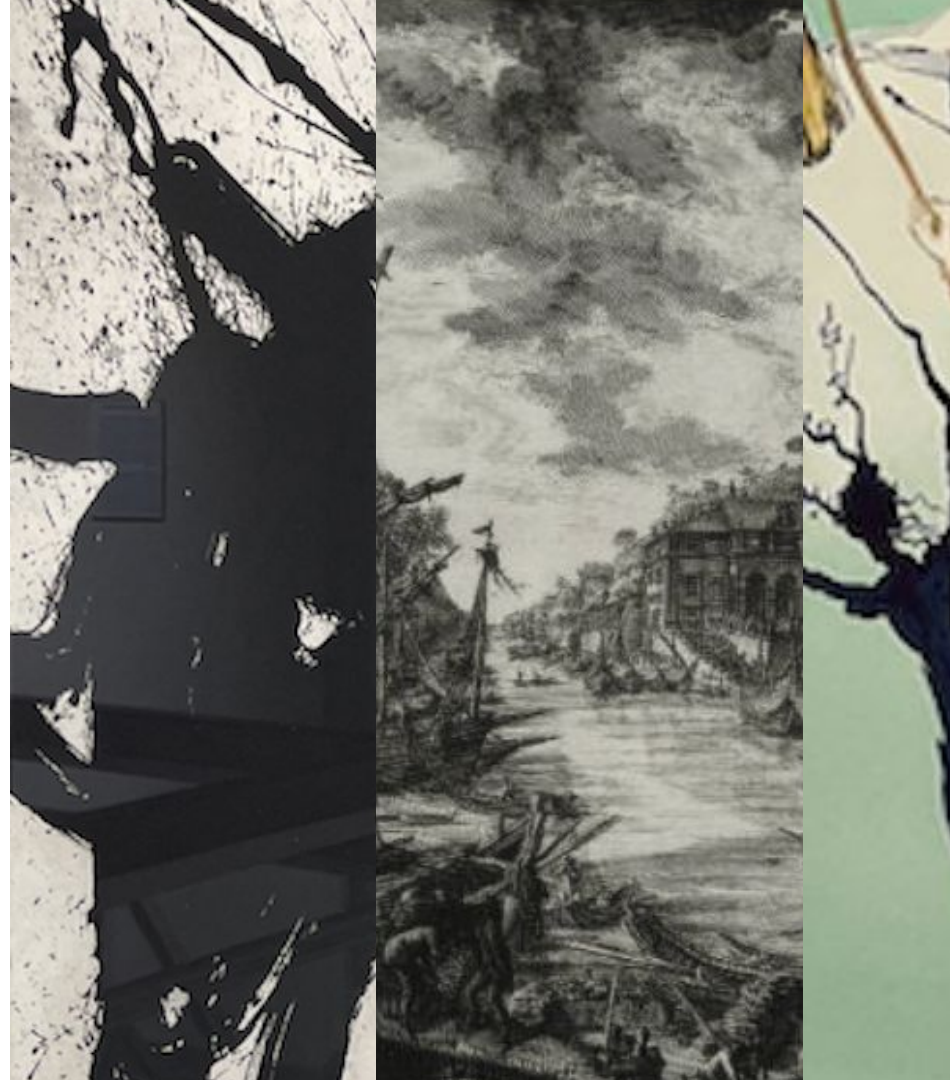


# **Piranesi to Motherwell: Prints on the Path to Modernism**

**Curated by John O'Donnell**

**Benton Museum of Art  
2025**



**Prints on the Path to Modernism** explores the transformation of artistic vision through selected works from the Benton Museum's collection, tracing modernism's evolution from the meticulous etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi to the bold, gestural forms of Robert Motherwell. The exhibition begins with Piranesi's architectural renderings, which demonstrate a mastery of linear detail, control, and classical form, setting a foundation for Western art's focus on structure and representational fidelity. Piranesi's precise compositions give way to works that capture the raw energy of industrial landscapes, the dynamics of urban life, and modernist abstractions, culminating in Motherwell's prints, where bold, intuitive marks celebrate the raw energy of pure gesture. Together, these prints illustrate modernism's journey from clarity and order to dynamic abstraction, inviting viewers to experience and reflect on an evolving relationship with form, structure, and the changing worldviews that shaped the modern era.

