

What Makes Modern Art Modern?

INTENSE, CRITICAL, BREAKING WITH TRADITION, AND AVANT-GARDE—these are words and phrases sometimes used to describe modern art. "Modern" is a chronological and stylistic designation that usually refers to art made from the beginning of the twentieth century until after World War II, although some scholars date modern art from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s or beyond. Traditionally, the history of modern art is organized around a series of intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic developments that informed artworks created at the time. Contemporary historians, however, focus more on the connections between artistic styles than on a linear progression. These curriculum materials explore developments in modern art in western Europe and the United States. The selection of artworks that follows is from LACMA's permanent collection and illustrates the ways modern artists broke with centuries-old traditions of art making and turned a critical eye toward the subjects, concepts, materials, and formal qualities of their work.

Consider the following questions as you explore these works of art:

- What makes a work of art modern?
- In what ways do modern artists break with established art-making traditions?
- What are the subjects and materials of modern art?



EDGAR DEGAS
France, Paris, 1834–1917
The Bellelli Sisters (Giovanna and Giuliana Bellelli), 1865–1866
Oil on canvas, 36¼ x 28½ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Mr. and Mrs. George Gard De Sylva Collection, M.46.3.3
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA



EDGAR DEGAS

France 1834–1917

The Dancers, 1898

Pastel on paper on board, 29 x 24 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.21

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Degas is associated with a group of artists that worked in France in the late nineteenth century known as the impressionists. These artists rejected traditional subjects focusing instead on images of modern life that showed average citizens engaged in ordinary activities.

Degas based this double portrait of his cousins Giovanna (on the left) and Giuliana (on the right) Bellelli on a drawing he made of the girls during a visit to Italy in the late 1850s.

He made portraits early in his career, many were images of his family and friends. In these portraits Degas always sought a pose that reflected the essential quality of his subject. Make a list of details that provides information about each sister. Consider position of body, gaze, clarity of details, colors, and light.



PABLO PICASSO
Spain, 1881–1973
Portrait of Sebastian Jüner Vidal, 1903
Oil on canvas, 49¾ x 37 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, David E. Bright Bequest, M.67.25.18
© 2009 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Degas also turned his attention to the subject of dancers. In works like *The Dancers*, Degas explored movement, light, and color. Take a close look at this drawing. How does Degas use line, color, and areas of light and dark to suggest the dancers' movements?

In this work of art, Degas captured one moment of the dancers' day. Imagine what happens next. Many of the works of art Pablo Picasso made throughout his career are abstract but he often used traditional themes and depicted everyday objects. Like many artists Picasso painted portraits, still lifes, and stories from mythology. He made images of modern life as well and worked in a variety of media and styles.

In this portrait, Picasso depicts a portrait of his friend and fellow artist Sebastian Jüner Vidal using simple shapes and bold brushstrokes. How does this portrait compare to other portraits students are familiar with?



RAOUL DUFY

France, 1877–1953

Still Life with Closed Shutters, 1906

Oil on canvas, 31⁷/₈ x 25⁹/₁₆ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.23

© Raoul Dufy Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Raoul Dufy's work has been said to convey pleasure and joy. In this painting, Dufy used a variety of saturated colors in contrasting shades to depict a still life of fruit arranged on a tabletop. Sunlight filters through the closed shutters behind the table and makes a dappled pattern across the floor. Broad brushstrokes and bright colors create a lively composition and bring a fresh perspective to the traditional genre of still-life painting.

Search Collections Online at lacma.org to see examples of traditional still-life paintings. Compare Dufy's *Still Life with Closed Shutters* to Abraham van Beyeren's *Banquet Still Life* (1667). In what ways are they similar or different? What makes Dufy's painting modern?



HENRI MATISSE
France, 1869–1954
Jeannette I-V, 1910–13
Bronze, 12⁷/₈ x 11 x 11 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Gift of the Art Museum Council in memory of Penelope Rigby, 68.3.1
© 2009 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Throughout his career Matisse explored color and form in painting, sculpture, and other media. In this series of sculptures, Matisse explores the process of portraiture. The first two heads were modeled from life and bear the likeness of the model. In sculptures three through five, Matisse simplifies the head to its basic shapes and forms.

Take a close look at each of these sculptures. What is different or the same in each head? Discuss with students the ways in which this series of sculptures reflects the evolution in art from representation to abstraction.



MARC CHAGALL
Russia, 1887–1985
The Gamblers, 1919

Watercolor, tempera, and graphite on paper, 15⁵/₈ x 20 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection, 39.9.6

© Marc Chagall Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Marc Chagall is known for works of art that feature bold colors and innovative spatial arrangements. Many works focus on personal and autobiographical subjects such as his childhood, daily life with his wife, and his Jewish faith.

Chagall participated in the Russian avant-garde theater by designing scenery, sets, and costumes. *The Gamblers* is a sketch for a larger backdrop that Chagall made for a production of Nikolai Gogol's play of the same name. Create your own design based on a poem or book. What part of the text will represent the whole?



