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Hans Hofmann, *Nullo Scandis* 1964
(detail; see fig.41)

Frontispiece:
Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers* 1925
(fig.42)

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MODERNISM

CHARLES HARRISON

WHAT IS MODERNISM?

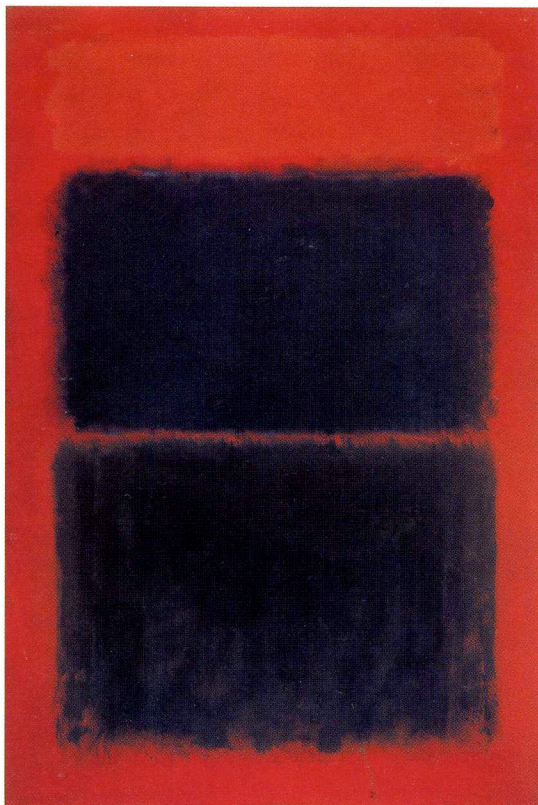
Modernisation, modernity and modernism – three concepts around which thought about the modern world and its culture has tended to revolve. In the definition of the first two there is rarely much disagreement. Modernisation refers to a range of technological, economic and political processes associated with the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath; modernity to the social conditions and modes of experience that are seen as the effects of these processes. On the meaning of modernism, however, agreement is less easily secured. In general usage it means the property or quality of being modern or up-to-date. Yet it also tends to imply a type of position or attitude – one characterised by specific forms of response towards both modernisation and modernity. When the term is applied to art there are thus two problems to be faced. The first is that modernism tends not to be used as a blanket term to cover all the art of the modern period. Rather, it is a form of *value* normally associated with certain works only and serving to distinguish these from others. To pick out a work of art as exemplifying modernism is to see it as belonging to a special category within the Western culture of the modern period. Yet the works which tend to be gathered into this category are not always easily seen as connected either to processes of modernisation or to the experience of modernity. How, for instance, are we to understand the modernism of a Matisse (fig.1) or a Rothko (fig.2), if not as a form of rejection or evasion of the physical evidence of modernity?

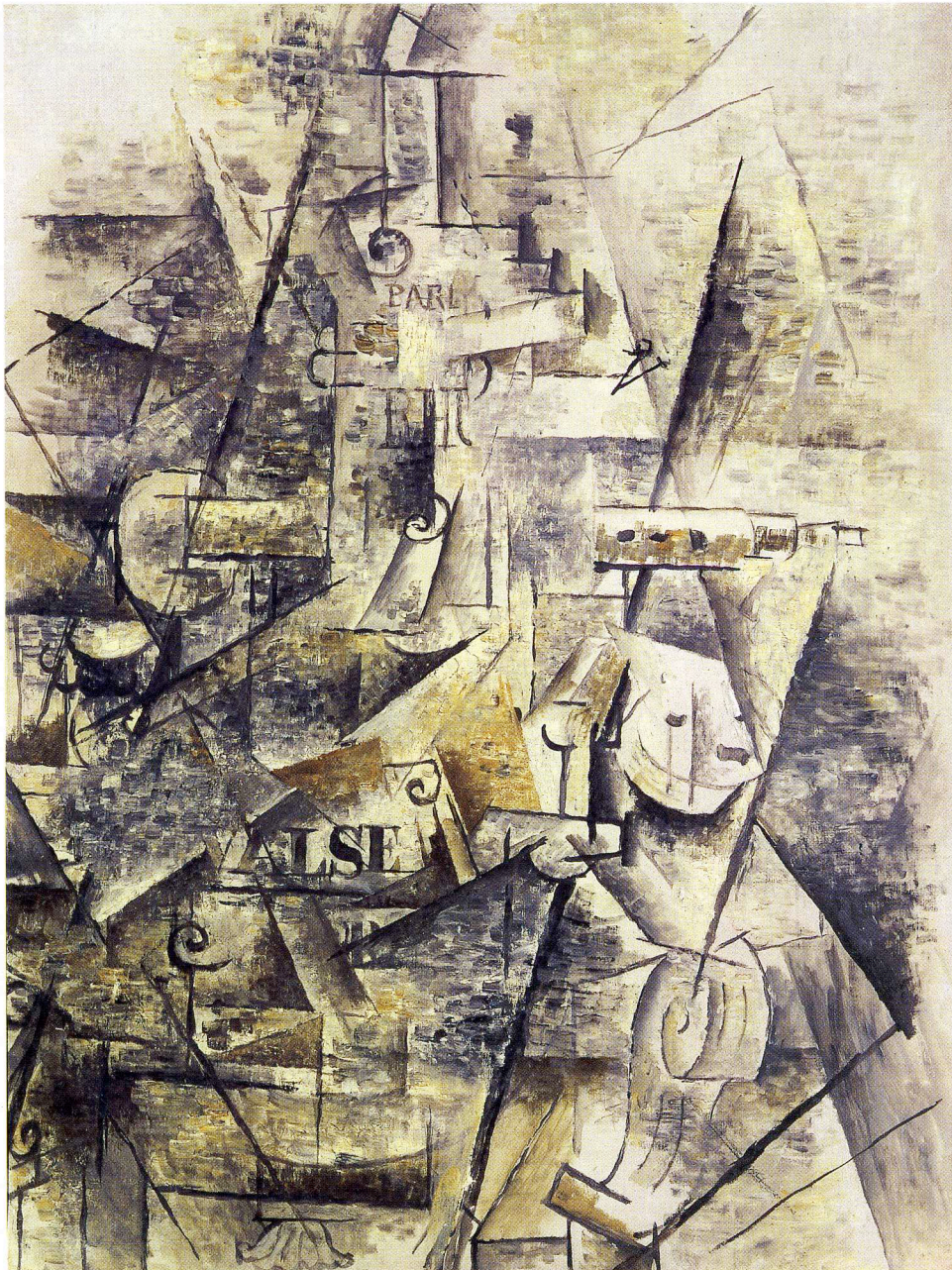
The second problem is that there are different views about the historical positioning of modernism: about when it is supposed to have been initiated

