

Modern and Contemporary Arts and Artists

Is that art? Discover the many ways modern and contemporary artists have responded to their environment and defied conventional notions of what constitutes art. Discuss artworks that push the boundaries of painting, sculpture, textiles, works on paper, and more.

Themes

Pushing the boundaries of space and place

Artists respond to a changing world

What's an -ism and what isn't?

Tours will generally be for an audience of middle school students to adults.

Modern Art (1860s to 1970s)

Modernism refers to a global movement in society and culture that from the early decades of the 20th century sought a new alignment with the experience and values of modern industrial life. Building on late 19th-century precedents, artists around the world used new imagery, materials and techniques to create artworks that they felt better reflected the realities and hopes of modern societies. (Note: very Euro-centric)

Modern art concepts:

- rejection of history and conservative values (including realistic depiction of subjects); prefers subject matter of daily life
- innovation and experimentation with shapes, colors and lines; tendency toward abstraction and expression of emotions through bold brush strokes and vibrant colors
- emphasis on materials, techniques and processes
- driven by social and political agendas; often associated with ideal visions of human life and society; belief in progress

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/modernism>

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art/

ARTWORK 1:

Paul Cézanne, *Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan*, c. 1885-1886, Oil on canvas, 49.9

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Cézanne is painting on the grounds of his family estate at Aix-en-Provence in southern France. He has chosen a place and subject that have great personal meaning for him.
2. He depicts the chestnut trees using multiple viewpoints, so that it's sometimes difficult to understand what is in front and what is behind. The branches interspersed with the sky show us how nature is continually changing and shifting. Some parts come forward (the part of the mountain between the tree branches), some parts recede (the cool colors of atmospheric perspective).
3. The carefully arranged planes are also shown from multiple viewpoints complemented by the shifting light and colors. There is both flatness and depth. Is that snow reflecting light on the treetops? This is a totally new way of depicting a landscape. (Cezanne is not trying to fool us with the illusion of perspective.)

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. With your first glance, what is your eye drawn to in this painting? What is it about that part of the painting that catches your attention?
2. Where could you walk in the painting? Where would it be difficult to walk?
3. Look carefully at the branches, sky, and mountain. Identify areas where you're not sure what's in front and what's behind.
4. If you were asked to paint or draw a place important to you, what would you choose?

TR: The use of multiple perspectives also plays an important role in the next work.

ARTWORK 2:

**Alexandra Exter, *Italian Town by the Sea*, c. 1917, Oil and tempera on canvas, 2008.83
(artist from Ukraine)**

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Alexandra Exter (oh-lihk-SAN-drah EHK-terr) combined the influences of Cubism and Futurism in her painting. Cubism seeks to display several aspects of the same object at once by fragmenting the forms and reassembling them in a new way. Futurism focuses on the technical progress of the modern machine age, dynamism, speed, energy, vitality and change.
2. Cubism's use of multiple viewpoints is closer to the way we see. Our eyes are constantly moving and shifting, seeing a series of views of an object or scene. In the 20th century, life moves faster all around us. As one art critic said, we are looking at the world from the train, not the horse.
3. As a young woman, Exter had her own studio in Kiev and taught other artists. When she moved to Paris in 1924, she became a figure of the Paris salons, mixing with Picasso, Braque and others. She pushed spatial boundaries both in her work and in her life.
4. Exter's work is experimental, vibrant, playful, and dramatic in composition, subject matter, and color. She also created set designs and costumes for the theater that were true to her attention to geometry, color, and rhythm (show examples with photo props).

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What shapes and forms do you see in this painting?
2. How does this depiction of a town on a hillside differ from a more traditional view?
3. What feelings or sensations do you have looking at this brightly colored arrangement of buildings, land, and sky?
4. How does the artist incorporate a sense of momentum, energy, and vitality in the image?
5. What subject would you use for a cubist work?

TR: Modern art emphasizes modern life, which includes attention to social and political issues. We'll see that in the next artwork.

ARTWORK 3:**Henry Moore, *Warrior with Shield*, 1954, Bronze, 54.22****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. Henry Moore volunteered as a young man (age 18½) to serve in World War I. His London regiment was reduced by more than half in one battle, partly as a result of the use of mustard gas by German troops. His experiences changed his stance on military conflict and significantly shaped his subsequent work to reflect the grim realities of war.
2. In 1952, while strolling along a beach on the English coast, Moore picked up a pebble that reminded him of the stump of a leg, amputated at the hip. It became the inspiration for a figure whose left arm and leg have been severed, rendering him unable to stand, but whose remaining arm thrusts a shield upward, as if to deflect a blow.
3. The scoring on the bronze surface of the sculpture calls to mind scars or wounds and the jagged stumps of limbs reflect extreme pain and exertion. Despite the agonies of his injuries, he fights with valor and persistence to the end. *Warrior with Shield* represents both the heroism and the tragedy of combat.
4. Through the abstracted, angular forms Moore creates an emotional response and resistance to the German bombing of London in WWII. As an artist he expresses a social and political agenda of the injustice of political systems like Nazism and Fascism that seek to deny freedom of thought and equal rights. (The work provides his commentary on modern life after viewing the destructive power of humans; he includes aspects of war that are difficult to see and contemplate.)

