

Modern Art and the City: Cubism, Futurism, and the European Avant-Garde

Professor Ara Merjian
9:30-10:45 Tuesdays and Thursdays



The city loomed large as both the site and subject of experimentation for the twentieth-century European avant-gardes. Whether as a nexus of aesthetic exchange, a metaphor of social and physical transformation, or simply a set of formal circumstances, urban space lay at the center of modernist activity. In this course, we will examine Cubism and Futurism not simply in formal terms, but as phenomena bound up with contemporary political and philosophical activity. Beginning with the vital changes to representation ushered in with Realism and Impressionism, we will consider the far-reaching consequence Cubism's shattering of pictorial space. We will look at its immediate influence in a wide range of media – from sculpture to literature to architecture – as well as its importance for Futurism in Italy and elsewhere. Along the way, we will consider the bearing of Cubism and Futurism on contemporary modernist movements such as Dada, Metaphysical painting, Expressionism, Suprematism, Purism, and Constructivism. We will also read and think about contemporary ideas about the modern city in philosophical, sociological, and political terms, particularly in France and Italy. By looking carefully at specific images, tendencies, and texts, we will try to elucidate the city's dialectical relationship to modernity and modernism: between order and chaos, administration and revolution, desire and repression, chance and planning, futurity and nostalgia, boredom and distraction, rupture and platitude.

We will examine various questions raised by the intersection of urban space and the pictorial imagination: questions of utopia and dystopia, technology, speed, simultaneity, war, fascism and anti-fascism. Primary readings will include works by F.T. Marinetti, Giorgio de Chirico, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Simmel, Guillaume Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, Giovanni Papini, Albert Gleizes, Umberto Boccioni.