1
Henri Matisse
The Inattentive Reader
1919
Oil on canvas
73 × 92.4 (28¾ × 26½)
Tate Gallery



2
Mark Rothko
Light Red over Black
1957
Oil on canvas
232.7 × 152.7
(91½ × 60¼)
Tate Gallery





3
Georges Braque

*Clarinet and Bottle of
Rum on a Mantelpiece*
1911

Oil on canvas
81 × 60 (32 × 23 $\frac{3}{4}$)
Tate Gallery

4
André Derain

Henri Matisse 1905

Oil on canvas
46 × 34.9 (18 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 13 $\frac{3}{8}$)
Tate Gallery

and whether it is supposed to have run its course. The origins of modernism have been variously located at times between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth, while the recent currency of the concept of postmodernism implies either that modernism itself has run its course, or that it has become synonymous with a form of cultural conservatism – which may amount to the same thing.

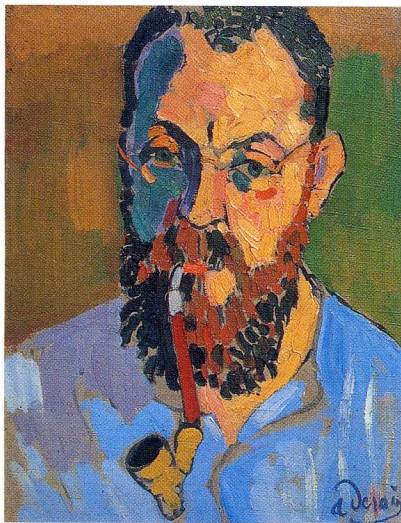
It is difficult to address one of these problems without becoming caught up in the other. For instance, whether or not one regards modernism as possibly exhausted depends on what kind of value or category one believes it to be. It is just this dual implication, in evaluation on the one hand and periodisation on the other, that renders the concept of modernism hard to pin down. The same difficulty applies to the concept of Romanticism, from which modernism derives much of its aesthetic theory, and with which it overlaps in other important respects. With most of the other ‘-isms’ agreement can normally be reached about when they are supposed to have

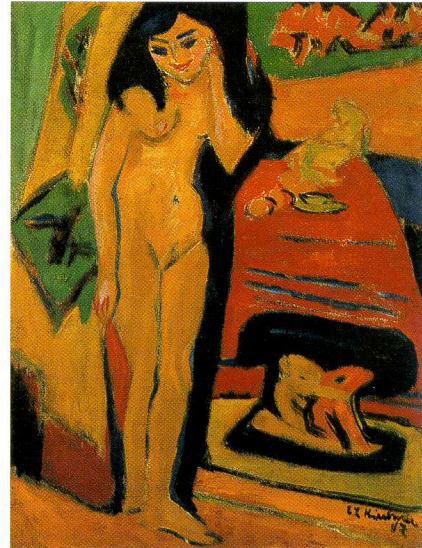
occurred without the need for agreement as to their value and significance. But as with Romanticism, to write about modernism in art is inevitably to enter an area of substantial controversy.

We should try to establish some more secure ground from which to start. It is normal to associate the modern in art with a breakdown of the traditional decorum in Western culture that previously connected the appearance of works of art to the appearance of the natural world. The typical symptoms of this breakdown are a tendency for the shapes, colours and materials of art to lead a life of their own, forming unusual combinations, offering distorted or exaggerated versions of the appearances of nature and, in some cases, losing all obvious connection to the ordinary objects of our visual experience. Thus a painting that looks like nothing on earth is liable to be categorised – on the streets at least

– as a ‘modern’ painting, though it may by now be the best part of a century old. To ask why this breakdown occurs when it does, and in the manner that it does, is to inquire into the historical character and form of modernism.

The works of art in which such symptoms are first unmistakably discernible were produced by avant-garde artists working in a number of major European cities in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. It was the development of Cubism in the years after 1907 that most clearly marked a break with previous styles (figs. 3, 32). In 1948 the American critic Clement Greenberg looked back to Cubism as ‘the epoch-making feat of twentieth-century art, a style that has changed and determined the complexion of Western art as radically as Renaissance naturalism once did’ (Greenberg 1948, in Greenberg II 1986, p. 212). However different accounts of modernism may vary in their chronological span, all are agreed on this at least: that the moment of Cubism and of its immediate aftermath must be accorded a central importance.





In its origins Cubism was a Parisian phenomenon, as was the roughly contemporary tendency that came to be known as Fauvism – a tendency in which simplification of form was combined with expressive exaggeration of colour (fig.4). By the outbreak of the First World War in September 1914, however, groups of contributors to an international modern movement were to be found in Milan, Munich, Moscow, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, London and elsewhere, their related forms of avant-gardism variously incorporating, adapting or transforming more local and more traditional interests and practices. There were Futurists in Italy (fig.5) and Russia, Expressionists in Germany (fig.6), and Vorticists in England (fig.7), while the possibility of an abstract art was being pursued by individual artists in a number of different locations. The war years from 1914 to 1918 saw the beginnings of Suprematism (fig.8) and Constructivism in Russia, and the expansion of a cosmopolitan Dada movement in Zurich, Berlin, Paris and New York.

We are immediately faced with a paradox – one to which we shall need to return at various points. On the one hand there is relatively widespread agreement that such works as these deserve to be considered as forms of ‘modern art’. On the other hand these same works have on the whole remained incomprehensible and in many cases unattractive to the great majority of people, who would no doubt see themselves in all other respects as qualified inhabitants of the modern world. How is it that a difficult and largely unpopular art has played so substantial a part in deciding the cultural self-image of the century?

A similar question might be asked with respect to the music and literature of the early twentieth century, in which comparable modernist tendencies may be seen at work. In studying the rise of modernism in music one might consider the breakdown of classical harmony and tonality during the later nineteenth century and the development of atonal forms by composers of the Viennese School in the early years of the twentieth. Similarly, to study literary modernism is to read the work of early twentieth-century poets who

5 above left
Giacomo Balla

Abstract Speed – The Car Has Passed 1913

Oil on canvas
50.2 × 65.4
(19% × 25%)
Tate Gallery

6 above right
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Nude behind a Curtain (Franzi) 1910

Oil on canvas
120 × 90 (47% × 35%)
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam

departed from conventional patterns of rhyme and metre, or of novelists whose forms of narrative seem deliberately to frustrate the accepted conventions of storytelling. The resulting works have an undeniable standing in the culture of the century, but they cannot be said to have achieved popularity. An aura of difficulty still clings to the music of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, to the poetry of T.S. Eliot and to the novels of Franz Kafka and James Joyce.

