PhD. Diss., University of Michigan, 1986, 138.

in this country Mrs. Whitney and Mrs. Rockefeller majored in American art."[23] In 1938 Miller recognized the impact of the patron's artistic tastes, seeing a growing interest by American collectors in American art that was beginning to compete with the previous hold European and ancient art had enjoyed. Miller connects this observation to Ms. Rockefeller's collection, saying that Rockefeller's preference for American artists has influenced other collectors to buy American art.[24] Rockefeller's understanding of the American artistic landscape resulted in an early support for displays of American and modern art – an initiative that eventually contributed to the founding of MoMA. The underlying desires of those founding the Museum of Modern Art exemplify a personal interest in supporting and recognizing American art and artists, which translated to the founding of the Museum. The early efforts of the founders to collect and display American art assisted in setting the foundation for the later recognition of the medium by both the American and global audience, as the following section will explore through an evaluation of the Museum's early interest, realized by its programming and exhibitions.

[23] Dorothy Miller, "Contemporary American Painting in Mrs. John D. Rockefeller's Collection," Art News 36 (1938 annual): 105, 108. Quoted in Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art,* 238.

[24] Dorothy Miller, "Contemporary American Painting in Mrs. John D. Rockefeller's Collection," *ArtNews* 36 (1938 annual): 105, 108. Quoted in Kantor. *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* 238.

Early Programming at MoMA

MoMA's founders' desire for a display of modern art in America eventually led to the formation of the Museum. Despite the founders' interest in America's modern art and artists, the first exhibition of the newly established museum featured leading European artists. The exhibition, which had more than 47,000 visitors by the time it closed, featured works by Cezanne, Renoir, Gaugin, Seurat, and Van Gogh and would be concurrently used as supporting evidence for the MoMA's preference of European art and artists. In response to the inaugural exhibition, the *New York Times* art critic, Edward Alden Jewell, wrote that viewers "will doubtless regret the committee's decision that the first of the forthcoming loan exhibitions shall be French rather than American."[25] While the chosen group of European painters can be viewed as pioneers of modern art Jewell states "it would have been a gratifying gesture if American ancestral painters might have inaugurated New York's first home of modern art."[26] Arguing for representation of American artists, Jewell reinforces the importance of institutional validation to its audience and comments on how displaying American art would raise these artists to a new level: "The showing of American Art in a museum is an honor that does not attach, in the same measure, to the showing in a dealer's gallery."[27] Jewell's critical response to the inaugural exhibition underlines the importance of a museum showcase of American art for both artists and the American public.

Despite the demands of his founding board members, Alfred Barr had originally proposed to showcase American artists as the inaugural exhibition of the Museum. In his memoir

[25] Edward Alden Jewell. "A Museum of Modern Art for New York." *New York Times*, September 22, 1929.
[26] Jewell, "A Museum of Modern Art for New York."
[27] Jewell, "A Museum of Modern Art for New York."

A. Conger Goodyear reflects upon the first ten years of the Museum of Modern Art and his role as its president. Addressing the critical response to the first exhibition, Goodyear underscored the lasting impact of this exhibition and revealed Barr's conflicting desires for the first exhibition.

> The choice of a European show for the grand opening of the Museum was a portent of future controversies. Barr was the target of never-ceasing harangue by the museum going public and the art world, accusing him of leaning toward the European Avant-garde, and he was constantly defending his choices. He claimed that […] the record of exhibitions and acquisitions in the Museum proved that the institution treated both [American and European art] equally – an argument that remained unconvincing, especially to American artists. Barr's desire to have an American exhibition of the opening was based on his opinion that a show with Alfred Ryder, Thomas Eakins, and Winslow Homer would be more interesting than the four postimpressionists. Nevertheless, the men yielded to the wishes of the three 'adamantine' women.[28]

Goodyear's reflections highlighted the way in which this first exhibition shaped the proceeding discourse about MoMA and its European favoritism, despite the desires of the founding players. In response to the criticism surrounding the anticipated opening of this exhibition and how it should feature American artists, Frank Crowninshield cabled Goodyear saying, "Sachs, Barr and I wanted small show Ryder, Homer, Eakins last two weeks October followed by Seurat, van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne in November but four ladies on committee solidly against us" and that since these circumstances could lead to postponing the opening of the Museum until there was an agreement, Barr, Sachs and Crowninshield succumbed to the will of the "adamantine ladies."[29]

While the Museum's original organizers had supported American artists, and some, such as Barr, Sachs, and Crowninshield had desired its inaugural show to be of American artists, ultimately, this did not happen. Out of fear that a disagreement could postpone the opening of the Museum, those who favored an American focused opening agreed to the proposed show of

[28] A. Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art; the First Ten Years* (New York, 1943): 16.
[29] Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art,* 16.

European artists.

The overarching goal of the Museum of Modern Art was to bring modern art to an American audience as they felt that America "lacks a public gallery where the works of the founders and masters of the modern schools can be seen."[30] The goal was to show the artists who truly reflected the current day, and build a collection of modern art – with a focus on both American and European – that would establish an immediate ancestry for modern art. While the Museum always asserted American artists alongside Europeans as great modern masters, opening with an exhibition showcasing artists such as Cezanne, Renoir, Gaugin, Seurat, and Van Gogh established a Eurocentric lineage of modernism.[31] The Sun newspaper, in response to the first exhibition, stated, "it is no exaggeration to say that no such showing of modern art has hitherto been made in America" giving an example of how the Museum was delivering upon its goal with this first exhibition, despite the surrounding controversy and lasting critique resulting from the exhibition of the European pioneers of modern art.[32] As exemplified by the early players' desires surrounding the founding of the MoMA and its first exhibition, a clear interest in American art and an aspiration to support American artists existed, even when not obviously displayed.

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The first exhibition helped establish the viewpoint that the Museum favored art of its European counterparts, as evidenced by Jewell's initial critique. This initial exhibition was used

[30] "1929: Three Women Have a Vision" MoMA, accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1920/starting-a-collection-from-scratch/.
[31] A New Art Museum, a brochure that described the new venture of the MoMA to the public, issued August 1929, by the seven founders of the Museum, reprinted in Defining Modern Art, Selected Writing of Alfred H. Barr Jr.
[32] *The Sun* (New York), November 9, 1929. Quoted from Goodyear. *The Museum of Modern Art, 20.*

to uphold a narrative that MoMA held European favoritism even though the Museum had an even-handed exhibition policy altering between European and American artists in its first exhibition season.[33] On December 13th, 1929, the Museum's second exhibition, and first devoted exclusively to the work of American artists, was held. Titled *Paintings by 19 Living Americans,* this exhibition showcased 105 works by 19 different artists. According to the exhibition's press release, the choice of artists was made by the Museum's trustees who were tasked with choosing 15 artists they felt should be shown out of a list of more than 100 better known American artists.[34] In the accompanying exhibition catalog, Alfred Barr explains that this process was to present work "representative of the principal tendencies in contemporary American painting", and that no particular school or manner was intentionally favored.[35] As a result, the exhibition intended to include "artists who are so 'conservative' that they are out of fashion and so 'advanced' that they are not yet generally accepted," consolidating into a deliberately eclectic selection.[36] Out of the 19 artists chosen, five were born abroad while three others had lived abroad most of their lives. With only some exceptions, the selected artists both advised and cooperated in the museum's selection of works, showing collaboration between the Museum and American artists.

The exhibition closed January 12th, 1930, garnering a total attendance of just 28,000 -- significantly smaller than the preceding exhibition -- and evoked a large negative critical response. Reviewing *19 Living Americans*, Jewell found a continued European favoritism. Jewell

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[33] Barr, Sandler, and Newman. *Defining Modern Art.*
[34] "SECOND EXHIBITION OP THE MUSEUM OP MODERN ART
NINETEEN LIVING AMERICANS OPENING DECEMBER 13th" Museum of Modern Art press release for *Nineteen Living Americans,* Dec 11, 1929, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_324916.pdf?_ga=2.113303684.246113226.1676764498-1143085620.1672001338.
[35] Alfred, H Barr, *Paintings by 19 Living Americans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930): 9.
[36] Barr, *Paintings by 19 Living Americans*, 9.

states, "especially since it treads so closely upon the heels of the French group inaugurating the museum, the American performance would have made a better all-around impression had it reflected a bit less saliently the atmosphere of older civilization across the seas", showing how the exhibition upheld the European hegemony in the critic's eyes. [37] In their original review of the show, published in December 1929, *ArtNews* also criticized the exhibition saying that "the inclusion of pictures which are well below the level of the best things in the show and less interesting than many by men who are not represented is a more serious fault."[38] A few years later *ArtNews* went even further, retrospectively comparing this first exhibition of American art to a 1931 MoMA exhibition of American works. In this later evaluation of *19 Living Americans* *ArtNews* described the exhibition as "confused and depressing."[39] Many of the artists chosen were not as well known to the American audience, likely resulting in such harsh criticism.

