

Introducing Modern Western Art : Movements and Artists
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Lecture - 13
Pure Abstract Sculpture (Constructivism & Minimalism)

Welcome viewers to MOOCs online course on Introduction to Modern Western Art. In this lecture we will be looking at the development of pure abstract sculptures and in this context briefly we will be also looking at some of the new innovative ideas of sculpture proposed by two short lived, but very significant movements in sculpture called constructivism and minimalism.

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Abstract Art
c.1907 onwards

Pure Abstraction is where the artist uses visual elements independently as the actual subject of the work itself. Suprematism, De Stijl and Minimalism.

Although elements of abstraction are present in earlier artworks, the roots of modern abstract art are to be found in Cubism. Among other important abstract styles that developed in the 20th century are Orphism, Rayonism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Op Art, Tachisme.

Now, pure abstraction is a tendency which has already been observed or noticed from the time cubism as an art movement came into being and if we try to define what this term or this phrase pure abstraction means then it is a kind of art where the artist uses visual elements independently as the actual subject of the work itself, something that we have seen Kandinsky been doing in his works in the context of German expressionism. He has been using lines, colors, certain elements abstract elements as the form instead of referring to the real life.

Now, all the elements of abstraction are present in earlier artworks, the roots of modern abstract art are to be found in cubism as I have already mentioned and among other

important abstract styles that developed in the 20th century modern art are Orphism, Rayonism, constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Op Art, Tachisme, but in this lecture we will be limiting our discussion to constructivism and minimalism.

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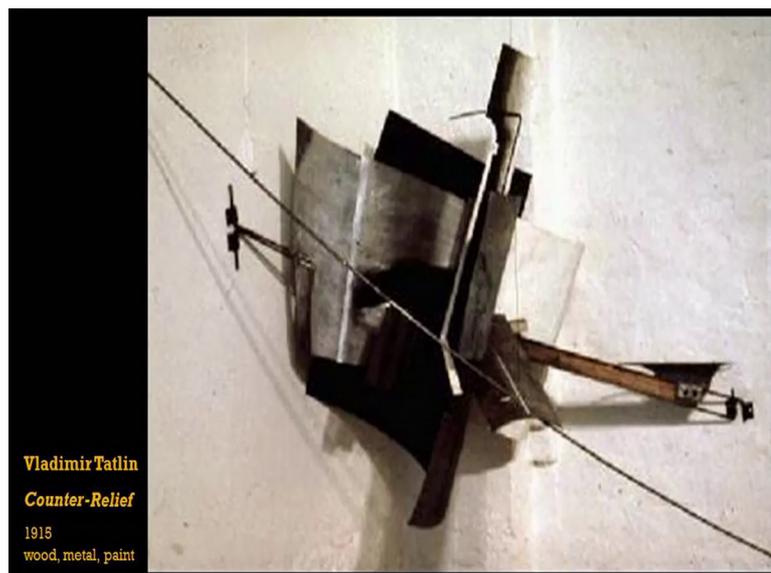
Now, talking about minimalism for example, we will be continuously reminded of Brancusi to some extent because Brancusi through his simplification was able to reach a sculptural idea which comes very close to the idea of minimalism. Now where you get rid of anything that you think is excess anything that you think is not necessary unnecessary not essential you simply get rid of that and reach a code sculptural idea through the process of simplification.

