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# The exhibition of the Century

4 April ~ 5 July 1998



Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism (Eight Red Rectangles)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 575 x 485mm

Modern Masterpieces from the Collection of the  
**Stedelijk Museum**  
Amsterdam

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It is a great privilege for the City Gallery Wellington to work once again in partnership with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, one of the foremost modern art museums in the world.

The Stedelijk Museum's substantial 20th century collection has made it possible for the City Gallery to present one of the most significant international exhibitions of modern art to be shown in New Zealand. Many of these artworks will never leave Amsterdam again. It is only because of restoration work on the Stedelijk Museum's historic building that we are fortunate enough to have the works in Wellington. **The Exhibition of the Century** provides New Zealand audiences with a once in a lifetime opportunity to experience at first hand the scale and painterly qualities of some of the pivotal artworks of the last hundred years. These works demonstrate the challenging and unexpected directions modern art has taken, and how it has changed accepted ways of seeing and thinking.

This is a most exciting project for the City Gallery, and would not have been possible without the commitment of the Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Rudi Fuchs, who allowed this thought-provoking selection of works from his institution to travel to Wellington. The exhibition project has given Rudi Fuchs an opportunity to spend time in New Zealand, to visit the studios of a number of our artists and consider further projects.

The City Gallery would like to acknowledge the generous contribution made by the three principal sponsors of the exhibition: Telecom New Zealand, Saatchi & Saatchi and Ernst & Young. It has been their crucial financial support that has made this ambitious exhibition possible.

We are also very pleased to acknowledge the role of the New Zealand Government, which has indemnified the exhibition through the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, thus making it possible for New Zealanders to enjoy these international masterpieces in our own country.

*Paula Savage*

Paula Savage  
Director City Gallery Wellington

## The Exhibition of the Century: An Introduction

Constantly breaking with tradition and moving into new territories, artists of the modern era have taken heed of the French poet Blaise Cendrars's invocation 'to dare and make some noise'. **The Exhibition of the Century** captures the creative dynamism—at times tragic, at other times beautiful, sometimes even violent—at the heart of 20th century art.

Spurred on by the progressive spirit of Modernism as well as by the events of history, 20th century art has enlisted new materials, techniques, ideas and objectives to reflect a world in which, as Cendrars wrote, 'everything is color movement explosion light'. During the first half of the century, movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Neo-Plasticism expanded the visual and philosophical potentials of the arts. And since World War II, art has lost none of its capacity for both inspiring and shocking its audience. As the works in this exhibition attest, at the end of the 20th century both the function of the artwork and the role of the artist are still being investigated as vigorously as ever.

An important precursor of 20th century art, **Paul Cézanne** (1839-1906), often called 'the grandfather of modern painting', spent much of the last two decades of his life painting versions of Mount Sainte-Victoire, in Aix-en-Provence, where he was born. Anticipating the later Cubists, Cézanne broke up the picture surface into planes or prisms, emphasising structure and relationships between forms. Working out in the open air, Cézanne sought to create a harmony that paralleled rather than copied nature, blending his impressions of the landscape with his emotions.



Paul Cézanne, *Mount Saint-Victoire*, c.1888, oil on canvas, 540 x 650mm

Similarly, **Vincent van Gogh** (1853-90) radically redefined the vocabulary of art, animating the entire surface of his paintings with expressive brushstrokes and heightened colours. In contrast to the purely visual emphasis of the Impressionists whom he had encountered in 1886, Van Gogh became obsessed with the symbolic and expressive capabilities of colour: 'Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily

so as to express myself more forcibly.' Van Gogh was often referred to as the 'spiritual father' of Fauvism and German Expressionism. His visionary intensity and use of expressive colour and brushstrokes prepared the ground for subsequent artists including Vlaminck, Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff.

A Russian Jew who had moved to Paris in 1910, **Marc Chagall** (1887-1985) painted *Self-portrait with Seven Fingers* shortly before WWI. The delicately painted folk-art forms of the cow, flowers and other details are juxtaposed with the fractured forms and sharp angles of the Cubist style of painting. The seven-fingered hand and the dreamlike scenes unfolding anticipate the Surrealist movement, which would be founded some years later.



Marc Chagall, *Self Portrait with Seven Fingers*, 1912 - 13, oil on canvas, 1260 x 1070mm  
©Marc Chagall, 1913/ADAGP, Reproduced by permission of VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney 1998.

