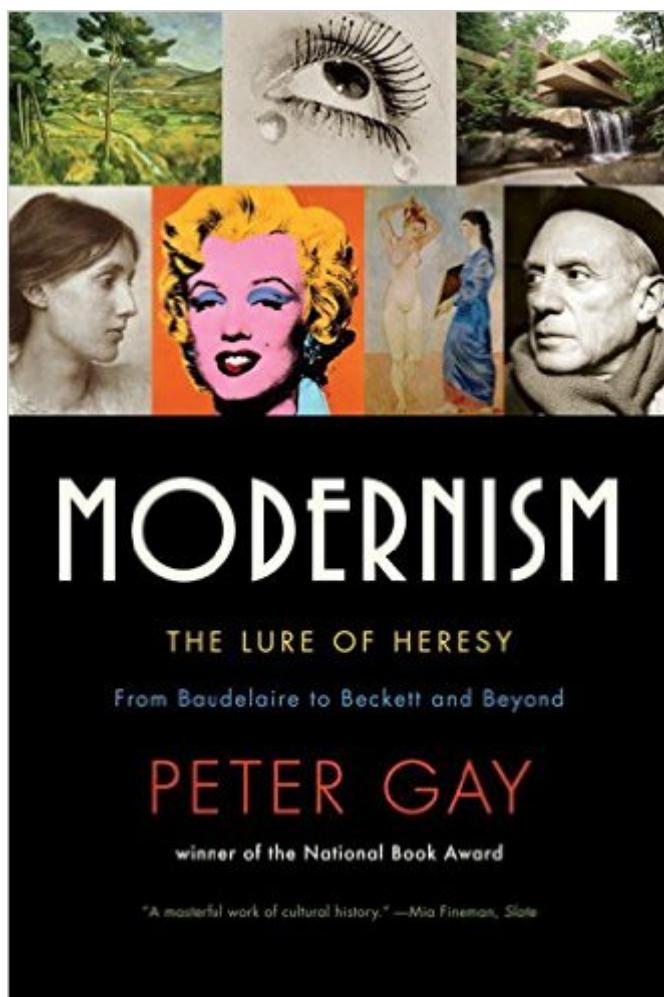


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Modernism: The Lure Of Heresy



Synopsis

â œRich, learned, briskly written, maddening yet necessary study.â •Lee Siegel, New York Times Book Review Peter Gay explores the shocking modernist rebellion that, beginning in the 1840s, transformed art, literature, music, and film. Modernism presents a thrilling pageant of heretics that includes Oscar Wilde, Pablo Picasso, D. W. Griffiths, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Walter Gropius, Arnold Schoenberg, and (of course!) Andy Warhol. 16 pages of four-color illustrations and 92 black-and-white illustrations throughout

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Customer Reviews

I recently took a course on Joyce's Ulysses and I've been studying Eliot's "The Waste Land" both of which were published in 1922 and serve as defining modernist texts. I looked forward to reading Peter Gay's "Modernism" for insights into the movement's complex nest of heretical ideas, conflicted cultural displays and artistic expressions. I feel let down. He focuses on the usual suspects; Joyce, Picasso, Balanchine, Stravinsky etc. and tells their stories with verve and enthusiasm. He dates the beginning of modernism from Baudelaire's publication of Les Fleurs du Mal in 1857. These poems offered up the twin defining characteristics Gay assigns to the movement; the breaking of conventions that elicit passionate revulsion and a subjective, psychological, inward focus by the artist. The book then follows painting, drama, music and architecture in a chronological progression through the male canon (except for Virginia Woolf) praising their distinctive takes on modernism as

he has defined it. He pulls the curtain down on the movement in 1960 with the advent of Pop Art. He ends the book with a rather perplexing claim that modernism is the great undead of movements, finding the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the architecture of Frank Gehry worthy of inclusion despite their work post-dating the movement's death knell by more than a generation. He does this by violating his own rule which is, "the lure of heresy." He doesn't claim that either Marquez or Gehry were treated as heretics. They were grandly praised and understood immediately upon the appearance of their work. Isn't modernism dead when there is no shock? This paean to the Marquez and Gehry points to a key weakness of the book in terms of providing an intellectual framework for the movement.

Peter Gay has written a sweeping survey of Modernism that is lucid, highly readable, amply illustrated, beautifully designed, and remarkably complete. He has, essentially, written a survey of 120 years of cultural and aesthetic history. This is not a task for the faint of heart, but Gay has never suffered from that malady, his array of works spanning multiple centuries. His two-volume history of the Enlightenment remains a very important study and his work on Freud and on 19thc sensibility equally so. The problem with Modernism is that there is so much of it, particularly if you set out to write about poetry and fiction, music, architecture, painting, pop culture, and the many movements and sub-movements attending them. And of course, he is not bounded by any national borders. This is history with a capital H. That means that he has relatively little space (4-6 pp., usually at the outside) for each major figure. Thus, the book is a sweeping survey, an excellent introduction to the subject. Theory is kept to a minimum. He focuses on two aspects of Modernism--its penchant for aesthetic heresy and its stress of subjectivism. The book is also scrupulously fair, recognizing silliness and extremism where they are found and recognizing the important realities that work designed to shock the middle class cannot exist without a middle class prepared to consume it and a society sufficiently free and stable to protect the shockers and provide them a safe place in which to work.

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