MARC CHAGALL

Russia, 1887–1985

Violinist on a Bench, 1920 (based on a 1914 original)

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mary Day McLane, 64.6

© Marc Chagall Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Violinist on a Bench is believed to be a copy of an earlier image that Chagall made in 1914. The fiddler is a recurrent theme in Chagall's work and references aspects of the artist's life. Chagall's Uncle Neuch played the violin and he often portrayed Neuch engaged in this activity. Chagall also studied the violin as a boy and took lessons from a neighbor.

What is the mood or feeling of *Violinist on a Bench* and *The Gamblers*. How does Chagall use the elements of art like line, color, and shape along with the principles of design such as rhythm and balance to suggest mood in these works of art?



IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

United States, 1883–1976

Magnolia Blossom, 1925

Gelatin-silver print, 9¹/₈ x 11¹/₂

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection,
gift of The Annenberg Foundation and Carol Vernon and Robert Turbin, M.2008.40.599

© 2009 The Imogen Cunningham Trust

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Imogen Cunningham began her career working as an assistant to photographer Edward S. Curtis. She opened her own studio in Seattle, Washington in 1910. Early in her career she won acclaim for her portraiture but is best known for her botanical images like *Magnolia Blossom*. Cunningham was a co-founder of the group *f/64*, a group that sought to break away from the romantic and "painterly" type of photography popular at the end of the nineteenth century in favor of unsentimental and straightforward image making.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many people saw photography as a convenient and novel way to document their lives, while others, including Imogen Cunningham, saw photography as opportunity to turn a critical eye toward the everyday. What is the role of photography and the photographic image in your life? What do you document through photographs?



CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI
Romania, 1876–1957
Bird in Space, 1927

Polished bronze, Height: 73 in.; Diameter: 8 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.13

© Constantin Brancusi Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

When asked about the meaning of his sculptures, Constantin Brancusi often replied, "I give you pure joy." Rather than imitating nature, Brancusi sought to capture the "essence" of his subjects. In this work, one of a series on the subject, the gracefully arching form is meant to represent flight.

Brancusi wanted to create art that would defy categorization. Although he resisted being associated with any one modern art movement, he made a significant impact on modern sculpture.

In what ways is his work modern? Consider the formal qualities of *Bird in Space*, such as its shape and form, as well as the subject. How do these qualities compare to the other modern works in these materials?



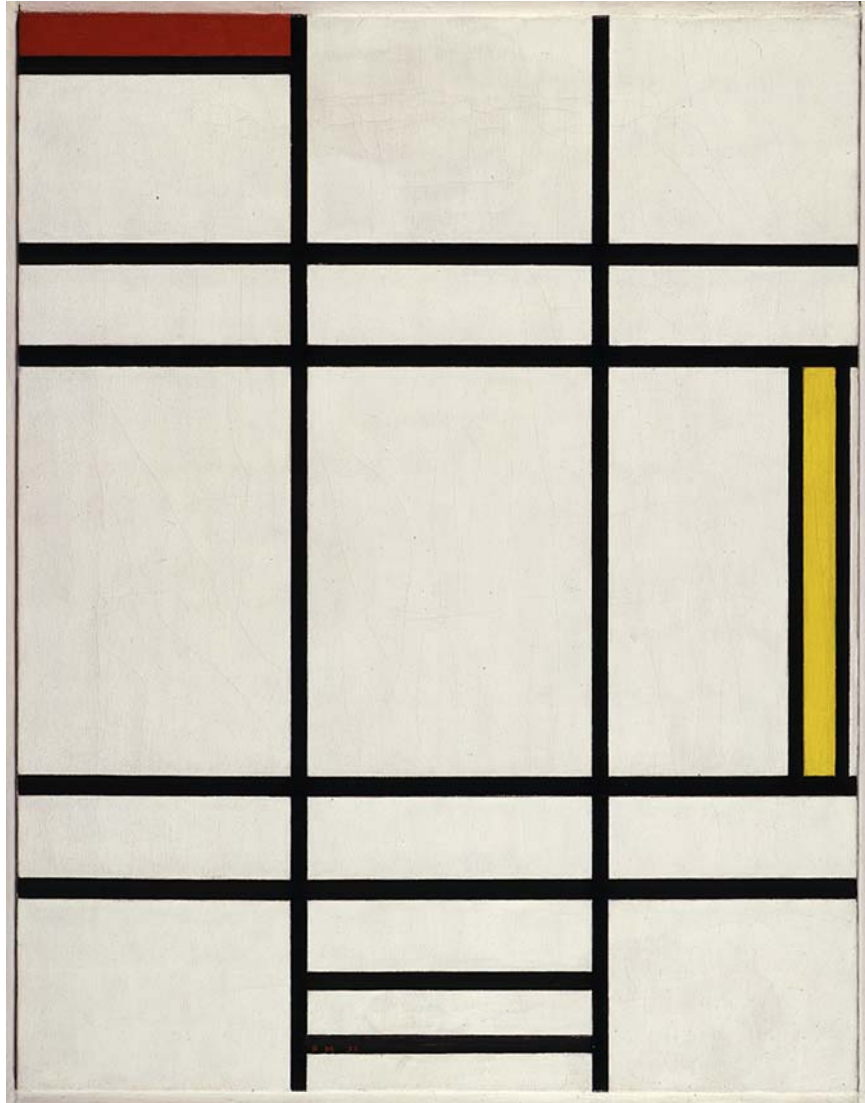
MARJORIE CONTENT
United States, 1895–1984
Untitled, 1928

Gelatin-silver print, Unframed: 4 1/2 x 6 1/2 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund, M.89.85
© Marjorie Content
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Marjorie Content has been described as a photographer with a poetic sense of the world. She is known for her small-scale photographs of ordinary things, as well as portraits and street scenes. Many of her compositions capture the surfaces of objects and the ways they are altered by light and shadow.

