

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 Juñer 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 Juñer 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

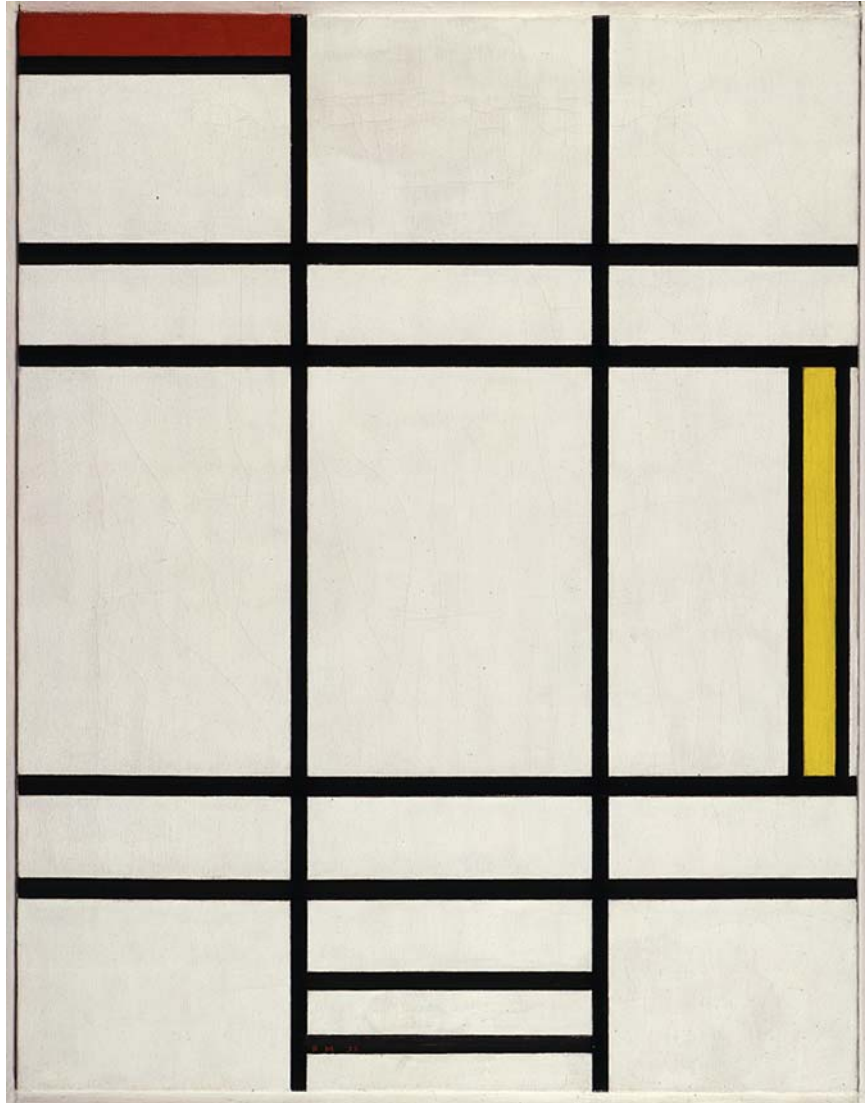
© Marjorie Content

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.

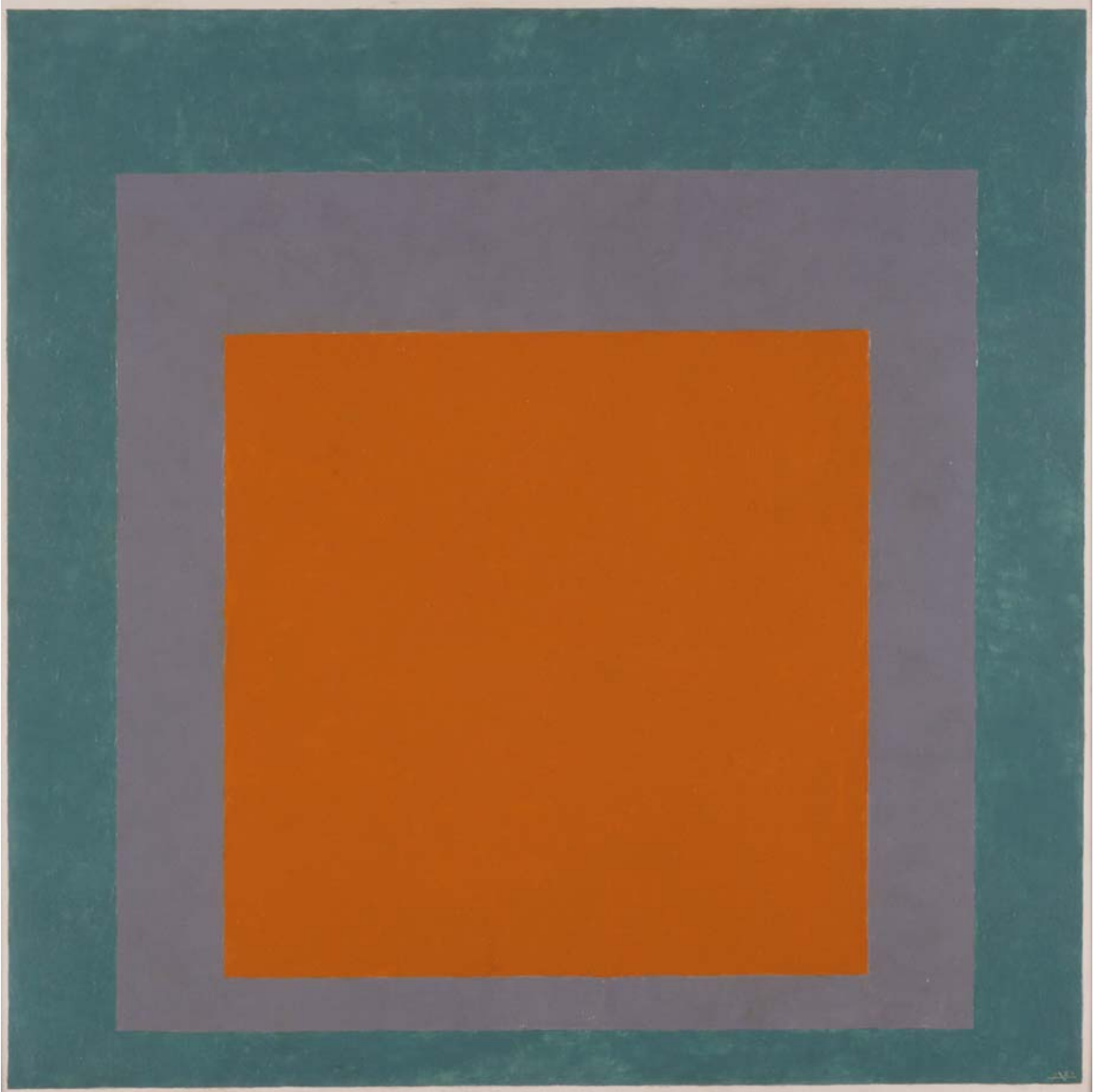
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mitchell, 55.90

