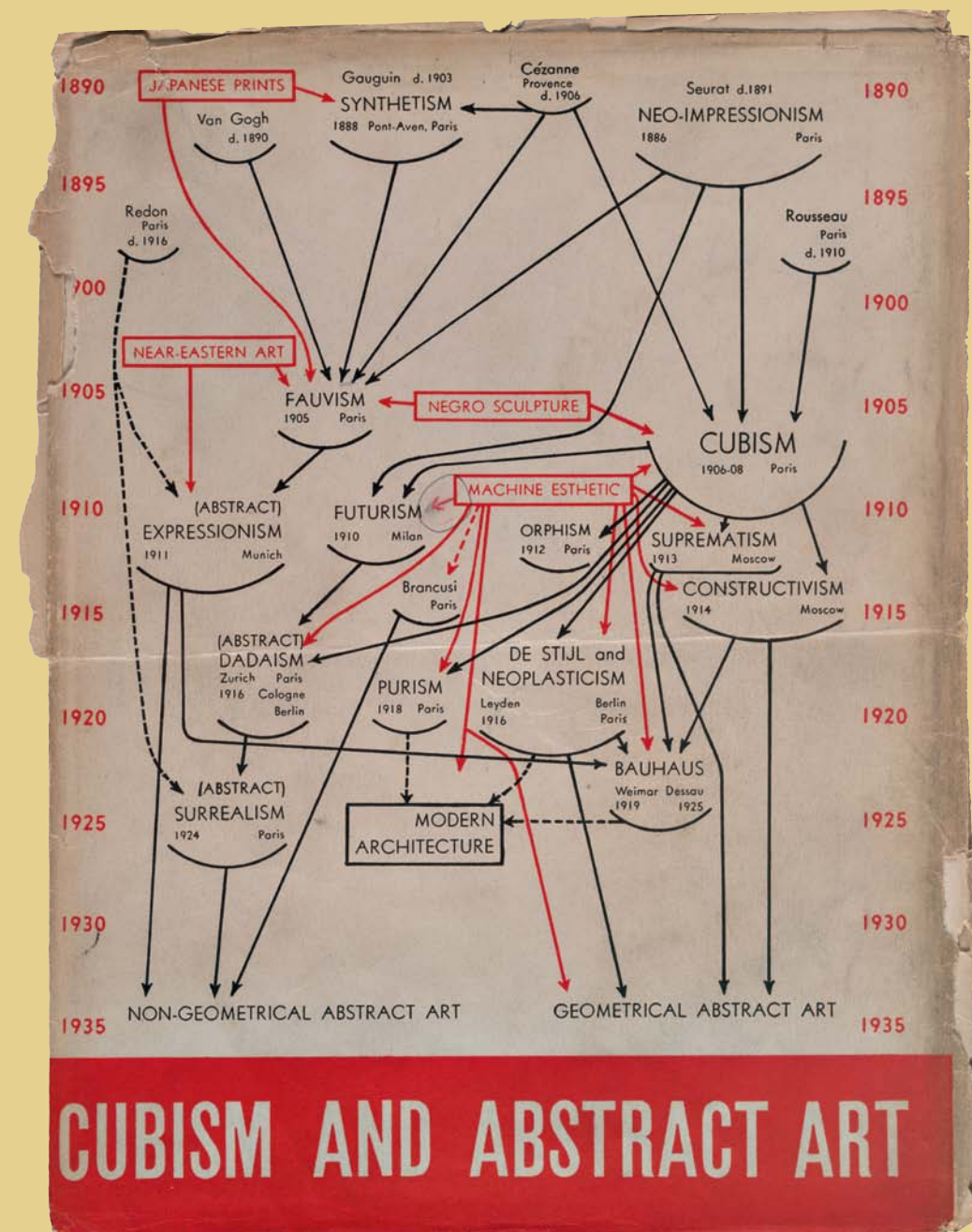
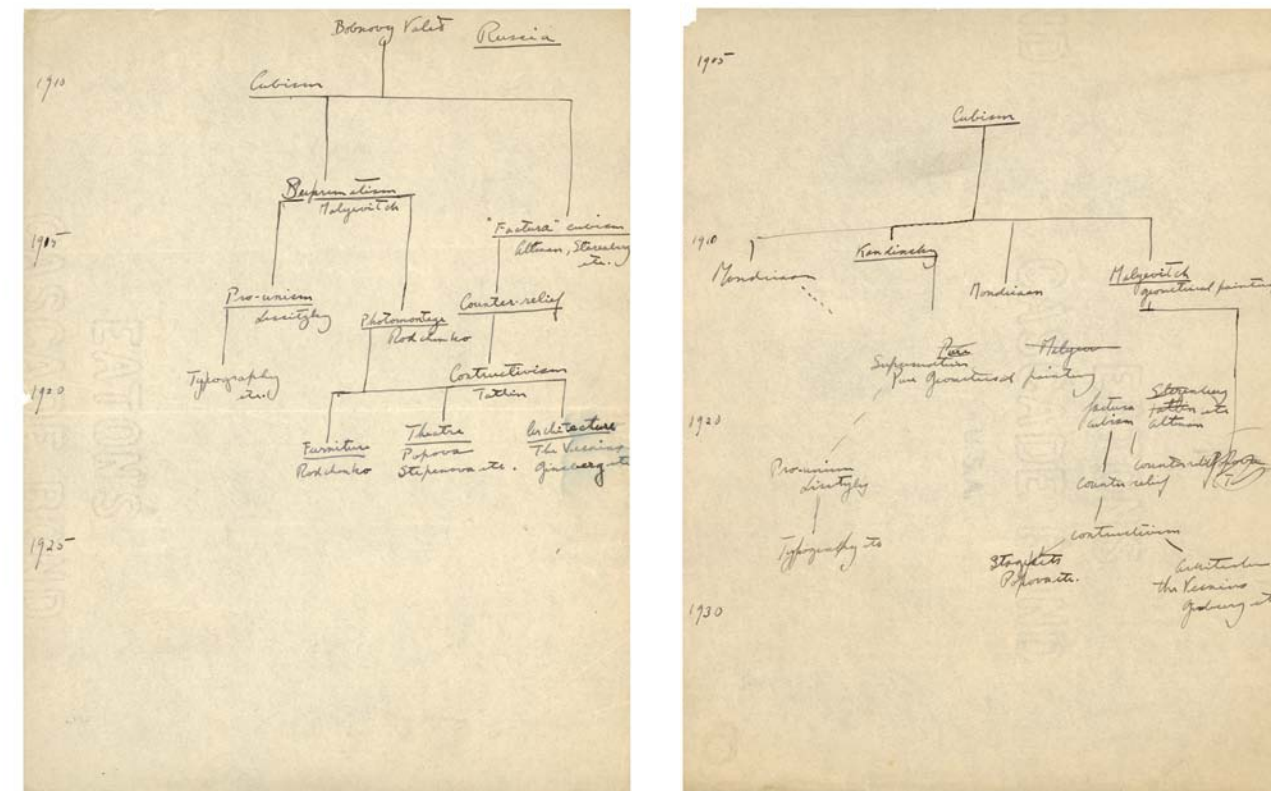