Take a close look at this photograph. What did Content capture in the frame of her camera? What details seem most important? Why do you think the artist chose to photograph this scene from above?

In what ways would the image change if Content had photographed Washington Square from a different vantage point?



PIET MONDRIAN

Holland, 1872–1944

Composition in White, Red, and Yellow, 1936

Oil on canvas, 31½ x 24½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection, 63.14

© 2009 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o HCR International, Warrenton, Virginia, USA

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Piet Mondrian was a founder of *De Stijl* (Dutch for "the style"), a group of artists based in Holland toward the end of World War I that expressed their belief in the possibility of a new utopian society. Their works of art were completely abstract as in Mondrian's *Composition in White, Red, and Yellow*.

Mondrian believed that a true understanding of the world demanded recognition of its underlying structure, one which the artist felt was divorced from the appearance of the natural world. This painting demonstrates his feeling that this underlying structure was held in place by the dynamic tension between verticals (which he felt contained energy) and horizontals (which he associated with tranquility.)

Imagine the steps the artist took in creating this work of art. Write a description of the artist's process. In what ways would the painting change if Mondrian had used additional colors, or had used curved or jagged lines?



Pablo Picasso

Spain, 1881–1973

Weeping Woman with Handkerchief, 1937

Oil on canvas, 21 x 17½ in.

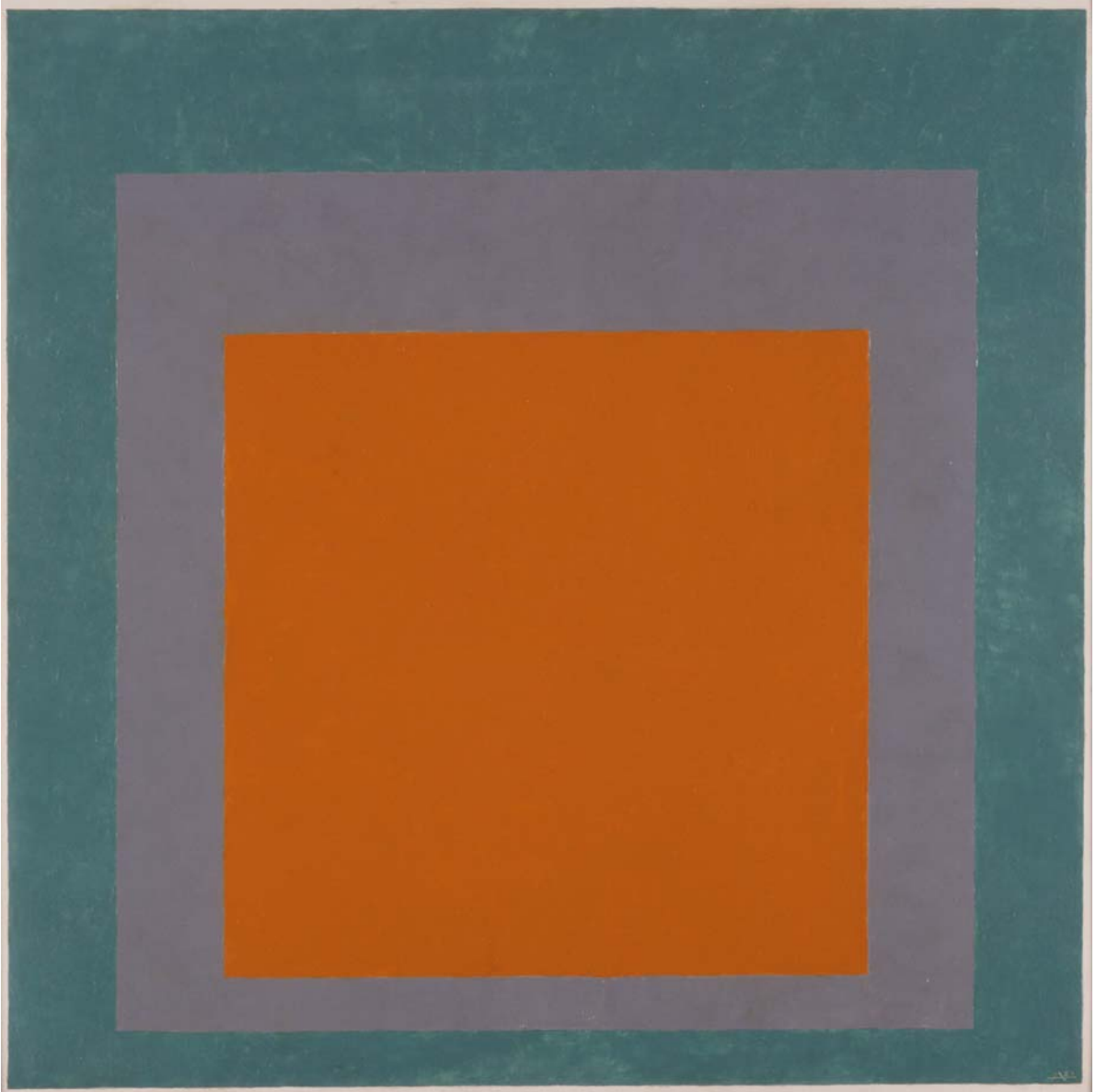
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mitchell, 55.90

