Modernist Art in the Magazines, 1893-1922

This talk is meant to be more of a reminder than a ground-breaker. It is about the role magazines played in promoting the acceptance of modernist modes of visual art, internationally, from Europe to the United States. Because they were limited by their page size and by the restriction to black and white reproduction that many of them faced, we often forget how involved they were in the promotion of modern art in Europe and America. That promotion began in the last decade of the nineteenth century in Paris and London. Let us consider a few examples those cities, before moving on toward the twentieth century.

*La Revue blanche*, which was founded in Belgium to promote symbolism, among other things, moved to Paris in the 1890s, and quickly embraced visual impressionism as a mode of modernist art, taking a special interest in the Nabis, a group that pushed impressionism in the direction of expressionism. A. B. Jackson, in his book on the magazine put it this way;
[From the beginning of the year 1893 Thadée Natanson wrote frequent reviews of shows of painting in Paris and elsewhere, along with discussions of the painters that interested him the most. A lot of attention was given in these articles to the artists who collaborated with the review itself—such as Bonnard, Ker-Roussel, Vuillard, and Toulouse-Lautrec. But
they also attended to the work of Cézanne, Gauguin, Monet, and Renoir—none of whom were directly connected to *la Revue Blanche*.

Shortly after Natanson began writing regularly about art, the magazine began to include visual prints, and in 1895 added supplements called “Nib” (which is French slang for “nothing doing”), with black and white images by artists like Toulouse-Lautrec, Denis, Bonnard, Vuillard, and Vallotton. And many of France’s finest artists produced posters advertising the magazine.
At almost the same time in London *The Yellow Book* began appearing quarterly. Its yellow cover was meant to point toward France, but its visual art had a distinctly British flavor. We are well aware of the literary figures who appeared in that magazine, like Austin Dobson, Max Beerbohm, Henry James, and H. G. Wells, who represent an interesting range of styles that connect Victorian literature to modernism. But we tend to forget that a similar range of visual art appeared in *The Yellow Book*. In a typical issue, like that of July, 1894, which was the second one published, we can find images by Walter Crane, who was connected to William Morris and the arts and crafts movement, the decadent
Aubrey Beardsley (who was the journal’s art editor), and the British impressionist Walter Sickert.

In this same issue there is a critical article by the art critic and memoirist Philip Gilbert Hamerton that examines the first volume. This article discusses the literary section first, and then the art section, following the pattern in the table of contents of the journal itself. This review concludes with the following interesting observation:
On the whole, these illustrations decidedly pre-suppose real artistic culture in the public. They do not condescend in any way to what might be guessed at as the popular taste. I notice that the Editor and Publishers have a tendency to look to young men of ability for assistance in their enterprise, though they accept the criticism of those who now belong to a preceding generation.

Hamerton, who was in the last years of his life as he wrote this, situates himself as a member of “a preceding generation,” but the note he sounds here was echoed by a later modernist journal, The Little Review, when Ezra Pound joined it in 1917 and persuaded the editors to add a motto to the cover page that said, “MAKING NO COMPROMISE WITH THE PUBLIC TASTE.” Literary modernism in England emerged from aestheticism and decadence, as French modernism began with impressionism and symbolism. But both these magazines were wooing the popular taste and seeking to refine it as well as to provide it with the occasional frisson of expressionism or decadence.

It is fair to say, I believe, that all the magazines that dealt with the visual arts in this period—in France, Germany, England, and America—were trying to educate the public about modern art, though the tones in
which they made these attempts varied widely from cajoling to blasting.

One of the journals that took its educational mission seriously at the end of the century was a London periodical called *The Dome*. Running in two series from 1897 to 1900 it had a section devoted to visual art in every issue, teaching its readers about earlier figures like Dürer, Cranach, and Botticelli, while also printing works by contemporary artists. Of special interest for modernists, however, were the articles by C. J. Holmes on Japanese print makers, like Hiroshige and Hokusai, with color reproductions of their work.

Modern Euro-American painters from Whistler to Mary Cassatt were influenced by Japanese artworks, and Holmes, who later became director
of the National Gallery in London, was teaching his readers how to appreciate those works. Ranking Hokusai, in particular, with the greatest of European artists, Holmes makes a powerful case for the importance of this artist.