452. The catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, March 2–April 19, 1936, organized by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. On the front-cover dust jacket is a diagram designed by Barr charting the sources and evolution of modern art. Offset, printed in color, 10 1/8 x 21 7/8" (25.7 x 55.6 cm). New York: The Museum of Modern Art. This particular copy of the book was Barr's own. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

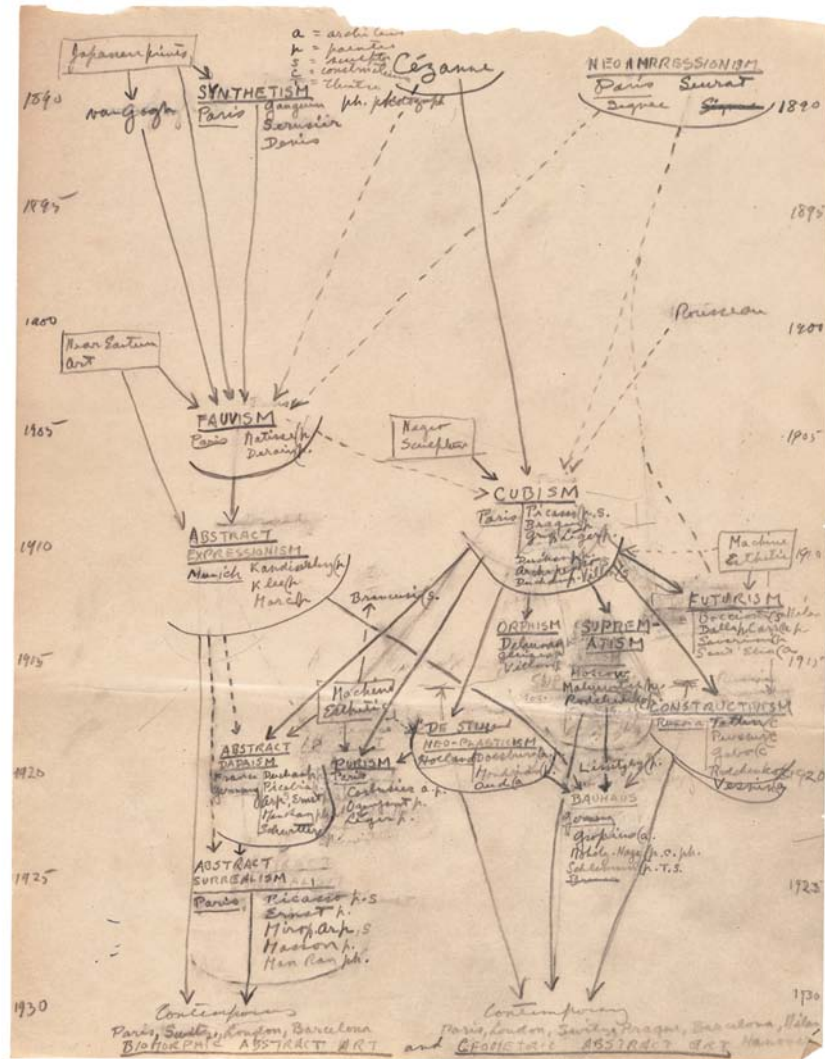
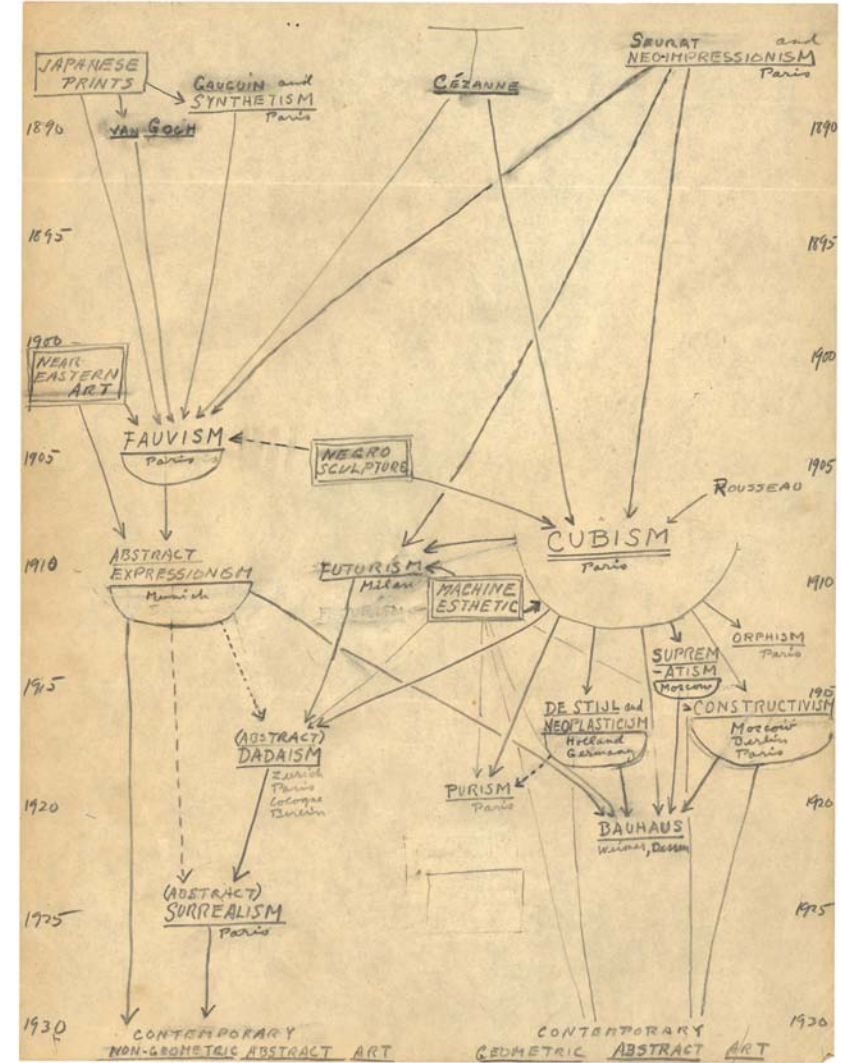
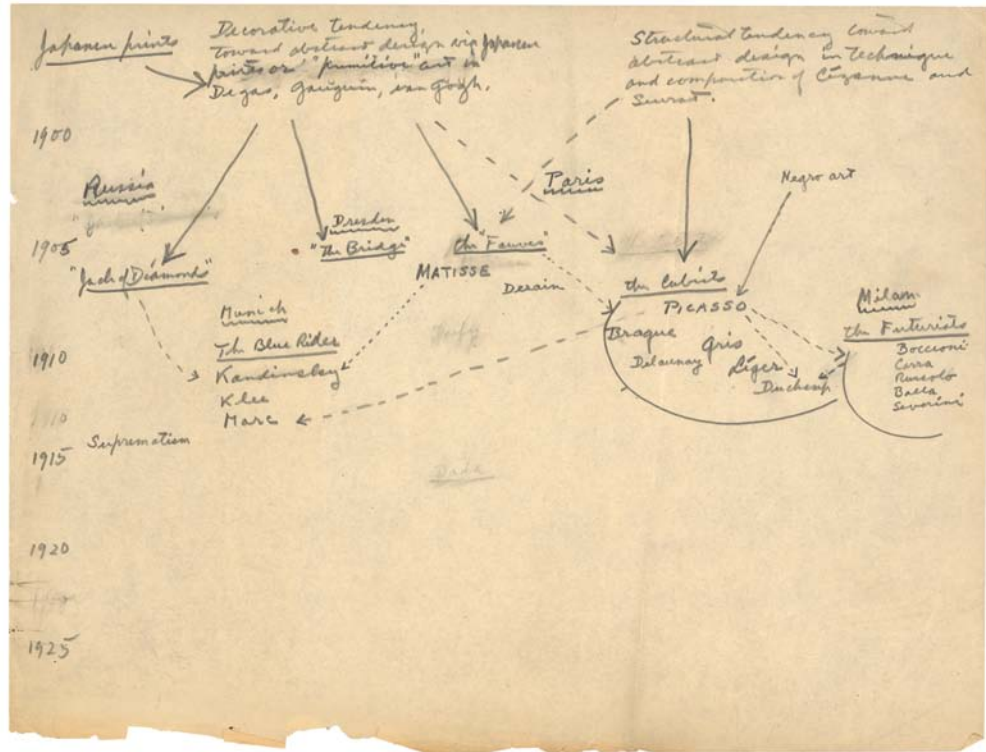
453, 454 (opposite). ALFRED H. BARR, JR. Hand-drawn drafts of the diagram on the dust jacket of *Cubism and Abstract Art*. c. 1936. Pencil on paper, two sheets, together: 10 7/8 x 16 3/4" (27.6 x 42.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York



