

*Against the Grain: Modernism in the Midwest*

Modernism emerged in multiple places around the Westernized world during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term “modernism” refers to a series of progressive, even radical, cultural movements that promote new, revolutionary forms of art. At its core, modernism entails a rejection of exhausted traditions, a passion for experimentation, an unrelenting questioning of accepted knowledge and the feverish pursuit of the new. Cubism, abstract expressionism, surrealism and other styles of art are associated with the avant-garde. Art critics use the term avant-garde as a metaphor for revolutionary, forward-looking art far ahead of the mainstream. By contrast, modernism is broader in nature and can even include some forms of realism that interpret everyday life through the lens of a personal, contemporary sensibility.

American art histories often narrowly ascribe the rise of modernism in this country to activities in New York and a few other cities along the East Coast. What this view fails to consider is that the United States is a land of immigrants, and that mass immigration brought with it direct and continuous contact between Europeans and Americans who lived in cities along the major waterways and transportation hubs in the interior. Cities around the Great Lakes, such as Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee, were teeming with large, immigrant populations from Germany, Italy, Ireland, Russia, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. Sons and daughters of immigrants who trained at art schools in the Midwest grew up speaking German or other languages at home, then went abroad for further studies, eventually retruning with direct knowledge of cultural developments on the other side of the Atlantic and creating a direct line of communication that did not necessarily require going through New York or Philadelphia.

This exhibition concerns the history of modernism in the Midwest, an area defined by eight states: Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri. For practical reasons, this exhibition is not a comprehensive study of modernism throughout the eight states of the Midwest, but instead focuses on major developments in some of the region’s most significant art centers, especially Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and St. Louis.

Excerpt from an essay by William H. Robinson, Ph.D., and Christine Fowler Shearer, M.A.