

PRESS RELEASE

UTOPIA MATTERS: FROM BROTHERHOODS TO BAUHAUS

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

1 May – 25 July, 2010

Press conference: Friday, April 30, 12 noon, roof terrace

Peggy Guggenheim Collection

From May 1 through July 25, 2010 the Peggy Guggenheim Collection presents the exhibition *Utopia Matters: from Brotherhoods to Bauhaus*, curated by Vivien Greene, Curator of 19th and Early 20th Century Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. With more than 70 works of art, encompassing painting, sculpture, drawing, decorative art, design, photography, and printed matter, the exhibition examines the evolution of utopian ideas in modern Western artistic thought and practice, taking an international sequence of case studies that reveals some of the faces that utopia can assume when embraced by artistic movements—from the brotherhoods of the 19th century to the avant-gardes of the period immediately following World War I. The groups addressed are the French *Primitifs*, the German Nazarenes, the English Pre-Raphaelites, English polymath William Morris and the international Arts and Crafts movement, the American Cornish art colony, French Neo-Impressionism, Dutch De Stijl, the German Bauhaus, and Russian Constructivism. The exhibition includes loans from some of the most important museums in the world, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, Tate Britain, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The exhibition opens in the late 18th century, at a time when artistic groups with articulated utopian goals sprang up as self-proclaimed brotherhoods, with conscious efforts to fashion model communities. These brotherhoods were often anti-modernist, lacked explicit political agendas, and promoted reform for idealistic, individualistic ends. They aspired to live a pure and sometimes monastic life and to remain untouched by outside ills. In instances, this retreat was prompted by religious sentiments that were a reaction to the increasing secularization of the Christian Church in the nineteenth century. At times, this withdrawal was also predicated on a quest for the “primitive,” an immersion in nature, or a return to an untainted harmonious state of being. The French *Primitifs* (Primitives) looked to the primitivism of archaic Greek and Etruscan art and the Italian *Quattrocento* (15th-century). Charged scenes from the tales of Homer, the poems of Ossian, and the Old Testament were among their preferred subjects. Similarly the German Nazarenes, such as Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr (*The Count of Hapsburg and the Priest*, 1809-1810), referenced the Early and High Renaissance and painted religious scenes in an attempt to restore faith through art.

Like the Primitifs and the Nazarenes, the Pre-Raphaelites also quoted the past, announcing their allegiance to the art and philosophy of the time before Raphael, when guilds reigned. Among them, artists such as William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti privileged clear pictorial narratives and an artistic style inspired by the Italian fifteenth century. The Pre-Raphaelites mined medieval history and literature, the dramas of William Shakespeare, and religious narratives in order to evoke a time when chivalry, purity of spirit, and morality ruled.

As 19th-century progress marched forth, there was a return to craft in response to increased mechanization and to the dehumanization caused by industrial labor. This return was accompanied by the concomitant recognition that art, architecture, and design could have a role in reformulating how people lived and could serve to ameliorate society. Key proponents of this philosophy were artists connected to the Pre-Raphaelites, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones (*Elaine*, 1870). Inspired

largely by Ruskin's theories, Morris was a progenitor of the Arts and Crafts movement, and advocated a system that would follow the model of collective production demonstrated by medieval guilds.

In the last quarter of the century, with the momentum gained by left-wing groups, some artistic movements, such as the Neo-Impressionists, developed utopian ambitions with politicized intent, championing workers' rights and critiquing capitalism in the very content of their art. The Neo-Impressionists saw their optical painting technique, based loosely on scientific tenets, as the vehicle to present scenes of progressive thought, uniting contemporary methods with idealistic narratives. While Camille Pissarro painted the bucolic landscapes and pastoral cycles of peasant life, Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross (*Excursion*, 1895) took cues from pastoral classicizing imagery.

At the onset of the 20th century there was a shift in the aims of utopian artistic groups. Following the advent of abstraction and the graphic horrors of World War I, artists turned toward the notion of truth as embodied in pure, abstract forms, which were equated with harmony.

The founders of De Stijl, a small group of Dutch artists and architects led by Theo Van Doesburg (*Counter-Composition XIII*, 1925–26), believed that the formal properties of architecture, art, and design could foster harmony. To forge a visual language that was universal rather than individual, those De Stijl members who were artists experimented with a variety of means, although all created paintings with flat geometric shapes—paintings that differed in scale and in their range of colors. The De Stijl hope for revolutionizing social relations and culture at large via an artistic language of reduced forms resonated with other contemporary artistic movements such as the Bauhaus, a state-sponsored school of art, architecture, and design, founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919, by architect Walter Gropius. The school assembled leading artists and designers of the avant-garde into a working community that could help reconstruct post-war society through art and design. Among the masters of the Bauhaus exhibited in Venice are Vasily Kandinsky (*Blue Painting*, 1924) and Josef Albers (*Interlocked*, 1927).

Vladimir Lenin and the other Bolsheviks who assumed power in Russia after the 1917 revolution also pursued a utopian vision, but theirs was centered pragmatically on restructuring class relations. In contrast to Lenin's conservative artistic taste, Russian avant-garde artists utilized the radical poetics of non-objective art. Both Malevich and Lissitzky were idealists who believed that form could represent grand, if vaguely expressed visions, while Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, the Stenberg Brothers, and others who all called themselves Constructivists were more interested in concrete materials as bearers of value. The utopian visions of the Communist Party and the Constructivist avant-garde intersected in the 1920s, and utopian beliefs and cultural production were put into the service of the leftist programs of the government. The furthering of these ideologies to large-scale political ends ultimately limited these utopian groups and exposed the pitfalls possible in utopian endeavors.

Utopia Matters concludes in the early 1930s, when the ascendancy of fascism brought about the close of the Bauhaus in Berlin in 1933 and when Stalinism reframed Russian Constructivist projects in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, utopian experiments persist, from artists' colonies and collectives to ecologically self-sustaining communities, creating multiple chapters in this history, which leads up to the present day. Utopian ideals matter, and they continue in our societies.

The exhibition *Utopia Matters: from Brotherhoods to Bauhaus*, is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, published by Guggenheim Museum Publications (New York) with essays by curator Vivien Greene, historian Russell Jacoby, and design-history authority Victor Margolin.

The exhibition benefits from the support of the Regione del Veneto and of Intrapresae Collezione Guggenheim. Hangar Design Group created the graphic design for communications. Clear Channel, Radio Italia and Corriere della Sera are media partners for the exhibition.

Peggy Guggenheim COLLECTION

Palazzo Venier dei Leoni
701 Dorsoduro
30123 Venezia, Italy
Telephone 041 2405 411
Telefax 041 5206885

The programs of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection are made possible thanks to the support of the Advisory Board of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and:

Intrapresæ Collezione Guggenheim

Institutional Patrons:
BSI, Swiss Bankers since 1873
Regione del Veneto

Aperol
Apice
Arclinea
Corriere della Sera
De Majo Illuminazione
Distilleria Nardini
Gruppo La-Vis
Gruppo Pirelli
Hangar Design Group
Hausbrandt
Istituto Europeo di Design
Mapei
MST-Gruppo Maccaferri
Oracle
Rubelli
Swatch
Trend

e-mail: info@guggenheim-venice.it; website: www.guggenheim-venice.it/peggyg.mobi

Opening times: 10am–6pm daily; closed Tuesdays and December 25

Admission: 12 euro; Seniors over 65, 10 euro; Students 7 euro; 0-10 years, free.

For further information: tel. +39 041. 2405404/415; press@guggenheim-venice.it