Nevertheless, *Paintings by 19 Living Americans* reveals important details about both the Museum's role in the discourse of American art, and the Museum's lasting impact on the American audience. In the November 1931 issue of *Creative Arts: a magazine of fine and applied art,* a publication which had a duration lasting from 1927 to 1933, Henry McBride comments on the criticism surrounding *19 Living Americans*, viewing it as beneficial and serving the purpose of providing publicity, as a "lack of adverse criticism would imply that there was no real public concern in the affair."[40] A statement supported by *ArtNew*s highly critical response which viewed the Museum of Modern Art, due to its position in the discourse of modern art and the important personnel involved with it, as holding a "very real prestige."[41] In an important part

[37] Edward Alden Jewell, "Contemporary America." *The New York Times*, December 22, 1929.
[38] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *ArtNews,* December 14, 1929.
[39] "Four Unusual Exhibitions of American Art." *ArtNews*, Volume 28, Issue 36, 1930.
[40] Henry McBride, *Creative Art: a magazine of fine and applied art*, November, 1931.
[41] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *Artnews*.

of this critical response, *ArtNews* stated that because of this prestige, the Museum's selections would carry weight, especially among the American audience, specifically those to whom American art was unfamiliar.[42] *ArtNews* saw this exhibition as "two-edged", being both a test of the Museum as much as it was of American art.[43] To uphold their critical take, *ArtNews* said that *if* this exhibition were part of a series of Contemporary American exhibitions presented by leading institutions, the "unevenness" in artists wouldn't be as important as they had found it to be, but, as they point out, "this is the only show of the kind planned for this season and therefore it assumes a greater importance than the Museum may have intended."[44]

Looking back on the negative criticism surrounding the show of *19 Living Americans* Goodyear reflects, "it is fair to say that in the ten years that have passed since our second show, hardly one of the nineteen holds a lower place in the public mind than he did at the time."[45] The impact that the Museum has, as highlighted by *ArtNews*, is reiterated by Goodyear, showing that even when viewed critically, its display of American artists helped change how they were perceived by the American public, introducing new American artists to the audience and elevating their status. Goodyear acknowledges that while the show may not have been successful in its existence, it did succeed in achieving future support for these nineteen artists and introducing them to the American art viewing public. The criticism of the exhibition showcases how the Museum contributed to the discourse of American art, expanding the conversation of American Art with a pubic not yet accustomed to viewing modern American art. Despite the display presenting American artists that upheld European artistic dominance, it was still inserting

[42] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *Artnews.*
[43] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *Artnews.*
[44] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *Artnews.*
[45] Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art: The first Ten years*, 20.

and supporting American artists and their engagement with the growing modern art movement. As stated by *ArtNews*, this was the only exhibition of American art by a major institution being put forth at that time, meaning that MoMA was not only engaged with the discourse of American art, but leading it.[46]

The Museum's first attempt to explore modern American art was not received warmly. It was viewed in the context of the previous exhibition of European modernists, who had already found a great degree of success in the country before the exhibition. Since the America audience already displayed a fondness for these artists, the first exhibition was met with a more receptive audience, as shown by the discrepancy in attendance figures. Both the choice of artists and selection of art from these artists bewildered critics. Additionally, many of the artists included reinforced the already established trajectory of modernism in America as derivative of that in Europe. Acknowledging this exhibition's flaws and the fact that the exhibition centered European art, this display still held a large amount of weight for an American audience and presented a challenge to the reception and construction of American modernism at this moment in time. As laid out by the exhibition catalog, the Museum was still giving a space for American artists that were viewed as so "'advanced' that they are not yet generally accepted", which provided institutional validation for these artists and presented the public with an opportunity to view and engage in a discourse with American art.[47] While not cohesive in its display, the Museum put forward an effort to present art that did not retell the conservative aspects of contemporary art.

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[46] "Modern Museum Opens American Exhibition." *Artnews*.
[47] Barr, *Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans*, 9.

Additionally, the exhibition featured many artists who lent to the Eurocentric views of art in America up until this point, such as the inclusion of artists who were born abroad, spent the majority of their time and creative output abroad, or received artistic education abroad. Despite the presence of European influence, the Museum of Modern art also provided a counter to this established influence in this exhibition. *19 Living Americans* also featured two artists in who fiercely stood apart from the Eurocentric framing of American modern art: Georgia O'Keefe and Charles Burchfield. In his book discussing the modernist art scene in America in the early 20th century, Lloyd Goodrich states American artists had a strong European influence, but out of the American artists, there were "at least two cases of purely spontaneous modernism, without discernible [European] influence: Georgia O'Keefe's and Charles Burchfield's early pictures."[48] The inclusion of these artists in this second exhibition, presented by such a prestigious institution, highlighted a recognition of American artistic production that offered "purely spontaneous modernism, without discernible [European] influence."[49] These two artists were, in the academic discourse, regarded as contributing to the modern movement in America separate from Europe. By including these two artists in *19 Living Americans* and presenting works of theirs that showcased the artists' takes on the American landscape, such as Burchfield's *Eating Place, East Salem, Ohio* (1926) (Fig. 3) and O'Keefe's *Radiator Building* (1927) (Fig. 4), the Museum of Modern Art presented and validated their contributions to the discourse of American art to the public, holding it both up to and against European dominance.

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[48] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*, 16.
[49] Goodrich. *Pioneers of Modern Art in America*.

Following *19 Living Americans*, two group exhibitions displaying European artworks opened: *Painting in Paris* (1930) and *Webber, Klee, Lehmbruck, Maillol* (1930). Next, the Museum of Modern Art opened its fifth exhibition, and its first solo exhibition, *Charles Burchfield: early watercolors 1916-1918* (1930) which was displayed in conjunction with the group show *46 Painters and Sculptors under 35 Years of Age*. Here, it is important to note the relative weight held by group shows versus solo exhibitions. This solo exhibition, which highlighted Burchfield's earlier expressionist work, was the first public exhibition of his early watercolors, which contrasts his vastly different and better known later realist works. Referencing his artistic output, the exhibition catalog notes that "It is impossible to discover any important external influence upon Burchfield's art."[50] At his American art school, Burchfield was encouraged to follow his own creativity rather than the popularized French impressionist methods. While creating these watercolors, Burchfield was oblivious to the work being created in Europe. As reiterated in the catalog, "one can only conclude that we have in this period of Burchfield's development one of the most isolated and original phenomena in American Art."[51] Displayed in this exhibition are Burchfield's watercolors that display an authentic landscape of American, including post-Civil War buildings such as *CAT-TAILS* (1916) (Fig. 5), *THE SONG OF THE KATYDIDS ON AN AUGUST MORNING* (1917) (Fig. 6), and *GARDEN OF MEMORIES* (1917) (Fig. 7). Discussing these exhibitions, Goodyear states "with this exhibition there was shown for the first time a collection of Burchfield's early watercolors, now so admired, which then the critics found puzzling and weird."[52] Reflecting on how this exhibition helped to introduce and change the publics opinion on this American artist, Goodyear's firsthand account

[50] Charles Burchfield, *Charles Burchfield: Early Watercolors 1916-1918*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1930, 6.
[51] Burchfield. *Charles Burchfield: Early Watercolors.*
[52] Goodyear. *The Museum of Modern Art: The first Ten years*, 21

shows how MoMA was both inserting and shaping the dialogue of American art through this exhibition. This true and original "American Art", the subject of MoMA's first solo exhibition, shows the lasting importance of both the exhibition itself and the artwork it highlights.

The accompanying group show, *46 Painters under 35 Years of Age,* intended to include artists of many ethnic backgrounds and varied expressions of contemporary art to show the "variety and vitality" of this new generation of artists.[53] Despite the desired diversity of the show, at least 23 of these artists – about half of the total show – were American, with even more of those included living and producing work in America. In an overwhelmingly positive response to these two shows, *ArtNews* stated that MoMA "has done more to justify itself and to prove itself a valuable addition to our art institutions than in all of its previous efforts."[54] Seeing how this exhibition positively contributed to the discourse of art in America, the review continued on to say that "the technique of a few leaders and the present show makes it quite evident that the term "academic" will have to be broadened to include the followers of the so-called modernists."[55] This response directly exemplifies how MoMA, specifically, contributed to elevating the perception of modernism in America. Further, acknowledging the attention given by the Museum to American modernists, this firsthand account exemplifies how the Museum was expanding the discourse of art to their audience to include Americans, inserting its followers into the public dialogue previously reserved only for European art.

The initial response of this show provides direct evidence for how the Museum was creating a favorable foundation for a shift in artistic epicenters amongst its viewers, and

[53] The Museum of Modern Art, press release, April 13, 1930.
[54] "Young Painters and Sculptors at the Modern Museum." *ArtNews,* April 19th, 1930.
[55] "Young Painters and Sculptors at the Modern Museum." *ArtNews*

expanding the discourse of modern art by inserting an idea of American art that was separate from than that of Europe. Through this exhibition, MoMA both raised modern art to the level of previous art movements, at least in its audiences' eyes, and showed a majority of American artists alongside European counterparts, as well as artists of different ethnic backgrounds, displaying their art as equal in the discourse of modernism.