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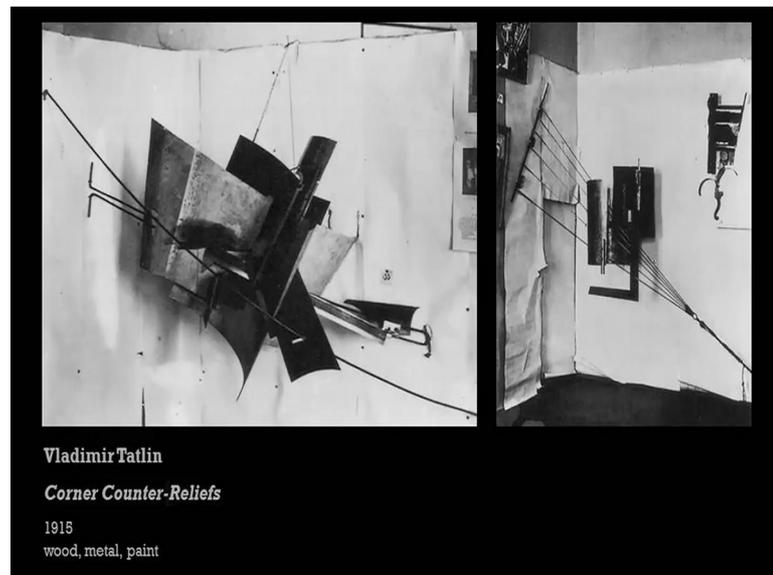
And Brancusi has done quite a few works like this where ultimately he has arrived at a form which resembles an egg. But really speaking it is not a representation of egg it is not an image of egg, it is an idea, idea that relates to the cosmic feel of the universe to the cosmic concept of universe. So, once again it is a very philosophical and a spiritually driven concept which Brancusi was trying to visualize and materialize in his sculptures going by a process of simplification.

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Now, as far as constructivism is concerned around 1915 we come across a kind of sculpture made by Vladimir Tatlin, a Russian artist we are once again you hardly see any representational element. It almost looks like what we call scrap objects discarded pieces from industrial products and Tatlin calls in this work relief counter relief.

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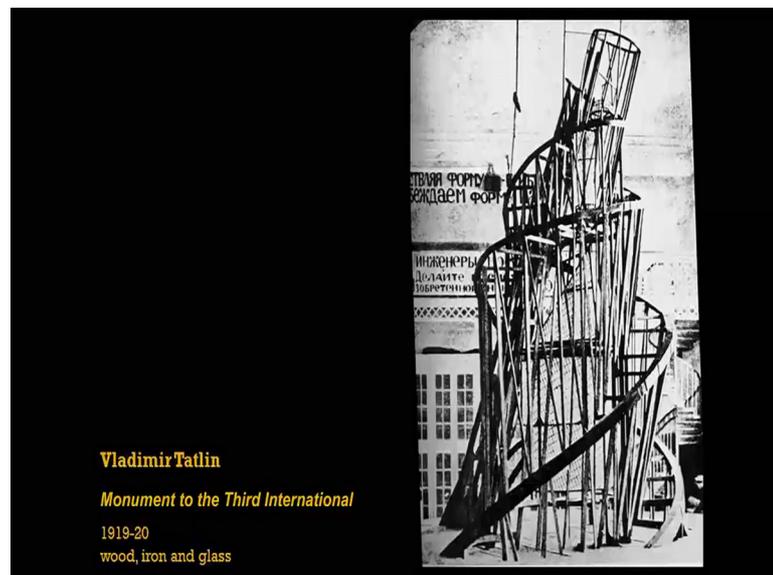
Now, in corner counter reliefs which is spokes like an installation art work for Tatlin he was continuously exploring an idea of a sculpture which will not have any realistic or visual reference right at the outset it will rather be more dependent on the idea of construction. Then you have another Russian artist and by the way constructivism is basically an art movement that generated from Russia.

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So, most of this the original artists the initial artists who worked in this movement where Russian; so Kazimir Malevich in this work which he calls the tea service he follows of course, the forms of tea cups and junks and all that, but as you can clearly see in this work what Malevich is more interested in is neither the functionality of the objects.

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Nor in the references of the objects, but in the construction of the objects in this we will get more and more clear in his other works like the monument to the third international