ALMOST SINCE THE MOMENT OF ITS FOUNDING, in 1929, The Museum of Modern Art has been committed to the idea that abstraction was an inherent and crucial part of the development of modern art. In fact the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, organized by the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., made this argument its central thesis. In an attempt to map how abstraction came to be so important in modern art, Barr created a now famous diagram charting the history of Cubism's and abstraction's development from the 1890s to the 1930s, from the influence of Japanese prints to the aftermath of Cubism and Constructivism. Barr's chart, which was published on the dust jacket of the exhibition's catalogue (plate 452), began in an early version as a simple outline of the key factors affecting early modern art, and of the development of Cubism in particular, but over successive iterations became increasingly complex in its overlapping and intersecting lines of influence (plates 453–58).¹ The chart has two principal axes: on the vertical, time, and on the horizontal, styles or movements, with both leading inexorably to the creation of abstract art. Key non-Western influences, such as "Japanese Prints," "Near-Eastern Art," and "Negro Sculpture," are indicated by a red box. "Machine Esthetic" is also highlighted by a red box, and "Modern Architecture," by which Barr meant the International Style, by a black box. Lines with arrows in red, from the non-Western influences and from Machine Esthetic, and in black, from stylistic movements such as "Neo-Impressionism," lead to either the formation of "Non-Geometrical Abstract Art" (through Japanese Prints and Near-Eastern Art) or to "Geometrical Abstract Art" (through Neo-Impressionism, Cubism,