Complicating American Modernism

In November of 1932, *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* opened. Curated by Holger Cahill, this exhibition was planned with the intention to feature painting and sculpture done by the common man in America, such as amateur artists and craftsmen in the 18th and 19th century. Included in this exhibition was art produced by sign painters, portrait limners, carpenters, cabinet-makers, shipwrights, wood-carvers, stone cutters, metal workers, blacksmiths, sailors, farmers, business men, housewives and schoolchildren. As quoted from Cahill, this exhibition was intended to give "a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter, intimate and quaint in the social history of this country."[56]

Accompanying this exhibition was an extensive catalog by the same name. Holger Cahill's introduction to the catalog gave readers a history of American folk art, drawing from a vast bibliography of both books and periodicals. "The work presented in this exhibition was influenced from diverse sources", as Cahill points out that while sometimes the work is derivative, but often, it is "fresh and original."[57] Cahill elaborates on the history of the American art presented, citing sources such as the Puritans and Quakers, who were the first generation of settlers in the country and the earliest developers of American art. Exploring the sources for early 17th century art that influenced later American art (and the art presented in this exhibition), Cahill traces the various settlers in this new country. While the majority were English, there were also Irish, Welsh, German, Dutch, Swedish, and French settlers, all intermingling in America

[56] Museum of Modern Art, press release, Novemeber 30, 1932.
[57] Cahill, Holger, *American Folk Art the Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900,* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1932. Published following the exhibition *American Folk Art the Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 3.

creating a folk art derived from the influence of the various settlers' craft. Cahill finds a connection between early craftsmen and the art produced in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries in America and even goes as far as to claim that these artisans "helped keep alive the fundamentals of tradition in times when there were no masters, and their work has furnished the background for the development of masters. That their work was not the background for the development of American art as we know it today is one of the accidents of our art history."[58] Continuing to highlight the influence of these American craftsmen on later American art, Cahill states that "it is often hard to draw a dividing line between the art of the common man and that of the professional."[59]

Going further, Cahill's introduction expands on other influences of folk art in America. While not included in the exhibition, he discusses the folk art of the Southwestern states which had a Spanish influence and have roots in Mexican colonial art. He also charts the influence of East and South-East Asia, detailing the sea trade brought influence from China, India and Japan, all of which were reflected in this American popular art. Concluding his essay on America folk art, Cahill credits its rise in popularity to "the pioneers of modern art who began coming back to this country from France about 1910", stating that these early American modern arts had begun a "cult of America."[60] In Cahills words:

> These artists were in revolt against the naturalistic and impressionistic tendencies of the nineteenth century, and their emphasis upon a return to the sources of tradition had given them an interest in primitive and naive art. They first turned to the productions of the American aborigines which they found in natural history museums.[61]

[58] Cahill, Holger. *American Folk Art, 7.*
[59] Cahill, Holger. *American Folk Art.*
[60] Cahill, Holger. *American Folk Art,* 27.
[61] Cahill, Holger. *American Folk Art.*

By connecting modern American artists to a folk-art influence, and rooting sources of this practice to a diverse array of creative practices ranging from the Middle East to Mexican colonial art, Cahill presented an exhibition that complicates the discourse of American art and separated American artists from European influence. With this exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art focused on an alternate form of art that was uniquely rooted in a history of American culture, and established as a historical basis for establishing American modern art. Through this exhibition MoMA complicates the history of modernism by America while highlighting domestic artistic creation.

This exhibition's influence on the American audience, as well as the ways that this exhibition furthered ideas about American modern art, can be best displayed through its positive critical reception. Edward Alden Jewell states that Cahill's essay "furnishes a vivid background, and together with biographical notes, makes much clearer to us today the spirit that urged these largely anonymous artists to creation and the struggles they faced" which helped to both introduce a portion of American art often overlooked and uncover and present its history.[62] *The New York Times* viewed the exhibit and its accompanying catalog as "giving a permanent form to the important collection it brought together" thus "making it [the history and origins of American folk art] part of the art history of the country." This review continues to say that *American Folk Art* analyzes the origins of the objects presented by MoMA and suggested that the presented folk art had a lasting influence on the artistic history of America.[63]

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[62] Edward Alden Jewell, "Works of 18th and 19th Centuries on View at Exhibition Called "The Art of the Common Man in America"' *The New York Time*s, November 29, 1932.
[63] New York Times, "Folk Art in America" *New York Times*, March 24, 1933.

In May of the following year, the MoMA put together the exhibition *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Maya, Incan)* which brought together objects such as pottery, painting, sculpture, precious ornaments and jade, and textiles from Aztec, Toltec, and pre-Columbian Peruvian artists. The exhibition, spanning three floors of the Museum, presented paintings by twelve modern artists on the first floor. Included in the first level were eight American artists including Ben Benn, who the New York Times viewed as among the first generation of American modernists, as well as Max Weber, one of the first American cubist painters.[64] Also on display were Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. On the second floor were stone carvings and pottery followed by gold and jade objects, textiles, with smaller sculptures presented on the third floor. This presentation, which displayed modern art alongside ancient American art, proposed a relationship between the two, and emphasized the influence of the antique art on the creation of modern pictures by American and Mexican artists.

In its presentation, the Museum underscored that these objects were intended to be viewed as art, rather than archaeological artifacts. The Museum chose these objects to showcase work that was not only modern in spirit, but also had "a direct influence on modern art" and make explicit the Americas' ancient traditional arts as a source of inspiration from which modern art had derived.[65] The introduction to the exhibition's accompanying catalog began with an investigation of modern art, stating that it had a "complex heritage" sourced from art of ancient civilizations of America. As stated in the catalog, "the purpose of this exhibition has been to bring together examples of this art which are to be found in collections in the United States, and to show its relation to the work of modern artists" whether the artist had sought out this influence

[64] New York Times. "BEN BENN, PAINTER, DIES AT 98, EARLY ADVOCATE OF CUBISM." *New York Times*, January 11, 1983.
[65] Museum of Modern Art, press release, April 30, 1933.

or if the artist is unconscious of it.[66] The catalogue charts the process of researching and the archeological act of uncovering the histories of Ancient America. As noted in the catalog, it was obvious that Mexican artists had taken influence from their cultural predecessors, but this influence was less known in relation to American artists. To further assert this influence, the catalog charted a history of American modern art: "About 1909 American painters returning from Paris began to study collections of Mexican and Peruvian art in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The earliest of these artists to turn the inspiration of ancient American art was Max Weber."[67]

The critical response to this exhibition was overwhelmingly positive. *ArtNews*, in an article titled "Modern Museum is Now Presenting an Amazing Show," urged their readers to visit the exhibition. They claimed it would interest a wide audience, even if "the whole process of modern art puzzles and annoys you, go and sit among its alleged forbearers at the Modern Museum."[68] To *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, the exhibition was a "beautifully arranged collection… alive with clues, every one of which should be followed up" and that *American Sources of Modernism* "calls for leisurely and thorough examination."[69] Delivering on its goals, "the present exhibition would seem more or less to indicate, the ancient cultures of this hemisphere have also played a vital role in some of the unfolding phases of the art of our own epoch" and that it was "high time we should give credit where credit is due."[70] In a later review revisiting the previous exhibition season put on by major institutions, Jewell elaborates on his views of *American Sources of Modernism* stating that "among the important museum shows still

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[66] Cahiill, Holger. *American Sources of Modern Art,* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1933, 5.
[67] Cahiill, *American Sources of Modern Art,* 7.
[68] ArtNews "Modern Museum is Now Presenting an Amazing Show." *ArtNews*, (New York), May 13, 1933,
[69] Edwin Alden Jewell, "Mainly about sculpture, Group Show in Philadelphia – "Sources" at Museum of Modern Art – Rivera Ousted." *New York Times*, March 14, 1933.
[70] Jewell, "Mainly about sculpture, Group Show in Philadelphia".

current is the *American Sources* display at the Museum of Modern Art, […] and those who may have delayed thus far should bestir themselves, for it is, in the main, a very illuminating affair."[71] Seeing the assertions found in the exhibition catalogue accurately reflected in the display, Jewell found that "modern Mexican artists such as Rivera, Charlot, Merida, and Siqueiros should eagerly have surrendered to the heritage of their own land is not at all surprising," but, it is important to see that "[t]he exhibition further sets out to demonstrate that the same sources have been sought by some of our own modern American artists." [72] This can be seen through the sculpture of Marion Walton whose work is directly exemplified by the ancient sculpture on display. For example, her displayed stone work *Family* (1932) can be connected to the Central Mexican work, *Standing Figure in Green Stone* (Fig. 8). [73]

The Museum expressed a strong interest in American art, outside of European influence, seen by the *New York Time's* review of the exhibition: "Thanks both to the exhibition itself of plastic art that expresses the ancient cultures of our Western Hemisphere, and to Holger Cahill's extremely able account that appears a foreword in the catalogue, one obtains an admirably clear picture of important Western developments."[74] Jewell's glowing review sums up a main component of this paper's argument and presents a convincing example of how MoMA complicated the narrative of modern American art and reveals the ways in which MoMA was educating American viewers a history of American art outside of European influence. Many academics of the mid 20th century did not believe that when considering America's contemporary painters, the developments of the country were worth regarding. As summed by

[71] Edward Alden Jewell, "Very Plump Lean Year, Art Is Longer Than Any Bread Line — A Second Look at "American Sources." *New York Times*, June 4, 1933.
[72] Jewell, "Very Plump Lean Year."
[73] Jewell, "Very Plump Lean Year."
[74] Jewell, "Very Plump Lean Year."

