



Chicago Historical Society



CELEBRATING MODERNISM

at the A Century of Progress World's Fair

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: Three class periods

Topic: The correlation between art, science, and society

Subtopic: A Century of Progress World's Fair

Teacher background information

World's fairs and expositions held in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries celebrated the past while introducing visions of the future. A Century of Progress World's Fair focused on the advances of civilization during the century following Chicago's incorporation. The design concept of "modernism" applied to the forward-looking architects, artisans, and designers, who contributed to the fair's overall success. Modernism drew upon advances in technology and held a futuristic flavor.

Key concepts

Aesthetic taste, utopian vision, economics, and urban planning

Key questions

Why did fair organizers fully embrace modernism? Why were many of the exhibits at the Century of Progress future-oriented? How accurate were the soothsayers?

Goals of this lesson

During this lesson, students will study the aesthetic movement known as "modernism." Students will discover why organizers chose modernism as the fair's design pattern, identify artifacts that reflect modernist ideas, and explain how the fair's design was similar to the global Art Moderne movement of the time. Students will also study the impact of modernism on the history of design.

Objectives

1. Students will describe modernism and grasp the importance of its design, in particular the rectilinear forms presented at the fair.
2. Students will interpret photographs of modernist fair buildings.
3. Students will find examples of modernism in their lives and share the examples with the class.
4. Students will discover that fair exhibits were future-oriented to temporarily distract visitors from the abysmal state of their economic lives.



Materials

Master copies of all photographs and handouts are provided.

1. Magnet sets 25594 and 25596 from the MoMa collection of modern design (optional)
2. "Reading Modernists Photographs" worksheet
3. "Celebrating Modernism Presentation Chart"
4. Photographs from the A Century of Progress World's Fair:
 - a. Avenue of Flags
 - b. Chrysler Motors Building
 - c. General Motors Building
 - d. Great Haviline Thermometer
 - e. Ford Building
 - f. Nash Motors Building

Procedures

Day 1

1. Display the MoMa magnets of modernist designs and ask students to identify the objects pictured. While many of the items are easily identifiable, others will "stump" the students.
 - a. Ask students to predict when each item was designed. Students will likely be surprised to learn that the items were actually designed many years before their guess.
 - b. Discuss the "look" of the objects. What characteristics do they have in common? What materials are the objects constructed from? What shapes, lines, and patterns are incorporated into the objects?
 - c. Note: If magnets are not available, find alternative images of modernist designs. Sources for such images are listed under the "Additional Resources" section of this packet.
2. Use student's observations about the objects to generate class definitions of modernism and art deco. The definitions below can serve as a guide:

a. **Modernism:** a modern artistic or literary philosophy and practice, a self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression

b. **Art Deco:** part of the Art Moderne movement, a popular design style of the 1920s and 1930s characterized by bold outlines, geometric and zigzag forms, and the use of new materials such as plastic

c. Explain to students that modernist design was applied both in household goods (as pictured in the MoMa magnets) and architecture. Students will discover how the buildings and grounds of the A Century of Progress reflected modernist design sensibilities.

3. Divide students into small groups and distribute one fair photograph to each group. Instruct students to view their photograph and complete the "Reading Modernist Photographs" worksheet.
4. Have each group present their findings about their photograph. During presentations, students in the audience should use the "Celebrating Modernism Presentation Chart" to take notes. After the presentations, hold a class discussion and consider the following:
 - a. How did the fair grounds provide visitors with a feeling of the designs of "tomorrow"?
 - b. Why were the architects so focused futuristic designs? (Hint: consider the era of the fair.)
 - c. How successful were the fair planners in "fortune telling"?
 - d. Does the modernist design aesthetic hold up today or is it dated?
5. For homework, ask students to find one every-day object (in use today) that incorporates modernist design characteristics. Students should bring their object or an image of their object to class the next day. Ask students to come prepared with answers to the following:
 - a. Background: What is it? When was it designed? Who manufactures it?

- b. How does it illustrate modernist design philosophy?
- c. What changes are possible in future design of this object?

Day 2

Spend a few minutes recapping the discussion of the photograph analysis. Ask students to display the objects they brought to class and explain how the object is an example of modernist design. After reviewing each object, close with a class discussion. Discussion questions could include:

1. Why are attractive design elements important to consumers, even in utilitarian, everyday products?
2. What are the far-reaching effects of the modernist movement? How did it effect everything from architecture, to entertainment, to transportation (the zephyr train is a great example), to household goods?
3. In what ways do today's technology breakthroughs influence the design of consumer goods?

Suggestions for student assessment

The student "show and tell" presents a perfect opportunity for assessment. Design a rubric and share it with students ahead of time. Criteria might include, the students' efforts at:

1. Locating and bringing in an appropriate object (or image of an object) to class.
2. Completeness of the students' knowledge of the background information about their object.
3. Articulation of how their object meets the definition of modernist design.
4. Explanation, in their own opinion, of why attractive design elements are important to consumers.
5. Presentation of their own vision of a future design for the objects they brought to class.

Additional resources

Mayer, Harold M. and Richard C. Wade. *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969.

Rydell, Robert W., John Findling, and Kimberly Pelle. *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2000.

Talbot-Stanaway, Susan. "The Giant Jewel: 1933-34 World's Fair" in *A Wild Kind of Boldness: the Chicago History Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.

Internet resources

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, www.artsmia.org

MoMa: The Museum of Modern Art, www.moma.org

Extension activities

Ask students to create a design concept for a 21st-century world's fair. What design would they favor and why? What would the message of the "new" fair be? Have students build models of fair buildings and exhibitions. Ask a neighboring class or other special guests to attend the "world's fair" in your classroom.

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Science

State Goal 13: Understand the relationships among science, technology, and society in historical and contemporary contexts.

Social Science

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

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READING MODERNIST PHOTOGRAPHS

Examine the photo carefully and answer the following questions:

1. Which parts of the photograph are the most significant? Why?

2. What does the photograph tell you about the time period in which it was taken?

3. Describe the architecture in the photograph. How does it suggest an Art Deco or modernist design?

To answer the next three questions, imagine that you are inside the picture.

4. Take a walk around the scene. What are you wearing? How do your clothes feel?
Are they comfortable?

5. What do you see, hear, and smell? What types of things can you touch or taste?

6. Have you been to a place like this before? How was it similar or different than other places you have visited?

CELEBRATING MODERNISM PRESENTATION CHART

Directions

As you listen to your classmates' presentations, take notes on their photographs.

PICTURE	PRESENTATION NOTES
Avenue of Flags	
Chrysler Motors Building	
Ford Motors Building	
General Motors Building	
Great Havoline Thermometer	
Nash Motors Building	



Avenue of Flags at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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Chrysler Motors Building at night at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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General Motors Building at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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Great Havoline Thermometer at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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Ford Building and gardens at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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Nash Motors Building at Chicago's A Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933-34.

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