

The Shock of the New

Running Time: 416 minutes

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Robert Hughes' history of Modern Art from Cubism to Pop and the Avant-Garde

The popular art history sequel to the BBC's Civilization series, picks up at the threshold of the 20th century. It is written and presented by Robert Hughes, art critic and senior writer for Time.

Hughes draws on a wealth of documentary materials from the archives of the BBC, including rare footage and interviews with noted artists. The range of major figures includes Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, le Corbusier, Maz Ernst, Francis Bacon and Jackson Pollock.

Available for delivery to US destinations only.

Series of 8 programs on 4 DVD's
Programs in This Series

Disk 1: The Mechanical Paradise/The Powers that Be

Running Time: 104 minute DVD

Volume 1: THE MECHANICAL PARADISE

The period 1870-1914 was one of the hinge points in Western cultural history. The emblem of the new age was the Eiffel Tower, symbolizing the reign of the engineer, the inventor.

Art followed a similar process. It adapted to a radically changing world: an urban world, of fragmentation, permeated by machine myths. The results: cubism, with its broken planes, multiple perspectives and "pop art." Delaunay's work was shot through with images of aircraft, solar disks and the Eiffel Tower. In Italy, the Futurists clamored for the death of museum art and the rise of culture based on the speed and dissonance of machinery, the potential violence of the modern world. In France, Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia made their own ironic jokes and iconoclastic images of life (including sex) seen through the machine metaphor.

Volume 2: THE POWERS THAT BE

Some of the post-World War I's best art was produced in opposition to all systems, all authorities, with a rancor and ingenuity scarcely imagined before. The political implications of Dada (Ernst, Schwitters, Hoch, Baader) and of German Expressionism were played out against the postwar collapse of Germany and the rise of a sharply internationalist intellectual climate. The nihilistic tradition of Dada dissent continued for years to its last major exponent, Ed Kienholz.

Some artists sought an active political role as the avant-garde's energies would be placed at the service of real political revolutions.

Disk 2: The Landscape of Pleasure/Trouble in Utopia

Running Time: 104 minute DVD

Volume 3: THE LANDSCAPE OF PLEASURE

We are lulled and delighted by the greatest Impressionist, Monet's monumental paintings of his lily pond at Giverny. Then to Provence to look at Cezanne's sublime late paintings. The liberation of color as the great trigger of free feeling was started by Gauguin on his doomed journey to the Pacific and was amplified by Derain and Matisse in the South of France after 1900. This region and the Mediterranean were a "mental landscape," a generator of key images of well-being that permeated the greatest French art for several decades. Braque's magnificent studio interiors and Picasso's erotic paintings reflect the personalizing of ecstasy.

Volume 4: TROUBLE IN UTOPIA

German visionary architects such as Scharoun, Finsterlin, Luckhardt, Taut planned their Wagnerian dreams with glass palaces in the Alps, as did Italians such as Sant' Elia and Chiattoni. Then, Bauhaus and the functionalist faith-Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, le Corbusier, and the worldwide spread of the glass-box international style, with their concomitant social programs and delusions. The great myth of the architect as social legislator culminated in the town plans of le Corbusier, the speculations of Buckminster Fuller and came to an end in the strange wasteland of Brasilia.

Disk 3: The Threshold of Liberty/The View from the Edge

Running Time: 104 minute DVD

Volume 5: THE THRESHOLD OF LIBERTY

Surrealism was the last revolutionary art movement of the 20th century, but not so much a "movement" as a religion. Despised by formalists, its effects were enormous. The Surrealists' desire to liberate the unconscious mind helped the "primitive" Rousseau flourish. We visit such little-known monuments to the irrational as the huge Ideal Temple built in rural France over a span of 40 years by a local postman and the Watts Tower and glimpse the fantasy/reality of Ernst, Miro, Dali, Magritte, Joseph Cornell and Jean Dubuffet. Shows how even the New York School - Gorky, Motherwell, Rothko - were affected by Surrealism.

Volume 6: THE VIEW FROM THE EDGE

Figurative Expressionism was ruined as an aesthetic possibility by the realities of World War II and its death camps when photography surpassed any distortions of the body an artist could imagine. Many artists struggled but lost in their attempts to maintain a mythic-religious imagery in the face of increasing secularization of 20th-century life. We examine the insufficiencies this led to when an art world, avid for the importance of myths, tried to extract too much from paintings that could not deliver a complete religious content (e.g., Newman and Rothko).

Disk 4: Culture as Nature/The Future That Was

Running Time: 104 minute DVD

Volume 7: CULTURE AS NATURE

Culture replaced nature as the subject-matter for many artists in the 20th century. Modern art has had to survive against an overwhelming flood of other messages from print, radio, advertising, photography and television. The best known event, in this context, was pop art. Artists had long been fascinated with ads, posters, dime novels and signs-the emblems of mass produced consciousness, of speedy transmission of blatant meaning. The cubists inserted pop material into their paintings as did the Dadaists and the Surrealists. Stuart Davis was inspired by jazz, the bright lights of Broadway and the brash signage of the American cityscape in the '30s. The flood gates really

opened in the 1950s with the advent of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Media provided new material and subjects for Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Oldenburg.

Volume 8: THE FUTURE THAT WAS

The old tension between the Academy and the new has vanished. Modernism is our institutional culture today. The consequences: neutralization of art by high market prices; the incestuous interlocking structures of museum and dealer; the attempts at a flight from this highly-organized system into conceptual art, earthworks, body art, art as not salable and not open to discussion; gradual but now complete fragmentation of the avant-garde; doubts about the future of painting; assimilation of self-expression to blatant narcissism, of contest to mere promotion, and finally, the death of the idea of the art movement as such.

We are at the end of a cycle; we are not altogether sure how to use the art we have. Not even modernism can last forever.