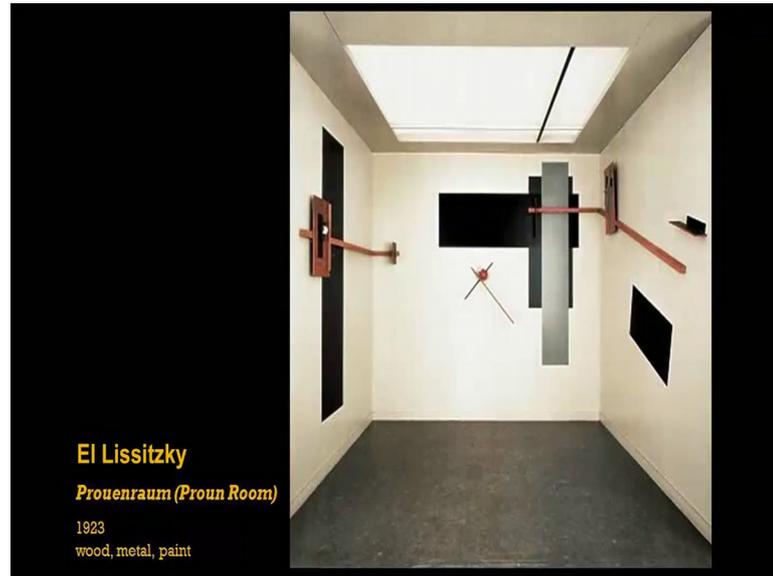
which he made in 1919 where he used wood iron and glass and another important contribution to the modern sculpture that.

Now, a sculptor is not confined to the use of only one single medium in one sculpture this combination of various mediums and various materials in one single sculpture is now possible, it is now allowed. So, Tatlin and art sculptures they should get the credit of experimenting with different mediums and; obviously, we will be reminded of Picasso who during their synthetic cubism has already done that a kind of combination of different materials in one board, but not so much in sculpture as much as Tatlin is doing in his sculptures like this monument.

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Then when you look at Lissitzky's work called the Proun Room, again what you are encountering it is not a conventional sculpture or not an conventional idea of sculpture what you are looking at is a combination of various geometrical forms. And again like Tatlin, Lissitzky is also using wood metal paint and other materials because the objective was not to retain the purity of material, but to achieve a certain formal idea which gets even more clear in the later works by the constructivist artists.

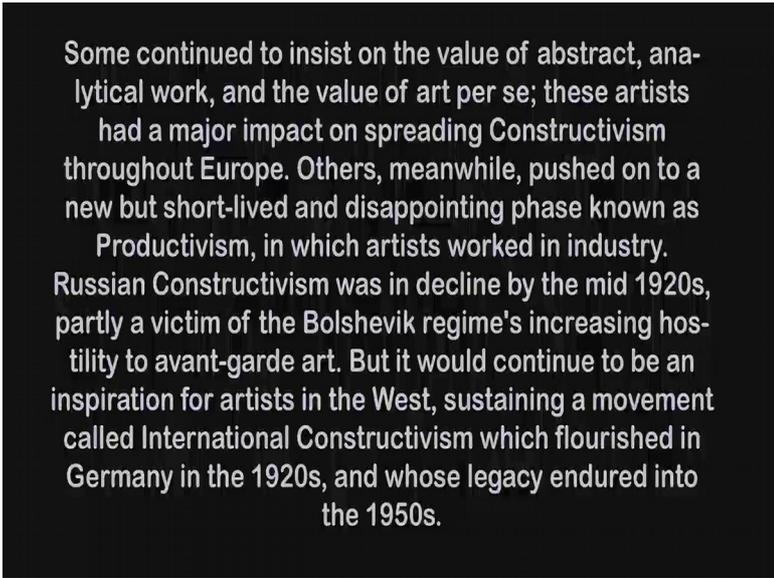
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It borrowed ideas from Cubism, Suprematism and Futurism, but at its heart was an entirely new approach to making objects, one which sought to abolish the traditional artistic concern with composition, and replace it with 'construction'. Constructivism called for a careful technical analysis of modern materials, and it was hoped that this investigation would eventually yield ideas that could be put to use in mass production, serving the ends of a modern, Communist society. Ultimately, however, the movement foundered in trying to make the transition from the artist's studio to the factory.

Now, this is accepted to some extent that constructivist they borrowed the ideas from cubism suprematism and futurism, but at its heart it was an entirely new approach to making objects one which sought to abolish the traditional artistic concern with composition and constructivism replace that tradition with construction.

So, construction becomes the key word, the key term to understand this new aesthetics of constructivism. Constructivism called for a careful technical analysis of modern materials and it was hoped that this investigation would eventually yield ideas that could be put to use in mass production, serving the ends of the modern, communist society. In a sense constructivism was certainly an art movement as much as it was an industrial movement ultimately; however, the movement founded in trying to make the transition from the artist's studio to the factory.

