

MODULE EIGHT

Art and Politics

The selected images are depictions of political figures and conditions throughout modern history. Included are works from a variety of countries: Germany, Mexico, and the United States. Because of their inherent ties to political history, the works are ordered chronologically. Throughout, consider how politicians present themselves and how they are perceived by others. The works can stimulate discussion about the living conditions created by particular political movements and events as well as their effects in subsequent years.

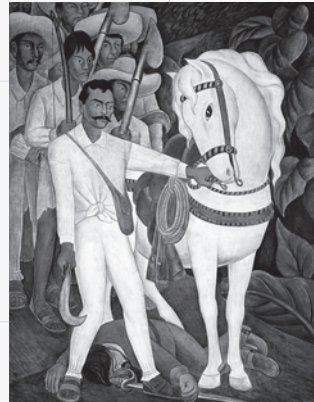
Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Otto Dix. *Dr. Mayer-Hermann*. 1926

- Who is the man in this painting? What is his profession?
- Do you think this is a positive or negative representation of a doctor?
- How do the elements of the doctor's office reflect Dix's opinion of his subject?

Otto Dix (1891–1969) is best known for the depictions of indigent war veterans and prostitutes that he painted after his service in the German Army during World War I. He also painted portraits of members of the upper echelons of German society. In this portrait of Dr. Mayer-Hermann, Dix's actual physician, he maintains his honest and unforgiving style. The frontal pose of the figure, as well as the various circular forms inside the doctor's office, all emphasize his unhealthy rotundity. This realism was the signature characteristic of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement, of which Dix was a chief member. Through this almost satirical portrait Dix highlights and critiques the life of excess led by the thriving middle class of the Weimar Republic.



Diego Rivera. *Agrarian Leader Zapata*. 1931

- What are some possible narratives suggested by this scene? What has just happened? What will happen next?
- Which social classes do the people in this painting belong to?
- What emotions do you associate with these characters?

Diego Rivera (1886–1957) was one of the Mexican artists that became known for their murals depicting events related to important advancements and figures in Mexican history. Having visited Europe on multiple occasions in the early twentieth century, Rivera was exposed to both the avant-garde trends of Paris and the continent's rich artistic history. He also traveled to Italy, where he studied the Renaissance fresco tradition. In *Agrarian Leader Zapata*, Rivera paints the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, backed by his army of peasants, holding the proud horse of his enemy, who lies dead behind him. This fresco was created for a 1931 solo exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. It is a replica of a portion of a mural painted the year before in the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca.



Garry Winogrand. *Democratic National Convention*. 1960

- Where do you think this photograph was taken?
- How is it different from other photographs of politicians that you have seen?
- Why do you think the photographer chose to shoot from this viewpoint? How does this perspective affect the way you interpret the image?

This photograph is one of a series that depicts various gatherings and social functions, taken by Garry Winogrand (1928–1984) in the 1960s. Winogrand adhered to the documentary tradition of photography and commented on the social and political conditions that created the scenarios he focused on. In *Democratic National Convention*, Winogrand captures the future president John F. Kennedy speaking to his constituents from two different perspectives. In the foreground he shows the typical experience of the public, viewing the event on a television screen. This image is juxtaposed with a behind-the-scenes look. This photograph touches on different aspects of American politics, issues of honesty and transparency, and the role of the media in relaying political events.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss a specific political moment that was important to you. Where were you when it happened? Were you there in person, or did you watch it on television? How did that event affect your life and the country?



Jasper Johns. *Map*. 1961

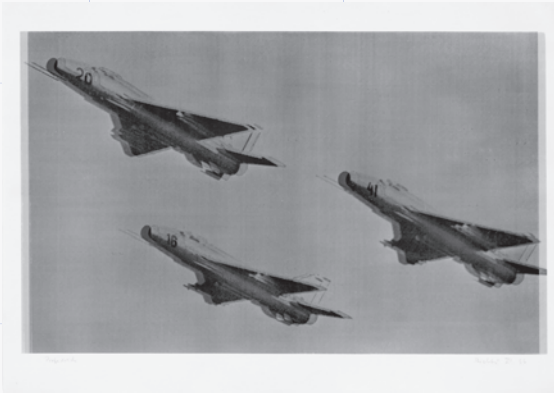
- How has Johns altered the traditional image of a map of the United States?
- How would you describe Johns's use of color and brushstroke in the painting? How does it inform your interpretation of this work?
- What are the political undertones of the transformation of this map?

Jasper Johns (born 1930) began his career in New York City during the height of Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, the artists most associated with the movement, were celebrated for their individualistic and emotionally revealing large-scale works. In *Map*, Johns adopts their highly expressive brushstroke and applies it to the representation of a recognizable and rather mundane image: a map of the United States. Through the use of everyday images, such as maps, targets, and flags, Johns is able to focus on the process of creation rather than the subject matter. In addition, *Map* alludes to the representation and meaning of political symbols.

TURN AND TALK: Think about how you would create your own version of the map of the United States. Which elements would you change? What emotional effect would you try to create?

Art-Making Activity

In this module we discussed how artists have responded to and represented political events and ideas. In relation to this theme, ask participants to make a propagandistic poster of a particular political figure, party, or event. They can use a variety of materials and mediums. In addition, ask them to include a slogan to go with the poster. Invite participants to tell a story relating to an event or figure that is or was particularly important to them and influenced their life in some way.



Gerhard Richter. *Flugzeug II*. 1966

- What type of airplanes do you think are depicted in this work? What are they used for?
- Why do you think Richter used a photograph as his starting point for this print?
- Have you seen similar images of aircraft elsewhere?

Gerhard Richter (born 1932) began incorporating photography in his practice in the early 1960s. Richter used images that he found in newspapers and other publications, and investigated the effect of mass media on perception. Richter began making prints in 1965 and has completed more than one hundred. This print of fighter planes reflects the World War II bombing of his native Dresden and the debates around German rearmament prevalent in the national press at the time. The printing strategy creates an effect for the viewer that is similar to that of newspaper illustrations.