On the basis of this evidence, it is tempting to conceive of modernism as a form of specifically twentieth-century cultural revolution, driven by rapid technological progress and political ferment, involving the pursuit of change for its own sake and issuing in forms of militant avant-gardism and experiment. Some of the most influential characterisations of modernism have indeed been sketched out along these lines. There is much apparently to recommend such a view. The pace of stylistic change in the arts does seem to have accelerated dramatically after the turn of the century. It is also true that relevant connections can be made between the theories that circulated in the artistic avant-gardes and those forms of social and political vision that invested the politics of the period. The Futurists in Italy and the Suprematists and Constructivists in Russia were each in their different ways anticipating forms of social and political change to which they intended their works to contribute, and by which they expected them to be justified.

But this account of modernism is in the end inadequate. It has two major deficiencies. The first is that it encourages us to think of the modern art of the early twentieth century simply as the artistic expression of modernity; that is to say as a form of spontaneous reaction to social conditions and historical events. We are then in danger of underestimating those concerns and problems specific to the practices and traditions of art which may also have been powerful motivating factors in the development of new forms and styles. Whether or not individual artists react to historical conditions and changes, their work is done as art, and in their thought about how this work is

7 below left
Wyndham Lewis

Composition 1913

Pen, watercolour and
pencil on paper

34.3 × 26.7

(13% × 10%)

Tate Gallery

8 below right
Kasimir Malevich

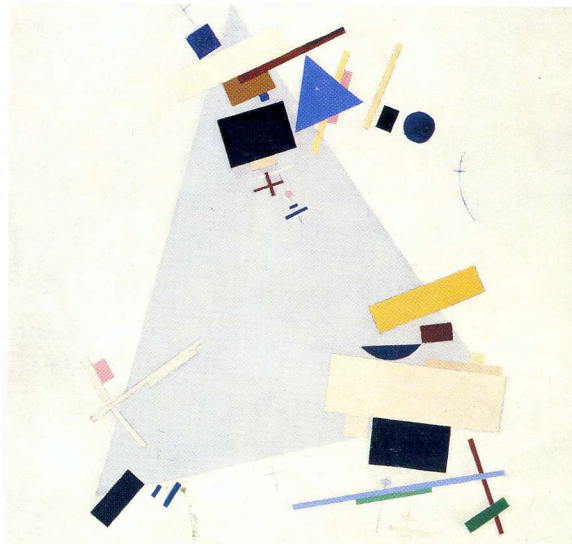
Dynamic Suprematism

1915 or 1916

Oil on canvas

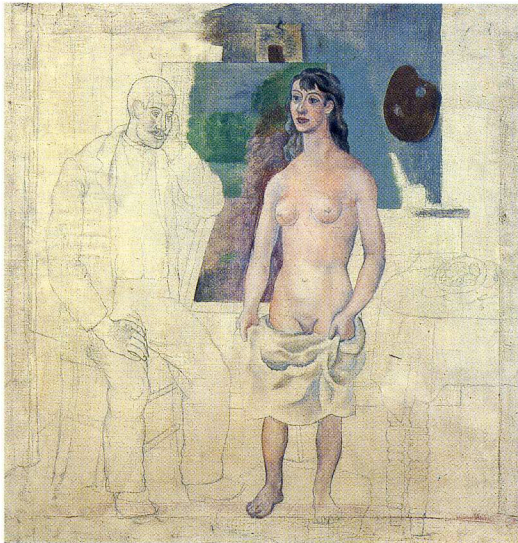
80.3 × 80 (31% × 31%)

Tate Gallery



to be pursued they tend to refer to other art, be it the achievements of an earlier generation, their own immediately previous production, or the enterprises of their contemporaries. Indeed, it may be precisely this recourse to the apparent intensity of other art that assures the artist of some independence of judgement and expression *in face of* social conditions and historical events. As we shall see, many of the most influential of modern art's early supporters believed that it was precisely in its independence from social concerns and processes that the value of modernist art was to be found.

The second deficiency in the account is that it encourages us to consider modernist avant-gardism in virtual isolation as the representative art of the twentieth century. The danger here is that we may come to regard modernism as a somehow 'natural' and inescapable tendency in culture, and fail to bear in mind that it was always an option among others – and one never adopted by more than a minority. We tend to assume, with some justice, that by the turn



of the century the lines of battle were clearly drawn between modernists and traditionalists. It does not follow, however, that it can always have been easy for the artist in the studio to distinguish what was and what was not a 'modern' direction to pursue, or, indeed, what might or might not constitute a 'modern' form of response to historical events. If modernism represents a form of value, it is one that was not to be achieved without thought or struggle. Nor should we assume that obscurity was an end that artists pursued for its own sake. Pablo Picasso was one of the

leading figures in the Parisian avant garde during the first two decades of the century. Even during the periods when his most consistently 'difficult' works were produced we find moments of lucid conservatism or of classicism. He seems to have found it necessary at certain points to re-establish contact with that which modernism was not, as if modernism's necessity and its value were uncertain in the absence of sufficient contrast (fig.9). However we are to conceive of modernism, in other words, we need to think of it in relation to such other forms of value as art might at any given moment be thought to possess.

From these two cautions – that we should avoid conceiving of modern art *either* as merely reactive *or* as somehow isolated and unquestionable – we may derive a single more positive account of modernism. The first point to note, as already mentioned, is that the practice of art is necessarily conducted within the context of some tradition of art and with regard to other works of art. Even among the more abstract productions of the early twentieth-century avant gardes there occasionally occur forms of quotation and

9

Pablo Picasso

The Artist and his Model
1914

Oil and pencil
on canvas
58 × 56 (22½ × 22)
Musée Picasso, Paris

10

Joan Miró

Dutch Interior I 1928

Oil on canvas
91.8 × 73 (36¼ × 28¾)
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York.
Mrs Simon Guggenheim
Fund



reference by which the works of previous artists are conjured up. For his *Dutch Interior I* of 1928 (fig.10) Joan Miró took as his point of departure a painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Hendrick Sorgh that he had seen on a trip to Holland. The second point to bear in mind is that the value of modernism is established in practice as a kind of intentional *difference* with respect to other current forms and styles and practices. In many cases a modern work will invite comparison with some similar but more conservative manner of treating of a given subject, as if it is precisely through what is *not* shared – through the remainder that is left when all common features have been excluded – that its real meaning is to be found (figs.11, 12). Thus Cézanne



regarded the works of the Academician Bouguereau as a model of what to avoid.