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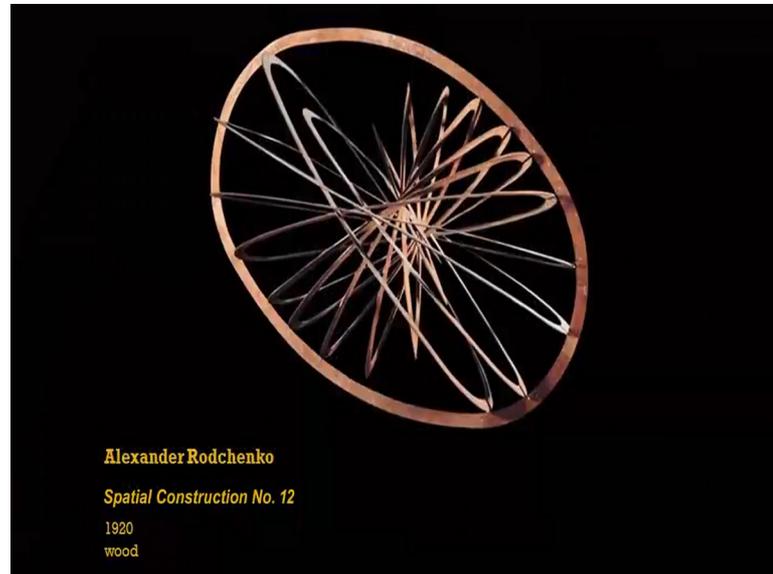
Some continued to insist on the value of abstract, analytical work, and the value of art per se; these artists had a major impact on spreading Constructivism throughout Europe. Others, meanwhile, pushed on to a new but short-lived and disappointing phase known as Productivism, in which artists worked in industry. Russian Constructivism was in decline by the mid 1920s, partly a victim of the Bolshevik regime's increasing hostility to avant-garde art. But it would continue to be an inspiration for artists in the West, sustaining a movement called International Constructivism which flourished in Germany in the 1920s, and whose legacy endured into the 1950s.

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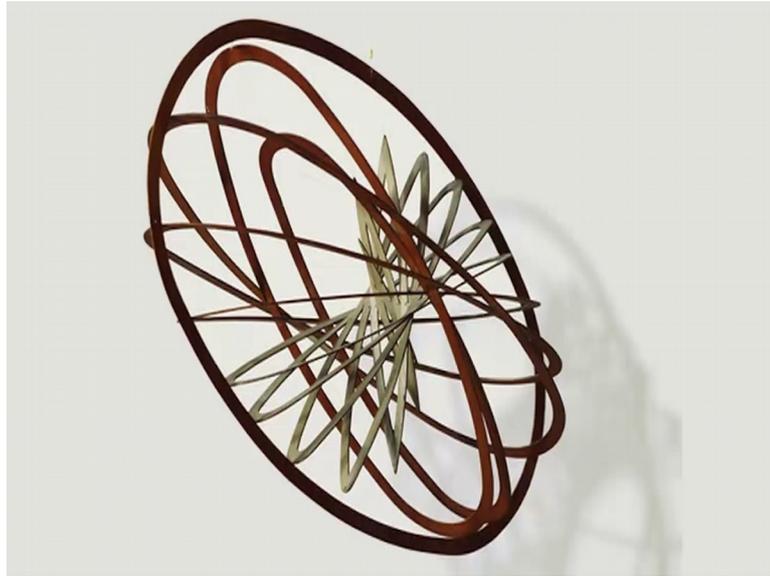
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Because when you look at this kind of sculptures produced during the heydays of constructivism and if you are familiar with lot of model sculptures done even in the 60s 70s 80s even in the 90s not only in the west, but also in our own country it will certainly find and have a feeling that constructivism has not really lost its relevance it is still there very much as a great source of inspiration for the modern artists for many decades. Because this very idea of getting completely rid of any real visual references in your sculpture this provides the sculptor with a huge range of freedom to explore other areas of sculpture making.

So, from sculpting and modelling and carving constructing an idea physically becomes the central source of inspiration for the constructivists and the later artists who were inspired by the constructivism.

