Joslyn Art Museum

TIMELINE – 1800s in North America

France, 1900–present

Overview

In France, the first half of the twentieth century is dominated by the two World Wars. The years between 1900 and 1950 witness the ongoing industrialization of France, as in other countries of Western Europe and in North America. Economically, politically, culturally, and socially, Paris continues to be at the center of French life, periodic efforts at decentralization notwithstanding. The postwar period in France is dominated by the towering presence of General Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), who serves as president from 1944 to 1946, and 1958 to 1969. The processes of rebuilding and modernization that he implements are continued by his successors Georges Pompidou (1911–1974), Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (born 1926), and François Mitterand (1916–1996). The latter, in particular, makes an important mark on the capital city through his grands projets. Actually begun under Giscard d’Estaing, this series of public works updates French cultural institutions like the Musée du Louvre and transforms the city of Paris.

During the 1950s and '60s, France, like other Western European countries, undergoes a process of decolonization when its former African and Asian colonies claim independence. Wars in Algeria and Indochina result, and contribute to the social and political tensions that erupt in the "Events"—specifically the general strikes and student revolts—of May 1968. As in other Western countries, an energy crisis, inflation, and high unemployment create economic malaise in the 1970s. The economic recovery of the mid- to late 1980s coincides with the movement toward European cooperation, which is manifest in the adoption of the Euro by twelve of the fifteen European Union countries as the common unit of currency for electronic transactions in 1999.

The twentieth century opens with France, and especially the city of Paris, occupying a preeminent position in the art world. The French avant-garde in the period after 1900 pursues the development of artistic modernism that began during the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, the Fauvist artists, led by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), produce paintings characterized by the broad application of bright colors. At approximately the same time, Parisian artists, among them Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963), pioneer the Cubist style. So important does Paris become in the early decades of the twentieth century with regard to the development of avant-garde aesthetics, that it is possible to speak of a School of Paris comprised of artists from many nations who are drawn to the city.

The persecution of Jewish artists in Germany and elsewhere in the years leading up to and including World War II brings many émigrés to Paris. The subsequent German Occupation and French involvement in the conflict drives some away from Paris, to the United States. In the postwar period, the international significance of Paris as a center for art production is somewhat eclipsed by New York. Nonetheless, the French continue to make important contributions to photography, easel painting, and sculpture, as well as to design and architecture. The grands projets, among other works, are important for establishing postmodernism as an international cultural phenomenon during the last two decades of the century.

Key Events

* 1900 The Art Nouveau style dominates design and architecture around the turn of the century in France. Paris and the northern French city of Nancy are centers for the production of Art Nouveau decorative arts objects, architecture, and entire domestic environments.
• **1900** The Exposition Universelle opens in Paris. Two buildings from the exposition, the Petit Palais and the Grand Palais, survive as venues for art exhibitions up to the present. The Paris Métro system opens in connection with the fair.

• **1902** The film A Trip to the Moon, directed by Georges Méliès (1861–1938), opens in Paris. The film uses the complex editing and tricks for which the director is known to convey a sense of space travel to enthralled audiences.

• **1905** The first exhibition of the Fauvist artists is held in Paris at the Salon d'Automne. Among the group is Henri Matisse (1869–1954), André Derain (1880–1954), Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958), and others. In 1911, Henri Matisse paints The Red Studio (Museum of Modern Art, New York), a work that demonstrates his non-normative use of bright colors, as well as his deliberately erratic use of perspective.

• **1906** Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), a Jewish French army officer who had been arrested in 1894 and charged with spying for Germany, is acquitted. His trial occasions a nationwide debate on anti-Semitism, including "J'accuse," a letter published in 1898 by Émile Zola (1840–1902) in defense of Dreyfus.

• **1907** The Triple Entente is signed by France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The agreement is an expansion of the earlier Entente Cordiale between Britain and France that resolved some disputes and established diplomatic relations between the nations. When Russia joins, the three countries form the core of the forces that will oppose the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary and Germany) in World War I.

• **1907** Louis Lumière (1864–1948) develops a process for color photography using a three-color screen. The process proves to be adaptable to the industrial production of images and is one of the few available for nearly thirty years. With his brother Auguste Lumière (1862–1954), Louis is also credited with having virtually invented the motion picture.

• **1907** Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) paints Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (MoMA, New York), in which his fractured treatment of three-dimensional form heralds the advent of Cubism. He likewise demonstrates his interest in African masks in the treatment of some of the figures' faces.

• **1907** The first exhibition of work by Cubist artists is held in Paris, although the term will not be applied to the group until the following year (1908), when it is coined by critic Louis Vauxcelles (born 1870). In 1913, poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) publishes The Cubist Painters, which codifies the common objectives of the group.