Samuel Kootz in *New Frontiers in American Painting*, "it is unnecessary to go back into American history for ancestors, because nothing of importance now taking place can be attributed to such ancestry. If this seems a sweeping statement, one need only review our previous accomplishments and attempt to reconcile the ideas, statements and techniques of those previous painters with the accomplishments of our more important living men."[75] MoMA's *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Maya, Incan)* and *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* directly challenges these common assumptions of American modern art.

[75] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, 26-27.

American Art Beyond Painting

In the spring of 1932, the MoMA opened the exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, organized by Lincoln Kirstein and the Junior Advisory Committee. As stated by the exhibition's accompanying catalog, this exhibition was spurred on by recent interest from the American audience in mural decoration. To foster this growing interest and "encourage American artists to study the possibilities of this medium of artistic expression" the Museum's Advisory Committee organized *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*.[76] This exhibition was held with the intention to encourage artists, giving American artists the opportunity to display their creations in a medium that was previously reserved for European academic artists. In his research on American art and photography at MoMA American art historian Douglas R. Nickle found that *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* was proposed to and delivered on its mission to "counteract the growing sense that MoMA was only interested in European modernism, demonstrate a concern with the functional aspects of contemporary art, and introduce the medium of photography as an independent art form".[77]

In the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, Lincoln Kirstein discusses mural painting, its history, and how this exhibition falls within the goals of the Museum. In this discussion, Kirstein states that architects in America lacked an interest in mural painting speculating that if they had had an interest, there would be more mural painting. Kirstein intended for this exhibition to demonstrate the significance of including mural paintings in new constructions, helping to support and create an audience and market for American mural painters. To conclude his insights on the economic considerations of mural painting, Kirstein states that "it has taken

[76] Lincoln Kirstein and Julien Levy, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1932): 5.
[77] Douglas R. Nickel, "'Walker Evans' Revisited" *American Art*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 1992): 91.

Mexico to show us the way."[78] Kirstein charts the history of mural painting back to the academic memories of Venice and Rome, but also, to Diego Rivera and Ghirlandajo. He cites the Ministry of Education building in Mexico City which contains murals by Rivera as an example of murals that have ended up more important than the agency's architecture, providing historic evidence to combat the criticism and reluctance of adorning structures with mural painting.[79] The following essay by Julien Levy focuses specifically on the exhibition's photomurals. Levy begins by addressing the problems posed by mural decorations for a structure's architect and builder, and asserts that photographers are well quipped to address these problems. Photomurals can be easily installed, installation can be kept at a low cost and quickly stripped from a building's wall to be relocated somewhere else or replaced by a new photo.[80] In the exhibition catalog, the authors were introducing the American audience to alternate forms of art that American artists were engaging with. In introducing these practices, Kristen connects the foundation for this growing American artistic practice in both antiquity and in Mexican practices, introducing a narrative for an art form gaining popularization in America outside of Europe.

Murals by American Painters and Photographs was met with strong negative criticism. New York Times art critic Jewell went as far as to say that the exhibition as a whole was "so bad" that it would give American art something to think about for a very long time. He stated that MoMA had done everything in its capacity to ensure the artists' work was displayed to their advantage, so it was only the fault of the artists that the exhibition was "pretty terrible."[81] Jewell, agreeing with Mr. Levy's statement that photo-muralists answer the problems posed to mural

[78] Kirstein, and Levy, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers,* 10.
[79] Kirstein, and Levy, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers,* 8.
[80] Kirstein, and Levy, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers,* 12.
[81] Edward Alden Jewell, "The Museum of Modern Art Gives Private Showing Today of Murals by American Painters." *New York Times* (New York): May 3, 1932.

painters by the modern architect and builder, saw the saving grace of this show as the section exhibiting experiments in mural photography.[82] A few weeks later, following up on his initial review, Jewell re-evaluated this exhibition after the museum rehung and rearranged the murals. While he viewed the exhibition as being better overall, he specifically cited that the "photo-mural display is more impressive than before" and that this showing of American photography "must leave the photographers encouraged, promoting them to go forward with experiments that will be watched with keen interest."[83] Jewell importantly highlighted that in this exhibition "straight" photography is honored as an articulation of the photographic medium, a point that reinforces this paper's argument surrounding the role of photography and the Museum of Modern Art that is expanded upon below.

As clearly exemplified by both the success and failure of *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, MoMA's early initiatives in creating space for American artists can most clearly be found in the Museum's initial displays of photography and the blossoming photography department. The year of the Museum of Modern Art Photography Department's establishment, Barr wrote a colleague stating "another important factor is the tendency on the part of the public to identify art with painting and sculpture – two fields in which America is not yet, I am afraid, quite the equal of France; but in other fields – the film, architecture, and photography for instance, the United States would seem to be the equal or superior of any other country."[84] Within the United States in the 1930s, the popularity of photography was rising. Despite this, the debate was still raging as to whether photography should be evaluated as a form

[82] Edward Alden Jewell, "The Museum of Modern Art Gives Private Showing"
[83] Edwin Alden Jewell, "Photography and Walls" *New York Times* (New York), May 22, 1932.
[84] Alfred H. Barr memorandum to Miss Miller, Oct 10, 1940 reproduced in Defining Modern Art: selected writings of Alfred H Barr, 16.

of fine art to be regarded alongside established artistic mediums such as painting, drawing, and sculpture – a question that had vexed photography since the medium's inception. Barr found photography to be a medium in which the United States surpassed other countries in creativity, and therefore dedicated special attention to this medium. In 1940, the Museum of Modern Art's Photography Department was established with Beaumont Newhall as its curator, making it the first museum to have a department specifically dedicated to photography. This allowed the Museum to be one of the first American institutions to elevate the medium's status and help define its articulation, and in doing so by specifically focusing on American artistic creation. Prior to the establishment of a specific department, the Museum held several shows exclusively of photography, beginning the Museum's role in carving the medium's narrative for an American audience.

Quentin Bajac, a French art critic who specializes in photography, penned an essay in 2016 evaluating modern photography at MoMA. In this essay, Bajac reiterates and upholds the view that MoMA had a Eurocentric focus, stating, "what we call "modern" in painting and sculpture was defined by MoMA in its first twenty-five years as an essentially European phenomenon."[85] Despite his criticism and viewpoint that the Museum charted a Eurocentric narrative of art, Bajac maintains that photography specifically deviated from this precedent and that the Museum's early exhibition programming "in the field of photography the modern was closely linked, on the other hand, to the United States."[86] Recounting the early history of photography at MoMA, Bajac underscores that the medium was used by Barr to respond to the criticism that he and the Museum were too European, stating, "the major figures of particularly

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[86] Bajac, Quentin. "Modern Photography at MoMA." Photography at MoMA: 1920-1960. The Museum of Modern Art, 2016, 11.

fertile American scene – Adams, Evans, Steichen, and Alfred Stieglitz – represented the cardinal points that guided the institution along its path between 1930 and 1960."[87]

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As previously mentioned, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* was the first entry of photography into the Museum's programming, asserting photography as an American art form with its own trajectory isolated from Europe. The next exhibition of photography, the 1933 *Walker Evans: Photographs of 19th Century Houses,* continued the theme of displaying this medium in an exclusively American context. The 1933 exhibition helped the Museum respond to criticism that its attention was only directed towards Europe by showcasing American modernism through the artist, his American style, and the uniquely American subject matter—the American landscape as portrayed through 19th century houses.[88] This exhibition, which featured Lincoln Kirstein the collection of photographs gifted to the museum by Lincoln Kirstein, was shown as one of three smaller exhibitions of gifts and semi-permanent loans, all alongside the larger exhibition of another American artist, Edward Hopper.

