

SELLING AN IDEA

MODERNISM AND CONSUMER CULTURE

DARRA GOLDSTEIN

IN 1913 IN PARIS a young Marcel Duchamp was questioning the very meaning of art and whether the value of a work resides in its production and reception. "Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?" he mused in a note he later placed inside *The Green Box*. Duchamp began to play with mundane objects from daily life, transforming them into arguably artistic creations. His *Bicycle Wheel*—no more than the front wheel of a bicycle mounted upside down in the center of a white kitchen stool—became his first "readymade," albeit *avant la lettre*.¹ Duchamp's focus on the object challenged the most fundamental ideas about perception, leading to a new dynamic between artist and audience, as the traditionally passive viewer was coaxed—at times bullied—into active engagement. This essay explores the early modernist urge to involve the audience and the means by which artists sought to provoke new ways of seeing.

Artists of the *avant-garde* contended that what constitutes art is a matter of perception, that even the most ordinary objects can become extraordinary when seen through the artist's eye. No matter the medium, modernist art challenged the receiver to participate in creating art. It was no longer sufficient to feed a self-contained work of art to the public for passive absorption; instead, modernist artists sought to engage their viewers (or readers or listeners), to enter into a dialogue with them and thereby distill new meaning. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the idea of audience response was still new and exciting, and artistic challenges to a complacent public reverberated throughout Europe and the United States as myriad progressive groups competed to discover novel forms of expression.

While Duchamp was creating his uncommon objects in Paris, sixteen hundred miles away in Moscow a young painter and poet named Vladimir Maiakovskii was writing startlingly original verses for which he could not find a publisher. So with a group of fellow Futurists, Maiakovskii decided to tour the Russian provinces to promote this new, unconventional art. The outlandishly dressed poets left little but indignation and confusion in their wake.

1. Although *Bicycle Wheel* was produced in 1913, Duchamp did not actually use the term "readymade" until 1915.

The provincial public could not easily comprehend the poems Maiakovskii declaimed at his performances, which read like Cubist still lifes in verse. One of his best poems, "But Could You?" (1913) offers up a poetic challenge akin to Duchamp's visual one, provoking the viewer or listener to find beauty in everyday things:

I smeared the chart of everyday,
splashing colors from a glass;
On a dish of aspic I showed
the slanted cheekbones of the ocean.
On the scales of a tin fish
I read the summons of new lips.
But you—
could you
play a nocturne
on a drainpipe flute?

In this poetic challenge, Maiakovskii's primary images—drawn from urban domestic life—are angular and metallic. The fish has tin scales and its cheekbones are slanting; the nocturne arises not from a shepherd's pipe but from a drainpipe. Through the artist's skewed renderings, such commonplace objects as fish aspic, a fishmonger's store sign, and a gutter appear in new guises. He affords the reader or listener a startling look at the mundane, challenging us all to do likewise as we contemplate our world. Maiakovskii sought to catalyze his audience's perceptions; his best work reflects the modernist belief that art has the ability to store impressions until they are released by the viewer's imagination, ultimately leading him or her to an understanding of the object (or commodity) beyond its commonly accepted definition.

Artists of the European and American avant-garde shared this conviction regardless of political allegiance. As they challenged preconceived notions of art and sought to instill a new perception of the world, their works frequently extended beyond the traditional confines of art to influence society. Working in media as varied as posters, ceramics, and textiles, disciples of the avant-garde shaped a new consumer culture.² Many works from the Merrill C. Berman collection allow us to see how even the ephemera of daily life contributed to a new mass aesthetic.

2. By "avant-garde" I mean that group of artists who, in Richard Kostelanetz's definition, created "works so radically innovative that they constitute the edge of modernist art." See Kostelanetz, ed.,


The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1982), xi. Although Kostelanetz is referring to literary production, the same holds true for the visual arts. The modernist movement, though spanning several decades and encompassing highly diverse

← read from
... the modernist belief
through ... shaped a
new consumer culture
HGD p. 223 Before through
313 After the war

works, may generally be characterized by its absolute belief in novelty, seen as necessary to any attempt to render experience in a fresh way. As Ezra Pound exhorted in his famous dictum: "Make it new!"

