

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

The way in which modern American and European art is studied is in large part due to the work and life of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. In 1929, Barr was appointed as first director of **The Museum of Modern Art** in New York City. As Director until 1943 (when he was forced to resign), Barr was instrumental in promoting the art of established modernists like van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and Cézanne. Additionally, there was perhaps no greater champion in America for the work of **Pablo Picasso**. Barr sought out many of the artist's pieces and arranged the well-known retrospective at MoMA in 1946, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*.

Key Ideas / Information

- When the Museum of Modern Art was first conceived, Barr was hand picked by the founding trustees to be its director. His goal was to create a permanent home for the world's greatest modern artists, a controversial idea in the early 20th century when modern art was characterized by its constantly changing nature. In that sense, a museum for modern art seemed to be an oxymoron. Barr sought to change that way of thinking.
- Barr believed that the artist led and the museum followed, and not the other way around. He also sought to present modern art and sculpture in the greater cultural context of modern society.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Alfred Hamilton Barr, Jr. was born in Detroit to Alfred Hamilton Barr, Sr., a Presbyterian

minister, and Annie Elizabeth Wilson, a homemaker. The family soon moved to Baltimore, Maryland where Barr spent his childhood.



He was valedictorian of his high school class, graduating at the age of 16, and then went on to study at Princeton University in 1918. Two years later he chose Art History as his major.

Post-World War I years

Barr graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton in 1922, and soon thereafter began teaching at Vassar College while simultaneously pursuing his Ph.D. at Harvard.

Between 1925 and 1928, Barr also taught art history and courses on modern art at Princeton University and Wellesley College.

While at Harvard, Barr studied under Dr. Paul J. Sachs (of the Goldman & Sachs banking family), the associate director of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. Under Sachs's tutelage, Barr curated the very first modern art show at the Fogg. Around this time, Barr also met Philip Johnson, who Barr would later appoint to direct The Museum of Modern Art's architecture department.

In 1927 Barr traveled to Dessau, Germany to educate himself in the Bauhaus school of art, founded by **Walter Gropius**, and home to artists such as **Wassily Kandinsky**, **Paul Klee** and **Joost Schmidt**. Barr was quite interested in the Bauhaus, and would eventually purchase several paintings, sculptures and lithographs on behalf of The Museum of Modern Art.



Early in 1929, Sachs, along with the philanthropist Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (the wife of John D. Rockefeller), a wealthy art collector named A. Conger Goodyear, and several other people all formed a committee to raise funds for a new museum devoted to modern art. On Sachs's recommendation, they chose Barr as the museum's director-to-be.

At MoMA's first show, Barr met Margaret ("Marga") Scolari-Fitzmaurice, an Irish-Italian woman who at the time was teaching art history at Vassar College. The two married in 1932.

Barr and his wife traveled to Germany in 1932-33, while Barr was taking a year-long sabbatical from the museum, and rented a home in Stuttgart, a city known for its modern art and architecture. Adolph Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany while the Barrs were there, and the two witnessed first-hand the closing of Stuttgart's art galleries and museums by the newly-empowered Nazi party. Not long after this, Barr sponsored the German art historian and professor Erwin Panofsky (and one of Panofsky's students) to come to the U.S. and receive a full-residency professorship.

Shocked by what they had seen, the Barrs traveled to Ascona, Switzerland and briefly took up residency there. In Switzerland, Barr wrote a series of articles about what he had witnessed in Germany. When they returned to the U.S., Barr tried to get his articles published but no newspapers or magazines would publish them. Mrs. Barr once recalled, "Everybody said he was hysterical, exaggerating - it *couldn't* be as bad as that!" One of the articles was printed in a small magazine called *Hound and Horn*, but none of the other articles saw a printing press until the entire set was published in *Magazine of Art* in 1945.

Barr's first major acquisition for MoMA was Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, which he purchased in 1938 for \$10,000 with the help of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.

During the 1930s, Barr curated an impressive number of groundbreaking shows at MoMA, including a van Gogh exhibition in '35, *Cubism and Abstract Art* in '36, a Bauhaus show in '38, and a Picasso retrospective in '39.

In 1943, MoMA exhibited a one-man show by a relatively unknown slipper manufacturer-cum-artist named Morris Hirshfield, who was referred to as a "primitive

painter": the figures in his paintings were infamous for having two left feet. The exhibition was scorned by critics, and though Barr had little to do with the Hirshfield show, MoMA's chairman of the board of directors, Stephen Clark, blamed Barr for the debacle. Clark and Barr clashed on nearly everything, and Barr was forced to resign as Museum Director that same year.



