Vocabulary

Expressionism
Cubism
Surrealism
Regionalists

Early Twentieth Century

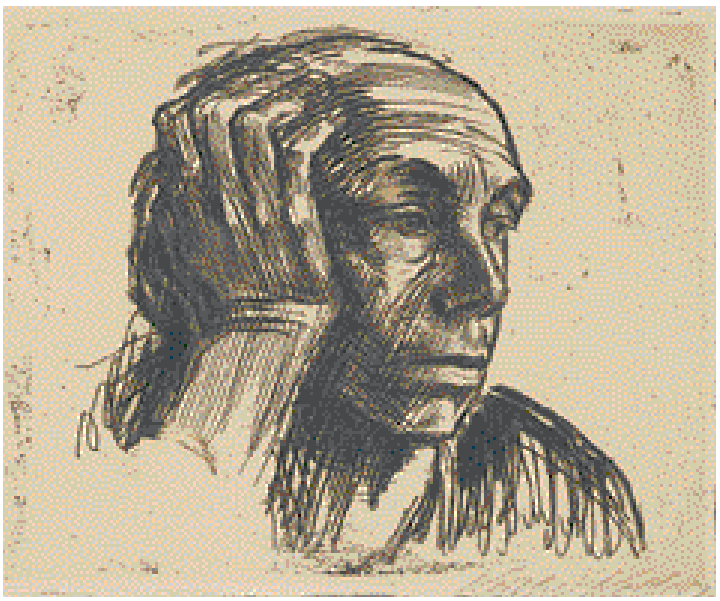
During the first half of the twentieth century, artists responded to rapid changes in technology, world politics, and culture by creating a variety of approaches to artistic expression. One style replaced another with bewildering speed. With the invention and spread of photography, artists no longer functioned as recorders of the visible world. They launched a quest to redefine the characteristics of art.

Trends in the arts changed rapidly because increased travel and new ways of communication helped artists to compare ideas. One individual or group could easily influence another. It no longer took years for one art movement or style of art to catch on in other areas. In fact, some artists who lived long lives, such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, changed their own styles several times during their careers.

European Art

In general, European artists assumed one of three different directions in artistic expression: self-expression, composition, or imagination. Each direction emphasized a different aspect of art.

In Germany, artists began working in a style later called **Expressionism,** *a style that emphasized the expression of innermost feelings.* The German Expressionists did not think the purpose of art was to make pretty pictures. Instead, because they experienced the terrible economic and social conditions in Germany before and after World War I, they wanted to express their feelings about these conditions. Their emotional subjects ranged from fear and anger to a preoccupation with death. Käthe Kollwitz (**kah**-teh **kohl**-vits), an Expressionist concerned with poverty and war, created many moving images of mothers grieving for dead children. She based her work on personal experience: she lost her eldest son during the first weeks of World War I **(Figure 13.26).**



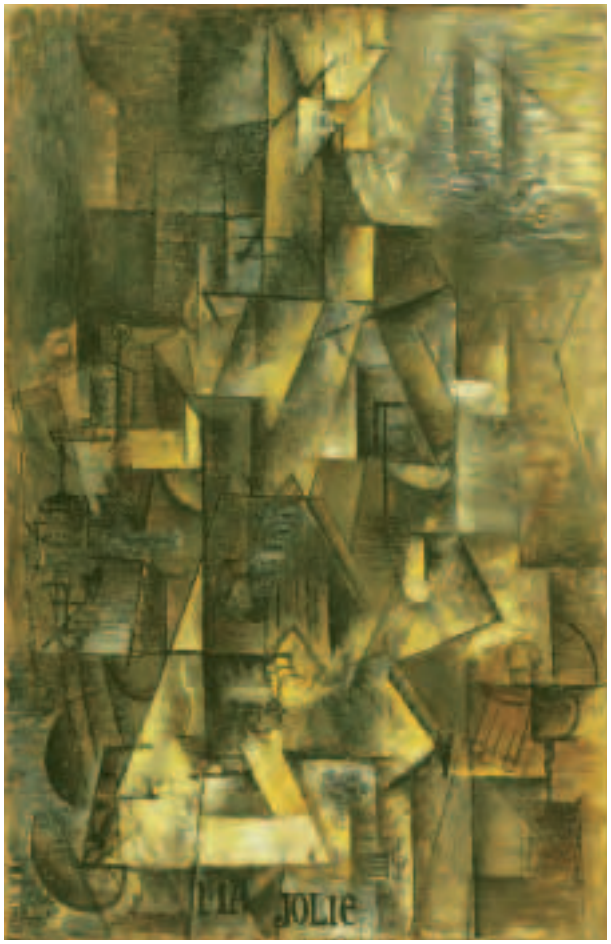
▲ **FIGURE 13.26** Describe the person that you see here. Identify the elements of art that the artist used. How does Kollwitz view herself? Is this a person you would be interested in meeting? Why or why not?

