

Faculty Resource Guide: “The Roots of Abstract Expressionism”

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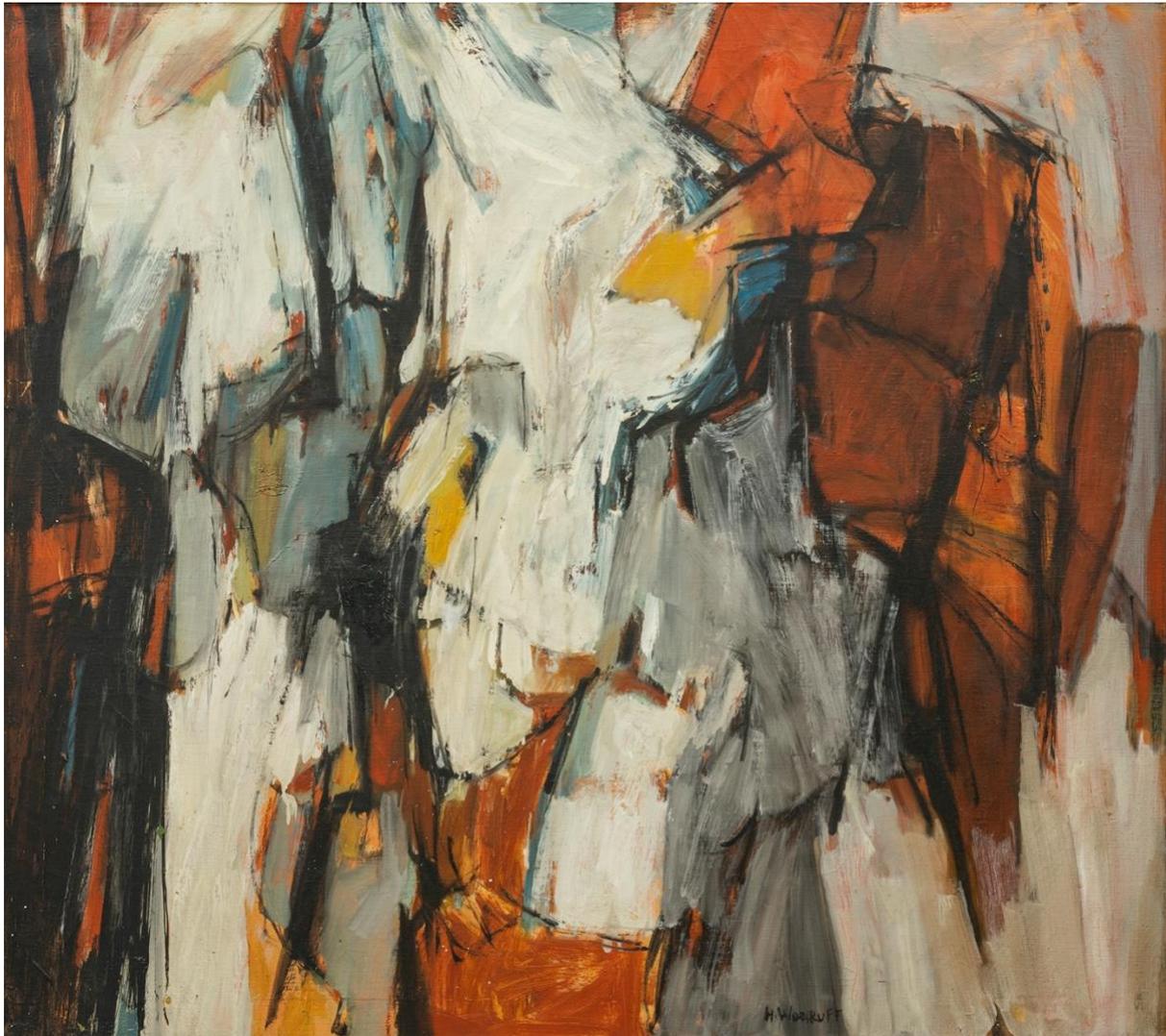


Figure 1: Hale Woodruff (1900–80), *Two Figures: Abstraction* (c.1958), Oil on Canvas, Gift of the artist 1968.16.01

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Objectives

What follows is designed to assist faculty from across the curriculum in incorporating critical thinking into their classroom, using art as a prompt for fostering metacognition and meaningful exchange.