Color reproductions, however, were still not usual in British publications at this time, and three of the journals that had the most to say about visual modernism—*The New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *Blast*—were strictly black and white. *The New Age* actually ran four different series of modernist images (or perhaps five, if we include cartoonists) during the period from 1911 through 1914. In 1911 a series of cartoons by Max Beerbohm appeared in supplements to the magazine, and a series of images by Walter Sickert began running in the journal’s regular pages. The presence of these two artists connects this modernist journal directly to its Victorian predecessor, *The Yellow Book*. The images of Sickert’s work, claiming to be modern art, provoked the regular art columnist of the time, Huntley Carter, to run a series of images by Picasso, Herbin, de Segonzac, and
Russolo as examples of art Carter considered really “modern.” This same battle between two modes of modernism was continued two years later, when Sickert ran a series of drawings by himself, Charles Ginner.
and others that he called “modern” and T. E. Hulme responded by introducing a series called “contemporary” that included work by Gaudier-Brzeska, Epstein, Bomberg, and Nevinson.

Thus *The New Age* drew a very clear line between artists engaged in
what Baudelaire called the painting of modern life, and artists who were not representing but abstracting from that life.

It is important to note that Hulme and the artists involved in these two series also wrote articles or letters to the magazine debating the merits of these two modes of modern art, with other figures like Anthony Ludovici joining in, and the magazine’s regular cartoonist, who signed his work “Tom Titt,” also producing images mocking both modes of modernism.

The lesson here for students of modern culture is that the magazines
must have a special place in such studies, because they published the works of verbal and visual modernism along with the debates and manifestos that functioned as advertisements for modernist modes of art and literature. For example, in the last issue of *The New Age* for the year 1913, we get both an image of Epstein’s “Rock Drill” and an article by Hulme called “Mr. Epstein and the Critics,” in which he attacks Ludovici, the journal’s current art critic, in no uncertain terms. Ludovici replies in the next issue, and then, in the one after that, several people join the fray with letters to the editor, including the artists Douglas Fox Pitt and Wyndham Lewis.

During this same period, from 1911 to 1913, John Middleton Murry’s new magazine, *Rhythm*, offered its own version of modernist visual art, sometimes using the French term “fauves” to refer to these artists, who were also referred to as “rhythmists.” The artists whose work appeared in *Rhythm* included Picasso, de Segonzac, Derain, Gaudier-Brzeska, and Othon Friesz, as well as J. D. Fergusson (who was the magazine’s first art editor), Anne Estelle Rice, Jessica Dismorr, and Georges Banks.
The images in this magazine were distinctly modern but they were all
more representational than abstract. And they suited the journal’s black and white mode of representation as well as the work of Beardsley and Sickert had suited *The Yellow Book* in the previous century. The term “rhythmists” never caught on, however, as a name for this rather eclectic group, perhaps because of that very eclecticism, or perhaps because it did not point as clearly to a specific feature of visual images as terms like cubism and impressionism did. Vorticism had a similar problem, but has proved a little more durable because of its association with one magazine with a dominant visual artist as its editor.

I am referring, of course, to Wyndham Lewis and *Blast*, which ran for just two issues in 1914 and 1915. “Vorticism”—a term coined by Lewis with the help of Ezra Pound—was intended to designate a mode of abstraction different from the already named Cubism and Futurism, as in this image by Lewis from *Blast* 1. The differences are real enough not enormous, and the term itself is less descriptive than either Cubism, which pointed directly to a geometrical
feature of that art, or Futurism, which pointed equally directly to an attempt to represent time and motion in a spatial form. World War I helped to kill *Blast* and Vorticism, as it literally killed Gaudier-Brzeska and Hulme, among many others. But the magazine helped to put a stamp on modernism in the arts. It is insufficiently noticed that Gaudier and Dismorr, who were very visible in *Rhythm*, were also included among the Vorticists, though Faith Binckes, in her recent book on the subject has helped to remedy that problem. The Vorticist artists, including Lewis himself, did not push abstraction to its logical conclusion, as a painter like Kandinsky did, but it is worth noting that Kandinsky was discussed in both *Rhythm* and *Blast*, though his art did not appear in either.