The proposition to which these observations are leading is that modernism may fruitfully be thought of as a form of tradition, but one maintained in a kind of critical tension with the wider surrounding culture. The tradition in question is one in which what is carried forward is not a given stylistic canon, but rather a kind of disposition or tendency. On this view, artists of a modernist persuasion will tend to dissociate themselves and their practices from authorised manners of seeing and picturing the world, while nevertheless seeking to maintain that independent depth and intensity of effect for which other art alone provides the measure. It follows that, whereas a form of art may be identified as *modern* on the basis of its style alone, to call a work of art

modernist is to make a finer distinction. It is to register its appearance as significant of certain critical commitments and attitudes maintained by the artist with regard both to the larger culture of the present and to the art of the recent past. This may help to explain how significant values come to be carried through artistic works that remain unpopular in the sense of being difficult to connect to prevailing cultural interests and values. It may also help to explain why a modernist art such as Matisse's or Rothko's should appear to distance itself from those forms by which the appearance of the modern is normally defined; why, that is, their art should show so little sign of the effects of mechanisation and the expansion of consumer goods.

11
William-Adolphe
Bouguereau

The Bathers 1884

Oil on canvas

210 × 129

(82% × 50%)

The Art Institute of
Chicago. A.A. Munger
Collection

12
Paul Cézanne

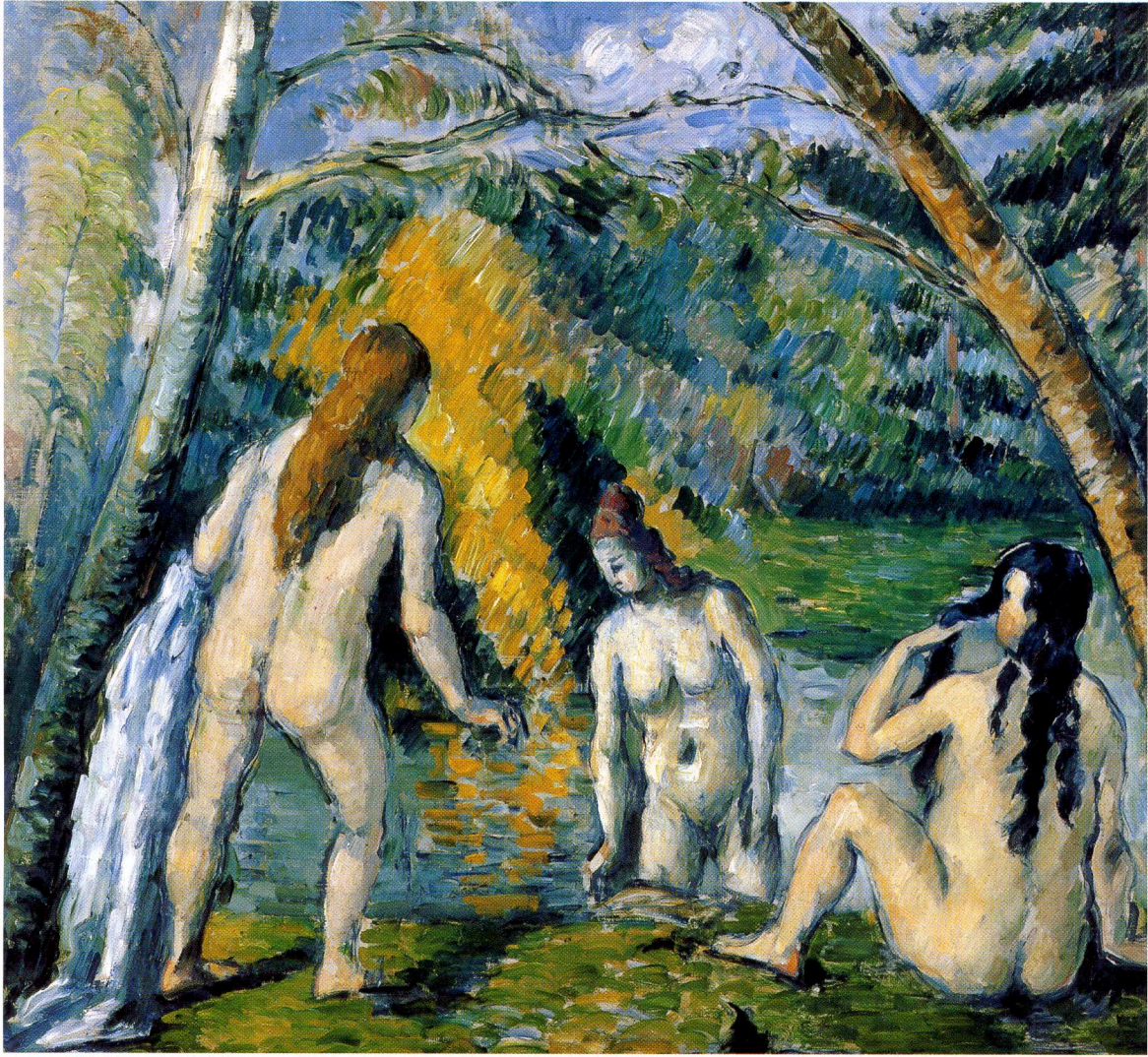
The Three Bathers

1879–82

Oil on canvas

52 × 55 (20% × 21%)