Photographers, such as Walker Evans, were given large amounts of attention from the museum in the 1930s resulting in exhibitions such as the 1933 *Photographs of 19th Century Houses* as well as the 1938 exhibition, *American Photographs*. Edward Alden Jewell called this 1938 exhibition a true portrait of America[89] and its accompanying publication which a 1993 survey of Evans's oeuvre called the "first modern book of photographs, against which all others

[87] Bajac. "Modern Photography at MoMA" 11.
[88] Trudy Wilner Stack. "The Museological Mise En Scène: Walker Evans, 'American Photographs', and The Museum of Modern Art." Art documentation 13, no. 4 (1994): 15.
[89] Edward Alden Jewell, "Camera: Aspects of America in Three Shows" *New York Times*, October 2, 1938.

must be measured."[90] Evans, an American photographer who received more attention from MoMA than any other photographer during this period, showcases the underlying goals of the Museum's photography department. His photographic style, rooted in direct representation, separates him from European aesthetics, and exemplifies the Museum creating a space for an American artist on the global stage.

Evans's stylistic development and career are tightly linked to Lincoln Kirstein, a young art historian who was a highly influential character in MoMA's early history, organizing a number of early exhibitions at the Museum. Kirstein helped champion Evans's work, and assisted in changing his style from a European one to one that focused on clear and factual documentation of a composition, lending his style to be categorized as "straight" photography, a uniquely American style.[91] In art historian Douglas R. Nickel's reevaluation of Evans's show, he notes that Kirstein proposed "a photographic aesthetic that described Evans's newer, more prosaic style and encouraging him along a path away from the European-derived formalism of his earlier work."[92] The interest in Evans as an American artist and photographer displays a direct engagement between these artists and truthful representation of their subjects, as well as a space provided for American artists.

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The influence of The Museum of Modern Art's photographic displays can be best understood through its largest presentation of the medium. In 1936, museum director Alfred H.

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[90] Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993): 161.
[91] Kirstein, Lincoln. "Walker Evans' Photographs of Victorian Architecture." The bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art 1, no. 4 (1933).
[92] Nickel, Douglas. "American Photographs Revisited -- American Photographs by Walker Evans." *American Art* 6, no. 2 (1992): 90.

Barr asked the museum's former librarian and soon to be founding director of the photography department, Beaumont Newhall, to organize an exhibition of photographs. This request eventually evolved into *Photography 1839-1937,* an impressive survey that embraced the entire history of the medium, and was the most comprehensive exhibition of the medium ever held in America up until this point. Barr made this request of Newhall with the goal in mind of displaying the avant-garde's means of expression, especially in the United States; "In Barr's mind, this exhibition would bring to the fore an important means of expression, widely practiced by avant-gardes of all kinds, and thriving in particular in the United States."[93] Ultimately, it was Barr's goal for the forthcoming Photography Department to "define photography as an artistic form for an American audience."[94] With one of the first photography departments, MoMA had the privilege of establishing the narrative of the photographic aesthetic. Through the Photography Department, MoMA highlighted American creations and contributed to the narrative of the photographic aesthetic in America, helping create straight photography as a uniquely American art form.

Photography 1839-1937 was divided into three sections: 19th century, Contemporary Photography, and technical approaches and non-artistic photography. This was the only exhibition in the museum's early programming that diverged from MoMA's strictly American perspective on photography. Yet, by including American photographers alongside European counterparts and focusing on American artists in the contemporary section of the exhibition, Newhall was able to continue his focus on American photography as its own art form. In the

[93] Quentin Bajac. '"Modern Photograph at MoMA,' Photography at MoMA: 1920-1960. The Museum of Modern Art", (2016).
[94] Quentin Bajac. '"Contemporary Photography at MoMA,' Photography at MoMA: 1960-now," The Museum of Modern Art, (2015): 11.

contemporary section of Newhall's exhibition, he featured American photographers such as Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, and Bernice Abbott, all of whom engaged in straight photography, showcasing America's artistic output as distinct from that of Europe. *Photography 1839-1937* would become MoMA's showcase of the history of the medium and set the standard for how to view and present photography, elevating photography to the level of other media presented in the museum.[95]

[95] Quentin Bajac, ' "Background Material"; Nineteenth Century Photography at MoMA", New York: Museum of Modern Art, (2015): 11.

Dominant Narrative of the Museum

In 1943 art dealer Samuel Melvin Kootz wrote *New Frontiers in American Painting* outlining his vision for a new era of American art. In his text, Kootz advocates for an American art that breaks away from traditional European styles and embraces a uniquely American aesthetic for painting. In the forward, Kootz establishes the cultural context of American art for his readers. The author discusses how critics in America are pushing forward European artists and art movements, avoiding the existing American painters who have "extended our American province in painting."[96] He asserts to his readers that it is time to discuss what American artists are doing in positive terms, and how it was unfortunate that our audiences – the American art viewing public -- were not keeping up with the more inventive artists who were deviating from the European presentations of art. This is "primarily because [the audience] expect the artist to confine his expression within the known experience of that audience – whereas it is the obligation of that audience to grow up to the statement of the artist. The culture of any particular period can be determined by its more revolutionary statements – if the people are ready to listen to those statements, to understand and sympathize with them."[97] Here, the "known experience of the audience" is the art they are familiar with, namely that of European artists. Kootz provides both a summary and reasoning for the limited tastes of the American audience and their lack of support for the national artists:

> Each successive age in the progress of man has witness an inevitable clash between the "modern" men of that era and the academicians… The reactionary versus the liberal. Study the art movement of the past. Note the public disregard for the men who displayed advanced thinking, who disrupted the comfortable theories of their time. Whenever these men have been more than a stone's throw ahead of their fellows they have been

[96] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, vii.
[97] Kootz *New Frontiers in American Painting*, vii.

outcasts.[98]

In the early 20th century Americans created art influenced by the European schools, collectors were guided towards purchasing this art, and the American audience was influenced by euro-centric tastes. This context limited institutional support for American artists and a limited audience and market for their work. This led to American artists being encouraged to study in Europe and recreate European forms of expression to find support. This audience preference is reflected by the discrepancy in attendance figures for the early shows of European masters versus the experimental shows of American artists. In his analysis, Kootz creates a picture of America and its public that overlooks its own artistic production, and instead favors that of Europe—a reality that MoMA's early initiatives assisted in altering.

Despite the foundation established in the beginning of the 20th century, by the mid-1940s the hegemony of Europe had shifted as America had taken the spotlight as the global hub of the western art world. Robert Rosenblum, in his catalog essay for *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America* called for a reexamination of the distinct American tradition of painting in Modern art and Abstract Expressionism. Here, Rosenblum comments that the American abstract painters "could not only, by the late 1940s, hold their own against European art of the decade, but could even be claimed to have successfully rerouted the mainstream of Western painting from Paris to New York."[99] As Rosenblum makes clear, by 1945, American painting "did demand the kind of international attention it had seldom merited before, and therefore did adopt the role of heir to

[98] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting,* 7.
[99] Kynaston McShine [Ed.], Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum, John Wilmerding *The Natural Paradise : Painting in America, 1800-1950 : [exhibition], the Museum of Modern Art*, (New York : Boston: Museum ; Distributed by New York Graphic Society, 1976): 15.

European avant-garde traditions."[100] In the mid 1940s, abstract figuration became the favorable articulation of art in America, and American art and its artists succeeded to the point of "rerouting the mainstream of western painting from Paris to New York."[101] Despite the global acknowledgement of American artists, and their rising success at home, many regarded this chain of events as almost instantaneous.

As shown through firsthand accounts found in newspaper and scholarly responses, the American audience saw the MoMA as injecting modernism into the country, creating both a new and wider audience for modernism. Yet, what was largely overlooked was how in doing so, MoMA, since its 1929 founding, was also highlighting American art and creating a dialogue around American modern artists separate from the art of Europe. The Museum helped elevate the status of its national artists by having an exhibition program that switched from American to European artists as well as organizing group exhibitions that presented American works alongside European ones. Additionally, the MoMA presented alternate forms of expression, such as photography, mural painting, and objects of cultural heritage that specifically focused on American artistic expression and contributed to the narrative of American modern art. The goal of this paper is not to assert that the Museum of Modern Art is the only reason for the global success of American art, but instead, the above argument intends to chart the early history of MoMA and how this history contributed to the later the rerouting of Western art hubs from Paris to New York.

Despite the history this paper has outlined of MoMA not only bringing modernism to

[100] Novak et al., *The Natural Paradise*, 15.
[101] Novak et al., *The Natural Paradise*, 15.

America, but also asserting the importance of American artists in doing so, the upheld criticism of the early institution is that it put forth a Euro-centric narrative of modern art and focused its attention on Europe, specifically Paris. This narrative is almost always supported with Alfred Barr's 1936 exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art* and the accompanying visual (Fig. 9) that charts, what now is widely considered a flawed and reductive history of modernism, centering abstraction as the main articulation of modern art. Since its introduction, this exhibition and chart has laid out the henceforth commonly held view of modernism, both in American and abroad, and been perpetuated by countless other institutions of modern art. Some (but not all) examples of this influence can be seen in the 1956 exhibition at the Tate Modern, *Modern Art in America*, and the Art Institute of Chicago using Barr's chart as a guide for exhibitions in the 1940s and 1950s.[102] This chart is often cited as a leading example of MoMA's early preoccupation with European modernism, creating a reputation that this institution had a singular and reductive view of modern art that has been perpetuated ever since.