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Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Picasso's long career comprised several stylistic periods such as the Blue and Rose periods and Cubism. Throughout his explorations of these styles, Picasso explored themes in his own life and the world around him. The motif of the weeping woman is one he explored many times over.

Compare *Weeping Woman* to Picasso's *Portrait of Sebastián Juñer Vidal*, also highlighted in this resource. What are the purposes of portraiture? How do these paintings fulfill those purposes? In what ways do they challenge this definition?

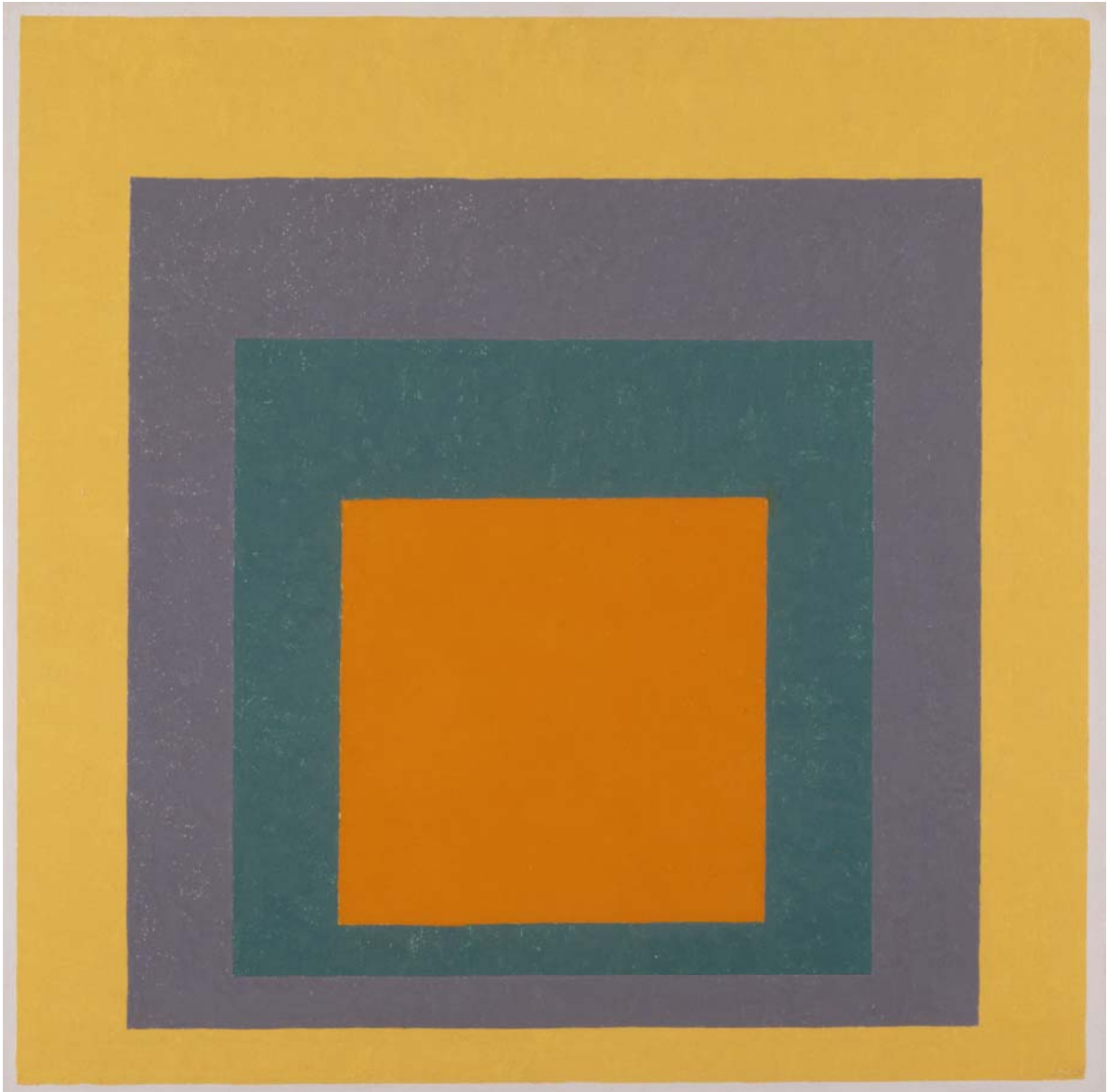


JOSEF ALBERS
Germany, 1888–1976
Homage to the Square: Dissolving/Vanishing, 1951
Oil on masonite, 24 x 24 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Anni Albers and the Josef Albers Foundation, Inc., M.81.51.2
© 2009 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

For twenty-five years, Josef Albers focused on a series of paintings entitled *Homage to the Square*. Limiting himself to the combination of different-sized squares painted in a variety of colors, Albers's rigorous exploration of this theme allowed him to be experimental and imaginative as he examined the interaction of colors when placed next to one another.