ABSTRACTION IN 1936: BARR'S DIAGRAMS

GLENN D. LOWRY



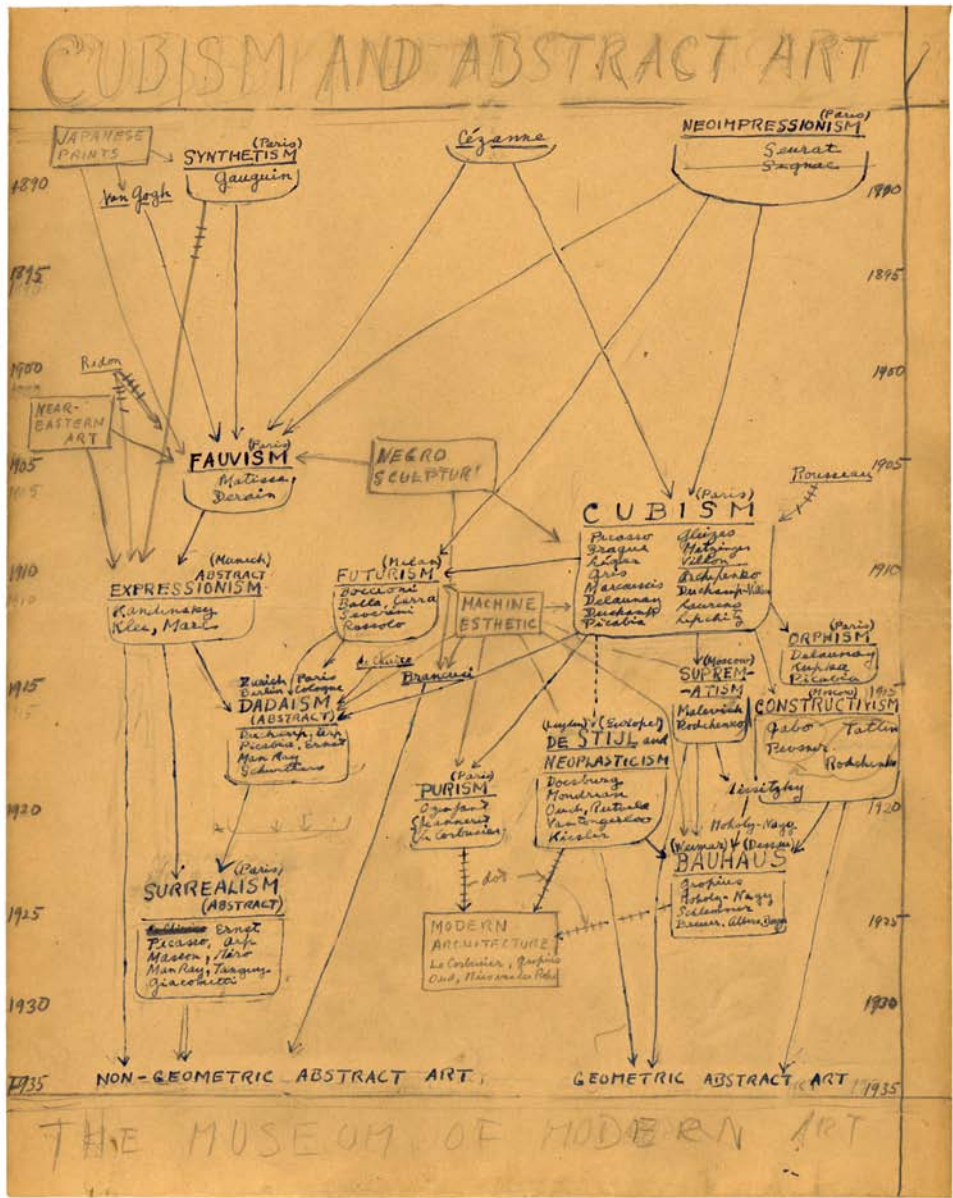
455-57. ALFRED H. BARR, JR. Hand-drawn drafts of the diagram on the dust jacket of *Cubism and Abstract Art*. 1936. Pencil on paper, plate 455: 8 3/8 x 11" (21.3 x 27.9 cm), plates 456, 457: 11 x 8 3/8" (27.9 x 21.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