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# Disintegration of Form & Gesture





Modernism's progression can be illustrated by tracing the transformation of form in depictions of ships, symbols of both journey and conquest. A 19th-century realistic etching of a ship presents a meticulously detailed structure, evoking the romance of the high seas and embodying the technological achievements of its time. Here, the ship looms large on the horizon, a monumental presence, suggesting both mastery over nature and a static certainty in representation. In the early 20th century, however, an expressionist woodcut of a ship—a vessel now defined by bold, angular marks and fractured, cubist forms—reveals a new, unsettled modern vision. The ship, still massive against smaller boats, now feels volatile and deconstructed, as if heralding an approaching modernity that disrupts the romanticized past.

A purely gestural form, such as Robert Motherwell's dense, abstract mark, marks a further transformation: form has disintegrated entirely, leaving a confident, isolated gesture centered on the page. Here, there is no literal ship, yet the bold, monolithic shape suggests something simultaneously powerful and ungraspable—a shape that could be read as a "pirate ship" stealing from the past, or a "tugboat" pulling us forward into the ambiguity of postmodernity. This selection, moving from elaborate detail to abstract confidence, illustrates the trajectory of modern art, beginning with the structured precision of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings and charting a path through innovation, disruption, and the eventual embrace of the unformed and indeterminate in modernist gesture.

## Disintegration, Form & Gesture





# Modernism via Piranesi, Dali & Motherwell



ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG  
"Black and White" (1965)  
Oil on canvas  
100 x 100 cm



SAVADOR DALÍ  
"The Persistence of Memory" (1931)  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 33 cm



J.M.W. TURNER  
"Rain, Steam, and Great Central Railway" (1844)  
Oil on paper  
18 x 25 cm



Piranesi's “Veduta del Porto di Ripa Grande” serves as a starting point, capturing the bustling energy of an 18th-century harbor filled with overlapping masts, symbolizing the productive, sail-driven industry of its time. This intricate composition reflects the structured, highly detailed nature of classical representation and a fascination with the orderly complexities of industry and trade.

Moving forward, Salvador Dalí’s “Transcendent Passage” introduces a surreal interpretation that bridges structured realism with dreamlike abstraction. The line work used by Dalí articulates the figure's flowing ambiguity, similar to the execution and rhythm of Piranesi’s etched lines delineating the ships. Finally, Robert Motherwell’s “Black Sea” distills this progression, presenting a dense, gestural abstraction.

Together, these works illustrate a pathway from Piranesi’s meticulous realism through Dalí’s dream-infused surrealism to Motherwell’s pure abstraction, reflecting modernism’s gradual disintegration of form in favor of gesture and emotional resonance. Each print marks a stage in the evolution of artistic language as modernism moves away from structured, external views of the world toward the subjective and internal.

# Modernism via Piranesi, Dalí & Motherwell

# Through the Arcade of Convention



ROBERT BENTLEY  
1840-1841  
Illustration of the interior of a house, showing a group of people gathered around a table. The scene is set in a room with a large window and a chandelier.



ROBERT BENTLEY  
1840-1841  
Illustration of a street scene, showing a row of buildings and a horse-drawn carriage. The scene is set in a town or city.