In the apocryphal account of Barr's forced resignation, Barr refused to leave, and instead secluded himself in the museum's library, running the day-to-day operations from behind the scenes. This story has since been confirmed as untrue. However, Barr was re-hired by the museum after a special administrative post was created for him, which came with a significant pay cut.

Post World War II Years

Since Barr had left Harvard to run the museum in 1929, he was never able to complete his Ph.D., but with the publication of his book *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* in 1946, Harvard accepted the book as Barr's dissertation and awarded him his Ph.D.

Soon after this, Barr was appointed to "Director of Collections" at MoMA, and moved back into his old office.

In 1960, the *New York Times* art critic John Canaday referred to Barr as "the most powerful tastemaker in American art today," a title which Barr resented, inferring that the *Times* was suggesting he was the dictator of the art world.

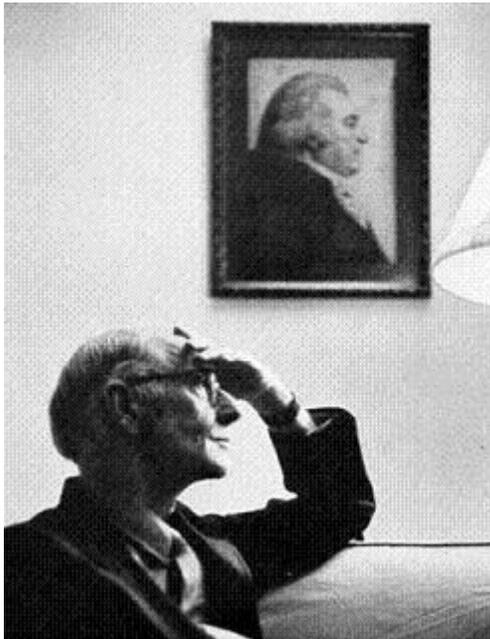
Later Years and Death

By the late 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had long been established as the leading artistic style of the modern era, and various offshoots were gaining favorable attention from critics as well, including Pop Art, Color Field Painting and Post-painterly Abstraction. Barr (and, consequently, MoMA) were late to embrace these newer modern

styles.

Barr officially retired from the museum in 1967 and settled in his Connecticut home. He fell ill with Alzheimer's disease in 1975, and passed away in a rest home six years later.

Legacy



Barr is arguably the catalyst for the American public's acceptance of and enthusiasm for modern art in the latter half of the 20th century. His work with The Museum of Modern Art helped secure modern art's place as an institution, rather than just a fleeting trend. Art historian and critic Thomas B. Hess once praised the work of Barr, and stated he was a man "whose taste and knowledge has set an international example to all who are interested in the fields of modern art."

One of Barr's more ambitious goals was to help establish a permanent collection at MoMA, to which the Museum's Board of Trustees finally agreed in 1953. Barr saw a permanent collection at MoMA as something that would secure modern art's place in the annals of Art History, and would finally make the Museum what he intended it to be from the beginning: a home to the greatest collection of modern art in the world. The works he selected for display at MoMA by artists such as Picasso, Matisse, van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gauguin (many of whom are in the Museum's permanent collection today), eventually formed the canon of modern art history.

Among his greatest innovations was the establishment of six different curatorial departments at MoMA: Painting and Sculpture, Drawings, Prints and Illustrated Books, Film, Photography, and Architecture and Design.

Barr may or may not have coined the term "International Style" for a movement in

modern, Bauhaus-influenced architecture made popular by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. Some have attributed the term's origin to the architects rather than Barr.

THEORY:

Introduction to Alfred Barr's Theories and Work

Alfred H. Barr, Jr. was an art history scholar and in many regards a formalist. He tended to group eras and movements of art history into schools of thought and technique, or what are commonly called -isms (i.e. Expressionism, Cubism, etc. etc.). Throughout his time working for MoMA, Barr's whole approach was to create a house of scholarship, whose chief goal should be not to discover the new but to classify the old.

On making MoMA what it is Today

The Museum's original founders did not share Barr's grand vision of a permanent home for modern art. Dwight Macdonald wrote in his 1953 profile of Barr for *The New Yorker*, "They had in mind nothing more complicated than an American version of the Luxembourg - a refuge for Modern art until it was 'ripe' enough to be accepted to our Louvre, the Metropolitan." When approached in 1929 by the committee to run MoMA, Barr responded with detailed plans for a multi-departmental museum, complete with sections devoted to modern architecture, film, photography, theatrical design sets, commercial art, and industrial art. The Museum of Modern Art would be more than a house for modern painting and sculpture; as far as Barr was concerned, if it was modern and culturally significant, it had a place at MoMA.