• **1909** French aviator Louis Blériot (1872–1936) crosses the English Channel from Calais to Dover, England, in thirty-seven minutes by airplane. During World War I, his manufacturing company produces the S.P.A.D. fighter plane used by the Allies.

• **1913** Irish-born furniture designer Eileen Gray (1879–1976) attracts favorable attention at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in Paris with luxurious modernist pieces combining lacquer and rare woods, geometric abstraction and Japanese-inspired motifs. In the 1920s, Gray will reject the Art Deco sensibility in favor of a functionalist vocabulary, incorporating modern materials such as tubular steel and aluminum in her furnishings.

• **1913** Marcel Proust (1871–1922) publishes Swann's Way, the first volume of his larger project, Remembrance of Things Past. In this work, Proust offers a fictionalized memoir of visits to family in Auteuil outside of Paris.

• **1913** The Rite of Spring, a ballet by composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), premieres in Paris. It is performed by the Ballets Russes, founded by Russian émigré impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929), with whom Stravinsky is associated through 1929. This association leads to collaborations with a number of avant-garde visual artists. In 1917, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) designs sets and costumes for composer Erik Satie's (1866–
1925) ballet Parade, which premieres at the Ballets Russes.

• **1914** World War I begins. Germany invades France. In February 1916, Germans attack Verdun and thousands of troops are killed there through July, when the Germans end their offensive. In France, the Battle of the Somme is also fought in 1916. In 1917, the U.S. enters the conflict. In 1918, World War I ends with the signing of the Armistice by Germany; the Treaty of Versailles is signed in 1919. As part of the settlement with Germany, the province of Alsace and part of the province of Lorraine, both previously seized by Germany, are returned to France.

• **1918** Swiss-born architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887–1965, later known as “Le Corbusier”) and Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966) publish Après le cubisme (After Cubism), a manifesto of the Purist movement. The aesthetic purity of industrially manufactured objects championed in Purism is manifested in paintings and architecture incorporating forms that echo common consumer goods. In 1923, Le Corbusier publishes Vers une architecture, a manifesto of his conception of modern architecture.

• **1919** The first Pan-African Congress, organized by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), opens in Paris with fifty-seven delegates from sixteen countries and colonies.

• **1921** Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel (1883–1917) introduces Chanel No. 5, which becomes the world’s best-selling perfume. In 1928, Chanel makes her first tweed women’s suit, a casual style stressing simplicity and comfort with which she will become closely identified.

• **1923–25** Conflict with Germany over unpaid reparations, stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles, motivates the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr Valley, territory which is eventually relinquished.

• **1924** The film L’Inhumaine, directed by Marcel L’Herbier (1888–1979), is produced with sets by modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886–1945) and painter Fernand Léger (1881–1955).

• **1924** André Breton (1896–1966) issues the first Surrealist manifesto. Two additional manifestos will follow in 1930 and 1942, making Breton the most important theorist of the movement.

• **1925** The Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, or Art Deco Exhibition, opens in Paris. The term “Art Deco” will become associated with the style embodied in, for example, the work of designers Jean Dunand (1877–1942) and Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933).

• **1929** The French begin construction on the Maginot Line of defense against Germany, commencing a long period of political tension between the countries that culminates in World War II.

• **1929** Like other Western European and North American countries, France is seized by economic depression in the wake of the U.S. stock market crash.

• **1931** The Exposition Coloniale in Paris precipitates protest by the Surrealists, who organize a counter-exhibition.

• **1931** Construction on the ocean liner Normandie, an apogee of Art Deco style, begins.

• **1931** Le Corbusier (1887–1965) completes the Villa Savoye in Poissy, outside Paris. The period of economic and political instability between the World Wars brings about a number of competing styles in the arts, including architecture. Widely observed as a “turn toward the organic,” which entails a repudiation of the Machine Age forms favored in the arts of the 1920s. In the Villa Savoye, this transformation is signaled by the presence of rectilinear, rationalist forms as well as more curving, organic elements.

• **1935** The Nobel Prize for chemistry is awarded to Frédéric Joliot-Curie (1900–1958) and Irène Curie (1897–1956) for the synthesis of new radioactive elements.
• 1936 The Popular Front, a political party, comes to power in France. It responds to working-class dissatisfaction by advocating paid vacations and the forty-hour work week.

• 1937 Jean Renoir (1894–1979), son of the painter Auguste Renoir, directs The Grand Illusion. The antiwar film is banned in Germany and Italy.

• 1937 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) paints Guernica (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid), which dramatizes the bombing of the Basque capital during the Spanish Civil War.