We should be aware, as well, that Gaudier’s art also was represented in *The Egoist* magazine in 1914, along with an article by Ezra Pound, in which he supported both Gaudier’s work as a sculptor and that of Epstein. Visual art was there, in those modernist magazines we are more likely to think of as literary or even political, along with debates about the way that artists should respond to modernity itself.
That is my major point. Before leaving Europe, I want to mention one more magazine that played a role in Germany from 1910 onward that was quite similar to what *La Revue Blanche* had done in Paris in the nineties. *Der Sturm*, edited by Herwarth Walden, started out as a journal of literature and criticism, but there was visual art in it from the beginning, which grew more and more important, with the group called *Die Brücke* featured in 1911 and *Der Blaue Reiter* group in 1912. This interest in visual art led to Walden’s opening an art gallery in 1912 in which works by the French Fauve group appeared along with contemporary German artists, and Italian Futurists. In the following years Braque, Picasso, Delaunay, Arp, Klee, Severini, Archipenko, Munch, Kokoshka, Kirchner, Kandinsky, and Schwitters all exhibited in the *Galerie Der Sturm* or appeared in the pages of the magazine—or both. But now we must cross the Atlantic and look at visual art in a couple of very different American periodicals: *The Little Review*, and *Scribner’s*. 
The Little Review, edited first in Chicago and then in New York, is justly famous as the literary periodical that published James Joyce’s Ulysses until the courts put a stop to that by fining the editors. What we may not be aware of is how interested this magazine became in visual art, especially in the later years of its run. This interest in visual art really began a few months after Ezra Pound had joined the editorial board of the journal in the Spring of 1917. We can see it clearly in the November issue of that year, in which visual art by Max Weber, Marie Laurencin, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska appeared, along with
André de Segonzac, Jules Pascin, and the Americans Walt Kuhn and Arthur Davies, and the Canadian-British Wyndham Lewis.

Kuhn and Davies, we should remember, had been organizers of the famous Armory Show in New York in 1913, and many of the other artists in this group had appeared in *Rhythm* or *Blast*, or both. In many
issues of *The Little Review* that followed, aggressively modernist artworks appeared, sometimes accompanied by discussions of the artists involved, culminating in the issue of Autumn, 1921, which included twenty-four photos of sculptures by Brancusi, introduced by Ezra Pound, who praised his work highly and connected it to that of his late friend Gaudier-Brzeska.
I say ‘culminated,’” meaning reached a peak rather than ended, because the interest in visual art continued through subsequent issues of this journal that had become quarterly, after having been a monthly since its beginning. This issue marked Pound’s return to the editorial board, and the addition of the painter Francis Picabia to that board. Picabia, who was associated with both Dadaism and Surrealism, remained on the board for some years, with the magazine devoting a “Picabia Number” to him in the Spring of 1922, and images of many other modernist artists appearing during the final years of this important periodical. During these same years a magazine with a circulation about two hundred times greater than that of The Little Review, was also generating its own take on modernism in visual art, and looking at the way art was represented in such a periodical can help us understand both the resistance to modernism and the way that resistance gradually gave way to acceptance.

Scribner’s Magazine was published on Fifth Avenue, a bit uptown
from *The Little Review*, and, as late as 1912 it was still resisting Impressionism, as in this cartoon in which a man can’t tell how to hang an impressionist painting and is told that the signature goes at the bottom. The idea that impressionist art was not representational seems truly laughable today, but the joke ran the other way back then—in *Scribner’s*, at least. A few years later, in 1918, the magazine ran a series of excellent color images of paintings by Renoir, Monet, Degas, and others, with little appreciative notes, but it was still resisting more modernist modes of visual art. In that same year, 1918, an article appeared by an medical man under the title “Insane Art.” In it, the author presented images of drawings by insane people that he described as Cubist [image 39] and Futurist. [image 40] He also
went on to assert that Goya, Blake, and Whistler were “mentally unsound,” and that El Greco was a “psychopath.” I have told the story of modern art in *Scribner’s* at greater length elsewhere, but I must conclude here by reporting that finally, in 1922, an article appreciative of Picasso and Matisse appeared, with images by both of them. *Scribner’s* never caught up to *The Little Review*, but, ultimately, it fostered an appreciation of modern art among a much wider audience than that reached by all the little magazines put together.

And that concludes this very quick glance at modern art in the magazines.