Barr on Abstract Expressionism

Before World War II, Barr was heavily criticized by many contemporary American artists and critics for not including in MoMA's collection much of the abstract art being produced in the very city Barr's museum called home. In 1940, a group calling itself the American Abstract Artists, led by Ad Reinhardt, picketed The Museum of Modern Art and distributed a leaflet that opened with the provocation, "HOW MODERN is THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART? WHAT DOES 'MODERN' MEAN? Does it mean ALL THE GREAT ART OF ALL TIME? .. Shouldn't 'Modern' conceivably include the 'Avant-garde'?"



Indeed, Barr was initially reticent to accept works by members of the "New York School" of Abstract Expressionism (at this time also known as Post-Abstract, Biomorph, and Intra-Subjectivist). It wasn't until after the war that MoMA began purchasing paintings by Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell and Hofmann, thus embracing the next phase in abstraction. (Barr has been heavily criticized for never purchasing a single painting by Mark Rothko, who was and is widely considered one of the giants of Abstract Expressionism.) Even though Barr was MoMA's Director of Collections after the war, there is little evidence to suggest that he was personally instrumental in launching the museum's post-war favor toward Abstract Expressionism. Nonetheless, under Barr's rule, the Collections Committee's prime focus remained with acquiring and showcasing the works of the modern "Old Masters" like Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Léger.

In the final section of Barr's 1936 book, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, entitled "The Younger Generation," he wrote: "The non-geometric biomorphic forms of Arp and Miró and Moore are definitely in the ascendant. The formal tradition of Gauguin, Fauvism and Expressionism will probably dominate for some time to come the tradition of Cézanne and Cubism." Barr's prediction was almost correct. What he couldn't foresee (and few actually did) was that the prevailing trend in abstract art would become a form of free expression that lacked any actual form at all.

Barr on Modern Art's Place in the World

In 1937, an article written for a local newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi criticized The Museum of Modern Art because "Majority opinion in America is not friendly to modernism .. Those who stand for hours in front of paintings and rapturously exclaim they are finding new and hidden meanings therein are merely fakers and flourflushers." Barr responded with a letter of his own, exclaiming that while majority opinion may not take kindly to forms of modern art, that same majority has also been hostile "to most original and radical innovations, such as automobiles or airplanes or transatlantic cables or Protestantism or the theory that the earth is round and not flat."

Barr on MoMA's Role in our Culture

Barr once remarked in an interview that after the museum had been in existence for nearly 25 years, "The historical museum has to be very conservative and careful in its choices. The modern museum, on the other hand, has to be audacious, to take chances. It has to consider the probability that it would be wrong in a good many cases and take the consequences later." This can hardly be called a premonition; Barr was commenting on a quarter century's worth of experience, having presided over MoMA's many triumphs and failures as the world's supposed leader in showcasing modern art.

Although Barr was criticized in his day for being something of an elitist and a "tastemaker," he never wanted to preside over an institution that catered exclusively to the social elite. In 1944 Barr wrote: "The primary purpose of the Museum is to help people enjoy, understand, and use the visual arts of our time." Even though a part of Barr's legacy is his reluctance to wholly embrace Abstract Expressionism on behalf of the museum, this can be explained by his preoccupation with educating as many as possible about what was significant about the past before focusing on the future.

Writing Style

Barr's approach to scholarship and arts education was simple and chronological: he moved from one movement to the next with stunning clarity and precision. Of Cubism and Abstraction he wrote: "As a movement Cubism had consistently stopped short of complete abstraction. Heretics such as Delaunay had painted pure abstractions but in so doing had deserted Cubism." Barr's writing style is relatable and easy to follow, crafted for the novice who seeks to get a general sense of where different trends in modern art originated and who first made them popular.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Alfred H. Barr's main influencers, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
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 Vincent Van Gogh	 El Lissitzky	 Cubism
 Paul Cézanne	 Hans Arp	 Fauvism
 Piet Mondrian	 Gertrude Stein	 Impressionism
 Pablo Picasso	 André Breton	 Surrealism
 Wassily Kandinsky		 Bauhaus

**INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST**



Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Years Worked: 1928 - 1967



**INFLUENCED
BY ARTIST**

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Ellsworth Kelly</p>	 <p>Meyer Schapiro</p>	 <p>Abstract Expressionism</p>
 <p>Jackson Pollock</p>	 <p>Thomas B. Hess</p>	 <p>Color Field Painting</p>
 <p>Joan Mitchell</p>	 <p>Stanton Macdonald-Wright</p>	 <p>Post-Painterly Abstraction</p>
 <p>Robert Motherwell</p>	 <p>Robert Rosenblum</p>	 <p>Postmodern Art</p>
 <p>Adolph Gottlieb</p>	 <p>Erwin Panofsky</p>	 <p>Installation Art</p>

Quotes

"Sometimes in the history of art it is possible to describe a period or a generation of artists as having been obsessed by a particular problem."