The assignments contained herein are intended to stimulate higher order thinking operations through an introduction to art historical methodology. Writing and drawing prompts invite students to analyze key works of art, reflect on those observations, make connections and draft original evidence-based assessments.

How to Use This Guide

This guide introduces faculty to the Housatonic Museum of Art's exhibition, "The Roots of Abstract Expressionism." It first provides an overview, situating the movement and its adherents within the appropriate social, cultural and historical context. Then it explores several key works and artists in greater depth. Along the way, this guide also points towards related concepts, such as politics or gender, which faculty may explore with students according to their interests or curricular needs. We'll begin with a step-by-step guide to learning to look at art more closely.

For more information about the exhibition, and for a complete virtual tour, please visit www.HousatonicMuseum.org.

How to Look at Art

Formal Analysis: Making Thinking Visible

Why is art so compelling? Formal analysis, a detailed examination of the elements that constitute a work of art, gives us the language to describe and understand our experiences with art more fully. In essence, formal analysis helps to make our own thinking more visible.

In formal analysis, we temporarily put aside questions of subject matter and historical context to focus solely on what the work *looks like*. The discussion focuses on detailed descriptions of the visual properties and an analysis of their effects upon the viewer. A series of broken, jagged lines, for example, can communicate aggression. Conversely, a smooth, meandering line can signal playfulness.

The process of carefully looking and then reflecting reveals what the brain does automatically when you experience a work of art. First you observe, then you react. Formal analysis slows this process. It asks the viewer to carefully consider the choices an artist has made and the effects of these decisions upon the viewer.

Although the subjective response is part of a formal analysis, aesthetic judgement is not the goal. Rather, formal analysis deconstructs our thinking. With slow, careful observation, we begin to unpack a work of art as a series of choices an artist has made. Formal analysis helps us to understand both artistic intentions and our own thinking more deeply.

Resources

Jesse Day, *Line Color Form: The Language of Art and Design* (New York: Allworth Press, 2013).

Beth Harris and Stephen Zucker, "How to Do Visual (Formal) Analysis in Art History," SmartHistory, www.KhanAcademy.org, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/start-here-apah/intro-art-history-apah/v/visual-analysis>

Lumen Learning, "Module 1: Elements and Principles of Design," *Art Appreciation*, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/masteryart1/> (OER/Creative Commons License)

Tips for Guiding Formal Analysis

1. Begin by considering the piece as a whole. Note your sensations and subjective reactions but put them aside. You'll come back to them later.

2. Create a brief "snapshot" that describes, in a sentence or two, what it is you're looking at.

3. What do you see? Look at the work in greater detail. Consider the qualities of color, line, form, etc. and use describing words. You may also assign different categories to groups of students to save time.

(One group might consider color, another composition, etc.) Prompt students by asking questions like:

What colors are used? Are they warm or cool? Are they harmonious or do they clash?

What shapes or forms do you see? Are they amorphous, rectangular, figurative etc.?

What materials are used? (Paint, marble, stone, metal, fabric. etc.)

Are there words, numbers or letters?

Are there any recognizable figures or is the work abstract?

Notice line if it exists. Describe it in detail: fluid, curving, sharp, wide, dashed, etc.

Is the work three-dimensional or flat?

Is the space deep or shallow? Explain your answer.

Describe the light. Where does it fall? Are parts of the image obscured by darkness?

4. Encourage students to support evaluative statements with visual evidence. Ask: what do you see that makes you say that?

5. Then consider the function of the elements students have observed, referring back to their initial subjective reaction. A night sky, for example, may feel peaceful or ominous, depending upon specific choices the artist has made. Ask why different elements of the work operate as they do.

6. Discuss possible meaning only after you've carefully considered formal properties and analyzed their function within the larger work. Revisit your initial reactions. Have they changed? Which of the formal elements you observed made you feel that way? If your feelings have shifted, why?



Figure 2: Jimmy Ernst (1920–85), *Disc* (1967), Oil on Masonite, Gift of the artist, 1968.41.01

Formal Analysis (Sample)

Jimmy Ernst American, 1920–85, *Disc* (1967), Oil on Masonite

Subjective Reaction:

anxious, trapped, explosion, webbing, drab, bleak, ominous

Snapshot:

An abstract painting constituted by a brown field in which a circle filled with a tangle of dark lines and a few colors is centered.