Constructivism, and the Bauhaus, among other sources). Barr's point is clear: by the 1930s, abstraction, whether geometric or nongeometric, was modern art's most progressive expression. In two of the earlier versions of the chart he makes this point even clearer by attaching the prefix "contemporary" just above nongeometric (which he also calls biomorphic in one of his sketches; plate 456) and geometric abstract art (plate 456, 457).

Barr identifies only seven artists in the final chart, all but one of them in the context of the 1890s: Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, and Georges Seurat—the collective subject of the Museum's first major exhibition in that opening year of 1929—plus Henri Rousseau and Odilon Redon. He gives the dates of these six artists' deaths, indicating, I think, that he intends them to be understood as the precursors of Cubism and the other movements mapped by the chart. The seventh artist Barr names is Constantin Brancusi, whom he identifies with the city of Paris, locates in the 1910s, and connects by a dotted red line to Machine Esthetic and by a solid black line to Non-Geometrical Abstract Art, suggesting that he saw the artist as the most important source for this movement. In addition to Paris, Barr also lists other key cities and regions where modern art developed—Pont-Aven, Provence, Berlin, Moscow, Milan, Weimar, Leyden—and identifies each with the movement or artist associated with it.

The vectors created by Barr's lines suggest an effort to show that modern art developed from one movement to another in an almost algorithmic or scientific progression from Neo-Impressionism to abstraction. Deeply shaped by positivist thinking that endeavored to treat the social sciences with the same empirically based methodology of data and knowledge as the natural sciences, Barr mapped his history of modern art with the kind of scientific precision that he associated with those disciplines. Indeed, he often borrowed the language of science to describe the Museum, establishing both its validity as a new kind of institution—a laboratory, to use his word—and its authority as a place of experimentation and learning. In doing so he shifted the idea of MoMA away from the Enlightenment notion of the museum as a treasure house and an instrument of classification to something more dynamic and engaging, its processes equally rigorous but its outcomes less certain.

Barr's diagram, however, was not entirely objective. It had a goal: to demonstrate that abstraction was the inevitable culmination of earlier movements in art, making it the primary means of modern expression and not incidentally explaining the Museum's own commitment to it as a critical artistic process. It was for this reason that Barr highlighted both Machine Esthetic and Modern Architecture as pivotal nodes through and out of which abstraction flowed: having already presented important exhibitions arguing for design and



architecture as powerful manifestations of a new artistic impulse, the Museum had a stake in claiming the centrality of these fields to a larger definition and history of modern art. A comparison between the published version of the diagram and Barr's earlier sketches is instructive in this regard. Where the final version omits almost all artists' names, the most elaborate sketch (plate 458)—presumably the penultimate one—sets out to identify the principal artists associated with each movement. It is possible that the artists were dropped from the published version for purely graphic reasons, but it is equally possible that Barr chose not to encumber the diagram with the specificity of individual names because he wanted it to be as universal as possible. Whatever the reason, the result is that the chart reads as a progression of movements rather than as a list of individual achievements. And it is the presumed universality of this progression that has given the chart its enduring impact as a kind of summary of the development of modern art.

Barr left no notes as to the history of his chart, but its beginnings may lie in the lists of art movements that he grouped together in an “ism-dictionary” while teaching at Wellesley College in 1927.