Käthe Kollwitz. *Self-Portrait.* 1921. Etching. 21.6 × 26.7 cm ($8^1/_2 \times 10^1/_2$″). National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Museum Purchase: The Members' Acquisition Fund. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

In France, a group of artists created works that focused on the formal qualities. Some of these artists created **Cubism,** *a style that emphasizes structure and design.* Three main concepts influenced the Cubists.

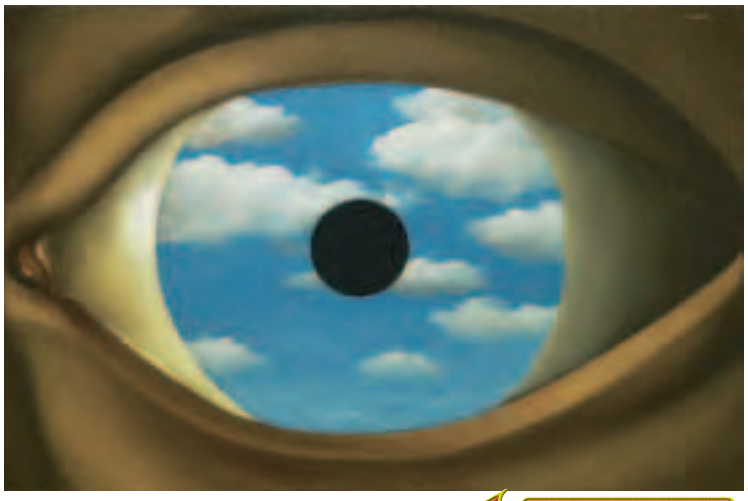
The first concept was that shapes in nature are based on geometric forms. The second concept, based on a scientific discovery, showed that all matter is made up of atoms that are constantly in motion. The third concept, based on art from other cultures (African sculpture had recently been displayed in Paris), revealed that shape and form could be simplified and rearranged to increase the expressive qualities of an artwork. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque pioneered the movement. In **Figure 13.27,** you can see how Picasso visually translated the human body into geometric shapes. He tried to paint three-dimensional objects as if they could be seen from many different points of view at the same time.

A third group of artists relied on fantasy to create art that expressed personal feelings. They explored the psychology of the mind as subject matter in their work. **Surrealism** emphasized *art in which dreams, fantasy, and the subconscious served as inspiration for artists.* Surrealists painted very realistic, almost photographic, images but combined objects that didn't belong together. The work of the Surrealists appears strange and dreamlike. Surrealist paintings can be funny or mysterious and frightening. **Figure 13.28** reflects the Surrealist belief in the power of dreams. René Magritte places the external environment, a cloudscape, within the eye.



▲ **FIGURE 13.27** Near the bottom of this work, Picasso places a musical staff and a treble clef near the song title *Ma Jolie*. This, along with the title, suggests the presence of a figure playing music.

Pablo Picasso. *"Ma Jolie" (Woman with a Zither or Guitar).* 1911–12. Oil on canvas. 100 × 65.4 cm (39³/₈ × 25³/₄"). Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



◀ **FIGURE 13.28** Magritte has combined the realistic depiction of a human eye with a surreal sky reflected in the eye's iris. Interpret the meaning of this work's title.

René Magritte. *The False Mirror.* 1928. Oil on canvas. 54 × 81 cm (21¼ × 31⅞"). Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. © 2003 Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

