American Moderns, 1910-1960: From O'Keeffe to Rockwell

was organized by the Brooklyn Museum.

Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887-1986). 2 Yellow Leaves (Yellow Leaves), 1928. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 1/8 in. (101.6 x 76.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe, 87.136.6.
AMERICAN MODERNS, 1910—1960: FROM O’KEEFFE TO ROCKWELL

September 27, 2012–January 6, 2013

The five decades from 1910 to 1960 witnessed tumultuous and widespread changes in American society. As the United States assumed international prominence as an economic, industrial, and military superpower, it also faced the difficulties of wars and the Great Depression. New technologies altered all aspects of modern life, and a diverse and mobile population challenged old social patterns and clamored for the equality and opportunities promised by the American dream.

These dramatic social and technological changes inform the paintings and sculptures from the world-renowned collection of the Brooklyn Museum in American Moderns, 1910—1960: From O’Keeffe to Rockwell. In seeking new ways to make their work relevant to contemporary audiences, many American artists rejected long-standing artistic traditions of realism and narrative and reformulated the genres of figure painting, landscape, and still life. Avant-garde European styles served as catalysts for experimentation, as did the work of non-Western and folk artists who operated outside of academic conventions.

The altered conditions of modern America also provided creative inspiration. Artists found new pictorial possibilities in the urban grid, the vertical architecture of skyscrapers, and the streamlined shapes of machines. Social interactions—charged with the anonymity of urban life, new conceptions of human psychology, and shifting gender expectations—offered new material for artistic exploration. As an alternative to the dizzying world of modernity, some artists evoked America’s past and small-town life in order to create a sense of continuity amid change.

The works in American Moderns display the wide variety of styles, subject matter, and aesthetic concerns central to modern American art in this period. Ranging from the expressive botanical subjects of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986) to the realistic figural scenes of Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), they present the scope of American artists’ responses to a new, modern United States.

“One cannot be an American by going about saying that one is an American. It is necessary to feel America, like America, love America and then work.”

Georgia O’Keeffe, 1926
CUBIST EXPERIMENTS

Widely considered the most influential stylistic revolution of the first half of the twentieth century, Cubism was invented in Paris about 1908 by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963). The Cubists took a radical new approach to the age-old challenge in Western painting of how to represent three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional picture plane. By breaking up an object into fragments and reordering them across the composition, the artists were able to show multiple, simultaneous viewpoints. Cubism drew inspiration, in part, from the powerfully distilled forms of African sculpture, as well as the art of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who sought elemental geometric shapes in all subjects.

Cubism quickly became an international phenomenon with many practitioners and permutations in painting, sculpture, and even architecture. Artists experimented with this analytical approach to form by incorporating collage elements and hard-edged, flattened shapes and by using various color schemes, decorative effects, and subject matter. This section of the exhibition examines the myriad ways in which progressive American artists adapted a Cubist vocabulary for their own creative ends.

BEFORE VIEWING

Research the Armory Show of 1913.

Discuss the impact of the Armory Show on progressive American artists.

Select and identify a work of art from the Armory Show.

Analyze the selected art object by examining the artist’s use of the elements of art (i.e., line, shape, form, space, texture, and color).

“I don’t want people to copy Matisse or Picasso, although it is entirely proper to admit their influence. I don’t make paintings like theirs. I make paintings like mine.”

Stuart Davis, 1946
THE STILL LIFE REVISITED

The still life—generally, an arrangement of food, flowers, vessels, and other inanimate objects—has a venerable history in Western art with roots in ancient Roman wall decorations and Renaissance pictures. Traditional still lifes allowed artists to showcase their skills at the illusionistic depiction of diverse materials. In addition, imagery of perishable items and other references to passing time served as instructive references to the transitory nature of life.

In the twentieth century, modern artists largely rejected conventional aims of imitation and instruction and revitalized this genre, using the still life to explore purely formal concerns and decorative effects through the manipulation of color, form, and space. Some artists experimented with new modes of perception and new styles, such as Cubism and abstraction. Still life compositions were sometimes invested with personal symbolism or biographical content through the selection of particular items.

“...I know I cannot paint a flower. I cannot paint the sun on the desert on a bright summer morning but maybe in terms of paint color I can convey to you my experience of the flower or the experience that makes the flower of significance to me at that particular time.”

