

Modernism

When?

1910 – second half of 20th century

Where?

Europe, Russia, U.S.A.

The early 20th century was marked by great changes in history and technology. Artists were deeply affected by the many innovations around them and tried hard to let their work mirror the novelties and express the experience of modern city life. Innovations like cars, aircrafts, electricity, x-ray, movies and radio waves influenced the avant garde formal achievements and often became the subjects of the new artworks.

Responding to the need for renewal suggested by new technology and an established industrial production, the artists started thinking that their role should go **beyond the mere artwork** and they aim to **redesign the world**. The romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork in German) let art expand up to industrial design and architecture and gathered together different kind of artists, architects, craftsmans and designers in international avant-garde movement as Futurism (Italy), Bauhaus (Germany), De Stijl (Holland), Constructivism (Russia). The art researches begun in the early years of the Twentieth Century are part of what is called Modernism, a revolt against the conservative values in favor of abstract, straight forward, and functional formal results.

Functionalism

Functionalism is one of the most evident features of modern trends in architecture, furniture design and industrial design in general. According to functionalism, the design of an object has to be based on its purpose. In architecture this means that buildings should be made of plain volumes, free from any useless decoration, conceived according to the function of the inner rooms. Form follows function: the usage of iron beams and reinforced concrete structures is emphasized and purposely revealed. Articulated volumes and big windows allow an organic interaction of building and environment.

Bauhaus (Weimar, 1919-1925, Dessau, 1925-1932; Berlin, 1932-1933)

Bauhaus was born as a high school aiming for effectively connecting creativity and manufacturing to prepare the architects, the artists and the designers for the modern new world. The Bauhaus

abandoned much of the old academic tradition of fine art education by linking intellectual concerns to the first-hand knowledge of materials, practical skills, crafts, materials and techniques. Fine art and craft were brought together to solve the problems of modern industrial society. Old hierarchy of the arts was leveled, paving the way for many of the ideas that have inspired artists for most of the upcoming 20th century. After Bauhaus, art was considered less as part of humanities, like literature or history, and more as a kind of research science. The most influential artists of last century, like V. Kandinsky, P.Klee, W.Gropius and Mies van der Rohe have been teaching at Bauhaus and most of them escaped the Nazi persecutions by emigrating in the U.S. where they kept on teaching and carrying out their research.

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), born and active in U.S.A., was one of the most important modern architects. His projects are based on variety in plan and volumes, free from any symmetry and fixed geometry. His masterpiece is *Fallingwater* (1936) a house build on a waterfall. The building grows in the environment according to the inner room and interacts with the surroundings, often including natural materials like stones, rock and wood, kept visible to emphasize the diversity of their texture. Among other buildings F.Lloyd Wright designed the *Guggenheim Museum* in New York City.

Mies van der Rohe's (1886 - 1969) projects are based on a visible structure, built up with a free standing system of horizontal and vertical metal or reinforced concrete elements able to support walls that can be made out of glass. This essential architecture is made precious by the materials employed, always revealed in their color and texture. Their reflective potential has a very important role in the designing of skyscrapers like the *Seagram building* in New York City.

Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as **Le Corbusier** (1887 – 1965) before becoming one of the most influential architects of modernism was a painter obsessed by the idea of purity and perfection. His buildings are based on pure geometrical forms, cubes and cylinders, arranged according to the harmonic proportions of the golden mean. Made of reinforced concrete, they are supported by elegant posts (pilotis) that allow the possibility of opening long windows on the walls (*Villa Savoy*, 1929-1931). The usage of white and pure primary colors endows his projects with a sober elegance that makes pleasant and precious even project with negative consequences on future residential housing like the *Unité d'Habitation* built in Marseille (1947-1952)