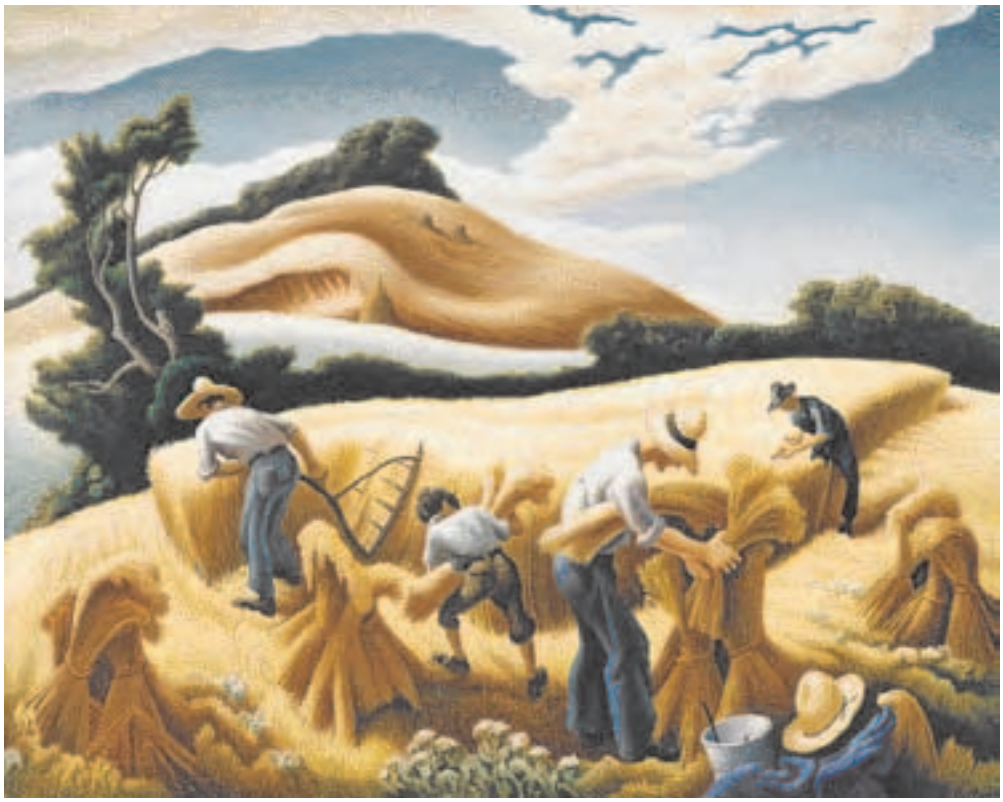
North American Art

In the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of young artists turned to the harsh realities of the city for subject matter. They called themselves The Eight and organized an exhibition in 1908. Their original name was soon forgotten when critics immediately labeled them the Ashcan School. Critics expressed displeasure at the subject matter of their work: stark tenement buildings, crowded city streets, poor working people, and ragged children.

Although this realism shocked unwary viewers, the Armory Show of 1913 exerted an even greater impact on the American art world. This show introduced Americans to the work of European artists. Most Americans felt confused by what they saw. The art on display did not fit into their traditional understanding of the nature and purpose of art. However, the show energized many American artists, who responded to the challenge posed by the daring exhibition and took their first steps toward making modern art in the United States.

Alexander Calder, a sculptor, ranks among these twentieth-century innovators. Most sculptors at this time worked with traditional materials and methods. A few experimented with the new materials of modern industry. Calder created a new form of sculpture by arranging wire and sheet metal into balanced arrangements that stayed in motion (Figure 8.20 on page 213). He called these moving sculptures mobiles (**moh**-beels).

As a reaction against the infusion of European styles into American art, some artists decided to focus on strictly American themes. Called **Regionalists,** these artists *painted the farmlands and cities of the United States in an optimistic way.* Each artist had a slightly different style, but all of them portrayed upbeat messages in their work. They focused on the vast expanse, beauty, productivity, and abundance of the United States and depicted happy, hardworking people. **Figure 13.29** is an example of Regionalism.



▶ **FIGURE 13.29** Benton modifies the backbreaking nature of the work by placing the workers in an idyllic setting. He created a flowing rhythm by repeating the gentle curves of the hills, trees, clouds, and bundles of wheat.

Thomas Hart Benton. *Cradling Wheat.* 1938. Oil on board. 78.7 × 96.5 cm (31 × 38″). The Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. © T. H. Benton and R. P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

FIGURE 13.30 Wright designed the ramp from the main gallery to the upper level, using a gentle curve. The slope and curve allow the customer to look down on the objects on display. Notice how the wall and the upstairs gallery create harmony through repetition of flowing rhythms.

Frank Lloyd Wright. Xanadu Gallery, San Francisco, California. 1949.

In this painting, Thomas Hart Benton celebrates the work of farmers harvesting wheat. He portrays their labor in a dignified, graceful style.

Another American artist working at the same time showed a different side of the American experience. African-American artist Jacob Lawrence used bright, flat areas of color in a geometric style to create his art (see Figure 4.19 on page 80). His series paintings tell the stories of historical African-American figures, as well as describe the struggles of African-Americans moving from the South to the North in the early twentieth century.

The twentieth century also saw vast changes in architecture. New materials and technology and new demands for commercial space led to the development of skyscrapers. Architects designed functional structures with steel frames that emphasized simplicity of form to replace heavy, decorated structures. One famous modern architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, believed that form should follow function, meaning that the look of a building should be based on its use **(Figure 13.30).** He also designed buildings that blended harmoniously with the landscape around them (Figure 11.20,page 301).

Like France in the late eighteenth century, Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century experienced deep social and political unrest. The tension erupted into the Mexican Revolution. Some Mexican artists felt the need to develop new approaches to art that would express their feelings about the plight of the people. These Mexican artists were referred to as the Mexican muralists, because they covered walls and ceilings with murals about Mexican history, the suffering of the peasants, and the immoral behavior of the ruling class. Artists such as Diego Rivera (Figure 9.5, page 229) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (Figure 10.14, page 264) combined the solid forms of ancient, pre-Columbian Mexican art with the powerful colors and bold lines of Cubism and Expressionism.

Check Your Understanding

1. Define *Expressionism.*
2. Name the three main influences on Cubism.
3. Compare and contrast the historical styles in Figure 13.28 on page 375 and Figure 13.29 on page 376 to identify the general themes of each style.