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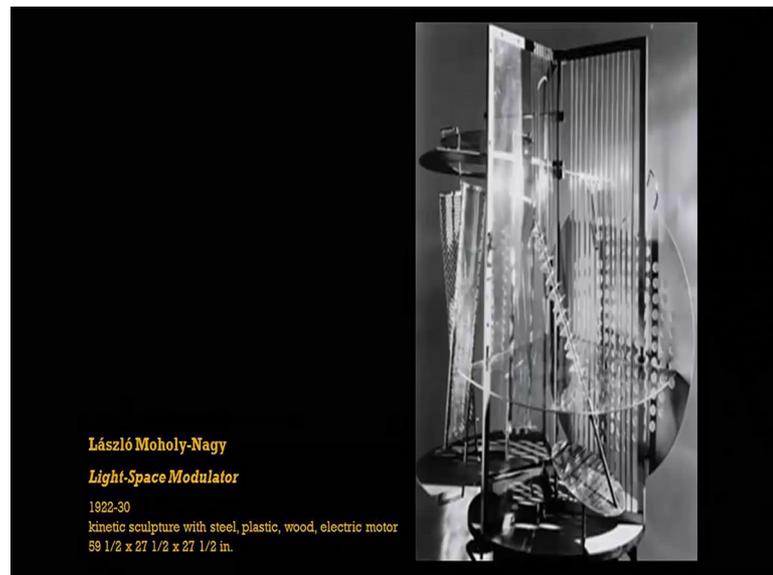
Alexander Rodchenko one of the chief proponents of constructivism make this work in 1920 in wood calling spatial construction 12. You might a whole series of this kind of works and as you can see when you look at this kind of work we are not supposed to ask for wheeling; obviously, we are not supposed to ask for any story or any narrative content. We are supposed to appreciate and enjoy the form in terms of its construction and also we are supposed to mentally at least playback and imagine the process of constructing such sculpted sculpture, like this one as well.

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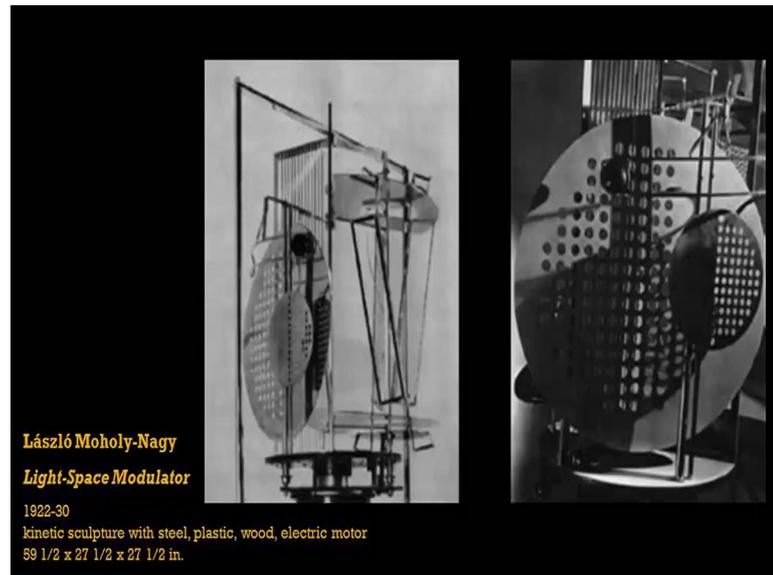
And interestingly many of the constructivist sculptures also look like industrial products and deliberately so, they intentionally made their sculptures look like industrial product. They do not look like anything close to the traditional aesthetics of beauty, emotion, psychological, temperament and not at all any subjective personal individual association.

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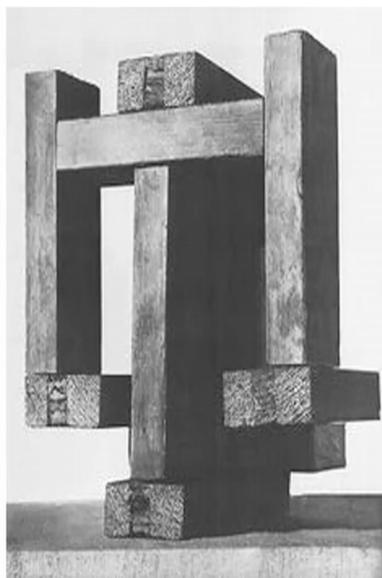
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy another constructivist sculptor was also making kinetic sculptures, sculpture that would be moving rotating with steel, plastic, wood and electric motor this is definitely a very important moment in the history of modern sculpture where a sculptor is using a motor. He is generating certain movement within the sculpture through a mechanized device nobody has done that before.