Musée du Petit Palais
de la Ville de Paris



13

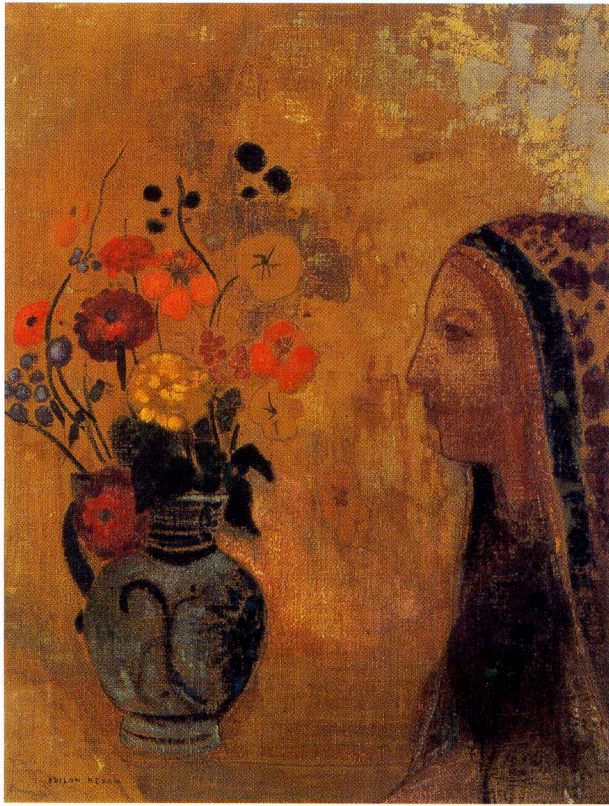
Odilon Redon

*Profile of a Woman with
a Vase of Flowers*
c.1895–1905Oil on canvas
65.5 × 50.5
(25¾ × 20)
Tate Gallery

THE MODERNIST TRADITION

The principal focus of this book is on the modernist art of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but given the connection mentioned earlier between the evaluation of modernism and its periodisation, we should give some thought to the derivation of a modernist tradition. In considering what this broadly involves, it is useful to bear in mind the ways in which the modern and the classical are distinguished in the study of human languages. A modern language is one that is still in everyday use and is thus still adaptable and transformable for the purposes of expression. The classical languages of ancient Greek and Latin, by contrast, are fixed into an unchanging form by their surviving inscriptions and by the canons of their literature. Matters are similar in the field of art. The aspiration to modernism makes little sense if conceived of in isolation. Rather it reveals itself in contrast with the values of some cultural tradition that the artist has come to regard as both canonical and untransformable.

In the majority of European cultures during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the classical arts of the Greeks and Romans constituted the foundations of a continuous tradition and furnished the constant standards by which any relevant achievement was to be measured. This art was largely understood on the basis of surviving monuments and fragments, while, though no Greek painting survived as such, its supposed achievements were extrapolated from the evidence of sculpture and from suggestions derived from classical texts. Those contemporary artists who hoped to win the patronage of the cultured and the powerful for the most part aspired to



a kind of matching standard. That is to say, they submitted to the idea that the route to success in art was defined by the authority of classical exemplars and the continuity of classical principles. From the mid seventeenth century in France and from the late eighteenth century in England, this authority and sense of continuity were principally vested in Academies (the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Royal Academy in London), which also had the important function of representing standards of professional competence to potential purchasers and patrons.

Under such circumstances, what might it mean for an artist to conceive of a 'modern' art as some form of alternative? The first thing we could say about this artist is that he or she must have come to experience the inherited language of art as unchanging and unchangeable,

and in that sense as unsuitable for any spontaneous or individual form of expression. In pursuing the idea of a 'modern' art, this artist would thus be motivated both by frustration at the rigidity and impersonality of the ruling grammar and vocabulary of art, and by a certain determination regarding the currency and difference – the individual value – of that which he or she had to express. This is indeed how it seems to have been. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become a virtual convention that to express just such a mixture of frustration and determination was to proclaim the 'modernism' of one's disposition. This is the French artist Odilon Redon (fig.13) looking back to the time of his studentship in the 1860s:

The teaching I was given did not suit my nature. The professor had for my natural gifts the most . . . complete lack of appreciation . . . I saw that his obstinate eyes were closed before what mine saw . . . Young, sensitive, and irrevocably of my time, I was there hearing I-don't-know-what rhetoric, derived, one doesn't know how, from the works of a fixed past . . . No possible link between the two, no possible union. (Redon 1922, in Rewald 1961, p.73)

As this passage makes clear, the aim to be 'modern' typically grew from some sense that the present was being unduly shaped in the image of the past, and from some consequent loss of identification with the dominant tendency of the culture. It is reasonable to assume that where that loss was significant in terms of the production of distinct alternative forms of art, it cannot simply have been the experience of a few socially maladjusted individuals

(or 'geniuses'), but must have coincided with some larger change of self-image in a substantial section of society. If modernism was unacademic in its origins and in its development, then, as it generally was, this was not simply because certain artists were unwilling to conform to classical styles. It was because the entire mode of existence within which modernist critical intuitions were realised was incompatible with the world of values that the Academies were there to represent. Under such circumstances academic standards were bound to appear at best inadequate and at worst decadent and oppressive (as they already did, for instance, to the Romantic William Blake at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The would-be modern artist must then look elsewhere than the authorised classical tradition – into other reaches of the culture or into other cultures altogether – for models to emulate and for measures of aesthetic achievement.


To think of modernism in these terms is to suggest a strong alternative to the identification of modernist art simply with the avant-garde enterprises of the early twentieth century. As implied earlier, it involves recognising a tradition of modernist sensibility with some specific moral and intellectual building blocks, which can be traced back to the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is the period that embraced the European Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the rise of Romanticism in Germany. In the advanced thought of this period certain major tendencies may be noted that were to remain consistently relevant to the pursuit of modernism in all the arts. Though these tendencies were closely interconnected, I shall single out four for the sake of clarity.

The first tendency is confidence in the possibility of progress and betterment in human societies, to be brought about through the exploitation of technological advances and the application of rational principles. In the Kantian philosophy of the time, it was seen as an inescapable obligation of the educated that one should strive for the elimination of error through processes of rational self-criticism. The second tendency is a determination to break with the legacy of classicism in its aristocratic forms (though not, it should be noted, with the supposed classical ideal of a republican freedom). For the French Enlightenment critic Denis Diderot, a 'modern' taste was one that self-consciously distanced itself from the decorative neo-classical modes of the *ancien régime*. The third tendency is a commitment to scepticism in the face of received ideas and beliefs, however apparently authoritative, combined with an inclination to regard direct experience as the true source of knowledge. For the Empiricist philosopher it was incumbent upon the responsible individual to seek emancipation from superstition, and to suspend a given belief if no relevant observation and experience could be adduced to confirm it. (This grounding in Enlightenment scepticism helps to explain modernist art's virtually complete disengagement from traditional religious themes.) The fourth tendency, associated particularly with the Romantic movement, is to stress the role of the imagination in safeguarding human freedom and in realising human potential. It could be said of this last tendency that it represents a synthesis of all the others. The capacity to imagine a different order of things is a necessary condition of critical and

self-critical activity. It is a form of creative projection in thought, which is mere idealism unless it is grounded in those values that one's direct experience confirms. (Though this understanding of imagination may not be entirely standard, it is central to the development of modernism, as I hope to show.)