Georgia O’Keeffe, 1930

BEFORE VIEWING

Define the different genres of painting (e.g. still life, landscape, portrait).

Describe the qualities of both real (tactile) and apparent (visual) texture in paintings (e.g. rough, smooth, bumpy, scratchy, slippery).

Examine space in works of art. Observe how artists can make something two-dimensional look three-dimensional by creating an illusion of depth.

By the modern period, nature had long held an important place in American art and national identity. The mid-nineteenth-century Hudson River School of landscape painters, for example, fostered an idealized vision of the American wilderness as beautiful and bountiful, and as a sign of divine providence for the United States. In the twentieth century, nature continued to be a major source of aesthetic inspiration for artists, despite the dramatic transformation of the American landscape through the forces of modernization.

Many American artists found creative rejuvenation and escape from the stresses of urban life in the country, at the seaside, and in other remote locales. Their encounters with nature prompted explorations of avant-garde styles, formal properties of color, shape, and space, and humanity’s relationship with the natural world. Organic imagery was often abstracted or stripped of extraneous details in an effort to reveal nature’s vital essence, while also reflecting the modernist aesthetic for simplified, streamlined forms. Many artists also avoided realistic representation in favor of expressing their own subjective responses to natural motifs.


Georgia O’Keeffe (American, 1887-1986). Green, Yellow and Orange, 1960. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Georgia O’Keeffe, 87.136.3.

Joseph Stella (American, born Italy, 1877-1946). The Virgin, 1926. Oil on canvas, 39 11/16 x 38 3/4 in. (100.8 x 98.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Adolph Lewisohn, 28.207.

“The idea of modernity is but a new attachment of things universal—a fresh relationship to the courses of the sun and to the living swing of the earth.”

Marsden Hartley, 1914
MODERN STRUCTURES

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BEFORE VIEWING

Research American culture between 1910 and 1960. Specifically review the following:
- World War I
- Roaring Twenties
- The Great Depression
- Roosevelt’s New Deal
- World War II

“Reality in art is composed of shapes and colors.”

Stuart Davis


ENGAGING CHARACTERS

By 1920 the majority of Americans lived in cities—a culmination of the nation’s transformation over the nineteenth century from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrialized one. This demographic concentration persisted until the rapid rise of suburbs after World War II. Cities teemed with people from diverse ethnic, economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Social interactions were often governed by anxiety as people coexisted in close proximity with strangers. Although modern work and leisure offered new opportunities for socializing, many urban dwellers felt alienation within the anonymous throngs. Traditional gender roles were also challenged during the twentieth century as women gained expanded educational and professional opportunities, as well as the right to vote.

Many American artists embraced the human spectacle as their subject matter, depicting both the pleasures and pitfalls of modern society. Their works represent a broad cast of characters—such as the savvy businessman, the independent New Woman, and the down-on-his-luck homeless man—while also creating insightful commentaries on shifting patterns of social interaction.

WHILE VIEWING

Describe the characteristics of the following stylistic/period terms:
- Abstraction
- Cubism
- Expressionism
- Impressionism
- Post-impressionism
- Precisionism
- Social Realism
- Synchromism

“It is never difficult to see images—when the principle of the image is embedded in the soul.”

Marsden Hartley, 1932
AMERICANA

Amid a rapidly changing and challenging world, images that evoked the nation’s past and simpler ways of life enjoyed great popularity. The representational style and recognizable subject matter of such pictures appealed to wide audiences, particularly in their rejection of abstract currents in modern art that many Americans considered inaccessible, elitist, and foreign in origin.

This interest in Americana also reflected an attempt to define what was distinctive about the culture of the United States. The search for “Americanness” was never an uncontested or unified endeavor. Some artists celebrated industrial products, the machine aesthetic, and the modern cityscape to express a national identity, while others offered nostalgic visions rooted in rural and small-town life or in heroic moments from history.

Another manifestation of the quest for an authentic America was the rising appreciation of folk art, or work produced by untrained artists. Often characterized by decorative patterns and simplified forms, modern folk art was embraced as both a refreshing alternative to academic traditions and a continuation of amateur creative practices that had thrived in America throughout its history.

“The artist is the person who makes life more interesting or beautiful, more understandable or mysterious, or probably, in the best sense, more wonderful.”