"Abstract art today needs no defense. It has become one of the many ways to paint or carve or model. But it is not yet a kind of art which people like without some study and some sacrifice of prejudice."

Major Works:



Title: Bauhaus (1923)

Artist: Joost Schmidt

Description: For Barr, the work of the Bauhaus artists in post-World War I Germany represents a monumental step in the evolution of modern art. Joost Schmidt's asymmetrical layout, used for the 1923 Bauhaus yearbook, is just one example of the Bauhaus's innovative use of geometric shapes that emphasized function over abstraction. Although the Bauhaus was renowned for its innovations with furniture and architecture, Schmidt's cover design is an apt reflection of what Barr identifies as the school's "gradual emancipation .. from [de] *Stijl* domination."

Year: 1923

Materials: Color lithograph

Collection: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum of Design, Berlin



Title: Composition 8

Artist: Wassily Kandinsky

Description: Of Kandinsky's work, Barr pointed out that the artist's theory of art "was mystical, depending upon an awareness of the spiritual in the material, and an expression of this feeling through the material medium of paint." To put it more simply, Barr also wrote: "Kandinsky's method was the logical expression of this theory." Barr reveals that Kandinsky's many improvised abstracts were the manifestation of a mind that knew no other way to express itself. But *Composition 8*, and the many others like it, is more than just an improvisation. Writing in 1936, Barr aptly points out the many artists and styles that directly influenced Kandinsky's work, as well as those he has influenced: "His work became more drily geometrical but in the last few years he has turned to more organic forms, perhaps under the influence of the younger Parisians, Miró and Arp, to whom he pointed the way twenty years before."

Year: 1923

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



Title: The Studio

Artist: Pablo Picasso

Description: Barr's analytical approach to art, especially concerning Picasso and

Cubism, was to draw a clear evolutionary line to determine where something originated. In Picasso's post-Cubist *The Studio*, Barr identifies both a step forward and a step back for the artist. "While the method composition is superficially Cubist there is, in the masks of the figures, an element of disquieting Surrealism very different from the more reticent sentiment of Cubism in its earlier years." Interestingly enough, long after Picasso and Georges Braque had confirmed that Cubism was behind them, Barr stood fast in his determination to point out even the faintest traces of Cubism in Picasso's later works.

Year: 1927-28

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art



Title: Guernica

Artist: Pablo Picasso

Description: Picasso's *Guernica* is largely considered to be the artist's greatest triumph, and by far his grandest political statement. Barr wrote, "[he has] used modern techniques not merely to express his mastery of form or some personal and private emotion but to proclaim publicly through his art his horror and fury over the barbarous catastrophe which had destroyed his fellow men." Barr certainly had the capacity to empathize with Picasso's fury, having witnessed the Nazis ransack museums and galleries in Stuttgart just a few years prior. (The "catastrophe" Barr writes of is the 1937 massacre at Guernica, a town in northern Spain, in which approximately 1,000 civilians were killed by Nazi bomber planes. Picasso lent *Guernica* to MoMA on permanent loan, with the stipulation that it be returned to Spain once Generalissimo Franco was no longer in power. The painting entered Spain for the first time in 1975, following Franco's death.)

Year: 1937

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid



Title: City Square

Artist: Alberto Giacometti

Description: Writing of the Surrealist and Dadaist movements of the early 20th century,

which included the works of Max Ernst, Man Ray, and Alberto Giacometti (seen above), Barr stated, "They turned...to primitive art as a revelation of unspoiled group expression and to the art of the insane and of children as the uninhibited expression of the individual." Barr considered Giacometti's bronze sculptures of jagged little pedestrians (as well as the artist's earlier work) to be profound in their childlike simplicity, and in their bizarre, Surrealist-like "attempt to recapture the atmosphere of dreams."

Year: 1948

Materials: Bronze

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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Year: 1948

Materials: Bronze

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York