Many of the movements identified in the chart appear in these lists.² He may also have been responding, at least in part, to several earlier efforts to chart the origins and progression of modern art. In May 1933, for example, *Vanity Fair* magazine published Miguel Covarrubias's *Tree of Modern Art, Planted 60 Years Ago* (plate 459). A well-known Mexican caricaturist, Covarrubias was also a thoughtful critic, and his *Tree of Modern Art* was not just a send-up of modern art but a pointed argument about it. The roots of the tree bear the names of a number of great artists—all French—who can be seen as precursors to modern art, including Poussin, Ingres, and Delacroix. From them springs the trunk of Impressionism, which divides into three Post-Impressionist branches: one leading through Cézanne to Cubism and Futurism, another through Seurat to Surrealism, and a third through Gauguin and Van Gogh to the Fauves and Expressionists. On each branch, and off the trunks, Covarrubias identifies various artists, again mostly French (and some now relatively obscure), giving a special place to Rousseau, whom he turns into a bird. At the base of the tree are an African sculpture, a classical head, and a reclining man staring quizzically at an empty frame,



suggesting both the sources of modern art and the possibility that the emperor has no clothes—a point further underscored by the braiding together of all the branches in the tree's upper reaches, playfully rendering the different roots from which these artists spring almost meaningless.

Covarrubias's schema of sources, precursors, and the multiple lineages of Post-Impressionism is echoed in Barr's more “scientific” chart. But where Covarrubias means to tease, Barr wants to give definition to a larger tradition and to trace that tradition's direction over time, which may also explain why he concentrates on movements and their locations rather than on artists, as Covarrubias does.

Kazimir Malevich's Analytical Charts of 1925–27 (plates 446–50) are another possible source. Malevich made these charts with the help of his students in what he called the “Department of Bacteriology of Art” at GINKhUK, the State Institute of Artistic Culture, Leningrad, and used them as a teaching aid in his classes. Many were included in a landmark exhibition of his work in Berlin in 1927. Barr certainly knew the charts; he included four of them in *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and had even himself gone to Germany in 1935 to secure their loan. In fact, in a bit of art-historical derring-do, he had smuggled them and four paintings back to New York, since he and the German museum director Alexander Dörner, who had possession of them, were concerned that the Nazis might otherwise confiscate and destroy them.

In identifying and exploring art's innovations from the nineteenth century to the present, Malevich's charts emphasize how they led to abstraction. In this sense his charts presage Barr's, as they also do in their invocation of science—and Malevich's metaphor of his class as a Department of Bacteriology of Art, where artistic

458. ALFRED H. BARR, JR. Hand-drawn draft of the diagram on the dust jacket of *Cubism and Abstract Art*. 1936. Pencil and ink on paper envelope, 14 3/8 x 11 1/2" (36.5 x 29.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

459. MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS. *The Tree of Modern Art—Planted 60 Years Ago*. Published in *Vanity Fair* 40, no. 3 (May 1933):36

development was studied in the way a scientist studies the epidemiology of disease, likewise foreshadows Barr's vision of The Museum of Modern Art as a laboratory, a place of inquiry and analysis. Malevich's work on his analytical charts came to an abrupt end when he was recalled to Leningrad from the Berlin exhibition in 1927, but Barr's chart was a living diagram, and he continued to tinker with it and refine it into the 1940s. A sense of how carefully he thought about it can be gleaned from a letter he wrote in 1941 concerning the reprinting of the chart as a poster by the Iowa WPA Art Program:

Omit the arrow from “Negro Sculpture” to “Fauvism”. Add a red arrow from “Machine Esthetic” to “Futurism”. The three dotted arrows leading from “Purism,” “de Stijl” and “Neo-Plasticism” and “Bauhaus” to “Modern Architecture” should be solid not dotted. There should be a Black arrow from “Abstract Expressionism” to “Abstract Dadaism” and another black arrow from “Abstract Expressionism” to “Abstract Surrealism”. The dotted arrow from “Redon” to “Abstract Surrealism” should be omitted.³

Like a great deal of Barr's early work, his chart should be seen not as a definitive statement but as an argument or, better yet, a means of gaining a better understanding of the pathways and directions of modern art. To this end it was very much a pedagogical tool—in the same vein as Malevich's Analytical Charts, but for a very different audience—designed to help a general public unfamiliar with modern art to learn about Cubism and abstraction in order to “see” that they were not aberrations.

¹ For a detailed discussion of the chart and its historical setting see Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, “Ableger der Avantgarde nach 1945,” chapter 4 in her *Stammbaume der Kunst. Zur Genealogie der Avantgarde* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005).
² See Michelle Elligott, “Modern Artifacts #1, Charting Modernism,” in *Esopus* 7 (Fall 2006): 77.
³ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., letter to Monroe Wheeler, March 13, 1941, repr. in *ibid.*, insert between pp. 84 and 85.