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This is very interesting because this is going to have a great impact on the latest sculptors like Alexander Calder whom we will be looking at in the next lecture.

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So, kinetic sculpture was first when introduced by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and then going by the very typical idea of constructivism you also come across this kind of sculptures where the whole idea of the sculpture is based on not only shapes and construction, but also the relationships created by different shapes constructed joined and placed against each other.

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Constructivists proposed to replace art's traditional concern with composition with a focus on construction. Objects were to be created not in order to express beauty, or the artist's outlook, or to represent the world, but to carry out a fundamental analysis of the materials and forms of art, one which might lead to the design of functional objects. For many Constructivists, this entailed an ethic of "truth to materials", the belief that materials should be employed only in accordance with their capacities, and in such a way that demonstrated the uses to which they could be put.

Now, constructivist proposed to replace arts traditional concern with composition with a focus on construction as we have already said, objects were to be created not in order to express beauty forget about personal emotion or the artists outlook or to represent the world, but to carry out a fundamental analysis of the materials and forms of art one which might lead to the design of functional objects. So, that was in their mind all the time. That how art practice could actually help the industrial design sector.

Now, for many constructivist this entailed an ethic of truth to materials and also I would like to add truth to shapes, truth to geometry, truth to the basic units of a construction the belief that material should be employed only in accordance with their capacities and in such a way that demonstrated the uses to which they could be put.

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Constructivist art often aimed to demonstrate how materials behaved - to ask, for instance, what different properties had materials such as wood, glass, and metal. The form an artwork would take would be dictated by its materials (not the other way around, as is the case in traditional art forms, in which the artist 'transforms' base materials into something very different and beautiful). For some, these inquiries were a means to an end, the goal being the translation of ideas and designs into mass production; for others it was an end in itself, a new and archetypal modern style expressing the dynamism of modern life.

So, in that sense constructivism is entirely a new practice in the modern sculpture. Constructivist art often aimed to demonstrate how materials behaved to ask for instance what different properties had materials such as wood glass and metal.

The form an artwork would take would be dictated by its materials not the other way round as is the case in traditional art forms in which the artist transforms the base materials into something very different and beautiful, but here the materials will be retained in its original character. So, in the and also the shape also the shape and the pattern for some these enquiries where a means to an end. The goal being the transmission of ideas and designs into a mass production for others it was an end in itself a new and archetypal modern style expressing the dynamism of modern life.

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In fact, when you go through many of these constructed constructivist sculptures it appears that the constructivist sculptures are made in a way that they can be replicated they can be reproduced by other artists as well. So, this is just to show a kind of contrast between constructivism and let us say more individualistic sculptures like Brancusi sculptures or Henry Moore sculptures or Rowther sculptures which are in spite of their particularly Henry Moore and Brancusi case, in spite of their interest in the formal values, in the non representational and abstract values their work still remain very individually stake and they are subjective and they are emotionally touched.

As a result they cannot be replicated in spite of the measurements and calculations because there is a personal touch in their work.

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Now, in case of constructivists artists and their artworks like this one by Naum Gabo or this one it is at least the look is such that it can have a mass production it can have an industrial output it will not remain in the real of a very personalized and individual and the psychological temperament.

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The seed of Constructivism was a desire to express the experience of modern life - its dynamism, its new and disorientating qualities of space and time. But also crucial was the desire to develop a new form of art more appropriate to the democratic and modernizing goals of the Russian Revolution. Constructivists were to be constructors of a new society - cultural workers on par with scientists in their search for solutions to modern problems.