Although Albers followed a very strict method in this series of paintings, he believed that his paintings should evoke emotions. Using a selection of colored pieces of paper cut into geometric shapes, encourage students to make combinations that convey a specific emotion or other abstract idea.



JOSEF ALBERS

Germany, 1888–1976

Homage to the Square, 1951–1955

Oil on masonite, 24 x 24 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Anni Albers and the Josef Albers Foundation, Inc., M.81.51.1

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Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Albers believed that color does not exist by itself, but rather arises only in dialogue. What do you think this means? Have students explore this idea by experimenting with the interaction of colors. Have students paint a series of two or three different colors next to each other, keeping at least one color the same throughout. For example, what, if anything, happens when the color yellow is placed next to purple, green, or a lighter shade of yellow?



Jackson Pollock
United States, 1912–1956
Black and White Number 20, 1951
Oil on canvas, 57³/₁₆ x 64 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, David E. Bright Bequest, M.67.25.16
© 2009 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Jackson Pollock is best known for his "action" paintings in which he poured, dripped, splattered, and even threw paint onto canvases to build up intricate layers. His paintings challenged the traditional notion that painting should be a "window on the world." Rather than portray a specific idea or subject in his work, Pollock wanted to infuse his work with his physical and spiritual energy.

Look closely at *Black and White Number 20*. Describe what you see. Describe the marks and lines Pollock used to create this composition. What shapes can you identify? What words would you use to describe the mood of this painting? Consider whether the painting is active or somber, playful or serious.



LEE KRASNER

United States, 1908–1984

Desert Moon, 1955

Collage of oil on paper on canvas, and oil on canvas, 58 x 42½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Jo Ann and Julian Ganz Jr.,

Robert F. Maguire III, Leslie and John Dorman, Betty and Brack Duker, John and Joan Hotchkis, Mr. and Mrs. H. Tony Oppenheimer/Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation, Lynda and Stewart Resnick, Sheila and Wally Weisman, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross, Judith and Steaven K. Jones, Myron Laskin, Tally and Bill Mingst, and Irene Christopher through the 2000 Collectors Committee, Director's Discretionary Fund, Judith and Richard Smooke, and two anonymous donors, M.2000.82

© 2009 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Many of Lee Krasner's works are rooted in nature and natural forms, and she gave them titles that reference their inspiration. In this collage, Krasner combined oil paint in saturated shades of orange, red, and pink with sections of oil on paper torn from separate artworks.

Ask students to define "painting." What kinds of paintings have they created? What are some of the choices artists make when they paint? Describe *Desert Moon*. In what ways does it differ in style, materials, technique, and subject from a traditional painting?

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at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and designed by Jenifer Shell.
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WHAT MAKES MODERN ART MODERN?

INTENSE, CRITICAL, BREAKING WITH TRADITION, AND AVANT-GARDE—these are words and phrases sometimes used to describe modern art. “Modern” is a chronological and stylistic designation that usually refers to art made from the beginning of the twentieth century until after World War II, although some scholars date modern art from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s or beyond. Traditionally, the history of modern art is organized around a series of intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic developments that informed artworks created at the time. Contemporary historians, however, focus more on the connections between artistic styles than on a linear progression.

These curriculum materials explore developments in modern art in western Europe and the United States between 1906 and 1955. Four works are highlighted: a painting by Raoul Dufy titled *Still Life with Closed Shutters* (1906); Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture *Bird in Space* (1927); *Untitled* (1928), a black-and-white photograph by Marjorie Content; and *Desert Moon*, a mixed-media work made in 1955 by Lee Krasner. This selection of artworks from LACMA’s permanent collection illustrates the ways modern artists broke with centuries-old traditions of art making and turned a critical eye toward the subjects, concepts, materials, and formal qualities of their work.

Modern Art and Ideas

In the twentieth century, the world was transformed by changes to social and political structures, and developments in technology and industry. Modernism evolved as artists sought new ways to respond to and represent their changing world. Artists began to critically examine and explore the premises of art and artistic media. The term *modernism* refers to artists' self-conscious breaking with the past and their search for new forms of expression. Modernist works reveal concerns about art and aesthetics, regardless of whether or not the artist is representing traditional subjects (as in Dufy's still life) or scenes from contemporary life (such as Content's photograph). By questioning traditional techniques and methods of representation, modern artists broke through the boundaries established by art academies to pioneer new art-making approaches.

Successive challenges to the traditions of art making in the nineteenth century gave rise to the term *avant-garde*. From the French for "vanguard," the foremost part of an army, it began to be used in relation to art in the 1880s. *Avant-garde* referred to artists who were considered to be ahead of their time and challenged established art-making traditions. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne were among the first to be called *avant-garde* because of their unique approaches to representing the world. Some *avant-garde* artists criticized political and social ideologies in their work; others pursued a more introspective path, examining and critiquing artistic principles and elements. The term *avant-garde* is sometimes associated with modernism and many modern artists once were referred to as *avant-garde*.

