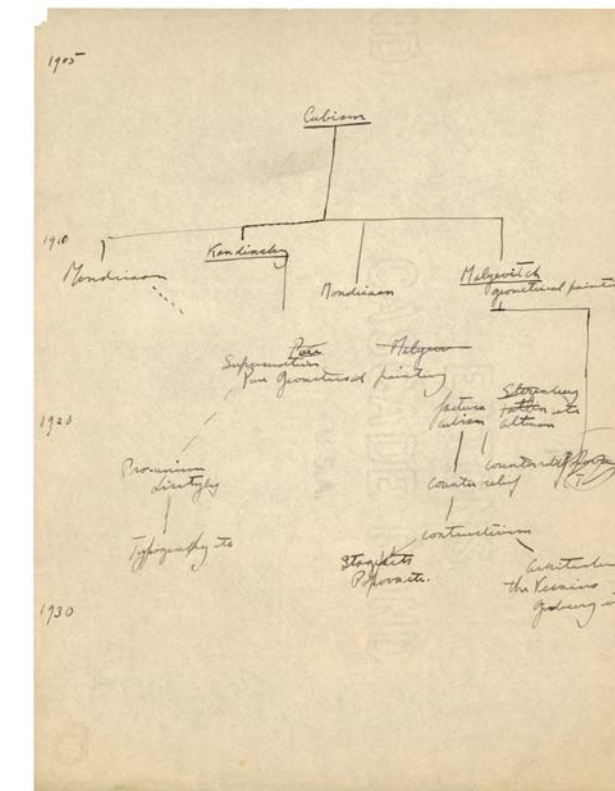
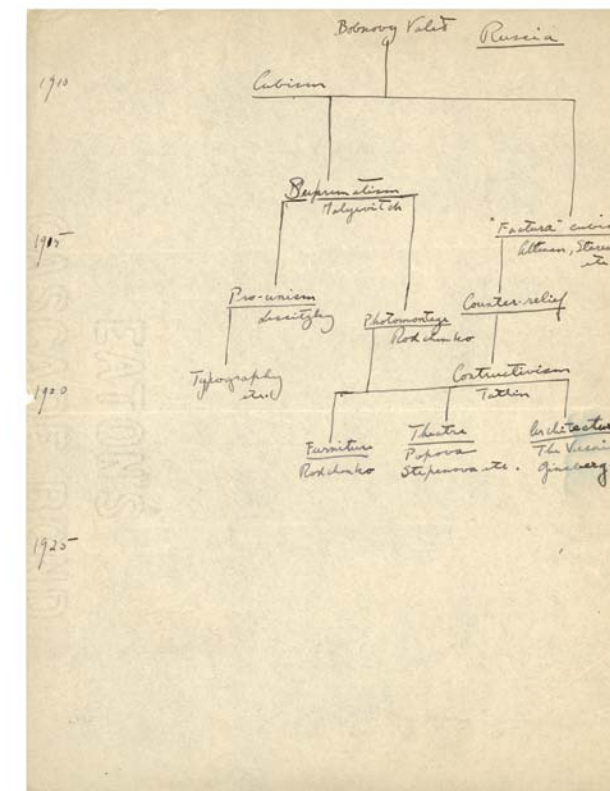


452. The catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, March 2–April 19, 1936, organized by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. On the front-cover dust jacket is a diagram designed by Barr charting the sources and evolution of modern art. Offset, printed in color, 10 1/8 x 21 7/8" (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