• 1939 World War II begins when German troops invade Poland. France and Britain declare war on Germany. In 1940, Italy declares war on Britain and France. German troops enter Paris, beginning its Occupation in that year. The northern two-thirds of France are controlled by the Germans, while the southern third is under the collaborationist government of Marshall Philippe Pétain (1856–1951). In 1942, southern France is occupied by Germany. In 1944, Allied forces land on the Normandy beaches on D-Day and Paris and Rome are liberated from their German occupiers. Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) becomes head of the provisional government. In 1946, the Fourth Republic is created with a new constitution.

• 1945 France is a charter member of the United Nations. The institution is intended to foster international peace and cooperation.

• 1945 Painter Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) begins to collect what he calls "Art Brut," works characterized as "primitive" or "naïve" and that are produced by untrained nonprofessionals, including the mentally ill. This activity eventually leads to an international interest in Outsider Art.

• 1946 Revolt by Indochina begins and culminates in French withdrawal from the area in 1954. In that year, the Algerian revolt against French rule begins, culminating in Algerian independence in 1962. In 1956, the former French colonies of Morocco and Tunisia gain independence.

• 1947 Henri Matisse (1869–1954) publishes Jazz, an album of paper cutout compositions. The cutout technique will become his primary medium in the last years of his life.

• 1947 Couturier Christian Dior (1905–1957) introduces the "New Look" in women's clothes and Paris takes on international preeminence as a center of fashion. After Dior's sudden death in 1957, his assistant Yves Saint Laurent (born 1936) becomes head of design for the company. In the 1960s, Saint Laurent will open his own fashion house and become one of the stars of Parisian clothing design, even as London begins to emerge as a fashion leader.

• 1949 Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) publishes The Second Sex. The book will become a classic text of the feminist movement.

• 1950 French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman (1886–1963) first proposes the concept of European integration in a speech on May 9. This date is celebrated subsequently as Europe Day, the birthday of the European Union. A step toward unification will be taken in 1957 when the "Six" (France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) sign the Rome Treaty establishing the European Economic Community.

• 1954 The completion of the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp by Le Corbusier (1887–1965) signals the emergence of a more sculptural and expressionistic modern architecture.

• 1957 The Situationist International is founded in Paris. In response to postwar rebuilding, its members propose utopian urban projects in maps, models, and other forms over a fifteen-year period.
• **1957–62** Parisian artist Yves Klein (1928–1962) presents The Void in a series of five works that blend performance and installation. Klein’s works embody a tendency among postwar French artists to create art that engages not just the flat canvas, but three-dimensional space as well.

• **1958** The Fifth Republic is established under a new constitution. The president, Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), is given greater power. De Gaulle will remain in office until his resignation in 1969, which is followed by the election of Georges Pompidou (1911–1974) as his successor.

• **1958–60** The first feature films by directors associated with the "New Wave" appear, including The 400 Blows (1959) by François Truffaut (1932–1984) and Breathless (1959) by Jean-Luc Godard (born 1930). The films are marked by spontaneity and directorial control of all aspects of production.

• **1960** An exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci’s (1452–1519) Mona Lisa (Louvre) in New York and Washington, D.C., is brought about by Minister of Culture André Malraux (1901–1976) as part of a campaign to bolster France’s international standing on the basis of its cultural heritage.

• **1960** The Op Art movement explores the effects that can be created through optical illusions. Among the French artists associated with it is the Hungarian-born Victor Vasarely (1908–1977).

• **1967** Film director Jacques Tati (1908–1982) premieres Playtime, in which he calls attention to the hollow tastelessness of postwar French architecture, urban planning, and American-style consumer culture.

• **1968** In May, students demonstrate against de Gaulle (1890–1970) in Paris, touching off nationwide demonstrations and strikes involving some 10 million people, roughly two-thirds of the workforce. The "Days of May" prompt widespread institutional, political, and social reform in France. The state-supported art school, the École des Beaux-Arts, which has dominated academic training since the nineteenth century, is reorganized and decentralized.

• **1968** Fashion designer André Courrèges (born 1923) introduces the Moon Girl look, featuring flared minidresses with plastic portholes at the waistline, platter-shaped hats, and calf-high white plastic boots—soon to be dubbed the Go-Go boot.

• **1970s** Writings by French feminist theorists, including Luce Irigaray (born 1939) and Hélène Cixous (born 1937), inspire the production of feminist art from the 1970s onward, by Annette Messager (born 1943) and others.

• **1971** Georges Pompidou (1911–1974) allows the United Kingdom to join the Economic Community (after 1993 incorporated into the European Union, EU), a move which de Gaulle (1890–1970) had opposed.