FORM	FUNCTION
Size/Scale: Roughly 2 feet square, the circle occupies about two-thirds of the Masonite	We aren't overwhelmed by the work. It's about the size of a window. The scale, rather, makes this work feel more intimate.
Line: rough, jagged, blurred, streaked, sharp and numerous, intersecting.	The straightness of the lines makes them feel sharp. The way they intersect creates a web that feels impenetrable and dense.
Color: palette is limited and drab, consisting of a warm, muddy brown, rust, olive, blue, black and grey.	The limited palette creates an image in which colors do not compete for our attention. The colors remind me of decay and industrial materials, like metal. The warmth of the rust color creates a focal point within the disc.
Composition: The disc shape dominates the composition. Its positioning in the center creates a balanced, symmetrical composition. However, the flatness of the brown field contrasts strongly with jumble of lines within the disc.	The contrast between the brown field and the disc juxtaposes calmness against chaos. It feels as if the disc is contained and we are peering in at a remove.
Materials: painting, oil on Masonite, a hard, flat surface with little texture	Oil is a medium known for its blending and rendering capabilities. It seems like an odd choice for a work that is largely flat and abstract. The paint appears to be both translucent and opaque in different areas.
Form (shapes): abstract, consisting of jagged, intersecting lines that are dense and overlapping, the lines create blade-like forms of various widths.	The way the blade-like forms intersect feels like a trap or web. The angular shapes feel sharp and dangerous, like razor blades. The different angles of the lines and the blurring of color creates a sense of energy and movement.

<p>Light/tone: Dark, not a lot of light escapes; the blue and rust colors create small points of light that catch the eye and create depth.</p>	<p>The inky blackness of the lines and forms of disc, combined with the drabness of the other colors and lack of light, feels ominous. The blue background in the disc shape suggests depth, but a depth into which you couldn't penetrate.</p>
<p>Texture/Pattern: The pattern of intersecting lines crisscross at all angles. While the painting is smooth across its surface, the forms created feel as if they'd be sharp to touch.</p>	<p>The unpredictability of the pattern creates a sense of chaos, contained within the flatness of the brown color field.</p>

Template adapted from Jesse Day, *Line Color Form: The Language of Art and Design* (New York: Allworth Press, 2013), 77. Download at www.HousatonicMuseum.org.

After you've discussed the work's formal attributes and the feelings it evokes, you might then consider the biographical or cultural context of *Disc* in the wake of World War II and amidst the development of the Abstract Expressionist movement more broadly.

About the Artist:

Jimmy Ernst is a German American émigré and a first-generation Abstract Expressionist. Part of a series exploring the juxtaposition of a circle within a square, *Disc* is considered one of Ernst's mature works.

Ernst found inspiration in jazz, the unconscious and in the iconography, material culture and rituals of the Hopi and Navajo tribes of the American Southwest. But he was also haunted by a traumatic childhood, the challenges of having what he called a "genius-stranger" father, the Surrealist [Max Ernst](#) (1891–1976), and the agony of his failed attempts to rescue his mother, who was Jewish, from Auschwitz.

Abstract Expressionism...At a Glance

Forging a new path between the pure abstraction and surrealism of the European avant-garde, Abstract Expressionists reinvented Modernism after the Second World War, shifting the fine art capital from Paris to the gritty Greenwich Village art scene of New York City. “The Roots of Abstract Expressionism,” presented by the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, CT, explores some examples from the New York school and beyond, including [Jimmy Ernst](#) (1920–84), [Willem de Kooning](#) (1904–97), [Hale Woodruff](#) (1900–80), [William Bazotes](#) (1912–63), [Romare Bearden](#) (1911–88), [Conrad Marca-Relli](#) (1913–2000), [Herbert Ferber](#) (1906–91) and others.

Emerging in a postwar period marked by [McCarthyism](#), anxiety, trauma and poverty, “[Abstract Expressionism](#),” a term coined by the *New Yorker* critic Robert Coates and popularized in the early 1950s, encompassed not only the color field paintings of [Mark Rothko](#) (1903–70) and [Barnett Newman](#) (1905–1970), but also the action painting of [Jackson Pollock](#) (1912–56) and [Franz Kline](#) (1910–62). Their inimitable, gestural mark making, as well as their eccentric, anti-establishment “devil-may-care” attitudes, assaulted the staid sensibilities of the American art world at the time. Known colloquially as “[the Irascibles](#),” the Abstract Expressionists effected a seismic generational shift in American Modernism, liberating the New York art scene from the mind-numbing conformity and rampant consumerism of the postwar landscape. As Barnett Newman explained, “some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope...the awakening had the exaltation of a revolution.”