So, the seed of constructivism was a desire to express the experience of modern life its dynamism its new and disorienting qualities of space and time we need to see constructivism of course, in the context of the new modern life of the early 20th century

where industrialization, mechanization and the machine driven life was slowly overwhelming and capturing the imagination of the society. And futurists had already responded to that in a certain way constructivists are responding to the same situation in a slightly different way.

But also crucial was the desire to develop a new form of art more appropriate to the democratic and modernizing goals of the Russian revolution. Constructivist where to be constructors of a new society cultural workers on par with the scientists in their search for solutions to modern problems.

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So, artists belonging to constructivism add this objective in their mind that they would be creating art that would in terms of the construction help the society to progress, help the industry to develop.

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Minimalism

Minimalism emerged in New York in the early 1960s among artists who were self-consciously renouncing recent art they thought had become stale and academic. A wave of new influences and rediscovered styles led younger artists to question conventional boundaries between various media. The new art favored the cool over the "dramatic": their sculptures were frequently fabricated from industrial materials and emphasized anonymity over the expressive excess of personal emotional content.

Now, minimalism, minimalism emerged in New York in the early 1960s though it is slightly later history, but we are discussing minimalism along with constructivism only because of their great similarity in terms of the formal values. So, it minimalism emerged at least 40 years later than constructivism and among the artists who were self consciously renouncing recent art they thought had become stale and academic.

So, a wave of new influences and rediscovered styles led younger artists to question conventional boundaries between the various media. The new art favored the cool over the dramatic they were also minimalist were not also much in favor of a very dramatic and narrative art, they were in favor of a kind of art that is yes minimalist in a very literal sense of the term and also in a sense abstract and also it will have no excess everything will be there as it is required, nothing extra nothing excess will be part of any minimalist work.

And light constructivists minimalists fabricated their sculptures out of industrial materials and they also emphasized anonymity over the expressive excess of personal emotional content same with the constructivists.

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Minimalism

* This denial of expression coupled with an interest in making objects that avoided the appearance of fine art led to the creation of sleek, geometric works that purposefully and radically eschew conventional aesthetic appeal.

* Minimalists created works that resembled factory-built commodities and upended traditional definitions of art whose meaning was tied to a narrative or to the artist.

So, if you look at the main features of minimalism. Number one there is a denial of expression personal or emotional expression with an interest in making objects that avoided the appearance of fine art led to the creation of extremely sleek geometric works that purposefully and radically eschew conventional aesthetic appeal.

Secondly, minimalists created works that resembled the factory built commodities and upended the traditional definitions of art whose meaning was tied either to a narrative or to the personal inclinations and proximities of an artist.

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Minimalism

* The use of prefabricated industrial materials and simple, often repeated geometric forms together with the emphasis placed on the physical space occupied by the artwork led to some works that forced the viewer to confront the arrangement and scale of the forms.

* Viewers also were led to experience qualities of weight, height, gravity, agility or even the appearance of light as a material presence. They were often faced with artworks that demanded a physical as well as a visual response.

Thirdly, the use of prefabricated industrial materials and simple often repeated geometric forms together with the emphasis placed on the physical space occupied by the artwork led to some works that force the viewer to confirm the arrangement and scale of the forms.

So, this is also interesting that how minimalists were trying to engage the viewers physically with their works, in order to kind of enable the viewers to engage their perception with the physicality, with the geometric features, with the sleek industrial components which has become a part of their artworks.

So, viewers as a result will need to experience the qualities of even weight, height, gravity or agility or even the appearance of light as a material presence. They were often faced with artworks that demanded a physical as well as a visual response, this was pretty interesting because until minimalism viewers whenever expected to respond to a work of art physically. They were expected to respond to the physical attributes of a work of art, but entirely mentally not by touching, but now the viewers could actually touch the objects feel the surface feel the geometry and also experience the formal applications of a minimalist work.