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What is your emotional reaction to this sculpture?
2. How has the artist experimented with shapes that represent parts of the human body?
3. Remember when I asked you to walk into the Cezanne painting. Walk all the way around the sculpture. How does this work created in 3-D space engage you as the viewer?
4. How could we relate what this figure represents to events in today's world?

TR: Our next artist moves completely toward abstraction as a way to express his feelings toward the world he lives in.

ARTWORK 4:**Beauford Delaney, *Untitled*, 1954, Oil on raincoat fragment, 2003.106****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. Beauford Delaney spent most of his life in New York City. He was drawn to the city by the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual, artistic and literary movement from the 1920s to the 1930s that inspired a range of works by African American thinkers, artists and writers.
2. This artwork was produced after Delaney moved to Paris. He was excited to be in a new place with new ideas. It represents his shift from recognizable figures and places to complete abstraction. He saw the light of France as “eternal, serene, wordless, yet sovereign.”
3. Delaney applied the paint with his fingers, palette knife, and straight from the tube.
4. Modern art also includes the use of “new” materials: Delaney cut up his raincoat (show photo prop of back of the painting) when he received a new, heavier coat; at the time he couldn’t afford to buy canvas.
5. A 1950s “revival” of Claude Monet’s work influenced Delaney; he saw the works firsthand in Paris. Monet’s late paintings also influenced Abstract Expressionist painters in the US, including his water lilies, garden at Giverny, and murals.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. This painting is full of movement. Imagine you’re holding a paintbrush. Pick an area of the painting to focus on. Move your hand to paint that area. How does it feel? What made you choose that area of the painting?
2. Movement and colors can express emotion. How do you feel when you look at this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Look for the clues to his use of a raincoat as his canvas. What does this say about the artist’s use of materials and his desire to create art?

TR: Now we turn to look at Contemporary Art and the ways in which artists challenge the boundaries of what defines a work of art.

Contemporary Art

The art of today, produced in the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century. Contemporary artists work in a **globally** influenced, culturally diverse, and technologically advancing world. Their art is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that continues to challenge boundaries in ways already well established in the 20th century.

Contemporary art concepts:

- diverse and eclectic, lacks a uniform, organizing principle, ideology, or "-ism"
- places more emphasis on the process of making art than on the final product
- provides opportunities to reflect on current social events and practices important to us and to the world
- encourages dialogue on personal and cultural identity, family, community, activism, and nationality
- does not have one, single objective or point of view; can be contradictory and open-ended
- includes common themes such as identity politics, the body, globalization and migration, technology, contemporary society and culture, time and memory, and institutional and political critique

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art

<https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-contemporary-art-definition/>

https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/contemporary_art/background1.html

Robertson, J., & McDaniel, C. (2012). Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980 (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ARTWORK 5:**Frank Stella, *Tahkt-i-Sulayman Variation II*, 1969, Acrylic on canvas, 69.132****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. In 1967, Frank Stella began a series of brightly colored paintings based on the protractor (show an image), a drafting tool used for measuring and making angles. With this device he made three semicircular designs including the one you see here, called the “rainbow.” These designs are the basis for the many paintings in his Protractor series.
2. Stella titled the works after circular cities and archaeological sites he saw on a 1963 trip to the Middle East: Tahkt-i-Sulayman is an ancient shrine in Iran’s Azerbaijan province. Perhaps it was only his inspiration; he was not so interested in the actual place. This UNESCO-registered archeological and touristic site, the “Throne of Solomon,” encompasses a lake and a Zoroastrian temple complex (show image on iPad or picture prop). He’s also looking at geometric designs used in Islamic art.
3. Stella has insisted that the meaning of his work is purely formal: “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object...You can see the whole idea without any confusion. What you see is what you see.”

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Think of a few adjectives to describe the type of colors Stella uses.
2. Look at how the circles and half circles overlap. What’s in front/what’s behind? Think about the spatial relationships (remind them of Cezanne).
3. What might it mean to say that the idea for a work of art is only about the colors and the forms depicted?
4. Stella leaves the pencil lines visible (see photo props of details). What does that say about the artist’s process?

TR: Our next work encourages us as viewers to have a dialogue about personal and cultural identity, including issues of gender.