Painted a decade after the heyday of Cubism, *Still Life with Guitar* by **Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973) revisits one of the great motifs of Cubism, the guitar. Here Picasso delights in simply stated forms, naive coloration and decorative surfaces. Rather than 'describing' the objects in this still life, the artist makes them part of a joyful pattern.

While the first half of the century was characterised by a move towards abstraction in painting, at the same time artists such as the Dutchman **Dick Ket** (1902-1940) were reworking traditional genre such as still life, landscape and portraiture, adding new dimensions and complexities. While Ket's concentration on texture and finely rendered detail is reminiscent of 16th century Netherlandish painting, the 1931 *Self-portrait* also reflects his awareness and grasp of contemporary art trends, most notably Cubism. Unable to venture far from his home because of a heart condition, Ket reflected on his ailment in his self-portraits, frequently painting himself surrounded by medicine bottles. Other artists associated with Dutch Realism—Charley Toorop, Pyke Koch and Carel Willink—also upheld the techniques of earlier eras but used them to new and unexpected ends. In contrast, the paintings of Dutch artist **Piet Mondrian** (1872-1944) moved dramatically beyond the superficial representation of nature towards what he called a 'portrayal of other things, such as the laws governing matter. These are the great generalities which do not change.'

*Composition with Red, Black, Blue, Yellow and Grey* epitomises Mondrian's theory of Neo-Plasticism which proposed a purely abstract art using vertical and horizontal lines and a palette restricted to the primary colours, black, white and grey. He wrote that 'by a total disregard of oneself, a work of art emerges which is a monument to Beauty: something which surpasses all that is human; and yet is intensely human in its depth and universality.'

The other two major pioneers of abstraction were the Russians **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944) and **Kazimir Malevich** (1878-1935). In 1915 Malevich initiated the Suprematist movement (the title derived from the Latin word *supremus*, meaning 'highest'). Malevich believed that abstract, experimental art could be a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. 'Forms move and are born, and

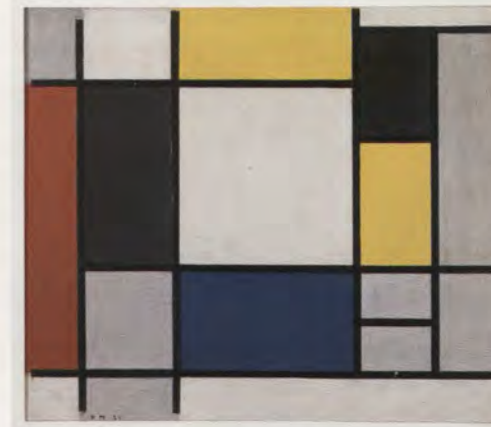


Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Guitar*, 1924, oil on canvas, 975 x 1300mm  
©Pablo Picasso, 1924/Succession Pablo Picasso, Reproduced by permission of VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney 1997.

we are forever making new discoveries,' he pronounced. A key work by Malevich, *Supremus No.50* is an eloquent balancing of vertical and horizontal elements deployed against the white background which characterised Suprematist painting. Like Piet Mondrian,

Malevich's stated purpose was 'to go further and further into the empty wilderness. For it is only there that transformation takes place.'

Following the Second World War, traditional methods of painting had been revised and, in many cases, assaulted by such groups as CoBrA (including Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Constant) and the emerging Abstract Expressionist painters in the United States, including Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning and **Jackson Pollock** (1912-56). As well as using conventional brushes, Pollock used sticks, trowels and knives, producing works like *Waterbull* by brushing, dripping and flicking paint onto the canvas.



Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Black, Blue, Yellow and Grey*, 1920, oil on canvas, 515 x 600mm

In dramatic contrast to Pollock, with whom Barnett Newman (1905-70) is often associated, Newman created works of stark detachment and discipline. *The Gate* illustrates the artist's fixation with flat surfaces and strips of colour, rendered without expressive brushstrokes or individual markings. The large scale of the work and the way its areas of colour seem to continue beyond the canvas were intended to 'engulf' the viewer, laying open emotions such as fear and awe. *The Gate* leads the way to the work of later Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Brice Marden.

One of the key artists in the Pop Art movement in the early 1960s, **Roy Lichtenstein** (1923-97), mined the image-bank of contemporary American culture, drawing upon sources such as newspaper advertising and, in the case of *As I Opened Fire...*, the comic strip. Questioning the notion of the 'original' artwork, Lichtenstein meticulously mimics the colour reproduction techniques of comics and graphic art by replicating the dot patterns used in colour printing. Lichtenstein's work mixes



Dick Ket, *Self-portrait*, 1931, oil on canvas, 715 x 510mm

irony and celebration, and, in an unsettlingly lighthearted way, deals with such troublesome subjects as war and sexual politics. James Rosenquist and Claes Oldenburg similarly explore modern culture's obsession with consumer objects.