Art historians and critics have organized the stylistic developments of modern art into a chronology of movements and ideas, each of which challenged artistic conventions with greater intensity. What follows is a brief description of some of the schools and movements that characterize modern art. These categories organize modern art into a linear progression of styles, ideologies, and approaches. It is important to recognize, however, that some ideas and approaches developed simultaneously and many artists sought to avoid being associated with any one school of thought.

Impressionism—A late nineteenth-century art movement that sought to capture impressions of fleeting moments by representing the effects of light and differing weather conditions on landscapes, cityscapes, and scenes of daily life. Impressionist artists include Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Gustave Caillebotte.

Postimpressionism—A movement that developed in response to impressionism. Postimpressionist artists sought to represent modern life by revealing its emotional and psychological aspects. Leading artists in this movement include Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh.

Fauvism—From the French word *fauves*, which means "wild beasts," fauvism was an early twentieth-century movement that explored the use of vibrant, bold color as the primary formal element in a composition. The *fauves* included Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse, and Maurice de Vlaminck.

Expressionism—An approach to art making that reflects the artist's unique personal vision and often incorporates or expresses emotion. Two important German expressionist groups were Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). Artists associated with expressionism include Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Oskar Kokoschka.

Cubism—A style of art that abandoned traditional strategies for creating the illusion of space, such as perspective, and instead presented three-dimensional forms with abstract, geometric shapes, often offering several views simultaneously. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are generally credited with developing cubism at the turn of the twentieth century.

Futurism—A movement founded by a group of Italian poets, painters, and sculptors who advocated social and artistic reform. Artists such as Fernand Léger and Umberto Boccioni represented the speed and dynamism of the modern machine age in their work.

Abstract art—Art in which no recognizable subjects are depicted. Instead, color, shape, and line are relied upon to convey meaning. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, and Robert Delaunay were at the forefront of abstract art in the early twentieth century. Since then, hundreds of modern artists have made abstract works using a variety of styles and approaches.

Dada—An art movement based on deliberate irrationality and the rejection of traditional aesthetic values. Marcel Duchamp and Hannah Höch, among others, are associated with dadaism; they were part of a loosely allied group of artists unified by their collective disillusionment after the brutality of World War I.

Surrealism—Considered by some scholars to be a successor to dada, surrealism was an intellectual, literary, and artistic movement that explored ways to represent in art the world of dreams and the unconscious. René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Meret Oppenheim are associated with this movement.

Abstract expressionism—The first major avant-garde movement to emerge in the United States, abstract expressionism (sometimes called action painting) took root in the late 1940s. The artists associated with the movement—such as Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lee Krasner—made paintings that used abstraction to convey strong emotional or expressive content.

Minimalism—A movement that some scholars see as a direct response to the critical and popular success of abstract expressionism. Minimalist artworks are characterized by a severe reduction of form and an emphasis on the viewer's physical relationship to works of art as seen in the sculpture of Tony Smith and Donald Judd.

The works highlighted in these materials represent a survey of modern styles and schools of thought. Raoul Dufy's *Still Life with Closed Shutters* (1906) illustrates his use of the expressive qualities of color to represent a traditional subject, as well as his association with fauvism. Brancusi's sculpture *Bird in Space* (1927) is an example of the artist's exploration of abstraction and represents his critical exploration of sculptural media and concepts. Photographer Marjorie Content captured New York's Washington Square Park in her photograph *Untitled* (1928). Although Content did not consider herself an artist, the photograph is an example of how modernist views influenced the perspectives of amateur and professional artists alike. Lee Krasner's *Desert Moon* (1955) reflects an interest in abstraction that is rooted in nature and the everyday world.

Consider the following questions as you explore these works of art:

- What makes a work of art modern?
- In what ways do modern artists break with established art-making traditions?
- What are the subjects and materials of modern art?

RAOUL DUFY (France, 1877–1953)

Still Life with Closed Shutters, 1906

RAOUL DUFY'S WORK HAS BEEN SAID TO CONVEY PLEASURE AND JOY. IN THIS PAINTING, DUFY USED A VARIETY OF saturated colors in contrasting shades to depict a still life of fruit arranged on a tabletop. Sunlight filters through the closed shutters behind the table and makes a dappled pattern across the floor. Broad brushstrokes and bright colors create a lively composition and bring a fresh perspective to the traditional genre of still-life painting.

- *Search Collections Online at lacma.org to see examples of traditional still-life paintings. Compare Dufy's Still Life with Closed Shutters to Abraham van Beyeren's Banquet Still Life (1667). In what ways are they similar or different? What makes Dufy's painting modern?*

When this painting was made, Dufy was part of a loose association of artists known as the fauves, who explored the expressive qualities of color and its use as the primary formal element in a composition. The fauves took their name, which means "wild beasts" in French, from art critic Louis Vauxcelles. He used the term disparagingly in his review of a 1905 Paris art exhibition in which a group of classical sculptures was surrounded by paintings of striking color by artists Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck. The broad brushstrokes, patterned surfaces, and brilliant colors Vauxcelles observed in the paintings are defining characteristics of fauvism.