# Through the Arcade of Convention

**This chapter explores a path to modernism by tracing the transformation of architectural forms and spaces across distinct periods, specifically work made through the printmaking processes and photography. Beginning with Piranesi's 1760 etchings, which depict fantastical and labyrinthine spaces filled with arches and monumental ruins, architecture is elevated to a grandiose realm of imagination, challenging conventions of scale and structure. Transitioning to a 1936 photograph of a New York City bridge, we witness the shift to modernism's celebration of industrial engineering and urban grandeur, with steel and stone symbolizing progress and resilience. A 1946 lithograph of a small American town street, in contrast, captures modernism's turn toward the intimate and everyday, grounding architecture within a lived, community-centered space. Finally, Robert Motherwell's abstract arches reduce these architectural elements to their essential, gestural forms, inviting viewers to experience space and structure as pure expression. Together, these works reflect modernism's journey, moving from ornate representation through to abstraction, capturing the evolving relationship between form, function, and human experience.**



# From Structure to Structure



**GEORGE BUTTS PRINCE**  
1800-1810  
View of the Palace of St. James, London, from the Strand, 1800. Engraved by George Butts. Published by J. Smith, Strand, London, 1800.



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# From Structure to Structure

**This section traces modernism's path by exploring printmaking's evolving representations of architecture and form. Giovanni Battista Piranesi's 18th-century etching of a basilica, with its intricate, idealized structure and classical grandeur, anchors the exploration in an era fascinated by architectural order and the sublime. Lyonel Feininger's woodcut, influenced by German expressionism and cubism, abstracts urban architecture into geometric, angular forms, departing from realism toward a fractured, modern perspective. George Braque's collage-inspired lithographs further fragment structure, blending elements into layered forms that resist clear spatial definition, embodying a shift to exploring perception itself. This trend culminates in two gestural, abstract works: Robert Arthur Goodnough's lithograph, which loosely suggests a man on a horse, dissolves figure and form into energetic strokes, while Robert Motherwell's etching from *The Hollow Men* series pares expression down to direct, hollow gestures implying a structure reminiscent of architecture, possibly a basilica with forms resembling arches, or even parishioners huddled. Together, these works illustrate modernism's journey from ordered structure to pure abstraction that can resemble familiar architecture, foregrounding intuition and movement. An inner experience transcending, but referencing, external representation.**

# Technology and the Texture of Reticulating Geometry





# Technology and the Texture of Reticulating Geometry

**This selection of prints examines modernism's relationship with structure and materials, tracing how evolving technologies transformed the depiction of architectural geometry. Giovanni Battista Piranesi's 18th-century technical illustration meticulously reveals the physics and engineering of a classical temple roof, where rows of repeating trusses display a harmonious, rational geometry essential to the temple's enduring strength. Transitioning to the early 20th century, Reginald Marsh's print *Derrick* captures men constructing a skyscraper using newly popularized steel box girders. Here, the geometry is functional and industrial, allowing unprecedented height and solidity—a testament to modern engineering. Later, Josef Albers distills this architectural essence in his abstract compositions of reticulating rectangles. His dynamic grids suggest structure yet remain fluid, as if shifting under external forces, embodying the tension of modernity: fixed yet in flux, stable yet vulnerable to cultural or seismic shifts. Together, these images trace a path from tangible, functional geometry to abstraction, reflecting modernism's embrace of structural order and contemporary life's volatility.**



# Time & Space: Similarity of Structure & Landscape





## **Time & Space: Similarity of Structure & Landscape**

**This section traces modernism’s journey by examining the interplay between structure and landscape through three prints emphasizing continuity and transformation in artistic composition. An 18th-century etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi depicts a Roman ruin resembling a castle, standing dark and imposing on the right side of the composition, creating a stark contrast with the light, open foreground. This composition finds an echo in a 19th-century etching of a windmill, where the structure—again rendered darkly on the right—dominates the landscape with a similarly monumental presence.**

**These architectural forms, rooted in specific times and spaces, lead us to a 20th-century print by Robert Motherwell. In this gestural work, thick, expressive lines evoke an ambiguous structure, suggesting a fusion of house, church, and windmill. Motherwell’s print abstracts the forms of earlier works, capturing the essence of structure as a timeless yet shifting presence within the landscape. Together, these works reveal modernism’s trajectory, moving from detailed, representational form toward gestural abstraction, and highlighting the enduring dialogue between architecture and landscape through time and space.**