George Wesley Bellows


NORMAN ROCKWELL (AMERICAN, 1894-1978). The Tattoo Artist, 1944. Oil on canvas, 43 1/8 x 33 1/8 in. (109.5 x 84.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the artist, 69.8 © 1944 The Norman Rockwell Family Entities.

BEFORE VIEWING

Define these elements of design:
- Figure and Ground
- Pattern
- Visual Rhythm
- Balance
- Symmetry and Asymmetry
MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL READING LIST (GRADES 6-12)
Resources from the Metropolitan Library System

NONFICTION
Gherman, Beverly. *Norman Rockwell: Storyteller with a Brush*. 2000. J759.13/R684g/BIOGRAPHY. This biography illustrates how the experiences of Norman Rockwell’s life shaped his work.


Rodriguez, Rachel. *Through Georgia’s Eyes*. 2006. J759.13/OK41ro/BIOGRAPHY. A biography of Georgia O’Keeffe that focuses on how she saw the world differently, and the peace and inspiration she found in New Mexico.


FICTION
Bryant, Jennifer. *Pieces of Georgia*. 2006. FICTION/BRY. After 13-year-old Georgia McCoy’s artist mother dies suddenly, her life is again changed when she receives an anonymous gift membership to the art museum.

Vivian, Siobhan. *Same Difference*. 2009. FICTION/VIV. Teenage Emily goes to an art program one summer in Philadelphia and finds out that at a new school with new friends she can shape who she wants to be.

Whelan, Gloria. *See What I See*. 2010. FICTION/WHE. Kate is a painter who moves to Detroit when she gets a scholarship to an art school and moves in with her estranged father, a reclusive and famous artist.
ADULT READING LIST


CUBIST SELF-PORTRAIT SCULPTURES

LEARN:
This lesson is designed to introduce the concepts of cubism, self-portrait, form, and sculpture.

TIME NEEDED:
This lesson can be completed in two or three 45-minute sessions.

PROJECT:
Begin by examining the cubist works in American Moderns, 1910-1960: From O’Keefe to Rockwell. Compare Abstraction #2 by Warren Wheelock to two-dimensional works by Alfred Henry Maurer, Max Weber, and Marguerite Thompson Zorach. How are they similar? Are there any shapes that are similar in all of the works? How are they different? How do the two-dimensional works compare with the form in the sculpture? Then, on the paper, sketch a cubist self-portrait. Consider encouraging students to change their facial position every time they draw a new feature. When complete, the nose might be in profile while the eyes are depicted from the front. Blind contour drawing is a fun way to end with an abstract self-portrait. Have students place their drawing paper behind their mirrors or behind a book. Then, begin drawing self-portraits without looking at the paper. Once drawing is complete, pencil lines can be traced with a fine-point Sharpie. Colored pencils can be used to add colors. Students can be encouraged to use bright vibrant colors or a more muted palette like the paintings on view in the special exhibition. Cut the head out and set aside.

Wood scraps can be purchased from online sources and are ready to use with no sanding required. Consider using popsicle sticks, small wood craft shapes, wooden dowels, etc. for arms, hands, feet, and other body parts. At least one large wood square or rectangle will be useful to create a sturdy base for the sculpture. If desired, use liquid watercolors to paint natural wood pieces before gluing. They will have a beautiful stained appearance and dry quickly. Once dry, have students experiment with building before gluing. Glue the sculpture together with wood glue and set aside to dry.

When everything is dry, the head can be glued to the sculpture. Hot glue may be necessary for this step. Yarn, wire, or pipe cleaners may be added to create hands, hair, or other details.

SUPPLY LIST:
• Watercolor paper, thick drawing paper, or cardstock (about 3” x 3”)
• Mirrors
• Colored pencils
• Wood glue
• Wood scraps, dowels, popsicle sticks, small craft wood shapes, wood spools (about 4 shapes total per student)
• Sharpies
• Liquid watercolors
• Paintbrushes
• Hot glue
• Yarn
• Wire
EXPERIMENTING WITH CUBISM

LEARN:
This lesson is designed to incorporate the concepts of cubism, line, shape, composition, content, still life, portrait, negative space, positive space and unity.

TIME NEEDED:
This lesson will take approximately two 1-hour sessions.