In her article, "Unpacking the MoMA Myth: Modernism under Revision", Sandra Zalman investigates Alfred Barr's infamous chart, arguing that it has been misread and used to establish and uphold a history of modernism that was not its initial intention. In Zalman's research, she finds that the chart has been considered as mapping all of modernism, rather than the development of just one stylistic trend as Barr had initially intended. She finds that Barr and MoMA did in fact view modern art as an expansive category encompassing various cross sections of visual production and states that Barr never claimed abstraction as the primary means

[102] 'Alfred Barr, 'Introduction', in The New American Painting, 1959', in Modern American Art at Tate 1945–1980, Tate Research Publication, 2018, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/modern-american-art-at-tate/resources/new-american-painting, accessed 19 February 2023; Susan F. Rosen, and Charlotte Moser. "Primer for Seeing: The Gallery of Art Interpretation and Katharine Kuh's Crusade for Modernism in Chicago." Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies 16, no. 1 (1990): 7–90. https://doi.org/10.2307/4101566.

of modern expression. Barr even went to great lengths to highlight that his personal interest in Cubism and abstract art had been in a steady decline by the time of the exhibition, in order to avoid any possible assumptions of favoritism.[103]

Abstraction and Cubism was met both with criticism and support. Art historian and critic Susan Platt highlights Barr's treatment of American art in her research, readdressing the historical importance of this exhibition, saying, "the astonishing omission from the exhibition of all twentieth-century American art with the exception of Alexander Calder and Man Ray had major consequences."[104] While in its time it was criticized and viewed objectively, Platt's research shows that the lasting impact of *Abstraction and Cubism* and the accompanying chart was not the journalistic criticism it received when first displayed, but rather, its effect on artists and historians:

> Despite criticism of the book and the exhibition, both had immense influence on later art history. The catalogue became a widely used source on the history of modernism for generations of students. Standard texts incorporated its interpretations of the significant artists and events as well as its impersonal approach to style that fit so easily with the methodologies of earlier periods of art history. The development of modern art, as it is widely taught, is still descended from the analysis of Barr…[105]

After the initial printing of the exhibition catalog sold out, which Barr hastily wrote in just 6 weeks, Barr did not allow it to be reprinted since he wanted to make changes and adjust its errors. As a result, Barr's catalog was not reprinted again until 1966, surprisingly without any of the proposed revisions.[106] Despite this, the catalog became a widely used source on the history of

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[103] Alfred H. Barr, Jr. to Jerome Klein, Jul cited in Zalman, Sandra. "Unpacking the MoMA Myth: Modernism Under Revision." *Modernism/modernity (Baltimore, Md.)* 29, no. 2 (2022): 283–306.
[104] Susan Noyes Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The 'Cubism and Abstract Art' Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art." *Art Journal*, vol. 47, no. 4, (1988): 291.
[105] Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics", 292.
[106] The Museum of Modern Art Archives: Alfred Hamilton Barr, Jr., Papers, unlabeled lecture notes for seminar report (dated on internal evidence to Spring 1925.) found in Platt, Susan Noyes. "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The 'Cubism and Abstract Art' Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art."

modernism for generations of students.[107] Zalman's argument attributes this fact to assisting the misconstrued understanding of MoMA's narrative and how the 1936 exhibition is placed at its heart. This chart, continuously contradicted and readdressed, also continues to be reasserted -- and in some ways, upheld -- shaping the narrative of the MoMA in the 1930s. Platt concluded her analysis and critique of *Abstraction and Cubism* by stating, "[w]e can do nothing less than honor the brilliant, analytical work and connoisseurship of Alfred Barr in creating such a durable model of the history of modernism and its major monuments, even as we alter, expand, and contradict it" exemplifying the diagram's continued impact on the perception of MoMA. [108]

The lasting impact of *Cubism and Abstraction* and its surrounding discourse makes necessary the investigating the narrative of the early MoMA and its intention. Barr did not intend for this chart to be viewed in the way that history has contextualized it. Since its creation, this chart has been used as evidence of MoMA's extreme favoritism of European art, and seeing European abstraction as the center of the dialogue of modern art. Yet, further evaluation of the Museum's founders and early programming shows that this result was not what was intentionally projected. This exhibition and chart has since been used as evidence to uphold assertions that MoMA created a Eurocentric narrative, rather than the larger serpentine narrative uncovered above through an exhaustive analysis of MoMA's early exhibitions.

Moments such as *Abstraction and Cubism* have been favored throughout history by scholars, creating a narrative of the Museum of Modern Art, rather than acknowledging the nuance of the pluralism of American modern art asserted by MoMA. Serge Guilbaut, considered an authority on modern and contemporary art and the cultural relations between France and the

[107] Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics", 292.
[108] Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics".

United States, wrote the book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, in which he showcases his research of how America found success as a cultural center, taking over from Paris. Through his research, Guilbaut examines the cultural and political implications that led America to become the leading center of art post WWII. Guilbaut champions the ideological resonance of American art, and sees this, paired with the socio-political context of the early to mid 20th century as the reason for American art's later success.[109] In his argument Guilbaut evaluates a broad set of socio-political factors including the process of de-Marxzation and later de-politicization in New York from 1939 onwards. These factors, coupled with the rapid rise of nationalist sentiment during WWII, guide the narrative of American art and its success within its historical circumstances.[110]

Guibaut, seeing the dominance that the Parisian art scene played on both American artists and citizens, using the hostile reception of Parisians to the 1938 exhibition *Three Centuries of American Art* held at the Jeu de Paume as evidence, argued that for the United States' domestic art to be recognized, it must be freed of the Parisian monopoly. To do so, he cites critics contemporaneous with this time such as Watson Forbes and the New York Times' art critic, Edward Allen Jewell, and how their goal of making American artists independent of Parisian dominance in the art market must be matched by political independence.

Retrospectively, Guilbaut sees the success of this goal depending on a first-rate museum on par with those of Europe.[111] The war happening in Europe, specifically Germany's overtaking of Paris, had left a cultural void, which allowed space for New York to both gain freedom from

[109] Guilbaut, Serge., and Arthur Goldhammer. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
[110] Guilbaut. *How New York Stole,* 2.
[111] Guilbaut. *How New York Stole, 45.*

Paris and its nationalistic reactionary art as well as takeover as a leading cultural center. The art historian outlines how the Great Depression led to a response from the US government, leading into the war and America's eventual independence from Paris. While the US was determined to fill the void left by the war and take its place as a cultural capital, the groundwork for this transition had to be laid. A key challenge to the success of American art, separate from that of Europe, was that American artists interested in modernism had been going to Europe to study, therefore upholding European dominance in America's art scene. A change of mental habits and the need for an ideology both similar to, but distinctly different than the ideologies of Paris was needed. As articulated by Guilbaut, "before the nation could support a modernist avant-garde, however, it first needed to develop an awareness of art and organizations within which dialogue and controversy could take place."[112] In his argument, Guilbaut positions the Museum of Modern Art as a direct challenge to the government initiatives: "The museum of Modern Art, more deeply involved in modernism than other American institutions, did not pay as much heed to American artists as to the great Parisian tradition."[113] While MoMA promoted modernism, Guilbaut sees it doing so with a Parisian emphasis, upholding the European hegemony in America. Guilbaut recognizes that after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Museum of Modern art played a larger role in aiding the government's efforts, but stilll "continued to defend an international modern art for which the imperiled art of Paris stood as the symbol."[114] Guilbaut's argument calls for an institution that accepts American artists creating a space for an American public to engage with and support these artists. This is a statement that this paper upholds,

[112] Guilbaut. *How New York Stole,* 55.
[113] Guilbaut. *How New York Stoel,* 58
[114] Guilbaut. *How New York Stole*, 59.

centering the MoMA's role in doing so -- a line of thinking that contradicts Guilbaut's mapping of this transitional time -- asserting a new perspective for the eventual success of American art.

Guilbaut presents the Museum of Modern Art as an obstacle to the different factors that led to both an American and international appreciation for American Modern art, reasserting the narrative that the early programing of the MoMA was upholding Parisian a dominance and provided a challenge to the development of an American modernism and shift of art centers. While Guilbaut acknowledges the existence of American artists who were making original work that could have potentially filled the calls for an avant-garde distinct from Europe, he underscores how they existed outside the museum structure, stating that large museums neglected American artists creating art that was not beholden to the visual vocabulary connected to European modernism. In this argument, Guilbaut goes as far as to say that "the Museum of Modern art was interested almost exclusively in modern European art, while the Metropolitan was interested in contemporary academic American Art. Hence American modern artists were cast off the summits of Olympus..." [115] Here, Guilbaut is constructing a view of the American art scene prior to the war, and in this construction, indicates that US institutions, specifically MoMA, were as not supporting American art and artists.