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For example if you look at this work by Donald Judd a very famous minimalist sculptor, can you say whether you have seen anything like this before? No, I mean it does not look like a sculpture at all in the first place, but only when you get to see more of his works

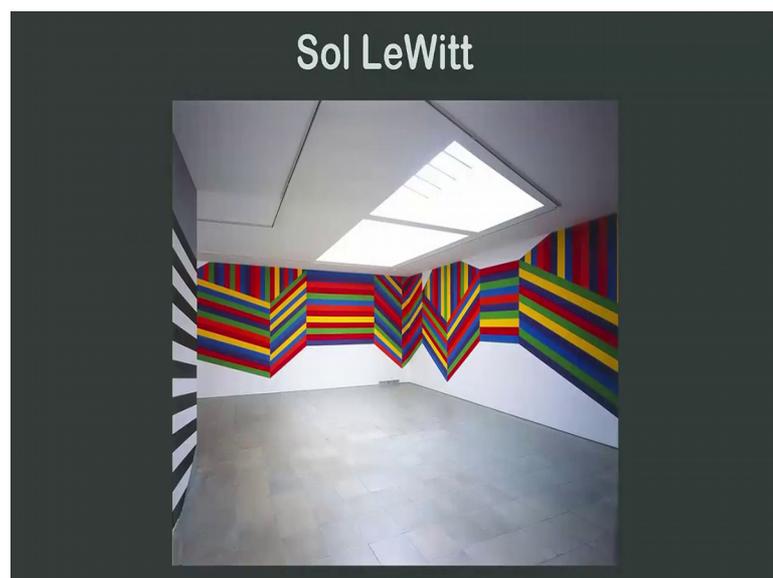
then you gradually get convinced about the idea of Donald Judd's works. He is kind of foundation, the conceptual foundation based on weight he was creating this works, for example this one.

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Similarly when you look at Sol Lewitt works, his works almost looked like a wall design or a mural that you see on the wall of a metro station or may be on the wall of a shopping mall they do not look like artwork maybe from today's context.

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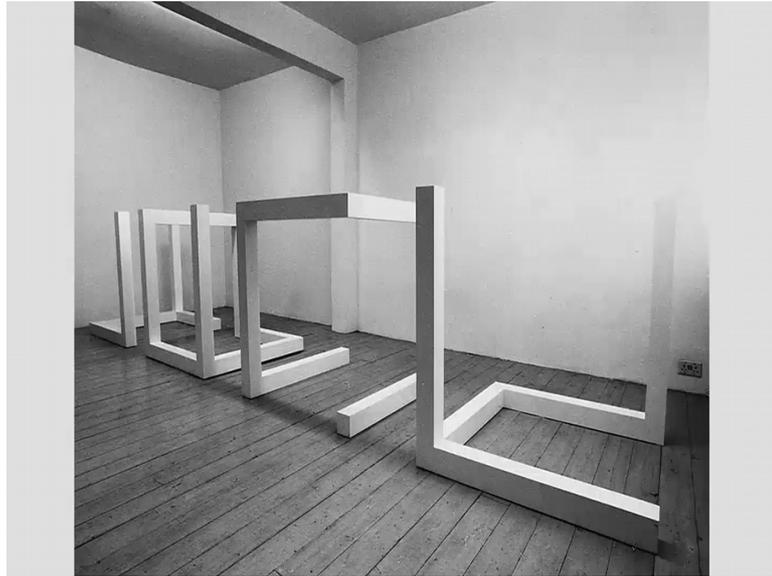
But when he was doing it in 1960s he was actually proposing a completely new idea of art which did not look like art, but came very close to a certain kind of design faculty of human being a design experience of human being.

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So, in that sense Sol Lewitt wanted to get rid of the conventional expectation from a work of art and he was exploring all the variables of a certain kind of aesthetics which relied mostly on very very simple elements like vertical lines, strips of wavy colors and that is it, but the scale and the form of art is definitely very different or for example, this one.

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Simple geometrical elements arranged in a certain way occupying a given space is what the minimalist are considering now as sculptures or for that matter this one.

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So, today one can look at this sculptures and see that how effectively either the constructivists from the earlier period or the minimalists from the later period we are able to actually reach that goal physically that goal reach the conceived in their mind, a goal that entailed a great ambition to get rid of any kind of realistic references, any kind of real life references in their work, but to explore the possibilities of the industrial ideas,

industrial products, industrial materials on the one hand and the geometry the basic shapes and forms on the other hand.

Really speaking both these groups of artists we are responding very honestly to the new socio economic and technological developments that started to take shape and we started to shape the society also to a great extent from early 20th century entire Europe.

Thank you.