Socio-Historical Context

Exhausted by the extreme poverty of [the Depression](#), scarred by the violence and despair of the [Holocaust](#) and [Hiroshima](#) and energized by radical leftist political activism, the Abstract Expressionists reconstructed a world broken by human cruelty by trusting their own intuitions and emotions. Many among the group got their start as fine artists in public relief programs like the [Works Progress Administration](#), working in the [Social Realism](#) and Regionalist styles then in vogue. Others were busy as [union organizers](#) or even as members of the [communist Café Society](#) of the Village. Ultimately, the Abstract Expressionists abandoned the political for the personal, probing the depths of their own isolation and disaffection.

The arrival and assimilation of European modernism further altered the course of American art in the postwar period. The upheaval that tore through Europe throughout the 1930s and 40s

generated an unprecedented wave of [European immigration](#). Leading artists, architects and theorists, including the Dutch De Stijl painter [Piet Mondrian](#) (1872–1944), surrealists [Max Ernst](#) (1891–1976) and [André Breton](#) (1896–1966), pioneering architect [Walter Gropius](#) (1883–69) and influential educators like [Josef Albers](#) (1888–1976) and [Hans Hoffman](#) (1880–1966) were essential mentors to the postwar generation. Their radical politics, diversity of personal and professional experiences and groundbreaking theories in art and design found fertile ground among the emerging New York School.

Though characterized as isolated and alienated, Abstract Expressionists, in fact, relied upon a network of avant-garde artists, writers, [poets](#), jazz musicians, critics and theorists for their social and intellectual sustenance. Facing early institutional resistance, Abstract Expressionists formed romantic partnerships, friendships, atelier-style academies and intellectual societies, such as [The Club](#), a collective community of artists who gathered to discuss topics such as Existentialism and modern psychology. Described as a “source of anarchist mutual aid,” The Club became an important testing ground, a place in which the Abstract Expressionists could articulate and refine their studio practice and ideas.

By the mid-late 1950s, the creative energy of the Abstract Expressionists began to splinter into new directions as Neo-Dada, Post-Painterly Abstraction, Pop, Minimalism and eventually Conceptualism competed for the mantle of New York’s “enfant terrible.” In 1961, the American art critic Clement Greenberg declared the gestural wing of Abstract Expressionism to be in a state of decline. First-generation Abstract Expressionists, like Arshile Gorky (1904–48) and Pollock, had either tragically died or, like de Kooning, were retiring to quieter environs. Of the scene’s decline, painter Mercedes Matter recalled, “there was extraordinary warmth and camaraderie among artists then. The end of that marvelous time came when American art became big business. Success seemed to spoil the climate.” Nonetheless, the Abstract Expressionists battled the establishment and captured the attentions of the entire mid-century art world. Theirs was the fertile ground upon which twentieth-century American art took root.

Resources (Abstract Expressionism)

The Art Story Contributors, "Abstract Expressionism Movement Overview and Analysis," www.TheArtStory.org, (November 22, 2011), <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/abstract-expressionism/#>.

Yve-Alain Bois, “1947,” *Art Since 1900: Volume 2*, Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yve-Alain Bois, et. al. editors (New York: Thames & Hudson [2004] 2016), pp. 404–10

Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women* (New York, Boston and London: Little Brown and Co., 2018)

Valerie Hellstein, "Abstract Expressionism's Counterculture: The Club, the Cold War, and the New Sensibility," MoMA Lecture, PDF,
<https://assets.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/calendar/Hellstein2.25.11MoMApaper.pdf>

MoMA Learning, "Abstract Expressionism," www.MoMA.org,
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/abstract-expressionism/

Stella Paul, "Abstract Expressionism." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–)
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm (October 2004)

Virginia Spivey, "Abstract Expressionism, an Introduction," www.KhanAcademy.org,
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/post-war-american-art/abex/a/abstract-expressionism-an-introduction>



Figure 3: Willem de Kooning (1904–97), Seated Woman (1987), bronze on marble base, Gift of Phillip Pavia, 1981.12.01

Willem de Kooning (1904–97)

Seated Woman (1987)

"In a way I feel that the *Women* of the '50s were a failure. I see the horror in them now, but I didn't mean it then. I wanted them to be funny and not look so sad and downtrodden like the women in the paintings in the '30s so I made them satiric and monstrous, like sibyls."
—Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning's small bronze *Seated Woman* (1987), cast from a series of thirteen small, terra cotta sculptures begun in 1969, is dense yet powerful, capturing the frenetic and furious scramble of de Kooning's two-dimensional paintings and drawings. Not a natural sculptor, de Kooning's late career exploration in the medium resulted from a chance encounter with sculptor and friend Herzl Emmanuel while traveling in Rome. Several of these, including *Standing Figures* (1969–84) and *Reclining Figures* (1969–82), were enlarged and cast in bronze in the early 1980s.