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The dominant view that the Museum of Modern Art neglected American art to focus and uphold Parisian dominance has been continually reiterated since the opening of the Museum, and can still be found in the present day, giving importance to this paper's argument. The perception

[115] Guilbaut. *How New York Stole,* 220.

that MoMA did not play an early role in fostering American art, supporting American artists, and instead had a sole focus on the output of Europe, hindered the groundwork for creating a foundation for a shift of cultural epicenters continues to be perpetuated by many of today's leading scholars and critics. Prolific art critic Jerry Saltz, in an article for *Vulture* gives a brief overview of modern art in relation to the MoMA from the beginning "I believe, and MoMA has long seemed to assert, that [modern art] began with Paul Cézanne's *The Bather* (c. 1885)."[116] Saltz continuously references MoMA's central focus on artists like Picasso and Matisse, restating the typical view of modernism in which MoMA's engagement with American art began only "when Americans took up the mantle with Abstract Expressionism."[117] Like Saltz, German historian Hans Belting also finds MoMA complicit in supporting this dominant narrative of art in America. Belting asserts that MoMA, from its founding in 1929 "recreated modern art as a new myth that was rescued from European history" thus making modern art accessible to an American audience while leaving out American artists, asserting that the museum "acted as a European outpost."[118] Additionally, art critic Hal Foster upholds the same established narrative of MoMA saying that "The [Museum of Modern Art's] policy, indeed, had caused a dilemma by relegating modern art to history, above all to a history out of America."[119] As becomes clear, there is sustained criticism of the Museum of Modern Art and its presumed neglect of American art and artists early on in its history that remains pervasive almost a century later. However, this only accounts for part of the Museum's history and overlooks key aspects of MoMA's history that exemplify early involvement and support of American art.

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[116] Jerry Saltz, "What the Hell Was Modernism**?** The Museum of Modern Art tries to open itself up." *Vulture*, (New York) October 2, 2019.
[117] Jerry Saltz, "What the Hell Was Modernism?"
[118] Belting, Hans. "The Museum of Modern Art and the History of Modernism." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 46 (2020): 102.
[119] Hal Foster, "Museum Tales of Twentieth-Century Art."

Conclusion

The Museum of Modern Art was created in the cultural context of early 20th century America in which American artistic creation was seen as secondary to modern European art. In this landscape, American artists struggled to find support, both institutional and economic, because the American audience placed its attention on the artistic production of Europe. Despite this, the founders of the Museum of Modern Art had a strong interest in American art, which was reflected in MoMA's early exhibition programming. The early displays of American art helped to introduce the artists to a national audience, bolstering their careers and garnering support for these artists. In these exhibitions, the Museum placed American artists alongside Europeans, asserting that they saw their artistic creations as equal. The Museum also held solo exhibitions for American artists, placing an importance on their artistic production, separate from European influences. While the artists that MoMA chose to display did at times uphold the aesthetic dominance of the European tradition, this was not the only way American artists were displayed. Often, the Museum of Modern Art centered American artists whose practice deviated from European influence, foregrounding these original American modern artists in the discourse of modern art in America.

In addition to creating a foundation for the later success of American artists by providing institutional support and cultivating a receptive audience, MoMA's early exhibition programming, in its display of American artists, complicated the narrative of American modernism. The Museum highlighted artists that found inspiration outside of Europe, and provided historical and visual evidence of multiple sources of creative influence. By displaying a diverse range of artistic expression outside of the traditional fine art mediums, the Museum of

Modern Art helped construct a new narrative that favored American artists' success in these fields.

This paper's framing quote, found in Samuel Melvin Kootz's essay in the exhibition catalog *The Natural Paradise of Painting*, deserves restating here as a concluding reminder of how important institutional support was to the cultivation of a uniquely American modern art:

> The artist must be given a chance to be seen. That is the duty of the gallery and the museum – and particularly of the museum. There is much double-talk from our more responsible museums about their devotion to modern work – and then some more shows are staged with strictly regional underpinnings. Now if our museum directors have a valid interest in creative, progressive painting it is their obligation to exhibit that painting – devotedly, consistently, logically – until the public becomes familiar with the language, the ideologies, and the spiritual values of the artists. There can be no other method that will substitute for this encouragement.[120]

Kootz's understanding of the influence of museums and how they can positively influence the American audience is directly delivered upon through MoMA's early displays of both modernism and American modern artists. The art museum plays an important role in the way the public perceives art. The Museum of Modern Art, from its founding in 1929, had a profound interest in American art, showcasing a myriad of sources for American modern art including painting, photography, objects of cultural heritage, and mural painting. As argued in this paper, the American public was familiarized with the language, multiple ideologies, and diverse sources of American art. In doing so, the Museum of Modern Art assisted in creating a favorable foundation for the global success of American art, revealed more than a decade later.

[120] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, vii.

Figure 1.
Edward Hopper *House by the Railroad,* 1925,
Acquired by the MoMA 1930, one of the first works to enter its collection
Courtesy of MoMA

Figure 2.
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's private gallery on the seventh floor of her Manhattan home.
Photo courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Artwork: © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018.

Figure 3.
Charles Burchfield *Eating Place, East Salem, Ohio,* 1926
Displayed in the 1929 exhibition, *Paintings by 19 Living Americans.*
Sourced from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog *Paintings by 19 Living Americans.*

Fig. 4
Georgia O'Keefe, *Radiator Building*, 1927
Early American artist painting America, displayed in the Museum of Modern Art's *Paintings by 19 Living Americans* (1929).
Image courtesy of MoMA.

Figure 5.
Charles Burchfield, *CAT-TAILS*, 1916
A Burchfield watercolors that displays an authentic landscape of American.
Sourced from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog *Charles Burchfield: early watercolors 1916-1918.*

Figure 6.
Charles Burchfield, *THE SONG OF THE KATYDIDS ON AN AUGUST MORNING*, 1917

A Burchfield watercolor of American pre-Civil War buildings.
Sourced from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog *Charles Burchfield: early watercolors 1916-1918.*

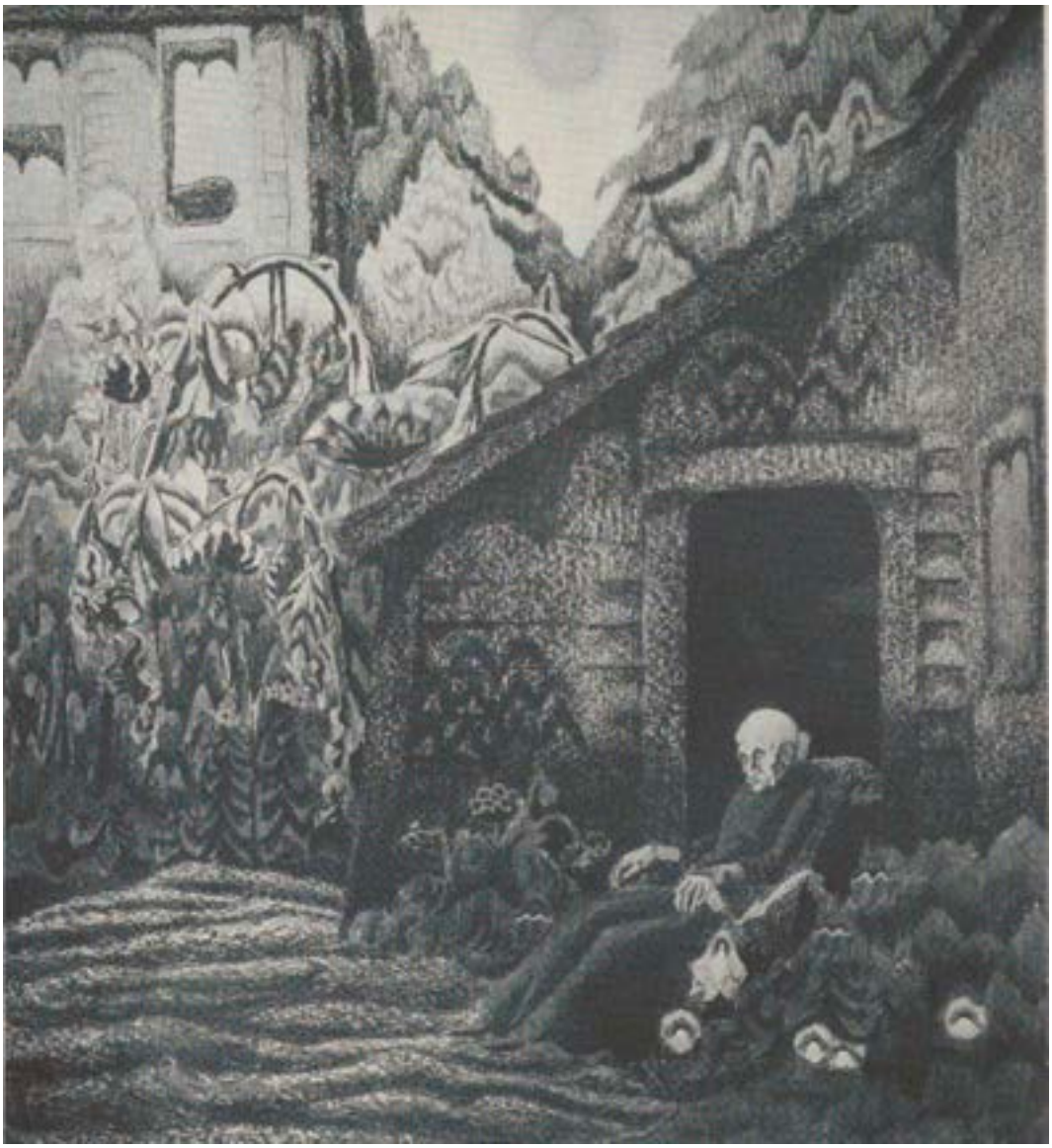

Figure 7.
Charles Burchfield, *GARDEN OF MEMORIES,* 1917
An early Burchfield watercolor displayed in the Museum of Modern Art's first solo exhibition, *Charles Burchfield: early watercolors 1916-1918.*
Sourced from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog *Charles Burchfield: early watercolors 1916-1918.*