To apply the concept of modernism to the history of art, then, is to refer to a tendency that accords **priority to the imagination** as thus defined, that is affirmative of the value of **direct experience**, and that is **critical of ideas that remain resistant to change**. As implied earlier, we should not expect to be able to identify a specific modernist style. Rather, modernist art will tend to define itself by reference to the kinds of style from which it establishes its difference. In fact, we might say that one of the identifying signs of a modernist art will be a kind of scepticism or wariness about *any* fixed relationship between a picture and its subject – a form of **self-consciousness**, in other words, about **how the picturing is done**. In the classical art of the eighteenth century and in the academic art of the nineteenth, technique was conceived of as a means to realise a subject. It was assumed that, at the point at which that realisation was achieved, technique as such would cease to be noticeable. It would, as it were, be seen through. It is a distinguishing feature of modernism, as we shall see, that its technical means can no longer be allowed to become transparent.

This distinction between pre-modernist and modernist art was described by Clement Greenberg in terms that have been much quoted:

 Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; **Modernism used art to call attention to art**. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly ... Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first ... (Greenberg 1960, in Greenberg IV 1993, pp.86–7)

The essay from which that quotation is taken was first issued under the title 'Modernist Painting' in 1960. Greenberg's ideas have had so strong an influence on thought about the nature of modernism that no discussion of the subject can proceed far without some acknowledgement of them. By means of what he represented as a 'logic of development', Greenberg aimed to connect a series of decisive judgements in favour of individual artists to a retrospective view of modernism as a historical phase or period in western culture. In Greenberg's view all that was 'truly alive' in modern culture was possessed of a self-critical aspect, that he traced back to the Enlightenment. In Greenberg's view this aspect was not to be identified with the imagery of a work or with such descriptive or narrative content as it might possess. On the contrary, it was revealed in each art through a kind of **concentration upon those technical considerations that were specific to the medium**. According to the logic of development Greenberg perceived, 'Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.' In each

art, it emerged, these effects 'coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium.' So far as painting was concerned, the unique property was its flatness. Accordingly, 'Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else' (loc. cit.).

We should not be surprised to discover that the artists connected together in Greenberg's canon are those whose works can be made to tell a story of progressive flattening of the apparent pictorial surface and, by implication, of progressive loss of figurative form and content. This story begins in the 1860s with the French painter Edouard Manet (fig.14), whose works 'became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted' (ibid., p.86). It continues with the Impressionists and with Paul Cézanne, and runs on via the Cubists and Henri Matisse, Joan Miró and Jackson Pollock (fig.45), to Kenneth Noland (fig.48) and Morris Louis (fig.52), these last being the painters by whose current work Greenberg's critical attention was engaged at the time he was writing his essay.

It should be made clear that the account 'Modernist Painting' provides is an account of *high* art. The logic of development that Greenberg observes may be applied specifically to painting, and in general terms to sculpture, and to the kinds of music and literature sometimes described as 'serious', but it is capable of being extended into the larger culture only in negative terms. In other words, in identifying modernism both with forms of high art, and with all that is 'truly alive in our culture' (ibid., p.85), Greenberg was consigning popular culture and mass culture to the realms of the culturally inert. This position is consistent with the conclusions of his much earlier essay, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' of 1939, in which he proposed that the role of the avant-garde was 'to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence' and in face of the habituating effects of kitsch (Greenberg 1939, in Greenberg I 1986, p.8). Under the heading of kitsch – 'the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times' – Greenberg conflated the works of the modern academy with the synthetic products of urbanised mass culture (ibid., p.12).

Of course, influential as Greenberg's analysis has been, some strong objections have been raised to this account of the culture of the past two hundred or so years. Though 'Modernist Painting' was not explicitly written as an argument for abstract art, it is hard to see how painting's traditional figurative themes could survive the kind of reductive process Greenberg appears to propose as inescapable. Many people have been unwilling to accept the consequent association of modern high art with abstract painting and sculpture. For others, no theory of modernism could be acceptable that distinguishes between the values of modernist painting on the one hand and popular culture on the other in terms so apparently unfavourable to the latter. Even those who find themselves in broad agreement with Greenberg's judgements about which are the most important painters of the period may still find themselves unable to agree with the terms in which he connects them together: the logic of development by which painting is supposed progressively to purge itself of imagery, detail and depth in pursuit of a kind

14
Edouard Manet
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe
1863
Oil on canvas
208 × 264 (82 × 104 in.)
Musée d'Orsay

of reductive 'purity'. It has often been noted that Greenberg's 'logic of development' is only confirmed by the evidence of painting if one allows that the apparent exceptions – those artists, such as Salvador Dalí, who continue throughout the mid-twentieth century to employ roundly modelled forms and deep illusionistic spaces – do not in fact achieve 'major' status, and thus need not even be taken into account.

For those concerned to maintain traditional values in one form or another, and for all those who stand outside the framework that Greenberg proposes, modernist art as he describes it must appear merely as one form of practice among many; one, moreover, that seems to deal dismissively with just those competences in illusionistic picturing that many people continue to expect of art. Such people are likely to view those adopting this framework as themselves caught up in – and preaching – a form of 'Modernism'. The



important lesson here is that to talk of modernism is not necessarily to refer only to a form of the practice of art. Increasingly since the early 1960s, the term Modernism has been used to label a specific tradition and tendency in criticism – one in which the art of the modern period is viewed and represented in a way consistent with Greenberg's theories and judgements.

We shall look

more closely at the character of this critical tradition in Chapters 5 and 6, and will give some further attention to Greenberg's account of modern art in chapter seven. Meanwhile, my aim will be to employ a form of 'Modernist' view on the painting and sculpture of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so as to single out a specific artistic tendency or tradition characterised along 'Modernist' lines. I shall also try to stand back from that view, however, so that the particular judgements and assumptions it involves may be held up to scrutiny. The terms 'Modernism' and 'Modernist' will henceforth be capitalised whenever I mean them to be understood primarily as referring to a critical rather than an artistic tradition or point of view. As will become increasingly clear, however, it will not always be possible or useful to distinguish the tendencies of artistic practice from those of criticism.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND SCEPTICISM