This particular bronze, an artist's proof, was gifted to the Connecticut-born sculptor and Club founder [Philip Pavia](#) (1912–2005). The subject matter of *Seated Woman*, a rumpled and monstrously distorted female figure, was of course well familiar to de Kooning, and would come to occupy his attentions for nearly thirty years. Beginning in the early 1940s, de Kooning turned from depicting seated men to seated woman, completing his first *Seated Woman* in oils c. 1940.

Considered among the most "aggressive" revisions of the female figure in art history, de Kooning's canonical *Woman* series (1950–53) also reinvented the gesture in American painting. According to Thomas Hess, de Kooning, like many Abstract Expressionists, was reacting against the then-dominant Parisian School aesthetic, which emphasized balance and refinement. De Kooning's energetic, slashing strokes, by contrast, "omitted the last stage of finish," exposing the painting's compositional obstacles and its solutions. De Kooning often added ground glass, fine pebbles, quartz, even plaster of Paris to enhance the bulk of his materials and create textural contrast. With the terra cotta series, de Kooning brought the same attention to surface and material into the third dimension.

The female figure, for de Kooning, was an emotionally ambiguous compositional device. However, critics variously interpreted de Kooning's depictions of women as either misogynistic or as a response to the sexualization of women in popular consumer culture. Canonization of

such works by art historians and by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art only further elided women from the art historical canon, gendering the movement as heroically masculine to the exclusion of artists like [Lee Krasner](#) (1908–84), [Grace Hartigan](#) (1922–2008), [Helen Frankenthaler](#) (1928–2011) and de Kooning’s own partner [Elaine de Kooning](#) (1918–89).

De Kooning’s *Woman* series broke with the non-figuration of Abstract Expressionist production, plunging his figurative explorations into an emerging debate about gender in postwar society. The demobilization of the 1950s were a period of regressive social conformity in which the enforcement of certain normative gender roles, particularly those relating to women and domesticity, were viewed as essential to the success of a “healthy” and prosperous society. The increasing unhappiness of women with this bargain was later uncovered by the feminist author and activist [Betty Friedan](#) (1921–2006), whose 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique* challenged the ways in which America culture perpetuated the myth of the happy housewife.

Group Exercise: “Step Inside” de Kooning’s *Woman*

This following encourages perspective-taking and close looking through projection, a technique in which students project a persona into a person or thing in order to explore ideas from a new viewpoint.

After some close looking and formal analysis, step inside the point of view of the subject of de Kooning’s *Seated Woman* or any painting from his *Woman* series. Consider:

- What can the person perceive and feel?
- What might the person know about or believe?
- What might the person care about?
- Imagine portraying de Kooning’s woman character and improvise a monologue. Speaking in the first person, talk about who/what you are and what you are experiencing.
- Assign readings and videos from the resource list below. Ask students to debate and discuss the interpretations of de Kooning’s *Woman I* in the context of Friedan’s writing and mid-century feminism.

Exercise adapted from Harvard’s Project Zero, “Artful Thinking,” (OER/Creative Commons License) http://pzartfulthinking.org/?page_id=2

Resources (de Kooning)

The Art Story Contributors, “Willem de Kooning Artist Overview and Analysis,” TheArtStory.org (June 1, 2011) <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/de-kooning-willem/>

MoMA Learning, “Willem de Kooning: Abstraction, Representation, and Reinvention,” https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/willem-de-kooning-woman-i-1950-52-2/

PBS, Makers: Women Who Make America, "1950s Housewives,"

<https://www.pbs.org/video/makers-women-who-make-america-1950-housewives/>

Jerry Saltz, "My Final Word on MoMA's Woman Problem," *Vulture* (Nov, 20, 2013),

<https://www.vulture.com/2013/11/jerry-saltzs-final-word-on-momas-woman-problem.html>



Figure 4: Romare Bearden (1911–88), *The Conversation* (1979), Lithograph, Gift of Bruce Cappels, 1991.19.07

Romare Bearden (1911–88)

The Conversation (1979)

"When I conjure these memories, they are of the present to me...Because after all, the artist is a kind of enchanter in time."