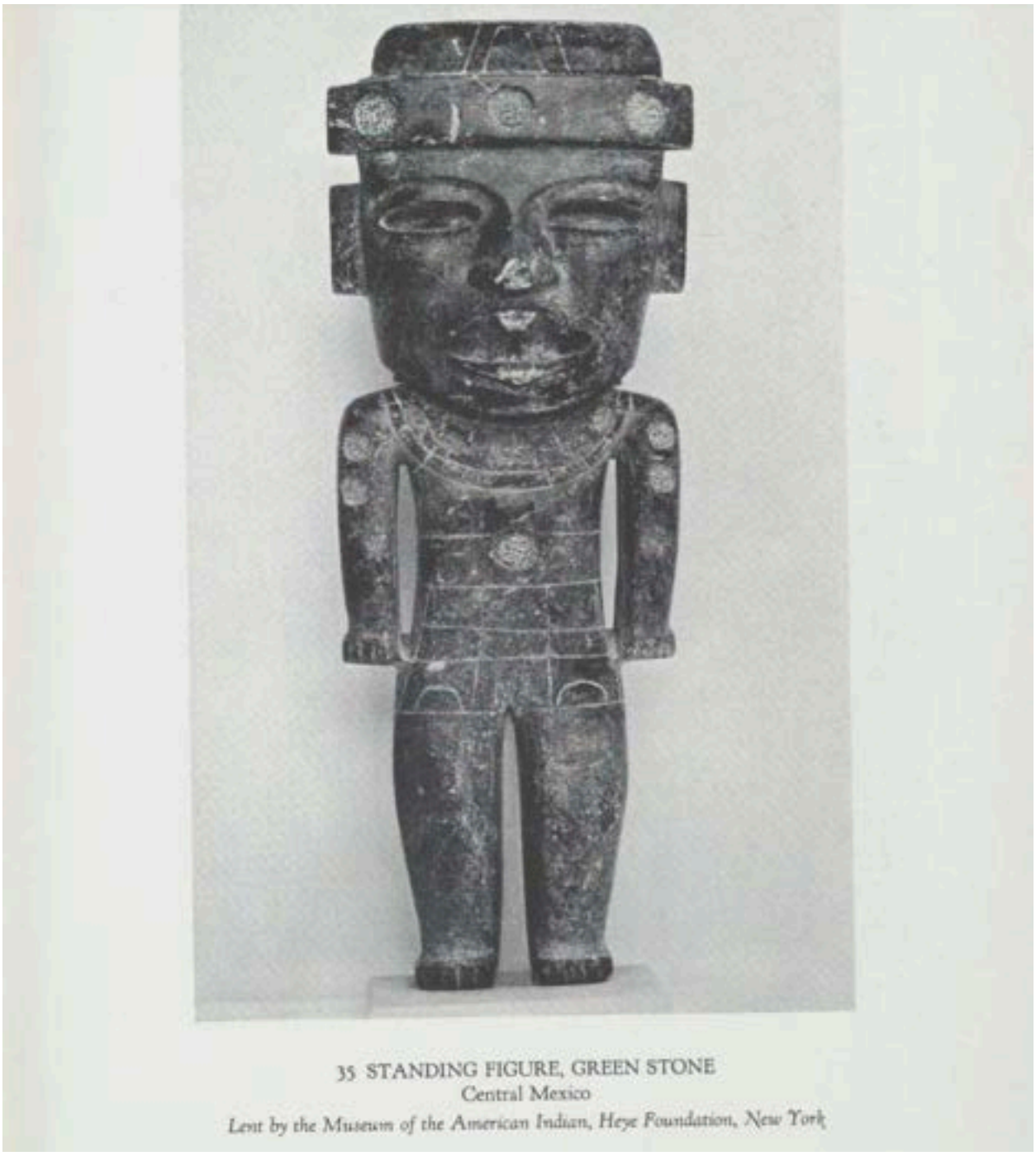

Figure 8.
Standing Figure in Green Stone, artifact from Central Mexica
Sourced from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalogue *for Sources of American Art*.

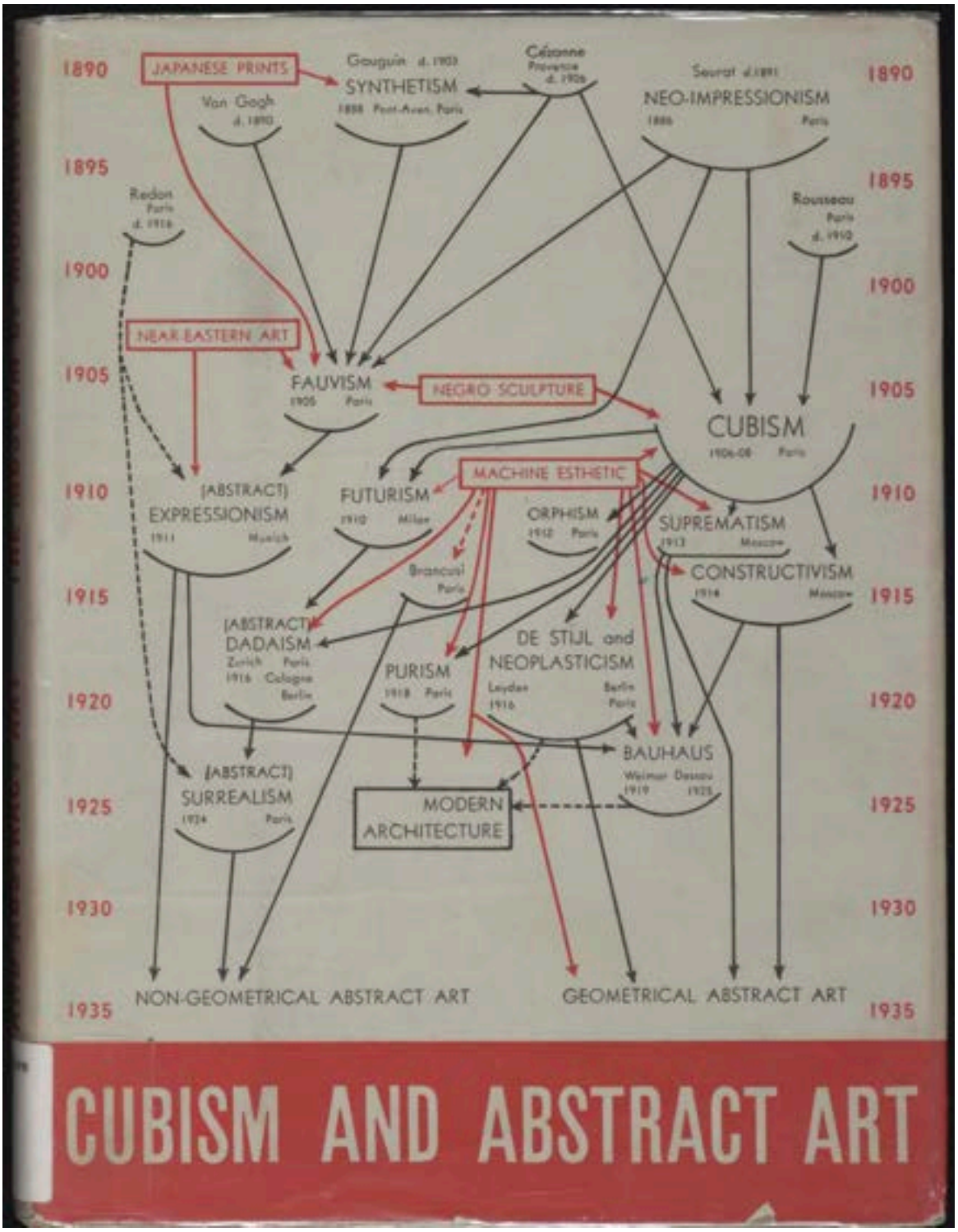

Figure 9.
The 1936 chart found in the exhibition catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art.
Image courtesy of MoMA

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