If the roots of a modernist tradition can justifiably be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century, Greenberg's identification of Manet as the 'first Modernist painter' suggests that the disposition modernism represents took some considerable time to achieve a practical outcome in art. It also suggests that the moment of that achievement, when it came, was such as to be precisely pinpointed. Both suggestions deserve to be treated with some caution. Forms of academic practice certainly remained predominant during the first half of the nineteenth century, supported for the most part by aristocratic patronage and, increasingly, by governmental agencies and by those who had made commercial fortunes. But, as I have suggested, many of the priorities and commitments of which a modernist tradition was to be composed were worked out gradually during the same period. During the second decade Caspar David Friedrich in Germany and John Constable in England produced landscape paintings of great aesthetic power that were largely independent of the ordering principles of classicism. Friedrich instilled his work with romantic psychological resonance. Constable appeared to derive his pictures from a resolutely empirical regard upon the natural world, thereby risking the criticism that his work was insufficiently 'artistic'. During the 1820s and 1830s a number of French artists looked outside the European tradition for points of reference. Notable among them, Eugène Delacroix brought a decidedly unclassical exoticism of colour and painterly texture to the treatment of North African and Middle Eastern themes. And in the 1840s and 1850s a new social constituency found

15

James Abbott
Whistler*The White Girl*
(*Symphony in White*
No. 1) 1862Oil on canvas
214.7 × 108
(84½ × 42½)
National Gallery
Washington D.C.
Whittemore Co.

representation in the Realist paintings of Gustave Courbet. Though often sentimentalised in the Academies, the peasantry of the French countryside and the marginalised poor of the European capitals had themselves remained untouched by the decorum of the classical. In the mid century they began to appear in painting as it were on more equal terms with the genteel spectator.



This new form of their appearance was a sign, often threatening to that spectator, that the social forces and tensions by which modernism itself was impelled were being brought closer to the surface of the art. We might also note that the five volumes of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* were published in England between 1843 and 1860, and that the principal focus of his endeavour was the work of J.M.W. Turner, while the French critic and poet Charles Baudelaire issued his call for a 'painting of modern life' in reviewing the French Salon of 1859.

There is plenty of evidence, in fact, to show that the gap between classical and modern forms of artistic practice was widening gradually as the nineteenth century progressed. It could be said, however, that the *distinctness* of the modernist disposition was first made fully and self-consciously palpable during the 1860s, when Manet's paintings came to public notice. The French Salon of 1863 marked a clear and public point of schism; or rather what most tellingly and publicly revealed the schism was the contrast between the official Salon and a Salon des Refusés (Salon of the Rejected), set up by the French Emperor following protests at the extent and nature of the exclusions from the Salon in that year. The jury had rejected some 60 per cent of the works submitted. The apparently liberal justification for showing these works in a Salon des Refusés was to enable the public to judge for itself. Manet was one of those who elected to have his rejected works thus exhibited, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* most notorious among them (fig.14).

James McNeill Whistler was happy to leave his painting *The White Girl* (fig.15) to this alternative form of adjudication. Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne were among the other exhibitors. With the benefit of hindsight we can conclude that, by 1863, those liable to be excluded from the principal professional forum on the grounds of incompetence included a significant number of the painters we now esteem most highly among the artists of their time. What this suggests is that conflicting forms of valuation were at work within the wider culture of art. Another way to put this might be to say that by 1863 – in France at least – it was becoming clear that taste in art was no longer something that one dominant section of society could define and control.

Even with hindsight, though, the Salon des Refusés should not be thought of as a straightforward triumph for the values that we now associate with modernism. A high proportion of the three thousand rejected works must have been unsuccessful attempts to produce normally academic pictures. In leaving their own paintings to be exhibited with these, painters such as Manet and Whistler took the risk that their work would be seen by the visitors to the Salon des Refusés as what it had been deemed to be by the Salon jury: incompetent *rather than* modern. The risk, in other words, was that the critical difference of their own paintings would fail to register – as it no doubt did for the great majority of visitors. What, then, was the nature of this difference? How did it make itself manifest? And how was it that the works of Manet, and even more improbably of Cézanne (the merits of whose work Manet himself was unable to accept), came in the end to be seen not simply as competent, but as possessed of abiding value? In addressing the second of these questions we provide ourselves with the key to the other two. If we can explore the distinctive effects of these works, we will be in a better position to appreciate their departure from contemporary norms. We may also begin to understand why it is that they tended to remain of interest and value as the works of more immediately successful artists came to be disregarded.

What we are considering, in effect, are the reasons for modernism's establishment as the representative art of the modern period. In pursuit of this inquiry, then, I want to consider two paintings produced within a few years of each other in the mid-1870s, one by Manet (fig.16), the other by Carolus Duran, a painter whose work was more consistently deemed acceptable in the Salon (fig.17). I have chosen them because they are similar in many respects. Each uses a landscape format to picture a full-length and near life-size figure of a woman in a lounging pose. In both pictures the woman appears to look out so as to engage the eye of the spectator, or rather of some imaginary person whose presence the composition seems to presuppose.

Another way to put this last point would be to say that each painting offers its actual spectator an imaginary role as the woman's interlocutor. In exploring the differences in these imaginary roles and in the means of their construction, we immediately confront some marked differences in effect between the two pictures. In the case of the Carolus Duran we are invited to look through the surface of the painting in the manner Greenberg associated with 'realistic, naturalistic art', and as it were to project ourselves into the

16
Edouard Manet
Woman with Fans de Callias 1873
 113 × 166.5
 (44½ × 65½)
 Musée d'Orsay, Paris

17
E. Carolus Duran
Mademoiselle de Lancey c.1876
 Oil on canvas
 157.5 × 200
 (62 × 78¾)
 Musée du Petit Palais de la Ville de Paris



space the woman is shown to occupy. To linger too long on the means by which the illusion is sustained – the modelling of her figure, the techniques for depiction of satin and pearls – would be somehow to lose sight of the rounded figure in her shadowy space, and to step outside that state of mind in which her identity and character impress themselves upon us. With Manet's picture it is different. The eye level is set slightly lower, the figure slightly closer within the pictorial space. Small as these differences are they are sufficient to locate the spectator as it were on level terms, very close to the picture plane (the notional 'front' of the represented space) though firmly this side of it. The relative shallowness of the picture space serves to emphasise a feeling both of proximity and of self-awareness on the spectator's part, while the frankness with which the illusion is achieved seems consistent with the apparently unassuming character of the figure we confront.

If we were to sum up these differences in effect, we might say that while Carolus Duran's picture sets its subject up to be seen and addressed in a flattering manner, Manet's treats viewer and subject as potentially equal partners in a social exchange. Such an assessment would certainly fit with what can be discovered about the respective subjects of the two paintings. Mlle de Lancy was an actress, whom Carolus Duran must have been commissioned to represent in the style of a society beauty. Manet's subject, Nina de Callias, was a friend of the artist, a socially independent woman who was hostess to gatherings of the literary-artistic circles in which he moved.

