

# Modernist Sculpture

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Modernist sculpture expanded this type of artwork by venturing into various non-traditional materials and forms. To truly understand what modernist sculpture entails, it is essential to compare pieces of art created by the many talented sculptors. This lesson covers:



### BIG IDEA

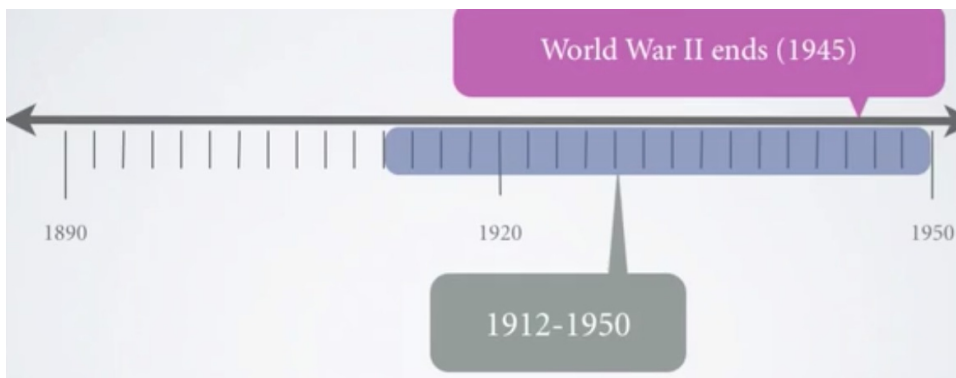
Modernist sculpture explored the representation of forms as well as the use of non-traditional materials, such as sheet metal, raw iron, wire, et cetera.

## 1. Period and Location: Modernist Sculpture

The artwork covered in this lesson is from the years 1912 to 1950, as highlighted in the timeline below. Modernist sculpture artists came from all over the world.

In this lesson, you will explore sculptures from the geographical regions of:

- Capri, Italy
  - Jacques Lipchitz died in Capri in 1973.
- Paris, France
  - Picasso lived and worked in Paris during this time.
  - Julio González died near Paris in 1942.
  - Constantin Brâncuși died in Paris in 1957.
- New York City
  - Alexander Archipenko died here in 1964.
- St. Ives, Cornwall, England
  - Dame Barbara Hepworth died in St. Ives in 1975.
- London, England
  - Henry Moore received some of his training here.



## 2. Examples of Modernist Sculpture

The modernist sculptures that you will look at in this lesson are Cubist or abstract, and they are in the forms of either assemblage art or casting. Let's take a look at some examples as we walk through modernist sculpture.

### 2a. "Bather"

The **Cubist sculpture** "Bather" is an interpretation of a classical subject. It is that of a female bather either stepping into or out of the water, clutching a garment and looking back over her shoulder.



**Bather by Jacques Lipchitz**

**1917**

**Bronze**

Here, Lipchitz has completely reduced the figure to its most basic and abstract elements. He then fractured those parts into geometric protrusions that move in different directions. Essentially, Lipchitz has taken a two-dimensional cubist work of art and made it in the round, or three-dimensional, as shown above.



**TERM TO KNOW**

**Cubist Sculpture**

Three-dimensional artworks characterized by qualities of planes, facets, and non-representational forms that intersect and are reassembled.

## 2b. “Guitar”

Picasso, the co-founder of Cubism, also dabbled in sculpture. Actually, he sculpted quite a few works. Where Lipchitz’s “Bather” is an example of bronze casting, Picasso’s “Guitar” is an example of assemblage.



**Guitar by Pablo Picasso**

**After 1914**

**Sheet metal and wire**

In this sculpture, he has taken sheet metal and metal wire and assembled it into this object. Picasso’s use of layered sheet metal gives a suggestion of greater depth to the work than actually exists, and at the same time, completely distorts the viewer’s expectation of physicality. The best example of this is the sound hole of the guitar, which protrudes from the figure. This hole essentially comes outward as opposed to receding into the guitar.

## 2c. “Woman Combing Her Hair” #1

Alexander Archipenko’s “Woman Combing Her Hair” is another example of a modernist interpretation of a classical subject.