Fauvism was among the first of the avant-garde movements to flourish in early twentieth-century France. Dufy and his fellow fauves painted conventional subjects such as landscapes, portraits, and still lifes in a way that broke from established artistic traditions. From 1904 to 1908, the fauves pioneered a modern vision of the everyday world.

The fauves sought to develop an approach to painting that combined the immediacy of impressionism with the expressiveness of highly saturated color. Their innovative and "wild" use of color is one of the qualities that distinguished fauvism from academic art. Derain described fauvism as "color for color's sake," encapsulating the way these artists abandoned nuanced use of color in painting, such as soft transitions or shading, in favor of its unrestrained use. Rather than use color as it is perceived in nature to create the illusion of perspective or volume, the fauves used color for its expressive qualities. De Vlaminck, in fact, often put color on canvases directly from the tube, without mixing in other pigments to modulate it.

Although they shared some tendencies, artists associated with fauvism developed individual approaches that aligned with their personal aesthetics. Some artists, such as Matisse and Derain, used harsh, contrasting colors to create visual effect, while others—including Dufy—used milder shades. In artworks from this time in his career, Dufy was determined to paint not only what he could see but what existed in his own reality. He was particularly interested in depicting light in his paintings. He used colors that are found in nature not to re-create the visual perception of those hues but to represent the chromatic equivalent of light as he perceived it.

- *Many of the fauves only worked in this style for a short period of time. Matisse, however, remained interested in the possibilities of color and continued to explore the ideas developed during the fauvist period throughout his career. Look at the enclosed CD to see an image of Matisse's painting Tea (1919). How does it compare to Dufy's Fauvist work? What elements of the fauve style did Matisse continue to develop in Tea?*



RAOUL DUFY

France, 1877–1953

Still Life with Closed Shutters, 1906

Oil on canvas, 31⁷/₈ x 25⁹/₁₆ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.23

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Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI (Romania, 1876–1957, active France)

Bird in Space, 1927

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE MEANING OF HIS SCULPTURES, CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI OFTEN REPLIED, "I GIVE YOU pure joy." *Bird in Space* is a key example of Brancusi's work. Rather than imitating nature, Brancusi sought to capture the "essence" of his subjects. In this work, one of a series on the subject, the gracefully arching form is meant to represent flight.

Brancusi focused on a variety of subjects throughout his career, such as the human form and a variety of animals—including the bird, the fish, and the turtle. He often returned to the same subject, making a series of works that explore a single theme. *Bird in Space* is part of a progression of artworks that focus on the bird form. Brancusi made at least seventeen versions of the *Bird in Space* in bronze and marble over the course of twenty years. Each time he revisited a subject, Brancusi altered the height and proportion. He stated that he repeated forms not to "merely do them differently, but to go further."

- *Brancusi wanted to create art that would defy categorization. Although he resisted being associated with any one modern art movement, he made a significant impact on modern sculpture. In what ways is his work modern? Consider the formal qualities of Bird in Space, such as its shape and form, as well as the subject. How do these qualities compare to the other modern works in these materials?*

This version of *Bird in Space* is made of highly polished bronze. The golden finish Brancusi created on his bronze sculptures was his own invention and was unlike that of any other western artist at that time. The reflective surface contradicted the closed form of his sculptures by blurring the boundaries between the artwork and its surroundings. Brancusi often intensified the mirrored effect by polishing the sculptures and manipulating the lighting in which they were seen. According to Brancusi, the surface of a sculpture should appear to go on forever, unhindered by the boundaries of its form.

In addition to bronze, Brancusi worked in marble and different varieties of wood, such as oak, walnut, and maple. Many of his wood sculptures are made of multiple blocks that he carved and placed on top of each other. Brancusi often built a sculpture from many interchangeable and varied parts. He frequently would create a sculpture only to disassemble it and reconfigure the pieces into a new whole. Even sculptures that were made of a single form, such as *Bird in Space*, were subject to variations by changing the bases on which they were displayed.

A sculpture's base may echo an expressive quality of the work or it may call attention to its proportions. Brancusi understood this relationship between the base and sculpture, and he made all of the supports for his works.

- *Take a long look at Bird in Space and make a sketch of it. Next, make another sketch of the sculpture but change its base. Consider designing a base of a different shape and size. In what ways does the base influence your understanding of the artwork? Make a few sketches of the sculpture each with a different base. If you were the artist, with which base would you pair the sculpture?*



CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI
Romania, 1876–1957, active France
Bird in Space, 1927
Polished bronze, height: 73 in.; diameter: 8 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof, M.2005.70.13
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MARJORIE CONTENT (United States, 1895–1984)

Untitled, 1928

MARJORIE CONTENT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A PHOTOGRAPHER WITH A POETIC SENSE OF THE WORLD. Her photographs are small in scale (many are only three-by-four inches), yet in many photographs she captured expansive views of urban or natural landscapes. In this image, Content photographed a bird's-eye view of Washington Square Park in New York. A tree is silhouetted against an area where four paths converge. Both the tree and the paths extend beyond the margins of the composition, asking the viewer to wonder what lies beyond the frame.