ART AND THE CONSUMER

read all of
pp 97- top 99
H&D pp 223 between
through 313 & the way



A majority of the “-isms” emerged with theoretical agendas published as manifestos that often differed only slightly from political tracts. In some cases, the urge for a new perception of art was as much societal as aesthetic, thereby virtually mandating public involvement. Modern artists believed that their works had the potential to awaken and enlighten a dismayingly staid population by showing how artistic manipulation could elevate ordinary words and objects to a high aesthetic, even spiritual level.

The artists’ sensitivity to their audience’s response was mirrored in the commercial world. The early twentieth-century avant-garde approach to art changed the prevailing realism in advertising. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, when the lithographic process was perfected and halftone photography introduced, commercial firms had been able to advertise their wares more economically, hence more widely. Consumers saw highly realistic images of the goods being offered; they reasonably expected that what they saw was what they would get. Thus an ad for a newfangled cooking range depicted the range as precisely as possible, sparing few details. The consumer (who was, of course, also a viewer) had little need to try to imagine anything beyond the realistic depiction on the page, and even less need to try to step beyond the confines of the catalogue or newspaper copy to make any larger, more meaningful associations. That was now changed by a more intimate approach to art. Even as avant-garde artists took consumer needs into account, they attempted to shape the public’s taste by arresting the viewer’s attention with new forms of illustration, using striking graphics that committed the potential consumer to an interplay with the piece. And they required the viewer-consumer to make an imaginative leap to discern meaning from images that were at times neither realistic nor even representational.

Thus the consumer, like the viewer of modernist paintings or reader of modernist verse, was converted from passive spectator into active participant, a change that has determined the evolution of consumer culture ever since. Issues of style, not only of function, have become ever more prominent: in buying a product, the consumer buys more than an object; he or she buys into a way of life, or so he or she thinks. Of course, the particulars of consumer culture vary from country to country. In Russia following the Bolshevik

Revolution, the social impetus of consumerism was highly pronounced: in buying goods, consumers could help not only the new socialist state but also the progress toward worldwide revolution. During the early Soviet period, every object, from the morning newspaper to the porridge bowl, from the day's dress or shirt to the ubiquitous tram advertisements and sidewalk billboards, was designed to create a new awareness of the changing society. In this way the consumer's choices actually came to be constructed by others, whether in the realm of fashion, commerce, or politics.³ Although in Western Europe consumer needs were more individualized and self-indulgent by comparison, a new approach to graphic art evolved there, too.

In the 1920s, this modern look was realized in flattened images and typefaces devoid of ornamentation. A machine-age aesthetic informed much commercial design, with trademarks and logos now drawn in a sleeker and more geometric manner to reflect an increasingly mechanical, as opposed to organic, world. Enthralled with clean images and visionary ideals, modernist artists translated their excitement into works so full of energy as to seem electrically charged. (E. McKnight Kauffer represents this energy literally in a poster for the London Underground [see fig. 3.21], in which a zigzag charge emanates from the worker's hand.) The artists entered into a partnership with their audience, using art as a means to provoke new perceptions. Although the seeds of crass manipulation were present even in the heyday of modernism, the best works were informed by such passion and belief that they came across as fresh and vital. In many cases, their perceptual challenges still involve the viewer today. Gustav Klutsis's design for a rostrum (see fig. 3.7), for instance, appears first as a beautiful construction in its own right and only secondarily as the propagandistic tool it was intended to be.

Artists believed that they could help change the world by associating a given commodity with progress, personal independence, or an uncluttered aesthetic quite antithetical to the musty drawing rooms and social strictures of paternalistic European society. For artist and consumer alike, fashion came to be equated with freedom, or at least the pretense of it. But as modernism declined, lesser artists used the same graphic styles over and over again, in the process contradicting the very precept of novelty that had originally character-

3. For more on consumer culture, see Alan Tomlinson, "Introduction: Consumer Culture and the Aura of the Commodity," in Tomlinson, ed., *Consumption, Identity, and Style: Marketing, Meanings, and the Packaging of Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1–38.

ized modernism. Having lost the passion that once imbued them, images became stale and institutionalized; now they were used not to evoke new responses but to ensure prescribed ones. The motive to sell and sell again to the same public unbalanced the partnership between artist and consumer, whose participation—rather than contributing to a broadened perceptual awareness—was soon limited to being led from purchase to purchase by vanity and hope. In this way participation, so key to the modernist aesthetic, eventually devolved into rank manipulation.