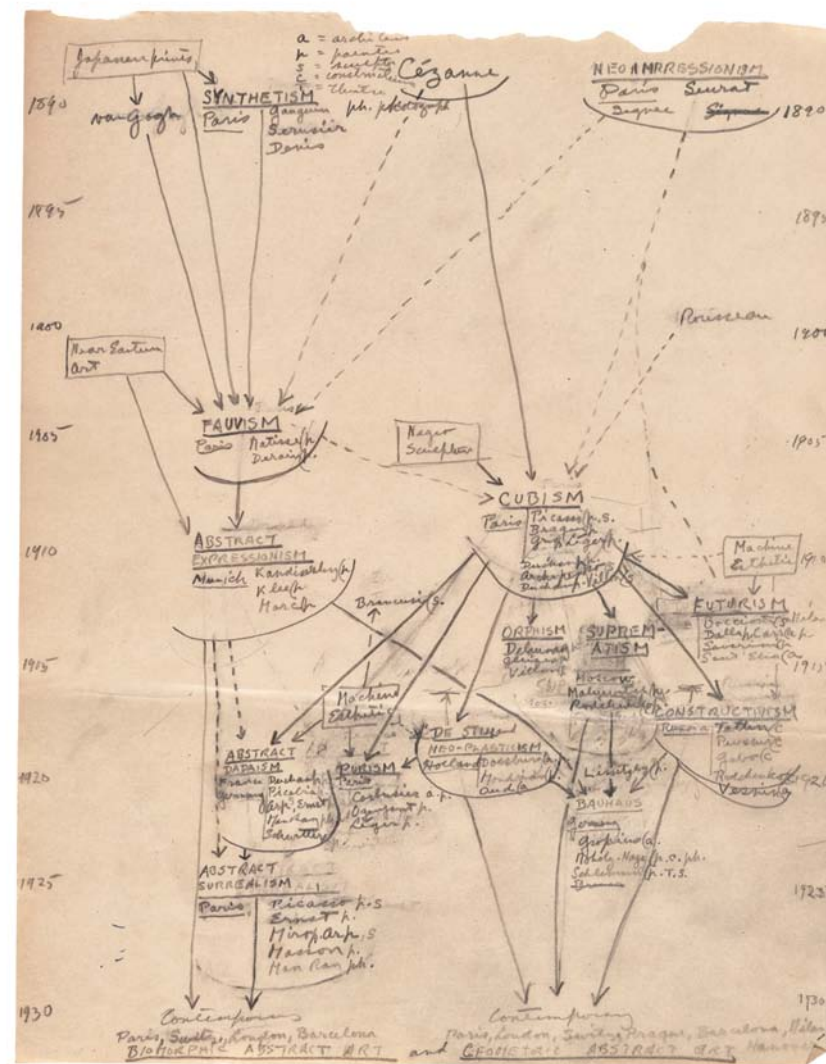
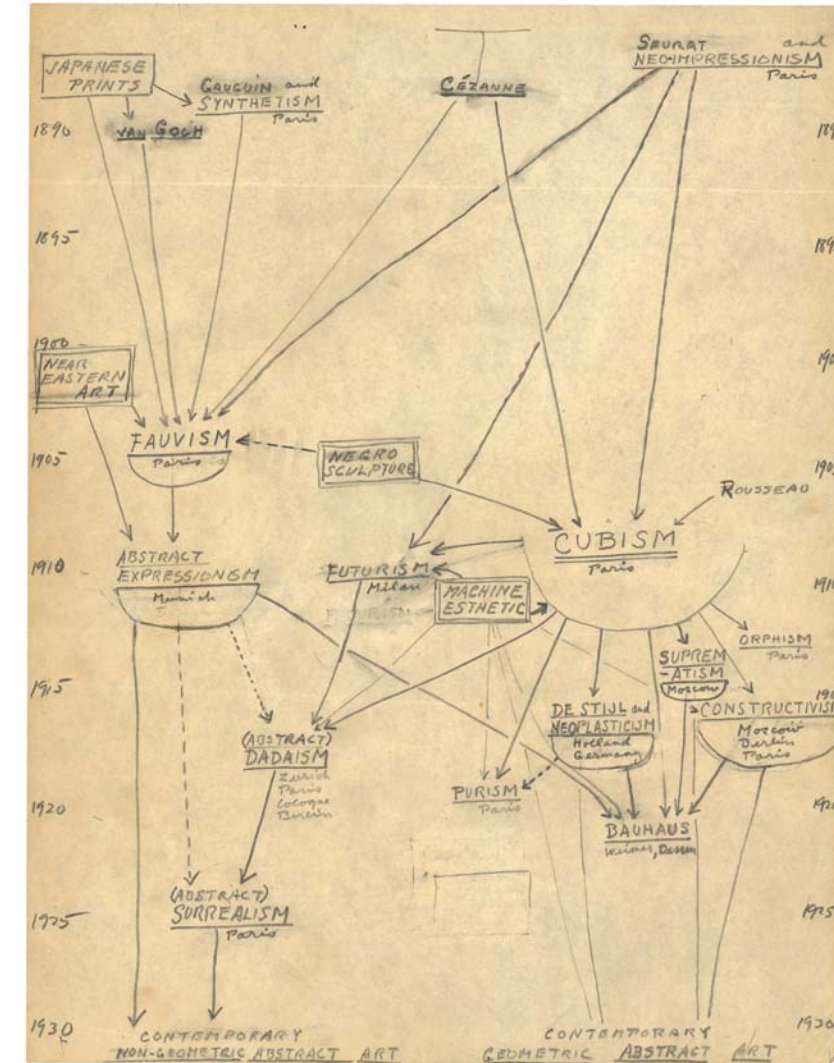
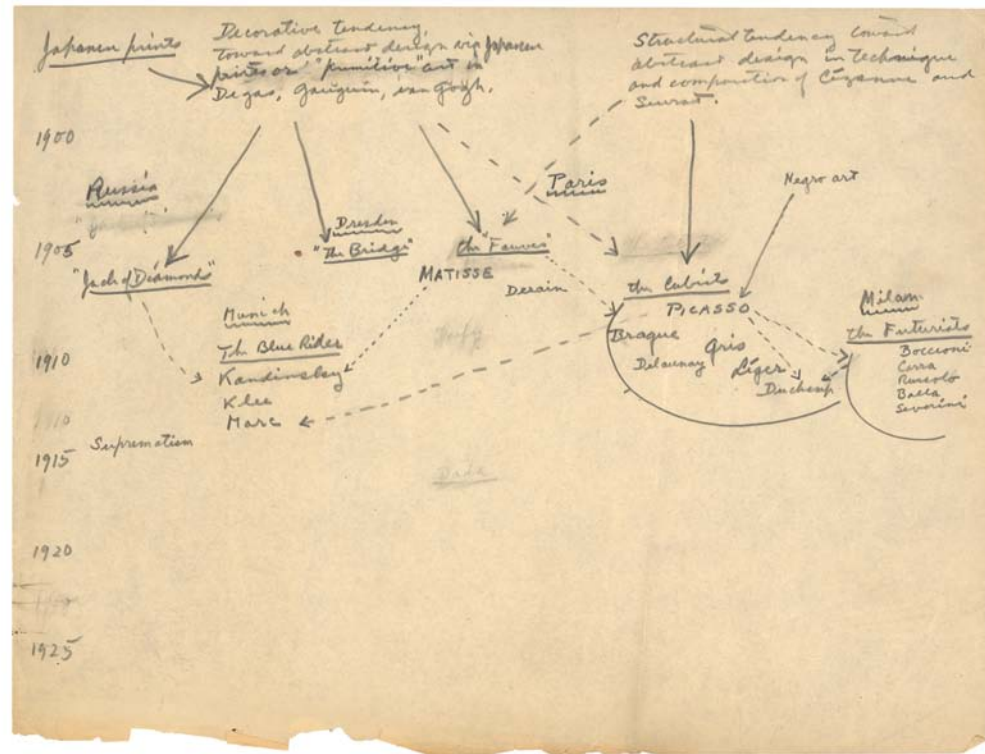
453, 454 (opposite). ALFRED H. BARR, JR. Hand-drawn drafts of the diagram on the dust jacket of *Cubism and Abstract Art*. c. 1936. Pencil on paper, two sheets, together: 10 7/8 x 16 3/4" (27.6 x 42.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York



ABSTRACTION IN 1936: BARR'S DIAGRAMS

GLENN D. LOWRY

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,



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

