

Self-Guide

Prelude to the Modern

As we look forward to the opening of the Modern Wing next month, we look back at the art, artists, and innovative thinking that paved the way for modern and contemporary masters.

GALLERY 200

Circular Medallion from Schlesinger and Mayer Store (1903–1904) by Louis H. Sullivan

Often regarded as the father of modern American architecture, Louis H. Sullivan breathed fresh life into the late 19th century's latest engineering feat, the skyscraper. While other architects were designing steel-frame towers in century-old European styles, Sullivan promoted that the "tall office building" should be an organic expression of its uniquely American needs and spirit. Creating an innovative language of flowing decoration, Sullivan allowed his ornament to grow naturally from a building's form and function. This bronze-plated medallion from an elevator grille bears the abstracted forms of leaves, berries, and vines that vitalized the Schlesinger and Mayer Store, now the Carson Pirie Scott building.



GALLERY 223

Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra (1875/76) by Gustave Moreau

Though one might never guess it by just looking at Gustave Moreau's work, the Symbolist painter had a profound influence on diverse modern artists. With his mythical scenes such as this painting, Moreau sought to "render visible...the flashes of imagination that one doesn't know how to situate," a fusing of the imaginative and the real that inspired the Surrealists. For Henri Matisse and other Fauve artists, Moreau's influence came through his teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he exposed students to a broad range of art and encouraged them to find their own direction. "Think your color. Know how to imagine it," he counseled Matisse—advice the brilliant colorist seemed to take to heart.



GALLERY 242

At the Moulin Rouge (1892/95) by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Renowned for capturing Parisian nightlife in all its exuberant flashiness, superficiality, and unrest, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec anticipated a very modern and ever-broadening definition of art, successfully merging the aesthetics of poster art and advertisements with the fine art of painting. He brought a painterly touch to his posters and a graphic quality to his paintings that won him the admiration of both the popular audience of the Parisian cabarets and the burgeoning avant-garde art circle. Yet his unique style would not only influence close followers such as Picasso but also much later artists. In this painting, the exaggerated treatment and garish coloring of the woman's face on the far right, the notorious dancer May Milton, seems to anticipate Andy Warhol's celebrity series of the 1960s.





GALLERY 246

Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair (1888–90) by Paul Cézanne

Though French painter Paul Cézanne experienced critical success only at the end of his life, the early innovator has had an enduring influence on artists throughout the last century. His bold use of color and passionate execution was taken up by Henri Matisse and his circle, while his portrayal of objects from more than one perspective, such as the chair rail on either side of Madame Cézanne in this painting, laid the ground for the Cubists. In fact, many superstars of 20th-century art have confessed their indebtedness to Cézanne. For Matisse, he was “a benevolent god of painting,” and for Pablo Picasso “my one and only master.” Jasper Johns has said that Cézanne’s work “makes looking equivalent to touching” while Brice Marden proclaimed simply, “Cézanne, my hero.”



GALLERY 50

Reliquary Head (mid-/late 19th century), Fang, Gabon

Many European modernists found fresh inspiration in the arts of distant lands that were little known to them, including Africa. This Fang reliquary head, with its high domed forehead, elongated nose, jutting chin, and starkly plaited coiffure, features the sophisticated abstraction of human features that appealed to many European artists of the early 20th century including Paul Klee, Amedeo Modigliani, and Pablo Picasso. Made to sit atop a box filled with ancestral remains, such reliquary figures were also attractive to some modernists, who saw in them a greater spiritual resonance and deeper connection to creative energy. Art dealer Claude Verité, who was well known among the avant-garde artists and intellectuals of Paris, purchased this reliquary head in the 1940s.



GALLERY 179

Spindle Cube Chair (1902/1906) by Frank Lloyd Wright

For his own home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois, Frank Lloyd Wright harmonized the exterior architecture with the interior space, designing fixtures and furniture in accordance with Arts and Crafts philosophy of simplicity and integrity of materials. He experimented with cube chairs—among the first known examples of their kind—which contemporary critics described as “simple, strong, *modern*.” Influenced by the solid, spare lines and positive and negative space of Japanese architecture, he incorporated spindles into his chair designs creating works that are equal parts sophistication and simplicity. Just over a century after Wright initiated the organic integration of exterior, interior, and site to pioneer modern architecture, his ideas still hold as revealed in Renzo Piano’s design for our new Modern Wing, a masterpiece merging building with nature.

Ready to continue your journey to the modern and beyond?

Join us on May 16 when the Modern Wing opens its doors to Chicago and the world. As a celebration of the landmark Renzo Piano–designed building and our world-class collection of 20th- and 21st-century art, admission to the whole museum will be free for an entire week, May 16 through May 22. Join us for this remarkable modern moment!