—Romare Bearden

Romare Bearden's *The Conversation* (1979) exemplifies Bearden's mining of memory, mythologies and emotional realism as rich sources of his personal visual vocabulary. Placing African American cultural life within the context of universal themes, such as religion or migration, Bearden's exploration of ritual and celebration of Black cultural life, much like [James Van Der Zee's](#) photographic portraiture, reclaimed the dignity of "the new black citizen" from the poisonous battlefield of American visual politics. His childhood in rural North Carolina, coming of age in Harlem and Pittsburgh in the 1920s and emergence as a major artist at the height of Abstract Expressionism, intersected squarely with battles over the iconographic representation of African Americans. Bearden's lithograph, *The Conversation*, exemplifies an autobiographical approach common to his mature works, exploring a personal symbolism constructed by passing trains, roosters and neighbourhoods populated by conjure women and references to African material culture.

A critical figure in the [Harlem Renaissance](#), Romare Bearden is best known for his series of collages and photostats known as [Projections](#). Completed in 1964, the series marks Bearden's departure from Abstract Expressionism and uncompromising return to lyrical figuration and narrative. Merging his political activism with interests in Western art, African sculpture, [Mexican mural painting](#) and music—especially blues and jazz, Bearden's prints, collages and paintings throughout the 1960s and 70s embodied the urgency of the [Civil Rights Movement](#) and the negotiation of race and identity politics in America. According to his biographer Mary Schmidt Campbell, Bearden insisted that his work was neither propaganda nor sociology. Rather, he described his approach as an exploration of the "prevalence of ritual," an attention to the choreography of daily life in Black America.

The Conversation follows Bearden's 1977 cycle of collages and watercolors based on Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, in which Bearden gave Homer's *Odyssey* modern cultural relevance, seeing in the epic battle for Troy, a parallel to the rioting and protests of the American Civil Rights Movement. Mining both African and Western art historical tradition, Bearden combined colourful Byzantine flatness, Ancient Near-Eastern abstraction and West African tradition and ritual with the figurative Modernism of Matisse and Picasso. *The Conversation*, like Bearden's *Odyssey* series, plays with sharp-edged abstraction and bold fields of flat color. The two

female figures at right reflect Bearden's fascination with African material culture. The dress of the woman on the left may reference Kuba cloth or West African [Kente textiles](#). The women's exaggerated silhouettes, a composite of frontal and profile views, recall Kalabari water spirit masks and [Yoruban sculptural traditions](#).

Writing/Drawing Exercise: Visualizing Jazz

Many among the Abstract Expressionists were influenced by the improvisation and expressiveness of jazz. Some, like Bearden and Larry Rivers (1923–2002) were not only influenced the sound of jazz, but also worked as jazz musicians and lyricists.

Bearden's work, particularly, explored the ways in which color, form and repetition might visually express the spontaneous energy, graceful fluidity and emotion that jazz stirs. Ask students to tape together several sheets of paper and, using whatever resources they have to hand, play with line and color while listening to a jazz composition. Next, ask students to repeat the exercise listening to a classical composition. Finally, ask students to visually analyze their responses to the two musical selections, noting the differences in the quality of line work, color, form, etc.

- Are the lines graceful, frenetic, meandering, scribbled or jagged?
- Show your works with others. Can they tell which one is "jazz?"
- If color was used, in what ways did the music influence color choice?
- What shapes did you create? Are they rounded or more angular?

Writing/Drawing Exercise: Mining Memories

Bearden constructed a rich visual vocabulary from personal experiences and vivid recollections of his childhood in Harlem, Pittsburgh and rural North Carolina. In works like [The Woodshed](#) (1969) and *The Conversation*, Bearden fuses the personal with his fascination with Western art history and African material culture. If you were to create your own visual language, what aspects of your life might you include? Are there icons from your childhood or your neighborhood that might figure prominently in your invented landscape? What inspirations from adulthood might also influence the way your visual language might look? Draw some icons you might include or write about what memories and inspirations you might draw from.