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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?

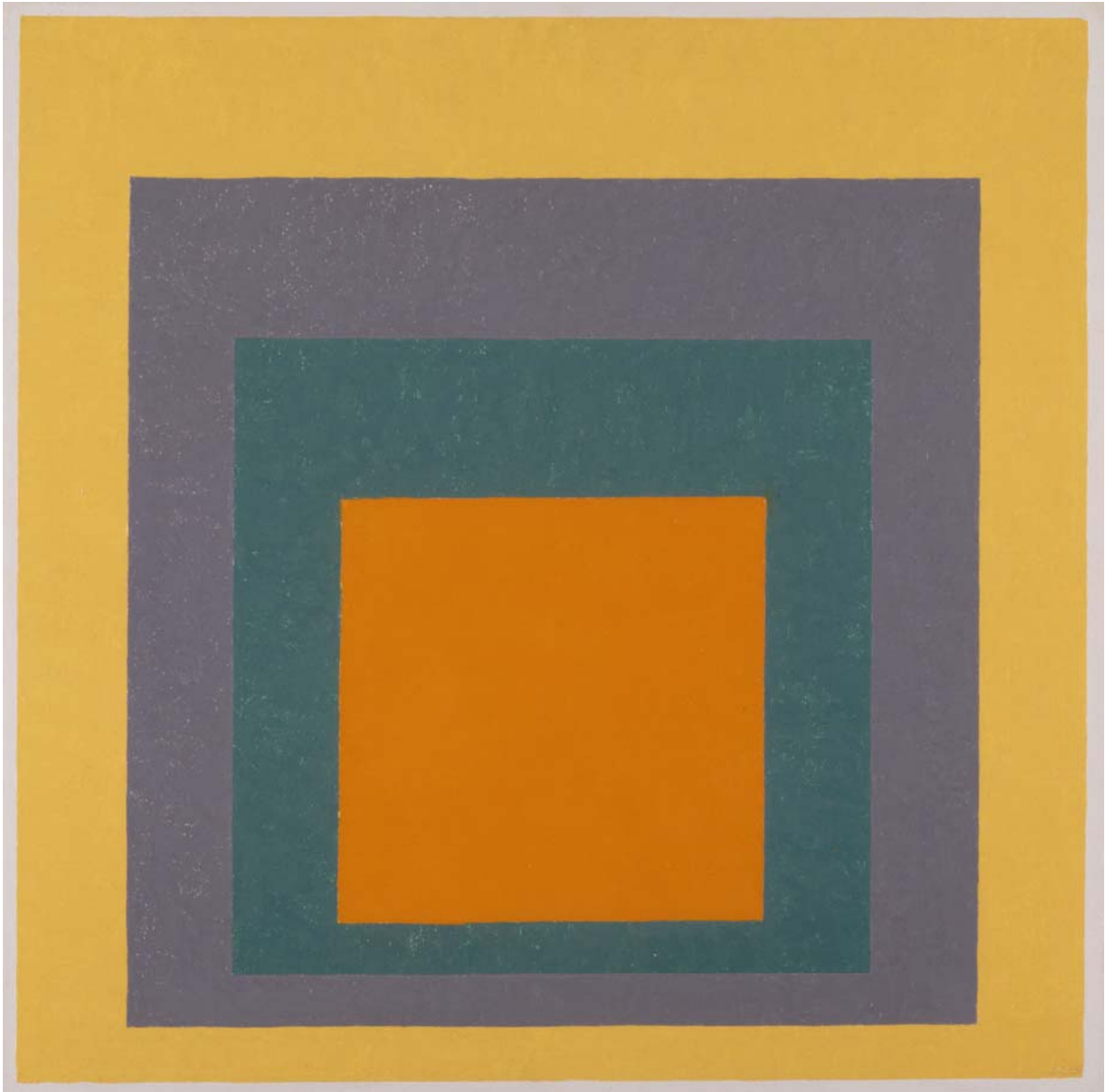


JOSEF ALBERS
Germany, 1888–1976
Homage to the Square: Dissolving/Vanishing, 1951
Oil on masonite, 24 x 24 in.

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 Steven 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

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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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