**Woman Combing Her Hair by Alexander Archipenko**

**1914 or 1915**

**Bronze**

Archipenko's bronze is a brilliant example of his skill of reducing a form to its most essential elements while at the same time not losing the central theme of the piece. Just enough pieces to tell the story are included. The simplified lower body displays a contrapposto-type stance and a realistic depiction of shifting weight. However, as you move upwards, the form continues to simplify until it is left with nothing but an arm, the suggestion perhaps of a comb, and the faint suggestion of hair. The head and left arm are completely left out, as they are nonessential to the artist's depiction.

## **2d. "Woman Combing Her Hair" #2**

Compare the image of "Woman Combing Her Hair" #1 with this image just below.



**Woman Combing Her Hair by Julio González**

**1912**

**Iron**

This is an assemblage sculpture by Julio González. At first glance they appear very different; however, both artists have achieved the reduction of form to its most essential elements. González's sculpture provides a scaffolding upon which the viewer's imagination fills in the details or blanks.

## **2e. "Family Group"**

British artist Henry Moore's "Family Group" is an abstract interpretation of the traditional family posing.



**Family Group by Henry Moore**

**1950**

**Bronze**

Notice there is one man, one woman, and one child. Everything has been reduced to simple forms, again just enough to tell the story with a complete lack of specificity.



**THINK ABOUT IT**

Some think this lack of specificity may be one of the aspects of modern art that make it so appealing to each generation. It's open to interpretation. It doesn't depict somebody, it depicts anybody. It's universal in that regard. Do you agree? Does this piece of artwork appeal to you? Why or why not?

Moore only includes what's necessary to differentiate forms, such as the addition of the skirt and hair to distinguish between the man and woman. He only includes one child, just enough to transform the sculpture from the depiction of a couple to that of a family.

## **2f. "Bird in Space"**

At times, some pieces of art get overlooked by the average individual when critiquing modern art. This may be the case with the sculpture below.





**Bird in Space by Constantin Brâncuși**

**923 and after**

**Marble or bronze (originals; multiple copies)**



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Try this perspective. Compare what it would take to write a story with access to every word in the English language, versus writing a story using only 10 words. Which would be easier?

The sculpture above is simple. Some think of it as a timeless look—simple, beautiful, and more visually accessible. The subject matter here is reduced down about as far as it can go without completely losing its hold on what the artist is attempting to depict. Some might see the suggestion of a bird, at least the beak, careening through space, almost lost within a cloak of wind and lines of speed, like something entering the atmosphere.

## 2g. “Three Forms”

The images in this lesson have been arranged with regard to the level of abstraction rather than in chronological order. They are ordered to show the reduction of form to pure **abstraction**, and as the lesson has gone on, the images have become more and more abstract.



### Three Forms by Dame Barbara Hepworth

1935

Serravezza marble on marble base

Dame Barbara Hepworth's "Three Forms," above, is an example of pure abstraction. There is no discernible human form or object. It's simply three spherical and elongated shapes placed in proximity to each other. But there's something appealing about it. Hepworth hasn't simply just glued three rocks to a slab. The forms are carefully shaped with dimensions that are proportional to each other and situated within a triangular arrangement that is also proportional in its dimensions. Hepworth has completely removed the color. It's a monochromatic experience of pure shape and pure form that truly exemplifies modernism as well as abstraction.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Abstraction

In the arts, the simplification of form down to its most basic elements.



#### SUMMARY

Non-traditional materials and forms are what make modernist sculpture truly unique. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of modernist sculpture**.

In doing so, you explored several **examples of modernist sculpture**. These sculptures were ordered throughout the lesson to show you examples of increasing levels of abstraction. The examples you explored in this lesson were:

- "The Bather"
- "Guitar"
- "Woman Combing Her Hair" #1
- "Woman Combing Her Hair" #2
- "Family Group"



- “Bird in Space”
- “Three Forms”

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Abstraction**

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### **Cubist Sculpture**

Three-dimensional artworks characterized by qualities of planes, facets, and non-representational forms that intersect and are reassembled.