PROJECT:
First, begin by examining the works in the first section of American Moderns, 1910-1960: From O’Keefe to Rockwell. This section is titled Cubist Experiments and includes artists such as Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, and Max Weber. Examine the content and composition of each painting. How does a still life compare with a portrait? How are they the same? How are they different? Do you see certain lines or shapes that repeat often?

Students will create a drawing from life on the 7” square drawing paper with pencil. The content can be a still life or portrait. For younger students, a still life incorporating simple shapes such as fruit, flowers, or musical instruments may be preferred. Older students may enjoy portraiture. Draw each item or person as you see them. If desired, all pencil lines can be traced with a Sharpie. Use colored pencils to add color to the drawing. Consider using a certain color family to achieve a certain mood.

Next, students are ready to cut their drawings apart. If desired, pencil and rulers can be used to draw the lines on the back of the drawing. Consider making some lines horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and curvy. Younger students may want to draw only 4 or 5 lines to minimize the number of pieces. Older students may decide to draw more lines and cut into smaller pieces.

Begin reassembling the pieces on the 8½” square papers. Do not start gluing until the composition has been completed. Consider encouraging students to place the pieces in a similar place on the larger paper so that the item/person is still recognizable. For instance, place the head near the top with the neck below. They may be spread out more than they were originally, or they may not line up exactly, but the head is still above the neck. Once the composition has been finalized, use a glue stick to attach.

Finally, discuss positive space and negative space. Using colored pencils, create unity in the piece by connecting lines and shapes and adding color to the negative space.

SUPPLY LIST:
• White drawing paper 7” x 7” square
• Pencils
• Erasers
• Colored or white drawing paper or construction paper 8 ½” x 8 ½”
• Scissors
• Glue sticks
• Colored pencils
• Extra-fine Sharpies
• Rulers
GEORGIA O’KEEFE FLOWERS

LEARN:
This lesson introduces the concepts of space (positive and negative), composition, and still life.

TIME NEEDED:
This lesson can be completed in one 45-minute session.

PROJECT:
First, examine the works of George O’Keefe in the special exhibition, American Moderns, 1910-1960: From O’Keefe to Rockwell. How are they the same? How do they differ? Notice how the composition fills the space of each canvas.

Next, students will draw the flower of their choice filling most of the paper. The flower could go off of the page on one or more sides. Flower catalogs may be used for reference, or fresh flowers may be used to create a still life. Using a viewfinder may be helpful. Whether drawing from life or a photograph, use the viewfinder to isolate parts of the image. The flower should be colored completely with oil pastels. Students should be encouraged to blend and mix colors and add details. Finally, a watercolor wash of a contrasting color can be applied to the entire paper. The watercolors will only adhere to the negative space, the parts of the paper not covered with oil pastels.

SUPPLY LIST:
- Watercolor paper (a square composition works well for this project)
- Pencils
- Erasers
- Oil pastels
- Watercolors
- Paintbrushes
- Water containers
- Seed or flower catalogs
- Fresh flowers
- Viewfinder
STANDING CITY SCENES

LEARN:
This lesson is designed to encourage students to examine the shapes and forms in their community while considering the use of foreground and background in their work.

TIME NEEDED:
This lesson can be completed in one 45-minute session.

PROJECT:
Begin by examining the paintings in the Modern Structures section of *American Moderns, 1910-1960: From O’Keefe to Rockwell*, paying close attention to the cityscapes. Note the different types of structures depicted and the use of foreground and background. What types of objects are occupying the foreground? What types of things do you see in the background? Examine the skyline in each image.

Using the long strip of heavy paper, sketch a cityscape. For younger students, simple rectangular buildings can be drawn. Older students may choose to use the rules of perspective to depict a three-dimensional structure. Include interesting items along the skyline such as spires, smokestacks, etc. Using markers, colored pencils, and/or oil pastels students should add color to their cityscape. Be sure to add lots of details such as windows, brick, bushes, trees, etc.

Next, students will cut along the top outlines of the buildings, creating a skyline along the top of the paper. Vertically fold the paper in thirds toward the center. Each side does not need to be folded evenly. This will allow the scene to stand up. It will also force the center of the cityscape to the background and the sides of the cityscape to the foreground.

SUPPLY LIST:
- 9” x 24” piece of paper per student (watercolor paper or heavy construction paper)
- Colored pencils and/or markers and/or oil pastels
- Scissors