There are two points to note here. The first is that in each case the form and composition of the picture serve not simply to describe a certain subject – the depicted woman – but also to place the spectator in a specific imaginary relationship with that subject. In fact we might now redefine what we mean by 'subject-matter', so that it includes not simply *what* is pictured, but also the form of effect on the spectator's imagination that follows from *how* the picturing is done. Thus one effect of the more noticeable brushwork of Manet's painting is to stress the spectator's implication in what the picture shows.

The second point is that while some paintings, like Carolus Duran's, invite us to project ourselves through their transparent surfaces and to become the guests of their fictional spaces, others, like Manet's, seem rather to act upon the space we are already occupying, and to require that we redefine our self-consciousness in their own – often quite specific – terms. Now whether or not we can apply this distinction over works from earlier periods, it seems to have been only during the mid-to-late nineteenth century that it became an issue of critical importance. It is as if the person for whom Manet was painting was someone to whom the social reality represented by the portrait of Mlle de Lancy was no longer plausible or attractive. To say this is also to say something about where we should look for explanation of the differences in question. It is to suggest that we should think not simply in terms of developments in the art of painting, but rather in terms of larger social and cultural changes – processes and consequences of modernisation – by which painting itself was bound to be affected. The specific kinds of change I have

in mind, of course, were those that might be said to define the experience of modernity. These were the changes that bore down upon people's sense of themselves as this was given by their immediate social and physical environment: by the nature of their relations with others and by their experience of urban or suburban or rural life. The distinguishing factor in what we come to see as modernism, however, is that rather than simply reflecting these changes, it involves some form of reflection *upon* them: the assertion of a position – a critical self-consciousness – in the face of modernity.

Here, then, is the point at which a gap seems to open between modernism and modernity. Modernism was not to be the mere passive expression of the experience of modernity. Rather it was to stand for the attempt to secure some independence of thought and value – some autonomy – in the face of that experience. The self-image of the modernist, as thus constructed, depended upon the maintenance of some sense of distance from those seen as the typical representatives of the modern: those, that is to say, who were either the agents or the patients of modernisation.

So far as the practice of art was concerned, what this distancing process involved was a kind of sceptical *unfixing* of those kinds of stable relations between subject and spectator that works of art had previously tended to assume. Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was scandalising not because it pictured a typical form of modern social situation, which it did not, nor because it offered a realistic account of some exciting bohemian alternative. Rather its disturbing effect upon the viewer was to make present to the imagination just those components that modern social life could not in practice allow together – nudity and modern dress among them. (For those in a position to recognise his quotations, the ironies of Manet's painting were clear enough. Its general theme referred to the classical type of the *fête champêtre*, in which it was normal for dressed and undressed figures to be gracefully combined, while the main figure group was posed after a composition attributed to Raphael.) This may finally help us to understand just why it was that works such as this were in the end distinguished from among the host of other contemporary works with which they invited comparison. The interesting difference of Manet's paintings registered with those whose responses to processes of modernisation and to the experience of modernity were already mixed. In serving to distinguish the idealised imagery of the past from the uncomfortable appearances of the present, the occasions of intimacy from the occasions of alienation, they seemed to speak to and to encourage an alertness to the complex *character* of the modern, at least in the eyes of those who now took the opportunity to advance themselves, through acts of criticism, of entrepreneurship or of patronage, as the competent judges of the art, the music, the literature and the manners of the present. This is to imply that the success of modernist art may be associated with the coming into being of a distinct 'modernist' constituency, a constituency whose critical values it helped to define by giving them imaginative form. From the mid nineteenth century until at least the late twentieth, no single factor served more consistently to identify the members of this constituency than their

concern to distance themselves from the normal tastes and values of 'the bourgeoisie'. It should be noted, however, that they themselves had no other class to belong to. The aristocracy could not be entered at will, and was anyway in decline as a force in the determination of culture, while to be a writer, a patron or an entrepreneur was by definition to rule oneself out of the working class. If the members of the modernist constituency were to



18
Edouard Manet
Woman with a Cat
c.1880
Oil on canvas
92.1 × 73 (36 1/8 × 28 3/4)
Tate Gallery

maintain a sense of their own distinctness, then, they must continually demonstrate the *exceptional* character of their own tastes and interests. Under these conditions, it is not hard to see just how useful an apparently difficult and unpopular art might prove to be.

I have made considerable use of the idea that there is a form of imaginary experience that Manet's art solicits and defines. I suggested in the previous chapter that emphasis upon the critical and self-critical function of the

imagination may be seen as central to the tendency of modernism. We can now expand on this suggestion along the following lines. Modernist painting puts into effect a distinction between wanton self-projection or fantasy on the one hand and critical self-awareness or imagination on the other – a distinction that is necessary both to its own aesthetic ends and to the self-image of the public it attracts. To signal the appropriateness of its project the modernist work may need to establish some form of reference to the surrounding culture. But the distinction it has to offer is made not simply in terms of what it is that the modernist picture shows. More significantly it is made in terms of the kind of *self-conscious* activity it defines – and defines as *modern* – for the spectator. It is thus first and foremost through the manifest forms of its composition – not simply through its depicted subject, but through forms of practical negotiation between that subject and the decorated surface – that the modernist work of art serves to position its paradigm spectator relative to the emotional and intellectual manners of its time. Thus we might associate the property of modernism with the generation of a kind of scepticism in the spectator. What distinguishes the modernist work from the merely contemporary, we might say, is that it makes involvement with the procedures of representation a *condition of valid response* to whatever it is that is represented.

In the late picture of his wife, now in the Tate Gallery (fig.18), we can see the technical implications of Manet's modernism pursued to a point where the demand made upon the spectator is palpable and severe. The painting stimulates our habitual strivings to detach the image from the painted surface, and thus to make it correspond to our stereotypes of solid and comfortable domesticity. But Manet stimulates these strivings only to depreciate them. For all its lifelikeness, the image never quite loses its sheer artificiality. Hard as we may try to imagine the actual figure in its homely setting, we find ourselves caught up in the very process of its fabrication. To experience the painting in this manner, *as a composition*, is to comprehend the kind of work that is required in order to see and to represent without sentimentality. There is satisfaction of an aesthetic kind in this comprehension, but it is not a feeling we can carry back with any reassurance to the normal contexts of our own social existence. As the modernist poet T.S. Eliot was to observe, 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality'.