During the last three decades, artists have continued to breach the boundaries of painterly conventions, with Arte Povera artists including Luciano Fabro and Jannis Kounellis using everyday materials and techniques to make works that query elevated notions of Fine Art. Ger van Elk and Jan Dibbets combine photography with hand-drawn techniques to explore the way methods of producing images determine the meaning of the images themselves. Gilbert & George have blown the photographic image up into a mock-epic statement of contemporary identity and artifice.

The 1980s were marked by a return to the Expressionist style of painting, seen here in works by Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel, among others. Postmodernist artists Jeff Koons (who is represented by his mischievous 'readymade' art-object *Ushering in Banality*) and David Salle show how contemporary art borrows images and materials from mass culture and assembles them into such puzzling and complex artworks as Salle's *Carnation* (1994).

'I paint as I see as I feel,' Paul Cézanne said late last century, asserting his right as an artist and an individual to interpret reality. And so begins and ends our narrative of painting and sculpture spanning the last one hundred years: a diverse and at times puzzling, but always passionate story of seeing, feeling and making art.

Jackson Pollock, *The Waterbull*, 1945, oil on canvas, 765 x 2130mm  
©Jackson Pollock, 1945/ARS, Reproduced by permission of VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney 1998.



## Glossary

**Modernism** General term referring to the succession of avant-garde art movements in the 20th Century. Modernist art is characterised by an ongoing experimentalism and an evolution towards—and then beyond—a purely abstract art.

**Expressionism** Dominated German art from around 1905 to 1930. Expressionism upheld the supreme importance of the artist's emotions—conventional laws of realism, colour and perspective were overturned by the artist's vision. This emphasis on subjectivity and the creative freedom of the individual was one of the foundations of 20th century art.

**Fauves** Derived from the French word for 'wild beast', the Fauve group (which included Matisse and Vlaminck) emerged in Paris in 1905. The Fauves advocated an expressionistic approach to painting, using heightened, non-naturalistic colours and bold applications of paint.

**Cubism** Founded by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque between 1907 and 1909, Cubism developed Cézanne's ideas of flattened planes and formalised colour. The Cubists reconstructed three dimensional figures, objects and landscapes, breaking the subject matter into careful orchestrations of tones and (often cube-like) shapes.

**Futurism** Italian cultural movement founded by the writer F. T. Marinetti in 1909. The Futurists used a pictorial language similar to Cubism to depict the speed and dynamism of the modern world. Their work celebrated the mechanisation and militarisation of pre-war Europe, which they considered a part of humankind's progress towards an enlightened future.

**Suprematism** Derived from the Latin word 'supremus' meaning highest, Suprematism proposed an art based on pure abstract forms which, according to the movement's founder Kazimir Malevich, embodied a deep, universal spirituality.

**Neo-Plasticism** Theory of art pioneered by Piet Mondrian that proposed a purely abstract art, the forms of which would be restricted to right angles and using only the primary colours supplemented with black, white and grey.

**Abstract Expressionism** American art movement which dominated the 1950s. Derived from Surrealism,

it promoted an automatic, gestural manner of painting, laying abstract shapes on a shallow space. Pollock's 'drip—', 'all-over—' or 'action paintings' sum up the movement's concern with the rhythms and textures of nature, as well as the movement's desire to free painting from traditional concerns such as composition.

**Dutch Realism** A loose grouping of artists working in the Netherlands between the First and Second World Wars. The 'Dutch Realists' were regional painters revitalising traditional pictorial formats, although often with a psychologically disturbing quality reminiscent of Surrealism.

**CoBrA** Art movement founded in 1948 by artists mainly from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam (the placenames providing the capitalised letters in the movement's title). Painting impassioned works which paralleled Abstract Expressionism, the CoBrA artists were outraged by the course of recent European history and embraced children's art and the art of the insane as a more credible tradition to draw upon.

**Pop Art** Having emerged in England and America in the late 1950s, Pop Art drew its imagery, materials and techniques from mass culture. Influenced by advertising, television and billboards, the exaggerated realism of Pop Art is often playfully undercut by the scale and materials of the artwork.

