

MODULE FIVE

Family Pictures

The selected works offer several perspectives on the idea of “family” as represented in modern art. The initial works exhibit more traditional interpretations, while the subsequent works are more abstract both in style and in relation to the theme. Throughout, consider such topics as the representation of the figures and their relationships to each other, to the artist, and to their surroundings.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Édouard Vuillard. *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*. 1893

- Who might these women be, and what is their relationship to each other? Do you think they have any relationship with the artist?
- What might Vuillard be telling us about their personalities by painting them in this way?
- Do you relate to either of these figures? What is your role in your family, either now or when you were growing up?

The majority of paintings by Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) depict domestic interiors and public scenes. They are often rendered with an overall blurred quality, with different textures and patterns blending into each other. Vuillard’s mother earned a living for her family as a dressmaker. The influence of her profession can be seen in Vuillard’s inclusion of intricate decorative patterns. In *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, he incorporates these patterns throughout the domestic space, seen not only on the clothing of his sister (the figure on the left) but also on the wallpaper. The mother anchors the composition, with the walls and floor all angling in toward her seated figure.



Dorothea Lange. *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. 1936

- When and where do you think this photograph was taken?
- Describe the face of the woman in the center. How do you think she is feeling? What might she be thinking?
- What is the role of this woman in her family?

Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) began her career as a photographer in her native New York City before moving to San Francisco. Together Lange and her husband documented the poverty and exploitation of migrant workers during and after the Great Depression. *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* is perhaps her most famous work and became the iconic image of the Great Depression. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Lange spoke about her experience taking the photograph: “I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me.” Lange captures the desperation of this mother as well as the strong ties which existed in this family nucleus.



Max Beckmann. *Family Picture*. 1920

- Who is represented in this painting? What are the figures doing?
- How would you describe the relationship between the figures?
- The title of this work is *Family Picture*. How is this painting similar to or different from your own family pictures?

After serving as a medic in World War I, Max Beckmann (1884–1950) transformed his artistic style to incorporate altered perspective and proportion. In contrast to popular trends, he rejected abstract painting and embraced traditional subject matter such as portraits, still lifes, and genre scenes. In *Family Picture*, Beckmann paints a typical genre scene of the various stages of life, ranging from infancy to old age, within one family. The relationships of the figures, however, remain ambiguous.



Marc Chagall. *I and the Village*. 1911

- How does this work relate to our theme of family?
- What are some other ways to think about the idea of a family? Could it include friends? Animals? A community or village?
- Are there specific places that you associate with your family?

Marc Chagall (1887–1985) was born to a large Jewish family in a village in Belarus, at that time part of the Russian empire. In the early twentieth century he moved to Paris. His work often includes imagery from his childhood, including details of Hasidic culture. In *I and the Village*, Chagall includes figures in rural dress, vernacular buildings, and domesticated animals. The large man and goat in the center dominate the composition and seem to have a strong bond, as illustrated by a faint sight line that connects the two figures' eyes.

TURN AND TALK: Which city or village do you consider your “hometown”? Is it where you live now or where you grew up? How would you paint this place? Which specific places or people would you include?

Art-Making Activity

In this module we discussed how different artists have represented families, both their own and others'. Ask participants to create a work that depicts their family, using colored pencils and pastels. You might even ask participants to bring in actual family portraits or copies of photographs and other memorabilia. They can collage these family photographs into their work. Finally, have participants share a story that relates to their family or the work.



Fernando Botero. *The Presidential Family*. 1967

- Who is depicted in this portrait? Do you think these figures are related? Why?
- What do you think is their social status? Consider how they are dressed and how they are posed.
- Is this a positive or a negative rendition? Can you surmise any opinion of the presidential family on Botero's behalf?

Colombian artist Fernando Botero (born 1932) traveled to Europe at a young age with the goal of studying the work of the Old Masters. Characterized by bloated figures, his work often depicts contemporary life in his native Colombia as well as portraits of militarists and people in power. In his work Botero explores both the nature of politics and power as well as the formal possibilities of painting.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss past or current depictions of political families in the United States or abroad. How are they represented? Are they posed or candid? Are they positive or negative depictions?