ARTWORK 6:

Cindy Sherman, Untitled (MP #212 edition 6/6), 1989, Color photograph, 2010.23

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Cindy Sherman's untitled photograph of herself in the guise of a Renaissance woman is overtly disconcerting. Her opulent dress and jewel-adorned hair run counter to her awkward, false nose. Though piously folded, her reddened hands suggest hard work. The coloration beneath her eyes betrays a very real woman, while the classical column suggests an idealized European society portrait.
2. She is the model in all of her photographs. It's about the concept, as much as the end product. By using extensive makeup and costuming, Sherman has conspicuously constructed a prototype of a Renaissance woman (show photo prop of a Renaissance painting of a woman in a similar pose). It is the visibility of the real woman beneath the artifice that makes the photograph so unsettling.
3. By emphasizing the artificial and the grotesque, Sherman urges viewers to look beyond the surfaces and consider portraits as constructions designed to serve a social, political, or even erotic purpose. Sherman's critique is as relevant for portraiture today, in which digital photography enables easy manipulation of images to suit the sitter's purpose. Her photographs suggest that identity is interconnected with one's outward appearance.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What do you first notice about this supposedly "Renaissance woman"?
2. What do you think was the role of female portraiture during the Renaissance (largely painted by male artists)?
3. How does Sherman's portrayal differ from the Renaissance painter's image?
4. What role do you think the gender of the artist plays in this work?

TR: As we reflect on current social events, we'll examine a work by a Native American artist who looks at the needs and desires of marginalized communities.

ARTWORK 7:

Jeffrey Gibson, *WHAT WE WANT IS FREE*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, glass beads and artificial sinew inset into wood frame, 2021.28

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Jeffrey Gibson (of Choctaw-Cherokee heritage) created *What We Want is Free* to express the necessity of “dignity, respect, joy, freedom, and liberation” for marginalized communities. We are all struggling with the global pandemic, civil unrest, and a call for racial justice. Gibson’s work encourages dialogue on personal and cultural identity, family, community, activism, and nationality.
2. Gibson creates a dazzling array of colors and geometric shapes. Multiple hues of bright oranges and reds transition to muted greens and blues, and black triangles move diagonally across the painting, providing layers of depth and contrast. His Modernist patchwork quilt incorporates color palettes found in historic Choctaw clothing and cultural belongings (show photo props of clothing).
3. Look for the incorporation of words in the design.
4. Neon colored geometrics appear at the top and bottom of the painting and in the title of the work. A beaded frame pays homage to beadwork found in nearly every Indigenous community across North America. Gibson draws from tradition while he innovates how beads are used in his work.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely. What materials does Gibson use?
2. How does he place the triangles within the composition? Look for the words of his title.
3. Gibson uses colors and shapes found on traditional Choctaw clothing. This clothing is still worn today on special occasions. What colors and shapes would you choose that are meaningful to you?

TR: Our final artist on the tour references the global nature of contemporary art as she addresses cultural issues and how they are expressed in her work.

ARTWORK 8:

Shahzia Sikander, *Arose*, 2020, Glass mosaic with patinated brass, 2021.10

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Shahzia Sikander wants to challenge and reinvent classical Indo-Persian miniature painting (show example of miniature painting in collection) by experimenting with scale and materials. She challenges the strict formal rules of the genre by experimenting with scale and various media including mosaics. Her work is informed by multiple voices from South Asian, American, Feminist and Muslim perspectives.
2. Through her work, she asks questions about language, trade and empire, migration; all current issues of concern in a globalized world.
3. The mirror versions of the same woman whirl around in a pinwheel; which she calls “the enormous possibility of the feminine spirit.” She wants to change the way we look at these women.
4. The lush skirts can be read as a poppy blossom, alluding to the opium industry in Afghanistan and the long-term U.S. intervention and conflict there.*
5. The ravishing circular composition “also looks like a bombed-out site to me,” said the artist, who likes to play with multiple meanings simultaneously and create tension between beauty and destruction.

*Only a few species of poppy produce opium. The poppy bud blossoms into a flower with four petals in a variety of colors. The petals fall away to reveal a green pod that continues to grow to the size of an egg. Inside the pod is the ovary that produces opium, which contains codeine and morphine. Once the pod reaches maturity, opium can no longer be produced.

Sources: US Department of Justice, “Opium: A History” by Martin Booth, “Unholy Wars” by John Cooley

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What materials does Sikander use? How does her use of mosaic change the way we look at this work, compared to a painting?
2. Show an image of a Persian miniature, a traditional form of painting that was also used and adapted by Indian artists. How does Sikander’s use of large scale change the way we think about this image?
3. What does the circular/pinwheel form suggest to you?
4. Women in Persian miniatures are depicted according to a stereotype—as dancers, as objects of desire. How do you think Sikander has changed the way we look at these women?