

MODULE FOUR

The City in Modern Art

The selected images are depictions of urban landscapes throughout the development of modern art. Each work illustrates the unique perspective of the artist as well as his relationship to his urban surroundings. The works progress in chronological order, ending with the highly abstract *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Throughout, consider topics such as the development and growth of cities and the benefits and challenges of city life.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



André Derain. *London Bridge*. 1906

- What part of the city does this painting represent?
- What city do you think this might be, and why?
- Where is the viewer in relation to the bridge?

André Derain (1880–1954) was a member of the French movement that came to be known as *Fauvism*. The *Fauves*, or “wild beasts,” were known for their unbridled use of color. Their disregard for the natural coloring of objects shocked their contemporaries. In this painting, Derain applies wild color in his depiction of the heavily trafficked London Bridge, with multiple boats and barges in the River Thames below. Derain was encouraged to visit London in the early 1900s by the dealer Ambroise Vollard. While there he painted many different views of the city, focusing mainly on the various monuments and bridges along the Thames.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Street, Dresden*. 1908

- What are the people in this painting doing?
- What is peculiar about Kirchner’s use of color in this scene?
- What is the overall mood of this work?

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) was a member of the German Expressionist group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge). The artists of *Die Brücke* explored the emotional effects of color and composition in the depiction of contemporary life. Through the use of bright, unrealistic colors, Kirchner energized this scene of Königstrasse street in Dresden

TURN AND TALK: Imagine a busy street in your town or city and think of how you would depict it. Which street would you pick? Why? What medium would you use? What colors and techniques?



Umberto Boccioni. *The City Rises*. 1910

- What seems to be happening in this painting? What are the figures doing?
- What are some clues that reveal that this painting depicts a city?
- What is the emotional impact of the way Boccioni has decided to depict the city? Consider his choice of brushstroke, color, and composition.

Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) was a key figure of the Italian Futurist movement. This group of writers, musicians, and visual artists sought to abandon the air of nostalgia they felt was restricting Italian society. They encouraged their compatriots to embrace the infinite potential of the future, powered by technological advancements and humans’ will for change. Boccioni uses “lines of force” to communicate this idea of progression in his dynamic composition of a city being built.



Jacob Lawrence. *In the North the Negro had better educational facilities*. 1940–41

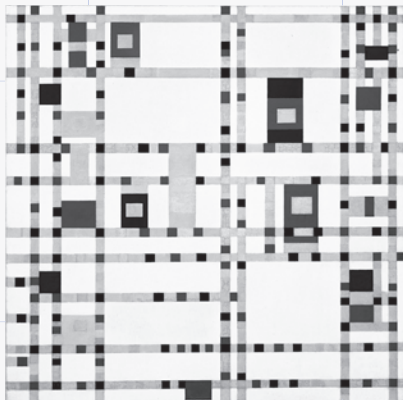
- How is this work related to our theme of the city?
- Do the people in this work look like they come from a particular background?
- What is the impact of the formal choices the artist has made on our viewing experience?

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) and his family were some of the thousands of African Americans to migrate to the North around the time of World War I. They eventually relocated to New York City’s Harlem neighborhood, where Lawrence began taking art classes. In 1940 he began *The Migration Series*, a multipanel series of images that narrates this great migration in American history. The panels were worked simultaneously, resulting in a uniformity of palette and similarity in overall composition among the sixty panels.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss the transformations you have witnessed in American society in the past decades, thinking in particular about shifts in public policy and initiatives in social reform.

Art-Making Activity

In this module, we discussed how artists have represented urban settings. Ask participants to make a representation of a city they have lived in, visited, or imagined. Encourage them to think about what elements of city life they will include and what materials they will use to represent the landscape. Provide various materials, such as paper, pencils, watercolors, and acrylic. Help them to think about how the formal decisions they make will affect the overall impact of their works. Make sure that participants are aware that their depiction does not need to be realistic but can be a rendition of a personal vision.



Piet Mondrian. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.
1942–43

- How many shapes and colors are used in this painting?
- What does this painting make you imagine or think of? Does it represent any particular place or thing?
- The title of this painting is *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Knowing this, how does your understanding of the painting change?

Through the course of his career, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) abandoned representation to focus on the depiction of “pure” forms. For Mondrian this meant the exclusive use of primary colors and geometric shapes. In 1940 he moved from London to New York City. There he joined a vibrant society, constantly in flux. He was influenced not only by the rhythm of city life but also by the syncopated beat of jazz music.