

MODULE ONE

Tradition and Innovation in Modern Painting

The selected works are among the most iconic in MoMA's collection. They share a common medium—painting—and represent various steps in the development of new artistic languages at the turn of the twentieth century. They illustrate developments in modern art and demonstrate how celebrated artists have built on and broken with artistic tradition to forge new ground in representation and artistic practice. Given the focus on innovation, the works are arranged chronologically. This sequence allows the conversation to progress historically and shows how each work builds on tradition to bring about innovation.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Vincent van Gogh. *The Starry Night*. 1889

- What do you notice first when you look at this painting?
- How would you describe the colors?
- How do you feel when you look at this painting? What in the painting makes you feel that way?

The Starry Night, by Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), is among the most recognizable images in the history of art, and certainly one of the most reproduced. It is a landscape Van Gogh painted in Saint-Rémy, in the south of France. The painting is a quintessential example of the artist's short and textured brushstroke. Furthermore, Van Gogh does not adhere to traditional uses of color but instead favors an imaginative, expressive palette, as in the rolling blue mountains in the background and the bright-yellow stars in the sky. His style influenced generations of artists who appreciated his sense of drama and unconventional use of color.



André Derain. *London Bridge*. 1906

- What time of day do you think is depicted in this painting? How can you tell?
- Why do you think Derain uses the colors that he does? What is the emotional effect of his color choices on the viewer?
- The title of this work is *London Bridge*. Can you imagine London looking the way it is represented here? Why or why not?

André Derain (1880–1954) was a member of the French group of artists who came to be known as the *Fauves*, or “wild beasts.” Their use of color, often not corresponding to reality, earned them this title. In the early twentieth century, Derain left Paris to travel to London, where he painted numerous cityscapes, frequently set along the River Thames, including this rendition of London Bridge. In his new surroundings, Derain continued his exploration of perception and color in his innovative style.



Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*. 1907

- What is the first word that comes to your mind when looking at this painting?
- How is the representation of these figures different from that in traditional paintings? Consider the shape of the figures and their facial expressions, proportions, and colors.
- This painting is eight feet tall and over seven feet wide. What are the emotional effects of the scale of this work? Why do you think Picasso created such a large painting?

This work by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) is considered to be among the most important paintings of the twentieth century. Picasso innovated at multiple levels, exploring the formal possibilities of painting and radically shifting the experience of the viewer. Geometric shapes are used to delineate the women, as if they are seen from multiple perspectives. Picasso incorporated the traditional motif of female nudes as well as African art, as seen in the masklike faces of the two women on the right.

TURN AND TALK: In preliminary sketches Picasso included two male figures in this composition—a sailor and a doctor—but ultimately chose not to include them. How would these figures have altered the composition and your interpretation of the scene? How would you change the scene?



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Street in Dresden*. 1908

- What type of place is represented in this painting?
- Does anything in the painting give you a sense of the time period depicted?
- What words would you use to describe the overall mood of this work?

During the nineteenth century, the population in Dresden and other German cities skyrocketed, yet Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) wrote, “The more I mixed with people the more I felt my loneliness.” As a member of *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), a German Expressionist art movement, Kirchner investigated the expressive potential of color, form, and composition in depictions of everyday German life. In *Street in Dresden* he highlights the relationship between individuals and their urban environment, including the other people present. Through formal elements he conveys a sense of the highly congested street and at the same time the separateness and emotional isolation between the figures.

TURN AND TALK: Share a personal story of a trip to a big city. Did this experience take place during your childhood or more recently? Do you prefer cities, small towns, or suburbs? How do you feel when you are in a city?



Umberto Boccioni. *The City Rises*. 1910

- Are there figures or objects that you can recognize in this painting? If so, what and where are they? What could they symbolize?
- The title of this work is *The City Rises*. How does knowing this title affect the way you view the painting?
- What is the significance of brushstroke in this work? How does it contribute to the mood of the painting?

In 1906 Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) moved from the Italian countryside to Paris, where he was inspired by the modern city and by the new technologies available to him. After meeting Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement, Boccioni, along with other Italian artists, shifted the movement beyond writing into visual art. The goal of these artists was to abandon nostalgia for Italy's past and propel society into the future by embracing technological advancements. Boccioni integrated notions of modernity and technology into his paintings not only through depictions of dynamic cities but also through optical distortion and blurred lines and figures, which capture the movement of the city like a camera would.

Art-Making Activity

In this module, we looked at different ways artists have altered traditional forms and styles in painting. Ask participants to create a simple landscape image (for example, trees or mountains) using acrylic, tempera, or watercolor paints on paper. They can depict the scene any way that they like. Once the first version of this landscape has been made, ask them to re-create the landscape on a different piece of paper. This time ask them to change either the color palette (for example, use colors that are not representative of what they really see) or the technique for applying paint (for example, use the tip of the brush, large brushstrokes, or a smaller paintbrush). Afterward, hold the works up side-by-side and discuss how the changes made have altered the overall appearance of the landscape. Ask participants about the motivation behind the changes. Repeat the activity with different materials and techniques as many times as participants would like or as the schedule allows.