• **1973** The Arab Oil Embargo against the U.S. carries with it a 70 percent price increase applied to American allies, including France. Economic recession follows.

• **1974** Georges Pompidou dies and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (born 1926) is elected president of the Republic.

• **1977** The Centre Georges Pompidou, designed by architects Renzo Piano (born 1937) and Richard Rogers (born 1933), opens in Paris. The contemporary art museum, cultural center, and library, with its brightly painted externalized structure and mechanical systems, stands out from its traditional neighborhood.

• **1980** The national telephone company, France Telecom, introduces the Teltel videotext network, by which subscribers can view telephone listings, news, and other information on their Minitel terminals.

• **1981** Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–1987) is the first woman to be elected to the Académie Française. Yourcenar is best known for her historical novels.
• 1981 Elections bring the Socialist party to power and François Mitterrand (1916–1996) becomes president, serving until 1995. Many industrialists and financiers fear that Mitterand will institute sweeping economic changes harmful to business interests, but such fears prove to be unwarranted.

• 1983 Former Nazi Klaus Barbie ("The Butcher of Lyon," 1913–1991) is extradited from Bolivia to France to stand trial for crimes committed under the Nazi regime during World War II. He is convicted and given a life sentence.

• 1983 The Institut Pasteur identifies the HIV virus, an important step toward the eradication of AIDS, which reaches epidemic proportions, especially in the gay community, by the 1980s.

• 1983 High-speed TGV (Train à grande vitesse) commences operation between Paris and Lyon, at speeds up to 168 miles per hour. Additional high-speed train lines are constructed and facilitate travel throughout France and Europe.

• 1983 Philippe Starck (born 1949) designs an apartment in the Palais de l'Élysée in Paris for Madame Mitterrand and receives instant recognition as a designer. His unique "Juicy Salif" lemon squeezer (2001.523) is designed in 1990 and is among the works he produces for mass consumption.

• 1985 Christo (born 1935) wraps the Pont Neuf, Paris. It is part of his ongoing project to intervene on a large scale in built and natural environments. His work is carried out in collaboration with his wife Jeanne-Claude (born 1935).

• 1987 The Institut du Monde Arabe, designed by Jean Nouvel (born 1945), is completed in Paris. The Lyon Opéra, also designed by Nouvel, is completed in 1993, and the Fondation Cartier building in Paris in 1994. Nouvel uses forms and materials (like steel and glass) associated with high modernist architecture, but in expressive rather than purely rationalist ways.

• 1989 The Bicentennial of the French Revolution is celebrated. In connection with the Bicentennial, several of the grands projets (or grands travaux) are completed, including the new pyramidal entrance to the Louvre (1989), designed by I. M. Pei (born 1917), and the Musée d'Orsay (1986) by architect Gae Aulenti (born 1927) to accommodate the state museum of French art from 1848 to 1914.

• 1991 The continued importance of installation art in France is signaled by Jean-Marc Bustamante's (born 1952) work Lumière (1992.5158).

• 1991 The fifteen member nations of the European Union meet in the Dutch town of Maastricht to sign the Maastricht Treaty, by which they agree to adopt a single currency. In 1999, the Euro becomes the trans-European electronic currency.

• 1991 EuroDisney opens in Paris. It is greeted with skepticism by some who see the amusement park as an indication of American cultural imperialism.

• 1991 The French participate in Operation Desert Storm in the first Gulf War.

• 1991 Edith Cresson (born 1934) is the first woman in France to be elected prime minister but serves only until 1992. Her political career is controversial: in 1999, she is charged with a variety of wrongdoings, including nepotism, at the end of a four-year term as EU Commissioner for Research, Science and Technology.

• 1993 New York-based architect Bernard Tschumi (born 1944), who is associated with the Deconstructivist movement, completes the Parc de la Villette in Paris in collaboration with other architects and artists. The park includes sculpture by Claes Oldenburg (born 1929), thirty-five red "follies," and other buildings.
1994 The completion of the "Chunnel," a tunnel under the English Channel, connecting England and France. The Chunnel facilitates commercial, social, and cultural exchange between Great Britain and the Continent to an unprecedented degree.

1995 Jacques Chirac (born 1932) is elected president. Chirac had gained notoriety previously as the mayor of Paris.

1996 Fifteen cybercafés operate in Paris. Like other developed countries, France is transformed by the computer, which brings rapid communication and up-to-date information to individual homes, as well as to social, cultural, and educational institutions.


2000 A crash of the supersonic Concorde airplane kills 113 people. Originally hailed as a revolutionary form of air transportation, Concorde service between Europe and North America is discontinued following the crash.