- *Take a close look at this photograph. What did Content capture in the frame of her camera? What details seem most important? Why do you think the artist chose to photograph this scene from above? In what ways would the image change if Content had photographed Washington Square Park from a different vantage point?*

Content is known for her small-scale photographs of ordinary things, as well as portraits and street scenes. Many of her compositions capture surfaces and the ways they are altered by light and shadow. In this photograph, the even lines of the fence surrounding the path and the shadows they create contrast with the jagged tree branches looming above. For Content, light and shadow are the subject, rather than mere qualities of the subject.

Content's interest in photography began in the 1920s, but she pursued it for only fifteen years. She once wrote, "In photography I knew I was getting to be a better workman . . . (and I suspect that when I could no longer observe improvement that was the point at which I lost intense interest)." She left little documentation of her inspiration or her approach to photography, but it is known that she was acquainted with the painter Georgia O'Keeffe and the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Some scholars believe it was Stieglitz who sparked her interest in photography and influenced her unique perspective.

Stieglitz championed modern photography and worked to promote the medium as equal to traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture. When he met Content, he ran the avant-garde Gallery 291, which exhibited photographs and other artworks by artists who also sought to bring modern photography to the awareness of critics and collectors. Stieglitz served as Content's informal mentor and may have taught her how to print her photographs. Her association with Stieglitz and O'Keeffe also would have exposed her to the latest trends in art.

Content's work was published in the French journal *Photographie* alongside images by Henri Cartier-Bresson, André Kertész, and Dora Maar, among others. Content's studies of flowers, close-up portraits, and details of urban landscapes reflect her critical focus on shape, form, and space—as well as her interest in the formal qualities of an artwork, such as line, pattern, and texture. Although she may have considered herself an amateur, her work reflects a sophisticated understanding of, and interest in, modern aesthetics and styles.

- *George Eastman created the first camera designed for recreational purposes. Beginning in 1888, his Kodak cameras were sold in the United States. Many people soon saw the medium as a convenient and novel way to document their lives, while others, including Marjorie Content, saw photography as an opportunity to turn a critical eye toward the everyday. What is the role of photography and the photographic image in your life? What do you document through photographs?*



MARJORIE CONTENT
United States, 1895–1984
Untitled, 1928
Gelatin silver print, 4½ x 6½ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parsons Fund, M.89.85
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LEE KRASNER (United States, 1908–1984)

Desert Moon, 1955

MANY OF LEE KRASNER'S WORKS ARE ROOTED IN NATURE AND NATURAL FORMS, AND SHE GAVE THEM TITLES that reference their inspiration. In this collage, Krasner combined oil paint in saturated shades of orange, red, and pink with sections of oil on paper torn from separate artworks. The bold shapes and brushstrokes create a dynamic, expressive composition.

- *Ask students to define "painting." What kinds of paintings have they created? What are some of the choices artists make when they paint? Describe Desert Moon. How does it differ in style, materials, technique, and subject from a traditional painting?*

Krasner is often associated with abstract expressionism, a vanguard movement in the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s sparked by American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. Around this time, New York became the center of avant-garde activity, since many European artists relocated there in response to World War II. Because many of the artists associated with abstract expressionism lived and worked in New York, the group is also referred to as the New York school. This group generally shared the belief that by clearing their minds of initial preconceptions and anticipation of the end result, their artworks would develop freely with each brushstroke. Often large in scale and characterized by expansive brushstrokes or broad areas of expressive color, these works combine shapes, lines, and forms to represent emotions, individual feelings, and personal experiences.

- *Some abstract expressionists believed that spontaneity and improvisation were important parts of their artistic process. Ask students to create a small drawing in pencil that expresses an emotion or idea. What elements of their drawings represent their emotion or idea?*

Abstract expressionism is described by some scholars as the attempt to establish the self through the act of painting. Many of these artists believed that nonrepresentational painting (painting without references to nature or the external world) was the most direct way to express spiritual and emotional truths. In contrast, Krasner maintained a connection to nature throughout her career. The shapes and colors she combines in her works of art recall natural elements, but the exact sources may be hard to determine.

Krasner's interest in nature was grounded in the organic cycles and processes of nature more than specific elements or objects. She kept a collection of shells, geological specimens, semiprecious stones, and green plants, yet these things only appear in abstracted form in her work. Instead, the gestures in her artworks seem to suggest that the invisible forces of the wind, the tides, and the seasons that affect natural objects and determine their structure and shape are of greater concern to her.

Krasner began making collages in the early 1950s from other artworks that she ripped or cut apart and then recombined into new compositions. She started making collages using her own torn pieces as well as paintings, drawings, and photographs by her artist-husband Jackson Pollock. Krasner believed that her work was part of a discourse with her own earlier pieces and Pollock's art. In her collages, early works are turned into a new media that is arranged without consideration for its original intention or message.



LEE KRASNER

United States, 1908–1984

Desert Moon, 1955

Collage of oil on paper on canvas, and oil on canvas, 58 x 42½ in.

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