

ALMINE RECH

Revolution

Art from the Hirshhorn Collection, 1860–1960

Mar 22, 2024 — Apr 20, 2025 | Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC, WA, US

To inaugurate its 50th-anniversary season, the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden presents “Revolutions: Art from the Hirshhorn Collection, 1860–1960,” a major survey of artwork made during a transformative period characterized by new currents in science and philosophy and ever-increasing mechanization. “Revolutions” captures shifting cultural landscapes through the largely chronological presentation of 270 artworks by 126 artists in the Museum’s permanent collection—including Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, Lee Krasner, Wifredo Lam, Jacob Lawrence, Georgia O’Keeffe and Jackson Pollock—made during these turbulent and energetic years. The exhibition includes contemporary work by 19 artists, including Torkwase Dyson, Rashid Johnson, Annette Lemieux, Dyani White Hawk and Flora Yukhnovich, whose practices demonstrate how many revolutionary ideas and approaches that arose during these 100 years remain critical. Organized by Hirshhorn Associate Curator Marina Isgro and Assistant Curator Betsy Johnson, “Revolutions” will fill the Museum’s second-floor outer-circle galleries from March 22, 2024, to April 20, 2025.

“The Hirshhorn opened in 1974 as a modern art museum,” said Hirshhorn Director Melissa Chiu. “It has since become a modern and contemporary museum, largely because of Joseph H. Hirshhorn’s vision that his foundational gift should meet the needs of a national museum dedicated to the art of our time. ‘Revolutions’ reminds us that we are connected to an art-historical continuum through engagement with artists, artwork and ideas—in person and virtually.”

“Revolutions” spotlights the rush of art-historical movements and genres that characterized the arc of Modernism and the ascendancy of abstraction, notably through the work of artists interested in engaging the mind, not just the eye. This breadth was evident in Joseph Hirshhorn’s founding gifts to the Museum. An industrialist, collector and philanthropist, Hirshhorn donated nearly 6,000 works—including a significant number of sculptures—in anticipation of the Museum’s opening on October 4, 1974, and 6,400 more upon his death in 1981. Together these gifts constitute one of the most important collections of postwar American and European art in the world. Today, the Hirshhorn collection comprises more than 13,130 artworks.

“Revolutions” takes a primarily chronological approach to historical movements, pausing occasionally to introduce contemporary works that serve as throughlines. The exhibition opens, for example, with “Modern Beginnings,” an examination of large-scale portraiture (a hallmark of social standing) that twins “Mrs. Kate A. Moore” (1884) by John Singer Sargent, part of Hirshhorn’s initial gift, with Amoako Bofo’s “Cobalt Blue Dress” (2020), a recent acquisition. In the same section, Henri Matisse’s series “Heads of Jeannette,” five sculptures made between 1910 and 1913, traces a progression from representation to abstraction, indicating how rapidly 20th-century artists adopted abstract approaches.

In subsequent galleries, sections such as “Abstraction and Construction” and “Vital Forms” are devoted to work by Futurists, including four sculptures by Giacomo Balla, as well as to Cubist works by artists including Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Yun Gee. Artistic responses to the ferocity of World War I’s nationalism and modern warfare are highlighted by Marsden Hartley’s “Painting No. 47, Berlin” (1914–1915) and Childe Hassam’s “The Union Jack, New York, April Morning” (1918). The installation also acknowledges how World War II tore communities apart, exiling significant artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Hans Hofmann, Lam and Piet Mondrian while accelerating the exchange of ideas between the likes of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore.

The speed with which artistic movements developed is emphasized by the scope of work on view: George Wesley Bellows's and Edward Hopper's realist paintings, Aleksandra Exster's angular Constructivist puppets, biomorphic abstractions by Jean Arp and Arshile Gorky, and lyrical landscapes by O'Keeffe and Horace Pippin, all on view, were created within 25 years of each other.

The exhibition also emphasizes the intensity of Joseph Hirshhorn's collecting. "Revolutions" contains six significant artworks by Willem de Kooning, eight by Alberto Giacometti, nine by David Smith and nine by Jean Dubuffet—all founding gifts. Hirshhorn's interest in Haitian painters is exemplified in pieces by Castera Bazile, Rigaud Benoit and Hector Hyppolite, whose lyrical paintings draw upon regional mysticism and resonated with the interests of the European Surrealists.

Concluding galleries consider the shift of the center of the art world from Europe to New York and the rise of Abstract Expressionism, teasing out strands of global artistic thought throughout. "Aftershocks" is dedicated to evidence of fractured artistic communities in the wake of World War II. "Gestures and Myths" considers Abstract Expressionism in artworks by, among others, Willem de Kooning, Janet Sobel and Jackson Pollock that exemplify both male and female artists' appetite for vigorous explorations of the unconscious mind during this period. Large-scale paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, Krasner and Joan Mitchell demonstrate the era's burgeoning confidence. Barnett Newman's and Mark Rothko's works, in the same galleries, evoke sensations of wonder with fields of saturated colors. The concluding section, "New Realities," features artists who introduced found and commonplace materials into their painting, such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as others who introduced new vocabularies. Artists associated with the Japanese avant-garde, for example, such as Natsuyuki Nakanishi, moved between object-based work and performance, lending their practice an immediacy that future generations would explore to great effect.