Resources (Bearden)

The Art Story Contributors, "Romare Bearden: Artist Overview and Analysis," TheArtStory.org, (Dec. 25, 2014) <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/bearden-romare/artworks/>

Denise Murrell, "African Influences in Modern Art," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (April 2008), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm

Stella Paul, "Modern Storytellers: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Faith Ringgold," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, (October 2004),

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/most/hd_most.htm



Figure 5: Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), *Lullaby for Jumbo* (1966), Serigraph, Gift of Bruce Cassels 1991.19.07

Louise Nevelson (1899–1988)

Lullaby for Jumbo (1966)

"I always wanted to show the world that art is everywhere, except that it has to pass through a creative mind...I don't think you can touch a thing that cannot be rehabilitated into another life. And once I gave the whole world life in that sense, I could use anything."
—Louise Nevelson

Lullaby for Jumbo (1966), a photographic collage screen-printed against a striking, butter-colored background, is one of a dozen serigraphs dedicated to the avant-garde British poet [Edith Sitwell](#) (1887–1964). Like Nevelson, Sitwell was an uncompromising figure whose work was nearly overshadowed by her eccentricity. Yet, both women navigated the gender politics and conservatism of their respective eras to successfully pioneer developments in mid-century modern art and poetry.

Lullaby for Jumbo, from the portfolio series, "Façade: In Homage to Edith Sitwell," is as abstract and playfully ambiguous as [Sitwell's poem](#) of the same name. The assemblages photographed are figuratively suggestive while also reflecting Nevelson's passion for [Cubist abstraction](#) and interest in the monumental and totemic qualities of [Mayan material culture](#) and architecture. In the foreground, a photograph of a wooden assemblage unfolds like an altarpiece. Wings huge and grey, the elephantine form recalls the absurdly slow surrealism of Stillwell's spoken word performance.

Working largely in found wood and debris scavenged from the streets of her Manhattan neighborhood, Nevelson initially eschewed the industrialism of contemporaries like the sculptor [David Smith](#) (1906–65) in favor of materials for which she had a more biographical familiarity. A young Jewish emigrant from the Ukraine, Nevelson's father kept the family afloat peddling scavenged goods before eventually becoming a successful real estate developer and lumberyard owner. [Nevelson's assemblages](#), which she began constructing in the 1940s, recall the haphazard [Merzbilds](#) of the German Dadaist [Kurt Schwitters](#) (1887–1948), as well as the more poetic shadowboxes of [Joseph Cornell](#) (1903–72). Yet unlike either, Nevelson cloaked her dense accumulations of detritus in monochromatic black, white or gold, cleansing them of all reference to the world outside her work.

Attempts to assess Nevelson's sculpture in terms of its gendered themes or aesthetics have been met with derision by feminists and by Nevelson herself. While fundamental to the history of feminist art, Nevelson, like fellow Abstract Expressionists [Lee Krasner](#) (1908–84), [Elaine de Kooning](#) (1918–89), [Grace Hartigan](#) (1922–2008) and [Helen Frankenthaler](#)

(1928–2011), preferred to be seen as artists first, not as women. Yet the art world too frequently struggled to see female Abstract Expressionists beyond their gender. A review of Nevelson's first solo show in 1941 revealed the sexism inherent to the industry: "We learned the artist is a woman, in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among moderns."

Writing/Group Discussion Exercise: Identity

Facing institutional sexism and blatant discrimination, Nevelson and her female contemporaries often faced difficult choices about how to market themselves and their work. Lee Krasner was frequently overshadowed by her husband, the famous action painter [Jackson Pollock](#) (1912–1956). Grace Hartigan even went so far as to exhibit as "George" in order to sidestep the "woman question."

Imagine you were marketing yourself. Which aspects of your identity would be important to emphasize? What is important to you? How would you describe yourself? Write ten words that are central to your identity or create a collage that represents these aspects of your identity. These words can be anything, including social categories such as ethnicity and gender, adjectives describing your personality, issues or beliefs you care about, and your favorite pastimes and activities.

Readings from the resource list below address the institutional exclusion of women from the art historical canon. Ask students to discuss or reflect on the ways in which our identities sometimes sit uncomfortably within the broader culture. To what extent does the desire for conformity influence the public identity we create for ourselves?

Resources (Nevelson)

The Art Story Contributors, "Louise Nevelson: Artist Overview and Analysis," [TheArtStory.org](https://www.theartstory.org/artist/nevelson-louise/), (July 1, 2013), <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/nevelson-louise/>

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