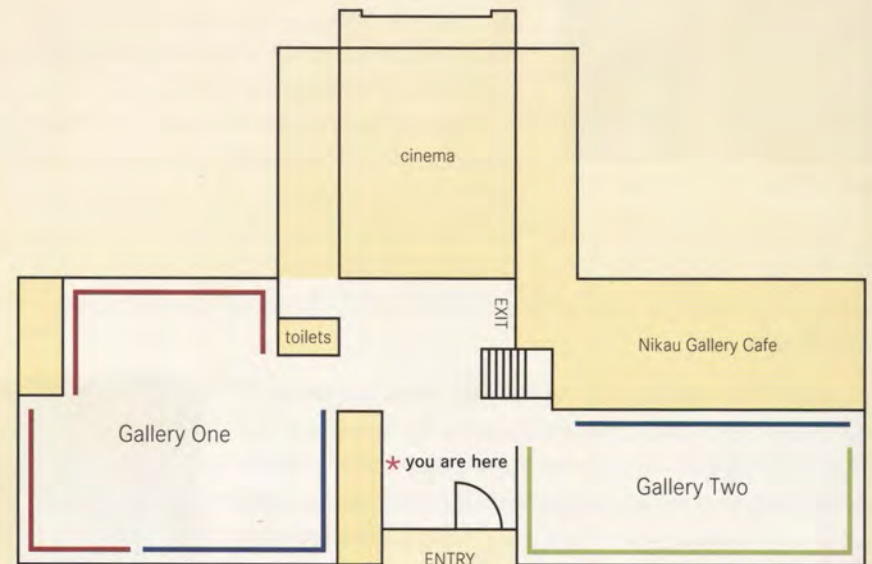
**Postmodernism** Both a continuation of and a reaction against modernism, Postmodernism embodies a return to image-based art, freely appropriating images and symbols from earlier painting as well as contemporary life. Postmodernist artists have sought to address such issues of identity as gender, race and religion which they believe Modernism overlooked.

**Minimalism** Emerging in the 1960s, Minimalism ignored expressiveness and traditional pictorial concerns, substituting an ardent concern with simple geometrical or elemental forms.

**Arte Povera** Translating from the Italian as 'impoverished art', the style loosely defined as Arte Povera emerged in Italy during the late 1960s. Arte Povera works are usually made from such humble and commonly available materials as stone, sand, wood, clay, newspaper and earth.

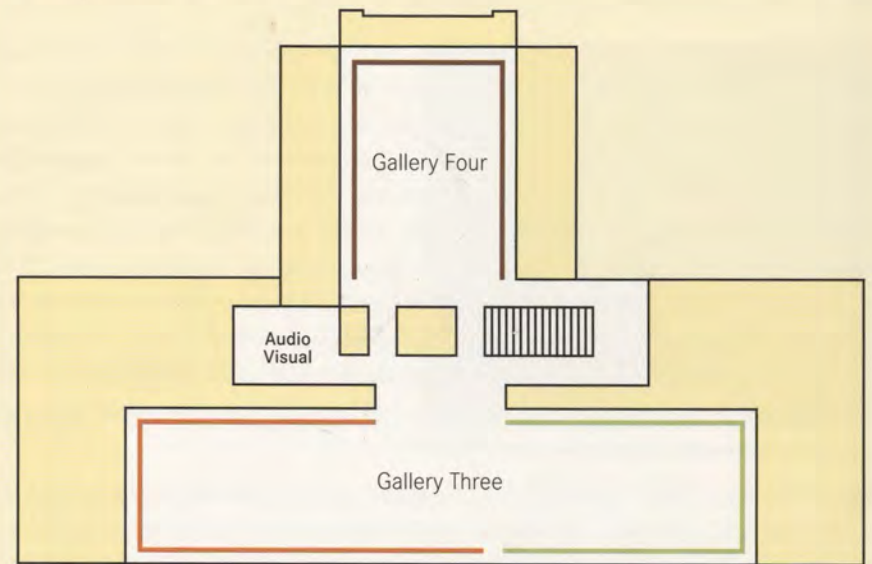


Sandro Chia, *Rabbit for Dinner*, 1981, oil on canvas, 2055 x 3390mm  
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Ground Floor Plan

- Part 1 | From Van Gogh to German Expressionism
- Part 2 | From Cézanne to Malevich and Mondrian
- Part 3 | Dutch Realism and its Circle
- Part 4 | Europe and America after World War Two



First Floor Plan

- Part 4 | Europe and America after World War Two
- Part 5 | From Pop Art to Conceptual Art
- Part 6 | Neo Expressionism and After the 1980s

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